

النسيان، الذاكرة، والتفكك السردى في رواية "نظريات النسيان" للكاتب لانس أولسن

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Forgetting, Memory, and Narrative Disruption in Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting*

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المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة بشكل نقدي رواية نظريات النسيان (2014) للكاتب لانس أولسن، من خلال التركيز على الكيفية التي يعمل بها النسيان ليس فقط كقضية موضوعية، بل كإستراتيجية سردية أساسية. ففي أدب ما بعد الحداثة المعاصر، تمثل هشاشة الذاكرة وتفكك السرد تحدياً للسرد الخطي التقليدي، كما تعكس هذه الظواهر القلق الأوسع المرتبط بالهوية والحقيقة التاريخية. تجادل الدراسة بأن أولسن يوظف النسيان على المستوى البنيوي من خلال الفجوات النصية والتسلسل الزمني المختل، مجسداً بذلك الطبيعة الهشة للذاكرة. وتهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف كيفية استخدام إستراتيجيات النسيان السردية لزعزعة المعنى وإشراك القارئ في عملية إعادة بناء التفسير. وتعتمد الدراسة على منهج تحليل الخطاب النوعي والقراءة النصية الدقيقة، مستندة إلى نظرية السرد في ما بعد الحداثة (هاتشون، ماكهيل) ودراسات الذاكرة (ريكور، هوبسن). تكشف النتائج أن النسيان في الرواية يعطل التسلسل الزمني، ويفتت الهوية،

ويجعل اللغة نفسها غير مستقرة. وتسهم هذه النتائج في إثراء النقاشات الأوسع حول أدب ما بعد الحداثة ووظيفة الذاكرة الثقافية.

Abstract

The current study critically examines Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) by focusing on how forgetting operates not only as a thematic concern but as an essential narrative strategy. In contemporary postmodern fiction, memory uncertainty and narrative fragmentation challenge conventional linear storytelling. They reflect wider anxieties surrounding identity and historical truth. The study argues that Olsen structurally introduces forgetting through textual gaps and disordered chronology to embody the weak nature of memory. The study aims to explore how narrative strategies of forgetting destabilize meaning and engage the reader in reconstructive interpretation. The article applies a qualitative discourse analysis and textual close reading method that is grounded in postmodern narrative theory (Hutcheon, McHale) and memory studies (Ricoeur, Huysen). The findings reveal that forgetting in the novel disrupts chronology, fragments identity, and makes language itself unstable. This contributes to broader discussions of postmodern fiction and the cultural function of memory.

Introduction

Postmodern literature reimagines forgetting as an important narrative strategy that influences the structure, meaning, and treatment of literary texts. It takes forgetting not as a passive memory failure or a simple psychological slip. The subtle nature of memory and the ways that forgetting creates alternate realities and challenge's identity with time's straight progression have long been studied by writers like Paul Auster and Jorge Luis Borges While Borges's "Funes the Memorious" depicts the terrible cost of perfect memory and suggests that the inability to forget can be just as devastating as forgetfulness, Auster's *The New York Trilogy* emphasizes narrative gaps and lost identities (Borges, 1964, p.70).

This new narrative technique places forgetting at the center of postmodern literature. It is a technique used by authors to challenge conventional ideas of reality and coherence. But despite its importance, forgetfulness has often been examined by the idea of absence or psychological trauma, with little consideration given to its structural and aesthetic functions in postmodern narrative forms. Moreover, postmodernism examines forgetting as a formal method that reconfigures the reader's experience of narrative itself, rather than just as material. Postmodern works frequently use self-reflexivity, irony, and



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fragmentation to challenge the authority of historical memory, as Linda Hutcheon (1988) argues in her idea of "historiographic metafiction". The structural and aesthetic function of forgetting, for Linda, is still understudied, although trauma and absence have received a lot of attention in critical debate (Hutcheon, 1988, p.77).

By concentrating on Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetfulness* (2014), a novel which is perfectly illustrates how postmodern fiction employs fragmentation, incoherence, and memory disturbance to embody forgetfulness within its very structure, as this study fills that gap. To establish that forgetting serves as both a thematic concern and a narrative construction that influences identity formation and the limits of meaning, the present study will examine the relationship between narrative fragmentation and the images of forgetting. The present study advances, also, the understanding of forgetting as a literary device by bridging postmodern narrative strategies and trauma studies. It questions the dichotomies of presence/absence and remembering/forgetting, ultimately demonstrating how meaning is created through gaps and removals rather than continuity.

The novel's dual narrative structure and layered explanations function not only to reflect memory thematically, but also to study it formally through disturbance, removal, and fragmentation. As Brian McHale (1987) notes, *postmodern fiction* often shifts its focus from epistemological questions "What can we know?" (p.20) to ontological ones "What world is this, and how is it constructed?"(p.23) So, the novel *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) functions within this framework, using structural fragmentation to question the stability of identity, memory, and the meaning of the text. The foundation of this study is the idea of narrative forgetting, which is examined both formally and thematically in Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014). In Olsen's bidirectional novel, forgetfulness is shown as an active and important literary technique of breakdown and decomposition rather than just the absence of memory or something related to forgetting a bad situation. The novel emphasizes memory instability and the ways forgetting is materially rooted in the text through its fragmented structure. According to Olsen (2014), "forgetting is an act of narrative revision; it is not just a void" (p. 42).

Linda Hutcheon's (1988) concept of historiographic metafiction shows a central role in outlining postmodern narrative as both a self-reflexive and historically involved form of storytelling. She defines postmodern fiction as "intensely self-reflexive yet paradoxically also lays claim to historical events and personages" (p. 5), which emphasizes a



dual function: the narrative not only accepts its contractedness but also engages with the cultural memory of the past. This paradox arrests the essence of many postmodern texts, including Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014). The narrative act of the novel's storytelling draws attention to its artificiality while still contending with real-world issues such as trauma, illness, and the fragmentation of personal and collective memory. Hutcheon's (1988) concept places forgetting as not merely a psychological gap but as an "aesthetic and narrative strategy" that critiques dominant historiographies by foregrounding gaps and absences of reality (p.56). In Olsen's novel, this is particularly obvious in the layering of textual voices and annotations, which challenge the notion of a singular, authoritative narrative. The novel's form serves as a metafictional commentary on the unreliability of memory and the selective nature of historical narration. Thus, Hutcheon's framework allows readers to see how *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) operates within the postmodern fiction that hazes the boundary between fiction and history, which calls attention to the constructed nature of both and places forgetting not as a failure of narrative, but as its very substance. Similarly, postmodern culture is defined by a "waning of affect" and a collective historical forgetfulness, according to postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson (1991). This makes forgetting a cultural phenomenon rather than just a psychological error, connecting Olsen's story to more general late-capitalist processes of spectacle and repetition (p.8).

Brian McHale's (1987) examination of fragmentation in postmodernist fiction is also used in this study. According to McHale, postmodern fiction moves the focus from epistemological investigations to ontological ones, such as "Which world is this, and how do we construct it?" (p. 10). The core of this ontological ambiguity is fragmentation, which is expressed through several narrative worlds, narrative gaps, and self-disruptive textual forms. In his novel, Olsen incorporates textual gaps, nonlinear temporality, and scattered narrators. Each aspect contributes to an atmosphere of disorientation and multiplicity. These techniques exemplify what McHale describes as "self-disruptive textual forms," which are structures that resist closure and invite ontological questioning. Furthermore, the novel's **palimpsest design, in which** Alana's and Aila's texts overwrite one another, complicates the reader's understanding of what is real, remembered, or removed. The unreliability of memory and the instability of identity become not just themes but are **embedded in the novel's physical design**. It makes the form itself an expression of McHale's concept of ontological fragmentation. In this way, the novel *Theories of Forgetting*





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does not simply illustrate the instability of memory and narrative, but it **materializes it**, which offers a postmodern reading experience that aligns directly with McHale's (1987) vision of *postmodernism of Fiction* as a literature of ontological inquiry and formal experimentation. Within the theories used in the current study of memory, the researcher can mention first a landmark work in the philosophy of memory and forgetting by Paul Ricoeur (p.89).

Ricoeur's work *Memory, History, forgetting* (2014) theorizes memory not as a passive store but as an "active process of narrative construction, inherently selective and interpretive" (p. 412). He opposes that memory is always arbitrated by language and shaped by storytelling, which means that remembering necessarily involves acts of rearrangement, omission, and imaginative reconstruction. Furthermore, Ricoeur argues that forgetting is not simply the opposite of remembering, but a productive absence, a necessary space that allows for the creation of meaning through narrative gaps (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 412–415).

In this way, forgetting becomes a precondition for memory, as it enables narratives to shift and evolve in response to current needs. Lance Olsen's *Theories of forgetting* resonate with Ricoeur's model by embodying memory as a fragmented and unstable narrative force. The novel's bidirectional structure, narrative disconnections, and textual removals reflect Ricoeur's idea (2004) that memory is never complete or fixed but always in the process of reinterpretation. Characters like Alana and Hugh experience memory not as a reliable range but as a disrupted and reconstructed identity that formed as much by what is lost as by what is remembered. Thus, Ricoeur's theory provides a critical way through which Olsen's formal research can be understood as a performance of memory's temporality and narrative complexity (pp.412-420).

Within the same domain of memory and forgetting, Andreas Huyssen's *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) discovers the connections between personal and collective memory, which emphasizes how modern societies remember and forget through cultural forms such as literature and media. One of Huyssen's most influential contributions is the use of the palimpsest metaphor to describe memory as layered, unstable, and subject to deletion and engraving. Rather than preserving the past complete, memory becomes a site of continuous rewriting, in which the fragments of earlier narratives coexist, sometimes uncomfortably, with newer ones (Huyssen, 2003, pp. 7–9). Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* literalizes this concept through its form. Alana's narrative is annotated, overwritten, and partially



removed by Aila's commentary, transforming the book into a textual palimpsest.

This structure reflects Huyssen's (2003) view that memory is never singular or authoritative but is instead subject to temporal layering and ideological conflict. Moreover, Huyssen advises of a growing "memory boom" in contemporary culture, in which memory is commodified and aestheticized, often leading to "historical amnesia rather than deeper understanding" (p. 28). Olsen's novel critiques this dynamic by emphasizing loss, decay, and the limits of archival recovery. It shows how memory can collapse under the pressure of repetition, trauma, and cultural destruction. Therefore, Huyssen's insights help position *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) as both a narrative and a cultural commentary on how memory is constructed, distorted, and threatened in postmodern society.

This study uses a qualitative discourse analysis approach to investigate how the fragmented structure of Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) enacts narrative forgetting. In literary studies, discourse analysis enables the researcher to examine how thematic concerns are communicated through the structure of language, narrative gaps, and textual gaps (Fairclough, 2013, p.60). The analysis here focuses on how the novel's thematic concern with memory and forgetting is reflected and constructed through formal disruptions, temporal dislocations, repetitions, erasures, and changes in narrative voice.

This approach specifically uses a synthetic reading that unifies form and content. In keeping with McHale's (1987) contention that formal fragmentation in postmodernist literature centers ontological instability, this study interprets these artistic devices that reflect memory instability (p.40). This reading is further informed by Hutcheon's (1988) theorization of historiographic metafiction, which offers a framework for comprehending how *Theories of Forgetting* uses self-reflexive textual design to question the validity of narrative memory (p.34). *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) is the main text here and is being examined closely. This study closely examines a few selection passages that best illustrate narrative fragmentation and temporal disruption rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of the full book. These consist of parts of Hugh's narrative that reiterate and modify previous events, sequences in Alana's narrative where temporal markers are purposefully left out or hidden, and narrative overlap points in Aila's annotations, which serve as textual palimpsests. This methodology is based on textual evidence and is interpretative rather than statistical. Concerning postmodernist theory (Jameson, 1991; McHale, 1987) and, where applicable, deconstructive





methodologies, this approach aims to identify patterns of narrative disjointedness and analyze their thematic implications (Derrida, 1997, p.45). By doing this, the research demonstrates how Olsen's book transforms forgetting from a mental state into a structural principle of storytelling.

The study looks at *postmodern fiction* (1987), questions accepted ideas of identity and historical coherence, and undermines linear narratives. Furthermore, it makes the case that forgetting is a creative force in story building rather than just an absence by bridging the gap between trauma studies and postmodern aesthetics. The study's ultimate goal is to show how Olsen's book reinterprets meaning-making through erasures and gaps and turns forgetting into a literary device that challenges prevailing historiographies.

The result of this study the novel's overwritten narratives fit into Huysen's (2003) palimpsest metaphor, which depicts memory as a layered, contested process. By combining these frameworks, the study concludes that forgetting in postmodern literature is a purposeful tactic that reinterprets identity, narrative authority, and the process of meaning formation through disruption and absence rather than a failure

Discussion

Temporal Dislocation and Repetitive Memory

One of the dominant strategies through which *Theories of Forgetting* passes narrative forgetting is temporal dislocation, particularly in Alana's narrative. Her experience of time dissolving, as she said, "days bled into nights, into weeks. There was no way to measure them anymore, no way to keep track of what had already slipped away" (Olsen, 2014, p. 37), illustrates the collapse of linear temporality and the corrosion of chronological structure. This confusion is more than a symptom of illness or trauma. It represents a formal enactment of forgetfulness. Alana's inability to remember her experience within conventional time frameworks mirrors Derrida's (1997) concept of "difference", in which meaning is never static but always deferred and destabilized. Time, like memory, becomes unknown, experienced as a distortion rather than a linear or sequence. This formal device not only reflects Alana's cognitive decline but also disrupts the reader's temporal anticipations, implicating them in the experience of forgetting (p.67).

A connected device appears in Hugh's storyline, where repetition and revision signal the unpredictability of memory. As he walks through a familiar yet changed environment, "uncertain if it was a return or an echo" (Olsen, 2014, p. 91). The narrative layers slight differences over familiar scenes, evoking what Fredric Jameson (1991) defines as the

“waning of historicity” in postmodern culture. This technique distorts the boundary between memory and misremembering, which creates a feedback loop in which the past is not improved but recycled as fragmented simulacra. Rather than progressing toward closure or determination, Hugh’s repetitions of words reinforce dislocation and fragmentation, consistent with Jameson’s claim that postmodern narratives are marked by a destruction of time and historical depth. Thus, Alana's and Hugh's experiences illustrate how memory is more of a fluid process that is influenced by loss, distortion, and narrative unpredictability than it is a source of truth (p.60).

Repetition, Revision, and the Collapse of Historical Memory in Hugh’s Narrative

Lance Olsen, in his novel, emphasizes the obscure line between memory and misremembering in Hugh's story by creating a textual environment that is shaped by repetition with modest variation. He claims that "he found himself walking the same street again, uncertain if it was a return or an echo" is a paragraph that demonstrates this point quite clearly. Although the businesses' names had changed, the walls were familiar, or maybe he was misremembering them (Olsen, 2014, p. 91). This scene's ambiguity, whether Hugh is remembering a true memory or hearing a changed echo of it, shows how postmodern literature challenges the idea of stable, retrievable memory. The "waning of historicity" in postmodern culture, as defined by Fredric Jameson (1991), “is mirrored by this recursive wandering and changing perspectives.” The "waning of historicity" in postmodern culture, which Fredric Jameson (1991) describes as the present cannibalising the past through surface-level duplication rather than substantive continuity, is mirrored in this recursive wandering and changing views. Recurring actions lack the tone and narrative unity necessary to be rooted in a clearly defined historical context (p.90).

This "return or echo" pattern serves as a metaphor for postmodern memory in general, which is an unpredictable and disjointed narrative. The postmodern subject's crisis of orientation is embodied in Hugh's uncertainty about whether the change is in the world or his experience of it. It poses the ontological question at the heart of Brian McHale's (1987) analysis: “What is this world, and how is it created?” Instead of offering closure, Olsen's story raises a sense of spatial and reasoning displacement that mirrors Hugh's decline and emotional distance. His repetition through areas with different signage but recognizable buildings illustrate





how memory separates from fixed referents and instead exists in a temporary state between forgetfulness and memory.

Not only is the repetition aesthetically attractive, but it also serves a structural purpose by delaying the plot's development and preventing determination. Every time a street is reentered, a memory is rebuilt, but with little changes that make the reader doubt the story's coherence. Jameson would contend that this type of imitated memory is a major example of the postmodern propensity to recycle the past in conventional, fragmented ways, depriving it of historical authenticity and tone. No original moment is completely preserved in the repeating scene, which works like a palimpsest, a literary surface covered in variations. Hugh's psychological state is defined by this gathering of partially erased experience, which also frames forgetting as narrative excess without grounding rather than absence.

Furthermore, Ricoeur's (2004) idea that memory is always reconstructive, modified by both remembering and forgetting, is exemplified by Hugh's experience and his reflective questioning, "or perhaps he was misremembering them." Olsen highlights that memory is a narrative act that is disposed to loss and distortion rather than a factual recovery by incorporating misremembering within the process of memory. Thus, the novel presents a memory that is both actively recreated and constantly weakened, that reflects a postmodern state where the validity of cultural and personal history is questioned (p.70).

Accordingly, *Theories of forgetting* not only embody the temporal and spatial fragmentation characteristic of postmodern fiction, but they also investigate the psychological ramifications of recursive memory, in which meaning is produced through dissonance, instability, and constant reinterpretation rather than through narrative progression. The narrative topology created by Hugh's looping paths and fragmented awareness reinforces Olsen's main argument that forgetting is both thematically and structurally incorporated in postmodern narrative form, which reflects the decline of memory as a cultural and cognitive system.

Annotative Overwriting in Aila's Notes

Another notable formal manifestation of narrative forgetfulness in *Theories of Forgetting* is Aila's marginal comments, which partially remove and disrupt Alana's primary narrative. "Alana's words: faint, almost erased. The glacier never existed," Aila says in one illustrative example. Or maybe it was hidden under the white all along (Olsen, 2014, p. 154). This quotation functions on a structural and literal level all at once. Alana's diminishing vocabulary reflects her cognitive deterioration,





and her uncertainty rewrites the memory as malleable and vulnerable to reinterpretation. The resulting textual palimpsest, a layering of one narrative over another, represents what Brian McHale (1987) calls the fragmented, self-disruptive structure of postmodern fiction, in which competing narrative voices expose ontological uncertainty and erode the notion of a singular, authoritative reality (p.59).

Linda Hutcheon (1088), on the other hand, defines historiographic metafiction as fiction that "lays claim to historical events and personages," but is still highly self-aware and sceptical of its truth claims (p. 5). This annotative intrusion is not merely reporting. It is an act of narrative review and even erasure. Alana's past is aggressively undermined by Aila's annotations rather than explained. Aila notes in one annotation, "Alana thought this trip would save us." However, I don't recall it that way (Olsen, 2014, p. 149). In this occasion, Aila's recollection not only challenges Alana's account of what happened but also replaces it and establishes a new narrative authority that is a product of construction. This procedure is similar to Andreas Huyssen's (2003) idea of the urban palimpsest, in which fresh inscriptions continuously replace older ones without ever completely removing them. Alana's voice becomes a plunged trace in the novel, only made accessible by Aila's editorial distortions (p.67).

Paul Ricoeur (2004) argues that forgetting is not just the absence of memory but a requirement for narrative reconfiguration, which supports the idea that memory is not recovered but rather recreated by selective writing and deletion. His statement that "forgetting is not nothingness, but a hidden resource of memory" (p. 443) clarifies this. Aila observes at another point that "her words didn't matter anymore." What was left, and what I could still write, was what counted (Olsen, 2014, p. 156). The policy of memory and authorship is dramatized by this overt claim of textual control, which demonstrates how one narrative is removed in the process of maintaining or reinterpreting another. Thus, the novel formally and thematically performs narrative forgetting, not as passive loss, but as active overwriting.

Memory and Fragmented Identity

In *Theories of Forgetting* (2014), Lance Olsen presents memory loss not only as a thematic issue but also as a cause of identity fragmentation, which upsets temporal stability and personal coherence as the main characters, Alana, Hugh, and Aila, gradually lose their identities as their memories deteriorate. This reflects Andreas Huyssen's (2003) claim that both individual and collective memory are palimpsest, layered and





unstable, just as urban environments display identities constructed on fragments of the past (p.89).

Alana's story best exemplifies this identity collapse since her sense of self declines in tandem with her physical state. As she declares, "I feel like I read about that woman a long time ago... I can no longer remember who I was when this began" (Olsen, 2014, p. 52). Her narrative gets more and more broken, punctuated by ellipses, white space, and notes. These devices reflect the detachment from her previous personality. Her voice fades, both literally as her text gets progressively softer and symbolically as Aila replaces it. This creates what Huyssen (2003) refers to as a "void of identity," in which the subject is cut off from both the past and the present (p. 15).

Hugh's story is also preoccupied by fragmentation. His habitual recording of Alana's world is an attempt to maintain meaning in the face of her removal, but it becomes compulsive, which reflects his own eroding hold on reality: "He found himself walking the same street again... uncertain if it was a return or an echo" (Olsen, 2014, p. 91). Hugh's repetition of spatial roads, familiar yet subtly altered, echoes Huyssen's concept of the urban palimpsest, in which memory is rewritten on top of older layers. However, this cyclical movement does not offer renewal, but instead reveals a hollowed identity without resolution or clarity.

This fragmentation is further highlighted by the novel's bidirectional form. Like the characters, the reader is deprived of a singular, definitive point of origin; reading itself turns into an interpretive reconstruction, reflecting the characters' quest for constancy in the face of confusion. Brian McHale's (1987) claim that postmodern fiction substitutes ontological doubt for epistemological inquiry is best illustrated by this structural confusion. "Which version matters, and whose memory survives?" is now the question instead of "What happened?" Identity is constantly rebuilt in Olsen's narrative universe; it is a result of who gets to tell the story, what is remembered, and what is forgotten (p.45). In the end, the novel reinterprets forgetting as a formative process, rather than as a simple loss. Partial and uncertain prejudices are created by Olsen's characters as they are trapped in the dangerous relationship between memory and its removal. Therefore, in a narrative world where no memory is protected from modification, forgetting becomes similar to losing the connecting tissue of the self, leaving behind only fragile traces, fractured voices, and layered texts.

Forgetting and Language

According to *Theories of Forgetting* (2014), language itself acts as both the location and the means of memory damage. It also includes executing

forgetfulness at the syntactic, semantic, and form levels in addition to the narrative content. In support of Jacques Derrida's (1997) theory that language is fundamentally unstable and defined by "difference", Lance Olsen's prose fragments meaning through verbal repetition, ellipses, and disrupted grammar. According to this perspective, forgetting is materialized in the novel's linguistic construction rather than just being portrayed in it.

The cognitive disintegration of memory, further is particularly well-represented in Alana's story through grammatical errors and rubbishes of phrases. For example, she admits, "I was trying to remember... but the image slipped away before..." during a period of mental confusion (Olsen, 2014, p.44). To simulate forgetting in real time, the sentence turns into ellipses. The reader is left to occupy the liminal realm of lost memory. As the character is caught between remembrance and forgivingness, the open-endedness refuses to provide closure. What Derrida refers to as the "violence of language", its propensity to both create and destroy meaning, which is enacted by this syntactic fragmentation (Derrida, 1997, p. 11).

Olsen also applies similar linguistic instability to Hugh's passages, where the distinction between remembering and forgivingness is blurred by homophonic play and semantic repetition. "Trace... tracing... erased... erasing," Hugh muses (Olsen, 2014, p. 103). Here, the recursive wordplay serves as a verbal echo of memory's instability, in which meaning starts to fade as repetition becomes too much. Fredric Jameson (1991) noted that postmodern language often "recycles fragments of the past without securing historical reference," producing a textual surface that mimics history but is unable to firmly establish its meaning (p. 25). This is consistent with Jameson's findings. In Hugh's example, the repetition only serves to widen the gap of ambiguity rather than bringing back memories or insights.

Moreover, Aila's comments, in which language serves as an instrument for both preservation and obliteration, further emphasize this instability of memory. Annotation becomes a linguistic type of forgetting when she writes over Alana's fading words, "Alana's words: faint, almost erased" (Olsen, 2014, p. 154). Andreas Huyssen's (2003) metaphor of the urban palimpsest, according to which "each new inscription both preserves and erases what came before it," is reflected in the overwritten text that is still barely discernible beneath the new inscription (p. 28). In this situation, language is not a transparent tool nor a neutral medium; rather, it becomes a tool for the distortion of memory and combining conflicting voices.





Furthermore, the metaphor of linguistic entropy is extended by the novel's typography, which includes fading text, unusual formatting, and a back-to-front narrative orientation as well. By simulating the psychological experience of forgetfulness through textual gaps and linguistic signs, Olsen's prose frequently mimics the cognitive rhythms of a faltering mind. It embodies Derrida's idea of absence as constitutive of language, where meaning is always haunted by what has been lost or left unsaid (Derrida, 1997, p. 61). This is not just formal experimentation.

So, all the above devices are some of the strategies used in *Theories of Forgetting* to show how language cannot protect memory; rather, it exposes its partiality and fragility. Memory is both shaped by what is said and weakened by what cannot be said, as the novel suggests. Therefore, forgetting is not just depicted in the narrative, and it is woven into the structure of the language used to convey it.

Materiality and the Body: Forgetting as Embodied Decay

Memory loss is not limited to the mind or narrative structure, according to *theories of forgetting*. The decaying corpse is also engraved with it. In addition to serving as a philosophical backdrop, Alana's failing health turns into a somatic narrative in which the collapse of identity and memory is reflected in her physical health. Her claim that "my body remembers what my mind forgets" (Olsen, 2014, p. 48) perfectly arrests the conflict between mental dissociation and physical memory. Though it gives way to entropy, the body becomes a remainder of memory that contains what the mind has rejected. This is in line with Paul Ricoeur's (2004) theory that memory is not just mental but also embodied and exposed to both physiological weakness and instinctive memory. In this way, the body only the site where memory is stored, but also where forgetting is experienced as pain, exhaustion, and disorientation.

Olsen uses both form and substance to exaggerate this physical fall. As Alana's condition worsens, her parts grow more and more sparse and typographically split. White space increases, punctuation vanishes, and sentences drop, simulating a neurological breakdown. Sentences such as "I can't recall if it happened before or after the glacier." Syntactic and cognitive boundaries are blurred in "But I feel cold all the time" (Olsen, 2014, p. 62), which combines the body and intellect into a common space of breakup. This instability is a reflection of what Elaine Scarry (1985) calls the unmaking of language through bodily suffering in her research on pain. In this process, pain destroys the coherence of speech itself rather than resisting representation. Alana's narrative, like her body, becomes spongy and unreliable, flooded with the trauma of her vanishing selfhood (p.57).

Andreas Huyssen's (2003) assertion that trauma "leaves traces on both body and archive" (p. 17) is likewise consistent with this union of textual and physical degradation. Like the story itself, Alana's body is prone to decline and deletion, but it also serves as a store of cultural and personal memory. Her diminished action as a woman suffering from disease and as a figure whose voice is dominated by others is paralleled by her growing incapacity to tell her story. Through the final destruction of her story and the fading type, this silence is not merely symbolic; however, it is instinctive. The body becomes the first victim of forgetting as well as the bearer of memory.

Furthermore, imitating Alana's physical weakness, the novel's tangible format invites the reader to experience the instability of memory on the page. The novel's material design stresses that reading is both embodied and intellectual. In order to continue, the novel must be physically turned upside down to reflect the characters' confusion. This supports Ricoeur's (2004) theory that memory, time, and the body interact to create narrative identity. Thus, forgetting is not an abstract literary issue in Olsen's work; rather, it is a physical crisis that is represented at the level of form, plot, and book design.

Narrative Authority and the Ethics of Remembering

Aila's literal and symbolic overwriting of Alana's speech presents a major ethical puzzle in *Theories of Forgetting* (2014). This postmodern narrative technique forces readers to consider not just what is recalled but also who controls memory and at what cost. "Her words didn't matter anymore," Aila claimed. A dramatic change in narrative power is indicated by the statement, "What was left, and what I could still write, was what counted" (Olsen, 2014, p. 156). It is a declaration of narrative authority that substitutes one voice for another, not just a gesture of sadness or continuity. Aila's comments thus turn into a metaphor for the politics of memory generation, who insistent ethical issues regarding remembering and forgetting, especially in light of painful experiences.

Linda Hutcheon's (1988) theory of historiographic metafiction, which challenges the construction of historical knowledge by highlighting the unstable boundaries between fact, fiction, and memory, is reflected in this narrative domain. According to Hutcheon, such texts reveal how history is written by those in positions of power, and all acts of historical narration are subjective and ideologically infused (p. 122). Thus, rather than only protective Alana's story, Aila's annotations reshape it, emphasizing her voice while partially silencing Alana's. The disappearance of Alana's text on the physical page reflects her disappearance from both narrative and memory. As Ricoeur (2004)





argues, every act of remembering also implies acts of forgetting, and often, forgetting is what allows remembering to happen in the first place (pp. 443–445). Aila's control over the narrative is a prime example of this idea. Her memory of Alana is shaped not only by what she chooses to include, but also by what she chooses to remove or reinterpret. Her voice becomes the filter through which the past is reassembled.

Dominick LaCapra's (2001) theory of acting out vs working through in trauma narratives is also in line with this narrative structure of the novel. Despite being portrayed as a means of love or continuity, Aila's literary interventions are infused with power and control, which reflects LaCapra's worry that repetition or adoption might turn remembering into a means of re-traumatizing (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 142–143).

This dichotomy is further complicated by the *Theories of forgetting* (2014). Olsen portrays Aila as someone trying to use narration to make sense of suffering, even if that narration inevitably changes what has already happened, rather than as a monster. In this sense, the novel reflects Cathy Caruth's (1996) observation that trauma frequently defies straightforward portrayal and needs to be communicated through fragmentation, repetition, and substitution (p. 5). Thus, it is possible to view Aila's comments as a traumatic condition in which the original voice is buried beneath layers of memory and grief rather than destroyed. Since there is no fixed narrative center or stable point of entry, just as there is no singular or “authentic” version of memory, the reader is forced to navigate silences, contradictions, and textual gaps. The ethics of layered storytelling in the novel are as much a product of its physical design as of its content.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014) incorporates forgetting into the fundamental form, structure, and language of the novel rather than just illustrating them as a narrative theme. Olsen turns forgetfulness into a generative artistic principle that undermines linear chronology, breaks the coherence of selfhood, and questions the validity of language itself. This has been done by the three elements examined in this study: narrative structure, identity construction, and linguistic instability.

First, the narrative structure analysis showed how the text is broken by temporal bounds, omissions, and distorted repeats. This forces readers to fill in the silences and gaps. Second, when memories fade, people like Alana, Hugh, and Aila gradually lose their sense of self, as the identity fragmentation discussion illuminated. The study illustrated how these characters represent fractured identities. The process of forgetting

removes the idea of a fixed point of origin by destabilizing and real identities. Third, Olsen employs fragmented syntax and linguistic ambiguity to demonstrate the investigation of language as a medium of forgetting. According to *Theories of Forgetting*, language is a place where meaning is postponed, changed, and lost rather than a haven of memory. This supports Jameson's (1991) finding that postmodern speech recycles historical tidbits without tying them to a specific historical context.

All of these results point to Olsen's novel's idea of forgetfulness as an active narrative technique that influences how language is perceived, and how identities are created rather than as a passive gap. Olsen's novel *Theories of Forgetting* forces readers to face the shortness of meaning and the infirmity of memory by including loss and absence into its narrative structure. As a result, this analysis places Olsen's writing in the larger postmodern and deconstructive traditions, that provides insight into how modern fiction resolves the conflict between remembering and forgetting in a society characterized by identity fragmentation and temporal displacement.

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