The Discursive Nexus
A Scholarly Forum for English Studies and Critical Inquiry
Research Journal, Department of English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune
Volume- 1, Issue - 1 | January, 2025 | ISSN 3107-4359

The Influence of Historical Narratives on Personal Memory Construction

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ABSTRACT

Historical narratives play a vital role in the construction of personal memories of an individual. These collective histories, whether national, cultural, or familial, shape how individuals recall or draw from the past, intertwining with personal experiences to form a cohesive sense of present identity. In literary works, this intersection is significantly prominent, as characters, especially female protagonists, navigate their personal recollections in the context of broader historical discourses. While scholars have examined the relationship between history and memory, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding how personal memories in novels, particularly those of female characters, are shaped by and interact with historical narratives. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how personal narratives in literature are influenced by and negotiate with larger historical contexts through novels, The Stationary Shop of Tehran *by Marjan Kamali and* The Bastard of Istanbul *by Elif Shafak. This study will focus on how novels construct and reshape personal memory through historical narratives through Birgit Neumann's concepts of "Fictions of Memory." Neumann suggests that literary works are not just representations of memory, but active agents in memory construction. Her concept of "Fictions of Memory" reveals that memories are " imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to the current needs" in her work* The Literary Representation of Memory *(Neumann) Through concept of Neumann's concept of memory from her essay "The Literary Representation of Memory", the hypothesis posits that personal narratives in novel are shaped by and engage with broader historical discourses, with memory serving as a site for resistance, alignment, or reinterpretation. The construction of memory is dynamic and characters from novels use their personal memories to challenge or align with the dominant historical narratives, reflecting both personal and collective forms of Identity.*

Keywords: Memory studies, personal memory construction, literary memory representation, fictions of memory, historical discourse

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Memory acts as a link between past and present, connecting people from different generations and their construction of personal narratives. In both the novels, historical memory influences characters' personal narratives. Their individual narratives are often intertwined with broader historical backdrop such as the Iranian coup in The Stationary Shop at Tehran and the Armenian Genocide in The Bastard of Istanbul. These historical events play a vital role in how characters perceive themselves and their identities over time, reflecting the fluid nature of historical memory.

> Numerous texts portray how individuals and groups remember their past and how they construct their identities on the basis of the recollected memories. They are concerned

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> with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of the identity. (Neumann, 333)

Novels like *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak and *The Stationary Shop* by Marjan Kamali are crucial for analysing personal identity construction in the backdrop of historical memory that influences their individual experience. These novels reveal that identity is not a static force but a dynamic process of reconstructing personal narratives. Memory thus plays as an active tool for individuals to make sense of their present by bridging the gap of past and present. These both novels provide profound insights about how historical complexity penetrates personal identity. Through active interpretation of the memory characters negotiate with their sense of self by assembling fragmented memories and experiences. This novel serves as a narrative laboratory that allows readers to explore mechanisms of memory to reveal how an individual makes sense of present identity by remembering, forgetting, and reinterpreting historical experience.

The Stationary Shop represents the traumatic past and its memory intricately woven into the narratives of characters like Roya and Bahman. *The Stationary Shop* is a poignant love story of Roya and Bahman set in 1953 Tehran in the backdrop of Political upheaval of 1953 Iranian coup. The Political upheaval during the 1953 coup affected the Roya and Bahman relationship. Their love story is abruptly interrupted by chaos and violence due to a political coup, leaving long- lasting emotional scars. Roya's memories of witnessing violence left her devastated for a lifetime. It contributes to her feelings of loss and longing, illustrating how her traumatic past still haunts her in the present.

The Bastard of Istanbul is a story that revolves around Asya Kazanci, a nineteen years old girl born out of wedlock in Istanbul. Simultaneously, the story also centers Armanoush, an Armenian-American girl who travels to Istanbul to understand her family's history related to the 1915 Armenian genocide. The novel explores the intersection of personal and collective memories with broader historical memories of Armenian genocide, a traumatic historical past of Turkish history that often underlines denial and amnesia.

Historical Memory and Personal Identity.

In Shafak's novel, historical trauma, specifically the Armenian genocide, menace over the lives of the characters. The novel is set against Turkish political history and the reluctance to confront the past, which affects the protagonist's identities. Asya, a central character, struggles to resolve her identity. Her relationship with her mother, Zeilha and other aunts feels suffocating to her. Kazanci family's dark historical corners that bury painful memories, examines how past events impact present day family dynamics.

> Asya tried a frown and then rolled her eyes, gaining no effect with either gesture other than a childish face. She whistled a tune from a Johnny Cash song, which she liked to recall on various encounters with her aunts: "Why me Lord, what have I ever done…." (Shafak, 69)

Simultaneously, the other protagonist Aramonush grapples with the challenge of establishing her identity, which has been fragmented by her parent's separation. Her sense of self remains elusive due to the disjointed nature of her childhood experiences. The pursuit of uncovering

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her personal history and familial background becomes a crucial aspect of her journey toward self discovery. The disintegration of her childhood experiences has left her without a cohesive sense of self.

> Being the only daughter of an Armenian father, he himself a child of survivors, and a mother from Elizabethtown, Kentucky. I do know how it feels to be torn between opposite sides, unable to fully belong anywhere, constantly fluctuating between two states of existence. (Shafak,116)

In *The Stationary Shop*, Kamali has stepped into historical context, focusing on post world war Iran, focusing on political upheaval when the nation was divided into two groups. The protagonist, Roya, navigates her personal identity in the wake of the nation's trajectory. Roya's sense of self is heavily influenced by her family experiences, her experiences, especially her tragic history of romance with Bahman, a man who was deeply affected by the events of 1950's Tehran. Roya's personal growth and identity was deeply intertwined with her memory of the past events, her memories of love, loss and exile.

Both the novels illustrate the deep influence of historical events, whether it's the unresolved trauma of the genocide in *The Bastard of* Istanbul or the post revolutionary political tension in the novel *The Stationary Shop*. This historical backdrop creates a complexity in the lives of protagonists and other characters in the novels, it also serves as a force in how characters understand their sense of self, their familial relationships, and their emotional journeys.

Narrative Techniques

By embedding personal narratives within historical contexts, the novels *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *The Stationary Shop* reveal how personal narratives are fundamentally interconnected with broader societal transformation. Authors like Elif Shafak employ distinctive approaches to integrate historical contexts. The use of fragmented timeline reveals the fragmented identity of characters and complexity of their presence. Multiple perspectives allow readers to deconstruct the monolithic historical narratives and use of nonlinear storytelling takes readers from present to past to dive deeper into the complexities of memories that is crucial in lives of characters. The narrative approach demonstrates that identity is not static but a process that is so dynamic that it is continually reshaped by intergenerational experiences, cultural displacements and collective historical traumas.

> The narrative devices are semanticized to the extent that they implicitly convey cultural specific notions of the working of individual and collective memory. What follows is a discussion of some of the most prominent techniques that can be employed by narratives to stage the processes of remembering**.** (Neumann)

In *The Bastard of Istanbul,* Shafak subtly incorporated historical narratives of Armenian Genocide through fragmented storytelling, letters, and familial dialogues, the past is is constantly present throughout the narratives but never revealed until the end. The ambiguity creates a suffering in lives of characters who struggle with an unresolved history and their search for identity in a world that is so complex and intricate around them where everything is interwoven yet their truth is ambiguous and mysterious, The world that denies or suppresses the painful truths shapes the characters understanding of themselves, as they each grapple with

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what is remembered and what is silenced. In the opening chapter of *The Bastard of Istanbul,* Shafak effectively introduces a complex and tragic situation, setting the tone for the narrative. In the subsequent chapter, she advances the timeline by nineteen years, employing a non linear storytelling technique that continues throughout the novel. This fragmented structure mirrors the fractured identities of the characters, reflecting the broader themes of dislocation and personal fragmentation. Shafak employs a polyphonic structure, offering different characters' viewpoints from various generations.

> "Nothing," Auntie Zeliha said, her voice lowering, "It's just that I never believed they could survive this long. I always feared they would break so easily, but I guess they live to tell the tale, after all. Even Tea glasses do!"(Shafak, 357)

Zeliha's painful past is often revealed through the perspectives of other characters, like her daughter Asya, rather than directly from Zeliha herself. This technique allows readers to grasp Zeliha's struggles through the memories and reflections of those around her. It emphasises how the emotional and generational scars she carries ripple across her family. For instance, Zeliha's trauma is transmitted through her interactions, particularly with her daughter Asya. The silence surrounding her pain creates a distance between them, underscoring how the wounds of the past continue to affect the present. The story, told through these fragmented and indirect ways, mirrors Zeliha's own fractured memory of her trauma, highlighting the impact of generational suffering. Tea glasses, while delicate and breakable, are also functional and indispensable in Turkish culture. It can symbolise the delicate balance between fragility and strength. The characters, especially Zeilha, may seem fragile in the face of their trauma, but the tea glass symbolises that even something fragile can endure, serving as a metaphor for the characters' own emotional and psychological survival. Despite their vulnerabilities, they persist, much like the unbroken tea glasses.

On the other hand, Kamali's use of nonlinear narrative, going back and forth narrative structure shifts between the protagonists Roya's youth in 1950's Tehran and later years in the United States. The novel begins with present day Roya as an older woman who is still stuck on her past love with Bahman and some of their unanswered questions. As the narrative unfolds, it jumps back to time when Roya was a young girl and her first encounter with Bahaman in the stationary shop. This alternating timeline reveals the influence of past and memory that still affects the present of protagonists. Through nonlinear narratives, Kamali gradually reveals the details of their life, including political events of 1915 of Iran, family dynamics, and misunderstandings. The nonlinear narrative reflects how memory works, where certain moments are revisited, reshaped with new understanding or emotional insight, and others are suppressed or forgotten until resurface unexpectedly. Neumann terms this as "Fictions of memory" (Neumann, 334) which refers to the stories that individuals or cultures tells about their past to make sense of their "Who am I?" he further claims that this "memories more often turn out to be imaginative (re)construction of the past in the response to current needs." (Neumann, 334) Similarly, Roya's recollection of her past, as she relives certain moments of her lives, offers deep dive into her emotional state. The non-linear narrative allows a contrast between her past and present, where she has grown old and how she interprets her memories of past with deeper understanding of herself and the world. Through the non-linear storytelling, Kamali effectively conveys how characters' lives were affected by the broader historical backdrop of political upheaval, which navigates their love, aspirations and dreams amid

shifting national landscape. The political elements are revealed not through a linear exposition but through the characters changing perspectives and the unfolding of events.

Trauma and Memory

The relationship between trauma and memory is central to understanding how historical events impact personal narratives. Characters may be burdened with the weight of historical trauma, which effects can be seen in their memories, which results in fragmented or suppressed experiences. Narratives of these characters explore how traumatic experiences fundamentally alter characters' perception of self and history. Memories become one of the key tools for characters to process past experiences. Characters struggle with collective amnesia and individual memory suppression while reflecting on their memories. Birgit Neumann's concept of "Fictions of Memory" (Neumann) provides a powerful lens to understand narrative construction in novels like *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *The Stationary Shop*. Neumann's theory establishes a concept that literary works are not just merely representations of past events, but dynamic processes that explore how memories shape individual identity**.** Neumann claims that memories are highly selective and reveal more about the present moment than actual past events. Literary narratives more often construct identities through remembered experiences. Memories serve as a tool for understanding personal and collective trauma. In these both novels, characters navigate their emotional complexity where memories are not very static, but living, evolving narratives. Therefore, the characters' memories become a means of processing historical pain, personal loss, and cultural identity. Neumann argues that literary narratives allow readers to understand how individuals and groups remember their past, and how these memories consequently construct identity. By presenting memories as fluid and interpretive, these novels demonstrate how traumatic experiences are transformed through narrative, allowing characters to reconcile with their personal and collective histories. The novels essentially become a space where memory is not just recalled, but actively re imagined and reconstructed.

In Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul,* trauma impacts memory through intergenerational experience and psychological mechanisms of remembering and forgetting. Shafak reveals how collective amnesia regarding historical events leads to affect on personal narratives of characters. They interpret their memories of historical events through their personal experiences and this memories keep on re(constructing) through the process of remembering and forgetting. Characters in the novel are trapped between deliberately forgetting painful experiences and being haunted by unresolved traumatic memories.

> This new name, religion, nationality, family, and self she had acquired had not succeeded in overtaking her true self. The pomegranate brooch whispered her name and it was in Armenian. (Shafak, 328)

Shushan was Armenian Orphan, who was converted to Islam and named Shermin 626, She Later married to Riza Selim Kazanci, but even after many years she couldn't forget about her traumatic childhood memories of Armenian genocide, and how she was forced to convert to Islam. This unforgettable past made her fly to America with her brother leaving his son and husband behind.

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This long back history of Armenian Genocide, profoundly affected Asya and Armanoush deep sense of rootlessness and identity crisis directly connected to their family's traumatic history. The genocide's indirectly haunts their previous generation, creating a complex narrative of inherited pain. The novel explores how the Armenian community cannot forget their past, even after becoming part of their community, due to which Grandmother Shushan fled to America with his brother, leaving his son and husband. This past truth of family was silenced with the coming generation but this unresolved historical tension reflected through the ongoing struggle to understand and reconcile with painful historical events that the Turkish government continues to deny. The genocide becomes a critical marker of their personal and communal identity, shaping their understanding of belonging and heritage. The trauma is not just a historical event, but a living memory that shapes familial interactions, identity formation, and emotional connection.

> Family stories intermingle in such ways that what happened generations ago can have impact on seemingly irrelevant development of the present day. The past is anything but gone. If Levent Kazanci hadn't grown up to be such a bitter and abusive man, would his only son, Mustafa, have ended up being a different person? If generations ago in 1915 Shushan hadn't been left an orphan, would Asya today still be a bastard?(Shafak,356)

The characters Zeliha and Asya illustrate the the impact of trauma across generations in Kazanci family, Zeliha's experience of incest and her subsequent decision to keep her child, Asy, embodies the intricacies of trauma. Asya, referred to as "bastard", grapples with her identity shaped by her mother's past reflecting how trauma can manifest in familial relationships and influence identity formation.

In Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop*, trauma emerges as a profound architectural force reshaping memory and personal narrative. The novel intricately explores how historical and personal traumatic experiences fundamentally deconstruct and reconstruct individual memories, particularly through the protagonist Roya's life journey. The 1953 Iranian political coup serves as a critical traumatic backdrop, creating a seismic psychological disruption that fragments Roya's emotional landscape. This historical trauma becomes more than a mere background event; it actively dismantles her anticipated life trajectory, creating a 60-year chasm between her initial love story with Bahman and their eventual reconnection. The traumatic experience doesn't simply interrupt her life—it fundamentally rewrites her memory's entire narrative architecture. Psychological fragmentation manifests through Roya's persistent nightmares, emotional disconnection, and continuous psychological struggle with unresolved memories. Trauma transforms her memory into a non-linear, complex terrain where past and present continuously intersect, creating a deeply nuanced exploration of how significant emotional wounds reshape human experience. The novel brilliantly illustrates that trauma is not just an event but a transformative process that continuously reconstructs personal identity, emotional understanding, and memory's intricate landscape. Kamali masterfully demonstrates that traumatic experiences are not static memories but dynamic, evolving psychological constructs that fundamentally alter an individual's perception of self, relationships, and historical context. Through Roya's journey, readers witness how trauma becomes a powerful mechanism of memory reconstruction, challenging linear narrative expectations and revealing the profound complexity of human emotional resilience.

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> And she had to move. Something stays with you, haunts you. Some embers nestle into your skin. Shots cannot be forgotten. And neither can that force of love.(Kamali, 240)

The trauma of political upheaval and revolution has similarly fractured the lives of the characters. Roya's recollections of her youth, especially her love for Bahaman, are deeply intertwined with the political unrest of Iran, this past memory of political idealism, personal betrayal, loss and violence influenced and shaped the emotional landscape of her life.

Her "One visit to one shop a mere week ago- to buy paper clips!—had cracked everything open, Once again she was mired in 1953."(Kamali, 4) This line from novel reveals how memories are not static but dynamic, capable of erupting into the present moment with intense emotional clarity, but these memories are not static but in process of reconstruction and reshaping with emotional maturity and time that Neumann referred to as "Fictions of memory".

Both novels underscore the theme of trauma and its influence on memories of characters and their personal identity. While Shafak's narrative focuses on historical silence and the inherited trauma of the genocide, whereas Kamali's novel illustrate the direct consequences of political revolution and upheaval. In both cases, the protagonist's sense of who they are is intricately linked with the historical past, which shapes their present.

Conclusion

The characters in both novels use their personal memories as a way to navigate their identities, both personal and collective. These memories may reflect a complex relationship with collective history, helping characters to either form a sense of belonging to or distance themselves from particular historical or cultural groups. In *The Stationery Shop* by Marjan Kamali, for instance, the personal memories of the characters are shaped by the political turmoil in Iran, where historical events such as the 1953 coup and the Islamic Revolution intersect with personal experiences. The characters' identities are inextricably linked to both personal and collective memory, which informs their decisions and relationships. Similarly, in *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak, the memory of the Armenian genocide looms large in the collective identity of the characters, and their personal recollections of the past become a way to confront or deny this historical trauma. The novel portrays the complex interplay between personal and collective memories in shaping identity and the challenges of reconciling personal experiences with historical narratives. Memory in these novels is not static; it evolves over time as characters reflect on their pasts and interact with others. This dynamic nature of memory allows characters to either resist or align with historical narratives as they revisit and reinterpret key events. Their personal memories are constantly re-negotiated based on changing contexts, both personal and societal. In conclusion, the concept of "Fictions of memory" in Neumann's essay, "The Literary Representation of Memory" shows how personal narratives in novels like The Stationery Shop and The Bastard of Istanbul engage with broader historical discourses, demonstrating how memory serves as a powerful tool for both resistance and alignment. By exploring the dynamic construction of memory, these novels reflect how personal and collective identities are shaped through memory, with characters using their pasts to either challenge, reaffirm, or reinterpret the larger historical contexts in which they exist.

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