



## Research Study

# Writing, Memory, and Place in Shumona Sinha's French Language Novel, *Calcutta*

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**ABSTRACT.** Fiction, through language and narration, has the power to bring the reader into alternate realities where they can explore the unknown and unfamiliar, culminating in a range of complex emotions and diverse ideas. As readers enter an imagined realm, the struggles, concerns, nuances, and social dynamics that unfold for the characters in the story, offer valuable insights on society and humanity. In the case of diasporic return writing, fiction can shed light on the lives of the exiled and displaced in a globalized world and their ambivalent relationship to the language and to places they have left behind. In this article, I examine how the literary act of remembering reflects the complex workings of identity and place in diasporic writer Shumona Sinha's novel, *Calcutta* (2014). The article provides justification for the choice of literary fiction to study questions of language and belonging and is situated in current literature in Memory Studies as well as theorization of "fictions of memory" (Neumann, 2008). The article includes a detailed analysis of the novel using Neumann's concept and concludes by describing the significance of this inquiry to questions related to writing, memory, and place in a globalized world.

**RÉSUMÉ.** La fiction, par le biais du langage et de la narration, a le pouvoir d'amener le lecteur dans des réalités alternatives où ils peuvent explorer l'inconnu, aboutissant à une gamme d'émotions complexes et d'idées diverses. Lorsque le lecteur pénètre dans cet univers imaginaire, les luttes, les préoccupations, les subtilités ainsi que les dynamiques sociales qui se déploient pour les personnages de l'histoire offrent un aperçu inestimable de la société et de l'humanité. Dans le cas de l'écriture du retour diasporique, la fiction peut faire la lumière, à l'époque de la mondialisation, sur la vie des personnes exilées et déportées ainsi que sur la relation ambivalente qu'ils entretiennent avec la langue et les endroits qu'ils ont dû laisser derrière eux. Dans cet article, j'examine comment l'acte littéraire de commémoration reflète les mécanismes complexes de l'identité et du lieu dans le roman *Calcutta* (2014) de l'écrivaine diasporique Shumona Sinha. L'article justifie le choix d'étudier les questions de langue et d'identité grâce à la fiction littéraire et se situe dans la lignée de la littérature actuelle des *Memory Studies* tout comme dans la théorisation du concept "fictions of memory" (Neumann, 2008). L'article inclut une analyse détaillée du roman à la lumière du concept de Neumann et conclut en décrivant l'importance de ces questionnements liés à l'écriture, à la mémoire et au lieu à l'ère de la mondialisation.

**Keywords:** *fictions of memory, Calcutta, Naxalite movement, francophone literature.*



## **INTRODUCTION**

How do novelists living in the diaspora return to their place of origin through their writing? Diasporic writing is an intersection of multiple linguistic and cultural practices, as illustrated in the works of celebrated novelists, like Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Dany Laferrière, Alain Mabanckou, amongst others. In this literary space, borders are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through remembering and forgetting. Fiction, through language and narration, has the power to insert the reader into alternate realities, where they can explore the unknown and unfamiliar, complex emotions, and diverse ideas of change. As we enter into an imagined realm, the struggles and concerns, the nuances, and social dynamics that unfold for the different characters in the story offer valuable insights on society and humanity. In the case of diasporic return writing, fiction can throw light onto the lives of the exiled and displaced in a globalized world and their ambivalent relationship to the places they have left behind them. In this article, I examine how the literary act of remembering reflects the complex workings of identity and place in diasporic writer Shumona Sinha's novel, *Calcutta* (2014). I will first provide a theoretical framework, which includes: a) justification of the choice of literary fiction to study questions of language and belonging; b) relevance of current debates in Memory Studies to this inquiry, and; c) theorization of "fictions of memory" (Neumann, 2008). This section will be followed by a detailed analysis of the novel using Neumann's concept and a concluding section that describes the significance of this inquiry to questions related to writing, memory, and place in a globalized world.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Literature and the Power of Imagination**

Several decades ago, the acclaimed British academic Richard Hoggart (1966) said that the:

Poetic, metaphoric, intuitive understanding is a form of knowledge although it cannot be objectively measured; that its validity depends on the imaginative power of the author ("imagination" includes penetration, complexity, honesty) and on our capacity as readers to test it against our own sense of experience. (p. 276)

What Hoggart was conveying to us was that any experience is complicated, fluid, and interinvolved, and that literature brings this point home to us most effectively. More recently, Ottmar Ette (2016) echoed similar views, claiming that:

Literature constitutes a laboratory of life that is continually in motion and offers sensory ways of thinking and experiencing that neither simplify the complexity nor screen out the contradictions of the multiple logics that might explain the life of and on our planet. (p. xxii)



Through its ability to reach out and affect audiences across great spatial and temporal distances, literature becomes a useful resource to gain knowledge through both intellectual and affective experiences about the two most salient features of contemporary global societies, namely, mobility and displacement. Hence, our choice of a literary text to investigate questions of writing, displacement, and belonging, and of other phenomena related to globalization, migration, and diaspora. These issues have been, for the most part, examined through the lens of economics, politics, finances, law, history, and geography. As both Hoggart and Ette have suggested, the power of imagination enables literatures of the world to show that experience is inter-involved and complicated and provides insights on new world orders other than those that binary logics enable. In this article, I will turn to imaginative literature of return, to study the questions of homecoming and place, and their intersections with memory.

## **Memory Studies**

Memory has become an important feature in contemporary research. It is a theoretical framework through which scholars from a variety of disciplines examine the relation between individuals and society, between past and present, between here and there. As a critical paradigm, it articulates connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, including the links between representation and social experience. Most importantly, within this theoretical framework, the opposition between history and memory, that is conventionally considered as irreconcilable, is discarded. Memory scholars, inspired by the distinction made by Maurice Halbwachs (1950) between collective memories and historical memory, explore how past and present are entangled in a complex web of relations that eludes easy definition and simple equations between past and present (Huysen, 2003). French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2000), in his seminal work on memory, history, and forgetting, has argued that between individual memory and collective memory there exists an intermediate level where affections have great relevance, and where relationships are established between the memories lived by individuals and the public memory of communities. Furthermore, as José Van dijck (2004) pointed out:

[m]emory filtered through the prism of culture acknowledges the idea that individual expressions get articulated as part of as much as in spite of larger collectivities; individuality can be traced in every negotiation of collectivity—past and present—as it is always a response to all previous representations. (p. 270)

Drawing from these discussions, we can conclude that memory extends the past into the present; it is both affective and selective, and as such, it is partial and dialogical, and thus linked to feelings and to imagination. Memory plays a central role in the continuum of individual identity and the construction of self. It is less a process of recalling than an act of negotiation between the public and the private. It is the ability to locate and identify pieces of culture that identify the place of self in relation to others (Van dijck, 2004). Scholars like Rothberg (2009) and Silverman (2013) have also demonstrated that the borders of memory and identity are not entirely smooth. These frontiers do not underline fixed positions but are produced



through dialogical moments of remembering, which occur often in uneven and unequal spaces. Quebecois writer Régine Robin's work is a clear example of how national and ethnic frontiers, created and reinforced through historiographic discourses, became deconstructed by the very narrative structure of writing. In her acclaimed book, *La Québécoise* [The wanderer] (1983), Robin has shown that perceptions of histories and cultures are negotiated through the theme of memory and these memorial narratives are multifaceted, fragmentary, adaptable, multiple. Robin's writing on history and belonging underscores the intricate links between memory and identity (personal, political, or gendered).

Memories are presented to us in narrative structure. Narrative is the central means whereby humans come to understand temporality. Humans organise time through the experience of narratives, both fiction and historical. As Ester Vösu and colleagues (2008) pointed out:

Narrative as a mediation of memory is embedded in the dialogic moment of telling, which in turn implies the mediation of language. Language is a medium for remembrance, which nevertheless cannot be taken for granted as a lucid medium but opaque and arbitrary in its application of linguistic or poetic device. (p. 249)

## **Fictions of Memory**

A narrative can be understood as a representation, or a construction based on a sequence of events in the past that communicates something from the memory of the narrator. However, as studies on memorial processes remind us, individuals tell a story differently as circumstances and emotions evolve, and as the meaning of the event or events develops in the narrator's life. Both memory and narrative are constructed. As noted earlier through Hoggart's and Ette's valuation of literature, the complex artistic constructions of imaginative literature that showcase acts of remembering underline the essential features that connect narrative and memory.

Drawing on the works of Gérard Genette (1988) and Paul Ricoeur (1980; 2000), Birgit Neumann (2008) argued that literature makes the nexus of memory and identity the object of explicit reflection and represents this link through a variety of semanticized forms. She uses the term "fictions of memory" to describe texts that write the processes of remembering. These literary fictional narratives use innovative narrative devices to explore how memory works, thus providing new perspectives on the past and responses to the "who am I question?" in the present (Neumann, 2008, p. 334). As we will see in *Calcutta*, individual memories are posited against collective memories of historical events. Consequently, Neumann (2008) argued that these novels succeed in creating new models of memory, not only by selecting and editing elements of a cultural discourse, but also by mixing the real and the imaginary. What is important to retain here is that literature does not merely reflect pre-existing cultural norms. The language of fiction contributes to the negotiation of cultural memory through the use of a broad spectrum of literary and narrative techniques which constitute it. According to Neumann, the following



novelistic elements permit the staging of memory creation: time structure, narrative mediation, perspective structure, and semanticization of space.

The foundational premise rests on the mediation of memory by narratives in intricate involvement with temporality. All fictions of memory operate in co-present time perspectives. In these novels, first and foremost, retrospection or analepsis is a typical device where events that took place in the past are recollected by a narrator in the present. So, we note that multi-temporal levels in the past blend with the present of the narration in a variety of ways. The organization of the past of the fictional narrator in the present is not always chronological. The chronological ordering is dissolved in order to represent a subjective experience of time. Secondly, the interplay between memory and identity is played out in the tension between the remembered "I" and the remembering "I". The challenge of the plot is to find meaning between the past and the present where the memories are being retrieved; in other words, the plot tries to resolve the tension "between the cognitive-emotional and the temporal" (Neumann, 2008, p. 336). While in conventional autobiographies, this tension is underplayed in order to provide a linear and coherent life story; in self-reflexive fiction, this meaning making process is questioned. If the remembering "I" is unable to adjust their memories to their current needs in a meaningful way, then the text questions the stability of narrative identity. Furthermore, some of these novels may also have multiperspectival narration through multiple narrative voices (Neumann, 2008). Such a structure provides a set of co-existing collective memories challenging the very idea of a unifying and consistent memory. Multi-perspectival accounts provide insights into the memories of several narrative personae in the social structure of the fictional universe and reveal convergences and divergences between different memory perspectives. Lastly, the semanticization of space through metaphors also constitutes the mimesis of memory (Neumann, 2008). Fiction can exploit space as a symbol of individual or collective memory of a community's past, thus providing a key to trigger forgotten and repressed experiences of an individual. In the rhetoric of remembering, the parts of a city, a building or parts of buildings could represent the memories through the evocation of different senses (visual, olfactory, etc.) associated with space. The narrative mediation of space and time underlines the continuing presence of a multilayered past inscribed in the landscape and its architecture.

## **ANALYSIS: DIASPORIC RETURN AND SHUMONA SINHA'S *CALCUTTA***

### **Language and Shumona Sinha's Diasporic Return**

The image of home is the crucial constitutive element of diasporic identity. People in the diaspora create an imagined return narrative, and some effectively accomplish a successful return to a real geographical entity, which they call "home". However, the path of return can also be fraught, and homeland society may turn out to be an unfriendly place (Lopez, 2015; Ravi, 2018). The imagined possibility of closure by way of return is based on the idea that the diaspora is a bounded and homogeneous space that mirrors the homeland as a rooted place, one that is



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thought of as sacred, mythical, and static. Sometimes, the country of origin can also become a place where ambivalent and traumatized feelings are experienced by individuals returning to their ancestral home. In this case, any possibility of return as reintegration with the past becomes impossible. Furthermore, the very idea of return becomes complicated in an age where easy travel has made several returns back and forth a reality, obscuring the very notion of a rooted homeland or ancestral land (Olsson & King, 2008). Under these circumstances, members of a diaspora find themselves adopting complex cultural and linguistic practices that reflect their layered identities as they negotiate their place in the world. To the diasporic writer, the novel provides a linguistic and cultural space where such narratives of conflict, confluence, and transition co-exist. Reading fictional return narratives by diasporic writers can provide an opportunity to examine the thorny issues concerning the possibility and impossibility of resolution in narratives of return (Lopez, 2015; Ravi, 2018).

South Asian diasporic writers of Indian origin, with a few exceptions, write primarily in the English language (e.g., Bharathi Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga, Avni Doshi). Shumona Sinha was born in Calcutta in 1973 and moved to Paris in 2001. She is the author of five acclaimed novels in the French language, *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* [Window to the Abyss] (2008), *Assommons les pauvres!* [Slay the poor!] (2011), *Calcutta* (2014), *Apatriote* [Stateless] (2017), and *Le testament russe* [The Russian Will] (2019). *Calcutta* was awarded the prestigious *Prix du Rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature françaises de l'Académie française* in 2014. In an interview with Sabine Peschel (2016) for *Deutsche Welle*, the writer had this to say about how writing in French was a liberating choice for her:

I started writing in Bengali. I grew up with literature from all the great writers of the world. But I never had a very literary relationship with the English language. Language isn't just a mode of expression. It's also substance: it's also the way I think. In French, my whole thought process is done in a very analytical, rational language. That has somehow freed me as a woman and as a female writer.

French is not the lingua franca for Indians from the sub-continent, English is. Writing in the French language is an act of appropriation that allows the writer to break free from pre-existing cultural discourses. Sinha's choice of the French language provides a fresh perspective on the questions of displacement outlined above and also locates the text within Francophone cultural ecologies concerning India. It is, however, not within the scope of this article to make a comparative analysis and the focus will remain on Sinha's semantics of remembering in *Calcutta*.

The protagonist, Trisha, currently living in Paris, returns to Calcutta upon learning of the death of her father to perform the funeral rites according to Hindu customs. She has not been home in a very long time. Her sick mother is absent from the cremation ceremony, just as she was absent from most of young Trisha's life when she was growing up. Trisha's visit to her parents'



home triggers a series of suppressed memories that link her father to his militant past during the political violence in the Indian state of West Bengal in the 1970s and to her own agonizing childhood. The house brings back memories of her troubled relationship with her mother, who suffered from chronic depression. Embedded in these memorial episodes are links to other histories of Bengal through her paternal grandmother's tales of *zamindari* [feudal] opulence and nationalist uprisings during the British rule in India. The narrator reunites physically with her sick mother the morning after the ceremony, but a wall of silence between them and the past remains as unyielding as ever. The novel provides an interesting example of what Neumann (2008) terms "fiction of memory," foregrounding the complex workings of language, memory, and space in diasporic return narratives (p. 334). It raises consciousness of the ambivalent notion of belonging experienced by exiles, migrants, and others who are displaced voluntarily or involuntarily.

### **The Novel's Historical Background**

The principal backdrop to *Calcutta* is the historic Naxalite movement, which started in the summer of 1967 in West Bengal, located in North-Western India, and which spread within a couple of years across the entire province (Banerjee, 1980). It began with a confrontation between the peasants and the landlords, followed by a clash between the peasants and the police. Led by the charismatic leader Charu Mazumdar, it became a radical political movement that would later dictate the politics of West Bengal for almost a decade. Mazumdar and his comrades believed that the revolution would start from the villages and that the peasants would be the main protagonists. This ideology inspired hundreds of university and college students in Calcutta to join the peasant insurgency and soon the city emerged as a major site of these Naxalite activities. Driven by readings on communism and socialism, students targeted what they perceived as the 'bourgeois education system', and questioned the glory of the Bengal Renaissance and the Indian nationalist movements. The movement turned violent with robberies and the killing of policemen to collect money and arms. As the state eventually reacted with fury, the movement rapidly degenerated into blind violence and killings to settle political scores. By the mid-1970s, many activists and sympathisers were killed in staged encounters on the streets of Calcutta. Despite the common hope about rapid revolutionary change in Bengali society, there was much factionalization among the Naxalites themselves. Eventually, a political compromise emerged with the Declaration of Emergency in 1975, by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and with the election of the Left Front that brought an end to these insurrectional politics. The memories of the novel's protagonist, Trisha, are centered around the final years of the Naxalite uprising, which left her activist father physically unscathed but emotionally scarred. The period between the 1980s to 2011 (the year the protagonist's father died) is glossed over in the novel with few passing references to the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, the rise to power of the right in Bengal, and the election of the populist leader, Mamata Banerjee, in 2011. By the mid-1980s, disillusionment with socialism had set in, the urban radicals in Calcutta were no longer active as the revolutionary crust of society had been decimated. Calcutta of the 1980s was a passive, dead city, both materially and



politically, with an economic revival happening gradually throughout the 1990s (Ramaswamy, 2011). The cities of Calcutta and Bengal from the 1980s to the present of the narration are absent from the narrator's own memories. The final section of Trisha's narrative (almost 50 pages) is dedicated to Calcutta and to the pre-independent feudal Bengal of the first half of the twentieth century. What is important to retain in Sinha's retelling of the history of Calcutta is that:

Bengal was the first land to be colonized and modernized. Hence it has the most deep-rooted appreciation, intellectual and spiritual, of what colonial modernity is all about, while of course retaining feudal features. Bengal continuously accepted this modernity but interrogated its inadequacies, never satisfied with the given version of modernity. (Ramaswamy, 2011, p. 8)

The turbulent events that touched Bengal and Calcutta between 1967 and 1977 have been abundantly represented both in Bengali literary and cinematic imaginaries, as well as more recently in English language fiction. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowland* (2013), Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2015), and Arundhati Roy's *Walking with Comrades* (2011) are some of the most widely cited examples of "Naxal fiction" in the English language. Sinha's French language novel locates and renders more complex the ambiguities around revolutionary violence within an extended chronological time frame beginning with the events of the independence struggle of the 1940s right up to the events of 2011. It is important to note that in 2001 the government of West Bengal decided to officially change its capital city's name to Kolkata to reflect its original Bengali pronunciation. Shumona Sinha's choice to retain "Calcutta" in the title is significant in many respects as we will see in the analysis of writing, memory, and place in the novel.

### **Analepsis, Narrative Mediation, and the Narrative Structure of *Calcutta***

The story with Trisha as the central remembering protagonist in the third person is framed by two chapters at the beginning and an epilogue; all three narrated in the first person. This primary distancing between the fictional "I" and the named protagonist brings yet another layer of complexity mirroring the author's relationship with her mother tongue (Bengali) and her chosen language for writing (French). The narrative mediation takes place at two levels: the first one is between the "remembering" Trisha in the present of the diasporic return and the younger Trisha within the framed narrative. The second is also between the "remembering I" in the present of the framing narrative and Trisha in the enclosed narrative. This aesthetic of *double distancing* reflects the dynamics of the language of memory making. The fictional "I" in the framing narrative arrives in Kolkata in 2011 and this time frame corresponds with that of Trisha's arrival in Kolkata in the enclosed narrative. In the third person narrative, Trisha's return to her ancestral home and the sight of familiar objects trigger long-forgotten memories. The discovery of an old red quilt takes her back to suppressed memories of her childhood in 1970s Calcutta, when she was approximately 10 years old. Shankhya, Trisha's father, was a college lecturer who taught astrophysics, and Urmila, her mother, was also a teacher. She remembers chancing upon her





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father hiding a revolver in the folds of a red quilt. This moment, in turn, triggers memories, on the one hand, of her incomprehension of the strange and dangerous activities in which she suspected her father was involved, and, on the other of her mother, Urmila's fraught relationship with her parents. The presence of her father's old communist comrades at the funeral brings home a forgotten revolutionary past in present day Bengal of 2011, one where the conservatives in power are ruthlessly hostile to political militants. When Trisha discovers a bottle that still smells of hibiscus oil, she is reminded of her mother's melancholia, which meant that as a little girl she had to spend most of her time alone. The domestic help and Trisha's father would massage Urmila's head with hibiscus oil to calm her down when she experienced violent episodes. Trisha remembers how sensitive she used to be to the changing moods of her depressive mother. Looking out of the windows in her parents' home takes her back to interminable evenings in the past when she would wait anxiously for her father to return from his nightly outings. As she wanders around her father's library, she finds herself at a time when she could not understand the link between the revolver hidden between the folds of the red quilt and her father's Russian books on communism. The now abandoned attaché-case of her father, containing his annotated books on astrophysics, a metal razor, and bottles of antidepressants and tranquilizers, bring back the painful moments when her father would administer pills to her mother to calm her down. Under the old mosquito net, Trisha recalls her grandmother's tales of Ashanti, a dancer who had seduced the feudal landlord who lived in *Golap Bari*.

As discussed earlier, retrospection or analepsis is a typical device in fictions of memory, where events that took place in the past are recollected by a narrator in the present. As each object unblocks suppressed events that happened in the past, multi-temporal levels in Trisha's memory blend with the present of the return narrative and chronological ordering is dissolved to represent a more subjective experience of remembering. Trisha's memories of her past are frozen within a specific time period, the 1970s, when she would have been about 10 years of age. However, by interspersing each of Trisha's memorial episodes with the recollections of different time periods by different people in Trisha's life: her father, Shankhya (1970s to around 1990s); her mother, Urmila (1970s); and her grandmother, Annapurna (pre-independent India, feudal Bengal and 1990s India), the author gives the reader a non-linear and fragmented historical backdrop that spans several decades. Finally, the novel's last chapter (the second part of the framing narrative) brings us back to the first-person narration. After a disturbed night, the fictional "I" wakes up to see her mother return to the home she had abandoned long ago. Mother and daughter both having physically returned "home" begin talking about the past. Despite the physical reunion, the two of them are unable to find any coherence in their stories, much like in the embedded story of Trisha, where all efforts at mediating between the narrator's memories and those of the others around her bear no intelligible conclusion.

The inability of the process of remembering to mediate between the present and the past is encapsulated in the following excerpts, one from the first part and the other from the closing chapter of the framing narrative:



Le pouvoir des mots est sans limites, sans faille, il s'impose aux choses, aux faits, à nos idées et à nos sentiments. Mais parfois les mots sont là pour mieux entendre le silence, l'encercler comme une petite margelle entoure un puits. Dans cet espace limité le silence devient infini, insondable. [The power of words is limitless, without cracks, it is present in things, in facts, in our ideas and in our feelings. Sometimes, however, words exist to hear the silence, to encircle it, like a casing of a well. In this contained space, the silence becomes infinite, impenetrable.]. (Sinha, 2014, p. 13)

The fictional "I" of the framing narrative realizes that the act of remembering renders the walls between the past and the present even more impenetrable.

Plus je parle, plus j'ai la sensation de tourner autour d'un puits avec elle, un puits de silence, d'absence et d'oubli. Le mur de nos mots l'entoure et devient lentement haut et fort. [The more I speak, the more I feel like I am turning around a well, with her, a well of silence, absence, and forgetting. The wall of our words surrounds it and slowly becomes high and strong.]. (Sinha, 2014, p. 204)

For the fictional "I", the past remains an unsolvable enigma hidden between "*deux plis du quotidien*" [two folds of the quotidian] (Sinha, 2014, p. 32). The quilt is a metaphor for familial comfort. Trisha was deprived of this emotional security when she discovered her father hiding his revolver within its folds. Narrative mediation as an act of resolution between the anxieties in the present and the disjointed memories of the past in this return narrative is further questioned by the aesthetics of double distancing, which constructs the story of Trisha as an unfathomable nightmare experience by the fictional "I". Additionally, the language of the returning and the remembering "I" is perceived as unreliable, further undermining the possibility of narrative mediation. Throughout the narrative, the unreliability of the remembering subject is underlined:

Trisha ne se souvient plus de l'instant où sa grand-mère lui avait parlé de la chance et du hasard. Elle ne sait plus distinguer la ficelle perdue parmi tant de contes nocturnes sous la moustiquaire grise. [Trisha no longer remembers the moment when her grandmother told her about chance and destiny. She can no longer differentiate the lost thread in all the different tales heard under the grey mosquito net.]. (Sinha, 2014, p. 166)

### **Multi-Perspectival Remembering or Embedded Memorial Streams**

The multi-temporal levels of Trisha's memory streams in the enclosed narrative, as well as those of the other characters in her story, and provides a model of multi-perspectival remembering. The narrative focus through the different memorial episodes shifts between Trisha remembering in the present of 2011 and the narrative perspectives of: Shankhya, Urmila, Annapurna, Trisha's



paternal grandmother, Ashanti, the courtesan, and Sathya, the revolutionary (both actors in Annapurna's story set in colonial Bengal of the early twentieth century).

Shankhya reminisces about his inexplicable survival during the violence of the 1970s, the crushing of all insurrectional activities during the State Emergency imposed in 1975, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and his disillusionment with communism. As a young bride to Shankhya, Urmila remembers her lost love Shatadru, who disappeared when the state cracked down on Naxalites. Trisha's grandmother, Annapurna, remembers bringing up her five children as a widow and later being caught up in the gruesome riots that ensued during the Babri Masjid violence in 1992, which pitted Hindus and Muslims against each other. Ashanti's narrative in Annapurna's bedtime story told to the young Trisha takes us back to feudal Bengal and her seduction of the *zamindar* [landlord], Bijendramohan Roy Chowdhury, in a narrative where the real and the imagined are fused. The mystification of Annapurna's own past evokes other legends, those of freedom fighters and their guerilla resistance against local aristocracy and the British Raj. The reader is led to believe that the illegitimate child borne by the courtesan, Ashanti, was in fact Trisha's grandmother, Annapurna. And thus, the violent events of 1940s colonial Bengal, those of 1970's Naxalite Calcutta, and the communal turbulences in 1990s Northern India are enmeshed in multiple temporal contexts of remembering.

In the novel, anachronies are semanticized to highlight the disorderly functions of memory and to underline that collective memory is not a homogenous interpretation of the past. Multi-perspectival accounts reveal convergences and divergences between different memorial perspectives (Neumann, 2008). This narrative structure reveals the fact that workings of memory are context dependent. In these streams of remembering, the language of guilt, shame, and disappointment dominates. Shankhya is both guilty and ashamed to have survived the violence of the Naxal revolution. Urmila's disappointment is transformed into silence and into loss of language. Annapurna regrets not having become a dancer like Ashanti. In the case of Annapurna, her regret transforms into the transcending language of myth. Shankya, an unsentimental Communist, does not want to believe the romantic tales of his mother and denies that he could have any connection at all with the feudal society. Trisha's inability to provide a coherent and signifying story reflects her own guilt caused by having turned her back on her parents, on her father, who had disappointed her, and on her mother, whose "*folie*" [madness] she feared (Sinha, 2014, p. 15). The diverse perspectives on the same period or the same place or the same people provided through multiple memory streams contextualize and nuance the feelings of shame and disappointment experienced by the various characters and successfully prevent readers from making simplified judgements.

### **Semanticization of Space and Writing *Calcutta* in the French Language**

Bengal and Calcutta constitute the fictional landscape where the narrative memories are constructed. Memories are spatially associated primarily with Trisha's childhood home and the neighbourhood. The space of Calcutta is multi-temporal as each of the protagonists recalls a



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different era: For Trisha in 2011, it remains a space of troubled childhood; for Shankhya, a Naxal activist in the 1970s, it is the space of disillusionment; and, for the mysterious widow-turned-courtesan Ashanti in colonial Bengal, it becomes a space of passion and rejuvenation. On rediscovering her native city, the returning narrator cannot help but notice the multi-temporal layers encrusted in the city's landscape: "*On dirait qu'une nouvelle ville est en train de s'incruster dans l'ancienne, grise et poussiéreuse, qui garde encore ses murs lépreux et ses volets en bois disloqués*" [One could say that a new city is encrusting itself into the old one, grey and dusty with its ruined walls and dislocated shutters] (Sinha, 2014, p. 19). In the present of the returning fictional "I", Calcutta is "*dense, étroite et lente*" [dense, narrow, and slow] (Sinha, 2014, p.19), and the empty and silent house symbolizes her own past that she has shut out from her life. The return is possibly an escape from the anxieties of her current life in Paris, but when she finds herself physically in her childhood home, she is overwhelmed with shame and powerlessness. The buried memories surface momentarily only to disappear again for ever: "*La maison vide me fait du bien, chaque meuble est un tombeau de silence où je devine, dans les infimes fissures, les bestioles surprises par mes pas qui s'enfuient ensuite*" [The empty house reassures. Every piece of furniture is a tomb of silence where in its infinite cracks, I imagine beasts that flee when surprised by my steps] (Sinha, 2014, p.14).

The play on Calcutta-Kolkata in the title is significant. It is as if the suppressed memories had locked the narrator's and Trisha's childhood (Calcutta) in a past that Kolkata (post-2001) can never signify. On another level, Calcutta is inserted in the literary and cultural ecology of Franco-Calcutta, which is a complex intertextual mapping that includes: the famous French director Jean Renoir's riverine city, Calcutta on the Hooghly river in his 1951 film, *Le fleuve (The River)*; Mircea Eliade's romantic Calcutta in his egocentric and controversial novel, *La nuit bengali* [The Bengali Night], 1950 (filmed in 1988); Louis Malle's 1969 documentary *Calcutta*; and Dominique Lapierre's impoverished and resilient city in *La cité de la joie* [The City of Joy] (1985). Written and produced for the most part under Western eyes, francophone Calcutta plots the oppositional tropes of endlessness and boundedness on to the chronological axis of progressive humanity, whether it is through the metaphors of excess (population, poverty) or the images of ephemerality (river, romance). Sinha's novel makes a forceful redrawing of this imagery. The title of her novel, *Calcutta*, recalls these pre-existing cultural discourses but the text deconstructs this romanticized imagery through a challenging rewriting of the history of Calcutta of the 60s and 70s, and the geography of the postcolonial city. Pierre Nora (1996) suggests that *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial; at once, immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. The most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to establish a state of things, and to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs. *Calcutta* is not a novel about a return to a *lieu de mémoire* or to a meaningful and sacred past. When the fictional "I" finally finds her mother, she has the impression of being caged in without any hope of escape: "*Mère et moi, nous commençons à tourner en rond dans la maison comme dans une cage*". [Mother and I, we begin to turn around in the house as if in a cage] (Sinha, 2014, p. 205). By questioning the idea that one can never completely leave any place, the novel



deconstructs the conventional narrative that the return to a pre-defined “home” is possible: “*Personne ne va nulle part, personne ne revient de nulle part*”. [No one goes anywhere, no one returns from anywhere.] (Sinha, 2014, p. 205).

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Following from the analyses of Sinha’s novel, we could say that fictional representations of memory expose the fault lines within and the slipperiness of sites of memory. They demonstrate the interplay of sanctioned and unsanctioned memories thus proposing a more active and self-reflexive heritage practice. In Sinha’s literary act of remembering, Calcutta, the city, remains elusive between *Golap Bari’s* 18<sup>th</sup> century feudal cosmopolitanism (symbolized by the globe given as a present by Louis XVI to Bijendramohan’s ancestor, who was a courtier of French East India) and Shankhya’s modern house in Calcutta’s developing Ballygunj neighbourhood in the 1970s, and the globalized metropolitan chaos of Kolkata in 2011. The temporal and spatial fixities are unsettled as the act of remembering blends reality and fantasy, and the text itself struggles and fails to connect the isolated images of the city and the memories of the protagonist. As for the protagonist, she thought that by cremating her father she had finally found peace and closure, but she did not realize that by delving into the “ashes” of her memories, she had touched the still burning flame of shame and guilt: “*Croyant trouver la paix, elle a fouillé la cendre. Elle l’a creusée et elle a touché le brasier*”. [Believing to have found peace, she searched the ashes. She dug in and she touched the flame.] (Sinha, 2014, p. 67).

Sinha neither condemns nor sympathizes with the turbulence, the violence, and the anger that was Calcutta in the 1970s, but provides a complex literary counterpoint by offering an intermeshing of several private and collective worlds to the Francophone reader. The dominant mood of the text is dark and somber expectation; one of waiting and unfulfillment: waiting for the father to return from his mysterious activities, waiting for the mother to regain lucidity, and waiting for city to emerge from the darkness. Sinha’s narrator has immense difficulty in finding rational ground between the slippery sites of her own childhood, the dark prison of her living mother’s “irrational” mind, and the haunted spirit of her activist father. The years have slipped “*dans un trou d’oubli*” [into a hole of oblivion] (Sinha, 2014, p. 67), and the act of remembering is inadequate to rewrite or give them any coherent significance. In Sinha’s novel of diasporic return, the unpacking of the archives of memories of violence in Bengal is contingent on their mapping onto a present by multiple actors. Homeland return does not necessarily provide a resolution, emotional, social or otherwise. Memories are intertwined with the contexts in which they are recalled and cannot by themselves reconstitute an identarian narrative for displaced individuals. Fictional writing on diasporic return invites us to reflect on the complex interplay between language, place, and memory. It raises our awareness of the ambivalent nature of homecoming stories and makes us more wary of celebratory versions of homeland return as narratives of uncomplicated belonging.



Literature is an appropriate cultural space to invoke the question of language change and the role it plays in forming language identity. For most displaced people, the act of remembering is one that necessarily involves changing language use. An illustrative example that comes to mind in the context of French language fiction is that Agota Kristof, a Hungarian refugee in Switzerland and an acclaimed writer who came to fame with her French language novels. In her autobiographical essay, she writes that French was imposed on her and that writing in the French language poses a challenge to her “illiterate” self (Kristof, 2004, p. 55). She refers to French as an “enemy language” (Kristof, 2004, p. 24) because the French language, she observes, had killed her mother tongue. In contrast, the Russian writer, André Makine, like Shumona Sinha, considers the language of art as not identifiable with one nation or one culture (Safran, 2003). Makine, according to Safran (2003), believes that his bilingualism allows him to transcend limitations of language and create a new, artistic language. Adopting a second language to write does not necessarily mean the rejection of one’s native language and neither can it be explained in simplistic terms of assimilation. By adding a short glossary of terms at the end of her novel, *Calcutta*, Sinha demonstrates that sometimes cultural self-translation (from Bengali to French, in her case) between languages needs to be rendered explicit and that this needs to be achieved without exoticizing the native language. Sinha’s writing may be in French but her language of remembering is a language of “disquiet” (“*intranquillité*”; Pessoa, 2002). Writing in a language of adoption enables her to “write” the “disquiet” and ambivalence of belonging:

I came to literature not only to cross boundaries, but to see them disappear. My home country is not India or France, it is the French language [...]. French was a foreign language for me, then it became another language, then the language, and finally my language. (Noubel, 2020)

Shumona Sinha’s use of the French language to represent the act of remembering poses a challenge to the idea of a singular or unitary national, linguistic or cultural identity.

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