Chapter 3

Memory and Personality: Breaking the Vicious Circle
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3.1 Introduction
Memory plays an important role in forming a subject’s identity and her relation to life. Historical and anthropological studies largely depend upon memory for their analysis and results. During the last few decades of the twentieth century, discussions of memory, or our ability to retain and recall information have gained importance in cultural studies too because of the strong implications of memory for identity formation. Memory has also come to be seen as something that generates solidarity and agency. Duncan Bell defines memory as:

At a very general level memory refers to the process or faculty whereby events or impressions from the past are recollected and preserved. Collective memory – or one of its many cognate terms, including social and cultural memory – refers, again in a general sense, to widely shared perceptions of the past. It shapes the story that groups of people tell about themselves, linking past, present and future in a simplified narrative. It is what keeps the past – or at least a highly selective image of it – alive in the present. (Bell 2)

This chapter seeks to understand the role of memory in Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s selected texts. Such a study is called for since these novels deal with how memory and its recording are important in understanding colonization, women’s struggles against patriarchy, and issues arising from migrant experience. Several layers of memory are present in these novels, including the memories of the author, the characters, and specific communities. These memories are either articulated consciously in the text or enter into it unconsciously and latently. Several layers of memories in these novels act like reference points or guiding milestones for the characters in their march towards subjectivity. Both memory and identity play a major role in affecting the colonized or oppressed psyche.

The representation of memory of the author has been often used in literary texts ever since the olden times. More recently, however, attention has shifted to
collective memory structures. Texts have become multilateral because the emphasis is now on both individual and communal stories. Memory is linked to social processes, and the personal memories of a subject intersect with those of other subjects who exist in a similar milieu.

In this discussion it is vital to understand that collective memory is not a synonym for history. History is what actually happened in the past; collective memory is the past as it is remembered by a community. A society remembers only what is of momentous importance and forgets most things that fail to impress on the psyche. Collective memory comprises, hence, the deeply felt and provocative events from a community’s past.

History records collective memory selectively. Macro history usually leaves out the collective history of the subaltern population. Thus there arises a need to give voice to the silenced subject through a re-recording of history. The rewriting of history is an act of rebellion against a pruned, ideological recording of the past. It is a contestation and a construction, where the macro histories are contested and the micro histories are simultaneously constructed.

Identities are not just created by events that are purely personal. Several events that collectively influence group psyche and generate a certain pattern of response from a community are also significant in identity formation. Memory then is linked to social processes, and the personal memories of a subject intersect with those of other subjects who inhere in a similar milieu. Thus cultural memory becomes the guiding principle in studies of subjectivity since it affects a totality of subjects. Von Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning define cultural memory as:

It is important to realize that the notions of “cultural” or “collective” memory proceed from an operative metaphor. The concept of “remembering” (a cognitive process which takes place in individual brains) is metaphorically transferred to the level of culture. In this metaphorical sense, scholars speak of a “nation’s memory,” a “religious community’s memory,” or even of “literature’s memory” (which, according to Renate Lachmann, is its intertextuality). (ed. Erll and Nünning 4)
The individual, to know herself, must engage in telling stories from her memory. Birgit Neumann contends, “These stories can also be called “fictions of memory” because, more often than not, they turn out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs” (ed. Erll and Nünning 334).

Memory of oppression is often traumatic. Trauma fissures one’s personality by distorting the very reference point to it—memory. Cathy Caruth links trauma and distorted memories when she defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11).

Amnesia as a phenomena demands exposition in any study of memory, particularly traumatic memory. Amnesia can be both personal and cultural. When experienced individually, it is an unconsciously triggered reaction of the brain. Culturally amnesia involves the hushing up of trauma by subaltern populations. Agency, however, is always expressive, vocal and verbal, even in the face of trauma. Amnesia is a closing of windows which are nevertheless not insulated and some heat always passes through the glass. Amnesia generates a false consciousness because it is an attempt to evade the past and yet, even through this evasion one is tied to one’s traumatic past. The past still controls the subject. By bringing the past into consciousness, one asserts a control over one’s memory, rather than simply the memory exerting control over the subject. Memory of the experience of postcolonialism, in natives from around the world, is not homogeneous. In addition individuals relate to even collective memories differently. What meanings one derives from one’s memories are dependent on the attitude one has towards one’s past. Lynn Meskell understands the past of postcolonial South Africa, not as a single objective facticity, but as a heterogeneously understood eventuality:

The past occupies an ambivalent role in post-Apartheid South Africa. For some it is seen as a vast reservoir of trauma and loss, while for others it can be mobilized as a source of pride and redemption. In fact there are many constructs of the past at play: the deep past of prehistory, the colonial past of named individuals and events, and the unforgettable apartheid past. (ed. Bell 158)
Negative heritage can either be remembered as a struggle or forgotten as an insult. Either way, the heritage remains functional, whether directly or unconsciously; its impact relies on whether preference is given to understanding it and healing, or to forgetting it, which causes psychological ailing. A negative heritage often engenders an understanding of the reasons for oppression in the first place. The colonized do not experience oppression alone, but as a group. Collective memories go a long way in dealing with this past.

The path of dealing with oppression is a positive path from subalternity to agency. This path however, is not that linear and the end is not a direct, clear view, Ndebele, a critic of memory contends that, this jostling of past and future is constant: ‘Now we want to throw off the psychological burden of our painful past; now we want to hold onto it’” (ed. Bell 162).

This psychological burden is synonymous with trauma. Trauma is a reaction to the past, and an apprehension of the future which comes from living with the past. An understanding of past trauma must come handy in dealing with a future eruption of it. Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub, in their book Testimony (1992) place trauma in a highly indeterminate and pessimistic place and suggest that dealing with it is only limited and partial:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it to a quality of “otherness”, a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. (69)

The forgetting of memories and their recession into the unconscious is a reaction of the psyche to preserve itself from trauma; the preservation of the present depends on the eradication of traumatic, contested pasts. Madness comes from this locking up; sometimes, simply answering the subjective question “How did I get here?” brings about agency through a positive engagement with memory.

The formation of subjectivity involves memory and forgetting. In Freudian terms, the painful forgotten memories are actually driven to the unconscious and are operational in guiding a person’s behaviour. In this sense, forgetting is not the opposite of remembering but a part of it. There are two broad ways through which
people deal with the past: either by putting off the telling of trauma like a neurotic or by facilitating its release. Agency lies in the latter course because the telling of memory is cathartic for an individual. Also, the telling of memory implies its positive handling, if not, control over it. Language plays an important role in this telling. When an individual is an outcast or oppressed and no one wants to hear her story, the eviction prompts her to create a new language. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the ghost of Beloved creates it when it asserts its presence through physical disturbance in 124, Bluestone Road. Baby Suggs creates her own language when she ponders over colour and so does Sethe when she murders her own daughter.

Everyone has their own voice that tries to surface at some point or another. The individual language or voice being a part of subjectivity is always present in everyone and is tied up with memory. The traumatic experience exists in a bracketed space and is pushed into the unconscious. Psychotherapy not only unveils trauma but also un-wraps it, giving us the alphabets to decipher it. Language is central to psychotherapy that requires a telling through language and emphasizes its repetitions and gaps. It is as if, it senses one’s secrets and makes them known to us. Language forms the subject’s discursive link to oppression. As language develops, one’s understanding of trauma and memory also becomes clearer. Language is important in that it passes on what must be remembered. Written language, in comparison to oral rendering, is more mnemonic in its functions. The African slaves suffered oblivion in the American landscape because of the loss of their oral mnemonic traditions. Jack Goody and Ian Watt argue, “non-literate cultures tend to be marked by an erasing or forgetting of that which is not of immediate, contemporary social relevance… such societies function in terms of an inexact evolution or reconstruction of memory” (ed. Whitehead 39).

In certain instances, remembering one’s past is a way of becoming agents. It is a way of staying connected to a vital aspect of one’s life which colonization thwarts. In the case of diasporics, memory of the loss of home involves a resistance against the displacement from a place. Its remembrance is not a simple nostalgia but a conscious effort to withstand forgetting what is an integral part of the self. Memory is always in the process of formation and reformation not only horizontally or linearly but also vertically, not only by the addition of new events to life history but also the addition of new insights into the past. Anne Whitehead observes:
Like Frow’s ‘textual’ memory, the ‘representation’ model recognizes that the very act of inscribing memory itself ‘rewrites the text that it makes available for rereading’ (1993: 109). In inscribing, memory simultaneously transforms, so that a memory represents not a copy of an original but more precisely a version of it. (Whitehead 51)

Since memory is not a dead weight, but evolves with experience, it is also clear that memory has gaps and empty spaces. Memory is also the thread that binds experience, and gives some form of linearity to the experience of life. It is something, an individual can draw on, to understand life. Memories of older experiences are useful in interpreting new experiences.

Memory is a place of interface between the past and the present, and the telling of memory lies somewhere between recollection and imagination. Memory is not something of the past; rather it is also a part of the present, since it not only dives up on its springboard but also because the present would be senseless without memory. Toni Morrison observes in her essay ‘Memory, Creation and Writing’ that "Memory is for me always fresh, in spite of the fact that the object being remembered is done and past" (Kennedy 62). Thus, memory is always open to re-interpretation. According to Anne Whitehead, “Memory is concerned with holding up past and present experiences for comparison; it enables the speaker to chart an ongoing process of alteration, both in the landscape before him and within himself.” (Whitehead 76). Memory is like a locale where the outer space of the world gets inscribed in the inner space of the body and mind.

Memory is connected to pleasure also. The ability to recall generates pleasure. People feel contentment not simply in remembering the past, but also because of the very control that they seemingly have over their past. Memory is a way of connecting to the very facticity of life. The past is static. Memory, however, is not static. Our associations with our memories are formed and reformed by our ongoing experiences. Experiences alter memories and hence, memories are not static.

Newmann describes the representation of memory as being retrospective and an analepsis. As an analepsis, memory is recuperation from dis-ease. Analepsis comes about when the forgotten past memories that lie in the unconscious, are brought to the fore and inhere the conscious surfaces of the mind.
Memory is also a continuum which is being understood and re-understood with intrusions of new experiences. Thus memory is never static like the past. It can be recreated umpteen number of times with reference to the subject’s changing consciousness. Experience is the real thing and its telling is only secondary. Telling is an attempt to reach the experience in its entirety, but is never possible. The mimesis of memory is this telling. It is diegetic and illucidatory but only a creative image of the real event. Because the real event is unobservable as a totality, it is therefore incomplete to our perception. Literature is an attempt to organize memory into an intelligible form. Literature reconstructs the past and brings to light a particular way of perceiving it and relating to it. Ann Rigney sees literature, not just as an interpretative tool, but also as a specifically mnemonic one. Stories “stick.” They help make particular events memorable by figuring the past in a structured way that engages the sympathies of the reader or viewer (Rigney, “Portable”). Arguably, all other forms of remembrance (monuments, commemorations, museums) derive their meaning from some narrativizing act of remembrance in which individual figures struggle, succumb, or survive. (ed. Erll and Nünning 334)

The issue of memory has perturbed scholars and philosophers since the ancient times. The most influential philosophies about memory in the western tradition were proposed by Cicero and Quintilian. Cicero stressed the localization of memory or the importance of locality in memory. The present study has a focus on localization of memory, and the role of memory and place in the construction of subjectivities. Localization is important because how the locality fits in our cognition and affection is determined by our experiences and how they are remembered. Cicero in his book De Oratore (55BCE) referred to Simonides’s story through which he understood the importance of localization for memory. Simonides who went for dinner at a friend’s place was met with an accident when:

… the roof of the hall where Scopas was giving the banquet fell in, crushing Scopas himself and his relations underneath the ruins and killing them; and when their friends wanted to bury them but were altogether unable to know them apart as they had been completely
crushed, the story goes that Simonides was enabled by his recollection of the place in which each of them had been reclining at table to identify them for separate interment; and that this circumstance suggested to him the discovery of the truth that the best aid to clearness of memory consists in orderly arrangement. (Cicero 353)

For Cicero memory is like a wax tablet on which we inscribe our knowledge and experiences. This implies that what is written on this wax tablet called memory comes automatically with the possibility of deletion or concealment.

For the ancients the loci memoriae or the localizations of memory were mnemotechnical devices. Pierre Nora understands, however that “lieux de memoire” or sites of memory while being mnemotechnical devices are also ideological and tend to serve the interests of the nation state. For example, it was in the interest of the colonizer that the slaves do not have a shared culture between them. The process accelerated their forgetting of their native culture which was the source of their strength. There are many instances of the slaves getting together to recite their native songs and stories as a means of retention of culture and therefore, also of strength. Talisha Sainvil, a feminist critic, in an article on women’s resistance among the African slaves, writes:

Within the system of plantation slavery, outward expressions of culture were not accepted. Therefore oral tradition keeping became a vital way of keeping the past alive, focusing on the spirit and forging deeper bonds amongst slaves. In particular, religion and dance became a pivotal part of culture amongst slaves; ways for them to release emotions and offer up prayers to their gods. (Sainvil 1)

Thus, memory becomes a source of strength and agency in societies where oppression operates through a hegemonic erasure of native culture and cultural memory.

Memory has multiple reference points. A single memory can actually be fissured into various sub-systems of understanding. It may be knotted and without any possibility of straightening. In this confusion, there might be several routes to several locations for the subject to take. Literary texts preserve these fissures and give us
multiple memories that the reader conjoins for a collective understanding of the literary work. The overarching memory which is the collective memory is what gives momentum to a work, as against the several individual memories that also surface in it. This collective memory is the thread binding the literary work, a unifying factor that links together the stories into a story. While the individual memories are idiosyncratic and personal, collective memories are more discursive since some form of discourse seems to operate in events that affect totalities.

Since collective memories are shared, they affect larger populations. People identify with collective memories and they play an important role in forming people’s subjectivities. People relegate their individuality to a backseat and become a collectivity of humans, or people belonging to a race, an age-group, or a gender etc. However, even in this becoming, the individuality that is always preserved, becomes a link between the individual and collective memories. If the collective memory exists, it does so because there is a grain of it in the individual memories.

Similar to the difference between individual and cultural memories, there is a difference in the understanding of memory among different generations. The understanding of how generation gap affects interpersonal relations is important in understanding how social bonds form. Generation gap is often dependent on memory. It is crucial to study it in the context of the texts because generation based conflicts are in the background of these texts. Generations vary because the historical circumstances change. People of a particular era make sense of their histories differently from people of another era. There is a difference between experiencing histories first hand and stories that are passed on from one generation to another. A memory that is collective gains in force and demands to be remembered and passed on through art and culture. Its passing on is crucial to agency, which always begins from making sense of experience. In this context if the ideas of Francesco Remotti as quoted in Erll and Nunning are very pertinent. Remotti in his book *Luoghi e corpi: Antropologia dello spazio, del tempo e del Potere*, writes:

In order to understand the processes of identity formations of a collectivity or of a nation, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between “what disappears,” “what remains,” and “what re-emerges.” Indeed, it is only through a careful analysis of the processes which select and filter the past that we can highlight the dialectics among
these three categories and avoid the dangers of an ideological manipulation of memory. (qtd. in Erl, and Nünning 128)

Memory exists in a complex network amidst cultural coordinates like language, taboos, points of view, religion, totems and monuments, these being important among others. The positional modality of memory is compound and multifarious. Memory, thus is very important in understanding the workings of culture. Metaphorically, if language is the ink that stains life cells under a microscope, memory is the lens that magnifies the cells under it. It serves as a grid for the comprehension of culture. As a tool for making sense, memory involves telling stories, understanding them and selecting what must be passed on, though this selection is never completely exclusive, and a lot of things that are never really chosen are also passed on. Telling stories and their interpretation is fluid and never absolute. There are always many forms of the same story which proves that memory is never monolithic. Rather it involves multiplicity of forms that are regularly revised.

History thus becomes a shifting subject and its documents and sources can be continually reinterpreted. There are always different versions of history, as has been made clear by the writings of the Subaltern Studies Group. The Subaltern Studies Group undertook the task of writing the history of the common people and those who in conventional historical writings are relegated to the margins. Memory, too gets transformed in the present as the past in it is constantly supplemented by new meanings. Different people have different takes on the same history, and the very existence of these views opens up doors to multiple viewing of memory.

The weight of memory, however, is shared by a society and the various versions usually converge. Thus collective memory becomes the guiding principle in studies of subjectivity since it affects social groups in their totality. In postcolonial societies, the focus of memory studies has shifted to collective memory. In case of marginalized groups, collective memories are counter memories too, and tend to strengthen struggles for agency. The modal memories of a culture come to re-form themselves into “counter memories” to deal with a contested past:

Thus in “gender studies” and in postcolonial studies what becomes pivotal is the concept of “counter-memory”— where the term “counter” emphasizes the fact that these are other memories belonging to minority groups and thus marginalized by the dominant cultures. Memory becomes an “act of survival,” of consciousness and creativity,
fundamental to the formation and rewriting of identity as both an individual and a political act. (ed. Erll and Nünning 129)

Thus, it becomes clear from the above discussion that memory has to be reconstituted into the individual psyche and understood by a community as a totality as it has a bearing on forming healthy subjectivities.

3.2 Trauma and Recuperation through Memory in Toni Morrison’s Novels

An individual’s subjectivity is never complete and cannot be described with certainty and in totality by the individual or by other observers. This is, in one sense, a fall-out of memory because an individual does not know for certain and in entirety, at any single time, what constitutes her. Also, subjectivity is always in the process of formation. The forgotten too lends credibility to her novels and the repression of memory runs parallel to the oppression of African American slaves.

Morrison’s novels focus on not history but herstory and hystery. Her novels usually have female protagonists at their centre and the male characters are located in the peripheries of her texts. As Emma Parker observes, “it is not so much a ‘herstory’ as a ‘hystery’ in the sense that the central protagonists can be read as hysterics: subjects haunted by the past, characters who unconsciously express repressed memories of psychic trauma through physical symptoms and use a corporeal discourse to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable” (1).

Generationality in Toni Morrison’s novels is inter-textual. Her novels plumb the distance between oppression and agency through subjective histories set in different times of African-American history. However, her novels mutually overlap and become an extended metaphor of collective African-American history and experience. She writes to destabilize the conventional channels of remembering slavery. Iyunolu Osagie observes:

Using both Western and African interpretations of the psyche, Morrison succeeds in destabilizing stereotypical “remembering” on slavery. She suggests, through multiple meanings her narrative provokes, that recorded history (which often presents certain
information to the exclusion of some other) is a social construction reflecting a particular consciousness, a particular agenda. (Osagie 1)

Like the painful repressions of the psyche, slavery is an open secret and yet everyone wants to hush it up: there is no festival in remembrance of slavery in African American culture; societies, have moved on, so to speak. Toni Morrison is not ready to accept such an attitude, she wants to relive the memories of slavery and reveal its secrets. Mae G Henderson observes, “her work is intended to resurrect stories buried and express stories repressed”[emphasis in original] (ed. Andrews 81). For her telling, she chooses the real life story of Margaret Garner and historicizes her fiction. Her telling, is, however, hurried. She too wants to get away with the past quickly. Her stories are without a background, and begin in the middle of the action and do not have the linear narrative. She does not dwell in Beloved on what happened, because we all know about it, the newspapers have already reported it; she wants to find the answers to the why and what comes next. The ‘how’ is important because it is what haunts us, but more important at this juncture, is the agency that must arise from the “how”. Her telling, like psychoanalysis, is a healing process. The ghosts of the past, literally, in Beloved, are not just the apparitions, but are bodies that intrude physically into the present. Sethe carries her past on her back that grows a tree of contusions. She carries the memory of Sweet Home wherever she goes; it is as if she carries on her back, the place’s crypt. R. Clifton Spargo observes about the recurrence of trauma in one’s psyche and post traumatic stress. He observes, “By virtue of this structure of repetition, trauma poses a challenge to historical knowledge… much as it is always the lack of knowledge that perpetuates the traumatic effect. As an excess of afterlife of the event, trauma refers to an act not yet encountered — as it were, to a spectre of the past” (3).

Also, Sethe remembers the past because of the trauma it engendered. For her, Sweet Home becomes the spacio-temporal screen on which her memories are etched. The African slaves, automatically, forget their roots not only because they have been uprooted but also because they live in a very different locale and the spacio-temporal screen has been thrown down, marking an end to certain stories and the play of memories. In the absence of spatial cues, they forget their past memories.

Beloved’s memory is artificial and her remembering is forced into existence through repeated rhetoric. Her need for stories is more than the normal human need
for them because she has few stories of her own and needs stories to make sense of her past and her subjectivity. She needs memories to subjectify her non-existence and to make it concrete. Beloved not only has a desperate need to become human from a phantom but also to understand the circumstances of her demise. She has two sets of memories because like all African-American slaves she belongs to two worlds — the living and the dead.

When Beloved returns to Sethe’s home, not like an airy ghost now, but in the garb of a real person, she is like an infant. It takes her some time to get accustomed to adult life. Her death, however, is only a temporary cessation of life. Her death is not a real death but only an interruption of the consciousness. When she comes to consciousness again, she needs memories to make up for the discontinuity in her existence and to explain the inexplicable—her murder. She needs a constant memory that can bridge the lapses in her existence. Beloved is a hysteric who first perpetrates violence on Sethe’s house and then comes in the shape of a young woman who ails physically. Her hysteria as Parker observes is clearly born out of her traumatic memory of murder: “Beloved’s violent haunting of 124 demonstrates the combination of feelings characteristic of hysterical subjects: hostility and desire, a longing for retribution and reconciliation, an inability to forgive coupled with a reluctance to forego the mother who killed her” (3). Beloved is hysterical. She is rendered psychologically abnormal by the trauma of her unnatural death. Her memories, as it were, have been distorted by the trauma that they cause. Memories, over time, fade away, and the domains of memory and imagination mingle. In Beloved, Sethe’s memories of Sweet Home are strong and real; she can recall them at length.

Paul D’s memories of Sweet Home converge on a rooster called Mister who, for him, is a symbol of slavery. The feeling of dehumanization becomes literal in his memory of the rooster. Also, the rooster comes to stand for the hard-heartedness, scrutiny and arrogance of the master. Lynda Koolish observes, “Much of the novel explores the extraordinarily anguish ing interlude of time during which virtually all the protagonists, not just Sethe, exist almost as dreamwalkers in a state of dissociation and denial as they remain determined to expend their psychic resources keeping the past at bay” (1). Much psychological effort is involved in keeping traumatic memories at bay by the victims of slavery. These memories are painful because they involve remembrances of dehumanization and a lack of control over one’s life.
There are several memories of dehumanizing events in *Beloved* belonging to the inhabitants of Sweet Home which must be recalled and passed on to deal with the trauma engendered by violent events. Jeanna Fuston-White states, “That story which was ‘not a story to pass on’ (Morrison 275) and, as a result, has been erased from the collective cultural memory, must be known, woven into the fabric of history. And vital to this agenda is the acceptance of multiplicities, in which there is not a single history that represents ‘truth’ but numerous truths, each affected by experience” (3). Thus, retelling stories is important for catharsis of the traumatized individual, but is also a message for the listener to make her understand oppression better.

The retelling of stories of Sweet Home runs parallel to the coming of Paul D. With his coming, the stories that Sethe had never mentioned also come out. Almost at the same time, the ghost comes in the form of Beloved. The ghost, then, becomes a trope of therapeutic telling. In a way, the anxieties she attaches to her past are beginning to get obliterated. Sethe returns to the suppressed past when Paul D comes to 124. According to Linda Krumholz, “while *Beloved* can be read as a ritual of healing, there is also an element of disruption and unease in the novel, embodied in the character of Beloved. As an eruption of the past and the repressed unconscious, Beloved catalyzes the healing process for the characters and for the reader.” (ed. Andrews 110).

Paul D, on the other hand, recourses to language in the form of the songs he creates to deal with the past. His songs stylized in the African-American tradition of rhetoric serve as a vent for emotions associated with his slave past. Like Paul D, it is a past the African-Americans would rather disown.

Both forgetting and remembering are important in equal measure. *Beloved* unfolds like the mind of a psychotic. Sethe’s repressed slave past, like all unconscious repressions, finds a way into the present in the form of Beloved’s ghost. Also, her repressed past affects her children just like the repressed memories affect the psyche. The legacy of slavery is passed on to Howard and Buglar in the form of the memory of Beloved’s murder and her haunting ghost. The past for them, like all slavery survivors and heirs, is unbearable and insulting. Their running away from home is symbolic, but it is also literally a repression of the conscious painful memories:
Howard and Buglar had run away… as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more… nor did they wait for one of the relief periods… No. Each fled at once- the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne and witnessed a second time. (Morrison, *Beloved* 3)

Howard and Buglar are coiled like a wire into a vicious circle where one wound creates many and one act of oppression leads to more oppression. However, running away is not the way to becoming an agent and straightening things. Running away from the ghosts of slavery is also a legacy they get from Sethe, who also ran away from her master. The breaking of the mirror, when Buglar looks into it, is symbolic of a fissuring of his personality. His personality and sense of self is distorted by the effects of an ever looming slave past. Buglar recognizes his personality through his mirror image.

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs stands for both hope and denial of history and memory. She is hopeful when she accepts the roughness of slavery and responds to it by loving her body. At the same time she cannot remember any of her children and in the exigencies of slave life she renounces inter-personal love and this act of renouncing it unhinges her. She says, “I had Eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil… My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember (Morrison, *Beloved* 6).

Memories whether contested or liberating are essential to a holistic envisioning of the self. Amnesia is related to stagnation, decay and incompleteness. In *A Mercy*, the most apparent memories are those of Florens, the narrator of the novel. She carries multiple memories of desertion, first by her own mother, and then by the blacksmith. How she copes with these memories makes up the narrative. Often the construction of subjectivity for those with contested pasts becomes a problematic, a vanishing into the whirlpool of trauma. This is true in the case of Sorrow.

*A Mercy* is a historical novel in the sense that it exemplifies through stories the beginnings of slavery. Figuratively, it is almost like the story of “Genesis” in that it
explores the emergence of the African-American slave initiated into the unexplored territory of America. At a larger level it is the story of the American Genesis where Jacob’s farm becomes a microcosm of the American landscape—rich in resources but lack of easily available labour until the importing of African slaves. The novel tends to historicize trauma. João de Mancelos observes about the role of the historical novel in understanding history: “In this context, private narratives help us understand History in a dimension that transcends the factual coldness of scientific works, and empower voices that have been silenced for belonging to ethnic minorities” (1). The narrator in A Mercy, voices the several individual memories and through her ‘telling’ makes these stand unified into a collective memory. Collective memory in the novel provides to the readers, an understanding of slavery as a shared, cumulative experience. The various stories of the different characters in the novel are presented to the reader not as personal memories but as collective memories. The only personal memory that we know of directly from the characters in the novel is Florens’s telling of her life, desires and how she undertook their fulfilment. Pamela Walsh observes that Florens’s voice is incomplete and requires other characters to fill in the gaps in her telling: “In A Mercy Toni Morrison relies on the collective memories of her characters to tell the journey of Florens, a young African American slave, orphaned by her mother. Morrison addresses the limitations of a linear, one-sided… Because of Florens’ flawed recollection, Morrison allows other characters to fill the breaches and allude to what Florens already knows subconsciously.” (1). Thus, collective memories are important because they help the subject make sense of her personal memories, since these two sets of memories are ultimately related.

The omniscient narrator’s voice, when it takes over the tale, seems emotionally distant from the events it narrates. It becomes stern and moves to the history mode. Florens’s voice carries more emotional tones and an urgency that demands fulfilment of the void left in her from the memory of desertion by her mother. The fulfilment of desires is the most apparent strain in the novel and Florens’s journey from the voids left by memory, to their fulfilment as an agent makes up a large part of the narrative. Florens tells us about a turning up of memories several times, the most stark being the memories of desertion: “I step into the room. Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sends me away” (Morrison, “Mercy” 109). Florens construes her
desertion by her mother as a betrayal and a void in love. She cannot understand it like the necessity her mother understood it as.

Both memory and existence are full of fissures, and there is always the possibility of misreading life because of these. This disability arises because our eyes are never panoptic. They are not circular and there is always an angle where our vision stops. When Florens goes into the jungle to meet the blacksmith, she is full of possibilities but no certainty. Her vision is limited. She cannot know with any certainty, despite her desperation and focus, what will happen. When Florens goes into the jungle, she meets the widow and has an experience that she had not visualized. She says, “Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you”, (Morrison, *Mercy* 37) which becomes a paradox in the face of all that the future holds. Florens has several experiences that she had not visualized and therefore is even more disillusioned with her life. She exists in a dream world until she is deserted by Blacksmith. It is only after this desertion that she becomes a more mature individual. Also, it is after this desertion that she makes important confessions about the regrets in her life.

Confession underlines the narrative, and memory is the base on which the narrative is placed. Confession implies guilt and also an act of remembering and confronting the past. This past is essentially guilt-ridden because it involves a moving away from the self. A connection with the true self, with all of its formative pasts is a guard against essentializing, a guard against the vouchsafing of nature. In colonial societies, ethnicity is bestowed on the native while the colonizer is largely considered to lack any ethnicity. Thus, a part of society is ethnicized and in the process essentialized. Guilt comes from this gaze that essentializes. The colonized, then, must learn to return the colonizing gaze to resist its in-forming of their subjectivity. The formation of subjectivity, as it seems, is not merely a processing of the past, but is an active mis-attestation of it under the influence of the colonist. Under hegemonic influences, the subject falls prey to miscalculation and mis-representation. This misrepresentation is thus not an individual failing, but an assimilation of extraneous knowledge of one’s captivity and the inhering of that knowledge in one’s subjectivity. The confession signifies a quest to be freed of punishment. It is remorse in a very bright hue. The very idea of confession means that one takes responsibility for one’s past, in addition to considering oneself also as a victim of life processes.
In a colonized space the mind of the colonized is controlled. Thus, what is remembered or talked about or even thought is controlled by the colonizer. The culture of the native becomes an impurity, an unwanted element in world culture. The world or universal culture is determined by power structuring in a layered political space. When Lina begins to live with the Presbyterians, her very reference points to her subjectivity undergo a change. The normality of her culture suddenly becomes a crime:

They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signify a sliver of hope. Afraid of once more losing her shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with her fingers was perverse….staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. (Morrison, “Mercy” 45)

Lina treats her contested memories and isolation from her original inheritance as a path to certainties. She ends her confusions by assimilating her memories into her consciousness and evades madness, unlike Sorrow, who cannot integrate her memories in time and space. Lina remembers her African past and merges her disconnected and varied memories into a continuum. Coupling the essential disjointed scraps of memory is not only a way to completeness but also a closure of existence:

She decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (Morrison, “Mercy” 46)

Lina forms ideas from testing her memories that gives her a world-view. In the midst of life’s dubiousness, Lina does not become skeptical, but understands her legacy and reaches a point of certitude and the confidence that comes from it:
The shame of having survived the destruction of her families shrank with her vow never to betray or abandon anyone she cherished. Memories of her village peopled by the dead turned slowly to ash and in their place a single image arose. Fire. How quick. How purposefully it ate what had been built, what had been life. (Morrison, “Mercy” 47)

This affronting of the past in A Mercy is opposed to the lengthy narration of Sethe’s evasion of her past in Beloved. She literally recedes into the garage and kills Beloved when Sweet Home comes back to claim and retract her back to its terrain in the form of School Teacher. Right till the end of the novel, Sethe recedes from any relationship with the community and in a way runs away from a basic strengthening that depends on relating to a group. Sethe gets over her suffering only in the end when she joins hands with the other women in the community. Baby Suggs, in a quaint retroceding, returns to basics of pleasure when she ponders over colour. Beloved, too removes herself from her present and goes back into the past when she demands that the past be related to her.

Morrison presents in the final pages of Beloved, an abreaction. Sethe is finally exorcized of the anxiety of Beloved’s murder when the original incident of murder is replayed in front of her. When the community collects at Sethe’s home to help her exorcize Beloved’s ghost, the coming of a man wearing a hat on a horse acts like a catalyst in this exorcism. His appearance reminds Sethe of the coming of School Teacher. Beloved, in this incident is killed again, only this time she is not a baby but a haunting memory. Also, while originally the community deserts Sethe, this time it extends its support to Sethe.

Lina is the most important character when it comes to the study of memory, not only because Lina’s mind is replete with memory of oppression but also because Lina forms a turning point of time frames. She lives surprisingly in the past, present and future, all at the same time. She understands the present from the past and gives insights into the present, and at the same time follows her instinct to understand the future. Lina is someone who lives in all these three worlds. She can jump over tenses and speak with many voices. Lina in her efforts to deal with her past employs veils and she traverses her past walking through side lanes. She does not tell direct stories of her past because the past is too painful; rather she tells symbolic tales. This not
only shows that Lina can conceal the past well and save herself from trauma, but also that she can interpret it and draw conclusions from it. Lina’s story of the eagle protecting her children is a classic example of coding trauma. When Florens asks Lina if the eagle’s offspring survive, she answers, “We have”.

Despite the fact that the African characters share a collective memory, they are not without gaps in their bonding and solidarity. Lina never likes Sorrow and fails to understand the fret and fever that she is a perpetual victim to. Lina wants to keep Sorrow at a distance because her individual memories of rites and rituals of her Indian past tell her that Sorrow is a bad omen. Sorrow for her is a lurking threat to the family’s happiness. Sorrow is personified sadness, the Acheron of Jacob’s kingdom.

In the case of Lina and Rebecca, they are tied to one another through their memories of collective struggles to tame the land. However, this sharing is not altogether simple. The complexity of hierarchy is always apparent and takes over her sense of human equality. Rebecca forgets these collective memories, and wants to give her slaves up after Jacob’s death. This form of forgetting breaks the links of solidarity.

Morrison, throughout the novel makes and breaks solidarity like a goddess playing with her sport. She relates memories to solidarity but then on another plane, also realizes that memories can engender solidarity only if they have a strong emotional quotient. Florens, who throughout the novel does not feel anything emotionally, also becomes emotionally aroused when the blacksmith deserts her. She feels traumatized when she understands her inadequacy as a woman and an offspring. The rejection by blacksmith is felt strongly by her because she re-experiences the full force of her initial rejection by her mother. She records these memories in writing on the walls and floor of her room. She wants to make sense of her past and wants to record her agony. It is as if she is leaving her signature in this home, a trace of her being there. She understands her memories by writing about them, as opposed to Lina the oral story-teller. But both are similar in that they record their memories in some form and at the same time pass them on. Florens’s story-telling is intense and urgent. Justin Allen Holliday points out that Florens’s writing has the “ability to seemingly move beyond the walls and into collective memory—into the consciousness of readers, even if the readers do not see the actual writing… While this writing does not
cause her to fully overcome the trauma, it nevertheless provides an outlet for her to try and make sense out of what remains a source of horror to her” (4).

Thus we see that Morrison’s interest in memory arises out of her attempt to understand the truth more holistically than it is usually understood. The subjective, haphazard nature of memory problematizes truth because remembered history has multiple voices. Osagie argues, “The reluctance of the author to draw a line between inside and outside, visible and invisible, image and reality, history and fiction. Morrison’s message here, that what we may be seeing is not there at all and what is open ans revealed we may not be seeing, questions the whole idea of truth and certainty” (3). Through multiple seeing Morrison not just tries to reach “the” truth but also exposes the very nature of truth. She reveals all interpretations as being limited in their scope and therefore questions not just traditional ways of seeing, but all ways of seeing.

3.3 Recalling and Reconfiguring the Past in Amy Tan

According to Naeimeh Tabatabaei Lotfi, who is a theorist on memory, “The haunting power of past memories, intensified in traumatic incidents, forces the individuals to create an eligible picture of past; this would ensure a secured sense of self. The process of recalling memories of traumatic event challenges the validity of stored images. Basically, the mind, proficiently, distorts the past and the outcome is representation of erratic memory” (1912).

Past memories of the characters in Amy Tan’s novels become debilitating to their development unless they assimilate them within their lives. Their memories can only lead to authentic subjectivities once they are recognized as an essential part of the subaltern self. Lofti writes in this regard, “Memory narratives could be considered the psychological solutions, to heal the victims of traumatic past incidents. Narrative therapy could be an inseparable part of memory narratives, in which recalling is the main narrative strategy to cure the past” (1912). Several characters in The Bonesetter’s Daughter engage in these narrative strategies. Both LuLing and Bao Bomu narrate their biographies through writing for their daughters not only as a strategy for redemption of the self but also to guide their daughters. A memoir is both a record of failing memories as well as a manual for living life. Both LuLing and Bao
Bomu record their memories when they realize that they will not be around forever to tell their daughters the stories of their lives. Bao Bomu writes just before committing suicide and LuLing writes after she begins to ail with Alzheimer’s disease. In *The Joy Luck Club* the memories are not passed on in writing but through oral cues. Memories of China are forever alive in the narrative. The stories told by the mothers about their Chinese pasts are spoken from memory, but they are fresh. Lofti observes, “The significant point is that, in the course of recalling memory, a collective identity is constructed, as well as the individual identity” (1913).

Memory is a very important strand in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. LuLing voices the importance of memory at the very outset. She speaks about how important memory is for making sense of life. Loss of memory comes about as a handicap. Precious Aunty tells her multiple stories about her past. The memories that Precious Aunty has are too painful to be related to anyone. She must distort her past because passing it to her daughter would mean passing on her legacy of pain. She finally passes on her memory to LuLing as a memoir before she commits suicide. Passing on her memory is vital to her subjectivity, which has hitherto remained ironically hidden in the ink makers’ household. She must hush her life and pass it under the covers as dictated by an oppressive social setup. She tells LuLing funny stories about her maimed face to protect her from her past:

I was a fire-eater, she said with her hands and eyes. Hundreds of people came to see me in the market square. Into the burning pot of my mouth I dropped a raw pork, added chilis and bean paste, stirred this up, then offered the morsels to people to taste. If they said, “delicious!” I opened my mouth as a purse to catch their copper coins. One day, however, I ate the fire, and the fire came back, and it ate me. After that, I decided not to be a cook-pot anymore, so I became a nursemail instead. (Tan, “Bonesetter’s” 3)

LuLing remembers the day Precious Aunty told her the family name of the bonesetters, but she cannot remember the name that was written on the slip. She remembers the background and forgets the foreground. LuLing revises the moment in her mind because she knows that memory is locally bound. Memory is a link to life and comprehension of the world. LuLing loses the very thread that binds her life when she forgets her family name. No matter how avidly she felt its importance, she
forgets it because it is a source of her guilt. Her depression, we learn in the second half of the novel is directly related to her belief that she is responsible for the death of her mother. Her subsequent life takes off from this one incident. It is as if she is born again with the memoir her mother leaves for her. But the death of her mother is also an ending. It gives her a dark passenger in the form of an imagined ghost. She wants to communicate with the ghost from the past to ascertain that her future is not tragic. She is able to communicate after the incident when Ruth breaks her arm and LuLing instructs her to write on the sand with a chopstick. Ruth writes the word ‘Doggie’, which coincidentally is also the name that Precious Aunty used to call LuLing by. This triggers off a conversation between LuLing and the ghost:

“Please let me know you are not mad at me,” her mother went on.
“Give me a sign. I have tried to tell you how sorry I am, but I don’t know if you’ve heard. Can you hear me?... Ruth felt something touch her shoulder, and she jumped. “Ask her if she understood everything I just said,” LuLing ordered. “Ask her if my luck has changed. Is the curse over? Are we safe? Write down her answer.” (Tan, “Bonesetter’s” 79)

Her ways of dealing with the past are hypothetical. She suffers from guilt much like Sethe in Morrison’s Beloved. They are both haunted by ghosts that are finally exorcised through some form of belonging and solidarity. Ruth and the Chinese man who translates her memoir act as exorcists of sorts for LuLing. Also, the telling of stories is a common strand in both novels. In A Mercy, too Florens writes down her story on the walls of her room, which is similar to the memoirs written by LuLing and her mother. LuLing and Precious Aunty pass on their legacies to their only inheritors in the form of memoirs when they feel that they would lose the past. LuLing writes her memoir when she feels that she is losing her memory. She realizes that she has forgotten the family name which triggers off her memoir writing out of the fear that she may forget other things.

Ruth’s reaction to her painful memories is that of numbness and a loss of her voice. When she falls off the slide in her school, she shuts off her voice from the shock and pain. Every year following it, at the same time she loses her voice. It becomes a form of ritual and she even makes it a path to agency when she infuses it with willingness. On another level, it is a form of displacement of memory ironically with silence. Ruth evades the discourse when she stops struggling to overcome the
suppressing memories. Her reaction may be psychosomatic but she makes it a
response by giving it special meaning and making it a ritual that does not just happen
but is performed. It is almost like a religious observation:

The following August, rather than just wait for muteness to strike,
Ruth explained to her clients and friends that she was taking a planned
weeklong retreat into verbal silence. “It’s a yearly ritual,” she said, “to
sharpen my consciousness about words and their necessity.” … She
made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease
or mystery. (Tan, “Bonesetter’s” 10)

Ruth has several bouts of forgetting in the novel, much like her bouts of losing
her voice. She often has a gut feeling that she is forgetting something but cannot point
with certainty what it is. Often her memory deficits are related to cluttering of
information. Ruth follows the simple routine of counting on her fingers but that does
not seem to be enough to order her memory. Ruth’s life also seems to be abnormal
and gains normality only by understanding her mother’s life. Shelley Thompson
observes:

While Luling seemed to be so opposed to adaptation into American
life, Ruth had forgotten all of her heritage. Luling felt isolated from the
American world, while Ruth was completely absorbed in it. After Ruth
found pieces of her mother’s lost history, she deciphered and learned
from them. Ruth felt the knowledge of her family’s past was very much
a part of her, as Tan had. This parallelism is also interesting in that
Ruth learns to help Luling adapt into American life, but also learns to
listen to her mother’s past and advice. (3)

Despite their present relevance to Ruth’s life we realize that LuLing’s
memories exist in the wild, unmarked and unarticulated space when we hear the story
she had been hiding all along. LuLing’s story has hitherto been evaded because of the
exigencies of her present. All along the first half of the novel she seems unfinished
because there are many questions related to her subjectivity that demand exploration.
Her amnesic, confused present hides a past that exists on the peripheries of her
existence. When the curtain rises over her life we see the real LuLing, with her
struggles and dreams. Nevertheless, it all seems like a dream from another time and
land. Ruth faces her inheritance and has new realizations about her mother when she
uncovers the mysteries of her mother’s past. Her mother’s memoir is incidentally a
self help book that Ruth has required all along to fulfill her destiny as a female Asian immigrant in the U.S.A. It is a book that gives her the missing nourishment to grow the shoots waiting deep in her subjectivity to sprout. She has been a co-author all along in her life, a ghost writer who ironically never saw the ghosts hiding in her past. First, she is the co-author to her mother who does not know English too well. Then she adopts the profession of a ghost writer and all along remains the small-type name. We know that Ruth all along knows the importance of the past and family when she gives the speech at her Chinese Thanksgiving party, “As the years go on, I see how much family means. It reminds us of what’s important. That connection to the past.” (Tan, “Bonesetter’s” 93). For her, her family becomes a generator of stories and perception, and her connection to the past.

An interesting metaphor for LuLing’s failing memory is the place that they call the End of the World, the ravine behind LuLing’s childhood home in China. It is the place of the forgotten, unconscious, unspeakable and can only be imagined:

The moving cliff gave us the feeling we had to look behind us to know what lay ahead. We called it the End of the World… And his wife said, “Don’t talk about this anymore. You’re only inviting disaster”. For what lay beyond and below was too unlucky to say out loud: unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts. Everyone knew this. (Tan, “Bonesetter’s” 165)

The ravine is a comprehensive discursive metaphor in the novel. After the incident of her mother’s suicide by jumping into the ravine, it becomes a symbol of the guilt and anxiety that LuLing will forever feel as a daughter. She finds herself responsible for it. It is also as if the pit sucks in her life. She records these things which she cannot talk about, in her memoir. But these are also the things she cannot forget: “About a lot of things, a stack of pages this thick. It is like her life story, all the things she didn’t want to forget. The things she couldn’t talk about. Her mother, the orphanage, her first husband, yours’” (Tan, “Bonesetter’s” 342). The things she had been hiding come out when she feels that she is losing her memory. Even then, she doesn’t speak of them because they are too closely connected to her emotional wellbeing.

Another metaphor from LuLing’s childhood is the cave where Peking Man was discovered. The bones of early men found in a cave in Peking are an interesting
symbol for memory. Tan in an interview with Molly Giles reveals her fascination with caves as a metaphor for memory:

I also have a fascination for caves, and while revising The Bonesetter’s Daughter, I decided to include imagery about excavations as a way to talk about memory. I had been lucky enough to meet the Chinese archaeologist who had led the team excavating Peking Man; he was about one hundred years old at the time, and his story fascinated me. Peking Man was, of course not a complete skeleton of one man but the partial remains of thirty-seven men, women, and children. The first remains found part of a skull, were actually from a woman. This had me thinking about how incomplete and fragile our memories are. We find bits and pieces of our own past or those of our parents or ancestors, and we try to reconfigure these fragments in order to understand ourselves, how we came to be who we are. (Tan, Bonesetter’s” 372)

There are always gaps in memory, as has already been pointed out earlier. The gaps of memory, incidentally, also become the gaps that separate LuLing from her mother. She fails to connect with her because she dies before LuLing can know that she is her real mother. LuLing, however, owing to her guilt remains tied to her mother for the rest of her life. Even though she does not exist, LuLing believes that her mother exists as a special power that still moves her life.

Through her memoir LuLing tries to reestablish the importance of the past to her life. LuLing’s narrative dives into the psychic subtexts of her emotional existence. LuLing keeps the past at bay all these years to preserve her psyche from the past traumas. Much like Sethe in Beloved raises Denver oblivious of the past, LuLing, also keeps Ruth away from her painful past. As mothers they keep their daughters from experiencing the pain that keeps threatening to bypass the strict borders of hiding. However, in both the novels daughters exorcise the ghosts of guilt and become the drainers of pain from their lives. Lofti observes:

Ruth discovers the answer to her philosophical questions about life. Interestingly, this insight belongs to a feminine sphere and its instructors are all women who share their memories with their daughters, to protect them from hazards of life. Unlike Tan’s other novels, which are based on oral narratives of mothers, this story
develops by the act of documenting past. However, the written word serves to perform as the savior of ancestral memories and preserves the history of a family and in larger scale, a nation. (1915)

There are several roadblocks in the novel where things are left unsaid or have been forgotten. LuLing’s life demands the telling of secrets that hide behind her anxious self. In fact she has been devaluing her past so far. She has been living in spurts of emotion all her life, but her memoir flows smoothly as if it comes from another woman, who is more in control of her emotions. There is a contradiction between LuLing’s two lives. They are displaced from one another; the life in China is displaced by the life in the U.S. but it nevertheless tries to come to the surface. She reaccentuates this past which though, it has been subverted by migration, yet exists in the margins of her consciousness, nevertheless.

The daughters in the texts must incorporate the memories of their mothers into their present lives to smoothen their lives. They must see themselves in their memories like Jing Mei sees herself in her Chinese twin sisters. The backgrounds of the stories of Chinese mothers and their American daughters are diverse, making their connectivity superficial. Looking deeper into the background, however, one sees how the relics of the past can be influential in rounding off the jagged corners of the daughters’ complex lives. The missing joining thread in the daughter stories is apparently present in the mothers’ stories. This thread, however thin, connects the daughters with their mothers in a major way. On another level, it is a connection not only between generations of a family, but also between cultures and on that level, the novel also becomes a space where cultures cohabit. However, America, in the novel is a space where memories fade and cultures metamorphose and lose their force. The second generation is not only born to America but also to a cultural amnesia regarding their Chinese past. This amnesia is highly infectious and is not something that is personal. It is collective and hence social.

Sometimes, the past memories one has, are obscured by the culture one presently lives in. An-mei cannot remember the essence of her mother. When her aunt guides her to tell her twin sisters in China about their mother, she suddenly realizes that there is very little she remembers. She has no words to place her memories. The memories are, however, there, we know, when An-mei suddenly knows what she would say to them. When she meets her sisters we are left hoping that she would know what to say about her mother’s essence. Harold Bloom writes about the
importance of recalling to how the diasporic subject makes sense of her life as an exile.

For immigrants, recollection is an important strategy used to negotiate a marginal position in an alien society. Specifically for Amy Tan, by retelling her mother’s story of the past, she is able to explore the nature and the function of memory and recollection, especially how recollection functions in a bicultural context and how it affects the re-creation of individual identities. Generally speaking, all recollection entails one’s conscious negotiation with and active reconstitution of the memory of the past. Put another way, all memories are socially and culturally reconstituted within a specific historical and cultural context and emerge in the form of narratives. (110)

The role that recalling the past has on identity formation is clear from this observation. *The Joy Luck Club* is a book about wishes that don’t translate into reality but are passed on to the next generation. Tan makes the point that the wishes are never really forgotten, but conversely are passed to the next generation. The book is about wishes and how the second generation comes to understand the wishes of the first generation immigrants. Their wishes lead them, ironically, not to the future but to the past. In “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away”, the woman has unfulfilled wishes that she carries to America for fulfilment, symbolized by the swan. But the moment she reaches the customs, she realizes that her wishes suddenly seem absurd. They do not fit into the American landscape. Even the passing on must wait because of the generation gap between the mothers and the daughters. At the very outset, the main thrusts of the novel become clear:

For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intensions.” And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English. (Tan, “Joy Luck” 17)

To make sense of her life, the diasporic must maintain continuity in her distraught life where life as a native of China is intruded into, if not replaced, by the American life. Memory is the only connection between these two lives. Their memories aid the diasporics to make sense of their present. As Ben Xu points out:
All the Club Aunties have experienced two kinds of extreme situations: one kind is famine, war, forced marriage, and broken family in China, and the other is cultural alienation, disintegration of old family structure, and conflict between mother and daughter in America. In order to survive the drastic changes in their lives, these women need to maintain a psychological continuity, a coherent picture of life-world, and a continuity of the self. (5)

Mothers and daughters have different dreams and both cannot understand each other’s dreams because the dreams of the mothers inhere in the Chinese language and the dreams of the daughters are manufactured in America. However, the daughters must make their mothers’ Chinese memories their own and see themselves rooted in them, like June begins to see herself emotionally connected to her foster sisters in China. The mothers’ and daughters’ stories are diverse, and it is as if their foregrounding separates them. At the level of the background, however, these stories are connected and can draw on one another.

Negative heritage is a very important aspect of the two novels by Tan. The very concept of negative heritage acquires multiple meanings for the two generations in *The Joy Luck Club*. The negative heritage for the Chinese mothers is of their colonization in patriarchal China. The negative heritage, for the daughters is the control of their mothers’ past on their present American lives. The daughters, however, come to understand over a period of time that the individualism propounded by American culture is their negative heritage. Suyuan Woo carries the memory of Kweilin as a negative memory. Kweilin which in common parlance is considered a paradise, becomes hell for her when war breaks out. Thus, a place that was considered the most beautiful site of heritage in the Chinese culture becomes a site of negative heritage. This idea runs parallel to the idea of negative heritage of America, which is otherwise a dreamland. A negative heritage springing in war torn Kweilin is Suyuan Woo’s trauma in decisively deserting her twin daughters. This trauma is so apathetic to her selfhood that she cannot even recall it clearly. She frames multiple stories for the same event. As Xu points out:

Suyuan told her refugee story in so many varied ways that her daughter does not know how to relate them to reality and can only take them as “a Chinese fairy tale” (12). These stories, in the form of memory, test Suyuan’s ability to forget. These stories are her symptomatic records
of a traumatized soul making a desperate effort to push back the memory of the tragic loss of a husband and two baby daughters during the war. (7)

Therefore it can be concluded that the memories of several characters in The Bonesetter’s Daughter and The Joy Luck Club exist as a complex formation involving factors like biology, culture, language, oppression and experiences of migration etc. Memory is influenced by the larger cultural space and is not simply inscribed as a code on the tissues of the brain. Also, memories are shared among individuals, like those that LuLing and Ruth share as mother and daughter or even those that are shared among Tan and the characters since she utilizes her personal memory and life experiences in writing this novel. Connections are established between mothers and daughters through the memoirs which function as relics of the past. Memories must be narrated and shared for establishing relations among different generations of women who are estranged in space and time for various reasons. Sharing one’s memory with others also becomes a way of dealing with one’s past. It helps the individual to emerge out of the complications of the experience of oppression and thereby become an agent.

3.4 Wandering and Going Back to Memory in Abdulrazak Gurnah

Gurnah foregrounds in his novels experiences related to love, desertion, morality, and the role of memory in the formation of subjectivity on the landscape of postcolonial Africa. Africa is a culturally diverse continent with Indians, Arabs, native Africans and Europeans inhabiting it. Gurnah focuses on the Muslim population of Africa and alludes in his novels directly or indirectly, to Islamic precepts which have entered collective consciousness about the Muslim world. Abdulrazak Gurnah configures his novels pictorially, engaging a vast array of colourful symbols, and figures of speech, giving them the feel of an Oriental tapestry. Nevertheless, his Orient is not superficially exotic. Africa is seen neither as a paradise of growth, nor as a dark space inhabited by wild creatures. Rather it exists as an ordinary space where culturally diverse populations cohabit in the context of economic pressures and drives. Gurnah does not give us any clear overarching discourse on the continent. On the contrary he stays away from an essentializing focus on space, centering his energies rather on the
diverse human populations that exist intertwined with each other. The present section of the chapter will focus on how memory plays a role in constructing subjectivity in *Paradise* (1994) and *Desertion* (2005).

The novel *Desertion* is written around a single story—the love story of Rehana and Pearce. This story is polyvalent and is told variously by the several characters giving it various voices and thematic directions. It affects a vast array of characters, who, on a cursory glance seem to be existing outside of its scope of influence. The story of Rehana’s desertion leads her to leave her city because of the shame it brings on her and her family; but it is not a story that will be hushed up. It is carried on for generations and has entered the social memory. It is not only Jamila and the women in Rehana’s family but Amin too who are affected by it decades after the original act of desertion. The desertion in the title is Rehana’s desertion by Pearce. This is not merely the desertion of a woman by a man but also at a deeper level the desertion of the native by the colonizer, where the native has a use value that diminishes over time. There is a desertion of people not only by people, but a desertion of people by history. The very first line in the novel points to the fluidity and variability of memory, “There was a story of his first sighting. In fact, there was more than one, but elements of the stories merged into one with time and telling” (Gurnah, *Desertion* 1).

The Africans were deserted by the Arabs and the Europeans on the basis of their obligations to each other because of their shared humanity. They were ousted from their own land which became a site of cultural deletion and mingling. Frederick discusses the history of Africa with Pearce in the characteristic colonizer way. When while talking about the civilization of Africa, he bares his teeth, he bares his xenophobia:

‘But it has a lot of history. Some of it is pretty fanciful, I must say Egyptians and Greeks sailing down this way for ivory in ancient times, that kind of thing. There’s a persistent one of a runaway Persian prince who establishes a kingdom which founds the mongrel Swahili civilization,’ Frederick bared his teeth as he said the last word but it was not clear whether he was smiling or snarling. Perhaps he was only wincing at the word, to indicate its inappropriateness in the context.

(Gurnah, *Desertion* 91)

Memory becomes a story for those who have not experienced it first hand, as it is, for Frederick and Pearce. For them the African memory is only a fanciful history.
They can relate to the continental memory of Africa only from a distance and only in their imagination. The reality, however cannot be fully grasped, whether from a distance or from existing within it because all views are limited views, something is always missed in the constantly expanding universe. Because we are constantly changing, reality is changing and deserting us.

Africa like all the colonized countries, has been deserted by the colonizers. Their intrusions have shaped the African history and hence history itself is a desertion. The history and memory of the colonized is an imposition. They have no say even in their own memory or history. Historically, colonization leaves their land dis-eased and hence deserts them:

‘Anyway, by the time the Portuguese finished with this town, it was not much more than a decaying coastal settlement. You know what they were like, plunder and loot and fanaticism. Then the town almost disappeared, under assault from the Galla and the whatnots from the interior, who camped and defecated on the ruins for centuries, until the sultan in Zanzibar decided to revive it.’ (Gurnah, *Desertion* 91)

Loss of memory is linked in the novel to guilt. Rashid feels guilty when he is unable to recall the contents of his father’s letter. Rashid’s guilt can be taken as a symbol for the guilt of the colonized at the failure of their memories. This guilt does not exist on the surface, but it exists in the subconscious recesses of the subject’s mind. The colonized were demeaned by hegemonic policies, but the shame of the colonized, was to some extent, their own responsibility. Rashid feels ashamed at constantly moving farther and farther away from his African roots. We however, cannot blame him completely for this because he has been cut off physically from his country. In the absence of perceptual cues relating to his native land his memory of it fades away.

The most obvious insights into memory come from Rashid’s experiences as a diasporic. Rashid’s only link to his country and family is through the letters from his home. His memories of home are pumped by rhetorical exchanges. He cannot experience the independence of Zanzibar firsthand but experiences it through Amin’s letter and the news on television. His memory as a diasporic is not experienced and heard in totality, but is akin to something that is experienced secondhand and overheard. His experience as a diasporic unlinks his personal memory from national memory. He gets a very superficial experience of nationality because his links, both to
the land of birth and land of settlement are shallow. His migration leaves him in a metaphorical middle passage.

There are many forms of memories in the novel. There is the national memory of the colonial intervention that is painful to come to terms with. Then, there are memories shared by family and society, apart from personal memories. The diary Amin passes on to Rashid, becomes a record of his personal memory. Amin wants to remember his beloved forever. Though he has deserted her once, he does not want to desert her again by forgetting her. Losing memory thus becomes a form of desertion in this novel and arouses guilt.

The most immediate and intimate memories of homeland are the family memories. Rashid keeps alive the family memories by narrating them in the novel. Family memories are important because the family is the first shaping tool of an individual’s personality. Also, family history can greatly influence life, especially in traditional societies where individual subjectivity is inextricably tied to family history. Jamila narrates her family history to Amin who passes it on in a concrete form to Rashid, who further strengthens it by writing a paper on it.

Memory can be forced out of existence by totalitarianism. Subjects under totalitarian regimes are made to remember or forget what the government wants them to. Amin and citizens of Zanzibar forget about the government of the sultan when a new regime emerges after a coup against the existing government and takes over the country:

The new flag no longer exists. It’s against the law to possess one, even out of curiosity. I’m already beginning to forget it. I can’t remember the colour of the clove cluster, if it was brown or golden. The national anthem is already forgotten. I don’t think anyone could hum a line of it. If they did, they would certainly get a beating or worse. People have been killed. I cannot write these lines. (Gurnah, Desertion 246)

Colonization operates thorough a deletion of the native’s memory. For the oppressor’s culture to flourish, the native’s culture must be subdued. The natives are made to believe that their culture is a lesser culture and must be altered if not replaced by the inclusion of something better. Thus, having memories becomes a vital part of asserting oneself. Several Africans and diasporics all over the western world engage in returning to their native countries to rejuvenate a part of themselves that has been overshadowed by the Western cultures.
Thus, power can mould what one remembers. But it can also be moulded by the state of one’s body. Amin’s memory begins to fade when he goes blind. Blindness is like the switching off of lights that also denies him the ability to see his past. He can no longer find his way around with the same cues.

In Paradise, memory exists on the periphery of Yusuf’s life. Yusuf is forcefully separated from his family and the memory of this event leads to his subsequent wanderings. His childhood becomes confused because of his inability to understand the event by which he was severed from his family. Later, Yusuf wanders into teenage and in early adulthood to find the answers to existential questions and to determine the meanings of existence. He grapples with confusion and reaches only an incomplete resolution regarding his subjectivity. He understands that he is a subaltern but when the novel ends he is still grappling with the idea of agency. The ending of the novel remains incomplete and so does Yusuf’s development. The single memory of severed ties continues to undermine his being and remains a site of trauma. Memory, since it is closely connected to one’s psychological life is important in determining how one relates to one’s past. Yusuf’s memory of his desertion by his father is weak and distorted. He cannot clearly remember what happened on the day when he was taken away from home. His last memory of his mother is pathetic and incomplete:

Yusuf could not remember what his mother did or said but he remembered that she looked ill or dazed, leaning exhaustedly against the doorpost. When he thought of the moment of his departure, the picture that came to mind was the shimmering road on which they walked and the men ahead of him. (Gurnah, Paradise 17)

Yusuf associates memory of his desertion with the outer environment. He remembers it through space. Memory, then, for Yusuf, is largely spatial and exists through certain spatial and temporal cues. One also attaches one’s memory with certain objects in the environment. A seemingly slight and unimportant cue can turn up memories that we did not even know existed. Yusuf also does not form clear memories of this event because he does not know its importance. He is unaware of the fact that he would never meet his parents again. His memories of this event are therefore weak.
Memories often become reasons for survival. Memories keep a state of the past alive that was more positive than the present oppressed state. It becomes in a way a motivator to reach this previous state through struggle and resistance. Yusuf’s memory of a better time generates in him this urge. He runs away from his captivity in the end not just because he is suppressed but because at the same time he knows that another form of existence is possible. He has experienced freedom before and after becoming a slave and memories of this state motivate him in a big way. Thus, the memories that one has determine if and how one would resist domination. Memories, then open up a new world for the subject.

In *Paradise* Yusuf keeps on moving forward without any retrospective glance. As a result, he remains confused. He exists in the sphere of no return. There is no place he can go back to because he knows no other place apart from his captivity. One’s present exists in one’s past. This can be seen as a debilitating factor as well as something that can be utilized for progress. One can move forward only by looking back. When one looks back one remains rooted to one’s experience and has a launch pad from which to take off. Yusuf lacks this launch pad and is a free-floating entity without roots. Being connected therefore depends on memory.

Traumatic memories cause a destruction of the normal psychological state. They are a form of insidious pollution of the psyche. The sullying of the psyche generates counter reactions in the unconscious self. The subject’s inner resources become weak and the traumatic memory becomes a form of road block to fulfilment. This obstruction of fulfilment, however, leads to journeys. Journeys start because of lack. There would be no subjectivity without struggle. Gabrielle Schwab states in this regard:

> There is no life without trauma. There is no history without trauma. Some lives will forever be overshadowed by violent histories, including colonial invasions, slavery, totalitarianism, dictatorships, wars, and genocide… Collective trauma is passed down to individuals in multifarious and refracted ways. Some lives are hit with catastrophic trauma over and over again; then trauma, with its concomitant strategies of survival, becomes a chronic condition. (96)
Thus, trauma of some kind is important for the growth of subjectivity. It is an excess of it that makes the individual mentally unsound. Yusuf, for instance, faces trauma. Because it is not extreme and chronic, he is able to deal with it and emerge out of its emotional hold by configuring his subjectivity. The trauma that he feels does not paralyze his growth. Rather it is essential for it.

*Desertion* and *Paradise* thematically focus on re-establishing memories and understanding the various strands and versions of the same memory. By focusing on the Arab Muslim population of Zanzibar, Gurnah tends to ground himself in the memory of this singular community and shows us how the various members of the same community can have varied understandings of the same memory. Intra communal differentiation exists for example, between Amin and his parents’ understanding of Jamila’s past. On another level, Amin’s recording of Rehana’s story is based on memories which are emotionally structured; Rashid’s understanding of the same story—in addition to being close to his emotional self—takes on intellectual overtones. Distancing from one’s past memories also complicates how one understands one’s present, as is the case with Yusuf in *Paradise*. Memory, we come to understand, fits, into structures and depends on them for its comprehension by the individual subject. There are certain memories, particularly those of subaltern subjects which are remembered collectively by a community. The collective memory register is important in creating linkages between these subjects, engendering solidarity and helping them move towards agency.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Thus we see that memory is important to making meaning of life because it is through the past that the subject understands the present. Memory aids the formation of subjectivity. In fact in this formation, memory and forgetting both play a role. The traumatic events in a subject’s life are relegated to the unconscious, thereby complicating her identity. Bringing the repressed memories to the conscious is essential to living a complete life.

The three novelists have different takes on memory as is apparent from a reading of their texts. Morrison understands the recalling of memory as being psychologically healing to the traumatized subject. The trauma of slavery is starkly
represented through the lives of the Sweet Home slaves in *Beloved*. In *A Mercy*, an important aspect of memory is its telling. Several characters like Florens and Lina make sense of their memories by recording them. The telling of their stories gives them an enlarged understanding of their lives. Similarly, in Amy Tan the various characters, tell stories to make sense of their lives, but also to pass them on to the next generation as guiding principles for their lives. The mothers in both her novels are anxious for the future of their daughters and help them deal with their diasporic lives by giving them their stories to draw on. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* both LuLing and her mother pass on their biographical stories in the form of memoirs. These make the daughters appreciate the lives of their mothers better. While in Tan, the daughters eventually unite with their mothers in that their minds get connected, in Gurnah’s novels the connection is not familial but social, cultural and even national. To make these connections, however, going back to the past memories is very important. Rashid reconnects with his past memories by writing a paper on Rehana’s story. Yusuf, on the contrary has been shorn of his familial ties and finds his past to be a set of inadequate experiences. This complicates his sense of self. He feels that he has to be more in control of his life if he is to give some definition to his self. The idea of subjectivity that is time and again voiced in these novels is tied to memory. Memory of one’s past is one of the most important aspects in the subject’s sense of self.