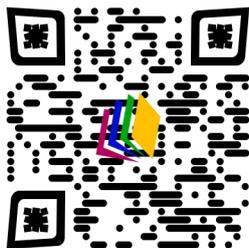


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Museum of Memories: Significance of Cultural Artefacts and Texts in Reconstructing and Narrativizing the Past

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ABSTRACT:

Memory is like a museum. It is our own personal repository and holds the key to our past. To unlock and understand the mysteries of the past, it is important thereby to access those arenas of our mind where the past has been buried. Our memory in this case helps us to preserve and understand the past. Walking down the memory lane, we not only re-live and re-experience the past but it also helps us to re-construct, re-constitute history and identity and shape the future. Narrativity then, plays a significant role for it is only through narrative that a memory or a past history can be re-examined. In this context then, it can be rightly said that memory is narrative and narrative is memory. Cultural artefacts and texts are the tropes through which memory and narrative can be analysed thereby allowing us to investigate history, re-examine it, narrativize it and possibly come up with an alternative history that is different from the naturalised history. This paper intends to examine the role and significance of memory and look into the theorisation of cultural artefacts and texts as repositories of memories both political and cultural in nature. For this purpose, it will examine the role of food, photographs, museums, family heirloom and texts particularly Nandita Haksar's *The Exodus Is Not Over* and *Bhimayana*, the graphic biography of Dr Ambedkar developed by Navayana. The final part of the paper will focus on examining how in acting as repository of memories, the cultural artefacts and texts reconstruct history.

KEY WORDS: Memory, Narrative, Cultural artefacts, History, Identity, Memory Studies, Nostalgia, Caste, Ambedkar.

The past holds many secrets as it is famously said. To unlock and understand the mysteries of the past, it is important thereby to access those arenas of our mind where the past has been buried. Our memory in this case helps us to preserve and understand the past. Memory is about "encoding, storage and retrieval" (Ross and Wang 2010, 401). In this act of retrieval, we not only re-experience the past but it also helps us to re-construct, re-constitute history and identity and shape the future. Narrativity in this context, plays a significant role for it is only through

narrative that a memory or a past history can be re-examined. In this context then, it can be rightly said that memory is narrative and narrative is memory. Cultural artefacts and texts in this context helps us to reconstruct and narrativize the past and shape the future for they act as chronicles to life. This paper intends to examine the role and significance of memory and look into the theorisation of cultural artefacts and texts as repositories of memories both political and cultural in nature. For this purpose, it will examine the role of food, photographs, museums, family heirloom and texts. The final part of the paper will focus on examining how in acting as repository of memories, the cultural artefacts and texts reconstruct history.

Artefacts of memories

Memory is like a museum which acts as a repository. Walking down the memory lane is like a mental time travel. It is an act of re-remembering, re-experiencing and re-living our bygone past. Memory and narrative thereby play a crucial role in reconstructing and narrativizing the past. Memory and narrative both “describe ways that an individual or a group represents a version of the past in the present, often for the purpose of shaping a desired future” (Linde 2015, 1).

Very often, a certain object, photograph or even a chocolate takes us on a trip down the memory lane. We get transported to a bygone time specifically because our special memories are attached with that particular object. Hippocampus in this regard is very important. Hippocampus is located in the temporal lobe of each cerebral cortex of our brain and it helps in regulating our emotion, learning, motivation and memory. It not only helps in forming long-term memories that can be consciously recalled but also helps in forming autobiographical memories. Thus, it is due to hippocampus that certain objects manage to trigger specific memories in us. In this context then,

it would not be wrong to surmise that objects, cultural artefacts and texts constitute life. They act as keepers of memory and history and its preservation thereby is important to understand history, culture and shed light on those aspects of historical reality which have never really been acknowledged by sanitised records. Such objects and artefacts also provides psychological and emotional support to aid with the construction of memories and in times of life’s major transition, they act as testimony to people’s narratives. These objects thus transmit culture with them, creating and reinforcing cultural norms so much so that it enters the collective consciousness and becomes part of collective memory. These shared memories then “contributes to an understanding of both individual and collective identity” (Mellor 2001, 63).

Cultural artefacts as Memory Keeper

Cultural artefact, from the Latin word ‘arte’ meaning ‘by skill’ and ‘factum’ meaning ‘thing made’, becomes important because it sheds light on history and the memorial past. Cultural artefacts thus connect us with the past and shapes the future. These artefacts thus, help us to re-produce memories. The desire and act of re-producing and re-calling of what is gone forever brings in a feeling of nostalgia, a nostalgia that at times people desperately cling on to. Food, in this context plays a powerful role in human memory and can examine cultural and biological truths.

Humans have very distinct memories related to food-some are good and some are bad. Even a chocolate that we might have had as a child can bring back many memories and transport us to a glorious past. The taste, smell, texture of food can be extremely invigorating and bring back memories not just of the food but also of the place and the setting where we might have had the food. Food thereby acts as a powerful trigger of our deepest memories and dawns

in us a nostalgia, a longing to go back to the past to re-experience it. In this context, the community feasts, special foods prepared for special occasion like festivals, birthdays etc. not only act as catalyst in triggering memories but even helps in preserving culture and constructing identity. If food acts as the catalyst in triggering memories, then perhaps this is the reason why migrants or diasporic communities living abroad prefer to have the kind of food that is closer to their roots. Nandita Haksar in her book *The Exodus Is Not Over* brilliantly encapsulates this. The book depicts real life account of the first generation of migrant workers from the Northeast region, especially Manipur in the metropolitan cities of India and abroad. The book examines the struggles of Tangkhul migrant workers who are generally employed in the service sector but their contribution is hardly acknowledged by society and instead face discrimination. *The Exodus Is Not Over* brilliantly encapsulates the everyday struggle, rampant sexism and racism that Northeast men and women have to face in metropolitan cities of India. The feeling of alienation and insecurity push Northeast men and women to ghettoize themselves in selected pockets of the city like Munirka in Delhi or Kalina in Mumbai but one space where they find comfort in is the space of food. Not only do they indulge in community eating but they have created a 'mini Manipur' wherever they reside. "Here they have created a world of their own, where one can find shops with vegetables flown in from the Northeast, smoked meats, dry fish, fermented foods such as bamboo shoots, soya beans and the famous ngari (fermented fish)," writes Haksar (3). It is food that keeps them connected to their roots, it is this personalised space 'a mini Manipur' that gives them a space of 'home' away from their real home. Food thereby acts as the route that triggers in them memories of their original home thereby helping them to re-experience, re-construct and narrativize the past. Their act of community eating and having shops laden with

traditional Manipuri foods can thus be seen as an attempt to preserve their culture and identity and enlighten others about their rich tradition.

If food can trigger specific memories, then photographs too take us on a visual trip down the memory lane. Ed Sheeran's famous song "Photograph" perfectly attests to this fact:

We keep this love in a photograph
 We made these memories for ourselves
 Where our eyes are never closing
 Hearts are never broken
 And time's forever frozen still"

Time indeed stands still in photographs. Photographs are the memoirs that authenticate our experience and are a survival sign of events. They tell a story and its narrative thereby helps in its existence. Perhaps this is the reason why we click pictures on our trips and holidays. The picture helps us to freeze a particular moment of our life and when we view the picture later, it helps us to re-experience the memorial past and build a specific narrative related to it. Photographs also brings in a sense of nostalgia as highlighted in Haksar's book. Atim's brother, Yaokhalek in a sense of nostalgia, desires for his homeland, Manipur. Life for him in Delhi, as depicted in the book is tough and he longs for the paddy fields, greenery, mountains and fresh air of his parent state. Thus, when one of his friends sends a "photograph of himself in a paddy field in Ukhrul and Yaokhalek could, for a few minutes, go back to the life he had once known: a life which was tough but simple" (Haksar 2016, 157). In this context then, his friend's photograph helps Yaokhalek to re-construct the past for his present and create a narrative based on it accordingly.

If photographs take us on a specific memory lane, then varied cultural artefacts in museums takes us on a journey of collective memory and shared history.

Museums throw light on those aspects of history which not only enlighten us about the past but examination of it helps us to re-experience, re-constitute and re-construct the past. Its narrativization then helps to re-write history. Museums thereby contains those artefacts of memory which helps in connecting with the past, understand it and examine its influence on the present and the past. In accumulating the past, museum also dilates collective memory and thereby involves the community and guides its activity as well. Museums thus have an instructing influence and aims to bring “an appropriately ‘civilising’ model into the life of the community. However, its present mandate is much more likely to include the capacity to reflect, and to reflect upon, the life of the community in which it is situated” (Mellor 2001, 60). Museums thus, are the custodian of many kinds of memory, where every object is infused with the memory of the person/s to whom it belonged before finding its way to the museum. A displayed object in a museum then “serves as a tangible reminder of the journey travelled from origin to museum display, as well as being a reassurance to the viewer of the reality of that journey as well as its own history” (Mellor 2001, 66). The Partition Museum in Amritsar and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC serve as a grim reminder of the untold sufferings of people during partition and holocaust. The Partition museum’s exhibits including the numerous refugee artefacts, artworks, archival materials and rich record of oral histories validates the anguish and bewilderment of the victims and survivors of Partition. Likewise, the United States Holocaust Memorial throws light on the systemic, state sponsored pogrom of around six million Jews by Hitler and his Nazi regime. The museum houses exhibit like photos and albums depicting life before, during and after the Holocaust, concentration camp uniforms worn by inmates with its striped blue lines

narrating a tale of their stripped life, identity tags issued to Jewish men, travelling shaving brush container from a concentration camp, documentaries of survivors and so on. Museums thereby are the memory keepers. In preserving the history and culture, museum triggers memories of the past for the survivors and act as their traumatic testimonies. Each and every object in a museum tells a story. Its narrativity thereby not only helps the survivors to re-experience the past but allows an opportunity to others to re-experience history, examine it, re-construct it and narrate those aspects of history which have not been acknowledged yet in order to invent the future.

Museums thereby, help in creating identities. Like museums, family heirlooms like jewellery pieces, furniture, radio and even television helps in preserving and creating identity. Family heirlooms helps connect one to his lineage and thereby allows him to be part of family history. When Kate Middleton got married to Prince William, she wore a tiara that is a family heirloom. It was bought by King George VI for his wife Elizabeth in 1936 three weeks before his accession to the British throne. The tiara has seen three generations of the British Royal family and as a family heirloom then, the tiara not only connects one to the past but helps in re-experiencing the past and be a part of a narrative which is not only re-constructing the past but a narrative which is still in making. Family heirlooms thus acts as people’s debt to their past through which they express their moral continuity with the past.

Textual narratives as Memory Keeper and History Maker

If cultural artefacts bear a testimony to the ancient past, then texts too presents a narrative and it is this narrative that gives a glimpse into the past and presents the way of life in the past. The Holy

scriptures, the four Vedas- Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda, and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* forming the Hindu Itihasa, *Manusmriti* and so on chronicle a way of life and act as a key to understand the past. History is fuzzy and ever evolving. These texts act as memoirs and reading them unlocks the mysteries of the past. It thereby, allows us not only to examine the past but also re-construct the past and develop a narrative that will help us to re-examine the fuzziness of history and also re-constitute history and identity from contemporary perspective so as to shape the future. Texts are a narrative in itself. Its words woven in threads of emotions often arising from the writer's deep memories transports us too into the world of our past. Autobiographical or biographical narrative in this context enters the collective consciousness of people and becomes a part of collective identity and history.

Bhimayana, a graphic biography of Bhimrao Ambedkar developed by Navayana is one such text that not only depicts incidents in the life of Dr. Ambedkar but in narrating those incidents, it also highlights years of oppression and discrimination faced by the Dalits owing to the Indian caste system. The Hindu social order is based on the caste system which is a closed system of stratification, where a person's social status is determined by his birth. The origin of the caste system dates back to Rig Veda according to which the division of people dates back to the time of creation: the Brahmin was born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriya was born from Brahma's arms, the Vaishya from his thighs and the Shudra from his feet. Being born from the feet of Brahma, the Shudras thereby are destined to serve the three upper varnas. The concept of untouchability as such in Hindu social and religious thought has been premised upon the concept of Karma and rebirth stating that one is born into an untouchable/ lower caste because of his sins committed in his

previous birth. Hence, even the mere touch of an untouchable is considered pollutant by the higher caste people. Relegated to dehumanised position, the untouchables were assigned tasks and menial jobs that were considered 'polluting' by the higher castes such as sweeping, tanning leather, manual scavenging and so on. Forced to live separately, and in the most degraded settlements often in outskirts, the untouchables were denied access to public water, temples and were even forbidden to hear sacred texts.

Bhimayana, provides a scathing attack on the Hindu caste system exposing its many hypocrisies and debunks the myth around which the Hindu social order created itself. The book then, is a grim reminder of the inhumane practices being followed in India, which denies a person of low caste a life of dignity as is highlighted in these lines from the book: "For the touchable folk, one set of rules, for us another. No water for us from public taps. No haircuts from the barber. No washing by the washermen. They wouldn't touch our clothes, even if we paid double. Animals enjoy more freedom" (Natarajan and Anand 2011, 25). The book is divided into three parts- Water, Shelter and Travel- and each one of them highlights the perpetual discrimination and relentless sufferings of people born into low caste. Water, shelter and travel are things that humans cannot survive without. These three sections then highlight how untouchables have to face discrimination at each and every step of their life. Although, the book is based on Dr Ambedkar's life but the incidents and sufferings depicted in the book reflect the life of each and every Dalit. Poignant among one such incident as depicted in the book is when in 1901, a ten-year old little Ambedkar had to plead to his school peon and the teacher to give him some water to drink. Being an untouchable, he is not allowed to touch the tap. His anger and frustration is aptly highlighted when he says, "Boys

at the well, even beasts at the trough, may drink till they burst. But the village turns a desert when I try to quench my thirst” (Natarajan and Anand 2011, 23). The duplicity of the rigid caste system and social order become all the more palpable when we realise that a Mahar can be employed to build a water tank but cannot drink from it: “There, my father in Goregaon is helping build a water tank for famine-stricken people who would die if it weren’t for his work. And here, I can’t get water to drink at school” (Natarajan and Anand 2011, 25). If the ‘touch’ of an untouchable is impure enough to destroy the sanctity of upper caste people and all things associated to them, then why is that a Mahar is employed to build and touch the water tank in the first place. The caste system then is nothing but a hypocritical division of labour where certain sections of people on account of being labelled as lower caste and untouchables are marginalised so that the menial jobs and poor wages can only be reserved to this category of lower caste people, thereby destroying any chance of their upliftment both economically and socially.

Bhimayana thus, not only gives an insight into the life of Dr Ambedkar but also refreshes traumatic memories of the Dalit victims who too went through similar experiences. The book through its powerful graphic narration also enlightens people about the injustices meted out to the Dalits. Reading the text thereby, helps to look at history from the perspective of the ‘Other’. It thus helps us to re-construct history and narrativize the past and also provides a platform to voice the concern of the voiceless, which otherwise do not find acknowledgment in naturalised records and history.

Cultural artefacts and texts are museum of memories. Reading it, observing it, then not only not only leads to re-live those memories but also offers an insight into the economic, political and social fabric of a

society. History has been manipulated for years through cultural artefacts and texts. These cultural artefacts and texts however, also allows us to examine and reflect on those aspects of history which have never been considered ‘real’. The artefacts and texts then, are credible tropes to re-examine history, re-construct it and narrativize it.

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