

**(Re)Imagining “Dystopian Space”: Memory and Trauma in Yoko Ogawa’s
*The Memory Police***

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Abstract

Yōko Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* (1994) is set in an unknown island where objects and their meanings gradually disappear from society’s collective memory. Spencer argues that “power imposes itself on society through spatial initiatives that reconfigure the entirety of social space.” As memory is suppressed in this authoritarian society, the act of retaining memories of “disappeared” objects is a form of violation of that authoritarianism, as it is seen as the individual’s resistance against the collective goals of the state. This article examines the ways in which memory and trauma play crucial roles in the lives of individuals in reclaiming their sense of space and individuality. To escape tyranny and oppressive real space, the narrator creates an imaginary space that preserves any remaining memory. As memory is associative, it functions to retrieve information related to particular objects or concepts and to connect this information with its relevant context to yield meanings. The move to preserve memory acts as a form of agency exhibited by the narrator and the novel foregrounds the various ways memory can also lead to liberation.

Keywords: Dystopian Literature, Space, Memory, Trauma, Japanese Literature

Introduction

Yōko Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* was first published in 1994 and translated into English by Stephen Snyder in 2019. The Kafkaesque elements of the novel picture a future of vigilance in a dystopian state reminiscent of George Orwell’s *1984* and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. *The Memory Police* is set in an unknown Japanese island where the narrator, an unnamed young woman, tells of her traumatic experience living under authoritarian rule. On this island, objects or concepts gradually disappear. In addition, the memories about these “disappeared” objects and concepts are concurrently erased from the inhabitants’ memories. The authoritarian government in this novel has made scientific advances that enable them to eradicate objects as well as the jobs

and industries that are related to these objects. This form of state violence which enforces disappearances is perceived to be a form of “reconfiguration of society” (Colombo & Schindel 4).

Memory is repressed by the unprecedented political, sociocultural, and technological changes on this unknown island. The depiction of the dystopian society that Ogawa imagines in *The Memory Police* is very unsettling and fundamentally changes perceptions of how a society is constituted. The authoritarian government subjugates the inhabitants’ minds, which results in “cutting off communication between the subject’s radical imagination and its ‘thought’” (Castoriadis 29). As a result, the Memory Police dictates the roles of memory in the dystopian society, where the abilities to encode and retrieve memories are controlled. The Memory Police exercises its mass control by ensuring that certain objects are physically and cognitively ‘disappeared’ from the island. The authoritarian government is determined to see things disappear and “from their point of view, anything that fails to vanish when they say it should is inconceivable. So they force it to disappear with their own hands” (Ogawa 25). This has an effect on the inhabitants of the island: “The memory is repressed which has only become trauma by deferred action” (Chase 61).

The sudden increase in the Memory Police’s power disrupts the equilibrium and subsequently changes the regulations on the island. Their exercise of power creates a state of “deregulation or anomie” (Thompson 79), a term borrowed from Émile Durkheim, that emphasises the change in a social system. Walter Mignolo defines anomie or anomy as “social instability caused by erosion of standards and values” (vii). Memory is undeniably important in retrieving information or recalling experiences encountered in the past, but on this unknown island, memory is suppressed. Jonathan Foster indicates that “Memories are personal and ‘internal’, yet without memory, we wouldn’t be able to undertake ‘external’ acts - such as holding a conversation, recognizing our friends’ faces, remembering appointments, acting on new ideas, succeeding at work, or even learning to walk” (2). However, memory is not limited to storing new information but also interpreting and integrating new information in order to function effectively in our daily lives. Thus, memory is associative as it has the ability to connect the objects or concepts to its context in the meaningmaking process. Unfortunately, the action of retaining memories of disappeared objects is considered a form of violation on Ogawa’s dystopian island. Most of the

inhabitants are unable to hold on to their memories of the disappeared objects but the novel further unfolds the fact that some inhabitants are immune to such enforcement.

Oppressed by an authoritarian government, the inhabitants are caught in a powerless position. Because of the persistent disappearance of objects such as hats, ribbons, birds, roses and many others in this authoritarian society, retaining memories about them is generally regarded as a form of revolt against the government. The novel warns against the repercussions of totalitarian leadership and reveals the coping mechanisms of those living under authoritarian terror and cruelty. It also points to the possibility of rebelling against this authoritarianism. To escape tyranny and an oppressive real space, the narrator, with help from the Old Man and R (who is not affected by the disappearance of memories), creates a projected space; an imaginary space that is able to preserve any remaining memories. Hence, this study intends to examine the ways in which memory and trauma play crucial roles in the lives of individuals in reclaiming their sense of space and individuality. Their empowerment is perceived in terms of their authority and participation in decision-making. They are supportive of one another in protecting what they deem important to their lives – memories. The preservation of memory acts as a form of agency and resistance, and is primarily exhibited by the narrator, R, and the Old Man.

Roles of the Memory Police

The Memory Police department on this unknown island functions as a social control mechanism. It maintains the rules and regulations of the island. The authoritarian state entrusts the Memory Police with power to extinguish any resistance that goes against the state's collective goals. As mentioned earlier, disappearances are a continual process on the island. The disappearance of objects and the meanings associated with them are common practices initiated by the authoritarian government. R explains that "The island is run by men who are determined to see things disappear." According to the narrator, the Memory Police are "dressed in dark green uniforms, with heavy belts and black boots. They wore leather gloves and their guns were half hidden in the holsters on their hips" (Ogawa 12). In the novel, the members of the Memory Police are depicted as being identical, distinguishable only by the different badges on their collars. People who complain about and question the disappearances attract the attention of the Memory Police, the

authority that governs the state affairs and enforces these disappearances as well. The protagonist mentions that they carry out their operations “efficiently, thoroughly, systematically, and without any trace of emotion” (Ogawa 150). To guard state affairs, the Memory Police enforces the acts of disappearance, ensuring that disappeared objects remain forgotten. In addition, the Memory Police also hunts for rebels whose memories are unaltered. The narrator further elaborates on the methods used by the Memory Police to ensure the inhabitants’ compliance with the rules and regulations on the island:

The methods used by the Memory Police were becoming more and more brutal...Everything happened by surprise, and they now carried heavy battering rams capable of breaking down any door. They invaded houses in search of any space where someone could be hidden – storage rooms, under beds, in the back of closets. (Ogawa 64)

Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* depicts how the authoritarian government invades and eradicates the memories of the inhabitants on this unknown island. Retaining memories of the past is regarded as potential contestation against the government. When memories are controlled, the government can easily manipulate the truth and control the inhabitants’ consciousness. The constructed “truth” about the present will feature government ideologies and propaganda. However, in an act of resistance, the state of repression experienced by the narrator further provokes her to preserve the past.

The Roles of Memory in *The Memory Police*

Memories are impermanent on this remote island. Memories about disappeared objects are eliminated and the inhabitants are confined in a powerless position. The purpose behind the eradication of memories on the island is not revealed in the novel but it causes problems for some inhabitants who are immune to the process. But most inhabitants, like the narrator and the Old Man, suffer from having too many gaps in their memories. Their fuzzy memories distort their perceptions, and they regress to a state of powerlessness. The narrator’s mother states that “It’s a shame that the people who live here haven’t been able to hold such marvelous things in their hearts and minds, but that’s just the way it is on this island” (Ogawa 3). She told the narrator once that

“it is all but impossible to recall the things we’ve lost on the island once they’re gone” (Ogawa 6).

The young narrator describes the feeling the inhabitants experience when an object disappears:

Lying still, eyes closed, ears pricked, trying to sense the flow of the morning air, you’ll feel that something has changed from the night before, and you’ll know that you’ve lost something, that something has been disappeared from the island.

(Ogawa 3)

The inhabitants indicate that this is a norm on this island. Their memories about these disappeared objects will be eliminated the following day. Interestingly, they are partially conscious about the notion of disappearance. However, in order to minimise their feelings of anxiety, they choose to repress their feelings. The protagonist also describes her fuzzy feelings after the process of disappearance:

Sometimes I try to remember – those were precious moments with my mother – but I can’t recall the objects. My mother’s expression, the sound of her voice, the smell of the basement air - I can remember all that perfectly. But the things in the drawers are vague, as though those memories, and those alone, have dissolved.

(Ogawa 62)

Most of the inhabitants of the island succumb to these surreal disappearances passively as they are used to it. For instance, during the disappearance of the roses, the narrator becomes concerned about the rose garden and the Old Man indicates that “No one knows and no one needs to know [about the disappearance of objects or concepts]. Time is a great healer. It just flows on all of its own accord” (Ogawa 51). The island’s inhabitants surprisingly do not show any extreme resistance towards the Memory Police. The disappeared objects will be permanently erased from their memories, and the gradual eradication of objects and concepts by the Memory Police reinforces their authoritative position in the island. The problem with the deprivation of memories is that it makes it difficult for the narrator to write her novel, as words are becoming more limited, as more memories disappear. The disappeared memories are “replaced by an emptiness that would not be filled” (Ogawa 14) and this sense of emptiness leads the narrator to be “on the verge of being drawn into its terrible depth” (Ogawa 14).

As she struggles in her writing, the narrator asks R “how does it feel to remember everything?” (Ogawa 81). Her inability to recall memories raises the concern that R must be very uncomfortable, since his “heart [is] full of so many forgotten things” (Ogawa 81). R replies that like our heart, memory “has no shape, no limits” (Ogawa 81). Despite her sensory memories failing her, R tries to help the narrator to remember her past. The narrator states:

My memories don't feel as though they've been pulled up by the root. Even when they fade, something remains. Like tiny seeds that might germinate again if the rain falls. And even if a memory disappears completely, the heart retains something. A slight tremor or pain, some bit of joy, a tear. (Ogawa 81-82)

Although the objects or concepts dissolve from their memories, the memory nonetheless retains faint traces of these disappeared objects.

The narrator states that those people like R and the narrator's mother, who are immune to the phenomenon of disappeared memories, need to be cautious and blend in with everyone else in order not to be caught by the Memory Police. R argues that blending in is not as simple as it seems:

The conscious mind is embedded in a subconscious that's ten times as powerful, which may make trying to pretend almost impossible. They can't even imagine what these disappearances mean. If it were easy to pretend, they wouldn't be hiding away in these safe houses. (Ogawa 24)

The inhabitants of the island are consciously aware of the Memory Police's mind control enforcements, and yet they are unable to oppose them. The responses to such anomalous conditions in society often range from conformity to resistance. The passive resistance portrayed by the narrator's mother reassures the narrator that the decision to hide R in the hidden room is the right thing to do. For example, the narrator's mother tries to preserve some disappeared objects in the hope of preserving part of her memories in the secret hiding room. Though her mother was caught by the Memory Police, the disappeared objects remain untouched in the drawers located in the secret room.

As Foster asserts, “The sensory store appears to operate below the threshold of consciousness. It receives information from senses and holds it for about a second while we decide what to attend to” (28). In some instances, the narrator explains that memory is associative, as

there are still traces of the disappeared objects that prompt familiar emotions or memories. Similarly, the Old Man indicates that “I’m not sure how to do that, but I think there might be some benefit from holding these forgotten objects in your hands, feeling their weight, smelling them, listening to them” (Ogawa 146). The disappeared objects similarly trigger the Old Man’s sensory memory. In another incident, the narrator observes:

From time to time, for just a moment, one of the objects would show me something more. A slight curve in the shape or a depth of color would catch my eye – and I would startle, wondering whether this could be the revelation that R was hoping for. (Ogawa 243)

She calls these moments “flashes of recognition” (Ogawa 243). This glimpse of hope instigates R to persist in motivating the narrator to continue writing and preserving her memories through her novel. R constantly urges her to push beyond her limits. Although they are experiencing oppression, inhabitants like R, the Old Man and the narrator feel liberated through this sheer optimism.

Trauma in Losing and Preserving Memory

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past” but identified in “the way it is precisely not known in the first instance – [but] returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4, 17). When human beings experience an oppressive and harrowing situation, their reaction towards these events defines trauma. These highly traumatic occurrences can damage the coping mechanisms of individuals, resulting in their feeling helpless and hopeless. Besides, trauma can make people feel worthless and incapable of developing a complete array of emotions and life experiences. The longer we live, the more we will experience trauma. Trauma is very subjective, and it is imperative to study the response rather than its trigger since the encounter with a traumatic situation that causes post-trauma symptoms differs rather significantly from one individual to another. Caruth argues that trauma’s latency and dissociation disrupts the ability to fully understand or represent a traumatic experience. Both individual traumatic experiences and collective historical events are ultimately never known directly but only

through an interrupted referentiality that points to the meaning of the past only as a type of reproduction or performance (Caruth 11).

According to the manual of “Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services” (“Substance Abuse”), the impact of trauma can vary from being subtle, to insidious, to outright destructive. Many factors may contribute to how an incident affects an individual, including the individual’s personality, the type and nature of the event(s), sociocultural factors and the definition of trauma held by that society. The notion of trauma’s unspeakability indicates a causal view of trauma and dissociation, as well as a view of memory as a storehouse of experience wherein traumatic memory is stored differently and is unavailable for normal narrative recall since it remains dissociated from consciousness (Caruth 160-163).

Similarly, in Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* most of the islanders’ reactions to losing their memory and objects is subtle and almost nonreactive. However, eventually the effect of trauma takes hold at various stages in the lives of the characters, especially the narrator. She experiences a sense of numbness, pessimism, emptiness, severe anxiety and emotional meltdown. Most of the time the people appear to be acquiescent to their bleak fate. However, in every lack of emotional reaction exhibited after traumatic incidents, evidence of emotionally chilling and gripping encounters of hidden suffering is present. In her analysis of trauma and the paradoxes of memorialization in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, Naomi Mandel asserts that “silence and forgetting are as much a strategic and self-conscious gesture on the part of the subjugated as they are the product of the subjugating culture’s demands and requirements” (172). The solemn ceremony held after a disappearance on the island, void of any outburst of rage or protest, indicates the numbing effects on their sense of pain and loss. The people gather to get rid of the remnants of the lost object without any protest, and pretend that nothing has happened, though deep down they may have been deeply hurt and traumatized. Here, they exhibit one of the common reactions of anxiety disorder caused by trauma:

The island is stirred up after a disappearance. People gather in little groups out in the street to talk about their memories of the thing that’s been lost. There are regrets and a certain sadness, and we try to comfort one another. If it’s a physical object that has been disappeared, we gather the remnants up to burn, or bury, or toss into

the river. But no one makes much of a fuss, and it's over in a few days. Soon enough, things are back to normal, as though nothing has happened, and no one can even recall what it was that disappeared (Ogawa 4).

As explained in the manual ("Substance Abuse") many different kinds of post-traumatic reactions are observed and reported. Victims often demonstrate immediate reactions because most of them are believed to be highly resistant to trauma, and form appropriate coping mechanisms that include the use of a support system to deal with the impact and repercussion of a traumatic incident. In the novel, the inhabitants of the island have formed a communal support system among themselves. They stand together to share their grief and support each other in coping with the loss of memory.

Apart from this, there are many reasons why individuals might encounter difficulties in recognizing their feelings. Lack of experience or preceding contact with emotional expression in their family and society might be among the causes for this scenario. Some traumatised individuals may believe that strong emotional expression is too dangerous and will cause them to lose control over their life. Others may experience what is defined as numbness or lack of emotions. These individuals might outright reject the suggestion that they are affected by the traumatic events in their life. This reaction is rather normal as trauma can affect their way of visioning their life. They often see their life with no hope for the future. Many fear that life will end unexpectedly, or that normal things such as being in a relationship and finding opportunities for career advancement will never occur. To some extent, the protagonist is initially governed by this sense of hopelessness. She is slowly starting to develop feelings towards R. By being together in pain and protecting each other from the oppressive system, they have eventually formed an emotional connection. However, when the Old Man asks the protagonist about her feelings for R, her answer reflects her state of mind which is evidently devoid of any sorts of romantic notions or hope about their future due to the oppression and struggle she faces while trying to live a normal life. Traumatic experience leads to lack of faith and hope in life. Even though she is determined to save R from the Memory Police she understands the reality that R as well is not living a normal life and will never be able to lead one. The trauma of living in constant fear of being caught has made him stonehearted, emotionally vulnerable and pessimistic about the future.

“I suppose,” I said, my tone intentionally ambiguous. “But do you think he’ll ever be able to come out of hiding? Do you think he’ll be able to see his wife and child again? I doubt it. I think he’ll be able to live only in the hidden room. His soul is too dense. If he comes out, he’ll dissolve into pieces, like a deep-sea fish pulled to the surface too quickly. I suppose my job is to go on holding him here at the bottom of the sea.” (Ogawa 196)

In addition, every individual member of the community is affected emotionally. The characters experience a series of emotions in the aftermath of the trauma imposed by the authoritarian government, namely the Memory Police. According to Lancer, feelings of detachment, a lack of connection to one’s self and external reality can be accompanied by a sense of emptiness. One may endure what can be described as a feeling that the ground one stands on is slipping away, while one remains emotionally or physically numbed. The sense of emptiness felt from living in a void is very much evident in the narrator. When “birds” and all that is associated with them are lost to the people of the island, she feels a severe sense of emptiness that she can’t fill: “I realized that everything I knew about them had disappeared from inside me: my memories of them, my feelings about them, the very meaning of the word ‘bird’ – everything” (Ogawa 10).

After the disappearance of roses, the next objects on the list are photographs, followed by fruits of all kinds. The woman protagonist claims that “nothing comes back now when I see a photograph. No memories, no response. They’re nothing more than pieces of paper” (Ogawa 95). The sense of emptiness comes with no notion of want, no sense that something is missing or lacking in their life, as they are devoid of wishes or desires (Lancer). Nothing is worthwhile for them. In the text, this notion of emptiness intensifies as the remaining research materials on birds gathered by the narrator’s father are confiscated by the Memory Police. The officers leave no stone unturned to wipe out every single thing that relates to the memory of “birds”, consequently wiping out the narrator’s preserved and cherished memory of her late father. This action traumatises her further, pulling her into an unknown abyss that she can’t climb out of. The deep sense of emptiness she feels, in a way alters her sense of self and being.

As people come to an understanding that the void is inevitable and can’t be filled in from outside, they begin to exhibit changes in the way they react to the traumatic incidents that push

them further into depression. As explained by Schopenhauer, it is like the “bottomless abyss of its heart” (36) and there is nothing in the world out there that can fill the vacuum. Similarly, changes can be seen in the narrator, from being unemotional and numbed to being extremely anxious and angry about the trauma she is experiencing. She is in acute emotional distress, aggravated, and anxious to preserve memories or objects that keep disappearing. It is a battle that can never be won, and that makes her angrier and more depressed:

The new cavities in my heart search for things to burn. They drive me to burn things and I can stop only when everything is in ashes. Why would I keep them when I don't think I will be able to recall the meaning of the word 'photograph' much longer, not to mention the danger if the Memory Police find them. (Ogawa 95)

Duriguetto argues that the evidence of extreme anxiety symptoms, such as constant tension, worry, nervousness or anger define anxiety disorder in general. He asserts that anxiety plays a crucial role in survival and can be considered as a normal reaction to psychological stress. The following example depicts the severity of anxiety in the protagonist:

That night, I wept in the hidden room. Never in my life had I cried for so long without stopping. I knew, of course, that I should be happy that nothing had happened to R, but for some reason I was unable to control my emotions and they were swept away in a direction I hadn't anticipated. But I'm not sure the word “crying” did justice to what I was experiencing. Clearly, it was not a matter of being sad. Nor was it just relief from the tension I had felt. It was simply that all the thoughts that had floated through my mind since I'd first taken R into my care had been changed into tears and come flooding out. And there was no way to stop them. I clenched my teeth, telling myself that I shouldn't let him see me in such a pitiful state, but despite his attempts to comfort me with gentle reassurances, it was useless. I could do nothing but sit very still, eyes downcast, in the company of my flowing tears. (Ogawa 156)

The protagonist goes through a series of emotional breakdowns, despite being detached and unaffected at the beginning as mentioned before; thus it can be surmised that gradually her emotional state is worsening. In this traumatic episode, she weeps uncontrollably, is inconsolable, and her despair is beyond her control. Avoidance, fear and anxiety are evident in her reactions,

and she finds that controlling her emotions is challenging. All her pent up emotions and fear are uncontrollable, leaving her traumatised despite R's efforts to comfort her. It is crucial to study the various stages of trauma faced by the characters in the text in order to have a better understanding of their struggle and how, despite their difficult circumstances, they choose to fight against the ordeal, proving their mettle and sense of empowerment.

(Re)Imagining Dystopian Space

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator mentions that her mother preserves old memories by keeping some of the forgotten objects in a secret hiding place, located "behind the staircase to an old cabinet with rows of small drawers" (Ogawa 4). She is fascinated by her mother's talk about these past forgotten objects and says that "it made me happy to imagine a time when all these things had a place here on the island" (Ogawa 5). The memories of the narrator's mother are inscribed in the secret hiding place, which triggers the narrator's memories about the disappeared objects. The "secret place" where the narrator's mother preserves her past memories foreshadows the secret hiding place she has prepared for R. The narrator claims that "If I was going to protect R, I needed a place far removed from the outside world" (Ogawa 67). With help from the Old Man, she successfully hides R under the floorboards. The hidden room they create revives the narrator's memories about the disappeared objects. The projected space creates a space of reminiscence through R, the narrator and the Old Man's collective memory. Their exposure to the disappeared objects in the hidden room further perpetuates feelings and emotions that produce a sense of the past. This projected space allows them to strategize their battle against the Memory Police and to reminisce about the past.

The secret room is where they initiate their "passive resistance" against the authoritarian regime. To retain and recall memories, they believe it is necessary to immerse themselves in this projected space. Although there is a possibility of being caught by the Memory Police, this space is essentially free of constraint, which the narrator suggests is important: "Perhaps it was necessary to rid oneself of everything that was superfluous in order to immerse completely in this airless, soundproof, narrow space shrouded in the fear of discovery and arrest" (Ogawa 119).

The narrator initiates the idea of hiding R because the retention of memories is arduous on this island. The young woman is worried that “things are disappearing more quickly than they are being created” (Ogawa 52). The protagonist claims that “memories do not change the law. No matter how precious the person I might be losing, the disappearances that surround me will remain unchanged” (Ogawa 242). Therefore, to preserve memories, she has decided to rebel against the Memory Police through two deliberate acts. Firstly, hiding someone like R (who is immune to the disappearance process) is considered an offense on this island; and secondly, the act of preserving memories is also considered a violation.

The secret hiding room symbolizes a form of resistance. The decision she makes in hiding R in the secret hiding room and keeping the supposedly “disappeared” objects (books, music box, and so on) exemplifies her resistance against the Memory Police. Her action of recovering memories connotes the definition of the verb “recover” that is, “To get back something that was taken from one, something that was lost or almost destroyed – the idea of regaining the ability, a sense of control over one’s feelings, movements, etc, after a period of absence or loss” (Friberg, Nordin & Pederson ix).

During R’s sojourn in the secret hiding room, he motivates the narrator to write, claiming that “your soul is trying to bring back the things it lost in the disappearances” (Ogawa 245). R asks, “Don’t we have all the memories preserved here in this [hiding] 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” (Ogawa 232). R perceives the concept of “disappearance” differently as he believes that the lost memories could be retrieved through stimuli such as one’s feelings and experiences with the disappeared objects:

“You may think that the memories themselves vanish every time there’s disappearance, but that’s not true. They’re just floating in a pool where the sunlight never reaches. All you have to do is plunge your hand in and you’re bound to find something. Something to bring back into the light.” (Ogawa 177)

At the same time, the narrator, who is a novelist, continues to try to preserve the world and retrieve her memories through the novel she is working on. The narrator indicates that “I’m going to go on writing them in secret” (Ogawa 185). Writing about the world helps the protagonist to retrieve

some information about the world that she used to know. It further enhances the narrator's lost memories. She is in the midst of writing a novel about a typist who loses her voice. Her situation is comparable to the life of her own fictional character because both of them are "silenced" under an oppressive system, as this excerpt from the narrator's novel, told by the typist, indicates:

In the past few days I've begun to feel my body growing more distant from my soul. It's as though my head and arms, my breasts and torso and legs are all floating somewhere just out of reach, and I can only watch as he plays with them. And that, too, is because I have lost my voice. When the voice that links the body to the soul vanishes, there is no way to put into words one's feelings or will. I am reduced to pieces in no time at all. (Ogawa 166)

Like the protagonist, the typist portrays a depressed state of mind that is not within her control. Her feeling of losing her being and sense of self is vividly depicted, to mirror the protagonist's own state of being. The typist feels disconnected from her body parts, the same way the protagonist feels disconnected from her existence. The typist loses her voice because of her tormentor; the tormentor is identified with the narrator's loss of memory.

In the hope of re-discovering her sense of Self and preserving part of her memories, the narrator reimagines dystopian space through her own fiction. Her fictional character resembles her oppressed situation, as is clear when the typist says "I was obviously upset when I first realized I'd lost my voice, but my anxiety was even greater now at having lost my typewriter" (Ogawa 127). The writer further emphasises the connection between them when she says that "When you lost your voice, you lost the ability to make sense of yourself" (Ogawa 132). In other words, losing one's voice and memory is equivalent to losing a part of you, your identity. According to Anne Whitehead, "Memory is historically conditioned...[and] bears the impress or stamp of its own time and culture" (4). Our identity and sense of attachment to a place are solely dependent on the transmission of culture from one generation to another through the process of remembrance. Conversely, here, this process of remembrance is entirely controlled by the government. Lexical words with their semantic and pragmatic properties are totally erased from the inhabitants' brain.

Therefore, her intensified anxiety is metaphorically described in the novel through the character of the voiceless typist. Here, the narrator figuratively reflects her inability to write due

to her loss of memory; she is mentally prepared that in time she will, like the typist, dissolve into nothingness. The narrator admits that it is challenging to be a writer on this island, when “words seem to retreat further and further away with each disappearance” (Ogawa 82); the difficulties intensify when novels become the next item on the list to be dematerialized. During the disappearance of the novel, she finds “the word ‘novel’ itself is getting harder to pronounce. That’s how you know the disappearance is taking hold. It won’t be long now until I’ll have forgotten everything. Remembering is impossible” (Ogawa 176-177). Through the disappearance of words and novels, it is clear that the authoritarian government aims to restrict freedom and to thus sustain their own power on the island. Despite living in fear, the narrator and R are determined to preserve their memories through her writing. When both books and words disappear, the narrator begins to face difficulties in retrieving words in her writing, but she overcomes the obstacles and tries to scribble a few words on a piece of paper::

One night I made an effort to write some words on the manuscript paper. I wanted to leave a record of what I saw in the dimly illuminated void of my memories. It was the first time I had done such a thing since the novels disappeared. (Ogawa 244)

The woman protagonist constantly consults R about her difficulties in the writing process. R keeps encouraging her to continue writing her novel despite all the challenges that she is facing. R guides the narrator through mnemonic techniques in order to compose her novel. He states “You mustn’t burn your manuscript. You must go on writing novels. That way, the bond will remain” (Ogawa 176). The novel itself represents the world she was familiar with. R believes that the writing process functions as a form of self-preservation that enables the narrator to reconnect with her lost memories. It serves as a coping strategy for the narrator to maintain her consciousness and her sense of being, and is also a form of resistance against the authoritarian regime. The narrator exclaims that “I’d like to leave behind some traces of my existence on the island” (Ogawa 270). The writing process empowers the narrator to reconnect with her lost memories. Though this technique, the narrator’s effort of preserving her memories of the past and present in her novel defies the oppressive policies imposed by the Memory Police.

Empowerment: The Power of Memory

Empowerment is defined as a process (Mosedale) in which those who are oppressed and dominated choose to acquire resources and get involved in making imperative decisions related to shaping their society. The different implications of the term ‘empowerment’ are derived from its various origins and uses. Generally, empowerment can be defined politically as individuals’ agency to attain what they desire (Carney), and to have the power to express what is in their consciousness (Alsop). To certain people empowerment is a collective resistance against oppressive social interactions (Page & Czuba). The notion of empowerment in Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* is manifested through the actions of the characters in regaining their sense of control over the problems that concern them in their authoritarian society, and in developing critical awareness in making decisions that directly affect their lives.

Faced with an oppressive authoritarian regime that gradually removes all that matters to the people, be it physical objects or memories, the inhabitants display agency in coping with their distressing circumstances. First, they learn to survive despite their loss. They move on, find new jobs, and continue to live their lives. In addition, their indifferent attitude to the disappearance of objects enables invention and innovation which again proves the people’s sheer determination to survive. In a way this behaviour can be perceived as a part of their coping mechanism:

When the hats were disappeared, the milliner who lived across the street began making umbrellas. My nurse’s husband, who had been a mechanic on the ferryboat, became a security guard at a warehouse. A girl who was a few years ahead of me in school had been employed at a beauty salon, but she quickly found work as a midwife. (Ogawa 9)

In fact, the narrator chronicles creative, healthy, and industrious ways to manage the strong effects of trauma, such as through renewed commitment to physical activity or the creation of a support system to help the survivors of trauma. She herself, for example, finds comfort in providing shelter and support to those who need it, as shown in the following excerpt. Her decision to do so, being a victim as well, portrays her strength and empowerment:

Since the nights were cold, I made him a bed from an old blanket and let him sleep in a corner of the entry hall. It occurred to me that I was giving Don all the love and

care I wished I could give to the couple who had been his owners, the boy who had been hidden in their house, the Inui family, and Mizore, their cat. (Ogawa 175)

The narrator's coping ability increases the resilience of her character. This ability enhances the quality of her personality, which implies her capacity to endure excessive stress and to function normally despite the oppression she experiences (Lazarus and Folkman; Richardson). Her determination to recall and preserve her memory, as can be seen in the excerpt below, highlights her resistance to authority and strength to cope and fight against the odds. It is her individual decision to stop crying over the loss, overcome her anxiety and battle her depression through building up her hope that "the light would illuminate the cavity in [her] heart":

Passing my nights this way did not relieve the anxiety I'd felt since the old man's death, but it was better than weeping in my bed. Occasionally, these flashes of recognition were sparked by some object two nights in succession – once it happened three times in one night – but then I might go four nights without encountering even one. I began to wait for these brief moments with increasing impatience, seeing them as luminous signposts that would lead me to R. And I, too, hoped the light would illuminate the cavity in my heart. (Ogawa 244)

In this regard, it is crucial to discuss people's resilience in the ways in which they adapt themselves to difficult situations. It is important to acknowledge their efforts, as empowerment is a process and not just an outcome (Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton & Bird). As they begin to gradually lose their body parts, the people are shaken for a moment but immediately regain their courage and face their life hurdles with renewed courage. They have better clarity about their life and without complaining about their loss, they start to appreciate the little things in life, ensuring a more meaningful way of being:

When our left legs first disappeared, we were thrown off balance and didn't know how to manage. But once our entire bodies were gone, no one seemed particularly upset. They seemed more coherent now that they had fewer parts, and they adapted easily to the atmosphere of the island, which was itself full of holes. They danced lightly in the air like clumps of dried grass blown along by the wind. (Ogawa 270)

R, however, gives memory a more important role compared to the protagonist and the Old Man. This might be due to the fact that he still has an intact memory. However, he keeps encouraging and motivating the narrator and the Old Man. He reasons with them that memory is the light of a being, it is part of one's soul, it carries one's identity, so no one should ever give up trying to regain their memory. His continuous efforts and perseverance can be viewed as a form of empowerment, which drives them to keep fighting against the odds. He seeks to encourage the narrator:

“You may think that the memories themselves vanish every time there's a disappearance, but that's not true. They're just floating in a pool where the sunlight never reaches. All you have to do is plunge your hand in and you're bound to find something. Something to bring back into the light. You have to try. I can't just stand by watching as your soul withers.” (Ogawa 177)

R further explains: “The meaning isn't important. What matters is the story hidden deep in the words. You're at the point now where you're trying to extract that story. Your soul is trying to bring back the things it lost in the disappearances” (Ogawa 245).

As mentioned earlier, R motivates the narrator to keep writing in order to conserve her memories. The meaning of the word, to R, is not essential but the essence of memory itself will be reconstructed through her story. They have discovered some other ways to retain their memories of the disappeared objects. They discover that the protagonist's mother preserved the disappeared objects in the statues she made and R indicates that “I truly believe they have the power to change you, to alter your hearts and mind. The slightest sensation can have an effect, can help you remember. These things will restore your memories” (Ogawa 231). For example, R, picking up the manuscript pages from the desk, rationalises that “These exist here and now, no doubt about it. As do the characters written on them. A mind that we cannot see has created a story that we can. They may have burned the novels, but your heart did not disappear” (Ogawa 231).

R convinces the protagonist that she still can recollect some memories about the disappeared objects, as memories are constructed based on the “combined influences of the world and the person's own ideas and expectations” (Foster 13). In other words, Foster argues that a memory is “constructed by the person who experienced it”. According to Barbara Levy Simon,

“empowerment is a reflective activity, a process capable of being initiated and sustained only by the agent or subject who seeks power or self-determination” (132). Similarly, Donald Linhorst states that “empowerment is that individuals are empowered through their ability to control or influence aspects of their environment” (7). Therefore, the narrator regains her sense of agency and decides to finish her novel in order to preserve her memory. She indicates that “Though it was not so long ago that novels had disappeared, I had taken an extraordinarily circuitous route to bring the story to this point” (Ogawa 269). As is revealed below, her struggle and subsequent success in completing the story as part of her legacy proves her sense of agency and determination to seek control of the situation rather than completely succumb to it:

The characters were awkward, written with my left hand, the lines growing weak and shaky and in places vanishing altogether, as though the words themselves were weeping...I had no real confidence that this was the story R wanted, but at least I had reached the end of the chain of words. I had completed the one thing I would be able to leave to him. (Ogawa 269)

The notion of empowerment must deal with all aspects of power relations. As mentioned before, “empowerment is a process, though the result of the process may also be termed empowerment” (Batliwala 1994, 10). Thus, empowerment is not just about defeating the oppressive power that has been subjugating an individual or community but is an all-embracing journey. Srilatha Batliwala asserts that empowerment should promote new notions of power. This is similar to the protagonist’s journey of empowerment where, in the end, she liberates herself from all forms of oppression and suppression through her voice and writing. She finally comes to a peaceful resolution:

There is no need to lift the heavy trapdoor [of R’s hidden room], since I was now able to slip through the narrow crack around it. In that sense, the complete disappearance of my body was actually a form of liberation. Still, if I was not careful, my unreliable and invisible voice might be swept away with the wind. “It’s peaceful with just a voice,” I said. “With just a voice, I think I’ll be able to accept my final moment calmly and quietly, without suffering or sadness.” (Ogawa 273)

The protagonist has been an embodiment of empowerment, as is evident in the ways in which she sets her mind to keep her parents' legacy safe, and to save R and preserve his memory by providing him shelter in her house. She goes beyond her will and capacity to fight the oppressive Memory Police in order to protect others in her community. However, what is more prominent in her journey is how she has overcome her own limitations and prevailed in the end. R's response to her is testimony to this:

Of course it will. Each word you wrote will continue to exist as a memory, here in my heart, which will not disappear. You can be sure of that. I'm glad. I'd like to leave behind some trace of my existence on the island. (Ogawa 270)

She further mentions that "In recompense for a mind that was able to retain everything, every memory, perhaps it was necessary that the body gradually fade away" (119). The preservation of memory is similar to the preservation of Self as memory is inherently connected to one's identity. She hopes that her memories will be conserved and revived by R in the future, ready to be brought into consciousness. Despite being in the midst of vanishing, she claims that "I hope my memory will live on forever here, through you" (Ogawa 273). This proves that it is her decision to fight against the trauma and anxiety which results in her comeback in writing and enables her to leave behind her own legacy in R's memory despite being gone forever due to her disappearance.

Conclusion

Yōko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* highlights the role of memory in resisting the traumatic and oppressive power structures in a dystopian society. The eradication of memories on the island is a form of control over the inhabitants' minds and bodies. The Memory Police subsequently eradicate the inhabitants' abilities to write and read when they make books and words disappear from the island. Therefore, the narrator's decision to hide R in the secret hiding room and her action of writing a novel can be considered a form of passive resistance against the Memory Police. The process of empowerment is strengthened when the woman protagonist reimagines a projected space: an imaginary space that is able to preserve the remaining memory. The projected space conjures up memories and longings. Although she disappears gradually towards the end of the

novel, the protagonist feels empowered and liberated when she manages to preserve her memories in her novel. Empowerment is seen as a process through which the narrator regains her own sense of agency and rediscovers her sense of identity. The Old Man, R and the narrator resolve to withstand the authoritarian regime. At the same time, the Old Man and the narrator are conscious and able to develop critical awareness of their oppressed lives in their authoritarian society despite their deteriorating memories and vanishing identities. Though memory is presented as something that is both acquiescent and threatening, *The Memory Police* catechizes the various ways in which the preservation of memories leads to liberation.

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