

Recalling the Past in Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants***¹G.P. Donish, ²Dr. G. SuhitharBaus,**

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Abstract

Boman Desai, grew up in Bombay and was educated in the United States and started writing in 1976. His debut novel, *The Memory of Elephants* moves back and forth between Anglo and Indian world clearly giving credence to the efficacy of both. grounded in an intimate and panoramic history. *The Memory of Elephants* is a visually evocative story concerned with collective, personal, and perceived memories. The novel's protagonist, Homi Seervai, is a brilliant Parsi from Bombay attending school in the United States. Homi has been conducting experiments on himself with a memory machine, a memoscan -that allows him to rewind to any memory he wishes to retrieve. He becomes so immersed of one particular memory. As a result, he is in a semiconscious state, and totally at the whim of an unrelenting past. This paper is an attempt to remind the past through the Parsis and their life.

Outline - Intro - Summary

Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* is mainly concerned with family and community novel. It focuses on the past prestigious life of Desai's Zoroastrian ancestors who were extremely cautious to preserve the purity of their blood and race. The novel delineates how Desai finds them one after the other on his memory machine, the memoscan and recaptures unmistakably their hoary past and all its excellences. He relives in his memory and brings to his memory the details of his community from his collective unconscious. But some critics ignores Desai's intention in portraying the memory of his soul, calling the novel as "Postcolonial in the broadest sense of the term" (Vevaina 332). The political content of the novel is very thin. However, as an Indian Parsi emigrant novelist who had chances to witness many political and religious upheavals that followed the Partition and still continue in the postcolonial Independent India, he cannot but bring in certain political characters to give vent to his political views and ideas. Desai unlike, Mistry and Dhondy seems to have great veneration for Mahatma Gandhi. In the novel *The Memory of Elephants* Bapaiji, the protagonist Homi's paternal grandmother marches forward as a social leader to settle a dispute between the local Hindus and Muslims. Finding herself followed by a huge crowd, she identifies herself with Gandhiji and recalls to her memory what he has done for the country; "Bapaiji smiled suddenly; a thought occurred to her. There were Hindus and Mussalmans among the students. She remembered Gandhiji's salt march during which Hindus and Mussalmans of both genders and all castes and ages had united in a show of solidarity against the English" (95-96).

Desai expresses his respect and love for Gandhiji in a number of places in the novel through the character Popatlal. Popatlal, a Gujarati tuition master who is a typical Gandhian in thoughts, and deeds says that, "It is a bad system for one nation to rule another. The British have ruled us now for too long. And with Gandhiji to lead us we will gain our independence again" (209). He adds that it is only for Gandhi's sake he would go to jail. And for him, "I will go to jail as many times as he wants. For him I will suffer beatings.... but what is a little beating when Gandhiji himself has suffered so much already for us all? I am willing to die for him today. He is the greatest man in the world" (209).

His speech influenced the enthusiasm of the young Parsi girls who listen to him and they "want to know whether Gandhiji is greater than God Zoroaster and the King of England" (209). It is significant to note that Desai rightly understands the troubles that may fester between India and Pakistan after Partition and presents them with great foresight and without malice and prejudice. It is noted that, "More repercussions of that damn Jinnah's Direct Action Day. We are so close to Independence and he has got to spoil everything. Mark my words. Gandhi is right. Pakistan is a stupid idea. It will come to no good. This is only the beginning of a long tunnel of trouble" (255).

Desai also describes a few horrifying scenes of violence that followed the Partition. Across narrow streets, by day, Chinese cobblers peddled wares among Muslim tailors and Hindu storekeepers, across rows of shacks of cardboard and corrugated metal within which families slept in rows. Desai records a man lying on the ground in dark, where goondas are kicking him, beating him with lathis and dandas. Blood spilled from the man's mouth, and from around the corner came more goondas, blades unsheathed. The first stabbings drew arcs of blood as the long knives rose and fell. Through the memoscan the protagonist of the novel remembers the time from his high school history:

almost four thousand dead in the streets; six thousand including those merely shot and stabbed and hacked and burned. Communal gangs had terrorized Calcutta: men's limbs were torn from their bodies as their families watched; lathis were stuffed into women's vaginas, wrenched upward tearing the women apart; pregnant women were cut open, left to die next to their unborn babies. (255-256)

The Parsis gets agitated. Their only question is "When will it end? When will it all end? How much killing will it take?" (256). Homi's Dad replies that Gandhiji alone can solve all the problems and prevent the atrocities; "Gandhi can. Let us pray he survives his fast. No telling what will happen otherwise. Gandhi was more than a man, a saint, the most Christ like figure in the world" (256). Homi finds on his memoscan that the Partition days were not at all the happy ones. There were endless Hindu-Muslim riots which adversely affected the Parsis. Even Gandhiji, became "an ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain" (257). The following passage quoted from the novel is an authentic indication of the fact that Desai too shares the vision of the migrants where Millions migrated, Muslims from India to Pakistan, Hindus from Pakistan to India. Many are seen with no more than the shirts on their backs, by foot, by bullock cart, by train, and more than a million died in the ensuing carnage.

A train arrived in Pakistan which Desai calls “A GIFT FROM INDIA”. The train is packed with the corpses of murdered Muslims, men, women, and children which prompted Muslims to respond in kindness. Homi says on seeing this “Mom’s tears developed into a monsoon and a deluge of blood, flooding the carnage in a crimson wash”(258). The Indian national anthem “Jana Gana Mana” dissolved into a squawk of feedback over the loud-speakers, rose into a wall of lamentation. On a thin mattress, on a hard floor, in a dark house, somewhere in Calcutta, Gandhi curled like a worm on his side, “shoulders skaking, weeping silently, this was not the conclusion he'd dreamed for his non-violent revolution” (257-58). However the greatest blotch on the novel is the reference made to the liaison between Nehru and Lady Mountbatten. Though there is no need for recalling their story in the context in which it occurs, Desai deliberately brings it into the limelight and thereby proves that he too, despite all his adoration for Gandhiji and balanced presentation of the Partition aftermath, is not without prejudices and biased views against the Nehru family. The Parsis in the country have been greatly hurt in their feelings by what Mrs. Indira Gandhi has done to Feroze Gandhi, her husband, and to Nagarwala in particular and to the whole race of Parsis in general by closing down their business concerns and paving way for the growth of Hindu militant organizations. it is no surprise to note that not even a single Parsi either in India or elsewhere is willing to forget what she has done.

The past ever remains as incurable, always kicking and alive in all their minds. To cap it all, the prejudice is passed from generation to generation through the printed media. The memory of the soul, therefore looms large in the fictional works of the Parsi writers, who are always alert enough to speak of a separatist identity and establish a 'heightened awareness' of their ethnic superiority. This discussion naturally leads to a further discussion of how the Parsi writers highlight their society which they find to be unique and superior in every aspect.

References:

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