'MIGRANT MEMORIES': CULTURE, COMMUNICATION AND COGNITION IN XIAOLU GUO'S *A LOVER'S DISCOURSE*

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Abstract:
Migration whether it is forced or voluntary, both carry the memories of the past. As in the case of forced it carries traumatic memories whereas in the case of voluntary it carries memories of the land and it give way to the feeling of homelessness. Memories play a vital role along with identity. Culture is a combination of food, landscape, language and so on. Everything a group follows may come under certain culture. So culture thus involves the process of memory. Communication also engages the act of remembering and it shows the result of cognition as memory is considered as a cognitive process. Xiaolu Guo's *A Lover's Discourse* (2021) is written in the form of first person narrative. Though it is a novel, it can sometimes reflect the format of auto fiction. The novel is set in the form of conversation and discussion between the unnamed narrator and her lover. The unnamed narrator is a Chinese woman who settles in London for her studies whereas her lover belongs to a multi-cultural identity as he is an Australian-German- Britain landscape architect. Through their conversation Xiaolu Guo brings out the Cultural practices of China, its language and landscape thereby highlighting people habits, history, and lifestyle through narrator's act of remembering the past. The feeling of homelessness is the central figure of the text. This research paper seeks to analyse the memories associated with migration and how the act of remembering and forgetting engages the cognitive process of memory in projecting culture and communication.
Keywords: Cognition, memory, culture, migration, remembering

Xiaolu Guo invents the unnamed narrator to describe the nostalgic memory of a Chinese in Britain. She employs first person narration to give the fiction the feel of autobiography though it sounds like a novel. The novel sets off with a conversation between the narrator and her lover. Britain is not the homeland for both the narrator as well as her lover. Besides, the conversations in the novel are exchanged in past tense to show the recalling of the immediate past with the functions of brain and mind. Through their conversations, Guo relates the connection of memory

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with culture. In the flow of their conversations, the lovers exchange plethora of memories related to their culture, landscape, food habits, the feeling of homelessness. The narrator explains her younger days as a Chinese while her lover discusses the days spent both in Australian and German. Their intimacy grows as they find a sense of home in their love towards each other. Both the narrator and her lover share a similar experience in one way or the other. The novel discusses Cultural Revolution and also the writer explains the economic conditions that prevail in China using Memory as a tool.

As the main argument of the paper deals with the memory in migration, it is significant to examine the concept of diasporic narratives. Andrew P. Davidson in his introduction combines three terms as he states that, "belonging, difference and identity" (2) are the key categories specially discussed with the contestation of diasporic narratives. Not only that, he also tries to interpret the values of identity and memory, "memories are the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, whereas identity is related to the concept of … hybridity" (2). Hybridity is a special term formulated and highlighted by Homi Bhaba, Stuart Hall and Gayathri Spivak. The formation of transnational identities and the construction of identity in memory are interlinked with the term hybridity.

In most cases, Chinese migration happens due to the impoverished conditions and financial instability in China. So the migrants involve in the act of migration and thereby forced to cross nations and boundaries in order to improve their social and economic status. Due to this, migrants experience certain feelings like dislocation and detachment from their Homeland. As remembering and forgetting are the basic process of memory and cognition, migrants remember the social and cultural practices which they followed in their motherland. Thus they naturally connect their past activities of social and cultural icons with their daily lives in the foreign land. In the text taken for study, Guo argues and interprets narrator's regular and daily life with her forgotten past. With this, Guo combines weather, cuisine, landscape and language as a part of culture and compares the past with the present to retrieve her memory.

It is common that human brain evolves and thinks in the first language or mother tongue. So Language or linguistics helps in retrieving memory of the past. With reference to displacement, history and culture are tangled along with private recollections of the past experiences or personal memories. The task of memory is to carry out one's cultural and social practices to the future generations. Davidson states this as, "Individuals and communities as a whole consciously chose what they want to remember and pass down to their future generations" (5). Here through individuals and shared communities, culture is transmitted to next generations and can be categorized as an unending process.

Diasporic narratives engage with trans-cultural or cross-cultural memories and also transnational memories as migrants are connected with two nations and two different cultures. In the essay "The Invention of Cultural Memory", Dietrich Harth explains certain metaphors and concepts in order to register culture and memory, as he says, "certain words and terms common in daily usage contain, like trace elements, metaphorically coded clues to a semantic deep structure, the investigative explication of which can shed light on hidden connections" (Harth 85). This intends that vocabulary also play an important role in memory and culture, hence this type of trans-disciplinary words are encouraged in the research of memory in neuro-scientific and psychology. As memory involves both forgetting and remembering, Aleida Assmann suggests that, "we must start with forgetting" (Assmann 97). And to justify this fact Assmann

describes this as, "Memory capacity is limited by neural and cultural constraints such as focus and bias" (97). Thus this results in the process of how human brain with its neural functions remember certain issues either it is likeable or something worst like trauma, brain's capacity forget and remember what it should focus or concentrate and also certain bias actions.

Migrant memories are traced with Chinese-American, Chinese-Australian, Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-Korean writers. This research provides some example on the memory and migration on these issues and it particularly concentrates on Chinese-British migration and their social, cultural impact in retaining and retrieving memory. Amy Tan is a prominent Chinese-American writer, most of her works deal with the interconnection of Chinese Ancient history to reflect memory in narration. Her famous work *The Bone Setter's Daughter* discusses the past experiences of Chinese-American woman Ruth. Ruth in her old age remembers her past life in China through which Tan explores the culture of china in a fictional narration. Lillian Ng is a famous Chinese-Australian writer and she discusses the Chinese experiences of an immigrant. Lillian Ng describes the life of a woman from her youth to old age. The main character Ah Pah is born in China in the early 20th century at the time of war in 1910s. Through the character Ng shares the Chinese tradition through the representation of the past memories. Madeleine Thien is a well known Chinese-Canadian writer and her novel *Dogs at the Perimeter* explains the traumatic memories of war and exile through the protagonist Janie. All these novels represent various kinds of memory in connection with migration. This research's main focus is on Chinese-British diaspora writer Xiaolu Guo and her novel *A Lover's Discourse.*

Guo's text is chapterized with directions in order to connect memory and landscape. As the chapter distinctions are named as west, south, east, north, down, up, left and right. These directional chapters share various parts of memory along with the narrator's travelling experiences as each of the land follows different cultures and social activities and through which the narrator "I" represent her Chinese past. Not only Guo describes Chinese past but also she includes the immediate past through neural functions of the brain. For example, in the prologue the narrator says, "You were from a culture I had no knowledge or deep understanding of" (Guo 2). This highlights that Britain is occupied with migrant population and how migrants of two different parts of the world get united with the commonly shared feeling of being an immigrant though they belong to two different cultures. They find peace or home among themselves, as both of them share the same feeling of homelessness and belongingness in the foreign nation.

Guo represents political memory of China in reference to the term 'Referendum'. Through the narrator, she brings out the political aspect of China with English context as she says, "I have never voted, because we were never asked to vote" (Guo 7). Referendum denotes a voting system and through the narrator's memory, the political situation of China is unveiled here. The narrator also feels that her identity is lost, to denote this Guo writes, "I wanted to equip myself with an intellectual mind so that I could enter a foreign land and not be lost in it" (7). She finds herself lacking knowledge, though it is not literally projected. Thus, there is a clear picture of the vast difference found between the two nations in regard with cultural, social and political happenings.

While considering cultural memory, food exhibits central position and it is transformed as food memories through their narration. In Guo's *A Lover's Discourse,* the narrator shares her native memories in most of the conversations with her lover. In the essay "The materiality of memory: affects, remembering and food decisions" Fox and Alldred discusses food in

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connection with social, personal as well as collective memory, they describe this as, "social science studies suggest that food is an important 'site' of memory" (Alldred 6). So this is evidence that not only buildings, monuments and objects stand as a 'site' of memory, but also food has given the same stand. When the narrator sits next to the wild nasturtium, she remembers China and how Chinese people have the habit of eating wild flowers; through this she also remembers her dead mother. The narrator says, "We used to eat their peppery leaves as well as their sour-tasting flowers in my home town" (Guo 12). The use of 'we' and 'my' combines personal as well as collective memory through neural functions of the human body. This can also be considered as sensory memory, because she remembers her homeland with a smell in connection with sense and brain. There is another reference to cuisine and memory in the novel, as the narrator says, "I tried a piece of Kangaroo meat. It tasted like the buffalo meat I ate back in China" (Guo 152). Here the narrator connects Kangaroo and buffalo in order to bring back the discussion of her homeland. This kind of discussion and remembering gives a pleasure and make her to feel less lonely. In the same way, Alldred states that, "memories mediate social and cultural values and norms that impact on identity, cultural continuity and sense of belonging" (Alldred 6). Here Alldred's discussion defines that food indulges the state of belongingness, identity and also implies certain values in connection with social and culture. In another instance Guo discusses Chinese memory as she writes, "We Chinese only eat ginger, never bread" (Guo 257). In Chinese Food culture, they prefer food with spices. Ginger and meat are a part of their regular diet and food habits whereas Westerners prefer bread and frozen food. Through such exchanges, Guo interconnects culture and food habits. Finally on eating German marzipan, the narrator once again connects with the Chinese Cuisine as in the same way of Kangaroo and buffalo meat, as she says, "It was very sweet, tasted like red bean buns made for toothless people in China" (Guo 260). This statement is yet again reference to the sensory memory. Earlier through smell, now Guo remembers the past Chinese experiences through her taste buds and with the help of tongue, another human sensory perception.

There is a great economic difference between European and Asian countries, because Western countries are termed as developed countries and Asian countries such as Korea, China, Japan and India are developing countries. Hence impoverishment, illiteracy and unhygiene are the prevailing social conditions of these parts of the world. To narrate the economic status of China in the novel Guo connects poverty along with memory. Mathew J Allen in his research article titled "The poverty of memory: For political economy in memory studies" combines memory with economy and politics, his discussion starts with a note that, "Memory and economy share unique historical correspondence and conflation in ways that continue to be felt for shaping and affecting our social lives". The above statement defines that the memories of economic condition stands as one of the reason in affecting the social lives of the human. In China, family members involve in a certain work for their livelihood. To discuss this in fiction, Guo takes the example of art workers in China. These Chinese artisans reproduce the original art of the westerners for sale. When the narrator visits Li Bang's house, he resides with his family in a residence which serves as shop as well to make his livelihood. Guo explains their living condition at the time of rains, she says, "all of a sudden a great mess of water came down from the sky" (Guo 108). This highlights that how the people in China are affected poor economic conditions. As a diasporic writer Guo brings out the memory of China with her imagination through narratives. To connect social issues with memory Allen insists that, "interrogating the

intersections between memory and economy… expands the conceptual resources… commenting upon pressing social issues… such as public remembrance, memory entrepreneurship, dark tourism and nostalgia industries". Thus Allen's argument insists that through memory, economical and social issues contribute to the act of remembering and forgetting in various stages. As a contribution to social issues and memory Guo represents the death of women in China due to pertaining economic conditions. As she describes, "every year thousands of Chinese women die of lung cancer, even though they have never smoked in their life" (Guo 117). This is an evident that shows in developing countries women suffer worse than men due to their domestic chores. Due to poverty they are prone to diseases that cost their death.

> The water in Europe is sad… if so the water in China was even sadder. On our coast, there were so many rusted hulks, abandoned factories, beaches crowded with people stripping them of seaweed and shellfish. The sea was grey and churned up like a dirty and crinkled canvas. (Guo 146).

Through the narrator's conversation with her lover, Guo brings out memory as the result of communication. Guo intensifies that sea is another 'site' of memory in a broad context. Here she also represents the whole China with the description of sea. It is nature that sea reflects the blue colour of the sky as the water is colourless. Here Guo mentions grey colour with the Chinese sea. This shows the identity which she shares among her native. This grey colour also projects the poverty of the nation. Her use of vocabularies like dirty, rusted hulks, abandoned factories represents memory in connection with social conditions and crowded beaches represents the huge population of China whereas seaweed and shellfish retrieves the memory in connection to food.

The next part of discussion moves to memory in connection with language and linguistics. As the novel itself a discourse, Guo uses Chinese words and phrases through the conversations between the narrator and the lover in various aspects. Jakup Mlynar in his article titled "Language and Collective Memory: Insights from Social Theory" connects the fulcrum between language and collective memory in the aspect of social theory. To describe this with the context, he says:

> Collective memory is conceived in different ways – as a metaphor, a sensitizing concept, a trait of individual memory or as a component of more general historical consciousness. However, various attempts to conceptualize the often vaguely used term collective memory come to the conclusion that collective memory is deeply related to linguistics and narrative phenomena. (Mlynar 218)

So Mlynar's argument defines that collective memory is same like individual memory. These two memories connects historical backdrop. While conceptualizing collective and individual memory, it certifies that it has deep connection with language as well as narrative form. Here in the fiction *A Lover's Discourse*, Guo's use of Chinese language in between English phrases shows the identity as a Chinese and it also proves the memory is primarily connected with linguistics. As a piece of collective consciousness Guo mentions that, "In Chinese we say liu shui bu fu – flowing water does not rot. If the water does not flow it is dead water. It will rot" (Guo 225). She gives life to water in Chinese context whereas her lover argues that in English context actually water does not die or rot, it can become dirty but it won't die, it's simply molecules. As the narrator and her lover lives in the boat, the narrator finds that the water is calm and unmoving so she states that, "The canal water is dead" (225). For this the narrator

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also takes reference from Chinese language and brings out collective memory. Through this it is understood that there is a saying in China 'flowing water does not rot' because they considers water has life. Due to pollution and stagnation or wastes dispensed in the water makes it smell rotten. Here through the Chinese phrase, Guo defines the interconnection between memory, culture and language. In another instance, Guo connects the Chinese pronunciation for magpie and mansion. The narrator says that, "In Chinese we say ai wu ji wu. Which means if you love your mansion you will love the magpie too" (Guo 35). As a singing bird, magpie represents happiness in the Chinese context, as well as in Chinese language both the words 'magpie' and 'mansion' is pronounced as "wu". Through this Guo certainly explains another concept which intersects memory and language. Mlynar in his essay argues that, "oral history provides insight into the realm of communicative memory" (Mlynar 224). This statement helps to understand that oral histories that are normally in spoken form and conveyed through conversation to next generation with the help of culture forms communicative memory. In the same way Guo through language uses 'magpie' and 'ai wu ji wu in order to highlight communicative memory. In another instance when talking about German and Sanskrit language Guo mentions that, "In our language we don't have articles" (38). This shows that recollection in daily life and also how memory is built in the human system through the construction of languages for every part of the world.

Guo concentrates on childhood memories of the narrator to establish nostalgia, personal or private memories in the foreign land. The childhood of every human contains various feelings which include happiness, sorrow, playfulness, longings and sometimes traumatic experiences. When the narrator is in China she lives with her parents and with her relatives. After the death of her parents she moves to London for her higher studies. Harlene Hayne and Damian Scarf in their essay "Childhood Memories" interpret cognition and human life to connect adulthood and childhood, they describe this as:

> Humans are the only animals who, over the course of their lifetime, make the transition from encoding their memories in a nonverbal format to a format that is primarily based on language. During infancy and early childhood, what we encode and remember is stored, retained and retrieved… during the rest of our lives the memories are established, maintained and expressed using our language networks. (Scarf 465)

Hayne and Scarf's statement on childhood memories explain that whether it is childhood or adulthood, humans are the only species which retrieves memory through the process of encoding, remembering and forgetting throughout their lives. At the stage of infancy their memories are encoded in non-verbal format but as they grow and at the stage of adulthood, memories are shared among communities. Here in this context 'language networks' is considered as the format of narration.

The narrator visits China for her research work when she stands under the cold shower, she recalls her childhood memory. Guo narrates that as, "I saw myself walking up from a siesta and eating a bowl of iced mint jelly, or killing mosquitoes… or stealing watermelons from a field with neighborhood kids" (Guo 96). The narrator thus explains typical Chinese lifestyle of a child born in China. Eating, walking and killing mosquitoes or else stealing food are considered as daily activities. In this case narrator at her adulthood, just with the site of China and the weather condition, she recalls her forgotten memories which convey happiness and this also shows the

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nostalgia. Simultaneously the narrator thinks about her dead parents. Memories are complex phenomena as it retrieves both kinds of memories whether it is about a loss or whether it is about the happiness simultaneously. She remembers about her dead parents as she says, "Back then my father was healthy and happy. I could always turn to him if my mother was hassling me to do something I didn't want to do" (96). Through the memory of her father and mother the narrator portrays her life at present. Though she is an adult and lives away from her native land, she couldn't resist the feeling of loneliness. She earns to return to her childhood and she couldn't lose the memory of her dead parents. Her parents death stays has a traumatic memory in her life.

Guo's next discussion moves to the 'site of memory' to remember the past experiences of her childhood days with her father. With the help of China's Grand Canal, Guo intersects personal memories with the historical period of China. The narrator expresses her childhood days as she says, "Then I thought of the Grand Canal in Beijing. It was built thousands of years ago and rebuilt by later dynasties… I went to visit the Grand Canal with my father" (Guo 130). 'Site of memory' represents a material that provides human brain to remember the past. Through narratives Guo inserts the beauty of historical Chinese architecture as well as with the fictional imagination she connects both collective and personal memory.

In the novel *A Lover's Discourse,* Guo intersects arts as a cultural memory in connection with Chinese landscape. The narrator delivers her thought as, "I remember the feeling of looking at ancient Chinese Ink paintings when I was still a schoolgirl, and how beautiful the landscape depicted in those images seemed to be" (Guo 155). Paintings as an art form reflect 'site of memory', which expresses beautiful as well as violent memories. Guo describes the memory in connection with landscape and thus invokes the ancient Chinese culture.

As a diasporic writer Guo narrates the experiences of homelessness and loneliness in foreign land. The narrator while thinking about her days in China, she feels that, "Here it was the feeling of desolation. Evenings were difficult to pass. English nights were long" (Guo 11). Through this thought Guo expresses the feeling of homelessness. Though the narrator does not belong to the category of forced migration, the feeling of desolation makes her to think that she does not belong to England. She feels alienated in England. The neural functions of the brain reproduce the memory of the Chinese past during her daily life in London.

> I thought about being alone here in England. I thought of China and my parents. I recalled a strange conversation I had with my mother. It was at my father's graveyard. The thought of how he had lived during his last few weeks made my throat turn to stone. (Guo 21)

Through the above reference from the novel Guo states that the feeling of loneliness makes the narrator to think about her dead parents. The memory of death and the symbol of graveyard represent painful pasts. The narrator lives her life all alone without her parents and also in an entirely different nation but her memories are accumulated only with place where she was born and brought up.

Migration serves as a base to reproduce and recall the memories which are stored in the human brain. This retrieval happens after the process of forgetting and then by remembering. As a Chinese-British writer, Guo with the help of memory and imaginary depictions portray her novel as a solid reference to highlight cultural memories. Cognition is a process that encodes the stored memories and with the help of communication, political, social and culture in the forms of

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art, language, landscape, food and even the childhood memories are portrayed to represent memory in various forms through narration.

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