

Voices of Memory and Identity: Lyrical Storytelling in Selected Novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai

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Abstract: This paper examines how Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) use lyrical, non-linear storytelling to render memory as the primary vehicle of individual and collective identity. Both novelists depart from conventional realist chronology, instead building their narratives out of recurring images, fragmented timelines, and richly sensory language that mimic the workings of memory itself. Reading the two novels through the lenses of trauma theory (Caruth, Herman), collective memory (Halbwachs), and postcolonial diaspora studies (Bhabha, Hua), this paper argues that lyricism in Roy and Desai is not ornamental but structural: it is the formal means by which colonial history, caste violence, migration, and personal loss are encoded into character and narrative. The paper further argues that while Roy's lyricism circles obsessively around a single traumatic day to expose the machinery of caste and family repression in Kerala, Desai's lyricism disperses across continents and generations to map the fractures of diasporic belonging. Together, the two novels demonstrate that in postcolonial Indian English fiction, poetic narrative form and the politics of identity are inseparable.

Keywords: memory, identity, lyrical narrative, trauma, postcolonial fiction, diaspora

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Contemporary Indian English fiction has been shaped decisively by writers who treat the novel not merely as a vehicle for plot but as an instrument for reconstructing the past. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are two of the most celebrated examples of this tendency. Both novels resist linear chronology, both are saturated with recurring images and refrains, and both use a densely poetic prose style to explore how memory constructs, distorts, and ultimately defines the self. As one recent study observes, Roy's narrative structure disrupts chronological continuity and instead develops "repetition, narrative gaps, and temporal dislocation" that mirror the psychological experience of trauma ("Memory, Trauma and Fragmented Narrative" 1). This paper argues that in both novels, lyrical storytelling is not simply a stylistic flourish but the very mechanism through which memory and identity are represented on the page. Where conventional realist narration might explain a character's psychology directly, Roy and Desai instead accumulate images, sounds, and fragments that the reader must assemble, so that the act of reading itself becomes an act of remembering.

The comparative pairing of Roy and Desai is instructive because the two novels approach the same broad concerns — caste, class, colonial inheritance, and the search for belonging — from different geographic and temporal vantage points. *The God of Small Things* is rooted almost entirely in a single Kerala town and circles obsessively around one catastrophic day in 1969, while *The Inheritance of Loss* moves between the Himalayan town of Kalimpong and the immigrant kitchens of New York City in the 1980s. Despite this difference in scope, both novelists rely on lyrical repetition, sensory imagery, and narrative fragmentation to suggest that memory is never a simple retrieval of the past but an active, often painful, reconstruction of it.

Memory as Narrative Structure in *The God of Small Things*

Roy's novel famously begins with its ending already implied, moving backward and forward across more than two decades to circle the death of Sophie Mol and its devastating consequences for the twins Estha and Rahel.

Elizabeth Outka has argued that this structure produces a distinctive "temporal hybridity," in which past and present interpenetrate rather than proceed in sequence, so that the narrative form itself performs the logic of traumatic memory (Outka 21). The novel's language reinforces this structure: Roy repeats phrases, breaks words apart, and returns again and again to small, seemingly insignificant details — a red-eyed cricket, a river the color of tea — until these fragments accumulate into an almost musical refrain. This repetition is lyrical in the strict sense, functioning the way refrains function in poetry, gathering emotional weight each time they recur.

This fragmentation is inseparable from the novel's political content. The "Love Laws" that govern who may be loved, and how much, are the invisible structure against which the entire plot unfolds, and Roy's refusal of linear chronology enacts the way caste and family trauma refuse to stay in the past. Critics have noted that the twins' fractured consciousness — Estha's silence and Rahel's disordered recollection — dramatizes how childhood trauma reorganizes both memory and identity across a lifetime (Dismantling Oppressive Family Dynamics). Velutha's death at the hands of the police, filtered through the twins' partial and delayed understanding, becomes legible to the reader only through the accumulation of fragments scattered across the novel, so that the reader's experience of piecing together the past mirrors the characters' own struggle to process what happened to them. In this sense, Roy's lyricism is a form of witnessing: it does not narrate caste violence directly so much as circle it, approach it, and retreat from it, the way traumatic memory itself operates.

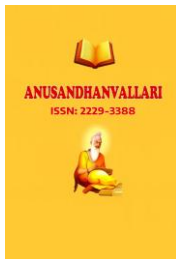
Memory, Migration, and Fractured Identity in *The Inheritance of Loss*

If Roy's lyricism is centripetal, drawing the reader back again and again to a single day and place, Desai's is centrifugal, scattering memory across oceans and generations. *The Inheritance of Loss* interweaves the story of the retired judge Jemubhai Patel and his granddaughter Sai in Kalimpong with that of Biju, the cook's son struggling through a series of illegal jobs in New York City. Scholars have observed that the novel's split structure functions as a narrative strategy in its own right, underscoring "socio-economic inequalities in the world" while inviting readers to think critically about immigration and diaspora ("Disjunctures and Diaspora"). The judge's memories of his humiliating years as a student in Cambridge, rendered in fragmented, image-heavy prose, expose how colonial mimicry curdles into self-loathing, a process that recalls Homi Bhabha's account of the colonized subject caught in an unstable relation to the colonizer's culture (Bhabha).

Desai's lyricism is especially evident in her treatment of landscape: the Himalayan mist, the ramshackle estate of Cho Oyu, and the flooded kitchens of Manhattan restaurants are described with a poetic density that transforms setting into emotional register. As one study of the novel's diasporic characters notes, the sense of loss is most acute for first-generation migrants, who remain nostalgic and dislocated even as they cannot bring themselves to return home, while later generations lose the cultural memory that once anchored identity (Sukheeja and Bhangu). Biju's homesickness in New York and the judge's residual shame from Cambridge are structurally parallel, separated by decades and continents but bound together by the same lyrical attention to humiliation, hunger, and the ache of not belonging. Anh Hua's concept of diaspora as "cultural memory" — memory that travels with people and is reconstructed in new locations — helps explain why Desai's narrative refuses a single stable setting: identity in the novel is always in transit, assembled out of half-remembered homes rather than rooted in one (Hua).

Comparative Reading: Lyricism, Trauma, and Collective Memory

Read together, Roy and Desai reveal two complementary models of how lyrical storytelling encodes memory into identity in postcolonial Indian fiction. Maurice Halbwachs's foundational argument that memory is never purely individual but always shaped by the social frameworks in which a person lives illuminates both novels: Estha and Rahel's private trauma is inseparable from the caste system and family structure of the Ipe household, just as the judge's and Biju's private humiliations are inseparable from the larger histories of colonialism and global labor migration (Halbwachs). In both novels, lyrical form allows the author to hold private feeling and public history



together on the same page, so that a single image — a river, a mountain mist, a plate of food — can carry both personal grief and collective historical weight.

The two novels also share a suspicion of straightforward narrative resolution. Roy's ending returns to the beginning of the twins' relationship rather than to Sophie Mol's death, refusing catharsis in favor of a lingering, unresolved tenderness. Desai's novel likewise ends without full reconciliation: Biju returns to Kalimpong having lost almost everything he traveled to America to gain, and the judge is left to reckon, however incompletely, with the violence his choices have caused. This shared reluctance to resolve suggests that for both novelists, memory and identity are ongoing processes rather than fixed points, and that lyrical, non-linear narration is the only form capable of representing identities that remain, by the novels' own logic, permanently unfinished.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai write in strikingly different registers — one concentrated and incantatory, the other expansive and fragmented across continents — yet both novelists arrive at a similar conviction: that identity cannot be narrated in a straight line because memory itself does not work that way. *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss* demonstrate that lyrical storytelling, far from being a decorative addition to postcolonial fiction, is the structural means by which trauma, caste, colonial history, and migration are made legible on the level of both character and form. In circling back to images, refrains, and fractured chronologies, Roy and Desai give literary shape to the way memory actually functions — partial, recursive, and stubbornly alive in the present — and in doing so, they render the search for identity in postcolonial India and its diaspora as a fundamentally poetic act.

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