

## Collective Memory And Personal Memory In Julian Barnes's *Elizabeth Finch*

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### Abstract

Memory is a vital need for human being's knowledge to survive in this world. Julian Barnes's novel *Elizabeth Finch* (2022) is about the protagonist trying to write a biography with the help of memory. The protagonist, Neil tries to give a tribute to his late college teacher, Elizabeth Finch by writing a biography. Elizabeth Finch was an inspiring teacher and thinker. She was doing a research on Julian the Apostate. She died before completing it. Neil first tries to complete her research and in this journey he also tries to write her biography with the help of personal and collective memory. In this search he finds that memory and history are interrelated. Memory, in postmodern thought, is often depicted as fragmented, partial, and prone to revision. It does not serve as a reliable record of the past but rather as a narrative shaped by subjective experiences, emotions, and cultural contexts. The novel also brings out the struggles faced by the writers of biography. He finds, how a single falsified or incomplete information about anything would change the world's perspectives. The novel makes the readers to raise the question, the reliability of memory. The paper tries to bring out the importance of memory and how it plays a major role in creating history.

**Keywords:** history, memory, personal, collective, biography

### Introduction

Postmodernist literature frequently portrays memory as incomplete or selective. In these narratives, characters may recall events differently, emphasizing the impossibility of accessing a stable and objective past. This challenges the idea of a grand, cohesive narrative that defines traditional storytelling. Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) can be considered as an example. In the novel, memory plays a crucial role in exploring how the past is reshaped and reinterpreted. The protagonist, deals with the inconsistencies in his recollections of past events. The novel underscores that memory is unreliable and influenced by individual perception, leading to a fluid, changing sense of the past.

Julian Patrick Barnes is an English writer who started his career as a lexicographer and a journalist. He became a reputed novelist after publishing his first novel, *Metroland* in 1980. He uses the writing techniques of an unreliable narrator and intertextual blending, which are associated with postmodernism. His contemporaries are Philip Larkin, Ian McEwan, and Martin Amis. His fiction deals with psychological realism and other serious themes such as truth and history. His novels talk about the dark sides of the humankind, like obsession and jealousy, and his heroes are always in search of authentic love. In most of his novels, his characters are obsessed and curious about their past. His latest novel, *Elizabeth Finch*, published in 2022, is called "a lyrical, thoughtful, and intriguing exploration of love, grief, and the collective myths of history" by the Booklist. The novel is divided into three parts. The first and final parts of the novel are about Neil's memory of Elizabeth and how she influenced his life. The second part of the novel is about Elizabeth's "tragic loser", Julian the Apostate. After the death of Elizabeth, Neil receives the incomplete papers of work from Elizabeth Finch; that is how he prefers to call her. Neil tries to complete it.

The protagonist of the novel, Neil, tries to pin down the life of the teacher with whom he is obsessed. The novel revolves around him and his memory of his teacher, Elizabeth Finch. He tries to understand his life and his relationships with others with the help of his past memories. Neil feels that he would honour his mentor's memories by writing a biography about Finch, but he does not have a complete understanding of her life. He begins a search and tries to fill the incomplete holes. The novel revolves around Neil's search for his well-wisher with whom he shared his fragmented life and only has incomplete details. He wants to complete his quest by showing the world that she has a profound impact on him.

### Memory

Memory is the ability to retain or remember information from past events. It is a fragmented and incomplete representation of the human past. This ability defines a human as a person because man and man alone can look back and he tries to bring out what happened in the past. One remembers oneself only with the help of memory. The human brain stores information according to its need, it might be for a few seconds or for a lifetime. Though memory is considered as an individual phenomenon, it is also collective in nature. The memory collected through the shared social experiences of a community about a common identity is considered as collective memory, whereas personal memory is gained through personal experiences about people, places, events, incidents, etc. The term collective memory was researched and developed by a French sociologist named Maurice Halbwachs. The concept of collective memory is that it is not possible for individuals to remember outside their community, which results in rejecting an individual's connection with memory. He talks about autobiographical memory, which is personal memory, and also about historical memory. Historical memory and collective memory are similar in nature. History is our remembrance of the past, which is helpful in the

present, but collective memory is also about the past, which helps to form the identities. History is the portrayal of past events, and its aim is to provide unbiased information. It represents the integration of multiple perspectives in detail, whereas in collective memory, it represents a single perspective of a single social group or community. The past events of this particular group narrate its values that are specific to that group. The recollection of the past of any one particular incident varies for different groups. The relationship between history and collective memory is entangled. Collective memory cannot be considered history, but its objective is to collect the statements and actions performed by individuals. Considering collective memory, the novel configures the relationship between history and memory over the course of time.

### **Personal and Collective memory**

The novel is a blend of personal and collective memory. The first and final part of the novel brings out the personal memories of Neil, Christopher, and Anna. The characters in these parts talk about their personal experiences with Elizabeth Finch. They also share their points of view about her. Neil tries to bring out Elizabeth Finch as a whole with the help of their words. The second part of the novel deals with collective memory. This part is one of Neil's attempts to find out the interests of Finch about Julian, the Apostate. He tries to complete her incomplete paper. He collects information about the Apostate. He thinks that if he completes this paper, he will get an idea about Finch. In Neil's search to bring out Elizabeth Finch as a person, he gets an opportunity to learn about Julian, the Apostate.

Neil expresses his personal memory with Elizabeth Finch. Neil recalls his first impression of Elizabeth. He even remembers how she used to dress, which he calls old-fashioned but stylish. Elizabeth was more of a private person, which made Neil more curious about her. She never hesitates to share her opinions on serious subjects in the class. He is so obsessed with her and praises her. He finds no negative quality in her. He is convinced that his fellow students will never be able to comprehend her.

### **Elizabeth Finch**

In Elizabeth's first interaction with the class, she says that she would not follow the regular methods of teaching; instead, she would allow her students to interact. As she said, she never rejects her students' opinions on any matter of the subject. Neil continues his relationship with her even after completing his studies. They go out for lunch dates, where she would gracefully pay for him every time. They would talk for hours about various subjects. He would always be in constant need of her approval. He makes sure that he never disappoints her through his comments in their conversation. Even though Neil spends much time with her, she never allows herself to share her private details with him. After her death, Neil was shocked to know that she has a brother. Neil confesses that he loves the mysterious Elizabeth, but his story is not a basic love story. He wants to understand her completely in order to make himself worthy of her.

In her will, Elizabeth asks to give all her books and papers to Neil. He decides he will immortalize her by writing and dedicating a biography about her. So he hopes that he will be able to find everything about her, but to his disappointment, he has no source of information about her life. Neil tries to form a connection with her brother, Christopher. Christopher's memory of Finch is different from Neil's memory and experience with Elizabeth Finch. So he questions him about her childhood and relationship. To Neil's surprise, his answers are also blank, just like his, but he remembers one of her encounters with a double-breasted overcoat man. He observes them parting ways after being together when she arrives to pick up her brother at the station. Later, when she meets her brother, she shares nothing about her interaction with that man, and he also never asks her. This triggers Neil, and he tries to find out about this man with the help of the contact numbers in the telephone notebook. This ends in vain. This man in a double-breasted overcoat remains a mystery. So Neil decides to track down one of his friends to find out if Elizabeth would have shared it with them. He contacts Anna, but he does not get answers to his questions.

Neil tries to contact Anna from Elizabeth Finch's address book. He sends her a letter, and he receives a reply. He decides to meet her in person. He informs her that he is going to write a tribute to Elizabeth Finch. They try to reminisce about her classes. He asks Anna whether she knows anything about the man in the double-breasted overcoat. She does not respond properly, as she changes the topic by commenting that he acts like Sherlock Holmes. He even asks her if she remembers Julian the Apostate, but she does not remember Elizabeth Finch talking about him. So Neil mentions that he often confuses his memory with his research. When Neil attempts to write down what Anna says, she asks him not to do so because it makes Elizabeth Finch more dead. She sounds as if she knows more about Elizabeth Finch. She talks about Elizabeth Finch's view on love and says that according to Elizabeth Finch, love is more about truth than happiness. Anna does not feel well enough to talk about the dead, and she refuses to read the letters she receives from Elizabeth Finch. Anna says that she could feel the importance of Neil's project, but he is in love with her, and how would anyone believe a biography from the subject of a lover.

Neil contacts Geoff through email. He receives a reply where Geoff starts his message by praising her, but that escalates quickly. He calls her an amateur and describes how he uses her as a counterexample in his lectures. He considers her opinions irrelevant, and no one would come up with the idea to publish the biography. He blames Neil for doing it because he idolizes her and he always lives in his own world of myth. Geoff's view of Elizabeth Finch is totally different from the others' points of view.

The search by Neil to find out the life of this woman brings out the difficulties faced by the biographers. He wonders how they do it. His idea of writing her biography is now impossible because he has no details about her. He wonders is was the point of all those conversations he had with her. Even though he feels lost in finding her, he consoles himself by deciding to cherish the memories he had with her. He even questions, in such a scenario, what a biographer would do. He wonders if they fake the details, and if so, it leads to the reliability of biographies. Since Neil does not get enough details about Elizabeth, he decides to begin and complete the work on the project about Elizabeth's tragic loser, Julian, the Apostate.

### Julian the Apostate

Flavius Claudius Julianus was a competent and intelligent Roman Emperor (361–363 AD). He was the son of Constantius and the nephew of Constantine the Great. In 361, he publicly announced his conversion to paganism, which led him to attain the title of Apostate. Julian was born in Constantinople, and he was baptized to be brought up as a Christian. He was left an orphan after his cousin Constantine II massacred his family; only Julian and his half-brother Gallus were left as the only remaining male heirs to the emperor. He was raised by his grandmother and tutored by an Arian bishop. He gained freedom of thought through his education. He has written many books, and he is well known as a philosopher. He wanted to rule his kingdom as a philosopher, and since he was well educated, he was considered a man of culture. Julian developed hatred towards Christianity in general, as most of his family members were murdered by them. At that particular period of time, when everyone was following Christianity, Julian preferred Hellenism over it. He did his education in Neoplatonism, or theurgy, in Athens. He was a follower of Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor, who is known for his meditations on Stoic philosophy. Julian wanted to revive paganism and make it their official religion. He considered himself the leader of the pagan church and gave religious instructions to the clergy. He wanted to be an orthodox pagan, so he performed animal sacrifices. This led to the ill-treatment of the Christians, and they were prohibited from teaching philosophy and classical literature. Churches were burned, many bishops lost their privileges, and many were tortured. Julian's aim to spread paganism ended in vain. The Constantine dynasty came to an end after the death of Julian.

With Julian the dynasty of Constantine came to an end. He was rather a philosophical litterateur of a somewhat visionary character, than a great ruler whose actions were the dictates of strong will and principles. The good beginnings of a just government which he showed in Gaul were not maintained when he was a sole ruler. Although his personal life was unostentatious, he was passionate, arbitrary, vain, and prejudiced, blindly submissive to the rhetoricians and magicians. Some of Julian's many controversial writings, orations, and letters have been preserved, showing his discordant, subjective character. (Hoerber)

Elizabeth Finch calls Julian the Apostate a 'tragic loser' instead of a tragic hero. This is because of his failure to revive polytheism in the Roman Empire. When Julian came to power, the practice of Christianity was less popular than paganism. Julian's practice of paganism was more forceful and raw when compared to that of a normal pagan follower. When he was killed on the battlefield, it was the end of polytheism in the Roman Empire. His supporters and followers failed to maintain paganism as a state religion. If Julian was a follower of the pagan's old tradition, he should leave the people to follow the religion that they wished for. Instead, he denied them their privileges, powers, and rights. He wrote against the Christians and called their faith as a fiction composed by wickedness of men. This made the Christians unify against him. As paganism is a polytheistic religion, they had their conflict and ended up not supporting each other. His successors did not share his attitude and beliefs towards Paganism. No other pagan Emperor came to power, and so the Roman Empire outlawed Pagan practices.

As Elizabeth Finch was not able to complete her paper on her tragic loser, Neil thinks that he would complete it. He believes that by doing this, he would prove to his son that he is not "the king of unfinished projects." The second part of the novel covers the life of Julian the Apostate, but by the end of its completion, he doubts if he is actually honouring her. Even after her death, Neil struggles to prove himself to her. Neil comes to a stage where he finds the life history of Elizabeth Finch and Julian remains mysterious. It is not possible for him to conclude their characteristics. Though he has completed his work, he finds it unworthy because it has not satisfied him in his search for Elizabeth Finch. He sets it apart, and Elizabeth Finch still remains as mysterious woman who he met at first.

Centuries have interpreted and reinterpreted Julian. The collective memory of a particular historical person changes when different people give their opinions and views on them. Milton's speech to the English Parliament in 1644, which was later printed as *Areopagitica*, argues for freedom of speech and expression. He talks about inquisition, censorship, and so on. He mentions that the Church was more persecuted and calls Julian "the subtlest enemy of our faith" (103). As far as history is concerned, Julian did not give orders for the destruction of Galilean texts. He did not censor the books; instead, he censored the readers. It was a dangerous tactic. "EF ironically put it, a 'hold-out hero'; for others, pretty much a younger brother of Satan" (78).

It was the Christians who came forward to write down the story of Julian, the Apostate. Gregory of Nazianus (c. 329–90) was a bishop who knew Julian. He portrays Julian as a monster in his writings. He consistently tries to show the tyranny of Julian and how he shows his hatred towards Christianity and his denial of the crown of martyrdom. Saint Jerome (c. 347–420) complains against "Julian's *blanda persecution* – persecution by methods of mildness" (83). Theodoret of Cyrus

(c. 393–c. 460) gives two points. First, he states that Julian was a brilliant general but a poor strategist with elementary mistakes. He talks about his failure. The second is about the nature of pagan gods, who were fickle and flaky.

The versions of Julian became more quasi-secular in later years. Lorenzo de'Medici, was an Italian statesman and he wrote a play in 1498. Julian is portrayed as less of a mediaeval monster and more of a Renaissance hero who comes to a tragic end. Hans Sachs wrote a ballad play named *Julian the Emperor While Bathing* (1556). In the play, Julian goes for boar hunting. After the hunt, he goes swimming, where his clothes are stolen by an angel. Without his royal attire, he becomes unrecognisable even to his wife. As a pagan, he begs for Christian God's forgiveness, and he gets back his clothes, throne, and empire.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) was a philosopher and the first modern independent thinker to make his judgement about the Apostate in his essay "On the Freedom of Conscience". He has lived through most of the wars of religion. He is a Frenchman with a stoic, sceptic, epicurean, and tolerant deist. He states that the reasons and consequences for these wars are that "reason had become overtaken by passion" (101). He states that even the men of reason in Christianity acts unjustly. The power they hold leads to excessive destruction. Montaigne's view on Julian are as follows:

Even though he was 'altogether vicious' in matters of religion and 'an enemy harsh towards us... but not cruel, the Apostate for Montaigne called him 'a truly great and outstanding person'. He left behind 'examples of model behaviour in every single field of virtue: chastity, justice, sobriety, philosophy'. He also 'greatly excelled in all branches of literature'. (102)

Julian was brought back again during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–81. King Charles ruled as a Protestant king since 1660, but his heir James was a Catholic, and he wanted to unite the country to one true faith. Many pamphlets were spread, and one of the famous pamphlets was written by Samuel Johnson when he was working as a chaplain for Lord Russell. It was titled *Julian the Apostate: being a Short Account of his Life; the sense of the Primitive Christians about his Succession; and their Behavior towards him: Together with a Comparison of Popery and Paganism*. According to Johnson, Julian was one of the greatest villains in Christendom's history, and he is in hell along with Herod, Judas, and Pilate.

The eighteenth century was Julian's posthumous reputation. He was famous for his aspects of life and how his 'mildness' became the enlightenment idea of 'toleration'. Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) was the modern interpretation of Julian. He denies Julian's subtitle, The Apostate. He states that Julian does not deserve his subtitle, as he used Christianity as his life-saving cover-up. He says, "He had all the virtues of Trajan, of Cato, of Julius Caesar, and of Scipio, but without their faults. In sum, he was entirely the equal of Marcus Aurelius, 'who was the first among men'." (108)

Edward Gibbons devoted three chapters of *Decline and Fall* to Julian the Apostate. He compares Julian with other historical characters by stating that Julian might not be a genius like Julius Caesar, might not have the prudence of Augustus, the virtues of Trajan, or the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, but Julian was a resolute person when it came to death. He told his troops that he was ready to face death. After his death, paganism turned to dust.

Henrik Ibsen wrote a play named *Emperor and Galilean* in 1873, and he called it 'A World-Historical Drama' and 'my masterpiece'. The play is not from historical perspectives. It is about self-realisation, the importance of will, the incapable coexistence of Christianity, and the joy of life. Ibsen's Julian outmanoeuvres his opponents. In the play, Julian's friend Maximus summons spirits, as it is Julian's task to combine the wisdom of Christianity with the wisdom of paganism.

Algernon Charles Swinburne mentions in two poems about Julian. The poems are "Hymn to Proserpine" (1866) and "The Last Oracle" (1878). The poem "Hymn to Proserpine" is a lament for the fall of paganism and the rise of Christianity. The poem begins with the lines, "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean." Julian dies by uttering these words as he accepts his defeat both in theology and on the battle field. The poem ends with regret for the rise of Christianity. The poem "The Last Oracle" is about the early reign of Julian, where he sends his friend Oribasius to Delphi.

## Conclusion

Postmodernism often examines how memory can be influenced by simulations or mediated representations, leading to the idea of "hyperreality", a condition where representations of reality become more real than reality itself. This can blur the line between genuine memory and constructed experiences. Jean Baudrillard, in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), argues that in a postmodern world dominated by media and images, memories may become simulations and representations that feel more authentic than lived experiences. This leads to a hyperreal understanding of memory, where the distinction between the real and the artificial is no longer clear. The memory is a narrative that is constructed by individuals or societies. It is an act of storytelling rather than a retrieval of facts. This perspective aligns with the broader postmodern critique of meta-narratives like large, overarching stories that claim to explain historical or cultural phenomena.

As Neil finds difficulties in pinning down a person's life, he questions the history. Whether history is a true representation of the past? Where is the truth? A reason can be the truth, and the truth is derived from memory. The human memory retains only the needed information, so it cannot be trusted fully. Historical contexts construct the world's meaning. Society constructs the truth. Society plays a major role in the perception of the world. So there is no absolute truth. The truth is fragmentary, and meaning is incomplete.



Elizabeth Finch tries to write the historical biography of Julian the Apostate, and she fails. Neil tries to write the fictional biography of Elizabeth Finch, and he too fails. Both characters try to find the truth, but they both fail in their quest for truth. Neil tries to complete the biography of Elizabeth Finch with the incomplete details of her. This leads to his awareness of questioning history. In this novel, Barnes has clearly portrayed the importance and influence of memory in everyone's life. It also brings out the responsibility a writer holds, especially a writer who pens down history and biography. A biographer cannot write down his opinions and ideas as it would mislead the readers. Neil's failure to complete the project shows that he cannot hold that much responsibility in his shoulder. Barnes attempts in this novel to show that history is a mix of personal and collective memory, based on the past memories. The idea that memory is not just personal but also collective, shaped by social and cultural narratives. This collective memory can be manipulated, contested, or revised, reflecting the power dynamics and ideologies of society.

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