

**UNRAVELING THREADS OF CULTURAL MEMORY: EXPLORING THE TAPESTRY OF CHILDREN'S IDENTITY IN KASHMIRA SHETH'S BOYS WITHOUT NAMES**

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**Abstract:**

This study explores the intricate relationship between cultural memory and the narrative of the novel *Boys Without Names* authored by Kashmira Sheth. The article delves into the incidents, themes, and elements present in the novel, examining how they connect with cultural traditions, beliefs, and societal norms. By analysing the characters' behaviour, decisions, and interactions, the article uncovers the profound influence of cultural memory on their identities and experiences within the slums of modern-day Mumbai. Furthermore, the study investigates the characters' resilience and adaptability, exploring how their cultural memory shapes their coping mechanisms amidst adversity through cultural memory theory. It also investigates the mechanisms through which cultural information and values are passed down from generation to generation, so ensuring the continuity and evolution of cultural memory within the community. Through a comprehensive analysis of *Boys Without Names*, this article reveals the broader implications of depicted cultural memory, offering insights into the social, historical, and cultural dimensions presented in the novel. By understanding the intentions in connecting cultural memory with the plot and characters, the study provides a nuanced perspective on the significance of cultural memory. Finally, this study adds to the existing body of literature on cultural memory by broadening the perception of cultural components in literature and emphasising the long-lasting impact of tradition and history on contemporary society. The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the significance of cultural memory in literature and its role in shaping human experiences and societal dynamics.

**Keywords:**

Cultural Memory, Child Labour, Resilience, Identity, Social Norms, Societal Impact, Child Memory.

**Introduction:**

In literature, cultural memory breathes life into the characters, settings, and themes, infusing the stories with the very essence of a culture's soul. Like a living tapestry, literature weaves together the threads of collective experiences, beliefs, and traditions, vividly portraying the struggles and triumphs of generations past. Cultural memory comes to life through stories passed down from ancestors, directing the characters' decisions and creating their identities. As readers journey through the pages, they embark on a time-traveling expedition, immersing themselves in the echoes of yesteryears and discovering the universality of human emotions. In this dance of words and heritage, literature becomes a portal to embrace the rich tapestry of diverse cultures, a timeless dialogue between the storytellers of old and the seekers of wisdom today.

Cultural memory, an integral aspect of human society, plays a significant role in shaping identities, traditions, and societal norms. Throughout history, narratives and stories have been used as powerful tools to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to another. In this context, the novel *Boys Without Names* by Kashmira Sheth stands as an intriguing and poignant literary work that offers an opportunity to delve into the connections between cultural memory and storytelling. Set in the bustling slums of modern-day Mumbai, the novel follows the life of the protagonist, Gopal, who finds himself trapped in a world where names are elusive, child labour is pervasive, and societal hierarchies are deeply ingrained. As Gopal embarks on a journey to reclaim his identity and freedom, he grapples with the echoes of cultural memory that reverberate through his experiences. This study

seeks to unravel the threads of cultural memory intricately woven within the narrative of *Boys Without Names*. From naming practices and oral storytelling to the observance of festivals and adherence to superstitions, the novel encapsulates a myriad of cultural aspects that shape the characters' lives.

Through a closer examination of the characters' behaviours, decisions, and interactions, we will gain insights into how cultural memory influences their identities and experiences within the socio-economic constraints of the slums. This article will explore the mechanisms through which cultural knowledge and values are transmitted from one generation to another within the community. By doing so, we aim to shed light on the enduring impact of cultural memory in shaping not only the characters' individual trajectories but also the broader dynamics of contemporary society. The main objective of this research is to add to the corpus of knowledge on cultural memory by emphasising its importance in moulding human experiences and societal systems. By appreciating the connections between cultural memory and the narrative of *Boys Without Names*, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of how literature can act as a mirror to reflect and preserve the essence of culture, tradition, and heritage in the face of changing times.

Kashmira Sheth is an accomplished author known for her engaging and culturally rich children's and young adult literature. She was born in India and moved to the United States in 1980, where she pursued a career in science. However, her passion for storytelling and writing eventually led her to become a successful author. Sheth's works often draw from her Indian heritage, and she masterfully weaves cultural elements into her narratives, providing readers with a glimpse into the diverse traditions and experiences of India. Her writing style is known for its authenticity, emotional depth, and compelling storytelling.

Some of Kashmira Sheth's notable works include *Blue Jasmine*, *Boys Without Names*, *Keeping Corner*, *Koyal Dark*, *Mango Sweet*, and *Sona and the Wedding Game*. Her books have received critical acclaim and numerous awards for their portrayal of culture, family dynamics, and personal growth. Through her writing, Sheth aims to bridge cultural gaps and foster understanding and appreciation for diverse backgrounds. Her books resonate with readers of all ages, encouraging them to explore the universal themes of identity, belonging, and resilience. Kashmira Sheth's contributions to children's literature have been widely recognized, and her books continue to captivate readers around the world, leaving a lasting impact on young minds and nurturing a love for literature and cultural exploration.

*Boys Without Names* by Kashmira Sheth is a compelling and poignant novel set in the bustling slums of modern-day Mumbai, India. The story revolves around the protagonist, Gopal, a young boy from a poor family. Gopal's life takes a drastic turn when he is lured into child labour at a sweatshop. Stripped of his name and forced to work long hours in deplorable conditions, Gopal faces the harsh reality of life in the city's underbelly.

Amidst the hardships, Gopal finds solace in the stories his mother tells him, preserving the cultural memory of their heritage. The novel portrays Gopal's resilience as he navigates the perils of child labour and attempts to reclaim his identity. Along the way, he befriends other boys who share similar struggles, forming a bond that offers hope in the face of adversity. Throughout the novel, *Boys Without Names* explores themes of identity, perseverance, and the enduring impact of cultural memory. It sheds light on the lives of those living on the fringes of society, while showcasing the power of storytelling and the strength found in the preservation of cultural traditions. The book serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit, even in the most challenging circumstances.

### **Statement of the Study:**

The study further explores the characters' resilience and adaptability, investigating how their cultural memory plays a pivotal role in shaping their coping mechanisms amidst adversity. It also seeks to understand the mechanisms through which cultural knowledge and values are passed down from one generation to another, thus contributing to the continuity and evolution of cultural memory within the community. Through a comprehensive analysis of *Boys Without Names*, this research strives to shed light on the broader implications of the depicted cultural memory, offering insights into the social,

historical, and cultural dimensions presented in the novel. This article aspires to contribute to the existing body of literature on cultural memory, enriching the appreciation of cultural aspects within literature and highlighting the enduring impact of tradition and heritage on contemporary societies.

### **Objective of the study:**

The study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural memory influences the characters' lives, shapes their identities, and impacts their experiences in the context of the novel's setting.

- Identify and analyze instances of cultural memory in the narrative, such as naming traditions, folktales, festivals, superstitions, and social hierarchies.
- Examine how cultural memory affects the characters' behaviors, decisions, and interactions with others.
- Investigate the role of cultural memory in shaping the characters' resilience and coping mechanisms in the face of challenges and hardships.
- Explore the ways in which the novel portrays the transmission of cultural knowledge and values from one generation to another.
- Discuss the broader cultural and societal implications of the events and themes presented in the novel.

### **Theory used in the study:**

This study is done based on the Cultural memory theory. Cultural memory theory, as proposed by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, provides a foundational framework for understanding how societies remember and transmit their cultural heritage. This theory emphasizes the importance of collective memory in shaping identities, traditions, and social cohesion. In the context of the study, this theory helps to analyse how cultural memory is preserved, transformed, and transmitted through storytelling and other cultural practices within the novel.

### **Factors Associated with Cultural Memory:**

There are numerous aspects related with cultural memory that help to know the values of previous incidents that help to know the strength that we built from the past in the future.

### **Naming Traditions and Cultural Identity:**

In the novel, the protagonist, Gopal, struggles with not having a proper name and being referred to as "Little One." This reflects the cultural significance of names in many societies and how they carry a sense of identity, family heritage, and community belonging. There are few more children those who lost their true identity, they are the six child labour victims in the novel including Gopal (Barish, Kabir, Sahil, Roshan, and Amar) are forbidden to speak or even call one another by their real names, and their boss, Scar, they are nothing but cockroaches which deserve little of his attention and care. When these children become entangled in child trafficking, they have no alternative but to do what they say. Scar was a name given by Gopal to the man who trapped them as child labour. The statement below shows who the children are treated: "Scar fixes his stare on me. So? You're working for me. I' ll call you cockroach if I want. No names are allowed in this place, you understand?" p.121. Gopal, a particularly brilliant child, understands that storytelling may be the boys' key to survival, so the children mingle in secret with one another in the picture frame shop, despite the fact that it is against the rules of the place. They open up and disclose stories about their family that they had long suppressed. These stories typically assist them in connecting and uniting with one another.

### **Oral Storytelling and Intergenerational Transmission:**

Throughout the novel, Gopal's mother often tells him folktales and stories from Indian mythology:

I tell myself a story about Lord Ganesha that Aai used to tell me. Once Ganesha and his brother, Kartikay, fought about who was the wiser of the two. They went to their parents, Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, to decide the matter. Their parents were sitting in their abode on top of the Mount Kailash in the Himalayas.

Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati said that whoever could travel around the world and return first was wiser. Lord Kartikay flew off on his peacock to go around the world. But Ganesha circled his parents and bowed saying, "I am back."

Lord Shiva said, "Beloved son, you did not go around the world."

Ganesha replied: "No, but I went around both of you. My parents symbolize the entire universe for me."

Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati declared that Ganesha was indeed the wiser one.

Aai told me that Lord Ganesha was the god of wisdom, intelligence, and worldly success. Maybe if I pray to him he will help me. After several days the festival of Lord Ganesha ends, but I am still here (p. 217). This practice of oral storytelling connects with the cultural memory theory, as it showcases the transmission of cultural knowledge and values from one generation to another. The stories provide a link to the past, preserving cultural heritage and shaping Gopal's understanding of his cultural identity. In this chapter, Gopal's mother - Aai describes the heritage of the new city they will reside in, saying, "Don't forget, it is called mayavati nagari, make-believe city, too." In the entire novel Gopal's parents teach him about the cultural heritage by teaching them the basic words that helps them to manage communication in the new city Mumbai:

Unlike Aai, I don't think of Mumbai as a monster, and I am not afraid to go there. One of my friends, Mohan, visited the city last year. He says that the city is the home of film stars, cloud-reaching buildings, markets that are bigger than our village, mirror-shiny cars, double-decker buses, and dozens of languages. It would be so exciting to see all the things that are in the store windows, to watch people, and to learn different tongues. He even taught me a couple of new words they use in the city. One is khajoor, which means stupid, and other is bindaas, which means carefree (p. 3).

Oral Storytelling is done by the protagonist Gopal to the other characters in the novel which played a major role to bring strength in them among the child labour victims to fight against Scar from the story Gaint and calves. Also, to keep more interaction with other children Gopal used to tell more stories like:

Also, every night I tell a story. Not about what I used to do but a made-up one like the Giant and calves, Timid Rabbit, or Akbar and Birbal story. GC has been good, but I don't trust him like Barish does. It is like giving monkeys a ladder. They will always climb it (p. 241).

The cultural custom of narrating stories for his young sister and brother helped him to survive among the other victims very cleverly when he is trapped.

**Festival Celebrations and Communal Bonding:** The observance of various festivals in the novel, such as Diwali, highlights the significance of cultural memory in shaping community bonding and shared experiences. The characters' participation in these festivals fosters a sense of belonging and continuity with their cultural traditions, reinforcing the collective memory of the community. People exchange sweets on festivals like Diwali, and Gopal received free sweets from the Sweet-man, demonstrating cultural humanism from the novel though he is suffered from Scar he uses to see people those who are still kind. Gopal use to learn things from both sides like which is right and wrong from his communal bonding:

"Happy Diwali, Gopal. Share your sweets. Share your sweets. Happy Diwali, Gopal." The booming voice echoes in my mind until I realize these sweets are not for me. Scar will take away even the big box that Sweets-Man gave me. Scar won't believe I got it as a gift and will think I stole it, or worse yet, he might think I bought it with money I stole from him (p. 268).

As an eleven-year-old boy who struggles to survive in the double-sided community is too confusing and the society teaches him how to balance the situation from the cultural memory he brought up from.

The speech of GC (Grey Cloud), whose real name was Kabir, gave them hope for their lives' transitions from dark to light during the Diwali festival, "Yes, this is a festival of lights. (p. 271)"

**Superstitions and Cultural Beliefs:** Incidents involving superstitions and cultural beliefs, such as the fear of evil spirits, demonstrate how cultural memory influences the characters' behaviours and beliefs. These practices are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and reflect the enduring influence of traditional beliefs on their daily lives. In the entire novel it revolves around the theme of superstitions and cultural beliefs which is evident throughout the story. These beliefs are woven into the characters' lives and influence their actions and decisions. The novel portrays how superstitions and cultural beliefs are deeply ingrained in the characters' daily routines and interactions, shaping their understanding of the world around them:

Aai told me that Lord Ganesha was the god of wisdom, intelligence, and worldly success. Maybe if I pray to him he will help me.

After several days the festival of Lord Ganesha ends, but I am still here (p. 217).

Through the cultural memory Gopal deeply believes that superstitions will help him during his hard times to escape from Scar.

**Caste System and Social Hierarchy:** The portrayal of the caste system in the novel reflects the connection between cultural memory and historical social hierarchies. Gopal and his family being from a lower caste underscores the lasting impact of this social structure on contemporary society, showcasing how cultural memory perpetuates societal norms and divisions. This making them vulnerable to discrimination and limited opportunities like not letting them to sleep in streets. Gopal struggles to survive in the society to sleep peacefully in the street because the police man kicks everyone not to sleep in the roadside:

Baba joins his palms together as if he is praying. "Please, show mercy. Where can we go in the middle of the night?" The policeman doesn't budge. I think he's waiting for a bribe (p. 53).

**Resilience and Coping Mechanisms:** Amidst adversity and challenges, the characters draw upon their cultural memory to find resilience and coping mechanisms. Gopal's ability to seek solace in the stories his mother tells him and the communal support during festivals exemplify how cultural memory acts as a source of strength and support in times of difficulty.

Aai's story about their culture and the history of Lord Ganesha, Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvati and Goddess Lakshmi through cultural memory helped Gopal and his friends to escape from Scar after Diwali:

It is the day after Diwali, and the lights twinkle in windows and galleries. The mood is festive and it fills me with joy. The darkness has ended and I am free! My friends are free! It won't be long before the inspector sends Barish, Amar, and Roshan home. It might take a while to find Sahil's relatives, though. I hope all of the boys get back to their families (p. 303).

These incidents in *Boys Without Names* exemplify how cultural memory theory is interwoven into the narrative, shaping the characters' identities, experiences, and interactions within the context of their cultural heritage. The novel showcases the enduring impact of cultural memory on individual lives and the broader dynamics of the community, emphasizing its role as a powerful force in preserving traditions and shaping human experiences over time. This mirrors the historical exploitation of children in various cultures worldwide and serves as a reminder of the harsh realities faced by marginalized communities.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, *Boys Without Names* serves as a compelling literary work that weaves threads of cultural memory into its narrative, creating a powerful depiction of the characters' identities, struggles, and aspirations. Through our exploration, we have highlighted the significant connections



between cultural memory and the experiences of the characters, offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural traditions and beliefs influence individual lives and community dynamics. Their ability to draw upon cultural heritage during challenging times showcases the enduring nature of cultural memory and its relevance in navigating the complexities of life. This study adds to the corpus of literature on cultural memory by emphasising the importance of this concept in moulding human experiences and societal institutions. It exemplifies how literature, as a cultural archive, perpetuates and preserves cultural memory, providing future generations with a window into the collective experiences of the past.

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