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From silence to articulation: A postmemorial reading of Rohan Chhetri's *Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful*

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Abstract

Rohan Chhetri's *Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful* captures the dilemma of being an Indian-Nepali diasporic writer who oscillates between historical amnesia and the burden of unresolved legacies. The volume is replete with images of suffering, mortality, bereavement, recollection, and ancestral trauma, reconstructing the memories of those who lived through the failed revolution. Using Marianne Hirsch's theory of Postmemory, this paper investigates how the second generation, like Chhetri, recalls traumatic experiences that they did not directly experience but that are passed down through stories, images, and behavior. As Hirsch writes, postmemory 'describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before' (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). The paper closely examines the memories of the ancestral figures like his father and grandfather, whose physical absence nonetheless profoundly impacts the speaker's identity and emotional landscape. This allows Chhetri to evoke a past intertwined with communal violence, broken promises, betrayals, and the disillusionment of separate statehood demands, shared by many like his grandfather, juxtaposed with a present that is equally dystopian and devoid of redemption.

Keywords: postmemory, trauma, ancestral memories, grandfather figure, failed revolution, identity

Introduction:

Rohan Chhetri's *Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful* captures the dilemma of being an Indian-Nepali diasporic writer who oscillates between historical amnesia and the burden of unresolved legacies. The volume is replete with images of suffering, mortality, bereavement, recollection, and ancestral trauma, reconstructing the memories of those who lived through the failed revolution. Using Marianne Hirsch's theory of Postmemory, this paper investigates how the second generation, like Chhetri, recalls traumatic experiences that they did not directly experience but that are passed down through stories, images, and behavior. As Hirsch writes, postmemory 'describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before' (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). In the poem *Father, Further: 1986*, the poet admits, "I don't exist yet... (pp 22)," yet long before his birth, the narrative of unjust politics stripping the Hill people of their aspirations

for separate statehood is already inscribed. Born into a family with a revolutionary grandfather who is force-fed soil by baton-wielding officers for demanding autonomy and land, “Feed him the land, that is what they’re fighting for” (Chhetri, 2021, p. 22), the speaker inherits the emotional weight of history that the powerful strive to erase. Underlining the politics of remembrance, Rohan Chhetri, in one of his interviews, remarks,

“I draw a lot from postmemory, familial history, and sometimes local legends retelling the various iterations of the Gorkhaland revolution, a 100-year-old movement demanding self-determination and a separate state for the Nepali-speaking population from the Indian state of West Bengal. My grandfather was involved in arguably the bloodiest iteration of the movement in the 80s. I used some of these details and the history and politics of the border town to frame something of an epic narrative which mixes the fabular and the personal and the historical, taking minor characters and recasting them in a mythical space.” (Darling, 2022)

This concise volume can be viewed as a site of historical reclamation and carries the imprint of an intergenerational voice of resistance. Although Chhetri now resides abroad, and we learn that he travelled a long way from his hometown to New Delhi and then to Los Angeles, his poetry nevertheless makes many allusions to his hometown. To quote him,

“Prospect of home washed in the retch/Of anxiety. My history of nausea in the cold half-/ Light of childhood, where did it come from?” (Chhetri, 2021, p. 6).

By closely examining the four primary sections of the collection, we can say that Chhetri not only recounts but also performs inherited pain, exemplifying what Hirsch refers to as “affiliative acts of memory” that rewrite histories suppressed within aesthetic frameworks. Chhetri’s poetic structure is unique, freely transitioning among prose poems, couplets, tercets, and open forms, indicating a failure to stabilize and encapsulate the trauma. The first section, *Katabasis*, is structured as a descent, a rejection of transcendence, and a voyage into the ruins of memory that concludes in echo rather than epiphany: Chhetri deviates from confessional poetics with his concept of listening. In contrast to narrating, the poet presents himself as a witness, translator, and mourner. He lets the poetry be shaped by the stillness surrounding ancestral trauma in the form of grotesque images like the “two severed heads of the Liberation Front leaders hung from a branch of a guava tree” (Chhetri, p. 20) or the smell of “kerosene & ragsmoke” (Chhetri, p. 20) or the women marching in “gunmetal silence” (Chhetri, p. 20).

In her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Hirsch contends that the emotional burden of trauma is passed on to successive generations, and that the second generation often inherits a kind of memory.

“It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 6).

The second generation of trauma survivors have memories that are indirect, but they hold traces of the trauma in the form of stories, representations, and the affective atmosphere transmitted to them by the first generation. The concept of postmemory has since been used extensively in literary studies, the history of art and cultural history, reflecting in particular the latter on the Shoah, migration and colonial history. As Hirsch writes, postmemory

“describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (2012, p. 5). Post-memory is memories of things that have not been experienced but are passed down through narratives, representations (images, etc), and cultural practices of those who have experienced them. The children and grandchildren of survivors, Hirsch argues, are not only imbued with a knowledge of the events but also a memory, one formed by the emotional and psychological legacy of those events. These memories are shaped to a large extent by family stories and shared cultural representations. ‘Ancestors become “giants walking the earth” and ordinary people and their lives are shot through with a mythic resonance. This singing of “the tale of the tribe” is a singing back to the history of colonization, immigration, and finally, against neocolonialism and the cultural claim that the state of Bengal exerts on the land and its ecology. The retelling is important because they also become placeholders of remembrance like songs and elegies of witness. On a fundamental level, it is also written in a hope against erasure from the national imagination.’ (Darling, 2022)

Through the lens of postmemory as a literary analytical tool, we can read Rohan Chhetri’s portrayal of the ramifications of trauma not only on the victims themselves, but also on the generations that come after. In this sense, Chhetri’s poetry serves as a site where the dialectic of memory and trauma works through the emotional inheritances of displacement and historical violence. One cannot help but notice the sharp poignancy in Chhetri’s work, “In the night fragrant with the tea gardens’ first flush/ we heard the pain-astonished men thrashing upside down/ as a baton tore welts into their calves” (Chhetri, 2021, p. 19). Here, we see how trauma is passed on, as the poet himself admits that “...I am not there yet” (pp 24), but the painful memories sculpt the identity of the later generation as the cultural legacies still inflect the personal. Hirsch interrogates, “How is trauma transmitted across generations... How is it remembered by those who did not live it or know it in their own bodies?” (2012, p. 11) and asserts that “postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (2012, p. 5). The emotive environment for inherited memory is created by Chhetri’s poetic style, which includes repetition, form, lyric voice, and the use of somatic imagery. *Katabasis*, the first section of the collection, foreshadows a descent that is both epic and intimate. The opening poem, *King’s Feedery*, invokes blood, bloodshed, and historical wreckage at the outset:

“One by one, they scrubbed/ blood off their fingers & faces & sat down to devour/ a feast of rice & goat served by the villagers” (Chhetri, 2021, p. 3).

This statement, seemingly straightforward, encapsulates the triviality of inherited violence. Despite not being a direct witness, the speaker participates through poetic reconstruction. This corresponds with Hirsch’s claim that postmemory pertains not to the re-experiencing of trauma but to its “remembrance” through the language, rituals, and silences transmitted across generations, “with its singular desire to bring to surface/ every lost map of your grandfather’s revolution” (Chhetri, 2021, p. 31). Throughout the poems, the spectral presence of the Gorkhaland movement is apparent, even if it is not explicitly mentioned. The images of fragmentation and surveillance are encoded with the language of revolt, disappearance, and siege:

“—long summer of bullets
One July morning a caesura in the terror a lull
in the pelting A man woke in the shape of a crosshair

looking for a pharmacy	He heard it before he---
White blow above ear then blanks	then black
blood sluicing down an eye	His open mouth vacuum-
still on the incline of a sidewalk	fistful of pipelines
twisting into the asphalt	beside his head his
hand clutching dust	body splayed fossil-ripe
	martyring"
	(Chhetri, 2021, p. 7).

A significant portion of oral history is lost. Historical remembrance and representation are so laden with politics that they end up serving as a tool for the wealthy and powerful. In this instance, the history of the disenfranchised remained either undocumented or completely obliterated. In the poem *Recrimination Fugue*, Chhetri envisions his grandfather presenting a blank sheet of paper to the poet's mother, inscribed on the margin with the words, "This is an empty page you will never write in" (Chhetri, 2021, p. 52). However, Chhetri reminds us that, "History, that slow child, / kept working on some infinite homework" (2021, p. 29), thus defying total erasure despite the might of the dominant. The anguish of recalling a past he had not personally lived but felt a strong connection to keeps the poet from ever finding peace anywhere. The poet traverses' homes, nations, and continents, yet bears the emotional baggage, stating, "I carried/ This ruin on my back across continents, / Lit vestibules, through a burning fuselage" (2021, p. 53).

In a number of his poems, the history absorbed is at remove, transmitted through stories, fragments, and artifacts: history of loss, of forced and broken passage, and the marks of violence on the body. Chhetri's memory and language bring to life the suffering of the previous generation, the memories of which haunt the subsequent generations. The graphic details of his grandfather "yanked upside down," "stripped naked" and "water boarded" beaten in chest and stomach, and fed "fresh shoveled earth" "until it plugs his windpipe" (2021, p.23) in the poem *Father, Farther: 1986* underscores the politics of the flesh that postmemory focuses on. Chhetri refrains from providing dates or headlines; instead, he etches the internal consequences of a bequeathed history into the body and psyche. The poet skilfully juxtaposes two scenarios: one in which the grandfather endures police brutality while advocating for statehood demands, and another in which his father, busy consuming brandy, fails to articulate to an inquisitive outsider the necessity of their struggle for the land. The father figure who, the more he drinks, the farther he is from the cause of the soil, who at "two a.m." "stutters" "uphill coat folded over shoulder (pp 27)" seems a caricature version of his heroic grandfather, whose "caked blood (pp 23)" is being cleaned by his eldest daughter. "These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). Chhetri beautifully yet poignantly highlights how different people react to trauma, which is evident in the varying responses of the grandfather, father, and grandson in the poetry collection. The hardships encountered by the previous generation during the revolution are transmitted as a collective experience through the myriad narratives relayed from the aggrieved to successive generations, "so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (2012, p. 5). Consequently, the pain of the violence experienced by their ancestors transforms into a collective experience, one that the speaker carries while not having directly endured it. Since Postmemory functions as a means of inheritance, both emotional and psychological, the speaker in the poetic collection

assimilates the collective sorrow of his ancestors. This emotional legacy is not just a reflection of the traumatic past but a way that shapes the speaker's understanding of identity and belonging. Interestingly, the grandfather figure is both rooted in history and removed by time. Hirsch argues that instead of using a linear narrative, postmemory reflects "an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" (2012, p. 6). In his poem *Lamentation for a Failed Revolution*, Chhetri deftly employs this approach to draw attention to the inhumanity associated with police atrocities. The poem is replete with horrifying account of a young man hastening to the drugstore, fatally shot at point-blank range, while on another afternoon a fifteen-year-old youngster struck with a pellet gun and hospitalized "alive in the elongated horror" (Chhetri, 2021, p. 9), while husbands are beaten by the same troops sustained by their wives, and a shirtless man self-immolates for the cause of the land. Interestingly, these brutal images of "bodies falling" are juxtaposed with the news of "two baby red pandas...born in captivity on the twenty-ninth day of the curfew" (2021, p.11). Despite death, violence, and hatred, this serves as a reminder that love, peace, and the creation of new life are still possible. The title of the poetry book, *Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful*, suggests that death and violence result in significant loss, while the twice-failed revolution has caused pain among the populace; nonetheless, there remains hope for renewal, as indicated by the phrase "in transit," which is beautiful.

Hirsch argues that postmemory is not a passive remembering of the past but is instead a living, breathing, active presence that leaves indelible marks on the emotional and psychological lives of those who carry it. In the prose-poem *Dasai*, the poet fondly recollects the memories of his great-grandparents, "alive, giants walking the earth still" (Chhetri, 2021, p. 32), his great-grandfather busy preparing for the festival of *Dasai*, which holds great cultural significance in a Nepali household. The poem awakens our olfactory and tactile senses with the "smell of new clothes and small bills still cool from the bank vault," and "foreheads itchy and fragrant in a pink crust of vermilion, yogurt, rice beads" (2021, p.32). The depiction of "nine goats fattened all summer were slaughtered one by one for the feast" and the mutton curry "simmering in a cinnamon gravy" that can be smelled "from the bend of the old school six houses away" (2021, p. 32) evoke a strong sense of nostalgia, as *Dasai* is a festival of homecoming within the Nepali cultural framework. Every Nepali in the diaspora can resonate with the cherished memories of parents, grandparents, and loved ones anticipating reunions on this festival, as "we see them once a year on this day" (2021, p. 32). The poet's trip to his ancestral place during *Dasai* resonates profoundly with all Nepalis. The poet reminiscing about his grandfather's final moments in *Towards Some Dark*, who perceives the "yellow mosquito net" as a white "shroud" (2021, p. 47), is poignant and resonates with every grandchild recalling their beloved grandparents experiencing similar distressing delirium in their last days. Here, the grandfather doesn't appear in his usual heroic self, but as a heartbroken, delirious old man, on whom the failed revolution has taken a toll on his health. Tiffany Troy notices a shift in the portrayal of the grandfather in the third section *Erato* where suddenly "the grandfather transforms from this epic hero and revolutionary to an old man who dies too embarrassed to pass on his tin box of money to his children" (Darling, 2022). Tiffany enquired on the reasoning for such a shift, to which Rohan Chhetri responded., "What happens, I suppose, is that the lyric movement beginning in 'Erato' unshackles the grandfather figure from that of a revolutionary and a pioneer and from the epic mode itself, exploring the very late aftermath of torture, trauma and

oppression. In a way, the epic mode exhausts itself around this section gradually. By the time we come to the third section, the collective voice has fallen off and the lyrical 'I' has emerged fully. 'Toward Some Dark,' the last poem in the section, is clearly set in America. The lyrical voice takes stock of the arc of the grandfather's particular story and gives it a possible movement toward closure." (Darling, 2022).

Conclusion:

Rohan Chhetri's poetry collection, *Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful*, possesses profound emotional depth and examines the intricacies of human life. The title itself evokes a continuous emotional and physical journey, encapsulating the subtleties of personal growth, transformation, and struggle. This poetic collection does not aim to reconcile the conflict between memory and history; instead, it embraces that conflict, creating significance via embodiment, intimacy, and formal innovation. Chhetri does this through a witnessing ethic that is both gentle and rigorous. "Chhetri's poems are an act of courage, a baring of the soul, written from the depth of his experiences, some as enigmatic as the title of the book itself" (Agrawal, 2021). His writing is notable in the context of modern South Asian poetics, not only for its artistic ability but also for its commitment to memory as a form of justice. Poetry becomes a space where grief is not only carried but also shared, as Chhetri confirms by giving voice to what was lost or silenced. The second-generation characters in his poems contend with memories that do not belong to them, of pasts that have shaped their identities without their having directly experienced these horrors. From a post-memory perspective, a key to understanding Chhetri's poetry is through an "inter-and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 6).

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