

**Facets of Traumatic Memory and Confabulation: Encapsulating The Irish  
Social Milieu Through Personal Remembrance In Anne Enright's *The  
Gathering***

**V. Suganya<sup>1</sup>,**

**PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar  
University.**

**Mail Id: [suganya.efl@buc.edu.in](mailto:suganya.efl@buc.edu.in)**

**Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0989-2653>**

**Dr. B. Padmanabhan<sup>2</sup>,**

**Assistant professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar  
University.**

**Mail Id: [padmanabhan@buc.edu.in](mailto:padmanabhan@buc.edu.in)**

Abstract

Trauma occurs, when people confront acute violence against them, or through the calamity of natural events. Some people dare to surmount such events but there are people who fail to do so and dissociate from the society, thereby, they lose the way to overcome it. Though people tend to forget traumatic experiences with the passage of time, they are inclined to recollect certain events in order to understand the veracity of such incidents. Therefore, the recollection of traumatic memory after many years can be the result of being witness or victim of certain events to disclose the truth. When it comes to recollection human memory can be fallible in narrating the past incidents. At some instances people deal with false memory and do unreliable narration about the past events but they will not affect the meaning of their retrieval of such events. Thus, this paper attempts to explicate the distinction of unreliable remembrance whereby the protagonist tries to bring meaning to the life of her dead brother. It also attempts to study the way the social issues prevalent in the Irish society like Child Sexual Abuse, dysfunctional families, trauma and social exclusion were portrayed

through the personal memories of the protagonist Veronica in *The Gathering* by Anne Enright.

Keywords: Traumatic memory, false memory, Unreliability, dysfunctional family

The protagonist, Veronica Hegarty in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* attempts to reconstruct her childhood memories to divulge the truth of an uncertain event. She tells, "I need to bear witness to an uncertain event" (Enright 1). The complicated and fragmented narrative structure of Veronica's story incorporates factual and faulty memories to trace out a truth from an event which can be certain or uncertain. In their study on "Memory distortion for traumatic events: the role of mental imagery" by Strange and Takarangi state that "Trauma memories – like all memories – are malleable and prone to distortion" (1). Accordingly, the fragmented and unreliable remembrance of Veronica manifests that she might have undergone a traumatic experience during her childhood days. Anne Enright's *The Gathering* delves into the past with the accurate and improbable memories, to unveil a truth. In the light of memory and imagination, Veronica exerts to remember her childhood days to figure out the cause for the demise of her brother Liam. The opening sentence of the novel replicates the paradoxical narration of Veronica with the combination of doubt and certainty about her memory: "I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen" (Enright 1). Veronica, a tricenarian attempts to pursue the memories of her childhood days in her grandmother's house. She tries "to write down what happened" in an attempt to understand the events of the past but at the same time she is uncertain that "if it really did happen." The author creates a unique narrative structure manifesting the paradoxical unreliability of Veronica's memory in narrating the story. She believes that her memory registers different incidents that happened in her life, however, again she doubts: "this thing that may not have

taken place” (Enright 1). Moreover, Veronica continues, “It does not matter. I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth. All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns. All I have are ravings” (Enright 2). Veronica in her attempt of understanding her past through memories faces confronting ideas about her own memory functions. The loss of her brother has affected her psychologically; therefore, the trauma destabilises her memory and she struggles with great pain in explaining the loss precisely. The paradoxical narration recurs throughout the novel. Therefore, from the beginning itself she is unsure about her memory yet she believes that something had happened when she was a child, which might have taken her brother’s life. Schacter et. al in their study “Memory distortion: an adaptive perspective” discusses the fallibility of memory and states that “It is now widely recognized that human memory is not an exact reproduction of past experiences but is instead an imperfect process that is prone to various kinds of errors and distortions” (467). Therefore, Veronica confirms to her reader that her memory may reproduce the real incidents with errors, imagination and fabrication in unveiling the truth. The research work done by Bernstein and Loftus “How to tell if a particular memory is true or false” also states: “In essence, all memory is false to some degree. Memory is inherently a reconstructive process, whereby we piece together the past to form a coherent narrative that becomes our autobiography. In the process of reconstructing the past, we color and shape our life’s experiences based on what we know about the world” (373). Memory creates a confluence of real and uncertain events in her familial historiography and makes it difficult for Veronica in her struggle to find out the cause for the demise of her brother. Therefore, the narration infuses imagination and fabrication along with Veronica’s precise memory to construct a coherent narrative of a family history. Veronica endeavours to make her familial genealogy in chronological sequences which have connections with her dead

brother. The demise of her brother whom she loves unconditionally is the impetus for the recollection of her childhood memories. Veronica is ineluctable from the memories of her brother, because she claims that “I am the one who loved him most” (23)

Veronica hopes that the reconciliation between the real and imaginative experiences will alleviate the pain of her lost brother. Therefore, she writes, “The seed of my brother’s death were sown many years ago. The person who planted them is long dead – at least that’s what I think. So, if I want to tell Liam’s story, then I have to start long before he was born” (Enright 13). She believes that the root of Liam’s death has already been embedded firmly many years ago and the miscreants have already died. Therefore, she begins to examine the complicated family history before the birth of her brother and create a coherent narrative in explaining the trouble which her brother confronted in his childhood days. Through her rich imagination Veronica takes the reader to 1925 when her grandmother, Ada Merriman, was young: “Lambert Nugent first saw my grandmother Ada Merriman in a hotel foyer in 1925. This is the moment I chose. It was seven o’clock in the evening. She was nineteen, he was twenty-three” (Enright 13). Thereupon she confabulates her story with the help of her imagination that Lambert Nugent, friend of her grandmother, has unrequited love for Ada and Nugent’s friend Charlie (Veronica’s grandfather) marries Ada which makes Nugent to hate Ada. She shifts her narration from facts to fictitious narrative and fabricates imaginary experiences about her grandparents. Schacter et. al explain in “The Cognitive Neuroscience of Constructive Memory” that “Confabulations, where people produce nonstudied information in memory experiments (intrusions) or narrative descriptions of events that never happened” (292). Veronica in her attempt to understand her family history, gathers her memories and confabulates many of the incidents which have not actually happened, especially, when it is about Ada and her relationship with Lambert Nugent to understand her historiography.

Therefore, the confabulation of Veronica implies that the narration of her family history is blended with non-existent events. Her narration makes the reader to believe that Lambert Nugent is a landlord and he had unrequited love for her grandmother. The historical details about her grandmother are obviously unreliable, because of the inclusion of imaginative experiences of her grandmother. She did so because she strongly believes that there is some kind of relationship existing between her grandmother and Lambert Nugent. Veronica surmises that the relationship of her grandmother with Mr. Nugent has imperilled the life of her brother. In "Myth, Memory, and History", M.I. Finley states that "A large number of individual facts and events bears no visible connection one another. They do not even have a close chronological connection until one is imposed upon them". Hereby, she assumes that the relationship between Ada and Nugent had affected the life of her brother. The immense production of her imagination made a profound impact on her story and clearly manifest that she is a fabulist. Though her familial genealogy is susceptible to intense unreliability, she writes with precision when it comes to the experiences of childhood days: "I am waiting for something else. I am waiting for things to become clear" (Enright 37). Therefore, following the imaginative experiences of her grandmother, Veronica garners the real incidents of her childhood days. She writes, "it is time to put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams, it is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was barely nine" (Enright 142). She makes an analysis of the past and arrives at a conclusion that Liam was abused and the sufferings at the hands of Mr. Nugent might have induced Liam to kill himself. When she forays into the past, she finds out that Lambert had abused her brother in Ada's house. Consequently, she discovers that Liam was the victim of sexual abuse. Indeed, she believes that Mr. Nugent is the root cause for her brother's death. Veronica claims that "The abuse happened in the

garage, among the cars and bits of engine that Liam loved. And Nugent was horrible to my brother in ordinary ways, too, out there. . . I know that my brother was sexually abused by Lamb Nugent” (Enright, 223). She is certain about her memory that Lambert Nugent had abused her brother sexually and visualizes the happenings through her consciousness. In *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*, Janet Walker states that “Traumatic events are subject to construe as they are experienced, re-imagined, reported, written down, and visually communicated” (Preface xviii). Accordingly, Veronica imaginatively re-experiences her childhood days with Liam, then she writes down establishing communication with the past. Juan Balbi in “Epistemological and Theoretical Foundations” enunciates that “reality is not revealed to us as a copy of the outside world that can be stored in the mind, but that we are active in the production of its meaning” (16). Therefore, the childhood memories of Veronica are not inactive instead it helps her to reconstruct the incidents in order to derive meaning for the life of her brother. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan explains the narration of Veronica in *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel* that “The novel’s ability to re-create for the reader the gaps, confusions and inconsistencies of traumatic memory are in fact one of its profoundest strengths” (56).

Moreover, the narrator also believes that her dysfunctional family system is also one of the reasons for Liam’s death. Family is the foremost and indispensable place for an individual in making self-identity and it is the one which guides the behaviour and attitude to integrate a person to the society. As Minkiewicz states that family is a “bridge between the individual and the society” (265). Whereas in a dysfunctional family, people dissemble their true emotions and feelings because of the lack of emotional bonds. The distance within the family disempower the people to associate with society too. “When I was just eight and Liam was nearly nine, we were sent with our little sister, Kitty, to stay with Ada in Broadstone”

(Enright 46). Amongst other siblings, Liam and Veronica have great affinity in taking care of each other. From the childhood itself, Veronica has great concern for her brother. The big family of Hegarty has twelve children and the relationship between the children and parents seems to be lacking emotional bond. Dysfunctional Family and Its Impacts On Veronica's Life in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*:

Children sometimes feel uncomfortable, such as they have low self-esteem, they do not believe to themselves or even they have unstable personalities in which they are blamed because they do something bad that is inappropriate with norms and values in the society. This condition called dysfunctional family. (2)

In *The Gathering*, Veronica's narration explicitly showcases that the relationship between the family members has mitigated due to the lack of emotional bond. By means of facts and false recovered memories Veronica surmises that the childhood sexual abuse had led her brother to get addicted to alcohol. She believes that Lambert Nugent may have abused her brother when Veronica was eight and Liam was nine. She writes confidently, "I know my brother Liam was sexually abused" (Enright, 224). The grievous part of her narration is that the abuse had happened in their home but the Hegarty family did not know about the trauma that inflicted on their child. The dispassionate family relationship makes him to become a drunkard, emotionally instable and depressed, and eventually induces him to commit suicide. Senthil states in "Impact of Family Dysfunctions on Child and Adolescents Mental Health." that "Dysfunctional families are most often a result of the alcoholism, substance abuse, or other addictions" (378).

Veronica's exploration of the past causes psychological trauma and the making of narration with the confluence of faulty and factual elements does not offer any comfort. However, she endeavours to recollect the incidents because the memory of Liam has seized the present life of Veronica. She is debilitating and unable to live a peaceful life with her family. She utters:

This is how I live my life since Liam died. I stay up all night. I write, or I don't write. I walk the house.

Nothing settles here. Not even the dust. (Enright 36)

She is being dissociated from her surroundings and finds it difficult to be united with the family. She is unable to bring changes in her life since the death of Liam. The distant trauma of childhood abuse and the recent trauma of her brother are the vital factors which have affected her coping abilities and they keep her away from family. Therefore, she gathers childhood memories to surmount the present instability in an attempt to recover from the demise of her brother and to lead a peaceful life. Through resolving the past trauma, she tries to overcome her present crisis with her family. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman claims that "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisite . . . for the healing of individual victims."

In the remembrance of past events Veronica's melancholy is associated with the concept of double mind that as Caruth identifies in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that "the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). Caruth remarked that when an unexpected death or any natural calamity destroys our loved ones (crisis of death) which has correlative to our life that it has

impact on our life (crisis of life). Human mind swings between the catastrophe of death of a person and its effect on one's own life. Here Veronica is haunted by the memories of her dead brother on one side and on the other hand she has a family which is waiting for her recovery from the trauma. She is completely destabilized by the horrific effect of her traumatic memories that imprison her life with the dark aspects of the past events.

Therefore, though she is tormented by the memories of her dead brother she needs to find a way to survive in the world in order to bring tranquillity to her soul and family members. "Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now" (261). The story swings between the past and present life of the narrator. When she comes to her present after knowing the reason of her brother's death Veronica struggles hard to overcome the melancholy and to survive with the dark memories of her past.

The pivotal motive of Veronica's genealogical study and writing the past is to unravel the mystery of her brother's sudden demise, and her historiography in most of the ways resembles the insurmountable issues that prevail widely in modern Ireland. The story moves into the confluence of personal and collective experiences to expose the social issues of Ireland. In "Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative", Katherine Nelson asserts that "The function of self-stories is related to the social and cultural milieu within which they are situated and the alternative resources available within the milieu for understanding self and society" (125). Social and cultural influences determine people's personality, opinion, behaviour and attitude. Through fact and unreliable remembrance of Veronica, Enright addresses "the prodigious array of psychic, somatic, and cultural ramifications of hidden child sexual abuse in modern Ireland, the fact of which is shown to be symptomatic of a pervasive devaluation and victimization of vulnerable

individuals by church, state and society”(188-189) states by Dr Liam Harte, Senior Lecturer in Irish studies in “Mourning Remains Unresolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*”. Since 1990s many individuals have begun to bear witness of abandonment and ill treatment of children within their own family, Irish industrial schools and catholic churches. Harte also states that “Irish childhoods from plural perspectives to the litany of child abuse scandals—and their systematic concealment—involving church- and state-run institutions that have attracted a torrent of media attention since the mid-1990s” (187). By assisting the story of Veronica, Enright elucidates the interconnections between personal and national trauma. The novel depicts the subtlety and complexity of exposing the trauma of familial child abuse as a collective as much as a personal experience. It also expresses Enright’s outrages against child abuse and portrays the dark side of children’s lives in Ireland. In “Trauma and the Construction of Suffering in Irish Historical Child Sexual Abuse Prosecutions”, Sinéad Ring states that “Ireland was one of the first countries in the global north to be forced to reckon with its history of pervasive sexual violence against children. A number of factors contributed to a greater willingness at a societal level to discuss the problem of sexual violence against children in the present and in the past” (89).

Veronica unreluctantly discloses her family secrets to construe the cause for the death of Liam, which helps her to navigate from the trauma of her dead brother. Though her confabulation creates a kind of disbelief in the narration and through the re-experience of real incidents she finds out that Liam was abused at the hand of Lambert Nugent. The past cannot be reproduced as it was. By the mixture of factual and unreliable memories Veronica not only exposes the familial condition but also a national issue. Her self-writing about her familial genealogy is an attempt to overcome the sufferings of her brother. The practice of writing to understand the past and overcome current problematical issues is termed as Scriptotherapy by

SuzzetteA Henke. Veronica's family history manifests clearly the effects of dysfunctional family in making the life of children difficult. The unreliability and failures in her remembrance denote that human memory is plausible to change the incidents and it will never reflect the past truthfully. The combination of deep emotion and high artifice replicates the finesse of Anne Enright, an ability found with many of the Irish writers. The statement of Frank Delaney in his novel *Ireland: A Novel* depicts the characteristics of the Irish in narrating the story that

. . . Imagination and emotion insist on playing their parts in every history and therefore, to understand the Irish, mere facts can never be enough; this is a country that reprocesses itself through the mills of its imagination. We merge our myths with our facts according to our feelings, we tell ourselves our own story. And no matter what we told, we choose what we believe. All 'truths' are only 'our' truths, because we bring to the 'facts' our feelings, our experiences, our wishes. (Preface)

As from his affirmation, while divulging the truth Veronica uses both fact and imagination which describes the characteristics of the Irish. Her belief on both the imagination and real events exposes insurmountable issue of Ireland. Though she doubts her memory she believes that her brother was abused physically and psychologically.

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