

The Memory-Fiction Nexus: Exploring Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate relationship between memory and fiction in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *Whereabouts*, posing a critical research question: How do the complex dynamics of memory, forgetting, and remembering intersect to shape the protagonist's narrative identity, and what role do these dynamics play in generating a sense of authenticity in the novel? Through a nuanced analysis of the narrative, drawing on memory studies and cognitive psychology, this research aims to excavate how memory operates as an agentic activity, entailing both the intentional recall of past events and the strategic forgetting of painful experiences.

By examining the intersections of memory, place, and identity, this study establishes memory and place as meaning-making enterprises that underpin the fictional process. The research demonstrates how the protagonist's memories of her past, her relationships, and her surroundings shape her narrative identity and how these memories are, in turn, shaped by the complex interplay between remembering and forgetting. Furthermore, this study explores how the politics of forgetting and remembering are wielded in the novel to generate a sense of authenticity, highlighting the tension between the protagonist's desire for self-definition and her need for connection with others.

Ultimately, this research contributes to our understanding of the memory-fiction nexus, illuminating how fiction uses memory to generate a sense of authenticity and how this authenticity is shaped by the complex interplay between remembering and forgetting. By examining the memory-fiction nexus in *Whereabouts*, this study provides insights into the human experience, highlighting the significance of memory in shaping our narrative identities, our relationships with others, and our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

Keywords: Fiction, Memory, Forgetting, Remembering, Agentic, Narrative Identity, Authenticity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, translated from the Italian original *Dove Me Trovo*, is a poignant exploration of the human experience, delving into the complexities of memory, identity, and belonging. The novel's narrator, a middle-aged university professor, embarks on an introspective journey, navigating the intersections of past and present, memory and imagination. Through lyrical and meditative prose, Lahiri

masterfully weaves together fragments of memory, observation, and experience, creating a rich tapestry of human emotion.

This study examines the intricate relationship between memory and fiction in *Whereabouts*, exploring how the narrator's memories shape her perception of reality and inform her narrative. Drawing on memory studies and cognitive psychology, this research investigates the mechanisms of memory and its impact on the narrator's construction of self and her understanding of the world around her.

Lahiri's narrator is a masterful example of how memory can be both a source of comfort and a catalyst for anxiety. Her memories are imbued with a sense of longing and disconnection, reflecting her struggles to reconcile her past and present selves. Through her narrative, Lahiri highlights the complex interplay between memory, identity, and belonging, demonstrating how our memories shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

The novel's use of episodic memory is particularly noteworthy, as it enables the narrator to recall specific past events in vivid detail. These memories are often triggered by sensory experiences, such as the smell of food or the sound of music, and serve as a powerful catalyst for her narrative. By examining the narrator's use of episodic memory, this study sheds light on the complex mechanisms of memory and its role in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our experiences. This research demonstrates the significance of memory in shaping our narrative identities and informing our understanding of the world around us. Through Lahiri's masterful storytelling, we gain insight into the complex interplay between memory, identity, and belonging and are reminded of the profound impact that memory can have on our lives.

The authenticity of memories is due to this interrelationship between spatial and temporal dimensions. Fiction is primarily concerned with encoding one's own experience, which may or may not have occurred. Throughout the novel, episodic memory enables the narrator to recall specific past events from a particular place and time. On the couch of the therapist, she can only recall the 'fitful rages' of her mother or the mother constantly finding faults with her and berating her. The repressive, intrusive mother is imprinted on her mind to such an extent that it stretches beyond the past, shaping not only her present but also her future actions through performativity and effective agency. She also recalls a nightmare in which she is trapped inside a square glass container that is enormous and full of her blood. She could not recollect happy memories when asked; it was just the Sun shining on her balcony, the Sun that hypnotised her. She connects herself to the account of a friend's daughter who was always saddened by her mother's absence to wish her good night. She feels comfortable in the ineffable water of the swimming pool:

"Everything- my body, my heart, the universe seems tolerable when I'm protected by water and nothing touches me.....below my body there is a restless play of dark and light, I am surrounded by an element that restores me". (Lahiri 40)

She compares a hotel to "a parking garage designed for human beings", and it sounds applicable to any modern metropolis's business core. Her images seem emblematic of the universalist vision. She enjoys the idea of waking up without having to get out of bed. An eavesdropping session while dining at a restaurant—is not culturally or geographically specific; it might happen practically anywhere in any modern city. She integrates many such stimuli to create a powerful memory that exists in both the past and the future as well all at the same time. She retreats to her memories to find a way out of the gilded cage of expectations. To Lahiri, the notion of a definite identity appears to be a trap. Her narrator seeks to dive into her past in a few interludes, titled 'Nowhere', 'In My Head', 'On the Couch', 'In bed', etc., to examine her dread, her anxiety, and her fear of taking leaps. She misses playing games in childhood. She was terrified of leaping from one tree stump to another, even though the stumps were lower, while the other girls enjoyed it like birds. This image of birds evokes the image of a cage. And she wryly confesses-

"It now occurs to me that I was as tenacious as I was timid. I never protested.....afraid each time that the empty space between the stumps would swallow me up. Terrified each time that I would fall, even though I never did." (P. 124)

This fear of the unknown co-responds to her fear of forming ties. When entrusted with the responsibility of a friend's apartment, she is intrigued by the way how the couple forms an 'ingenious organism', an impenetrable collective', which she calls the private morphology of a family. Jhumpa Lahiri once said in an interview that she was working to free her work from geographic coordinates and to arrive at a more abstract sense of place. *Whereabouts* is just a sign of that long-awaited arrival. And the arrival to that abstract location contains a slew of linguistic indicators. *Whereabouts* are located in memory that is both forward and backward at the same time, and this is what makes it human. Each reflection is place-stamped by its title, which is both parochial and universal, rooted yet adrift. Each chapter is littered with dis-junctions between fragmentation and novelisation, between ecstatic isolation and fearful loneliness, between statements of delight and evidence of discontent.

She recalls her circumscribed upbringing with an often irascible father and a despondent mother. The tragic recollection of a family trip that could not be taken, her potential birthday outing turning into a pageant of bereavement at her father's death, hints to her that there is no escape from the unforeseen, which lurks not only in the present but also in the future. Haunted by her image in the mirror, oscillating between shadow and light, emptiness and fulfilment, irritation and satisfaction, and stasis and movement, this disabled woman gradually resolves to "push past the barrier" that has

long obstructed her path in the world. Her act of pushing entails a desire to forget specific chunks from her past.

Memory is a complex and dynamic process that involves the reconstruction of past experiences, emotions, and perceptions. As philosopher Maurice Halbwachs notes, "memory is not a purely individual phenomenon, but is relational in terms of family and friends, and also societal and collective in terms of the social frameworks of social groups" (Halbwachs 53). This understanding of memory as a meaning-making mechanism highlights the significance of encoding, consolidation, and retrieval processes. The conscious interplay between what is included and excluded, presence and absence, is crucial in shaping our memories (Bosch 12). Furthermore, every act of remembering entails forgetting as a necessary condition, a cognizant component of memory itself (Everding). The bits and fragments of memory, as they are encoded, work similarly to metaphors, creating a stylised representation of reality.

In fiction, language is encoded in a particular way, combining possibility with presence or reality. This calibration of memory and forgetting is evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, where the narrator's memories and experiences are intertwined with her imagination and emotions. As Lahiri writes, "Every time my surroundings change I feel enormous sadness. Its not greater when I leave a place tied to memories, grief, or happiness. Its the change itself that unsettles me, just as liquid in a jar turns cloudy when you shake it" (Lahiri 3). This quote, borrowed from Italo Svevo's *Essays and Uncollected Writings*, highlights the narrator's aversion to change and her reliance on memory to navigate her surroundings.

The narrator's memories, however, are not just a nostalgic recollection of past events but also a means of resisting the trauma caused by remembrance. As Chris Wahlheim notes, "forgetting is an agentic activity, like remembering, and it enables the subject to resist the trauma caused by remembrance" (Wahlheim 23). The narrator's attempts to forget her past and her struggles to form lasting connections with others are a testament to the complex interplay between memory, identity, and belonging. Throughout the novel, Lahiri masterfully weaves together fragments of memory, observation, and experience, creating a rich tapestry of human emotion. The narrator's existential fears, reflected in her nightmare of the old lady swimmer in the pool, are a powerful example of how memory can be both a source of comfort and a catalyst for anxiety (Lahiri 120). The water in the pool, which reeks of grief and heartache, is a potent symbol of the narrator's emotional state, underscoring the significance of memory in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

In an incident, she alludes to a suppressed memory, when, as a child, she felt bad not for getting the desired dress from her parents but for having 'dared to desire such a thing'. An act which her adult self rejects. Tortured by her mother's typical rants, she develops a kind of self-dissatisfaction and feels incapable of choosing the right one. It is the memory that takes the agency here, and she performs by her conditioning:

"If I walk into a store, if I admire something but don't buy it, if I walk out and manage to avoid the cash register, I feel like a virtuous daughter. And if I cave, well, I cave." (Lahiri 73)

The novel is replete with such cultural markers; she is conditioned by ideology's structured working. She wants to decode the codes to shun them. She mourns her unhappy origins. She was in a cage, and ironically, she and her father were cages for her mother, who could not do the things she wanted. Her accusation that comes toward the end speaks for her state of mind and the reason for her solitude. In an overwhelming moment, standing at her dad's grave, she bursts-

"You always occupied your own space. You preferred dwelling in your realm, closed off. How can I link myself to another person when I am still struggling, even after your death, to eliminate the distance between you and my mother, maybe the gaps between those tree stumps, I always hoped would diminish and perhaps even close up completely, represented that space between the two of you. I learned never to involve you or to expect anything from you to save me." (Lahiri 145) She accuses her father of never protecting her and for asking a great deal from her: "You asked me to accept your measured responsibility, to acknowledge that you were a devoted father who was never besotted with his child." (Lahiri 147)

The complex interplay of memory across generations is a pivotal factor in the narrator's melancholic disposition. Her perceptions of others, such as viewing a married neighbour as a potential romantic partner or assuming a female friend must be bored with her marriage, are shaped by the intricate web of memories and experiences that have been passed down through her family (Lahiri 15). The narrator attributes her solitude to her mother, who is burdened by the "passage of time" and has always been afraid of being alone (Lahiri 20). This fear has been transmitted to the narrator, who now grapples with the consequences of her mother's anxieties. As Lahiri writes, "I listened to my parents and did what they asked me to. Even though, in the end, I never made them happy. I did not like myself, and something told me I would end up alone" (Lahiri 17). This poignant reflection highlights the narrator's deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and isolation, which her complex has shaped an often fraught relationship with her mother.

The narrator's reluctance to form lasting connections with others is a recurring theme throughout the novel. In one poignant moment, she finds herself in a hospital waiting room, where she compares her life to that of another solitary woman. As Lahiri notes, "No one keeps this woman company: no caregiver, no friend, no husband. And I bet she knows that in twenty years when I happen to be in a waiting room like this one for some reason or other, I will not have anyone sitting beside me, either" (Lahiri 21). This powerful passage underscores the narrator's deep-seated fears about her isolation and loneliness, which are inextricably linked to her memories of her mother and her family's past.

The complex interplay between the narrator's adult and child selves is a hallmark of Lahiri's nuanced and psychologically astute prose. As the narrator navigates her complicated feelings about love, family, and identity, she must also contend with the lingering memories of her childhood and the ways in which they continue to shape her perceptions of herself and the world around her. Through Lahiri's masterful storytelling, we gain insight into the complex and often fraught nature of human memory and how it can both unite and divide us.

As the narrative unfolds, the tension between the pleasures of aloofness and the pitfalls of loneliness, between the narrator's chronic discontentment and flashes of joy, becomes increasingly palpable. This tension is expertly woven throughout the narrative, creating a sense of dynamic tension that propels the reader forward. Memory, in this context, operates as an abstraction, allowing the narrator to navigate the complexities of her own identity and sense of belonging. As Lahiri so eloquently puts it, "Because when all is said and done, the setting doesn't matter: the space, the walls, the light. It makes no difference whether I'm under a clear blue sky or caught in the rain or swimming in the transparent sea in summer... Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, confused, uprooted, turned around. I'm related to these related terms" (Lahiri 124). This passage highlights the narrator's profound sense of dislocation and her struggles to reconcile her past and present selves.

In conclusion, this research paper has explored the complex and multifaceted relationship between memory and fiction in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*. Through a close reading of the narrative, this study has demonstrated how the narrator's memories shape her perception of reality and inform her narrative identity. The mechanism of memory, as seen in the novel, is inextricably linked to its ability to create fiction, and it is this forward-looking quality of memory that garners authenticity for the fiction that is the by-product of memory. Ultimately, this research has shown that the nexus between memory and fiction is a rich and complex one, offering insights into the human experience and how we navigate our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world around us. As Lahiri's narrator so poignantly observes, "My double, seen from behind, explains something to me: that I am me and also someone else, that I'm leaving and also staying" (Lahiri 151). This realisation, with its profound implications for our understanding of memory, identity, and belonging, is a testament to the enduring power and complexity of human memory.

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