

History as a Catalyst for Memory in Patrick Modiano's *The Search Warrant*

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Memory as defined by oxford dictionary is a person's "ability to remember things" and it also refers to "the period of time that somebody is able to remember events." Memory, apart from being personal, is also a storehouse or depository for the knowledge of one's culture and forms a type of a reference book which can be used at anytime in future to look back and elicit any information related to it. Memory is a phenomenon which is "historically conditioned" (Whitehead 4). Thus, it has a history of its own which is temporally and culturally conditioned. Due to different periods and continually changing communities, the definition of memory has become so fluid that its meaning keeps changing. Susannah Radstone talks of "memories" rather than 'memory,' as according to her, the memory changes its meaning at different times which evokes Mieke Bal's notion of memory as a "travelling concept" (Whitehead 3). Modiano in his novel, *The Search Warrant* (2000) has skillfully used memory as a travelling tool which helps him in slipping into past and present smoothly. This movement wipes out the boundary between the present and the past, and the narrator, by merging the two moments, freely drifts in both time periods.

For the early Greeks, memory had two components: remembering and forgetting. Needless to say that if a person forgets his bitter memory, he is relieved from the burdens and therefore, regains his health. For both, Nietzsche and Milan Kundera, remembering a bitter past is an overwhelming burden. For Nietzsche, forgetting the past is important to attain happiness in life but Kundera is of the view that a purposeful forgetting of the past would be more "unbearable" (Whitehead 88) than consciously remembering it and acknowledging it as a responsibility of that event in mind.

This paper seeks to present the ways in which history helps in reviving and reliving memory. It also focuses on the relative relationship between memory and history in Modiano's novel *The Search Warrant* (2000), which was originally published in French in 1997 as *Dora Bruder*. The novel is said to be "part investigation, part autobiography" which makes it difficult to demarcate a boundary between fictional and veridical telling.

Patrick Modiano is a French writer who was awarded Noble Prize for Literature in 2014 "for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation" (Schwartz). Being born in 1945, he was able to escape the war but not the taint of war. All his works excavate deep buried memories of the long forgotten people who might have survived that ferocious time period of the occupation of France during World War II. The memory dealing with Second World War and the Jewish Holocaust is "a sign not of historical confidence but of a retreat from transformative politics" (Whitehead 3). Modiano suggests that a writer has the gift for clairvoyance and he/she can take "essential leaps of imagination" and receive the "flashes of intuition concerning events of past and future" (48) to unravel the mysteries of past.

The novel is about a missing girl, Dora Bruder who went missing in the dark environs of the Jewish holocaust during World War II. In 1988, Modiano comes across an old report of a missing person,

Dora Bruder who was 15 year old and was from France. Modiano is not interested in Dora Bruder or in her life but the address. He is fascinated with the details of the location and streets of Paris as countless people died and lost their dear ones in the obliteration.

The stimulus behind Modiano's attraction towards the missing report of Dora Bruder (and not any other person or thing) can be traced with the help of a very important idiom which is "metaphor of spatiality" (Whitehead 10) of memory as pointed out by Edward Casey. The idiom includes a strong association between memory and place. A place triggers a memory which carries registers and traces of past in it. As Modiano states, "trace survives in registers" (9), and no one knows where to find registers and the traces carried in them. Modiano confesses that through this book, he is "sending signals, like a lighthouse beacon in whose power to illuminate the darkness [he has]" (37). Modiano acknowledges that the novel became the only book which brought him closer to "time and space" (49), to travel freely in both, pitting out the hidden layers of past.

Modiano, not as a historian but as a passionate wanderer or a flâneur, investigates like a detective, the streets of Paris. His record of minute details and keen observation of the places differentiates him from a historian who merely documents the memory and transforms it into a monument, as is pointed out by Michel Foucault in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2015). He remembers when in 1977, he went to see his father in a hospital. The moment he saw the hospital, he recalled that this place was once a prison for prostitutes.

His flâneuric passion towards the topographical depiction of Paris, lengthy but minute description of the locations, places, and buildings of France is much evident in the oeuvre of Modiano. His affinity with the locations and streets of Paris motivated him to go further in the pursuit of knowing about these unacknowledged, ignored and forgotten people. The people who were sent to camps used to write and receive letters to and from their relatives, but those letters never reached their dear ones. In order to identify the loss of Dora Bruder, he pays tribute to all those miserable people who were obliterated in their own homeland.

In 1942, the Germans were in the process of occupying France by capturing all the Jews and sending them to various camps and lastly to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. In order to escape the looming death, the Jewish people were hiding themselves in supposedly secret and secure places; but Dora, who was already residing safely in her Convent, The Holy Heart of Mary, ran away from that place, later to be caught by the Germans. She was then sent to Auschwitz in September 1942. Throughout the novel, the narrator contemplated the circumstances in which she fled from her school. This meditation made the narrator or Modiano himself so restless that he spent years researching upon her life. Through his imagination, he went back and forth in time linking the various clues he had been finding.

Sigmund Freud focuses precisely on the deep buried memories which after sometimes take the shape of repressed memory which "acts like a foreign body" (9) in a person's body and is always at work. According to Freud, these memories can be brought onto surface by employing his famous "talking cure" method in which a person talks out everything and then its "baneful influence" attached to the memory is completely vanished.

A hysteric, according to Freud, is a person who shows uncontrollable overflow of powerful emotions. Though Modiano is not acting as a conventional hysteric but throughout the novel, his actions showed the restlessness and continuous struggle to find the causes of tragedy that befell Dora Bruder. It took him four years only to determine Dora's date of birth: February 25, 1926. Then Modiano began a long and tiresome journey of investigation to know her whereabouts and the people who might have known her. The search brought forth various episodes of oblivion where the narrator is baffled since he cannot separate imagination from reality.

The circumstances in Dora's life reminded the narrator or Modiano, of his own father who also had the strangling experiences of the mass destruction. His father was arrested by the Germans during the occupation of France in 1942. The reason behind his arrest was that all the Jews at that time were forbidden to leave their houses after 8 o'clock in the evening and his father was found guilty of trespassing the law.

Modiano knew about his father but did not know much about Dora. In order to find anything about her, he related his father's life to Dora's. Modiano recalled his father's story in which there was a girl of Dora's age. He imagined and wondered that if the girl who was in the van had not been her. Both Dora and his father were Jews and certainly outcasts, he visualized, "Perhaps I wanted the two to cross paths, my father and her, during that winter of 1942" (6), but soon he found a link that connected both his father and Dora, as Dora lived with her parents in the same house in which his father did twenty years ago. He involuntarily travels into two time periods, "Paris then and Paris now, alone remembering all these details" (45). After knowing that Dora had escaped from her hiding place that was her school, Modiano recalled his own escapes from his house. At the end of the novel, Modiano found out her secret which nobody could know about her, as Dora might have hid in a secret place which could not be taken away from her by any German officer, authorities, the Dépôt, the barracks, camps, history, and even time.

In this manner, Modiano intertwines memory, imagination, and history. All these categories overlap. The intermingling of the three points towards an important aspect of memory which has its own history as pointed out by Michelle Foucault, in the Introduction to his seminal work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. According to Foucault, memory changes with the change of a period, and history uses memory to create itself. In order to write history, these structures are "memorize[d]" (7) and then transformed into documents which further transformed into monuments. Foucault acknowledges the "discontinuities" (6) coming in the way of writing a history. Modiano seems to be interested in the "discontinuities" in the history but history always tries to find the stable structures. He tries all the probable alternatives to find the details of Dora, her father and mother, and along with that, he gives voice to many unheard voices during the period of occupation. Passing through these discontinuities, Modiano collects information about Dora, and in bits and pieces organizes the memory related to her life.

Marcel Proust in his phenomenal work, *In Search of Lost Time* (2002), developed a much celebrated notion of "involuntary memory (qtd. in Whitehead 104). According to Proust, involuntary memory embraces the whole of the past which not only revives the memory but also the emotions and sensations involved in that particular moment. Modiano also imagines the memory of the past of his father in its entirety, and then ingeniously relates it to Dora Bruder.

Modiano never considers past as just an event which is over and cannot be relived but he sees it as "a screen onto which he projects his own existential fixations" (Schwartz). He feels, "from yesterday to today. With the passing of time, the perspectives blur for me, the winters mix one into the others. That of 1965 and that of 1942" (Modiano 6). In a very curious way, Modiano's idea can be seen closely related to T. S. Eliot's idea of simultaneity of time. This idea is evoked through the lines of Eliot's poem, "Burnt Norton":

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

The poem discusses about the nature of time. Eliot stresses on the need of the individual to concentrate on the present time and to know that there is a universal order. The poem also shows the convergence of the two time periods in which both reduce their identity and become one, and the difference between grows fainter.

Modiano is of the view that people who live at a particular place leave their traces there later to be found by someone else. He regrets nothing valuable about their lives except their addresses and finds this anonymity as a “mute block of the unknown” which is “blank” (Modiano 31) in itself. Throughout his wanderings, he finds only emptiness and darkness in the black and white contrast of the lights, which signifies that there are much more important actualities which need to be brought onto the surface but they lie underneath the falsities. This emptiness “comes with the knowledge of what has been destroyed, razed to the ground” (Modiano 30).

To sum up, Modiano was caught in the vortex of Dora (who was completely unknown to him), his father's, and his own partly veridical and partly imaginary memories. The sailing between the two time periods brings to the surface a very significant question regarding the nature of the present and the past. Throughout the novel, he juxtaposes the two extremes and their intermingling brings out the absurdity of our history and memory.

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