

MANUFACTURING THE SELF AND THE COLLECTIVE: MEMORY POLITICS IN LIFE NARRATIVES FROM A CONFLICT ZONE

Manisha Gangahar

In Kashmir, since the Valley became a conflict zone, when much of the social and political life has turned into questions of recognition, the concept of identity poses a quandary. Furthermore, when identity is comprehended as something that comes from the outside rather than something discovered as having existed within, narratives play a central role in providing a sense of identity. Within this domain of narratives but afar the factual details is a space that is deeply personal and it is through these personal accounts that emerges the preeminence of memory and its ability to provide a meaning to one's existence.

The paper, through reading of life narratives from the conflict zone of Kashmir, traces how memory is not merely a shadow or something out of control, but it is rather an alluring sanctuary. Memory becomes a tool for introspection, questioning the self and, at the same time, is also employed as a constituent of the collective during the process of recollection of the past. The paper analyses personal narratives to explore the range of memory's function in identity formation for ordinary people caught in a conflict zone and how, in the process, self-definition becomes liminal politics. Through remembering, not only is the present identity questioned, but also the linearity and continuousness of the self from the past to the present is examined. The memory narratives reconstruct the present in light of the past and vice-versa.

The territory of Kashmir is disputed, but can one say that the identity is not? What defines being a 'Kashmiri'? In this seemingly tug-and-pull of homogenization and fragmentation, as a result of a troubled history, political blunders and alliances, more than discovering a meaning, it is identity politics that a Kashmiri is found caught in. Within the discourse of Kashmir, as the frame of identity shifts to the space of writing, the representation procures a third

dimension that is open-ended, even profound, to allow a definition in strict terms.

The aftermath of 1989-90, with its legacy of censorship, repression, torture, disappearance and exile has left Kashmir in a paradoxical situation. The 'occupation' and 'resistance' calls into question the very existence. Thus, in the realm of culture, the memory about the years of conflict and turmoil is recovered and reconstructed in a way that it not only counters the official word—that normalcy and peace has returned to Kashmir—but also articulates an alternative story. Moreover, as Maurice Halbwachs (1980) asserts, memory—whether individual or collective—shapes identity. Who we are is directly linked to our past, our perception of the past, and our sense of belonging to a particular community. Memory is always a construction in as much as it is a way of understanding the past expressed through narratives and discourses and as such submerged in and instituted by language. Just as an account that goes on to explain who we have been, memory is chiefly brought forward by the need to express or define who we are in the present and, in turn, what we could or would like to possibly become.

Moreover, narratives facilitate constructing a world of symbolic forms wherein reality, in various colours, can be better understood and interpreted. Through stories and recollection of personal accounts of pain, death, war and killing, an attempt is made to revisit and review the past but in the present context. Remembering is not merely a commemoration of an event, or an incident. Rather, the act of commemoration becomes a cultural pattern, aiming towards self-description and self-representation. On the one hand, within the frame of the textual nature of memory, this study looks at memory as a creative force that constructs the past experiences through storytelling and narration and, on the other hand, it particularly looks into the politics of memory, from the everyday articulations of identity that remembering involves to the re-writing of history that recollection implicates, through the reading of selected narratives.

Furthermore, it explores the nuances of individual remembering in a socio-cultural context. It engages with memory within social-political practices in order to show the relation between memory and the composition of subjectivity. Memory, composing of recollection of the past that had taken place both in the private and public sphere, facilitates the establishing of meaning or truth on the one side and, on the other side, deposing the absolute perceptions about the truth. In the words of Herbert Hirsch, 'The connection between memory and identity is dialectical because memory both shapes the

content of what is communicated by the socialization process and is formed by that process. Ultimately, the self does not develop in a vacuum' (Hirsch p.133).

The writings from Kashmir, under the title *Of Occupation and Resistance*, map the trouble terrain of ordinary life in the Valley. The stories traverse the personal landscape of grief, mourning, rejection, humiliation and loss. And it is through these personal accounts that emerges the preeminence of memory and its power to provide a meaning.

However, Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher, asserts that 'the equating of identity, self, and memory...is the invention of John Locke at the beginning of the eighteenth century' (Whitehead p. 60). Offering a similar view, Francis Ferguson, a literary and a cultural theorist, states that Locke found memory to play an important role for securing 'a sense of individual continuity over time' (Ferguson p. 509).

Memory seems so personal, but, at the same time, it is shaped by collective experience and public representations. The shared memory transforms into a collective remembrance and, thereby, a trope for a political collective. Fahad Shah, the editor, says: "This book...is a compilation of numerous writers' interpretations of their memory of their experiences in the Valley...the people of Kashmir narrate their stories..." (24). The use of writing to preserve the memory of events becomes more prevalent with the notion of the permanence of the written word. To perpetuate the memory of a past, it must not only have the capacity to represent and reconceptualize the self but also be embedded in the collective consciousness.

However, through the reading of these personal narratives, I seek to underscore how personal experiences of pain facilitate a sense of recognition and define self-identity. When these personal accounts are shared and when they transmute into testimonies, anecdotes and memoirs—the memory—they not just remain in the personal space but become a collective memory, integrating the people together into a single entity which is different from that of the supposed oppressor. According to John R. Gillis (1994), the fundamental meaning of any individual or group identity, which is a sense of sameness over time and space, is persistently maintained through the act of remembering; and what is remembered is then defined by the assumed identity. Memory may even constitute the self-conscious because self-identity presumes memory. Personal identity in Kashmir is built out of reference to social objects, institutions, people and events. Memory of an individual can't be disconnected

from the things going around him/her. This becomes even truer in case of ordinary people in a conflict zone. In fact, all personal remembrance is located within a social framework that we call as collective memory. The history and the fate of Kashmiris become part of the collective memory that incorporates and integrates painful and shameful events. As one understands, collective memory in Kashmir becomes an uncompromising and an unconditional imperative of recapping what happened in the past and then the relationship within collective entities being reformulated and meanings derived henceforth. When the past experiences are recalled, they may appear in mind in fragments, tampered chronological order, at times muddled up or juxtaposed by a random pick-and-choose preference of the individual selection. Thus, remembering ceases to be an unadulterated pure exercise of recollections. Furthermore, memory is characterized by a reflection, which is an attempt to redraw the reality of the past, “guided and motivated less by aspects of the past that is being reconstructed than by the present’s needs for meaning and categories of understanding” (Roth p. 77).

In one of the stories, Atta Mohammad Khan has buried more than 235 bodies of unknown people and he recollects: “I can never forget that first day I buried a body...Those days were brutal. I have not slept since then. I still live in the past, with those bodies. Everyone I have ever buried is always in front of my eyes. They haunt me” (Fahad 73). As for the gravedigger, even for the others the past is the remembered present. Memory is invoked from the contents of the present but the past remains a point of reference. As Atta Mohammad Khan expresses: “I cannot forget those mothers who wandered in search of their sons and never found them. My memory is all that I have. Actually, these are not memories, I still live with them” (Fahad 74). The personal memory connects the collective as the personal experiences take shape of monumental symbols, which are then memorialized in personal narratives and nurtured by the power of the collective. Atta Mohammad Khan is an example: “Everyone I buried died because of the same cause, the ongoing struggle in Kashmir. I feel honoured that I was the person who buried them” (Fahad 75). For every story from Kashmir, occupation, oppression and suffering either becomes a point of departure or remains the central thread. The memories are then no longer merely people’s experience but, through the narratives, it is engineering of the memories for subjects to establish culture as durable entity—the narrative structure of reminding and recollecting.

Often, the survivor or the victim remains silent about his

victimization, or at least his voice is not heard in the main discourse. But the experience remains fundamental to the unfolding or enfolded conception of himself: “his silence is an internal one in which the victim attempts to suppress what is recalled (so as not relive the victimization countless times), or finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding self from the self experience according to unfathomable criteria and requirements” (Culbertson 169). At the same time, he is preoccupied by the memory of the violence or violation. And it is through writing, through narrative that the survivor manages to “live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory and a concomitant need to tell what is untellable” (Culbertson 170).

These public acts of recollection, of memorialization, have the capacity to constitute communities, since the act of remembrance is and has to be a collective act. Moreover, collective memory is a forceful and a self-motivating process that occurs whenever the past is re-signified through a testimonial, a ritual, a commemoration, a narrative or a painting. It is a way of making the past come alive all over again and the present can only be understood in light of that past as it is made present in the act of memory. While there are no concrete structures to allegorize, collective memory is connected to a collective imagination; thus a remembering community can be perceived as a bigger subject of which we, as individuals, are a part. Not only is the personal experience a collective, but the collective becomes personal as well. And, collective memory finds its way into the society—days of remembrance, flags, martyrs’ grave, strike calls.

The remembering and recollecting of the past is not only for the purpose of acquiring a sense of cohesiveness as far as self-identity is concerned or merely for creating a collective identity, but it is also an attempt to understand the past and to give it a meaning, even a future. Listing of the names of children and youth killed—martyred—becomes a part of the collective memory, a sort of cemetery in the centre of the Kashmir’s narrative of conflict, and is invoked each time a collective identity needs a manifestation, a reiteration. It becomes essential to remember the past in context of present or to comprehend the present in reference to the past. The symbols of remembrance further shape the contours of political consciousness.

However, even memory becomes problematic as in case of Showkat Nanda, working as a photojournalist in Kashmir. The choice of his profession was founded on his belief that a journalistic photograph had not just a moral value attached but it also carried with it historical

validity (Fahad 29). His write-up, entitled “The Pain of Being Haunted by Memories” is about how his experiences, which included witnessing bomb blasts, crackdowns, gun battles, search operations and killings on a daily basis, “shaped [his] identity and the way he saw the world” (Fahad 29). While his work was appreciated, the ethical dilemma burdened his consciousness. He is supposed to record the facts and not participate in them, he kept reminding himself. But the photographs were a constant reminder of yet another reality—the question of his identity, as he writes: “I too wanted to have an identity where my heart always belonged. That’s why I turned into a stone thrower. I couldn’t leave without making a statement” (Fahad 34). Being involved was important, for he says: “there comes a time in your life when you need freedom from blood soaked memories. I also needed freedom from those memories I’ve framed as self-taken pictures—of dead children, wailing mothers, disgraced fathers and destroyed homes” (Fahad 35).

Also, memory is always centred in an act of recollection that evokes and appropriates the past as a way to signify our present—a reconstruction of a past according to the narrative of the present. Dr Sheikh Showkat Hussain, in his piece, writes: “My mother would always insist that Majeed Beigh, their milkman, be paid immediately at the end of every month, saying that the man has suffered a lot since childhood...Soon after the Indian army landed in Kashmir they perceived every bearded person as a tribesman who had come from the Frontier Province to fight the army of the maharaja. They indiscriminately killed many bearded persons and Beigh’s father was one of them...” (Fahad 122).

In Kashmir, collective memory is based on a framework of common narratives that have been inherited by generations—as what happened in 1947-48, 1989, the Bridge, Pandit exodus, more recent 2008, summer of 2010, 2011 and so on—which are able to actualize the “authentic” reminding of the individual who is a member of his or her generation. “She remembers the dates, the time, and dreams revolution” (Fahad 76), as is true for each and all in the Valley. The substantial medium now is not just oral story telling but personal narrative in print. It is in personal narratives that the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity is conserved. For the memory to preserve the past, it needs to be reconstructed within its contemporary frame of reference and situation.

When cultures and identity are based on the acts of common remembrance and forgetting, reorganization of memory for social

and political ramifications is essential in Kashmir. The pursuit of memory takes place through compilation of testimonials, memory narratives and the creation of monuments at sites of repression. In the creation of monument, whether it be a memorial in a cemetery, a torture centre converted into a peace park, or an army school, there is always an element of selection, something that is privileged and something that is left unseen or not spoken about. But collective memory is always an idealistic construction, a narrative of memory will always be contested, and no society will have a single collective memory, the only thing a society as a whole may share is the silences, the things that everyone has chosen to ignore.

Touching upon the matter of displaced Kashmiri Pandits, novelist Siddhartha Gigoo says in *Looking Back at the Roots*: “Who am I? Where have I come from? What will become of me? The old Pandit generation is fading away. The young are losing the memory of their own ancestry and lineage. Have they been able to memorialise aspects of this shrinking identity and a litany of losses through the arts and literature? No. Haunted by a sense of extinction, I shiver when I come across people who seek to assess and weigh losses and assign degrees to suffering without even knowing what they lost” (Fahad 194).

Memory can be imagined as a space, but a labyrinth that provokes associations, commentaries and interpretations. Silences and practices of oblivion and control over memory have become central issues. Mohammad Jaunaid, who grew up in Kashmir, writes in his piece called “Forgetting”:

“I am not saying memories don’t falter. We forget and we misremember... In essence, one could say, forgetting and telling are similar—if violence dismembers life-worlds, amnesia and memorialisation re-memembers that torn-apart world—of course, as a different, transmogrified, fleeting home for life to continue to exist” (Fahad 53). But, on the other hand, for Gigoo and the Pandit community, who have been part of Kashmir’s fabric, “[the] future generations who will no longer be ‘displaced’ entities will bear the burden of a borrowed memory or remnants of ancestral memory” (Fahad 194).

Through yet another perspective, the very act of reminding—writing and re-articulation of memory—is a step towards catharsis. One encounters the cogent objection that catharsis is really out of place when one looks at these personal narratives of pain and death. Even if cathartic function is inadequate here, it is important to go on telling the story and seeking some sort of purgative release

however minimal and provisional. In Kashmir, narration of personal experiences become cathartic to the extent that they combine emphatic imagination with a certain acknowledgement of the cause and context of suffering, thereby offering a wider lens to review one's own insufferable pain. Allowing the suppressed voices to speak, it permits a certain "working-through" of memory, a powerful act of mourning, if by no means a miracle cure. Healing is a long process but to be heard is the start of the process.

Nevertheless, memory is in a permanent state of change. Personal memory changes and with it the pictures and views, the tableaux of memory and narratives on which memory is established. So it becomes clear that memory and remembrance are not phenomena of space but of time. Memory is not a stagnant reservoir but a complex contrivance for the creation of texts. Neither is the relationship between remembering and forgetting static. Forgetting is stigmatized as something unacceptable. In the narratives, there is a creative memory with new aesthetic and ethical output that generates remembering as a dynamic process which is far different from traditional concepts of preserving monuments.

The most influential narratives are always latent ones. They become manifest when there is struggle about forgetting and remembrance—a struggle that has never ceased. Latent memories do not disappear, nor lose force, in comparison to compulsory remembering and forgetting. While the turn towards narratology of memory might most quickly be grasped in matters of purely aesthetic interpretation, implication for such a turn resonate toward one of the most vexed and vexing intersections of culture and politics.

Literature imparts an underlying grid to the fragmented responses and pulls the reader/witness in as a participant. Art and memory, together probe into the unconscious and, travelling in time, they evoke a response in the minds and heart of readers across time and distance.

Do these reconstructions of the past offer us any perceptions that can help us work towards solutions? Can they make human life meaningful and valuable, that is give us a voice and help bond us together? The nature of memory is crucial for both the writer and the reader as it probes the conscious as well as the unconscious.

References

- Culbertson, Roberta. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self". *New Literary History*; 26, 1995. 169-195

- Gillis, John R. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994
- Shah, Fahad. *Of Occupation and Resistance: Writings from Kashmir*. New Delhi: Tranquebar Press. 2013.
- Ferguson, Frances. "Romantic Memory", *Studies in Romanticism*, 35, 1996. 509–33
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992.
- Hirsch, Herbert. *Genocide and the Politics of Memory*. London: University of Carolina, 1995.
- Roth, Michael S. *Memory Trauma and History: Essays Living with the Past*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Whitehead, Anne. *Memory*. London/New York: Routledge, 2009.