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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### TRACING CULTURAL AMNESIA IN SARA SULERI'S MEATLESS DAYS

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#### ABSTRACT

The research on culture most of the time goes hand in hand with the research on literature. This is because literature itself is a very important branch in cultural studies. At a general level culture encompasses way of life, action, way of thinking and behaviour as well as the material and spiritual commodities that a society produces. This paper will discuss a contemporary cultural discourse that is labeled as cultural amnesia. It will be analyzed using Sara Suleri's memoir titled *Meatless Days* (1991). The memoir by Sara Suleri is that of an Anglo-Pakistani that has been brought up in the United States of America with two cultures – the American culture and the Muslim-Pakistani culture. She writes her memoir as a diasporic Pakistani woman who lives in exile from her society. She portrays herself as doubly alienated from her society and the Western society that she lives in. Her narrative projects the idea that she has cultural amnesia. This doubly removed diasporic subject does not understand the culture of her father's motherland - Pakistan since she has been brought up in Yale, New Haven, United States of America. The memoir is quite nostalgic because Suleri tries to trace within her memory the experience of being a "Pakistani" in America, her religious background and the scars of colonialism on Pakistan. This essay will look at the author's memory crisis of *remembering* and *forgetting* in the context of the Indian-Pakistani Diaspora in America. The text will be read by using Andrea Huyssen's book titled *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995). His concept of time and memory will be used to analyze the memoirs in the context of the past and the present as paradoxes to each other.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Edward Burnett Taylor in *An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists* (2009: 5), culture or civilization carries broad meaning in ethnographic and complex encompassing knowledge, customs and beliefs, arts, morals, laws and all the skills and attitudes that Owned by a member of society. Kroeber & Kluckhohn (2002: 227), states that culture consists of explicit and implied patterns of attitudes or behaviors acquired and channeled through symbols that make up the individual achievement of a group of people including artificial human artefacts. An important thrust in culture consists of traditional aspects (through acquired or selected history), ideas and values as well as cultural systems that can be regarded as action products or as conditional elements for future action. The culture of a nation is regarded as a national identity and a country that involves all components of the nation and should be supported with the awareness of every element of society.

Without the combination of these elements, it will contribute to a cultural crisis that leads to racial problems. This paper is intended to examine the contemporary cultural discourse of cultural amnesia study through the *Meatless Days a Memoir* (1991) by Sara Suleri. *Meatless Days a Memoir* is a book that encompasses personal memoir, the history of the development of Pakistan, and female position within Pakistani culture. Suleri jumps from the present to the past, from the United States to Pakistan, and from the privileged world of Yale in New Haven to the traditional realm of cultural traditions. Both the clash of modern and traditional cultures as well as the exile versus the homeland is addressed in her beautiful prose (<https://neoenglish.wordpress.com/2010/12/04/Introduction-and-short-summary-of-meatless-days/>). The female Pakistani author, Sara Suleri addresses the ontological landscape of her narrative as the role of both a Pakistani female and an exile. Through a Pakistani's role as the "alien double" in relation to the West, Suleri sees herself as the American Pakistani also as the alien double of her own culture. Through her misunderstanding of some of her own cultural traditions, she sees herself as existing in between two cultures and two ideologies, neither one nor the other. Sara, through her stories of her father's work for

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Pakistan and his political machinations, Suleri presents history within a human frame. She also illustrates her own imagining of what Pakistan means to the exile. Her "country" becomes a homeland that encompasses both the remote and archaic world of traditions with the contemporary, modern society of both the East and the West. Through religion and the cultural development of the Twentieth Century, Pakistan is presented as both jarring and formless within Suleri's prose. The book is an intriguing look at life in Pakistan and in the American-Pakistani community that Suleri has known. This study will use a framework of cultural amnesia concepts to analyze the discourse of cultural amnesia embodied in the *Meatless Days a Memoir* text by Sara Suleri. This study will analyze the forgotten, outdated and eliminated cultural issues that result in cultural amnesia such as identity crisis and confusion of national identity. This study will analyze the problems of cultural amnesia inherent in the text as well as critically examining how the author struggling to heal the cultural amnesia. To understand the concept of culture amnesia effectively, the knowledge of the 'cultural' and 'amnesia' terms should be specifically addressed. In epistemology, culture or civilization carries broad and complex meaning from the ethnographic aspect of knowledge, customs and beliefs, arts, morals, laws and all the skills and attitudes that a society has. While the term amnesia, based on the Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology: A-E, Vol. 1 is described as follows.

In current common use, amnesia (from the Greek for forgetfulness) refers loosely and interchangeably to either one or two quite different states or both of them. First, it refers to a state in which memories that were available to recall in the past have been lost and is no longer available for recall in the present. Second, it refers to a state in which current experiences are not being kept account of and duly recorded, which result that they will not be available for recall in the future. The first usage is reflected in the oxford English dictionary definition of amnesia as "loss of memory" and roughly coincides with retrograde amnesia, whereas the second usage is reflected in the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition as "forgetfulness. (C.D Spielberger, 2004: 130). In summary, amnesia refers to a person who lost memory in the past or was unable to remember things in the present situation. From a particular study of the meaning of 'culture' and 'amnesia' in particular, the New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy Third Edition defines cultural amnesia as, "A loss of memory, especially one brought on by some distressing or shocking experience."

Whereas Epp Jerlei, through a thesis titled "Cultural Amnesia: Imagining Alternatives to the Dystopian Future of Norrland", explains cultural amnesia as,

Cultural amnesia refers to the diagnosis of a condition that occurs due to external or traumatic damage. This can be a cause for society to forget their roots, culture, and relationships with landscapes that have once been an example of society as a whole, but have now been forgotten and replaced with the ideal desire transferred from the original context.

(Epp Jerlei, 2015: 4)

Generally, cultural amnesia study is an interdisciplinary study involving two major areas of humanity and science, which

evolved from historiography studies to memory studies over the last two decades.

However, the study of cultural amnesia in the context of literature has not yet been seen so strongly in the academic world. This is due to the lack of research on cultural amnesia discourse in literary text academically. However, over the past ten years, the concept of cultural amnesia has attracted the scholar's attention in researching, criticizing, evaluating and analyzing the cultural discourse of amnesia in the context of literature. Through the study of cultural amnesia discourse ever done, it is found that the cultural amnesia that exists in the context of literature serves as a theme, motif, presentation tool, textual purpose, division of literary history, as well as narrative that replaces experience.

A cultural amnesia study conducted by Andreas Huyssen through his book *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Cultural of Amnesia* (1995) is well worth a look at the study as Huyssen focuses on the growing memory of human-induced cultural memory at the end of the 20th century, a transition century to the postmodern era. Despite his research focus on the German state, the problem of cultural memory highlighted by his views is relevant in the context of today's world culture. This book is divided into two main sections: part Time: Memory and Time and Memory: Part 2: Media and Culture (Media and Culture). This paper will only focus on the first part, 'Time and Memory' which shows the concept of cultural amnesia study clearly and appropriately for application with the selected text.

Andreas Huyssen in his book's introduction section explains that culture in the context of modern day generation of the century is experiencing a crisis of a disease called amnesia. He said that,

As we approach the end of the twentieth century and with it the end of the millennium, our gaze turns backwards ever more often in an attempt to take stock and to assess where we stand in the course of time. Simultaneously, however, there is a deepening sense of crisis often articulated in the reproach that our culture is terminally ill with amnesia.

(Andreas Huyssen, 1995: 1)

From the statement, Huyssen explains that as humans approached the end of the 20th century, their views often turned back as reassessing where they stood along the way. In view of this, there is a crisis that human culture is experiencing severe amnesia. This is because, the things that have passed in human history have formed a new or better situation compared to the earlier centuries. The study of cultural amnesia study Andreas Huyssen is a study that focuses on issues of time and memory and its relationship to cultural amnesia which prevails within the American and European societies. This study is a continuation of Freud's thought of memory and knowledge and its relation to forgetting in which the present context is diaspora and cultural amnesia. According to Huyssen,

The turn toward memory and the past comes with a great paradox. Ever more frequently, critics accuse this very contemporary memory culture of amnesia—anesthesia or numbing. They chide its inability and unwillingness to remember, and they lament the loss of historical consciousness.

(Andreas Huyssen, 2000: 27)

The presence of memory of the past in contemporary contexts is a paradox that prevails in this contemporary age.

Humans seem to have feelings of fear to forget and in the same time they also have the desire to remember. Huyssen goes on to write that,

For the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of memory, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. At issue is the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data. My hypothesis here is that we try to counteract this fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of public and private memorialization.

(Andreas Huyssen, 2000: 28)

This paradox occurs following the misalignment between the memory of the past with the postmodern world that leads to a change of cultural memory that no longer sees the nation's tradition, language and history of the nation. Postmodernism has brought to falsehood and loss of memory about culture and this circumstance encourages people to re-seek their long-lost roots. In this context, people who are far from their own culture and history, gradually experience a crisis of cultural memory following the attempt to extinguish unwanted memories and thus form a new memory. Generally, this situation occurs through the migration process as a breakout of unwanted memory or trauma. Through migration, humans adapt themselves to new environment, way of life, practice, thought and culture. The new atmosphere will slowly affect the personalities of migrants and the situation will grow in the course of time. In conclusion, the farther the human or the longer the period of humanity leaves the culture of its origin, the greater the potential for forgetting the culture and their original identity.

**Textual analysis:** Sara Suleri in her book, *Meatless Days A Memoir* (1991) explores her identity conflict as a Pakistani-American diasporic society within the postcolonial framework that shows a cultural clash between the West and the East. Suleri's migration to America is liberation of trauma of war, political instability and country's oppression against women, after Pakistan achieved independence. Leaving Pakistan more than her age, it was discovered that Suleri gradually experienced amnesia on his native culture and identity, Pakistan. The narrative jumps about from memory to thought to memory to sensation and back to reminiscence again. This can be observed through the following passages,

One morning, I awoke to find that, during the course of the night, my mind had completely ejected the names of all the streets in Pakistan, as though to assure that I could not return, or that if I did, it would be returning to a loss. Overnight the country had grown absentminded, and patches of amnesia hung over the hollows of the land like fog.

(Sara Suleri, 1991: 18)

One morning, when Suleri was in New Haven, her mind appealed to her homeland. In this context, Suleri was in two situations where she still remembers Pakistan, but at the same time, Suleri does not think to return there because Pakistan brings a lot of memories she did not want. The death of his mother, Dadi (grandmother) and Ifat (sister), oppression

against women, exploitation of religion and political made her to distance herself with Pakistan by way of migration.

Over time, Suleri is aware that many things about her homeland have been forgotten and she felt loss. In addition, the most significant cultural amnesia problem detected in Sara Suleri is through the aspect of language. As the Anglo-Pakistani diaspora society, Suleri dominates the two languages - Urdu and English. She is even an English professor at Yale University. In this context, English has become the first language of Suleri, while the national language has become the second language. This can be seen in the following passage,

Living in daylight, after all is not so different from living between two languages: it is a lie to say that some people only live in one, for to know a couple of different languages is merely a matter of demonstrating the pangs of intimacy that beset our mouths each time we speak. Coming second to me, Urdu opens in my mind a passageway between the sea of possibility and what I cannot say in English: when those waters part, they seem to promise some solidity of surface, but then like speech they glide away to reconfirm the brigandry of utterance. Speaking two languages may seem relative affluence, but more often it entails the problems of maintaining a second establishment even though your body can be in only one place at a time

(Sara Suleri, 1991: 117)

To speak in two languages, Suleri seems to be two different people. However, to maintain the Urdu language is also a problem for Suleri because she is not in the environment of her native society. This situation further complicates the identity of Suleri as a Pakistani society that is further away from its original culture. The memoir title, *Meatless Days* itself is a metaphorical symbol that shows a loss that occurred in Sara Suleri's life. The meaning of meatless days extends beyond what is already known to us. The word meatless becomes synonymous with motherless, fatherless, sisterless and brotherless. In short it is loveless, homeless – and finally lifeless. The subsequent cultural amnesia can be observed through the expression of the meaning of the Pakistani Muslim's food traditions. *Meatless Days* – is reference to transcending life of meat and drink, the life of body and physical pleasure, and to learn to survive without meat, for there are other forms of food, other manners of eating. This can be seen in the following passage,

I like order to a plate, and know the great sense of failure that attends a moment when what is potato to the fork is turnip to the mouth. It's hard when such things happen. So long before the *kapura* (sweetbreads that cooked with meat kidneys) made its comeback in my life, we in Pakistan were bedmates with betrayal and learned how to take grim satisfaction from assessing the water table of our outrage. There were both lean times and meaty times; however occasionally, body and food would sit happily at the same side of the conference table

In this context, the diasporic aspect has also distanced Suleri from her food culture. She compares Pakistani cuisine to the food that she cooks in America. The above passage shows that Suleri is a purist when it concerns food and taste. She likes her food to taste according to what is in the food. A potato should taste like a potato and a turnip like a turnip. Thus, she is criticizing Pakistan for concealing the real ingredients in food.

Therefore, Suleri makes the statement that she is different from the average Pakistani. She is Westernized and likes her food as well as other matters in her life to be straightforward.

### Conclusion

The presentation of cultural collisions between the East and the West in this memoir is Sara Suleri's quest of her own identity and cultural identity. This preference allows readers to understand the situation of the long-lost Pakistan diasporic society and the cultural amnesia that has taken place in this diasporic society. *Meatless Days a Memoir* is a dual travelogue. It takes the reader through a Third World that will surprise and confound him even as it records the author's similar perplexities while coming to terms with the West. In conclusion, *Meatless Days a Memoir* is seen as a form of therapy or healing of the cultural amnesia afflicted by its effects on the development of Pakistan's diaspora by reviving the cultural memories through literary texts. In this context, the healing of cultural amnesia cannot be achieved without being aware of it. Suleri conveys the memory of Pakistan's culture by recalling, revisiting and re-reading through the realization of its original history, and thus cures herself from cultural amnesia and rids herself from the confusion of being a diasporic Pakistani in America.

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