



# Exploring the Nexus of Memory, Power, and Identity in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*

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**Abstract**— *The study of memory, power, and identity explores how power dynamics within societies shape the construction and preservation of collective and individual memories, ultimately influencing the formation and evolution of identities. Accordingly, this research delves into the intricate relationship between memory, identity, and power by analysing two dystopian novels, Lois Lowry's The Giver and Yoko Ogawa's The Memory Police. In both the narratives, the theme of memory and its profound influence is apparent. Lowry drew inspiration from her father's memory loss, prompting her exploration of a world where painful memories are intentionally eliminated. Ogawa pays homage to Anne Frank's The Diary of a Young Girl and explores contemporary anxieties surrounding surveillance, media manipulation, and authoritarianism. This study seeks to examine how the manipulation of memory by authoritarian regimes impacts the sense of self and collective identity in both the texts. Drawing from the methods of memory studies and literary analysis, the paper explores how the characters in these novels navigate a world where memories are controlled, suppressed, or erased, leading to a disruption in the formation of individual and group identities. Through a comparative analysis of the two works, the paper uncovers the ways in which the manipulation of memory serves as a tool for maintaining dominance and shaping collective consciousness, ultimately distorting individual and communal identities. This study ultimately reveals how language and writing can also be used to resist the dominance of authoritarian regimes over the perceptions of the past, present, and future of individuals and communities.*



**Keywords**— *Collective Memory, Dystopia, Identity, Memory, Power, Resistance*

## INTRODUCTION

The fascination with memory shared by all dystopian narratives is a clear indication of the important role played by the ability of power structures to manipulate the human capacity for recollection and rewrite the past in any totalitarian regime (Opreanu, 2013). That is why, even Descartes' famous postulation "I think, therefore I am" can be modified as "I remember, therefore I am" (Beike et al., 2004).

Memory forms the very basis for identity markers, revolving around its formation and the way it can be modified and even manipulated. Perhaps, this is the reason

dystopian literature encapsulates memory to its core. This paper examines two dystopian narratives, namely, Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* to approach memory from oppositional standpoints in order to reaffirm the importance memory has to personal as well as communal identity as suggested by both the authors.

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* delves into a society where an assertive and ostracising power structure shapes every aspect of life, and individual memory is a key element in defining identity. Set in a seemingly utopian community, the novel explores the concept of collective memory and how it can be manipulated and controlled by those in authority. In this excessively controlled society, individuality and

personal memories are suppressed to maintain a uniform and orderly existence and render them all into a state labelled as 'Sameness.' The residents live in a state of ignorance, shielded from the harsh realities of the past and stripped of their unique identities. The power structures in place dictate what the community thinks, feels, and even how they communicate, leaving little room for deviation from the established norms. The protagonist, Jonas, is chosen to bear the weight of collective memory as the 'Receiver of Memory.' In this role, he becomes the repository of all past experiences, both joyous and painful, that society has chosen to erase from their collective consciousness. As Jonas gains access to these memories, he begins to question the suffocating conformity imposed by those in power and seeks to understand the true nature of his seemingly perfect world.

In Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*, the author explores a haunting world where the concept of memory becomes the foundation of identity within a society ruled by assertive and ostracising power structures. Set in a dystopian realm, the narrative revolves around the notion of collective memory, where pivotal events from the past shape the thoughts, actions, and expressions of a certain community. As the story unfolds, Ogawa delves into the idea that collective memory can be manipulated and controlled, depending on the whims of those in positions of power. The prevailing authority exploits the malleability of memory to erase and suppress certain aspects of the past, ensuring the populace forgets specific objects or ideas altogether. Amidst the authoritarian backdrop, Ogawa weaves a thought-provoking narrative that delves into the complexities of identity and the power structures that seek to control it. Through the lens of memory, she crafts a compelling exploration of how society can be moulded and manipulated, and how resistance and resilience can emerge even in the face of erasure. While Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* highlight the profound impact of memory manipulation within dystopian societies, they approach the role of memory from oppositional standpoints, shedding light on contrasting aspects of its influence on personal and communal identity.

### Collective Memory and Identity

In the 21st century, memory has been the subject of considerable thought both in the fields of literature and philosophy (Jedlowski, 2001). It has been contemplated for so long that the actual understanding of memory has become jaded throughout the years. What we call 'memory' is a complex network of activities, the study of which indicates that the past never remains 'one and the same,' but is constantly selected, filtered, and restructured in terms set by the questions and necessities of the present, at both the individual and the social levels (Jedlowski, 2001).

Memory is seen as a multifaceted phenomenon with various layers in the personal, collective, cultural, and historical dimensions. It's not just about individual recollections but also how those recollections are influenced by broader social contexts. Memory is not a static concept but rather a dynamic and evolving process. It can change over time due to individual experiences, cultural shifts, political agendas, and social influences. The field of memory studies recognises that memory is not fixed and can be manipulated, forgotten, or altered. Memories are not simple reproductions of past events but are constructed and reconstructed based on individual and collective perspectives (Balaev, 2018). This process involves selection, interpretation, and negotiation of what to remember and how to remember it. Memory is often intertwined with power dynamics and political agendas. Who controls the narrative of a particular memory and how it is represented can influence societal perceptions and shape historical understandings. Our memories are social to the extent that they codify perceptions on the basis of their meanings, i.e. on the basis of a structure of knowledge of the world which in turn is the expression of the individual's membership of a culture.

The field acknowledges the importance of forgetting as a companion to remembering.

Sometimes, forgetting certain aspects of the past is essential for societies to move forward. Additionally, certain memories might be deliberately silenced due to their inconvenient or uncomfortable nature to the political structures in power. Memory is closely tied to individual and collective identities. How people remember their personal experiences and their group's history contributes to their sense of self and belonging. The field considers how societies remember traumatic events and how those memories are transmitted across generations. This includes the study of trauma's effects on memory, as well as the ways in which societies cope with and memorialise traumatic histories.

Collective memory, referring to the shared memory of a group or community, is a concept that emphasises the social nature of memory and how memory is not solely an individual phenomenon but is shaped by and influences the larger social context. This collective memory often tends to be distorted and manipulated for the sake of creating new realities in favour of the ostracising and assertive power structures. Collective memory has a direct relation to personal and communal identity formation.

The concept of memory is very closely interconnected to the creation of identity as well as to the manipulation of it. Memory thus becomes the mediator between the present and the past. It is now widely believed

that memory is the foundation of personal identity and that anything that damages it will threaten the self (Klein, 2014). Individual identities are inextricably linked to the collective memory of the broader society or community to which individuals are affiliated. Individuals draw from collective memory to formulate their identities.

Collective memory is not a passive phenomenon; it encompasses elements of selective remembrance and oblivion. Societies are wont to recollect certain incidents and interpretations while relegating others to the periphery or excluding them altogether. The determinants of this selectivity encompass power structures to the very core of it. This faculty for selectivity holds the potential to substantially impact the process of identity construction and reinforcement.

Manipulation and control over collective memory distorts personal identity. Selective memory can result in past narratives that are biased and inaccurate to the society as a whole. When certain events are highlighted while others are ignored, the resulting narrative presents an incomplete picture of the past. This distortion can lead to a skewed understanding of past realities and prevent a well-rounded comprehension of simple events. Selective memory hampers efforts toward reconciliation by omitting crucial moments of shared past that demand acknowledgment and resolution.

#### **Loss of Individuality: The 'Sameness' Doctrine**

Selective memory can also be used to suppress individuality and uniqueness. When memory is controlled, it becomes impossible to form one's own unique identity. Experiences, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by memories. When these memories are taken away, one is left with nothing to define themselves and therefore is devoid of all individuality. The community in *The Giver*, seemingly idyllic on the surface, enforces strict rules and regulations that suppress personal freedom and uniqueness. Memory acts as a way to remember the past which is done when Jonas remembers the past passed down to him by 'The Giver [of memory],' however, it can also be used as a way for suppressing all that makes one unique. This is reflected in the entire narrative through Jonas's lens of the society.

One important piece of evidence that illustrates this loss of individuality is the Sameness doctrine, which is the governing principle of Jonas's society. The elders meticulously control every aspect of the residents' lives, from their appearance and clothing to their career paths. Jonas's father explains how the community regulates family units, and any deviation from the prescribed norms is considered dangerous (Lowry, 1993). "Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time, back and back and back. We

relinquished colour when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences" (Lowry, 1993), which exemplifies how the community's desire for conformity leads to the eradication of individuality in favour of a homogenous existence.

Furthermore, the society practises the 'Release' of individuals who fail to conform to or challenge the established rules. Jonas discovers the true nature of 'Release' when he witnesses his father euthanising an innocent infant (Lowry, 1993). This chilling incident emphasises society's willingness to eliminate those who do not fit neatly into their predetermined mould, demonstrating how the assertive power structure ruthlessly eradicates any signs of individuality. The Giver himself serves as a poignant example of the loss of individuality. As the Receiver, he holds the collective memories of the past, effectively removing those memories from the rest of the community. Jonas learns about the struggles and joys of the past through these memories, realising that the community's suppression of individual experiences and emotions deprives them of a meaningful existence.

Although the sameness doctrine in Lowry's narrative provides concrete evidence to highlight the suppression of memory, Ogawa's narrative offers a similar understanding and further extends it through the disappearance phenomenon. As memories fade and are forcibly forgotten in *The Memory Police*, so too does the uniqueness of each person. Their identities become intertwined with the erasure of their personal histories, leading to a sense of loss and identity crisis. The enforced collective memory loss in this world serves as a powerful metaphor for the suppression of individuality through the control of memory. Additionally, both narratives have a sense of fear and danger associated with those who resist or challenge the established norms. In *The Memory Police*, individuals who try to hold onto their memories or objects face the threat of being discovered and punished by the Memory Police, much like how those who deviate from the Sameness doctrine in *The Giver* are eliminated or silenced. Both novels underscore the oppressive consequences of a society that seeks to erase individuality through the control of memory.

#### **Burden and Value of Memory: "They Were Never Seen Again"**

The burden of memory in Ogawa's narrative is palpable, as the powerful totalitarian force called the 'Memory Police' relentlessly enforces their control over collective memory. Throughout the novel, Ogawa vividly portrays the Memory Police's control over collective memory. In the opening chapters, the protagonist reflects on the disappearance of everyday items: "Hats, ribbons, bells, books. . . . The

memories began to fade as soon as the objects disappeared, and before long, I could no longer recall the colour of the ribbon or the sound of the bell” (Ogawa, 2019). This passage exemplifies the uncanny process by which memories are erased, leaving individuals in a state of perpetual forgetting.

The importance of preserving memories becomes evident in the role of memory holders as custodians of history. Ogawa writes, “people who were able to keep some part of their memories alive were a precious presence. They were like wells that had never run dry, and as long as the water was drawn from them, the town would not die” (Ogawa, 2019). Ogawa also conveys the palpable fear experienced by those who retain memories in this dystopian society. “We had all heard stories of what happened to those who couldn't forget in time. They were never seen again” (Ogawa, 2019). This fear of disappearing at the hands of the Memory Police underscores the burden of knowing something that society demands to forget.

The value of memory becomes even more apparent amid the stifling environment of enforced forgetfulness. As memories begin to disappear, so do aspects of culture, language, and personal connections. The essence of identity, individuality, and the very fabric of society is at stake. People who safeguard their memories become the custodians of humanity's history and heritage. Their recollections hold the potential to resist the erasure of the past, preserving what is at risk of being lost forever. Ogawa also explores the weighty responsibility of preserving memories. She portrays the internal struggle faced by those who must decide what to keep and what to let go. This is exemplified when the old man tells the protagonist, “there are some memories I can't bear to lose, and others I would like to erase from my mind forever” (Ogawa, 2019). This internal conflict underscores the complexity of memory in this dystopian world.

In the dystopian setting of *The Memory Police*, the value of memory is further emphasised through the connections it forges between individuals. Those who share memories create intimate bonds, forming a resistance against the oppressive regime of the Memory Police, and “the act of writing became a revolutionary act, a way to overthrow the tyranny of the Memory Police and reclaim the power of memory” (Ogawa, 2019). As they weave their stories together, they find solace in the shared burden they carry and draw strength from their collective determination to protect their identities and histories. However, the burden of memory is also fraught with peril, as the Memory Police's surveillance is relentless and unforgiving. Those who refuse to let go of their memories risk isolation, imprisonment, or worse. The weight of this responsibility can be overwhelming, and it forces individuals to make

challenging decisions about what to preserve and what to relinquish to ensure that their identity is upheld.

Ogawa's depiction of the disappearance phenomenon is intricately connected to the censorship of language that plays a crucial role in the loss of the value of memory in *The Giver*. In the dystopian society depicted in the book, the community's leaders meticulously control both language and memory to maintain a highly regulated and emotionally sterile environment. One of the ways this censorship of language impacts the value of memory is by limiting the words and expressions available to the residents. The community uses “precision of language” to restrict the emotional depth and richness of human interaction (Lowry, 2019). This deliberate limitation of vocabulary stifles the ability to convey complex emotions, experiences, and memories accurately. As a result, the depth and nuance of individual and collective memory become diluted and simplified, diminishing the value of those memories.

Furthermore, the community's leaders employ a strict policy of erasing painful or unpleasant memories from the minds of its citizens, a role assigned to the Receiver of Memory. This act of censorship not only suppresses negative experiences but also removes the emotional context and lessons associated with those memories. In this way, the community effectively erases the value of memory by preventing individuals from learning and growing through their past experiences. In *The Giver*, the censorship of language and memory goes hand in hand, leading to a society where the richness of human experience is sacrificed in the name of conformity and control. The inability to express and remember the full spectrum of human emotions and experiences underscores the profound loss that results from such censorship, ultimately emphasising the critical role that language and memory play in the preservation of individual and collective identity. Both narratives juxtapose forgetfulness and recollection of the past through the contrasting memory narratives.

### **The Importance of Language and Writing**

The social frameworks of memory tend to be expressed and reproduced essentially through language and discourse (Jedlowski, 2001). Language plays a critical role in maintaining the power structure of the society depicted in *The Giver*. The manipulation of language and communication is evident throughout the narrative, as it is used to control the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of the community members. It is also important to notice that language is not just used to maintain the power structure in the novel but also used to break them through by Jonas.

A significant method by which control is exerted through language lies in the precision of speech that is

prevalent among all members of the community. The society in the novel depicts language being stripped of emotional nuances and ambiguities, designed to avoid any discomfort or conflict. For instance, when Jonas expresses his feelings of “apprehensiveness” about the upcoming Ceremony of Twelve, he is quickly corrected by his mother (Lowry, 1993), who explains that “precision of language” is essential, and he should use “nervous” instead (Lowry, 1993). This insistence on precision not only reflects society’s obsession with the idea of Sameness but also serves to limit the range of emotions that individuals can express and, consequently, think and feel.

In a similar manner, in Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* writing emerges as a powerful act of resistance within a society ruled by an assertive and ostracising power structure. The protagonist, an unnamed writer, clings to her memories as the basis for her identity, even as Memory Police seeks to eradicate them. Collective memory in this world is a delicate thread connecting individuals and their past experiences, determining how they think, feel, and communicate—“the writer’s words spread like wildfire, a contagion of dissent that the Memory Police could not even contain” (Ogawa, 2019). The protagonist describes how her writing has become a source of inspiration and hope for others who are also being persecuted by the Memory Police. This acts as a powerful reminder of the power of language and the human spirit to resist oppression.

The protagonist’s writing becomes a tool to defy the oppressive nature of the Memory Police and the erasure of memories. Through her words, she holds on to her identity, preserving the memories of things disappearing from the collective consciousness. “She refuses to conform to the forced amnesia imposed by the authorities, and her act of writing becomes an act of rebellion, a testament to her existence and her resistance against the dominant power structures” (Ogawa, 2019). However, the Memory Police’s manipulation of collective memory poses a constant threat to the protagonist’s writing and her ability to resist. As they hunt down and enforce forgetfulness, the very act of writing becomes perilous, and the writer must hide her work and keep it clandestine to protect her identity and the memories she preserves. The oppressive power structures seek to silence dissent and homogenise the community’s thinking, making the act of writing a defiant act of courage.

Furthermore, in *The Giver*, the community uses euphemisms to shield its members from the harsh realities of life. For example, “release” is portrayed as a joyous and celebratory event, while, in reality, it represents euthanasia, a process where those who are deemed unfit or nonconforming are eliminated (Lowry, 1993). This deliberate distortion of language masks the true nature of their actions and prevents the community from questioning

or challenging the authorities. Another significant aspect of language manipulation is the suppression of past memory. The community deliberately omits certain words and concepts, such as “war,” “pain,” and “love,” from their vocabulary, erasing the collective memory of humanity’s past. By controlling the language and memories associated with these concepts, the authorities ensure that the community remains ignorant of the world’s complexities and the potential for change.

The Receiver’s role further highlights the power of language in shaping the community’s identity. Through the transfer of memories, the Receiver provides a glimpse into the past, introducing emotions, colours, and experiences that were previously unknown to the residents. These memories demonstrate the potential for a diverse and vibrant existence outside the controlled society. However, it is precisely this language that acts as a way of defiance against the social order as the Giver continues to impart his knowledge to Jonas.

Similarly, in *The Memory Police*, the writer persists in her resistance through the written word despite the risks, reaching out to others who secretly hold on to their memories, too. In the shadows, they share their stories and experiences, creating a subversive network that challenges the authority’s control over memory. In this way, writing becomes a means of solidarity, a way for like-minded individuals to resist collectively, finding strength and solace in their shared memories and identities. Through her writing, the protagonist stands defiantly against the Memory Police, holding on to her memories and preserving her individuality. Writing becomes an act of rebellion, a means of resisting conformity, and a way to connect with others who also refuse to surrender to forgetfulness. In this evocative narrative, language itself becomes a tool of resistance and a testament to the enduring power of memory in the face of authoritarian control.

### Memory as a Catalyst for Change

Fearne Cotton says, “it takes one thought, one second, one moment, or positive memory to act as a catalyst for the light to gradually seep in” so when political structures start imposing their power on people, memories act as a way to retain information and power struggles. So when Lowry introduces the idea of memories acting as a medium of suppression, they also consequently start acting as a way of remembering the past.

Jonas is horrified with his present when he remembers the past that was filled with memories of pleasure and pain. His memories of pain act as a catalyst to change the future. His memories of joy, on the other hand, give him the support needed to overturn the power structures. Combined, the memory of both joy and pain acts

as a catalyst for a potent future where individuality is recognised. Jonas' exposure to painful memories, such as war, hunger, and suffering, shatters the illusion of a perfect and controlled society. These memories make him realise the price of conformity and the sacrifices made to maintain their way of life. The memory of pain acts as a catalyst for Jonas's growing disillusionment with the status quo. Jonas's experiences with joyful memories, such as sledding down a hill and feeling love, provide him with a sense of empowerment and purpose. These memories offer a stark contrast to the emotional numbness of his society, and they become a source of strength for him.

In Ogawa's text, the act of taking away the name of the protagonist represents the first violent attack on her memory and identity. This incident serves as a powerful symbol of the oppressive control exerted by the authorities in the story. When the protagonist's name is taken away, it becomes a direct assault on her identity. A person's name is a fundamental aspect of their individuality and is closely tied to their sense of self. By erasing her name, the authorities strip her of a core part of who she is, making her existence more generic and less distinct. This loss of identity is a form of psychological violence, an attempt to break down her autonomy and assert the dominance of the authorities.

The burden of memory lies in the constant fear of losing cherished memories. People are under constant surveillance by the Memory Police, and the threat of losing a memory, and subsequently an aspect of one's identity, looms heavily. Remembering is an act of defiance against the oppressive regime of the Memory Police. By preserving memories of banned items, people resist conformity and maintain a small semblance of autonomy. In *The Memory Police*, memory carries both a profound value and a significant burden. The tension between these aspects underscores the complex connection between personal identity, resistance, and the human need to remember.

In both Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, the intricate interplay between memory, identity, and power becomes evident. The characters in these dystopian worlds grapple with the weight of their memories, recognising their significance in preserving their identities and resisting oppressive regimes. The act of remembering serves as an act of defiance against tyrannical rule. However, these narratives also illustrate the delicate balance between the empowering nature of memory and its potential to be manipulated for control. The power structures in both novels wield the ability to shape the future by selectively erasing or preserving memories, thereby exerting dominance over the population's collective consciousness. This cautionary aspect underscores the vital role memories play in shaping societies and maintaining

individualism. One tends to contemplate the enduring value of memory, the dangers of historical erasure, and the indomitable spirit that arises when individuals safeguard their recollections. In a world ever at risk of losing its past to the whims of authority, the tales of *The Memory Police* and *The Giver* stand as reminders of memory's role in nurturing our humanity and the importance of upholding our personal and collective narratives.

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