

Performing Memory: Trauma and the Self in *The Miniaturist of Junagadh* and *Forget Me Not*

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Abstract

Theorizations on the subversive potential of memory to resurrect and recover lost history have been a central preoccupation for the poststructuralist as well as the postcolonial theorists alike. Judith Butler, in her groundbreaking work entitled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* contends gender to be a performance while looking at performativity as a “repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization.” (Butler xv) Such a performance facilitates the endorsement of specific brands of identity. Memory, with its cognitive apparatus and discursive extensions, like gender, is a performative category that informs and refashions human subjectivity. The simultaneity of remembering, forgetting and strategically dismembering experiences involve a complex mechanism that is the domain of neuroscience as much as it is a cultural phenomenon. As an immediate site of memory, the trope of the body, then, becomes a crucial marker that determines acts of remembrance and forgetting. Using contemporary scholarship from a wide range of disciplines, this paper will endeavor to map memory as a performative category as it relates to the larger ideological project of re(producing) identities in the context of Kaushal Oza’s *The Miniaturist of Junagadh* (2021) and Srijit Mukherji’s *Forget Me Not* (2021) from the *Ray* anthology.

Keywords: Memory, Performativity, Remembering, Cognitive, Subjectivity.

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The inscrutability associated with memory has intrigued and baffled scholars. As a term, it resists definition. Yadin Dudai defines memory as an "imprinting of past experience, be it physical, mental or both". (Dudai 11) Behavioral scientists had often linked memory with changes in the behavior of human beings but recent developments in neuroscience have grown past such readings. The repetitive quality of memory, its ability to be reproduced and reinterpreted, amplifies its sense of elasticity.

We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetrated. But precisely these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had. (Halbwachs 47)

Recent developments within the contemporary culture of Memory Studies has always addressed the "twilight status" (Huysen 3) of memory itself. Memory is always seen to be navigating contradictory forces- the material and the discursive, the internal and the external, the embodied and the extended. Memory can be seen as a fluid continuum of the past that seamlessly spills into the present, thereby problematizing time play. The temporal status of memory, then, as a function of human subjectivity, is marked by a characteristic duality.

Memory sits then at the crossroads of two directions in which experience extends: one axis stretches back towards the past and forward to an anticipated future; the other axis mobilises memory to inform our current actions in relation to the changing world around us. (Brown and Reavey 46)

The intersecting strands of Memory Studies and Humanities, in recent times, have interrogated monolithic grand narratives while unearthing the marginalized narratives from the cobwebs of history. Narratives, both literary as well as filmic, serve as powerful vehicles to explore historical as well as socio-cultural amnesia. In the words of Birgit Neumann, literary fictions as well as cinematic narrations "disseminate influential models of both individual and cultural memories." (Neumann 333) Cinema, as a cultural apparatus that consolidates and informs certain brands of dominant ideology, engages with varied kinds of representation in order to uphold and challenge "culturally prevailing notions of memory" (Neumann 336). Cinematic memory is a question of representation and the politics of it. Literary, as well as cinematic, representations have conferred agency on the apparently innocuous act of remembering to suggest how the process of remembering is a highly biased and selective activity. While reflecting on the complex cognitive mechanism of remembering, Siegfried J. Schmidt argues,

Remembering needs production which requires occasions, demands, and gratifications, which in turn are steered by cognitions, emotions, and moral orientations and which are specified in histories and discourses. Remembering needs performance, that is to say, narrations of remembrances, which make use of narrative schemata as modes of socially

acceptable production and performance of remembrances, of appropriate verbal instruments such as metaphors and pictures, and of optical symbolizations such as stereotypes or schematizations.”(Schmidt 194)

Remembering and forgetting are not defined by their contrastive nature but are closely interconnected activities. Thus the dynamics between recall and erasure is rooted in specific historical junctures. Closely related to the idea of remembering and forgetting is the concept of retrieval. Social customs and prohibitions act upon these cognitive components of memory in order to manipulate retrievals- both in case of the individual as well as in the national consciousness. The social, political and ideological investments determine the modes through which memory must be performed. The mainstream consciousness filters out those memories that are inadmissible by the social standards.

Novelists, literary scholars and filmmakers have engaged with the far-flung ramifications of the monumental event of the Partition to imaginatively reconstruct the cultural trauma experienced by the survivors across different generations. Memory, especially the chasm between private and public memory, functions to resist official historiography and offer counter discourse to unravel individual narratives. Such contestations offer multiple perspectives while revisiting the same historical event.

Based on Stefan Zweig's *Der Unsichtbare Sammlung* (*The Invisible Collection: Tales of Obsession and Desire*), Kaushal Oza's *The Miniaturist of Junagadh*(2021) chronicles the personal tragedy of a Muslim family against the backdrop of a political tragedy of the fragmentation of a nation in the wake of the Partition. Like Ismat Chughtai's *Roots*, Oza's short film of 29 minutes duration probes into the psychological recesses of the protagonist Husyn Naqqash, essayed by Naseeruddin Shah. Husyn was a miniaturist par excellence in the Nawab's palace who is compelled to abandon his ancestral house in Junagadh and migrate to Karachi, Pakistan with his family. The prospective Hindu owner of the house, Kishorilal, (essayed by Raj Arjun) is a nonchalant religious bigot who refuses to register the attendant trauma associated with forced evacuation from one's homeland. The chance mention of Husyn's priceless paintings piques Kishorilal's interest who is keen to acquire the house with all its belongings. Husyn's compromised vision is a hallmark of his fidelity to his vocation which he flaunts unflinchingly like a 'badge of honour' (*The Miniaturist of Junagadh*). The notion of negotiating memories is a highly complex cognitive process for the victims of any traumatic event. Husyn's memory is a spectral presence that resurfaces time and again- in the form of fluid traces. Internalization of such memory traces becomes a pathological condition due to the inability of the subject to negotiate the treacherous space between remembering and forgetting. For Husyn, however, it is the element of simultaneity that accommodates and informs his relation to the past. Husyn stands at the cusp of a changing world order- almost at the intersection of tradition and modernity that is keen to erode the foundation of his personal history. Husyn clings on to the pleasurable memories of his homeland through sensory perceptiveness- the fragrance of tea or a personal quirk to leave behind the remaining tea in the container in the hope of retuning back to his homeland. On the other hand, Husyn's passionate recollections of the intricacies of his craft as an acclaimed artist and his life as a miniaturist at the Nawab's palace entail a strategic curtailment of any direct reference to the violence of the partition. Such intentional omissions point to an innate tendency of Husyn to suppress unpalatable events by focalizing on those memories that offer emotional sustenance. It is only through such carefully orchestrated suppressions that Husyn can envision a return to his homeland. This endeavor to view the past as a static and immutable category

is what Svetlana Boym refers to as “Restorative Nostalgia” (1) which Husyn seems to embody. Slippage in the act of recollection, for Husyn, is a means to exercise his agency which in turn will structure his identity. Through the enactment of remembering and forgetting as parallel states of being, Husyn establishes his identity as an artist and a connoisseur of art.

Husyn, unlike his family, is not the victim of Partition in a similar manner. Husyn, who takes great pride in his miniature paintings, remain oblivious of the predicament of his prized possessions. His daughter Noor, (essayed by Rasika Dugal) in a voiceover, reveals that the paintings were traded in order to ensure protection during the turbulent days of the partition. Noor’s memories of the ghastly bloodshed, plundered houses, mass killings and carnage that followed in the wake of the Partition rehearses the psychological trauma associated with the cultural memory of the event. Various scholars across disciplines have interpreted the notion of cultural memory. Patrick Crowley opines:

Cultural memory can be understood as lying somewhere between the public space of History, with its marshalling and interpretation of what society takes to be objective facts, and the private, subjective space of local stories and personal memory. Cultural memory can be taken as an intermediary space constituted by the aesthetic forms of high culture and those everyday objects that are invested with family memories. ([Crowley](#) 161)

Mieke Bal in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* explains that cultural memory can be understood “as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one... Neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future...we invoke the discourse of cultural memory to mediate and modify difficult or tabooed moments of the past that nonetheless impinge, sometimes fatally, on the present.” ([Bal](#) vii) Noor’s act of narrativising the trauma, through a voice over, is not merely a benign recollection but a process of transmuting the memories of a tumultuous past into a somewhat palatable present. As a cinematic device, voice-over is strategically deployed to execute the act of performing memory as it were. Unlike the flashback technique that transports a character back to a historical past, the voice over technique allows a character to revisit the past as an intensely subjective as well as emotional experience. Noor’s voiceover, like the absent paintings of Husyn, tries to bridge the spatial distance between a ravaged past and an equally haunting present. Thus, for Noor, the psychological trauma of partition that accompanied the historical event is marked by a guilt-stricken conscience that Husyn remains oblivious of. However, the act of narrativising trauma, according to Mieke Bal, is an impossible mission and more importantly, a contradiction in terms. The relation between narratives and the act of traumatic recall is problematised by Bal who argues that a traumatic memory can never become a narrative since they resist all kinds of integration.

Traumatic events in the past have a persistent presence, which explains why that presence is usually discussed in terms of memory as traumatic memory...the concept of traumatic memory is in fact a misnomer, if not a contradiction. Traumatic memories remain present for the subject with particular vividness and/or resist integration. In both cases, they cannot become narratives, either because the traumatizing events are mechanically reenacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent who “masters’ them, or because they remain “outside” the subject. ([Bal](#) viii)

Unlike Husyn who performs ‘ellipsisisthe omission’ (Bal ix) of certain events, Noor recounts the atrocities inflicted on their neighbours with the primary objective of situating the traumatic memory within a “cultural context whose frame evokes and enables the memory.” (Bal x) The trauma of the knowledge of having sold the paintings supersedes the trauma of the physical brutalities of the past. Noor’s failure to voice the trauma, except in a voiceover, continues to haunt her. Husyn attempts to “articulate” (Husseyn 253) memories that are marked by a narrative texture while Noor’s recollections remain purely traumatic in nature. Susan J. Brison distinguishes between narrative and traumatic memory. Narrative memories display a characteristic reliance on “linguistic and other symbolic representations” (Brison 42) whereas traumatic memories are “more tied to the body.” (Brison 42) Thus Husyn’s memories are rooted in specific objects, like the paintings or the valuable gramophone, that trigger and enable the past to “become memory” (Husseyn). Memory, therefore, is an active process of becoming, un-becoming and re-becoming which functions through different modes of articulation.

Husyn and his family, despite being victims of the sectarian and psychological violence of the partition, respond to it differently. Husyn masters the scarring memories through interplay of selection and rejection in the process of imaginatively reconstructing coherent narratives. Through this negotiation of inclusion and exclusion, Husyn holds on to the language of his homeland Urdu rather unselfconsciously -another spectral trace of memory that defines his personality.

Memory is mediated not merely through the interplay of cultural variables but through the body. The body is as much of a neural machine as a cultural signifier. The trope of the body is significant as a tool of cultural representation to understand how human bodies participate in the process of encoding, consolidation and the eventual retrieval of memory. Husyn’s compromised vision is a medical condition that contributes to the way he recollects his past through selective dismembering of the unpalatable reality of the Partition. The ailing body of Husyn, therefore, seeks refuge in the memories of a past that is wrapped in nostalgia of happier times whereas Noor’s remembrance invokes the ground reality of the traumatic event itself. The body becomes a vital locus through which embodied memory is articulated and performed.

The Miniaturist of Junagadh, thus, plays out the dialectics of recollections and erasures through the interrupted identity of Husyn and Noor to foreground the complex dimensions of memory as a cognitive apparatus that is reconfigured through socio-cultural codifications. The disjunction between the remembering self and the remembered self must be negotiated to confront trauma through a careful manipulation of memories. Husyn and Noor, in their own ways, turn out to be the victim of a traumatic event in history and its gruesome memories. *The Miniaturist of Junagadh* does not juxtapose memory against forgetting but looks at the two cognitive categories in a synaptic suspension of continuum.

Director Srijit Mukherji strategically explores the chasm between experiencing an event and failing to remember it as a powerful stimulus for creative expression. *Forget Me Not*, the first story in the *Ray* (2021) anthology is a crystallization of that expression. The anthology pays homage to the multi-hyphenate that Satyajit Ray was by reinterpreting his stories in the contemporary light. *Forget Me Not* is a modern reinterpretation of *Bipin Chowdhury’s Smritibhrom* (translated as *Bipin Chowdhury’s Memory Loss*) that chronicles the meteoric rise and subsequent fall of Ipsit Rama Nair (essayed by Ali Fazal)- a

corporate hotshot who apparently, 'never forgets'. (*Forget Me Not*). The apparently innocuous humour, almost a comic disposition of sorts, underlines *Bipin Chowdhury's Smritibhrom* which is traded for sinister forms of memory loss in *Forget Me Not*. Ipsit, the alpha male with the "brain of a computer" (*Forget Me Not*) is introduced as the entrepreneur par excellence. This emphasis on Ipsit's infallible memory sets the tone for his subsequent neurosis and psychological meltdown. Unlike a computer, the human mind is hard-wired to be biased- both emotionally as well as cognitively. Ipsit's pride in his cognitive credential to remember everything is splintered to pieces after a chance encounter with the charming Rhea Saran, essayed by Anindita Bose. Ipsit's life spirals into paranoia when he fails to recall a passionate affair with Rhea. The experiential quality that constitutes memory is compromised for Ali who has no access to a past that seems to jeopardize his present. The attempt to retrieve a memory and thus actively reconstitute some aspect of one's past turns into an obsession that blurs the boundary between the real and the imagined. Ipsit's memory loss is induced by the machinations of his colleagues and friends who feel betrayed by his frigid and contemptuous demeanour. Erasure is in-built into the very mechanism of memory and thus processing of information must involve filtration of memory traces as well. Ipsit's ability to remember everything makes him incapacitated to execute acts of slippages that compromise his humane attributes of empathy, imagination and most of all, sanity. Forgetting is a mandatory pre-requisite of a functional mind- Ipsit's quest to revert back to a past disrupts his quotidian life. Forgetting is not merely a passive cognitive component but can be engineered discursively. Ipsit is duped into believing that he is the victim of an acute memory crisis- forgetting is therefore manufactured externally and acts as a stimulus to derail Ipsit from the humdrum of his everyday life. Moreover, the contestation between private and public memory plays on the vulnerability and insecurity of Ipsit which paves the way for his psychological disintegration. While evidence and friends' testimonials confirm his getaway with Rhea, Ipsit's private memory bears no trace of it whatsoever. The dialectics of tension that emerges from a conflict between private and public memory thrusts Ipsit into a labyrinth of self-doubt, conflict and unending vacillations that ultimately claim his sanity.

While *Bipin Choudhurir Smritibhram* revolves around one colossal event of memory loss, the narrative of *Forget Me Not* encompasses multiple episodes of memory crisis. *Forget Me Not* is a deliberation on the necessity to forget, without which our minds would be "cluttered with needless and unwanted thoughts and facts" ([Brandt](#) 266).

In the poststructuralist world we currently inhabit, identities are produced, re(produced) and in a constant dialogue with an array of socio-cultural markers. Identity, then, is a matter of self fashioning based on what the mind chooses to remember or forget.

We are right to assert that the formation of each identity is a kind of resilience, in other words, a kind of contradictory construction, a synthesis of memory and forgetting, of constitution and effacement of forms. ([Malabou](#) 77)

This synthesis of memory and forgetting is vital for the emotional sustenance of the self. Forgetting confers a sense of agency which prevents the imaginative component of the mind from withering away. Ipsit's desperate but futile attempt to recall a past that eludes him borders on the edge of a pathological condition. Ipsit constructs his selfhood through the commercial

repertoire of facts and data and rather unselfconsciously confuses memory for data. Ipsit's friend remarks, "What's data for you, are memories for me." (*Forget Me Not*). Ipsit is a product of a consumerist culture and represents those very same values of consumerism with a careless disregard for other people's feelings. By mastering the art of conveniently suppressing and overlooking everything that is unpalatable to Ipsit, he inhabits what Fredric Jameson refers to as a perpetual present. (2) Such a perpetual present ends up producing socio-cultural amnesia which the subject fails to recognize. Ipsit fails to register the pain of his loyal secretary Maggie, essayed by Shweta Basu Prasad, who was coerced by Ipsit into aborting their child or the disdain of his friend who is belittled by Ipsit. Ipsit's eventual descent into a succession of harrowing experiences destabilizes him. The climactic shot places a deranged Ipsit in a mental facility with Maggie revealing how she had orchestrated his downfall to seek vengeance on Ipsit.

The cinematic representations of *The Miniaturist of Junagadh* and *Forget Me Not* explore the myriad dimensions of memory and the internalization of various codes that relate to the functioning of memory. Traces of memory take multiple forms- from conscious recall to sudden reemergence. The conceptualization of memory as a performative category that is enacted through ideological vectors reconfigures the way memory operates. The recent explosion of the memory boom has opened up new vistas of knowledge whereby remembering is no longer viewed as an ontological opposite of forgetting but rather a necessary appendage to the process of recall. In *The Miniaturist of Junagadh* and *Forget Me Not*, memory becomes an umbilical cord that is interrogated to examine the relationship between the biological self and the world beyond. Aesthetic representations offer an insight into the performative aspect of memory to emphasize its enactive quality.

Notes:

1. Boym distinguishes between Restorative and Reflective nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia glorifies the past as something which is immutable, static and fixed. Reflective Nostalgia is characterized by a sense of longing and wistful yearning for the past. Restorative nostalgia attempts to reconstruct the past as if it were a changing entity- forever in a state of flux and kinesis.
2. Fredric Jameson uses the phrase 'perpetual present' to describe the postmodern era. For Jameson, the postmodern condition is marked by a sense of ahistoricity.

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