

**CULTURAL MEMORY SITES AS THE OBJECTS OF
SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE FORMATION OF AUTO-
BIOGRAPHICAL SELF AND IDENTITY IN ‘IN OTHER
WORDS’ BY JHUMPA LAHIRI**

Written by Niranjana G & Bhuvaneshwari G***

**Research Scholar, VIT University, Chennai*

***Assistant Professor Senior, VIT University, Chennai*

ABSTRACT:

Memory studies is one of the emerging fields of sociology, but it is developed into an interdisciplinary framework with insights and developments from multiple disciplines. “Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field and Literature serves as one of the media of cultural memory as history, art and other forms of media”, said Astrid Erll. According to Maurice Halbwachs, there exists no individual memory but a collective memory. Our memory is the product of personal individual experiences informed by societal practices. According to recent developments in neurosciences and cognitive psychology, there are two types of memory systems episodic and semantic memory systems. Both the memory systems do not lie separately but utilize different sections of their brain for their effective functioning. Our subjective experiences which involve ourselves make up the Episodic memory system and these experiences help in establishing the identity of the self culturally conditioned by time and space. Also, it contributes to the dynamicity of the Episodic memory which in turn leads to the evolving auto-biographical self. This study involves investigating how the physically and culturally conditioned Episodic memory shapes the auto-biographical self and identity formation in the select autobiographical work ‘In other words’ by Jhumpa Lahiri. Also, this study explicates the potential of metaphors in encoding life

[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 1 – March 2021

© 2015-2021 All Rights Reserved by [The Law Brigade Publishers](#)

experiences through the select work. 'In other words' is the autobiographical narrative written by Jhumpa Lahiri in Italian and later translated into English.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - MEMORY STUDIES

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field, and its primary function involves exploring, remembering, and analyzing the past with the help of literature, art, history, archaeology, and media as the sites of memory. Literature serves as the symbolic representation of the different forms of memory. Astrid Erll. (Erll, 145)

'Memory proceeds selectively. From the abundance of events, processes, persons, and media of the past, it is only possible to remember very few elements. As Ernst Cassirer noted, every act of remembering is a 'creative and constructive process. It is not enough to pick up isolated data of our experience; we must recollect them, we must organize and synthesize them, and assemble them into a focus of thought' (Cassirer 1944, 51). The selected elements must be formed in a particular manner to become an object of memory. Such formative processes can be detected in many media and practices of memory; they are also – and primarily – found in literature'.

Literature is one of the media of memory that is primarily examined to understand the manifestations of different memories. (Individual, Communicative, and Cultural) Collective memory was the term coined by French sociologist, Maurice Halbwach which encompasses the individual memory formed as a result of communication and interaction. Halbwach argues that there exists no individual memory. According to the classification of memory by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, there exist two major types of memory, communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory refers to the oral manifestations of memory, intergenerational and has a life span of not more than eight years whereas Cultural Memory refers to the memory manifested in memorials, architectural sites, days of national importance, and commemorations. Cultural memory is also a form of Collective memory that is shared by a number of people and it informs their collective identity. Culture memory is institutionalized and ceremonized to reconstruct the collective past and identity.

Communicative memory is the memory that operates at the individual level, but it is influenced by the social and cultural frameworks. It aids in the formation of the autobiographical self and consequently our identity. The above classifications are based on the research in social sciences/sociology.

Autobiographical memory is made up of the personal memories of the life events accumulated starting from early to middle childhood. This memory is the subtype of Episodic memory as proposed by Endel Tulving and not all episodic memories are autobiographical memories. The specialty of autobiographical memory is its personal significance which accounts for its long-term retention. The language provides a mode of encoding and accessing memories (Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). Further, it may provide a unique modality for reinstating a memory that might otherwise be forgotten, through talking about it with others or ruminating on it alone, as in crib monologues (Nelson, 1989b). Our memories are primarily developed into meaningful experiences with the development of language. Language is the symbol system through which the experiences take shape and subsequently constrain our memories. Thus, the Self is constantly reconstructed in the realm of different social and cultural frameworks.

Neurological research affirms that Memories are the representations of our experiences of the past not the replication of the past events. The way an event is recalled or remembered is highly influenced by the goals and motives involved in the attempt to recall it. This affirms the reconstructive and interpretative nature of the event recalled and the distortive nature of memory.

This study explores how cultural memory becomes part of our subjective experience through the use of metaphors. In other words, how metaphors mediate the process of remembering with cultural memory sites.

ANALYSIS

Language forms the basis of our identity because it serves as the dominant social framework in which our memories are formed, shaped, and establish a sense of belonging. It helps in the expression of our subjective experiences. A language is not a stand-alone symbol system but an associated system of cultural and societal practices. Language mediates between our

experiences and our interpretation of them. It also influences how we represent experiences in our memory systems. Any individual memory is the resultant of the experiences informed by the social frameworks (social, religious, cultural) in which we were part of. Our social, religious, and cultural frameworks are the constituent parts of the language we speak. According to Endel Tulving, there are two major memory systems Episodic and Semantic. Episodic memory concerns with the subjective experiences of which we are part. This memory is the basis on which individuals construct their identity. Our auto-biographical self is constructed out of our experiences from Episodic memory and there exist multiple dimensions to our identity corresponding to different societal frameworks.

‘In other words’ is a work that reflects the workings of the episodic memory in action. Episodic memory concerns with the subjective experiences associated with the past event. The author’s lived experiences in learning a language is being written as an autobiographical narrative. The book is full of metaphors for the learning experience. This autobiographical narrative demonstrates the author’s longing for belonging/identity towards a language and culture. Being an immigrant and a Bengali in America, the author was caught in between the splitting identities. The evolving auto-biographical self of the author is shaped with respect to physically and culturally conditioned time and space.

Metaphor is memory’s encoding technique to store our experiences. Here the author’s experiences in learning the language refer to the Episodic memories of the author and the book does not reflect much about the features of the language learned but the subjective experiences of the author. This work is a true explication of the function of episodic memory in encoding the experiences and the retrieval of them.

The act of encoding the experiences plays an important aspect in the retrieval process. Our memory system very much works by the act of association. The better the encoding, the accurate the retrieval process. (Schacter, 58)

‘Semon, in contrast, argued that memory does not depend solely on the strength of associations. He contended that the likelihood of remembering also hinges on the ecphoric stimulus—the hint or cue that triggers recall—and how it is related to the engram, or memory trace, that was encoded initially.’

Memory cues and stimulus are also important in determining the success of the retrieval process and they can restore the far lost memory.

The choice of the metaphors used by the author is informed by the physical space. When the author is in Italy, she used lakes, bridges, and architecture of the city of Venice in encoding her struggles in learning Italian, whereas she used mountains and woods for encoding her experiences in America.

‘There was a woman... who wanted to be another person.’(Lahiri, 1007) The beginning sentence in the author’s first Italian story denotes the systematic shift in the dominant framework which yields to the formation of the self. The Italian language and the city alter the author’s consciousness, sensibilities and pre-informs her perception of the language. The physical space and the culture overcome the author’s fear and increase her chances to speak the language. The author’s longingness to establish a connection with the city accentuates her desire in writing in Italian in the sense of feeling connected. This is one example that explicates the convergence of the author’s individual memory with the collective identity in shaping the self of the author.

‘The disorientation I feel in Venice is similar to what possesses me when I write in Italian. In spite of the map of sestieri, I get lost.’

The cultural artifacts such as bridges in Venice, rivers, the Grand Canal, and the topography of the place merge with the author’s encoding of her learning experiences. Here the sites of cultural memory become part of the subjective experiences of the author.

The bridges in Venice, Italy becomes the memory representing the linguistic difficulties faced by the author in learning the language. Metaphors act as the mediation between the cultural

artifacts or cultural memories and the individual memories. Thus, it enables an individual memory to become part of a cultural memory but in the realm of personal experiences.

The action of crossing bridges was also juxtaposed with life and death. This reference to bridges as the passage of life attaches another dimension to the memory of bridges which might resonate with the bridges seen elsewhere in the world. A cultural artifact/site unique to a particular place can be used as an encoding mechanism in the realm of individual memory which can be evoked with similar objects later.

Language and the place act as the primary determiner in forming identity and a sense of belongingness to a culture. The author's Bengali origin, American life, and love for Italian portray the uncertainty of origin in the author's mind. Bengali, English, and Italian are the different memory frameworks in which the author's identity operates in the realm of topography. Her physical absence from Calcutta contributes to the nulling of a Bengali identity as her temporary travel from Italy to America contributes to her delusions in speaking Italian. Geographical location proves to be a part of the memory framework in the construction of autobiographical memories and identity.

The use of figurative language in literature enables the participation of memorials, buildings, and architecture in the realm of subjective experiences. (Lahiri, 1350)

CONCLUSION

'Even a novel drawn from reality, faithful to it, is not the truth, just as the image in the mirror is not a person in flesh and blood.'

Any recalling or remembering involves active reconstruction of the experience not true replication of the past event. When writing an autobiographical narrative, the recalling is influenced by many factors such as fear of exposing one's life, fear of reader's judgment, goals of writing the book, and the true intentions of the author. This is known as 'Autobiographical Angst' a term coined by Boyle to describe the state of the author. 'In other words' is the reflective

autobiography by the author to capture the emotions and feelings experienced by her while learning the language. This work is a true masterpiece of memory work and elucidates the multiple operational frameworks in the act of remembering and recalling.

The language, physical space and the culture associated with it conditions or prefigures our memory in encoding the subjective experiences. Also, the metaphors enable the participation of cultural artifacts and sites in the subjective experiences of the individual which leads to the participation in the Episodic memory. Throughout the book, the author uses the physical objects, places of importance in Italy as the sites for memory in the realm of individual experience. The cultural memory site thus becomes the part of the individual memory through the act of association. Hence, the site of cultural memory can also be part of the Episodic memory of the individual (subjective experiences) other than evoking the cultural memory of its significance. This intersection between the cultural memory and the individual/social memory resonates with different experiences and it varies according to the present condition of the individual recollecting it. The present always influences the nature and type of the memory reconstructed from the past.

REFERENCES

- Assmann, Aleida (2011) *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (New York: Cambridge University Press) (orig. *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, Munich: Beck 1999).
- Assmann, Jan (2011) *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) (orig. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich: Beck 1992.)
- Boym, Svetlana (2001) *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books).
- Burke, Peter (1989) 'History as Social Memory' in Thomas Butler (ed.) *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind* (New York: Blackwell), 97-113.

- Draaisma, D. (2000) *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas About the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Erll, Astrid (2011) *Memory in Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Erll, Astrid, and Ansgar Nünning (2010). *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter).
- Erll, Astrid and Ann Rigney, eds. (2009) *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter).
- Halbwachs, Maurice (1994 [1925]) *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, ed. by Gérard Namer (Paris: Albin Michel).
- Middleton, David and Derek Edwards, eds. (1990) *Collective Remembering* (London: Sage).
- Nora, Pierre (1989) 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*' trans. by Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, 26, 7-25.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. (1999) 'Collective Memory. The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory*, 17:3, 333-348.
- Radstone, Susannah and Bill Schwarz, eds. (2010) *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press).
- Baudrillard, Jane. "Simulacra and Simulation." University of Michigan Press, 1994
- Iser, Wolfgang. "Reading Process as Phenomenological approach".
- During, Simon. "The Cultural Studies Reader." Taylor and Francis, 2007
- Butler, Judith, "Gender Trouble." Routledge Classics, 2016
- Foucault, Michael. "The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the discourse on Language." Vintage, 1982
- Haden, Catherine, Fivush, Robyn. 'Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self.' Psychology Press; 1 edition (14 May 2003)

Lahiri, Jhumpa. 'In other words.' Penguin Random House India (19 January 2017)

Assmann, J. "Communicative and Cultural Memory" in Erll, A.; Nünning, A. (eds.), A companion to cultural memory studies, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2008.

Assmann, J., "Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory"

Tamm, M., "Semiotic Theory of Cultural Memory: In the Company of Juri Lotman" in The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies, Kattago, S (ed.), 2015, 127-141.

4.Connerton, P., "Seven types of forgetting", in Memory Studies 2008; 1; 59.



[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 1 – March 2021

© 2015-2021 All Rights Reserved by [The Law Brigade Publishers](#)