



**Suppression of Memory as Totalitarian Strategy: A Critique of
Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police***

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, activities of the people have been monitored and scrutinised by the ever strong vigilant governments. The Fascist governments, in particular, are changing the dynamics of the countries as well as the world by moulding and shaping the minds of people according to their objectives. The opponents of the state are silenced or liquidated. The present paper on renowned Japanese writer Yoko Ogawa's science fiction work, *The Memory Police* (2019) has been done to highlight similar issues. The article is divided into three sections. The first section of the article examines how totalitarian regimes function, particularly by playing upon the minds and memories of its citizens. The paper also points out as how people engage with memory as a weapon of protest and as a near-sentient being are confronted with an iniquitous opposition whose main objective is to destroy it. The second section focuses how the psychological toll of forgetting is manifested in the physical world. For instance, when objects vanish from reality, they vanish from memory too and vice versa. Finally, in the third section, analogies are drawn between the metaphoric cosmos of the novel and in the previously witnessed progressively hyper-nationalistic and dictatorial governments acquiring control over the world.

Keywords: Memory Police, Totalitarianism, Orwellian, Memory, Authoritarianism

“Memory is the mother of all wisdom”

-- Aeschylus

Yoko Ogawa is a Japanese writer whose *oeuvre* comprises over fifty works of fiction and non-fiction. Some of her notable works are *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2008), *The Diving Pool: Three Novellas* (2008), *Hotel Iris* (2010) and *The Memory Police* (2019). Her visceral novel,

The Memory Police deals with functioning of authoritarian regimes which deliberately eclipse memories from the lives of people. *The Memory Police* follows the lineage of dystopian fiction, and conjures up classics as George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947).

The Memory Police, is a science fiction set in an unnamed island that has been engulfed by an epidemic called forgetting. The unnamed narrator is a novelist by profession who has already written three novels and the theme of all her published works centres on 'disappearance.' She is in the midst of a new novel which is a gothic tale about the relationship between a typist teacher and one of his students. Their relationship starts romantically but soon turns sinister as the teacher captivates her and locks her in a room full of broken typewriters, thus highlighting the theme of control, loss of individuality and captivity. Memory Police an, eponymous brutal regime present on the island, forces people to collectively 'forget' and lose their attachment to different objects. When the islanders move on from these disappearances, the Memory Police enforces the removal of missing artefacts from the island. The people such as the author's mother and the editor of her novel, with their memory intact, attempt to escape from the island or hide in safe houses to evade arrest by the Police. The Press hailed the publication of *The Memory Police* as "Orwellian" as the novel has similarly gravitated toward the timely themes of state surveillance and totalitarianism that forms its backdrop. Quite creditably, Ogawa employs deft strategies to express old anxieties of authoritarianism and humanity's willingness to be complicit in its own demise.

Michael Rothberg, the memory study scholar, in his work, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), opines that, "the goal of memory today is not only to move beyond discourses of equation or hierarchy, but also to displace the reductive, absolutist understanding of "good and evil" from the centre of global memory politics" (540). The narrator-novelist of *The Memory Police* begins by complaining that writing novels and being a writer is the least impressive and most underappreciated occupation one can pursue on the island because the reading public has already become the casualty and the books seem to cover on the shelves, fearful of crumbling to dust at the slightest touch. The bookstores are much the same, nearly deserted, and the managers sit idly behind their stacked books of yellowing covers. The opening line of the narrative delivers the first shock of totalitarian oppression: "I sometimes wonder what was disappeared first—among all the things that have vanished from the island" (3). In Ogawa's terrifying vision of this world, readers observe how suppressive and totalitarian

regimes destroyed the memories and minds of people. The islanders are facing the near extinction of the most important treasures human beings possess: “The only real treasure is in your head. Memories are better than diamonds and nobody can steal them from you” (Philbrick 72). Similarly, when the husband of the narrator’s former nurse asks him: “If we do remember something, what do we do then?” And R, the editor of narrator’s novel, who remembers everything, replies, “Nothing in particular. We’re all free to do as we choose with our own memories” (Ogawa 231). On the contrary, identified by their dark green uniforms, with heavy belts and black boots, the Memory Police, a dictatorial agency on the island operates efficiently, thoroughly, systematically, and without any trace of emotion. Memory Police does everything to destroy the memories of people. The dictatorial government functions in a way that everyday minutiae of living is constantly monitored and threatened through the vigilantism with regard to societal and personal memory. With reference to the complete control by such repressive authorities Orwell, in his book, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) writes, “We are living in a world in which nobody is free, in which hardly anybody is secure, in which it is almost impossible to be honest and to remain alive” (Orwell 152). The fictive island in *The Memory Police* does have its pockets of resistance, though passive. There are some citizens whose genotype is equipped them with the capacity to remember. As a result there are constant attempts by the people of the island to preserve the memories because keeping memories can only ensure their survival. Thus, the novel probes the idea that our humanity resides exclusively in our ability to create meaning, to imbue objects with a sense of importance. If humans are left with nothing external such as no world to act upon, do they still have value? In the universe that Ogawa paints, alienation acts as if it is gravity, affecting everyone equally, those who have forgotten as well as those who still remember.

For Oscar Wilde, “Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us” (Wilde 34). Though R being a person in control of his memory, feels more and more withdrawn from a world that is moving on without him and turns increasingly to treating forgotten objects with an idolatrous care. His vision for the future is to seal the past and remain connected to it long enough so that it can be restored. However, for him, a past without a people is as broken as a people without a past. This is a pointer to the existential effects of political suppression along with its mechanisms. Therefore, the main focus of the novel remains on issue of whether it is possible to preserve one’s sense of self in the face of obliterating political system. Yoko Ogawa succeeds in establishing connections between objects and memory as well as memory and a sense of self. There are constant discussions

between R and the narrator that are centered around her heart, her spirit, and the void that the loss of possessions creates on the island. When R tries to reawaken the memories of narrator through her mother's collected objects of the past, he not only is trying to reconstruct her memory, but awaken her soul too, "I can't just stand by watching as your soul withers" he tells the narrator (Ogawa 177). Therefore, remembering and memory are connected to a fundamental facet of self and identity. The narrator understands this intuitively when she writes in her novel about the typist student, "Things I thought were mine and mine alone can be taken away much more easily than I would have imagined. If my body were cut up in pieces and those pieces mixed with those of other bodies, and then if someone told me, "Find your left eye," I suppose it would be difficult to do so" (163). Ogawa provides us an allegory of the vanishing self. The character in the narrator's novel, i.e., the typist-student with an attractive male teacher is drawn into a nasty trap. She gets locked in a room full of old and broken typewriters that are imbued with the voice of their operator. The damaged machines all around her erode her sense of self, and the room takes on the characteristics of a cave, akin to the Plato's allegorical cave where the prisoners live in shadows cut off from the greater reality of conceptual forms. The metaphor of cave is a *leitmotif* in the novel which represents general ignorance, void in the heart and the disorientation of the islanders. Through the metaphor of R's room which exists as a collective consciousness as all reality, memory, and the items that are preserved in his room exist as separate entities different from the larger world of the Memory Police, a place where reality is progressively a shadow of what people such as R remember. The islanders like R and narrator's mother view the secret room as a reservoir of their existence, truth and reality.

The impact of forgetting is manifested in the physical world, for instance, when objects vanish from memory, they vanish from reality too. The narrator laments thus: "It's a shame that the people who live here haven't been able to hold such marvellous things in their hearts and minds, but that's just the way it is on this island. Things go on disappearing, one by one" (3). Forgetting entails disconnection from the past as it makes it easier to miss the connections between events or people together in the present. What vanishes with it is the ability to travel, the awareness of one's location in respect to others on the island, and the knowledge that there are other islands outside of the narrator's constrained perspective. The continuous disappearance of memory makes the people believe that the world they live in is the only reality that has ever existed, and that any alternative path is unimaginable. At certain points in the novel, there is a glimmer of optimism that the

disappearances are not forever and by preserving and revitalizing the remnants of knowledge, the decaying of hearts and minds can eventually be halted, thereby, opening up the possibility of charting a different course towards a brighter future. Although the islanders call them “disappearances” the objects do not necessarily disappear in the physical sense. Instead, once the attachments of people to these items fade, they dispose them off either by burning them or drowning them in river.

In the eyes of American psychologist Rollo May, “Memory is not just the imprint of the past time upon us; it is the keeper of what is meaningful for our deepest hopes and fears” (May 220). The disappearances in *The Memory Police* are not only a physical phenomena but a mental and affective one. To emphasise the significance of retaining the memories, Ogawa writes, “And even when that balance begins to collapse, something remains. Which is why you shouldn’t worry” (54). It is the resistance that Ogawa pins her hope on and informs that no matter how cruel a regime is, its totalitarian plans can be shattered. The endeavours of the characters establishing their connections with the past, acts a weapon against totalitarianism of the Memory Police. In an instance, the narrator finds hidden statues kept by her mother;

In the end, we found that each statue concealed a single object, different from the others. One was so tiny we almost failed to notice it, another was wrapped in oiled paper, a third had a complicated shape. There was a black one, a sharp one, a fuzzy one, a thin one, a sparkly one, a soft one...As I continued to study them, I began to be able to distinguish the objects I’d seen long ago in the basement and dimly recall some of the stories my mother had told me. But that was the extent of it. The swamp of my memory was shallow and still. (230)

These objects truly have the power to change the people of island, to alter their hearts and minds as the slightest sensation from the past has an effect and helps them remember. The secret room where all this revelation happens, is constructed in a manner that it will stay even if the whole island disappears. The editor R says, “Don’t we have all the memories preserved here in this room? The emerald, the map, the photograph, the harmonica, the novel— everything. This is the very bottom of the mind’s swamp, the place where memories come to rest” (232). The editor R becomes the main inspiration and driving force for the narrator-novelist to write novels so that the past could be preserved. He also prevents the narrator from burning the photographs, albums and the portraits of her mother at her home. R is aware of the value of the relics, particularly photographs as Marianne Hirsch writes, “image enables us to envision mother/daughter transmission not as an identity position, but as an affiliative space of remembrance, available to other subjects external

to the immediate family” (Hirsch 93). When Memory Police realises that the memories of people can hinder their totalitarian project, they make the people to disconnect with the outside world. People with memory are viewed as threat to the state which Memory Police undertakes to destroy. When the protagonist meets her editor, R, to go over the novel’s manuscript, she finds herself in a predicament. She learns that he is one of those whose memory retention is caused by their genetic composition. In an attempt to save him, the narrator constructs a hidden room in her home, akin to Anne Frank’s. Over the time the secret room gradually turns into a treasure trove of illicit but charming relics such as harmonics, ferry tickets and ramune candy. The protagonist’s mother is another person of undented memory, a sculptor who hid little disappeared objects in a cupboard in her studio. Richard Meckien in an article, “Cultural Memory: The Link Between Past, Present, and Future” writes, “memory appears as a device to protect the past against the corrosive action of time and to give subsidies for individuals to understand the world and know what to expect, ‘so they do not have to reinvent the wheel and start each generation from scratch” (Meckien 1). The people who can preserve their memories live under continuous fear of being arrested by Memory Police and subsequent liquidation. For instance, narrator’s mother is picked up by the Memory Police and returned with a death certificate. Since the narrator cannot remember objects she complains, “I have no seeds inside me, waiting to sprout again...that’s why I’m jealous of your heart, one that offers some resistance, that is tantalizingly transparent and yet not, that seems to change as the light shines on it at different angles” (Ogawa 82). However, there are instances in the novel when faint memories pierce consciousness of the islanders. Even though hats have been gone from the island for a number of years, the narrator has a sudden flashback when she sees people wearing something on their head. At certain instances she sees something flying high in the air and remembers it as something a bird looks like. She is, nevertheless, able to retrieve these vanished objects from the recesses of her mind, even if they are not strongly associated with any emotions or distinct memories.

The technique of nameless characters and dropping the proper nouns employed by Ogawa grants the novel a supernatural tinge. As a result, the story becomes more approachable and relatable to a wider audience by enabling them to project their own experiences and feelings onto the characters as in the end of novel R says, “The meaning isn’t important. What matters is the story hidden deep in the words” (245). The disappearance of the calendars from the island entails that people no longer have any use of days and dates. However, the heart acts as another leitmotif

throughout the novel, reminding the readers that memories are stored in there just as much as in the mind, and that though minds can be erased, the heart does not seem to act the same way as there are emotions attached to them. Thus, it can be argued that the metaphor of the heart and mind in *The Memory Police* reflects the emotional and intellectual aspects of human memory respectively. The heart often represents emotions, feelings, and personal connections, while the mind signifies rationality, logic, and intellectual understanding.

The tool of erasure of memories has been ideologically implemented by the state in such a way that it gets unnoticed by the islanders so that neither does it affect their day-to-day life nor do they complaint about it. The island stirs up after every single disappearance and regains normalcy after some time as though nothing has happened. The State seems to understand 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” (Neumann 252). Similarly, the birds also vanished out of existence unexpectedly one morning. The disappearance of birds symbolises the disappearance of dreams of flying high and possibility of escaping the cage of totalitarian regime. The occupants lose sight of the inner associations that birds hold for them such as the flight, freedom, extravagance and desire. As such, the novel *The Memory Police* illustrates the fear of being eroded until the self becomes “a hollow heart full of holes” (82).

The narrative involving the story of typist-student and a typist-teacher, takes the form of a manipulative relationship where the student is incarcerated by the teacher in a clock tower surrounded by dysfunctional typewriters. The student feels helplessly pushed into a corner reminiscent of Vladimir Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert isolating Lolita. Ogawa uses the allegory of student teacher relationship to explain how fascist states first charm, seduce and then imprison their subjects in a manner that is almost unnoticeable. The novel’s message is not just political; it also raises difficult questions about the nature of relationship among art, love and beauty, of what one holds dear and why one chooses to do so. More than political catastrophe, *The Memory Police* appears to call into question memory’s fundamental status as reliable protectors of the past. Ogawa’s work, thus, is incredibly powerful, leaving the reader feeling stifled, fearful and trapped in the shackles of an oppressive regime. In the novel, the vigilantism and the brutal handling of public activities by Memory Police has grown to be accepted as a routine matter. Therefore, the news of someone’s vanishing from the island becomes common, something to be silently and

strictly accepted as normal. In a similar vein the Memory Police forcefully organises a search to identify people who possess the trait of remembering things with the purpose of altering their minds or kill them. In case someone denies to cooperate in such research projects, he and his entire family vanishes overnight same as been voiced by Professor Inui, “If you don’t cooperate, you become their victim and [you] have no idea where they take you. Prison? A labor camp? The gallows? But you can be sure it isn’t anyplace pleasant” (Ogawa 34). In his essay, “The Prevention of Literature” Orwell wrote that “totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth” (Orwell 12). Ogawa’s novel is an authentic and relevant reflection of the contemporary era in which facts and news share a tenuous relationship. Not much seems to have changed since the novel is written. In the contemporary times as well as fascist states enforces its timelessness through the fabrication of historical events and destroying public records. As history, storytelling, and all means of record keeping are a threat to a state that tries to erase the past and establish its tenets subsequently. Therefore, when the people of the unnamed island forget one thing after another, and subsequently forget about forgetting, their hearts become more “diluted” and they lose their sense of self. Initially, there is a systematic suppression of right to protest and subsequently there remains nothing to protest for and, therefore, a passive acceptance of things becomes the routine.

In conclusion it can be said that *The Memory Police* has themes in common with dystopian fiction such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother, the head of the State, commands complete obedience to interests of the State, *The Memory Police* creates the same saga of oppression of the public through systematic erasure of the past by obliterating it from the memory. Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* can be read as the contemporary political allegory and metaphorical rendition of the global rise of the ‘Right’ wherein the totalitarian political regimes manipulate the common masses through the measures like controlling the reality, truth and brain washing.

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