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## MEDIUM OF ACTUALIZING THE REALITY: *THE MEMORY POLICE*

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### Abstract

Since the beginning of mankind, people are born into big stories, which are believed to be grand narratives. These master narratives are legitimated by the authoritarian powers and confine people in a *so-called reality* which only support the dominant group's maintenance. While grand narratives are widely accepted and therefore become *the reality*, others are suppressed and silenced. Through Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*, this paper aims at analyzing the impact of the dominant narratives on the lives of the inhabitants of a dystopian society whose memories are erased systematically. Through enforced forgetfulness, the island inhabitants are molded in accordance with the demands of the authoritarian force. In order to cope with the new widely accepted reality and survive, the island inhabitants create different coping mechanisms and, therefore, delay their traumas. Though the minority of the society is by chance lucky enough to preserve their memories, their alternative narratives cannot find an audience since they do not align with the dominant narrative which is constructed, supported and normalized by the ones holding the power.

**Key Words:** Grand narratives, Memory, Trauma, Collective identity, Constructed reality

## GERÇEKLIĞİ HAYATA GEÇİRMEK İÇİN BİR ARAÇ: *HAFIZA POLİSİ*

### Öz

Tarihinin başlangıcından itibaren, insanlar büyük anlatı diye inandıkları hikayelerin içine doğmuşlardır. Bu büyük hikayeler otoriteyi ellerinde bulduran güçler tarafından meşrulaştırılmış ve insanları sadece toplumda baskın olan grubun varlığını korumasını destekleyen sözde gerçeklik içerisine hapsedmiştir. Bu büyük hikayeler yaygın bir şekilde kabul edilerek, gerçek diye kabul edilirken, diğer hikayeler baskılanmış ve susturulmuştur. Bu araştırma, Yoko Ogawa'nın *Hafıza Polisi* adlı romanındaki büyük anlatının distopik bir gelecekte geçen ve hafızaları sistematik bir şekilde silinen toplum bireylerinin üzerindeki etkisini analiz etmektedir. Hafıza Polisinin zorla dayattığı hafıza silme tekniği ile, ada sakinleri gücü elinde tutan otoritenin istekleri doğrultusunda şekillenmiştir. Ortaya çıkan ve kabul gören bu yeni gerçeklikle başa çıkmak ve hayatlarını idam ettirmek için toplumdaki bireyler hızlı bir şekilde farklı uyum sağlama mekanizmaları geliştirmiş ve böylelikle travmalarını erteleme yoluna gitmiştir. Toplumun azınlık bir kesimi ise hafızalarını korumaya ve unutmamayı şans eseri başarabilir olsa bile, onların inandığı gerçeklik baskın olan ve genel kabul gören gerçeklik ile uyuşmadığından dolayı sessiz kalmaya mahkûm olur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Büyük anlatı, Hafıza, Tramva, Kolektif kimlik, İnşa edilmiş gerçeklik

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## Introduction

In *The Memory Police*, which was written in 1994 and translated into English in 2019, Yoko Ogawa presents a dystopian future where people's memories are strictly under the control of the Memory Police. The Memory Police which functions as the ultimate authority molds a new society by deciding what to disappear from people's memories and physical world. Thus, day by day, such kind of sole authority erodes the sense of identity, shared collective history and all the fundamentals of a societal order that glues each individual to one another. It creates its own "reality" by manipulating the memories of individuals and normalizing such a world. Hence, this paper aims at analyzing the power of the grand narrative shaped by the ones holding the power in society via collective memory in Yoko Ogawa's novel *The Memory Police*.

### 1. POWER OF METANARRATIVE

The term metanarrative, which was introduced by Jean-Francois Lyotard, refers to a grand, dominant, overarching story that brings people together with its binding power. Metanarratives have the power to exert a comprehensive influence on the individuals within the society due to the fact that the members of the society are born into and are brought up with such powerful stories. They contribute greatly to the formation and maintenance of our collective identity. According to Lyotard, "the people actualize the narratives [. . .] not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into 'play' in their institutions—thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of the narrator" (Lyotard, 1979: 23). As a result, individuals legitimate, normalize and internalise these powerful narratives, accept them to be "real" and pass them down to the next generation.

However, not every narrative is accepted to be a grand narrative that shapes and molds the society in every aspect. Metanarratives "act to universalize and cast dialogues in binary, contrasting categories that support the maintenance of dominant groups" (Stanley, 2007: 14). That is to say, if an alternative narrative does not serve the interests of the dominant group, it is silenced and cancelled. Within this scope, Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* exemplifies the ultimate power of the grand narrative by showing how the previously accepted narratives can be erased through the systematic collective forgetting that is imposed by the ones holding the power. With the disappearance of the objects which remind people of their memories, individuals lose touch with their past which is full of societal and cultural norms. Since they cannot pass these stories to the other generations, such narratives are doomed to be forgotten. Thus, the new societal order is dictated by the dominant group and the surveillance is conducted by the Memory Police. Though the disappearances appear to be mere random objects at first, they multiply in time and eventually lead to a new societal order where individuals even forget their own existence. All the memories these individuals used to have cease to exist together with their physical beings. Such a radical and totalitarian attempt actualized by the memory police paves the way for a new order where the ones holding the power create a society with the rules, stories, institutions and customs that serve and maintain their ideology. By systematically erasing the previously dominant narratives, Yoko Ogawa highlights the significance of *power* and *normalization* of the rules imposed by such absolute power in the process of constructing new metanarratives that will control and shape the collective memory.

## 2. DISAPPEARANCES AND THE CHAIN REACTIONS THEY CREATE

Ogawa's focus on the relation between humans and things illustrates how the presence and absence of objects directly affect people's understanding of the world around them. On the unnamed island, the unnamed characters occasionally start their day by witnessing the loss of certain objects and the loss of their memories in relation to these objects. The objects on the island do not only function as physical entities. They are also representatives of another reality through memories. Therefore, it is the memory police's main goal to erode the deep personal connection and cultural heritage people have with these tangible items and eventually challenge and change the grand narrative by focusing on what is forgotten and remembered. The first thing the narrator documents disappeared is birds. Birds are particularly important to the narrator as the narrator's father was an ornithologist. Thus, birds are the reminder of her belated father and her childhood memories with him. Once they are gone, her connection to her father disappears as well. The narrator describes this experience as follows:

The disappearance of the birds, as with so many other things, happened suddenly one morning. . . I spotted a small brown creature flying high up in the sky... I had just begun to wonder whether it was one of the creatures I had seen with my father I realized that everything I knew about them had disappeared from inside me: my memories of them, my feelings about them, the very meaning of the word 'bird'- everything. (Ogawa, 2019: 10)

The disappearance of birds has left a void in the narrator in more ways than one. The word itself, the associations it resonates and the memories it brings back are all gone. Under the control of such an authoritarian regime, residents also have to show that they are getting rid of the items publicly. As a result, the narrator is forced to relive the trauma of her father's death when the Memory Police intrudes her house to destroy and remove all the tangible proof related to birds, which are his father's life-long work and collection of books. Hence, she experiences her father's loss all over again without the chance of remembering their memories together ever.

Every disappearance affects society in an irreversible way. With every new disappearance, people on the island are trapped in a new narrative and they eventually normalize and accept this new reality. Their adaptation to the new order becomes natural since the inhabitants on the island forget the fact that those items once existed. The complete disappearance of an object goes beyond the deprivation of a thing. With its loss, every memory it represents vanishes, the link between the lost item and other things lose their meaning while creating a phantom pain in individuals who are semiconscious of the emptiness those losses create in their hearts. For instance, with the disappearance of books, people not only lost the concrete, perceptible, physical item but also the memory of the time they read those books, the universes those books presented and most importantly their perception of those alternative universes/stories. "Once a critical mass of information is lost, the linkages between them disappear, making it easier to believe that the world we live in now is how things have always been and there is no need and no possible way—to chart another path" (Farell, 2022: 71). The official narrative presented by the embodiment of the sole authority which is the Memory Police is automatically accepted as people's collective memory is systematically destroyed. Thus, by controlling people's memories, the authoritarian regime creates robot-like beings that are "devoid of self-consciousness and the sense of individuality [and are] reduced to a tabula rasa, and then re-created from scratch by rules of centralizing power" (Doina, 2014: 16).

The disappearance of every item creates a chain reaction which in return results in the demolition of collective memory and social identity, cognitive and emotional dissonance, normalization and acceptance of loss, and normalization of authoritarian control over memory. The loss of the calendar illustrates all these reactions. With its absence, the concept of seasons vanishes, forcing people to continue their lives in an eternal winter, which eventually leads to the erosion of significant dates, events or historical milestones. Such loss of cultural and historical consciousness undermines people's ability to connect to their past and destroys "the intergenerational bridge that provides not only social identity but also its continuity" (Farell, 2022: 66). The traditions, celebrations or rituals that people used to celebrate no longer exist. When the Memory Police forces people to forget the calendar and everything people associate it with, the island inhabitants are left in a state of ambiguity and aimlessness. The time does not move and seasons do not change, causing crops to be scarce. The scarcity of crops, heavy snow, being imprisoned at homes due to harsh weather and aimlessness brought by the inability to measure the passage of time have a huge impact on people's physiology and psychology. Though people forget the existence of the calendar, simultaneously they feel something is not right, yet they cannot name the problem. It is as if they are in a constant confusion state which they are unaware of and try to adapt to the new normality.

### 3. ADAPTABILITY AS A SURVIVAL MECHANISM

Interestingly, Ogawa also sheds light on the fast pace of adaptation of mankind to a new narrative that is imposed by the authorities. When the Memory Police announces the disappearance of things, people on the island adjust to the new changes very quickly since they do not have access to another reality that would challenge their current circumstance. Due to the fact that they are conditioned to the new reality imposed on them, they are desensitized to loss and, therefore, they do not resist. For instance, when books disappeared, certain lines of work, such as being a librarian and writer, disappeared with them, as well. The narrator, who was once a writer, started working in a spice company as a secretary. Though on the surface it appears to be the loss of a job, underneath, the Memory Police destroys the narrator's and many others' ability to contribute to collective memory. By silencing alternative fictional worlds, the cultural and historical bond between generations is destroyed. The authoritarian control takes away the power of storytelling, which fosters the sense of community and belonging. Since the Memory Police systematically tries to destroy every piece of evidence that might threaten the new order they are trying to build, the act of writing functions as an immediate threat that reinforces human connection.

The act of writing is a complex one that uses multiple areas of the brain to process and share information. Writing can be secretly coded, writing can be duplicated, writing preserves history. All three of these aspects of writing is what makes it dangerous for a dystopian society. People who write and people who read are connected to one another through the act of writing. The fact that writing can happen surreptitiously makes it a threat to a dystopian society. (Farell, 2022: 64). Hence, the authorities see the act of keeping a record of the present and the past as an immediate threat. They are afraid of the power of language due to its capacity to actualize the past, present and future by serving as a medium:

Because of its capacity to transcend the 'here and now,' language bridges different zones within the reality of everyday life and integrates them into a meaningful whole.[...] Language is capable of 'making present' a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally, and socially absent from 'here and now'. [...] Through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment. (Freedman and Combs, 1996: 28).

By ending the existence of books physically and mentally, the Memory Police prevents the power of words from functioning as a reality maker. Even before the disappearance of books, the narrator says: “Words seem to retreat further and further away with each disappearance” because objects hiding stories within themselves that are ready to be told are erased (Ogawa, 2019: 82). Similarly, by writing about a character who loses her voice in the narrator’s fictional story, the novel reinforces the idea that every form of alternative discourse, either written or oral, is feared and therefore silenced. Thus, the authority holding the power tends to control and maintain the obedience of the public to the new narratives tailored for them via the Memory Police and their punishments.

Such speed for adaptability is not limited to the absence of things but also it applies to the loss of body parts. As the island inhabitants wake up to a morning when their left legs suddenly disappeared, after a brief moment of surprise, they immediately accept it and adapt to their lifestyles accordingly. Sadly, they have to do this because the Memory Police enforces mind control and they are left with no choice but normalize the traumatic losses that they are unconscious of. When the narrator tells the story of the disappearance of her leg, she feels alienated to her own body and even calls her leg *the thing*. She says: “I had trouble getting down the stairs without falling. Holding on to the railing, I had to drag the thing—my disappeared leg—one step at a time” (Ogawa, 2019: 253). Apart from estrangement, people do not show any signs of panic, protest, or pain. A conversation held among neighbours after the disappearance of their left legs exemplifies the state of mind people are in:

‘A lot of unexpected things have disappeared, but never anything as shocking as this,’ said the woman who lived across the street. ‘What’s going to happen to us?’

‘Nothing at all. That’s the point. It’s just one more cavity that has opened up on the island. How is it any different from others?’ said the old man in the house next to mine who worked at city hall.

‘But something isn’t right about this. My body feels as though it’s gone to pieces and won’t go back together again.’ This time it was the hat-maker, who was digging in the snow with the tip of his umbrella.

‘You’ll get used to it. It may be a bit tricky at first, but that’s been true for other disappearances as well. It takes time to get accustomed, but there’s nothing to be afraid of.’ (Ogawa, 2019: 254).

Thus, as people are under the spell of numbing pain, these traumatic losses do not lead to outbursts of rage but rather result in acceptance and submission. Since it is a unique kind of a disappearance for the island inhabitants, they do not know how to get rid of their legs as there has always been a ritual of burning or tossing the things that stopped existing suddenly, yet systematically. After the initial shock of the loss of their left leg, the neighbours gather outside looking at each other void of any kind of emotion and waiting for someone to tell them what to do with this body part they no longer have any attachment to. The conversation held among the neighbours illustrate how normal such a traumatic loss is considered and how ready people are to do anything they are told by the authorities even about things regarding their bodies. After they see the Memory Police in the same condition as they are, yet walking as if their left legs have not disappeared, people are relieved and say:

‘I suppose there’s no need for us to get rid of our legs, then.’

‘You’re right. No need to get out the saw yet...’

‘Burning, burying, washing away, abandoning— I guess for some things, there’s just no appropriate way.’

‘Though I imagine they’ll come up with one soon enough.’

‘Maybe they’ll just fall off by themselves, like leaves from a tree.’

‘I’m sure you’re right.’

‘So there’s nothing to worry about.’ (Ogawa, 2019: 255)

The acceptance and indifference towards life and the traumatic changes it brings is so inured and normalized that the disappearance of a body part is strikingly likened to a fall off a leave from a tree. Tragically, as is the case with the tangible things, not only the physical body part disappears but also the memories associated with this limb vanishes into thin air as well. On the night of the disappearance, the fugitive named R, who the narrator hides in her house because he is one of the few still having access to his memories and therefore is chased after by the Memory Police, massages the narrator’s disappeared leg in the hope of reviving some feelings in her leg and making her believe that her leg has actually not disappeared. Yet all his attempts prove to be futile since the narrator no matter how hard she tries, does not feel anything. As the narrator talks with R, she vaguely recalls a memory of her mother rubbing her when she had a fever as a child. Upon hearing this, R becomes happy and claims that if she has a memory of such, her leg cannot have disappeared. The narrator states: “In fact, the feelings I remembered from my mother’s hand and those from R’s now were completely different. No warmth, no sensation at all came to my leg from his touch. Just the uncomfortable feeling of one thing grating against another” (Ogawa, 2019: 256). Thus, the loss of a limb signifies more than a physical loss. It also reflects eradication of the perception and experience of individuals whose physical autonomy and individuality are under attack.

#### 4. TRAUMA AND DIFFERENT COPING MECHANISMS

No matter how ordinary the normality of disappearances are considered as the Memory Police constitutes a new social order in which they serve as the ultimate decision makers that repress the society through disappearances, the belated trauma signs, though different in tones and styles, are detected throughout the story. As most people succumb to these sudden disappearances, they show a variety of reactions, either passive or active. For instance, the narrator goes through different stages of the trauma effects throughout her life. A sense of despair, emptiness, passiveness, anxiety and emotional meltdown, which are the indications of a hidden trauma, take hold of her being. With the loss of her mother, who was taken away by the Memory Police, the narrator grapples with unanswered questions about her mother’s fate and these questions haunt her for the rest of her life. Even years after her mother’s death, the narrator asks if R thought that her mother was killed. Both the narrator and R know the answer but the narrator cannot stop herself from asking the question aloud though she knows it is pointless. Such an unconscious reaction reveals the true nature of her grief and constant search for trying to make sense of her mother’s decease. The deep emotional turmoil she undergoes becomes very apparent as she witnesses her mother being taken away by the Memory Police before her eyes and their receiving her death certificate following that. The narrator recalls even the pale purple colour of the envelope, asking her mother to be summoned to the compound, and the white gloves of the driver taking her from home, both of

which signal how deep she relives that moment in her dreams and how precise every little detail is to her. She describes her state of mind on receiving the letter stating her mother's death as follows: "My father read aloud from the letter the Memory Police had sent, but I understood nothing, as though I were hearing some magic formula uttered in a foreign tongue. I watched, transfixed, as my father's tears made little stains on the lavender paper" (Ogawa, 2019: 38). Being petrified, she cannot comprehend the impact of the loss she is experiencing. As Cathy Caruth argues "trauma is 'not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past' but identified in 'the way it is precisely not known in the first instance – [but] returns to haunt the survivor later on'" (Caruth, 1996: 4, 17). Thus, the loss of her mother *haunts* the narrator throughout her life as she feels incomplete, being kept in the dark and empty. The narrator constantly remembers her mother and she becomes an indispensable part of the narrator's life, experiences and relationships even after her death.

Being unable to go through her mourning process properly due to vague memory and constant disappearances results in the latency of her traumatic dissociation and therefore indirectly leads her to give different reactions to the concept of death at different stages in her life. When the Old Man, her friend and a father figure to her, dies, she narrates her feelings as follows:

I found it terribly difficult to come to terms with the old man's death. I had lost many people who were important to me in the past, but somehow my parting with them had been different from what I experienced now. I had of course been terribly sad when my mother and father and my nurse died. I missed them, and wished I could see them again...But this time I had the impression that something was different. In addition to the sadness, I was overcome by a mysterious and menacing anxiety, as though the old man's death had suddenly transformed the very ground under my feet into a soft, unreliable mass. (Ogawa, 2019: 248)

While the narrator experiences her mother's loss passively in acceptance, her reaction to the death of the Old Man is much different. In contrast to the numbness she feels upon her mother's death, she overtly goes through a series of emotions accompanied by coping mechanisms. In order to survive, she tires herself out with daily activities which would help her fall asleep easily and not think about the loss of the Old Man. Yet, her strategy is not successful since she would still "feel a kind of panic, and tears would begin to flow" as she tries to sleep (Ogawa, 2019: 249). She also tries to deal with the Old Man's decease by writing her manuscript. However, this challenges her deeply as it is her first attempt to continue writing her manuscript since the disappearance of novels. She hardly makes any progress, but R always encourages her saying: "The meaning isn't important. What matters is the story hidden deep in words. You're at the point now where you're trying to extract that story. Your soul is trying to bring back the things it lost in disappearances" (Ogawa, 2019: 251). The narrator is trying to find a way to reflect the memories she encountered throughout her life. The death of the Old Man triggers her need to externalize and express her emotions and thoughts. In a sense, she abreacts via her manuscript and this helps her handle her trauma.

As the Memory Police systematically tries to "cut off communication between the subject's radical imagination and its 'thought'" by deleting things from memory both physically and cognitively, such an authoritarian system prevents people from going through their trauma in the first place (Foong and Chandran, 2020: 101). Some inhabitants on the island resist the system passively by holding onto disappeared objects, hiding in safe houses and preserving their memories or cleverly hiding disappeared objects in sculptures and eventually transmitting them to the next

generations, like the narrator's mother. However, most of the population tragically do not have access to their memories and therefore cannot fully comprehend the traumatic events by which they should be affected since they cannot associate any person or event with that trauma. Thus, everything loses its meaning because "silence and forgetting are as much a strategic and self-conscious gesture on the part of the subjugated as they are the product of the subjugating culture's demands and requirements" (Mandel, 2006: 172).

## CONCLUSION

All in all, once the majority of the people accept the grand narrative imposed by the authorities in charge, this narrative becomes *the reality*. No matter how many people try to reclaim their own narratives, these alternative narratives do not get accepted. This is not only because they are not officially declared so, but also because they cannot find others to support such alternative narratives since no narrative other than the one imposed by the oppressive authoritarian regime makes sense as a result of the eradication of collective memory. Yoko Ogawa, depicts a dystopian future where the grand narrative is enforced on the individuals via eradication of memory by the omnipotent Memory Police. Ogawa successfully portrays the power of shaping reality by the authorities and how it serves to make common people accept the prevailing narrative as *the Truth*.

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