

NARRATING STORIES OF EXISTENCE: POLITICS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN SELINA HOSSAIN'S *CHARCOAL PORTRAIT*

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Abstract

It has been established beyond doubt that one cannot be isolated from memories. One's memories range from the sweet remembrances of childhood to the traumatic experience of pain and suffering during the course of existence. The fragments of experience are encoded in one's memory which are later decoded and reconstructed as personal history. Circumscribed by a plethora of experiences, memories cannot be isolated from one's self though it may acquire different dimensions in the process of filling in the gaps in one's life. As a corollary, time plays a prominent role in reconstructing memories being grounded in the proposition that there needs to be a recreation of the past in order to have a clear understanding of the present. As Schacter rightly observes, "time and memory are inextricably woven; memory always refers to the past and after, shapes the future" (73). Taking recourse to the memory theory of Mark Freeman that our understanding the way memory works "both as lived and as told opens the way toward an enlarged understanding of self and world" (231), this research paper attempts to examine how one's life is in a constant process of editing with transformations colouring the present and in anticipating the future with reference to Selina Hossain's *Charcoal Portrait*. Following an analysis of the use of memory, the narrative follows Dulal's search for his mother which is connected with his "attempts to recover the self who existed 'before' " (King 1).

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Keywords: Memory, Reconstruction of Self, Human Rights, Politics of Identity

Selina Hossain's *Charcoal Portrait*

Memory studies occupy a significant place in contemporary literature with its ramifications spread over different genres. Having realised the role played by memory in retrieving past experiences spanning over extended periods of time in narratives, it becomes imperative to look at how the trajectory of past experiences by itself turns out to challenge the missing gaps of forgotten experiences. It is noteworthy that the experiences of personal memory are deeply connected with those of collective experiences, and the stories we share evolve as near reconstructions of personal and collective histories.

Born in Bangladesh in 1947, Selina Hossain is considered one of the most prolific writers in modern Bengali literature with a number of literary works to her credit. She has received innumerable national and international literary awards including the prestigious Bangla Academy Literary Award in 1980, the Ekushey Padak in 2009 and the Independence Day Award in 2018. In 2014, she was appointed as the Chairperson of the Bangladesh Shishu Academy, and has been serving as the President of Bangla Academy since 2022.

Published in 2019, Selina Hossain's *Charcoal Portrait* originally written in Bengali with the title *Kathkoylar Chhobi* was translated into English by Tirna Chatterjee with Jackie Kabir. In it, Hossain documents the touching story of a child's search for his biological mother 25 years after his adoption by a German couple. The course of the narrative is structured in such a way that the personal memories provide the gateway for collective memories, and towards an understanding the past. His hunt for his mother couples with Dulal's construction of his own identity, and provides space for questions related to his personal identity which has evolved over a course of time. Dulal makes sense of his life when confronted with the present chaos of existential challenges that requires negotiation between his old and new positions. As literature "is the space in which questions about the nature of personal identity are most provocatively articulated" (Bennett and Royle 130), Dulal's construction of identity is explicitly situated in contours of new space and time.

The novel tracks the story of Chaitirani as unfolded through Dulal's search for her, and it is of interest to note how there exists an interrelationship between memory and story for as Ender opines, "The architect of memory is also a storyteller" (15). In the opening

pages of the novel, we find Dulal trying to express his sense of strong feelings of connectivity to the land of his birth and his attempts to bring together different strands of his life to make it a convincing and meaningful whole - "he felt a yearning to connect to this place (*CP* 7) - and is therefore on the lookout "for a missing truth in a strange country" (*CP* 8). In his current situation, Dulal considers it necessary to understand his past, and so sets himself on the mission to find his biological mother for "memory pulled at the strings of Dulal's heart" (*CP* 9). Born to a Pakistani soldier and a Bangladeshi tea picker, Dulal was adopted as an infant by Martin and Doris who christened him Dulal Yope van Hoven. As a war-child, Dulal's identity remained an enigma for he knows nothing about himself and he feels his existence will become meaningful only when there is self-discovery and self-actualisation. Every person has a tangible identity, and even while drawn into and amongst the broader dimensions of affiliations, the desire to go back to his roots gets stronger and stronger with maturity. His mind is preoccupied with complex questions regarding his mother's whereabouts:

"Is she even alive? Does she still work on the tea estate? How will I feel when I find her? Identity – what a weird word." (*CP* 13)

A sense of bewilderment overtakes his mind as he is preoccupied with thoughts of constructing or rather reconstructing his own identity with the aid of personal histories and memories. Dulal's self and its changes over an extended period of time in a foreign country will remain incomplete without accommodating the mutations to be undergone in his biological country of birth. Though he is brought up in a country which was indeed quite welcoming to him, yet he feels a void in his life and the result is his decision to be in a familiar space inhabited by the presence of his mother and the fragments of memory associated with his birth during turbulent times. Though remaining in a country miles apart from the "familiar space" (*CP* 11), his attempts at reaching out to his mother shows his engagement with, and transnational efforts to discover himself by connecting to the original homeland which "is more complex and has more meanings than you know" (*CP* 8). Dulal's return to his homeland with a baggage of uncertainties raises questions about the unstable nature of identity determination.

Landscape has an unmistakable bearing on one's identity, and what is perceived as 'identity' acquires meaning only when it is constructed in relation to the other. Dulal's sense of identity is formed in the process of the discovery of his inner self against the socio-

cultural contours of his homeland. Turning back both physically and mentally to the original home calls the reader's attention to the concept of shared identity that a landscape encompasses. A person's identity cannot be viewed in isolation for the process of his identity formation is dependent on the twin perspectives of "personal identity" and "social identity".

Adherence to one's traditions, culture and customs fortifies communal ties, and this is evident when Latashiti says that she wants Chaitirani's son to be the head of the clan. Here, one can see that the collective identities of the Baraik family are bound up with the past. The narrative of *Charcoal Portrait* grows out of a sense of personal crisis in Chaitirani's life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman and most importantly as an individual. She becomes a symbol of constant suffering and as an individual, she is destined to lead a life without dignity. Dragged into a Pakistani's army camp, Chaitirani is raped during the War of Independence, and she gives birth to a boy - only for him to be given away to a foreign couple. Disillusioned and unemployed, Chaitirani suppresses her desire to bring up a child in the midst of her life of mishaps:

Why will my son be happy? He is born to suffer. A needy woman, how will I raise him? What will I feed him? (CP 71)

She remembers her past only to come to terms with her present, though she is painfully aware of her present situation:

Chaitirani starts crying. She snaps back to the present. One death, one birth, a widow, a little boy – the background to all this is a tea garden; tucked away somewhere behind is their home, their land. All these events cascade through her mind. (CP 72)

She undergoes a process of lonely discovery and having become illumined by the materiality of the present, she comes to terms with life.

Chaitirani's experiences of insecurity and disillusionment with her life as a woman on the margins of a society structured in the hierarchical patterns of dominance is of primary significance in the thematic design of the novel. The subaltern status accorded to a woman dooms her to lead a life without complaints and completely yielding herself to the whims and fancies of her master husband. Fated to lead a subhuman existence, her independent spirit is smothered by the patriarchal powers, and she is therefore constrained to act within the dictates of social supremacies. Though a victim of rape, Chaitirani emerges as a strong woman having learned lessons

from the traumatic ordeals in her life. In spite of being conferred motherhood twice, she “fails” in her role and responsibilities as a mother as his first son dies and her second son is given in adoption to a couple. Her helplessness as a rape victim is vividly portrayed in the novel, and she is forced to bear the trauma for the rest of her life, though she overcomes it later. Instances of striking violation of human rights in the tea plantations abound in *Charcoal Portrait* for the workers were forced to endure harsh working conditions and were viewed not as “human beings” (CP 196), but people with “a different identity, belonged to another category. A people without a homeland, they were meant to be killed” (CP 196). On reading the book given by Ranjan, Dulal comes to understand that during the War of 1971, indentured labourers were brought over by the British to the tea plantations in East Bengal. But with the flourishing of tea industry, more workers were brought from different places across India whose

“only capital was labour, and for this they were indentured, tethered to the tea gardens. Famished, bedraggled, they were herded into the gardens. Confined to their boundaries. Beaten, shot dead by the police if they dared run away. Or pushed back into the gardens like prisoners. For them there was no escape. (CP 189)

In the course of structuring his personal memories, Dulal looks back at the past to create a narrative of his life. As Sidone Smith opines, “[M]emory is ultimately a story about and thus a discourse on, original experience” (45). Dulal who comes in search of her mother recalls how he was born as a war child somewhere around the tea gardens and he tells Jotan about his desire to meet his mother. Chaitirani’s mind is flooded with memories of the War of Liberation for “the 1971 War rushing back with all its horror and brutalities – hundreds of women being tortured in the Pakistani army camps. Their bodies smeared with blood, their bruises bright red like hibiscuses” (CP 280). Overtaken by emotions, Chaitirani hugs Dulal passionately and “the spell of 1971 is broken” (CP 280). Chaitirani’s memories of the 1971 War is filled with anguish and torture, and she recalls:

It was during the War of Liberation. A horrible time. Thinking of it, blood still freezes in one’s heart. Pakistani soldiers were torturing people, setting fire to their homes. They looted cattle, abducted young women and lined up people before gunning them down. The workers decided to fight back, but all they had were bows and arrows. They held meetings and took out rallies. The whole garden was tense. The area was paralysed

by the news of killings, day in and day out, terrifies by the machine guns. (CP 275)

Drawing parallels with the colonial mental state, the loss of a past, a culture and a way of life has had a tragic impact on Dulal's life as he is yet to find his true self. Dulal's identity is rooted in his birth place, and he, therefore feels that his self becomes complete only when he establishes his attachment to the subjective feelings of memories, thoughts and values associated with the physical geography of his native place. The place acquires meaning when Dulal's search for his mother becomes complete.

Charcoal Portrait is a story of birth and death as seen through the lens of the main characters. Set against the atrocities unleashed by the War of Liberation, the novel follows the main thread of Dulal's story which finally ends in his meeting his biological mother. The act of finding his mother becomes a form of expressing his selfhood, voicing his mind and carving a space of his own. Chaitirani's instincts of motherhood swing into action when she hears the cry of the new born and decides to look after her war child born in the rehabilitation centre, but unfortunately "there was a strange sound to those sobs, and they made her flesh crawl. In a daze, Chaitirani felt the cries pierce her heart, looping round her lungs, anticipating suffering on the road ahead" (CP 71). Her rights as a mother are violated when her son is taken away from her. She becomes mad on knowing that she has no rights whatever on her own child though she cherished the hope of going back home with her little son. The intersection of motherhood and trauma has been brought out quite effectively through the character of Chaitirani whose marginalised maternal experiences are foregrounded, thus positing it with her sense of motherhood. The novel's engagement with the issue of human rights acquires significance as incidents of human rights violation are on the increase in contemporary times.

Chaitirani's recollection of her past experiences form the core of the novel. Doomed to live in an impenetrable void, Chaitirani's existence is defined by her attitude towards life which is characterised by an insistence on self-discovery and self-expression. To the postmodernist critics, an individual's self is perceptible in relation to the 'other'. Chaitirani's self is defined by the traditions of the society in which she lives, and she leads a painful life encircled by clouds of fear. Dulal's search for his mother provides the latter with an opportunity to delve deep into the trajectory of the past. Despite being forced to live on the margins during the dire times of the War

of Liberation, Chaitirani's positive spirit remains unabated as she never lost her hope of finding her lost son one day.

(...) He was born two months after the war. His father was a Pakistani soldier. I didn't know him, nor do I care. But I have been waiting for my son to come back some day. I am still hopeful he will come back if he is still alive. (CP 280)

In presenting the character of Dulal, Hossain calls the attention of the readers to the reconstructive nature of memory in making him recall his past and thus enables him to achieve self-realisation by filling in the gaps by making sense of what happened. Our memories occupy a vital place in the construction of our identities, and as Neisser states: "To be human, I think, means also to know that we have a past and a future." ("Self-Narratives" 16)

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