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The Right to Narrate: Diasporic Identity and Belonging in Janika Oza's *A History of Burning* Eesha Tur Razia

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the representation of diasporic identity and belonging in Janika Oza's *A History of Burning* (2023) through Edward Said's postcolonial concept of the "right to narrate." Despite growing scholarship on the novel's treatment of colonialism, migration, and historical memory, comparatively little attention has been paid to storytelling itself as a form of narrative agency through which displaced communities reclaim voice. The study therefore investigates how migration, memory, and intergenerational storytelling shape the construction of diasporic identity across the generations of one family, and how belonging is negotiated rather than inherited. Employing qualitative textual analysis within Said's theoretical framework, the article argues that the novel's characters are never treated as passive victims of displacement but as active narrators who reconstruct their own histories through fragmented, multi-voiced remembrance. The analysis shows that personal and familial narratives function as alternative archives preserving collective memory and sustaining cultural continuity despite geographical dislocation. Key findings demonstrate that identity in the novel is continuously reconstructed rather than fixed, that belonging is achieved through narration rather than territorial permanence, and that storytelling operates as an ethical and political act of resistance against historical erasure.*

Keywords: *Diaspora, Identity, Belonging, Storytelling, Migration, Cultural Memory.*

1 Introduction

The legacy of colonialism remains one of the most enduring global issues shaping political, social, and cultural life. Although formal European colonial rule largely ended during the twentieth century, its consequences continue to shape the realities of millions of people across Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and beyond. Colonialism was never limited to territorial occupation; it reconfigured identities, cultures, languages, and patterns of mobility, disrupting indigenous structures and transforming relationships between people and their homelands. As a result, scholars increasingly treat colonialism not as a completed episode but as an ongoing condition whose ideological and structural consequences continue to shape migration, identity, and belonging (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Said, 1993).

Despite political independence, colonial structures continue to manifest through forced migration, racial discrimination, and persistent struggles over belonging. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024), more than 120 million people worldwide are currently forcibly displaced, the highest figure ever recorded. Many of these crises are inseparable from colonial boundaries and historical exploitation. Such displacement frequently produces cultural dislocation, racial exclusion, and fragmented identities, particularly among communities whose migration has historical ties to empire. This does not mean, however, that the end of formal colonial administration has ended colonial influence; it continues to operate through social and cultural mechanisms that shape how displaced communities are perceived and represented.

Regional evidence continues to confirm this ongoing colonial condition. In South Asia, East Africa, and the Caribbean, contemporary reports on inequality, land dispossession, and minority exclusion routinely trace their origins to colonial-era boundaries and labour systems rather than to purely contemporary causes. The expulsion of South Asian communities from Uganda in 1972, for instance, remains a frequently cited example of how colonial-era migration and racialized economic hierarchies produced vulnerabilities that erupted into displacement long after independence. Such cases illustrate that the postcolonial nation-state often inherited, rather than dismantled, the racial and economic logics established under empire, leaving diasporic minorities exposed to renewed cycles of exclusion.

These patterns are not confined to a single region. Contemporary human rights and migration reporting across formerly colonized states continues to document how colonial-era racial hierarchies persist in citizenship law, land ownership, and access to political power, particularly for communities whose ancestors were themselves relocated under colonial labour regimes. This persistence demonstrates why postcolonial scholarship treats colonialism as the central and ongoing problem underlying contemporary displacement, rather than as a historical backdrop to it.

These continuing legacies have contributed to the expansion of diasporic communities worldwide. Diaspora has become a defining condition of the postcolonial world, representing far more than geographical movement. It embodies emotional, cultural, and historical experiences of displacement and settlement across multiple locations, producing identities that remain fluid rather than fixed. Scholars such as Hall (1990) and Brah (1996) argue that diasporic identities are continually reconstructed through memory and social interaction rather than inherited as stable essences, while Said's reflections on exile show that displacement produces consciousness shaped by multiple cultural affiliations (Said, 2000).

This complexity has made diaspora a significant subject within postcolonial literature. Literary narratives give voice to experiences that remain marginal within official historical accounts, foregrounding individual voices, family memory, and everyday experience rather than institutional record. As Said (1993) argues, narratives possess the power to contest dominant representations by enabling marginalized communities to reclaim authority over their own histories. Storytelling thus functions not merely as artistic expression but as cultural intervention through which displaced communities resist erasure and negotiate identities shaped by colonial history.

Among recent contributions to postcolonial fiction, Oza's (2023) *A History of Burning* occupies a significant place for its exploration of migration, displacement, and belonging across generations. The novel traces the movement of an Indian family from colonial India to East Africa and eventually to Canada, illustrating how successive generations inherit the emotional and cultural consequences of migration. Rather than privileging political events, Oza

emphasizes personal memory, intergenerational storytelling, and everyday survival, foregrounding perspectives that have remained largely absent from dominant narratives of empire.

Despite this growing scholarly interest, important aspects of the novel remain underexplored. Existing criticism has largely examined the novel through colonialism, displacement, intergenerational trauma, and cultural memory, but has given comparatively little attention to the narrative processes through which marginalized subjects articulate their own experiences. Limited attention has been devoted to how storytelling itself functions as narrative agency, allowing displaced communities to reclaim their voices and challenge dominant systems of representation. This gap is significant because the novel repeatedly demonstrates that memory, voice, and narration are central to identity across generations.

In response, this article investigates how *A History of Burning* represents diasporic identity and belonging through Said's concept of the "right to narrate." Rather than treating migration solely as physical movement, the study focuses on how storytelling enables displaced individuals to articulate experience, preserve memory, and negotiate identity across shifting geographical and historical contexts. The article argues that belonging is neither geographically fixed nor historically predetermined but emerges through the continuous interaction of memory, migration, and narrative.

To examine these concerns, the study employs Said's postcolonial perspective, particularly his concept of the "right to narrate," as its primary theoretical framework. Said's scholarship demonstrates that colonial power operated not only through political domination but through systems of representation that determined whose histories would be remembered. This perspective is especially relevant to Oza's novel, which repeatedly foregrounds voices situated at the margins of official colonial history while presenting displaced individuals as active narrators of their own experience rather than passive historical victims. Drawing on this framework, the article argues that *A History of Burning* transforms storytelling into narrative resistance through which displaced communities reclaim voice, negotiate belonging, and preserve collective memory across generations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 A History of Burning

Since its publication in 2023, *A History of Burning* has received considerable critical attention for its portrayal of colonialism, migration, displacement, and intergenerational memory. Although academic scholarship on the novel remains limited because of its recent publication, literary reviews and author interviews provide valuable insights into its historical significance and contribution to contemporary postcolonial literature. Existing criticism consistently recognizes the novel as an important intervention that recovers marginalized histories and foregrounds experiences frequently excluded from official historical narratives.

Walsh (2023), writing for The New York Times Book Review, describes *A History of Burning* as an ambitious historical novel that intertwines intimate family histories with the broader structures of colonialism and forced migration. According to Walsh, Oza reconstructs history through the experiences of ordinary people rather than political institutions, demonstrating how personal memories preserve voices often overlooked by official archives. Similarly, Kirkus Reviews (2023) characterizes the novel as a sweeping family saga that portrays displaced communities as active agents negotiating identity, belonging, and resilience despite repeated migration and exile.

The Asian Review of Books (2023) similarly observes that the novel recovers the neglected history of Ugandan Asians by transforming overlooked historical experiences into compelling

literary narratives. Likewise, Panofsky (2023), writing in the Literary Review of Canada, emphasizes that Oza presents colonialism not as a completed historical event but as an enduring force whose effects continue across generations through inherited memory, displacement, and cultural fragmentation.

Oza's own reflections reinforce these critical interpretations. In an interview with WBUR (2023), she explains that the novel was inspired by her family's experiences during the expulsion of Ugandan Asians and by her desire to recover histories absent from dominant historical discourse. Similarly, in an interview with Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU, 2023), Oza emphasizes that the novel explores the evolving meanings of home, identity, and belonging across generations of displaced communities. These authorial reflections demonstrate that *A History of Burning* deliberately positions storytelling as an act of historical recovery rather than simply a literary technique.

Collectively, existing criticism identifies colonial violence, migration, intergenerational trauma, cultural memory, and diasporic identity as the novel's central concerns. While these studies successfully establish Oza's contribution to contemporary postcolonial fiction, comparatively little attention has been devoted to storytelling itself as a form of narrative agency through which displaced communities reclaim authority over their own histories. This study addresses that gap by examining *A History of Burning* through Edward Said's concept of the right to narrate.

2.2 Diasporic Identity, Belonging, and Storytelling

Diasporic identity, belonging, and storytelling have become central concerns within postcolonial scholarship because they reveal the continuing consequences of colonialism, migration, and displacement. Rather than understanding identity as fixed or territorially determined, contemporary scholars argue that diasporic identities are continuously reconstructed through memory, cultural negotiation, and narrative. Consequently, storytelling functions not merely as literary expression but also as a means of preserving collective memory and sustaining cultural continuity.

Qabaha and Hamamra (2022), examining Edward Said's *Out of Place* alongside Fawaz Turki's *Exile's Return*, argue that autobiographical narration reflects the fragmented identities of displaced individuals who inhabit multiple linguistic and cultural worlds simultaneously. Their study demonstrates that storytelling enables displaced communities to reconstruct cultural continuity by preserving memories excluded from dominant national histories. Similarly, Qabaha (2022) contends that exile transforms belonging into an ongoing process of negotiation shaped by memory, cultural affiliation, and historical consciousness rather than geographical attachment alone.

Likewise, Ullah et al. (2022), analyzing Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, argue that migration intensifies tensions between assimilation and cultural preservation, producing identities characterized by hybridity and emotional in-betweenness. Their study further demonstrates that personal narratives enable displaced communities to negotiate belonging while maintaining connections with inherited cultural traditions despite political and social exclusion. Collectively, these studies establish that diasporic identity is fluid rather than fixed, while belonging emerges through memory, storytelling, and continuous cultural negotiation. They also demonstrate that narrative serves as an alternative archive through which displaced communities preserve experiences frequently marginalized within official historical discourse. However, existing scholarship pays comparatively little attention to storytelling as an expression of Edward Said's concept of the right to narrate, particularly in relation to Janika Oza's *A History of Burning*. The present study extends this discussion by examining narration as

a political act through which diasporic communities reclaim historical agency and cultural belonging.

2.3 Storytelling in Asian, African, and American Postcolonial Literature

Comparative postcolonial literature demonstrates that storytelling functions as an important means through which marginalized communities preserve memory, negotiate identity, and challenge dominant historical narratives. Across Asian, African, and American literary traditions, writers portray migration, colonialism, and historical trauma as experiences that continue to shape collective memory across generations.

Within South Asian literature, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the identity struggles of a Bengali immigrant family in the United States, demonstrating that belonging is continuously negotiated between inherited traditions and contemporary cultural realities. Mishra (2007) argues that Lahiri portrays diasporic identity as a condition of perpetual "in-betweenness," while Banerjee (2008) observes that family memory and naming practices become significant mechanisms for preserving cultural identity across generations.

African postcolonial literature similarly presents storytelling as resistance against colonial erasure. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* reconstructs Kenyan history through multiple voices, illustrating how colonial violence continues to shape postcolonial identities long after political independence. Gikandi (2000) argues that the novel restores marginalized historical perspectives, whereas Ogude (1999) maintains that its fragmented narrative challenges colonial historiography by allowing suppressed memories to re-enter cultural consciousness.

Comparable concerns appear in American literature through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which portrays slavery as a historical trauma transmitted through memory across generations rather than confined to the past. Caruth (1996) explains that Morrison presents trauma as an enduring psychological inheritance, while Krumholz (1992) argues that the novel rewrites suppressed histories by transforming literature into an alternative historical archive through storytelling.

Together, these works demonstrate that storytelling functions as a powerful means of preserving cultural memory, negotiating identity, and resisting historical erasure. Although they examine different geographical and historical contexts, they collectively illustrate how narration enables marginalized communities to reclaim histories omitted from dominant discourse. Nevertheless, comparatively little scholarship has explored these concerns through Edward Said's concept of the right to narrate, particularly in relation to Janika Oza's *A History of Burning*. This study builds upon these discussions by investigating storytelling as a form of narrative resistance through which diasporic communities reclaim historical visibility and cultural agency.

2.4 Research Gap

Existing studies have extensively explored colonialism, migration, diasporic identity, cultural memory, and intergenerational trauma in postcolonial literature. Similarly, the limited criticism on *A History of Burning* has primarily focused on its historical scope, colonial legacies, and representation of displacement. However, comparatively little attention has been given to storytelling itself as a form of narrative resistance through which displaced communities reclaim agency over their histories. More importantly, the novel has not yet been examined through Edward Said's concept of the right to narrate to investigate how narration enables diasporic communities to preserve collective memory, negotiate identity, and reconstruct belonging across generations. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating that storytelling functions not merely as a literary device but as a postcolonial act of reclaiming history and resisting historical erasure.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Edward Said and Postcolonial Discourse

Postcolonial theory emerged as a response to the cultural and ideological legacies of European imperialism. Rather than treating colonialism solely as a historical or political phenomenon, postcolonial criticism examines how imperial ideologies continue to shape perceptions of identity, history, culture, and representation long after the end of formal colonial rule (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Within this framework, literature occupies a central position because it not only reflects social realities but also participates in constructing and contesting dominant meanings. Edward Said remains one of the most influential scholars in postcolonial studies. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said argues that Western knowledge about the East was never politically neutral but functioned as a discourse that justified imperial domination. Through literature, travel writing, education, and historical scholarship, the Orient was represented as irrational, passive, exotic, and inferior, while Europe was constructed as rational, civilized, and superior (Said, 1978). These representations legitimized colonial authority by naturalizing unequal relations of power. Said's intervention marked a significant departure from traditional literary criticism by emphasizing that representation itself constitutes an exercise of power. Literary texts do not merely reflect reality; rather, they participate in determining whose experiences become visible and whose voices remain unheard. According to Said (1978), discourse is inseparable from power because knowledge about the Orient was produced within colonial structures that simultaneously created the very reality they claimed to describe. Consequently, literature becomes an important site of resistance where dominant representations can be questioned and marginalized voices recovered. This understanding of representation as a political act provides the theoretical foundation for Said's later concept of the right to narrate, which extends postcolonial inquiry from representation to narrative authority.

3.2 The Right to Narrate

Among Edward Said's most significant contributions to postcolonial thought is the concept of the right to narrate, which emphasizes the importance of allowing marginalized communities to represent their own experiences instead of having their histories constructed through dominant ideological discourse. Although the phrase is most closely associated with Said's later writings, its intellectual foundation lies in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), where he argues that imperialism was sustained not only through military occupation but also through control over cultural production and historical narration (Said, 1993). Colonial powers determined whose histories deserved recognition and whose experiences remained invisible; therefore, resistance requires reclaiming the authority to tell one's own story.

For Said, narration is never politically neutral. Every narrative is produced within specific historical and ideological contexts, and because narratives construct knowledge, they also participate in relations of power (Said, 1993). Official colonial histories frequently celebrated imperial expansion while silencing the experiences of colonized peoples, producing an imbalance that enabled empire to define both itself and those it governed. As Said (1993) famously argues, imperialism operates through "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging," making storytelling itself a site of political struggle. Communities denied the opportunity to narrate their own experiences remain excluded from historical recognition regardless of their actual role in history.

Storytelling therefore extends beyond literary expression to become a means of resisting historical erasure. Through personal testimony, oral traditions, memoirs, and fiction, marginalized communities construct alternative archives that preserve perspectives excluded from official historiography (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Narrative authority is inseparable from the

politics of representation because colonial discourse frequently reduced colonized societies to stereotypes that served imperial interests. Said insists that authentic representation must emerge from lived experience rather than external imposition, making narrative authority both an ethical and political responsibility (Said, 1978; Said, 1993).

Narration is equally connected with collective memory. Historical consciousness is preserved not only through official documents but also through stories transmitted across generations, cultural traditions, and shared experiences. Such narratives preserve emotional and cultural truths that institutional records frequently overlook, enabling displaced communities to maintain continuity with their past despite migration, exile, or political disruption (Said, 2000). The right to narrate therefore challenges the conventional distinction between history and literature by demonstrating that fiction can recover everyday experiences, memories, and identities often absent from official historical accounts.

Importantly, Said does not advocate replacing one dominant narrative with another. Rather, he calls for the recognition of multiple and intersecting histories that reflect the complexity of human experience (Said, 1993). The right to narrate thus provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between storytelling, representation, memory, and power. Within this perspective, narration becomes an act of resistance, historical recovery, and self-definition, forming the central theoretical foundation of the present study.

3.3 Narrative, Representation, and Rhetorical Agency

Within postcolonial criticism, narrative is understood not merely as a literary technique but as a cultural practice through which meaning is produced, history is interpreted, and identity is negotiated. Rather than simply recording events, narratives shape collective memory by determining what is remembered, forgotten, or marginalized. Consequently, storytelling functions as a rhetorical act that constructs particular understandings of the past rather than presenting history as objective or fixed (Said, 1978).

Representation occupies a central place within this process because narratives are never ideologically neutral. According to Said (1978), representation is inseparable from structures of power, as dominant institutions often produce images of marginalized communities that reinforce political and cultural hierarchies. Colonial discourse, for instance, portrayed colonized peoples through stereotypes that justified imperial domination while excluding their own perspectives. Literature therefore becomes an important space where such representations can be questioned and alternative perspectives articulated.

Closely connected to representation is the concept of rhetorical agency, which refers to the ability of individuals and communities to communicate their experiences in ways that influence public understanding and cultural meaning. Within postcolonial contexts, rhetorical agency extends beyond the ability to speak; it encompasses the authority to define one's own identity, interpret history, and challenge externally imposed narratives (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Communities historically marginalized by colonial discourse often experience rhetorical exclusion, whereby their experiences are either ignored or represented by others. Recovering rhetorical agency therefore becomes essential to reclaiming intellectual and cultural autonomy. Narrative agency similarly enables marginalized individuals to move from passive subjects of history to active interpreters of their own experiences. Colonial narratives frequently positioned colonized peoples as objects of observation rather than historical actors. Storytelling challenges this imbalance by restoring voice to those excluded from official histories and by preserving memories transmitted through personal recollection, family narratives, and cultural traditions. In this way, narrative functions not only as artistic expression but also as a means of historical recovery and cultural resistance (Said, 1993).

Ultimately, storytelling produces counter-narratives that broaden historical understanding by incorporating voices long excluded from dominant discourse. Rather than replacing one authoritative history with another, these narratives create space for multiple perspectives that reflect the complexity of historical experience. Narrative, representation, and rhetorical agency therefore work together to reconstruct cultural identity, demonstrating that identity is shaped not only by geography or citizenship but also by the stories communities preserve and transmit across generations.

3.4 Diasporic Identity and Belonging

Diasporic identity occupies a central position in postcolonial studies because it reflects the continuing effects of colonialism, migration, and displacement on individual and collective identities. Unlike essentialist perspectives that regard identity as fixed and rooted in a single geographical origin, postcolonial theory understands identity as dynamic and continuously reconstructed through historical experience, cultural interaction, and migration (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

Edward Said rejects notions of cultural purity, arguing that identities are shaped through continuous encounters between different cultures rather than inherited as stable or homogeneous categories. As he observes, “no one today is purely one thing” (Said, 1993), emphasizing that cultural identities are relational, fluid, and historically constructed. This perspective challenges rigid binaries such as East and West, native and foreign, or colonizer and colonized, highlighting instead the interconnected nature of cultures.

Migration fundamentally reshapes how individuals understand themselves by disrupting established relationships with homeland, language, and community. Said, however, does not interpret displacement solely as cultural loss. Rather, exile creates opportunities for critical reflection by enabling individuals to inhabit multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. In *Reflections on Exile* (2000), Said describes exile as both a painful condition of separation and a distinctive intellectual position that encourages broader perspectives on culture, identity, and belonging (Said, 2000).

Within diasporic communities, belonging extends beyond legal citizenship or physical residence. Instead, it represents an evolving emotional and historical relationship maintained through memory, family histories, cultural traditions, and storytelling. Memory plays a particularly significant role by preserving continuity between generations and allowing displaced communities to sustain connections with their cultural heritage despite geographical separation. Consequently, belonging becomes plural rather than singular, enabling individuals to maintain emotional attachments to multiple cultural spaces simultaneously.

From Said's perspective, diasporic identity should therefore be understood not simply as fragmentation but as a continuous process of negotiation shaped by colonial histories, migration, memory, and representation. Identity and belonging emerge through narrative practices that preserve collective memory while enabling displaced communities to reinterpret their historical experiences. These concepts provide the theoretical lens through which the present study examines how *A History of Burning* represents storytelling as a means of negotiating diasporic identity and reclaiming historical agency.

4 Analysis

4.1 Overview of the Novel

Janika Oza's *A History of Burning* (2023) is a multigenerational historical novel chronicling the journey of an Indian diasporic family from colonial India to East Africa and later Canada, against the backdrop of British colonialism and its aftermath. Beginning with a young labourer's migration to East Africa, the narrative traces experiences of colonial exploitation, displacement,

racial discrimination, exile, and resettlement across four generations. Through multiple voices and interconnected family histories, the novel foregrounds memory, storytelling, and intergenerational inheritance in preserving experiences absent from official history. Its fragmented and polyphonic structure reflects the complexities of diasporic existence.

4.2 The Right to Narrate and the Recovery of Marginalized Voices

A History of Burning engages Said's postcolonial thought through its recovery of voices historically absent from official accounts of empire. Rather than recounting colonial history from the perspective of institutions, Oza shifts narrative focus toward ordinary individuals whose lives were shaped by colonial expansion but who rarely entered the historical archive. Said argues that imperialism functioned through the production of knowledge as much as military occupation, since colonial discourse possessed the authority to determine whose histories deserved preservation (Said, 1993); the right to narrate thus emphasizes that marginalized communities must reclaim the authority to tell their own stories.

The novel embodies this from its opening chapters, centering Pirbhai, an ordinary young labourer recruited to work on the Uganda Railway, rather than celebrated colonial administrators. The dehumanizing nature of colonial administration is captured in the observation that “men were counted, not remembered” (Oza, 2023, p. 21), colonial bureaucracy reduced labourers to numerical units of productivity. Oza reverses this by reconstructing the emotional realities official archives fail to record, presenting Pirbhai as a son, husband, and migrant whose hopes and losses become central rather than incidental to the narrative.

Said's theory of representation illuminates the political significance of this choice: colonial narratives typically portrayed colonized populations as passive objects rather than active historical subjects (Said, 1978), and Oza directly challenges this hierarchy by allowing displaced individuals to narrate their own experience from within, rather than being spoken about from outside. While colonial history frequently commemorates the railway as an engineering achievement, the novel exposes the human cost sustaining that achievement, redirecting attention from the monument to the labourers who built it.

The novel further extends historical recovery beyond major political events to everyday experience family conversation, grief, migration, inherited memory that rarely appears in official record. As Pirbhai reflects on his uncertain future, his journey becomes “a journey begun without belonging and without return” (Oza, 2023, p. 26), illustrating that migration under colonial rule represents a rupture in identity and belonging rather than mere geographical or economic movement. Family stories and oral tradition thus become alternative archives preserving emotional truths that cannot be institutionalized, ensuring histories of labour and displacement are not erased. Through this recovery of voice, the novel establishes the foundation for its subsequent exploration of identity, belonging, and memory.

4.3 Storytelling as a Site of Diasporic Identity Formation

Alongside recovering marginalized histories, the novel presents narration as the process through which diasporic identity is constructed and sustained across generations. Said rejects essentialist notions of identity, observing that “no one today is purely one thing” (Said, 1993, p. 336), a principle central to Oza's novel, where identity emerges through memory and storytelling rather than stable geographical boundaries.

Characters repeatedly return to inherited stories to understand both origin and present circumstance, so that identity is determined not by birthplace but by the stories circulating within the family. This is especially significant for younger generations whose relationship with the past is mediated entirely through inherited narrative. Latika's engagement with family

history illustrates this: reconstructing fragmented recollections, she realizes that “everyone remembered it differently, as if the truth had been broken into pieces” (Oza, 2023, p. 188) identity is in this sense assembled from multiple, incomplete perspectives rather than a single authoritative account.

Because colonial discourse privileged official record while silencing colonized voices, personal narrative becomes an alternative site of historical legitimacy (Said, 1993); Oza's novel consistently privileges these accounts over institutional history. The movement from India to East Africa to Canada exposes generations to changing environments, yet storytelling bridges these temporal and spatial distances, allowing cultural identity to survive migration. This process is collective rather than individual: each generation contributes new experience while inheriting the last, producing identity that is relational rather than solitary, and resisting external classification by race or nationality that reduces complex experience to simplified labels. Because storytelling itself is never complete, identity in the novel remains open to reinterpretation rather than fixed by origin narrative accordingly becomes not only a record of diasporic experience but the very process through which that identity is imagined and sustained.

4.4 Negotiating Belonging across Generations

Belonging is one of the novel's central concerns, and Oza demonstrates that home is neither a permanent location nor a stable emotional condition but an ongoing negotiation shaped by migration, displacement, and inherited memory. Said's reflections on exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (Said, 2000, p. 173) illuminate this condition: displaced communities inhabit multiple cultural spaces simultaneously, and belonging becomes an ongoing negotiation rather than a final destination.

This becomes visible through Pirbhai's migration from India to East Africa, which distances him from his homeland without guaranteeing acceptance in colonial society, leaving him fully belonging to neither place; Oza captures this in the observation that “he carried home inside him, even when he no longer knew where home was” (Oza, 2023, p. 84). This uncertainty does not disappear with time: children and grandchildren inherit the emotional consequences of displacement without direct experience of migration, their relationship to homeland mediated through imagination and inherited narrative. Latika's search for belonging exemplifies this, as she recognizes that “the past did not stay buried; it travelled with them” (Oza, 2023, p. 198), belonging cannot be established through settlement alone because historical experience continues shaping present identity.

Oza also shows that belonging is shaped by racial discrimination and political exclusion: the family's forced displacement from Uganda illustrates how belonging can be abruptly disrupted by state policy and racialized nationalism, revealing that legal residence and economic contribution alone cannot guarantee social acceptance. Through this episode, the novel critiques narrow definitions of national identity that exclude migrants despite generations of residence, showing that belonging remains contingent upon political and cultural recognition that is frequently denied to minority communities. Nevertheless, the novel refuses to portray belonging solely as loss; Kiya's recognition that “their story was not only theirs it belonged to many others who had lived the same silence” (Oza, 2023, p. 241) expands belonging beyond the family to a broader diasporic community shaped by shared displacement. Belonging therefore emerges through shared historical experience and storytelling rather than territorial ownership, sustained by the enduring capacity of individuals to preserve cultural continuity while negotiating changing historical realities.

4.5 Narrative Agency, Memory, and Cultural Continuity

The novel's culmination lies in its representation of storytelling as an enduring form of narrative agency sustaining cultural continuity across generations. Said's concept of the right to narrate is especially significant here, positioning narrative as an ethical response to historical exclusion that allows the silenced to become active producers rather than passive subjects of history (Said, 1993).

Memory in the novel is a living rather than static phenomenon, surviving through continuous reinterpretation rather than complete archival record, reflected in the observation that "the past did not stay buried; it travelled with them" (Oza, 2023, p. 198). Because official archives rarely record the emotional realities of displacement, the novel presents memory as an alternative archive capable of preserving what formal documentation cannot capture. This depends on intergenerational transmission: each generation inherits fragments of memory while contributing new experience, and Latika's active reconstruction of family history exemplifies this responsibility toward the preservation of a past that might otherwise disappear.

The novel further rejects singular historical truth: its fragmented structure and multiple narrators reveal that different generations remember the same events differently, challenging colonial historiography's privileging of a single authoritative narrative. Narrative agency also extends beyond one family to symbolize the shared experience of countless migrants who endured colonial exploitation and displacement, making the right to narrate a collective rather than purely individual claim. This is captured in the recognition that "to tell the story was to refuse its disappearance" (Oza, 2023, p. 389) narration as an act of preservation and resistance that affirms the humanity of displaced communities and ensures that future generations inherit not only fact but the emotional realities of their collective past.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *A History of Burning* presents storytelling as a powerful form of postcolonial resistance through which diasporic communities reclaim voice, preserve collective memory, and negotiate identity and belonging across generations. Examined through Edward Said's concept of the right to narrate, the novel challenges dominant historical narratives by foregrounding the lived experiences of displaced communities often excluded from official histories and by illustrating how personal and familial narratives function as alternative archives that resist historical erasure. By applying Said's framework to Oza's novel, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on contemporary diasporic fiction by highlighting storytelling as a significant form of narrative agency and historical recovery. These findings suggest that further comparative research on South Asian and African diasporic fiction could deepen our understanding of how the right to narrate operates across diverse postcolonial contexts and how storytelling continues to reshape identity, memory, and belonging in contemporary diasporic literature.

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