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## THE BITTERSWEET REMINISCENCE OF CHILDHOOD

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### Abstract

“Memories are who we are” says, Rick Huganir (director of the Johns Hopkins Department of Neuroscience). One can say that humans are made up of memories and all these memories they carry with them through their life. Memories sometimes are pleasant, other times they are just the opposite, whichever way it is but people often go back in the past to recollect their memories, and in this process of recollection they become nostalgic and often desire to go back and relive those moments. Life is complicated enough to recall sad memories so people usually recall their happy days. These positive connections of the present with past experiences arouse bittersweet emotions in an individual. The habit of living in the past rather than present was for several centuries considered a trait to avoid, because it causes depression and pain to the attended thought of it. However, with the turn of the century psychologists have different opinions. Every once in a while an individual becomes nostalgic about his or her childhood days. In literature as well there are many authors who have written about childhood memories which describe an individual's feelings and emotions for the long gone past. This paper is an attempt to understand and analyze with the help of a few poems (of various poets) the question of what people recall from their childhood and why they often recall their childhood days more than any other phase.

Keywords: Adulthood, Childhood, Memories, Nostalgia, Reminiscence

Reminiscence act of remembering long past experiences often fondly. It is a process where an individual recollects memories. Reminiscence or recollection of the past is only possible due to memories. Memory is the ability to remember information, experiences, and people. What a wonderful thing the human brain is that it captures, stores, and recalls some of the most important

incidents which happen to an individual. No matter how advanced technology development takes place, there are still some limitations to it. For instance, humans can see beautiful stars with naked eyes, but we need powerful high tech lenses to capture them. Also, a picture camera can only capture the image of the surrounding and not the emotion. Similarly, there are so many memories which an individual

makes; and it is not possible to store all of it in any form. The best example to understand this concept is through an individual's childhood. Parents use camera or video tapes to capture the childhood of their children. Since it is being captured by someone else and not by the child, it is possible that the child can have a totally different memory of what is being captured in the picture or he may recall it differently.

According to science, humans start to remember from an early age, some memories we keep with us for long, while others we forget soon. The ones that we keep, piles up, and are stored in our brain, till we recall them. The question is what we remember? As we grow up we meet many people, go from place to place, experience and explore new things, undergo a lot of events and incidents, but there are certain things which leave a deep imprint in our brain. The stronger the imprint the more memorable it becomes. According to science,

“When we learn something—even as simple as someone’s name—we form connections between neurons in the brain. These *synapses* create new circuits between nerve cells, essentially remapping the brain. Those synapses get stronger or weaker depending on how often we’re exposed to an event. The more we’re exposed to an activity the stronger the connections. The less exposure, however, the weaker the connection”. (*Inside*)

This above statement makes it clear that we remember because we recall it again and again. This time and again recalling of the same event creates a fixed spot in the brain for that particular memory and we can easily go back to it whenever we want to.

When do we need to recall? It is a common human behaviour that we often become nostalgic and rely upon our memory to gather some little joys from the past to carry on with the present life.

“According to the researchers, most participants experienced nostalgia when faced with difficult life situations, such as present worries and anxieties. This suggested that casting their minds back to a happier or more meaningful time helped

participants cope with present uncertainties”. (Cohut)

There are various ways to remember the past. We can become nostalgic about love, or loss, pain, struggle, some trauma incident or any good experience. Childhood is one phase that an individual recalls more frequently than any other phase. One reason could be that we all have been children and so we all have multiple memories of childhood, which we can easily share and relate with one another. Childhood is the most blissful phase of life. There are so many reasons which describe why an individual reminisces about his childhood days. Firstly, it is because childhood days are the most carefree days. So, life is spent in happiness. During this period a child has nothing to worry about tomorrow, because he is too young to understand the real world. In this happy state of life one is able to create beautiful memories. As a child continues to grow, slowly he starts to gain worldly wisdom which fills him with practical knowledge of the world. A child is believed to have an innocent heart, a heart not corrupted by this world having no prejudices, and no negativity for others. As some say childhood is the phase where a child still remembers the heavenly world from where he came, so in the childhood phase he remains in a blissful state. As an individual becomes an adult he sees the world in a different way. In adulthood people have a lot of stress. Stress related to work, stress to pay bills, taxes, job, not only this but adults are responsible for taking their own decisions. While for a child his parents are there to take decisions for him, and are there to provide guidance. Adults when taking their own decisions are always fearful of the consequences. Adults are always conscious about what others will say or think, they fear being judged by the world. While on the other hand, children are the believers of fantasy, they believe that Santa Claus is there, all their superheroes are alive, and they also pray earnestly believing God is listening. Thus, children set no boundaries to their imagination, and fancy, so to them everything seems possible, while adults don't entertain any impractical things.

Now let us see how the authors in various works have described nostalgia of some childhood

experiences. Know for her feminist voice in India, Kamala Das', "My Grandmother's House" is a nostalgic poem about her childhood memories. The speaker starts with the description of her childhood home which is her Grandmother's House. And she says: she used to live in a house which is now far away, that was the house where she received love. This reflects the desire of the speaker to receive love, which is missing in her present life, and has made her remember her past. This is a nostalgic experience. It can evoke various emotions from humans like happiness, sadness, melancholy etc. There are various things that make one reminisce about the past. One of these reminiscence things is 'Home', the place where one's childhood is spent. The speaker here is also recollecting her past memories of childhood house "I was then too young/ To read"(Das, line4-5). She says that the house is not what it used to be. Now that house is withdrawn into silence, and no one lives there. The speaker continues and says she 'Often' has this thought, the thought of going back to that house. The speaker's desire to go back to the old abandoned house signifies her present tormenting state. The speaker's hopeless state of life has made her want to return back to that house and "pick an armful of/Darkness to bring it here to lie" (Das, lines 9-10). This clearly depicts that even the darkness of her Grandmother's house is more precious compared to her present state. The speaker says that even such a thing like darkness, she will carry with her and keep it like a pet in her room. The speaker continues and says that one cannot believe that she used to live in such a house and was proud of it, because that was the place where she received love. So, to the speaker the house has become a reminiscence of the feeling of being loved, which she has lost now. At the very end of the poem the speaker declares that, now she has lost her way to that house, now that house seems so far away that she cannot go there, and she is begging at strangers' door to receive love, "at least in small change?" (Das, line16).

Published in D.H. Lawrence's 1913 collection *Love Poems and Others*, "Piano" is a lyrical poem which explores the speaker's childhood memories. In the poem "Piano" the speaker after listening to

the music of piano and the soft voice of a woman singing, becomes nostalgic and remembers his childhood days. This very memory of the moment is enough to carry him "back down to the vista of years", (Lawrence, line 2) till he can clearly start to see a vision of a child sitting under a piano, beside the feet of his mother who is smiling at him, while singing her soft songs. Although, the speaker tried hard and resisted not to go back in the past but he can't. 'In spite of his' efforts the alluring but harmful melody of the song betrays the present, and carries the speaker to the past. And now the speaker's heart laments about going back to his childhood home. The speaker clearly remembers all things, like how it was cold out, and the 'hymn of the cosy parlour', the piano with its twinkling sound, and all this signifies the comfort and warmth he was feeling in those days. At the end the speaker says now there is no use for the woman singer to shout in a loud voice, and even the passionate playing of piano is all vain and of no meaning to the speaker, because he is consumed by his past memories and "the glamour of childish days" (Lawrence, line 10-11) is upon him. Although, he tried hard in the beginning to resist this feeling, and appreciate the present and not to wonder about the past, he didn't succeed. The speaker has cast down his manhood in the "flood of remembrance" and is lamenting and weeping just like a child who cries when he wants something. But the speaker clearly states that he is weeping for his past, the past which was happy, warm and full of comfort, now gone.

In another poem, "I Remember, I Remember" by Thomas Hood, we have a similar reference. The poem is a faint sigh in the poet's voice as he recalls his childhood days. In the first stanza the speaker recalls his childhood house. The house where he was born, his bedroom and remembers how through the little window in his room the sun shines in every morning. The poet tells that during those days he never felt that the days were too tiring and long, because he did not groan; his days were pleasant during those days. The poet comes back in the present and declares his dark desire. Now he often has this thought, why the night didn't take his breath away, so that he would have died before attaining adulthood. His unwillingness to live in the present

shows the lack of joy in his life. In the next stanza the poet remembers how he used to swing in the fresh air, and how his "spirit flew in feathers then/ That is so heavy now" (Hood, lines 21-22). Childhood is the phase where one has no worries about what will happen tomorrow that can weigh him down, in these carefree childhood days the poet's soul felt so weightless and he can feel the lightness in his soul. But in the present, the situation is totally different from what it used to be. All the lightness and freshness of his childhood days are gone. In the final stanza the poet states how fancy used to carry his imagination in childhood, but now no more. Children set no boundaries to their imagination, but as they grow and become adults their mind is filled with practical knowledge of the world. Adults set limits to their imagination and believe only in reality. This childhood ignorance is the source of little joy in life. The very highlight of this last stanza is the notion that children are closer to heaven, "But now 'tis little joy/ To know I'm farther off from heav'n/ Than when I was a boy" (Hood, lines 31-32).

In "The Retreat", Henry Vaughan has used the same reference and said joyful were the early days, the days of his infancy. The poet has a strong desire to travel back to his childhood days, so that he can once again reach the place where he has left his glories, which he possessed during his childhood. The only problem is that he cannot go back, because his soul has spent too many days on the earth and has forgotten the way, "my soul with too much stay/ Is drunk, and staggers in the way" (Vaughan, lines 27-28). Lastly, the poet describes that there are some people who prefer to keep moving forward, but the poet longs to move back. He says that with this backward move he will be able to live in his happy past. However, the poet is not very sure about this backward move of his, and so he has another way, and that is through death, "when this dust fall to the urn, /In that state I came, return" (Vaughan, lines 31-32). Ultimately, the poet declares that only after his death, he can return back to the glorious state he came from.

In "Our Casuarina Tree", Toru Dutt describes a casuarina tree, which is very dear to her, because the tree is the symbol of the happy childhood days which she had spent with her loved ones. First the

poet describes the casuarina tree, which is the centre of all the activities happening there. The tree stands gallantly, wearing the scarf of creepers that hang around it. Every morning when she widens her window, her eyes rest on the tree, "When first my casement is wide open thrown/ At dawn, my eyes delighted on it rest" (Dutt, lines 12-13). The tree is so lively, at the centre as the baboon sits there to watch the sunrise, kokilas far and near hail the day, and at the bottom the cows take their shelter and water-lilies spring together. This is the splendid view which the speaker encounters and enjoys every day. After the description of the gallant tree, the speaker tells it is "not because of its magnificence" that the tree is precious to her. She says "dear is the Casuarina to my soul" (Dutt, line 24). For the memories which I have made with it. Then the speaker recalls the early days when she used to play beneath the tree with her 'sweet companions', whom she has loved with an intense love. For this sake, the memory of happy days with her loved companions, the Casuarina tree will always remain dear to her. Even if the years may roll by she will not forget the precious memories that she shared with the tree and her loved ones. Further, the speaker says that the image in her memory is the blend of these two; the image of the tree and that of her companions, and that is why if she recalls any one of these two the other appears automatically. This memory is so strong that it brings 'hot tears' in her eyes. Next, the speaker describes that she hears some murmur and strange noise, which sounded like a dirge to her, and she thinks it is a lament speech uttered by the Casuarina tree, that may reach to an unknown place. The speaker continues and says even when she is physically far away from the Casuarina tree, she hears its lament in distant lands, 'and every time the music rose', - before her inner vision rises the very image of the tree, and the image of the Casuarina tree is exactly the same as it existed in her happy prime. Finally, the speaker declares that she wants to buy something in the honour of the tree for it is the reminder of her happy childhood days which she has spent with her loved ones. Her sweet companions are no longer with her, but she wishes that the tree will remain there forever just like the 'Borrowdale Tree'. Being the integral part of her childhood memory, and the

bridge that connects her present to her long gone happy childhood days, the speaker wishes immortality to the tree through her love, and says "May Love defend thee from Oblivion's curse" (Dutt, line55).

To conclude one can say that when recollecting childhood memories the first thing an individual remembers is the house where he was born. A house becomes home with all the members living in it i.e. a family. So, when reminiscing about home, one becomes nostalgic about family, friends, and siblings with whom they share many lovely memories. Sometimes people resist not to go back in the past, but it is difficult not to do so, because memories are like streams which once start flowing, carries an individual to the past. All these memories are both bitter and sweet. Sweet because it is only through memories that we are always connected with some incredible unforgettable moment which had happened in the past, bitter because although the past was happy, but it makes an individual sad, as it was all in the past and it is not coming back. But, still the best thing about memories is that they are always with us. People come and go but memories stay. And whenever an individual recollects his past the memories fill his heart with calmness, that yes! There was a time when I was young, carefree, happy and loved. Here, the role of memory is very crucial. Memories have warmth in them; and in times of stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, they provide comfort to an individual. This comfortness of nostalgia brings out deep buried emotions from the human heart, which makes him both happy and sad.

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