

A Sanctuary of Memory in Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women"

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Abstract— Diasporic literature has always brought out the pains and tribulations of the diasporans in the settled land. It has grown far and wide in the contemporary era. Such a dynamic field of literary studies not only presents the problems of the diasporans but gives solutions to the same. This research paper is one such attempt to propose the ways in which the diasporans can relieve themselves from the pains experienced in the hostland, as embedded in Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story "Black-Eyed Women".

Keywords— *Memory, diaspora, first and second generation diasporans, ghosts.*

Memory is the word that activates the world and ensures the existence of lives on earth. All animals and people are bestowed with memories that keep them moving on earth. Life sans memories cannot flourish as they would be computers sans CPU. In such a circumstance life would become meaningless. According to Elie Wiesel, a Romanian-American poet,

Without memory, there is no culture

Without memory, there would be

No civilization, no society, no future. (Wiesel)

It is quite evident that without memory, human beings would be mere mortals who would die every second if they do not remember anything.

Memory also delineates the personality of a person based on the type of memory he or she has. To define memory, it can be called as the retention or recollection of incidents, happenings and every single action around people. They are information that are encoded, stored and retrieved later. Memory works based on sensory organs and every living thing possesses memory, but only the range and the capacity of it differ in everyone.

Based on the range of memory, information imbued in a person can be classified into three types of memories as *sensory*, *short-term* and *long-term* memory. This division is based on the range and the type of information that is piled up. Information that are fed through the sensory organs like eyes, nose, ear, tongue and skin are stored in *sensory memory*. For instance, the smell of rain, coffee or hearing a sound or music gets accumulated here. *Short-term memory* holds information for limited period, say, a few hours or days and are available for immediate access. This cannot hold larger amount of inputs as they are limited in capacity. *Long-term memory* stays in the mind for years together, sometimes

for the whole life. These memories often comprises of objects and incidents that affect one's self personally.

Besides these, 'Flashbulb Memories' are yet another type of memory that do not fit under any time or range. They acquire such a name as they appear suddenly like flash floods. Unlike the other memories, these occur as vivid and highly detailed snapshots that originate at the times of shock or trauma. Recalling of personal events in which one is deeply injured or affected physically or mentally leads to flashbulb memories. These memories are the ones that kindle various feelings in everyone be it positive or negative.

Apart from storage, memories undergo multiple levels of processing such as shallow processing or deep or semantic processing. In shallow processing, only the overall appearance of the incident gets projected whereas deep or semantic processing involves elaborative rehearsal of memories. In deep processing, the repercussions of the incident or something which may happen in future are synthesised. Further, some memories do not undergo any of the above mentioned processings, but, they fade and get into oblivion. This is called *forgetting* and this happens due to age, mental capacity or internal imbalances.

Another phenomenon that supplements forgetting is *interference*. When some new information is fed, they interfere with the old memories because they may be inter-related with the old. Aligned with how these affect the existing memories, they can be *proactive* and *retroactive*. In retroactive memories they may inhibit the ability to memorise new information and in proactive memories they correlate with old information to store the upcoming ones. The cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Lofters in her research on the reliability of memories, discovered that even some false memories can be implanted to erase the existing or to

make believe something else. This is achieved with the help of violence and usage of weapons. These false memories that are rooted in the minds become a threat to the people compelling them to forget their true past and prodding them to get used to the newly injected ideas.

All these kinds of memories play a vital role in the life of the diasporans. Diasporans are people who migrate to an alien land by interest in search of greener pastures or the people who are transported by force or compulsion like slaves or expatriates. While the first category of people try to get accustomed to the hostland, the latter the slaves and expatriates live in eternal sadness and fear. The word 'diaspora' is literally derived from the Greek word 'diaspero', which means 'to scatter or to disperse'. This term was first used to represent the dispersion or the expulsion of the Jews from Judea after the conquest of Babylon. The term had also been used to represent the Africans who were sent to England and America as slaves. These kinds of people are called 'diasporans'. Presently, in the twenty first century, the term is used to denote the people who leave their motherland and settle in other countries for some reason. The diasporic communities are also named after the places they have left like Asian Diaspora, Indian Diaspora, Canadian Diaspora, European Diaspora and others.

Having settled in the host country, the diasporans face numerous hostile situations. Wearing the badge of two identities of the motherland and the fatherland, they live in-between two cultures and sway with hyphenated identities as hybridised individuals. Resultantly, an attitude of not-at-homeness surfaces in them at most moments. Not-at-homeness is one of the characteristic features of the feeling of non-acceptance or alienation by which they, eventually become marginalised. These marginalised men strive hard to find their identities in their lives that are filled with rejection, prejudice and uncertainty. In such a bid, they seek different methods to adapt to either of the cultures by changing their life styles akin to that of the people of the hostland. Nevertheless, at times they fail in their attempts and feel like the translocated plants, that wither out in an hostile environment.

Despite such an experience, the Diasporans hardly can return to their native country. Eventually, they try to evade from the pains in the new land, by clinging on to the memories of their motherland. In order to keep their memories alive and to experience at-homeness, they try to hold on to something of their motherland. They treasure some souvenirs of their ancestors in their minds or carry them in their suitcases. Recalling of such homeland

memories gives them an enormous strength and help them sustain their lives in the adopted land. It is to be underscored that the diasporans tug with them their language, culture, custom and ethnicity wherever they move. They are unable to sever themselves from their past land immediately and fully. Moreover, facing hostility in the host land, it becomes necessary for them to firmly hold on to and retain their native culture and try to create a mid-world between the two, to bridge the gap at least to some extent. In the creation of a unique mid-world, wherein they are torn between both the lands, memories are used as building materials.

In such an endeavour, some diasporans even emerge as 'diasporic writers' who pen down their memories with experiences as their scaffolding support. These diasporic writers focus on the off-centered people and try to unite their individual experiences collectively under one label as 'Diasporans', an identity or a label that they wear, irrespective of the nationalities they belong to. The writings also tend to be a collection of narrations of the heterogeneous people who face national, cultural, linguistic and ethnic challenges homogeneously in their day-to-day life at all levels. Their literary ventures give them a cathartic effect.

This paper "A Sanctuary of Memory in Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women" " tries to analyse the different types of memories that steer the lives of the various generations of diasporans that build up a mid-world for them and also evaluates whether this created world is haunting or soothing to the diasporans as presented in the short story titled "The Black-Eyed Women" by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Being a diasporan of Vietnamese origin, Viet Thanh Nguyen lives with the hyphenated identity as Vietnamese-American novelist. He heads the Aerol Arnold Chair of English and is presently working as a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of California. Nguyen was born in Vietnam and was later moved to America due to war. Having experienced wars in Vietnam and as a displaced man his works are autobiographical loaded with his native land's experiences. He reveals the toughened life of the diasporic people through his writings. He is an award winning novelist who has bagged a dozen of awards including Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Dayton Literary Prize for his debut novel *Sympathiser* in 2016. He published his second work *The Refugees*, a collection of short stories in the year 2017. Besides, he has written two non-fiction *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* in 2016 and *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* in 2002.

Sympathisers, his debut novel portrays the incidents that happened in the Vietnam war, forty years ago. The narrator of the novel recounts the war experiences and later in the novel brings them out as a movie when he becomes a film director. The narrator is a war immigrant settled in America and bears the dual identity born to Vietnamese mother and a French father, just like Nguyen.

Nguyen's second work *The Refugees* comprises of nine short stories, each dealing with the hopes and expectations of people who migrate under life-changing situations. The stories abound with questions exploring the themes of home, family, immigration and American experience. "The Black-Eyed Women" is the first story of the collection, that is taken for analysis. The story is narrated by an unnamed woman narrator living in the United States as a second generation diasporan.

The story revolves around the narrator whose family is of Vietnamese origin and that had to forcefully migrate to America during the Vietnamese war. In America, the narrator leads her life as a ghost writer, concealing her identity. As part of her profession she listens to others stories and gives life to them through her words. Nevertheless, she does not do so with her mother who shares her stories of the past, the narrator does not listen her. She hardly pays heed to her. One day the narrator happens to listen to her boss Victor's story, who is also a forced Vietnamese immigrant in America. After she listens to the pathetic story of Victor and his family's loss, she realises the mistake of evading her mother's stories as blabbering. She also finds that her mother is greatly haunted by the memories of her dead brother, father and others who lived with her in Vietnam. Realising the importance of her mother's reiterated memories she takes up the mission of recording her emotions.

Raki Nara, in his article "Narrating the Diaspora" explains that "diasporic condition is a state in which the longings and yearnings of the immigrants are expressed." (The Quest 114). Further, he explains that these longings are for the native land's culture, people, human relationships, love and security which they have cherished earlier. The immigrants use their sweet experiences from homeland as touchstones to compare with their pitiful state at the host land. Such memories come under the category of 'long-term' memory because it lives with them for their lifetime. The diasporans retrieve these memories and rehearse in their minds forever, whenever needed. These embedded memories undergo deep processing as it involves the comparison of the past and the present with the sole motive of striking a balance between their present and future.

The narrator's mother who is a first generation immigrant holds on to the long-term memory about Vietnam. She recalls and rehearses them more often than her daughter. The mother recollects her happy familial life she spent with her husband before the war as a stress buster. She compares Vietnam and America and the life with and without her husband and son. She also imagines how her life would have been if she were not to experience war and its miserable repercussions:

"If we hadn't had a war", she said that night, her wistfulness drawing me closer, "We'd be like the Koreans now. Saigon would be Seoul, your father alive, you married with children, me a retired housewife, not a manicurist" (*The Refugees* 11, 12).

Memories are often described with adjective like sweet, lovely, and sugary. However, in the case of the diasporans who have escaped from the gruesome conditions of the homeland, the memories are fearsome, alarming, terrifying and they are mostly haunting memories. They even take the form of ghost or phantoms. Keya Majundh in his work "Spacing the Third I in Diasporic Writings" opines that the diasporans never allow themselves to be 'crippled by claustrophobic national boundaries' instead they create their own space to enrich their journey in a positive way. They reconstruct their space through various means. One such recreation is making the dead come alive by imagination and live with them. Majundh also tells that the 'third I' is present in all the diasporans and this identity is not under the limits of native land or foreign land, they transgress every boundary including personal and public. The third I, for the diasporans, is like an oasis in the midst of the hot desert.

Victor in the story "The Black-Eyed Women", is the owner of a publication company where the narrator works creates the "third I". Having lost his wife and children in Vietnam war, he is psychologically shattered and is unable to recover from the loss. Though he appears to be normal for others, he finds himself to be trapped in the web of memories. Personally, he lives in a haunted world with his dead family, living with his third I. He reveals this when the narrator asks him whether he has seen any ghosts.

"All the time. When I close my eyes, my wife and children appear just like when they were alive. With my eyes open I'll see them in my peripheral vision. They move fast and disappear". (*The Refugees* 17)

In the supernatural world, he even feels the touch of his son brushing his hand on him and his daughter clinging on to his knees. He tells that he also converses with his wife and his wife too responds to him like asking him to check the

keys before leaving and singing birthday songs to him on his birthday. Despite his dreams being shattered by the war, he creates a third I for himself, to be strengthened and to survive in the troubled waters in America. This third I helps him to emerge as a successful owner of the publication company.

Sigmund Freud in his notable work *The Uncanny* remarks that in spite of all the technical technological and scientific advancements, human beings are powerfully held by the belief of ghosts. According to Freud, the word uncanny “belongs to all that is terrible-to all that arouses dread and creeping horror...it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread” (The Uncanny 210). He states that “to many people, the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything having to do with death, bodies, spirits, revenants, and ghosts” (qtd. in Eagleton 158).

Freud in his yet another essay “On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia”, says that the life after death is all about the imaginative speculations created by oneself. He puts forth that philosophers consider supernatural things as intellectual mystery which was created on seeing the corpse of the beloved. Normally, they are invented spirits, that arise out of primeval man’s sense of guilt mixed with grief. He theorises that the constant memory about the dead person becomes the foundation for the idea of ghosts or life after death. The story “Black-Eyed Women” also bears the testimony to Freud’s views. Both the narrator’s mother and Victor create illusions of their own family members. These creations remain the same forever. The narrator’s mother also says that the ghosts never get aged. The created ghosts become an integral part of them as third I.

The creation of third I is not always proactive, in some people’s lives they are retroactive. Raki Nara, says that most of the diasporans live under confusion and anguish and they are unable to come to terms with their new life. ‘They lose the grip on life and succumb under pressure’ (*The Quest* 115). Almost all the first generation diasporans confront this phase of life akin to the narrator’s mother in the story. The mother rewinds and repeats all her reminiscences connected with the ladies who were with her in Vietnam. Like Victor, she also perceives her dead son as a ghost and converses with him every night. She even goes to the extent of buying dresses for her dead son as he appears to her in the same wet dress when he was drowned in the sea years ago. This shows how she is unable neither to forget the old world nor get adapted to the new world. It is to be noted that the formation of ‘third I’ in the image of ghosts is not therapeutic easing her from her pains rather it is a slow poison.

On the other hand, the second generation immigrants face lesser agony than the first generation immigrants. In the modern life, they easily get acculturated to the host land and try to create an identity of their own. With their limited experiences of their homeland, they nurture only a few juvenile memories. Any bitter associations with the homeland easily disappear from their peripheral memory and get dumped in the subconscious state. However, they get surfaced only when similar events happen in the present as ‘flashbulb memories’. These flash bulb memories undergo only shallow processing as their pains are not intense like that of the first generation immigrants. The unnamed narrator of the story come under this category. Irrespective of the myriad violent and depressive situations that she faced as a child, she appears to have forgotten them after settling down in America.

The unnamed narrator succumbs to the pressures of assignments and liabilities at her office that her past life and memories are totally erased. The narrator is not able to decipher the cause for her inexplicable pains within her. She discovers the origin of those pains, only after listening to Victor and her mother. Her subconscious memories or the ghost memories, come to the conscious as ‘flashbulb memories’ only after they are stimulated by these external sources. Once kindled, these memories takes different forms and she imagines, sees and lives a motion picture with them. She too sees her dead brother like her mother. She strikes a conversation with the specter of her dead brother who is wet and wears the same dress when he was drowned. She even perceives his wounds caused during the fight with the shipmen and enquires about it.

...I touched the bruises. “Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore. Does it still hurt for you?”

...”Yes”. I said at last. (*The Refugees* 15)

The narrator’s flashbulb memories make her live the moments once again giving a momentous relief and joy. These memories turn into an integral part of her life as that of the other diasporans.

The sensory memory that operates via sensory organs, are temporal and are accessible only when the senses are used. On the contrary, in the life of the diasporans sensory memories too become permanent. In the recalling process, these sensory memories are bound strongly with them and most of the time the sensory signals provoke the other memories such as long term, short term and flash bulb. In this short story, senses of sight, smell and touch are predominant. In Victor, the narrator’s mother and later in the narrator, senses instigate and add more liveliness to their

recalled memories. The smell of the ‘perfume’, ‘saline water’ and the touches like ‘hug’, ‘pain of the bruise’ activate the memory boxes and speeds up the mental motion picture. This is evident in Victor’s motion picture of his dead family.

“I smell them too, my wife’s perfume when she walks by, the shampoo in my daughter’s hair, the sweat in my son’s jerseys. And I can feel them, my son brushing his hand on mine, my wife breathing on my neck the way she used to do in bed, my daughter clinging to my knees.” (*The Refugees 17, 18*)

In the lives of the diasporans, in spite of the similarity in their memories, types and stereotypes, the immigrants prefer different ways of extending or passing them on, based on their capabilities. Some prefer the art of story-telling, while some take up the art of writing. Both the tools are most powerful in creating ripples in the diasporic community. In the “Black-Eyed Women”, the narrator gets irritated when her mother always tells her stories about the women who lived with her in Vietnam. Never realising the importance of her mother’s memories, she evades them first, but later having seen her dead brother’s ghost, she believes the words of her mother and Victor. Then, she starts to take note of each and every detail of their memories and the magical effect they have on them. She takes up the art of writing and her mother chooses the oral narration. She records everything in writing to create the ‘third I’ for the entire diasporic community living in pain.

...We shared the passion for words, but I preferred the silence of writing, while she loved to talk. (*The Refugees 20*).

Humans generally tend to forget things with ageing, but in the case of the diasporans they just do not fade out as it happens with others. The older the diasporans become, the more they become conscious of recalling their memories by talking repeatedly about them or recording in order to sustain them. Forgetting also takes place manually by force and violence or naturally due to external or internal injuries and illness. The diasporans do not forget their scars in their body and mind easily, especially the first generation diasporans. They often try to preserve their past in their memories and try to pass it on to their progeny.

Nevertheless, certain powerful countries that colonise others consciously attempt in undoing their memories in order to curb the transmission of the same to the future. This happens when the countries want to capture other countries as slaves which Michael Foucault terms this

deliberate endeavour as ‘colonisation of mind’ as they make them feel inferior and make them believe the colonisers. The second generation immigrants get enmeshed in this quagmire believing solely on the rosy pictures created by the colonisers.

In “The Black-Eyed Women”, the narrator’s mother tries to uphold her culture by instilling the Vietnamese past into her daughter by deliberately safeguarding her from the false influences of the adopted land. Her success in this task is evinced in the real picture of her homeland delineated by her daughter:

...I pulled the covers upto my nose, the way I used to do in my early years in America, when creatures not lurked in the hallway but also roamed outside...My American adolescence was filled with tales of woe like this, all of them proof of what my mother said, that we did not belong here. In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories (*The Refugees 7*).

The narrator’s mother who is too apprehensive about the just and true representations of their culture, says:

“Writers.” She shook her head, but I think she was pleased. “At least you won’t just be making thing up just like you usually do.” (*The Refugees 21*)

As a first generation diasporan, she is too doubtful about the recording of their memories as she fears that they may be distorted for others’ benefits. However, her daughter instills confidence in her mother that she would be a true transmitter of their heritage.

Kateryna Longley in her essay “Killing me Softly, Storytelling, Ageing and the Migrant Experience” explores the opportunities the old people are given to tell their stories “they connect not only to the present and the past, the young and the old, they also connect disparate cultures, histories and ways of thinking and feeling” (qtd. in Parameswaran 90). Stories surpass boundaries and especially the stories of the immigrants, refugees and displaced indigenous people. For these people stories become powerful tools to retrieve and re-establish their identity in the new world. If they do not tell their stories, they tend to feel inferior in the eyes of the native people at the hostland. In the story, “Black-Eyed Women, the narrator’s mother always keeps saying about Aunt Six and how she died. She also tells about the other women who lived with her in Vietnam. Though she has been in the hostland for many years, she feels inferior as she does not

have any rich, meaningful relationships in America. As a mother, she also takes care that her children too should not feel inferior as manifested in her efforts to ask the narrator to give clothes to her dead brother:

“He can’t be wandering out in the cold with what you gave him, like a homeless person or some illegal immigrant.” (*The Refugees 11*)

Memories do not stop with storage, recollection and passing on. Psychologists say that they are also a therapy to analyse cure human minds. Sigmund Freud, the famous psychologist in his essay. “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” explains the concept of ‘talking cure’. In order to treat the people who are reserved, this therapy is used. Firstly, the analyst talks to the patient and takes the patient into his confidence. After becoming a confidant, the analyst goes to the next step of ‘transference’. In this stage, the patient transfers his or her psychological conflicts to the analyst. Then, the patient begins to imagine the analyst as the person with whom he or she has the conflict. For example, if the patient has had troubles with his or her father, he or she may unconsciously cast that role on the analyst. Similarly, in the story “The Black-Eyed Women”, the unnamed narrator becomes the confidant or analyst for her mother and her boss Victor. In the transference stage, they both see their beloved ones in the narrator.

As the process goes on, the patient is able to recollect some portions of his or her life which has affected his or her life largely and shares it to the analyst. In this, the long term memory of the patient is tapped and one might be surprised to note that these patients would remember nothing else but only those moments that have affected their emotions strongly. Further, the therapist would talk repeatedly of it to create a newer and more complete narration of his or her life, by which the cure begins. The analyst makes some sort of sense from their repetitions and deciphers to give solutions for them. The therapy concludes that by this talking cure even in the middle of this treatment, they become half-cured. Studies reveal that ninety percent of the people are relieved of their mental conflicts by this therapy. The oral narration of the life stories by the narrator’s mother come under this category of ‘talking cure’:

“Aunt Six died of heart attack at seventy six” she told me once, twice or perhaps three times, repetition being her habit. I never took her stories seriously. (*The Refugees 3*)

When the first generation diasporans, undergo the treatment of talking cure, there is no psychoanalyst for collecting and synthesising their memories, instead the members of the same family especially the young generation at home become the therapists who listen to the patient. In “The Black-Eyed Women”, the mother and Victor being first generation diasporic patients transfer their memories to the narrator, who is a second generation diasporan, who acts as the therapist. Like the therapist suggesting solutions for the problems, the narrator stores and gives them the assurance that they will carry them in their future and sustain it. This oral transmission of personal stories of a family does not remain as personal but they become history:

When the narrator's mother asks "these kind of stories happen all the time. Why write down what I am telling you?", narrator replies " someone has to." (*The Refugees 20*).

When this 'talking cure' therapy does not take place in the lives of the diasporans, they may become worse cultivating negative feelings like anger, sorrow and frustration. This happens with the narrator’s mother when she expresses her anger and frustration on the narrator for not listening to her memories. Raki Nara explains that "a lot of confusion, agony may take a turn for the worse" (*The Quest 115*). Having already succumbed under tremendous pressure of searching for identity, retaining their mental anguish of being unable to communicate with their beloved native people, the lives of the first generation diasporans become pathetic. So invariably memories of living beings are non- volatile. They are not just the events or incidents stored as they are for the other but they are the flesh and blood of diasporans as evident in the case of Victor.

Like Victor in the story, the diasporans create a third I and live immersed in them without affecting anyone or the narrator they steerforth the recording of the memories and make them accessible to all. If they do not choose either of these, they would live a burdened life like that of the narrator’s mother. Creating a third I like Victor would help live happily and being like the narrator they might vent out their bottled pains through their writings. It is left to the diasporans to choose between the two.

As stated in the beginning, without memories human beings would be like computers without RAM or ROM. Memories serve as eternal springs of joy and strength giving the diasporans the immunity to fight the battle of identity crisis in the host land. From the analysis of this short story, it can be said that the memory boxes of the diasporans are not just gardens but sanctuaries that protect, multiply and

safeguard the endangered species. They do not give short relief but provide a lifetime security. Where hope is lost, memory comes to rescue and it is the choice of the diasporans to choose the manner in which they are going to put them to use.

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