Revisiting Self and Nation through Cultural Memory: A Study of Ved Mehta's Vedi and Face to Face

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will examine the interconnectedness between personal memories and shared cultural identity in the Ved Mehta's memoirs Vedi and Face to Face. The relationship between autobiographer's personal memory and his cultural identity as represented in the autobiographies of Ved Mehta. According to the theoretical framework of cultural memory explained by Maurice Halbwachs and further expanded by Jan Assmann, the study explains how individual memories are influenced according to the cultural and social backgrounds. By means of textual analysis of the selected memoirs, it will be possible to see how Mehta, while trying to reflect on his personal history, creates a special relationship between his personal identity and his national identity. Mehta is known for writing about the autobiographer's personal experiences of being brought up, as well as his experience of blindness, and how he perceived various cultures surrounding him. His narratives reflect the connections between the cultural memory and personal remembrance of colonial and post-colonial India.

In this respect, it becomes clear that Mehta's memoirs not only serve as autobiographies but also as the means for keeping memories and negotiating them. As such, the memoirs make the important contribution to the discussion on the ways autobiography works as mediation between an individual self and collective national identity. The paper explores the importance of memory in shaping personal identity and cultural imagination of the nation.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Disability Narrative, Autography, Memoir.

Introduction

Ved Mehta is widely known for his autobiographical series "Continents of Exile" that explores themes of culture, identity and personal transformation. Autobiographical writings can be understood as a potent tool used by many to reconstruct personal experiences while at the same time relating to larger stories of social or cultural relevance. Memoirs and personal life narratives not only narrate personal events but also relate to the socio-cultural and historical context within which such experiences unfold. Ved Mehta's memoirs present detailed reconstruction of his childhood, educational

experiences and family relationships. He has earned himself an immense fame due to his large-scale autobiographical writings on the topics of identity, culture, and transformations. Losing his vision at a tender age, Mehta has created an autobiographical style characterized by intense dependence on memories, imagination, and introspection. Mehta provides elaborate reconstructions of his own childhood experiences, relations, and education. In all of his life-narratives, he looks into the cultural contexts that helped shape his identity both in India and other countries. Two major works in Mehta's collection of autobiographies are Face to Face and Vedi. This literature serves as an insight to the author's life, difficulties he had to face when trying to deal with the problem of blindness, and also cultural traditions. Thus, the literature is connected with the history of India at the end of the colonial era and during the first years after its independence.

Cultural memory theory serves as a basis for the interpretation of these stories in terms of the influence of cultural traditions on individual perception of events. "Cultural memory stores the repository of knowledge from which a group can draw an understanding of its particularity" (Assmann 37). According to the researchers such as Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, memory can be viewed as a product of the influence of the society and culture rather than as an individual experience. "The self in a memoir is constructed as much out of the act of remembering and telling as out of personal experience itself" (Couser 6). This shows how memory functions as a link between individual identity and the collective identity of a nation or community. Autobiography of Ved Mehta is a perfect example of this connection.

Autobiographical works by Ved Mehta have been widely analyzed by scholars because of their treatment of disability, identity, and cross-cultural issues. Many critical analyses of the author's books, including Vedi and Face to Face, are based on autobiographical writing, diasporic identity, and blindness. Nevertheless, there is only little research conducted on these books in terms of cultural memory theories. Although many critics admit Mehta's ability to contextualize his personal experience within the larger cultural background, there has been no systematic discussion of the way how his memories fit into a collective memory paradigm or national identity.

At the same time, the contribution of the works of memory theorists, like Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, have not been exploited to discuss the ways how personal memories of Mehta could be contextualized in the process of analysis. Therefore, there is little research dedicated to Mehta's memoirs concerning how personal memory fits into cultural memory and national identity construction. This paper will attempt to explore how Mehta's memoirs reconstruct identity of both individuals and nations through memory.

In this paper, the cultural memory theory will be used as a means of analyzing how Mehta's memoirs create not only a sense of self but also a sense of cultural belonging. Through an understanding of the relationship between personal and collective memory, one can understand how Mehta's memoirs create both a self and a nation.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the representation of personal memory and autobiographical recollection in Vedi and Face to Face.
- To examine Vedi and Face to Face through the framework of cultural memory theory.
- To investigate the ways in which Mehta reconstructs ideas of identity, belonging, and nationhood through autobiographical writing.

Cultural Memory Theory: Conceptual Framework

The theory of cultural memory has emerged as an important theoretical approach in modern memory studies. This concept deals with the process through which cultures or societies keep track of their memories in the form of traditions. Two prominent theorists who have made significant contributions to this field include Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann. The

theory of collective memory was coined by Halbwachs. As per his theory, individual memories are the result of the social group to which the individual belongs. "Individual memory is the standpoint of collective memory" (Halbwachs 48). In Halbwachs view, memory is not an individual activity but rather it is formed through social processes and contexts such as family, religious communities, and society. Thus, the formation of memory in an individual's mind is linked with the surrounding society or the social environment in which the individual exists. Individual memories thus tend to represent collective values of social groups.

Jan Assmann expanded on the above definitions by incorporating the notion of cultural memory into his theoretical approach. The idea of cultural memory implies the process of preserving the collective memory through cultural practices, literary texts, and other media forms. Assmann made a distinction between two types of memories: communicative memory; memories passed from generation to generation through communicative acts and cultural memory, memories transmitted through formalized cultural practices. Cultural memory helps form and shape a national identity of a community.

For literary scholars, cultural memory theory can be used as an important perspective to study autobiographies and memoirs as sources of cultural memory. The idea of cultural memory theory is helpful when exploring autobiographical writings because memoirs and autobiographies function as cultural memory by recording personal experiences that reflect social and cultural contexts. Ved Mehta's autobiography can be considered as an example of literary works that combine personal memories with cultural aspects. It is necessary to mention that the writer's personal memories cannot be separated from Indian culture and social structure.

Memory, Childhood, and Identity Formation

Among other major issues explored by Mehta in his autobiographical work, the role played by memory in constructing individual identity is prominent. In Face to Face, Mehta talks about his childhood and about how devastating it was to become blind in the early years of his life. The episode of blindness had become so influential in his life that it started determining his perception of reality and intellectual growth. "These blind people are 'shelved'…glued to a rocking chair" (Mehta 305).

Since Mehta was deprived of the possibility of developing visual memory of the surrounding environment, he had no choice but to construct the concept of reality using other senses and imagination. Thus, memory is used as a device to understand and interpret things that happen to him and to develop his personality. The family becomes an important element in the construction of Mehta's memories because his father, being a renowned physician, signifies authority, discipline, and intellectual ambition in the family context. "You are a man now" - "the beginning of my clear, conscious memory" (Mehta 3). The expectations of Mehta from the family create an impression about his responsibility and ambitions. Thus, these family memories become meaningful for understanding the content of Mehta's memories.

The perspective of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs concerning collective memory helps to understand the role of family in individual memories. "Cultural memory is a type of collective memory preserved through cultural production and institutional communication" (Assmann 36). Family is one of the primary types of social groups influencing personal memories. Therefore, it becomes possible to explain the content of Mehta's memories through such a sociological concept.

In addition, the autobiographies of Mehta are indicative of the process of self-discovery and personal growth of knowledge. "Autobiographical memory is an interpretive process whereby people make sense of their past" (Smith & Watson 16). Even in the face of obstacles associated with his blindness, Mehta shows himself to be incredibly resilient and determined. The account indicates the role of memory in shaping one's identity through reflective and interpretive practices.

By narrating about his childhood experiences and

recalling past events, Mehta creates his own unique identity, which results from both personal and cultural factors. Thus, in this respect, Mehta's memoirs are an illustration of autobiographical memory as a form of identity formation.

Cultural Traditions and Social Memory

Apart from Mehta's personal experiences, his memoirs also serve to document the memories of the cultural practices and traditions that existed in the society of India. The memories of such family traditions, social norms, and education systems are documented in the chapter, Vedi. "In later years, I would recall it again and again, as if it were the injunction of my destiny." (Mehta 3) Such memories provide us with an understanding of how the social life in India was in the latter stages of its colonial history. It is evident in Mehta's work how family rituals, social stratifications, and community interactions played an important part in shaping the culture of the society in India.

Education is yet another theme highlighted in Mehta's remembrances. The education Mehta has been through reflects both Indian traditions and influences from the West. Indeed, during the colonial era, the educational system in India could be seen as a forum for interactions between different cultures. The interactions are reflected in Mehta's memoirs when he describes the intersection of western educational practices and local cultural heritage. Using cultural memory theory, one may interpret Mehta's memoirs as cultural texts that embody collective experience of society. In fact, cultural memory may be defined as a body of knowledge passed down from generation to generation through stories describing social practices, historical events, and cultural norms. Hence, by retelling his experience within this context, Mehta makes his memoirs a cultural text documenting Indian social history.

Cultural traditions described in detail in Mehta's memoirs also help understand how memory operates as a source of collective knowledge. "I began to remember the world through sound and touch" (Mehta 21). In other words, using narrative reconstruction, individuals' memories are incorporated into cultural heritage. As a result, the readers can learn more about the historical and social context of the author's life.

Diasporic Memory and National Identity

One more important aspect about the memoirs of Mehta is the connection between memory and national identity. While spending most of his life in other countries such as the USA, Mehta's autobiographies remain focused on the cultural memory of India, where he experienced most of his formative years. These memoirs evoke feelings of nostalgia concerning the social and cultural surroundings of his early childhood days.

Such an approach can be explained by considering the concept of diasporic memory that denotes various ways of relating oneself to one's origin through memory and storytelling. As for writers from diasporic societies, memory is a means of sustaining one's cultural identity and feeling of belongingness to one's own culture. Thus, through his memoirs Mehta shows how individual memory can be helpful in the process of re-constructing national identity. This is achieved due to the depiction of daily life in his native country, which is an important element of cultural tradition and the historical identity of the nation in question. Within the framework of Assmann's theory on cultural memory, such stories assume a significant importance in terms of cultural continuity. The essence of cultural memory is to help societies keep their experience and transfer it to future generations. In autobiographies, personal memories tend to become instruments for articulating cultural memory.

The memoirs of Mehta, hence, show how individual memory can become a basis for the restoration of national identity. Through remembering his own experiences, Mehta participates in the continuous process of cultural remembering.

Narrative Technique and Memory Representation

Not only thematic aspects but also the techniques used by Mehta have a tremendous impact on how memories are represented in his memoirs. The author uses reflective narration, vivid

descriptions, and reconstruction of the events of the past in his work. As a result, even in the lack of visual perception, he succeeds in creating a rich imagery of his experiences. "I clutched at his short hair and tried to walk as he pointed" (Mehta 6).

The use of imagination occupies a special place in Mehta's narrative. Given that he lost his vision at a young age, he has to rely on imagination as well as auditory perception and other sensory impressions in order to describe the world around him. This feature makes Mehta's writings truly unique since they allow transforming memories into a narrative experience Moreover, the memoirs of Mehta could be considered as a way of cultural documentation. Using memoirs, one manages to preserve various facts about social activities, customs, and historical background that could easily be forgotten by future generations. Thus, in this case, Mehta's memoirs play two roles: on the one hand, they are his personal reflections; on the other hand, they are also pieces of cultural documentation.

The use of autobiographical narrative helps Mehta to create narratives beyond the borders of autobiography. The memoirs presented by the author prove the ability of autobiographical narratives to become carriers of cultural memories.

Conclusion

The autobiographical writings of Ved Mehta provide valuable insights into the complicated association between individual memory and cultural identity. From the autobiographies such as Vedi and Face to Face, Mehta manages to recreate memories and recollect experiences from his childhood days in ways that put his life stories into larger societal and historical contexts. Through the use of cultural memory theory, this paper has been able to analyze the relationship between individual memory and cultural memory frameworks from an interesting perspective. The memoirs of Mehta suggest that memory is more than just an account of personal experience; it is a process through which individuals give meaning to their experiences within the larger context of culture narratives. His memories of growing up, family life, schooling, and traditions reveal the influence of social structure on memory-making. Simultaneously, however, Mehta's writings add to the creation of cultural memory through his representation of Indian social history and national identity. In essence, Mehta's autobiographical writing reveals how the process of remembering helps establish links between the self and the cultural memory of the nation as a whole. Through the transformation of personal experience into cultural narrative, Mehta's memoirs become invaluable literature that contributes to cultural memory.

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