

When Things Remember: Material Archives, Thing Theory, and Cultural Memory in Amitav Ghosh's *the Hungry Tide* and Kiran Desai's *the Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

The renewed interest in materiality has transformed literary studies by questioning the assumption that objects merely reflect human experience. While Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* explains how ordinary objects acquire "thingness," comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which literary objects function as enduring archives of cultural memory. This paper addresses that gap by bringing *Thing Theory* into dialogue with Cultural Memory Studies to examine how material objects preserve histories that remain vulnerable to erasure in contemporary Indian fiction. Focusing on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), the study argues that notebooks, boats, rivers, houses, letters, and domestic artefacts do more than support narrative action; they remember. These material forms preserve ecological knowledge, colonial inheritances, migration histories, and affective experiences that escape institutional archives and official historiography. Drawing upon Bill Brown's concept of thingness together with the cultural memory theories of Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, and Pierre Nora, the paper develops the concept of material archives to demonstrate that memory in these novels is dispersed across relationships between people, places, and things. Rather than treating objects as symbolic motifs, the study foregrounds their narrative agency and archival function. In doing so, it proposes a new interpretative framework for reading contemporary Indian fiction, extending *Thing Theory* beyond ontology toward a sustained understanding of material objects as active custodians of cultural memory.

Keywords: Thing Theory, Cultural Memory, Material Culture, Contemporary Indian Fiction, Narrative Agency.

Introduction:

The relationship between human beings and material objects has undergone a significant transformation within contemporary literary and cultural studies. Traditionally, objects in literature were often interpreted as symbolic extensions of human emotions, social conditions, or psychological states. A house represented belonging, a letter signified communication, and a landscape reflected human experience. However, the emergence of the material turn in humanities has challenged this anthropocentric understanding by suggesting that objects possess meanings and histories beyond their symbolic associations. Material things are not merely passive elements within human narratives; they participate in the construction, preservation,

and transmission of cultural experiences. This shift has encouraged scholars to examine how objects interact with individuals, communities, and histories, opening new possibilities for understanding literature through the lens of materiality.

One of the significant contributions to this field is Bill Brown's concept of Thing Theory, which examines the moment when ordinary objects move beyond their functional purpose and reveal their deeper cultural significance. Brown argues that objects become "things" when they interrupt habitual human relationships with the material world and demand attention as independent entities. In literary texts, this perspective enables readers to examine how everyday objects carry traces of forgotten experiences, social relations, and historical transformations. Rather than functioning merely as metaphors, objects can become active participants in narratives, preserving memories that may not survive through conventional historical records.

This understanding of material agency becomes particularly relevant in the context of postcolonial literature, where histories of displacement, colonial domination, environmental destruction, and cultural loss often remain absent from official archives. In such contexts, memory is not always preserved through institutional documents or historical narratives; it survives through landscapes, domestic spaces, personal belongings, and everyday objects. Cultural Memory Studies, particularly the works of Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, and Pierre Nora, provides a valuable framework for examining these alternative forms of remembrance. Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory emphasizes the role of material and symbolic forms in preserving collective identities across generations. Similarly, Aleida Assmann highlights the importance of archives as spaces where societies negotiate what is remembered and what is forgotten. Pierre Nora's idea of "sites of memory" further demonstrates how physical locations become repositories of historical consciousness when living memory begins to disappear.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* provide significant examples of how contemporary Indian fiction represents material objects as carriers of cultural memory. Although these novels have received extensive critical attention from the perspectives of ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, migration studies, and identity politics, the archival function of material objects within these narratives remains comparatively underexplored. Existing criticism on *The Hungry Tide* frequently focuses on ecological concerns, human-nature relationships, displacement, and the marginalisation of communities in the Sundarbans. Similarly, scholarship on *The Inheritance of Loss* primarily examines colonial legacies, globalization, migration, and fractured identities in the Himalayan region. While these approaches have illuminated important aspects of both novels, limited attention has been given to how objects, spaces, and material forms themselves preserve histories and memories that challenge dominant narratives.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh presents the Sundarbans not merely as a geographical setting but as a living archive where ecological and human histories intersect. The river, boats, islands, and Nirmal's notebook preserve memories of migration, political violence, and ecological transformation. Particularly, the suppressed history of the Morichjhapi incident survives through fragmented material and narrative traces rather than through official historical documentation. The notebook becomes an alternative archive, recording experiences that have been marginalized within dominant historical accounts. Similarly, the river functions as a material witness, holding memories of human struggles, displacement, and environmental change. Through these elements, Ghosh demonstrates that memory exists not only in human consciousness but also within relationships between people, places, and things.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* similarly explores how material spaces and objects preserve the residues of colonial history and personal displacement. The Judge's house in Kalimpong becomes more than a physical structure; it embodies colonial aspirations, cultural alienation, and the emotional consequences of historical transitions. Domestic objects, books, photographs, and inherited belongings preserve traces of individual and collective experiences, revealing how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary identities. These material forms act as silent archives of loss, carrying memories of a past that continues to influence the present. Desai's novel therefore illustrates how everyday objects become repositories of cultural memory, especially in societies marked by colonial encounters and fragmented identities.

This paper argues that *The Hungry Tide* and *The Inheritance of Loss* transform material objects and landscapes into material archives—alternative repositories that preserve cultural memories beyond institutional histories. By bringing Bill Brown's Thing Theory into dialogue with Cultural Memory Studies, this study proposes that objects in these novels possess narrative agency and archival significance. Notebooks, boats, rivers, houses, letters, and domestic artefacts do not merely support human experiences; they actively participate in remembering, preserving, and transmitting histories. The concept of material archives developed in this paper expands the understanding of literary objects beyond symbolism and demonstrates how contemporary Indian fiction represents materiality as a dynamic force through which forgotten histories, ecological knowledge, and cultural identities continue to endure.

Through a comparative analysis of Ghosh's and Desai's novels, this study contributes to broader discussions of material culture, postcolonial memory, and contemporary Indian literature. It suggests that when official archives fail to preserve marginalized experiences, things themselves become witnesses, storytellers, and custodians of memory. In this way, literature reveals that remembrance is not limited to human minds or written histories; it is embedded within the material world that surrounds and sustains human existence.

Literature Review

The present study is ground in the interdisciplinary fields of Thing Theory, Cultural Memory Studies and Material Culture Studies, to examine how material objects operate as repositories of memory in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). While contemporary literary criticism has increasingly acknowledged the significance of materiality, existing scholarship on these novels has largely concentrated on themes of ecology, displacement, colonial inheritance, migration, and identity formation. The archival potential of objects as their ability to preserve, transmit, and challenge cultural memories that remains insufficiently examined. This study addresses this critical absence by proposing the concept of material archives, through which objects are understood as active participants in remembering rather than merely symbolic representations.

The turn toward materiality in the humanities has transformed approaches to literary objects by questioning the dominance of human-centered interpretations. Earlier literary criticism often considered objects primarily as metaphors or reflections of human emotions and social conditions. However, scholars associated with material culture studies posits that things possess their own histories, agencies, and cultural significance. Bill Brown's influential work *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) provides a foundation for this shift through his formulation of Thing Theory. Brown distinguishes between objects and things by suggesting that objects become "things" when their material presence interrupts ordinary human relationships with them and reveals meanings beyond functionality. This

approach enables literary studies to examine objects as active elements that participate in the construction of meaning and memory.

Further contributions to material studies have expanded the understanding of object agency. Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986) argues that objects acquire meanings through their social trajectories, suggesting that things possess biographies shaped by exchange, ownership, and historical contexts. Similarly, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) challenges anthropocentric perspectives by emphasizing the vitality and agency of non-human entities. These theoretical approaches offer productive frameworks for examining literary objects not as passive narrative devices but as material forms that preserve traces of cultural experiences.

The connection between materiality and memory is further developed through Cultural Memory Studies. Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory emphasises that societies preserve collective identities through symbolic and material forms such as texts, monuments, rituals, and cultural practices. Aleida Assmann extends this discussion by examining the relationship between memory, archives, and cultural preservation. She argues that archives are selective spaces that determine which histories are preserved and which are marginalised. This perspective is particularly relevant to postcolonial societies where official archives often fail to represent the experiences of displaced, indigenous, or socially marginalised communities. Pierre Nora's concept of "sites of memory" further demonstrates how physical spaces become repositories of collective remembrance when historical experiences are threatened by forgetting. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding literary objects and landscapes as alternative archives of cultural memory.

Existing scholarship on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has primarily focused on its ecological imagination, representation of the Sundarbans, and critique of human exploitation of vulnerable communities. Ecocritical studies have examined the novel's portrayal of the relationship between human beings and the non-human environment, while postcolonial readings have explored issues of displacement, refugee experiences, and the marginalization of communities affected by political decisions. The Morichjhapi episode has received considerable critical attention as a representation of historical injustice and state violence. However, these studies generally approach the river, landscape, and objects as ecological or symbolic elements rather than examining their function as material repositories of memory. The role of Nirmal's notebook, boats, and the Sundarbans landscape as carriers of suppressed histories and ecological knowledge remains underexplored.

Similarly, criticism on Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has largely examined themes of colonial legacy, globalization, migration, and cultural alienation. Scholars have interpreted the novel as an exploration of postcolonial identity and the psychological consequences of colonial domination. The Judge's house has been frequently discussed as a symbol of colonial inheritance, while Biju's migration narrative has been analysed through the lens of diaspora and global inequality. However, existing readings have rarely considered the material objects within the novel—such as domestic belongings, books, photographs, and inherited possessions—as active archives that preserve personal and historical memories. Consequently, the relationship between material culture and the transmission of colonial memory in the novel requires further critical attention.

Although Thing Theory and Cultural Memory Studies have individually contributed significantly to literary scholarship, their combined application to contemporary Indian fiction remains limited. Existing research on materiality often focuses on object agency, while memory studies frequently examine monuments, archives, and collective narratives. There is comparatively less exploration of how everyday

objects within literary narratives function simultaneously as material entities and memory archives. Furthermore, comparative studies of *The Hungry Tide* and *The Inheritance of Loss* have generally emphasized shared concerns of displacement, identity, and postcolonial experience but have not examined the parallel role of material forms in preserving fragmented histories.

Therefore, the primary research gap identified by this study is the absence of a sustained comparative analysis that investigates how ordinary objects, landscapes, and domestic spaces in contemporary Indian fiction operate as material archives of cultural memory. This research moves beyond viewing objects as symbols and argues that they possess narrative agency by preserving ecological knowledge, colonial histories, migration experiences, and marginalised memories. By bringing Brown's Thing Theory into dialogue with Assmann's and Nora's theories of memory, the study develops the concept of material archives as a new interpretative framework for understanding the relationship between materiality and remembrance in Indian literary contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Material Archives, Thing Theory, and Cultural Memory

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework combining Thing Theory and Cultural Memory Studies to examine how material objects preserve and transmit cultural memories in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. While Thing Theory draws attention to the agency and significance of material objects, Cultural Memory Studies explains how memories of communities and histories survive through material forms. Bringing these approaches together, this paper develops the concept of material archives to understand objects, landscapes, and spaces as repositories of memories that often remain outside official historical records.

The theoretical foundation of this research emerges from Bill Brown's formulation of Thing Theory in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003). Brown challenges the conventional understanding of objects as passive elements existing only for human use or symbolic representation. He argues that objects become "things" when they move beyond their ordinary functions and reveal their material presence and hidden associations. This distinction between objects and things allows literary criticism to examine how everyday materials acquire historical and cultural significance. A notebook, a house, or a boat may initially appear as ordinary objects, but within a literary narrative, they can preserve experiences, relationships, and histories that exceed their practical purposes.

Brown's approach is particularly relevant to postcolonial fiction, where material objects frequently carry traces of colonial encounters, displacement, and cultural transformation. Objects often survive when human memories are forgotten or when official narratives exclude certain experiences. Therefore, things can function as witnesses to histories that remain incomplete or suppressed. In the selected novels, material forms do not merely represent memory; they actively participate in the process of remembering.

Arjun Appadurai's concept of the social life of things further expands the understanding of material objects. In *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Appadurai argues that objects possess social histories shaped by their movement, ownership, and cultural contexts. The meaning of an object is not fixed but develops through its interactions with human societies. This perspective is useful for analysing the objects represented in *The Hungry Tide* and *The Inheritance of Loss*, where boats, personal belongings, and domestic spaces carry histories of migration, identity, and cultural change. Their significance emerges from the experiences attached to them rather than from their physical existence alone.

Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter also contributes to the understanding of material agency. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Bennett challenges human-centered approaches by

suggesting that non-human entities possess a capacity to influence human actions and experiences. Although objects do not possess human consciousness, they shape relationships, emotions, and memories. This idea helps explain why landscapes and material spaces in the selected novels function as active forces within the narratives rather than as passive backgrounds.

While Thing Theory explains the agency of material forms, Cultural Memory Studies provides the framework for understanding their role in preserving collective histories. Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory emphasizes that societies maintain their identities through shared symbols, texts, rituals, and material practices. Memory is therefore not limited to individual recollection; it exists through cultural forms that allow communities to preserve experiences across generations. Material objects become important because they provide continuity between past and present.

Aleida Assmann's work on memory and archives further strengthens this perspective. She argues that archives are not neutral collections of information; they involve processes of selection that determine which histories are preserved and which are marginalized. This insight is particularly significant in postcolonial contexts, where official archives may overlook the experiences of displaced and marginalized communities. Literary objects can therefore function as alternative archives by preserving memories that remain absent from institutional histories.

Pierre Nora's concept of "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) also contributes to this framework. Nora suggests that physical locations become repositories of collective memory when traditional forms of remembrance weaken. In literary narratives, landscapes and architectural spaces often preserve histories through their material presence. The Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* and the colonial house in *The Inheritance of Loss* can be understood as such memory sites, containing traces of ecological change, political conflict, and historical inheritance.

Based on these theoretical approaches, this research proposes the concept of material archives to describe the capacity of objects, spaces, and landscapes to preserve cultural memory. Unlike institutional archives, material archives are dispersed and embedded within everyday life. They do not preserve history through official documentation but through physical presence, emotional attachment, and accumulated experiences. They become especially significant in contexts where certain communities and histories have been excluded from dominant narratives.

In *The Hungry Tide*, material archives appear through Nirmal's notebook, boats, and the Sundarbans landscape, which preserve ecological knowledge and memories of political marginalization. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, houses, books, photographs, and inherited possessions retain memories of colonial influence, displacement, and personal loss. By examining these elements through the combined perspectives of Thing Theory and Cultural Memory Studies, this research argues that material forms are not merely symbols within literary narratives but active custodians of memory.

Thus, the concept of material archives provides a framework for understanding how contemporary Indian fiction represents memory as something embedded not only in human consciousness and written history but also in the material world itself.

Analysis

The Hungry Tide and *The Inheritance of Loss* present the past not as a completed historical moment but as an active force that continues to shape the lives of individuals and communities. Although the novels differ in geographical setting and thematic emphasis, both Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai explore how memories of displacement, colonialism, ecological transformation, and social marginalisation survive

beyond official historical records. These memories do not exist solely in human consciousness or institutional documentation; rather, they are embedded in the material world that outlives its human inhabitants. Rivers, landscapes, houses, notebooks, and everyday objects preserve experiences that official archives often overlook or suppress.

Read through Bill Brown's Thing Theory alongside the cultural memory frameworks of Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, and Pierre Nora, both novels reveal that material forms acquire significance when they transcend their practical function and become custodians of historical experience. This study therefore proposes the concept of material archives to explain how Ghosh and Desai relocate cultural memory from institutional repositories to the material environments of everyday life. Material forms do not simply preserve the past; they actively mediate how it is remembered, transmitted, and reinterpreted across generations.

The archival function of materiality is first established through space itself. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans is far more than the geographical setting of the narrative. Its rivers, islands, mangrove forests, and tidal rhythms constitute a living repository of migration, ecological struggle, and political violence. The landscape is characterised by constant change, yet this instability becomes the very condition through which historical experience endures. As the narrator observes, "Transformation is the rule of life" (Ghosh 43). The statement extends beyond ecological description to suggest that remembrance is sustained through continual renewal rather than permanence. Ghosh reinforces this historical consciousness when he remarks that "No place was so remote as to escape the flood of history" (Ghosh 51). Far from being an untouched wilderness, the Sundarbans emerges as a landscape where natural and political histories converge, bearing the imprint of migration, survival, and violence.

The historical significance of the Sundarbans becomes most evident in Ghosh's representation of the Morichjhapi tragedy. Although the violent eviction of Bengali refugees occupies only a marginal place in official historiography, the novel refuses to allow the event to disappear into institutional silence. Instead of relying on governmental records, Ghosh allows its memory to survive through the landscape and personal testimony. The rivers, islands, and forests become silent witnesses to a history that official narratives have largely ignored. Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire is particularly useful here. The Sundarbans functions as a site of memory because it preserves collective experience in the absence of adequate institutional recognition. The landscape itself becomes an alternative archive through which suppressed histories remain materially present.

While Ghosh locates memory within an ever-changing ecological landscape, Desai situates it in the apparent stillness of a decaying colonial house. The novel opens with the memorable observation, "Time might have died in the house that stood on the mountain ledge..." (Desai 5). From the opening page, *Cho Oyu* is established not merely as the setting of the narrative but as one of its principal custodians of memory. Its ageing walls, colonial architecture, neglected furniture, and silent interiors retain the emotional residue of empire long after colonial rule has formally ended. The house remembers before its inhabitants do, preserving histories of cultural alienation, social hierarchy, and emotional isolation that continue to shape the lives of the Judge and Sai. Like the Sundarbans, *Cho Oyu* functions as a material site where the past survives through physical space rather than through conscious recollection.

Despite their obvious differences, the Sundarbans and *Cho Oyu* perform remarkably similar narrative functions. One remembers through movement and ecological transformation; the other through stillness and endurance. Yet both challenge the authority of institutional archives by preserving histories that official narratives neglect. In *The Hungry Tide*, the landscape safeguards the memory of Morichjhapi and

the ecological knowledge of marginalised communities. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the colonial bungalow retains the psychological afterlife of empire, revealing how colonial history continues to inhabit everyday domestic life. Together, the novels demonstrate that historical consciousness is embedded in the environments people inhabit as much as in the stories they tell.

This reimagining of space resonates with Bill Brown's proposition that objects become "things" when they exceed their ordinary utility and acquire meanings accumulated through history. Neither the Sundarbans nor Cho Oyu functions merely as a landscape or a house; both emerge as historical agents that mediate the relationship between past and present. Their significance lies not in what they symbolise but in what they continue to do: they shape historical consciousness by carrying traces of earlier lives and experiences. Aleida Assmann's emphasis on the role of durable material forms in sustaining cultural memory further illuminates this process. However, Ghosh and Desai move beyond viewing materiality as passive storage. Rivers reshape the histories they carry, while houses continue to influence successive generations. Material forms therefore do not simply contain memory; they actively determine how the past is encountered and understood.

Seen from this perspective, the concept of material archives offers a productive way of reading both novels. Landscapes and domestic spaces are not symbolic backdrops or inert repositories of history. They function as active mediators that preserve ecological knowledge, colonial inheritances, and suppressed histories while shaping the consciousness of those who inhabit them. The archive is therefore no longer confined to official institutions or written documents but dispersed across the material world, where rivers, houses, and everyday spaces continue the work of remembrance long after human voices have fallen silent. While Nirmal's notebook records the history of Morichjhapi, its significance ultimately extends beyond the intentions of its author. Unlike human witnesses, material objects neither choose what to remember nor consciously decide what to forget; their testimony derives from endurance rather than intention. The notebook survives Nirmal's death, preserving narratives marginalised by official record-keeping, while Cho Oyu retains the emotional residue of colonialism regardless of whether its inhabitants acknowledge or understand its significance. In both novels, objects function as reluctant witnesses: they neither speak nor interpret the past, yet their persistent material presence bears silent testimony to experiences that exceed individual lifetimes. Their authority rests not on conscious recollection but on material continuity, allowing them to retain traces of history that human witnesses cannot always sustain.

The novels further distinguish between human memory and material memory, suggesting that each preserves the past through fundamentally different processes. Human recollection is shaped by emotion, loss, and selective remembrance, making it vulnerable to silence and forgetting. Material memory, by contrast, accumulates through continuity and endurance. Kanai reconstructs the history of Morichjhapi because Nirmal's notebook preserves what individual recollection alone cannot sustain, while Sai encounters the legacy of colonialism through the architecture, furnishings, and atmosphere of Cho Oyu despite never experiencing empire firsthand. In both narratives, the past survives not because individuals remember it perfectly but because material forms transmit historical experience across generations. Rather than replacing human memory, objects stabilise it by preserving cultural knowledge beyond the lifespan of living witnesses.

This capacity to sustain memory also gives material objects a broader historiographical significance. Ghosh and Desai present notebooks, houses, inherited possessions, and everyday objects as counter-archives that challenge the authority of institutional history. Whereas official archives are shaped by political priorities, ideological selection, and the logic of documentation, material archives retain the lived

experiences that often remain excluded from state records. Their archival value lies not in institutional recognition but in their ability to preserve ecological knowledge, colonial inheritances, and everyday histories within the material world itself. By relocating historical authority from official repositories to ordinary objects and places, both novels redefine the archive as a dispersed and democratic space of remembrance, demonstrating that some of the most enduring histories survive not in monuments or state documents but in the material environments that quietly outlive human lives.

While landscapes, notebooks, and domestic interiors preserve the traces of collective history, *The Hungry Tide* and *The Inheritance of Loss* ultimately reveal that material archives acquire their deepest significance through human experiences of displacement and belonging. In both novels, memory becomes most visible when characters are separated from the material environments that once defined their lives. The loss of familiar spaces transforms ordinary objects into powerful repositories of identity, suggesting that belonging is sustained not simply through emotional attachment but through continuous interaction with the material world. Ghosh and Desai thus move beyond viewing objects as static reminders of the past; instead, they demonstrate that things actively mediate the relationship between memory, place, and selfhood.

This relationship is most poignantly explored through Biju's experience of migration in *The Inheritance of Loss*. Living as an undocumented worker in New York, Biju inhabits a succession of restaurant kitchens, basements, and temporary shelters that deny him any lasting sense of home. His displacement is not expressed through grand reflections on exile but through the persistent recollection of ordinary domestic details. Desai writes, "He spent his time trying to remember the precise smell of the kitchen, the exact height of the counter, the weight of the heavy aluminum pots... He tried to remember the taste of the water at home" (Desai 101). The passage illustrates that memory is grounded in the sensory experience of material life. The remembered kitchen, utensils, and even the taste of water function as intimate archives through which Biju reconstructs a homeland that physical distance has rendered inaccessible. These are not valuable possessions in any conventional sense, yet they carry an emotional and cultural significance that no official document could preserve. Their absence reveals the extent to which identity depends upon material familiarity.

Brown's *Thing Theory* becomes particularly illuminating at this point. The aluminium pots, kitchen counter, and everyday utensils ordinarily remain unnoticed because they are integrated into habitual life. It is only through displacement that they emerge as "things" in Brown's sense—objects that confront the subject with meanings beyond their practical function. Migration disrupts the ordinary relationship between people and things, making the material world newly visible. Biju does not long for abstract ideas of nation or citizenship; he longs for the tactile realities of home. Memory is therefore experienced through sensory materiality rather than through ideological attachment. His recollections affirm Aleida Assmann's observation that cultural memory survives through material media capable of carrying shared experience across time and space. The migrant's archive is not a museum or a state repository but the remembered texture of everyday life.

A comparable relationship between materiality and belonging is developed in *The Hungry Tide*, though Ghosh situates it within ecological rather than domestic experience. For Fokir, the river is not simply a physical environment but an inherited world of knowledge accumulated through generations of lived engagement with the tide country. Boats, waterways, tides, and fishing practices embody forms of ecological memory that cannot be adequately documented within scientific or institutional discourse. Their significance lies in use rather than possession. Fokir's remarkable understanding of the river demonstrates

that memory is embedded within everyday interaction with material landscapes rather than preserved exclusively through written records. His knowledge survives because it has been transmitted through practice, observation, and intimate familiarity with the environment.

The contrast between Biju's remembered kitchen and Fokir's lived landscape reveals two complementary dimensions of material archives. Biju experiences home through absence; Fokir experiences it through continual presence. One reconstructs belonging from memory, while the other sustains belonging through uninterrupted engagement with place. Yet both characters depend upon material environments to negotiate identity. Domestic utensils and boats, kitchens and rivers, become equally significant because they preserve forms of knowledge and emotional attachment that language alone cannot communicate. Material archives are therefore not confined to exceptional objects or monumental spaces; they are constituted through the ordinary environments in which everyday life unfolds.

This understanding reshapes the relationship between memory and history in both novels by challenging the assumption that the past is preserved primarily through official documents, state records, or public monuments. Ghosh and Desai instead demonstrate that some of the most enduring histories survive within the material world. The memory of Morichjhapi persists through Nirmal's notebook and the landscape of the Sundarbans rather than through governmental recognition, while the emotional legacy of colonialism continues within Cho Oyu, its furniture, and inherited domestic routines long after imperial authority has disappeared. These material forms derive their archival significance from their capacity to outlive individual memory. Human recollection is fragile, selective, and vulnerable to forgetting, whereas objects endure across generations, carrying historical traces beyond the lives of those who first experienced them. Thus, Kanai inherits Nirmal's notebook without sharing his experiences; Sai inhabits Cho Oyu without witnessing colonial rule; Biju reconstructs home through the memory of utensils he no longer possesses; and Piya gradually learns to read the ecological archive embodied in Fokir's relationship with the river. In each case, the material world mediates between personal experience and historical consciousness, preserving forms of ecological, colonial, and migratory memory that institutional archives either overlook or fail to record. Objects therefore do not merely illustrate the past; they make remembrance possible by ensuring that lived experience remains accessible across generations.

Seen from this perspective, Ghosh and Desai extend Bill Brown's concept of thingness in a significant way. Brown is primarily concerned with the moment when objects become visible as "things" by exceeding their utilitarian function. These novels, however, demonstrate that things acquire a further dimension of agency by functioning as material archives that preserve memories beyond the lifespan of those who created or used them. Their agency lies not only in interrupting perception but also in sustaining cultural continuity by determining which histories remain available for reinterpretation and which experiences resist historical erasure.

By bringing Thing Theory into dialogue with Cultural Memory Studies, the concept of material archives proposed in this study redefines the role of objects in contemporary Indian fiction. Landscapes, houses, notebooks, boats, and domestic utensils are not merely symbolic accessories to human action; they emerge as enduring witnesses that preserve ecological knowledge, colonial inheritances, migration histories, and intimate emotional experiences. Their significance lies not simply in representing the past but in mediating its transmission across generations, ensuring that lived experience remains accessible beyond individual memory. Ghosh and Desai thus invite readers to recognise that memory is never exclusively mental or textual but fundamentally material, embedded within the ordinary environments and objects that quietly outlive human lives. The archive, therefore, is no longer confined to institutional repositories; it is

dispersed across the material world, where things continue to shape historical consciousness through their persistent work of remembrance.

Conclusion: Material Archives and the Persistence of Memory in Contemporary Indian Fiction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* demonstrate that memory exists beyond human recollection and official historical records. Through landscapes, houses, notebooks, boats, and inherited objects, both novels reveal how material forms preserve histories that remain vulnerable to disappearance. This study has argued that these material forms function as archives of memory, carrying traces of ecological transformation, colonial inheritance, migration, and personal loss. By bringing Bill Brown's Thing Theory into conversation with Cultural Memory Studies, the analysis shows that objects in these novels are not merely symbolic representations but active participants in the preservation of history. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans and Nirmal's notebook preserve subaltern and ecological memories that challenge dominant historical narratives. The landscape itself becomes a witness to displacement, political violence, and human adaptation. In contrast, *The Inheritance of Loss* presents material archives through Cho Oyu and inherited possessions, revealing how colonial histories continue to influence identities and relationships in the postcolonial world.

The comparative study highlights that while Ghosh focuses on ecological and collective memories, Desai explores colonial and personal memories, yet both writers challenge the limitations of institutional archives. Their novels suggest that objects and spaces retain experiences that official histories often overlook. The concept of material archives therefore provides a valuable framework for understanding how contemporary Indian fiction represents the relationship between memory, materiality, and identity. Therefore, these novels demonstrate that remembering is not only a human activity but also a material process. Things and places preserve the traces of forgotten experiences, allowing suppressed histories to remain visible. By presenting objects as custodians of cultural memory, Ghosh and Desai expand literary understandings of archives and offer new possibilities for interpreting the relationship between human lives and the material world.

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