



# A War of Memory and Identity in Yoko Ogawa's *THE MEMORY POLICE*

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the theme of the war of memory and identity and this novel depicts a society where memories and objects gradually disappear, and those who remember them are at risk of being persecuted by the Memory Police. This leads to a struggle between those who seek to preserve their memories and identity, and the forces seeking to erase them. Using the theoretical framework of retrieval failure, this study examines how the characters in the novel suffer from memory loss and the consequences of this loss on their identity and sense of self. The study also analyzes the ways in which the novel reflects the sociopolitical context of Japan, particularly in relation to the loss of memory and identity in the aftermath of World War II. Through the lens of science fiction, the novel explores the complexities of memory and identity, and how they are linked to power and control. This study contributes the understanding of the role of memory and identity in shaping the individuals and societies, as well as the consequences of their loss.

**Keywords:** Japanese literature, science fiction, memory, identity, war, retrieval failure, forgetting, dystopia, authoritarianism, loss, disappearance.

## I. Introduction

Memory and identity are intimately connected, as our memories serve as the foundation for who we are as individuals. Memories shape our views, values, and sense of self, and losing those memories can lead to confusion, disorientation, and a loss of identity. In literature, these themes frequently appear in dystopian works, where memory and identity are threatened by repressive governments.

One such novel is *The Memory Police* by Yoko Ogawa, set on an island where people and objects are mysteriously vanishing. As time goes on, people's memories of these vanished things and people also disappear, leaving just a select few who can recall them. The disappearances are controlled and enforced by the Memory Police, a government agency, which maintains a condition of dread and uncertainty among the islanders. The novel's protagonist, a writer, finds it difficult to recall the things and characters who have vanished and strives to hold onto her memories and sense of self because she is aware that she could vanish at any time.

The psychological implications of memory loss and identity erasure are also explored in the novel, with the inhabitants of the island experiencing a sense of bewilderment and uncertainty as the vanished items and individuals are forgotten. Anxiety and despair result from their inability to relate to their past and sense of self. The protagonist emphasises the importance of retaining memories as a way to protect one's identity by keeping her memories alive through her writing.

One of the key theories in psychology that explains how memories might fade or disappear over time is the retrieval failure theory of forgetting. This idea states that forgetting happens when information is stored in our memory but cannot be accessed or retrieved because the retrieval process has failed. According to the retrieval failure theory, memories are kept in the brain's extensive network of linked neurons, and the neural network related to a memory must be activated in order to retrieve it. The intensity of the memory, the similarity between the retrieval and encoding contexts, and the accessibility of retrieval cues are some of the variables that affect retrieval.

The presence of retrieval cues is one of the key elements that influence retrieval, as they cause the brain network connected to a memory to become active. Retrieval cues can be internal or external, and the strength of the relationship between the retrieval cue and the memory determines how effective they are.

Retrieval failure can happen when retrieval cues are absent or insufficiently potent to trigger the neural network connected to a memory. When memories are not routinely practised or reviewed, the brain connections become frail and challenging to activate. Or, if the context of retrieval and encoding are different, retrieval cues may not be effective if they are not properly matched with the memory.

## II. Crisis of Memory and Identity

The idea of memory retrieval failure is crucial to the plot of *The Memory Police*, as the fictional authoritarian government known as the Memory Police forces the island's residents to forget and get rid of particular things, creatures, and people. People's recollections of these items start to deteriorate over time, making it difficult or impossible to recall them. The Memory Police successfully modify the retrieval cues' availability, making it challenging for people to recall specific memories. The protagonist finds it difficult to recall her father. She attempts to remember his face and voice, but it gets harder and harder to access her memories as time passes.

The characters in the novel struggle to recollect anything connected to the wiped objects due to the deletion of memories. "This bird, which should have been intertwined with memories of my father, was already unable to elicit any feeling in me at all. It was nothing more than a simple creature, moving through space as a function of the vertical motion of its wings" (11). The protagonist remembers her father, but she has no recollection of his occupation, his interests, or his character. The protagonist's sense of identity and perception of the outside world are greatly impacted by this erasure of memories.

"If spring never comes, does that mean summer won't either? How will the crops grow when the fields are covered with snow?" (136). The example of crops not growing in snow-covered fields highlights the significance of memory as the basis of our comprehension of the world. Similar to how the growth of crops depends on the recollection of prior seasons and agricultural techniques, memories are interrelated and rely on one another for retrieval. Because the loss of memories signifies the loss of the past, which is a crucial component of one's identity, this can be connected to the struggle of memory and identity. The characters lose a significant piece of their history and cultural legacy when they lose the capacity to remember the changing seasons, which eventually influences how they feel about themselves.

The absence of the seasonal cues makes it difficult for the protagonist to recall how the world functions. It is unclear and uncertain if summer will arrive at all in the absence of spring, a season that traditionally heralds its arrival. The protagonist is perplexed since there are not any outside clues to assist her remember and apply what she's learned about the seasons and the events that go along with them.

“But that's impossible. Novels have disappeared. Even if we keep the manuscripts and the books, they're nothing more than empty boxes. Boxes with nothing inside. You can peer into them, listen carefully, sniff the contents, but they signify nothing. So, what could I possibly write?” (176).

It relates with the idea of identity formation, which is the process of realising our unique identities and forming a sense of self. The protagonist experiences a sense of loss and uncertainty about who she is and what she stands for as a result of her incapacity to write novels, which had previously been a crucial aspect of her identity. The protagonist struggles to preserve a sense of identity and purpose without her capacity to write novels.

The novels that have vanished from the island are no longer easily retrieved from the manuscripts and books that the protagonist has access to. Despite having access to the actual books and manuscripts, the protagonist is unable to recall the details of the novels since there are no longer any external cues to activate her memory. The idea of cue-dependent forgetting, a sort of retrieval failure that happens when the retrieval cues present during encoding are different from those present during retrieval, is analogous to this lack of external cues. The novels in this scenario are no longer on the island, therefore the protagonist is no longer able to use the retrieval cues she had previously relied on.

The claim of the protagonist, novels have disappeared. Even if we keep the manuscripts and the books, they are nothing more than empty boxes demonstrates her insight that the actual items themselves are insufficient to bring back memories of the novels. It highlights how crucial outside stimuli are in causing memory retrieval. The memories themselves may be intact but inaccessible without these cues. The protagonist has experienced a sense of loss and bewilderment regarding her identity and purpose as a result of the novels' disappearance. This demonstrates the significance of memory and life events in forming our sense of self as well as the possible consequences of retrieval failure on our identity and psychological health.

“It’s a shame that the people who live here haven’t been able to hold such marvellous things in their hearts and minds, but that’s just the way it is on this island. Things go on disappearing, one by one. It won’t be long now,” she added. “You’ll see for yourself. Something will disappear from your life” (3).

The island’s memories and tangible objects can be made to vanish by the Memory Police, leaving the characters to forget they ever existed. The characters strive to hold on to their memories and preserve their sense of identity in a world where things are continually disappearing, which generates a sense of instability and loss. Anyone will ultimately experience the loss of something they treasure because the vanishing of objects on the island is an ongoing process.

The protagonists become uneasy and anxious as a result because they are unsure of what may vanish next or how it would affect their lives and identities. This constant loss of memories and tangible items might be interpreted as a metaphor for the battles the characters are having with their memories and sense of who they are. They fight to maintain their sense of self in the face of this loss since the removal of these items from their lives signifies the loss of a piece of themselves. This is akin to what people who have gone through trauma or major life upheavals go through, which can cause a sense of loss and uncertainty about one’s identity and place in the world.

“I stood at the window, where I once stood with my father looking out through binoculars, and even now small winged creatures occasionally flitted by, but they were no more than reminders that birds mean nothing at all to me anymore” (18). The narrator remembers a day when they enjoyed a moment with her father while watching birds from the window. But today, the narrator discovers that birds mean nothing at all, signalling a break with the past and a change in who they are.

Standing where the narrator formerly stood with their father at the window suggests an effort to relive a former memory and perhaps to reclaim her former identity. It emphasises the narrator’s altered viewpoint and sense of detachment that the little winged creatures that flit by are simply memories of what has been lost. The main character is observing birds via a window where she formerly stood with her father. She now believes, however, that he does not care about birds anymore, which shows that she is unable to recollect the memories of birdwatching and the delight she had felt. The loss of memories and the removal of artefacts from the island are to blame for the absence of retrieval cues in this case. The protagonist has a weakening

sense of identity and a loss of significance connected to once-cherished activities as a result of the repeated disappearance of things and memories that make it challenging for the protagonist to recollect the memories connected to those objects.

“The objects in my palm seemed to cower there, absolutely still, like little animals in hibernation, sending me no signal at all” (5). The protagonist is carrying inactive, meaningless objects in his hands, such as a ribbon, bell, emerald, and a stamp. It is now impossible to have any emotional or personal connection to the things that once held great value and meaning, which results in the loss of memory and identity. The words cowering and sending no signal describe the things can be seen as a metaphor for the loss of the link between the objects and the memories they formerly represented. The protagonist is left with nothing except the actual presence of the things because they are now weak and devoid of all associations and meaning.

The absence of retrieval signals in this case can be attributed to the disappearance of objects from the island and the erasure of memories, as shown. The protagonist has a weakening sense of identity and a loss of significance connected to formerly beloved objects as a result of the repeated disappearance of objects and memories that make it challenging for the protagonist to recollect the memories connected to those objects. Like little animals in hibernation emphasises the lack of retrieval cues by implying that the objects are dormant or inactive. The absence of any signal from the objects or any memories they trigger suggests that there are not any or not enough retrieval cues.

“Closed in the hidden room, I continued to disappear” (274). In order to avoid being apprehended by the Memory Police, who are in charge of enforcing the disappearance of things and memories on the island, the protagonist of the book is hiding in a secret room. The protagonist is unwilling to let go of the memories and artefacts that are leaving the island, therefore hiding symbolises a wish to retain memories and a feeling of identity.

The protagonist is sequestered in the secret room, cut off from the outside world and the people and things that are leaving the island. As the bonds between the self and the outside world get weaker, this isolation can contribute to a feeling of loneliness and a deterioration of one’s sense of identity. The act of hiding can be interpreted as a means of defending and maintaining memories and identity, but it also implies that it is getting harder to access and retrieve the memories. The protagonist may be experiencing a sense of

absence as a result of the memories fading and becoming more challenging to recall due to the removal of things and memories from the island.

Moreover, concealment itself can result in a failed recovery. It can be more challenging to recollect memories later on the more one tries to ignore or repress them. The protagonist may be experiencing a sense of fading because their act of hiding makes it harder for them to access and retrieve their memories.

“But I suppose you’re right when you say we should do everything we can to bring back memories of the things that have disappeared” (231). The people of an island are losing their recollections of things and other people. The loss of these memories causes a sense of separation from reality and loss of identity. The older man in the book is aware of this loss and is prepared to do anything to stop it. A type of resistance against the Memory Police, who are in charge of wiping these memories, can be found in the act of bringing back recollections of things that have vanished.

The characters are actively regaining their identity and asserting their humanity in the face of authoritarian control by seeking to remember and preserve the past. The old man emphasises the significance of memory in determining our sense of self and how humans interact with the environment. Humans lose a piece of ourselves and our connection to the past when we lose our memories. So, the act of keeping memories becomes a means of keeping our identity and sense of belonging in the world. In the face of a world that is constantly changing, the characters’ active attempt to regain memories might be understood as a means of preserving their own identities.

They are clinging to a piece of themselves that could otherwise be lost by clinging to recollections of things that have vanished. It can also be interpreted as a commentary on human experience and the frailty of memory. The characters of the novel are eventually powerless to stop the disappearance of things and memories, despite their best efforts to keep memories alive. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for change’s inevitable arrival and the transience of life. The characters in the novel are trying to develop new cues that will aid them in retrieving the memories later on by actively trying to remember and retrieve memories. The concept of retrieval practise, which is deliberately attempting to recollect information in order to improve memory retrieval in the future, is comparable to this.

“I desperately wanted to be able to tell R that I remembered, but no matter how hard I concentrated, the object sitting before me did not trigger a single memory” (145). The protagonist’s inability to recall a specific item serves as a symbol for both individual and societal memory loss. A government organisation known as the Memory Police systematically purges memories of specific items from people’s minds, leaving them disoriented and disconnected from their own histories. As a result of their inability to remember their past encounters, customs, and connections, these individuals have lost their sense of cultural and personal identity. This also depicts the protagonist’s frustration and desperation as they struggle to fight the forced memory loss. Despite their best attempts, they are unable to get away from the memory police, and their inability to remember causes them stress and solitude. Once objects from their lives vanish, the retrieval cues connected to those items are disturbed, making it difficult or near-impossible for them to recall them. As a result, memories that are important to a person’s sense of identity are deliberately destroyed, making them lose their sense of self. The protagonist’s yearning to recollect the object and share it with R emphasises the emotional toll that unsuccessful retrieval can take. She knows the memory is in her brain, but she cannot get to it, which frustrates her and makes her feel lost. This captures the battle of the protagonist to maintain her memories and sense of self in the face of a culture that encourages forgetting.

“We didn’t have a single novel in the house, so this one was easy. But it must be horrible for you as a writer. If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know. Books are heavy things” (175). The protagonist’s concept of self and identity as a writer are both influenced by writing. The protagonist’s identity is endangered when books start to vanish from the island since it takes away her ability to express herself and interact with the outside world through writing. Her memory is also impacted by the lack of books because words and stories are progressively lost in her memory. The protagonist’s identity is further weakened when the memory police enforce the disappearance of books. She believes she has no control over her own life or memories and feels helpless. The absence of books serves as a reminder of the value of literature and narrative in helping people develop their sense of self and perspective on the world. The protagonist’s fight to maintain her identity in the face of a society that actively seeks to destroy it serves as a potent metaphor for the loss of cultural identity and the erasing of history in the face of repressive governments



The novel also emphasises the psychological repercussions of memory loss and identity erasure, which may happen as a result of retrieval failure. People may experience a loss of self-awareness, identity, and ties to the past when memories fade or become unavailable. The protagonist fights to write down her memories as a strategy to prevent having her identity erased and to keep her sense of self intact. This theme is especially poignant given the growing prevalence of memory-related conditions such as Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

The novel also explores the ethical implications of memory loss and identity erasure, particularly in the context of medical science and technology. As scientific research continues to advance in the area of memory modification and enhancement, the question of how much control we should have over our own memories becomes increasingly important. The novel raises important questions about the potential consequences of tampering with memories, including the possibility of losing touch with our sense of self.

Moreover, the novel explores the idea that memories are not only personal but also collective. The protagonist discovers that her memories are interconnected with those of others, and that they form part of a larger, shared narrative. This theme highlights the importance of collective memory and its role in shaping our understanding of history and culture.

### III. Conclusion

Overall, the novel is a thought-provoking exploration of memory, identity, and the human experience. It raises important questions about the nature of memory and the ways in which it shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Memories provide us a sense of continuity, connection, and belonging. They also enable people to uphold the unique identities and defy tyrannical rule. To keep our sense of self, connection to our past, and our individual and social identities, it is crucial to preserve our memories. Through its vivid portrayal of a world where memories can be lost or erased, the novel encourages readers to reflect on the importance of memory in their own lives and to appreciate the preciousness of their own memories.

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