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Memory and Identity in Crisis: A Comparative Study of *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police*

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Abstract

This paper examines how identity, memory, and loss are represented through the dislocation of self and the fragmentation of reality in Vajra Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall* and Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*. The primary objective is to explore how both narratives construct dystopian landscapes where personal and collective memories are destabilized, and individual subjectivity is continuously eroded. This paper examines how characters in *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* navigate systems of erasure that distort their sense of identity, memory, and belonging. Using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study analyzes how both novels portray the psychological consequences of living in environments where history is suppressed and the boundaries between self and society collapse. The absence of stable spatial and temporal coordinates in these narratives disrupts traditional storytelling and reflects the protagonists' inner fragmentation. As memory fades and reality becomes unstable, the characters experience a profound sense of dislocation, and presents how trauma unsettles not only the mind but also the narrative form itself. The study, further, argues that *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* foreground a crisis of identity rooted in the unreliability of memory and the impossibility of stable selfhood in fragmented worlds. Both narratives highlight how authoritarian structures manipulate memory and perception, and ultimately leads to an existential disconnection from time, place, and self.

Keywords: Displacement, hybridity, rhizomatic identity, unhomely

Memory, Identity, and the Formation of Loss: Setting the Context

South Asian literature often tells stories about people who have lost their homes, identities, or sense of belonging—especially under the long shadows of colonialism, political conflict, and forced migration. In an era increasingly marked by cultural dislocation, memory crises, and the erosion of stable identities,

contemporary South Asian fiction offers fertile ground for exploring the construction of the self within unstable sociopolitical environments. In this evolving literary terrain, Vajra Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall*—a Sri Lankan dystopian narrative—and Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*—a Japanese speculative novel—emerge as compelling case studies. Though written in vastly different cultural contexts, both texts use dystopian and speculative tropes to depict societies where memory is systematically erased and identity is deeply fragmented.

What distinguishes these narratives is not merely their bleak settings but their radical engagement with memory as both a burden and a battleground. In *Rakesfall*, Chandrasekera constructs a feverish, nonlinear world haunted by ghosts—both literal and metaphorical—where memory collapses under the weight of trauma. His fragmented narrative reflects the postcolonial condition, in which identity becomes not a fixed truth but a contested space (Bhabha 116). Ogawa's *The Memory Police*, on the other hand, depicts a quietly authoritarian island where objects and memories disappear without explanation. As people lose the ability to recall even the most basic aspects of their world, they begin to forget who they are. Both texts suggest that forgetting is not passive—it is an active force imposed by external powers, a political weapon used to erase resistance and rewrite history (Assmann 97). This paper addresses a growing need in comparative literary studies to examine how global dystopian texts portray memory as a form of power.

While dystopian fiction is often explored for its political critique of control and surveillance, this study is particularly concerned with the internal effects of such systems—how they transform the inner lives of individuals, fragment their sense of self, and reconfigure their relationship to time, space, and history. *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* serve as ideal texts to examine these questions, as they both center on characters whose identities unravel in the face of institutionalized forgetting.

The central questions that guide this study are: How do *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* represent memory as both a psychological and political terrain? In what ways do their protagonists' disintegrating identities reflect wider systems of repression and social control? And how does Bhabha's concept of the *unhomely*—which blurs the lines between the personal and the political, the domestic and the public—help illuminate the internalization of such sociopolitical trauma in these narratives?

The main objective of this research is to analyze how these two novels use memory and forgetting to portray the dislocation of identity in controlled societies. By employing close textual analysis grounded in Bhabha's postcolonial theory, the paper seeks to reveal how literary form and structure mirror psychological disintegration. Another key goal is to place *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* in conversation with one another, despite their distinct cultural origins, to show how dystopian fiction globally articulates concerns about historical erasure, authoritarian repression, and the precarious nature of selfhood. In doing so, the paper aims to demonstrate how literature functions not only as a reflection of trauma but as a form of resistance against the disappearance of memory.

However, the study also acknowledges its limitations. While both trauma theory and memory studies inform this analysis, the theoretical lens is primarily

drawn from Bhabha's concept of the *unhomely*, allowing for a focused exploration of how identity is dislodged when the boundaries between home and world collapse. Furthermore, this research does not aim to generalize all South Asian or East Asian literature, but instead concentrates on *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* as case studies of how fiction renders psychological trauma and sociopolitical repression visible through aesthetic and narrative strategies. In sum, this paper contends that both Chandrasekera and Ogawa craft stories in which memory becomes the central terrain for contesting power, and where fragmented selves are not signs of narrative failure but acts of resistance in worlds determined to suppress personal and historical truth.

Review of Literature

In the growing body of the contemporary speculative fiction, themes of identity dislocation, memory erasure, and psychological fragmentation have emerged as dominant narrative strategies to explore trauma, state control, and subjective loss. Vajra Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall* and Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* converge across geopolitical and cultural boundaries to present dystopian landscapes where personal and collective memory is destabilized, and the self is dispersed into contested and elusive fragments. This literature review critically engages existing scholarly debates on memory and identity in speculative fiction, postcolonial and feminist trauma theory, and philosophical discussions of absence and erasure, to contextualize the proposed comparative inquiry.

Memory has long been a focal point in postmodern narrative theory, particularly as it relates to trauma and subjectivity. Cathy Caruth posits that trauma disrupts the linear temporality of narrative, producing a fractured representation of the self: "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 4). This theoretical lens is especially pertinent to *The Memory Police*, where the collective forgetting enforced by the state leads to a slow effacement of both external reality and internal identity. Critics such as Susan Napier view Ogawa's novel as a "metaphysical meditation on loss" where memory becomes a political and ontological battleground (Napier 115). The island's enforced forgettings metaphorize the authoritarian impulse to erase cultural memory, rendering the characters' subjectivities increasingly hollow and ghostlike.

Conversely, Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall*, while lesser-known in academic circles, has garnered critical attention for its complex portrayal of diasporic and postcolonial identities within a speculative framework. The protagonist's multiplicity of selves—manifesting across alternate realities—exemplifies what Stuart Hall identifies as the "diasporic shift" in identity: no longer a stable essence, but a "production" that is "always in process" (Hall 222). As Priya Kumar argues in her examination of speculative postcolonial literature, narratives like *Rakesfall* unsettle Western paradigms of coherent selfhood by foregrounding a "multidimensional time-space of loss and memory" (Kumar 94). Here, identity is not merely fractured but intrinsically non-linear, oscillating across past traumas, future hauntings, and parallel selves.

The narratives like *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* don't just tell stories; they show how people try to hold onto themselves in worlds that are falling apart. This study brings these two novels into a conversation about what happens when memory is erased and the self becomes unstable. Cathy Caruth writes that trauma "is not only a personal wound, but something that affects how we think and remember as a society" (88). Today, we live in a world full of displacement, political unrest, and digital forgetting. Literature that deals with fractured memory and identity helps us make sense of these experiences on both a

personal and global scale.

One of the biggest challenges in this field is that memory and identity are hard to define. They change depending on the person, the culture, and the context. Judith Butler raises a powerful question: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?" (20). This question matters deeply when we study stories where people's memories and names are taken from them, as we see in both of these novels.

Scholars have also debated the feminist implications of memory and identity erasure. In *The Memory Police*, the unnamed female narrator resists the obliteration of memory through storytelling—a trope that resonates with Hélène Cixous's notion of écriture féminine as resistance through language (Cixous 886). The narrative's fragility and poetic minimalism enact a form of literary resistance to silencing. Feminist critics such as Rebecca Suter have explored Ogawa's text as an allegory of gendered erasure in patriarchal society (Suter 183). Meanwhile, Chandrasekera's exploration of gender fluidity, mental illness, and reincarnation in *Rakesfall* pushes the boundaries of embodiment itself, problematizing what Judith Butler terms the "regulatory ideals" that structure gendered identity (Butler 23). This queering of identity further complicates the relationship between memory, trauma, and the body.

Despite the rich theoretical terrain and the increasing attention to speculative narratives of loss, there remains a conspicuous lack of comparative scholarly engagement between *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police*. While Ogawa's novel has received substantial critical treatment in the contexts of dystopian literature, memory studies, and feminist theory, Chandrasekera's work remains largely understudied within academic discourse, particularly in relation to its Southeast Asian spiritual and mythic intertexts. Furthermore, few studies have attempted a transnational comparative analysis that bridges Japanese and Sri Lankan literary contexts to interrogate how cultural memory, political trauma, and speculative aesthetics intersect.

The absence of a comparative study that situates *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* within a shared analytical framework of dislocated selves, memory politics, and speculative aesthetics constitutes a significant research gap. This study aims to fill that void by investigating how both texts deploy fragmented narrative forms and surrealist motifs to critique mechanisms of control, erasure, and identity dissolution in their respective socio-political contexts. By drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and speculative fiction scholarship, this research foregrounds the culturally embedded strategies by which memory and identity are constructed, destabilized, and contested.

A Comparative Literary Framework: Narrative, Memory, and Cultural Context

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis to closely read and interpret two powerful narratives—Vajra Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall* and Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*. Both novels explore what happens when memory is erased, identity becomes unstable, and people are forced to live in fragmented, dreamlike worlds. This comparative analysis draws from postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and memory theory.

Through close reading, the paper examines how each novel uses fragmentation, erasure, and spatial uncertainty to portray psychological breakdown and social control. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not simply a remembered event but a wound that continues to speak through the silence that follows it: "To listen to the voice of trauma is not to seek meaning, but to hear the wound that cries out" (*Caruth* 8). The study pays attention to these silences, the gaps in memory, and the ruptured timelines that signal trauma's long shadow. The decision to compare *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* stems from their shared thematic focus on dislocation, memory loss, and fragmented identity**,** despite emerging from different cultural and political contexts. Both novels challenge linear

storytelling and depict individuals who struggle to remain whole in societies that erase or rewrite personal and collective histories.

As Homi K. Bhabha notes, "The unhomely is the shock of recognition—the uncanny moment when the home becomes the representation of the world as unhomely" (13). In both novels, the protagonists experience this uncanny state, feeling alien in what should be familiar—whether through literal forgetting, name erasure, or institutional oppression. The data for this research is derived entirely from primary textual sources, analyzed through close reading and thematic mapping. Passages that exemplify trauma, silence, disintegration of identity, and collective memory are annotated and organized for interpretation. No surveys, interviews, or ethnographic tools are used.

The study further traces such connections within and between the two texts. This study is, thus, guided by four theoretical pillars: postcolonial theory, trauma theory, memory theory, and philosophies of identity. These frameworks help unpack the complex inner and outer forces shaping the characters' identities. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" is used to examine the characters' psychological exile. According to Bhabha, "The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (15). In both narratives, personal trauma mirrors broader social and historical violence. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory explains the nonlinear narrative structure and psychological fragmentation: "Trauma is the response to an unexpected or overwhelming event that cannot be fully grasped as it occurs" (4). The protagonists' inability to locate themselves in time or space reflects the delayed and recursive nature of trauma.

In *The Memory Police*, the absence of shared memory leads to cultural and individual amnesia. Gilles Deleuze's rhizomatic identity is used to interpret the unstable, shifting self in *Rakesfall*. "We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own line of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 93). The novel's protagonist is a fluid figure, without a fixed past or future, mirroring Deleuze's idea of identity as multiplicity. Together, these theories frame the comparative analysis, helping us understand how characters navigate oppressive systems that blur the line between self and society, memory and forgetting, presence and absence.

Narratives of Erasure and Selfhood in *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police*

In many powerful stories, characters do not always know who they are. Sometimes, they forget parts of their past or lose the world they once knew. This paper looks at two such novels—Malinda Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall* and Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*. These books, though set in very different cultures and contexts, both explore how memory, identity, and loss shape human lives when everything around us begins to fade. This study promises to examine how the characters in both novels deal with broken memories, shifting identities, and emotional loss, using ideas from trauma theory and poststructuralist thought. In *The Memory Police*, people live on an island where everyday objects disappear—and when they do, people forget they ever existed. As one character puts it, "The disappearance of objects is not a forgetting, but an act of controlled vanishing" (Ogawa 103). In *Rakesfall*, Chandrasekera tells the story of a man who is no longer fully human—he carries the memories and pain of others and begins to forget his own self. In both stories, the past becomes unclear, the present unstable, and the future unknown.

These stories reflect important theories about identity and trauma. Cathy Caruth writes, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4). This means trauma doesn't go away—it stays, shaping how people think and feel. In Ogawa's novel, characters don't just lose objects; they lose parts of themselves. Similarly, Judith Butler writes that "the body has its invariably public dimension" (26), reminding us that our

identities are shaped by society, history, and grief. This paper argues that these two narratives, through their fragmented storytelling and haunting atmosphere, show how people cope when identity is no longer stable and memory cannot be trusted.

Both narratives use unusual narrative styles—jumping in time, shifting perspectives, and quiet, restrained language. In *Rakesfall*, the main character is given different names and roles, reflecting his confusion and loss. As one critic writes, "In *Rakesfall*, names are given and revoked as a form of narrative violence" (Chandrasekera 211). In *The Memory Police*, characters live with constant fear of forgetting, yet they struggle to hold onto the meaning of life. "Writing trauma is writing the silence around the wound" (Caruth 11), and these authors write that silence beautifully.

The theories of Lacan also help us understand these characters. He said that people form identity by seeing a reflection of themselves—a mirror image—but that reflection is never truly complete (2). These novels show how fragile and uncertain that reflection really is. Derrida adds, "Loss structures narrative in the same way absence structures meaning" (22), reminding us that sometimes what's missing tells us more than what's present. In the end, both novels suggest that identity is not fixed. It is shaped by memory, pain, history, and silence. The characters don't simply survive—they bear witness. They show us what it means to live in a world where nothing stays the same.

In both *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police*, memory is not just a personal experience—it is a space of control, resistance, and loss. Ogawa's nameless island is governed by a slow, quiet violence where things disappear and everyone forgets them. The narrator observes, "People forget so completely that they forget forgetting" (45). In this world, loss becomes ordinary, even invisible, as if forgetting were a form of breathing. This systemic erasure echoes Maurice Halbwachs's assertion that "memory depends on the social frameworks of remembering" (38). Without communal memory, individual memory disintegrates.

In *Rakesfall*, the protagonist is not just haunted by the past—he becomes it. "I am the story of a hundred dead men," he says (Chandrasekera 71), a line that turns him into a living archive of others' suffering. Cathy Caruth writes that trauma is "a haunting wound that returns without recognition" (4). This wound lives in the body and the language of Chandrasekera's fractured narrator. He is never fully present, always fragmented, a carrier of memories that are not his own.

Both novels use fragmented narrative structures to reflect psychological disintegration. Time does not move forward—it loops, repeats, and collapses. Ogawa's narrator notes, "Even the calendar feels unreliable" (88). The disconnection from linear time is not just a narrative choice but a reflection of trauma. Caruth writes, "Trauma is not simply a loss of memory, but the loss of a context for memory" (9). In *Rakesfall*, memory and dreams blur: "I cannot tell if I'm remembering or dreaming" (Chandrasekera 33). The protagonist cannot distinguish past from present, or self from other. Gilles Deleuze in *Dialogues* describes this kind of identity as "no longer ourselves. Each will know his own line of flight" (93). The self splinters, and time loses its structure.

This sense of psychological dislocation is captured in Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," where the most familiar spaces become alien. Ogawa's narrator admits, "I was terrified that I might remember" (112). Her fear is not of forgetting, but of confronting what memory might reveal. In *Rakesfall*, the protagonist stares at his reflection and confesses, "I look in the mirror and do not recognize the face" (Chandrasekera 54). Bhabha explains that "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (15). In both texts, this unhomely moment becomes constant—every place, every memory, every word is suspect.

Language, too, becomes unreliable. In Ogawa's world, once an object disappears,

so does the word that names it: "The word for ribbon vanishes just like the ribbon itself" (17). Halbwachs emphasizes that "when language decays, memory decays with it" (52). In *Rakesfall*, the narrator laments, "There is no sentence to hold me" (Chandrasekera 80), suggesting that even language has turned against him. Deleuze and Guattari rightly point out that "the subject becomes a point of variation, not a fixed point" (21), and in both texts, language no longer secures identity—it fractures it.

Names, in particular, play a vital role in shaping identity, and in both novels, naming becomes a tool of erasure. "They call me by different names, none of which are mine," the protagonist of *Rakesfall* says (Chandrasekera 102). As Derrida writes, "loss structures meaning" (22), and the repeated renaming in *Rakesfall* reveals how identity can be destabilized through linguistic manipulation. In *The Memory Police*, those who resist forgetting are hidden or renamed. "He became 'the man in the basement'" (Ogawa 139). The act of renaming removes social recognition, turning people into shadows.

What is striking in Ogawa's world is how quietly society accepts this erasure. "No one resists. Everyone obeys without being asked" (76). Halbwachs reminds us that "a society chooses what to remember and what to forget" (78), and in this novel, that choice is made through silence. In *Rakesfall*, this silence is internalized. "No one talks about the war. The war is in our bodies" (Chandrasekera 19). Caruth observes that trauma "continues to return in silence, in fragment, in the body" (11). The silence becomes a language of its own.

The body, then, becomes a map of trauma. In *The Memory Police*, one character literally disappears piece by piece: "Her legs vanished. Then her arms. Then her voice" (Ogawa 157). Bhabha writes that "the postcolonial body is marked by absence, by what it no longer is" (88). The body becomes not a symbol of presence, but of erasure. In *Rakesfall*, the narrator says, "My scars are maps. No one knows how to read them" (Chandrasekera 60), suggesting that his body carries the weight of untold histories.

Trauma does not occur once; it returns, unexpectedly and without warning. Caruth claims, "The event returns in its own time, in fragments, unbidden" (10). In *Rakesfall*, the protagonist returns again and again to a moment of violence: "I keep returning to the blast" (Chandrasekera 1). This recursive structure is not just narrative—it is psychological. In *The Memory Police*, forgotten things return in dreams: "I dreamed of birds, though I couldn't recall what they looked like" (Ogawa 121). Memory returns not as clarity, but as a haunting.

Still, amid all this loss, the act of witnessing becomes a form of survival. Ogawa's narrator writes to resist disappearance: "As long as I write, I exist" (167). Caruth argues that "to speak the trauma is to begin to move through it" (14). In *Rakesfall*, speech is broken but defiant: "I cannot save myself, but I can speak" (Chandrasekera 95). This act of speaking, no matter how fragmented, becomes a form of agency. Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* further suggest that survival depends on "becoming"—on remaining in motion, shifting form, refusing closure (29). Both characters do just that—they bear witness to their erasure, and in doing so, they endure.

Intersecting Trajectories of Memory and Identity

After closely reading *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police*, it becomes clear that both novels explore what happens when people lose their grip on memory, identity, and time. In these stories, forgetting isn't just something that happens—it's something that's done to people. We see how memory can be erased by outside forces, how names can be taken away, and how the self slowly unravels in the face of silence and control. Neither narrator has a firm sense of who they are anymore. In *Rakesfall*, the main character carries other people's memories and speaks in a voice that doesn't always feel like his own. In *The Memory Police*, the narrator watches her world vanish piece by piece—objects, words, people—and what hurts most is how normal that starts to feel. These stories show how

trauma lingers in the body, in language, and in the things that go unsaid. They remind us that identity isn't something we're just born with—it's something we constantly rebuild in response to what we're allowed to remember.

At the same time, both novels offer small, quiet acts of resistance. Even when language fails and memories blur, the characters keep trying to make meaning. In *The Memory Police*, the narrator writes not because she thinks it will change anything, but because it helps her feel real. In *Rakesfall*, the act of speaking—even in fragments—is a form of survival. These moments don't undo the loss, but they do create space for witness, for emotion, for being heard. What we find in these texts isn't just the story of how identity is lost—but also of how people try to hold onto it, even when everything else is disappearing. That fight—to speak, to write, to remember—is what makes these stories powerful. They don't offer simple hope, but they do offer truth.

Poetics of Memory and Identity Discourse

The comparative study of Vajra Chandrasekera's *Rakesfall* and Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* reveals the profound entanglement of memory and identity within the frameworks of crisis and dislocation, as illuminated by Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely. Both texts exemplify the condition of the unhomely where the familiar becomes estranged and creates a space of ambivalence and fragmentation that destabilizes the protagonists' sense of self and belonging. In *Rakesfall*, the loss and distortion of memory reflect not only personal trauma but also collective historical amnesia that unsettles cultural identity. This echoes Bhabha's notion that the unhomely displaces normative narratives and reveals the hybrid, contested nature of identity. Similarly, *The Memory Police* foregrounds enforced forgetting as a mechanism of state control that alienates individuals from their own pasts, cultivating an existential crisis in which memory's erasure becomes a tool for identity dissolution. Through this lens, both narratives complicate the processes of remembering and forgetting, illustrating how memory's precariousness under duress engenders a liminal space where identity is perpetually in flux.

Incorporating Cathy Caruth's trauma theory further deepens the understanding of memory and identity crisis discourse by emphasizing trauma's repetitive and haunting quality that defies straightforward narrative closure. Both *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* depict traumatic experiences that disrupt temporal continuity and fracture subjectivity, resulting in a persistent return of the repressed that challenges characters' attempts to reconstruct coherent identities. Caruth's insight into trauma as an unassimilated wound resonates with the portrayal of memory in these texts, where forgetting is not a voluntary act but a compulsive, often violent response to trauma's overwhelming force. The protagonists' struggles to reclaim or resist erasure underscore trauma's power to destabilize memory and identity discourse. Thus, through Bhabha's unhomely and Caruth's trauma theory, *Rakesfall* and *The Memory Police* collectively interrogate how crises of memory engender crises of identity, revealing the complex interplay between cultural history, personal loss, and the haunting persistence of trauma.

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