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Memory, Promise, And Martyrdom: Interpreting *Usne Kaha Tha*

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Abstract

Chandradhar Sharma Guleri's short story *Usne Kaha Tha* (1915) is often hailed as the first modern Hindi short story. It explores themes of love, memory, promise, and martyrdom in the backdrop of colonial India and the First World War. This paper attempts a critical interpretation of *Usne Kaha Tha* through the interconnected lenses of memory, emotional obligation, and sacrificial heroism. By examining the protagonist's personal journey from romantic longing to selfless sacrifice, the paper underscores how memory becomes a moral compass, the promise a moral burden, and martyrdom a fulfillment of both love and duty. Drawing upon historical, literary, and psychological perspectives, this study places Guleri's work in a broader cultural and literary context.

Key Words: Memory, Promise, Martyrdom, Ethics, Duty, Sacrifice, Love

Introduction

Chandradhar Sharma Guleri's short story *Usne Kaha Tha* occupies a seminal position in Hindi literature. It tells the story of a young soldier, Lehna Singh, whose innocent childhood love matures into a deep moral commitment, culminating in an act of supreme sacrifice on the battlefield. Written at a time when the Indian subcontinent was under British colonial rule and Indian soldiers were being recruited to fight in World War I, *Usne Kaha Tha* combines personal emotion with collective historical context.

The story's title—translating roughly to “She had said”—centers on a singular moment of dialogue that echoes throughout Lehna Singh's life, shaping his destiny. This paper will analyze the narrative by focusing on three intertwined themes: memory, promise, and martyrdom, and examine how these themes reinforce the emotional and ethical core of the story.

Memory as Ethical Continuum

Memory is not merely a narrative device in *Usne Kaha Tha*; it is the very axis upon which the story revolves. From the opening scene to the climactic moment of sacrifice, Chandradhar Sharma Guleri constructs the life of Lehna Singh as one shaped by a single remembered phrase: “*Tum bhool to nahin jaaoge?*”—“You won't forget, will you?” Spoken during a moment of innocent childhood intimacy, these words echo persistently throughout the story, resurfacing at critical junctures as a reminder, an obligation, and eventually, a form of moral law.

Lehna Singh's relationship with memory is not passive; it is active, dynamic, and guiding. In this sense, Guleri's narrative structure draws upon a psychological realism that anticipates later developments in modernist literature. The protagonist's inner life, shaped by a remembered moment, suggests a model of ethical behavior rooted not in external rules but in internal, emotionally charged recollection. Maurice Halbwachs, in his theory of collective memory, suggests that memory is always framed by social and interpersonal contexts: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 38). In the case of Lehna Singh, memory is constructed in a deeply personal yet socially embedded context—within a fleeting, almost anonymous childhood encounter with a girl, whose voice becomes more than sound; it becomes a moral invocation.

What gives Lehna Singh's memory its ethical potency is the transformation it undergoes over time. The girl's question, initially a childlike appeal to affection, takes on deeper and more serious meanings as Lehna Singh matures. It evolves from a question of love to a test of loyalty, and finally, to a code of conduct. As he learns of the girl's marriage to another man—ironically, his future officer in the army—the memory no longer serves romantic aspirations. Instead, it becomes sublimated into a duty of care and protection. His fidelity to that childhood moment now finds its expression in safeguarding her husband on the battlefield, even at the cost of his own life.

In literary terms, this is a powerful example of how memory functions as a "continuum"—a bridge between the past and the present, between emotion and action, between the individual self and social obligation. Guleri does not depict memory as a static flashback but as an evolving influence on Lehna Singh's choices. As literary scholar Avadhesh Kumar Singh notes, "In *Usne Kaha Tha*, memory is not retrospective nostalgia; it is an instrument of ethical transformation, a call to action rather than a retreat into the past" (Singh 102).

The moral intensity of Lehna Singh's memory is heightened by the fact that it is not publicly recognized. His sacrifice is not witnessed or rewarded by the society around him; it is a private fulfillment of a private promise. This, paradoxically, deepens its ethical significance. In the framework of deontological ethics, which emphasizes the intention behind actions rather than their outcomes, Lehna Singh becomes a figure of supreme moral integrity. He does not seek validation for his sacrifice; the memory of the girl's words is sufficient to guide his moral reasoning. The ethical continuity of memory lies in this very solitude—it is an internal compass that neither fades with time nor wavers in complexity.

Moreover, Lehna Singh's memory is intricately tied to his sense of identity. He is not simply a soldier or a lover or a friend. He is someone who carries forward a remembered moment into every action he takes. His identity becomes inseparable from his memory. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur notes: "We are not only beings who act and suffer, but also beings who remember and who, by remembering, determine the meaning of our actions" (Ricoeur 89). Lehna Singh's final act of martyrdom, seen through this lens, is not just the end of a narrative arc; it is the fulfillment of a remembered moral promise that gives coherence and dignity to his life.

From a structural perspective, the story's circularity reinforces the continuum of memory. The story begins with childhood innocence and ends in mature sacrifice, but the emotional thread—anchored in memory—remains unbroken. Each narrative shift is linked by recollection, forming a seamless loop in which memory acts both as seed and fruit. This gives the story its emotional weight and philosophical depth.

Guleri's use of memory is thus unique in early Hindi fiction. While many early 20th-century Indian stories focused on moral fables or nationalist themes, *Usne Kaha Tha* uses memory as a mode of moral inquiry and self-realization. It is not didactic but introspective. The reader is invited not to admire Lehna Singh for his actions alone, but to trace the evolution of a single remembered phrase into a life-defining ethic.

To conclude, memory in *Usne Kaha Tha* is not a passive archive of the past but an active ethical force. It shapes identity, motivates action, and transforms romantic emotion into moral transcendence. Through Lehna Singh, Guleri offers a profound meditation on how one moment—once remembered—can become a lifetime's guiding star.

The Weight of a Promise

At the heart of *Usne Kaha Tha* lies an unspoken yet deeply binding commitment—an emotional and moral promise that transforms the trajectory of Lehna Singh’s life. The pivotal moment occurs early in the story, when the unnamed girl from Lehna’s childhood asks, “*Tum bhoool to nahin jaaoge?*”—“You won’t forget, will you?” While seemingly innocuous, this question plants the seed of an enduring inner obligation, one that resonates across time, personal relationships, and even war. The power of this moment lies not in a formal oath but in its emotional charge—suggestive of a silent pact, rich in trust and longing.

A promise, traditionally, is a declared intention to do or not do something in the future. However, in Guleri’s story, the promise is never verbally articulated by Lehna Singh. Instead, it is internalized. This subtle shift—from external declaration to internal resolve—renders the promise even more potent. It becomes an internalized moral compass, almost sacred in its function. As Charles Fried argues in *Contract as Promise*, “The moral force of the promise is that it makes explicit and voluntary the responsibility which binds the promisor to the promisee” (Fried 17). Lehna Singh, though never giving a direct answer, becomes bound to the girl’s words, voluntarily accepting the burden of remembrance.

Importantly, the promise does not serve as a romantic fantasy or escapist indulgence. Instead, it undergoes a transformation, from the realm of adolescent emotion to the domain of adult moral responsibility. When Lehna Singh discovers that the girl is married to his commanding officer, the romantic subtext of the promise dissolves, but its ethical core endures. In one of the story’s most striking moments, the woman entrusts Lehna Singh with protecting her husband on the battlefield. Without any complaint, bitterness, or regret, Lehna Singh accepts the responsibility. In doing so, he carries the burden of the original promise—*not to forget*—but now translated into the duty to safeguard another life. The promise is recontextualized, no longer a matter of emotional fidelity alone, but a test of moral integrity and action.

This evolution of the promise underscores an important ethical trajectory. The girl’s words, once a plea for remembrance in the context of love, now find new meaning in the field of war. This shift reflects a movement from *sankalp* (intention) to *kartavya* (duty)—a transition steeped in Indian philosophical and literary traditions, where emotional bonds are often expressed through action rather than words. The unfulfilled romantic desire does not lead to disillusionment; instead, it channels itself into selfless duty. As noted by Meenakshi Mukherjee, “In much of Indian literature, love is not just an emotion; it is a mode of ethical being. Guleri’s story exemplifies this ideal where love expresses itself not in union but in sacrifice” (Mukherjee 47).

The emotional weight of the promise is further intensified by its private nature. There is no external validation for Lehna Singh’s decision, no public acknowledgment of the promise he carries. This invisibility renders the burden all the more personal—and morally profound. As philosopher Sissela Bok remarks in her work *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, “A promise, even when unspoken, binds the conscience of the one who gives it” (Bok 108). Lehna Singh’s loyalty stems not from institutional codes of conduct or social pressure but from a personal sense of truthfulness and responsibility. This is what lends his actions a tragic heroism. He fulfills a vow that no one asked him to keep aloud, yet he does so with unwavering resolve.

Furthermore, the promise is sustained not only by memory but also by empathy. Lehna Singh does not act out of obligation alone; he understands the emotional vulnerability of the woman, now a wife worried for her husband’s life. In taking up the responsibility to protect the officer, Lehna Singh becomes a vessel through which love transforms into compassion, and compassion into sacrifice. His promise is thus not to the woman alone but to the values of care, trust, and loyalty she evokes in him. Literary critic Harish Trivedi offers a similar reading, observing that “Guleri’s story moves from romantic sentiment to a higher realm of moral consciousness, showing how duty can be born from desire, and sacrifice from longing” (Trivedi 62).

This transformation is also underscored by the setting of war. In a context where promises are routinely broken, where chaos reigns, and where life is constantly under threat, Lehna Singh’s fidelity to an old promise becomes a counterpoint to the moral anarchy of battle. It is his personal law, his *dharma*. The battlefield, ironically, becomes the sanctum where his vow finds its most authentic fulfillment. This lends a sacred quality to the secular setting of war—what is often a space of destruction becomes, in this story, the ground of moral and spiritual elevation.

The emotional trajectory of the promise in *Usne Kaha Tha* can thus be seen in three stages. First, it begins as a silent emotional bond—a tacit promise to remember. Second, it becomes a moral obligation when reawakened by the woman's later appeal to protect her husband. Third, it culminates in a self-sacrificial act, thereby transforming a private emotional impulse into a public moral action. Each phase deepens the emotional weight of the promise, showing its capacity to endure and evolve through changing contexts.

In sum, the weight of the promise in Guleri's story is not just about remembrance—it is about responsibility, integrity, and transformation. The promise binds Lehna Singh not just to another person but to a version of himself—a self that is defined by loyalty and moral constancy. Through the subtle portrayal of this promise, *Usne Kaha Tha* elevates a personal act into a philosophical and ethical statement, demonstrating that the most binding obligations are often the ones unspoken, yet deeply felt.

Martyrdom as Moral Fulfillment

Lehna Singh's final act on the battlefield—sacrificing his life to save his superior officer—transcends personal loss and becomes an emblem of martyrdom. It is not simply an act of duty to a fellow soldier but a culmination of his lifelong commitment to the memory and promise associated with the woman.

In her study of war literature, Elaine Scarry argues, "The soldier's body becomes a site upon which the abstract values of loyalty, honor, and nationhood are inscribed" (Scarry 113). In *Usne Kaha Tha*, the act of martyrdom is not for the state but for a deeply personal, emotional cause that reflects higher ethical principles. Lehna Singh's body becomes the battlefield where personal memory meets public duty.

Furthermore, Guleri presents martyrdom not as a tragic end but as a transcendental fulfillment. The story closes not with grief but with a strange sense of serenity. The protagonist dies not in despair but in peace, having kept his promise. His death is not senseless; it is sacramental.

This aligns with the Gandhian idea of "sacrifice as moral victory," where the highest form of human action is not aggression but renunciation. Guleri, writing in pre-independence India, reflects a deep Indian ethos where dharma (duty) and tyaga (sacrifice) are intertwined.

Historical Context: Colonialism and the Indian Soldier

The backdrop of World War I is crucial to interpreting *Usne Kaha Tha*. Over one million Indian soldiers fought in the Great War, many of them recruited from Punjab, which included Lehna Singh's fictional hometown. As David Omissi notes, "The Indian soldier was both a colonial subject and an imperial agent, caught between obedience and identity" (Omissi 74).

Lehna Singh's loyalty, therefore, is layered. On one level, he is a loyal sepoy of the British Indian Army. On another, more profound level, he is a loyal guardian of a promise that predates and transcends imperial allegiance. His martyrdom is not glorified in the name of the Empire but in the name of personal dharma. This duality complicates the reading of *Usne Kaha Tha* as a mere patriotic story; it is more aptly seen as a narrative of existential commitment.

Literary Craft: Language and Form

Guleri's use of colloquial language and realism was revolutionary for its time. In contrast to the ornate prose common in early 20th-century Hindi literature, *Usne Kaha Tha* is marked by simplicity and emotional depth. According to Namwar Singh, "Guleri brought a new life into Hindi storytelling by making it resonate with the emotions of the common man" (Singh 92).

The story's structure—non-linear and memory-driven—predates modernist tendencies. By opening in media res and moving back and forth in time, Guleri creates a psychological realism that mirrors the protagonist's inner turmoil. This makes the story not just a love narrative but a deeply introspective exploration of moral consciousness.

Comparative Perspective: Echoes in World Literature

The themes of *Usne Kaha Tha* resonate with universal literary motifs. The motif of unfulfilled love leading to heroic sacrifice can be seen in Western literature as well, from Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* to the tragic heroes in Hemingway's war stories. However, what distinguishes Lehna Singh's story is its rootedness in Indian ethical traditions.

Unlike Hemingway's existential cynicism or Dickens' romantic idealism, Guleri's narrative is one of spiritual evolution. Lehna Singh's martyrdom is not the collapse of identity but its ultimate realization. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "Indian literature often merges the personal with the metaphysical, the individual act with a cosmic sense of duty" (Mukherjee 45). *Usne Kaha Tha* exemplifies this cultural sensibility.

Conclusion

Chandradhar Sharma Guleri's *Usne Kaha Tha* is a masterpiece of emotional and ethical storytelling. Through the intertwined themes of memory, promise, and martyrdom, the story constructs a narrative that is both intimate and universal. Memory in the story is not a passive recollection but an active force that shapes identity. The promise, though never formally articulated, becomes a binding moral force. Martyrdom, rather than being a tragic end, is depicted as the highest form of self-realization.

By anchoring these themes in the historical context of World War I and colonial India, and by using a language accessible to the common reader, Guleri created a story that is timeless in its appeal and profound in its implications. In Lehna Singh, Indian literature found one of its first true tragic heroes—defined not by his failure but by his fidelity to a remembered promise.

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