

The Cultural Disembodiment of the Demented Self in Selected Postcolonial Indian Novels

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Abstract

The displacement of the human self as a culturally disembodied subject in periods of socio-economic change, political crisis and personal turmoil sometimes disrupts the rhythm of mind / body performance in the selected narratives situated at a historical locus of protest and conflict in a postcolonial nation state. Shah Alam Khan's novel *Man with the White Beard* accounts the communal riots in Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination and fictionally correlates it with Godhra based disturbances in Gujarat as a cause for memory lapses and disembodiment of the central characters and cultural amnesia for the society at large. Anuradha Sharma Pujari's *Jalsobi* is set against the post-independent socio-economic changes in Assam which are juxtaposed alongside the personal turmoil of the central female protagonist who embraced death after a struggle with dementia. The paper locates dementia as the structuring device of disembodiment of the self from the society in the backdrop of conflicting socio-political conditions in these novels.

Keywords: Cultural Memory; Dementia; Disembodiment; *Meconnaissance*; Public Amnesia.

Introduction: Dementia and Disembodiment

The displacement of the demented human self as a culturally disembodied subject in periods of socio-economic crisis, political change and personal turmoil causes disruption of the rhythm of mind / body performance (Bleakley et al 266). This internal conflict of the self is studied in this paper from a postcolonial medical humanities perspective by a "contrapunctual" reading of the assumed western dominance in medical studies (Naidu 739). In the chosen narratives progression of dementia in Shah Alam Khan's *Beezi* and Goldy and Anuradha Sarma Pujari's *Subarnajyoti*,

is operational as a heuristic for negotiating the fractured postcolonial self of the individual, in collision with both self and society which needs intervention beyond the purview of universalized domain of Western medical humanities. Kate Swafer in the foreword to the book *Literature and Dementia* writes that the literary genres like novels, drama and short fiction display a varied range of responses to mental illness like dementia having both tragic as well as comic propensities, that can offer literary models with a panoply of emotions like humour, courage and resilience.(x) It is an undeniable fact that dementia is a global issue, and a wide-ranging subject involving human tragedy, mental conflict and social burden that can be best addressed by literature along with disciplinary practices of individual and social health. Literary representations of dementia problematize its biomedical discourses, which brings forth the question of looking at established hegemonies from a critical and creative perspective that locates the disentanglement of the self with society and fracturing of subjectivity in the process of cultural disembodiment.

Disembodiment is a nullification of life unable to be sustained by the Cartesian mind/body dualism which is valued only in death from a nihilistic perspective. Disembodiment in modern psychological practices is a rejection of the traditional mind/body dualism. Camille Mori in a historical discussion on the clinical approaches to disembodiment in psychology and psychotherapy talks about the mindfulness based approach to cognitive therapy provided by psychologists as an example of disembodiment in cognitive tradition (Mori 2022). The crux of this paper is the disembodiment of the respective demented personas-Beezi and her grandson Goldy in *Man with the White Beard* and Subarnajyoti in *Jalsobi* with the cultural moment of the here and now and the collective memory of the past through internal displacement, nocturnal disease and naturalized death. Dementia is often seen as a kind of inexorable physical and social decline in later years of life as in Beezi and Subarnajyoti and so is negatively termed as living death. The interactive role of personhood, self and memory needs to be disentangled in understanding narratives of dementia (Leibing 2006). The paper would partially attempt to do so by an interdisciplinary approach to memory and mental health studies in reading the selected postcolonial texts.

Methodological Approach of Memory and Mental Health Studies

Collective memory, a term derived from the coinage “*memoire collective*” (Halbwachs 1925), is crucial to the understanding of public amnesia. Cultural memory a corollary of the notion of collective memory is distinct

from social or individual memory as it exists in disembodied forms. The increasing studies on post-war memory discourses often enmeshed memory and dementia with ideas of killing and racial eradication associated with the Holocaust. Comparable to the story under analysis J. Bernlef, a Dutch writer's account entitled *Out of Mind* (1984) is a first person account of dementia that linked cognitive impairment diseases like dementia with the Holocaust and extermination (Zimmermann 75). The language of impairment is often used as a descriptive marker of the postcolonial nation where "disability" as a social and a cultural construct "shape the politics of decolonization and postcolonialism" (Cleall 12). The lunatic self of Manto's immortal character Bishan Singh erased with the traces of individual memory becomes the potential 'other' in the denial of his nationality as a legal citizen of the either country. He "stood in a no man's land on his swollen legs like a colossus", (Manto 18). He was a significant other to the process of distribution of nations who refused to move to India from Pakistan because of his obvious Sikh identity. The tragic propensity of Manto's demented character Bishan Singh in the tale "Toba Tek Singh" heightens the traumatic memories of the partition holocaust that divided the Indian subcontinent in the name of religion. The violence inflicted to the Sikhs after Indira Gandhi's assassination and the later change of events at Godhra in *Man with the White Beard* selected for discussion is a sad reminder of the after effects of the partition holocaust.

Lunatics or misfits are not fixed and despite of their instability they are very real and material rather than linguistic constructions (Garland-Thomson 593). The evidence-memory dichotomy runs the risk of a fractured schizophrenia which further problematizes the idea of looking at the collective memory of nations through the archives of memories while dealing with memory based studies. As traditional memory fades, one has to gather the physical records through testimonials, images and palpable symptoms of what were lost (Lowenthal 57). Thus the role of dementia based literature in looking through the silences and gaps of collective memory may have a crucial role carrying forward the colonial burden of being what Fanon calls "wretched" lives. The study of cultural memory and social forgetting is a contested realm where certain stories are privileged while others are marginalized at the discretion of the one who collects. The abstract nature of the word archive can also lead to confusion and conjure conspiracy and even exclusivity with respect to the study of memory in Dementia. It is an undeniable fact that dementia is a global issue, and a wide-ranging subject involving human tragedy, mental conflict and social burden that can be best addressed by literature along with disciplinary practices of individual and social health. The need to emphasize on the justifiable and

the powerful nature of an archive is an essential requirement in archival texts in literature more specifically while coordinating the link of archives to memory (Brown 86). In this regard mention may be made of what Derrida described about the desire for archives as one of “forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory” and further reminds that the powerful meaning of the archive is essential to the idea of forgetting as much as it is required for the need of remembering a particular context (Derrida11). In narratives related to remembering and forgetting there is a risk of archival knowledge being mishandled and manipulated which may compromise with moral and ethical responsibilities while dealing with mentally challenged individuals. The decline of Beezi’s memory in *Man with the White Beard* is correlated to this idea. The evidence- memory dichotomy runs the risk of a fractured schizophrenia which further problematizes the idea of looking at the collective memory of nations through the archives of memories while dealing with memory based studies. As traditional memory fades, one has to gather the physical records through testimonials, images and palpable symptoms of what were lost (Lowenthal 57). Tess Maginess writes that the social environment has a significant impact on people based on their personal dignity and interpersonal aspects related to care giving. *Jalsobi* deeply probes into the nuances of a care giver’s narrative through Malini. Many critics focusing on disability studies counter and challenge the trope of dementia as a constructed narrative of social decay however the social and geo-political reasons affecting the disease cannot be undermined. In all the narratives taken into account in this paper the characters are mostly unaware of their mental decline. They come closer to what Suman Seth refers as being a liminal, hybrid subject produced “at the interstices of an implacable opposition between Western science and native unreason” (Seth 377). Thus the role of dementia based literature as seen in the novels *Man with the White Beard* and *Jalsobi* for looking through the silences and gaps of collective memory have a crucial social role.

Discussion: Dislocation and Public Amnesia in *Man with the White Beard*

Man with the White Beard is a political satire written in an undertone of parody. Shah Alam Khan a doctor by profession in his first novel *Man with the White Beard* depicts a concoction of the dismissed narratives of non-descript minority discourses. The novel is not what it apparently projects. The Muslim author here is not a representative of the Muslim culture. By dislocating the author figure in Michael Foucault’s terminology in “What is an author” and Roland Barthes’ reassertion of the same authorial dislocation in “The Death of the Author” the author becomes non essential

in view of the subject matter of the text. The story in the novel focalizes round a fictional Sikh family which was fatally affected by the emerging bloodshed and violence in Delhi inflicted to the Sikhs following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. The narrative resonates the intermittent sorrow of the religious chasm created by Radcliffe line of the Partition dividing the nation into two halves designed for the benefit of the colonial masters and the men at power. The narrative resonates the intermittent sorrow of the religious chasm created by Radcliffe line of the Partition dividing the nation into two halves designed for the benefit of the colonial masters and the men at power. The narrative speaks at length about the sadism of the reeling hatred collectively imbibed in the mass psychology in modern India which is further politically engineered and reignited with mob violence in the most negligible communal agendas based on fake or real news while still carrying forward the colonial burden of being what Fanon calls "wretched" lives.

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of care-giving and affect other family members (Ramsay 223). The novel surrealistically presents the character of Goldy, Kulwanti's adopted son with a rare condition similar to that of Kulwanti's mother although he was born after two decades following the aftermath of the 1984 riots. Goldy is haunted by a strangely weird nightmare in which four characters like those of a street play come to traumatize him in his sleep every day. The demented self is a stranger who does not resemble in any way the culturally embodied self from before (Ramsay 227). Goldy's dream narrative medically represents the subjective fracture and estrangement caused by mental aporias.

The idiom of insomnia has been used by several postmodern writers as a part of their non linear narrative technique. The author creates a Marquez like sense of fear in the charting of the problem of insomnia that affected on a parallel plane the three characters- Kulwanti, her adopted son Goldy and Kulwanti's demented mother Beezi. The narratology of the haunting saga of historical violence has been envisioned through the postmodern technique of magic realism by writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Guntur Grass, Salman Rushdie and others. Shah Alam's narrative is more scientific rather than magic realist in representing the alternative reality of the dreams that emanated out of a deranged mind in its subconscious state. Memory is a deeply situational social construct which offers a challenging analysis of treating dreams (Hawlbwachs 1925). The novel's narrative structure is a decadent social mirror of documented realism reflected through the prism of the faded memories and the stream of unconscious dreams of the characters. These archives of memory are dementia ridden and fragile in their very intrinsic. The narrative takes the advantage of using coincidences which are loosely connected. For example, Kulwanti coincidentally connects with Khaleda, a Muslim woman whom she had met at the steps of a Gurudwara. Khaleda Patel was revealed to be a survivor of the violence against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 following the Godhra train incident.

Along with the trope of the erasure of cultural memory, the narrative subverts the concept of the symbolic power of the oriental belief of talisman as an alternative traditional medicine in treating mental ailments. A talisman, cultivated in Arabic, Greek and Latin in 1st millennium and entered European vernaculars in the 17th century, is an object that effects change at a distance by means of its visually apprehensible form (Anderson 2023). The traumatic dreams of Goldy remained despite his visits to Nizamuddin Dargah along with the visits to the Sikh langars and Nanak Sahib Sat Sang Gurudwara in New Delhi. These talismanic attempts failed as an

alternative traditional medicine to his continued 'nocturnal cauchemars'. The author here comes close to become what Said calls a modern Oriental scholar who takes part "in its own Orientalizing" (Said 325). The absoluteness of the hounding dream narrative was ensconced to the memory of Goldy as a regular presence which evaded the divulgations of his identity as an existing entity leading to "*meconnaissance*". The much sought after resolution for Goldy's nightmare about the misrecognized sardonic man with the long white beard laid interconnected with the city of Ahmedabad. Kulwanti during her visit to Ahmedabad with Godly, Khaleda and Topo could arrive at the cognizance about Goldy's dream amidst the relics of the disembodiment of the culture of the Muslims in the Gulberg Society. This exterminated culture collectivizing the loss of memory and identity for Goldy had hitherto embodied "collective effervescence" (Durkheim 1995) in the ghettos of what the author termed as *modified* Ahmedabad.

The systematic erasure of the Mohammedan culture in the Gulberg Society was a tragic reality that operated at the public level of cultural disembodiment. The novel suggested that the genocide of the Muslims by political patronage in February 2002 has become a part of the collective amnesia in the public memory of the nation. Forgetting insubstantially contributes to memory by erasure of events, often without any considerable base of rhetorical, political or ethical action in its own capacity. Bradford Vivian considers forgetting to be a socially productive cultural practice in public affairs (Vivian 9). Here the public memory of the Gulberg society is officially erased by the ruling government as a part of the majority jargon which the novel tries to dismantle as well as foreground as a sign of continuity. Existentialist philosopher Nietzsche considers the human need of holding on to public memory in remembering everything as a necessary sign of cultural decline. By focusing on the need of forgetting he cites that there is a certain sense of insomnia in ruminating history which is culturally destructive (Nietzsche10). Further, postmodern critic Lyotard talks of the withdrawal of the real in connection with the politics of memory that operates at the level of power (Lyotard79). The transitional politics in India based on hate has allusions within the fictional base of the novel. Moreover, the situation of memory and forgetting in the narrative is a faint reminder of celebrated Czech novelist Milan Kundera's novel *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* which foregrounds memory's necessity in resisting power notwithstanding its role as a mode of political oppression with respect to the notion of the political nature of collective memory. Orality is a forceful way of retrieving evidence of things past. There is a lack of forceful oral narrative in the novel. The recapturing of the evidences of violence throughout the plot often reads like a documentary report instead of fic-

tion. However, the representation of a demented mind in trauma through Kulwanti and Goldy's subconscious shows with ingenuity the correlation of mental health with literature and life as an essential part of medical humanities. The rarified memories of the culturally embodied self from before inspire the family caregivers to persist in caring for the culturally disembodied self transformed by dementia (Ramsay 227). The demented characters are never shown to be treated with neglect in the narrative. Dementia in the characterization of Beezi shows it as a peaceful mental condition where one is unaware of the external filth of the human world:

"She had always been gentle with children and even as dementia was eating up her brain, she had never shown any signs of being violent. It appeared that violence could take birth only in a healthy brain. A demented brain forgets to hate, or be violent. No wonder in dementia lays the peace of this globe!" (*Man with the White Beard* 168)

Memory is an essential dimension of personhood and the loss of same leads to unmitigated tragedy and loss. The psychiatrists define dementia in medical terms as a form of mental degeneration beginning with loneliness and depression leading to fatal consequences. Besides the individual dimensions of dementia, Shah Alam Khan's narrative is also a political satire having a therapeutic closure of peaceful progress following the resolution of Goldy's identity crisis and Khaleda's safe resettlement at Delhi. *Meconnaissance* operates in the narrative with respect to Goldy's identity; born as a Muslim but due to communal chaos and displacement he had to be raised in a Sikh family by Kulwanti. The climax of the narrative is built up with Goldy's realization that the sardonic man in his dreams having the white beard was none other but the newly appointed Indian prime minister in 2014. The deconstruction of a public persona through paradox is a postmodern convention that the author applies in his text. This paradoxical figure's connection with the 2002 Gujarat riots becomes apparent but dismissed at the very moment of discovery. The narrative symbolically highlights Kulwanti's systematic erasure of the memory of this figure through false evidences and masquerading of accounts about the Shah Alam refugee camp at Gujarat and Goldy's origin.

The case of public amnesia operates in this novel when Kulwanti forcefully suppresses her active memory to embrace partial dementia arising out of political crisis. The narrative conveniently closes without Goldy coming in terms with the knowledge about his birth or his Mohammedan legacy and his orphan status caused by the Gujarat crisis which served as public amnesia. Though the novel is not a powerful counter-narrative in resis-

tance or fully engages in the marginalized dementia patients at individual level, it interrogates the politics of suppression while challenging the threats to the secular impulses of the Indian nation-state through a brief take into medical humanities. Besides the causes of cultural disembodiment and individual displacement through mental ailments, the novelist uses the troupe of dementia as a postcolonial /cultural metaphor of forgetting the hope for a unified future in a diversified land like India where the minorities and weaker sections persist in their journey of progress rather than seeking en route to a foreign land for cultural rehabilitation. The author reiterates his painful belief that the peace of the globe lies in public amnesia within an established postcolonial social order.

Meconnaissance, Aging and Social Decline in Jalsobi

In the other fictional account *Jalsobi*, a mimetic attempt is made by the narrator Anuradha Sharma Pujari in deciphering the mental conditions of memory loss of her protagonist's mother Subarnajyoti Devi, a smoldering matriarch who had held the family together dauntlessly despite all odds but failed to her own memory during the last years of her life. The novel, originally written in Assamese language, uses the technique of the diary in forwarding the analysis. The pages of the diary, ineligible in meaning as its ink become crucial in the symptomatic analysis of Subarnajyoti's condition under psychiatric regulations of medical treatment. The backdrop of the independence movement and the post independence changes, chief being the changes in the tea gardens in Assam are sufficiently covered in the novel through the familial relationships of rise and fall, friendships and feuds of Subarna Devi's home and the feudal decline affecting her microcosm. Nizara Hazarika reads this novel from the lens of gendered gerontology and observes that as Subarnajyoti's "dementia progresses, forgetfulness, confusion, fear and clinging to her daughter for reassurance engulf her along with a sense of loss for not having a context for her identity, leaving her own home and living with her daughter eventually leads to the loss of her sense of power and belongingness to her society" (Hazarika 145). As she mixes characters and situations from her past with the present her spatial displacement is evident. The care giver narrative is that of the narrator Mani who visualizes her mother as "decrepit memorial to that distant dream; a physically and mentally broken woman whose only liberation is her death" (*Jalsobi* 83).

Social ostracism is completed in "*meconnaissance*" when a person cycles out of social power by losing a social identity that the world responds to (Marshall 59). Despite of her illness Subarnajyoti wished to live long

and deny her old age with a fierce positivity that sounded alarming for her family in her mental condition. A psychiatrist's version of the disease and its medical history is also rendered in the narrative through the conversations between Mani and her doctor Tridiv Sharma which offers information about the varied dimensions of the fatal ailment amounting to a complete erasure of the idea of selfhood. However the diagnosis does not immediately signify a biosocial death (Synder 2000). The psychiatrist described in the novel suggests the treatment for Subarnajyoti in accordance with the theory of antagonism "where one disease may react upon and block another disease from proliferating" (Pujari 85). She further adds that:

"For instance we know that our knowledge, emotions and desires are the central components of our mind and they must be kept in balance. Disproportion and lack of harmony among the three lead to an imbalance in our mental health" (Pujari 85).

The diary becomes an essential tool for the care giver and the doctor in comprehending Subarnajyoti's turmoil as a child, as a young woman and as a woman witnessing the onslaught of time at old age that disrupted her coherent memory, independence and identity. The diary covers a phase of Subarnajyoti's life when she had to take her ailing husband for a sea voyage sponsored by the English tea garden company where her husband worked before he had met with an accident and had a memory lapse. In the course of his treatment in Hong Kong Subarna had started writing her daily accounts but some blank pages had remained in her diary. Those blank pages in the diary can be read as the first symptoms of her own mental decline while continuously taking care of her husband on board. The treacherousness of her memory in later years shed a miasma of estrangement around her where she suspected first the maids and later her own children as conspirators against her in confining her to the hospital bed. Advocates of personhood movement in psychiatry suggest an inclusive notion of reformulating memory as social and interactive (Leibing 253). The germs of Subarna's segregated self between the person within and the person about were laid with her husband's ailment when she had to leave behind her three children to be with him for treatment from Calcutta to Singapore and other places in South east Asia through sea.

The narratives on dementia run the risk of simplifying dementia as an association of idea for adjudicating all forms of memory lapses and forgetting as a pessimistic representation of a general notion on ageing. "Jal-sobi" or the reflection of one's image in water is a metaphor of her fragile

self during her sea voyage to Singapore that remained repressed in her subconscious erupted during the vulnerability of her failed mental health at old age. "Jalsobi" or water image can be read as a cultural term for feminist "*meconnaissance*" where "jal" means water and "sobi" means picture as refracted images formed in water are not distinctly cognizant. Moreover in the process of cultural disembodiment, *meconnaissance* associated with the psychoanalytical realm of dementia is a powerfully disorienting experience (Marshall 66). *Meconnaissance* leads to the annihilation of the idea of a perfect self as a discursive cultural agent in the regressive process of disembodiment that eventually leads to death. Subarnajyoti's death in *Jalsobi* in postcolonial medical humanities terms, becomes "a way of describing a relation between a body, a history and an environment" (Fitzgerald et al 44).

Feminist activist of age Baba Copper (1988) asserts that socio-cultural ostracism begins with a person's acceptance of visible agedness (Marshall 58). It has been mentioned that people complicit in their own erasure through social performance of their bodies (Woodward 1991). The protagonist as defined by the prime caregiver adheres to this process of social erasure. The novel's narrative begins with the death of the protagonist after a long stay of three months in the hospital while much of the plot revolves round the pieces of information shared by Mani the guilt ridden daughter of Subarna Devi. Thus structurally too the memory span plays a crucial role in the narrative technique where the vulnerable mental health of the prime care giver Mani is pictured in the narrative sequences of flashback and flash forward. There is an extended comparison of Subarnajyoti's resilient fight with the demons of her mind with goddess Durga's powerful fight with Mahisasura as Subarnajyoti's death coincided with the festivities of Durga puja that she had celebrated with zeal all throughout her life. The narrator correlates the disembodied self with the spirit in the death of her dementia ridden mother as a victory of good over evil. The narrative shows how the traditionally inclined daughter had silently prayed for her mother's peaceful submission to a naturalized death. The novel ends with a positive note through a comingling of the postcolonial demented self with the social and spiritual. The philanthropically designed narrator Mani seeks to find her disembodied mother in the public space by providing succour to many vulnerable beings within the social ambit those who needed human help to make their predicaments less painful. The novel ends with a positive note through a comingling of the postcolonial demented self with the social and spiritual with an aim of integrating nature, culture, social and human through the traditional of death and decay in an interstitial entanglement.

 Results& Findings: Public/Private Memory in Dementia as a Cultural/Historical Closure

Memory studies locate the performative instances in literary practices that are symbolically reconstructed in its vocabulary of selective repression as well as revision of a traumatic event in the past (Houston Gray 1). Health humanities intervene into the human mind and body from a literary praxis. The Global South is often associated with belief and practice in traditional health, epidemics and failing health systems which denigrates the Global South ways of knowing and teaching about human health from those of Global North leading to a cultural hegemony (Naidu 2021). These Indian novels taken into consideration is not merely a summation of Western linear perspective of looking at the mental health condition of dementia as a symbolic reconstruction of past trauma; nonetheless the turbulent past is irrevocably attached to the destiny of the diseased characters through cultural disembodiment and *meconnaissance* of the normative self as a performing identity in correlation to their respective social orders. Shah Alam Khan looks at aging Beezi with stoicism as a survivor of the communal riots by living as a demented relic of the past, while Anuradha Sharma Pujari's protagonist Mani accepts the dauntless journey of her demented octogenarian mother Subarnajyoti and celebrates her martyrdom to mental decline. The varied dimensions of the representation of dementia through these fictional pieces adhere to the initial proposition of the paper that seeks to demystify the monolithic representations of mental ailments from Western terminologies or from oriental experiences of lived realities where often social and spiritual intermingle with the fractured subjectivity of the postcolonial self. Shah Alam Khan's novel *Man with the White Beard* in consideration locates dementia from a socio-political perspective of cultural erasure as a character from the religious minority while *Jalsobi* is a more individualized representation of Subarnajyoti's personal displacement in dementia with her troubled mind in gendered spaces of coexistence.

The account on dementia by John Bailey, infamously known as an Oxford don, written about Iris Murdoch his better half and an author, has highly influenced literary studies about mental health and dementia till recent times which offers a bleak picture of Murdoch's degeneration from a previously accomplished life as a writer to a condition of helplessness due to dementia (Vassellas 439). This misrecognition of one's own body is the experience of *meconnaissance* which accordingly to Woodward dangerously connects one to aggression, withdrawal and death. Subarnajyoti's hospital cabin stands as a trope of discursive "biomedicalization" of the

cultural disembodiment of the self trapped in the “pathophysiological” process of relocating the mind body nexus where emotions, traumatic feelings and painful experiences are discursively embodied in the cultural ethos as insights of social control (Woodward 12). The public and private realms of consciousness in the demented characters operate in the fragile disjuncture of individual/collective memory and social forgetting in their process of cultural disembodiment entailing the constructs and taboos of mental health. To conclude these demented personas deviated from discursively normative mind /body performances in biomedical terms of disentanglement between self, society and subjectivity as rational social beings in their particular historical/cultural moment.

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