

**Transcript of the Session of Dr. Avishek Parui on “The Future of Memory Studies”
hosted by The English Lyceum**

Transcript prepared by: Tithi Roy

[04:20] **Ishani Routh:** Now, without further ado, I would now like to invite Dr. Parui, to begin with the session. Over to you Sir.

[04:29] **Dr. Parui:** Thank you very much Ishani. I hope I’m audible. I'm delighted to be invited by the English Lyceum to deliver this talk on 'Memory Studies.' I'm particularly grateful to Doctor Banerjee for contacting me to deliver this talk, and it's a pleasure to be among colleagues and scholars, fellow scholars and I look forward to the interactions which'll hopefully emerge in the end.

[04:50] **Dr. Parui:** So, the title of my talk, ‘The Future of Memory Studies’- it will talk a little bit about the ontological quality of the discipline, what we mean by memory studies, the kind of work we do in our centre at IIT Madras, and also some of the philosophical frameworks that we espouse in the course of our research and the course of our academic engagement. So, I'll start with two theorems in memory studies which sound like paradoxes, but they're actually quite key or vital, shall we say, in any understanding of memory.

[05:23] **Dr. Parui:** The first theory that we need to bear in mind, and I've said this elsewhere, but I'll reiterate because it's important to reaffirm this, is when we talk about memory, we should look at memory as an entanglement or an interplay of remembering and forgetting. In other words, we should not look at forgetting as the ontological opposite of a membrane, but rather a cognitive component of the membrane. In other words, if you remember something, you must be able to forget the series of things. So, you know, you can give a very banal and quick example to corroborate this. If I were to ask you what you did today, as in this particular day, 12th September 2023, you will tell me a series of events which had taken place throughout the course of the day- you've got up, you had a coffee, you had your breakfast, left office, etc.

[06:10] **Dr. Parui:** But even the more detailed, even the most detailed account that you will give, will also have exclusions, will also have erasures. In other words, you've already forgotten the series of things that you have done. And obviously, if I keep asking you what you did, what did you do in 12 September 2023, a week later, you'll give me a more condensed, a more chunked out version. So, ‘forgetting’ operates through a series of chunking processes, which incorporates in remembering and forgetting as an entanglement, as an interplay of each other. So, the first philosophical framework you need to espouse is to look at these two activities as informing and shaping each other in great fundamental, ontological, functional ways. The second theory in memory studies that we take very seriously, and this connects more closely and more organically with the title of my lecture this evening; and that is, we need to take a look at memory not just as a retrospective activity, but also as a prospective activity, as an anticipatory activity. In other words, every act of remembrance is also organically an active anticipation. You anticipate the future; you were able to navigate the future better through the mode of memory. So, memory should be seen as a retrospective and perspective. It is going back as well reconstructed as well as anticipatory

in many ways. There are a lot of really interesting research in neuroscience as well as in philosophy, of the anticipatory quality of memory, the prospective quality of memory, and this connects more organically with the title of my lecture today, 'The Future of Memory Studies,' because memory, by default, is not just going back in the past, but also futuristic inequality and what you remember, how we remember, also orients the future. So, I define memory as an orientation-an orientation which includes the past as well as the future. I'll come back to this point- 'orientation,' later.

[07:55] **Dr. Parui:** But just to give you a very quick summary of the kind of work we do in our Centre for Memory Studies, you're very welcome to visit us at IIT Madras; some of you might be coming to the upcoming conference that we have later this month. But, just to give you a very quick summary, we look at memory fundamentally in two different ways- one is the neural molecular mechanism of memory, in terms of how the memory operates in the brain, in a skull, in our neurons, the electrochemical reactions which constitute memory, the synaptic reactions, electrochemical reactions, the neuro-mechanism through which, the molecular mechanism through which memory operates, and also the more macro, the less micro, the more macro cultural quality of memory- in terms of how memory becomes history, memory becomes monuments, museums, artifacts, culture, literature, narratives, etc.

[08:43] **Dr. Parui:** So, as you can see, there is this, and this is what Andrea Hoskins talks about in great detail throughout his magnificent work, that is, we need to take a look at memory as a connective as well as an emergent activity. It emerges from a site, you know. That site could be a monument, the site could be a brain, the site could be a cellular mechanism, the site could be an artificial intelligence machine. At the same time, memory is by default connective in quality; it must be able to connect across. So, there is this constant interplay of the emergent and the connective quality of memory. Now this takes different shapes, different forms and different points of historical time. So, we live in a post-digital age today, but the more dominant version of memory is the digital media. But you know, it's always been that way. I mean pre-digital media, then there was something else in the print media and then pre-print media, they are other kinds of modes of transfer of memory. But there is a fundamentally kinetic quality about memory. In fact, that it should be able to move, it should be able to sort of have an interfacial kinetic connective quality through which we, you know, have what we call 'history' or 'collective memory'. So, in our centre, we look at this intersectionality between the molecular mechanism of memory and a more historical, cultural, material mechanism of memory. And again, we are looking at these not as ontological opposites, but as something which is an entanglement, as it was. I'm very fond of this word, so I might bore you with this. But repeated use of this word 'entanglement', it's a very handy word. But this entanglement of remembering and forgetting, this entanglement of retrospection and anticipation, this entanglement of molecular mechanism and cultural mechanism, constitutes what we broadly define as 'memory studies.'

[10:20] **Dr. Parui:** Now of course, it's one of those organically multidisciplinary disciplines, shall we say, which constitutes which is plucked into psychology, plucked into neuroscience, plucked into history, archaeology and of course, literature, which makes memory studies a very, very rich dynamic discipline, but also sometimes a little bit notoriously dynamic. In terms of how we define it, it can be, you know, be a series of things. Memory can be about economics. Memory can be about... almost everything under the sun is about memory. There is a three core key evolutionary quality of memory. So, we've evolved as a primate because

you remembered. You know, there is a core evolutionary anthropological quality of memory, there is more machine quality of memory, there is this more organic quality of memory in terms of the brain, in terms of the cell; in terms of neurons, etc. But what I intend to do in this particular session is to stick to my basic fundamental discipline, which is literature.

[11:17] **Dr. Parui:** Why is literature important for memory studies? And then why is the literary education important, in other words, in memory studies? Because, you know, we're living at a time where the whole ontology of education is very, very complex. It can be politicized. It can be technologized. It can be, you know, cultured in different kinds of ways. So, education becomes a very important instrument, a very important commodity, a very important function of our culture and not least in a post-digital age. So, the kinetic quality of education is very different from the way it was. You know, the more distributive quality of education, the more kinetic quality of education, the more connected quality of education is something we experience, for better or for worse, in the post digital world we live in today. So how is the literary angle, the literary landscape, important for a more nuanced understanding of memory and memory studies? Now, let's take a look at literature. So, you know, if you want to define 'what is literature' in the first place, it is sometimes important to define the literary as a medium. You know, if we are talking about the digital medium, the artificial medium, the analogue medium, we also need to come up with the definition of the literary medium. So, what is the literary medium? In other words, how do you know that this particular passage, this particular language, this particular mode of communication is literary in quality? Right. Now when some come to start thinking about the literary medium, it becomes very complex medium, because on the one hand, it's primarily linguistic in quality. It is operative through language; you build stories through language, letters, etc. But of course, it's much more than just language. It is not just.... So, there's a difference between, let's say, a piece of journalistic information and a piece of poetry, right? So, if I were to tell you before I came to this, you know, particular session, I was taking a walk in my apartment and I saw 12 lovely flowers. That's one way of putting it. I'm giving you the data. I'm giving you the number. But if I were to tell you "Ten thousand saw I at a glance, tossing their heads in a sprightly dance"; now the second is more of an effective communication. So, it's not relying on data. It's not relying on number. You're never going to question me- 'Did I actually see 10,000 flowers?' It was a 7337, right. Because you're immediately in the realm of the effective, in the realm of the hyperbolic, the metaphoric, etc. So, there is this linguistic plasticity about literature which makes it a very, very amenable medium to study when you look at memory.

[13: 37] **Dr. Purui:** Now, what do you mean by linguistic plasticity and how does it connect to the entire politics of education and anti-ontology of education in the post-digital age? Because that's something we need to keep grounding ourselves in, you know. What is education today? And how is the literary education an important tool, the human-centric literary education? Because, you know, almost everywhere we talk about the AI, we talk about the emerging machines. You know this is the Terminator age as it were; the rise of machines, etc. I'll come back to that point later- that sort of the dystopian dream, the dystopian condition that we constantly consume and we love to consume even as we fear it. I'll come back to the point later in the session, hopefully.

[11:15] **Dr. Parui:** But I'd like to do a little bit more on this entanglement, this relationship between the literary medium and what we call memory studies, because surely, there are

different ways to look at memory and the more immediate ways that come to mind are psychology, neuroscience, archaeology, museum studies, you know, anthropology, a series of things. So, why Literature at all? What is the purpose? What is the function that Literature offers? What is the contribution of Literature? What does Literature offer in terms of engagement and study of memory, right? And this is interesting because I pick up; this is several things you can pick up, but I pick up the affective quality of literature as a very important ingredient through which you look at memory, because one of the key things we need to remember about memory, especially human memory, autobiographical memory, what we call autobiographical memory, is the emotive quality of memory, right; the emotional quality of memory, the affective quality of memory. And if you define memory in three different phases, if we, let's say, have a diagram of memory, the way things work, we can broadly classify it as a series of three things- encoding, consolidation and retrieval, right. So, you can encode the information, you consolidate the information and depending on the strength of consolidation, becomes short term or long term and then of course, you retrieve it. So, it's not just, you know, we often talk about memory as only retrieval, but it's actually more complex than that. There's a process of encoding. So, I'm taking a walk and I see an accident in front of me- my brain encodes the information. And then, of course, depending on how emotionally connected I am to that particular event, the consolidation happens. At a later stage, the brain can sort of re-context or reconstruct it if the context matches. Hence, retrieval takes place.

[15:59] **Dr. Parui:** Now, you will notice each of the three phases- encoding, consolidation, retrieval- has a slippery quality about it. In other words, every time you encode something, you're obviously also leaving out many things. You're not noticing less of the colour of the shirt a person is wearing as a bystander, looking at the accident. Your brain has already forgotten that; de-encoded that. It doesn't get into the encoding process. So, there's a very fundamental similarity of resonance, shall we say, between the process of encoding and the process of representation; what we call the Literature. You represent a story, the very old debate about, you know, story and plot, the raw material and the narrative which emerges from the raw material, how to design a narrative, how to design the story, which then becomes, you know, some kind of a plot. So, there is a sense of emplotment, which takes place at a very fundamental quality about memory. So, when you encode the information, it's also a form of emplotment. It's like writing a novel in your brain. It's like writing fiction in your brain. So, you're constantly mixing up things which are happening and you're anticipating something else. You're imagining something else. And all along, the important thing is, there's a very strong emotive quality about it. So, emotion becomes the very key quality in the entire cognition process.

[17: 12] **Dr. Parui:** And as a series of really rich neuroscientific work on the relationship between emotion and cognition, the immediate scientist who comes to mind is Antonio Damasio. So, if you read Damasio's work on emotion and cognition, he actually takes a very interesting stance. He's plopped into philosophy, he refers to Spinoza, he refers to Keats, he refers to a series of literary and philosophical figures in his understanding of cognition and emotion, and a central thesis that he comes up with is- a large part of what we call cognition depends on an emotive frame, emotional frame, the emotional attachment that the brain has at that particular point of time with that particular event, which then becomes an encoded material in the brain which can be consolidated, which can be retrieved later. So, at a very

fundamental, organic, sequential, diachronic, whatever level you want to call it- there is a great organic similarity between the process of encoding and the process of representations. Because if you talk about fiction as emerging from a raw material, if you talk about fiction as a plot which is emerging from a recognizable world, but you're obviously defamiliarizing it, you're constantly mixing it up with imagination, that becomes a very fundamental similarity in terms of encoding.

[18:21] **Dr. Parui:** Now, what is the other thing about fiction which makes it important in memory studies? We talked about effect. We talked about representation. The third important point, and this is why it begins to become cultural, material, historical, etc; there's a whole point of what we call the literature as focalization, as in who is a storyteller. 'What is the focal point' is a term that is borrowed, shall we say, stolen from camera technique, and literature is very good at stealing things. It borrows a series of metaphors on geography and all kinds of things; architecture. Postmodern canon is a sort of theft from architectural jargon and vocabulary. But focalization is as a point, as a metaphor, as a concept which is borrowed from the camera. You know, what is the focal point, what is the perspective of position through which the story has been told, the story is being experienced, the emotion is being experienced, in other words. So, this degree of focalization is important even when it comes to memory, as in who is a rememberer? Who is doing the memory? So, who is the person who is positioning and orienting the memory? Now, you can be aware this is why it begins to get political, discursively designed, you know, culturally encoded and all the rest of it. What becomes cultural studies. As in who is the storyteller? Who was the agency? Who is the knowledge provider? Who is, you know, Guardian of Knowledge and the archive, etc. So, we can begin to think about those terms immediately.

[19:46] **Dr. Parui:** But the more known thing that literature does is it is able to give you a series of different focal points. The one particular novel, one particular story is equipped- the medium is so plastic, the medium is so elastic in quality, ontologically speaking, it is able to accommodate many points of view, multiple points of view. Now you might say cinema can do it. You might say film can do it, and you're absolutely right, which is why literature has a very congested relationship with films. And, you know, those of you who have done research on, let's say, modernism and cinema, you'd know that cinema was seen as a threat. People like Virginia Woolf, you know, they saw cinema as a new powerful medium which would take away literature. But literature is more complex, obviously, because it does this entirely through language. It doesn't require any audio-visual apparatus, and of course, literature can be a private form of consumption as well as a collective consumption. So, Harry Potter release can have a series of people queuing up at the same time. It is, you know, you can read a poem privately and enjoy it and be moved by it privately. So, this entire medium is designed to articulate and accommodate multiple points of view. The multifocality of literature shall we say.

[20:57] **Dr. Parui:** Now the other important factor about literature which makes it really amenable as a really interesting instrument in memory studies is a whole process of ambivalence. So, what is ambivalence? I just talked about how we need to take a look at remembering and forgetting, not as ontological opposites but as connected categories. At the same time, anticipation and retrospection, at the same time, nostalgia and future buildings, all these things begin to come together in very complex ways, in terms of how memory operates at a molecular level, but also how memory operates at a collective level. So, they go ontology

of nostalgia. And those of us who studied nostalgia, people like Svetlana Boyem etc, you'll find that a large part of what we call nostalgia is aspirational inequality, right? So, you get nostalgic about something which may have never existed and the whole orientation of nostalgia is you're trying to imagine a better future. This is a utopian quality of nostalgia because it's looking forward in time. It is anticipatory in quality in many ways. So, you can see how even a very collective level nostalgia operates in a very complex way and in terms of being retrospective as well as anticipatory and prospective in quality. But at its core, you notice that memory or what we call memory studies requires, you know, an ability to accommodate ambivalence because you're doing it with all these dualisms. It is something almost fundamentally deconstructive in quality and this fundamental deconstructive quality about memory studies makes it amenable to what we call ambivalence. Now, what is ambivalence? We sometimes make the error, shall we say, of looking at ambivalence as uncertainty, as confusion, etc. But if you look at the word carefully, ambivalence is basically 'ambivalence' as in both values as an ambidextrous with both hands equally equipped. So, ambivalence being both values are equally present and equally available and equally valid at any given point of time. So, it is fundamentally opposite, directly undercutting any idea of binary or dualism. So at its core, literature becomes a very important vehicle to accommodate an articulate ambivalence. Because again, the whole idea of the open-ended story, the whole idea of reliable, unreliable memory, the whole idea of contested histories, all this become interesting, you know, viewpoints into some narrative designs through which ambivalence can be accommodated and articulated.

[23:14] **Dr. Parui:** Now taking all these into consideration, let me come back to a point I touched upon a little bit earlier, and that is the whole valley of literary education. So how important is literary education today and the whole politics on education and the whole sort of contested debates about education, especially in post-digital world where education can be operated across smartphones, where education is getting more metonymic in quality, where education is becoming more kinetic in quality, more distributive in quality and the velocity with which education is operated today, whether it's through apps, whether it's through different kinds of digital interfaces. So, what is the validity of literature in this scheme of things, in this magnificent kinesis of education that we are celebrating and also dreading simultaneously, right? Now, literature comes in again in a very interesting way, because one of the features so literature, again this connects to memory in a very interesting way is, along with defamiliarization, what we call defamiliarization; that is a term borrowed from the Russian formalist, as I'm sure most of you are aware, the whole ability of literature to defamiliarize the familiar. So, 'table' becomes something else. The 'child' becomes something else. The ability to metaphorize, in other words. So along with defamiliarization, there's also a sense of deceleration, slowness, right; deliberation, deceleration, that comes in with literature because it forces you, in other words, to engage with a different kind of literary, a different kind of linguistic experiment which is ambivalent in quality, which is a mixture of retrospection, anticipation, which is plastic in quality, which is sort of open-ended in quality. So this whole idea of looking at literature as a form of deceleration is very valid. It is very, very valuable, shall we say, not least in a post-digital world where education is almost always defined through kinesis, also almost always defined through a sense of, you know, spreadability, you know, this contagious quality of education through which you can make something vital. And again, notice how the medical metaphor is used as a marker of, you know, information, as a marker of information contagion, shall we say. So, literature over

here becomes a very important tool to sort of have a dialogue with this kinesis through a process of slowness, through a process of defamiliarization, through a process of deceleration. But equally, it also equips us in very fundamental, organic, neural, psychological, cultural ways to be able to accommodate an articulate ambivalence.

[25:33] **Dr. Parui:** Now, why is it important you should ask, you know, why is ambivalence such a big deal and why am I talking about it all the time? One of the reasons why it is an important thing, especially politically, is because at its very core, ambivalence is equipped to sort of undercut dualism. So, the sense of the other production, the sense of the fear of the other, hostility towards the other; the other can be uncanny, the other can be political, other can be, you know, any kind of alterity, shall we say. So that ability to accommodate the other, that ability to sort of incorporate the other and also establish a relationship or empathy with the other, it's something literature does in a very interesting way. And again, I use the word 'empathy' very, very carefully because it's a very complex term. Empathy has, I'm sure all of us are aware over here, is very different from sympathy, because empathy is the ability to imagine yourself as someone else. Empathy is the ability to sort of situate yourself as another subject's position. And again, it connects very interestingly with imagination, memory, encoding because you are using the data of your memory and using imagination to sort of project it further in order to situate yourself with someone else. So, literature is able to sort of empathize, it's just able to establish a relationship with empathy. It can be something very, very basic, as in you read a book, you empathize with a character, and in the process, you begin to situate yourself in the landscape. But also, experimental literature, an engagement with a deep literary medium is also an exercise in empathy, which is a very vital form of education in almost all cultures, not least in the culture we live in today; in a post-digital culture where things go viral very, very quickly. In fact, we were toying with this idea in our centre. It hasn't materialized yet. And that idea was, is it possible ever to come up with an app of empathy? An empathy app? It's almost impossible, because that is one of the really key points. Because you can't digitize empathy, you can't algorithmize empathy. And perhaps it's a good thing we can't do it as of now, because the whole idea of empathy is the ability to sort of be somewhere and also be somewhere else. So again, there's almost like a very Einsteinian quality about empathy- you are somewhere as well as being somewhere else, because you're able to situate yourself, project yourself, anticipate yourself through a process of remembering and coding and also anticipation and projection and prospective formation. So, it becomes a very complex process. So as of now, I'm not aware of any empathy app, but perhaps there will be some. That's not a distant future.

[28:03] **Dr. Parui:** Now, just to come back and I'm beginning to wind up now. So, as you can see, memory studies as a cultural mechanism, memory studies as a molecular mechanism- it has a series of interplays that is plucked into different disciplines. It is plucked in different kinds of conversations and dialogues, but at its core has all these human attributes- empathy, imagination, anticipation, retrospection, future formation, aspiration. So, all these things become very key ingredients of memory, both at a molecular level as well as at a collective level in terms of how we remember as a collective, in terms of how to remember as a, you know, consumer of history. And of course, history, as we all know, is a very contested way to look at memory because, you know, there it's a textualized version of memory, it's a condensed version of memory. So, when I said at the beginning that memory incorporates encoding, consolidation, retrieval, history can be seen as a massive process of, you know,

encoding at a cultural level, you encode information. And again, you know, we all know, we are aware that history is very contested because not everything gets into history books. So the entire textualization of a nation's memory, the entire textualization of a collective memory is a series of inclusions and exclusions. So, it's equally important for us, as students of memory studies, to take a look at the silences, the absences, the ellipses, the erasures. And again, this is where literature comes in as an instrument for which we can sort of engage with erasure, engage with silences, engage with what is not written. Because at this very fundamental level, we look at literature or the idea of competent reading as the ability to read between the lines: between the lines, what is not stated, what is absent, the half-present, the almost spectral liminal quality, through which knowledge, memory, you know, production, consumption operates at different levels, molecular as well as cultural. Now, just to wind up, so I talked about the effective quality of literature, the ability of literature to sort of produce ambivalence, to produce empathy, to produce deceleration, defamiliarization, different focal points and how all these things are interestingly connected to the way memory is operated in terms of how we remember in our brain, in terms of how we consume memory through different digital devices today, through different forms of history formations, textualizations, materializations, etc.

[30:21] **Dr. Parui:** So, what does it tell us about the future of memory studies, which is the title of this lecture. So, where is 'memory studies' headed in the times to come? So, like I mentioned at the very beginning at a very ontological level, memory is about the future. So, what you remember is what you're likely to anticipate, you know, and that will help you, that will help us equip us to anticipate what is to come. And again, even a level of history writing, very politicized version of history, and you can think of many examples across the world; what is foregrounded as historical fact, what is foregrounded as historical narratives, are often used to legitimize future actions. The future actions can be wars, invasions, territorializations, etc. So, history can be weaponized in many ways and there are countless examples across the world we can think of; how history can be sort of reconstructed in a way which is more future-oriented because it's legitimizing future action, whether it's military action, a policy action or economic action, whatever the action plan may be. But history can be weaponized, instrumentalized in many ways in the covert, over spectacular and explicit ways through which we can anticipate the future.

[31:31] **Dr. Parui:** Now, the future of memory studies in a post-digital age that is one which is a mixture of kinesis as well as, you know, deliberations. So obviously, literature becomes a very important factor and the good news is even with the advent of, you know, digital devices, even with the advent of, you know, technology and of course, the digital world, there's a lot of dooms interactive going around. But you know, books are still read. You know, stories are still consumed, you know, people, there's a lot of collective interest in literature and storytelling. Now storytelling might change. The medium of storytelling might change, the medium of literature might change. So, we can move on to a more digital medium of literature, we can move on to more E-medium of literature. I was in a session of Sahitya Akademi a couple months ago on E-literature. Right. So again, it is a bit simplistic to say that a whole idea of digitization literature will take away the essence or the value of literature. So I'm not entirely sure that it's going to happen because literature has always been able to move across different mediums. There's a preprint literature, then came print literature

and digital literature, inter-literature. So, all kinds of mediums and interfaces have been very, very instrumental in shaping what we call the literary medium today.

[32:39] **Dr. Parui:** So, the future of memory would incorporate literature, would incorporate storytelling, would incorporate digital devices. But, you know, if you go back to the Andrew Hoskins model of looking at memory as emergent as well as connective in quality, I think that fundamental quality of memory will remain unaltered, but it will be emergent, it will be connective. Maybe it'll become more kinetic, more contagious in quality, but at the same time, it will constantly be a source of anticipation, a source of retrospection and projection, and that will continue in the times to come. We might know more about the brain. We might know more about how the brains work, how, you know, the cells become the brain, which become the mind, which becomes the self. We don't know that yet, right? So, we know how synaptic mechanisms work. We know how electrochemical mechanisms work. But we don't quite know how that becomes a subject or a self, which is, you know, able to be ambivalent in quality which is able to anticipate, which is able to empathize. We don't know the process yet. In fact, it's a very interesting sub-genre in literature which became quite popular when I was in my PhD. But that was a neuro novel and I'm sure some of you are aware of it. Some of you may have researched on that, know more about that than I do. But let's take the example of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, which has a neuroscientist- a neurosurgeon as a protagonist- was looking at the brain and having these existential philosophical questions about how the brain becomes the mind, which becomes the self, which becomes a subject, which has the ability to anticipate, hesitate, have ambivalence, empathize, etc. Right. So, at the level of education, I think the literary medium will always have a very, very crucial role. And there's an entire ontology of education in a way we look at it today, even in the post-digital age. Because you know, again, like I said, literature has this ability to produce ambivalence. And the popularity of literature, the reception of literature hasn't dwindled, you know, it has obviously taken different forms.

[34:33] **Dr. Parui:** The curricula may have changed, the pedagogic quality may have changed, the forms may have changed, but we still consume stories, because at the end of the day, we have to remember, it is not about an artistic value all the time. It is not about an aesthetic value all the time. So, we are essentially storytelling mammals. We are the only primates who tell stories. We're the only primates, and you know, Rushdie talks about this, you know, in *Joseph Anton*, his magnificent work, where he talks about how we have evolved through storytelling. You know, the whole evolutionary mechanism through which it evolved from cavemen to hunters to farmers to industrialists, has been through storytelling. And storytelling at this fundamental level is the ability to imagine futures, is the ability to create worlds, story worlds and that media might change, it might become digital, it might become post-digital, it might become equipped with artificial intelligence. But that is a core fundamental evolutionary principle that we will not get rid of and that's part of who we are. So I think the future of memory studies is complex. It is interfacial in quality. It will have more interfaces; it'll have more nodal points. It'll be more of an entanglement of the digital and the analog, the organic and the inorganic. But at its core level, I think we will remain, will stay as situated storytelling animals through which we will consume literature, consume memory and also anticipate the future. So, thank you very much for your attention and I'm happy to take a few questions, if there are any.

[36:11] **Dr. Parui:** There is one question by Dr. Paul, I think. How does sensory memory work? How reliable is it? So, can I start answering it or are we collecting questions for a bit and then....? I'm happy either way.

[36:51] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** Yes Sir. You can answer the question now only.

[36:54] **Dr. Parui:** Ok, great. So, it's a really interesting question. How does sensory memory work? How reliable is it? So, I think I may have established this, you know, a slight degree of ambivalence, that the whole idea of reliability of memory is a very complex phenomenon because, you know, almost all memory is unreliable at a certain point. But that doesn't mean that we are saying because there is no objective memory, let's do away with history, let's do away with all kinds of reliable accounts, etc, because there is no reliability. That's sort of a lazy way to look at memory. But this question is really interesting. I mean sensory memory, the viscerality of memory, the embodied quality of memory, what the body remembers as Shauna Baldwin would put it, is really interesting because it can become a mode of memory which is more...which is deeper in quality, which is more corporeal in quality and perhaps less narrative, perhaps less textual in quality. Now, the question of reliability, unreliability- that can be calibrated in different ways, cognitively, medically, culturally. But I think it is sort of sufficient to say at this point that the whole idea of visceral memory or embodied memory or what we call muscle memory, motor memory, that is fundamentally ontologically different from narrative memory and that is a very good way to take a look at it, say, let's take a look at, let's say, trauma studies, right. So, trauma victims or trauma sufferers, they have this constant dichotomy between what the body remembers and what they're able to shape into a narrative. In fact, one of the earliest psychologists, if you can call him a psychologist, was a contemporary of Freud, Pierre Janet. J-A-N-E-T. I mean he was the one who came up with this concept of traumatic memory and narrative memory. And at his very core level, he sort of conceptualized it as being very ontologically and functionally different. So traumatic memory, by definition, is not narrative because, you know, in order for a traumatic memory to become narrative memory, there must be a lapse of time, there must be a time lag, there must be a temporal division before you can start talking about it. Give a shape through narrative, right. So more than a question of reliability, I think at a very ontological level, it is different from narrative memory. So sensory memory is more visceral, more embodied, more corporeal in quality and to put that in the narrative is almost always impossible, and there's a temporal quality before that can happen. And trauma studies, which is a very important sort of an allied discipline of memory studies, foregrounds that very, very robustly.

[39:32] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** That's extremely interesting. Should we go to another question?

[39:38] **Dr. Parui:** Yeah, sure.

[39:40] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** Yeah. So, the next question is- Is our memory span sensitive to stimulus as well as sensory modality?

[39:48] **Dr. Parui:** Yeah, I mean again it's a very good question. So, the entire idea of stimulus- there has to be a context overlap. Let's say a stimuli happens and the context match. So, the context in which the encoding took place, the first encounter of that event and the context in which the retrieval takes place, because if the match is complete, the memory is very strong, right, which is why simulation is so important. Neuroscientists often use

simulation. You simulate the same environment in which the original memory happened, right? So that overlap of context can be a very important instrument through which you can retrieve memories. So yeah, so stimulus becomes a very important quality in the whole memory research that we sort of see in neuroscience today. What was the second bit of the question?

[Crosstalk 40:37] **Dr. Parui:** Can you repeat the second point?

Sarah Rahaman Shaikh: Just a moment sir. Yeah sure.

[40:41] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** First, is our memory span sensitive to stimulus, then as well as sensory modality?

[40:46] **Dr. Parui:** Yeah, so again, I think it's connected to the first question in a way. There are different senses through which memory is operated. So, if we go by, let's say, the very blunt reading of the five senses, right, that we have, what we know through research is that the one sense which is most amenable to memory in terms of trigger is the sense of smell. And the reason for that is; I'm not a neuroscientist, it's something I have to learn from reading because I'm not trained. But I probably can answer this a little bit because the relationship between smell and memory is a very direct relationship, because what the hippocampus is, the memory centre of the brain and the smell centre in the brain, they have a direct neural pathway, right? It doesn't have to go through the thalamus, which is how the other senses operate. Which is why you notice that smells can trigger memories more than any other senses. So, you smell something, you immediately go back in time and retrieve it. And of course, I'm sure all of you are aware of it, the poster boy for this literature is Proust, right? The whole idea of the Madeleine episode in *Search of Lost Time*. Why he dipped this in Madeleine tea and had it and that so transported them back in time. But I should warn you, this, it's a cheeky thing to say. But I mean, I once found Madeleine and I wanted to taste it and it was a tea shop which had Proust all over it, the Proustian Madeleine and I had it as disgusting. I have no idea how he... maybe it's a cultural thing. It's a very French thing. It was not palatable to my Indian taste at all, yeah.

[42:25] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** Indeed yes! The next question. What is the theoretical account of false memory?

[42:32] **Dr. Parui:** Yeah, it's a very good question. There's a lot of really interesting research on false memory. Again, this is beyond my ken because I'm not a trained psychiatrist or neuroscientist. Well, I'll tell you this, there are two ways in which psychology looks at memory. One is the cognitive bit that I am more amenable to. I sort of know a little bit more about that. The other bit which is more compatible to this question is a clinical psychology bit, right- the medical case studies and false memories and how false memories are created. You know, false memories can be...so different kinds of brain mechanisms, sometimes coping mechanisms for abuse sufferers, sometimes sort of aspirational mechanisms, for, you know, people who don't sort of have the, you know, the gifts of life, so to speak. But false memory can also be quite political in quality, as we all know that it's perfectly possible to create false memories, because again, what we're looking at, why would you create it? I mean, that's the basic question. Why would a political structure, political paradigm, other examples across the world, at different points of history where false memories were created and propagated. And the reason for that, it's not because the government is suddenly very nostalgic or the

government is very sentimental about the past. More often than not, the reason for that is that false memory was used as instruments to orient the future, through policy, through relation, through different kinds of, you know, political, you know activities. In other words, false memories can be a part of the action plan. You know, you legitimize the action plan by creating a false memory, right. So false memory can be very, very... I mean, of course, like I said, it can be a part of clinical psychology. There are really some studies on false memories, but also it can very well be a part of the non-molecular quality of memory, the macro material quality of memory through which false memory is created to orient the future. And this sort of goes back to one of my earliest definitions of memory as acts of orientation. And memory is an act of orientation. And I think what we need to do with memory is a bit like what, let's say, post structuralists like Judith Butler had done with gender, right? So, memory should not be seen as a stable ontology, but rather, as a performative quality; memory as a verb rather than as a noun. It's an act of becoming, unbecoming, rebecoming, again, process of orientations. So false memories can be weaponized in many ways to create orientations, which can have profound and sometimes very evil political consequences.

[45:00] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** Beautiful explanation, Sir. False memory can be extremely dangerous. The next question- the sequence of presenting in a story is important. Can this be a possible way that an author can play with the impression of creating memory for the readers?

[45:20] **Dr. Parui:** Yeah, absolutely. It's a brilliant question actually, because I talked about emplotment for a little bit and I said there's a fundamental similarity between the process of encoding and a process of emplotment because encoding is what the brain does. You know when you see an event, when you see or experience, how the brain encodes the information and in terms of the sequence, but in terms of the bias and the brain is a biased machine, as we all know it. The brain is, you know, a set of neurons, so very biased. So that will encode information in a very biased way. There's a sequence to encoding in that sense, and that sequence can be a very subliminal sequence. It may not be an intentional sequence; it may not be a conscious sequence. But a large part of, and this is where Freud, I think, is still important. I mean no matter how contested or how refuted he is, I think the significance of Freud in psychology today is very historical because he was one of the first philosophers, psychologists, whatever we want to call him today, to place a lot of attention on the unconscious, or the irrational. And his primary theory was: a large part of what we are irrational; is part of a series of irrational events, a series of irrational activities, right? And that is entirely true because if we look at our motor decisions that we take in the course of every day, they are perfectly irrational in quality. I mean, there's no rational reason why I'm moving my right hand and not my left hand at the moment. There's no rational reason why you hold your toothbrush in a certain way while you brush it. So, these are the mortal events. If you think about it, it's unconscious in quality and that unconsciousness is something that Freud acknowledges and celebrates. You think that it is a very important part of who we are because if the brain is constantly conscious of whatever it is doing- so that will exhaust the brain bandwidth in a way that will make it almost impossible. In fact, there's a lot of interesting research and people who suffer from this- they're conscious of everything that drains. So that becomes a brain problem in some ways. So, I think the whole idea of the subliminal sequencing in the brain in terms of how we encode information is very important. And connected to that is the question- so how does emplotment govern memory in a novel,

let's say, with a short story? Of course, it does, because the way you sequence information, the way you sequence the narrative designs, will have a profound impact on what you're trying to foreground and what you're trying to push in the background, right? Because if you look at a text as an interplay of the centre and the margin, right; so, every form of textuality, every form of textual production will have a centre and a margin which are mutable. The centre can be margin tomorrow, margin can be centre tomorrow. So, it's a very mutable interplay. But the whole point is, what are you foregrounding in the sequence? Because that is what you are biased to sort of foreground as a dominant memory and a less dominant memory. See, a very quick response to this would be all of us have favourite novels, right. All of us have favourite short stories. And if you look at even our most favourite stories, the most favourite novels, there are certain characters that we remember and certain characters you forget, right? Why does that happen? That happens because the author, whether intentionally or subliminally, will always create a narrative design in the same way as the brain creates the encoding design through which the sequence is created. So, there is a very common similarity, very fundamental similarity, between the two.

[48:48] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** Thank you, Sir. The next question. Sreejita Dutta says from the comment section: I have a question for Sir. As students of literature, where can we start with our study on memory studies?

[49:04] **Dr. Parui:** Yeah, I mean, see, as students of literature, I think we are very privileged to study memory studies because we are already sort of trained to decode narratives. We are already trained to decode silences, erasures, slippages, misinformation, absences in a way that a computer scientist can't, right? Which is why, let's say, you know, people like us are relevant hopefully in memory studies today and is not entirely sabotaged by psychologists. I shouldn't say that; they're lovely people. But you know, there is also a lot of premiumness on literature and literary people in terms of studying memory and narratives because literature, as I said, is a linguistic experiment through which we can study erasures, study absences, study slippages. And that is a very important factor in memory because a large part of memory is about what is not remembered, what is not represented. And in fact, you know, we sometimes have this running joke in our centre that we should call our centre 'Centre for, you know, Forgetting', rather than 'Centre for Remembering or Memory Studies'. Because you know, even politically, culturally, you know, in a molecular way, it is important to study what is forgotten, what gets forgotten and what is so. And again, they look at forgetting not as an innocent activity, but as something we just manipulated, produced. How do you manufacture oblivion? How do you manufacture, you know, forgetting, you know, that can be done in a very material way. Some historical figures are forgotten because they're not included. They're not encoded anymore in history textbooks, right? And that's how you manage to forget certain figures that can have political consequences, etc. But just you, you know, respond to the question with an example and maybe this will be helpful. Since the beginning of the novel, we have examples of how novel writing and representation is an interplay of foregrounding and forgetting, right? So, let's say, and I give this example a lot, so this might be familiar to some of you. The example of Daniel Defoe was Robinson Crusoe, right? Where the entire novel Robinson Crusoe, I mean, it's a staggeringly boring novel, but it's interesting to see how. I mean, it's about a white man going to an island, taking over, tantalizing, the gun, you know, the religious text, the salvation of the native, the meta-text for imperialism in many ways. But if you read the novel, there are pages and pages of very dense

detail and extremely boring description of how Crusoe is building the fence, sort of fortifying himself. He can sort of describe; Defoe was describing each nail as it were. And it's so dense, so thick, it'll put you to sleep because that is the important part, that he's fortifying himself with fences and the cottage and the plantation and becomes the shepherd, etc, etc. But towards the end of the novel, you'll notice, those of you who have read it would know that this one-half sentence towards the end of the novel where he says, 'by the way, I came back, got married, my wife produced three sons, and then she died,' Right, now, the nail is more important than the wife in Robinson Crusoe. Why? Because the whole point of the woman in that novel is to produce more men who'll carry on the Empire, who will carry on this expansionist program. Right? And again, the wife is brought in a sentence and killed in the same sentence, and she's almost forgotten. And that tells you a lot about the culture of the time. That tells you a lot about the cultural momentum of the time. Islands are more important than women. Nails are more important than women. The machine gun, the gun is more important than a woman, right? So that becomes part of the collective memory momentum. So, a look at literature, reading, a competent reading, a detailed reading of the novel, will tell you a lot about the orientation of memory at any given point of time. So, I think as students of literature, we are especially privileged to do it.

[52:50] **Sarah Rahaman Shaikh:** Extremely true, Sir. Exactly. Thank you so much. It was an inspiring and extremely insightful discussion. I learned a lot personally.

[53:15] **Dr. Parui:** Thank you very much for having me here.