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ORU Glass Nostalgia: Nostalgia and Past in Malabar Café

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ABSTRACT

A recent trend is observed regarding the portrayal of cafes around Christ university. Cafes such as 'Malabar Café' use several techniques such as those of images, music, artefacts and food to create a sense of nostalgia among a specific ethnic group – the Malayalee community. The café commodifies the past to create this nostalgia. The images, music, artefacts and food used in the café utilizes nostalgia to elicit feelings of social solidarity, belonging, longing for a long lost childhood and a commonly shared past, thus modifying the consumer behavior to one that favours the economic aspects of the café.

Keywords: nostalgia, commodification, past, consumer behavior.

It is often the case that institutions such as universities become the epicenter of cultural and economic growth; the areas around such institutions flourish and prosper because of the needs that arise because of these very institutions. In the context of the research, the shops around Christ University are seen to be undergoing changes in respect to the groups they cater to and the way in which they portray themselves. A recent trend has been observed by the researcher, which shows how newly established cafes are made and designed in ways to appeal to specific ethnic groups, in contrast to the earlier cafes which did not focus on any specific ethnic groups. These cafés use different techniques such as images, songs, references, artefacts, clothes and food to create a sense of nostalgia or a sense of 'home' in the customers belonging to the target ethnic group. The research intends to explore and analyse these techniques and elements in 'Malabar Café' used to create a sense of nostalgia in the Malayalee community. The research specifically looks at how nostalgia is invoked using images, songs, food and artefacts. Thus, cafés such as 'Malabar Café' uses images, songs, artefacts and food to invoke nostalgia in the consumers by commodifying the past.

Several studies have looked at nostalgia and its effects. Researchers such as Sedikides et al., Batcho and Lu looks at the more positive aspects of nostalgia such as its relation to positive emotions and recollection of memories, whereas Christowska, Sierra and McQuitty, Hafez and Ling and Holbrook looks at a more economical and capitalistic idea of nostalgia. Tim Wildschut, Xinyue Zhou, Constantine Sedikides, and Ding-

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Guo Gao looks at how social connection affects nostalgia and other feelings such as loneliness.

William J Havlena and Susan L Holak explores the relation between images and other factors which affects nostalgia, such as personal relevance, resemblance to any childhood memories, references to a common history, relation to communicated experiences, shared symbols and so on. David J Davies looks at how nostalgia evoking images are used to commodify the past and to create ideal modes of behavior according to the will of the ones with the power to do so. Even though they might be political propagandas, images of the past often elicit positive and emotional responses of a historical event or a commonly shared past. Paul Grainge looks at how monochrome images tends to provide itself an authority of time, acts as an agent of visual historicism, provide more meaning, suggest cultural significance, historical identity and so on. Researchers such as Holtzman Mannu and Duzur looks at the realation between nostalgia and food. Alan R. Hirsch looks at how the smell of different things elicit different nostalgic responses in different people. Shumway, Batcho and Bryant explores a more positive side of the relation between songs and nostalgia, whereas Stocken and Brennen looks at nostalgia as a result of the collapse of a commonly understood musical language. Even though there are contrary studies related to the topics, these studies themselves provide multiple perspectives to look at nostalgia and its effects. As one of the basic human emotions, nostalgia plays an important role.

Invoking nostalgia by commodifying the past is achieved through the usage of several elements such as songs, artefacts and food, all of which functions at the level of semiotics. All these elements are signs which signify feelings related to nostalgia. In order to understand how these elements function in the context of the primary text, Semiotic theory could be used. Ferdinand de Saussure explains how words have no inherent meaning. All the signs and sign systems consist of a signifier and a signified. He emphasizes on how the meanings are only relational and not inherent. Roland Barthes also explains this meaning making process through his explanation of cultural code, semic code and the symbolic code. For example, the *samovar* used in the café is a sign which signifies a time when they were popularly used and all the feelings associated with it, such as those of home and belonging, thus invoking nostalgia in the consumers. These elements would be thus looked at through the theoretical framework of semiotics and it would be an observational study.

Recreation of past is achieved mainly using symbolic representations. Both tangible and intangible stimuli from the past can be a source of nostalgia. After applying Social Identity Theory, Sierra and McQuitty explain how both emotional and cognitive responses are based on a group feeling from the past and has the capacity to influence the customers' behavior, which is described as 'nostalgic decision making' (Sierra and McQuitty 109). Music, images, souvenirs from the past, food and beverages, clothes, magazines and television programs are a few examples which uses nostalgia to influence consumer behaviour.

'Malabar Café' extensively uses images to portray a past long gone. Figure 1 becomes the central theme of the café and the feeling it intends to convey. In the image, it can be seen that an elderly man with a long beard and minimal hair wearing only a *thorth mundu* and making chai in the traditional way. Such an image of an elderly man making chai is profusely used in media and popular culture to show the 'traditional' chai shop in the 'old' Kerala.



Figure 1

The *mundu* being the traditional wear of Kerala, automatically evokes a homely feeling. This image of the old man making chai is a stereotypical understanding of how a chai shop is structured. It homogenises the idea of the chai maker. This and such similar images are also used profusely in modern movies and music albums. The next major element in the picture is that of the *samovar*. *Samovar* is a metal container which was used earlier in almost all the chai shops in Kerala. The *samovar* was later replaced by several other more efficient kitchen utensils. For a long period of time, *samovars* went out of the mainstream culture and faded into the shadow of the past. Over the past decade or so, these objects of the past slowly started reemerging into the mainstream culture because of their sentimental value. In the specific context of shops around Christ University, it was *Samovars* only extensively in the reemergence was not of the object or availability, but observed that these-started reappearing past few years. The based on the efficiency because of its solely because of its value attached to it and the feelings attributed to it. The main target cohort of these Cafes are the young adults and the adults, which become a very important factor. The age group of this target group is from 18 to 30. This age group would be specifically impacted by these artefacts as they might remind them of their childhood. Those who were born during the 1980s and the 1990s would have been exposed to these artefacts in their early years.



Thus, the reappearance of these artefacts and images would bring back the memories of childhood. As Krystine Irene Batcho observed, the memories of childhood become an important resource which benefits the psyche of the person. It is also important to notice that the logo of the café is based on this artefact (figure 2) and it is the central unit of the café.

Several other minor elements of the image such as that of the bunch of plantains hung from the ceiling also contributes to the major theme. These sights were common in the past and is not so commonly seen in current tea shops. The image of the bamboo stick supporting the extension of the shop also takes the viewer to the days when bamboos were majorly used in construction of shops and stalls. The way in which the image is portrayed also shows the emphasis on the old man. All the other elements of the image are drawn as basic structures with minimal detail, whereas the old man drawn with more detail, showing that this element is the one which is being emphasized.

It also suggests that this process of invoking nostalgia is a conscious process and not a mere byproduct of some artistic expression.

In a similar image, (figure3) the shop is seen to have hayroofing, which was also how houses were roofed in earlier times. The presence of stick supports and benches and desks also adds on to the effect. A coconut tree can also be seen in the background, which would remind the viewer of the geographical area of Kerala and consequently the memories associated with the 'home land'.



Figure 3

Figure 4 shows a group of people traveling in an *ambassador* car, which is based on the earlier common trend of using ambassador cars. They were widely in trend during the latter half of the 20th century. These cars gradually faded from the market because of the boom in the automobile industry. And consequently, over the course of time, these cars became 'antique'. The values and emotions added to the antique quality of things are also essentially one of nostalgia.

Thus, these cars became a marker of nostalgia, a vehicle which takes the viewer to the past. The image of the group of people, assuming they represent a family, also brings in the elements of social connectedness and a social togetherness. Irene Batcho and Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt and Routledge also talks about this relation between social connectedness and nostalgia. Feelings of social integrity boosts the feeling of nostalgia and creates a sense of memory based identity.



Figure 4

Figure 5 shows a boy the commercially made swings that play areas, the swing in the image coconut tree. These sort of swings house in the past. The swing thus is entertainment, but also a reminder viewer to the days when they essentially remembering the past, associated with them. playing in a swing. Contrary to could be seen today in parks and is made of rope and parts of a were an integral part of any not just an object of of childhood. This takes back the played in the swing, which is childhood and the memories



Figure 5

Figure 6 is group of pictures which consists of pictures of candies in a child's palm, a ball made of coconut palms, a bunch of *kanthari*(chillies) on a yam leaf, an old fashioned hut and paper boats floating on a water body. The candy, commonly called *narangamittayi*, literally translated to 'Orange candy', was commonly consumed in the past. It was widely consumed because of its availability and low cost. It is a sweet tasting hard candy which was sold mainly near school areas. They were available almost in any shop and were widely popular among the school going age of children. The image is showed in such a way that only the candies are in colour and the palm of the child is in greyscale. Paul Grainge talks about how these monochromatic elements influence the thought process of the viewers. Monochrome images tend to provide themselves an authority of time, acts as an agent of visual historicism, provide more meaning, suggest cultural significance, historical identity and so on.



Figure 6

The ball made out of coconut leaves, the *kanthari* (chillies) in the yam leaf and the paper boats are again significant markers of childhood. But just like most of the images used here, this image is also based on a stereotypical understanding of childhood and childhood experiences. Most of these images builds upon the assumed commonality of experiences. The ball made out of coconut leaves are again, a marker of childhood. As coconut trees were common and almost all the houses had access to coconut trees and leaves, these balls preexisted before the entry of plastic and rubber balls. Several local games revolved around such toys and objects, thus making them important units of play time in childhood. The significance of the paper boats can also be explained in this context. The agrarian societies that predominated several areas of Kerala were heavily depended on the monsoon rains. It would be safe to say that the culture of the Malayalee community was majorly influenced by rain and everything associated with it. One of the major festivals of Kerala, Onam, is a festival of harvest. Monsoon is a symbol of happiness and harbinger of celebration. During this rainy season, the children of the household would engage in games such as those of paper boat making and paper boat racing. This image of paper boats would bring back memories of floating boats in fields and puddles, thus taking the

consumer to a different time altogether. We can also see how rain becomes a central theme in many of the movies and songs related to childhood, nostalgia and past. The image of the chilies in the yam leaf also takes the viewers back to a time when all houses had a backyard of its own and its own vegetable patch. Before the invasion of plastic covers and such, the huge leaves of yam were used to collect chilies and other things. The image of the old fashioned house with hay roof and wooden pillars also create similar feelings in the consumers. These images thus create a spatial and temporal displacement in the viewers. Coming to the artefacts, 'Malabar Café' mainly uses two different artefacts to bring the feeling of past among the consumers. The first one is the *samovar*. As mentioned earlier, it is an artefact of the past which becomes a socio-cultural marker as well. The *samovar* thus becomes an embodiment of the commodified nostalgia. The second artefact used in the café is the old fashioned lantern. Before the widespread use of electric bulbs and florescent lights, lanterns with candle wicks inside were used mainly. Using the same type of lanterns, but with electric modifications brings in a blend of past and the present, creating nostalgic feeling and feelings of old-ness in the consumers while subtly mingling with the present. These lanterns also become embodiments of commodified nostalgia.

The major aspect of the café is the food it serves. The café is designed in a way in which it is portrayed as a tea shop. It could be understood from the lines which are used in the café and the images of tea being made or drank. Different from the glasses in which tea is served in Karnataka majorly, 'Malabar Café' serves tea in bigger glasses, the way in which it is served in Kerala. Apart from tea, several other ethnic food items are sold in the café. Nostalgia is often related to food, as it is an important cultural marker. Jon D Holtzman explains the idea of 'seasonal food cycles and prospective memory'. He explains how often food is related to the seasons and to time in general. He says, "The experience of food evokes recollection, which is not simply cognitive but also emotional and physical . . ." (Holtzman 365). Furthermore, Holtzman also argues that the food we eat also creates ethnic identities.

'Malabar Café' serves several ethnic food items such as *parippu vada*, *sugiyam*, *pazham pori*, *pazham nirachath*, *bonda*, *kaipola*, *kappa biriyani*, *ulli vada* and so on. All of these food items are popularly sold in Kerala. Many of them could be even considered as exclusive to Kerala. Julie Sahni's story 'South Indian Filter Coffee with Amma', Disney's 'Ratatouille' are examples of how food is closely related to nostalgia. Sujata Bhatt's poem 'Chutney' explains how diasporic woman are wedded in the expectation and hope that they can recreate the culture that is physically away from them. She says, "For diasporic communities, spatially and temporally distanced from the geographic parameters of the nation-state, a collective sense of nationhood, an affective longing for the home, and a fear of losing tradition morphs into a desire to retain viability and visibility through a systematic tempt to ossify the fragments and shards of cultural practices authentic." (Mannur 27).

Another major element of the café are the songs that it plays in the café. The playlist consists of both old and new songs, but old songs outnumber the new songs. Similarly, even though there are songs of different languages, most of the songs are in Malayalam. The old songs played in the café falls under are the popularly approved category of 'good, old songs'. Even in the field of songs, a recent trend has been observed. Old songs are picked up and remade or remixed by artists or bands such as *Thaikkudam Bridge*. Doing so is also a way of commodifying the past and homogenizing the past. These popular media create the ideas of the values that has to be attributed to songs- especially old songs. These songs are thus adding nostalgic values in a pop culture sense as well, apart from any personal feelings towards the songs a person has.

David R Shumway talks about songs in the context of movies and how they 'arouse a feeling of generational belonging'. In his work, Shumway talks about how music affects our memory and in turn, nostalgia. It can create a sense of alienation, but at the same time, makes the audience associate with the protagonist to create a sense of generational

solidarity. Music is seen as a vehicle for emotions and memories and that is why people generally tend to remember the song lyrics or parts of poems more accurately than prose. Music also serves the purpose of selective re-construction of the past. These reconstructed memories recreate feelings and propagate a 'shared past' and a collective memory. Bryant says, "The emotional power of music and the meanings which individuals construct surrounding music allows basic emotions to be carried through the otherwise complex web of politics and history. In this sense, the nostalgia is an attempt to recover the positive emotions of the past, but not necessarily an attempt to recreate or rebuild the past" (163). Leon Botstein looks at music as a form of history. Music acts as a tool to invoke recollection of memories of the past. This recollection, is nothing but nostalgia of a time gone by. Music created by different artists over different time periods are examined to see how they have used different techniques to evoke sensibility of loss for a past that the listener might not even have experienced. The memories related to those musical frameworks are activated at once.

Chrostowska draws relations between nostalgia, consumerism, capitalism and economic models to talk about three modes of nostalgic experience: romantic nostalgia, philosophical nostalgia and capitalist nostalgia. He says, ". . . capitalist nostalgia issues from an economy of representations simulating (retrieving, repossessing) lost pasts, indeed, lost temporalities . . .romantic nostalgia is, by contrast, rooted in an economy of representations in which the past is experienced as irretrievable. . .philosophical nostalgia - the sublation of romantic nostalgia into systematic thought . . ." (Chrostowska 64). Chrostowska points out how nostalgia is used as a tool for 'commodifying the past' and making profit in a capitalistic society, instead of being merely used as a tool to boost social connectedness and such. While romantic and philosophic nostalgia defamiliarizes and romanticizes the past to create positive effect, capitalistic nostalgia commodifies the past. The logic behind nostalgia is that the past cannot be recovered, but only recollected and re-imagined. The farther the past is, the better it becomes a tool for 'commercially bound imagination'. Thus, this 'nostalgification of the past' becomes a vehicle to spread capitalistic ideology into the consumers. Renato Rosalde looks at nostalgia as it is one which is closely related to colonialism and imperialism as well. Patrick H Hutton argues how nostalgia may be experienced privately, but is absorbed into a common culture. Hutton calls this nostalgia a "modern sensibility". Over the course of time, nostalgia has morphed and transformed. It has given rise to a 'postmodern nostalgia'. The postmodern nostalgia brings together the perspective of the experience of the past and the feelings within the imagination of the present. The analysis of the elements in 'Malabar Café' show how it commodifies the past through different ways, to create an economic system based on the same and consequently utilizes this system for commercial profit making.

The study was conducted only on a specific café and the findings may not be extrapolated to other cafés. The intention of these images and elements are assumed to be of capitalistic nature by the researcher. Also, many of the images and songs could not be analyzed due to time constraint. The effects of this induced nostalgia on consumer behavior could also be not measured. The basis of the argument, that this induced nostalgia influences consumer behavior, is mainly based on the observations by the researcher.

Through the research, it is evident that 'Malabar Café' revolves around the idea of nostalgia. It uses several elements to invoke nostalgia and through these ways, it commodifies the past and utilizes it for commercial purposes. The use of images, songs, artefacts and food have shown excellent results in creating homely feelings and feelings of nostalgia. Because of their high economic aspect, past and the elements of past becomes objects which are manipulated to meet certain desired ends. The research is significant as it deals with nostalgia, and as there is a recent trend in reviving the old and combining it with the new. Past is brought up time and again and is portrayed and utilized in several different ways. This would be the scope for further research as well, as the theme of nostalgia is recurring in several spheres of life. Advertisements, shops, narratives, products, songs, movies, popular culture and several other industries constantly use

past and nostalgia to direct consumer behavior. The research could provide basic insight on the mechanics of this process and could prove to be groundwork to further studies.

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