



Memory, Erasure, and Trauma: Deconstructing the Symbolism of the Violet Vein in “The Vein of Memory”

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.37>

Abstract:

The paper examines how memory plays a remarkably significant role in the development of the plot of the short story “The Vein of Memory” by K. R. Meera. In the story, Meera portrays an elderly woman writer who could not make use of her creativity productively because of her familial duties and marital bondage. The old woman is presented as a person who has lost her memory in an attempt to commit suicide. Thus, memory plays a substantive role, creating an abrupt turning point in this story. Here, the paper attempts to deconstruct the storyline by probing the woman writer’s psychology and examining the status of her memory through a profound examination of the narration of her experiences in her suppressed marital life. The paper states that the protagonist is pretending memory loss or erasure of memory to mitigate the psychological trauma of the experiences she underwent as well as the pain of her unfulfilled ambitions.

Keywords: Memory, Erasure, Trauma, Suppression, Deconstruction.

Introduction

K. R. Meera, a well-acclaimed, multi-award-winning Malayalam writer, looks upon writing as the ultimate act of resistance. Her stories and novels break the shackles of conventional patriarchal norms through the bold actions of her protagonists. Meera picks subjects that many mainstream male writers are afraid to address. Meera's female protagonists never claim to be feminists, but their fantasies, hopes, expressions, and actions loudly proclaim it. In an interview with *The Huffpost*, Meera states, "I don't intend to write stories about feminists. I want to write stories which would turn the readers — men, women and transgender persons — into feminists" (Susan). Not being apolitical, she unabashedly and daringly voices her observations and standpoints publicly, which disrupts patriarchal power structures. In an interview with Susanna Rustin, Turkish author Elif Shafak navigates the pressure of being a public intellectual in Turkey. She speaks about the inescapable burden of the writer from the global South thus:

If you are a writer from Turkey, Pakistan, Nigeria, or Egypt, you don't have the luxury of being apolitical. You can't say 'that's politics, I'm just doing my work'. For me, coming from the women's movement, politics is not just about parties and parliament. There is politics in our private space and in gender relations as well. Wherever there's power, there's politics. I don't have the luxury of being apolitical. (Rustin)

This statement of Shafak's aligns precisely with K. R. Meera's literary ethos. Meera, too, does not enjoy the luxury of being apolitical. Both writers expand the definition of the political by localising it within the claustrophobic spaces of domesticity and gender performance. For both Shafak and Meera, the domestic sphere is a primary political battlefield, meaning that any realistic portrayal of a woman's everyday life becomes an act of political dissent. In Meera's writings, she engages

with persistent gender-based issues in society realistically, thereby eliciting a sense of recognition—an ‘I too have’ realisation—among her readers, especially female audiences. A similar recognition can be traced out in K. R. Meera’s short story “The Vein of Memory”, translated into English by Jayasree Ramakrishnan Nair. The plot of the story revolves around an old woman writer who is presented as the one who lost her memory in an attempt to commit suicide. In the story, K. R. Meera portrays her heroine as someone who could not make use of her creativity productively because of her familial duties and marital bondage. The burdens of domestic life and the suppression of her narrative talent lead to the repression of her desires and emotions, which end in a suicide attempt.

Theoretical Framework

The paper analyses how the three core concepts or threads— memory, erasure and trauma—contribute to the development of the short story. To investigate this, this paper establishes a tripartite theoretical framework combining trauma theory, deconstruction, and feminist literary criticism. The research design employs detailed textual analysis, and the application of Derrida’s concept of deconstruction challenges the story’s fixed meanings and hierarchical binary oppositions. The study is based on the core ideas enunciated by Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk, which offer frameworks for understanding the linguistic, psychological, and somatic aspects of trauma. The feminist ideas put forward by Simon de Beauvoir are also integrated into the paper to trace traumatic experiences.

Close Reading of the Text

The title “The Vein of Memory” is symbolic, echoing the role of memory in the plot. Both memory and erasure play a substantive role and create an abrupt turning point in this short story,

which also discloses the silenced traumatic life of the old woman. Here, the paper attempts to deconstruct the storyline by probing the woman writer's psychology and examining the status of her memory through a profound analysis of her experiences.

The story begins abruptly with the reference to the violet vein of memory itself: "a violet coloured vein stood out, challenging on her wrinkled neck." Here, the violet vein becomes the strongest metaphor of memory. The entire narrative unfolds accordingly as she memorises each incident from her life. Just as her scalp and some black strands of hair beneath the grey hair became visible, her suppressed desires and thoughts were also let out after a prolonged period of silence to the newlywed wife of her grandson. She recollected each past incident without any difficulty. At first, the woman writer recalled a meeting where Vallathol had attended before independence. She had written a poem and read it at the meeting when she was only nine. Still, she remembered the exact lines of the poem she had recited there, "...the sweet scent of the flowers of imagination in our humble gardens too..." (Raveendran 110). The Mahakavi blessed her on the head after the recitation, and she visualised the whole scene as it happened before her. Her narration never gives any hint about her memory loss.

The old woman then reminisced that her husband had first seen her at this meeting. Nevertheless, she stopped to continue speaking about her marriage and "carefully broke off a white thread" (111) of her *neriyatu*. It seemed she had deliberately ended the topic, which shows her displeasure with marital life. Nevertheless, the reader can assume that, with that first meeting, her marriage was arranged. As the story progresses, the narrator gives many hints about the woman writer's unpleasant marital life. She was forced to fulfil all the wishes of her husband and mother-in-law, forgetting all her ambitions as a writer. As Virginia Woolf said, "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (4). This old woman in the short story did not have a room, at least

a space of her own, and she was penniless in her marital life as well. The entire story is stuffed with symbols of broken marital life or unpleasant family life. The image of “breaking off a white thread” symbolises her broken family life. Similarly, the *sindoor* she puts on her *simantarekha* clinging there for a second “like a drop of blood” (Raveendran 111) before falling off is also such a symbol of her suppressed ambitions and fragmented self.

The old lady then recalled the past days of her story writing, when her husband was in jail. She wrote her first story about a woman who was imprisoned during the independence uprising. Nobody at her husband’s home encouraged her to write. She wrote her first story, “in the light of a lamp at the corner of the room” (112), without being caught by the mother-in-law. According to her mother-in-law, reading or writing would not be useful to the family. That was why when her husband said that he wanted to marry the girl who recited the poem at the meeting, it created a furore in his family. Because the stereotypical role of girls is cooking, giving birth to babies, etc., and there is no use in writing stories and poems.

Society imposes certain norms on women, so that they always remain on the fringes rather than at the forefront. She is placed in a domestic space, where she has to perform her duties as a mother, wife, cook and so on. The society always wants a sacrificing and nurturing mother, a virgin heroine (*femme fatale*), a dutiful daughter, a redundant wife, a *pativrata* (loyal wife) from her. (Samuel & Vellanikaran 67).

The old woman was also a silent, dutiful and sacrificing woman or an unpaid labourer (wife). Nevertheless, her first story reveals her desire to lead a strong social and political life apart from her monotonous domestic life in her husband’s house.

The woman wrote her second story when her husband was in Delhi as an MP, and all the family members except her went to visit Delhi. She also wanted to go with them, but his mother did not allow her. She recollected:

I wanted so much to see Delhi. However, he didn't take me. The answer every time was "later -- later." Time passed. Once during the long vacation, he took his mother and children to see Delhi. If I too were to go, who would look after the cows? Who would light the lamp at father's *asthithara*?... these were mother's questions. Anyway, I never could go.
(Raveendran 112)

From her reminiscences themselves, it is evident that her husband's house becomes a metaphor of patriarchal society, which considers women as the 'Other.' "Though the woman's experience dates back to 20th century Kerala, it is no wonder that many women are still considered unpaid domestic labourers, and all of their skills, talent or potential are overlooked" (Reshmipriya 187).

The second story was about a woman writer who wrote stories under a male pseudonym and sent them to magazines. At last, when one of the stories won a prize, her husband unabashedly took ownership of her writing. After recollecting her second story, the old lady laughed by saying "What all desires...." (Raveendran 113). This comment will make the readers perplexed about whether it really happened. In the phallogocentric society, men of a 'dominant' nature silence women and their creativity. Here, Simone de Beauvoir's famous, iconic quote in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283), which highlights the social construction of gender, is very relevant. The old woman's identity, storytelling talent and freedom are curtailed by androcentric societal norms that attempt to mould her into the socially constructed ideal of 'a woman.'

The woman writer's creativity, deep interest, and passion for writing and reading were evident when she discussed naming her son. She wished to name him 'Ravindranath' in honour of Tagore, but her husband named him 'Ramankutty'. So she did not think of any name for her daughter, Srikutty, because she knew that no wish of hers got fulfilled. Furthermore, as every woman whose desires were thwarted did, she wanted to fulfil her desires and ambitions through her children. So she told her son, Ramankutty, to name his kids 'Ravindranath' or 'Mrinalini' when he had children.

Marriage, particularly in the Indian context, is seen as an erasure of a woman's hitherto existing identity and preferences. She is surrounded by a rigid code of 'appropriateness' that expects her to function in particular ways. Self-sacrifice is not only expected but is cleverly glorified by our culture, which is nothing but a cruel ploy to push the woman into never-ending slavery. (Athira 67)

As Athira M. states, the old woman's life is a fine example of the erasure of a woman's identity after marriage. In the translator's note, Jayasree Ramakrishnan Nair says,

The story is replete with culturally significant terms that defy translation. For instance, the old lady addressing her husband as '*ivitatteyaal*' (the one here) marks the man's position and importance in the household. At the same time, the term '*ivitatteyamma*' (the mother here) highlights the distinction between the mother-in-law and one's own mother. (115)

This address gives the sense that the lady always felt like an outsider, and the only people who are part of the family are only her husband and mother-in-law. This sense is evoked by a feeling of a lack of space, both physical or emotional, within the family.

During the encounter between the old lady and the girl, Padmakshi, whose relationship with the old lady is unclear, revealed that the old woman had been searching for an old book ever since she had lost her memory. She would climb up to the attic and go down to the cellar to search for that book. Finally, she was given some old books, which somewhat relieved her. Here, the old lady is portrayed as having lost her memory. However, only through Padmakshi's words does the reader become aware of the old lady's memory loss. Otherwise, nowhere in the story is the lady's memory loss hinted at.

Symbolism in the Text

The violet vein is a beautiful and strong metaphor of memory. The symbolism of the "violet vein" can be decoded as both a visual and psychic marker of suppressed wounding. After listening to the old lady, the young girl also inspected that violet vein on her outstretched neck. Here, a sense of interconnectedness is developed between the old lady and the girl which leads her to realise that "even her newlywed husband is a part of the long lineage of men who have acted as the active perpetrators of this unequal system" (Reshmipriya 193). The protruding artificial teeth symbolise the old woman's lost independence, which was self-reflective for the girl, who realised that moment as an instance of internal transformation and an understanding of shared fate. Here, the boundaries between personal and collective memory are ruptured when the girl captures the old lady's memory and trauma "as a vehicle for solidarity, creating a shared emotional space between them" (187). It echoes the fact that the collective memory of trauma and the resistance to it creates a sisterhood bonding among women. Here, the old woman becomes the mouthpiece of many women writers whose creativity got ignored and were silenced and domesticated under the yoke of patriarchy. Here, K. R. Meera invites attention to the many underlying parallels among women writers across history and cultures.

“The violet coloured vein” which stood out challengingly, “the jutted out artificial teeth,” “the black strands beneath her grey hair,” “the moth-eaten, water stained family photos,” “her cracked sound,” “her crumbled white blouse,” “the falling down *sindoor* soaked in sweat,” and “the wrinkled throat” all act as the metaphors of the old woman’s fragmented self and dissatisfied marital life. The noose also functions as a powerful symbol, suggesting a paradoxical form of liberation from accumulated trauma and emotional turmoil. As Resh Susan mentioned in an interview with K. R.Meera,

Noose and knots have been recurring themes both as symbols of suffocation and liberation — *Hangwoman* thrives on nooses, the protagonist in “The Deepest Blue” laments that “*thali* — the marriage pendant — was tied around my neck like a noose”, Rajani in “The Unseeing Idol of Light” can effortlessly tie hangman knots.

In this context, the noose symbolises both the old woman’s fate and her desire for liberation from her trapped, suppressed life.

In the paper, memory functions as both a site of pain and a means of articulation. The memory and trauma in the story reveal the old woman’s identity. Traumatic memories are inherently disruptive, overwhelming the mind’s natural defence mechanisms (Freud). Unlike ordinary memories, which integrate smoothly into conscious recollection, traumatic memories remain fragmented and unprocessed (van der Kolk). Here, in the short story, memory acts as the central, transformative chord, unveiling the unseen, unheard, and unspoken trauma and oppression of the old woman. The psychological disturbance or trauma disrupts the continuity of articulation or recollection, which leads to repetition, silence, dissociation, or a fragmented, nonlinear narrative.

The Violet Vein as the Site of Deconstruction

Deconstruction, developed by Jacques Derrida, challenges the structuralist assumption that meaning is stable and based on fixed oppositions. In works such as *Of Grammatology* and *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida argues that Western thought is organised through hierarchical binary oppositions—speech/writing, presence/absence, reason/emotion, and memory/forgetting. These hierarchies are unstable because the privileged term depends upon the excluded term for its meaning. According to Derrida, meaning cannot be fixed at one particular point because the secondary element in the binary is already present within the primary one as a “trace.” So, meaning is constantly deferred through what Derrida calls *différance* — a process of difference and deferral. Deconstruction does not merely invert binaries but reveals how meaning emerges from the play between opposites. In literary texts, deconstruction exposes moments of contradiction and silence that destabilise fixed, coherent interpretations (361-70). This is relevant to K. R. Meera’s “The Vein of Memory,” where memory, trauma, and identity emerge not as fixed entities but as mutually dependent, unstable constructs.

The story unveils an entirely different picture at the end, when the old woman herself reveals the reason for her memory loss. Here is K. R. Meera’s twist in the story when the old lady says to the girl, “unnatural death” (*durmaranam*). She continues, “When you tie the noose, it should tighten here on this vein. Who knew that?.... Don’t err on the vein.... If you go wrong, you’ll lose your memory” (Raveendran 114). Through the term ‘*Durmaranam*’ (unnatural death), the old woman conveys the death of her identity and independence. Here, the old woman reveals that in an attempt to commit suicide, she tied the noose on another vein, “the violet vein of memory,” which was not the exact one, and as a result, lost her memory. These words of the old woman actually deconstruct the entire plot structure. The revelation makes one confused whether

she has lost her memory in reality or not. Because she is still remembering her attempt to commit suicide and the related memory loss, she knows everything that happened before and after her suicide attempt.

Cathy Caruth, an American literary critic, identifies trauma as an overwhelming, unassimilated experience that inherently resists linear narrative (4). According to Caruth, amnesia and the inability to speak about a traumatic event are hallmarks of trauma. She adds that “survival itself can be a crisis” (62). Traumatic experiences are often distorted in the victim’s mind, making accurate interpretation and communication profoundly challenging. Nevertheless, here the woman recollects and pinpoints each episode in her life: the recital of her poem in front of Vallathol, her first meeting with her husband, her unpleasant family life, the effort she had taken for writing each story, the naming of her children by her husband and the failed suicide attempt. The narration of several incidents from the past reveals that she is fully in possession of her memories, without any perplexity. Also, her broken words connote that if she had known about that violet vein and the loss of memory earlier, her attempt would not have been a failure. So what Padmakshi said and the old woman repeated about her memory loss may not be right. It also exposes her attempt to commit suicide as an act of resistance to patriarchal power structures. By recounting her past experiences in her autobiography, she challenges phallogocentric norms.

At this point, one question arises: why did the lady pretend to have lost her memory? The answer is she did not want to disclose the real happenings and the reason behind her attempt to kill herself. She wanted to mitigate her psychological trauma by not facing the interrogation of others. When she searched for Ramankutty’s old notebook, Radhechi pacified her by giving her another old notebook. All the family members thought that, because her memory was lost, she had misjudged these books as the ones she was searching for. However, at no point in her narration

does she misidentify the handpicked notebook as Ramankutty's. That means she was well aware of everything. Thus, with this fact, the entire storyline and what the violet vein symbolises get deconstructed.

In this story, erasure occurs as a defence mechanism to mitigate psychological pain. Erasure refers to the deliberate or unconscious suppression of memory, which is itself a form of pretended memory loss. If anything is left unsaid, forgotten, or obscured in the old woman's narration, it is not memory loss but erasure, a strategy of survival or imposed silence. The old woman chooses to pursue her silence by pretending memory loss after the failed attempt to commit suicide. Here she deliberately suppresses memory or embraces self-imposed silence. In this sense, erasure becomes a coping mechanism, allowing the subject to endure psychic trauma by suppressing memories. This imposed silence transforms erasure into a site of resistance by foregrounding memory. The old woman's reminiscences gradually reconstruct her suppressed self. In narrating her past, she destabilises erasure into an act of reclamation, resisting the forces that make her invisible. Thus, *"The Vein of Memory"* presents erasure not as a passive absence but as a contested space where survival, silence, and resistance intersect. Besides, the story shows that erasure itself becomes another form through which memory survives. The attempted erasure contains the very memory it seeks to conceal.

"The Vein of Memory" is not presented as a fixed account of experience, but as a complex interplay of remembrance and erasure, where the old woman's trauma is both expressed and obscured. Therefore, if the memory loss is feigned, the story is not about the loss of memory at all but the impossibility of erasing memory. The protagonist performs forgetting, but the violet vein repeatedly exposes the persistence of what is supposedly forgotten. The text thus demonstrates Derrida's insight that what is excluded or suppressed never disappears; it returns as a "trace" that

destabilises every attempt at fixed meaning. In Derridean terms, forgetting carries the trace of memory within it. The “forgotten” event remains active beneath the surface. Thus, forgetting becomes a mode of remembering. The protagonist’s silence about her traumatic past does not indicate the absence of memory but its continued presence. Here, the supposedly absent term, memory, makes the other term, forgetting, possible, which collapses the binary. The silence of the protagonist is not the negation of articulation but a strategic form of articulation itself. By withholding speech, she communicates the persistence of trauma more effectively than direct narration could. Through a deconstructive reading, the paper shows how the binaries of memory/forgetting, presence/absence, and silence/articulation are destabilised within the narrative, revealing the complex and often contradictory nature of traumatic experience. The violet vein becomes the point where all three binaries collapse. By interrogating the binary oppositions such as memory and forgetting or presence and absence, the text is deconstructed.

Conclusion

Drawing upon a Derridean deconstructive approach, the analysis destabilises the binary opposition between memory and erasure. It demonstrates how textual gaps and psychological defence mechanisms create the abrupt turning points that disclose the old woman’s silenced life. Furthermore, grounded in feminist criticism’s focus on exposing patriarchal containment and reclaiming marginalised subjectivities, this paper deconstructs the narrative by probing the woman writer’s psychology. By analysing the fractured status of her memory and looking deeply into her narrated experiences, the study uncovers the gendered power dynamics that mandate her erasure and shape her trauma. By relying upon the theory of deconstruction, the concept of traumatic memory, and feminist ideas, this paper argues that “The Vein of Memory” presents memory not as a stable repository of the past but as a fragmented and contested space where trauma, erasure,

and remembrance continuously intersect. Most of the existing studies on K. R. Meera's works have largely focused on themes such as gender, identity, marginalisation, and psychological conflict, while paying very little attention to the deconstructive dimensions of memory and trauma in "The Vein of Memory." By foregrounding the relationship between silenced experience and fragmented memory, the paper offers a new perspective on Meera's representation of trauma and expands critical discussions of symbolism, subjectivity, and narrative complexity in her fiction.

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