

The Cultural Memory and the Changing Moralities in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*

Maged Mohamed Abdelfatah Hassan*
maged950@hotmail.com

Abstract

Memory is one of the primary keys of our past through which we can extract the outcome of our wisdom to construct our present vision and mature conclusion on life, people, and art. However, the deliberate search in our memories will paint our story with subjective choices and prejudiced judgments. To reflect an accurate and authentic picture of the past, we need to use our involuntary memories to stress the objectivity and neutrality of our story. Marcel Proust's seven-volume autobiography *In Search of Lost Time* represents this artistic vision with its entire elements. It includes the author's constant encounter with his culture, the involuntary triggered memory from his unconsciousness, the author's struggle and frustration to focus aiming at unleashing a wave of voluntary memories, and finally, his eloquence and detailed description of the whole scenery, allowing his readers to fulfill their quests and draw their own conclusions. The current study analyzes Proust's technique in remembering his past through three main stages. The first stage concerns using our cultural background to trigger an involuntary memory from our unconsciousness. After the activation, our brain can collaborate between the triggered involuntary memory and the other relevant voluntary memories to represent a coherent story of the past. This picture of that past should be based on the aesthetic and detailed elaboration and description of the scenery, giving the reader a comprehensive vision and helping them draw their conclusions.

Key Words: Involuntary and Voluntary Memory – Culture – Moralities – Marcel Proust – In Search of Lost Time – Consciousness and Unconscious Mind

* Lecturer at AL-Alsun Higher Institute, Ain Shams university.

1.0 Introducing the Study

Marcel Proust's writing is considered one of the leading literary works published at the beginning of the twentieth century, giving the reader a comprehensive portrait of life, thoughts, people, and art that dominated the world in the first and second decades of the previous century. Proust's seven-volume autobiography, narrated from the eyes of an anonymous narrator whose creative process spanned more than fourteen years, starting in 1908 until he died in 1922, is one of the outstanding literary accomplishments of his time (Balsamo, 2007, p. 574). This is represented in Proust's revolutionary concept of involuntary memory, considered the natural source of human knowledge and thought. The complicated process the narrator uses to recollect his memories of the past is essential to give his text the authenticity and objectivity it requires to gain the readers' trust (p. 576). The narrator shows his inability to recollect and revive the memories of his past through his deliberate choice. Instead, he waits until a materialistic object from his cultural background triggers the memories. Only then can the narrator taste the sensational flavor of the past as he has experienced and lived it (p. 575).

Nevertheless, more than the activation step is needed to narrate his story. The narrator needs extra work of concentration and relaxation to remember the rest of the elements of the entire scenery from the past with all its people, places, incidents, and situations (Balsamo, 2007. p. 578). This collaboration between his involuntary and voluntary memories helps the narrator achieve his goals by representing his memory from a neutral point of view. This leads to another significant point in Proust's writings, namely, the aesthetic aspects of the literary work. According to D'Arcy (2002), Proust prefers the aesthetic aspect of writing, giving the reader a comprehensive view of all his changing judgments and moralities without limiting the scope to his ultimate vision (p. 39). Thus, the readers can draw their conclusions from the detailed scenery represented and visualized in front of them, filled by the author's wise points of view about people, art, and life itself.

2.0 Proust's Changing Moralities

The concept of memory is a central theme in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which the author uses to represent and address his spiritual and ethical evolution throughout the work. The readers are only represented by the narrator's voice and observations of what has

been happening in his surrounding atmosphere and how this influences his moral growth dynamically until he has reached the final and ultimate representation of his identity as a literary creator by the end of the work. The most important study concerns Proust's changing moralities and vision through his long journey of writing his book, which is represented in Grauby's (2015) unique analysis of the literary work entitled " 'Sand's Way': The Voices of George Sand's François the Waif in Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past." In this article, the researcher scrutinizes the symbolic journey of the narrator in which he has discovered his own individual voice as a writer. This journey has lasted from the beginning of the work onwards to its final pages, in which the protagonist succeeds in weaving out his life, his identity, and finally, his mature judgment of life, art, and people. Grauby addresses the two appearances of George Sand's novel entitled François le Champ / François the Waif in both the first volume of the work, namely, Swann's Way, and the seventh and final volume of the work, namely, Time Regained (pp. 1-2). The symbolic significance of the author's use of this literary work is to stress the initial and final stages of the protagonist's spiritual and physical growth from an innocent child to a conscious and influential observer of life.

The first appearance occurred during one of his unique childhood nights, in which he listened to the story narrated by his mother (p. 4). After being deprived of his mother's goodnight kiss for several nights, the narrator is rewarded by his mother's affection and warm presence for a full night in which she narrates the whole story (p. 6). The same work reappeared again when the narrator recolonized the work in Guermantes's library in the final volume of the work. This recognition is echoed with a moment of pure disillusionment on the protagonist's part. He has revived his faith in life and literature and his abilities and talents as a good writer. Grauby argues that the narrator combines his childhood verbal memory of the story and his present recognition of the book entity on the library shelf to draw a complete circle of the beginning and the end of his spiritual journey, constructing his identity as a writer (p. 9). The gap between his childhood memory of the story, as told by his mother and the present realization of the work with an accurate and neutral evaluation indicates the changing and shifting mentalities of the narrator. To illustrate, according to Paul Zumthor (1983), the narrator, as a child, admires the idealistic and perfectionistic atmosphere of the work as it was only represented to him through his mother's feminine voice (p. 25). Grauby (2015) argues

that the mother's voice is considered the solid ground of the child's imagination from which he absorbs his self-confidence and security (pp. 8-9). The adult narrator is now freed from the mystical influence of his mother's voice to the extent that he can neutrally judge the work without being culturally entrapped in his intimacy with the mother. For him, the work can be praised for its literary richness and expressiveness. Nevertheless, this does not make Sand, the author, one of the leading names in the field (p. 11).

3.0 The Cognitive Bases of Proust's Concept of Memory

The changing moralities in Proust's vision and evaluation of the surrounding universe are not the only aspects of Proust's literary works addressed in the academic field. Other studies address the scientific foundation of his new concept of memory. For example, Isabel Sargento (addresses the melancholic atmosphere of Proust's memories and morals that dominate his entire work. She argues that the real cause behind this melancholic atmosphere of the narrator lies in his conscious research for a fictional happiness that only occurs in his vivid imagination and eternal longing for unfulfilled desires. Sargento

classifies Proust's melancholic memories into three main types (2022, p. 32). The first part of her study investigates the narrator's happy memories, in which he attempts to recall the sweet sensation of the memory itself. Being in constant sadness and despair, the narrator relied on those memories to revive his taste of life.

Nevertheless, time is the sole enemy of all the happy memories that, despite the narrator's attempts to eternalize its joyful sensation, limits their existence (p. 35). Thus, the happy memories of the past are not enough for the narrator to satisfy his eternal hunger for happiness, but they are at least enough for his present survival. The second type of the narrator's melancholic memories is represented in his mourning of the painful moments in his life. In this aspect, the researcher stresses Freud's famous student Theodor Reik's distinction between memory and remembrance (p. 36). The former is the conscious choice of the narrator, who chooses the glorious moments of happiness from his past inventory. The latter is the involuntary emergence of the painful moments in the narrator's past from his unconsciousness to his present consciousness. According to Walter Benjamin (2002) in his essay "The Image of Proust," this act of remembrance is inventible, and fighting it is useless (p. 35). This is represented in Proust's (2002) own words:

"My unhappiness was regarded no longer as a punishable offense but as an involuntary ailment which had been officially recognized, a nervous condition for which I was in no way responsible" (vol. I p. 51). The third type of the narrator's memories is represented in Freud's accurate distinction between mourning and melancholy. Sargento states, "According to Freud, in melancholy, the subject loses self-regard and experiences a feeling of immense guilt that takes him to permanent dysphoria, not being a temporary state as in the case of mourning (p. 39). Thus, in mourning, the narrator recalls involuntarily the painful losses of the past to his present. However, the agony is limited to the moment of remembrance. Nevertheless, when those painful memories emerge again from his conscious present mind to his unconscious ego with a touch of guilt, the temporary experience of mourning develops into a constant state of melancholy. According to Sargento, the agony of this process is the primary motive of the narrator's identity to become a great writer who can use the melancholic atmosphere of his past life as ink for the linguistic fluency of his creative writing (p. 41).

Sargento's trio classification of the concept of memory in Proust's writings into happy, mourning and melancholic memories is not the only one that can explain the cognitive complexity of the term.

In other words, Proust's unique distinction between voluntary and involuntary memories is also addressed from another approach in a detailed study by Emily Troscianko, entitled "Cognitive Realism and Memory in Proust's Madeleine Episode." In her empirical study, the researcher proves the substantial and unrealistic distinction made by the author of *In Search of the Lost Time* to differentiate between the voluntary and involuntary motives of the narrator's memories. Initially, the researcher praises Proust's scientific methodology in introducing his memories to the readers (2013, p. 440). The narrator told a story from his conscious present where he encountered a materialistic object that would trigger involuntarily one of his memories from his unconsciousness. Proust's choice of this method achieves its function of detaching the author's voice from the narrator and representing the incidents to the readers objectively. Evelyne Ender praises this act on the part of the writer, stating:

Proust emphasizes the physiological underpinnings of remembrance and changes the very definition of recollection. [...] With his stimulus-response model and his visionary idea that mysterious chemistry produces remembrance, Proust

opened new vistas for the scientific exploration of personal memory (2005, p. 29).

In this respect, Proust constructs a scientific, cognitive, and realistic atmosphere for the emergence of the narrator's involuntary memories. For example, in the Madeleine episode, several elements stress the cognitive reality of the situation (Troscianko, pp. 442-3). First, there is an apparent link between the present situation and the counterpart involuntary memory from the past. Additionally, the author describes the narrator's mental state when the madeleine is tasted, indicating his complete detachment from choosing the memory. Finally, Proust stresses the emotional influence of the madeleine's smell and taste as a logical cause to trigger the involuntary memory from the narrator's unconsciousness.

Nevertheless, the coherence of the events the narrator remembers after the initial incident contrasts scientifically with the spontaneous act of remembering (p. 452). Of course, the coherence of the narrated incident is obligatory to have a story to be told. Charlotte Linde states, "An essential property of the life story, both linguistically and psychologically, is that it must be coherent. Its coherence is not a property of life but rather an achievement of the speaker when

constructing the story (1987, p. 346). Proust himself admits the importance of such a process in the Finding Time Again episode as he states, "Their primary character was that I was not free to choose them, that they were given to me just as they were. And I sensed that this was the mark of their authenticity" (vol. VI, p. 187). Nevertheless, the cognitive basis of this coherence depends mainly on folk psychology more than logical and cognitive conclusions (Troscianko, p. 450). In other words, its theoretical boundaries are irrelevant to the new results of the scientific research about human memory. They are utterly irrelevant to the mechanism of the human brain's functioning (p. 451). In folk psychology, the brain is likely to be compared to an extensive library where coherent memories are stocked together in different rooms. Thereupon, triggering a single memory from one room will involuntarily lead to remembering all the related memories kept nearby. This assumption has nothing to do with cognitive and natural science. Consequently, the number of memories that come after triggering the first involuntary memory shades several doubts on the scientific framework of Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memories (p. 452). This is simply because all the subsequent incidents after the first triggered memory are chosen voluntarily, where the

narrator was utterly conscious in selecting, arranging, and finally narrating them in a coherent atmosphere.

These two classifications of the concept of memory in Proust's writings are not enough to understand fully the term's cognitive elements. In her detailed study about the development of the concept of memory in the writings of the Western canon from Plato until the present day, Anne Whitehead devotes an entire section to cast more light on Marcel Proust's extraordinary accomplishments to the meaning of the term. This study should portray the term more academically than the previous ones. In the literary work, the author explains through unique details the new concept of involuntary memory, which should be the real mirror of the past. Whitehead argues that Freud's new revolutionary theories about the unconsciousness of the human brain paved the way for Proust to attack the falsehood of voluntary memories that only reflect the superficial surface of our past. The real essence of our past life can only be expressed involuntarily (2009, p. 106).

Additionally, Proust marginalizes the effect of the sight senses in triggering involuntary memories. Before publishing his seven-volume work, most writers focus on visual images to recall the past. Proust introduces tangible senses in freeing the human mind from the

frame of its habitual memories, leading it to new horizons of authentic past images. For example, in the Madeleine episode, the sight of the cake itself does not affect the narrator's mind, as it is a part of his habitual memories where he has seen the exact cake in unlimited situations. Nevertheless, the smell, the touch, and the taste of the cake after being soaked in the tea is the real spark that has unleashed an unlimited flood of involuntary memories from the narrator's past (p. 110). However, more than depending on that, a spontaneous trigger is needed to reflect the memories. The narrator took another spoon of the cake to reflect more memories of his past, but "the potion is losing its virtue" (vol. I, p. 51). Thereupon, the narrator has to clear and relax his mind, emptying it of everything but the taste of the cake. Only then does the flow of memories start to invade his conscious presence. Thus, according to Mary Warnock, resurrecting the dead memories of the past is voluntary and conscious. However, the trigger is spontaneous and natural (1987, p. 95). In other words, Proust likens our memories to hidden treasures with clues in several material objects scattered everywhere in our everyday lives. Getting into contact with this object is entirely accidental. At this point, the clue activates a hidden memory in our unconsciousness. However, Whitehead accurately states that this

initial trigger cannot retrieve our memories. It is the role of the conscious brain to finish the job and recall the whole scenery from our past (p. 110).

4.0 The Aesthetic Aspects of Proust's Act of Remembering

The final aspect of Proust's concept of memory is its representation through an aesthetic context. In a poetic study entitled "The Past Is a Woman: Hart Crane's, Arthur Rimbaud's and Marcel Proust's Journeys Down Memory Lane," Alicja Piechucka examines the aesthetic aspects of Proust's concept of memory. According to the researcher, Proust likens the memory to women in their fragility and delicacy, where one has to treat them carefully. Otherwise, they will be lost forever from our conscious and unconscious minds (2012, p. 32). For example, in the madeleine episode, the narrator states, "I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic" (vol. I, p. 35). Here, Proust stresses the narrator's insistence on grasping the memory from the taste of the cake. However, the more he tries to clutch it to his conscious present, the more its

magical touch is weakened and vanishes. The problem with involuntary memories is that they can be easily triggered through our present sensations. However, they also need all our effort and concentration to weave them from the vast universe of our unconscious mind (Piechucka, 2012, p. 33). Using the verb "search" in his work's title, Proust emphasizes the human's struggle and effort to trace his lost memories. The narrator's frustration in several attempts to clutch his memory indicates the impossibility of such a quest (p. 35).

Additionally, remembering the entire scene from the past is not only limited to capturing it from the unlimited space of unconsciousness but also represented in the narrator's inability to comprehend and fully understand the exact shape of such memory (p. 35). This struggle is obligatory to emphasize the authenticity of the memory. The Proustian narrator fought to represent an authentic version of his memory to the readers. The frustration he went through until he finally could narrate his memories, which were accidentally triggered by his conscious senses, indicates the difficulty of remembering. According to Piechucka, the process is equally challenging as creating something new (p. 39). The narrator states, "I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and

inhibit all attention to the sounds which come from the next room" (vol. I, p. 36). Therefore, remembering is not an automatic effort in which the human mind plays the same role as the recorder in playing what has already been experienced. The act of remembering includes several elements of creation, such as comprehending the memory, imagining the missing and foggy parts, and, above all, expressing the whole story in aesthetic terms that can capture the heart of the readers.

5.0 Proust's Memory and Cultural Background

Scanning and skimming most of the academic studies dealing with Marcel Proust's writings, focusing on his masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time* shows an apparent need for dealing with two significant aspects regarding the author's new term of involuntary memories. The first topic that needs to be added is the necessary link between the recollected memories and the cultural surroundings of the narrator. The obligatory cultural background of the narrator is essential in understanding his memories and grasping their hidden beauty. The second missing topic is the narrator's spiritual growth and shifting moralities, as he has shown when collecting pieces of his past life. The current section addresses those two topics concerning what has been

represented in the previous section. The bridge between the narrator's memories and the surrounding culture is stressed from the early beginning of Proust's work. For example, in the final volume of the literary work, our protagonist attempts to remember his past days in Venice, but all his deliberate attempts are in vain. Nevertheless, stepping on the stoned pavement of the countryside while attending a reception of the Prince and Princess de Guermantes' in the last episode of the final volume of his work entitled *Time Regained*, the narrator states:

I had yet to look for the two uneven paving stones in the courtyard where I stumbled. But the fortuity, the inevitability of how the sensation was encountered, controlled the authenticity of the past that it resuscitated, the images it let loose. Since we feel it was striving towards the light, we feel the joy of the real, found again. (vol. VI, p. 187)

Here, the narrator establishes the apparent link between his lost memories and the cultural surroundings, indicating his narration's authenticity. In other words, Pamela Anderson argues that the material object that accidentally triggers a flood of involuntary memories is not foreign to the narrator's senses or knowledge (2014, p. 374). Instead,

this sensible object, which the narrator touched, stepped, and tripped on, is an impartial part of his cultural background. Its familiarity with the narrator's culture is solid enough to awaken the lost sensation of the memory that the narrator could not grasp in the previous days (p. 376). This means that the close encounter between the narrator and his surrounding culture is mainly his sole and only path to search and recollect his memories. Being detached from his culture means being isolated from all the material triggers that can activate involuntarily his memories of the lost past. This link can also be seen in the Madeleine episode when the taste of the cake soaked in tea triggers another wave of memories. Anderson argues that this piece of cake is essential to the narrator's cultural Sunday habits while visiting his aunt, who used to give him the exact cake after soaking it in some tea (p. 381). The narrator states: "the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray ... when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her cup of tea or tisane" (vol. I, pp. 53-4). Here, the exact link between the narrator and his cultural memories is his only path for recollecting his lost memories and writing his unique story.

For Proust, Diane Leonard argues that searching in one's memories is the ultimate way to acquire neutral knowledge and universal laws of life, people, and society (1988, p. 412). Reading a book is a subjective process in which the human mind acquires only the author's point of view. Nevertheless, Leonard adds that remembering that book after a while and applying its message to memories will achieve a neutral conclusion based on detailed observation and description of the surroundings (p. 416). For example, in the final volume of his work, the narrator recognizes in Guermantes' library the same story his mother once read to him during his childhood. The narrator's critical evaluation of his childhood reaction to the story shows the process of his spiritual evolution. The changing moralities between the narrator as a child and a grown-up shows multiple variations in his opinions regarding life, people, and art. Here, Proust does not give his readers the conclusions of his ultimate understanding of life and people. Instead, he gives them massive variations of his philosophical theories between the past and the present, giving them the chance to reach their conclusions similarly in the same way he has. According to Proust, each act of reading has an individuality that leads the reader to its unique conclusion. The aim of the art is not

pedagogical, which attempts to dominate the readers' mental quest and opinions subjectively (Eloise Hay, 1988, p. 370). Instead, the artist can only give his reader an aesthetic description and understanding of the truth based on his searching in his memories and observing all the people, places, and conditions he has experienced. The narrator states:

In reality, every reader, when he is reading, is the reader of himself. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument he offers to the reader to permit him to discern what he would have never seen in himself without the book. The reader's recognition of what the book says proves its truth. (vol. VI, p. 244).

Proust compares literary writing to a window for the readers to search for their conclusion similarly in the same way the narrator has reached the ultimate understanding of his self, career, and life. According to James Reid, the aesthetic representation of an author's memories is the unquestionable and neutral truth that the readers can use to form his/her understanding of it (1988, p. 469). Proust's morals are the outcome of his quest and journey. Nevertheless, it is not the only version of morality that the readers should follow and imitate. The literary work can be compared to a beautiful painting with significant details and

observations whose totality and depth can guide the readers to comprehend and grasp their version.

6.0 Conclusion

The researcher has proved the impartial link between the narrator's memory and cultural background. The dynamic exchange between his culture and his memory is inseparable to the extent that the latter's existence leads to the former's existence. The Proustian narrator has to keep his constant encounter with his own culture, through which he can only involuntarily activate his memory from the past. The deliberate activation of such memories proves their unworthiness. However, the moment of activation is only part of the process of remembering. The narrator has to exercise great relaxation and concentration to spark the whole scenery from his unconscious. Depending only on the material object that has triggered the memory will ruin the whole process. The researcher also demonstrates the positive influence of memory on educating the human mind. Nevertheless, narrating our memories to others should not include direct advice and guidance to limit their role in the manner of adaption and imitation. Instead, the actual writer will give his readers an

authentic and detailed picture of his past that contains a comprehensive collection of all his/her judgments and moralities. Consequently, the readers can draw their conclusions from their individual reading experiences. The aesthetic aspects of the literary work are an essential and central feature in Proust's literary endeavor. The ultimate vision of his conscious present is the outcome of his long journey that summarizes his spiritual development of various moralities and opinions. However, each reader should have his/her quest to grasp his/her vision after finishing his/her journey, similar to Proust's quest in creating and writing his masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time*.

7.0 Work Cited

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الملخص العربي

تعد الذاكرة المدخل الرئيسي للتطلع لصفحات الماضي والتي تحوي في طياتها لمحات من الدروس والعبر التي مررنا في حياتنا فتساعدنا في فهم حاضرنا بعمق يسهم في بناء رؤية سديدة عن الحياة وما بها من أشخاص وفنون. إلا أن تذكر صفحات هذا الماضي البعيد يعد معضلة في حد ذاته لأن الاختيار الواعي المتعمد لهذا الذكريات السابقة قد يضي نوع من التحيز الفكري وما يترتب عليه من فهم غير محايد للماضي والحاضر. ولكن لو أردنا عرض صورة نقية وصادقة لهذا الماضي فعلينا بفهم ما كتبه مارسيل بروسست عن الذاكرة اللاإرادية وقدرتها الفذة في التوغل في صفحات الماضي البعيد بلا توقف أو تحيز. ففي سيرته الذاتية المكونة من سبعة أجزاء تحت اسم البحث عن الزمن الضائع، تعرض الكاتب بإبداعه المتميز لهذه القضية وهي التعبير عن الماضي بدون التحيز لأفكار معينة وتجنب أفكار أخرى. وهنا دعا الكاتب إلى ضرورة الاتصال اللحظي بثقافتنا التي تحتوي في جوانبها صفحات متنوعة من ماضينا. ومن فوائد هذا الاتصال إطلاق العنان لذكرياتنا اللاإرادية لترسم صورة كاملة وبديعة لهذا الماضي بحيث يكون للقارئ دورا هاما في تكوين رؤيته الفنية الخاصة وحكمه النابع عن فهمه لما يحتويه هذا المشهد التصويري من عبر ومواعظ. تتناول الدراسة الحالية تحليل هذا التصور البديع من قبل بروسست لدور الذاكرة في عرض الماضي بصورة محايدة والذي يتكون من ثلاث مراحل. المرحلة الأولى تقتضي الاتصال بالبيئة المحيطة والتي شهدت الماضي الخاص بنا بهدف توليد الذكريات من اللاوعي. ثم ننقل للمرحلة الثانية والتي تشمل مهارة الكاتب في الجمع بينا الذكريات اللاإرادية المتولدة وبقية الذكريات الواعية الحية لكتابة قصة كاملة محايدة عن هذا الماضي، إلا أن صورة هذا الماضي يجب عند وصفها أن تمتلئ بالبيان الجمالي والتفاصيل الإبداعية المؤثرة في نفس القارئ لحنه واستفاره لبناء حكمه الخاص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذاكرة الإرادية واللاإرادية - مارسيل بروسست - البحث عن الزمن الضائع - العقل الواعي واللاوعي - الثقافة - الأخلاقيات.