

BLENDING OF DIVERSE LAYERS OF MEMORY IN A MEMOIR

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Abstract. The current research highlights memory as a central element in memoir writing, which shapes the narrative through both distant and recent recollections. It is based on the book “The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family Memoir” by Victoria Belim (2024), which was written during the current war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine. It makes the article vital and testifies to its novelty. In the discussed memoir, memory plays a multifaceted role, being represented explicitly and implicitly within the narrative structure. Distant memories are mostly related to the author’s childhood experiences, going back to the Soviet times, while recent memories provide a lens for contemporary reflection and identity construction. Explicit representations of memory are conveyed through direct references using such words as recall, recollection, memories and remember. However, implicit memories can be perceived through vivid descriptions of details, events, emotions and physical sensations which bind the past with the present and bring them to life. It is notable that both explicit and implicit layers of memory enable the author to connect her personal experiences with the historical and cultural background, making the issues touched upon in the memoir not only personal but universal, too. Victoria Belim’s personal recollections turn out crucial in the complicated process of redefining her Ukrainian identity. The memoir’s timeline spans from the author’s personal past to her present, extending toward her personal hopes for the future, for the victory of Ukraine in the war which has been going on for three years. Despite the fact that the author and her family experienced tragic events and were exposed to trauma, and the memoir is permeated through with pain and grief, it affects the reader by its optimism and life-assertiveness.

Keywords: concept of memory, sensory details, memories, personal narrative, Holodomor, historical and cultural background, identity.

“Memories are a doorway to the past, and the more one
treasures the memories, the wider the door will open”
(Sparks, 2018: 198)

“As a tunnel through which ways of life are passed down
from generation to generation, language helps store
and articulate memory”
(Ngom, 2022: 45).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE CONCEPT OF MEMORY

The concept of memory has been the subject of numerous theoretical researches and empirical studies. Therefore, there exists a wide range of definitions of memory. For instance, Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines it as “the power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been

learned and retained esp. through associative mechanisms" (1975, p. 717). Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners suggests a simpler interpretation of the concept: "something that you remember" (2002, p. 891). An expert in the theory of memory Aleida Assmann emphasizes the connection of "self" with the surrounding world, and considers that "memory is knowledge with an identity-index. This <...> knowledge <...> refers to all kinds of things of the outward and inward worlds, but with a strong link to an idea of "self" that accompanies this knowledge and sets it off against normal, identity-neutral knowledge" (Assmann, 2008, p. 97). There is also a study which interprets "the fictional possibilities for memory construction" (Bystrov, 2023).

Scholars distinguish different types of memory. For example, Tyler Burge (2003, p. 289) differentiates three types which he calls 1) experiential memory, 2) substantive content memory, and 3) purely preservative memory. He argues that experiential memory relies on prior perception or experience of the object being remembered, or a similarly direct form of awareness, such as self-reflection. In substantive content memory the acquired belief is preserved through various methods, including perception, self-awareness, interaction, and deduction. Purely preservative memory is characterized by the representational and knowledge-related functions of the retained content. Thus, substantive content memory is used for recalling a general fact; experiential memory - for recalling an event; and purely preservative memory relies on "an earlier-instantiated step in an argument to combine with an inference".

In other researches memory is classified into personal and collective (e.g. Bosch, 2016; Klein et al., 2010; Nelson, 2003; Ngom, 2022); personal and personalized (Prey & Smit, 2018), communicative and cultural (J. Assmann, 2008), etc. Oliver Klein et al. (2010), by constructing a hypothetical episode which could have opposite outcomes, demonstrated how individual memory, recalled and communicated, resulted in the formation of collective memory. According to Mamadou Ngom, the difference between these two types of memory is sometimes extremely blurred because they both are closely intertwined. Although the process of remembering is inherently personal, it takes place within a social framework, being shaped and influenced by group interactions (Ngom, 2022, p. 38). What unites individual and collective memories is a common image of their past (J. Assmann, 2008, p. 109).

There are numerous useful studies on peculiarities of autobiographical memory (e.g. Bluck et al., 2005; Ross et al., 2019). Susan Bluck et al. claim that autobiographical memory (AM) performs three main functions: "directive (planning for present and future behaviors), self (self-continuity, psychodynamic integrity), and communicative (social bonding) functions". Expanding on each of those functions, the scholars state that the directive function of AM "involves using the past to guide present and future thought and behavior." The self-function implies that AM enables a person to remain coherent over time. Finally, the social function contributes to social interaction, empathizing with others and "initiating new social relationships" (Bluck et al., 2005, p. 113-123). Katherine Nelson views autobiographical memory from a cultural perspective. She argues that in order to understand "contemporary autobiographical memory <...> it is important to situate it in its cultural context, and not solely in the social and individual context of its development" (Nelson, 2003, p. 131). Likewise, Elien Vanderveren et al. (2017, p. 2) mention the influence of cultural environment on the development of a person's life story. Moreover, the scholars maintain that the latter acquires the form of several layers of autobiographical memories. Those memories are "represented in the autobiographical knowledge base and the episodic memory system: life story schema, lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge".

According to them, autobiographical memories are accessed by activating three categories in sequence, beginning with general information at the upper levels, which then leads to the retrieval of related, more specific details at deeper levels.

1.2. MEMOIR AS A GENRE OF NARRATIVE NONFICTION

According to Mamadou Ngom (2022, p. 43) “memory enacts recollection through language.” Therefore, the role of memory is viewed as essential in different genres of writing, especially in memoir which belongs to a genre of narrative nonfiction. Memoirs have been written since ancient times yet their popularity has notably revived recently (Donlon, 2020). This revival results from present-day events and historical facts which have become open to the public and began to be widely discussed in all information sources (e.g. full-scale war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine; Holodomor; Holocaust, etc.).

There are multiple views on memoir. In dictionaries we find definitions of this genre. For example, Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1975, p. 716) defines memoir as “a narrative composed from personal experience” or even as a biography. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003, p. 1029) suggests that memoir is “a short piece of writing about a person or place that you knew well or an event that you experienced.” However, those definitions can be considered too scanty and brief because they mention *what* memoirs are about, leaving out the information about *how* they are written, *what* they are *like* and *why* they can encourage reading. Scholars throw light on those aspects of narrative nonfiction. For instance, Sally Donlon (2020) maintains that memoir “uses literary style and techniques to create factually accurate narratives, seeks to entertain, and is almost always written in the first person.” The importance of describing events in a creative way has been highlighted by Liz Stanley who regards memoirs as “works of imagination, of art and artifice” (Stanley 1994, p. 145). In Suzanne Bunkers’ opinion, in order to perceive the reality as it is and to represent it in an adequate way, the author must be open to a wide range of feelings including grief, regret, remorse, etc. (Bunkers, 2006, p. 1). Besides, she expresses a contention that in a memoir “the past and present conjugate to produce the future.” Alternatively, memoirs can be viewed from a scholarly perspective. By way of illustration, Olga Kulchytska et al. (2023) analyse patterns of temporal world-switches (the present → the distant past → back to the present → the distant past again) in Gabija Bankauskaitė’s (2018) review of the publication “Memoirs and Letters of Polish Authors from Taken Lands in 19th Century – Role and Place in the Historical Research.” The function of temporal world-switches in scientific discourse is “to indicate connection between a past event and its today’s interpretation” (Kulchytska et al., 2023, p. 25).

Another controversial issue concerns “the boundaries between a ‘true’ memoir and a fictionalised one” (van de Pol, 2013). Sally Dolon (2020) argues that readers regard memoir as one of the most truthful narratives, however she considers truth relative because it is based on a subjective, individual perception of the world. Additionally, there exists an idea that memoir presents not factual recollections, but rather improvised reconstructions of fragmented memories, intentionally crafted to project a specific image of oneself (Longo, 2018, p. 25). However, a touch of fiction, presentation of emotions, physical sensations, etc. are essential for memoir to be enjoyable for reading, otherwise telling the whole truth of a story could be overly detailed and dull (Gergen, 1994, p. 78). Therefore, it’s better to focus on communicating the main point effectively.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The present research is aimed at analyzing the ways memories are featured and interlaced in a memoir, and it is based on the book “The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family Memoir” by Victoria Belim (2024), a writer and journalist of Ukrainian descent.

To investigate the blending of diverse layers of memory in the memoir and their representation modes (e.g. individual and collective memory, explicit and implicit mode) textual analysis, narrative theory, and psychological perspectives on memory have been employed. They present a comprehensive analysis of how memories are interwoven in Victoria Belim’s personal narrative making it comprehensive and coherent. Textual analysis has resulted in the discovery of flashbacks, fragmented storytelling, and non-linear chronology alongside with emotional and sensory aspects of memory; of the ways how past and present experiences are blended against a historical background and within a cultural context.

The author’s trauma caused by her relative’s death in Soviet times and the current war in Ukraine as well as her rediscovering her identity are central to the memoir.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

3.1. EXPLICIT PRESENTATION OF THE CONCEPT OF MEMORY

Victoria Belim (2024), born in Kyiv, left Ukraine at the age of 15. Only after the Crimea was annexed in 2014, she returned to Ukraine and was staying with her grandmother Valentina in a small town of Bereh, Poltava region. In her book the writer recounts her journey of self-discovery. She seeks answers about a relative who was found missing in the 1930s, weaving together her childhood memories, family stories, reflections on Ukrainian culture, an exploration of the Soviet Union’s violent history, the atrocities committed by the NKVD, and the enduring resilience of the Ukrainian people. Writing about her personal memories, the author focuses on creating vivid, emotional, and relatable narratives that disclose key moments in her life. She presents her personal story against the background of Ukrainian history, its past and present.

In her narrative, throughout the whole book, Victoria Belim familiarizes readers with her distant and recent memories. Her distant memories are related to her childhood and teenage years, the stories about her great-grandparents’ and grandparents’ life. Whereas her latest memories are closely connected with the current war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine, and her recent stay in Ukraine. Both distant and recent personal memories are accompanied by historical facts.

While sharing her memories, she often resorts to the concept of memory *explicitly* (by means of such lexical units as *memories, memory, recall, recollection, remember*), revealing its manifold nature, and simultaneously describing her feelings aroused by it. For example, she recalls her childhood and portrays her strong emotional response to the memories: *The more I sifted through the **memories** from my Soviet childhood in Ukraine and **recalled** the squalor of our lives in the eighties, the more my throat clenched and my temples throbbed* (Belim, 2024, p. 4). In 2014, still in Brussels, where she has been residing by now, Victoria watched the news about the events in Ukraine, which strongly affected her and triggered new overwhelming memories: *The Ukraine I never claimed took hold of me and filled my thoughts and voids with its **memories**. <...> These bright **memories** flickering against the news of carnage in Ukraine were excruciating. I sought them, conjuring up the minutes of details, the way one pressed a throbbing bruise to see how much pain*

one could bear (Belim, 2024, p. 12-13). When a child, Victoria enjoyed listening to her great-grandmother Asya's stories which intrigued her a lot and have left an imprint in her mind: *These riddle-like tales baffled me. Lingering in my memory, and I prompted Asya to tell me more* (Belim, 2024, p. 29). After returning to Ukraine, the author first went to Kyiv where she stayed for a while, and was very excited getting ready to go to Bereh, her second home, where she had spent most of her childhood: *I wanted to prepare myself to return to a place that held so many memories that it had stopped being part of real-world geography* (Belim, 2024, p. 40). Describing the moment of coming back to her grandmother's house, Victoria says that she easily let herself in through the gate because everything about that place was so familiar to her: *[her] fingers, encoded with muscle memory, undid the latch on the heavy wooden gate* (Belim, 2024, p. 47). When Victoria Belim was trying to discover information about her paternal family who used to live in the town of Maiachka, she could hardly find people who remembered anything about them. Therefore, she mentions transience of memory with bitterness, simultaneously implying the urge to have stories archived: *The memory was fragile, and unrecorded stories disappeared like ripples on water* (Belim, 2024, p. 112). Additionally, readers come across some vividly described details related to her "second home", to her grandmother's stories, which contribute to the poetics of remembering as a way of reviving love for Ukraine, rediscovering her own identity and escaping the harsh reality of the ongoing war: *Every recollection of Bereh became warmer and brighter. I talked to Valentina and relived the memories of my Ukrainian spring in all their vibrancy. I recalled our cherry orchard in full bloom, the quilt of wheat fields in the countryside and the splendid curves of the Vorskla, and lost myself in daydreams to escape the ever-darkening reality"* (Belim, 2024, p. 150).

3.2. COMPREHENDING THE HISTORICAL REALITY OF UKRAINE THROUGH INDIVIDUAL MEMORY

Reading Victoria Belim's memoir, we are exposed to the author's personal story of redefining her identity. It is notable that her family's particular experiences are described against the background of different periods of Ukrainian history, both being intricately interlaced. Although the events are not presented chronologically, they are revealed in a very emotional way, laying emphasis on reflections and insights rather than chronology (Landsborough, 2024).

The writer familiarizes readers with her groundbreaking and eye-opening experiences, the most crucial of which are related to the war in Ukraine. As soon as she found out that the war had broken out, Victoria felt an irresistible desire to rediscover her identity by visiting the country of her forbearers. She writes in the Prologue: *The year 2014 was a life-changing one for me, and its events made me realize the intensity of my connection to the place where I was born, even though I hadn't lived there for years* (Belim, 2024, p. xiii). Another fact that triggered her desire to go to Ukraine was the entry she had come across in her great-granddad Sergey's journal about his brother Nikodim who *vanished in the 1930s fighting for a free Ukraine* (Belim, 2024, p. 31).

Throughout the whole book readers can witness how closely Victoria's family's fates were interwoven with the historic events in Ukraine, starting from the Soviet times up to the present day. For example, on the pages about Holodomor Victoria Belim brings together the story of her great-grandmother Asya and the tragic statistics of the Great Famine. Asya was a teacher in a village primary school in early thirties and she witnessed how people who died of starvation were lying on the side of the road; how requisitions brigades took all food from the villagers and beat up one of them for picking up several grains from the ground. *[E]vidence of starvation was in plain view," writes Victoria*

(Belim, 2024, p. 132). Simultaneously, she provides the following excruciating figures and facts concerning Ukrainian people's mass starvation: *Every eighth person in the Ukrainian territories fell victim to the Holodomor, the Great Famine. One million children under the age of ten died. The toll of the famine was more than three million* (Belim, 2024, p. 132-133). Her great-grandmother was fortunate to survive owing to the fact that she agreed to marry Sergey, a Bolshevik who saved her from hunger.

The year of 1986 is associated to the author with the disaster of Chernobyl and her parents' divorce. Another event which immediately sparked her memory and simultaneously puzzled and intrigued her was the start of the Maidan protests. The event affected her strongly. That's how she describes her reaction to what was going on there: *<...> the Maidan events ended up absorbing me. I watched the news footage in a state of shock* (Belim, 2024, p. 7); *The sound of the gunfire ricocheted and echoed in my room in Brussels. My heartbeat deafened me* (Belim, 2024, p. 8). She portrays what she saw on the screen with such precision and detail that readers can easily visualize the picture: *The surreal graphic images of red puddles on the pavement, bullet holes and burning car tyres <...>* (Belim, 2024, p. 7); *The figures on screen lurched and hurtled into each other. The camera ran after them, slicing through black smoke, and then grabbed the shadows of the shooters* (Belim, 2024, p. 8). However, what was going on in some way contradicted to her Maidan-related memories of the third year of Ukraine's independence. There, still a teenager, she enjoyed meeting with her friend, eating ice-cream and admiring the blooming chestnut trees. With great accuracy, Victoria Belim paints a picture of that meeting, a street kiosk, her friend's cobalt-blue dress, her own cranberry lipstick. She describes the slightest details on purpose, to highlight the contrast between the peaceful time in which she was growing up and the time of war in which she found herself. That was when the first signs of redefining her identity, her belonging to Ukraine, broke through: *Witnessing the shooting on Maidan, I latched onto my memories of Ukraine in an attempt to restore what was mine and part of me* (Belim, 2024, p. 8).

During her stay in Ukraine, Victoria Belim started digging for information about her great-granduncle Nikodim Berezko who had been considered missing since the 1930s. She left no stone unturned on her groundbreaking "journey." She visited various archives, and, finally, when she paid a visit to the *Rooster House* (that's how the local people called the former building in Poltava which used to be the KGB headquarters) she was given the file containing the details of Nikodim Berezko's case. The reading of the file was an extremely painful and torturing process as Victoria Belim found out how her great-grandfather's brother had been arrested, then interrogated until he admitted his anti-Soviet conspiracy. According to the file, after one of the interrogations, Nikodim was found dead in his cell having committed suicide. Victoria found multiple inconsistencies in the documents which gave rise to more questions. Reading between the lines, she understood that the file was full of lies which testified to the hypocrisy of the Soviet system. It was only in 1962 that Nikodim's case was *pronounced as lacking 'a criminal matter'* and he was rehabilitated. It is notable that on the pages of the book the facts from her relative's life are closely interwoven with the events taking place in the Soviet Union before, during and after Nikodim's arrest. The author mentions aggressive Russification of the society, Stalinist purges, the cases of Trotsky and Bukharin, campaigns against 'ex-kulaks' and 'anti-Soviet elements', which resulted in massive arrests. That part of the book looks like a documentary essay abundant in facts, names and figures rather than a memoir. It proves the uniformity of her family story which resonated with many others mutilated by the Stalin regime.

3.3. SENSORY DETAILS AND EMOTIONS AS A WAY OF BRINGING MEMORIES TO LIFE

According to Francesca Strik Lievers and Bodo Winter, “[H]umans perceive the world through their senses and then share their perceptions with others” (Lievers & Winter, 2018, p. 45). Victoria Belim brings her memories to life by means of including in her story sensory details such as vision, sounds, touch and smells, combining them in her descriptions. Sensory input contributes a lot to the comprehension of the environment described and triggers a wide range of emotions. For example, in the portrayal of the house in Bereh, where Victoria spent her childhood, the images merge with both sounds and smells bringing back her memories: *the ticking clock and the morning sunshine; the doors creaked in the same high-pitched register; the musky scent of old books* (Belim, 2024, p. 55-56). The cherry orchard, a poetic Ukrainian symbol, urges Victoria’s memory about her great-grandmother Asya to come alive, arousing a feeling of nostalgia: *Here in the orchard I felt Asya’s presence more than anywhere else in Bereh. I imagined that she was still around, cutting gladioli or experimenting with a new method of grafting grape vines* (Belim, 2024, p. 122).

Recalling her return to Poltava with such familiar and deeply-rooted smells evokes strong emotions about the homecoming as soon as she gets off the train: *<...> the familiar scents of pungent greenery, scorched rubber and poppy-seed rolls made me light-headed. I understood the exalted sentiment of people falling on their knees to kiss the ground of their homeland* (Belim, 2024, p. 154). Then she performs her regular homecoming ritual which has a sentimental value for her: after hugging her granny Valentina, she goes to their garden and touches *the rough bark of the cherry trees* (Belim, 2024, p. 154). Only then she feels literally at home.

In the writer’s memory, a lot of pictures of her neighbourhood blend with various familiar sounds. Owing to employing metaphors, this blending contributes to the emotiveness of the description making it more high-flown and poetic: *A framed vision of a summer evening floated up in my mind: the tops of tall lilac bushes glazed red by the setting sun, the distant rumble of a passing train and the atonal symphony of frogs, nightingales and village dogs* (Belim, 2024, p. 195). The sensory language makes the text more true-to-life and “palpable”, evokes images and gets the reader to feel their immediate presence in the places mentioned in the book.

The “rollercoaster of emotions” that the author described in her memoir is caused by the events related to her childhood, her family members, to the historical background and the ongoing events, specifically the war in Ukraine. Among the emotions that took possession of her, when she contemplated on Ukrainian history of the Soviet era and the current war in Ukraine, Victoria Belim mentions pain, anger, panic, agony and grief. However, between the lines, we can find admiration she felt for the resilience of the Ukrainian people as a whole and of her family members in particular. Moreover, the author inspires the reader with hope that Ukraine will win no matter what. More than once the word *hope* occurs in the book: a) in the Prologue: *<...> Ukraine’s resilience makes me **hopeful** that it will emerge out of this war victorious* (Belim, 2024, p. xiv); b) in the body of the book: *I accepted pain and never ceased to **hope*** (Belim, 2024, p. 153). c) in the Epilogue: *Every bud and every branch is a reminder of the irrepressible *vivre memento* that illuminates the darkest of days with **hope*** (Belim, 2024, p. 286). It proves that no matter how painful her memories are, how thorny the author’s way to redefining her identity has been, she remains consistent throughout the whole memoir making it life-asserting and optimistic.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the current research prove that memory plays an essential role in memoirs. As a result of generalizing the existing theoretical sources and the analysis of the memoir “The Rooster House” by Victoria Belim, the following conclusions can be made:

- Memoirs have become popular recently due to the fact that they touch upon vital issues which are interesting for the reader. Specifically, the memoir under discussion mentions the tragic periods of Holodomor, Chernobyl, Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- The memories in the narrative are not presented chronologically. The author resorts to flashbacks, smoothly moving the story from present to past and back.
- The memoir acquires the form of an amalgamation of distant and recent memories, the former mostly related to the author’s childhood, whereas the latter – to the author’s perception of identity and of the ongoing war in Ukraine.
- The concept of memory is presented explicitly (by means of such lexical units as *memories, memory, recall, recollection, remember*) and implicitly – by describing events and emotions aroused by them.
- Personal memories are inseparably connected with the historical background and cultural context they are immersed in.
- Personal memories contribute to the author’s redefining identity.
- The use of sensory language and description of the author’s feelings make the narrative vivid, dynamic, vibrant, and emotionally imbued.
- The time frame of the memoir stretches from the personal past to the personal present, and to the personal hope for the future.

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Запропоноване дослідження висвітлює пам'ять як важливий елемент у написанні мемуарів, як явище, що допомагає формувати наратив через віддалені та нещодавні спогади. Матеріалом дослідження слугує сучасний мемуарний роман Вікторії Белім "The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family Memoir" (2024), написаний під час війни, яку розв'язала Росія проти України. Вибір матеріалу дослідження свідчить про актуальність статті та її новизну. Будучи представлена у проаналізованому романі, як експліцитно, так і імпліцитно, пам'ять відіграє багатогранну роль. Віддалені спогади здебільшого стосуються дитячих переживань авторки ще за радянських часів, тоді як нещодавні спогади є основою сучасних роздумів та сприяють формуванню ідентичності.

Експліцитні уявлення про пам'ять передаються за допомогою таких лексичних одиниць, як згадувати, спогади, пам'ять і пригадувати. Водночас імпліцитна пам'ять сприймається через яскраві описи деталей, подій, емоцій та фізичних відчуттів, які пов'язують минуле з теперішнім і оживляють їх. Варто зазначити, що як експліцитні, так і імпліцитні рівні пам'яті дозволяють авторці пов'язати свій особистий досвід із історичним і культурним контекстом, що сприяє перетворенню особистих спогадів на загальнолюдські.

Особисті спогади Вікторії Белім відіграють вирішальну роль у складному процесі переосмислення її української ідентичності. Хронотоп мемуарів охоплює особисте минуле авторки, її теперішнє та простягається до її особистих сподівань на майбутнє, на перемогу України у війні, яка триває вже три роки. Незважаючи на те, що авторка та її родина зазнали трагічних психологічних травм та пережили трагічні події, а її мемуари пронизані болем і скорботою, можна зробити висновок, що книга надихає оптимізмом та є життєстверджуючою.

Ключові слова: концепція пам'яті, сенсорні деталі, спогади, особистий наратив, Голодомор, історичний та культурний контекст, ідентичність.