

## Re-mapping Lost Histories and Family Ties through Memory and Elderlies in Keki N. Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs*

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### Abstract

Memory plays a crucial role in forming history. They have the capability to move in diverse time frames to recollect and revive events and situations from the past and help create a present. Within a family, the elderlies narrate the past from their memory and help to keep the intergenerational family unit together. But, family is a part of the society and what affects the society, leaves an imprint on the family. This article tries to explore the dynamics of memory and history as a part of a singular family unit from the perspective of a father and son as they revisit their family history through their grandparents and grand-uncles and -aunts in Keki N. Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* --- a 2015 novel on a Parsee family living in India immediately after the 1947 Partition. In due course of the novel, Daruwalla explores the life of a Parsee family where the two narrators, Saam Bharucha and his son Rohinton, are confined within their family dilemmas and struggles. In doing so, Daruwalla brings out the issue of freedom struggle and subcontinental Partition through the memory of the old aged characters. Therefore, this article highlights the importance of socio-political events in influencing personal lives and building family ties with the help of the elderlies. Correspondingly, it underlines the sociological perspectives to understand ageing and its effect on family during country's turbulent history.

### Keywords:

Memory, history, Partition, social gerontology, family.

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Keki N. Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* narrates the saga of Bharucha family while demonstrating the influence of social events in their personal lives. The novel tries to establish how memories of individual and the family unit plays a crucial role in reimagining history within the perspective of human lives. Historical events or social upheavals are correspondingly responsible for shaping personalities while attributing individuality and developing comportment towards the family. Memories can easily travel in different time frames reviving and recollecting incidents and situations from the past which inevitably leaves an imprint on the present, thereby affecting as

well as nurturing familial relationships. In Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs*, the old aged family members play the crucial role of keeping the events of supplanting and relocation alive by narrating past events to the younger generation while the nation was undergoing political as well as territorial change. The plotline of *Ancestral Affairs* deals with the lives of a father and son as life unfolds amidst turbulent, impending and imprecise decisions of Partition and how it associates past traditions with modernity expressing the sense of hope and despair, light and darkness and aspirations and ugly existence. Several incidences are recollected from the past through memory and imagination and they are knitted together with the help of the aged grandparents and grand-uncles and aunts, which helps in shaping the future course of the Bharucha family. This article endeavours to explore the dynamics of intergenerational family ties emphasising on the significance and consequence of historical and political events in private lives of the individual. In this process of development, what this article seeks to discuss is the worth and value of older family members in keeping the family together in spite of altercations.

The uniqueness in narrative style of Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* remains in the use of first-person narration as the focus alters between Saam Bharucha and his son Rohinton – gradually unfolding their experiences amidst uncertain socio-historical proceedings and personal family disputes. The dual narrative helps to represent the characters and experiences of the father and son with clarity as they encounter the family dilemmas and worries amidst national emergency and Partition struggle. Though the novel was published in 2015, the story is set against the backdrop of 1947 India-Pakistan Partition depicting the lives of a humble Parsi family entangled with the ambiguous fate of the nation as well as their citizens. The Parsi identity of the characters aim to provide a balanced and unprejudiced view of the impact of Partition on minorities in a country dominated by Hindus and Muslims. The bifurcation of a country based on the two religion left others staggered and indeterminate with respect to their future in a country where though independence was declared, yet decisions were pending – decisions related to what will be the final border between India and Pakistan, which cities or parts of land will be assigned to India or will be handed over to Pakistan, who among the citizens need to leave India for Pakistan or who can stay behind in India. According to historical records, the 1947 Independence from British rule is apparently a peaceful affair of delegating and forming Islamic Pakistan and secular India, but the real presentation of the national history emerges from the point-of-view of humble and innocent people who lived through the gruesome tragic times of partition undergoing migration, displacement, dislocation and death.

The novel is set against this backdrop of 1947 Partition as Saam Bharucha is posted in Junagadh as a legal adviser to Nawab Mahabat Khanji. Saam Bharucha is an eminent lawyer in pre-Independent India who had written a book titled, *Ideal Constitutions and Ramshackle Reality*. His assigned duty in Junagadh was to counsel the Nawab about the state of affairs related to the town of Junagadh. With the impending decision on Partition, his work was to efficiently help the Nawab to attain a place for Junagadh in Pakistan. But, the pending decision related to the country's partition left the fate of the nawab and his town in uncertainty related to its placement in India or Pakistan. Bharucha himself was unwilling to be a part of Pakistan and it kept him in consistent dilemma with respect to his loyalty towards the Nawab and his professional duties. During the problematic times of decision-making regarding the state remaining in India or becoming a part of Pakistan, Bharucha gets very little time to actually interact and advice the Nawab as he remains strongly guarded by his followers. Though, Bharucha does not want to join Pakistan or remain under the duty of the Nawab, he cannot express his desire openly. While not having much professional duty to fulfil, he starts to intermingle with the locals in Junagadh and in that manner he meets a British couple Sydney and Claire. There he has an affair with Claire after her husband's death. This ends his marriage with his wife, Zarine and estranges his relation with his son, Rohinton. When, finally, the country is divided, the Nawab leaves for Pakistan with his family and Bharucha's post as a legal advisor is lost and he is left with a bleak future. The author, in the novel, simultaneously, deals with Rohinton's share of trouble and upheavals also. With India gaining Independence he had to be taken out from his boarding school and brought to Bombay. He is expelled after a scandal from the Medical College in Kanpur when his roommate dies after drinking country liquor. His relationship with the woman he loves is also uneven and disturbed even though he gets to marry her and eventually they settle into a harmonious family life.

Majority of the characters in the novels are Parsis and Keki N. Daruwalla has beautifully portrayed the ups and downs of a single family surrounded by the historical event of Partition which carries a universal resonance to the predicament of all Parsis. Parsis are a small community of people who originally belonged to Persia and are now majorly found only in India. Hindu-Muslim strife and sectarianism marginalised the Parsi community rendering it impossible for them to attain value in a country under tremendous communal violence and hatred. The dramatic change in the nature and prospect of Parsi community from the times of British rule to that of the post-colonial times can be attributed to the fact that they were a

migrating community with the sole purpose of keeping up with their tradition of Zoroastrianism. They assimilated, adopted and amalgamated to new cultural and social situations faster than any other ethnic or native communities of India. What makes the Parsis distinctive is their willingness to accommodate themselves in different surroundings while strongly protecting their cultural heritage. Parsis developed as a strong ethnic community as they were “an influential and important community determined to promote cooperation with the other Indian communities ... including the British ... in the interests of the improvement of life.... At the same time, they remained ever conscious of the need to safeguard and distinguish their minority community identity” (Palsetia 19). Long settled in Indian soil, Parsis were keen to adapt to British or western ways during the colonial period and they reached greater heights economically and socially with that effort benefitting the community at large and individuals in particular. Palsetia rightly describes how the development came with “the incorporation of the Parsis into the economic and political world of British power, from the late eighteenth century, evinced the successful transformation the Parsis effected from minority community in the provincial setting to influential colonial elite in the new urban setting” (28). T. M Luhrmann prolifically studies the origin of the Parsis and explains the reason behind their getting relegated as a minority in a secular country after enjoying prosperity and living peacefully for centuries:

Modern Parsis are a tiny Indian community settled in Bombay. They are an old people who emigrated from Persia a thousand years ago, probably to preserve Zoroastrianism from Islam. They were remarkably successful during the Raj. But their success came at the cost of jettisoning their adopted Indian identity in favour of a western one. As a native colonial elite, Parsis were more westernized than most other Indian elites, and as displaced Persians, they committed themselves thoroughly to a non-Indian sensibility. Now they feel marginalized in a postcolonial world, with an aching sense of loss of status, of cultural genius, of their historical moment. (1)

When British rule came to an end, the Hindu –Muslim dispute had reached greater heights, and the country was divided and governing body was constructed keeping the two prominent religious sectors in mind. As the country was being divided by the British keeping the Hindu-Muslim antagonism under consideration, Parsis’ future appeared ambiguous and it is clearly reflected, through the novel in Saam Bharucha’s concern aroused from reading newspapers related to the Partition as he contemplates: “Our fate beamed in from another planet – that’s

how I looked at it" (Daruwalla 51). By divulging his apprehension in the story, Daruwalla highlights how the social context, past histories and related memories played a crucial role in the development of the characters in the present situation. The older members of the family contributes in associating all the family connections together by remembering and referring to the "ancestral affairs" from time to time.

The characters from the novel seems to share a unique connection with memory and history in their relation with family and the society while continually being in search of freedom. In his definition of the relationship between memory and history, Alistair Thomson clearly defines: "[m]emories are "significant pasts" that we compose to make a more comfortable sense of our life over time, and in which past and current identities are brought more into line" (qtd. in Tumblety 4). Memory and history has remained interconnected since ages yet they are considered so vastly opposite. Memory is a form to remember the past while history is a form of documenting the same. Memory is 'socially conditioned' as our thought processes are developed as per our surroundings. According to Jan Assmann and Rodney Livingstone:

its contents and the use we make of it are determined by our intercourse with others, by language, action, communication, and by our emotional ties to the configurations to our social existence. Like consciousness, language, and personality, memory is a social phenomenon; in the act of remembering we do not just descend into the depths of our own most intimate inner life, but we introduce an order and a structure into that internal life that are socially conditioned and that link us to the social world. (1)

How an individual remember the past varies from one to another as the way one experiences the social condition and remembers it differs. Memories can be a private experience or a cluster of collective cultural experiences as the surrounding, immediate environment around a character has its ramifications as a "repository of conscious and unconscious collective memories" while the "intrinsic spatiality of memory can be explored through the cultural and social practices, activities, and enactments that symbolically reinforce or challenge the collective memories inherent in physical landscapes" thereby providing the "core emotional attachments linking communities to their environments" (Meusburger et al. 4). For Daruwalla, memory has the power to manipulate living individuals as they could be haunted by historical and communal disputes and, sometimes, it is beneficial for individuals to forget the melancholy past for a favourable future. On the "dangers of myth becoming scripture and memory," Daruwalla spoke

at length on a three-day Biennale, titled “Poetry as Memory”, held at Triveni Kala Sangam as a part of “Vak: The Raza Biennale of Indian Poetry” and described how:

The healing touch against simplification and rewriting of history would come with the realisation that memory is also an investigation, not something inscribed in stone. Unless we forget, we will be always slaves to the kind of historic memory and philosophy people are thrusting on us. (Daruwalla)

This concept of remembering and forgetting serves the plotline of *Ancestral Affairs* when we gradually observe how the characters are collecting their lost identities and moving forward even when demotivated by undesirable and destructive social scenarios. Saam Bharucha and Rohinton evolves from their daunting environment multiple times to appear victorious while finding solace in peaceful family life. Therefore, memory and history are intrinsic to the development of intergenerational family relationships but for individual development, history and memory should be selectively forgotten. Thereby, letting memories to be moulded in a fashion which fits the perception of the personal and public life of an individual. Memory and history are separate yet inextricably associated; just like an individual person linked to his family yet separate as a personal being. The past history from the family is remembered and recalled many a times when they appear intrigued by the events that shook the nation and their personal lives. A close reading of the novel in the following passages will determine the concept holistically.

Older relations bridge the generations together through their knowledge of the past. Moreover, ageing is not the reflection of physiological changes but economic, culture, tradition, and society affects the process of ageing exceptionally. The reflection of surrounding social structure and political events could be traced through their stories and conversation, proving the significance of memory and history in personal lives of an individual. Therefore, old aged grandparents are an inevitable part of a family, shielding everyone through their experiences from past history and sharing anecdotes from their memory. Daruwalla, in the novel, creates a memorable character through Kavarana Kaka, who is Saam Bharucha’s distant uncle from father’s side, who is seemingly well informed about their and Saam’s wife Zarine’s family history. A nonagenarian, Kavarana Kaka has lived and witnessed eras of political and familial upheavals. During his young age, Bharucha often visited Kavarana Kaka to quench his curiosity related to his family ancestors and also to know about the forefathers of Zarine Dubash. Typical of old age, Kavarana Kaka was living in recluse, not engaging in family functions thereby showing traits of

“disengagement” from society and the stress associated with it. “Disengagement theory” in sociological ageing studies old aged people who disengage or isolate themselves from the society. The withdrawal of the older generation from the family and social circle “permits younger, more energetic individuals to take over the roles that need to be filled. Disengagement therefore is seen as a way of permitting an orderly transfer of power between generations” (Victor 18). Bharucha’s visit to Kavarana Kaka’s house reflects his interest in knowing about family histories, which is propagated orally from one generation to the next. He tells him about the origin of the family title, Bharucha and informs how “they first belonged to Surat, in olden days,” then shifted to “Bharuch on bank of river Tapti,” were their “family became Bharucha” (Daruwalla 176). Kavarana Kaka seems to know about Zarine’s ancestral family tree as well and how her grand-uncles, who were brothers, branched off from each other due to their differences, jealousy, and feuds, which consequently, divided the entire Dubash family. Saam Bharucha has his inhibitions about his inquisitiveness related to know about past ancestral histories as he questions his frequent visits to Kavarana Kaka to know about their forefathers even when the relations are blurred and forgotten:

What was so surreptitious about all that, I now wonder. Why must one burrow into their history? Ancestors are a ghost wall; between their genes and their shadow, there could be a world in itself, cause and effect, genetic determinism, legasis, varsas, of epilepsy, failing kidneys, bheja na fatela tempers. Ancestors are a cave where boys shouldn’t enter. Set against our forefathers we’ll always be kids. (Daruwalla 181)

Saam Bharucha felt both awe and disbelief in learning about the ‘ancestral affairs’ of his forefathers as the person concerned were so familiar yet so foreign. Because, he acquired their information through oral accounts narrated by the elders of the family, he wondered what made these stories fascinating – distant yet so relatable.

Nonetheless, whenever Saam went to ask about the family ancestors, Kavarana Kaka every so often deviated to narrate about the Second Opium War of England and France with China. He had spent some of his years in China and seems to remember that time vividly. War torn land of China, with English and France against them, was facing trouble economically and politically and it inevitably influenced the inhabitants. Kavarana Kaka, was, also, evidently affected by the turmoil of the foreign country as he looked as if to remember about the war on a personal level as he talked about the people negotiating and bargaining over the resources of

opium. But, as with history, documenting past incidences chronologically gives it a proper synchronised structure. History is not dependent on memory rather on facts, but “memory is always sceptical of history – history that can be manipulated by politicians and historians (Butt 206).” Daruwalla’s presentation of freedom struggle from the personal interpretation of the elderly suggests how the real history differs from the way people remembers it. Kavaran Kaka remembers the Opium War as the warriors involved into it used to counter the attacks and respond to one another, unlike the historical documentation of the war which might only mention the cause and effect of the war with a statics of the death and disorder it caused. This confirms how certain political upheavals leave an imprint on an individual’s mind even when he has turned so old and so many years have passed.

A similar fascinating incident narrated in *Ancestral Affairs* is that of Rohinton’s grandmother (Zarine’s mother) recalling past memories of Partition, and how the fear from the time is deeply seeded within that old lady. During her end days, while recuperating in hospital and then home, she is unable to recognise her home, daughter or grandson, thoroughly asking them questions regarding her whereabouts. But, when she sees Rohinton leaving for his office, she instructs: “When they catch you, tell them you are neither Hindu nor Muslim.” Later, instructing him: “You take cover in a doctor’s house if they surround you.” Rohinton is surprised to observe how “these fears of the partition era” (Daruwalla 195) could emerge after so many years at such an old age, ailing from pain while having difficulty in recalling her home and family members. The war and trauma of Partition has left her disillusioned for life and suggests how she had difficulty in believing people.

People grow old while living within the society and are, therefore, not unaware of the situations and circumstances affecting them and the world around. So, even when they are not physically fit enough to work they remember the social conditions of the outside world and mention them time and again in their conversation proving how social and political commotions invade ordinary life. Therefore, the process of ageing is not “in isolation from the rest of the society” but “ageing occurs within a social context ranging from the microscale of the family to the macroscale of the whole society or culture or increasingly of a globalised world (Victor 5).” The major characters are influenced by the elders in the family and has been shown visiting them often with the wish to learn more about their ancestors, but in due course they have seen how the discourse had referred to the political unrest of the time. Predominantly, they intend to explain the inevitable bond between memory and history and there role play in



intergenerational family ties. Both the narrators present the importance of aged uncles and aunts for addressing the significance of “human and cultural encounters” which overlaps with “histories and territories, shifting countries and continents where different people, cultures, nations and communities seek to communicate above the ... social, national and territorial barriers (Butt 210).” The novel, therefore, “brings out the role of national ideologies in shaping personal memories and collective history (210).” It is through Rohinton’s grandmother that we get to know about the familiar and unfamiliar events and incidences from memory. But, the psychological disenchantment is acute and Keki N. Daruwalla is quite correct when he insists on selective memory and considers it “as something to be remembered as having lived or occurred ... the darker side of memory -- is linked to nostalgia. A little amnesia would benefit us all” (Daruwalla). The anguish and wariness evolved through traumatic past history is better forgotten to live peacefully, though the task seems impossible.

Rohinton and his entire family takes care of his grandmother in the last stage of her life, suggesting the significance of family in the elderlies’ life when health declines. Even when it is considered that industrialization and globalization has altered the concept of the age-old, family tradition of living together as joint or nuclear family, what remains static is the nature of how the “family continues to be the caring and the nurturing institution” (Patel 30). Rohinton and his wife, Feroza takes turn to take care of their ailing grandmother. Rohinton, who had to face the emotional hurdle of seeing his parents separate at a young age, grew up with that anguish which is reflected in his life course. He got expelled from the medical school after being defamed falsely for the death of his roommate and could not become successful in his attempt to become a journalist. Feroza, initially, faced difficulty in committing to him as a wife even after marriage. She returns to him after hearing about his ailing grandmother therefore, signifying how in such a scenario, too, the elders could unite them. Another significant family dispute that went for generations is restored when Zarine’s distant cousin, Karl comes from America to meet Zarine so that their dispute is solved and they are reconciled. Behram, Karl’s father is her Uncle who wanted to reconcile with Zarine in his last days of life. Initially, Zarine had her inhibitions but gradually she gives in and began talking about her grandmother, mother and aunt and how they would have been happy to see Karl had they been alive. Karl, too, came to know about his distant family members through his father, Behram, who according him, even in his nineties, possesses sharp mind and memory. All these episodes are revealed through thoughts and memory as the old aged family members make an effort to bridge the gap between the ancestors and the young

generation. Even Zarine wilfully meets her long lost Uncle before she dies in an accident, thereby significantly ending all familial tensions and differences. Though Rohinton's career and life's context are personal, family plays an important role in his development. Tulsi Patel explains:

The family is an institution that simultaneously envelops and unfolds the ideal and the normative on the one hand and actual behaviour on the other. It works as a conduit, and sanctions and provides the potential for continuity as well as change in structures of kinship, marriage and reorganisation of living arrangements in accordance with times (Patel 31).

Family, is at once, personal and public and one's demeanour outside the family environment is dependent on family's reputation and cultural heritage. "The family protects and lends its status and honour to its members before the outside world (Patel 31)" and gives the opportunity to develop individual identity. When the person goes out into the real world, many "changes are taking place in various aspects of people's personal and social lives, and are manifested through personal attributes, such as individualism and independence." In the wider world, "economic, cultural, occupational, educational, gender and kinship factors interface with individuals as members of the family and the household" (32). Therefore, wholesome development of a person is possible with the support of his family surrounded by healthy environment.

## **Conclusion**

Keki N. Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* does not simply represent the lives of particular individuals Saam and Rohinton Bharucha but through them he tries to portray the plight of all Sindhis during the times of Partition when the rift between Hindus and Muslims have taken a violent turn. By showing "the contrast between personal memory and political history" Daruwalla had shown that no one was spared from the aftermath of Partition and the fear of the disorder was ingrained. To conclude, what the narrator does with a novel published in 2015 about the Partition history is probably his way of reminding the readers that Partition "perpetuates in the current political sphere of divided subcontinent (Butt 233)" and has left an imprint on every individual irrespective of caste, creed or culture. Therefore, the freedom struggle and the Partition movement does not simply remain as a part of subcontinental history but an event which is going to affect people from all age group even after many years have passed and going to remain a part of the memory of the families as they share the same history.

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**BIO- NOTE**

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