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The Eloquence of Silence: Voice, Memory, and the Historical Imagination in Veera Hiranandani's The Night Diary

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Abstract

Veera Hiranandani's *The Night Diary* (2018) occupies a unique position at the intersection of children's historical fiction, trauma literature, and the vast archive of creative works responding to the catastrophic Partition of India in 1947. This paper undertakes a focused examination of the novel's treatment of silence, voice, and historical memory, arguing that these three interrelated concerns are not merely thematic preoccupations but the formal and philosophical foundations of the text. Nisha, the twelve-year-old protagonist, is characterized by a profound speech difficulty that renders her nearly voiceless in social situations, yet she finds in the private practice of diary writing a mode of articulation that is fluent, searching, and emotionally precise. The paper reads this contrast between public silence and private voice as a deliberate formal strategy through which Hiranandani explores the relationship between individual trauma and historical catastrophe: just as Nisha cannot speak the complexity of her dual Hindu-Muslim identity in a world that demands categorical allegiance, so too does the history of Partition resist the simplifying narratives that official memory imposes. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Paul Connerton's work on social memory, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and Maurice Halbwachs's foundational sociology of collective memory, the paper analyzes how The Night Diary functions as a vehicle for the transmission of historical memory to readers who are generationally and culturally distant from the events it depicts. The novel's diary form, its child narrator, and its intimate mode of address to a dead mother together constitute a distinctive memorial aesthetics that combines historical witness with imaginative empathy. The paper concludes by arguing that The Night Diary models a form of historical consciousness particularly well-suited to the task of transmitting traumatic memory across generations: one that acknowledges the irreducibility of loss while affirming the

possibility of meaningful narration. Nisha's anxiety around speaking is revealed when she confesses, "It feels scary to talk, because once the words are out, you can't put them back in" (Hiranandani 12). The growing communal divide appears when Nisha observes, "Now I look at him and think Sikh" (Hiranandani 22).

Keywords: Silence, Voice, Historical Memory, Postmemory, Trauma, Partition of India, Diary Fiction, Children's Literature, Marianne Hirsch, Collective Memory.

The unspeakable fear of Partition emerges through the line, "There are some things I don't know how to say out loud" (Hiranandani 35). When Veera Hiranandani chose to make her protagonist in The Night Diary a child who cannot easily speak, she made a decision that resonates through every dimension of the novel's meaning. Nisha's speech difficulty—her halting, stuttering attempts to communicate in social situations—is not a mere character quirk or narrative device to generate sympathy. It is the novel's central metaphor, the embodied form of a historical and cultural condition that exceeds easy articulation. Nisha cannot speak fluently because the world she inhabits has no language adequate to what she is: a child born of a Hindu father and a Muslim mother, a child who is simultaneously both and neither, a child whose existence confounds the binary logic of the religious nationalism that is in the process of tearing her world apart.

The paradox at the heart of The Night Diary is that the character who cannot speak is the novel's most eloquent voice. In the pages of her diary—addressed each night to her dead mother, written in the hours when the household is asleep and the pressure of social existence is temporarily lifted—Nisha writes with a clarity, depth, and emotional precision that her spoken voice cannot achieve. This contrast between the silence of speech and the eloquence of writing is one of the novel's most powerful and purposeful formal achievements. It asks readers to consider not only what is said but what cannot be said; not only what is remembered but what is suppressed; not only what history records but what it conceals.

The historical context that frames the novel is, in itself, a history of silences as much as a history of events. The Partition of India in 1947—the division of the subcontinent into the independent nations of India and Pakistan along religious lines, accompanied by one of the largest and most violent mass migrations in human

history—is a historical trauma that has generated both an enormous archive of creative and scholarly response and a pervasive culture of silence. Many survivors of Partition did not speak of their experiences for decades; many families transmitted only fragments of knowledge across generations; many communities suppressed or displaced their memories of violence and loss. The Night Diary enters this complex memorial landscape, adding to it the voice—the written voice—of a child narrator who represents both the historical moment and its long aftermath.

This paper examines The Night Diary through the lens of memory studies, a field that has developed rich theoretical resources for understanding how individuals and communities remember, transmit, and transform their relationships to the past. The work of Paul Connerton on social memory and its embodied practices, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory as the transmission of traumatic memory across generations, and Maurice Halbwachs's foundational distinction between individual and collective memory together provide the conceptual framework for the analysis that follows. Within this framework, the paper traces three interrelated arguments: that the novel's formal structure—the diary addressed to a dead mother—constitutes a distinctive memorial aesthetics; that Nisha's speech difficulty functions as a somatic encoding of historical silences; and that the novel as a whole performs the cultural work of transmitting Partition memory to readers who are generationally and experientially remote from the events it depicts.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond the literary interpretation of a single text. Questions of historical memory, its transmission and transformation across generations, and its relationship to both individual psychology and collective culture are among the most pressing questions of the contemporary moment. In an era of renewed ethnic and religious nationalism, of deliberate historical revisionism and the politicization of memory, literary texts that engage thoughtfully and imaginatively with the relationship between past and present perform a vital cultural function. The Night Diary, this paper argues, is one such text: a work that models a form of historical consciousness characterized by humility, complexity, and an unflinching commitment to the humanity of those who suffer the consequences of ideological violence.

The paper proceeds through four major sections. The first examines the memorial aesthetics of the diary form, drawing on theories of life-writing to analyze how Nisha's diary functions as a vehicle of historical transmission. The second section reads Nisha's speech difficulty as a somatized expression of historical silences,

drawing on trauma theory to illuminate the relationship between individual symptom and collective wound. The third section applies Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to analyze how the novel models the transmission of traumatic memory across generations. The fourth section examines the novel's representation of the social and political dimensions of historical memory, analyzing how Hiranandani depicts the relationship between individual memory and collective narrative. A concluding section draws these arguments together and reflects on the novel's significance as a work of cultural memory.

The diary addressed to a dead mother: this is the formal core of The Night Diary, and it is an extraordinarily rich and resonant literary choice. To understand its significance, it is useful to consider what a diary does and what a letter does, and then to consider what happens when these two forms are combined. A diary is traditionally a record addressed to no one, or to a hypothetical future self; it is a space of private reflection, uncensored by the demands of social address. A letter, by contrast, is explicitly addressed, shaped by the consciousness of a specific reader whose needs, knowledge, and reactions the writer must imagine and negotiate. In combining these two forms—writing that is both diary and letter, both private reflection and intimate address—Hiranandani creates a mode of narration that is uniquely well-suited to the exploration of memory and identity.

The addressee of Nisha's diary is her dead mother, Mama, who died in childbirth when Nisha was born. This choice creates a relationship of writing to an absence, a communication across the boundary of death that cannot expect a response. The one-sidedness of this communication is central to its memorial function: Nisha writes to a mother who cannot reply, who cannot confirm or correct her daughter's understanding, who can only receive the words her daughter sends. This asymmetry is also the condition of all historical memory: the past cannot respond to the present's account of it; the dead cannot correct the living's representations of their lives. Nisha's diary thus figures the fundamental condition of historical writing, but from within the experience of a child for whom this condition is deeply personal.

The diary also functions as a form of memorial creation: in writing to Mama, Nisha is constructing a mother from the fragments of information available to her, creating a presence from an absence. This creative dimension of the diary is one of its most significant aspects. Nisha does not simply record memories of her mother—she has almost none—but rather builds an image of her mother from secondary sources: Dadi's stories, her father's rare and painful reminiscences, the few

photographs she is permitted to see. In this respect, Nisha's relationship to her mother mirrors the relationship that postmemory theorists describe: a relationship to a past that one did not directly experience but that was transmitted through fragments, stories, and imaginative reconstruction.

Paul Connerton's argument in How Societies Remember, that social memory is transmitted through embodied practices—habitual actions, commemorative ceremonies, bodily postures—is illuminating here. The practice of diary writing is itself an embodied practice of memory, a nightly ritual that Nisha performs in the hours of darkness. This ritual quality of the writing is emphasized throughout the novel: each entry begins with "Dear Mama," establishing a formulaic opening that marks the diary as a regular practice, a habit of memory that structures time. The nightly writing is Nisha's way of keeping her mother alive, of sustaining a relationship with her absent mother through the embodied act of writing.

The novel's title, The Night Diary, captures this temporal and atmospheric dimension of the writing practice. Night is the time of dreams and memories, of a loosening of the defenses that daytime social existence requires. It is the time when Nisha's father's grief surfaces most painfully, when the sounds of the sleeping household create a space of privacy within the crowded life of the family. It is also, in the context of the historical moment the novel depicts, a time of particular danger: as Partition violence spreads, the night becomes a time of fear and uncertainty, of fires visible on the horizon and rumors of atrocities. That Nisha chooses this time for her diary writing—or rather, that the diary writing has always occupied this liminal, dangerous time—connects her private act of memory to the larger historical crisis that surrounds her.

The language of Nisha's diary entries is another aspect of the novel's memorial aesthetics that deserves attention. Hiranandani writes in a prose style that is simultaneously simple and lyrical, capturing the voice of a twelve-year-old without condescending to its implied young readers. The simplicity of the language is not a concession to a younger audience but an aesthetic achievement: it captures the directness of a child's perception, unmediated by the sophisticated rationalizations that adult perspective brings. When Nisha describes violence or loss in the simple, declarative sentences of a child, the effect is more devastating than a more elaborate prose style would achieve.

The relationship between individual psychological symptoms and collective historical traumas is one of the central preoccupations of trauma theory. Freud's early work on hysteria established the paradigm: the body speaks what the mind cannot consciously acknowledge; somatic symptoms encode historical and psychological contents that resist direct expression. Later trauma theorists, from Judith Herman to Bessel van der Kolk, have elaborated and refined this insight, demonstrating the complex ways in which traumatic experience leaves its mark on the body as well as the mind.

Nisha's speech difficulty can be read within this framework as a somatic encoding of historical silences. She lives in a household organized around a central silence: the suppression of her mother's Muslim identity, the refusal to speak of Mama except in brief, painful fragments, the systematic excision of one half of Nisha's cultural inheritance from the family's daily life. This household silence is not simply an individual grief response on her father's part; it is also a response to the communal politics of the moment, a protective adaptation to an increasingly dangerous climate in which a Hindu man who had loved a Muslim woman and produced children who embody that love might find that love used against him.

The household's silence thus participates in the broader culture of silence that characterizes the public discourse around Partition and its aftermath. The violence of 1947 was, for many survivors, literally unspeakable: it exceeded what language could contain or what social norms permitted to be said. The suppression of these memories—the inability or unwillingness to speak of what had been witnessed, done, or suffered—is a well-documented feature of Partition survivor testimony, one that scholars such as Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon have analyzed in their landmark oral history projects. Nisha's personal speech difficulty thus resonates with this broader cultural silence, suggesting that her individual symptom is a form of historical consciousness, a bodily registration of the unspeakable.

The contrast between Nisha's spoken silence and her written eloquence maps onto a distinction that trauma theory has identified between declarative memory—explicit, narrative memory that can be put into words—and implicit or procedural memory—memory encoded in the body, in habits, in emotional responses that resist verbal articulation. Nisha's difficulty with spoken language suggests that the traumatic knowledge she carries—the knowledge of her hybrid identity, of her mother's death, of the family's silenced past—is encoded in her body in ways that resist easy verbalization. Writing, as a more deliberate and controlled form of

language production, provides a different pathway to expression: one that bypasses the immediate social pressures that trigger her speechlessness. Her diary becomes a private refuge where she can speak freely: "I've decided that night is the best time to write to you" (Hiranandani 11).

The novel's treatment of Nisha's speech difficulty is notably non-pathologizing. Hiranandani does not present the difficulty as a disorder requiring treatment or as a sign of Nisha's inadequacy, but as a comprehensible response to her situation. Nisha herself is aware of the pattern: she knows that she can speak more easily in some situations than others, that her voice fails her when she is anxious or when what she needs to say is too complex or too vulnerable to risk in public. This self-awareness is itself significant: Nisha understands her silence as meaningful rather than arbitrary, as related to the content of what she cannot say rather than to a simple physical limitation.

The gradual development of Nisha's voice over the course of the novel—her increasing ability, by the end, to speak more freely and to claim her identity more openly—parallels her growing clarity about who she is and what she values. The therapeutic narrative arc moves from silence to voice, from suppression to expression, from incomprehension to understanding. Yet Hiranandani is careful not to make this arc too smooth or too complete: Nisha does not achieve perfect fluency by the novel's end, does not arrive at a fully resolved sense of identity. The healing is real but partial, appropriate to the scale of the trauma and the age of the protagonist. This formal restraint reflects a sophisticated understanding of both therapeutic process and narrative art.

Marianne Hirsch developed the concept of postmemory to describe the relationship to the past of those who did not directly experience the traumatic events that profoundly shaped their consciousness. The children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch argues, are formed by memories that are not their own—memories transmitted through stories, silences, images, and behaviors that saturate their family cultures. These transmitted memories are so powerful and so present that they feel like genuine memories, yet they are mediated, incomplete, and shaped by the transmission process itself.

The concept of postmemory provides a powerful framework for understanding The Night Diary in at least two senses. First, it illuminates Nisha's relationship to her dead mother: Nisha's knowledge of Mama, and through her the

Muslim dimension of her heritage, is a form of postmemory—a relationship to a past she did not experience, transmitted through fragments, stories, and the significant silences of the family culture. Second, the concept illuminates the novel's own function as a vehicle for transmitting Partition memory to contemporary readers who are generationally remote from the events of 1947.

Nisha's relationship to her mother's memory is explicitly presented as a form of construction rather than retrieval. She has no memories of Mama because Mama died when she was born; she has only the postmemories transmitted through others. Dadi's stories about her daughter-in-law, her father's grief-laden fragments, the photographs she is occasionally permitted to see—these are the raw materials from which Nisha constructs a mother and, through that construction, a sense of her own identity. The diary writing is the vehicle of this construction: each letter to Mama is simultaneously an act of memory and an act of imagination, a reaching across the boundary of death toward an absent figure who must be imaginatively reconstructed from whatever fragments survive.

Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is shaped not only by the content of what is transmitted but by the form of transmission itself. The gaps, distortions, and emphases of the transmission process leave their marks on the postmemorial consciousness. Nisha's postmemory of her mother is shaped by the particular distortions of her family's transmission: her father's silence, Dadi's carefully selected stories, the absence of certain kinds of information about her Muslim heritage. These distortions are not simply deficiencies but themselves carry meaning: the silence around certain topics tells Nisha something about what is too painful, too politically dangerous, or too culturally foreign to be easily transmitted.

The novel's implicit address to its readers—the children and young adults for whom it is primarily intended—is itself an act of postmemorial transmission. Hiranandani is transmitting to readers who are likely at least one, and possibly two or more, generations removed from the events of 1947 a memorial relationship to those events: not facts and dates, but the emotional texture and human reality of what it meant to live through Partition. The diary form is particularly well-suited to this transmission: it offers the reader the experience of intimate access to a consciousness shaped by historical trauma, creating the conditions for what Hirsch calls "affiliative postmemory"—a memorial relationship to the past based not on family connection but on imaginative identification across difference.

The generational dimension of postmemory is also central to the novel's thematic concerns. The Night Diary depicts a world in which the failures and silences of one generation are transmitted, in complex and often damaging ways, to the next. Nisha's father's inability to speak openly about Mama, to acknowledge her Muslim heritage and honor it as part of his children's inheritance, has profound consequences for Nisha's sense of self. Yet the novel also suggests that this transmission is not merely passive: Nisha actively works with what she has received, transforming the fragments of postmemory into a more coherent and livable sense of identity through the practice of writing. The next generation is not simply the inheritor of the previous generation's traumas but also the creative transformer of those traumas.

Maurice Halbwachs's foundational insight—that all memory, even apparently individual memory, is shaped by the social frameworks within which it occurs—has important implications for reading The Night Diary. Nisha's personal memories and her postmemories of her mother do not exist in a social vacuum; they are shaped by the collective narratives that her community, her family, and the larger historical moment provide. These collective narratives are themselves deeply political: they determine what can be remembered, what must be forgotten, and how the past is to be interpreted in the service of present needs.

The collective memory of pre-Partition India in The Night Diary is notable for its complexity and its contestation. Different characters in the novel carry different versions of the past and different stakes in how it is remembered. Nisha's father remembers a world in which Hindus and Muslims lived as neighbors, friends, and even spouses—a world that the violence of Partition retroactively makes to seem impossible. The leaders of communal organizations remember a world of ancient enmities and irreducible differences, a narrative that justifies the present violence and the separation to come. The cook Kazi Sahib carries memories of decades of service to a Hindu family, memories that resist the communal narrative while ultimately being unable to protect him from its consequences.

The novel is particularly attentive to the processes by which collective memory is produced and enforced. The school curriculum, the newspapers, the speeches of political leaders, the sermons in the mosque and the temple—all are sites where collective narratives about the past and the present are produced and disseminated. Nisha encounters these narratives and is shaped by them, even as her own experience and her postmemories of her mother resist their simplifying force. The tension

between the complexity of personal experience and the reductive power of collective narrative is one of the novel's central dramatic motors.

The figure of the Partition itself—the drawing of a border through a community—is the novel's most powerful image of the violence that collective memory can inflict. The border that will separate India from Pakistan is not simply a political division but a memorial one: it determines which memories belong to which nation, which pasts can be claimed and which must be abandoned. For Nisha and her family, the Partition requires them to leave behind not only their home and possessions but also their relationships with Muslim neighbors and friends, relationships that cannot survive the new geography of communal identity.

The role of women in the transmission of collective memory is also significant in the novel. Dadi, Nisha's paternal grandmother, is one of the primary transmitters of family memory: she tells stories, maintains traditions, and keeps alive a version of the family's past that Nisha's father, in his grief and adaptation, has partially suppressed. This representation reflects a broader pattern that memory scholars have documented: women often serve as the primary custodians of family memory, transmitting through narrative and practice the contents of a cultural inheritance that official or public memory neglects. Dadi's role in the novel suggests that the transmission of Partition memory, like much historical memory, is a gendered practice.

The novel's ending—with the family established in a new home in India, Nisha's voice gradually finding greater freedom, and the diary continuing—is carefully balanced between loss and hope. What has been lost is irreplaceable: the specific world of Mirpur Khas, the friendships that crossed communal boundaries, the material culture of a household assembled over a lifetime. What has been preserved is more intangible but no less real: the relationships within the family, the memories carried in Nisha's diary, the identity that she has fought to maintain through the catastrophe of Partition. This balance—the acknowledgment of irreversible loss alongside the affirmation of resilient selfhood—is characteristic of the most honest and most humane literature of historical trauma.

Beyond its theoretical significance, The Night Diary demonstrates a remarkable narrative craft that deserves attention in its own right. Hiranandani manages the complex challenge of writing historical fiction for young readers in ways that are consistently successful: she does not condescend to her audience by

simplifying the complexity of the historical situation, nor does she overwhelm them with the weight of historical facts and analysis. Instead, she trusts the intimate, personal drama of one family's story to carry the larger historical meaning, knowing that readers who care about Nisha will find themselves, through that care, drawn into a deeper engagement with the history that shapes her world.

The novel's use of recipes as a structural element deserves particular attention. Nisha's interest in cooking, her practice of learning and recording recipes from Kazi Sahib, creates a parallel text within the diary: a record of culinary knowledge that is also a record of cultural memory. The recipes are practical—they include specific ingredients and techniques—but they are also memorial: they are the cooking of a household that will soon be dispersed, the food of a culture that Partition will force Nisha to leave behind. In teaching herself these recipes, Nisha is performing an act of cultural preservation, ensuring that something of the Muslim culinary heritage that Kazi Sahib embodies will survive his departure.

This use of the recipe as a vehicle of cultural memory reflects a broader feature of the novel's approach to historical transmission: its insistence on the material, sensory, and embodied dimensions of cultural life. The Night Diary is a novel full of sounds, smells, tastes, and textures—the smell of Kazi Sahib's cooking, the sound of the call to prayer, the feel of the night air in Mirpur Khas. These sensory details are not decorative but functional: they create the conditions for the kind of embodied, experiential identification with the past that Connerton sees as essential to genuine memorial transmission. Readers who have imaginatively inhabited Nisha's sensory world are better equipped to understand the magnitude of what she loses when that world is destroyed.

The pedagogical implications of The Night Diary are significant and multiple. As a classroom text, the novel offers young readers an entry point into the history of Partition that is emotionally accessible without being emotionally manipulative. It models forms of historical thinking—the recognition of complexity, the resistance to binary categorization, the importance of attending to individual experience within collective history—that are valuable well beyond the specific historical content of the novel. It also models forms of ethical response to historical violence: grief, but not despair; understanding, but not forgiveness of the perpetrators; recognition of loss, alongside affirmation of resilient identity.

The novel is also a powerful invitation to reflection on the relationship between writing and identity, writing and memory, writing and healing. Nisha's diary writing is presented throughout as a genuinely transformative practice, one that enables her to process experiences that would otherwise overwhelm her and to construct a sense of self that is more coherent and more livable than the fragmented reality she inhabits. This representation of writing as a therapeutic and identity-forming practice carries an implicit message to young readers: that writing about one's experience is not merely a school exercise but a genuine form of self-construction and self-understanding.

The Night Diary is a novel that rewards the kind of sustained, theoretically informed reading this paper has attempted. Through the interrelated lenses of memorial aesthetics, trauma theory, postmemory studies, and the sociology of collective memory, the analysis has revealed the depth and complexity of Hiranandani's engagement with the history of Partition and with the broader questions of how traumatic historical memory is transmitted, transformed, and kept alive across generations.

The central arguments advanced in this paper can be summarized as follows. First, the diary form that gives the novel its title and its structure constitutes a sophisticated memorial aesthetics, one that combines the private quality of diary writing with the social quality of epistolary address to create a mode of narration uniquely suited to the exploration of memory and identity. Second, Nisha's speech difficulty functions not merely as a character trait but as a somatic encoding of the silences that characterize both her family's relationship to the past and the broader culture of Partition memory. Third, the novel deploys Hirsch's concept of postmemory in two interrelated ways: to describe Nisha's relationship to her absent mother, and to model the transmission of historical memory from a generation with direct experience to readers who are generationally remote from the events depicted. Fourth, the novel's representation of collective memory illuminates the political dimensions of historical narrative, showing how official and communal stories about the past serve the interests of those who produce them while suppressing the more complex truths of individual experience.

The significance of The Night Diary as a work of cultural memory extends beyond its literary achievements. In a moment when the Partition of India is being increasingly interpreted through the lens of contemporary religious nationalism—when the historical complexity of 1947 is being simplified into narratives that serve

the interests of present political projects—Hiranandani's insistence on the irreducible humanity and complexity of the people who lived through these events carries a particular urgency. The novel's most fundamental argument, embodied in Nisha's hybrid identity and her determination to claim it, is that human beings cannot be reduced to the categories that political and religious ideologies impose on them: that the lived reality of individual experience always exceeds and complicates the abstractions of identity politics.

In this sense, The Night Diary is more than a historical novel or a work of children's fiction; it is an act of cultural resistance, a refusal to allow the violence of categorical thinking to have the final word on what it means to be human in a world divided by religious and political borders. That this resistance is expressed through the voice—the written, nocturnal, intimate voice—of a twelve-year-old girl writing to her dead mother is one of the most moving and most politically significant achievements of contemporary literature for young readers.

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