On the Concept of Memory and the Dilemma of Forgetfulness

Have we ever heard anyone speak of collective forgetfulness? While the term "collective memory" exerts its power over us, it places a whip in our hands against our attempts at personal forgetfulness.

/ Wadah Abu Jame December 19, 2024

Watermelon, 2023, Charcoal, ballpoint pen, and pastel on Kafan, 30 x 100 cm, Aysha E Arar.jpeg



[1]Aysha E Arar, Watermelon, 2023, Charcoal, ballpoint pen, and pastel on Kafan, 30 x 100 cm
Courtesy of the artist

The two terms, memory and forgetfulness, indeed carry a profound dilemma that accompanies us through time. Memory, especially the collective kind, sometimes functions as a moral weapon, and sometimes as a pistol aimed at feelings of guilt. These are terms with very different origins. Memory is a collective concept, often characterized as somewhat superficial, yet it demands a strong obligation from society as a whole to preserve it for as long as possible. Memory often serves as the basis for the collective's consolidation, and although it carries obvious and understandable pain, it does not demand an excessive price from society.

Forgetfulness is a more complicated and complex matter. The attempt to forget is accompanied by unexpected pain, in contrast to the obvious pain of "remembering." Forgetting sometimes exacts a higher emotional price because it forces us to confront feelings of guilt or loss and sometimes leads us to confront what we would rather suppress or erase.

The two become part of our daily struggle - a process that moves between remembering, which begins in the morning when we recall yesterday's experiences, and the attempt to forget them in the evening, as we try to let go and prepare ourselves for the next day.

Abundant Memory

Memory seems to have a clear direction, but it has a unique ability: it not only retrieves stored

experiences and information but also integrates with different perspectives - emotional and historical - that enrich it and give it further depth. When we sit down with people from different cultures and listen to their points of view, the question arises: does our memory undergo a process of reshaping? It seems that it might. In fact, without shared memory, we would not be able to create the mental and experiential connections that bind us together.

Books - like memory - often flow from a shared source of information, a fragment of the past retrieved from somewhere, even though the stories within them may end with completely different characters or insights. The memory retained by the reader becomes subject to personal interpretation, drawing the line between what is considered "good" and what is considered "bad," depending on the cultural context or personal experience of the individual. Thus, memory becomes a myth or a refuge - depending on the eye of the beholder.

I see a person as a product of their memory; it shapes not only their understanding of the past but also their vision of the present and even the future. However, this memory can become a "bad friend" when it merges with the collective memory of society. Once personal memory is swallowed up by the shared cultural narrative, the individual may lose their unique voice and personal visions.

This leads to a situation where we are required to participate in collective struggles that supposedly belong to everyone, but during which we lose something of our individual identity. Thus, personal memory, once a source of vision and self-formation, may become blurred in the face of the dominant force of collective memory.

IMG_3513.jpeg **[2]**



[3]Aysha E Arar, Gentle Fall, 2023
Courtesy of the artist

One-Faced Forgetfulness

Every time I hear the word "forgetfulness," the common saying "forgetting is a blessing" comes to mind. But blessings are not given as gifts, and we are not born with them. Forgetting is the hardest work in our daily lives and throughout the year. It is our historical task, rejected and accumulated since the dawn of humanity. Even with the advancement of communication and social relations today, we still reject it and continue its accumulation.

I remember when, in a conversation with a friend, he talked about something he wanted to forget, and he said to me: "I want so much to erase my memory and break it." Forgetfulness seemed so rigid to me compared to memory, when we often see them as opposites in all contexts. But the closer you come to understanding them, you realize that memory is something we are born with, while forgetfulness is something we need to create. The convergence of the two, be it easy or difficult, is not something I prefer, and that is what complicates the matter for me.

We understand this late in our early attempts when we decide not to tire ourselves by creating forgetfulness and settle for the memory we were born with. Memory eventually becomes a prison, and there is no doubt that its rules are strict. Every prisoner in it has their own unique deviations, but memory keeps us captive to past experiences that, over time, become complex in our thoughts.

The odd thing here is that it occurs to you that prison is preferable to sudden and excessive success in the dosage of forgetfulness, as in the case of Alzheimer's disease.

Memory Differences of Nations and Cultures

Any discussion of historical memory and the present is based on the principle of national existence and identity. Each side finds in its memory the foundations of its identity and personality. Both sides view the issue from within the accepted historical and moral context, and both manage to formulate memory from the perspective of old traditions and customs. These traditions, which are called "transmitted," come through collective memory, which prefers to unite with society as one form. This is in contrast to forgetfulness, which has a personal identity and suppresses the group’s policy.

When you talk about a particular topic without referring to collective memory, someone might interrupt you and say, "if you had forgotten, I did not." That's the truth; forgetting is one-sided, and everything related to it is considered personal. Have we ever heard anyone speak of collective forgetfulness? While the term "collective memory" exerts its power over us, it places a whip in our hands against our attempts at personal forgetfulness.

In general, collective memory provides a sense of belonging and conservatism in the national consciousness, while forgetfulness allows for renewal and openness to new processes. The discourse between memory and forgetfulness, therefore, not only reflects the complexities of society but also serves as a tool for discussing how we view our history, our present, and our future as a community.

A clear difference emerges here in the way Nation A deals with memory compared to Nation B. Nation A focuses on exploiting its memory to strengthen its ideologies and shatter the memory of the other, while Nation B uses its memory to emphasize its victimhood and its historical and cultural precedence. It seems that memory here serves as a means of coercion, expression, and judgment, perceived as a tool for defining identity and creating a sense of belonging.

A question arises here that engages the public but is usually asked behind closed doors: can two nations in conflict will decide to forget? And if it is possible, what is the alternative to their memory? Many may think that the present can serve as an alternative, but it largely depends on the past and their vision of the future, both of which stem from memory’s background.

Here lies the absurdity in trying to overcome memory; no one can fully recover from their memory. Can forgetfulness be considered an alternative? Forgetfulness may be able to do the unexpected, but it becomes impossible when it comes to a group, especially when two opposing nations or parties raise one slogan: "Lest we forget." This slogan expresses rejection and is considered an imprint in the heavy memory on itself and others, making the matter an absurdity that prevails over the absurdity of memory itself.

IMG_3514.jpeg **[4]**



[5]Aysha E Arar, The kick, 2019
Courtesy of the artist

What is the nature of memory that guides opposing sides?

Initially, it seems that the dynamic is somewhat competitive, with narratives reinforcing divisions and leading to the exchange of excessive hostility, like a memory bomb that could suddenly explode. But this is far from being the case because it is not an unselective memory, but rather a memory of conflict, focused on hysteria around the others and their pain, with the aim of refuting their suffering and recording what is more painful.

Still, denial can be seen as the first step towards achieving shared forgetfulness, expressed precisely

in recognizing the experiences of the other and building a shared memory based on these experiences, side by side. It is a union of memory, based on a new perception of entitlement and a desire to reconcile and share the memory, something that is usually not possible for two hostile nations that carry the same slogan "Lest we forget."

Another solution is gradual forgetfulness, which appears as a form of emotional defense, allowing people to continue living without drowning in disasters. We do this in our emotional and personal relationships as well and thus cope with everything around us. This solution will only be possible if the nation’s memory carries the element of emotion in the depths of the heart.

However, in general, collective memory and forgetfulness are often unconscious actions played out by hidden desires and different aspirations. The two are influenced by each internal behavior and every external event, making forgetfulness a problem that ultimately leads us to forget what we don't want to forget and remember what we tried to forget.

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