



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitolonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X Vol 16. No. II July - December 2020



Memory: The Act of Remembering in the Select Novels of Anne Tyler

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Abstract

Memory has always been a topic for discussion when a creative piece is analysed. The role it plays is an inexhaustive list sans repetition. That is one of the reasons that we find in every literary work memory is present either as a theme or motif. This paper gives a brief overview of “memory”, what constitutes memory, how external objects contribute to bring to the fore front the memories that lie submerged in the unconscious mind. The focus of this paper is on the use of memory by the American novelist Anne Tyler in her works with special reference to three novels, *Ladder of Years*, *Back when we were Grownups*, and *Digging to America*. Tyler constantly uses sounds, smells, pictures, dreams and videos to make her bring back memories which sometimes are pleasant and sometimes painful. Memories help us to move on with life.

Key Words: Memory, Psyche, Alien

Memory is the ability to remember and retain the happenings of the past in the present as well as in the future. It can be rightly called as the backup for all our life's experience irrespective of whether the experience is good or bad. Memory aids in recording and recollecting of events. It is an abstract concept and is often very elusive. Memory has played a key role in compilation of history in the past long before writing evolved. Life will seem meaningless in the absence of memory. The uniqueness of memory is that it lays dormant and gets activated when the need arises. It is universal and inherent in all living creatures. In all art forms memory holds a high seat, the importance assigned to it is unrivalled. The creative artist whether a musician, writer or a painter solely depend on profound memory. It is the foundation on which the work is built. Writers especially in the past and present have always assigned memory a special place in their work to bring out the intricate nature of the character by recalling the events that happened in the character's life.

The present study involves an attempt to understand how Anne Tyler, an American novelist, uses memory as a tool to establish the idiosyncratic nature of her characters. Karen L. Levenback opines: “All the novels of Anne Tyler are about memory or more particularly, the act of remembering...and then coming to terms with individual and personal memories that may interfere with the business of living” (77). She observes that Tyler not only deals with memory but is also keen about “how memory is revived” (78). A photograph often helps to clarify a blurred memory, videos bring back the moment once again, familiar sounds (songs) and smell kindle the memory, and dreams bring out the suppressed memory to the fore front. Tyler has made use of the aforesaid in her novels to incite the memory. Given the fact that almost all Tyler's novels delve on memory only three novels, *Ladder of Years*, *Back when we were Grownups*, and *Digging to America*, have been taken up for discussion.

S.Megala Devi

In *Ladder of Years*, Delia's memory of her recently deceased father cripples her common sense, she refuses to allow her teenaged son to use the room. She says:

"... pretty soon you can have the room, I promise. But not just yet! Not right now! Right now it still smells of his pipe tobacco." (17 LY). Delia feels that as long as the smell of her father's pipe remains in the room it will keep her father's memory fresh. It resonates Tyler's view "Smell could bring a person back clearer than pictures, even", (Breathing Lesson). Delia has been in the care of her father from a very young age as her mother had died due to kidney failure when Delia was just four years old. She grows up in the care of her older sisters and her father; she denies having any remembrance of her mother. She admits: "I don't remember anything about it! Delia said. "Why do you keep insisting? I have no memory of her at all!" (115LY). But at the same time she remembers with fondness going at night along with her father to attend patients: "All the house calls I used to make with daddy, just the two of us! Seems like old times" (34LY). Both remembering and forgetting are ways of processing the memory.

Memories of her father is very distinctive in Delia's mind. The vacation to the Delaware Beach, reminds her of the fun she had with her father in her childhood. She is able to raise in her memory of how the place had looked earlier. She thinks:

In her childhood, this had been grassy marshland, with a few plain-faced cottages scattered about. In her childhood, she was almost certain, she and her father had flown homemade kites right where that complex of orange plastic pyramids now shaded a modernistic sundeck. For an instant she could feel her father's blunt fingers closing over hers on the kite string. She brushed a hand across her eyes. Then she turned and started walking back. (75LY)

Delia doesn't have a strong relationship with her two older sisters because of their different opinions about their childhood. Delia feels it was very pleasant but her sisters felt it was cumbersome as they were loaded with the responsibility of taking care of their sibling. Karen L. Levenback remarks: "Childhood memories, consciously acknowledged or innate, affect one's ability to cope with the present and may leave characters feeling as outsiders, even as adults" (83). Delia is unable to discuss her problems with her elder sister Eliza, because she feels she is an outsider in her own family. Though in her mid -life, unable to cope with stress, out of mere desperation she runs away from her family like an immature teenager. Later employed as a surrogate mother to Noah, when she meets Nathaniel Moffat, his grandfather she is instantly drawn to him as he resembles her father.

In the novel *Back when we were Grownups*, Rebecca, the protagonist dreams of "traveling on a train with her teenaged son. Never mind that she had no son" (21BG). This dream makes her contemplate whether she had made a wrong turn in the fork of her life. She walks out of her relationship with Will Allenby her childhood sweetheart and opts to marry Joe Davitch, divorced, father of three girls and thirteen years older than her. Joe dies within six years of their marriage. In her desperate attempt to change her life course she goes to visit her mother in her home in the country side. She is pleased to recall her childhood memories in her home. But she is awakened to the stark reality that she feels she is a stranger in her own room where she has slept as a young girl. She ruminates: "It didn't even smell like her anymore. Not that she was certain what her own smell was; but this smell was her mother's, clean but musty," (79BG).

Rebecca's mind begins to picture the boy of the dream as her son she must have had if she had married Will. She even names him as Tristram, and day dream about his being a topper in everything in school, how proud she will feel of his undeterred love for her. Suddenly when her day dreams are disturbed she thinks: "Peculiar memories popped up out of nowhere" (82BG). She drops out of college to marry Joe, her college teachers had advised her to marry after finishing her graduation. Now she regrets her decision: "When I think what I could have accomplished if I hadn't bothered with marriage! It's enough to make me weep" (92BG). When she tries to patch up with Will she finds their memories of the years they have been together seems to be different. The image that Will conjures from his memory of

Rebecca is not the same as the image that she has about herself. Things that he told about her seemed alien, but she tries hard to fall in line with his ideas of her. Ultimately she admits: “She remembered things he did not; he remembered things she did not. Their past was a bolt of fabric they had scissored up and divided between them.(185BG)

Karen L. Levenback observes: “Tyler continues to remind us, the revelation of the memory is that however much pain it causes, we must put together the severed pieces and get on with the business of living” (85). Rebecca realises that it is impossible for her to evolve into the person in Will’s memory and that he is more obsessed with the past than with the present image of her. She breaks all ties with him without a sense of remorse. As long as she was involved with Will, Joe’s memory had been relegated to the back of her mind. Rebecca begins to ponder about Joe to fill the void created by Will. She muses: “Oh, he would have made a fine old man. A fine old man. Sixty-six this past September; imagine. Rebecca was older now than he had even been,”(235BG). Rebecca feels offended that her name does not appear in the credits at the end of the video that was played to commemorate the hundredth birthday of Poppy, Joe’s maternal uncle. She is instrumental in arranging the party but does not receive acclaim for it. She becomes very emotional, and tears swell up, Zeb, Joe’s brother tries to comfort her. He makes her sit and gives her a drink to calm her .“She buried her nose in her empty glass and remembered, unexpectedly, a long-ago childhood crying fit that had ended when her father brought her a tumbler of ginger ale. (The same spicy, tingly smell, the same saltiness in her nostrils.)” (270 BG)

BertandRussel states: “...we often remember what we have seen or heard...”. Hence it can be said that memory is accumulation of our day to day experiences in the mind. In *Digging to America*, Tyler delves in showing that external forces and the environment play a vital role in memory retention. Waiting in the airport lounge for the arrival of their adopted child from Korea brings about a connection between the Bitsy and Brad Donaldson (American) and Ziba and Sami Yazdan (Iranian) families. The families over a period of time bond with the result that they decide to celebrate the arrival day of the girls Jin-Ho (Donaldson) and Susan Yazdan together in Donaldson’s house. After the festivities are over Bitsy says: “Well, next we’re going to show a videotape... My brothers and one of Brad’s uncles...brought video cameras to the airport when we went to meet Jin-Ho...We didn’t know back then that Susan would be there! Otherwise we’d have filmed her too”(67DA). Bitsy feels awkward that the videotape may not carry images of Susan. But Ziba responds immediately saying: “I have the memory in my head”. Bitsy is filled with awe that Ziba could remember where as for her it is all vague. The reason may be that there were too many people around her, her relatives all in a celebration mood taking photographs and videos preventing Bitsy from staying focused whereas in Ziba’s case it was only she , Sami and her mother -in - law Maryam.

Watching the videotape Bitsy is able to evoke her memory. She recollects every person on the screen as one by one they alighted from the flight before they could catch a glimpse of the baby. She recollects: “How odd these people were so familiar, and yet she hadn’t given them a thought since that night and had certainly not been aware that they were stored in her brain” (72DA). As luck prevailed to the surprise of everybody the video also has captured the Yazdan’s and also the arrival of Susan. Both Ziba and Bitsy are filled with a feeling of remorse after seeing the video. Bitsy reasons: “they made that long trip without us!”...(75DA). The thought that the children had to travel from Asia to America to meet their parents brings tears to the mothers who had taken it for granted that the girls had always been with them. They are forced to re-live the memory.

A discussion of the three novels of Anne Tyler has provided a deep understanding of memory and its impact on the human psyche. Happy experiences need to be cherished in the memory as it creates positive vibrations and help in overcoming difficult times like the present. Bad memories are best forgotten by clicking the refresh button.

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