

Memoryscapes of Guilt, Grief and Loss in Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange Tree*

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*Explicit and implicit memories are part and parcel of our everyday activities. Sites of memory may be located in various metaphors like personal experiences, emotions, stories, and physical objects like food, clothes, accessories, childhood, youth or even old age. These aspects help in making sense of the present because past or personal experiences provide a gateway for an exploration of the nuances that have contributed largely not just in the resurgence of tales of bereavement, exclusion or even subversion, but also in exploring and identifying new cultural commonalities and differences. Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange Tree* narrates the ruminations of Zuhour, a young Omani student, who, although residing in Britain is being constantly tugged by memories of her deceased surrogate grandmother in Oman. The spooling narrative is interlaced with threads of stories, traumatic memories and accounts of unrequited love, artistically juxtaposed against the fulfilled dreams and blissful experiences of other vivid characters like the grandmother and Zuhour's friend Suroor. The paper "Memoryscapes of Guilt, Grief and Loss in Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange Tree*" seeks to discern how the individual acts of remembrance of the three key figures help not just in exploring their individual cultural identity but also depicts their lived experience in another place.*

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Explicit and implicit memories are part and parcel of our everyday activities. Sites of memory may be located in various metaphors like personal experiences, emotions, stories, and physical objects like food, clothes, accessories, childhood, youth or even old age. These aspects help in making sense of the present because , past or personal experiences provide a gateway for an exploration of the nuances that have contributed largely not just in the resurgence of tales of bereavement, exclusion or even subversion, but also in exploring and identifying new cultural commonalities and differences. Literature has often been regarded to be a poignant vehicle in locating memories, incidents and events of the past, present or future. Birgit Neumann asserts that novels:

...combine the real and the imaginary, the remembered and the forgotten and, by means of narrative devices, imaginatively explore the workings of memory, thus offering new perspectives on the past. Such imaginative explorations can influence readers' understanding of past and thus refigure culturally prevailing versions of memory (334-335).

Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange Tree* is a novel that categorically offers an exquisite analysis of memory through specific mnemonic devices. The text narrates the ruminations of Zuhour, a young Omani student, who, although residing in Britain is being constantly tugged by memories of her deceased surrogate grandmother in Oman. The spooling narrative is interlaced with threads of stories, traumatic memories and accounts of unrequited love, artistically juxtaposed against the unfulfilled dreams and blissful experiences of other vivid characters like the grandmother and Zuhour's friend Suroor. The paper "Memoryscapes of Guilt, Grief and Loss in Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange Tree*" seeks to discern how the individual acts of remembrance of the three key figures help not just in exploring their individual cultural identity, but also depicts their lived experience in another place.

Zuhour, Suroor and Bint Aamir are the principal figures around whom the whole structure of the text revolves. The narrative encapsulates their individual incidents of guilt, grief and loss in such a manner that at the end of the narrative, it turns out to be a singular

compilation of memories that reconstruct the present. The paper enquires as to how these three aspects help in examining the text using the lens of memory studies. The unfolding of emotions helps chart out the various realms through which the characters make sense of their lives. What is remembered and how it is remembered is a significant aspect of study in memory studies. The individual's acts of remembrance are always linked to his/her cultural and historical background. In other words, an intersection of language, social groups, religion, land and family serve as the key sites of creating a sense of belongingness and affiliation to the group as a whole. The title of the novel is indeed a key symbol of recollecting memories about a person, land, social settings and much more. The bitter orange tree brings forth a rush of memories that force Zuhour to notice the rapid and fundamental changes that occurred in her life. The narrative begins with Zuhour waking up from her sleep with thoughts of remorse for having neglected her grandmother. This then loops her onto thoughts about her land, her home, her courtyard and from thence forth she arrives again to musing about her grandmother who according to her is sitting under the shade of the bitter orange tree "not remembering anything, not missing anything"(Alharthi 19). This dynamic process of intertwining present situations with past thoughts runs throughout the text .

Paul Basu mentions in his essay "Memoryscapes and Multi-Sited Methods" that memoryscapes are frameworks or sites of memory and they "include a plurality of different forms of mnemonic phenomena, ranging from individual acts of remembrance to transnational context" (130). This statement serves as the operative focal point of the paper. Grief, guilt and loss serve as the terrains through which the individual locations of remembrance are laid out before the readers. Memory studies falls within the purview of Culture Studies. Marek Tamm asserts in his article titled, "Semiotic Theory of Cultural Memory: In the Company of Juri Lotman" that Juri Lotman was instrumental in linking memory studies with cultural studies. According to Tamm, "For Lotman, a text was the basic element of culture and culture itself." (130) Culture constitutes every aspect of lived experience and recollections, this, in turn, provides a means to

evaluate, interpret and create the self and the society. The text under consideration elucidates how memories mirror the cultural context inherent in the fictional text. Julie Hansen mentions in the article titled “Theories of memory and the Imaginative Force of Fiction” that:

Memory is linked to both identity and the imagination, and therein lies the potential of fiction to help us understand the past and define our relation to it. Literature resides in a grey zone between history and memory, lived and imagined experience. Although it reflects and refracts the real world, fiction frees us from definitive truth claims about reality. Imagined pasts allow us to contemplate alternative interpretations, to question accepted historical truths and to problematise the relationship of society and individuals to past events and even memory itself. Thus, fiction can serve as a catalyst and forum for critical self-reflection. (198)

Ann Rigney has discerned five inter related roles that can be applied to all fictional narratives that serve as agents of cultural remembrance. According to Rigney literary works are “relay stations,” “stabilizers”, “catalysts”, “objects of recollection” and “calibrators”(350-351).The fictional narratives are only sites of remembrance but they are simultaneously strong objects of locating and exploring cultural nuances. Marilyn Booth translated Jokha Alharthi’s *Bitter Orange Tree* from Arabic to English. This fictional narrative- spiced with the personal experiences of Zuhour, an Omani student, who is trying to adjust and adapt to her new place of residence (Britain), but is also severely choked by thoughts of remorse for having neglected the pleas of her foster grandmother, Bint Aamir - embodies within it, the potential to unveil the collective memories through the individual’s act of reading and interpreting. The text presents a thorough reading of cultural memory through the character’s personal memories, conversations and discrete feelings of pain, loss, or guilt. These experiences provide the elementary framework for the protagonists to make sense of their lives.

Zuhour’s guilt runs through the text and it is interspersed with the feelings of grief experienced by her close friend Suroor (a Pakistani) alongside with the stories of forfeiture narrated by Bint Aamir. Zuhour, thus is suspended between the pressing thoughts of

Bint Aamir on one side and Suroor on the other. Zuhour's guilt, Suroor's grief and Bint Aamir's loss form the background of the narrative. The researcher has identified that these three elements surface through six cultural indices: body, food, clothes/ land, war, songs and dream. These recurrent images and their corresponding memory associations, are elaborated in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Memories are best evoked through the parts of the body or bodily secretions. The opening lines of *Bitter Orange Tree* reads thus, "I open my eyes suddenly and see her fingers" (Alharthi 3) The readers are immediately transported to the present reality that the speaker was asleep and wakes up at night and sees "the hard, black, crooked nail" (3) before her eyes only to leave her "wakeful with remorse" (3). This sense of guilt about having neglected or ignored someone who was very dear to her, pricks at Zuhour all throughout the next few chapters. The finger nails thus serve as a vehicle for transporting her thoughts back to her past and to her present (4). The opening chapter is titled "Fingers" and it resounds with Zuhour's feelings of "harsh, grating regret" (7) and its only by the close of the chapter, one realises that the fingers and finger nails brought back memories of her grandmother, whom she had left without offering a proper goodbye.

For Zuhour, the deformed fingers, or finger nails, serve as a constant reminder of the negligence and callousness she had meted upon her grandmother (29), while for her friend Suroor, who had blemish free "slender fingers" (7), was always grieving over her sister's infatuation. Suroor's sister, Kuhl, had secretly married a man who belonged to a lesser social status and Alharthi writes that Suroor, "was bearing the secret, dragging it around with her like a mutilated finger with a misshapen black nail." (8) Suroor gets a temporary respite from her grief when Zuhour refers to her grandmother. The story then drifts on to narrate the past of her grandmother, whose personal losses are deeply entrenched within Zuhour's guilt and Suroor's grief. Bint Aamir was Zuhour's surrogate grandmother but she shared an intimate bond with her. Zuhour recounts her grandmother's personal incidents of loss, neglect and disownment as evinced the following excerpt:

But she told the story countless times after that, and every time, one little tear from her single good eye would roll down her face.

Not because they'd been kicked out as two lone orphans but in memory of her brother who had not been able to endure the misery and pain...He died less than two years after their expulsion .(13-14)

These losses serve as sites of memories about lost land, forlorn love and unfulfilled dreams and desires .

The grandmother's personal narratives of loss form part of the fabric of memory narrative which entwines personal incidents to the history of the land. In the days soon after the First World War, famine, drought and poverty had made life miserable for the people of Oman and these tales are recounted in the following way:

Shipping was at a standstill in the Gulf, and goods were hard to come by....Drought struck. Famine .The irrigation canals dried up ,the date palms were dying, and whole villages emptied as people left home, heading to parts of the country where hunger was not so widespread or acute and life was more affordable, or to the east coast of Africa.(12)

Each time she retold the stories, it brought back memories of her brother who died of over exertion and misery. Memory thus can be identified to be a part of individual and collective experiences. Bint Aamir's stories and songs touched upon the good old days she enjoyed but, Zuhour mentions her sense of guilt for not paying attention to her stories. The story of Bint Aamir thus turns out to be a construct that clubs together the history of the land with the personal lives of the people. Eva Hoffman mentions in the chapter titled "The Long Afterlife of Loss" that, "Loss leaves a long trail in its wake. Sometimes, if the loss is large enough, the trail seeps and winds like invisible psychic ink through individual lives, decades and generations." (406) This is what happens to Zuhour, her present reminds her that her grandmother is no more and that she has lost a precious treasure. This grave reality arouses in her a sense of guilty consciousness so much that she remarks that, "The losses piled up, and there was nothing there to compensate for them. No compensation, Grandmother" (Alharthi 86)

Food serves as another substantial site of memory. Food brings thoughts of one's homeland and loved ones. Surplus of food or even lack of food has innumerable layers of associations like nostalgia,

warmth, health, love and much more. Dates and coffee are the staple ingredients of typical Omani life as portrayed in the text. Coffee reminds Zuhour of her grandmother's "fleshly wrinkled fingers"(18). Alharthi mentions about Bint Aamir that, "Through those many years of her long life...she never stopped serving the family." (61), taking care of the little children and planting trees in the orchard . The bitter orange tree was her favourite tree and soon after her death, "the bitter orange tree died"(86). Zuhour wakes up at night with a feeling of regret for not having fed her grandmother. She would walk around the streets of London but at the back of her mind she could sense a feeling of "unseeingness" . Bint Aamir narrates the story of her son's village to strangers but she never mentioned anything about her own village. The bitter orange tree mentioned in the title serves as a metaphor for the grandmother. She had planted the tree in Zuhour's father's courtyard and each time Zuhour thinks of the tree, she is drawn back to recollections of her grandmother, who used to sit below the tree, singing lullabies for Zuhour's infant brother and talking to her close friend Shaykha .

The next memory site is located in the land. Land is closely linked to the clothes and the people. Zuhour is from Oman and she is pursuing her higher studies in London, while her friend Suroor is from Pakistan. She remarks about how she "changed out" of her traditional clothes and "wore jacket and trousers" (21). Bint Aamir, the third figure in the text lived in Oman all through the eighty long years of her life and she "never shed the clothes that were native to the village she came from" (21). Alharthi writes that "in the days of hunger and inflation-a masarr did cost two entire qirsh" (23). Bint Aamir worked hard as a charcoal labourer to buy a head dress. Thoughts of the grandmother revert to Zuhour every night "in a foreign land" (29). She is plagued by the guilty feeling that she and her siblings "fled" from their grandmother (30). Zuhour gets disturbed when the corpse washers "stripped off" the grandmother's clothes while washing her dead body (67-68). She reconciles with the realisation that "...this memory is gone, and this is where the pure, calm sunset fades into nothing." (76). Suroor's grief was over the fact that her sister Kohl had fallen for a boy who belonged to "a remote village somewhere deep in the

interior of Pakistan” (8). Suroor’s sister and her husband did not fall for outward appearances. Zuhour is able to perceive the genuine love that existed between Suroor’s sister and her husband. Zuhour accepts their differences when she thinks of her grandmother whose love was unconditional and sincere. She could feel “powerful feelings of regret pulsing through” (138), even when she tries to justify her transgression as revealed in the following excerpt:

And then all those hours passed ,all those years, which we managed to fling away, conveniently forgetting what had opened our wounds in the first place.... But we did sometimes remind ourselves that those wounds had not gone away. Because after all, at some point in time... even before the passage of those hours and years... we had already been broken into pieces.(139)

In their chapter titled “Southeast Asia and the Politics of Contested Memories”, Kwok Kian-Woon and Roxana Waterson state that the many dimensions of memory can be marked as “trace”, “event” and “trajectory” and in each of these markers, “acts of recall play a crucial role” (331). *Bitter Orange Tree* presents all these three dimensions of memory through the incidents that happen to each of the characters. War serves as a poignant cultural marker throughout the text. In the chapter titled “Introduction: Memory Studies and its Companions” Siobhan Kattago writes that, “Since memories are fluid and change over time, what is remembered or forgotten follows different paths, trajectories and vectors.” (6) This statement holds true for the text under consideration as events or incidents of reminiscence are brought to light through the different experiences of the characters. Zuhour’s personal memories or associations run into her interactions with her friend, which correspondingly takes her back to her grandmother. There is a constant oscillation from the present to the past and through these, the readers get to know the time period of each experience. For example, Bint Aamir and her brother were born soon after the First World War, the terrible impact of the Second World War, the birth of Mansour, Zuhour’s father, after the end of the Second World War, the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam. War, although scantily interspersed within the narrative, serves not just as an indicator of time but also draws out associated memories of the war-torn Oman and how things change over the course of time.

Songs serve as another significant cultural memory site .Bint Amir looked after Zuhour and her siblings as her own grandchildren. Zuhour vividly re imagines the scene where Bint Amir used to sit under the shade of her favourite bitter orange tree and sing an Arabic lullaby to rock her baby brother off to sleep. Songs remind Bint Amir about her glorious past ,the days when she knew no poverty or destitution. The last chapter of the novel is a reminiscence narrative which describes the happy days of little Bint Amir, the rich horse man’s daughter. She enjoyed a carefree life in her childhood as revealed through the happy songs she sang along with her girlfriends. Zuhour recollects these songs when she has thoughts about her grandmother. Zuhour places events in her present life with the memories of her grandmother’s selfless love and care. This reconstruction of the songs serve as a means to reflect upon the famine that struck Oman, the extreme scarcity that followed soon after and the disruption of a small happy family where “The mother had not yet died, the father had not yet married another woman, and there were not yet so many hungry mouths clustered around him.”(211)

Remembering and forgetting is closely linked to memory and dreams serve as the apt metaphor to represent it. The following lines indicate that dreams reverberate throughout the text, in such a way that there is an overlap of reality and imagination

But just a moment before, I had been there: just before I opened my eyes and autumn plunked itself down in my consciousness .I was in her embrace, I was smelling her scent, a blend of civet musk, precious aloeswood oil and ancient soil. We were switching roles.... (6)

Zuhour would often see her grandmother in a dream, especially on nights that were freed of “grief, or memories” (5). Guilt surfaced in Zuhour’s dreams when she remembers that she “just went, in (her)cocky presumption that (she) could look the other way(7), while Bint Aamir dream “of the tiny plot of land she would tend,living off its proceeds, until her death” (14). It seems as if Zuhour eagerly expected the warm, loving presence of her deceased grandmother in her dreams. Each time when Bint Aamir failed to appear in her imaginings, Zuhour starts wondering if her grandmother had not

“forgiven” her for having gone away in spite of her constant pleas of asking her not to leave. Zuhour seeks medical aid to free herself from troublesome thoughts, but there too she did not reveal anything about the recurring dreams she had (81). She overcomes this agonising torture through self -reflection and self -realisation that made her feel “completely at ease, confident, composed, tranquil”(84). She even learns to step out from the discomfoting presence of Suroor, only to be closer to Suroor’s sister, Kohl. Dreams thus have a cathartic impact upon Zuhour. She learns to focus on life in a more distinct and sensible way by understanding that her grandmother had gone far away.

Alharthi’s narrative pattern also augments the remembrance element inherent in the story. The recounting of the past heals the disturbed present of the protagonist. The narrative moves on like a memoir but it deftly mingles memories and actuality of three women who are webbed together due to mutual affection and affinity .Of the three female figures in the text, the deceased grandmother stands out as the key figure whose memories elicit in Zuhour thoughts about the real unconditional love, relationship, sincerity, gratitude, self-esteem and loss of beloved ones. Almost all the early chapter titles invoke references about the grandmother’s life incidents. Zuhour’s bereavement is revealed in the following lines:

She had gone. She abandoned me. She left me behind, thinking backward through succession of time: winter, snow, autumn, spring...and all that time, she didn’t come back ,not even once....All I wanted was to make one little swerve ,to take just one step back: and then, from there, I would not *go away*.(28-29)

Zuhour learns to accept the death of her grandmother and her recounting of the past incidents are slowly altered by narrations of how she bears the incidents in her present life. Zuhour musters the strength to move on but also conscious of the wounds that they carried forth in their onward journey .

The whole narrative begins in London but shifts to Oman intermittently. This segueing shift becomes another memory scape. Zuhour ,an Omani, has arrived at the British University to pursue her higher studies but everything about the new locale brings forth in her memory, images of her home land. She is acclimatizing herself to the

new surroundings but “grating remorse” (7) pierces her consciousness when she remarks, “What the hand of fate had written could not be unwritten”(6). Zuhour mingles with her new found friends and offers sensible solutions for their personal issues. However, alongside these interlacing incidents, she presents a vivid caricature of her foster grandmother, her family history, the past history of her country. This process of reviving memories of the land is a significant aspect of trans-national memory studies. “Migration and diaspora facilitate or demand more fixed senses of ‘the homeland’ and more fluid negotiations of who one is and where one has come from” (Inglis150). Zuhour’s memories of her homeland help her reconstruct her present scenario and make new relations. She invites Imran to her village, to “see the bitter orange tree” (Alharthi 120), to notice the mountain peaks and to experience a genuine taste of love and bliss. Zuhour has left her country behind and started life anew in another country, but memories of her homeland still remain fresh. Zuhour’s thoughts of her native place cannot be defined as nostalgia, it’s a feeling of immense regret for not having “said goodbye to her”(208) unassuming grandmother .

The remarkable aspect of *The Bitter Orange Tree* is that whatever Zuhour remembers is entwined with her emotions and personal commitment towards her grandmother, her siblings, her parents, her friends and others. Her recollections turn out to be an attempt at reconstructing her present. The cultural indices selected from the text help in observing how a reconstruction of present takes place through these reminiscences. It is a kind of self-oriented memory narrative. Through this verbal narrative, the reader gets to know about Zuhour and all people she associates with. A construction of the self takes place through these spoken words. This self-voice keeps changing with the shift in context and locale, but nowhere do we sense a tone of bitter accusation directed towards the other. Emotions form an integral part of memory narratives and Alharthi’s Zuhour is emotionally bound to her grandmother and this serves as the base for her to review her feelings of guilt ,Suroor’s grief and Bint Amir’s loss. Zuhour’s memories become a story of her life, a telling and re telling of what happened forms the narrative of the text.

To conclude, *Bitter Orange Tree* is a fictional narrative, which has within its frame, specific memory loci which helps bridge the past and present experiences with that of the individual and collective memory. Ann Rigney writes in the essay titled “Cultural Memory Studies: Mediation, Narrative and the Aesthetic” that,

... fictional narratives have a broad appeal and, judging by patterns of distribution and translation, tend to travel relatively easily across national and linguistic borders. This means that they are also important agents in the cultural transfer of memories from one community to another, and in the building of imaginative bridges between communities through the workings of prosthetic memory. (74)

Keeping the aforementioned statement in mind, the paper has elaborated how memory serves as a commentary upon the land, the people and the cultural variations. The text, serves as a means to bridge communities and lands, thereby paving way for redefining, shaping and negotiating not just “issues of memory,” but also, as Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad remark in the “Introduction” of their edited book *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, focusses upon “pressing issues of cultural values, national identity and social integration...” (5).

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