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MOTIF OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY ACROSS CULTURES: IN WESTERN AND EASTERN NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This article explores the role of memory in the formation of identity through a comparative analysis of Western and Eastern literary and philosophical traditions. Drawing on narrative theory, cultural philosophy, and memory studies, it argues that Western narratives predominantly conceptualize memory as an individual, episodic, and testimonial archive through which personal identity is constructed, interpreted, and ethically evaluated. In contrast, many Eastern traditions frame memory as relational, cyclical, and embedded within lineage, ritual, and collective temporal frameworks, prioritizing social continuity over introspective self-narration.

Through close analysis of narrative form, thematic structures, and cultural contexts, the study identifies both significant divergences and productive points of convergence, particularly in representations of trauma, mourning, and historical rupture. The article further examines the ethical and political dimensions of remembering and forgetting, addressing issues of narrative authority, power, and the marginalization of certain memories within dominant cultural discourses.

By adopting a cross-cultural comparative approach, the article demonstrates that memory functions simultaneously as a bridge between cultures and a site of contestation in the construction of identity. Ultimately, it shows how diverse literary traditions negotiate continuity, belonging, and meaning through distinct yet interconnected practices of remembering.

Keywords

memory studies, identity, identity formation, comparative literature, western literature, eastern literature, cultural memory, collective memory, narrative identity, testimony and trauma, ritual and lineage, cross-cultural perspectives

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Memory does more than record past events; it helps form who we are. Across cultures, authors, philosophers, and storytellers use memory to explore identity, agency, and belonging. In Western narratives, memory often appears as a stream of discrete moments—an archive, testimony, or problem to be solved. In many Eastern narratives, memory is frequently portrayed as relational and cyclical, embedded within family, tradition, and the ongoing flow of time. This article traces how memory shapes identity in representative Western and Eastern literary and philosophical traditions, highlighting points of convergence and difference and considering what cross-cultural reading of memory can teach us about the human condition.

Memory and the Western Self: Individuality, Narrative, and Testimony

Western approaches to memory often reflect philosophical and cultural commitments to individual subjectivity. From Augustine's Confessions to modern psychological and literary texts, memory serves as the archive that renders the self continuous across time. Augustine famously examines the inner life, asking how recollection links a present mind to a past act and how memory can be a sanctuary of identity. That introspective model influenced Western literature's focus on interiority: novels frequently present characters who narrate or reconstruct their pasts to define themselves.

In Western literary fiction, the act of remembering often takes the form of narrative reconstruction. The first-person memoir and the novel of consciousness—think of Proust's Remembrance of Things Past—make remembering an ethical and epistemic endeavor: the narrator must select, interpret, and often justify remembered events. Memory here is contested knowledge; it can be unreliable, selective, and imaginative. This uncertainty becomes a central theme: if memory is malleable, what becomes of a secure, unitary self? Modernist and postmodernist Western narratives exploit this doubt, using fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness, and metafiction to depict selves constituted less by stable facts than by interpretive acts of memory.

Western memory narratives also emphasize testimony and accountability. Historical novels, survivor memoirs, and legal testimony position memory as evidence. Remembering carries civic weight: to remember correctly can be an act of justice for victims, while forgetting may become complicity. This stance reflects a culture that links memory to rights, responsibilities, and the ethics of truth-telling. The Western literary canon thus presents memory as both personal heritage and public artifact, a resource for constructing a morally legible biography.

Psychology and neuroscience in the West further shape narrative practice. Research emphasizing episodic memory—specific events tied to time and place—

fits well with stories that anchor identity in unique life episodes. The emergent self is an author of its life story, piecing together episodes into a coherent plot. When narratives fail to cohere (through trauma, repression, or degenerative illness), literature responds by exploring fragmented selves and the struggles to reconstitute continuity.

Memory and the Eastern Self: Embeddedness, Lineage, and Collective Time

By contrast, many Eastern traditions emphasize relationality and continuity through social, familial, and cosmological ties. In such frameworks, the self is rarely conceived as an isolated author of memory; instead, it is a node within networks of ancestors, community rites, and collective narratives. Memory often functions as a living inheritance: stories, rituals, and repeated practices carry the past into the present, making identity a matter of participation rather than subjective reconstruction.

Classical Chinese and Indian literatures illustrate this tendency. In Chinese thought—rooted in Confucian concerns—filial piety and ancestral remembrance build moral character. Remembering the deeds and teachings of forebears is not private excavation but public duty. Identity is understood as shaped by roles and obligations sustained across generations. Memory, then, is apparatus for social continuity: it preserves norms and relations that give the individual ethical bearings.

In many South and East Asian narrative traditions, the past interpenetrates the present through cyclical conceptions of time. Rebirth, karmic echoes, or repeating familial patterns suggest that memory is not only cognitive recall but also a register of moral continuity. Oral epics, family sagas, and ritualized narratives sustain collective memory and anchor identity in lineage. Authors writing in such contexts may foreground communal memory—how stories transmitted through kin or village life inform choices, temper desires, and regulate behavior.

Eastern storytelling techniques often reflect these priorities. Instead of confessional interiority, narratives may unfold through multiple voices, long genealogies, or embedded tales that place individual lives within broader social fabrics. Memory appears as communal repertoire—proverbs, songs, and ceremonial acts that encode the past into present action. To remember correctly is to act in accordance with inherited wisdom; to forget is to risk social disorder or moral decline.

Points of Intersection: Trauma, Mourning, and Reconstruction

Despite differences, Western and Eastern narratives meet around certain human experiences where memory's power is unmistakable. Trauma, for instance, disrupts continuity everywhere and compels storytelling practices that attempt

repair. Survivors across cultures use narrative to reclaim agency, to bear witness, and to seek recognition. Literature and film from diverse traditions show how memory can be both a source of pain and a resource for resilience.

Mourning is another shared space. Both Western elegy and Eastern memorial rituals reveal memory's role in maintaining bonds with the dead. The divergence lies in emphasis: Western mourning may center on personal loss and the attempt to maintain inner continuity with the departed, while Eastern practices often reassert communal ties—performing memory as a duty that reassures the living of their place in an ongoing lineage.

Cross-cultural engagement also reveals convergences in methods of memory reconstruction. Techniques like testimony, archival excavation, and the use of objects (photographs, heirlooms) appear globally as means of reconnecting self with past. Modern writers in both traditions increasingly experiment with hybrid forms: novels that mix testimonial fragments, documentary materials, and mythic elements to account for complex historical traumas such as war, displacement, or colonialism. These hybrid texts often foreground interplay between individual recall and collective archives, suggesting that memory's work is multiply situated.

Narrative Form and Memory: Style as Memory Practice

The forms writers choose to represent memory matter. Fragmentary structures, nonlinear timelines, and repeated motifs are not mere stylistic flourishes; they model how memory functions. In Western experimental fiction, fragmentation mirrors how trauma interrupts linear recollection. In Eastern forms, circular or recursive storytelling can embody ritual repetition and reinforce communal continuity. Repetitions—whether a recurring phrase, motif, or ritual description—act like mnemonic devices, guiding readers toward remembering through pattern.

Language itself carries memory. Dialect, idiom, and culturally specific references evoke collective pasts, enabling texts to perform memory by embedding cultural particulars. Translation complicates this process, sometimes erasing local resonances while making global circulation possible. Translators thus become memory mediators, deciding which cultural cues to preserve and which to adapt. Cross-cultural literary exchange often leads to novel memory practices: diasporic writers, for example, weave together both Western individualist and Eastern familial memory logics to articulate hybrid identities.

Critical Questions: Power, Forgetting, and Ethics

Two critical questions emerge when comparing traditions: whose memories are preserved, and who has the authority to forget? Memory is an arena of power: political regimes, dominant cultures, and institutional archives can privilege certain

narratives while marginalizing others. In the West, debates over public monuments and collective memory show how remember/forget choices are politicized. In Eastern contexts, state-prescribed histories and the privileging of lineage can similarly exclude subaltern voices. Literary nonfiction often intervenes here, amplifying marginalized memories—women's narratives, indigenous testimonies, migrant voices—challenging official amnesia.

Ethics of representation also matter. When authors reconstruct experiences they did not personally live, they must navigate fidelity, empathy, and the risk of appropriation. Both traditions have contested norms about who may speak for whom and how to balance aesthetic form with truth claims. Memoirists and articleists thus face the task of being truthful to memory's fragmentary nature while acknowledging the social contexts that shape recollection.

Toward a Comparative Practice: Reading Memory Across Borders

Studying memory cross-culturally enriches how we understand identity. It interrupts the assumption that identity is always best expressed as a coherent, individual narrative and invites attention to relational, ritualized, and collective modes of remembering. Sensitive comparative reading requires attentiveness to local shapes of memory (e.g., filial genealogy, testimonial archive), an awareness of historical power dynamics that mediate remembrance, and recognition that literary form both expresses and shapes memory.

For students, practicing comparative reading means close attention to voice, structure, and cultural cues. Ask: Who tells the story and why? What social practices sustain or silence memory? How does narrative form mimic the process of recalling? How do memory practices respond to historical rupture—colonialism, war, displacement—and what solutions do they offer for reconstituting identity?

Conclusion: Memory as Bridge and Site of Contestation

Memory is a principal means by which humans make sense of continuity and change. Western narratives tend to stress the individual's inner archive and the ethics of testimony; Eastern narratives often foreground relational memory, lineage, and ritual continuity. Yet both traditions confront overlapping dilemmas—trauma, forgetting, power—and both invent narrative strategies to respond.

Understanding memory across cultures does not reduce difference to sameness; rather, it reveals a shared human urgency: the need to place one's life in meaningful relation to past and future. Comparative study of memory encourages humility—an openness to diverse techniques of remembering—and responsibility: to listen for marginalized voices and to recognize the moral work memory performs in personal lives and public histories. Through literature and nonfiction,

memory becomes not only a story about who we were but a practice through which we become who we hope to be.

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