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### **Being Home in the Shelter of Time: *Gospodinov's Time Shelter***


*Gospodinov'un Zaman Sığınağı Romanında Yuva Özlemi*

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**Abstract** In the context of contemporary culture, nostalgia is often linked to feelings of deep yearning for home. Human's pathological home desire and traumatic state of most individuals due to modern life result in nostalgic feelings that are often associated with the safety and coziness of home. In order to maintain such state of protection, people not only yearn for the physical state of their home but also long for the time they spent in that protected world. Their memories of the past are anchored in such space and time where they can have self-continuity, increase attachment security and boost self-esteem. Such individual memories of the past function as a shield that neutralizes the threats of the unknown present and therefore, serves as "time shelter". The same is also true for collective memory. People tend to prefer living in specific time periods in which they are secure and feel a sense of belonging. Though this kind of longing for a specific time period can be maintained via memories, Georgi Gospodinov, a Bulgarian writer, claims it can also be physically actualized through a strong, mainstream narrative. While focusing on both the biological and sociological reasons behind people's need and motives to forget and live in nostalgia, Georgi Gospodinov, the winner of the International Booker Prize 2023, also sheds light on how socially constructed realities, particularly "time", can become reality once accepted collectively in his novel, *Time Shelter*.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, memory, metanarrative, Georgi Gospodinov, social construction of reality

**Öz** Günümüz çağdaş kültüründe, nostalji çoğunlukla eve varabilme duygusu ile ilişkilendirilmiştir. İnsanın patolojik ev özlemi ve modern hayatın neden olduğu çoğu insanın travmatik durumu, genellikle evin güvenliği ve sıcaklığı ile ilişkilendirilen nostaljik duygulara neden olur. Bu güveni ve korumayı sağlayan nostaljik hissi sürdürebilmek için, insanlar sadece fiziksel olarak evlerini aramamakta, aynı zamanda evlerinde geçirdikleri o kıymetli zamanın peşinde koşmaktadır. Geçmiş ile ilgili anıları kendi öz sürekliliklerini sağladıkları, aidiyet hislerinin ve öz saygılarının arttığı zaman ve mekanlarda sabitlenmiştir. Bu tür bireysel anılar, bilinmeyen ve ait olunamayan zamanın tehlikelerini etkisiz hale getirerek, bir zaman kapsülü oluşturmaktadır. Aynı durum kolektif bellek için de geçerlidir. İnsanlar ait olduklarını ve güvende olduklarını hissettikleri zamanlarda yaşama isteği eğilimi gösterir. Bu tür belirli bir zamana geri dönme arzusu anılar ile mümkün olsa da, Bulgar yazar Georgi Gospodinov, bunun ana akım güçlü bir üstanlatı ile fiziksel olarak da gerçekleştirilebileceğini kurgusu aracılığı ile iddia etmektedir. Gerek toplumsal, gerekse bireysel anılar çeşitli olası anlatılar ile şekillendirilebilirken, bu anlatıların sadece bir tanesi toplum tarafından benimsenir ve gerçeklik olarak kabul görür. Uluslararası Booker Prize 2023 ödülünü alan Georgi Gospodinov, *Zaman Sığınağı* isimli kitabında insanların hem biyolojik hem de sosyolojik nedenlerden kaynaklanan unutmaya isteğine odaklanırken, ayrıca onların sosyal olarak inşa edilen gerçekliğe, özellikle zaman kavramına, nasıl kolektif bir şekilde inandıklarına ışık tutar.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** nostalji, bellek, üstanlatı, Georgi Gospodinov, gerçekliğin sosyal inşası

## Introduction

In *Time Shelter*, the winner of the International Booker Prize 2023, the Bulgarian author, Georgi Gospodinov, tells the story of Gaustine, who functions as a time-travelling alter ego reappearing in Gospodinov's narration. Throughout his fiction, Gospodinov focuses on the theme of memory and delves into the politicization of nostalgia. In an interview, he states: "Now space is reachable. You can be everywhere. But time is not. That's why we experience something that could be called chronostalgia— longing for the time, not the place" (Levitin 2023). That's why, Gospodinov's novel circulates around an Orwellian scenario in which European nations decide which past era to adopt for the future. By wittingly showing the preference of healthy individuals to go back in time, Gospodinov

offers a different perspective on collective and individual memory, nostalgia and social construction of reality. This paper aims at analyzing the need for nostalgia among individuals and nations and how the revival of past events can become present day reality through metanarrative in Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*.

### **Sensory Stimuli and Memory Retrieval**

Our perception of the world is deeply linked with our senses and the memories they are associated with. According to Marcel Proust, a French novelist whose ideas on memory not only influenced the literary world but also the field of psychology, sensory experiences trigger involuntary memories. The role of senses in recalling memories is so immense that they both evoke personal memories and lead to surfacing the sociocultural features of a certain era. Such memories, which are almost always linked to external cues, are retrieved "bottom-up" as the process first starts with the sensory input and then subsequently leads to the memory recall. For instance, smelling a scent of a perfume can function as "bottom-up" stimuli that incites one to recall a childhood memory. Gospodinov portrays a clinic where the memories of the characters suffering from dementia are activated via sensory stimuli. These memories are recalled unexpectedly and effortlessly, without requiring any cognitive effort.

The protagonist G.G, who is working with Gaustine on the project of building a clinic for Alzheimer's patients, examines and collects the details that mark the specific time periods. G.G. fills the storeys of the clinic, all of which represents a different era, decade or year with certain kinds of decorations and carefully places every entity including the scent that is associated with that exact time period. Upon being exposed to sensory stimuli, the patients in the apartments that belong to specific eras recall their long-forgotten memories and revisit the experiences that are full of sentimental value. Such transportation to the moments, which are often trivial and mundane, is unintentional as it is a result of connections the brain makes via senses. In a conversation with the narrator, named G.G who is ironically very similar to Gospodinov himself, Gaustine states the significance of every detail that will trigger the patients' senses and sweep their feet off from the present time as they prepare for the 60's set that they will create in their clinic:

What the hell did they drink during the '60s, anyway? I cut in.

Everything. Gaustine took the hint, grabbed a bottle of Four Roses bourbon out of the minibar, and filled two heavy crystal glasses. Look here, with these couches, tables, and the bourbon(cheers!), with these lamps and light fixtures, with the music and all the pop art of '60s—all this we can handle fine on our own. But as you yourself well know, the past is more than a set. We're going to need stories, lots of stories... We'll need everyday life, tons of everyday life, smells, silences, people's faces; in short, all the things that crack the memory open, mixing memory and desire, as our man would say. You have experience with time capsules that they used to bury, right? Well, that's the sort of thing I mean. Travel around, gather up scents and stories. (Gospodinov 2022: 46)

Gaustine is well aware of the fact that placing the objects that are associated with the 60's will not be sufficient for the patients since the past cannot only be reduced to the decor and style of a certain era. In order to make the past credible and serve it as an alternative reality, they need to enrich the decor with stories, scents, everyday life and offer it as if it is organic. The clinic can restore the patients' sense of belonging only by providing all these details in a compact way.

By employing every detail of a certain era carefully, these floors in the clinic function as a gate to the past where the concept of linear time does not function anymore:

In the segments of time filled with an event that spurs on the senses of scent or taste, memory activates itself, and the evoked event slowly actualizes itself in such a way that

brings us to think of it as happening in the present, before our eyes. These are moments of the exclusion of consciousness from the flow of historical time, and of a surrender to the instance of timelessness, in which the layers of the past and the present intertwine" (Srbínovska 2019: 108).

No matter what time period patients are in, the experience these patients go through in the clinic gives each patient the sense of belonging to a time where they feel "present".

Gospodinov presents the significant role of sensory stimuli in memory retrieval not only through the perspective of clinic patients but also through other characters who do not need to visit the clinics. For instance, G.G. recalls a memory as he goes to meet Gaustine in the clinic:

I was walking toward Heliosstrasse. The April sun shone softly, yet without warmth. Here and there a few trees had begun blooming. A vague scent of soil and barns seeped in even here, in the city. That's how it smelled in the village, when my grandfather was shoveling manure out of the barn onto the garden in front of the house. That scent is gone now. Everyone uses synthetic fertilizers, so the soil smells like penicillin. Even now the scent of real manure takes me back...there, forty years ago and two thousand kilometers to the east. (Gospodinov 2022: 134)

The retrieval of memories is heavily cue-dependent and ephemeral. It does not require any motivation, focus or attention to remember the past scene. As G.G. walks, he sees the trees and feels the sun's warmth. Though these stimuli do not trigger any memory retrieval, the moment he smells a scent of soil, he is directly taken back to his childhood. The power of senses can bring memories and feelings attached to them to the surface in unexpected moments, especially the memories that are recognized through odour. "The lateral olfactory stria (which connects the olfactory bulb to other brain areas) has a direct anatomical connection with the amygdala-hippocampus complex, the 'neural substrate of emotional memory' (Herz and Schooler 2002: 22). That is to say, the olfactory system directly connects to neural regions linked with emotions and memory. Thus, such memories are recognized involuntarily due to strong neurological link.

Since Proust's description of recalling his childhood vividly after smelling and tasting a tea-soaked cake, many researches have proven a strong link between eating behaviour and memory. Gospodinov presents a similar recall of a childhood memoir of Hilde, an expat in Germany, after eating a factory-made bread bought from Bulgaria. Hilde, whose mother was Bulgarian and father was German, had to flee Bulgaria during the start of World War II. Though her mother, brother and Hilde managed to cross the border by train under constant bombardment, her father who was supposed to take another train a week later ended up being shot. Bearing this traumatic memory throughout her life, Hilde, who is seventy years old now, recalls some memories of her past life thanks to a slice of a factory-made bread. Before the arrival of the narrator and his wife for a visit, Hilde asks specifically for ordinary factory-made bread in Bulgaria which surprises the narrator since nobody prefers it anymore. The narrator describes how nostalgic Hilde becomes upon touching the bread as follows: "Hilde carefully took the bread, she was evidently deeply moved, and went out into the hallway so I couldn't see her. She returned a short while later and said that she remembered the taste of that bread from childhood. She cut three slices, sprinkled them with a little salt...I've never seen anyone savor more a slice of simple factory-made bread with salt" (Gospodinov 2022: 80). The factory-made bread loses its significance as food but rather symbolizes the time Hilde used to have with her family before fleeing from Bulgaria. Hilde's remembering her memories shows how significant senses are in retrieving memories. The tastes of childhood tie individuals to the past: "Through cooking and eating, we navigate and negotiate the family and social relations that shape our biographical selves. Thus, food memories are not solely concerned with

tastes and aromas but with people—those with whom we shared dinner, those who cared enough for us to cook us a meal—and with hospitality, trust, reciprocity, and emotional intimacy” (Strand: 467). All these emotions triggered by a piece of a factory-made bread make Hilde feel “home” for a brief second. It comforts her yearning for her long gone family and hometown. In other words, it freezes time and provides her with a temporary sanctuary.

### Need for Nostalgia

Though the dementia these patients experience stem from neurological conditions, the characters in Gospodinov’s *Time Shelter* willingly choose to relive in the time eras they choose via referendum. Through his novel, Gospodinov wittingly shows the tendency of almost all citizens of European countries to forgetfulness. It is as if the majority of the population wants to experience Alzheimer’s collectively. The narrator puts forward the need and longing for nostalgia in people’s lives through his narrative and sheds a light on the risk of loss of hope and belonging in the present time due to the uncertainties of the modern world. In a conversation between the narrator and Gaustine about setting up a clinic for patients with failing memories, Gaustine claims:

This sudden groundswell of people who have lost their memories today is no coincidence...They are here to tell us something. And believe me, one day, very soon, the majority of people will start returning to the past of their own accord, they will start ‘losing’ their memories willingly. The time is coming when more and more people will want to hide in the cave of the past, to turn back. And not for happy reasons, by the way. We need to be ready with the shelter of the past. Call it the time shelter, if you will. (Gospodinov 2022: 44)

With the fast pace of today’s hectic life and digitalization, people are constantly subject to the overwhelming outpouring of everyday potential threats and risks. Being engulfed in these threats, they end up being in search of safe zones where they know the narrative and time flies slowly. Gaustine’s comment “and not for happy reasons, by the way” implies the fear of the future. With nothing to hope for, the depressed Europe finds comfort in choosing to live in an era. Since history of the past decades is already written and determined, it is safe to relive in such eras where the historical, political, economic and international outcomes are known by everyone. Thus, one can be nostalgic about earlier times that s/he has never lived through. In addition, subconsciously bearing the Judeo-Christian tradition in mind, which advocates the belief tenet that God created the world impeccable but everything has hit bottom since then due to human wrongdoing, can also be claimed to encourage nostalgia for the fictitious past that people have never experienced first-hand.

The narrator also casts light on the majority of people’s need to live in certain years regardless of having connection to any patient since they also did not feel at home in the present time by likening such need to Homer’s *Odyssey* where the theme of returning home strongly prevails. “The term ‘nostalgia’ derives from the Greek words *nostos*, meaning return to one’s native land, and *algos*, meaning pain or suffering: literally, suffering caused by longing to return home” (Hepper and Ritchie, 2011: 102). Hence, no matter what opportunities the present time offers to the individual, people thrive to go home where memories help them reinforce their sense of belonging and keep them company. Similarly, leaving Calypso and her promise of immortality behind, nostalgia becomes “the wind that inflates the sails of the *Odyssey*” (Gospodinov 2022: 112). Thus, Odysseus chooses to head to his home to see something “specific and trifling, which he called hearth-smoke because of the memory of the hearth-smoke rising from his ancestral home”. (Gospodinov 2022: 112)

By highlighting the similarity between the choice of the older and younger generation in terms of their preference of the decades that surfaces in the referendum, Gospodinov sheds light on the inheritance and transmission of memories:

In the end, in the referendum people chose the years when they were young. Today's seventy-year-olds were young in the 1970s and 1980s, in their twenties and thirties back then...Exit polls indicated that the majority of them [the young] voted, in even great numbers than the old, for the decades of the previous century, which they had no memories of. Some kind of new conservatism, new sentimentality, imposed nostalgia passed down from generation to generation. (Gospodinov 2022: 246)

Though not having a first-hand memory of the years they voted for, the young, who grew up with the stories and memories handed down to them, unconsciously make their preferences under the influence of the former generation. Thus, post-memory functions as “not an identity position, but a generational structure of transmission” (Hirsch 2012: 35).

Choosing to relive an already experienced decade while knowing its exact outcomes also surfaces the majority of the people's concern towards the future. Since risk looms our present-day society globally, people seek shelter and therefore, vote for the past rather than the future. Their hopelessness and anxiety towards the future lead to that decision. Thus, they find comfort in reliving the foreknown past as they fear what comes next. On one of Gaustine's notes, it says:

Even the past is now no longer and the future is now not yet—isn't that what St. Augustine says in Book XI of the Confessions? In that not yet there is still some consolation, it is not here, but it will come. But what will we do when the future is no longer? How different is a future that is not yet from that which is no longer? How different that absence is. The first is full of promise, the second is an apocalypse... (Gospodinov 2022: 266)

In other words, people are avoiding a future that is not yet as they believe the future is no longer. This fear of the future underlies their need for nostalgia.

Through the lens of the narrator, who suffers from Alzheimer's and, therefore, and rushes to finish his story before he forgets, Gospodinov focuses on the concept of nostalgia which stems from either biological reasons or individual choices in his novel. In both cases, people yearn for nostalgia since they feel estranged to the present. Such tendency to favor past over present not only “increases accessibility of positive self-attributes and decreases defensive responses to self-esteem threat” but also boosts “perceptions of social bonds, attachment security, interpersonal competence, and social support” (Hepper and Ritchie, 2011: 104). The story of Mr. N, a former agent from Socialist era suffering from memory loss, and the agent keeping tabs on him exemplify how “returning to the warm cave of the past” has a positive, soothing effect on them in terms of self-esteem, social bonds and attachment security (Gospodinov, 2022: 55). Having lost his memory, Mr. N has no choice but to ask for specifics of his past life to the agent, Mr. A, who was assigned to him to get as much information as he could during those years. Interestingly, both parties end up enjoying their meetings. While, on the one hand, Mr. N feels alive while listening about the past which functions as a ground that anchors him to the reality and, therefore, makes him feel secure and soothes his self-esteem, Mr. A, on the other hand, also feels liberated and redeemed after revealing the guilt he committed on his part. When Mr. A mentions the constant visits of Mr. N's lover on Thursdays, Mr. N thinks: “if there had been someone who loved him, this meant that he had existed after all, even if he doesn't remember much of himself. If there had been someone whom he had loved, this could also count as proof of his own presence” (Gospodinov 2022: 61). Learning about his past life and bringing together the puzzle pieces while trying to read into them boost Mr. N's sense of belonging and makes him feel more secure in a world where he feels lost. Since Mr. N remembers



almost nothing, Mr. A knows that he has immense power on shaping the narration of Mr. N's past life. Yet, Mr. A decides not to provide him with false information, he uses this opportunity as a way to redemption:

So why, then, does Mr. A come and tell these stories? Probably because a human being is not meant to keep a secret for so long. Secrets, it seems, are a late outgrowth in the course of evolution. No animal keeps secrets. Just man. If we had to describe a secret's structure, it would most likely be uneven, granular, some kind of lump. In Mr. A's case, this is not a metaphor. The lump is real, he had been trying to ignore it for several months, but after going to the doctor three weeks ago, everything is now clear. The fact that he is terminally ill frees him away from many things, but it also spurs him on toward others. Now the predator begs the prey to hear him out. Age is the great equalizer. They have become brothers-in-arms, they have crossed over to the losing side in a battle whose outcome is clear. Mr. A can finally tell everything. And Mr. N can finally hear the whole story about himself. (Gospodinov 2022: 66)

Hence, old age and running out of time bring together the necessity of being freed from lifetime sins.

Like Mr. N, people who suffer from Alzheimer's disease are separated from the present time and trapped in the past. It is as if the patients' memories navigate through the disorderly world while they lose touch of everyday reality. They are adrift and disassociated with space and time they are living in. In this regard, Shenk suggests "As the plaques and tangles proliferate and the brain begins to shrink, a psychic barrier arises between the victim and the outside world. The Alzheimer's sufferer becomes an island" (Shenk 2003: 145). By becoming an island, they isolate themselves within the surrounding where they feel comfortable and secure. The idea of "becoming an island" also forms the backbone of the story, Gospodinov narrates in *Time Shelter*. The narrator, G, describes the project of setting up an Alzheimer's clinic whose floors are chronologically divided in terms of eras as follows:

The point of the experiment was to create a protected past or 'protected time'. A time shelter. We wanted to open up a window into the time and let the sick live there, along with their loved ones. To give a chance for elderly couples, who had spent their whole lives together, to stay together. Daughters and sons, more of the daughters, who wanted to spend another month or even a year with their parent, before things completely went to seed. But they didn't just want to stand next to their beds in a sterile white room. The idea was for them to stay together in the same year, to meet up in the only possible 'place'—in the year that still glimmered in the parent's fading memory. (Gospodinov 2022: 100)

Thus, thanks to such an experiment, all the patients have a chance to enjoy living in the familiarity of the habitat which becomes their island. As islanders, it is impossible for them to acquire the existence of the outside world beyond the seas, which in this case represents the present time. Time shelter represents a protected time that is preserved with memories and therefore it functions as a token of protection from the threats and dangers of the unknown and unprecedented present time similar to a bomb shelter. In other words, the so-called islanders seek refuge from the bombardment of harsh realities of everyday life that they can no longer relate to their everyday lives.

### **Social Construction of Time**

By making the necessity of feeling home as a result of going back in time the novel's focus, Gospodinov reveals how people in Europe who do not suffer from dementia make a drastic choice. These people choose to live happily in a decade that is alligned with their own internal time and at the same time synchronized accordingly with their surrounding. Such an unexpected twist in the plot tears down the concept of reality by surfacing the

fact that reality can be socially constructed: "Reality enters into human practices by way of the categories and descriptions that are part of those practices. The world is not readily categorized by God or nature in ways we are all forced to accept. It is constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it" (Potter, 1996: 98). Apart from the concrete facts, such as mountains, rivers, or the Sun which exist autonomously, yet are still collectively termed by the members of the society, everything can be constructed socially. Time, history, institutions are all generated by the way people think and talk about them. Once they are cognized and classified collectively, that collectively agreed and, therefore, strong version becomes the reality. For instance, time is a concept that is created by people to make the everyday life more organized. In order to organize the social life and create an efficient social order, people needed to divide the day into hours or categorize a year into four seasons. In other words, neither time nor seasons are concrete and tangible facts. They are rather the outcomes of the collective agreement of the society.

In the novel, Gospodinov exemplifies how people's belief in the concept of time suddenly changes. When the European countries choose the recent past decades they want to live in, they choose to live in the reality of that specific era. For instance, while the northern European countries choose to live in the 1970s, central European countries, encompassing Spain, Germany and France choose the 1980s. Though people are experiencing the 2020s, they decide on a change in their understanding of time and era collectively and make it a reality. Gospodinov highlights the easiness of making socially constructed realities by presenting the new time map of the countries as a result of the referendum. He reveals how suddenly a socially constructed reality, such as time, loses its present meaning once the new understanding of time is accepted. Thus, within this scope, different realities of time zones are products "not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other" (Burr 1995: 229). That is to say, socially constructed realities, such as time, institutions, borders do not stem from our understanding of nature. Instead, they are created as a result of interaction and collective acceptance among people.

However, once this shared and categorized social reality is stopped to be believed and normalized collectively, the reality can change. For instance, though at first European nations choose the time periods they want to live in willingly via referendum, after several months most of them change their minds as they do not want to give up the pleasures of the present time, such as the internet, social media or cell phones. The writer explains the latest situation after the referendum as follows: "The world has become a chaotic open air clinic of the past, as if the walls had fallen away. I wondered whether Gautine had foreseen all this—he, the onewho always made me shut the doors tightly so as not to mix the times..." (Gospodinov 2022: 254). The motto behind the eagerness to live in the past is to feel attached to something familiar and predictable. However, since it is not natural but a made-up illusion, such chosen periods provide only a short-time relief to those unbelongers to the present time. Mixing the times brings chaos both for the dementia patients and for those who socially construct time periods for the sake of nostalgic feelings in the hope to protect themselves from a dystopian future.

## Conclusion

All in all, Gospodinov's novel surfaces questions about the challenges of feeling home in today's world. Through his fiction which dwells around such a universal theme, the writer makes the reader think whether one is really aligned with the time they live in. The novel elaborates on people's natural tendency to belong somewhere, especially a time or era where they would feel secure. By addressing the power of nostalgia in present time in which future is feared to be dystopic, Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*, presents us a story of the present that ironically takes place in the past thanks to challenging the irreversibility of



time as a result of its social construction. By showing the collective agreement of the European nations to find a shelter in the past and their reluctance in originating a narrative of counter nostalgia, Gospodinov sheds light on the yearning for an anticipated, safe, knowable future where individuals will not feel fragmented by either due to dementia or the dissatisfaction with the modern age. However, by making an analogy between European people's voting for their preferred time period that they construct collectively and the involuntary choice of Alzheimers patients' to inhabit in temporal safe spaces, Gospodinov also shows that there are cracks and flaws in both as people are unbelongers in both cases. While the past functions as an illusion giving temporal relief to Alzheimers' patients and to most of the European citizens for different reasons, Gospodinov shows that mixing the times leads to ending up in purgatory for both parties.

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