



Landscapes of Loss: Aleida Assmann's Memory Theory and the Erasure of Place in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *The Folded Earth*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Anuradha Roy's novels *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) and *The Folded Earth* (2011) through the lens of Aleida Assmann's cultural memory theory, particularly her foundational distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory. Drawing on Assmann's framework of places as memory archives — what she terms *Erinnerungsorte* or memory sites — this study argues that Roy consistently figures landscape as a repository of personal, cultural, and ecological memory, and that the destruction or abandonment of place in both novels constitutes a simultaneous erasure of memory at multiple levels. The sacred geography of Jarmuli in *Sleeping on Jupiter* and the Himalayan hill town of Ranikhet in *The Folded Earth* function not merely as settings but as living archives of communal and ecological knowledge. Through close textual analysis and application of Assmann's theoretical vocabulary — including her concepts of active and passive memory, the storage archive, and the canon — this article demonstrates that Roy's fiction enacts a sustained meditation on how environmental trauma, displacement, and modernity rupture the fragile threads of memory that bind individuals and communities to place.

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1. Introduction: Memory, Place, and the Literary Landscape

In the contemporary Indian English novel, landscape is rarely merely scenery. It is argument, archive, and elegy. Anuradha Roy, one of the most celebrated voices in contemporary Indian fiction, consistently deploys natural and built environments as sites of memory — places that store what communities have known, loved, and lost. Her novels *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) and *The Folded Earth* (2011) are exemplary instances of what we might call memorial fiction: narratives in which the fate of a place and the fate of memory are inextricably entangled.

Aleida Assmann, the German cultural theorist and memory scholar, offers a theoretically rigorous framework for understanding precisely this relationship. Her work, developed in dialogue with her husband Jan Assmann, distinguishes between different registers of memory — communicative, cultural, active, passive — and insists above all on the crucial role of material sites in the storage and transmission of collective memory. For Assmann, places are not passive receptacles; they are active participants in the making and unmaking of identity, history, and community.

This article brings Assmann's memory theory into productive dialogue with Roy's fiction. It argues that both *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *The Folded Earth* dramatize the fragility of place-based memory in the face of violence, modernity, and ecological change. The sacred town of Jarmuli in *Sleeping on Jupiter* and the Himalayan settlement of Ranikhet in *The Folded Earth* function as Assmannian memory sites — locations that hold cultural and ecological knowledge across generations — and their threatened or destroyed integrity signals a crisis of memory that is simultaneously personal, communal, and environmental.

2. Aleida Assmann's Theory of Memory: A Conceptual Framework

Aleida Assmann's contribution to memory studies is foundational and wide-ranging. Her major works — *Erinnerungsräume* (Cultural Memory and Western Civilization, 1999) and *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur* (2013) — establish a systematic account of how memory functions across individual, social, and cultural levels. Her framework is built around several key distinctions that are directly relevant to the analysis of Roy's fiction.

2.1 Communicative Memory and Cultural Memory

Building on Jan Assmann's earlier distinction, Aleida Assmann defines communicative memory as the living, embodied memory shared among contemporaries — the stories, anecdotes, and experiences passed between people who have lived through the same era. Communicative memory typically spans no more than

three generations, the horizon of living recollection. It is warm, personal, and vulnerable: when the last witnesses die, communicative memory dies with them unless it is translated into another medium.

Cultural memory, by contrast, is the long-duration memory of a society, preserved through institutions, rituals, texts, monuments, and — crucially for our purposes — places. Cultural memory can survive for centuries and millennia, but it requires constant maintenance and re-activation. Assmann distinguishes within cultural memory between the canon (that which is actively remembered, taught, and transmitted) and the archive (that which is stored but lies dormant, awaiting rediscovery). This distinction between active and passive memory is central to her theory.

2.2 Place as Memory Archive: Erinnerungsorte

Perhaps Assmann's most productive concept for literary analysis is her theorization of place as memory site — what she develops in dialogue with Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. For Assmann, places possess a unique quality as memory archives: unlike texts or objects, they cannot be easily moved or destroyed without catastrophic loss of the memory they hold. A landscape carries the traces of all who have inhabited it; a sacred site condenses centuries of ritual, belief, and identity.

Assmann writes that places have a kind of mnemonic density — they accumulate layers of memory over time, becoming what we might call thick places. The destruction or desecration of such places is therefore not merely physical damage; it is an act of *mnemocide* — the killing of memory. When a place is violated, all the memories it held are threatened with erasure. This is the theoretical foundation on which this article's reading of Roy's fiction rests.

2.3 Trauma, Forgetting, and the Wound of Memory

Assmann also develops a sophisticated account of traumatic memory — memory that cannot be integrated into communicative or cultural frameworks and instead persists as wound. Traumatic memory disrupts normal processes of remembering and forgetting; it returns unbidden, fragmentary, and destabilizing. For Assmann, the work of memory culture involves finding ways to acknowledge and metabolize traumatic memory without either repressing it or being overwhelmed by it. This dimension of her theory is especially pertinent to *Sleeping on Jupiter*, where childhood trauma and ecological desecration are inseparably interwoven.

3. Sleeping on Jupiter: The Wounded Sacred and the Erasure of Cultural Memory

Sleeping on Jupiter is Roy's third novel, set largely in a fictional coastal temple town called Jarmuli. The novel weaves together multiple storylines: Nomi, a young woman of tribal origin who was abducted from her family as a child and raised in an abusive ashram in Jarmuli; three elderly women, Latika, Gouri, and Vidya, on a pilgrimage to the town's famous temples; and Suraj, a documentary filmmaker from the Netherlands who accompanies them. These intersecting stories converge around Jarmuli as a space simultaneously sacred and profaned, remembered and forgotten.

3.1 Jarmuli as Assmannian Memory Site

Jarmuli functions in the novel as a memory site in precisely the Assmannian sense. The temples that dominate the town's landscape are repositories of centuries of devotional practice, artistic tradition, and communal identity. Roy describes them in terms that evoke their mnemonic density — they are encrusted with time, bearing the marks of generations of worshippers. The town's spatial organization — the arrangement of temples, ghats, ashrams, and the sea — constitutes a kind of spatial text in which the cultural memory of a community is inscribed.

For the three elderly pilgrims, Jarmuli is precisely a site of cultural memory activation. Their journey to the temple town is an act of what Assmann would call anamnesis — a re-animation of dormant cultural memory through ritual re-enactment. Latika, Gouri, and Vidya carry within them communicative memories of earlier visits, family devotions, and personal histories entangled with the sacred geography of Jarmuli. Their pilgrimage is simultaneously a journey through personal memory and a reconnection with the longer cultural memory that the place holds.

3.2 Nomi's Severed Memory: Displacement as Mnemocide

Nomi's story enacts a different and more devastating dimension of Assmann's memory theory. Abducted from her tribal forest community as a small child, Nomi is severed from the communicative memory of her people — the stories, songs, ecological knowledge, and ritual practices that constituted her community's living memory. This severance is irreparable: the communicative memory she might have inherited simply did not reach her, and without it, she has no access to the cultural memory that gives her community its identity and continuity.

What Nomi carries instead is traumatic memory — the unbidden, fragmentary recollections of violence that return to her throughout the novel. Assmann's framework helps us understand why Nomi cannot simply

replace her lost communicative memory with cultural memory of another tradition. Memory is not transferable in this way; it is rooted in place and community. Nomi's displacement is therefore not merely geographical but mnemonic: she has been cut off from the very networks of memory-transmission through which identity is formed.

3.3 Tourism, Commodification, and the Desecration of Memory Sites

Roy's novel is also acutely attentive to the ways in which tourism and commodification threaten the integrity of Jarmuli as a memory site. The town's sacred geography is being progressively colonized by tourist infrastructure — hotels, souvenir stalls, and guided tours that transform devotional space into spectacle. This process, Roy suggests, is a form of what Assmann would recognize as the degradation of active cultural memory into passive storage: the temples remain, but their capacity to generate living memory is being hollowed out.

Suraj's documentary filmmaking is itself implicated in this process. His camera mediates between the observer and the place, creating the illusion of access while in fact substituting representation for presence. Assmann's distinction between the archive and the living memory community is relevant here: Suraj's film preserves images of Jarmuli but cannot preserve the memory that the place holds for those who carry it in their bodies and communities.

4. The Folded Earth: Ecological Memory and the Himalayan Archive

The Folded Earth, Roy's second novel, is set in and around Ranikhet, a hill town in the Kumaon Himalaya. Its narrator, Maya, is a young widow who has retreated to Ranikhet following her husband Michael's death in the mountains. The novel traces her gradual immersion in the town's ecology, community, and layered history, as well as the forces of development and modernity that threaten to transform — and ultimately destroy — the landscape she has come to love.

4.1 Ranikhet as Living Archive

Ranikhet is presented from the novel's opening pages as a place of exceptional mnemonic density. The hills, forests, and colonial-era architecture all carry traces of multiple overlapping histories: the indigenous Pahadi communities whose ecological knowledge is encoded in the landscape; the British colonial presence whose buildings and orchards still mark the town; and the personal histories of the novel's characters, for whom the landscape is inseparable from memory of the dead.

In Assmannian terms, Ranikhet functions simultaneously as canon and archive. Certain memories are actively transmitted — the stories of the hills' ecology, the rituals and festivals of the Pahadi communities, the shared knowledge of plants, animals, and seasonal cycles that constitutes what Roy presents as an irreplaceable ecological intelligence. But other memories are archived: the suppressed histories of colonial extraction, the silenced stories of marginal communities, the geological memory of the mountains themselves.

4.2 Maya's Grief and the Landscape as Mourning Space

Maya's relationship to Ranikhet is mediated through grief. She has come to the hills to mourn Michael, and the landscape becomes for her a space in which mourning and memory are materialized. She walks the hills daily; the paths she takes are paths of memory, retracing her relationship with Michael through the topography of the place. This is a precise enactment of what Assmann calls memory-in-place: the landscape holds and enables the work of mourning in a way that no purely mental or social process could.

The landscape also holds communicative memory for the other characters. Diwan Sahib, the eccentric old man who becomes Maya's friend and mentor, is himself a living archive of Ranikhet's stories — a human repository of communicative memory who has spent his life accumulating the town's layered history. His relationship to the landscape is itself a form of cultural memory practice: by recording and transmitting the place's stories, he performs the canonical function that Assmann identifies as central to cultural memory.

4.3 Development, Destruction, and Mnemocide

The central threat in *The Folded Earth* is the encroachment of development — new roads, hotels, and infrastructure projects — onto the ecology and memory of Ranikhet. Roy presents this encroachment not merely as environmental damage but as an assault on the memory archive that the landscape constitutes. When trees are felled for a new road, what is lost is not only biodiversity but the web of ecological knowledge — the Pahadi names for plants, the seasonal rhythms encoded in forest cycles — that constitutes the community's living cultural memory.

Assmann's distinction between active memory and the storage archive is illuminating here. Roy suggests that the Pahadi communities' ecological knowledge is precisely the kind of active cultural memory that cannot survive displacement from its material substrate — the landscape itself. Once that substrate is destroyed, the knowledge cannot simply be archived elsewhere; it becomes inert, disconnected from the living practices through which it was sustained. Development, in Roy's fictional world, does not merely damage the environment; it kills memory.

5. Comparative Analysis: Memory, Place, and the Ecology of Loss

Reading *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *The Folded Earth* together through Assmann's framework reveals a sustained thematic and ethical concern that runs through Roy's fiction: the insistence that landscape is archive, and that its destruction is simultaneously an act of environmental violence and a mnemocide. Both novels present places — Jarmuli and Ranikhet — as repositories of memory at multiple levels: personal, communal, ecological, and cultural. And both trace the consequences of that memory's threatened or actual erasure.

5.1 The Structure of Memory Loss: A Comparative View

In both novels, the structure of memory loss follows a similar pattern. First, there is the disruption of communicative memory — the living, embodied memory that passes between generations through direct contact and shared experience. In *Sleeping on Jupiter*, this disruption is enacted violently through Nomi's abduction; in *The Folded Earth*, it occurs more gradually through the erosion of the intergenerational bonds that sustained Pahadi ecological knowledge. Second, there is the threat to cultural memory — the longer-duration archive held in place, ritual, and institution.

What both novels dramatize is the interdependence of these two levels of memory. Communicative memory is the living conduit through which cultural memory is activated and renewed; when communicative memory is severed, cultural memory loses its access to living practice and risks becoming mere archive — passive storage without the capacity for meaningful transmission. Roy's fiction suggests that the ecological destruction she depicts threatens precisely this process of activation: the landscape can no longer serve as memory site when the communities that animated it are displaced or silenced.

5.2 Gender, Marginality, and the Bearers of Memory

Both novels are notably attentive to the gendered dimension of memory and its loss. In *Sleeping on Jupiter*, the primary bearers of both communicative and cultural memory are women — the three elderly pilgrims whose journey enacts memory's fragility, and Nomi whose severed memory figures memory's violence. In *The Folded Earth*, Maya's role as witness and mourner places her in the position of the one who must carry memory when the place itself is threatened.

Assmann's work is sensitive to these gendered dynamics of memory. She notes that women have historically been assigned the role of memory-bearers — keepers of the domestic archive, guardians of the

communicative memory that passes between generations. Roy both draws on and interrogates this tradition: her female characters are powerful memory-agents, but they are also vulnerable to the forces that would erase the memories they carry. The novels suggest that the marginalization of women and the destruction of ecological memory are not unrelated phenomena; both involve the silencing of those who hold knowledge the dominant order finds inconvenient.

6. Conclusion: Roy, Assmann, and the Ethics of Environmental Memory

This article has argued that Aleida Assmann's memory theory provides a rich and illuminating framework for reading Anuradha Roy's fiction. Both *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *The Folded Earth* present landscape as memory archive, and both trace the devastating consequences — personal, communal, ecological — of that archive's threatened erasure. Through Assmann's conceptual vocabulary — communicative memory, cultural memory, the canon and the archive, the memory site, traumatic memory — we can articulate with new precision what is at stake in Roy's fictional worlds.

The conjunction of ecocriticism and memory studies that this reading enacts is not merely methodologically productive; it reflects a deep ethical imperative in Roy's fiction. The destruction of landscapes — whether through tourist commodification in Jarmuli or development in Ranikhet — is presented not as regrettable but ultimately manageable environmental damage, but as an act of violence against memory itself. To lose a place is to lose an archive; and to lose an archive is to lose a community's capacity to know who it is and where it has come from.

Roy's novels, read through Assmann's framework, make a powerful case for what we might call ecological memory justice: the recognition that communities have a right not only to their environments but to the memories those environments hold. This is a claim that speaks urgently to the contemporary moment, as climate change, development, and displacement threaten living memory archives around the world. Anuradha Roy's fiction, informed by the deepest insights of memory studies, insists that we recognize what is truly at stake in every act of environmental destruction: not merely the loss of biodiversity or natural beauty, but the erasure of memory itself.

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