

Memory, Blindness, and Generational Trauma in *'The Blind Lady's Descendants'*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the use of memory and blindness as motifs in the novel The Blind Lady's Descendants (2014), written by Anees Salim. The paper also makes an attempt to study the theme of generational trauma. The novel, which is written in the form of a suicide note by the protagonist, Amar, appears more like a memoir. All the events in the novel are completely recollected from the memory of Amar, who is also the narrator. Memory is the crux of the novel, with blindness running throughout the novel as a metaphor. The theme of generational trauma is dealt with intensity. Anees Salim makes good use of dark humour. The novel narrates the history of a large but old and dilapidated house called Bungalow and its inmates. The house is devoid of happiness, familial love, peace, and money. The family members are continuously hunted down by bad luck. Unreasoned trauma and unexpected deaths haunt the family.

Keywords: blindness, dark humour, generational trauma, memory, motif

Introduction

Anees Salim is an Indian author from Kerala who writes in English. His first book is *The Vicks Mango Tree* published in 2012. Five books of Anees Salim were published in a span of six years, which include *Tales from a Vending Machine* (2013), *Vanity Bagh* (2013), and *The Small Town Sea* (2017). Anees Salim is originally from Varkkala, which is the setting of the novel *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014). The influence of the experiences he had in this coastal village is strongly reflected in the novel. *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014) was the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2018 and the Raymond Crossword Book Award for Best Fiction in 2014.

Set in the beautiful coastal village of Varkkala in Kerala, *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014) narrates the tragic story of Amar and his family. The book is divided into five sections. The novel begins with Amar, the youngest son of Asma and Hamsa, stating that he is writing a suicide note. While reading the novel, one is also reading a suicide letter. The entire narrative progresses through the memories of Amar. As Amar writes, he recollects the events that happened in his life from around the age of seven to the age of twenty-six. He relates the history of Bungalow, "a big, ancient house that sits by a railroad" (Salim 2) where he lived along with his parents, two sisters, and a brother. Memory is an important motif in the novel. The whole story evolves from the recollected

memories of Amar and is narrated in first person narrative. Only the point of view of Amar is presented, and all other characters are weaved out by Amar, the narrator, as he remembers them.

Memory is an important part of human life. Everyone lives with memories, good and bad. Human existence itself is centred on memory. People live in the memories of others, which is what makes them immortal. There is no man without memory. There is no life without memory. Memory has often been used as a theme or motif in novels. It helps create a sense of nostalgia. Memory can be used as a tool in fiction to portray human relationships and experiences. Memory allows us to effectively explore the impact of past events on our present lives.

Blindness works as a motif in the novel, not only symbolising the literal blindness of the old lady mentioned in the title but also carrying a metaphorical meaning. Many characters fail to see the truth. They are kept in the dark about secrets and deceptions.

Trauma can sometimes be passed down from one generation to succeeding generations. It is known as generational trauma. Generational trauma can occur due to various reasons. Psychological and social reasons and traumatic experiences are a few to name. Deaths, sexual abuse, natural disasters, illnesses, accidents, childbirth and witnessing violence or crimes can trigger trauma. Traumatic events can have a physical and emotional

impact on a person. An individual can inherit trauma from a family member of the previous generation, most usually through societal discrimination and prejudice. Indigenous communities and children of Holocaust survivors are affected by generational trauma. This happens mostly due to epigenetic changes. Most of them have depression or psychological distress. The theme of generational trauma is very relevant in the novel. The descendants of the old lady mentioned in the title face generational trauma.

The paper studies the use of different motives, themes, and symbols to effectively narrate the tragic tale of a family and create grief and bitterness in the readers.

Memory as a Motif

Amar, a 26-year-old, writes a suicide note like a novel where he tells the readers the history of his family from his memory. All the characters are produced solely from his memory. It is his subjective account, and the readers get to see only his perspective in the majority part of the novel. Each and every event depicted is recollected completely from his memory. He was involved in every event he recounts. The characters and events exist in his memory, and the novel, or more precisely, his suicide note, is a recollection of them.

Amar tells how his family has always been affected by tragedies, despite their ardent effort to ward off bad luck. He remembers the death of his sweet sister Sophiya, who died drowning. He clearly remembers the day she went on the school tour, bidding farewell to all. Jasira, Amar's sister, didn't care to wish her or see her before she left. That cruel memory haunts her later in life, and others use it to hurt her. Sophiya lives in the memory of her family members. Akmal, Amar's elder brother, goes missing one day after he places a bomb near the railway building. The honour of the family is destroyed, and Hamsa, Amar's father, dies from grief. Amar's memories are mostly sorrowful and leave the readers miserable.

The memory of Sophiya's death traumatises Amar to an extent. Amar says, "...Sophiya- who would walk away with most of our small fortune..." (Salim 2). He accidentally stumbles upon the books of Javi, his uncle, and makes a passive investigation about him. Soon, he becomes engrossed in discovering the identity of this person. Memories of Javi are recollected by his sister Asma, who is

Amar's mother and by Aunt Suhuda, Hamsa's sister. Amar remembers how he learned about Javi, who seems to be his alter ego from a different timeline, from Asma and Suhuda. The sight of Amar triggers the memories of Javi in several characters like Sajjad and Dr. Ibrahim, who constantly compare Amar with Javi. Javi's suicide letters remain as remnants of his existence.

He remembers how Jasira became an outsider after her marriage, which pushed the family into utter poverty. Asma was forced to betray her mother by selling her house. In fear of her blind mother discovering the truth, she poisons her.

Anees Salim evokes a sense of nostalgia as he reminisces about his childhood memories and experiences. Memory as a motif has added depth to the novel and succeeded in evoking emotions in readers and bringing them close to the characters and the family of Amar. At the end of the novel, the narrator states:

"I have recorded everything I remember, everything I feel worth recounting in these pages. The past has been chronicled. What remains is the future, tomorrow" (Salim 300).

Blindness as a Motif

The blind lady referred to in the title is Amar's maternal grandmother who is simply described as Grandma in the novel. Asma, Javi and Kasim (brothers of Asma), Amar and his siblings are the descendants of the blind lady. Her blindness is taken advantage of by Asma which results in terrible consequences. Amar relates how his piece of writing got the title 'The Blind Lady's Descendants'. Amar while working as a tourist guide meets Professor Tim whom he had met several years ago as a kid. Tim along with his wife Nancy visit Amar's house and meet his family including the blind Grandma. They click a picture with them. Nancy suggests a title for the picture if her husband ever puts it on a travelogue – 'The Blind Lady's Descendants'. Amar tells about the moment he decided the name for his piece of writing, "It was then at that instant of the camera clicking, the flashlight blinding us for a moment and Nancy pronouncing a title for the photograph; it was then that the seed of this memoir was sown in me" (Salim 230).

Blindness appears as a motif throughout the novel. It can be read as a metaphor for deception and the inability to see the truth. Grandma is literally blind. She cannot see anything and hence she is easily fooled by everyone around her including her daughter Asma. She is kept in dark from many secrets. Grandma has two sons and one daughter. Javi, one of the sons suicided at an early age and Kasim, the other one left for London. Kasim gets married to a White lady which is kept a secret from Grandma. Asma makes Grandma sell her house by deceiving her. She lies to Grandma that Kasim has given up the house for her. Kasim is also blind about the fact that the house that is rightfully his is sold for the sake of Jasira's marriage without his consent. Asma poisons Grandma's food and kills her, when things begin to go out of hand.

Aunt Suhuda, Hamsa's sister, was romantically involved with Kasim. He promised to marry her but conveniently forgets her after reaching London. Aunt Suhuda is not informed about his marriage until she reads the suicide letter Javi sends her. Kasim kept the marriage a secret from everyone except Javi.

Jasira is given a part of the property where Bungalow stands as dowry. She keeps asserting her right over the land without any concern for the poor financial state of the family. Her parents, Hamsa and Asma sell the trees from her share of land without letting her know it. When she finds it out, she turns the house upside down.

Telling lies and keeping people in dark with secrets lead to irreparable consequences. Blindness denotes deception and betrayal in the novel.

Generational Trauma

The theme of generational trauma is introduced through the characters Amar, Asma and Javi. They are members of the same family, the descendants of the blind lady, and suffer from mental stress and depression. Javi is Asma's brother. He committed suicide at the age of twenty-six. He suffered mental distress for a short period prior to it. The author does not mention the exact reason for his distress and suicide. He used to live in the Bungalow with his sister. While Hamsa went away to Malabar for trade, it was Javi who took care of the family. Once, when Hamsa went missing for three weeks, Javi went in search of him. Soon

after returning, he started to seclude himself from the outer world. "He hardly left his room, and read his books with windows shut and curtains closed" (Salim 82).

He slowly seemed to start losing his sanity as he set his books on fire under the cradle of Sophiya. He refused to consult a doctor and stopped going to college. He chose to stay in darkness often. Slowly, he started having suicidal thoughts. He even went to the extent of buying a rope to kill himself, but he never used it. Later, his body was found inside the railway tunnel.

The trauma Javi suffered seems to have been inherited by Amar. Amar is exactly like his uncle, as several people have commented on him. He continuously blinks his eyes, just like Javi used to. He too hates college. He renounces his faith in Islam and becomes an atheist, making him the exact copy of Javi. Amar was named so by Javi, intensifying the connection between the two. Amar develops psychological distress, presumably triggered by the sudden demise of his sister Sophiya. People frequently comparing him with Javi and commenting on his close resemblance with Javi prompts Amar to fear that he might also turn like Javi. The unconscious prejudice from the side of his family and society might be the reason for his trauma and depression. Unlike Javi, he seeks professional help from a doctor along with his mother.

While his mother narrates the story of Javi, Amar is brought closer and closer to him. He starts to wonder whether he will also lose his sanity. This unnecessary thought indirectly provoked his mind to become distressed. Unknowingly sitting in the same place where Javi sat several years ago or having similar thoughts as Javi, Amar is forced to believe that he will also end up like Javi. At the age of twenty-six, Amar also decided to end his life.

Generational trauma can be induced in the uterus during the pregnancy period. The foetus in the uterus can be exposed to chemicals associated with maternal stress. When the mother faces trauma during the gestation period or just around the time of delivery, the baby could be affected. Maternal stress can expose a child to the risks of anxiety and depression.

Amar's mother was pregnant with him at the time when Javi became suicidal, leaving her in tension and stress the whole time. She lost sleep and became careless

about her health. She feared it might affect the baby. Her fears come true not soon but years later.

She wept to lighten her heart, but soon she could shed no more tears because a new fear took possession of her: a strange conviction grew in her that the child inside her was sharing her pain willingly and sobbing in the womb, and she feared it would bear the brunt of the endless torments she had been put through (Salim 85).

Asma's stress might have transferred to her son, resulting in generational trauma. Amar, after the death of Sophiya, gets obsessed with finding out more about Javi and starts to identify himself with Javi as he unravels more facts about Javi and his life. He slowly turns into another Javi.

Asma is another victim of generational trauma. Javi's suicidal tendency triggers trauma in her. Her pregnancy time is spent in distress, with her husband away from home most of the time. She lacked emotional support but had to take care of her kids and safeguard them from Javi, whom she thought might hurt them. As she gets older, her mental state worsens. She starts taking sleeping pills. News of Kasim's potential visit sends her into an unpleasant mental state, as Kasim's return to India means discovering that the house that was rightfully his has been sold without his consent. Their mother will also come to know this. So, Asma kills her, but she never feels at peace from then on. She starts to hallucinate. Amar sees her talking with Sophiya, who died long ago. Amar also begins to have hallucinations. He hallucinates Akmal returning home and sees Sophiya in the same lake where she drowned several years ago.

Jasira, too, faces minor distress as she undergoes multiple miscarriages. Asma, her mother had also gone through a string of miscarriages. The descendants of the blind lady suffer trauma in different ways, which is carried down to the next generation.

Conclusion

The study of *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014) reveals the use of memory, blindness, and generational trauma as motifs and themes. The use of memory as a motif serves to establish a connection between the characters and the readers. Every character in the novel is well written and deep. They come alive through the memories of Amar. Memory brings back the past and immortalises the dead. Blindness works as a motif and as a symbol, adding profundity to the novel. A wide use of black humour is used

throughout the novel to describe serious and unpleasant events in a light-hearted way. It has helped in creating a comic effect. Generational trauma is the most prevalent theme dealt with in the novel. Most characters face psychological issues in hidden ways. The author has not described the mental issues or their root causes in explicit ways, but they are passively hinted at. Trauma and depression are part and parcel of Amar's family. Amar's family members do not express love for each other. They are not there to support each other emotionally. The family is full of secrets and deception. They hide everything from one another, so no one knows what is going on in the minds of others. Good familial bonds and emotional support are necessary to break generational trauma. Amar is the only one who is conscious of the secrets going on in the family that no one else knows. Yet he cannot remain in peace or share the secrets and woes with others. Almost the whole family is destroyed ultimately except for Jasira, who might be the next bearer of trauma.

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