# Writing in and about Prison, Childhood Albinism and Human Temporality in *The Book of Memory*

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## Summary

In its depiction of childhood albinism in a Zimbabwean township in the early 1990s and the imprisonment of females during the height of Zimbabwe's political paralysis and economic collapse of the early 21st century, Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015) makes one imagine ways in which human time is constructed and perceived. As a child, Memory, the protagonist, suffers social exclusion because she has albinism, and as a young adult she is falsely accused of murder and is sentenced to death. These circumstances influence Memory's perception of human temporality as she resorts to the internal resources of memory of the past and future triggered by imprisonment to reflect on the abuse and indignities that she has suffered. The non-linearity of Gappah's novel is an attempt to escape or at least disrupt the main characters' feelings of being bound within the contingencies of linear human time. The remembering of the past captured in the novel's title and the novel's presentation of the present are all future-oriented, although the future of the protagonist is largely presented as bleak.



## Opsomming

Danksy Petina Gappah se uitbeelding van kinderjare-albinisme in 'n Zimbabwiese township in die vroeë 1990's en die gevangenskap van vroue gedurende die toppunt van Zimbabwe se politieke verlamming en ekonomiese ondergang vroeg in die 21ste eeu in *The Book of Memory* (2015), kan mens jou maniere verbeel waarop menslike tyd gekonstrueer en waargeneem word. As kind ervaar Memory, die protagonis, sosiale uitsluiting omdat sy albinisme het, en as jong volwassene word sy valslik van moord beskuldig en die doodstraf opgelê. Hierdie omstandighede beïnvloed Memory se persepsie van menslike temporalieë wanneer sy haar wend tot die interne hulpbronne van herinneringe van die verlede en die toekoms, wat aangevuur word deur gevangenskap om te reflekteer oor die mishandeling en onwaardigheid wat sy moes verduur. Die nielineariteit van Gappah se roman is 'n poging om die hoof-karakters se gevoelens van gebondenheid aan die gebeurlikhede van lineêre menslike tyd, vry te spring of ten minste te ontwrig. Die onthou van die verlede wat in die roman se titel opgesluit is, en die roman se voorstelling van die hede, is alles toekoms-georiënteerd, hoewel die toekoms van die protagonis grootliks as droewig voorgestel word.


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## Introduction

Petina Gappah's novel is organised in a non-linear manner, although its subsection titles suggest linearity. As a result, the reader starts "to look for points of reference and to re-establish the chronology for himself [or herself]", if one may appropriate Sartre's (1963: 225-226) formulation in his analysis of the configuration of time in *The Sound and the Fury*. Subjecting Memory's story into a linear format reveals layered narratives that are largely occupied with the perception of human temporality and its dependence on one's life experiences. First, the novel highlights the violation of the rights of vulnerable girl children by being structured as an ethnographic study into a traumatic patriarchal way of dealing with crime in a Zimbabwean Shona traditional society. Memory's mother is given away in a forced marriage to satisfy the dictates of a traditional justice system that purports to appease a restless and vengeful spirit of a murdered man.

Second, the novel is imagined as a human rights tract condemning the ill-treatment of female children with physical challenges in contemporary Africa. Javangwe and Tagwirei (2013: 21) have argued that Zimbabwean literature has been pivotal in "the dissemination of human rights consciousness". In this regard, Gappah's novel condemns the politically charged post-2000 Zimbabwean justice system with its degraded penal system, which is exposed as unsuitable for female prisoners. The novel foregrounds the rights of vulnerable individuals by simultaneously utilising and criticising Western interventionism with regard to discourses of global human rights. Through this forked strategy, the novel provides important glimpses into how forced female child marriage, albinism and incarceration in a politically polarised and economically collapsed African post-colonial state (re)organises the individual's perception of human temporality.

## Articulation of Human Time and Childhood Albinism

Ricoeur's (1988: 52) argument that "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and [that] narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence" is well illustrated in *The Book of Memory*. The novel's title gives the impression that the narrative adopts an unproblematic linear structure of a Bildungsroman. Part One references the township house where Memory spends most of the first nine years of her life. This section gives the reader an illusion that events are seen "through the eyes of a child" (165). Part Two is named after Lloyd Hendricks's home in Umwinsidale where Memory lives from the age of nine years until she completes high school and comes back to live again after spending nine years in Australia and England. Again, this section is not a sequential narration of Memory's life. The third part is named after one of the

largest maximum security prisons in Harare, Zimbabwe, where Memory is incarcerated after her murder conviction. The title and content of these sections illustrate that time becomes human through the narrative's translation of it into a linear trajectory.

However, the construction of human time or temporality through narrative is complicated by the fact that all three parts can indeed be called Chikurubi because the whole story is written by Memory while serving time at this prison. In this sense, both the reader and the narrator could be said to be experiencing a kind of "arrested motion in time" (Sartre 1963: 227). Childhood events are mediated through the protagonist's adult memory whilst in prison. Therefore, the protagonist's views on time as a child, though concentrated in the first part of the novel, are also found in the other two parts because the story itself starts, plays out and ends in prison, contrary to the sections' delimitations which suggest an unproblematic linear narrative.

Mavis Munongwa, a prisoner with whom Memory shares a cell for a while, graphically illustrates the notion of arrested motion in time. Mavis lives in physical and psychological prisons. She was sentenced to life imprisonment just a year before Zimbabwe's independence for fatally poisoning her brother's four children. When Memory arrives, Mavis has been in prison for close to thirty years. Mavis's life is not only frozen at the moment of her crime, but, tragically, she is also disengaged from political and economic developments as she "does not know that anything has changed" in Zimbabwe (79). Interestingly, Memory claims that the community of white people that Lloyd is part of lives in a similarly time detached manner. She notes: "[T]he people that I lived amongst in Umwinsidale lived in a cocoon of privilege that was untouched by the political changes around them" (79). It is as if these people's clocks blissfully stopped at a minute just before Zimbabwe's independence. Similarly, Memory realises that her story remains stuck in prison despite her attempt to make it unravel out into the past, to trace her life from birth until the present moment and into some hopeful future. She acknowledges: "I am still stuck here in prison when I should be telling you about how it all began" (91). She is literally imprisoned but her story also circles around prison. Despite her mind's moving back in time, the story remains completely confined by its teller's physical limitations which affect her perception of human time.

The central event that shapes Memory's thoughts and actions for almost 18 years after the age of nine is what she calls "a false memory", or rather "a true memory from which [she] ... made false assumptions" (261): the idea that her parents had sold her to Lloyd. This strategy creates narrative suspense because the reader assumes that the jailed narrator is discovering the truth about her past as she writes the story. But, since at the very beginning of her story Memory knows the truth, the statement becomes a contrivance that narratively constitute human time. This point is illustrated by Ricoeur's (1988: 142) argument that the reconfiguration of time takes place in the reciprocal

interweaving of historical and fictional narratives. Gappah's narrative reorganises time's perception as the reader experiences Memory's story of coming to understand how she came to stay with Lloyd as if it is unfolding with the telling of the story itself. This fictitious lack of knowledge on the part of Memory is central to the success of the narrative since it drives the story's plot.

Moreover, the protagonist's depiction of her childhood is influenced by current international human rights constructions of the African child as vulnerable and susceptible to abuse at the hands of the very people who are supposed to nurture her. The idea of a child with albinism being sold by her parents has a lot of currency in the current debates and international discourses which construct Africa as a stronghold of human rights abuse of vulnerable groups such as children. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the protagonist is asked by her lawyer to "write down every detail that [she] can remember" (8) for the benefit of Melinda Carter, an American journalist who is visiting Zimbabwe for a year and has "made a career out of exposing the miscarriages of justice" (9). Interestingly, Melinda is in Zimbabwe "to research a series of essays about [the country's] benighted justice system" (9).

Melinda's coming coincides with a period when Zimbabwe is on the global spotlight due to its government's violent dispossession of white farmers' land, an event that triggered an economic meltdown and plunged the country into political and social crises. Addressing herself to Melinda, Memory writes: "The story you have asked me to tell you … begins … when the sun seared my blistered face when I was nine years old and my father and mother sold me to a strange man" (1). Tellingly, Memory says that Melinda is "conditioned to believe in the worst that can come out of darkest Africa" (138). By linking Memory's story with the topical issues of the perceived abuse of children and the appalling human rights record of the post-colonial Zimbabwean prison, Gappah places Memory's domestic drama firmly within contemporary negative international constructions of Africa. What the protagonist observes about Zenzo, the artist whose "career has risen with [Zimbabwe's] collapse" (178), can be read as a moment of self-reflexivity on the part of Gappah.

Through flashback, the narrative makes the reader relive Memory's traumatic childhood. Grethlein's (2010: 316) definition of human time as the tension between expectation and experience captures how Memory experiences time as a child. She expects a carefree childhood in which she is fully accepted by her peers in her neighbourhood and at school. However, her experiences make her realise that her physical difference is limiting and leads to ostracism. She reports: "On Mharapara Street, I had a torrid time of it, but at school, where children from other streets in Mufakose joined the children of my street, the tormenting reached unbearable levels" (54). For the older Memory, her autobiographical narrative "offers a way of coming to grips with [her] temporality by letting [her] reenact the tension between expectation and

experience" (Grethlein 2010: 317). During her imprisonment, the narrative gives her some measure of control as she reconciles the differences between what she had anticipated and what actually obtains in her life.

Memory indicates that the passage of time has an effect on how past events are remembered. She writes: "It is hard for the truth to emerge shining clearly from a twenty-year fog of distant memory" (120). The amount of time that has elapsed and the fact that the truth is constituted through narrative; and as we have learnt from Ricoeur, time also becomes human when it is expressed via narrative, makes it impossible for the truth to easily come out. For example, what is true for children may be significantly different to what adults perceive as true. A character in the novel named MaiWhizi exclaims: "Ah children. When they overhear something, they don't always understand it" (127). However, the meaning of events would differ, not only depending on the age and experience of the individual, but primarily because of the different narratives that constitute and are constituted by each person. By extension, one's circumstances, such as the fact that Memory has albinism and is on death row, have an effect both on the story she tells and on the ways she narratively constructs and perceives human time.

Memory's reflection on her albinism as a marginalised child with a mentally deranged mother offers the reader an intensified view of human temporality. Her perception of time is largely shaped by her albinism, which dictates how she spends her life as a child. About her play-starved childhood, she remembers: "From the *speya,* I heard the children of Mharapara Street play their favourite games" (38). Memory exists in a painful loneliness and yearning that remains unfulfilled since she can only hear other children play but cannot be part of them. So the games they play become "their games". Her story as an adult enables her to narrate what she anticipated versus what she actually went through as a child.

The phrase "I heard" dominates Memory's remembering of this period of her childhood because she could only participate vicariously through auditory means in the children's games being played in the streets. Her life largely played itself out internally and she played a mind's game "in which [she] moved [herself] across time and space and imagined the alternative lives [she] could have had" (51). She experiences her childhood as postponed motion in time. Elsewhere, she observes: "From the time I was a child, I have been able to retreat into myself, and to find within myself the resources that have made it possible to bear my own company" (77). Her childhood isolation prefigures and prepares her for the much more painful isolation that she subsequently suffers in prison.

Memory's socially shunned skin "condition that makes [her] black but not black, white but not white" (5) creates a warped sense of being in time which makes her want "to crawl out of [her] own skin" (51), and also results in her parents suffering a relentless social exclusion. This exacerbates the original marginalisation of Memory's parents for having entered into a socially

unsanctioned marital union. Being superstitious, Memory's mother interprets her daughter's albinism as "a curse sent to her by her ancestors to punish her" (102). For her, the past inescapably dominates the present. This alters her perception of time and leads to a limited social interaction, which compromises the quality of her life as she becomes mentally unstable. As a consequence, the existence of Memory's parents becomes a frustrating *cul-de-sac* leading to premature deaths.

As Memory grows older, she matures to accept her condition and moves from a confused condition to a state of understanding and acceptance. For example, responding to one pregnant inmate who screams when Memory stands next to her because she superstitiously believes her unborn baby would somehow get infected with albinism, Memory writes: "Years ago, this might have hurt me … It no longer hurts with the acid pain I felt as a child" (51). Chief among the processes and institutions that lead to her achievement of a measure of self-realisation are her adoption by Lloyd, her attending a privileged school and her getting a scholarship to study in Australia. Through Lloyd, she "got a sense of a world that was bigger than [her]self" (144) and in time she "gained the confidence that comes with any expensive private education" (168). This suggests that the way humans view time and themselves is a result of the individual's complex interaction with institutions of socialisation and the individual's biological endowments.

## Memory's Malleability and Past's Construction through Narrative

The title of Gappah's novel, *The Book of Memory*, foregrounds the important role memory plays in the constitution of human time through the framing and relating of stories. Or to appropriate Heitman's formulation, Gappah's novel shows "memory as mutable, prone to the passage of time and the vagaries of imagination [and illustrates] the plasticity of the perceived past" (Heitman 2016: 17, 20). This is implied in Memory's words when she tells the reader that her story is a product of being encouraged by her lawyer to "write down every detail that [she] could remember" (8), and her admission later that "as the years ran into each other, the memories faded" (143). As events recede into the past, they enable the construction of stories and by extension the perception of human time. The novel's title also highlights not just the unreliability of memory but also the inventive power of the human mind to intricately meld the real and the imagined in the metaphoric canvas of perceived human time. Memory also admits: "Sometimes you come to understand the things you cannot possibly have known; they make sense and you rewrite the memory to make it coherent" (133). The way events are narratively remembered is unavoidably entangled with the passage of time and the mind's resourcefulness.

Memory's life story refuses to be disciplined into a diachronic rendition because linearity is a human mind's invention of making sense of events. Although it makes tentative attempts to escape prison, Memory's story meanders within prison because it is dictated through memory, which is not only selective, forgetful and treacherously self-serving, but is also subject to numerous states of embodiment. Showing memory's unruly nature as it rearranges events according to its needs, Memory states: "I remember, too, the first words that Lloyd said to me. 'Speak, Mnemosyne'" (2). Then she adds: "But perhaps I am confusing this with the second day that I saw him" (3). At the core of these statements is the demonstration of memory's central role in the construction of an autobiography and its resistance to the regimens of factuality and linearity. Memory's autobiography emerges as an attempt to impose linearity onto the chaotic and confusingly painful life's events which she feels have a bearing on her present identity. About where she would have begun had she decided to relate a traditional autobiography, she says: "I could also start by telling you all about Lloyd. I could start by telling you that I did not kill him" (3). This prolepsis performs at least two functions. First, it makes the protagonist a likeable character by revealing that she is no murderer but a mere victim of a serious miscarriage of justice. Second, it creates a richer suspense as the reader tries to establish, not whether Memory is a murderer or not, but to find out how she ended up on death row despite being innocent.

Grondin (2010) suggests that memory is always implicated in the way people perceive time. He argues that memory involves remembering the past based on location and distance. This, according to Grondin (2010: 562), has to do with "estimating the amount of time that has elapsed between a past event and the present". Memory's location as a female prisoner with albinism prompts her mind to reminisce about her past as she tries to understand how the events of her childhood contributed to her current predicament. However, what Grondin does not state is that this estimation of the passage of time between past and present event is narratively constituted. Hodgkin and Radstone (2003: 2) capture this idea when they argue that "the past is constituted in narrative, always representation, always construction". Therefore, what Memory purports to remember is not independent of narrative because there is no autonomous retrieval of the past without narrative. Towards the end of the novel, Memory talks of the "treachery of [her] imperfect memory" (267) and the fact that the writing process "helped to construct [her] memory" (267). Memory's realisation agrees with Hodgkin and Radstone's observation that the past and memory as functions of narrative are always provisional.

Additionally, Gappah's novel grapples with the difficulties related to the manner in which a lived life is rendered logical through an autobiographical narrative. Memory declares: "So I reflected on my life, to rework the events that brought me here, to rearrange and reimagine them in an endless cycle of what-if" (11). Chronological time, then, should not be confused with the

workings of memory and narrative in the (re)structuring of human time. Remembering involves (re)imagining and (re)constructing what happened or what allegedly happened in the service of the present and of an envisaged future. Desires, nostalgias and hopes are projected and superimposed through the process of narratively remembering. Memory writes: "I remember playing that game in Mufakose, or, I should say, watching children on Mharapara street playing that game while I imagined that I was part of it" (22). A trace of positive nostalgia, or what Dlamini (2009) calls native nostalgia, is evident here in Memory's remembering of her albinism-curtailed childhood. Nostalgia always involves some kind of narratively going back in time but the past is always conjured up in the service of the present and as a tool for a desired future.

Furthermore, Gappah's narrative suggests that although the past is carried in people's heads as memories, when it is narrated, it has real consequences in the present and in future affairs. On this point, Hodgkin and Radstone (2003: 1) argue that memory is not just the past but rather is about the present, and is very much alive and active. The notion of *ngozi* which Memory weaves into her story aptly illustrates this point. Memory's mother is forced into marriage because an ancestor of hers "had killed an ancestor of her first husband" (249). According to the *ngozi* logic, this "long-ago death had to be honoured through the gift of a girl to the family of the murdered" (249). It would seem that after the girl has been pledged as "the currency that paid the debt" (249), no recourse to any state sanctioned legal system could reverse the spiritual ramifications of the process. The tragic past becomes the demented present and the doomed future, as Memory's mother's situation illustrates. In the end, to use Sartre's phrase, it becomes Memory's mother's "misfortune to be confined in time" (Sartre 1963: 227). Her suicide can then be viewed as her final futile attempt to shake off the shackles of human temporality. Yet, this fateful action effectively seals off any possibility of (re)imagining any alternative positive future.

The *ngozi* notion allows the protagonist to implicitly compare events in her life and those of her parents to those of heroes of Greek tragedies. Memory mentions Sophocles' Oedipus the King, whose life was predestined. Lloyd is a teacher of classical literature at the University of Zimbabwe and one of his life's projects is to translate Greek plays such as "Oedipus the King" into Shona, one of Zimbabwe's main languages. Earlier, on the day he dies, Memory goes to the university to give Lloyd his cellular phone which he had inadvertently left at home. She finds him giving a lecture and she decides to sit in. Incidentally, Lloyd is showing connections between the Greek idea of predestination and *ngozi*, the one thing that supposedly haunts Memory's family. Lloyd declares: "Oedipus was pursued by ngozi …. To have a fatalistic sense of life is to hold that our destiny is out of control of any human being and that non-human actors will always determine the outcomes" (220).

The dramatic irony in Lloyd's words is that they seem to be a commentary on his own life and that of Memory.

Following the principles of *ngozi*, the events in Memory's life seem predetermined by an "undocumented past" (152), or rather a past that simply exists as anecdotes that refuse disciplining. About her family, Memory observes that they seemed "to be completely unconnected to anyone but [themselves], to have emerged complete into the present without a history" (153). Her parents had "no old letters, no mementos, no links to any kind of past" (153). Moreover, they seem to have entered into some kind of deliberate amnestic pact, for they "answered no questions about their past, or any past" (153). Her parents have been cut off from the immediate family because their union is socially unsanctioned. In this sense, their actions can be seen as an attempt to exist outside the constraints of human time. Memory's mother escapes from a forced marriage and elopes with Memory's father. However, according to *ngozi*, time is cyclical and crimes committed by one's blood relatives are inescapable, and in line with this logic Memory's mother's defiance of her familial and cultural obligations are futile.

Memory's mother's past and her traumatic experiences result in a tragic psychological disorder which leads to her confused perception of time and subsequent compulsive infanticides. For her, time really exists as a deferred motion. She cannot remember her children's birthdays and sometimes assumes it is Christmas when it is not. She drowns her son, Gift, and her daughter, Moreblessing, under some stress-induced delusion that she is obeying a supernatural command. She claims that she drowned Gift because "her dead son (from her previous marriage) had appeared before her and commanded it" (251). She is caught up in a cyclical perception of time where she is condemned to self-torture as she imagines that this appeases the angry spirit of her first son. The teenage-hood trauma of forced marriage determines her entire existence. For her, memories become a dark veil which shrouds the possibility of any hopeful future or a reinsertion into a rational human time.

Memory's father's thinking and actions are also controlled by his conviction that he violated some social taboo by eloping with another man's wife. His belief in *ngozi* determines his fatalistic acceptance of his wife's murderous course. Memory says: "He continued to believe that it was not she who did it, but a force external to her, a supernatural force that possessed her to kill" (253). He holds what Lloyd in his lectures calls "a fatalistic vision of human experience" (220). He quits his job at the factory and works from home to try and prevent his wife from drowning the children. He believes that "protection … was constant vigilance" (253). However, his protective actions seem decidedly doomed and he is resigned to his fate. Besides ineffectual watchfulness over his children, he waits for events to happen by chance. Lloyd enters his life by chance but instead of opening up a hopeful future for Memory, Lloyd authors his own tragic death and propels Memory into a tragic future. When Memory's father eventually decides to act, it is an action that is

so final that human temporality becomes inconsequential. The act of double suicide by husband and wife is depicted as beyond human time due to its dreadful incomprehensibility. Memory's ending up with a death sentence would seem to confirm the logic that indeed her family is pursued by *ngozi*.

## Death Row, Imprisonment and being Time Bound

Memory suggests that her death sentence alters her behaviour and her view of temporality. About her sense of humour, she observes: "[T]here is a hysterical edge to my laughter, because every time I laugh I know that I am laughing into the darkness" (30). Boyd (2004: 12) observes that we laugh because "[w]e topple into the trap of error and are then sprung free, exhilarated by the speed of our recovery". Memory's death sentence prevents her from springing free from the trap of error that produces her laughter and inhibits her from experiencing the delight of quickly regaining the balance that produces carefree laughter. Boyd (2004: 17) observes that Nabokov's writings suggest that "there is something playful behind life itself, that toys with us only to allow our triumphant recovery". Significantly, Gappah uses Nabokov's opening words in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* to the effect that an individual's existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness as a framing phrase for her novel. Memory's laughter is agitated and it is as if she is laughing into the eternal darkness of death. Boyd (2004: 11) further observes: "Part of the pleasure of human laughter is that it shows how richly attuned our expectations are, even if they remain inexplicit". Memory's mirthless laughter signals that her expectations or future prospects are out of tune with those of her inmates since she is the only female prisoner on death row.

Memory's imprisonment forces her to confront time without the help of activities which ordinarily structure human time. She writes: "In time that I have spent [in prison], I have come to know well this formatted place, its narrow corridors and narrow cells" (16). Memory also writes: "Every aspect of our lives, from where and how we sleep to what we eat and how fast we eat it, from how much water to how much toothpaste we use, is chosen for us" (17). Elsewhere, she talks of the "strange rhythms of the jail [and] the distorted sense of time" (18) which she has to confront. However, it is not just spatial confinement which organises her perception of time but something much more foreboding, that is, her anticipated execution. Her story is told in "the shadow of the gallows" (9), and without the misfortunes that led to her imprisonment, the autobiographical reflections that make up the novel would not exist.

Therefore, the novel gives the reader an opportunity to contemplate the complex interaction of imprisonment as a permanent human condition of being time bound and of the prison in its literal sense of punishment and

spatial confinement. Memory's imprisonment restricts her movements and her death sentence forces her to contemplate her own mortality. This magnifies her perception of human temporality. She becomes very sensitive to the passage of calendrical time as suggested by her declaration that when she is visited by Melinda, "two years, three months, seven days and thirteen hours" (7) of being on death row had passed. Memory's story is an attempt to escape the seemingly unavoidable human boundedness in the perceived linearity of time as it allows her to disrupt human time by reconstructing the past in the service of the present and using it to imagine alternative hopeful futures. She claims that she is writing her story "for the appeal" but pointedly states: "I am also writing it for myself … I am writing to keep myself alive … laying out the threads that have pulled my life together" (84-85). She observes that although it will not be possible for her to undo her past, if ever she should revisit it after getting the facts about how she came to stay with Lloyd, "it will only be to find ways to make rich [her] present" and possibly her future (262-263).

Imprisonment, and particularly the death sentence, forces Memory into a hyper-consciousness of the chronological passage of human time. After her arrest, she indicates that it was the interrogating officers' apparent disruption of human time which forced her into a false confession. She recalls: "When I confessed to killing Lloyd, I had not slept for days" (8). Although she was not physically tortured, she indicates that the lack of sleep and food are in fact forms of torture. She remembers the time spent at the cells at the police station as being "endless moments" (17). This confused perception of time leads to her psychological breakdown and false confession.

The death sentence "becomes the occasion for the narrator to journey across time to a greater self-understanding" (Ramanathan 2014: 27). Although she self-effacingly denies it, she is in fact "writing in the tradition of the prison diary" (85). The story is an outcome of being rendered immobile in time because it is a product of Memory's two-year stay in prison. Moreover, since the narrative is written despite prison authorities' attempts to prevent her from writing, it can therefore be viewed as a subversion of prison's attempt to regiment her life. With the help of a self-serving prison officer, she is able to have "notebooks and pens" (7) in her cell. This enables her to write her narrative and document her family's undocumented past. However, she points out that writing her life story was "not as simple as [she] had imagined" (85). She thought that she would "tell a linear story with a proper beginning, an ending and a middle" (85). The refusal to conform to prison's regulatory regimes is mirrored in her memory's subversion of the rules of linearity dictated by traditional autobiographies. Since memories often come in non-linear flashes, formatting them into a linear mode would be to mimic and conform to the penal disciplinary regimes.

If narratives allow for the reconfiguration of time, the prison literally formats the time of inmates in rigid ways in an attempt to foster conformity

and uniformity. Memory's resistance to penal rules operates both literally and metaphorically, allowing her to disrupt the formatted prison time. This is principally done through her memory's refusal to operate in a linear fashion. Concerning constraints of linearity imposed by a traditional autobiography, Memory says: "The ritual of oral autobiography here is that we introduce and begin stories by locating our position in the family" (12). In a sense, then, Memory's writing of her autobiography in a non-linear manner while in prison becomes an act of subversion against prison's attempt to turn her into a completely time bound creature. Similarly, Memory's fictional escape of the repetitive prison time through narrative metaphorically depicts humankind's yearning to escape temporality. Ironically, although refusing to conform to the dictates of linearity, by the end of the story, the reader has gleaned enough information to locate Memory firmly within her family. This reveals the inescapable disciplinary power of both the confessional self-monitoring intentions of both the penal regime and of the autobiographical form.

In Foucault's theorisation, the auto/biography is deeply implicated in the penal practice of policing the psychology of the criminal through methods of self-monitoring and introspection. Foucault observes that the auto/biography of a criminal copies the penal practice. He argues that the auto/biography of the "criminal duplicates in penal practice the analysis of circumstances used in gauging the crime" and as a result we see "penal discourse and psychiatric discourse crossing each other's frontiers" (Foucault 1977: 252). In this light, Gappah's use of a fictitious autobiography to explore the psychology of her protagonist at the intersection of physical difference and imprisonment is less a subversion than the intensified workings of prison's disciplinary power. This introspection is suggested by Memory's claims that "memories have been coming" (10) since her imprisonment. After lockdown, she finds her mind idle. To occupy herself, she says: "So I reflect on my life, to rework the events that brought me here, to rearrange and reimagine them in an endless cycle of what-ifs" (11). Through autobiography, the prison inmate becomes implicated in the instruments that the penal regime uses to determine and supposedly correct the conduct of criminals; that is, through forced introspection engendered by confinement.

Notably, rather than finding the remembering and writing of her life story difficult, she finds that "memories are flooding [her] mind, faster than [she] can write them down" (10). However, some South African political female prisoners suggest that imprisonment inhibits memory and writing. For example, about her inability to invoke her imaginative memory when in solitary confinement, Ruth First writes: "This was the time I should have been able to feed on the fat of my memory … I was appalled at the absence of my inventive and imaginative powers" (First 1965: 71). Probably illustrating the difference between factual and fictional autobiography, First's experience is the opposite of that of Gappah's protagonist who claims that imprisonment enabled her memory and the writing process. Granted, Memory does admit to

the challenges of organising the memories that flood her mind into a linear story. She writes: "Until you attempt to write the story of your life, you cannot quite understand just how hard it is to grasp at the beginning" (12). So, while it seems effortless for memories to flood one's mind, it is quite another matter to have what First (1965) calls the inventive and imaginative powers that transform memories into a narrative.

As was the case with the unjust political imprisonment of First and many others during apartheid South Africa, Memory is not a criminal but is constructed as such by discourses that conflate peculiarities rooted in her albinism into some kind of social deviance deserving of ostracism and punishment. The irony is that once she is condemned as a criminal and is confined, the penal practice affects her the same way as if she were a criminal. Her confinement triggers a confessional and psychological mobility which goes back into her parents' and her ancestors' crimes and projects itself into a future existence facilitated by the unintended accumulation of knowledge which radically alters her perception. The book of memory that she writes is at once an unconscious participation in the penal regime's disciplinary mechanisms and an attempt to mitigate the limiting effects of being bound in time.

## Future Orientation of the Narrative

Gappah's narrative is not simply oriented towards Memory's unforgiving past, her painful present as a prisoner and her perplexing future as she awaits possible execution. There is hope despite Memory's death sentence. Techniques used by the author to infuse hope include the fact that the narrative is addressed to an American journalist. Melinda's human rights advocacy may lead to Memory's murder conviction being overturned if the re-trial process succeeds. When her lawyer mentions the possibility of a new trial, Memory talks of a "flicker of hope that leapt up in her" (255). Similarly, Loveness, the guard who flouts prison rules to help Memory, signals a fracture within the prison system that undermines its status as an institution for total confinement. Therefore, the future orientation of the story is implied in that Memory has and will have a life beyond the prison walls.

Furthermore, the hope for better times is evident towards the end of the story where the female section of Chikurubi prison is almost empty as most prisoners have received amnesty as a result of a new political dispensation. Memory reports: "The prison is open now; I go where I please, when I please. There is no lock-up. I eat at Loveness's house, and spend most of my time there … [t]eaching children, thinking about my parents and all the things that I will do if they ever let me leave" (260-261). One of the children Memory teaches is Yeukai (a Shona name which can be translated as Memory), Loveness' daughter, "a small albino girl" (242). Although the narrative withholds complete freedom from Memory by keeping her on death row until

the end, the introduction of Yeukai suggests that there is a future that the novel envisions for females who are albinos in Zimbabwe.

Significantly, in Yeukai's mannerisms, Memory sees herself again (242) as a little girl struggling with albinism in Mufakose. Yeukai is a projection of Memory unburdened by the complicated past of her parents. When Memory asks Yeukai "if the other children gave her problems at school" because of her skin condition, Yeukai says "everyone [is] used to her" (242) because there are three other children with albinism at her school. This engenders optimism for individuals with albinism. Whereas Memory suffered from painful social discrimination as a child, Yeukai's experience is different.

## Conclusion

*The Book of Memory* largely deals with a bewildering past and a painful present which Memory tries to understand by (re)configuring time through narrative. By being set in a politically unstable and economically collapsed Zimbabwe, "the novel comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present" (Bakhtin 1981: 27). This allows Gappah to tap into the dominant international discourses such as the neglect and ill-treatment of children with physical challenges in Africa and the prevalent travesty of justice in most postcolonial African states. For example, she points out that in Zimbabwe, magistrates "hand out stiffer sentences for stealing cows than for raping children" (21). Memory's traumatic experiences as a child with albinism affects her perception of human time and dictates what she subsequently remembers and how she imagines the future as a young adult through a process Grondin (2010: 562) calls the memory for the future. Additionally, the novel suggests that the process of turning one's memories into writing influences the way one remembers and also bears on the process of narration and time perception. The process of recording one's memories renders human temporality perceptible, and it is a practice that reflects humans' symbolic resistance to the two eternities of darkness that straddle each individual's brief existence invoked in Nabokov's words referred to earlier. In the novel, human temporality is accentuated by Memory's feelings of being imprisoned by her albinism, her restricted movement as a child and her unjust literal imprisonment. Ultimately, Memory's realisation of her *being in time* is influenced and intensified by her being on death row at Chikurubi prison.

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