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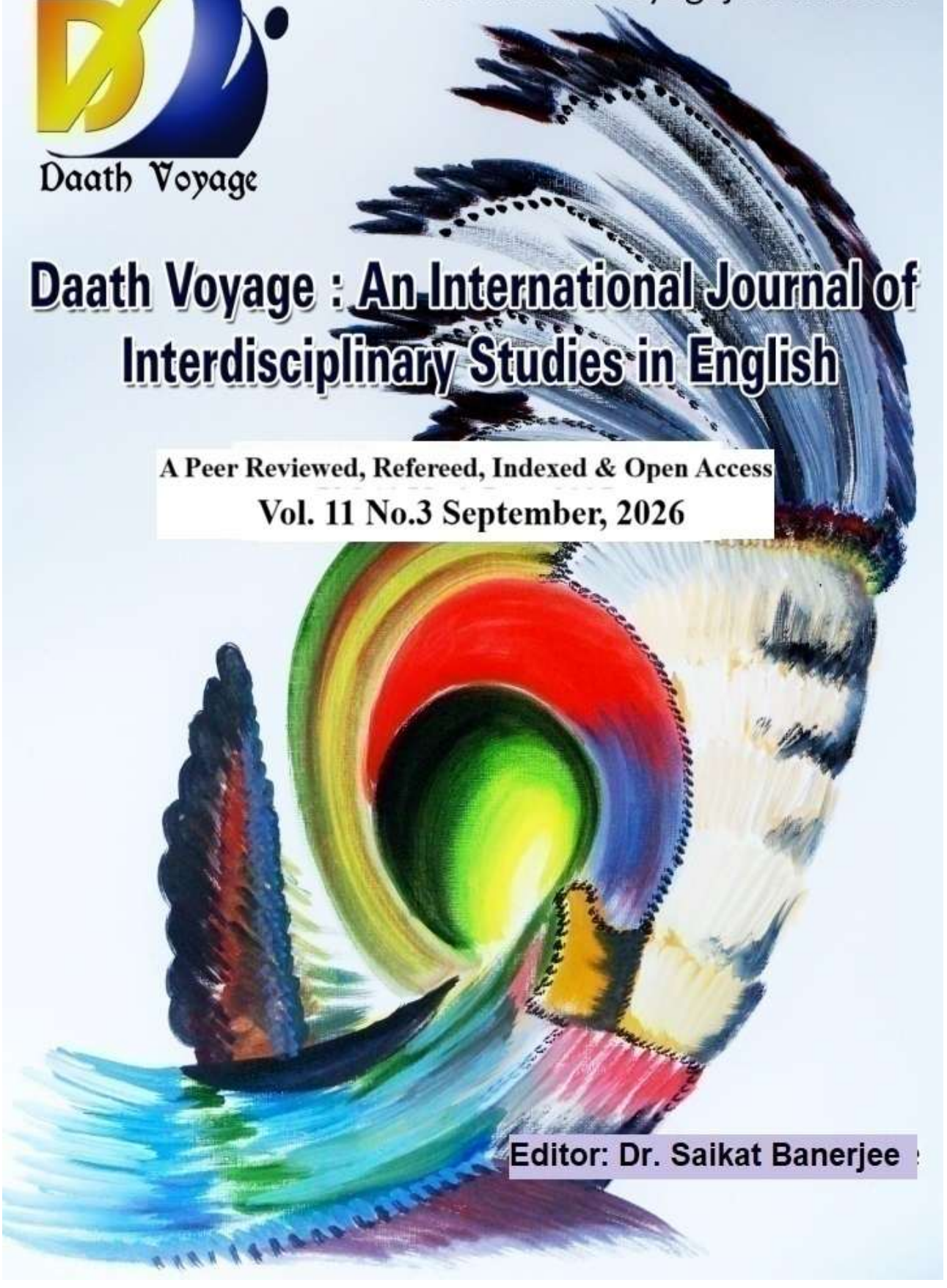

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Rooms of Remembrance: Domestic Space as an Archive of Cultural Memory in Rituparno Ghosh's Bariwali

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Abstract: Rituparno Ghosh's movie entitled Bariwali (2000) is an acclaimed Bengali movie which centres on the life of Banalata, an unmarried woman of middle age. Banalata resides alone in the decaying ancestral mansion in rural Bengal but her monotonous existence is disrupted when a film crew arrives to use her living space as a shooting location. The temporary intrusion of modernity into the secluded ancestral mansion awakens the long-suppressed desires, memories and expectations in Banalata but it all ends in profound disillusionment. My paper focuses on the exploration of the ancestral mansion in Bariwali as an archive of cultural memory and living repository of personal histories, emotional residues, and collective cultural experiences instead of just considering it to be just a living space for shelter and protection. The theoretical ideologies of Gaston Bachelard, Jan Assmann, Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora support the research study to establish that memory is shaped, preserved, and transformed due to elements like spaces, objects, cultural practices, and social structures, though it is an isolated psychological phenomenon.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Domestic Space, Bengali Cinema, Memory Studies, House as Archive.

Introduction:

Ghosh's *Bariwali* studies contemporary humanity research and focuses on the relationship between memory and space to reflect on how these components become the archives of personal life experiences. Domestic spaces are often the symbolic sites through which issues of family, gender, class, and cultural identity are articulated in Indian cinema. When it comes to contemporary film making representing Bengali society, Rituparno Ghosh has established a distinct position for himself through his nuanced exploration of interiority, emotional complexity, and the changing social realities of Bengali, especially Calcutta. Similarly *Bariwali* represents the life of a middle-aged unmarried woman, named Banalata (the protagonist) who lives a life of solitude and isolation within a dilapidated ancestral mansion in rural

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Bengal. The stillness of Banalata's life is disrupted when a film crew arrives choosing the mansion as the shooting location. Banalata's attitude towards life changes due to the temporary presence of the outsiders and it awakens her long-suppressed desires and emotional expectations. The movie subtly presents the themes of memory, loss and decline of Bengal's aristocratic cultural heritage. The present study establishes the mansion to be an archive of cultural memory rather than serving merely as the setting of the movie. The mansion is the representation of living repository of personal histories, emotional residues, and collective cultural experiences. In order to examine the role of architectural spaces and domestic objects in preserving the traces of both individual and collective pasts , this paper applies and refers to the theoretical perspectives of Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space (1958), Maurice Halbwachs' On Collective Memory (1950), Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination (2011) – (based on his foundational essays on cultural memory from the 1990s), and Pierre Nora's essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" (1989) . It is the ancestral mansion in *Bariwali* that is interpreted to be a living archive of remembrance in the present study to establish that domestic environments serve as repositories of memory, cultural identity, and historical consciousness.

The scholarly studies have also focussed on the importance of domestic and architectural space in Ghosh's movies. The study of Romita Ray's article titled, "At Home with Durga: The Goddess in a Palace and Corporeal Identity in Rituparno Ghosh's Utsab" , presents the relationship among architecture, memory, corporeality, and historical consciousness in the movie Utsab. The architectural palace in the movie functions as the repository of lived experiences and collective remembrance as memory, nostalgia, identity and cultural history intersect (Ray). The article provides clear insights into spatial memory and domestic architecture for better understanding of the ancestral mansion in Bariwali as a mnemonic space. The book chapter of Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen titled "A Room of Her Own: The Queer Aesthetics of Rituparno Ghosh", explores the elements like interior spaces, domestic environments, and visual aesthetics to understand its role in constructing alternative subjectivities (Bakshi). It highlights the transformation of domestic spaces into sites of emotional negotiation and identity formation. The symbolic function of the ancestral mansion in Bariwali can be understood from the insights of the book chapter which highlights the significance of interiors and private spaces within Ghosh's cinematic universe.

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The work of Omar Ahmed titled "Theorising Rupture in the Foundational Years of Indian Parallel Cinema", presents the themes of trauma, rupture, and historical change in cinematic narratives. It helps in better understanding of the features of Bengali cinema which serves as a medium through which cultural histories and social transformations are negotiated. It highlights the role of cinema as a site of memory where historical consciousness is preserved and reimagined (Ahmed). The study of Rohit K. Dasgupta and Kaustav Bakshi entitled "Opening Closets and Dividing Audiences: Rituparno Ghosh, the Queer Star of Bengali Cinema" examines the socio-cultural influence within the changing media landscape of post-liberalisation Bengal in the movies of Ghosh. The study suggests that the transformations in the notion towards the aspects of identity, sexuality, and cultural representation in Bengali society can be observed in the movies of Ghosh (Dasgupta and Bakshi). It demonstrates broader cultural significance of Ghosh's cinematic oeuvre though the primary focus is on queer visibility and stardom.

The research study of Aniruddha Lahiri and Sarabjeet Lahiri titled "Familial Space and Struggle for Identity in Rituparno Ghosh's World of Films" represents that family structures and domestic environments serve as sites of negotiation, resistance, and self-fashioning. The movies of Ghosh consistently portray the family home as a contested space where individuals confront questions of identity, belonging, and emotional fulfillment. The study observes the active role of domestic spaces in shaping human experiences (Lahiri and Lahiri).

Analysis and Discussion

The theoretical framework of Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space (1958) provides a better understanding of the significance of domestic space in Rituparno Ghosh's Bariwali. A house is considered to be a phenomenological space according to Bachelard, which shapes the memory, imagination, and emotional identity of an individual. It is not merely a physical structure but it is an intimate universe where human experiences accumulate over time, beyond the conventional architectural interpretations. As Gaston Bachelard's definition of a house : "…house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard n.p.), it is hence, a house that becomes a repository of memories, desires, fears, and aspirations, preserving the emotional experiences of the persons and the events that happened in that domestic space even after the times have passed. The mansion functions not simply as a setting but as a living presence that shapes the emotional and psychological existence of the protagonist, Banalata. It is isolated from the outside world and the decaying architecture mirrors Banalata's

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own emotional loneliness and social marginalisation as she lives a life of solitude with no kith and kin alive. It is an extension of her inner life which embodies her memories, disappointments, and unrealised desires. It is mentioned in the terms of Bachelard as the "topography of intimate being" – a domestic space where emotional experiences become embedded within physical structures.

The perspectives of Bachelard state that human beings establish profound emotional attachments to the house they live in, because it is not merely an external or materialistic object but an intimate environment that contributes to the formation of identity. A house preserves the traces of the lived experiences and hence individuals carry the memory of their homes throughout their lives. After being left alone, the life of Banalata is unfolded entirely within the walls of the ancestral mansion and her identity also becomes inseparable from it as her physical and emotional world is structured by its spatial boundaries. The unoccupied rooms of the mansion represent her solitude while the deteriorating condition of its architecture reflects the stagnation of her emotional life.

The silence or quietness of the mansion is transformed by silence as every corner of the mansion reflects the traces of previous experiences. The viewers of the movie experience the house as a repository of emotional histories due to the film's restrained use of dialogue which further strengthens the importance of spatial atmosphere. According to Bachelard, the intimate spaces of the house nurture imagination and dream life which is reflected in Banalata's emotional attachment to the film director, who visits the mansion temporarily for shooting. The mansion becomes a space where desire and memory intersect when the arrival of the film crew disrupts the stillness of the house and awakens fantasies of companionship and transformation for a temporary period of time. The hopes of Banalata are also short-lived as it does not emerge from external reality but from the imaginative possibilities fostered by her domestic environment. The phenomenology of space extends beyond architecture to encompass the everyday objects that populate domestic interiors as they acquire emotional significance because they participate in the formation of memory. The elements of the Bariwali ancestral mansion like antique furniture, portraits, decorative artifacts, and household possessions serve as the material reminders of a vanished social world. The objects of the mansion become repositories of intimacy as described by Bachelard and they also preserve emotional traces to connect the present with the past. The film draws detailed attention to the materialistic objects of the mansion to emphasise their role in upholding the cultural continuity. Despite the physical deterioration and social change, the material objects retain the identity of the mansion for generations.

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Further, the theoretical perspective of Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory presents an understanding among the relationship of memory, social environments, and spatial structures. The Collective Memory (1950) of Maurice Halbawchs states that, "…it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs n.p.). Memory is considered either to be entirely private or an individual phenomenon. The existence of Banalata is deeply connected to the familial traditions and cultural histories embedded in the mansion though she lives in isolation and solitude. Her sense of identity is constantly shaped by the aristocratic lifestyles and family practices of the earlier generations that were preached in the mansion. Collective memory is reminisced through the elements of the mansion like room, corridor, courtyard, and object which holds the life experiences of the past that extend beyond the individual experiences of Banalata. The ancestral mansion of Bariwali, despite its visible decay, remains a repository of familial and cultural histories.

The emotional experiences of Banalata in the ancestral mansion reflects the inseparability of personal and collective memory. The role of the mansion to be a repository of accumulated memories is reasserted by the departure of the film crew to establish that the life experiences of the individuals or the family members continue to reside in the mansion as memories remain profoundly shaped by the collective histories embedded within domestic spaces. The connections between the individual and the collective are sustained by domestic environments as it transforms the house into a living monument of remembrance where memory is embedded within the architectural space. The theoretical lens of Halbwachs helps in interpreting the movies as a cinematic exploration of collective memory.

Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory gives a better understanding of the sociological aspects of memory developed by the theoretical perspectives of Maurice Halbwachs. It examines the role of societies in preservation and transmission of historical consciousness beyond the lifespan of living generations. Maurice Halbwachs' theory concentrates on the role of social groups in shaping collective memory while Jan Assmann's perspective focuses on the mechanisms through which cultural traditions, identities, and historical experiences are institutionalised and maintained across time. Assmann's essay titled "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" (1995) defines cultural memory as "a form of collective memory" which allows society to construct and preserve a shared sense of identity through symbolic representations, cultural practices, and material forms. The same theoretical perspective of Assmann is represented through

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the ancestral mansion in Rituparno Ghosh's movie Bariwali. The persistence of historical memory is exposed in the movie through long corridors, expansive courtyards, aging walls, and neglected rooms. The visual representations of the movie repeatedly emphasise the role of the ancestral mansion as the archive of cultural memory.

The mnemonic significance of the ancestral mansion in Rituparno Ghosh's Bariwali can be interpreted through the concept of Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire ("sites of memory") from the influential work titled, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire". Nora has developed this concept in response to the erosion of living memory in modern societies. The traditional forms of collective remembrance have weakened due to modernisation, urbanisation, and social transformation and the closely intertwined concepts of memory and history are increasingly separated. Nora's observation can be stated as "…memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events" (Nora n.p.). The places like monuments, museums, or official commemorative spaces are not only lieux de mémoire but any location object, ritual, text, or symbol that preserves a community's sense of its past can function as a site of memory. The ancestral mansion in Bariwali which acquires significance as the repositories of cultural identity and historical consciousness embody the tension between remembrance and forgetting, preserving traces of the past in the face of historical change.

According to Nora, the sites of memory gain significance to a great extent when the environments that once sustained collective memory begin to disappear due to the passage of time. The ancestral mansion in Bariwali represents the remnant of a fading aristocratic order in Bengal as the traditional social structures, economic privileges, and cultural practices have lost their importance. It therefore exists as the lieux de mémoire because it preserves the memory of a social world that no longer exists in its original form. The distance between past grandeur and present decline is repeatedly emphasised in the movie. A history of prosperity and social prominence are evoked through the mansion's vast architecture, aging furniture, neglected courtyards, and empty rooms. The traces of the customs and traditions of Bengal's aristocracy remain embedded in the mansion though they are longer practiced in the present times. The disappearance of the living tradition transforms the house into a site where memory crystallises and survives even after ages according to Nora.

According to Nora, modern society transforms the memory into representation to suit the modern social strata rather than living within traditions. Two different relationships to memory are represented in the

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movie where Banalata preserves the traditions of the mansion through reminiscence of the past events while the film crew establishes a modern outlook by choosing the mansion as the cinematic location for its aesthetic artifact. The fragile status of memory in a rapidly changing world is highlighted in the movie due to the temporary transformation of the house during the film production. Historical continuity is confronted with modern representation when the ancestral mansion becomes the site for film shooting.

Conclusion

The relationship among domestic space, memory, and cultural identity are represented in the movie Bariwali. The ancestral mansion is the centre of narrative in the movie as it emerges as a dynamic archive of personal, collective, and cultural memory and not just merely presented as a physical setting. The life and identity of the protagonist, Banalata is defined by her stay at the mansion as the cultural traditions of that place continue to shape individual consciousness even in the face of social change. The present study is supported by the theoretical perspectives of Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Halbwachs, Jas Assmann and Pierre Nora. According to Bachelard, the mansion is established as an intimate realm that nurtures imagination, longing, and remembrance. The theory of collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs suggests that memory serves as a social framework to sustain connections between personal recollections and shared histories. Jas Assmann's theory of cultural memory presents the mansion to be a symbolic medium to transmit cultural meanings beyond living generations. Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire suggests that mansion stands as a site where the memory of Bengal's fading aristocratic heritage is preserved amid the erosion of traditional social structures.

The decay of architecture, silent interiors, abandoned rooms, and enduring objects which retain the traces of a disappearing world represents the passage of time and the transformation of domestic space into a living archive that negotiates the relationship between past and present. The scope for further research in memory studies, spatial humanities, and film studies can be undertaken from the analysis of the movie. The study illustrates that the domestic architecture which functions as a custodian of cultural heritage preserves the histories that might otherwise be forgotten. The enduring role of space in the construction of collective and cultural identity is reaffirmed in the study. The relationship among cultural texts, literature and film studies helps in understanding the features of films and how they represent, interpret, and critique human experiences within specific historical and cultural contexts. The film literary studies primarily focus on technical and aesthetic elements as it differs from the conventional literary

analysis. The ways in which cinema reflects and shapes societal values are represented in the investigation of the narrative structures, characterisation, symbolism, themes, and ideological frameworks.

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