



Autobiographical Memory and Identity Reconstruction in Old Age: A Cognitive Analysis of Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter*

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Abstract

This paper has conducted a character analysis of the three old women, Gouri, Latika, and Vidya who appear in Anuradha Roy's novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter*. The study is based on the cognitive literature theory of Autobiographical Memory. It aims to reveal how past memories help individuals retain their connection with their identities even as they lose their mental faculties owing to old age. Roy's narration illustrates the reconstructive function of memory as she allows the three old women to embark on a pilgrimage to a place called Jarmuli. The analysis shows that Gouri's spiritual recollections, Latika's unresolved emotional conflicts, and Vidya's structured sense of duty reveal the psychological complexities of aging and memory. Through this exploration, the study highlights how Roy presents memory not just as a reflection of the past but as a cognitive tool that the characters use to cope with the challenges of aging and identity.

Key words: Cognitive Literature, Anuradha Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, Autobiographical Memory, Old Age, Identity Reconstruction

Memory becomes one of the prominent thematic concerns shown in the novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter* by Anuradha Roy when she allows her protagonist to revisit her past with the view to reconstruct her identity. Alongside this main plot, there is also the story of three old women, Gouri, Latika, and Vidya who continue to grapple with their problems related to aging. The lives of these three old women are

intricately shaped by their autobiographical memories, which play a central role in defining their identities and actions. These three women undertake a pilgrimage to Jarmuli, and during their journey, the past continually influences their present as each woman struggles with her own memories of personal significance. Gouri's spiritual recollections, Latika's unresolved emotional conflicts, and Vidya's pragmatic

outlook all reflect how memory reconstructs their present reality. Applying the concept of autobiographical memory in analysing the lives of these three women promises to provide a suitable ground for research in understanding how the identities of these three old women are shaped by their past memories. This paper explores how Roy uses these characters to depict the interplay between memory, identity, and aging as they navigate their personal and social relationships.

Sleeping on Jupiter is the third novel written by Anuradha Roy which narrates the story of a young woman visiting her past to reconcile with it. The novel explores the themes of trauma, displacement, and memory, (Singh and Mishra 24) particularly focusing on how the past shapes individual identity and the present. IN the novel, memory serves as a central theme. It is revealed as characters like Nomi and the elderly women face their pasts (Vashishth 77). They confront their past that is buried either through flashbacks of violence, loss, or spiritual reflection. The author employs memory to depict how trauma that is not solved resurfaces in everyday life. This resurfacing of the past influences the relationships and self-perception of the characters. The narration is carefully built to navigate the delicate balance between remembering and forgetting. This underscores how individuals reconstruct their identities by either confronting or escaping their painful histories.

The theoretical framework employed in the analysis, Autobiographical memory, as a cognitive concept propounds that memories constructed through one's own experiences plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's sense of self. "Autobiographical memory, and particularly its semanticized forms, are important for the formation and maintenance of a mental representation of the objective self in the present moment and across time." (Prebble, Addis, and Tippet 820) It influences the present actions of the individual, as well as their emotional states.

A collection of the individual's personal experiences and events are involved in reconstructing their memory as a narrative. Applying this cognitive concept to analyse characters delineated in literature becomes significant in providing valuable insights into how they reconstruct their identities, cope with trauma, and deal with psychological fragmentation.

In the novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, examining the memories of the three major elderly women characters, Gouri, Latika, and Vidya, based on the theory of Autobiographical Memory can be valuable in throwing new light on old age and its challenges, and how Anuradha Roy presents them in her novel is also explored as part of this analysis. The three characters, for the major part in the novel, reflect on their pasts even as they navigate their present. In fact, their present is largely shaped by their past recollections. The train journey that they undertake and the pilgrimage they go becomes the space for these women to confront their memories. Their past and their present mingle as they allow their past to surface into their consciousness. This is sometimes done consciously, and other times unconsciously.

Gouri is one of the three old women who travel parallelly with the story of the protagonist. She steadfastly holds on to her past, particularly in her recollections of spiritual pilgrimages, and this highlights how autobiographical memory becomes central to her sense of self. She struggles with forgetfulness and the signs of aging more than the other two old women. "Over the last two years it was as if her brain had termites tunnelling through it. She repeated herself, she forgot where she put things, and she forgot names. She would even forget that she had eaten and begin serving herself again." (Roy 10) But, in spite of this, her .is able to retain her link with her identity by repeatedly recollecting important moments that happened in her life. For her, this cognitive reconstruction is an essential way of preserving meaning in her life.

Gouri's internal struggle becomes apparent as she is shown to feel the need to locate her belongings, often driven by the nagging sense that she has forgotten something. She constantly keeps searching her hand bag: "She sat down on her bed, now strewn with her things, and wondered – what was she searching for?" (Roy 39) This constant search for lost items parallels Gouri's broader quest to reconnect with significant moments in her past, such as her memory of the Vishnu temple and her husband's comment on her "haldi-coloured sari" (Roy 41) during their Badrinath pilgrimage. As she experiences the loss of her mental faculty owing to old age, she is able to cling on to her identity by making her past memories as the foundation for her present actions.

Gouri considers the visit to the temple at Jarmuli as a personal challenge to prove that she still has her faculties and that she still holds her identity: "It was her territory; she had arranged everything for this part of their trip. She wanted it to be perfect: it was after all the reason for coming to Jarmuli." (Roy 40) Her connection to the temple signifies a deeper connection to her own memories, allowing her to reconstruct her identity as someone still capable of spiritual leadership and self-determination. As she declares to her friends, "It was her territory; she had arranged everything for this part of their trip. The memories serve important directive functions: they inform, guide, motivate, and inspire." (Pillemer 195) This is evident in Gouri's attempt at always perceiving her present through her past memory. Cognitive literature highlights the function of memory that not only serves as a mere storage of facts but a reconstruction of experiences that serve present needs and interpretations. "Vivid memories of personal experiences provide models for present activities and contribute to successful problem solving and adaptation.

In the case of the second old woman, Latika, much like Gouri, constructs her narrative by her autobiographical memories. However,

her connection to the past is less spiritual and more tied to personal relationships and unresolved emotional conflicts. In this regard, Latika's memories of her late husband and her daughter forms the predominant part of her past memory. This memory plays a pivotal role in shaping her present actions. She constantly negotiates with who she is now and how past events have shaped her identity. This is the foundation for her cognitive process of memory reconstruction.

The memory bank of Latika's past is filled with regret and dissatisfaction unlike Gouri's which is founded in spiritual experiences. Latika had a difficult relationship with her husband and this forms the central influential pivot that shapes Latika's navigation of the present, as well as her behaviour with others and her surroundings. As she lies awake in the hotel, Latika reflects on her husband's hurtful words: "You have no loyalties. You'll say anything for a laugh. All you want is popularity." (Roy 41) These biting remarks still resonate with Latika, shaping her self-perception as someone who may have failed in her marriage or as someone whose motivations are misunderstood. Such internalized criticism speaks to how autobiographical memory is not always positive or affirming; it can also serve as a source of emotional trauma, which continues to affect the individual's self-esteem and interactions with others. (Ross and Wilson 197)

Latika's memory construction is also heavily influenced by her memories of her daughter and their relationship. It also plays a significant role in shaping her present perceptions. While speaking to Gouri and Vidya on the train, Latika casually mentions her daughter's visits from Florence, noting the stress these visits cause her: "Of course, I love seeing my grandchildren – and my son-in-law – but the amount of mineral water I have to stock up! Sausages, pasta! And cheese! The children eat nothing else." (Roy 11) These memories, though rooted in love, also carry the weight of obligation and domestic expectations, which

Latika finds overwhelming.

The relationship that Latika has with her daughter is a love-hate relationship. Because, her daughter's visits also serve as a reminder of the cultural and generational gaps that exist within her family. Latika is frustrated with these differences but at the same time, she cherishes the moments and memories that she has with her daughter and her grandchildren. This cognitive dissonance is a hallmark of autobiographical memory, where past experiences are revisited and reconstructed in ways that reflect the individual's current emotional and psychological state. (Holland and Kensinger 92) For Latika, these memories are not fixed but are constantly being reinterpreted as she navigates her relationships with family and friends.

Vidya, the third woman in this journey, also experiences the influence of autobiographical memory, though her approach to life and memory reconstruction differs from that of Gouri and Latika. Vidya is portrayed as pragmatic and detail-oriented, often acting as the caretaker of the group, which is evident in her preoccupation with organizing things for others. However, beneath this practicality lies a reliance on her own set of memories and experiences, which inform her current behaviour and self-perception. In fact, Vidya's memories are centred on her past professional life, her role within her family, and her sense of duty, all of which shape her present actions.

Vidya's memory is founded on orderliness. It is evident in the way she handles Gouri's problem of forgetfulness. She is acutely aware of Gouri's cognitive decline, and her response to this is to impose structure and precaution. For example, when Gouri shows signs of memory lapses, Vidya immediately creates a system to ensure her safety: "I want you to put a card into every pocket of your handbag, Gouri. If you drift off and can't remember where you are, it'll be easier for someone to bring you back to us." (Roy 8) This

gesture demonstrates Vidya's cognitive reconstruction of her identity as a problem-solver, someone who can organize and control the lives of those around her.

Vidya sees herself as someone who must always be productive, as seen in her tendency to stay busy even in moments of leisure. Her memories, particularly of her time spent working in a bureaucratic environment, continue to influence her self-perception. "Forty years in the bureaucracy and a preoccupied self-importance was now Vidya's natural way of being." (Roy 7) Her professional past informs her present behaviour, as she constantly seeks to impose order and efficiency on the world around her. Autobiographical memory, in this case, reinforces her need for control and structure, even in retirement.

As Vidya's identity is closely tied to her memories in her work place, she allows the same memories to shape her present that she spends with her friends during the pilgrimage. Her memories influence her attitude and make her responsible for her two friends, Gouri and Latika. Her preoccupation with details, from packing the right medicines to ensuring they have everything they might need, shows how her past experiences of caregiving and organization shape her current identity.

In her bag was a bottle of hand sanitizer, a packet of rose-scented wet wipes, and phials containing basic homoeopathic medicines. After packing these she had sat for a full five minutes of quite next to her luggage, to run through in her mind a list of the many things she and her friends might need that had not yet gone in. (Roy 9)

Such influences project Vidya as an emotionless person who struggles to connect with her friends. This is evident when she busies herself with writing on cards instead of engaging with her friends: "She went back to writing in careful block letters, but now she had a smile on her face." (Roy 7) Vidya's reliance on

structure and order, influenced by her autobiographical memory of a life spent in bureaucracy, creates a barrier between her and the more emotional, chaotic aspects of life.

For Gouri, Latika, and Vidya, their collective journey to Jarmuli becomes a space where individual memories intersect and affect each other. This contributes to a shared narrative which invariably shapes their experience as well as their perception of the present. Their conversations, interactions, and mutual reflections reveal how their personal pasts influence not only their individual sense of self but also the way they relate to each other. This intersection of autobiographical memory creates a collective narrative reconstruction, in which each woman's past informs the others' understanding of themselves and their shared journey. Whether through Gouri's spiritual reflections, Latika's personal struggles, or Vidya's sense of duty, the process of memory reconstruction becomes a means for these women to navigate the challenges of aging, friendship, and personal trauma. As they share and reflect on their pasts, their journey becomes not only a physical one but also a cognitive and emotional exploration of how memory shapes the self and its connection to others.

In conclusion, Anuradha Roy delineates characters whose memories play a vital role in their identity formation and in their behaviour. This extends even to old people, particularly three old women – Gouri, Latika, and Vidya - who populate the novel, *Sleeping on Jupiter*. The analysis has revealed how each woman's past shapes her present, highlighting the profound psychological and emotional impact of memory on identity. The stories of these women illustrate how autobiographical memory functions as both a source of continuity and a means of coping with the challenges of aging. This paper has underscored how Roy presents memory as an active, reconstructive process, essential to the formation of self and the negotiation of trauma. Ultimately, the novel reflects the universal struggle to reconcile past experiences with

present realities, particularly in the context of old age.

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