



## Configuration of Memory in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

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### ABSTRACT

Memory is the ability to recall or remember information or events in the past. This is carried out through three distinct processes such as encoding, storage and retrieval. Memory plays a significant role in the narratives of Edwidge Danticat, a Caribbean-American Diasporic writer.

The protagonists in Danticat's novels are very much influenced by their past and its memories. These memories act both as a preserver and destroyer of life in her novels. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it acts as a destroyer. The protagonist Sophie is haunted by the memories of 'testing' and her mother Martine is obsessed with nightmares of rape. This paper attempts to study the impact of memory on the psyche of Danticat's characters.

### KEYWORDS

Short term memory, Long term memory, Episodic, Semantic.

Memory is the ability to recall or remember information or events in the past. This is carried out through three distinct processes such as encoding, storage and retrieval. Encoding is a process of receiving sensory input and transforming it into a form, or code, which can be stored; storage is a process of actually putting coded information into memory; and retrieval is the process of gaining access to stored information when it is needed.

Memory can be classified into short term memory (STM) and long term memory (LTM). As the capacity of short term memory is small, the information stored here is lost because it is displaced by incoming items of information. Long term memory stores large amounts of information over a long period of time.

Two types of information are stored in LTM- semantic and episodic. Semantic memory involves the abstract knowledge and meaning of words, symbols, ideas and rules for relating them. Episodic memory records an individual's past experiences and episodes of daily life. It consists of long-term memories of specific things that happened to people at particular times and places. Thus episodic memories are memories of episodes which have a biographical reference.

Memory plays a significant role in the narratives of Edwidge Danticat. Danticat was born on January 19, 1969 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She is a Caribbean-American Diasporic writer. She earned a Master's degree in Fine Arts in creative writing from Brown University in 1993 for "My turn in the fire – an abridged novel", which was later published into her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). She has taught creative writing at the New York University and the University of Miami.

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'Testing' is a Haitian tradition for centuries. It is a process with which a mother ensures that her daughter is a virgin by inspecting to see whether her little finger can pass the daughter's hymen. Martine was tested by her mother Ife, until she was raped by a macoute. She forces the same on Sophie in their Brooklyn home, "I closed my eyes upon the images of my mother slipping her hand under the sheets and poking her pinky at a void, hoping that it

would go no further than the length of her fingernail" (*BEM* 155). Sophie hated testing.

Sophie used the technique of 'doubling' while being tested. She did this by imagining beautiful things to distract her mind, "Doubling refers to a split identity that characters such as Sophie Caco generate in order to cope with trauma in their lives" (Munro 43). She disengaged herself from the present and thought of her childhood days in Haiti "I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tante Atie's gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils" (*BEM* 155).

In spite of 'doubling', the crippling weight of 'testing' psychologically shattered Sophie. Her rebellious nature urged her to put an end to her mother's insane ideology of keeping her pure, so she uses a spice pestle to fail the test, "My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed them into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she tested me....Finally I failed the test" (*BEM* 87). Thrown out of the house, she married her lover Joseph.

'Testing' led to trauma. Memories of 'testing' built up a phobia for sex in Sophie as she felt ashamed of her body. She used the same technique of 'doubling' for diversion, when Joseph made love to her. Here again 'doubling' helped her only for a short span of time. Unable to continue the relationship with Joseph, she took her daughter Bridgette and returned to Haiti. To discover the reason behind this Haitian tradition, Sophie enquired Grandme Ife the cause for testing her daughters and Grandme Ife stated that it was a mother's duty to safeguard her daughters' purity until marriage.

Grandme Ife suggested Sophie that patience was the tool, which would aid in fading her pain, "Now you have a child of your own. You must know that everything a mother does, she does, she does for her child's own good. You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself." (*BEM* 156). Later that night, Grandmè Ifé gave Sophie her statue of Erzulie and told her, "My heart, it weeps like a river," she said "for the pain we have caused you" (*BEM* 157). To overcome the trauma inflicted by testing, Sophie attended therapeutic classes conducted by the therapist Rena.

Like 'testing' which resulted in phobia, memories of rape ended in nightmares. Martine was raped at the age of sixteen by a masked

macoute in the cane fields of Haiti. The rape not only left her with a child-Sophie, but also evoked constant nightmares in her. The nightmares which haunted Martine after rape affected her sanity. She lost her sanity after the rape and attempted suicide several times during the post delivery period, as the nightmares appeared too real, "For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside her. At night, she tore her sheets and bit pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares" (*BEM 138*). Martine emigrated to the U.S. after Sophie's birth and worked hard to earn a living. Sophie joined her at the age of twelve and was taken aback to see her mother struggle with nightmares:

Later that night, I heard the same voice screaming as though someone was trying to kill her. I rushed over, but my mother was alone thrashing the sheets. I shook her finally and woke her up. When she saw me, she quickly covered her face with her hands and turned away....

"It is the night," she said. "Sometimes, I see horrible visions in my sleep." (*BEM 45*)

Place became a mediator of memory in this novel. For Martine a visit to Haiti was like returning to the scene of rape. Martine hesitated going to Haiti because it made her nightmares more violent, "I have to go back to make final arrangements for your grandmother's resting place. I want to see her before she dies, but I don't want to stay there for more than three or four days. I know that sounds bad, but that is the only way I can do it. There are ghosts there that I can't face, things that are still very painful for me" (*BEM 76*). Martine struggled with sleepless nights at La Nouvelle Dame Marie in Haiti, "Whenever I'm there, I feel like I sleep with ghosts. The first night I was there, I woke up pounding at my stomach" (*BEM 192*).

Pregnancy is a phase to be cherished by women but Martine's trauma became intense during her second pregnancy. Martine conceived for the second time with Marc's child. As the baby started to grow, the nightmares which she disturbed her only at night took a different turn and troubled all the time, "'You know what happens now. I look at every man and I see him' " "Marc?" "Non non," she whispered. "Him. Le violeur, the rapist, I see him everywhere" " (*BEM 202*). Her second conception left her more anxious, as she heard the rapist's voice from the baby, "Last night when I heard it speak to me." "....It has a man's voice, so now I know it's not a girl...Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me. You tenten, malpwop. He calls me filthy whore. I never want to see this child's face" (*BEM 221*).

The burden of inheritance was clearly evident in Sophie as Martine's nightmare echoed in her. She, too in her dreams, saw a masked man raping a young girl in the cane fields. This showed the devastating influence of human beings on one another:

After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had "caught" from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn't both spent the night dreaming about same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl. (*BEM 196*)

Martine haunted by her past committed suicide, "Indeed, however far she could be from Haiti, the memory of that fateful night in the sugar cane field became the one single obsessive event that determined her life's outcome. So potent was this memory that every night of her life, she had nightmares in which she is pursued by a shadowy figure" (*Christophe 98*). Sophie on the other hand chose therapy. Martine's fear to attend therapeutic classes and to encounter the scene of rape resulted in ending her life while Sophie's therapeutic sessions and her final encounter with cane field liberated her from the traumatic memories:

They were only few men working in the cane fields. I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding(*BEM 238*)

Thus memory becomes an inevitable factor in determining the psyche of Danticat's characters. The novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* draws an explicit relationship between the past and the present. It is a testimony of Caribbean tradition and women's suffering.

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