

The Scented Tapestry: Memory And Identity In Aanchal Malhotra's *The Book Of Everlasting Things*

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Abstract—Aanchal Malhotra's *The Book of Everlasting Things* highlights the enduring psychological and social repercussions of forced migration by foregrounding the lived realities of Partition-era Lahore. It also effectively illustrates the concept of loss, encompassing not only the deprivation of material possessions but also the enduring impact of inherited grief and the trauma that spans generations. In the context of her characters, memory functions as both a foundational element and a source of anguish. It serves to preserve love and contribute to identity formation, while simultaneously acting as a painful archive of irreversible separation and yearning. This paper examines the intricacies of memory and its relation to identity construction, which are continually negotiated through shared memories of homeland and family, drawing on Maurice Halbwachs' conceptualisation of collective memory as a socially mediated framework. Halbwachs' theory reveals that memory is not a solitary possession; rather, it is cultivated and performed within social groups that endow personal remembrance with meaning and legitimacy. The analysis thus interrogates whether displaced individuals, cut off from familiar geographies, can maintain a coherent sense of self anchored in collective practices and frameworks of memory, even as borders and nations dislocate them.

Index Terms—loss, identity, homeland, memory, past, borders

I. INTRODUCTION

The legitimacy of memory has been a subject of ongoing controversy since well before recorded history. Pierre Nora defines 'true memory' as the largely lost, unselfconscious practices and traditions of remembering that are intimately embodied and socially transmitted. He contends that these memory modalities are especially linked to the body, including "gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions,

intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes" (Whitehead 142). True memory is different from official or institutionalised memory, which is often externalised and codified in "places of memory" (lieux de mémoire). True memory is rooted in lived experience and habitual action, showing a continuity that goes beyond conscious remembrance. Nora's findings contest the prioritisation of historical narrative above embodied memory, highlighting the crucial function of physical and communal transmission in preserving memory's authenticity and vibrancy.

Aanchal Malhotra's *The Book of Everlasting Things* intricately explores the themes of memory and identity within the harrowing context of Partition-era Lahore, offering a nuanced portrayal of how historical trauma shapes personal and collective lives. The story shows how memories are fragile when they are closely linked to displacement, grief, and political upheaval by focusing on the changing relationship between the main characters, Samir and Firdaus. These emotionally charged memories are not fixed; they are reconstructed through actions of recollection that both maintain and transform identity throughout time. In this context, Paul Ricoeur's critical reflections on *Memory, History, and Forgetting* prove especially pertinent. Ricoeur's interrogation of linear memory and the ethical demands of true remembrance underscores the complexity inherent in recalling the past. He argues that memory is never a neutral act; it carries ethical weight, requiring a careful balance between remembering and forgetting to foster reconciliation and identity formation.

Malhotra's, *The Book of Everlasting Things* foregrounds the evocative childhood memories of

Samir and Firdaus, employing them as entry points into the intricate interplay between individual recollection and collective frameworks. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's foundational concept of collective memory, it becomes apparent that childhood memories are fundamentally shaped—and at times delimited—by social processes and familial networks. Maurice Halbwachs demonstrates that memory, while often conceived as personal, is in fact constructed through continual interaction with community; thus, “there is no individual memory as such,” but only memories refracted through collective representation. This assertion underpins his argument that even those recollections we term ‘childhood’ cannot be regarded as self-evidently authentic or whole, since their formation is embedded in the social frameworks that persist and change over time.

Paul Ricoeur advances this perspective, arguing that memory images “are still situated within the framework of the family, because they were initially enacted there and have never left it”. Ricoeur’s approach further reveals that the act of remembering is an ongoing negotiation between the familiar and the collective, a process in which individual identity is constructed through remembered experiences organized and mediated by family, cultural patterns, and historical forces.

Malhotra's narrative illustrates that the clarity of Samir and Firdaus's childhood memories functions not just as indicators of personal sentiment but also as manifestations of collective memory, shaped by familial connections and overarching social structures. In this way, the text shows how childhood memories are crucial factors in forming identity, as they are constructed and preserved by enduring social and historical frameworks. The literary representation of memory in *The Book of Everlasting Things*, therefore, invites a reconsideration of the status of childhood recollection—not as direct recoveries of the past, but as dynamic, socially constructed acts of remembrance.

II. EMBODIED NATURE OF COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE

Embodiment in Malhotra's narrative aligns with Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, in which social frameworks establish the conditions for the persistence of memory, thereby providing structure and significance to individual recollections through

habitual social practices. Malhotra powerfully shows how communal recollection is embodied in *The Book of Everlasting Things* through rich sensory memories and familial traditions. These components ground individual identities within the extensive historical trauma endured by families, with special emphasis on the Firdaus and Samir families. The embodied memories, expressed through preserved scents, tastes, and habitual practices, serve as lived connections that link present experiences to a shared past.

ITTAR KADA, VIJ & SONS, ESTD 1921, LAHORE (Malhotra 28), is a venerable establishment that originally opened its doors in the bustling streets of Anarkali Bazaar, housing hundreds of different fragrances and oils. At first, it was a bustling centre full of various scents and oils that drew both nobles and common people from all over North India. It was a social and cultural centre. The perfumery became a significant place of memory for Samir, especially after he lost his family in the Partition. The only things he chose to keep were his uncle's signature scent, Amrit, his perfumery tools, and his perfume journals. These things not only represented his own history, but also the history of the community as a whole. In this way, ITTAR KADA goes beyond its business purpose and becomes a lasting place for people to remember things together. It connects individual identity to collective history and shows how memory is passed down through generations.

For Firdaus, the memory was encapsulated within the three hundred and eighty-eight letters that Samir had authored to her, addressed diligently as Firdaus Khan in straightforward, unembellished Urdu. Despite her yearning to physically connect with Samir through his handwriting, the only remaining embodiment of him in Firdaus's life was captured and preserved within the fragile folds of paper (Malhotra 210). In this way, Samir's memory became inseparably entwined with a tangible object, transforming a simple piece of paper into a profound vessel of remembrance and presence for Firdaus.

In the case of Firdaus, Samir's handwriting preserved on paper functions as a material locus or mnemonic object that embodies and sustains his memory within her lived experience. For Samir, along with his vials of perfume, Firdaus's dupatta became a shared embodiment for both characters. This resonates with Halbwachs's assertion that memory is physically

situated in shared environments and social interactions, where objects, rituals, and spaces play essential roles in shaping and preserving collective remembrance. The paper is not merely a passive repository but an active site where personal and collective memory intersect, allowing Firdaus to maintain a tangible connection to Samir despite physical absence.

Thus, the embodiment of Samir's memory through the material medium of paper illustrates Halbwachs's idea that collective memory is both constructed and lived through concrete, socially embedded practices that transcend purely cognitive recollection. This material mediation is crucial for the survival and transmission of memory within social groups over time.

What remained as personal embodiments of memory in Samir's life can be further understood through Maurice Halbwachs's social framework of memory, which emphasizes the centrality of geographical location and landscapes in the formation and persistence of collective memory. Halbwachs argues that memory is not an isolated individual faculty but is always constructed within social frameworks—sets of shared places, times, and social groups—that provide the context and reference through which individuals remember their past. Significantly, he highlights how the physical environment—such as family homes, neighborhoods, and communal spaces—functions as indispensable anchors for memory, serving both as spatial frameworks and symbolic containers of collective experience.

For Samir, the family home, the perfumery, and neighbourhood streets, especially the iconic streets of Anarkali Bazaar, where he met Firdaus for a date, emerge as spatial frameworks that contain and perpetuate collective memories, embodying the vividness and texture of experiences that official histories may overlook. These locations perform symbolic functions as vessels of intergenerational transmission, enabling characters to navigate displacement and trauma by situating their memories within tangible, shared environments.

Samir's life is uniquely framed by a communal landscape that transcends mere spatial and geographical boundaries to encompass the nuanced realm of scent. For Samir, perfume is imbued with occasion, history, and embodied meaning—it possesses its own landscape, body, and elicited response (Malhotra 85). A vivid representation of

memory woven into Samir's narrative is found in the lingering scents—specifically, the familiar scent of his mother's *tulsi*—that shaped his childhood experiences (Malhotra 137). Reflecting on this, Vivek elaborates, “To smell is commonplace; we inhale our environment every day, without question or thought” (Malhotra 81), highlighting how sensory experiences often function below conscious awareness yet hold profound mnemonic power. This fragrant reminder serves as a sensory portal, transporting Samir across time and space, and exemplifies Halbwachs's assertion that memory requires a ‘place’—not only geographically but also socially—to be maintained and perpetuated. Furthermore, this sensory spatiality encapsulates the embodiment of memory, where smell becomes a carrier of tradition, evoking collective histories and identities embedded in environment and practice.

Maurice Halbwachs's inquiry into the social frameworks sustaining collective memory offers a profound lens to understand how contemporary social groups—such as families and everyday professional communities—fulfil roles analogous to those once held by the nobility. Halbwachs argues that the nobility historically functioned as the principal custodians of traditions and collective memory. In modern society, however, the responsibility for preserving and elaborating social remembrances has diffused into diverse extraprofessional groups that organize daily social life (Halbwachs 139).

This theoretical perspective is vividly illustrated in the instance of Samir's encounter with the scent of tulsi at an Iranian café in Paris, which evokes an intense sensory and emotional recollection. This olfactory stimulus instantaneously transports him from his present reality to the Lahore of his childhood—specifically to Vij Bhawan, the epicentre of his familial and cultural memory (Malhotra 229). The fragrance serves as a powerful mnemonic medium, reactivating Samir's identity and sense of rootedness. Samir's experience aligns with Halbwachs's assertion that memory endures through collective frameworks embedded in social practices and shared environments. The scent of tulsi and the spatial significance of Vij Bhawan function as carriers of tradition, linking individual memory to a collective history sustained by the community. This underscores Halbwachs's central claim that memory is not a purely individual faculty but is shaped, preserved, and

transmitted through social frameworks that provide coherence and continuity to personal and collective pasts.

III. INDISPENSABLE IDENTITY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF MEMORY

Maurice Halbwachs's heavy reflections on "The Reconstruction of the Past" offer crucial insights into the fluid and dynamic nature of memory and its role in shaping identity. This thought provoking study can be applied effectively to the interpretation of Malhotra's *The Book of Everlasting Things*. Halbwachs has carefully emphasized that the memories, especially those formed during childhood, are neither fixed nor perfectly preserved; rather, they exist in fragmented, revised, and recontextualized forms shaped by the ongoing interplay between past and present consciousness. The act of revisiting memories—like rereading a cherished childhood book—reveals the inevitable gaps, alterations, and reinterpretations that occur as memories negotiate with current frames of understanding. Despite this fragmentation, these memories constitute a continuous thread that underpins and perpetuates a person's sense of identity over time (Halbwachs 46)

Thus, Halbwachs's concept of memory as a social and reconstructive process provides a powerful analytic tool to understand how memory and identity interact in the text. The novel exemplifies how displaced individuals engage in an active recreation of identity by assembling fragmented memories into coherent narratives that both preserve their heritage and adapt it to new present realities, thereby underscoring memory's pivotal role in the ongoing formation and negotiation of selfhood.

All this time spent in Paris, Samir never spoke of his past. His marriage to Lea, which he considered not a maddening love but a shared experience of losing a beloved, was a way of renewing his identity, far from the pain of losing everything back in his own Hindustan.

"The scent of warm, earth-like aroma he had embarked with from Hindustan had been entirely replaced with an aquatic, mineral odour. The pain of losing everything had persuaded Samir to assume himself as possessing the flatness of a failed perfume". (Malhotra 208)

These statements strongly resonate with Halbwachs's insight—that "the most painful aspects of yesterday's society are forgotten because constraints are felt only so long as they operate, and because, by definition, a past constraint has ceased to be operative"—offer a profound theoretical lens for interpreting Samir's emotional trajectory. (Halbwachs 49)

Furthermore, Halbwachs contends that collective memory and the force of past suffering or societal constraints weaken once they are no longer actively experienced; hence, over time they adapt into different forms. These forms instead materialise into constraints that are either repressed, transformed, or rendered invisible in memory as new social realities emerge. This dynamic resonates powerfully with Samir's personal history. For Samir, the impossibility of returning to his homeland renders the traumas of Partition and exile not only persistently but, paradoxically, unbearable in their presence and absence alike.

The memory of Lahore, his homeland, once a living context now lost to history, becomes a source of deep pain and alienation. His painful predicament is also evidently clear in Lea's realization that Samir punishes himself for his inability to return, his lack of accessibility to his inner and real life. This consequently demonstrates how enduring trauma resists assimilation into ordinary memory. Even Samir's first utterance of the word Lahore, felt foreign to him ever since his migration to Paris.

For Samir, the "constraint" of exile does not simply vanish with time or distance; instead, it becomes internalized, shaping his self-perception and his relationships. On his journey to Paris, the feeling of being truly alone supports this statement of how he became accustomed to accepting his fate. Halbwachs's theory elucidates the reasons why Samir's historical suffering is both unavoidable and isolating. Unlike typical social constraints that diminish once their immediate context is removed, the trauma that results from forced migration persists internally, particularly when communal structures and opportunities for shared remembrance are absent. His perpetual inability to forget, paired with his eventual isolation, demonstrates the constraints of communal memory's restorative capability in the presence of unresolved ruptures. Halbwachs's concept elucidates the selective remembrance and oblivion of societal constraints, while also illustrating how individuals like Samir can

become trapped in unbearable histories, leading to alienation from both their previous community and present affiliations.

A pervasive sense of sadness envelops the characters in Malhotra's text, rooted in the loss of the homeland and the incompleteness that accompanies displacement. This narrative sorrow resonates as a universal condition—the longing for a home left behind and the anxiety over an uncertain future are not unique to Samir, but emblematic of the human experience in times of war and forced migration.

For Samir, the enduring presence of scents and fragrances in the text operates as a salvific force, catalyzing the reconstruction of his fractured identity following displacement and loss. Immersed in his uncle's journals, Samir finds in the ritual of perfumery not just a profession but a path to self-renewal, where each fragrance becomes a medium for recovering lost time and reviving a buried self. This dynamic resonates with Paul Ricoeur's philosophy in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, particularly his notion of "reversible forgetting." Ricoeur posits that while some memories are subject to oblivion, there remains in human experience an "unforgettable"—those slivers of the past that, when triggered, re-emerge as moments of recognition, granting what he calls "the small happiness" of recovering something lost to time (Ricoeur 417).

Ricoeur's concept points to the capacity of memory not merely to passively preserve, but to actively reconfigure the past in the present through recognition, especially via sensory cues. For Samir, perfumes enact such moments of reversible forgetting; through them, memories believed lost return unexpectedly, revitalizing his identity and granting meaning to both remembrance and survival. Ricoeur's framework thus reveals how Samir's renewed self emerges, not through mere factual recollection, but through the transformative, affective power of recognition and the deeply personal encounter with the "unforgettable."

This phenomenological account can be productively contrasted with Maurice Halbwachs's sociology of memory. Halbwachs insists that memory is fundamentally collective: individual recollection is always contingent on social frameworks—family, profession, community—from which meaning is derived and through which the past is anchored. In Halbwachs's view, Samir's memories would not

persist in isolation; they find coherence within the traditions and practices of his perfumer lineage and the shared social spaces of his lost homeland. Samir's acts of remembering are therefore not solitary but deeply entwined with communal rituals and the intergenerational transmission of craft.

Yet, as Ricoeur observes in his critique of Halbwachs, there is a tension between the social embeddedness of memory and the spontaneous, creative act of individual remembering. Ricoeur cautions against reducing memory solely to collective scripts, emphasizing instead the active role of the individual in recognizing, reinterpreting, and sometimes resisting collective narratives. In Samir's case, the healing afforded by scents arises precisely from the interplay of these forces: the communal history of perfumery offers the framework, but it is his uniquely personal encounter with specific fragrances—a moment of "happy forgetting"—that affects true recognition and renewal.

Thus, while Halbwachs elucidates the indispensable role of social frameworks in the survival of memory, Ricoeur offers a more nuanced understanding of how memory, history, and forgetting converge in the subject's ongoing negotiation with the past. Samir's story in Malhotra's novel exemplifies this synthesis: his restoration is achieved not only through the collective lineage of his craft, but also through the singular, redemptive moment when an unforgettable fragment of his past is reinhabited, momentarily overcoming the effects of erasure and exile.

This synthesis is further supported by our observation that Samir was left without anyone to inform him about the long-suppressed years that ultimately led the family to the perfumery industry; therefore, he summoned the courage to unearth his uncle's journal. This activity that Samir got involved in, even leaving aside his daughter and wife, moving to Grasse from Paris, shows that he may have achieved his happy forgetting by unearthing his uncle's journal and learning more about him. This "happy forgetting" unfolds as an active retrieval and reconfiguration of the self rather than a passive recollection.

The journal of the uncle serves as a tangible link to the suppressed familial past and provides the contextual support necessary for Samir's memory to find continuity. Similarly, Samir's uncle, Vivek's experience in Vilayat captures the tension between worldly aspirations and an indelible connection to

“Hindustan,” as seen in the metaphorical “silhouette of home” etched in the lines of his palms and heart, as the lines of his journal make clear.

“And despite the excitement of being in Vilayat, no matter how worldly or untethered Vivek aspired to be, there was no escaping the sudden flicker of Hindustan. For embedded in the lines of his palms and the depths of his heart, there remained the silhouette of home, quietly mirroring Samir’s own predicament.” (Malhotra 243)

This reflects Halbwachs’s notion that even in the solitude of exile, collective memory persists, anchored in the embodied cultural and social heritage carried within individuals. Together, these parallel narratives between Samir and Vivek demonstrate how displacement does not erase collective memory but perpetuates it within social and familial networks, enabling individuals to negotiate identity by reconstructing their connection to home through both material artefacts and embodied memories.

This assertion is further supported by the interaction between Samir and Édouard deRose in the text, which highlights how individual memory is intricately entangled with collective frameworks and material culture, as Halbwachs identifies as essential for sustaining memory. DeRose functions as a conduit for the transmission of artisanal knowledge and cultural heritage, akin to Halbwachs’s concept of “social frameworks” that anchor memory. From Ricoeur’s perspective, this moment exemplifies the process of “reversible forgetting,” in which the resurfacing of “bottled memory” through perfume serves as a recognition, allowing Samir to reinhabit parts of his lost identity and experience the “small happiness” of recovering the past. As said, people ignore the fact While listening that leads to misinterpretation. (Chamundeshwari 3673). The perfume thus transcends sensory experience into a mnemonic apparatus that simultaneously embodies history, trauma, and identity, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between individual recognition and the preservation of social memory. This synthesis deepens our understanding of memory’s role in identity formation amid displacement, emphasizing both the subjective and communal dimensions of remembrance and selfhood.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *The Book of Everlasting Things*, readers are invited to contemplate whether escaping the war-torn landscape of Lahore leads to true existential liberation. Characters who have fled the perils of Partition nevertheless have to deal with internal difficulties that don’t go away when they leave. This highlights the paradox of displacement, where physical freedom does not erase the scars on memory, identity, and belonging.

The characters’ identities remain marked by rupture, loss, and the unresolved trauma of violence, which stubbornly resists integration into a coherent sense of self. This condition illustrates the constraints of freedom in post-conflict environments, highlighting how identity is shaped not only by geographical setting but also by the psychological and cultural remnants of trauma. Even in safety, the invisible chains of memory and history bind individuals, manifesting as a resistance to fully reclaiming or reconstructing one’s identity separate from the disintegrated past.

This notion harmonizes with Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory, which articulates that memory—and thereby identity—is sustained within collective and spatial frameworks. Even when displaced geographically, individuals carry with them the social and emotional frameworks of their lost worlds, which persistently shape their subjectivities.

The art of perfumery is a link to a lost homeland for Samir and his family. It also shows how cultural memory and identity can be relevant to a person’s life even when they migrate and are displaced from their original location. As protectors of these fleeting essences, they have the capacity to bring back, heal, and rebuild—the unseen threads that connect the past to the present and protect the eternal. So, perfumers become the most important people who keep scents, senses, and perfumes safe and protect the little delights of life. They are the guardians of something that is both real and powerful. Through the delicate alchemy of scent, they preserve and transmit memories, histories, and identities across fractured geographies and generations.

Mr Ali’s reflection that “only water is borderless” (Malhotra 207) strongly and considerably symbolizes the novel’s meditation on identity beyond fixed boundaries. The fluid purity of water, where

distinctions fade and dissolve, is amicably seen to serve as a potent metaphor for transcending the hard barriers created by history, displacement, and geography. For Samir, this thought provoking statement of a borderless concept represents hope - an enormous, permeable realm where memory, belonging, and identity circulate freely, unrestrained by the boundaries that divide his past and present. In this manner, the novel is suggestive of promoting a transformative freedom that is not based on physical location, but rather on the fluidity of memory and identity.

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