



# ‘Emotional Discourse’ and ‘Neuroplasticity’: A Study of Lee’s *Tell Me Everything You Don’t Remember* in Health Humanities

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## Abstract

Health Humanities, an emerging interdisciplinary field of study probes into the medical discourse in the light of liberal arts to provide holistic insights about the construction and apprehension of illness, care and therapy. Foregrounding the cultural and social dimensions, Health Humanities have examined illness related to women like anorexia, infertility, post-partum, menopause, etc. thereby propounding multifarious theoretical framework for the better perceptual experience of the illness but when it comes to neurological disorders it is often neglected and sidelined. The reason is the theory of neurological nihilism which dominated the arena of neuroscience until the twentieth century which walled up the theory of the malleable nature of the brain. The advent of brain plasticity not only disputed the moribund representations of the brain, but also rendered great hope to humanity by opening up new avenues for healing brain related illness which earlier got demarcated as unalterable and lethal. Set against this backdrop, this paper is an endeavor to study and analyze Korean-American writer Oak Lee’s heartwarming memoir *Tell Me Everything You Don’t Remember* where the narrator employs an emotional discourse as a mindful intervention therapy to invigorate brain plasticity in order to reclaim her lost memory. In addition, the research traces the interconnection between emotional discourse, neuroplasticity and aesthetics of healing in the context of unique biological aspects of sex based differences in female brain to highlight the psychological therapeutic transformation and well-being of women in particular by deploying the narrator as a specimen.

**Keywords:** brain plasticity, health humanities, re-wiring, art therapy, sex difference etc.

## Introduction

“Any man could, if he were so inclined, be the sculptor of his own brain” (Cajal, xv) is the challenging breakthrough made by the evolving neuroscience thereby invalidating the age-old metaphors associated with brain like hard-wired, unregenerate mechanism, telephone-exchange etc. Until the dawn of the twentieth century, brain was kept locked under the theorization framework of neurological nihilism which vehemently denies the proposition that the brain is capable of undergoing changes even after the end of cortical period. Besides, it creates new pathways to heal and retrieve the injured part in its own unique mode. Before the advent of neuroplasticity the frontiers of neurologists didn't altogether reject the malleable nature of brain but it is restricted to the period of adolescence. Whereas, the advancement of medical equipment provided an opportunity to examine and study the brain in detail which in turn culminated to prove that “the adult brain is not only capable of changing, but it does so continuously throughout life, in response to everything we do and every experience we have” (Costandi, 3). This intervention in neuroscience turned out to be a hot-potato topic and started exerting its influence not only to add information to the already existing body of knowledge about brain science, but to explore all the practical ways in which it could be used to make marvelous healing and recovery in patients of brain-related disorders like Cerebral Palsy, Stroke, Alzheimer, Schizophrenia, Dementia, Parkinson etc. which got branded by medical professionals as incurable.

The Stroke defined by the World Health Organization as “rapidly developing clinical signs of focal (or global) disturbance of cerebral function, with symptoms lasting 24 hours or longer, or leading to death, with no apparent cause other than of vascular origin” (Warlow, 352) turns out to be the second most deadly disease “with an annual mortality rate of about 5.5 million” (Donkor, 2018). Given this census data a serious investigation, it is important to find out what makes people vulnerable to stroke and what are the novel therapies which could be used to rescue and retrieve the affected victims back to the state of normalcy apart from the already available typical remedies like surgery and medication which comes at the cost of side-effects. There are many theories, datum and research articles about the former case from the medical professionals whereas, the latter received little attention and significance. Therefore, this research article with the advent of brain plasticity theory as a central focus study and spotlights how brain could be re-wired after being wounded by means of aesthetics and creative art by deploying Lee's *Tell Me Everything You Don't Remember* as a specimen by examining the biological nature of the female brain configuration.

## Journal Therapy: The Holistic Way of Healing

“Memory is identity....You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life you cease to be, even before your death” (Barnes, 241). Oak Lee, thirty-three year old after being diagnosed with an acute left-thalamic ischemic infraction her life turns topsy-turvy because the brain cease to ordinate its cognitive function. The Thalamus, communication hub in the brain plays an active role in transferring sensory information to its appropriate receptors, thereby

aiding the brain to process information and transform short-term events to long-term memory. The stroke in Lee caused thalamus to form a patch of dead tissue being deprived of oxygen and rendered memory impairment which in turn robbed of her social identity and personality as follows,

I am feeling strange. My brain is in a weird state right now—a  
Combination of short brain games and lack of memory. While  
Taking on the concept of a brain game earlier today, I suffered  
a memory overhaul. Now I can't say what I want to say or re-  
member what I want to remember. It's just a weird situation (Lee, 6).

Initially, Lee didn't comprehend the gravity of her memory impairment and decides to live her routine life thinking that it would pass but it got intensified. For instance, one day while partying with friends Lee thinks of having fried eggs for breakfast, but when she tries to articulate the word egg she struggles to figure out the right term and end up saying shell-bells. Every object seems familiar to Lee but her brain refuses to space them in the chronology and context which is evident from her description of common objects like metal knob (door handles), rectangular soft cloth (towel), slippery stuff (shampoo), sudsy stuff (soap) etc. Amidst all this weird situation and chaos Lee never let go of her reading habit and continued reading Kurt Vonnegut's *The Slaughter House Five* which helped her to come to terms with her medical condition thereby making her to understand that her brain is spaced out to a greater degree because for days she read nothing other than the first paragraph of the text repeatedly.

After sensing her strange behavioral self, resulting from incomprehension and inarticulacy Lee approaches the hospital with the complaint of memory impairment and is astonished to find out that she had stroke. The deadly stroke which usually causes paralysis rendered Lee not physical impairment rather aphasia a sort of brain disorder which hinders thought process and communication. Lee blessed with an excellent photographic memory before stroke couldn't confront her new self which knows neither past nor future, but relies only on the present and felt at a loss as she says,

I cannot hold my thoughts and I'm sick of being a receptacle of only the present moment. The lesson of living in the moment is wearing thin. My brain was the part of me I always relied on most. I don't like the way I look and I am so not an athlete—so I always relied on my ability to THINK and REMEMBER and rely on my BRAIN. And now it is GONE (Lee, 86).

Lee entangled in the threshold of grief from which there is no immediate return to retrieve her lost self, starts journaling the important information while being in the hospital like the names of physicians, disorders names, report details etc. with an accurate time, date and day in her moleskin diary for reference. Without knowing that it would be an excellent therapeutic cure for her wounded brain she starts writing just like that propelled by sheer determination that she should somehow tune her brain to store and remember things. Fortunately, the neurologist Dr. Volpi while giving short-term memory test to examine the intensity of the damage level asked Lee to remember three word apple, table and penny and told her that he would ask for those words in

the middle of their conversation which she should recall and tell him correctly. But she flunked in the test, after jotting down the test result, when Dr. Volpi is about to leave the room, he sees a notebook and learns that Lee writes whatever she could remember in that notebook for her personal reference. Realizing the power of journal therapy which could help the brain to track and trace its lost routes and Lee's enthusiasm for writing, Dr. Volpi advises and encourages her to write everything that happens in that notebook and thus commenced the writing therapeutic cure of Lee which turned out to be her one and only memory reservoir.

Journal Therapy, a sort of writing practice which helps to boost memory, understand self and heal the emotional turbulence as defined by Adams as "To journal is to write about your life- it is telling your story. Life-based writing is one of the most reliable and effective ways to heal, change and grow" (Adam, 1990) aided Lee in two ways. On one hand it turned out to be an excellent therapeutic health-enhancing activity. Whereas, on the other hand it provided Lee an opportunity to confront and understand her new self, thereby forcing to initiate a conversation with her inner voice and rendered cathartic effect. That is to illustrate further it helped Lee to give vent to her pent-up emotions of her lost self which would never make her feel vulnerable. Lee, being an extrovert before stroke enjoyed life to the fullest by taking part in social gathering which added fuel and fulfilled the emotional and verbal aspect of her brain. But after stroke Lee couldn't find a companion who would be patient enough to listen to her agonies and difficulties as a stroke victim because as soon as she tries to start conversing with her friends the sarcastic remark "How are you feeling? What's it like? But you look fine—did you really have a stroke?" (84) breaks her heart and makes her quite but the white pages calmly waiting to be filled in offered the trust, kindness, space and time she desired. Besides, Lee being a controlled personality in openly expressing emotions and shortcomings finds it hard to confide in her friends and husband about her yearnings for emotional healing, whereas the journal renders the comfort by silently listening to her distressed life without offering any censure and mockery. Lee's primary determination to start journaling is similar to that of Gail L. Denton, who too suffered a brain injury like her in 1991 as she says,

My journal....was my way to reach inside and pull out my Self so that I could look at her and begin to figure out the new her! This woman was experiencing and expressing thoughts and emotions that the old me did not easily recognize as being ME. I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted some understanding, if not control. Journaling was my way to make sense of my predicament (Denton, 204).

But Lee didn't stop figuring out her predicament rather journeyed forward to re-wire her brain and discovered the writer within her. As Lee progressed from recording mere significant information to everyday events her brain started to heal in its own way of finding out the served connection based on the dusty footprint on impression. Every time Lee orders her brain to write and construct a sentence about her life experience it unlocked her past memories and opened up creativity. The proof that the journal therapy indeed helped her in healing and recovering the lost functions and personality is the memoir *Tell Me Everything You Don't Remember* itself which is the product of her journaling experience as she says,

My diary became, like a differential diagnosis procedure, a part of my eventual writing process—all the documented facts became a story. I pieced it all together into narrative. I depended on my experience and knowledge to cobble together themes and lessons and scenes and episodes into an essay, into this book. And in this way I truly became a writer. (Lee. 42)

Taking into consideration the stance that physically and psychologically men and women are wired up differently journal therapy tends to heal women faster compared to men on two important grounds. By nature in the brain circuits of women hippocampus the storehouse of memory and verbal areas processed by both hemispheres are relatively larger than men that is why women tend to remember even minute details to a greater degree. Though at birth for both sexes, organs tend to be of equal size as women pass through each stage the growth differs based on Doidge principle of “neurons that fire together wire together” (175). This relatively explains why it is easy for Lee to re-wire the brain and retrieve the lost functions by means of simple and comfortable therapeutic journal writing. On the other ground women tend to seek an emotional response to sustain and boost up their day to day activities. After becoming stroke victim Lee’s emotional receptor becomes barren because no one is patient enough to lend his or her shoulder or to engage in a conversation about her distressed psyche. But journal therapy by being a silent listener enveloped her in the coziness of relief by detoxicating the negative emotions and helping to identify her passion in writing.

### **Conclusion**

A simple cost efficient journal therapy, which requires nothing more than a pen and a notebook make marvelous healing in retrieving the lost functions caused by brain damage thereby increasing the residual timing from minutes, hours to days or by creating new pathways to re-route the lost functions. Journal therapy, a reliable, creative and inspirational art which vouches for the recovery at the cost of the trust and interest of the practitioner helped Lee to retrieve the functions of the dead brain in a healthy new way. By foregrounding the unique structure of the female brain discussed above journal therapy tends to satisfy the dual-purpose as health-enhancer and emotional healer.

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