



THE ART OF REMEMBERING: NOSTALGIA IN ARUNDHATI SUBRAMANIAM'S POETRY

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Abstract

Nostalgia is an age old concept yet Arundhati Subramaniam through her poetry seeks to inform the reader of her ability to possess the past and the present at the same time. Through her poetry anthologies, *Love Without a Story* and *God is a Traveller* she succinctly sums up the elements of her nostalgic reverie: homesickness and remembrance of her childhood. This paper aims to understand nostalgia in its originality and how Subramaniam plays with it in her short, soulful lyric poems. In doing so she invites her past into her present rather than showing a resistance towards it. Her themes happily comply with fragments of memory stolen from the past yet relieved in the present. Ranging from the art of remembering to talking about dead parents, Subramaniam makes sure that her poetry is nothing short of a sensuousness, untamed and intense.

Keywords: nostalgia, homesickness, childhood, parents, poetry.

Introduction

"Home seems to be a place where innocence and experience—nirvana and samsara, longing and nostalgia, Eden and the fallen world, if you will—are no longer oppositional." -Arundhati Subramaniam

Arundhati Subramaniam in her interview with *Livemint* reacted to her experience of the poetic process, which for her is an emotional coupling of nostalgia and longing, innocence and experience. Subramaniam is a contemporary Indian poet, writer, critic and has authored twelve books of poetry and prose. Although a pioneer in modern Bhakti poetry, her's poems are a travesty of everyday realities, the nostalgia of the past and the aporia of the present.

Her poetry anthologies *Love without a Story*, *When God is a Traveller*, *On Cleaning Bookshelves* have been widely read and revered in the present Indian poetry scenario. In numerous interviews,

Subramaniam insists on recognizing 'nostalgia' as a recurrent theme in her poetry. One is then forced to wonder how nostalgia coupled with desire and grief features in her poems, serving as a reminiscence of the lost.

Nothing provides better scope to understand 'nostalgia' than Subramaniam's poetry anthologies named *Love Without a Story* and *When God is a Traveller*. Each poem in these anthologies are a remembering, a pause in life to present us her past. Some of her poems skirt through memories of childhood, others are a prologue to the process of remembering. There are still others, at times uncertain yet intense, bordering on issues of the search for a sublime home. This paper will look at some of her poems to ascertain the nature of nostalgia that she experiences and the way she is connected to her past. Christa Wolf elucidates, "What is past is not dead: it is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it: we pretend to be strangers."(Wolf 3) I argue that in Subramaniam's

poems she ceases to be this stranger, that her detachment is not absolute and that it is not a detachment at all. I will interrogate her poems to delve into the politics of the past which only serves to reinforce her nostalgia rather than producing a resistance towards it. In fact the very fact that she chooses discourses of intimacy, friendship and modern day longing, augment her presence in the realm of nostalgia. She uses symbols and signifiers to connect to the paradigm of the past, her home to bring it back to the present. I will explore—her nostalgia through the categories of ‘childhood’ and ‘homesickness’ and her ability to connect with them through her poems. However before I delve into her poems it is principal to understand what exactly is nostalgia and how it has developed over the years to serve the poetic function.

Nostalgia: An Emotion or Function

To understand ‘nostalgia’ in its originality it is pertinent to move back to Homer’s *Odyssey*. Among all the hardships what kept Odysseus going is the burning desire to return home. The Greek word for return is ‘nostos’ and ‘algos’ stands for pain. This definition is primary to nostalgia, a kind of home sickness distinct from other forms of longing and desire. Later in 1917, Sigmund Freud presented a rather negative notion of nostalgia in ‘*Mourning and Melancholia*’- “an opposition that can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory psychosis.”(Freud 244) Freud’s understanding of nostalgia is more of a pathological analysis rather than a literary one. Similar to Freud, Alan Hirsch in 1992 also posited a view of psychiatric nostalgia, “ During the analysis of the transference neurosis, the patient’s earliest memory undergoes changes and divides into multiple components that are separate, definable childhood memories.” (Hirsch 390) Thus memory plays a crucial role in nostalgia. This memory is triggered just by being around familiar sounds and smells. It has been biologically proven that nostalgia shares an innate connection with the olfactory system. “Anatomically, the nose directly connects with the olfactory lobe in the limbic system -that area of the brain considered the seat of the emotions. The olfactory lobe is actually part and parcel of the limbic

system.”(MacLean 6-66) Many of Subramaniam’s poems are a reference to sights and smells that she might have experienced as she also agrees to nostalgia being a somatic phenomenon. In her poem ‘Remembering’ she writes:

“Nostalgia is reflex, a spasm
of cortical muscle.
But this remembering isn’t habit
or even sentiment.
This remembering is a slumbering
...
inhaling you
as rumour
as legend” (Subramaniam 27)

Subramaniam’s nostalgia is vivid, living in her present, a reflex of her muscle. This stands sharply in contrast to Wolf’s perspective of being a stranger to one’s own memories. She is not the stranger in her poems, only revisiting her past. Her nostalgia is at once a repetition as well as a reality. Linda Hutcheon refers to this as a “doubling up of two different times, an inadequate present and an idealized past.”(Hutcheon 21) This is duly enunciated in the title of another poem ‘*A First Monsoon Again*’. The use of the words ‘first’ and ‘again’ together is ironical, one she deliberately indulges into. It gives us a sense of how the act of remembering is a lived experience in continuum with the past.

At first
it’s nostalgia
a downpour of kisses
under a weeping umbrella
...
Every moment
the memory of a previous one
...
The first rains
are always
this plagiarism of yearning. (Subramaniam 22)

Childhood: The Yearning for the Familial

Childhood and her parents play a crucial role in Subramaniam's understanding of nostalgia. Nostalgia as a literary device in her poems strengthens the argument that her remembering is an act of the present and not some far-fetched idea of it. "Nostalgia is not so much an attempt to recall experienced emotions as to engender them." (Havlena & Susan 323) This is achieved by her through kindling and coalescing her emotions, from time to time in relation with others or material objects around her. "Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups of nations, between personal and collective memory." (Boym 19) Rooted to this notion, is the critical purpose of nostalgia as a mediation between the self and the lost other. Rather than being resistant towards the past, Subramaniam is forever welcoming memories.

In this regard it is important to reflect on her poems about her parents or a significant other. Her poem called 'Parents II' reads,

"They litter

your cells with memories

your head with echoes" (Subramaniam 52)

Yet another poem 'Finding Dad' reads

"When parents die,
you hunt for clues
in strips of Sorbitrate,
immaculate handwriting,
unopened cologne
and in evening air,
traces of baritone." (Subramaniam 14)

These signifiers further substantiate the argument that her nostalgia is no stranger, but closer to home, one that she wants to hunt for and hear in echoes. Melanie Klein wrote, "The symbols are created in the internal world as a means of restoring, recreating, recapturing and owning again the original object...The capacity to experience loss and the wish to recreate the object within oneself gives the individual the unconscious freedom in the

use of symbols." (Segal 167) This recreation is what Subramaniam aims for in her poems, a movement towards the past while being in the present. In one of his articles, Adam Muller writes that nostalgia is "individual's desire for belonging, to a place, to a time or to both- against which actions and ambitions in an ever more precarious present may be judged important or in some other way worthwhile." (Muller 739) Subramaniam's nostalgia alludes to this precarity through poems essentially lived in the past but felt in the present. In her poem 'Remembering', she vehemently opposes to the art of remembering as being second hand, twice removed from the past,

"Remembering isn't an art,
more an instinct,
a knowing that there is
nothing limited
about body,
nothing piecemeal
about detail,
nothing at all
secondhand
about remembering" (Subramaniam 27)

Homesickness: A Path to the Past

Subramaniam's poems broadly adhere to the categories of the familial and the instinctual. She continually harps on the categories of home and childhood as a medium of nostalgic impressions. Her carefully chosen themes prolong our understanding of how people remember lost faces and places. Her resistance towards being a stranger to her memories is tempered through her choice of themes. Her poems resonate a kind of 'homesickness', a category specific and integral to nostalgia studies. This homesickness is often a tense gathering of words but more so by choice than chance. Other times its free floating, moving on from one memory to the next in her short, quick poems.

Her poetry is untamed and intense, her metaphors aggressive in a way that her writing gives a whole new meaning to 'home sickness'. In her naming of her poems lies a politics, profound and poignant. The paradoxes produced by nostalgia are subtle yet so clear. Subramaniam's poems range in variety, sensuousness and musicality. Hirsch

maintain that nostalgia can be “viewed in psychiatric terms as a driving force for actual behaviour.”(Hirsch 390) Subramaniam’s nostalgia and actual behaviour find a profound meeting ground in most of her poems. In a recent interview with Tanvi Shah of an online magazine, Subramaniam speaks of her poetry as a discursive domain, “It’s the places where one meets the other – a kind of magic here-and-now-ness or else a familiar elsewhere-ness. Why? Because I guess I want both in poetry – the familiar and the unfamiliar, ‘anchorage and adventure’.”(Subramaniam) In yet another poem she talks of this dichotomous situation that is homesickness:

“In Short
All the time
that you believed
you were housed,
you were actually outside,
...
and all your life you’ve done nothing
but make hectic designs
on the glass.
And you’re still
outside.”(Subramaniam 82)

Homesickness as equivalent to nostalgia, is her lookout for familiar places. This also reflects in her desire to be with friends and places alike. In one of her poems titled ‘The Dark Night of Kitchen Sinks’ she remembers her kitchen sink, absolutely banal yet memorable.

“I know you of course-
your familiar swamp of grease
and indignity
knives and spoons scattered
like mutilated limbs
across a battlefield
of gravy-streaked plates
and wounded china.”(Subramaniam 78)

In her iconic book *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction*, Roberta Rubenstein writes, “Not merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space, *home* is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our

psychic vocabularies, given its associations with the most influential, and often most ambivalent, elements of our earliest physical environment and psychological experiences as well as their ripple effect throughout our lives.”(Rubenstein 2) This ambivalence is also a part of Subramaniam’s poetic being, wherein she seeks out familiar spaces which through she calls ‘the soil sense’ and the ‘need for this slurry of grass, warmed by the dreamless slumber.’(Subramaniam 8) Reminiscent of such signifiers, Subramaniam is constantly tempted by past longings and deliberately submits to them.

Conclusion

Subramaniam’s poems are not only a reckoning from the past but also the desire to dwell in it. Although her poems are short as she says, “I’m not one for lengthy descriptions – I write lyric poems, remember?”, they are crisp in detail. In one of her poems called ‘Deleting the Picture’, she deliberates on the nature of nostalgia,

“It isn’t difficult, of course,
to skip nostalgia,
to fast forward
the embarrassment
of memory”(Subramaniam 5)

yet she does the exact opposite. For her remembering is an art, one she willingly acknowledges to bear with. Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* remarks, “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images-----of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.”(Boym 14) This superimposition is what marks Subramaniam’s poems in all its rawness and intention to travel and seek out the past, all this time being in the present.

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