

## **THE SPECULATIVE MEMORY: CONTEXTUALISING MEMORY IN SPECULATIVE FICTION**

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**Sonal Dutt \* Dr. Parul Mishra \* \***

Reminiscing is inherently human. Missing the glory days of youth, remembering the loved ones who have passed away, regretting choices, or even the burden of choices and paths abandoned are all important facets of the human experience. These reflections are facilitated by memory. Memory is defined as the process of obtaining and retaining the information around us. It is a psychological process influenced by one's perception, knowledge, and emotional state at the time of 'creating the memory' along with all the contextual factors that we must consider while retrieving these memories. It has been studied in various ways across many disciplines like psychology, neuroscience, literature, and many more. Memory Studies is considered a multidisciplinary field that combines intellectual strands from literature, anthropology, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, and education (Roediger and Wertsch, 2008). It spans different domains and contributes uniquely to their respective discourse. Memory has also been an integral part of fiction and storytelling. It has been utilised as a theme, a plot device, a foundational element, and much more to further the narrative of a story. Movies the likes of *Memento* (2000), *Fifty First Dates* (2004), and *The Girl on the Train* (2021) as well as popular fiction novels such as *The Bourne Identity* (1980) by Robert Ludlum, *Before I Go to Sleep* (2011) by SJ Watson, *What Alice Forgot* (2009) by Liane Moriarty, etc., have made the trope of 'memory loss' prevalent in mainstream media. Many prolific writers such as Aristotle, John Locke, and Frances A. Yates as well as contemporary filmmakers and television directors like Christopher Nolan, M. Night Shyamalan, Michael Schur, etc., have all used memory to explore the intricacies of human life and morality.

Speculative fiction is, perhaps, the one genre that has optimised the use of memory and its tropes. Memory deletion as shown in the science fiction novel *The Invincible* (1964) by Stanislaw Lem, the comic and movie series *Men in Black* (1997-2019); memory modification as seen in the cult science fiction film *Blade Runner* (1982), the popular movie *Inception* (2010), the space adventure novel *Six Wakes* (2017) by Mur Lafferty; eidetic

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\* Ph.D Scholar, School of Liberal Arts, GD Goenka University, Gurugram, India

\* \* Associate Professor, School of Liberal Arts, GD Goenka University, Gurugram

memory as a superpower seen in popular fictional characters like Professor X (The X-Men comic and film series), Angel (Buffy the Vampire Slayer), Fox Mulder (The X-Files) etc., are some of the examples wherein the genre has employed memory in myriad ways. The stories in the genre strive to reshape and advance memory studies towards discussions of trauma, identity, history, etc., arising at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other such social categories. These stories often reflect the real sufferings of those subjugated to give their sufferings a voice, a platform.

Works in the speculative fiction genre transcend time, space, and science. They are stories of fantastical worlds where anything is possible. That is not to say that these works are completely removed from reality. Writers of the genre strive to build worlds that reflect the reality we live in. The genre uses elements of science fiction, fantasy, and such to amplify both the beauty and the ugly truth of the world. By giving it a fantastical setting and removing it from the biases of everyday life, the writers try to reinforce the truth about how pervasive and deep-rooted the systems of oppression are in society. Adding memory and memory studies into the mix has only helped strengthen the genre in creating more relevant and inclusive stories. Memory, in contemporary science fiction-both as a theme and as a structural element-is slowly becoming the site of a full-scale interrogation and re-evaluation of traditional accounts of human subjectivity (Smelik, 2009, pp. 52). Memories are small fragments which form a greater whole when interconnected. This whole can make up a person's identity, reiterate their trauma, reinforce their sense of belonging as well as become a part of their history; be it cultural or social. Not only personal but cultural and social identities are also intrinsically linked with memory. Each reminiscence is deeply influenced by an individual's distinct knowledge and perceptions of their and the world's reality. With time, memories can change when influenced by new experiences, due to the passage of time, change in perception, or the addition of new information. Considering its malleable nature, it would be true to say that memory is not merely a record of factual events rather it is a complex and overworking editor and interpreter of one's life experiences. Speculative fiction employs memory to closely study how memory affects the notions of identity, history, belonging, trauma, and much more.

Identity and memory have been thought to be closely linked by psychologists, philosophers, and writers-who always emphasise that memory plays an important role in shaping one's identity. Personal narratives-the stories we tell ourselves and others around us about who we are and what defines us-are all composed of memories of the past events that have happened to us and around us. Key life incidents that we remember and recount on various occasions all contribute to our sense of self-which is an ongoing and evolving

process. One of the widely talked about ideas around memory and identity comes from the English philosopher, John Locke (1632- 1704). In his work titled *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke propounded that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity and that a person's memory and identity are shaped by experience (Nimbalkar, 2011). By psychological continuity, Locke meant that there must be no gaps or accidents that would hinder the linearity of a person's memory. A break or gap would result in a collapse of personal identity. The person would lose all sense of self and ultimately would lose his identity, and self-worth. This idea has been widely explored in speculative fiction. The fantasy-comedy television series *The Good Place* (2016-2020) follows the lead Eleanor along with three other humans who find themselves in the Good Place, a reiteration of heaven, after their death. Eleanor knows she does not belong there but plans to earn her spot in heaven by improving and becoming a better human. Over time, the humans inadvertently start torturing each other and soon realise that they were in the Bad Place all along being experimented on by demons. Unfortunately for the humans, the demons wipe out their memory and restart the whole experiment; this happens thousands of times essentially trapping them in a loop where they lose all sense of their real self. Humans also lose their progress in trying to better themselves because their memories are not theirs anymore. They are in a constant fight over their identity and memories as they try to earn their place in heaven. The show repeatedly reiterates the ideology that a person's memory, experiences, and knowledge form a huge part of their self. Their memories are what makes them human. "Memories of past actions go towards constituting personal identity"(Klein and Nichols, 2012, pp. 677). This idea furthers the belief that a person's identity is centred around the memories that they have formed throughout their life; their sense of self and their memories run hand in hand.

Another very prominent work on identity and memory comes from the famous Japanese animation company, Studio Ghibli called *Spirited Away* (2001). The fantasy movie is about a little girl called Chihiro who along with her parents gets trapped in the spirit realm. To save her parents, who have now been turned into pigs, she strikes a deal with a witch to work and pay her parent's debt and in exchange gives away her name and essentially her freedom. Chihiro slowly starts losing her memories as her name, or rather her identity has been taken away from her. Her memory and identity are deeply connected. She needs to remember her name in order to be able to leave the spirit realm. The witch takes away her name and gives her a new one with the aim that Chihiro will forget who she really is and will never be able to escape the spirit realm. Even at the end, the witch gives Chihiro a final test to identify her parents to gain her freedom. The movie shows how intrinsically a person's

memories are tied to their and their loved one's identity.

The *Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* (2020) a fantasy novel by V.E. Schwab is the story of a girl who no one remembers. Addie was a poor girl in rural France in the year 1714 being married off against her will. To escape her fate, Addie strikes a deal with a being who promises her eternal life for as long as she wishes. Soon she realises the gravity of her mistake. The being did grant her immortality but he also placed a curse upon her. Anyone who encounters Addie will immediately forget about her existence. And it instantly disappears whenever she tries to leave a mark as proof of her existence. Dejected and in despair she spends her days in the hope that someday someone might remember her. Arkady Martine's science fiction novel *A Memory Called Empire* (2019) follows the protagonist Mahit Dzmare who is appointed as the new ambassador to the glorious imperial city, Teixiclaan. To help her assimilate into the foreign culture and life of the city, she is implanted with the memories of her predecessor who died mysteriously. But when the memories malfunction, all the knowledge and experience that she needs to fit in and perform her duties in the foreign society is lost forever. *Piranesi* (2020) a fantasy novel by Susanna Clarke is set in a parallel universe where a man lives inside the House, an immense never-ending building full of empty rooms and vestibules. The novel follows the protagonist who is documenting each day he spends in the House as he is gradually losing his memories. Piranesi is shown not remembering some of the entries he made in his journal. Interestingly, he also does not remember how he ended up at the House. The story captures the determination of a man who is slowly losing his memory to hold onto his identity and self. All these examples are a testament to how speculative fiction has employed memory and its tropes to enrich speculative narratives. The genre has become the seat for a large-scale investigation of how memory influences an individual's identity as well as how sometimes it is too easy to manipulate memory in order to distort a person's reality.

Memory must be seen as a complex cognitive process that is constantly being shaped by social interactions and the context in which they occur. Consequently, memory can be heavily influenced by social factors which include shared experiences, interpersonal relationships, cultural norms, and traditional values. Through these social interactions, a person can form memories-individually and as a collective-which, in turn, form shared recollections of past events and experiences. Such experiences shape and modify a group's perspective of their surroundings and how they perceive the world. On that account, memories play a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities which further influence social behaviours and interaction. "Identity is constructed largely from pieces of memory that are often socially constructed" (Hampton, 2012, p.277). In a social setting, culture and

tradition when performed by a group that shares history form a significant part of that group's identity. Additionally, a group's identity is fuelled by its culture which has long been a part of its history and been passed on from one generation to another through the process of memory. Sharing stories of their ancestors, folklore, and myths all form the memory of a group or community. Speculative fiction narratives often explore how collective memory and identity are interlinked and, in many ways, sustained by one another. Guy Gavriel Kay's fantasy novel *Tigana* (1990) touches upon the concept of collective memory and identity. The term 'collective memory' occurs extensively within history, culture, and even sociology:

Collective memory refers to complex social process in which a society or social group constructs and reproduces its relation to the past. CM mainly refers to those cultural practices and social knowledge about the past that influence emergence, transformation, and extinction of social identities. (Ijabs, 2014)

A society's culture, tradition, and history come together to form its cultural memory. Cultural memory is generational and passed down the lineage. It is a learned and repeated practice. Kay's novel follows the bid of a group of people defying a tyrant's rule. The nation of Tigana was cursed into oblivion, its name never to be heard by anyone who is not a native. After decades of cruelty, the people of Tigana rebel and start fighting to restore their kingdom to glory. The story reflects upon the evil of colonisation and how it is responsible for destroying the identity of a nation and its collective memory. *The Buried Giant* (2015) by British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro is a fantasy novel which follows an elderly Briton couple, Beatrice and Axl. Set in the Sub-Roman Britain (c. 5th century AD), it shows a world covered with dense fog that has been robbing the people of their memories. Axl and Beatrice, devoid of most of their life's recollections, have a feeling that they have a son and decide to find him and bring him back home. The story is about their journey of uncovering their identity and forging a path of self-discovery amidst a decaying country. This novel has been seen as an allegory about countries and their people forgetting their traumatic history and in turn, letting go of a significant part of their identity. Such speculative narratives showcase the complex relationship between collective memories and identity, wherein, an individual or a group's quest to uncover their 'lost memories' is an intricate process of them discovering as well as reiterating their own (or their collective) identity.

Another way memory and identity are informed is through the interference of trauma. Traumatic events have been seen to severely affect the memory process. Trauma is "generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world" (Balaev, 2018, p. 360).

Traumatic responses usually involve a person having a breakdown where they struggle to differentiate between their reality and the relentless memories of the trauma they suffered. Because the impact of the trauma is difficult to process, an individual finds it difficult to come to terms with what happened and how significantly it changed them. Psychology has extensively studied trauma and its effect on memory:

... memories of a traumatic event are characterized by very vivid recollections of the event including many sensory details and, at the same time, difficulties in facing the memories and in learning to put the details into coherent speech and chronological order. (Iffland and Neuner, 2016)

Trauma and its effect render a person incapable of distinguishing reality from their traumatic memories. Often the overstimulation from such memories results in a violent outburst. Speculative fiction has a long history of investigating trauma and how severely it can affect a person's identity and sense of being. The science fiction television series *Westworld* (2016-2022) portrays a dystopian version of Wild West American life. *Westworld* is a technological park where visitors interact with human-like androids. However, the androids do not realise the reality of their situation. They are programmed to believe that they are real humans just living life and interacting with other humans they encounter. These androids are often rebooted and their memories erased after a traumatic incident. The problems arise when the androids start malfunctioning; they become sentient and remember everything that happened to them. Fuelled by the trauma inflicted on them, the androids rebel and exact revenge on the humans. This series detailed how trauma and memory come together to reshape the identity of the victim. David Means' science fiction novel *Hystopia* (2016) deals with the destructive facet of trauma. A soldier, along with various other men like him, after returning from the Vietnam War undergoes a government procedure where all his traumatic memories of the war will be erased so that he can live a normal life. Unfortunately, not all these procedures succeed and the soldiers who were promised a peaceful life end up becoming more violent and a threat to the country. *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) by Richard Condon, which was also adapted into a film twice, is the story of the son of an influential political family in the US who is abducted, tortured, and then brainwashed into becoming an assassin. The man is haunted by the memories of his past but his trauma makes it impossible for him to distinguish his dream from reality. Octavia Butler's science fiction novel *Kindred* (1979) brings together time travel with slave narratives. The protagonist, Dana is constantly transported between her present life and a 19th-century plantation. She must constantly relive the trauma of slavery and sexual violence in order to ensure the safety of her ancestors. She slowly starts to lose her grip on her identity forcing her to

choose between her present and the past. This novel explores how trauma, gender, and race intersect. *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) a science fiction film follows Evan, who experiences frequent blackouts and memory loss as a result of some childhood trauma. Soon, he realises that he can travel back in time. Determined to change his present and regain his memories, he tries to correct the wrongs in his past. But each change he makes has devastating effects on his present. Another science fiction movie that deals with trauma and repressed memories is *Flatliners* (1990). A group of medical students explore the possibilities of near-death experiences hoping for some breakthrough. With these experiences, their past and traumatic memories start to resurface and wreak havoc on their present life. Speculative narratives-at the intersection of memory, identity, history, and trauma-aid us in understanding the complexity of the human condition. These stories help one make sense of individual or collective traumatic experiences as well as recognise the ways in which they influence and change our perceptions of reality, identity, and belonging. Consequently, one would be remiss to overlook the crucial role memory, trauma, and identity play in shaping the individual, generational, cultural, as well as political aspects of a society and community.

Speculative fiction works are consistent about exploring the interactions of memory with trauma and identity. Many popular culture writers, filmmakers, and artists have employed memory and memory studies to explore and understand the human condition. While the works in the genre might be fantastical, they are created in a way that reflects the harsh reality of our world. Identity and memory are intrinsically linked and have been explored throughout the genre in a myriad of ways. Trauma and its effects on memory have formed an important part of the discourse of speculative fiction. As human life gets more complex every day, the human notions of identity, trauma, memory, belonging, history, and such get more convoluted. Trying to study and understand these notions through a speculative lens has aided in a finer cognisance of the human condition.

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