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MEMORY AND NARRATIVE IN 'THE JACKFRUIT TREE'

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine aspects related to memory and narrative and its thematic centrality in 'The Jackfruit Tree' written by a Mizo author Vanneihluanga (*Lamkhung* in the original Mizo, which has been translated into English by Margaret L. Pachuau). The paper attempts to render special references to the manner in which memory and narrative initiate the construction of identity. Dorothee Birke asserts that nothing could be more personal and more unique than one's own memories (24). In 'The Jackfruit Tree', Vanneihluanga utilizes autobiographical/individual memory where his character constructs the past and it is denoted as a basis for his identity. Accordingly, the important role played by memory in the realization of one's own identity is coherently reflected in the narrative.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Narrative, Past, Present, Remembering

Vanneihluanga has authored a number of plays, essays, articles, and short stories. He is the publisher and editor of *Lengzem*, a monthly magazine on popular culture, as well as co-owner of the Mizo television network, *Zonet*. Vanneihluanga is a writer who appears to be able to derive an infinite amount of inspiration from his surroundings. In 'The Jackfruit Tree', Vanneihluanga portrays the life of a broken man, denoting how his previous mistakes have haunted him in life. It recounts the memories of the narrator, Laldailova, also known as Pa Daia who fell into a position of low social rank and dejection due to his alcoholism and disorderly lifestyle. It is a touching account of his life as it is lived, from the perspective of a beautiful romance into one that is almost devoid of all signs of human dignity. At the outset, a burial takes place under a jackfruit tree. The narrator assures the readers that they will learn everything about the person being

grieved. Then he recalls how, twenty years before, a protagonist by the name Pi Pari had a house located close to the jackfruit tree. He had fallen in love with the woman's daughter, a comely young lady called Nonovi, and had enjoyed her constant supply of liquor. The narrator recollects how he and Nonovi embraced one night while there was a power failure in the vicinity, and he narrates that only "the wind, the rain, and the jackfruit tree knew" (Vanneihluanga 91) what he and Nonovi did. Nonovi informed him later that she was pregnant, but the narrator ignored her and responded to her in a "drunken stupor," which made her cry. Then he remembers Nonovi marrying her richest suitor to escape her despondency. As his drinking habit worsens, things become more blighted. He loses his home, and although he knows that he had left Nonovi willfully and without providing her with good justification, she has been in his thoughts constantly.

Then the narrator goes into detail about what happened the week before. He brought the swine herd from Champhai village during inclement weather. Then he determines right away that he should meet Nonovi this time. When he arrives and is about to see Nonovi, he notices from a newspaper that Nonovi is going to be buried. He rushes straight to Nonovi's former residence, where he notices that a lot has changed. He is even more shocked to learn from the attendants that Nonovi's mother had already passed away and had left all her possessions to Nonovi, which she has foolishly wasted. He also learns that Nonovi's life had been a disaster as a result of her heavy drinking. He overhears them discussing the possibility of her contracting HIV. He is aghast when he realizes that Rinmawia, Nonovi's son, is also his son. However, just as he is about to reveal his identity to the mourners, a strong wind blew across the jackfruit tree. He then ended up assaulting a stranger and for this action, he was arrested. Later on, he was released on the grounds of being labelled as a madman. While wandering aimlessly, he runs across a man inside Dawrpui church who asks him if he wants to repent of his sins. Nevertheless, he retorts that the memory engrained and testified by symbolic jackfruit tree prevents him from doing so, despite his desire to do so.

Peter Middleton and Tim Woods indicate:

Memory is a means of overcoming the limitations of the human condition as it is understood in contemporary culture, by making the past appear once again in the present, despite its temporal, and possibly spatial, distance.(2)

The complicated relationship between the past, present, and future in human consciousness is articulated by memory, which can provide the appearance of a brief return to a long-forgotten past. It is difficult to overstate the significance of memory in creating a sense of identity. According to Dorothee Birke:

In order to answer the age-old question 'who am I?' we more often than not look to our past and fashion a narrative for our lives. By comparing our present selves with the selves we remember, we experience ourselves as

being in time – an experience which is crucial for our sense of self.(2)

Memory not only serves as building blocks for identity, but also plays an important role in the interaction with others since details of the past are employed in order to validate images that are conveyed. Recognizing the crucial role of memories for the social relationships, Gergen describes memory as a "form of social skill"(101) and memory according to Assman is a "backbone of identity" (Cited from Birke 1). In a postmodern era, in which it is perceived as especially hard to attain a satisfactory sense of personal identity, Nunner and Inkler states that autobiographical memory constitutes a stabilizing factor in what has come to be seen as a state of perpetual crisis of identity (ibid).

The study of memory is genuinely an interdisciplinary endeavour that has been carried out and fosters collaboration across the boundaries of many disciplines. According to Nunning et al.:

The genealogy of discourse on memory reveals, however, that philosophy, historiography and literature have more in common with neuropsychology than one may be inclined to think (1).

Over time, thinkers have tried to discriminate among the many meanings of the concept of memory, Warnock distinguishes between 'habit memory' and 'conscious memory'. 'Habit memory' refers to "skills, responses or modes of behaviour that are learned by human beings, non-human animals and even machines," while 'conscious memory' consists of "recalling or recollecting past experience" (Cited from Rossington and Whitehead 3). Therefore conscious memory becomes one of the defining factors which distinguish human from non-human. The characteristic quality of human nature and the seeming indefinability have caused the concept of memory to be a popular topic among philosophers, thinkers and writers of all times. Already in antiquity since the publication of Francis A.Yates' *The Art of Memory*, the concept of memory has never escaped the attention of thinkers and philosophers. However, since the 1990s, there has been a renewed interest in memory, even as it has branched out to other concepts like trauma,

Holocaust testimonies, False Memory Syndrome, collective and cultural memory. Nicola King in *Memory, Narrative, Identity* observes:

The late twentieth century has also seen an increased focus on questions of memory as the generations which experienced the atrocities of the two world wars die out, and as new or revived national movements base their demands on memories of oppression or trauma ... the recent insistence on the role of memory also mark a renewed desire to secure a sense of self in the wake of postmodern theories of the decentered human subject (2).

Subsequently, in 'The Jackfruit Tree', 'the desire to secure a sense of identity' with memory has been explored. In order to grasp the significance of the kind of memory that this study is concerned with, namely, autobiographical memory, it is important to specify its components and properties that make it so significant in the formation of the sense of identity. According to Susan Engel:

Autobiographical memory is on the one hand a deeply personal, subjective, and vivid construction of the past, a construction that reveals, creates, and communicates a personal identity. But we constantly use these memories in public transaction. To that extent we expect reliability, accuracy and objectivity. What and how we remember has consequences for our own lives and the lives of those included in our memories (21-22).

In 'The Jackfruit Tree', Vanneihluanga utilizes autobiographical/individual memory where his character construct the past and it is denoted as a basis for identity. Dorothee Birke states that nothing could be more personal and more unique than one's own memories (24). On the other hand, the important part played by memory in social transaction which not only draws attention to the one-sidedness of autobiographical memory as purely individual matter is also reflected by Vanneihluanga. In this way, autobiographical memory provides different ways of processing and making sense of past experiences. Ferrara states:

From being the main actor of a more or less coherent life story the individual derives a sense of continuity in time which ... is part of any conception of the authenticity or fulfillment of an identity (17)

This is where autobiographical memory and personal identity meet: by assembling memories to form a narrative, an individual can relate about himself/herself as well as to others in terms of who s/he really is. In this connection, Mark Freeman also opines:

The very act of making sense of ourselves and others is only possible in and through the fabric of narrative itself (21).

Similarly in 'The Jackfruit Tree', narrative and memory allows forging meaningful links between past events and present life, to define the present selves in relation to the past selves and to assert development. In this way, narrative helps to structure memory and becomes an integral aspect of autobiographical memory, as Bruner notes:

We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing and so on (Cited from Birke 3).

Literature has manifold ways of taking up and transforming ideas and problems that are part of contemporary culture. In particular, literary works offer genuine contribution to the understanding of the mechanisms of memory's role in identity formation. They grant insights into the processes that are hard to observe that is, the workings of the human mind. As Finke has denoted, literature provide a laboratory for the imagination in which concepts and assumptions about memory and identity can be staged, tested or taken to extreme (ibid). Thus, the interconnection between memory and identity plays a significant role in literature. In an essay entitled "The Literary Representation of Memory", Birgit Neumann opines:

Memory and the processes of remembering have always been an important, indeed a dominant, topic in literature. Numerous texts portray how individuals and groups

remember their past and how they construct identities on the basis of the recollected memories. They are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of identity. Such texts highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer's present – his or her desire and denial, than about the actual past events (333).

Subsequently, in 'The Jackfruit Tree', the narrator's memory plays a pivotal role in determining his identity. Through memory, he attempts to find the 'truth' about his life and eventually come to realize who he really is. The narrative brings to light the way people seek truth in their lives, but who then find multiple ways of dismantling access to it, because of the painfulness of truth itself. In narrating his past, the narrator reveals a kind of self-interpretation in terms of limit case of the more general process of interpretation which was already spoken and may thus serve as a testing ground of sorts to determine its value and validity. Vannehtluanga explicitly denotes that the narrative is absolutely dependent on the memory of the narrator. It is made of memories, it discloses memories, it creates memories, and it brings back memories. The narrative shows that without the ability to remember past experiences, there is no life story to be created. The narrator uses his memory to relate the present to his past, to understand the world around him, and to create an interpretation of both himself and others that utilizes his experience and knowledge. Herbert Hirsch in *Genocide and the Politics of Memory* writes:

As an individual reconstructs his or her biography through memory, that biography becomes the basis for identity (133).

Indeed, he asserts:

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 (ibid).

Similarly, 'The Jackfruit Tree' exudes that consistency of consciousness and a sense of continuity between the actions and events of the past, and the experience of the present are integral to a sense of personal identity. It is commonly accepted that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories that one tells about oneself and relates it to other about one's lives. However, it is not only the content of memories, experiences and stories which construct a sense of identity. The concept of identity which is constructed in narratives is also dependent upon assumptions about the function and process of memory and the kind of access it gives to the past (King 3). In essence, memory is the fundamental force behind identity formation and self-understanding. It is with the help of the narrator's memory of specific life events that he derives cohesive understanding of his life course. His identity is essentially created out of personal memories as well as his narratives. However, identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as it is often thought. Stuart Hall explains:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, ... we should think instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (115).

'The Jackfruit Tree' raises key issues about the function of memory and the ways in which it is reconstructed in narrative and implicated in notions of self-identity – an identity which is rehearsed again and again in a narrative which attempts to recover the self which had existed 'before'. The experience of the narrator gives an acute example of the fact that much human experience or action takes place under the mark of 'what wasn't known then' (King 22): what is remembered are events that took place in a kind of innocence. This model is suggested by Freud's reference to the 'retranscription' of memories and the structural principle of *Nachtraglichkeit*. *Nachtraglichkeit* is a word repeatedly used by Freud but never developed by

him into a consistent theory. It has been translated by Jean Laplanche as 'afterwardness'. This concept makes it clear that because memory operates as it does in the present, it must unavoidably include the awareness of 'what wasn't known then'. As Lowenthal states:

We interpret the ongoing present while having to live through it, whereas we stand outside the past and view its finished operation, including its now known consequences for whatever was then the future (91).

Nicola King also asserts:

The paradoxical 'knowing' and 'not knowing' is the position of any autobiographical narrator, who, in the present moment of narration, possesses the knowledge that she did not have 'then' in the moment of experience (2).

'The Jackfruit Tree' elucidates how individuals often lacked a perspective to see beyond his environment and to stand outside the actual values of his time. Due to the lack of perspective to see beyond his environment, the narrator of 'The Jackfruit Tree' has to order his past in order to come to terms with the mistakes he had made in the course of his life. The narrator had made a decision to leave Nonovi which he later regrets and haunts his life. After leaving Nonovi, Pa Daia's habit goes from bad to worse, for he writes:

I was drunk all the time. Yet, I even married several times in the meanwhile. My wives often left me for another men and when that occurred I would cast them out from the house and take another wife. (Vannehtluanga 91)

The narrator keeps fighting a losing struggle with life and is unable to hold onto the temporary work his family secures for him. Eventually, when his wife and daughter abandon him, he ends up homeless. He eventually accepts a job by procuring swine from nearby villages and selling them to Aizawl because he has nowhere else to go and nothing to support himself by. Despite the fact that the job is unsanitary and uncomfortable, he is not in

a position to question the entire procedure. As he describes his most recent journey from Champhai:

I stood amidst the herd, that was bullied by the others and so ensure that no harm prevailed. Rain lashed about all night and very soon I was caked with dirt amongst the droppings of swine. (ibid 92)

In spite of his awful circumstances, what keeps the narrator moving forward is the memory of his beloved Nonovi: "... even in my deepest drunken revelry, I never forgot Nonovi. She flashed across my mind's eye at all times and her countenance amidst the wind across the jackfruit tree soothed me always. In times of joy or sorrow and despair I saw Nonovi's face and I do not recall passing even one night without a glimpse of her visage." (Vannehtluanga 91-92) His trials in life would have been very difficult, and he might have given up hope in life altogether, had the memory of Nonovi been fully gone from his mind. As Heather Homes in "Meditations on Memory" opines: "The essence of memory is twofold; there is the present idea, and the relation of this idea to the past." (67). It is his memory of the past that enables him to move forward and the memory of Nonovi that keeps him going, and eventually, he becomes determined to see Nonovi again. However, upon his arrival, he learns that Nonovi died as he gazes up at the paper and read, "Lalpiannovi (Nonovi) will be buried today." (Vannehtluanga 92).

At the time of the funeral, he discovers a great deal of information about what occurred while he was away. He poignantly denotes his struggles in life as: "All this was not understood by the world. Yet the jackfruit tree comprehended it fully. As proof of its empathy, it was still alive in spite of being shunted about by humanity" (ibid 94). He recognizes Rinmawia as his son when he first sees him, but just as he is about to confess the truth, a strong wind destroys the scene and topples the jackfruit tree, the only survivor of the previous encounter between him and Nonovi. He entrusts his most vital secrets and the purpose of his existence to that jackfruit tree: "With the final thrashing of the plastic sheet it creaked violently and amidst the streaks of lightning

I saw Nonovi's face...no...the jackfruit tree...even as it finally fell." (ibid 95) .

The narrator reflects upon the past in an effort to reconcile himself with his present self. After hearing about Nonovi's passing, he comes to terms with his own identity and even accepts Rinmawia as his son, whom he had previously disregarded. While accepting his own failure and identity, he also realizes how pointless his life had been. He poignantly reflects upon his life as: "All this was not understood by the world. Yet the jackfruit tree comprehended it fully. As proof of its empathy, it was still alive in spite of being shunted about by humanity. As long as the jackfruit tree was alive I felt that Rinmawia ought to know the truth. Let others think what they will, I would go ahead." (ibid 94). Vanneihluanga adeptly portrays the turmoil of his character's situation in an evocative discourse where his memory and narrative depict the difficulty he has in owning up to the prospect of his actions and decisions. Jean Paul Sartre remarks in his autobiography that: "A man is always a teller of stories surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it (Cited from Bruner). To a certain degree, when remembering, the narrator makes his past rather than simply retrieve it. Vanneihluanga's narrator reveals that identities are by no means fixed and through memory and narratives, an individual consciously or sub-consciously narrates the past, present and future 'identities' into existence.

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