



Fragments Of Nostalgia In Binodini's The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories Of Her Father

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Binodini's memoir, *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memory of Her Father* (2015), arguing that it masterfully intertwines the theme of nostalgia with the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, transforming personal memory into a potent form of storytelling. Focusing on her own personal experiences and domestic spaces, Binodini consciously documents the lives of people and events that directly or indirectly revolve around her life. Ultimately, the paper examines and concludes that this memoir beautifully captures these narratives by reframing history from a woman's perspective.

Keywords: nostalgia, stream-of-consciousness, memoir, royal household.

INTRODUCTION

The essence of remembering things that happen in one's life or what one encounters and experiences, and documenting those memories, is a process that is both tenacious and fragmentary. The fragmentary nature of recollection influences the memoir's narrative style, revealing a non-linear flow of internal thought characteristic of the stream of consciousness. The beautiful memoir *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memory of Her Father* (2015) by Binodini, a Manipuri writer from the Northeast, is no exception. The memoir serves as a repository of Binodini's experiences and the stories she heard, reflecting political, social, cultural and domestic boundaries that shaped her life and times. It is not just a simple record of the royal household but a sea of emotional undercurrents of nostalgia.

Binodini (1922-2011) was a literary and cultural icon from Manipur. She was the youngest of the five daughters of Maharaj Churachand and Maharani Dhanamanjuri, who enjoyed a unique social position of being a princess, yet witnessed and suffered the complexities of palace life as a woman under patriarchy and colonial rule. Her invaluable literary output, which includes short stories, film scripts, essays, lyrics, plays, one novel, and one memoir, is characteristic of Northeast literature, featuring themes of identity, displacement, socio-political conflict, nature, and cultural issues. Her writings, deeply rooted in personal memory and historical consciousness, are bountiful in their depiction of women's struggles. Hence, Binodini's literary voice not only helps preserve the cultural identity of her motherland, Manipur, but also foregrounds themes of nostalgia that resonate in her memoir.

Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) says that “nostalgia” was a term coined by a Swiss doctor named Johannes Hofer for his medical dissertation in 1688. This term is a combination of two pseudo-Greek words *nostos* and *algia* as Boym mentions. Boym further identifies two types of nostalgia in her introduction of the book- one is the restorative nostalgia, which stresses *nostos* for “a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home”, and the other is the reflective nostalgia, which “thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming-wistfully, ironically, desperately.” (xviii). These two kinds of nostalgia run deep in this memoir. Nostalgia serves as a driving force in Binodini’s memoir, evoking a sense of longing for a bygone era in which she brings to life the grandeur and complexities of royal life, the rich cultural rituals, social hierarchies, and intimate domestic spheres of her childhood. Yet her remembrance is not merely romanticised; it is disrupted by colonial intrusion and the rigidity of traditions. This nostalgia is therefore not purely sentimental but imbued with ambivalence, which is both affectionate and painful. Binodini’s memoir is to be distinguished from a private diary or journal in its focus on people and events that she observes, rather than a strictly personal daily record, as mentioned in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Abrams and Harpham 22-23). The memoir is not just a preservation of her personal memory but a discourse on collective history and identity, where the past is continuously negotiated in dialogue with the present.

Against this backdrop, the present paper examines and answers how Binodini’s memoir manifests nostalgia, particularly in three selected chapters: “My Mother Tampak, Maid of Chongtham”; “Maharaja Churachand’s Favoured Retainers Landriba and Mukta”; and “My Good Natured Elder Brother Crown Prince Bodhchandra”. Ultimately, by intertwining personal recollection with the wider historical and psychological realities of her time, Binodini’s life narrative emerges as more than just a personal memoir. Thus, the intricate details of the narrator’s thoughts, even though in fragments, capture the forgotten stories associated with the royal household.

ANALYSIS OF NOSTALGIA

Chaban, in “The True Meaning of Nostalgia” (2017), says that nostalgia, understood in its most significant sense, is a momentary and delicate emotional experience marked by the longing for what was lost, what one never acquired, the sights one missed, or the individuals one yearned to know. This idea frames *The Maharaja’s Household* as an exploration of deeply personal and collective longing and an attempt to reconnect with the past. Binodini’s recollections of royal Manipur are grounded in this fragility that Chaban describes, which is painful. This longing craves an emotional space, wishing for a reconnection with those lost aspects of one’s life or self.

In the first chapter of the memoir titled “My Mother Tampak, Maid of Chongtham”, the author discovers an old photograph of the fourth queen, Tampak of Maharaj Churachand. This act of discovery acts as a powerful mnemonic catalyst:

I was entranced. Enchanted. I was close to tears. Mother! My beautiful mother, where have you been hiding all this time?” I looked again and again at this champak blossom of Langthabal, this nymph of Chinga Hill. Did all the land not say that, my mother? I was beside myself. Memories of days gone by unfolded vividly before my eyes. I looked again at the old photograph. (Binodini 1)

The photograph here becomes an object that stimulates the act of remembering. It helps the author to remember and reconnect emotionally with her fourth mother and family. The intimate memories surface as the author chances upon the photograph, which acts as the “restorative memory”, recalling her fourth mother’s beauty and presence in her life and the royal household. As Edwards in “Photographs as Objects of Memory” argues, “For photographs belong specifically to that class of objects formed specifically to remember, rather than being objects around which remembrance accrues through contextual association...” (Edwards 222). Remembering this beautiful woman reveals the emotional connection between the author and her mother, as she hopes to fill the gap left by the loss of her daughter and friend, Princess Tampha. Binodini tries to fulfil her duties as a daughter when she says, “I am here Mother- your littlest, weakest child is still here. I will fulfil my obligations....” (2). Though beautiful, Tampak, who never had a child, suffered this humiliation alone. Binodini tries to lessen this deep, inherited hurt when she confesses that she never knew about this grief at the time of its occurrence because she “was a child and only knew happiness; of suffering I knew nothing.” (3) This chapter also showcases the essence of nostalgia for a lost era, the time when World War II broke out after her father died in 1941, and they could not keep track of their families and relatives, of who went where. Svetlana Boym’s “reflective nostalgia” comes into function here. This longing for a past that dwells on the ambivalences of memory and absence is drawn here with the finding of the photograph, as Binodini excitedly remarks that she has found it. The intersection of personal memory with historical events like World War II illustrates nostalgia as a mediating space to mourn losses inflicted by political changes.

The tenth chapter, titled “Maharaja Churachand’s Favoured Retainers, Landriba and Mukta”, is also steeped in reflective nostalgia as she rediscovers a past world which she describes as a hidden treasure. The narrator expresses a sense of pride and wonder at the very history before her, that is so fragile, unreachable yet right in front of her as she remarks in the very opening of the chapter itself, “The wonder of it is that I had no idea that such a huge world, such a fascinating history of Manipur, lay in my own family like some hidden storehouse”. (42) She compares this storehouse of the past to “a jewel that could not be found, invisible though before one’s very eyes, slipping away to be left behind” (42). This act of comparing the past to a jewel by the author reflects the non-linear, subjective nature of her internal thought.

Her meeting with Ta’ Khelchandra proved priceless. He provided her with some information on the palace of Manipur, which left Binodini astonished. “He said, ‘As far as Manipur is concerned, the palace of Manipur is a university; it is an institution. Let people say what they want- they will come to understand on their own. Our kings of Manipur are divine...’ Such were the words of the scholar.” (43). This forms a deeply nostalgic sentiment towards the past glories of Manipur and its kings. Through this remembrance, Binodini creates a powerful message to her readers about the glories of a bygone era.

Binodini’s recollections are also filled with specific details about daily events and people involved. Here, she retells the story of Landriba and Mukta, who were the favored retainers of Maharaja Churachand. Considering the author’s remembrance of Ipu Landriba, with which she addresses him, it is nostalgically sweet. She recalls how Landriba stood guard for a small thatched hut that stored charcoal just adjacent to the bathroom of her father, the Maharaja. She writes about him fondly:

Even today I can see him vividly. I never knew what he did at other times. Most of the time, I remember he sat dozing in a corner of the hut’s verandah, a bathing sarong tied around his knees. Landriba was his name. Ipu Landriba was skinny and very fair. He would wake up from his doze and spring to his feet the moment Sovereign Father came out to go to the bathroom. Perhaps he was attached to the Office of the Janitors. (43-44)

Mukta emerges as yet another compelling character in the narrative. Binodini calls him Ta’ Mukta, and his duty was looking after the king’s attire and the dressing chamber. Everyone considered this simple valet of Maharaja Churachand to be the favourite of the king. The king would never use any other mirrors in the dressing chamber except the one that Mukta holds. Binodini confides that “As a child I use to watch these goings-on with great interest”. (44).

Another interesting story is Chapter Twelve, titled “My Good Natured Elder Brother, Crown Prince Bodhchandra,” which is an anecdote about Bodhchandra’s childhood, career, and relationships. The author has undertaken an enormous task of capturing her brother’s life in a few pages, which is flooded with childhood memories and observations from the author’s side. The text itself is rich in nostalgic recollections of their childhood, implying an affectionate remembrance as the author puts in her very words:

I often heard my mother say that Bodhchandra and Tamphasana, brother and sister, were very fond of each other. They called each other ‘Bemma Bemma’ and ‘Tamo Tamo’. She used to tell us what a sweet and lovely child Bodhchandra was, and how chubby he was... I didn’t know him intimately, but we adored our big brother who always greeted us warmly and kidded us whenever we met. (50)

This well-mannered young boy, when he became the Maharaja, was loved by all with no enemies against him, as recounted by Ta’ Khelchandra. One story narrated to Binodini was how Maharaja Bodhchandra addressed with proper etiquette and manners, “Even though he had become king, when I went to him on official matters, he would say, please come in. What may I do for you? And he showed us the highest respect. People like him are very rare.” (52). Above his gentle manner, Bodhchandra was also a poet. He had a published book of poetry to his credit but, Bodhchandra was not interested in his studies. So, Maharaja Churachand had to bring him back from England. In doing so, his younger brother Sanayaima, known to people as PB, had to return. The narrator mentions that she heard, “Bodhchandra was sent to a school for princes in Raipur, or some place like that, but that he was such a poor student that together with the crown prince of some native state, they had to create a separate class just for the two crown princes.” (52) What is more interesting to note in this text is that when the author went to see a horse racing session while she was at St. Mary’s College in Shillong, one of her father’s friends, Uncle Dutta, introduced her as Manipur’s princess to a particular person. That man asked her if she was Bodhchandra’s sister, and when the answer was positive, he further enquired about her brother but remarked that he was a dimwit. Later, when Binodini narrated this encounter to her brother, Bodhchandra replied, “He was a guy from Orissa, the crown prince of Dhenkanal. Boy, was he stupid !” (54)

It turned out that this man was the same person who attended the special class with Bodhchandra. One cannot help finding this story humorous, turning a harsh memory into a funny anecdote.

The narrator's way of framing Bodhchandra's narrative, not on his academic failure, but on recreating her brother with his flaws and accepting him as he was, is a classic example of "reflective nostalgia" as Boym pointed out. She embraces him with all his contradictions, acknowledging his imperfections yet still finding meaning, fondness, and a connection to his identity. She openly recounts that "the child maharaja Churachand so wanted to groom had always had his own way and refused to take an interest in his studies." (52) But he was such a gentleman that people "always spoke of him fondly" (52). Khelchandra even remarked on him as a person who is very rare. The generous nature of Bodhchandra in welcoming Binodini's friends and donating to the Saraswati festival illustrates a memory of kindness and love.

Another "reflective nostalgia" is the fond remembrance of Bodhchandra's first wife, their first sister-in-law, "princess Rampyari from the small kingdom of Borkhemji in Orissa" (54). As a child, Binodini had witnessed this Indian sister-in-law wearing beautiful saris with lots of gold and silver jewellery. This memory serves as a child observing a beautiful and exotic figure. With the remembrance of Rampyari, Binodini takes us to the beautiful place called Orissa. The narrator reflects upon the world-famous Konarak temple, the beautiful monuments in Bhubaneswar, through her act of remembering Rampyari:

Today, that shapely, full-figured, fair and small-statured maiden appears in front of my eyes like the bewitching stone sculpture at Khajuraho of a woman grooming herself in front of a mirror. What was endearing, as I came to learn later, was that she was very religious and respectful of her elders. What a perfect woman!" (55)

The narrator does not try to restore the presence of Rampyari in their household. Not even a photograph exists to prove the existence of Rampyari in their lives. Nor does the author seek to answer why this Indian princess was forgotten from the history of Manipur. The author, instead, wishes to remember Rampyari as she saw and adored her when she was a little child. She lovingly remembers this princess and how, as a child, she "used to hide and peek at her, looking secretly from behind the screens...So, even if I did not know her language, I was very fond of my sister-in-law Rampyari" (55)

CONCLUSION

Binodini's memoir, *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father*, is far more than a simple personal record. It emerges as a powerful narrative space where historical critique and psychological excavation converge. The paper establishes that the memoir successfully uses nostalgia to achieve a profound form of preserving the forgotten stories of the past. The technical brilliance of the text lies in Binodini's skilful use of the stream of consciousness technique. By embracing the fragmentary nature of recollection, this structural choice captures the non-linear reality of the author's storytelling.

In applying the frameworks of nostalgia, the paper highlights how Binodini's longing is never purely sentimental but rather characterised by reflective nostalgia, an "ambivalent" force that is both affectionate and painful. This ambivalence is crucial for uncovering the collective psychological wounds inflicted by colonial and patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, the memoir functions as a layered exploration of the author's mind, which positions the domestic space as the primary site of historical inquiry and longing. Binodini uses her position to document women like Tampak, whose private distress and "enormous defeat" aroused empathy. Through this fragmentary process of recollection, Binodini validates the existence of the forgotten Princess Rampyari, and the attendants like Ipu Landriba and Mukta. Thus, *The Maharaja's Household* emerges as an invaluable literary contribution, offering a crucial lens through which the emotional undercurrents rooted in a daughter's remembrance capture the forgotten stories associated with the royal household.

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