

An Orchestration of National Cultural Memories in the Grand Union of Britons at the Lazy River of Spain

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Abstract

Zadie Smith is a British author, novelist, and short-story writer well known for her portrayal of the interplay of culture, race, and identity in her works. ‘The Lazy River’ is one of the collections of short stories in the book *The Grand Union* written against the background of Britain leaving the European Union after the Brexit deal. Few stories in this collection signify the British culture and its embodying acts and also, symbolizes Britishers’ association with European countries in diverse forms and cultural acts. Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry and literature serves as the medium of memory. Literary fiction is a parallel to the memory system and a placeholder of fictional memories produced as a result of the process of memory creation and it is also perceived as the symbol of culture. The ‘Lazy River’ exemplifies the process of memory creation and the establishment of collective identity. This paper aims to examine the process of memory creation and exploits the act of memory creation as an act of cultural significance for the establishment of identity as a multifarious factor determined by the intersection of socio, political, physical, and psycho effects.

Keywords

Cultural Memory, Episodic, Communicative Memory, Culture, Self

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Introduction

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field and Literature serves as one of the media of cultural memory as history, art, and other forms of media”, said Astrid Erll. According to Maurice Halbwachs, there exists no individual memory but a collective memory. “Memory” is not owned by anyone single discipline. Instead, sociology, philosophy and history, archaeology and religious studies, literary and art history, media studies, psychology, and the neurosciences are all involved in exploring the connection between culture and memory.’ (Erll, 1) Memory studies is the discipline that integrates different disciplines like no other and philosophy, history, archaeology, literary studies, media studies, psychology, and neurosciences are all involved in exploring the connection between memory and culture. It is another word to examine social formations, literature, art, and media for the study of culture.

‘Just like the narratives of autobiographical memory, the story – or ‘master narrative’ – of the Cultural Memory rests on the ‘process of selection, connection, and the creation of meaning’ (ibid., 137). ‘Narrative structures play a significant role in every memory culture. We find them in the life stories and anecdotes that are listened to oral historians; and in the patterns of the oral tradition on which anthropologists focus. The main function of narrative in culture is, according to Jörn Rüsen, ‘temporal orientation’, the linking of past, present, and future in a meaningful way.’ (Erll, 147) Memory making is the process of active reconstruction of isolated data of the past into meaningful narratives. Such formative processes can be found in the many media practices of memory. One such medium is literature.

According to Astrid Erll, there are three central intersection points between literature and memory First, ‘Condensation’ which is important for the creation and transmission of ideas about the past; second, ‘narration’ as a ubiquitous structure for creating meaning; and third, the use of ‘genres’ as culturally available formats to represent past events and experience (145).

“Fictions of memory” refers to the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question “who am I?”, or, collectively, “who are we?” (Neumann, 334) ‘Such Conceptual and ideological fictions of memory consist of predispositions, biases, and values, which provide agreed-upon codes for understanding the past and present and which find their most succinct expression in literary plot-lines and myths.’ (Neumaan, 334)

Literary representations of memory are always prefigured by culture-specific configurations of memory. Literary fictions provide models for representing individual and cultural memories as well as the nature and functions of memory. ‘Literary Fictions are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, they re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of identity.’ (Neumann, 333)

Narratology helps to identify the different forms of representation of individual and collective memories in literature. The aesthetic qualities of literature also enable the process of memory creation in it. The choice of representation or representative techniques or narrative techniques of representation function as independent carriers of meaning. Any work of fiction is the symbol of culture which interacts with multiple symbol systems and act as the lens to the cultural configurations of the epoch to which the work of fiction belongs.

‘The Lazy River’ is a condensation of the ideas about the contemporary British culture for which the author has chosen the first-person narrative form represented in the genre of ‘Short Story’.

Analysis

Lazy River is an artificial pool ride offered by many hotels and resorts for travelers around the world. This short story is narrated in Almeria, Spain where the people from Britain are holidaying at a resort. It is happening in the historical background of the successful Brexit deal with Britain leaving the European Union. The political and national climate in Britain after the EU exit anticipate difficulties in immigration and economy and the impact of it will be echoed in the national and cultural identities of people all over Europe. The short story “The Lazy River” in the book of *Grand Union* is set in the last year of Britain’s union with Europe.

The Lazy River is being portrayed as the metaphor of life explicitly and the narrator metaphorically categorizes the circle of life through the Lazy River. The narrator ‘I’ represents the position of the remembering ‘I’ apropos British culture in the act of narration. The narrator ‘I’ invites the reader to participate in her act of memory creation in the lazy river at the resort. She takes the collective position of her family in narrating the tale. Educated upper-class elite people from London are considered, and the people from other parts of Britain are participating in the grand union happening at the pool and they all intermingle in the circle of the lazy river as in the circle of life. People are using different floats to keep them afloat not submerge in the river. Branded floats, too large floats, comically shaped floats differentiate people according to their classes and status

quo. These floats stand for the artifacts or assets people cling to in their life without realizing the inevitability of death, the sea. Holidaying symbolizes willful forgetting of the mundaneness of real life back in the city for the narrator.

In all the short stories in the book, “Grand Union”, the author foregrounds the holidaying place as the place where all the human souls intermingle irrespective of their class and status. This is a place where the Grand union happens. Time never stops for anyone as the artificial current in the Lazy river. Tattoos, floats, and habits embody the different cultures people represent. The absence of cultural memory acts that differentiates Britishers from other country people signifies that the presence of ‘Other’ is needed for its representation and it gains agency only in the act of contestation with another culture. Thus, the cultural representation signifies acts that do not gain agency/representation in the absence of ‘Other’.

By the collective act of swimming in the pool, the British people are involved in the process of shared memory creation that signifies their collective cultural identity. The narrator juxtaposes their vacation to the journey of realization undertaken by Moses in the sight of burning bushes. The memory capacity of a mirage or invoking irrelevant images in the sight of African Men working in the polytunnels renders the wilful forgetting ability of the narrator’s memory. This text by invoking the mythology from Bible mediates the cultural memory of Moses at the sight of a burning bush as a mirage of flying tomato baskets in the punnet with the label of Spain. Even though the narrator participates in the act of collective memory creation, her epiphanic/episodic experiences apropos the place are also being created at the same time. This act of memory creation explicates the congruence between Communicative and Cultural Memory. Also, the ability of Cultural memory in enhancing the episodic experiences of the individual.

Though the narrator expressed belongingness to the group of British people at the resort the national memory or the collective identity also invigorates inclusiveness indicate the existence of class differences among them. By the performativity of their roles like applying sun cream, warning their children of overeating, relating the lazy river to metaphors, and not participating in the communal practices of the resort, people from London confirm their identity as educated elites. The narrator’s use of metaphors like the river of Heraclitus to relate to the educated people represents their differences among others however people are invariably performing their roles to express their belongingness and establishing their identity to a specific class or sub-culture. Also, their acts confirm that they express their identities through their body and actions. Bodies and social actions are consistently involved in the act of creating a memory.

The Lazy river represented as a metaphor of life is also represented as a metaphor of shame after the daily act of floating in the later part of the story which signifies the multiple identities of people in their multifarious roles. Also, the narrator’s use of biblical references provokes a re-interpretation of the designated code of conduct transmitted as a cultural memory through the act of ceremonies, sermons, and practices. The social and cultural dimension in creating individual memories is evident in the text and Cultural memories such as burning bush and Heraclitus river are mediated in the

realm of the individual memory of the narrator or the fictional memory of the text. Different classes of people educated elites, people representing popular culture, and people representing digital culture were all part of the act of creating fictional memories of the text all while creating their memories which proves Halbwachs claim of social frameworks in the process of any act of memory creation. The simultaneity in the process of individual and Cultural memory creation confirms the inevitability of cultural configurations in representing the episodic/epiphanic experiences in memory.

The narrator's lexis for the pair of girls taking photographs juxtaposed with the people floating in the river denotes the differences in the quality of time of life and the process of meta-memory creation through photographs. Industry, project, and accountability reflect the cultural configuration involves in the process of creating the fictional memory. The artificiality of the digital culture supersedes the naturalness of the ocean, its ever-expanding horizon, mysteries, and depth when people chose the boardwalk over swimming in the sea during the dark hours.

The lazy river, trampolines, and blood-red moon are the metaphors of life quoted by the narrator to underscore the convergence of real and imaginary in the city of Spain. It is this quality of the city to attribute reality to everything and everywhere emphasize the openness of the city of Spain to accommodate people of multiple cultures. The two ladies from west Africa and southern Africa swam against the current of life to sustain themselves in the world. The narrator's assertion of reality, "Men are in the polytunnels, tomatoes are in the supermarket, the moon is in the sky The Brits are leaving Europe." establishes the connection between various social actions in the hierarchy of memory culture.

There might be different rooms but their act of creating memories in the holiday remains the same for all married people with children, the usual routines of putting children back to bed, and connecting to social media every night to live their secret self. University-educated elites, two teenage girls, ladies making hair plots, the boys from the band, and the men cleaning the somniferous lazy river also shared in the process of creating collective memories of people in the resort.

Multiple sub-cultures of Britain and its embodiment in various forms involving social action and performativity of bodily practices gain agency and representation in this short fiction of memory. Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory is dependent on social structures and the cultural version of this collective memory was proposed by Jan Assmann to act as the symbol of culture or as the manifestations of culture in different forms. Our memories are the product of social and cultural frameworks operating at multifarious levels. In the short story, "The lazy river", the narrator showcases the orchestration of the process of creating memories through the act of collective union at the Lazy River. Through their collective process of memory creation at the Lazy river, the people at the resort participate in the shared national heritage of Britain.

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