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### TRACING ENDONOSTALGIA IN THE POETRY OF KALEEM OMAR

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#### Abstract

The significance of nostalgia cannot be overlooked when reading Kaleem Omar's poetry. This research aims to trace endonostalgia in Omar's poetry taken from three famous anthologies on Pakistani Literature: Pieces of Eight, Word Fall, and A Dragonfly in the Sun. Some of the poems referred to are unpublished. They are available at the International Centre for Pakistani Writing in English at Kinnaird College. The objective of this research is to effectively highlight the presence of nostalgia in the poetry of Omar, which is why the term "endonostalgia" proposed by David Berliner in his essay, "Multiple Nostalgias: the Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang" will be applied (Berliner 2012). No documented research has been done on the chosen poet prior to this one, making it a unique topic to be researched upon. To enable Pakistani literature to flourish, this research is essential in understanding the poetical trends of the region. A second advantage will be an increase in criticism available on South Asian poetry which has great room for advancement. This will be done in the light of endonostalgia which is a form of remembering the past one has lived. A thorough analysis of Omar's poems will allow a deeper understanding of the text. By conducting pioneer research on Omar, research opportunities to analyse other aspects of his poetry will become possible for future researchers.

#### Keywords

David Berliner, Endonostalgia, Loss, Lamentation, Disintegrating Relationships.



## 1. Introduction

*“One only goes round once,  
And then comes to an end.  
That’s all there is to it.  
But in that space of time  
What lifetimes I have lived.”  
Kaleem Omar*

Kaleem Omar, a Pakistani poet, wrote this poem in one of his notebooks in 1995 (*KO/NB-1*). He was born in India, Lucknow, 1937 and was educated at the Burn Hall School, and Sherwood College in Naini Tal as described in his article titled “Naini Tal Days”. Omar’s family moved to Pakistan after independence. It was during the “impressionable years” of Omar’s life that political events forced his family to migrate to Lahore. He left for England to pursue further education. After returning to Pakistan, Omar became an investigative journalist and began writing poetry for various newspapers. He passed away on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009, in Karachi, Pakistan.

### 1.1 Research Aim

This research aims to investigate Omar’s poetry to look for the presence of nostalgia. Agreeing with Omar that “rhetorical flourishes are all very well, but we shouldn’t ignore the facts”, the quantifiable objectives seek to measure the types of nostalgia found in his poems. The study seeks to decipher the poet’s attempts to recreate the lost past.

As Kaleem Omar was growing up, his aunts shared their fond memories of his youth. His sister narrated their afternoons spent discussing stories of joyful life as they knew it before they

grew up. Omar became sensitive to the old ways of life through these oral stories narrated to him. In an interview, Omar’s cousin Kabir Omar reiterated this by stating that the “...past was precious to [Kaleem Omar]. People tend to forget their past, but not Kaleem Bhai. He fondly remembered each event and date, as if it took place yesterday. He had [a] vivid recollection of the past...” (Omar).

When Omar witnessed his family struggling to make ends meet, he contributed by helping his father and uncles set up a family business. Omar mentions his being “a businessman for many years...in the family construction company” in a Letter to the Editor of Daily Times on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2004 (Omar). After years of hard work his family were able to make a breakthrough. The corporation called Omar Sons, which was set up in East Pakistan, became a well known industry and its profit margin began to slowly but gradually increase. Soon after, another tragedy befell the family with the loss of East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh). The family had to start from scratch for the second time. Omar’s marital life suffered too when the business failed. The death of one of his sons at a young age was another cause for distress. Events left a lasting impact on Omar and traces of these memories are found in his poetry.

### 1.2 Theoretical Framework

Nostalgia stems from the two Greek words, *nostos* which translates to “returning home” and *algos* which is a feeling of “longing” (Boym 7). David Berliner, proposes a type of nostalgia titled

“endo-nostalgia” in his essay “Multiple Nostalgias: the Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR)” (2012). He labels the personal nostalgia which has been lived by people as endonostalgia. This is applied to Omar’s poems to reveal the poet’s longing for the past.

## 2. Research Methodology

Since the aim of this research is to trace nostalgia in the poetry of Kaleem Omar, a content based textual analysis of the primary source is done. The primary text for this research is Omar’s poetry published in various books such as *Wordfall: Three Pakistani Poets* edited by Kaleem Omar, *Pieces of Eight: Eight Poets for Pakistan* by Zulfikar Ghose (1971), and *A Dragonfly in the Sun* by Muneeza Shamsie (1997).

### 2.1 International Centre for Pakistani Writing in English (ICPWE)

A volume of his unpublished work is available at the International Centre for Pakistani Writing in English at Kinnaird College for Women (ICPWE), and some of these will be included in the analysis. The secondary sources constitute interviews (of Omar’s family, friends, and fellow-poets), posthumous newspaper articles, and Omar’s print sources (notebooks, letters, and articles) found at ICPWE.

**Table 1: Poem Sources**

Published Poems taken from	Unpublished Poems taken from
Books	Notebooks
Articles	Letters

The theoretical framework for this research is one type of nostalgia Berliner has mentioned in his article “Multiple Nostalgias: the Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR)”

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 Endonostalgia

#### 3.1.1 The Point of Departure

One of the earliest poems published by Omar was “The Point of Departure” in 1969 (“The Point of Departure”). In “The Point of Departure”, Omar recalls his father upon revisiting the city of Karachi where his father was buried thirteen years ago. The city evokes memories and the endonostalgia present in this poem is two-fold. Omar remembers his father as well as the city of Karachi as it used to be. While the “wet wall of air” of the sea-city is the same, the “more brightly lit” advertisement boards reveal a change towards a more cosmopolitan lifestyle. Omar has a close connection with the city as he moved to Karachi when his marital life ended and his finances diminished. It is in this city that the poet begins “to feel/ the absences of generations in [his] hands” (“The Point of Departure”). The place where he is sitting “is not far from where” his “father lies buried” (“The Point of Departure”). The entire funeral procession and “the colour of the day they put him down/ still worries” the poet (“The Point of Departure”). It seems as if only yesterday he laid his father to rest. The poet reiterates that it was “thirteen years ago” which erases any doubt in the minds of the readers or listeners about when the funeral took place. Time becomes significant when tracing nostalgia

because it helps the reader to identify the passage of time between the past and the present. This repetition of “thirteen years ago” seems as if the poet is still struggling to accept the death of his father. The time that has passed since then has not eased his pain. Memories and feelings force the poet to write down the word “Enough” as he observes the dark city and remembers the lives of people who lived here (“The Point of Departure”). For the poet, “the dark also hides” the true but ugly face of the city (“The Point of Departure”). The poverty of the “pavement dwellers” restricts them to rely on “only a bucketful” which they can barely afford (“The Point of Departure”). The poet feels sympathy for such sufferers. It is essential to note that Omar faced similar challenges in his personal life when the loss of his family business left him poverty-stricken. His friends and colleagues were all aware of the hard times that fell upon him. Omar’s cousin hinted at how a man was able to eat at a roadside makeshift restaurant but could not take his family there because of the “clichés of what a man is and what he must do/ to remain a man”. If he fails to make ends meet, people ridicule him and he is left to languish. The word *enough* can be a way the poet tries to keep at bay the flooding negative memories. Such thoughts perturb the poet while he pretends to live life in normalcy. This is hinted at his visiting all the “usual places” and meeting the “usual long acknowledged faces” (“The Point of Departure”). He does “all this- when the truth of the matter is,/ That [he is] sick for the sound of one soft voice/ To call [his] name and mean it”

(Omar ). This is the voice of his father which death muted thirteen years ago. The poet desires to hear the voice again which will comfort his aching soul. Outer stimulus becomes redundant and focus is on the central voice existing in memory. This is the voice of his father. It is almost as if memories flood the mind just as the “wet wall/ of air...slaps against the face” when the poet leaves the plane (“The Point of Departure”). This proves how sights and sounds trigger memories which are deeply embedded within the mind. The readers and listeners begin to question whether the poet left the city after his father’s death? Was the point of departure a physical escape from the city of Karachi? This mystery can be solved when the poet mentions he has “lived here” but does not continue to do so as is implied by the past tense (*lived*) (“The Point of Departure”). The first line of the poem indicates the same when the poet writes, “Arriving again tonight at the point of departure” (“The Point of Departure”). It was the place he left perhaps “thirteen years ago” (“The Point of Departure”).

### 3.1.2 Poem for my Father

“Poem for my Father” centres upon the same subject and perhaps was written at the same time as “A Point of Departure” because of the reference to “thirteen years ago/ that we buried you” (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). Loss multiplies as Omar mourns the loss of his father as well as the metaphoric loss of his brother. Father was a figure cementing the family. His death shocks all, making them “unnerved for the first time/ without the affection of your certain

hand” (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). It seems as if the anchor of the family has been lost, making members wander far away from each other. The poet builds upon this diffusion when he says “Much more than one man perished” with the death of his father (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). It was followed by the death of two of Omar’s uncles and an aunt. The “family business continue[d] to slide” which affected Omar and his marital life as Omar’s mentioning of the “Two marriages [that] have broken up” (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). It was the second time the family disintegrated. Closeness melts away as marriages break, elders pass away, and sibling rivalries ensue. Omar looks back at his family’s peak of happiness. Now they have become a “catalogue of woe” with “nowhere else to go” (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). Burdens cannot be shared as his “younger brother is/ half a stranger in another country” (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). The last lines of the poem yearn for acceptance and a soothing voice which will direct the poet once again: “Father, accept us- we have nowhere else to go” (Rafat, Kureishi & Omar 53). The poem now reads as a letter written to his father. The poet addresses his father by using the pronoun “you”, narrating what he felt as a son when he heard the news. What each person did on the day of the funeral and afterwards, is recorded and narrated to the father. This poem is full of endonostalgia as it concerns events related to the poet’s personal life. Language encapsulates the state of grief, which plagues the poet. Historian, Tariq Rahman comments on the “soft voice of the

poet” to be “hankering” for the voice of his father, “whose death has been a great trauma for him” (2015, 201).

### 3.1.3 The Equation

“The Equation” is about the poet’s distress felt at the death of his son and is closer to what Omar feels for his father. Shaukat, who was handicapped, passed away in his teenage years, leaving Omar in a state of chaos. The question asked at the beginning of the poem expresses the poet’s despondency. “What are these objects left for me to classify/ now that you are gone?” echoes the feeling of being dispirited (“The Equation”). Omar uses the weather to express the hollowness of life. The seasons are not enjoyed or likened to blossoming roses and illuminating sunlight, rather, they evoke memories of bereavement. The mention of “Dear child” and “playgrounds” being “full of boys and loaded swings” indicates the poem to be written for his son (“The Equation”). The poet seeks to see the face of his son while looking at the boys play. “Yes it is you I see” is the poet assuming one of the boys to be his own, as if nostalgically looking back at the times he and his son spent at the playground (“The Equation”). The title of the poem indicates a comparison being drawn between life and death, particularly the difference between the difficulties the son faced during life with the peacefulness found in death. It is the equation of life equalling misery, while death bringing peace and comfort. The poem itself becomes a medium of keeping the son nearby. The son is immortalized in the poem and his

safety lasts only with the poem or else “the poem shatters and [his] presence breaks” (“The Equation”). Such fragility mirrors the vulnerability of human beings at the hands of death. No matter how powerful a human being, it takes only one bullet or a plane crash to rob him of his life and power. The image of the “stone” and that of the “rose” blooming is another way of contrasting life and death. The stone is concrete and unmoving; denoting death. On the other hand, the rose blossoms into a full flower. The image of the grave stems from this contrast and reminds the readers of the flowers people leave at the graves of their deceased beloved. The poet has perhaps used this image to denote how people yearn to make their loved ones alive again by the mere act of placing a living object on the grave. For the poet, poetry acts as a flower, drenched in endonostalgia.

#### 3.1.4 If I could write a Love Poem for You

Omar addresses similar pangs of separation when he yearns to hold his brother close and “say/ words enough to give” himself away (“If I could write a Love Poem for You”). In “If I could write a Love Poem for You” the poet recounts how the “distance between” them has mounted as time passed. The brother is in “another country” and his “disquieting presence can disturb” the poet to a great extent (“If I could write a Love Poem for You”). The poet wants to embrace his brother on a “festive night” and yet he cannot because the “distance” between them and their “childhood” has altered both of them (“If I could write a Love Poem for You”). The changed sibling relationship

over time can be noted in Maki Kureishi’s “Christmas Letter to My Sister” (Shamsie 67). While Kureishi, the poet, is fidgeting with the “make-believe” world they construed together, her sister is “homesick and not/ eager to come home, are foreign everywhere” hinting at geographical distance causing the divide (Shamsie 67). In Omar’s poem, there is a hint that the marriage of each brother which is something he is “forced to recognise/ as a limit grown indisputable” (“If I could write a Love Poem for You”). Hence his disability, of being “at a loss to explain” his brotherly attachment despite having known the brother “long enough” (“If I could write a Love Poem for You”). The poem begins with the poet praising the “old songmakers” who “found it easier” to express their love by invoking the natural elements: “the sun, the sky, the sea” (“If I could write a Love Poem for You”). These songmakers are either the Greek choruses which later Shakespeare personified into his plays, or are the Romantic Poets with their lyrical ballads. In both, there is an element of lamenting people or places lost and fleeting time. A noteworthy mention is of the moon which despite being “tragic” would “shed/ it’s light uncritically on those who loved” when invoked by songmakers (“If I could Write a Love Poem for You”). Yet it is not “merely a matter of counting syllables” which is why the poet does not feel inclined to be dishonest about his feelings (“If I could Write a Love Poem for You”). It indicates a slippage as well as a critique on their relationship, which like empty words, has become hollow and

meaningless. The weather too is “a season at odds with itself” hinting at how unnatural life has become whereby a brother “must now resign” himself “to guarded words” (“If I could Write a Love Poem for You”). This nostalgia is brought about by personal estrangements between brothers, quite different to the kind of nostalgia Omar felt for his father. This poem tends to lean more towards a sense of disappointment. The poem’s title hints at the probability denoted by the conjunction “If” which is based on some conditions. Though the poet does not intend to write a love poem for his brother, yet if forced to write one, it would have been like this. The poet seems to be testing the waters to explore the possibilities. This hints at the sorrow embedded deep within issuing from a warped relationship. Somewhat similar to Kureishi’s childhood memories of festive days, the poet is affected by his brothers “disquieting presence” even though they are separated by acres upon acres of land (“If I could Write a Love Poem for You”). However, the poet does not dedicate the poem to his brother by mentioning him in the title. He is unnerved by such a remembrance but will not wholly succumb to it by directly mentioning his brother.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research applied David Berliner’s theory presented in his research article, “Multiple Nostalgias: The Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR)”, and traced the presence of endonostalgia in the poetry of Kaleem Omar (2012). Such an application made apparent the presence of nostalgia in Omar’s poetry, and the

research was able to connect it to the poet’s personal life. Each poem contained a remembering of old times, either they were personally lived by the poet or they were inspired by the cultural loss of other countries. Exploring nostalgia revealed the depth of Omar’s poetry which contained multiple layers of meaning.

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