

Memory and Remembrance in Whereabouts by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Memories can be unreliable, yet at the same time they are absolutely essential to interacting with the world and functioning in any setting. It is the human ability to ‘remember’ specific episodes of our lives leading to the formation of our personal identity.

In a word, memory is complicated, as illustrated by the opening paragraph of John Sutton’s entry on memory in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Remembering is often suffused with emotion, and is closely involved in both extended affective states such as love and grief, and socially significant practices such as promising and commemorating. . . . Some memories are shaped by language, others by imagery. Much of our moral and social life depends on the peculiar ways in which we are embedded in time. (1)

Perhaps, We remember experiences and events which are not happening now and are manifested by expressing different states of emotions. There are different ways to remember a memory, it can be by emotions wrapped in language or any specific image in the mind. Therefore, memory depends on how we perceived specific events in the past. There are times when we remember, perceive and imagine certain events of the past. However, what could be the reasons behind the triumph of certain past events and others failing to imprint in our minds? Why are some phenomena selected from the past and represented while others are not given the same stature? Most importantly, why are some past experiences considered to explain the present happenings? How the

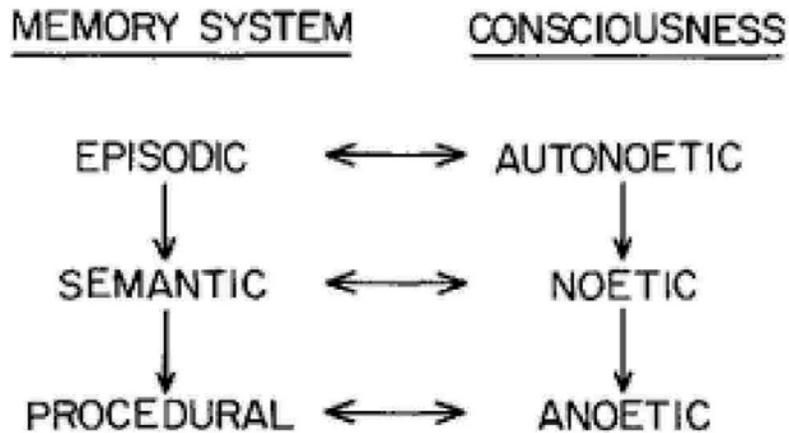
preferences in terms of memorising the past events happen? These are some of the questions which need authentication and validations and as David Lowenthal has observed, 'the locus of memory lies more readily in place than in time' (Sutton 180) bu language, others by imagery. Much of our moral and social life depends on the peculiar ways in which we are embedded in time (1).

In this regard, Jhumpa Lahiri clearly believes in the power of change. From addressing problems related to the immigrants to exemplifying urban s solitude of the characters, she has tried to focus on ordinary lives more. *Whereabouts* is the first novel written in Italian and later translated into English, and the blurb or the book cover has the description of the novel's themes as unravelling the themes of 'stasis and movement, between the need to belong and a refusal to form lasting ties'.

Notably, Jhumpa Lahiri moved to Rome in 2011 for a few years which transformed her work and her life. The novel may have autobiographical overtones as the unnamed narrator is in the middle age and She fell so deeply in love with Italian that she decided to write a book about her new language in her new language, which was translated into English by Ann Goldstein and published in the United States as *In Other Words* (2015).

Tulvig's theory of Memory Systems based on Consciousness

There are various theories which have emphasized on the relationship between consciousness, memory systems and remembering specific moments of life. In this regard, tulvig's view about the three memory systems and how these are characterized by consciousness need to be highlighted (Tulving 1985). He emphasizes that 'Procedural memory is associated with anoetic (non-knowing) consciousness, semantic memory with noetic (knowing) consciousness, and episodic memory with auto-noetic (self-knowing) consciousness' This arrangement is schematically depicted in Figure 1.



Note. An arrow means "implies."

Fig 1: Tulvig, Endel. Schematic Arrangement of Three Memory Systems and Three Kinds of Consciousness, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 40, No. 4, April 1985

Tulvig explains 'Autonoetic (self-knowing) consciousness is a necessary correlate of episodic memory. It allows an individual to become aware of his or her own identity and existence in a subjective time that extends from the past through the present to the future.'

Application of Tulvig's theory on the text:

The novel *Whereabouts* is a direct manifestation of the narrator's conscious effort to 'remember' specific episodes of her life and strategically making use of vignette Narrative to highlight either some characters, encounter with other characters, specific places and her peculiar experiences which makes the 'autonoetic' reading of the text more viable for the readers.

As the title suggests, a sense of place is a major theme; *Whereabouts* unfolds an episodic narrative-style where the titles of the chapters are tagged by where they occur — ranging from the straightforward "On the Street" and "At the Trattoria" to the more conceptual "In My Head" and "In August." to a specific time of the day -"At Dawn," "Upon Waking." On the brink of a big change in the

narrator's life, a chapter is titled "Nowhere." Moreover, the novel's chapterization seems to be like a closed structure reflecting the emotions of the narrator and the deliberate attempt to remember and forget, magnifying the concept of presence and absence as stated by the writer. This again emphasizes the point that the narrator's identity and existence is linked with the episodic manner of narrating her life's experiences.

Whereabouts offers a portrayal of a woman with a deep sense of solitude, exuberance and dread and trying hard to fill her quiet life with specific routine and rituals..She says, "Solitude: it's become my trade. As it requires a certain discipline, it's a condition I try to perfect."She is nothing if not disciplined" (Lahiri 26).

Apparently , She carefully fits her own writing around her teaching, which pays the bills; orders a different dish each day at the trattoria where she lunches alone; swims twice weekly at dinnertime; indulges in twice monthly Sunday manicures; lines up single tickets in advance for the upcoming season of concerts, for which she always dons a nice dress. Less enjoyable are her dutiful but distant twice monthly visits to her mother, a train and bus ride away. There are also occasional baptisms, weddings, small dinner parties, and visits with friends, though she often feels "separate from the group.

Memory and Remembrance

The novel emphasizes on the fact that there is no escape from the moments of the past and the physical places and the portrayal of the same is stimulating to the past incidents in everyone's life.

In one chapter 'On the sidewalk' which has a handwritten note on a small marble prague. She recollects how the memoir has been instigating the existence or the presence of the son in the mind of the trespasser and she says 'I suppose he dies in this very spot, on the sidewalk' (*Whereabouts* 3), 'There's no photograph of him. Above the candle, attached to the wall, there is a note from his mother, written by hand' (*Whereabouts* 4) and the chapter ends with the line ' Thinking of the mother just as much as the son. I keep walking, feeling slightly less alive' (*Whereabouts* 5). This episode claims the fact that the narrator

is recreating her existence, stance and identity as a woman and as a person being empathetic to others' loss.

. . . the intersecting communities of language, family, religion and social class that provide some of the specific group contexts through which individuals remember or recreate the past (Sutton 22).

Such social frameworks influence both what is remembered and how it is remembered, binding group members together in a shared 'community of memory' and contributing to an individual's sense of belonging to the group. Pursuing the spatial metaphor, we might conceive of this varied mnemonic terrain as a 'landscape of memory' – or, better, a 'cultural memoryscape'.

Memory and Identity based on specific subjective time frame

The novel traces the fact that the identity of the protagonist has been unravelled by offering the specific glimpses from her past. How the consciousness of the past is reflecting not only the complex emotional complexes but her deep loneliness in the city. She is trying hard to initiate, maintain and sustain in the relationships magnifying the role of memory and the consciousness to remember 'specific' moments from her past. The chapter "In the Bookstore" is a chance encounter with her former partner ("the only significant one"), which brings back painful memories of her eagerness to please him and take care of the sundry details of his life, culminating in the shocking revelation of his betrayal. The end of the relationship finally offers her a sense of liberation for the protagonist. She says

The city doesn't beckon or lend me a shoulder today. Maybe it knows I'm about to leave. The sun's dull disk defeats me; the dense sky is the same one that will carry me away. The vast and vaporous territory, lacking precise pathways, is all that binds us together now. But it never preserves our tracks. The sky, unlike the sea, never holds on to the people that pass through it. The sky contains nothing of our spirit, it doesn't care. Always shifting, altering its aspect from one moment to the next, it can't be defined. (Lahiri 27)

The protagonist's life is imbued with a pervasive sense of loss. There are painful memories of the sudden death of her father, the trauma from which she and her mother have never healed. The loss of the narrator's father happens at a time when she and her father were going to a different town to see a play, one of their few shared pleasures. Later in the novel, she visits her mother, who is absorbed in her own numerous physical ailments and does not ask the protagonist any questions about her life but focuses on the loss of an address book and brooch. In contrast to the emotional vacuum in her relationship with her mother, her visit to her father's crypt is filled with emotional intensity.

Towards the end of Jhumpa Lahiri's beautiful new novel, *Whereabouts*, the unnamed narrator, living in an unnamed city in Italy, finds herself in a peculiar double bind. On her last day in her hometown, before she leaves for a long fellowship in a place "across the border", she stumbles upon an uncanny sight. Walking down the familiar streets throbbing with life, she notices a woman dressed exactly like her, striding on her own towards an unknown destination. Suddenly, confronted by this image of her identical double, the narrator has an epiphany. "I'm me and someone else," she realises, "that I'm leaving and also staying."

Emotionally adrift and a flamboyant by temperament, she is rooted to her long-formed habits of living, being and thinking. The routine of buying the same sandwich from the same bistro, a weekly visit to her favourite stationery store, a coffee with a friend or the odd dinner party—though even among loving company, she retains her autonomy, gently but firmly protective of a boundary that no one can cross.

While the narrator frequently seems like more of an oddity than an everywoman, her story is populated with small and large burdens of daily existence that will to an extent be familiar to any reader. *Whereabouts* reminds us that there is no escape from the confines and consequences of physical place and time, but its portrayal of these elements is cathartic, stimulating and satisfying.

Episodic Memory and a Consciousness of Urban Solitude

Not only the narrative enhances the consciousness of being and becoming with the use of episodic pattern, but the novel also offers to portray the urban solitude in the garb of longing and desire. The specific memories of the past where she fills her loneliness with everyday routine and she writes “Solitude: it’s become my trade. As it requires a certain discipline, it’s a condition I try to perfect.” Many times, we follow discipline to forget the past or to escape some phases of life.

She is nothing if not disciplined. She carefully fits her own writing around her teaching, which pays the bills; orders a different dish each day at the trattoria where she lunches alone; swims twice weekly at dinnertime; indulges in twice monthly Sunday manicures; lines up single tickets in advance for the upcoming season of concerts, for which she always dons a nice dress. (Lahiri 32)

A recurrent theme is how heavy time can weigh when alone. She feels her isolation more sharply during what was meant to be a restorative break at a friend’s vacant country house, and notes, “Solitude demands a precise assessment of time, I’ve always understood this. It’s like the money in your wallet: you have to know how much time you need to kill, how much to spend before dinner, what’s left over before going to bed.” (Lahiri 43)

Memory and the Conscious Reflection of the Childhood

She reflects repeatedly on her unhappy childhood — laying blame on both parents, but especially bitter that her passive father never felt it was his business to protect her from her mother’s vicious rages. In “On the Couch,” she recalls her dissatisfying (and clearly unsuccessful) year of therapy: “Every session was like the start of a novel abandoned after the first chapter.”

‘Whereabouts’ is the literary equivalent of slow cooking; it demands patience.

We learn that her “spartan life” has included multiple lovers, many of them married or duplicitous. Her attraction to a friend’s husband provides a frisson of suspense as she wonders “what it would be like to take things a step further” than their “chaste, fleeting bond.”

Like many accustomed to their own sovereignty, this woman does not suffer fools gladly. She is easily annoyed by colleagues and strangers, including another dinner party guest at whom, to her mortification, she lashes out over a disagreement about a film.

However, the shifts between shadow and light, emptiness and fulfillment, irritation and enjoyment, and stasis and change carry us along as this hampered woman gradually resolves to “push past the barrier” that has long impeded her way in the world.

Works Cited

Sutton, John. “Memory.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Uri Nodelman and Colin Allen, 2010.