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Recollections Raised, Sorted, and Compiled in Alice McDermott's *Someone*

**Sr. Amala Valarmathy A.,
Research Scholar**

**Dr. (Sr.) Ugini Fathima Mary L.
Principal & Research Supervisor
Department of English,
Auxilium College (Autonomous),
Gandhi Nagar, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, S. India ,632006**

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze Memory as an active and selective process in Alice McDermott's Someone. McDermott does not pretend that human memory is infallible instead she makes it clear that it is reconstructed. It is an active process that assists in shifting the inessential according to individuals emotions.

Keywords: memory; active; reconstruction; emotions; infallible

Jonathan K. Foster in his *Memory: A Very Short Introduction* by way of final thoughts says "...memory is not a passive receptacle, nor is it necessarily a truthful recording of events in our lives. It is an *active* and *selective* process, with both strengths and weaknesses - which often represent the opposite sides of the same coin" (137). This paper attempts to view Alice McDermott's recent novel *Someone* with this as the theoretical background. The reviewer of *Someone* commends the writer for the wonderful piece of writing:

Ms. McDermott brings supreme ease and economy to summoning young Marie's memories in detail ...and staying within specific time periods in Marie's life. It is only later that the book will revisit that soda bread and link it to a sense of loss. Marie



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survives her father by at least 66 years, which means that this slender-looking book is filled with incident, transformed by experience, apprehensive at the constant sense of imminent loss. Ms. McDermott gives Marie the perfect job: hostess and professional mourner at a funeral parlor, where she will re-encounter dead characters who remain very much alive in her imagination. (Maslin)

Marie's memories roll back in time as the novel begins with her remembrances as a seven year old and a chance meeting with Pegeen Chehab brings home the message that there is always someone nice. Marie remembers this as a thirty year old during a fall that was characteristic of Pegeen and proved fatal to her. As a little girl, she remembers telling her brother of the bad dream that she had and he advises her to pray to keep the nightmares away. But Marie confesses, "... I tried out a few prayers, but since the nightmare I had described was a lie, there was nothing, really, to ask protection from" (21).

Marie, as the narrator of the events in the novel selects what to tell and omits what not to tell her brother Gabe after her late arrival after a date. McDermott involves the reader in the selection process by placing in the parentheses what Marie chooses to hide and not to reveal for instance she excuses herself for being late as she had to accompany Rory to the station as he was leaving for the war front after the funeral of his mother, "[s]o out of sympathy alone, I told Gabe, I went with him to station to wait for his train, where we necked ferociously (I didn't tell Gabe this) and shared a bag of doughnuts and a fifth of whiskey (nor this) until 5.15" (Someone 113). This is a clear indication that the author admits that memory is a selective process and the reader is vested with the knowledge of the same as a case of admitting that our human memory is fallible and it is reconstructed. Simultaneously it also serves to stress the fact that memory is essential in our lives as it shapes us and our future. Foster clarifies that "[m]emory of a past event or information is indicated whenever a past event or information influences someone's thoughts,



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feelings, or behavior at some later time” (137). Marie is well aware of this fact when she admits that Gabe is right about her behaviour as she wants to prove Walter Hartnett wrong for deserting her for another attractive girl, “ [w]ith your filthy mind,” I said, and it was the whiskey, as well as the truth in what he said about Walter Hartnett, that tricked me into sudden tears”(114). When he called her up to the restaurant to tell about his wedding with Rita Sweeney she says, “...but in my recollection of that hour, I saw tears flow from my eyes and fill up behind my glasses like fish bowls. Because I knew I cried, and yet no tear fell” (Someone 78). The anger that wells up in Marie as the motivation of her behaviour stares her on the face in Gabe’s steady and resolute revelation also indicates the active process of memory in the present even as the memory of that night is recounted. Gabe fondly puts his hand on her shoulders but Marie does not appreciate his gesture but is still indignant and thinks it to be more to prevent her from waking the mother than to comfort her. When he laughs a little after she abuses him she is infuriated by his lighthearted sense than his admonition and is not yet willing to come to terms with him.

Memory is retained intact to some extent by multi-sensory perceptions at the very moment the event takes place. In Tim O’Brien’s ‘New Forms and a Multisensory Style of Writing’ Beverly Maeder’s statement from his *Representing Realities* aptly summarizes the art of construction and reconstruction of memories:

All of us encounter external reality ready to select and combine, usually in a way that makes the heterogeneous experience more homogeneous and thus gives it a sense...for the mediation they perform as they reconfigure and (re)create what is given in the world around us (qtd. in Fuchs 170).

Marie works in a funeral parlor for Mr. Fagin who makes it clear to her the reason for appointing a woman to ensure privacy in the case of dressing up women’s bodies so the unasked question that lurks in the minds of the father, brother, son of the dead women will be well answered though she will have nothing to do with the preparation of the bodies. On hearing this Marie



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expresses her relief and McDermott skillfully puts this in the parenthesis as the deep processing of memory, the exact response to the repulsive moment which makes Marie exclaim loudly “Thank goodness” (Someone 104) and she herself was surprised as Fagin laughed. She just had to receive the mourners, direct them to the right room, collect their Mass cards and show them the seats for the Rosary. Fagin elaborately enlists the reason for having a woman in his business so as not to allow men to speculate about the privacy question for their dear departed women. Marie does not fully comprehend him then though she does later and the bewilderment she hides then is recalled, “I only nodded to show that I understood, although, to tell the truth (this, I was also to learn, was Mr. Fagin’s favorite refrain)” (Someone 105). Though she says that never she attempted to go to the basement to see how the bodies were prepared but could recognize what has happening there with the cloying vinegary smell that came up despite the smell of the flowers, perfume and the general Brooklyn air. The memory of the unknown is retained by the olfactory sense. She also gradually learns to overcome the fear of seeing a corpse laid out. She gains knowledge of herself through the senses and McDermott conveys her perception of the world and her own self through the multisensory approach which Fuchs commends was the exceptional style of Tim O’Brien in conveying the emotions to the readers. “O’Brien describes how the characters experience a scene with all their senses. They see, hear, smell, and feel what happens and so do the readers.”(Fuchs 183)

Marie remembers how she was emotionally affected by the various causes of death of children such as “...burst appendix, whooping cough, consumption, pneumonia, lead poisoning, the infection from a dog bite... (Someone 110) that as a mother later she was “overcautious about the simplest things, anxious, superstitious, plagued by dreams of disaster: ‘you wouldn’t say that if you’d seen what I’ve seen’” (Someone 111). The past memories guides the future with a choice made in the present. At the Funeral parlor Marie had another job to do that is to keep company with Mrs. Fagin living in the upstairs in her leisure time. Marie would brief her about the dead



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person being waked that evening or she would share the details of the family. The old woman discussed about the deceased with the other women and the cause of their death:

Recollections were raised, sorted, compiled. If there was a good story attached to the life of the dead, whatever woman among them had it would be given the floor, and whatever part of the story was deemed perhaps too delicate for the old lady's ears (or, more likely, mine) would be acted out with a series of gestures and nods and sudden silences that I quickly came to be able to interpret as readily as the rest... But there was a sense, too, in their sorting out of recollection and rumor, of gossip, anecdote, story- and even in their disappointment when a body came to the funeral parlor ... to weave a biography of sorts for the newly dead. (Someone 121)

The unknown dead be it a stranger or out-of-towner acquired an identity in the wake. Marie does not find these conversations morbid but pleasant that brought some laughter. Marie gets to hear the story of the life of the person whose life must have been long since forgotten. The best wake that could be given to a dead person that Marie figuratively says was like making cold embers glow again. Edward Hagan, in his paper presented at ACIS (the American Conference for Irish Studies 'Narration as Experience of Simultaneity in Alice McDermott's *Someone*' analyses the attitude of the community of women engaged mulling over the dead thus:

Stories make "no ones" into "someones." This is particularly seen in the 1940s on the second floor of Fagin's funeral parlor where Fagin's mother, a few nuns, and other female visitors put together the stories of the dead who are waked in the funeral parlor below. Marie, our narrator, learns the language and kindness of storytelling from these women. They restore the individuality of the dead bodies while yet subsuming each of them into their community. (Hagan 3)



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Fuchs has adopted the ideas of Jan Assmann to analyse Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, *In the Lake of the Woods* and *July, July* as the Vietnam War serves as a background of these novels. She says according to Jan Assmann, "cultural memory is not biologically inheritable that it has to be constructed and handed down from generation to generation (38). The past is "a social construction" and content "results from the needs and frames of the present. The past is not naturally given but a cultural creation" (18) The cultural memory approach holds good to interpret the novels of McDermott as her novels too are set in the backdrop of the Vietnam war. Marie in her observation of the women discussing the lives of the dead observes "[c]ollectively, the women sat back, smiling at one another and the glowing conclusion they had wrought out of Mrs. Meany's travail" (Someone 123). Marie is enabled to get back to her Irish roots during the wake of Mrs. Meany, a mother who proved her love for a mean daughter despite the vulgar words thrown at her, visited her Sunday after Sunday to prove that a "...mother's love was a beautiful, light, relentless thing that the devil could not diminish"(Someone 123).

Marie tends to remember events which have functional significance as Foster says, though we encounter a lot of information every day we decide to remember only some of it. Marie gains knowledge of mothers who sacrificed themselves for the welfare of their children counting no cost, the experience in turn shapes her to be a loving mother to her children. It's not just Mrs. Meany but she also happens to hear about Redmond Hogan's mother, who dies of a broken heart six months after he was killed in the war. McDermott subtly brings out the truth that he was her daughter's probably illegitimate son born of her relationship with James Redmond who was much older than her when she was just sixteen years old. As a loving mother Mrs. Hogan saves the daughter from disgrace to make the people of the town believe that her grandson was her youngest child and the ladies sarcastically say that it was Florence who gave birth to her brother. That's not just the end of the story she in fact dares to meet Mr. Roosevelt, the President to give him a piece



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of mind but it is Florence who convinces her and writes a fifty-two page letter. Marie is able to remember the story of Mrs. Hogan as it is an extraordinary event that rarely happens in the ordinary circumstances of life.

Marie is able to recall the wake of Margaret Tuohy, the Bishop's sister in the series of recall of the past life of the dead persons. She was the sister of Rev. Fr. Martin Tuohy, who hailed from a poor background but never visited his sister even after she fell seriously ill. But he made sure to get her the best dress for the funeral and after a short visit he leaves though Mr. Fagin expected him to lead the rosary. Marie did not know the past of the siblings and she was thrilled to see the bishop. But she quickly learns that the ladies don't approve of it as she becomes aware that they were exchanging some communication with one another. "They were warning one another, I could tell, not to infect my awe of the man with their own clear eyed assessment" (130). According to the encoding specificity principle as delineated by Foster, what we retrieve depends on the context in which it was encoded or classified and to the extent that it matches the context. Marie starts comparing her own life with Bishop's sister. She starts imagining what the ladies would talk about her and her family. She also displays her trust in her brother Gabe, who would tell the story of her life though it, irks her little that her brother has left the priesthood and that would add to the scandal and she hopes that the ladies would know the truth of it. She firmly believes that, "...they would know as well how to choose their words to tell a kinder tale" (131). Foster explains this phenomena that, "...in our evolutionary past humans may have survived by remembering information that signalled threat...or reward" (50). Though the ladies seem to unmask the past of the women who are being waked yet they prove to be compassionate in their charitable ways to honour the dead by tracing the goodness hidden behind the ugly past.

Marie, the unremarkable woman in fact with a defective eye lives her quotidian life and the author traces the beauty of life lived in hope. Marie looks at first at the deformities of the other characters



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but through it all she is able to picture the beautiful side of the persons. Bill Corrigan is blinded in the war, yet she finds that it is to him they appealed when there arose a quarrel in the midst of their game. The author presents her world view through Marie, a simple woman who dares to go against the fatigues of life and rubbishes the rumours of her brother being a gay though much hullabaloo is created today in the discussion of such matters. Hagan comments with his deep appreciation for the author that, “McDermott, in making Marie’s the only voice we hear, appears to open up the possibility that a single story teller can give insight into eternity as indeed simultaneity, according to Einstein, is only open to the perception of an individual” (10).

Marie’s simple faith helps her to sail through life though she encounters disasters, disease and death. The memories of people who passed through in her life leave a lasting trail from whom she has learned to accept life’s ups and downs. McDermott’s skillful weaving of stories within a story is the touch of a master who knows to strike the right chord and bring in harmony. The novel *Someone* is almost a Bildungsroman as it traces the psychological and moral development of Marie. The cross sectional study of the memory of Marie as she recalls her memories as a child, young woman and an octogenarian helps to map out the changes that occur in the lifespan of an individual and the changes and maturity that one attains in her lifetime. McDermott wonderfully interlinks memory and storytelling in the novel to retrace the memory of her characters to their past.

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