

The Aspect of Memory in Oonya Kempadoo's *All Decent Animals* and *Buxton Spice*

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Introduction

Literature, since the time of its advent in the form of oral retellings, has relied greatly on memory. Eventually, as the populations expanded and newer cultural and religious groups emerged, the oral tradition was improvised according to the collective or individual memory of the speakers, borrowing heavily from their myths, legends, languages, and beliefs. With the passage of time, however, it can be said that literature took up the form of metadata, making the literary works a hospice for the memories of the authors and providing a way for the memories to live on, which may otherwise have been forgotten without the aid of the literary stimulus.

In a very impactful essay about literary engagement with the past and how nostalgia ties together the present with the past, Eric Sandberg rightly claims literature to be the "...most explicit repository of cultural memory..." (Sandberg 27). In addition to preserving the stories of the past for personal recollection, such literary memory also acts as a quasi-cultural document that provides a safe asylum to the common memories of the population, such as narratives of colonialism, slave trade, partition, social unrest, war etc. The present discussion testifies to this statement and shows how, despite the different sources, the memories of the individual characters ultimately position them into the bigger picture at the social and cultural level.

Jeffrey K. Olick and others, in the "Introduction" to the book *The Collective Memory Reader*, tell of the omnipresence of memory since times immemorial. While they identify an exponential increase in the preoccupation with memory as a phenomenon called "memory boom," (Olick et al., 4), they go on to enlist a number of fields that have been included under the ambit of memory studies, like neuroscience, trauma studies, psychology, inquiry of past oppression, cultural theory, social, and political science, etc. while adding that the list is certainly not exhaustive. They further elaborate that the field of memory studies looks at the dynamicity of memory within the "social frameworks," "media technologies," "cultural institutions," and "political circumstances" (Olick et al., 37).

The overarching nature of the constituents of the field of memory studies is what makes defining it both a challenge and an elusive task. What can be said, though, with conviction, of memory studies that makes its relevance in the corpus of Caribbean Literature more grounded is the fact that all of the aforementioned fields can be situated within the history of the Caribbean. Trauma, psychology, oppression, and politics, being very ingrained in the history of the Caribbean, create a pool of memory on individual, cultural, historical, and material levels that authors from and of the region, including diasporic authors, have harnessed in their literary output.

Halbwachs' idea on how memory operates also throws light on how it can be tied to the collective memory. He states that "memory comes back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us" (Halbwachs 38). It is by way of that common memorial link that permeates the said people, which becomes a stimulus to the process of recollection for another person, too. It is this idea by Halbwachs that resonates in the instances discussed in this paper where one character's individual memory is seen in inexplicable connection to the memory of other characters. But, in addition to the human elements involved in this recollective experience, the prominent role of another element that facilitates it was found: objects. My discussion will show how material objects come to hold meaning and memory in their very materiality, which often transcends temporal and spatial boundaries.

Interestingly, Astrid Erll refers to the “memory boom” in discussing how “[p]ainting, sculpture, architecture, Internet art, movies and novels all address themes such as the fragility of memory and the ideological implications of public commemoration” (Erll *Memory in Culture*, 66), which, this essay shows, can be interpreted as a way of looking at objects as retainers of memory that set off the phenomenon of recollection among people. Erll’s statement can be utilised for foregrounding the instances in this discussion where everyday objects like a woman’s black eyeglasses covering her eye injury become an embodied memorial of the xenophobic violence or when a mundane fruit becomes a link to a character’s childhood memories. Such instances show the interaction between tangible objects and memory, as a result of which the mundane object elevates to the position of an artefact that elicits memory beyond the temporal constraints.

Speaking of Caribbean literature, it can well be understood why and how memory became an integral part of their narratives. The experiences from pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, respectively, created sediments of memories in the common consciousness of the people. It is the embeddedness and pervasive nature of memory that facilitated its recollection and representation, which novelists like George Lamming, Jamaica Kincaid, Jean Rhys, Samuel Selvon, and V. S. Naipaul, among several others, have harnessed in their works. Memory acts as a reservoir for drawing inspiration for such retellings, and the narratives and characters end up becoming vessels through which the memories are recreated for the readers to connect with. The commingling of the various ethnic, cultural, and racial groups in the Caribbean Island creates a melting pot of diversities that makes ‘memory’ the linchpin that holds together past and present and often renders a peephole into the prospective events. Looking at the present study from this lens explains the engagement that the characters display with the lived individual past, the shared collective past, and the tangible materials as potential artefacts that elicit memory.

Oonya Kempadoo is a Caribbean novelist and winner of the 2002 Casa de las Americas Literary Prize, whose novels have lent a new perspective to the Caribbean literary canon, capturing the youthful dynamicity of the island country as it gears up for ushering into the twenty-first century, along with remnants of the past tucked under the layers of memories and experiences. Having spent a large part of her life in various Caribbean countries, Kempadoo allowed the experiences to be absorbed by her consciousness. When the artistry of writing occurred to her, it was only natural that she produced works that mirrored the various aspects of social, cultural, professional, and personal incidents that were lived by the people.

Discussion

In an introductory article on the aim and scope of “Memory Studies” as a discipline, Henry Roediger and James Wertsch state that the emergence of “Memory Studies” in the 20th century as an overarching field of inquiry pulled under its ambit the subjects of sociology, history, philosophy, literature, psychology, and anthropology (Roediger and Wertsch). Eminent scholars like Astrid Erll, Aleida and Jan Assmann, Jeffrey K. Olick, Maurice Halbwachs, and others have made pioneering contributions in the field of memory studies.

While in the general sense of the term, memory remains an intrinsic and private experience for a person, in literary studies, the emotive and psychological aspects of it are focused upon. Particularly in the case of Caribbean literature, it may be said that the history of colonisation, immigration, and diasporic population have contributed to the creation of a common consciousness that makes the narratives of Caribbean literature a storehouse for memory studies. Being full of such incidents that emerge out of the vivid sociocultural forces in Caribbean islands, *All Decent Animals* (2013) and *Buxton Spice* (1998) prove to be suitable works for exploring the different facets of memory.

Set in Trinidad, *All Decent Animals* unwraps the complexities of the relationships and societal expectations surrounding the central characters. The novel primarily looks into the lives of Atalanta, a returnee in the island country of Trinidad, Pierre, the French man working in the United Nations, and Fraser, the now bed-ridden architect whose characterisation presents him in the liminal space between European aesthetic and Trinidadian traditionality. Speaking of Ata, her entire characterisation seems to be based on memory. Kempadoo models Ata after her own lived experiences, and fictionally, Ata creates an image of herself based on her childhood recollections and how she thinks the people around her see her. All these instances create a complex of memories in Ata's mind, which guide her thoughts and actions within the novel.

The novel *Buxton Spice* tells the coming-of-age story of Lula as she explores the world around her with her sister Sammy, and friends Rachel and Judy. It is interesting to note that the story ties more than just personal memory to the narrative. Much of the progression in the novel, including that of Lula's character and the action, is informed by the collective cultural, historical, and material memory tied to Guyanese history and culture. The story draws as much from the historical facts of the communal unrest in Guyana as much as it draws from the personal memories of Lula and she joins the dots of lived experiences and the retellings that she receives from her parents and the neighbours.

In *All Decent Animals*, Atalanta, who is better known as Ata, recalls her first visit to Trinidad as a timid person, astounded by the unwelcoming, fast-paced, and robust life of the place. Upon returning to Trinidad as a young woman who has spent a large part of her life in Europe living the diasporic identity, Ata recollects how the "Caricom ideals" (Kempadoo *All Decent Animals*, 5) made her develop a sense of rootlessness in that, she felt like she did not belong to any true nation, rather, generalised by the "Caribbean" label when its diversity left her feeling like "A nonbelonger. Unrooted in place and race and in herself" (6). Ata comes to realise that her mixed values and the "lack of religion" (101) aided in the creation of her flawed rootlessness. Thus, it may be said that the rootlessness in one's identity may occur as a result of the lack of affirmative cultural memories or the individual's non-identification with the cultural representations.

A tune of familiarity with this 'non-belongingness' may be found in an essay by Sylvia Wynter in which she examines the Caribbean diaspora's collective memory of deracination. Their condition is described as "one of uprootedness," which stems from the fact that the geographical displacement of the Caribbean people from their homeland is also reflected in an emotional detachment or "exile" (247) from their cultural or historical foundations. The constant catapulting of the people between contrastive sociocultural settings may aggravate the feeling of detachment, explaining why the common collective memory of the Caribbeans had been, for a long time, painted by a sense of estrangement from their roots.

History is an indispensable component of collective memory, and a lot of recollective incidents in the novels overlap the reminiscence of colonial rule in the Caribbean. While talking about the economic state of affairs, Marriette's brother tells how the Caribbeans were experiencing another form of colonialism, with the mercantile conditions proving to be financially exhausting and pinioning for the locals. He states that, similar to the colonial times, all economic freedom of the Trinidadians was lost to the supremacy of the foreign stakeholders who controlled and manipulated the business such that the Trinidadians ultimately owed their savings and assets to their employers. With their salaries being too low to avail basic necessities, the locals had to sell off their "piece'a heritage for U.S. dollars" (25) to support their families and ended up being consumed in the quagmire of crises. Angelique V. Nixon, in chapter seven of her book of essays, calls out the "neocolonialism" which perpetuates on the sociocultural, political, and economic fronts not so much by external forces as by the ingrained "...lingering effects of slavery and colonisation on the minds, bodies and spirits of Caribbean people" (Web). The collective memory of suffering and exploitation faced by the Trinidadians serves as the basis for the comment made by Marriette's brother.

One aspect of culture that unites Ata and Fraser is their common Caribbean ancestry which involved growing up eating similar foods and thus acquiring a similar taste palate. While savouring the texture and taste of sugar apples, Fraser's memory takes him back to his childhood days. Similarly, the mere thought of chenet fruit sparks a sensory image in Ata's mind, causing her to drool from just thinking of the fruit's flavour. A similar phenomenon is observed in *Buxton Spice*, wherein Lula's indulgence in eating sapodilla fruits is reminiscent of Ata's fond memories of fruit-eating. An activity as mundane as fruit-eating is cherished by Lula so much that it becomes evident that such experiences would go on to become a part of the cultural memory, as is observed in Ata's case.

An interesting link can be found between Maurice Halbwachs' idea of memory being "recalled to [us] externally" (38) and Ata's epiphanic reconnection with memories of her childhood. During her solo stay at Blanchisseuse, Ata meets an unidentified man, and her interactions with him draw them both towards a shared memory of Caribbean culture. In a moment of intimacy, the man states that Ata smells like "bitter cocoa, boiling with bay leaves, cinnamon, and nutmeg, and said that it reminded him of his childhood" (224). References to materials that make up a part of the Caribbean culinary culture thus become the memory bridge that journeys the man to his childhood. Their short yet impactful interaction prompts Ata to exclaim in response, "You are from the islands" (ibid).

Ata's interaction with the man and her subsequent recollection of her childhood memories of passionate engagement with the culinary and cultural experiences of the Caribbean occurs at a time when she struggles with her self-identity owing to her swerving relationship with Pierre. Understanding this episode in the light of Halbwachs' idea explains that for Ata, the process of recollection and subsequent reconnection with her Caribbean culture happens after the encounter with the unidentified man, whose references to elements of Caribbean food culture facilitate this recollection.

In a trailblazing essay published in 1988, Jan Assmann describes "cultural memory" as a sort of repository of "repeatedly used texts, images, and rituals" (Grabes 35) by virtue of which a continuance of cultural practices is established. It might be this continuance that plays an active role in governing the actions or prompting the culturally 'correct' way for certain things to be done. This is observed when Ata, presumably from previous experience, points out the correct way of eating sugar apples – sitting outdoors, and using hands to handle the fruit, without using any plate, cutlery, or paper napkins. She associates an insouciance with the handling and eating of the tropical fruits, for only then, according to her, they could be truly enjoyed and appreciated. In *Buxton Spice*, Lula's almost mechanical way of eating the sapodillas using her hands is similar to Ata's thoughts, and it seems as if all that Ata yearns for and recollects in nostalgia are the realities lived by Lula.

The conventional role of memory as a faculty of recollection is contrasted in *All Decent Animals* when Fraser Goodman displays signs of memory repression. In an article on repressed memories, Henry Otgaar and others testify to the presence of repressed memories as a result of traumatic experiences of the past. As a closeted homosexual man, Fraser bitterly recalls the times when his mother, Mrs. Dorothy Goodman, had ill-treated him. Attempting to "straighten" him "as a child" (Kempadoo *All Decent Animals*, 100), his mother used to lock him up in a secluded room. This tyrannous suppressed memory triggers what may be identified as anxiety, as Fraser recoils into being the "overly sensitive, tremulously unhappy small boy he claimed to have been in this house" (64) when he is invited along with Pierre and Ata to Mrs. Dorothy's house for lunch. His anxiety is also observed by his friend, Alan, who believes Fraser's "childhood nightmares or the lack of his mother's real connection to him" (220) to have caused his vexation.

Otgaar's study also notes that in cases of sexual abuse and shock, victims were likely to push the traumatic memories aside, leading to cases of repressed memories. This might explain the incident surrounding Emelda DeAbro's harsh treatment of her daughter, Judy, and

how it affects Lula's mind in *Buxton Spice*. Upon learning of Judy's forbidden escapade with André, Emelda loses all control over her anger and she goes to the extent of invading Judy's privacy. She physically assaults Judy to check for any signs of suspected sexual activity. A petrified Lula witnesses this incident, giving a hint to the readers that as traumatic as the incident has been for Judy, even Lula would be haunted by its memory. The despondency in her thoughts can be understood in these words – "We sat down right there. Couldn't believe Mrs DeAbro would do that" (Kempadoo *Buxton Spice*, 182), wherein the sudden shock in her tone suggests that the harrowing incident would get crystallised in Lula's consciousness and perhaps even leave behind a deep recess of repressed memory.

It may be reasoned that factors such as the lapse of time between the occurrence of an incident and its recollection, the presence of "psychopathology," and "suggestive therapeutic interventions," as mentioned in Otgaar's article, may lead to the inception of "false memory" (Otgaar et al., n.p.), which essentially is the inaccurate or fabricated recollection of events. However, the possibility of "false memory" is ruled out in *All Decent Animals*, as it is noted that Fraser keeps the horrifying memories from his childhood suppressed for all his adult life and brings them to the forefront only while confronting his father, Mr. Charles Goodman when he is on the verge of impending fatality. The trauma of his childhood memory seems to have been fossilised in Fraser's mind, leading to his accurate recollection. Mr. Goodman's nonspeech reaction ratifies Fraser's accusations, thereby attesting his memory, albeit they were from a long time ago.

Fraser acknowledges the power of memory and asks Terence not to visit him in his last days. As is later figured out by Ata through a recollection of the shared glances between Fraser and Terence, their undisclosed love for each other is what Fraser wishes to preserve from being pulverised by the ghastly clutches of his rapidly deteriorating health. He does not wish to be remembered by Terence as the "ghoulish remnant of flesh and blood" (Kempadoo *All Decent Animals*, 230) that he had been during his heyday. Reminiscent of John Donne's lauded poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", Fraser believes that the beauty of his and Terence's bond is best maintained by the discretion of quiet withdrawal.

Being set in 20th century Trinidad, when the country was emerging out of the cocoon of subordination, it makes sense why financial independence is sought by the people in *All Decent Animals*. From the way Ata admires Angelica Diaz's prosperity and personal upkeep in a sort of godly adoration, it becomes clear that in a population where the majority was still struggling to establish a sense of financial freedom, such prosperous women were both idols for other young girls and a rarity in the contemporary time of the novel's setting. The individual memory of Sammy's mother at once throws light on her own past which was full of hardships and perseverance and on the collective memory of numerous other Black women who quietly struggled against all odds to create an identity of their own. The absence of any references to his father throughout the narrative makes it quite clear that Sammy was brought up single-handedly by his mother, with the money that she earned from her cooking business. In hindsight, she recalls how her cooking was the only thing by which she was able to clothe Sammy and build the house. Such a recollection attests to the pitiable financial conditions of other women at that time, which Sammy's mother had bravely fought through to attain a sense of self-dependence and freedom.

In *Buxton Spice*, memory is also manifested through material objects, ranging from quotidian to magnificent entities. Material memory is explored in the ruins of an old mosque, which, at once, points to the transience of time and how certain objects perpetuate memories across periods of time. Lula marvels both at the past grandeur of the building in its heyday and the relic that it had turned into in the present times. Such desecration of a venerated place also hints at the negation of humanity against the brutal forces of communalism. Lula claims she can hardly visualise people gathering in the mosque to pray and passingly also refers to the xenophobia that the people associated with the building by way of religion must have faced. Turning to Astrid Erll's notion, "...no memory is ever purely individual, but always

inherently shaped by collective contexts” (Erl *Cultural Memory Studies*, 5), seems to be particularly true in the given case as it is observed that the sight of the old mosque triggers a chain of linked individual, material, and cultural memories in Lula. The collective factors of the dilapidated mosque, instances of social unrest, and the perpetration of hate crimes in the neighbourhood — these contexts shape Lula’s memory surrounding the idea of different cultural groups in Tamarind Grove.

Another object that links the cultural and material aspects of memory is the “prized possession” (Kempadoo *Buxton Spice*, 67) of the DeAbro household – a gramophone. The gramophone embodies the elitism of “Away” that Mrs. Emelda DeAbro and some other female characters in the novel are often seen romanticising. Fixation of the characters with settling in Canada may be seen as a way of pursuing the dream of moving up the social ladder by earning a financially and socially secure life. The radical xenophobia against South Asians or anyone “who wasn’t from Tamarind Grove” (22) can be exemplified by considering the single case of Mr. Mohammed’s family. Mrs. Mohammed wears a pair of black goggles to hide the eye injuries caused by “A glass bottle full of fire” (52) that was hurled at their house by the grudging extremists. This becomes a pinching reminder of the cruelty perpetrated upon them. Lula observes the fortified windows in their house, which reminds her of the tragic attack that she may not have witnessed personally but could very well sense the distress of.

Eric Sandberg considers some forms of writing to be an “inherently nostalgic art form” which, according to him, acts instrumental in preserving “voices from the past into the present” (28). This statement stands true to a great extent in the novels under consideration, for example in Atalanta’s and Fraser’s cases. But the other examples discussed so far make it clear that memories are more than just the remembrance of the past. It is a force of life to be reckoned with, particularly when the past seems to be abundant with a bricolage of such experiences which relate to the sociocultural setup of the contemporary time, thereby setting off trails of recollections at the individual, material, and cultural levels. By aiding in the conscience development of the characters, as is seen in Lula’s case, memories transcend their typical role of transporting the character, albeit metaphorically, between the present and the past. In such cases, memories play an influential role in shaping the personalities of the characters by way of cultural or historical factors.

To zoom into the aspect of memory without paying attention to the use of autobiographical elements in the novels under consideration would take away from the fact that such elements, when incorporated into literature, are the subtlest yet most prominent examples of how memories overstep the temporal boundaries and act as an extension of life itself by putting forward a literary representation of the past experiences. Harald Leusmann’s interview with Oonya Kempadoo reveals how her memories of early childhood and professional career informed several instances in her first two novels, *Buxton Spice* and *Tide Running* (2001) which were published by that time.

Kempadoo recollects spending her early years in “Golden Grove”, the village after which Tamarind Grove of *Buxton Spice* is modelled. The pastimes of lounging around with friends, playing on the trees, and “...discovering the details of the seawall, mudflats and canals...” (Leusmann 108) are highly reminiscent of Lula’s life as described in the novel. The collective memory of political atrocities faced by the people of Guyana is also recorded in the novel. Being told from Lula’s perspective, the narrative shows her innocent yet keen observation of the racial and communal unrest in the village. Even Lula’s mother, Rose, seems to be modelled, in part, after Kempadoo’s mother. Speaking of the increasing difficulties, Kempadoo adds that she has “...memories of [her] mother trying to cope” with disrupted standards of social life, all of which made her realise that “something drastically wrong was going on” (Leusmann 111) in Guyana.

The protagonist of *All Decent Animals* is inspired by the memories of the time when Kempadoo worked as a graphic designer and eventually “worked in Carnival with Peter

Minshall” (Leusmann 108), quite similar to Atalanta’s career of working as a graphics designer for Angelica Diaz’s company and then with the Carnival designer, Slinger. By projecting her own life, youth, and career onto her characters, Kempadoo consciously chooses to perpetuate those memories and let the readers relate with them, either in part or whole, if they may, based on their own experiences. Had the faculty of memory not been a strong custodian of past experiences, such recollections that Kempadoo speaks of would not have been possible.

The inclusion of autobiographical elements in writing is identified as “...purposeful acts of individual remembrance...” (Hebel 49), which is what essentially helps Kempadoo align in words the experiences that she had lived decades ago. These memories, while occurring as an act of individual recollection, transmigrate into the novels, where they act as a pool of common memories for the readers to relate with. Thus, these examples also demonstrate how the nature of memories may change, or their significance may change from being of individual value to a common value. The careful preservation of memories and their retrieval from the recesses of the mind speak of the self-referential nature of memories. Kempadoo draws heavily from certain experiences of her own life, which are termed autobiographical elements for the nature of the literary work, but in essence, such recollections depend on the retentive faculty, and their literary representation affixes the work with the bearings of the memories.

Tanja E. Bosch succinctly details the way memory studies find a way into other disciplines and how their confluence opens the gates for further scrutiny into the wide scope of the applicability and significance of memories. To quote Bosch, “Memory studies is thus a multidisciplinary field which began with individual memory growing outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory. . . .” (2). As discussed in this paper, several instances within the novels show how the lines between individual, collective, and material memories are often blurred, allowing the process of recollection to brew in the liminal spaces. With this idea, the paper comes full circle to Astrid Erll’s observation of memories being a construct of collective forces all of which lend meaning and order to their vastness.

Conclusion

Memory, which is often only thought of as a recollective domain of the cognitive faculty, when dealt with in terms of literary studies, seems to serve the greater purpose of also lending meaning to past incidents and providing explanations to the present conditions. As seen in the two novels, *All Decent Animals* and *Buxton Spice*, Oonya Kempadoo explores the way memory functions as an appendage of life itself.

It is noted that instances of individual memory relate to the personal experiences of characters, and the interpretation of such memories divulges the thoughts and inner workings of the characters to the readers while also providing a retrospective explanation of their actions and character progression. Personal memories also deal with the ‘why’ behind the way certain characters choose to respond in a given situation, which, it may rightly be claimed, is also often governed by the collective cultural memory.

It may be argued that the multiculturalism observed in Caribbean countries, tied together with their colonial history, seems to be influential in the creation of the collective cultural memory. Most objects or incidents that elicit memory tend to have some relation with the cultural past, which, in turn, makes all memory a part of the collective memory. The unifying force behind all cognitive preservation remains the acknowledgement of the past. In the context of the novels under study, to state that an individual character exists and ‘recollects’ independently of the commonality that he or she is a part of would obliterate the perseverance of the collective Caribbean force.

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