

**REFLECTIONS ON NOSTALGIA IN THE POEMS OF
SELECTED INDIAN ENGLISH POETS**

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Abstract

With reference to selected poems of Indian poets like A.K.Ramanujan and Kamala Das, and Anglo- Indian poets such as Margaret Deefholts and Daphne Ruth Clarke, who thoroughly and successfully reflected and deployed the theme of nostalgia in their poems, this paper shall argue that via the tool of nostalgic writing both Indian and Anglo- Indian poets could resurrect their dreams and hopes and then construct their own identities. In their passionate poems, the reader can sense that, from an Indian and Anglo –Indian perspective, India is not only a physical and exterior experience but that living India is internalized so that it becomes the very core of their identity in an emotional and spiritual sense. In this paper, I argue that both Indian and Anglo –Indian poets could reclaim and capture India as a home, and then achieving their identities via the tool of nostalgic writing. This tool, nostalgic writing, could help the Indian poets remember, idealize, and pine for their childhood, memories, experiences and colonial past. Nostalgia which has been experienced by the diasporic Anglo- Indian community could produce history and stories which can be seen as an achievement to claim and reclaim India is a homeland. Although nostalgic history is told predominantly through recollection, and therefore to some extent imagination, it is a voice which demonstrates and celebrates the connectedness of the community to its birthplace: India. Finally, this paper tries to touch on the fact that nostalgic and familial memory has curative effects on the troubled mind of the poets; it simply restores and heals them.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Identity, Home, India, Diaspora, Nostalgic Writing, History, Anglo-Indian.

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Introduction

In "Anglo-Indian Nostalgia: Longing for India as Homeland", Alzena D'Costa acknowledges that Zlatko Skrbis defines Nostalgia in his book *Long-distance Nationalism* as 'a painful condition related to the homeland (Gr. nostos means "to return home" and algia, "a painful condition")' (41). In "History and the Politics of Nostalgia", Marcos Piason Natali notes that it was in fact the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer who, in 1688, coined the term nostalgia from these Greek roots. Therefore, the term nostalgia has its origin in medical history, where it had been originally regarded as a disease with physical symptoms which were the results of homesickness (Chase and Shaw 1).

In "The Dimensions of Nostalgia" both Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw state that today the term nostalgia bears metaphorical meaning as the home we long for is not geographical 'but rather a state of mind'(1). They also argue that: 'certain classes or strata within a society (especially those whose situation has changed for the worse) are likely to experience a more public and collective nostalgia' (15). Roberta Rubenstein, in her book *Home Matters*, also depicts nostalgia as a 'temporal separation' (4). The recent nostalgic writings produced by the Indian writers and the Anglo-Indian community abroad remember, idealize and pine for their childhood memories, experiences and colonial past –a time when the Anglo-Indian community felt a sense of belonging in India.

D'Costa argues in his aforementioned article that some historians assert that nostalgia is 'perhaps the most dangerous ...of all the ways of using history' (Lowenthal 20) for it glosses 'over the past's iniquities and indignities'

(Lowenthal 21-2). Rubenstein, nonetheless, thinks about nostalgia in a more positive light. She argues that 'Narratives that engage notions of home, loss, and /or nostalgia confront the past in order to fix it' (6). Rubenstein goes on to explain that:

To fix something is to secure it more firmly in the imagination and also to correct –as in revise or repair –it. Even though one cannot literally go home again ...it may be recoverable in narrative terms. (6)

On the view of this, in this paper I shall argue that both Indian and Anglo – Indian poets and authors via nostalgic writing can reclaim and recapture India as a home. In other words, nostalgic writing serves as a tool used by Indian poets to achieve their identity. Via the tool of nostalgic writing, both Indian and Anglo- Indian writers could resurrect their dreams and construct their identities.

Reflections on Nostalgia in the Writings of Ramanujan and Kamala Das

Indian poets such as A. K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das have exploited the theme of Nostalgia thoroughly and successfully in their poems. To begin with, Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan who was born in Mysore, India 1929 is basically a poet of experiences and memories. His major work includes his collection of poems, *The Striders, Relations, Second Sight*, and other selected poems. "Looking for a Cousin On a Swing" is one of Ramanujan's poems which reflects his mood of nostalgia. The poem maintains the poet's childhood memories and experiences of a cousin who was his play –fellow when they were little children. They used to sit together on a swing and move rapidly, experiencing the innocent physical touch. They also used to climb a tree with heavy leaves.

Ramanujan points out in the poem that the little girl who had grown up and may be got married is unable to forget the pleasure of the swing. She looks for the swing in the cities with fifteen suburbs where she has settled after marriage. She longs for the same physical touch and physical pleasure. Doubtlessly, the innocence of childhood is lost and maturity has knocked the

door. So the relationship has changed and the girl yearns for her past days. We therefore feel the touches and the omnipresence of nostalgia throughout the entire poem.

Another remarkable poem of A. K. Ramanujan that reflects the mood of nostalgia is "Of Mothers, Among Other Things". In this poem, the poet remembers his mother and recalls her youth, middle age and old age. He depicts his mum in youth as pretty and delicate like silk and white petals of a flower.

I smell upon this twisted
Backbone tree the silk and white
Petals of my mother's youth.

The poet remembers his mum's three diamond earrings which glittered like sunlight. In the middle age, his mother used to run to the cradles to calm the crying infant. The rain reflects her years of adversity and affliction that she faced tackling and sewing. His mother lost her charming, youth beauty due to the burden of domestic work. The poet's mother grew old and withered. Her hands became wrinkled like an eagle's feet. In her old age, her sari hung loose around her like broken feathers of a wounded bird. I think a thorough reading of this nostalgic and affectionate poem along with deep contemplation can reflect how much the poet is nostalgic about the memory of his mother.

Another poem of A. K. Ramanujan which reflects the mood of nostalgia is "Love poem for a Wife". This piece of poetry is basically about the wretched married life, its conflicts and matters. It is obvious that the poet is in a nostalgic mood. He hardly finds emotional fulfillment in his relationship with his wife. The emotional detachment and alienation is an outcome of the fact that they have not been able to share each other the experiences of childhood. We hardly see emotional or spiritual unity between the couples in the poem and the relationship between them is pure physical and materialistic. The poet, therefore, seeks to find the emotional fulfillment in his relationship with his wife. In short, the poets seek refuge in nostalgia where he is able to express his feelings and attitudes towards a bitter marital life.

Ramanujan's "Small- Scale Reflections on a Great House" is another poem of the nostalgic memory of his childhood. In the poem, the poet gives a long list of things that enter the great house but never leave it. Things such as cows, books, sweet dishes, and daughters-in- laws and even the song of a beggar enter the house. Ramanujan's nostalgic memories of the ancestral house and the joint-families are revived in this poem. The poet recollects and tries to revive the things which were lost long ago via using his memory. We can see the comic and the tragic touches skillfully interwoven in the poem. A close reading of the poem shall convince the reader that the poem is a fine piece of social criticism; in other words it is an elegy on the death of human dignity and identity. Ramanujan's poetry is a recollection of emotions. Memory unfolds itself in his mind. The poet presents his memories of the south Indian life style in a very nostalgic manner which reflects the Indian sensibility. Finally, nostalgia is deeply employed by A. k. Ramanujan in his poetry especially when he was in the USA, the nostalgic writings helped him revisit and hence reclaim his Indian identity.

Another Indian poet reflected on the theme of nostalgia in her writings is Kamala Das, one of the three most significant Indian poets in Indo-Anglican Literature in the post independent India. Das's poetry is all about her bitter experiences in life, notably her intensely felt desire for love, for emotional involvement and her complete failure to achieve such a relationship. As far as the theme of nostalgia in the writings of Kamal Das is concerned, I shall shed lights on her reflection of nostalgia in her famous poems "My Grandmother's House" and "A Hot Noon in Malabar".

One of the central themes in Kamala Das's poetry is her nostalgic memory of the family house in Malabar and the childhood experiences centered round it. Kamala Das in "My Grandmother's House" recalls her marvelous ancestral home and her dead grandmother. The poem takes the form of confession comparing her present broken state with that of being unconditionally loved by her grandmother. "My Grandmother's House" is a reminiscence of the poetess' grandmother and their ancestral home at Malabar in Kerala. Das's memory of love which she received from her grandmother is

associated with the image of her ancestral home, where she had passed some of the happiest days of her life, and where her old grandmother had showed her love and affection. With the death of her grandmother the house withdrew into silence. When her grandmother expired, the house seemed to share her grief, which is poignantly expressed in the phrase "the House withdrew". The home soon became desolate and snakes crawled among books. Her blood became cold like the moon because there was none to love her the way she wanted.

The poet now lives in another city, a long distance away from her grandmother's house. But the nostalgia and memories of her ancestral house make her feel sad. The poetess is heart-broken. The intensity of her emotions is shown by the ellipses in the form of a few words. Now in another city, the poetess is living another life and she pines to go back to that life. She knows that she cannot regain the past yet still she wants to go back home, look once again through its windows and bring back an "armful of darkness" –sad and painful memories, which she would have made her constant companion, to keep as a reminder of her past happiness. The poetess is unable to proceed with her thoughts for sometime as is indicated by the ellipses.

How often I think of going
There, to peer through the blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding Dog.

The poetess is now shocked with the intensity of grief. She longs for love like a beggar moving from one door to another asking for love in small change. Her need for love and approval is not fulfilled in marriage and she thus goes after strangers for love at least in small quantity, but she is not getting it even in small change or coins.

...You cannot believe, darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved ...I who have lost

My way and beg now at stranger's doors to
Receive love, at least, in small change?

Her love hunger remains unsatisfied, and there is a big emptiness within her. In wild despair, the poet longs to bring in an, to use her words, "armful of darkness". I think this armful of darkness is her essence of nostalgia. With this piece of darkness, she can lie down for hours, like a brooding dog behind the door, lost in contemplation. The image of the window serves as a link between the past and the present. It signifies the desire of the poetess for a nostalgic peep into her past and resurrects her dreams and desires. Thus, the old house was for the poet a place of symbolic retreat to a world of innocence, purity and simplicity, an Edenic world where love and happiness are still possible.

"Hot Noon in Malabar" evokes the typical experience of a hot summer afternoon in her home. The prosperous ancestral house attracted several strangers every afternoon, beggars and bangle –sellers. All these strangers were attracted, probably by the kindness of the generous grandmother of the poet. The poetess utilizes the imagery of the house as a symbol of cultural and value system and a symbol of freedom. The grandmother's house is a picture of Indian house that shapes her personality. The portrayal of the house is full of concern and melancholy and its memory makes her miserable and nervous. Consequently I am in a full belief that Familial memory has a curative effect on the troubled mind of the poet; it simply restores and heals her.

Nostalgia in the Writing of the Diasporic Anglo- Indian Community

Nostalgia which has been experienced by the diasporic Anglo- Indian community could produce history and stories which can be seen as an achievement to claim and reclaim India is a homeland. Taking a critical approach to analyzing the collective identity of the Anglo-Indian community allows the discursive construction of this identity to be evaluated (D'Costa 2). While Anglo-Indians may want to feel at home in India , historical social conditioning , which discriminates against the community from achieving cultural acceptance , may be seen as a factor which has deprived them from expressing this desire. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been an increased

attempt to reflect upon the Anglo- Indian community's diasporic condition throughout constructing and reconstructing the community's stories and histories and hence remembering India.

For the Anglo-Indian community, India as a homeland is produced through the experience of nostalgia in reconstructing remembered places and events, and the narration of personal association with them. The Anglo- Indian community can be viewed as typical candidates for becoming nostalgists. The nostalgia that the Anglo- Indians use to describe their history can be regarded as a natural consequence of their un-homeliness and diaspora. In embracing this medium of historical expression, Anglo- Indian community can reclaim India as a homeland. The lost place for the Anglo- Indian community is the age of colonial rule in which the community had its conception and it felt a sense of purpose and belonging. For the Anglo- Indian community, India became lost when it gained independence from the English. This event further ensured the community's marginalization in Indian society. Since Anglo- Indians were regarded as lackeys of the British Empire, they were regarded as an enemy of India as the English were.

Rubenstein acknowledges that 'culturally displaced or exiled people may mourn their separation from home/land, community, language, and- or cultural practices that contribute to identity' (6). These people may be more inclined to employ nostalgia to re-center their identity about a homeland. For a people such as the Anglo-Indians who have grown into an extensive diaspora as a result of their un-homeliness, the idea of home is particularly vulnerable. According to Rubenstein, a nostalgic response to this condition of un-homeliness is more acceptable. Chase and Shaw in their article "The Dimensions of Nostalgia" argue that:

nostalgia involved a special way of being involved in the past: one had to be connected to the object of scrutiny, perhaps through kinship or through a broader feeling of identity ...These were in some way my people and my present therefore was bound up in their past (2).

This way of thinking about nostalgia is clearly evidenced in the history of the Anglo-Indians. Within the nostalgic mode, India and its peoples become the objects of scrutiny, the objects of longing and kinship (D'Costa 6). The nostalgia experienced by the Anglo-Indian community produces a history which creates a window to the community's unique experience. However, this history relies greatly upon memory and the ability to bring to mind those memories. Rubenstein makes this point as she states that, 'implicit in the deeper register of nostalgia is the element of grief for something of profound value that seems irrevocably lost...in the form in which it is remembered' (5). Although nostalgic history is told predominantly through recollection, and therefore to some extent imagination, it is a voice which demonstrates and celebrates the connectedness of the community to its birthplace: India. What remains important then, is that the connection to place, culture and people is established through the narration of historical memory.

The poem "I Remember When" by Daphne Ruth Clarke is an example of how nostalgic writing constructs a history which privileges local knowledge and individual experience, which can be ultimately seen as functioning to reclaim India as home.

I Remember When:

In our little backyard at home,
Our fowl roamed tame and free;
When chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys, too,
Pecked, scratched, gobbled, slept happily.
Winged ants flew into hurricane lamps,
Dying in hundreds against their will,
And stick boochis rested on guava branches
For days, so silent and still.

The nostalgic writings produced by the Anglo-Indian community remember, idealize, and pine for the colonial past- a time when the Anglo-Indian community felt a sense of belonging in India. Throughout these writings the Anglo- Indian community finds a speaking voice for the articulation of its

own history. Through the process of narrating home, Anglo Indians can challenge the notion that the community was simply a lackey of the English and, instead, prove their knowledge about India, and share their perceptions and emotions about life there.

Another example of such nostalgic writing, I present Anglo-Indian writer Margaret Deefholts' aptly titled poem "Homesickness":

I want to walk again along the city streets
Thronged with people;
The hawkers, the beggars, the urchins,
The hurrying office workers
All jostling by me.
I want to hear again the
Noise and clatter of the crowds;
The honking cars, the wheezing buses,
The confusion and clamour
Beating around me.
I want to smell again the
City's dust, spices, rotting detritus
And dung and urine stench of the sidewalks;
The sweaty, sour, strong musk of
Swarming humanity
Heady within my nostrils.
I want to feel again the
Throbbing life of a crowded, dirty City,
Its colour, its movement, its intensity,
Its vitality infusing
My own heart's beat.

India is my blood, my bones.
The land,
Its harsh contrasts...
Blazing days, clamorous nights;

Its cruelty, its violence,
Its huddled, wretched filthy slums,
Its destitute skeletal poor.
Its children with swollen bellies,
Carrying naked children on their skinny hips,
Dusty, matted hair and large black eyes,
Streetwise urchins.

And beyond the City's frenetic beat,
Its tranquil timeless villages,
With mud-walled huts,
Set under the dappled shade
Of flickering leafed pipal trees.
A brown, bare-bodied farmer,
Plodding the fields behind thin oxen
And a wooden plough,
Tilling through the flowing centuries,
Watching the sunset blaze
The stubbled fields.

Small towns with neem-tree shaded
Rickshaw wallahs dozing in the lethargic
Dusty glare of a summer afternoon.
The harsh screech of country parrots

Amid scented mango topes;
And the plaintive questing call
Of brain-fever birds
Across twilight lawns of
Red-roofed bungalows
Left over from the days
Of the old Raj. (115-6)

In this poem, Deefholts' memories come alive as she recalls the various elements of her life in India. Her desire to live these experiences again, through artistic recollection and even literally- is noticeable, perhaps the most powerful line of the poem is Deefholts' exclamation that 'India is my blood, my bones'. In this passionate statement the reader can sense that, from an Anglo –Indian perspective, India is not only a physical and exterior experience but that living India is internalized so that it becomes the very core of Anglo – Indian identity in an emotional and spiritual sense. The description of such deep feeling is instrumental to forging the ties between the Anglo –Indian community and India as a homeland. The nostalgic mode enables this connection to be established as it constructs a specifically Anglo- Indian history.

In expressing a longing for India, through the recollection of personal relationships and sentimental experiences between the community and India, the link between identity and place is consolidated. The process of writing home in a nostalgic mode is central to establishing these bonds, as this type of writing produces a culturally specific history. As the experience of nostalgia reveals feelings, associations, and ways of living that are a part of the community's memory, Anglo-Indians can claim their rightful place in Indian history and India as home through the production of their own history.

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