

## In Search of Fragments of Recollection: Cultural Memory and Identity in the Select Travel Narratives of Tahir Shah

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### Introduction

The critical attention given to travel writing as a field of scholarly research is relatively new. Travel always brings new experiences, knowledge, and an understanding of other cultures. Over the centuries, travel narratives, in various forms, have enriched and educated the human mind. A travel writer has previously been an adventurer who recorded his objective observations. While travel writers like Thomas Coryate and John Taylor documented their travel experiences in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century witnessed the attempt of writers like Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson to blur the boundary between travel writing and fiction. In the post-war period, travel literature took a different turn with the writers' formulation of theories based on travel narratives. Concepts such as identity, memory, diaspora, and colonial discourses have been studied in connection with travel literature.

Extensive research has been carried out in the field of travel literature. Previous research on Shah's works has been done on themes like border crossing, nostalgia, identity, etc. Rima Barua (2020) has analysed that Shah has digressed from the conventional treatment of the identity of a diasporic travel writer in his travel narratives. She has also studied the works in light of imperialism. Kamal Sbri, in his article "Border Crossing and Transculturation in Tahir Shah's *The Caliph's House*," deals with the questions of "alterity, mobility, and negotiating differences when crossing borders" (12). There are seldom any studies done on the connection of travel literature with memory studies. Memory is not only an individual experience but also a societal and collective phenomenon. It plays a prominent role in the establishment of both individual and cultural identity. This article is an attempt to analyse the association of cultural memory and cultural identity in selected texts of Tahir Shah. The scope of this paper lies in its treatment of the relation between memory and culture.

The texts selected for this study are *The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca* (2007) and *In Arabian Nights: In Search of Morocco* (2009), written by Tahir Shah. Tahir Shah (1966) is a prolific British writer of Afghan Indian descent who is credited with the authorship of fourteen books and many documentaries. Shah's works symbolise the multicultural background (Anglo-Afghan Indian) to which he belongs. Born and brought up in Great Britain, he has travelled extensively, and in 2003, he moved to Morocco with his family. There are two levels in this study. This paper will first analyse how the author represents the cultural identity of Morocco through memory, and second, at the personal level, it will show how he defines his identity through his experiences in Morocco. Both these works are about his settling and adaptation in a foreign land like Morocco.

### Cultural Memory and Identity

Jan Assmann, in his essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", has defined cultural memory as "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity" (132). Travel narratives are active participants in creating and realising culture and identity. Memory is essential to existence as it helps an individual in the process of becoming and belonging. Travel narratives are remembrances of a travel writer's experiences with a host community. They are the result of recording an individual's memories in the larger process of becoming and belonging. As Sturken has said, "memories

are part of a larger process of cultural negotiation, which defies memories as narratives and as fluid and mediated cultural and personal traces of the past” (76). “Remembering is an active reconciliation of past and present. The meaning of the past in relation to the present is what is at stake here; memories are important as they bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view of one another. Remembering is not just an articulation of individual psychologies, but a performance rooted in lived contexts” (Keightley 58). Every social group develops a memory from its past experiences, which will help preserve and pass it on to posterity. Collective memory is a socio-political construct and a version of the past. It is defined and negotiated through changing socio-political power circumstances and agendas. Sturken uses the term cultural memory as a memory shared outside formal historical discourse but imbued with cultural meaning: “Cultural memory as a term implies not only that memories are often produced and reproduced through cultural forms, but also the kind of circulation that exists between personal memories and cultural memories” (76).

Cultural identity refers to the shared sense of customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and language. It is a dynamic phenomenon that defines the soul of a nation. Cultural memory refers not only to the memories reproduced through cultural forms but also to the interconnection of personal and cultural memories. It foregrounds the connection between memory and socio-cultural contexts. Cultural memory can be analysed at social, material, or mental levels. Rituals and practices, myths, monuments, historical details, conversational recollections, organisation of cultural knowledge, etc. can be categorised under cultural memory. From ancient times, thinkers have inferred that identity is designed by the deeds of memory. For instance, the English philosopher John Locke has thought of the identity of consciousness as the essence of personal identity. It can also be considered a survey of the collective identity of a cultural community. Cultural identity refers to the shared sense of customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and language. It is a dynamic phenomenon that defines the soul of a nation. The author travels across the Kingdom of Morocco in search of the cultural identity of the nation, and he attempts to define his own identity.

### **Socio-cultural Elements and Cultural Memory in *The Caliph's House***

Tahir Shah was born in London, but he and his family settled in Morocco. The heroic explorations of Tahir Shah into Moroccan culture entitle him to be a sentimental travel writer who narrates and describes the cultural elements and experiences as if they are a part of the dramatic performance. Morocco is called “the desert kingdom in Africa’s north-west” (Shah, *Caliph's House* 1). His impulse to live in a land where traditions and family form an integral part of life and where his children can grow up learning the values of life leads him to buy a house in Casablanca. According to Shah, “tradition is the bedrock of life” (*Caliph's House* 16) in Morocco. The reasons for choosing Morocco were many. There were some personal and emotional reasons for him to choose Morocco as the place to live. His emotional attachment to Morocco developed from his childhood days as his father took him to Morocco to show them the fragments of his native land. The days spent in Morocco, he remembers, gave colour to his “sanitized English childhood” (*Caliph's House* 7). To Tahir Shah, it was “a place of escape, [...] a place with a soul” (*Caliph's House* 7) and he wished to pass on the cultural roots to his children as “a gift of cultural colour” (*Caliph's House* 7).

Apart from the remote remembrances of his childhood and his deep desire to retire from the desolate life in London, his search for freedom and identity also contributes to his decision. His grandfather, who had spent his last years in a small villa in Tangier, after the demise of his wife, has been another reason. He has decided not to return to any place that reminded him of his wife and he wished to live in a land known for “the kingdom’s mountains, its kasbahs, and the proud tribal traditions” (*Caliph's House* 157). Even though the author had been to Tangier more than three decades before, he could still feel the pungent and intoxicating smell of orange blossom. He travels across Tangier in search of the memories of his grandfather

but realises that the resonance of Tangier is replaced with a sort of melancholy. He tries to analyse the cultural background of Tangier by connecting his childhood memories with his present travel experiences. His travel across Morocco helps him understand the social standing his grandfather and father had there. Both had friendly relations with the King of that time. He was the person destined to collect the last reminiscence of his grandfather – the diaries he had left behind.

Through the description of his explorations in Casablanca, he is trying to decipher the cultural code of Morocco. The first cultural element that he came across was the concept of Jinns among the Moroccans. Dar Khalifa, the house he bought in Morocco, was occupied by not only earthly pests but also by Jinns, magical spirits that love to haunt unoccupied houses. The house, Dar Khalifa, along with the three guardians, is the primary source of contact between Tahir Shah and Moroccan culture. To the people of Morocco, jinns were a far more serious issue than suicide bombers. As per Muslim belief, a jinn is “a fraternity of spirits created by God from fire ... inhabit[ing] the world along with humans” (*Caliph's House* 354). Jinns or genies or jnun have supernatural power to take any form as they wish and are invisible to human eyes. All jinns are wicked and causing discomfort to man is their pleasure. The Moroccans believed that if a house is left empty for a long period, it will attract jinns and the master of the house should give them the blood they need. At first, Shah is incredulous about the existence of these supernatural elements. However, he is regarded with more respect only when he positively addresses the superstitious beliefs of the guardians. The Moroccans look for *baraka*, meaning ‘blessing’, in whatever they do. The name of the jinn in Dar Khalifa is ‘Qandisha’ and the guardians ask the master of the house to put out a plate of couscous and meat for Qandisha. They also believed that if a person keeps a frog in his pocket, fire will not harm him. Shah learned that everyday accidents like the breaking of a vase, and a dog biting a child were considered the work of mystic forces “with the jinns at the centre of the belief system” (*Caliph's House* 173).

As Aleida Assmann, in “The Dynamics of Cultural Memory between Remembering and Forgetting”, says: “Cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and re-use. To this active memory belong, among other things, works of art, which are destined to be repeatedly re-read, appreciated, staged, performed, and commented” (99). The architecture and planning of a city are material expressions of a culture and mirror its cultural identity. The narrative description of the city by the author is an indicator of the cultural standards of Morocco. The city of Fes which was once known for its wealth, scholarship, and trade, is described as follows:

Our starting point was Fès, undoubtedly Morocco's greatest jewel. It is the only medieval Arab city that remains entirely intact. Walking through the labyrinth of streets that make up the vast medina is like stepping into A Thousand and One Nights. The smells, sights and sounds bombard the senses. A stroll of a few feet can be an overwhelming experience. For centuries, Fès was a place of impressive wealth, a centre of scholarship and trade. Its houses reflect a confidence in Arab architecture almost never seen elsewhere, their decor profiting from a line of apprentices unbroken for a thousand years. (Shah, *Caliph's House* 7-8)

The houses in Fes were an example of brilliant Arabic architecture. Shah also perceives “an exclamation of French colonial might” (*Caliph's House* 40) in the buildings in Casablanca. The workshops in the alleys of the old city marked the existence of traditional skills of metalwork, leather tanning, mosaic design, weaving, ceramics, and marquetry. The interest among modern local Marrachis to sell their ancestral houses to Europeans for a large profit and to move into apartments in new towns reveals the cultural shift in Moroccan society.

Language is another concept that is closely knitted to cultural memory. It helps in shaping cultural identity and how the past is remembered. It also plays a pivotal role in transmitting cultural memory from one generation to another. The official languages in Morocco are Moroccan Arabic and Moroccan Berber. French and English are spoken in the urban areas of Morocco. The writer has used transliterated words from locally used languages. For instance, *jellabas* refer to traditional hooded robes. Certain examples of such words are Tarboosh (a round, velvet-covered hat), bidonville (French word for shantytown), B'saf (Moroccan Arabic word for a lot), sehura (sorceress), tadelakt (traditional Moroccan plasterwork), moualem (craftsman in a traditional Moroccan form of art), Merguez (spiced mutton or lamb sausages), douane (the French word for customs), khobz (bread), harem (a section of a traditional house reserved for women), sharif (noble), jan (a suffix added to a name), souq (market), etc. The use of vocabulary in the Moroccan way in the texts reveals the writer's attempt to adapt and adopt the cultural identity of Morocco. The writer glorifies bargaining as an honourable tradition in Morocco and stresses that it "has one of the most developed bartering economies" (*Caliph's House* 185).

Work culture is an element that defines the identity of a culture. The writer notices a difference in the work culture of the Europeans and the Moroccans. While the Europeans worked very hard and considered inactivity to be guilty, the Moroccans worked only when they needed to. Tahir Shah meets a French man working in the French Consulate in Morocco who sheds light on the Orient-Occident dichotomy in the minds of the Europeans. According to Francois, the French diplomat, Morocco seems to be closer to Europe and Europeans but in the minds of the Moroccans, "they are Orientals" (*Caliph's House* 23), and he also adds that the only way to exist is "to appreciate the culture and to navigate through treacherous water" (*Caliph's House* 24). The café culture in Morocco is entirely different from that of the European one. The writer, while in Europe, did not find it comfortable to spend much time in a café. In Morocco, however, spending time in a café is considered an honourable pursuit.

Various socio-cultural elements of Morocco have enriched the knowledge of the author thereby adding to the value of its cultural ethos. These socio-cultural acts are seemingly diminutive but are of high value in the field of cultural studies. These elements are bearers of cultural memory. Moroccan culture also gives importance to honour, especially honour of the family. Women belonging to respectable families were not allowed to go out to work, and they may take extreme actions to conserve the family's honour. Moroccan society is based on a system of helpfulness. In one instance, the author finds the Moroccan shopkeepers donating the best fruit from their collection to a beggar-woman. On the other hand, the writer also humorously presents the suffocation caused by the extreme helpfulness of the Moroccans. While searching for a maid and a nanny for the children, Tahir realised the quick spread of messages and news in Morocco "like a fire tearing through the depths of Hell" (*Caliph's House* 38). The writer's first shopping experience also throws light on the difference he has felt between life in London and Morocco. Morocco had a lot of imperfections and irregularities in its production of goods, but was cheaper than the European market. The family is the centre of Moroccan life, and food is also a focal point in Moroccan social life. In Moroccan culture, an important man opening the door of his home for guests was considered a lowly action. The people in Casablanca, unlike other Moroccans, appreciated new and modern things. Owing to this reason, the centre of the town was moved from Casablanca to Maarif. Even though there was a cultural barrier, Tahir Shah was happy in his Moroccan life. The daily challenges at Dar Khalifa and the cultural and linguistic barriers in Morocco developed the writer's enthusiasm and problem-solving skills.

### **Stories, Memory, and Identity in *In Arabian Nights***

Tahir Shah's second book on Morocco, *In Arabian Nights*, through its stories and storytellers, not only presents a detailed exploration of Moroccan folklore but also establishes the restorative nature of the cultural memory. The art of storytelling and storytellers has nourished

ancient Morocco for centuries. In the work *In Arabian Nights*, Tahir Shah investigates the repository of traditional stories narrated by a plethora of characters, including master masons, Sufi wise men who write for soap operas, and Tuareg guides addicted to reality television. The title of the work itself is based on the *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *the Arabian Nights*, a collection of folktales compiled in Arabic. These tales trace back their roots to ancient and medieval Arabian, Egyptian, Indian, Persian, and Mesopotamian folklore and literature. It is a towering monument in the history of the art of storytelling that is a source of inspiration for many artists and writers.

Storytelling as a universal cultural activity of sharing narratives within and outside a community helps in affirming the roots for growth. Storytelling has played a significant role in the development of a community since ancient times. Being a part of a cultural group, stories pass on with their narratives of the traditions, rituals, and beliefs of that group, thereby helping to identify both group and individual identity. Besides the entertaining nature of storytelling, it also aims to educate and instill moral values in the people and preserve cultural aspects. The oral tradition of storytelling can take many forms, like epic poems, chants, rhymes, songs, etc. It can encompass myths, legends, fables, religion, prayers, proverbs, and instructions. In many cultural communities, storytellers occupy honourable status in society. It not only preserves cultural practices and values but also serves to connect people to their cultural heritage, helping to shape their identity and sense of belonging. A sense of continuity between the past and the present helps in the sustenance of cultural identity and belonging. Stories make people capable of connecting to and understanding the experiences of their ancestors. They play a crucial role in moulding cultural identity by providing a space for collective memory. Storytelling is used as a bridge between knowing and understanding so that the members of a community can learn to connect the values of self and community. Shah writes, "To know about stories you must know people" (*Arabian Nights* 99).

The role of performativity in the production of cultural artifacts and symbols has received serious attention in the field of Cultural Studies. Storytelling is a cultural practice that engages with the acts of remembrance in the production of cultural identity. This interconnection of storytelling and cultural memory is clearly found in Shah's statement at the beginning of the book, "For my father there was no sharper way to understand a country than by listening to its stories" (*Arabian Nights* 9), and the assertion that the primary aim of the book is to share the author's understanding of Moroccan culture through its stories: "The Berbers believe that when people are born, they are born with a story inside them, locked in their heart. It looks after them, protects them. [...] Their task is to search for their story, [...] to look for it in everything they do" (*Arabian Nights* 7). The art of storytelling is inherent in the lives of the Moroccans. Stories are given the status of powerful guides that transcend human existence to a spiritual realm. The author is in search of his own story, and he motivates the readers to join his journey. As it is mentioned in the book, "Some people find their story right away"; others "search their entire lives and never find it" – "it depends on 'perception'" (*Arabian Nights* 48). To understand the stories of unknown cultures, people have to search for stories of their own. The *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of folktales compiled in Arabic, is a classic work in the history of the art of storytelling and has always been a source of inspiration for many artists and writers. His journey to find the lost ten-volume edition of *Alf Layla wa Layla, One Thousand and One Night* from his father's collection is symbolic of his travels to discover his identity.

One of the experiences that transformed Shah's identity as a traveller was his prison days in Pakistan. He was imprisoned as they thought him to be a spy. He describes his torturous experience of imprisonment in Pakistan: "As the days and nights in solitary passed, I moved through the labyrinth of my memories. I set myself the task of finding every memory, every fragment of recollection. They began with my childhood, and with the first moment I ever set foot on Moroccan soil" (*Arabian Nights* 4). It is evident that he has used memory as a source of solace and inspiration for his own development. Here, memory becomes an

instrument for the author to identify himself. In the work *In Arabian Nights*, Tahir Shah proposes his task to be “finding every memory, every fragment of recollection” (*Arabian Nights* 4), thus establishing his deep desire to trace the roots of his ancestry. These encounters, in fact, challenge him to question the stable nature of notions such as identity, nation, class, and gender. According to Bakhtin’s theory, a text contains many different voices, and each of these voices has its perspective and validity without subordinating to the voice of the author. Similarly, *In Arabian Nights* contains many different voices of the storytellers of Morocco, and these voices contribute to the restoration of a devolving cultural memory of Morocco. The multitude of storytellers acts as a testimonial to the fact that they are the carriers of memory. For instance, when Murad, the storyteller, narrates the Tale of Mushkil Gusha, he remembers the moral he has learned from the tale “that the journey is nothing more than a path that leads to a destination” (*Arabian Nights* 111). From Idries Shah’s stories, Tahir has also learned lessons of values like selflessness and the need to guide people to their paths. Thus, the author realises that his pursuit of the cultural identity of Morocco can help in revitalising his identity.

In Shah’s search to dive deep into the cultural memorials of Morocco, the Café Mabrook becomes the “gateway into the clandestine world of Moroccan men” (*Arabian Nights* 18) and he is asked to “root out the raconteurs” if he really wanted to get to know them (*Arabian Nights* 21). Events at home are interwoven with Shah’s journeys across Morocco, and he perceives how the Kingdom of Morocco has a substratum of the oral tradition that has been almost unchanged for a thousand years. He also understands that it is a culture in which tales are a matrix through which values, ideas, and information are transmitted. Shah listens to anyone who has a tale to tell, and it is this curiosity that entitles him to be a good storyteller. He encounters professional storytellers, a junk merchant who sells his wares for no purpose but claims a high payment for the tale attached to each item, and a door-to-door salesman who can bring in anything. He compiles a treasury of stories rooted in *A Thousand and One Nights* as he travels through the labyrinthine medinas of Fez and Marrakech, the Sahara sands, and tastes the hospitality of ordinary Moroccans. These tales reveal fragments of cultural and collective memory and an oriental way of thinking.

Tahir Shah explains the origin of tales and their importance in the cultural memory thus: “stories are a communal currency of humanity. They follow the same patterns irrespective of where they are found” (*Arabian Nights* 152). Stories can bridge cultural divides and promote understanding between different cultural groups. The writer’s words reverberate the universality of stories from a humanitarian perspective. The beauty that attracts people across the world to Morocco is the art of storytelling. The culture of Morocco has flourished and developed through storytelling. To realise the beauty and importance of the culture of Morocco, one has to go through its rich tradition of storytelling. When Shah writes that,

In the south of Morocco people believe that there are streams running under the ground. [...] The streams don’t run with water. [They run] With words. [...] The streams irrigate Morocco [...] like water on farmland, they have allowed the civilization to grow, to thrive. Why is Morocco what it is? Why does it mesmerize everyone who comes here, with its colours, with its atmosphere? [...] It’s because of the streams. (Shah, *Arabian Nights* 382)

It is evident that he has assumed himself to be a participant in the cultural system of Morocco. The tone of the author has now shifted from the gaze of a traveller to a familiar partaker in the cultural identity of the nation. Acculturation occurs with a continuous association with a foreign culture and its members, and it can apparently bring about changes in the beliefs, values, and conduct of the person. The journey of the author in search of his story culminates in his understanding of the role of storytelling as a cultural mnemonic tradition in the determination of its identity.

The author asserts the role of stories as a key, a catalyst and a device to help humanity think constructively. The author states that “until their minds are stirred with stories, people are asleep” (*Arabian Nights* 383). He also adds, “Stories are a way of melting ice ... turning it into water. They are like repackaging something – changing its form – so that the design of the sponge can accept it” (*Arabian Nights* 326). In *Arabian Nights*, there are references to Shah’s first book on Morocco, *The Caliph’s House*, and to the stories from the collection *A Thousand and One Nights*. Thus, the text, with its intertextual nature, is influenced by cultural and personal elements. When the author writes that stories are symbols and these symbols are around the people like a code, he is philosophising the aspect of storytelling in the lives of human beings. But he asserts that “the Oriental people can make sense of them, decipher them” (*Arabian Nights* 327).

His travel across Morocco acts as a symbol of the spiritual and cultural growth of his personality. Tahir Shah undergoes an identity transformation in his quest to unravel the mystery behind the art of storytelling. He is in search of his own alter ego and that makes up the story of his life. The recollection of the writer’s torturous past in Pakistani prison in between the narration of the pursuit of his own story reflects the conscious attempt to bring about an understanding of his identity. He is trying to rediscover his identity and the group identity to which his roots can be traced back. Shah’s recollection of his family’s first visits to Morocco and his father’s insistence that traditional tales contain vastly undervalued resources are interspersed in his narrative. Shah’s father has advised him to protect storytelling as it is a hereditary gift. As a father himself, Shah finally passes the baton on to his children.

Young Yun Kim has defined “adaptation as a fundamental life-sustaining and life-enhancing activity of humans [...]rooted in the self-organizing, self-regulating and integrative capacity in all living systems” (35). When a human being relocates to a new cultural environment, s/he attempts to establish a stable relationship with it. As “every cultural pattern and every single act of social behaviour involves communication in either explicit or implicit sense” (Sapir 78), communication plays a pivotal role in assisting someone in maintaining a mutual relationship with the host culture. The workings of stress, adaptation, and growth bring about an internal cultural transformation in the individual, and this transformation can be witnessed in the “functional fitness, psychological health and intercultural identity” (Kim 69). In Shah’s attempts to acculturate with the new, he understands that tradition is the foundation of life in Morocco, where friendship, honour, pride, and heritage are highly valued. After describing his adventurous life in Morocco, the writer closes the narrative with the note that while adapting to an antique culture, compromises are inevitable, and the consequences are priceless. The final realisation of the narrator that they were accepted by Morocco, the guardians, and the Caliph’s House marks the phase of growth. Thus, starting with a series of problems and challenges, and through compromises and communication, the narrator has finally reached a point of completeness.

## Conclusion

According to Sturken, “Culture and individual memory are constantly produced through, and mediated by, the technologies of memory” (Sturken 75). *The Caliph’s House*, and *In Arabian Nights* are documents that reflect the author’s efforts to redefine and re-construct his identity along with the re-assertion of the cultural identity of Morocco. The places he travels in Morocco are described in relation to its present and the writer’s present. There is an intricate connection between the cultural aspects of Morocco and the author’s identity. These works not only provide a detailed presentation of Moroccan culture and folklore but also act as a testimony of the emergence of an intercultural identity of the author. Once adapted to a new culture, an internal transformation occurs in an individual; thereby, the original cultural identity will lose its dominance, and a new intercultural identity emerges. However, this intercultural identity is not based on belongingness but on a self-awareness of being a part of both the original and host cultures. The author’s search for the story hidden in his heart is an example of the emergence

of an intercultural identity. The new intercultural identity has increased the narrator's communication competence and has enabled him to maintain a dynamic relationship with the original and new cultures.

Consistent acts of remembering and recollecting stories and past incidents help in actualising both individual identity and cultural identity. Tahir Shah uses memory as a tool to reaffirm the cultural identity of Morocco, and in this process, he ascertains his personal and cultural identity as well. He has realised that the cultural identity of Morocco lies in the continuous use of cultural symbols like storytelling, language, architecture, and cultural practices. Moreover, he has negotiated with his past experiences to assert his identity.

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