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Gerontological Insights from Indian Cinema: *Aachari Baa* and the Role of Episodic Memories

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Abstract:

*This study critically examines the role of episodic memory—the retrieval of personally experienced events embedded within specific temporal and spatial contexts (Tulving, 2002)—in shaping the lived experiences of older adults, with particular emphasis on identity construction, familial dynamics, and psychological resilience. Employing Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000) Self-Memory System (SMS) as its theoretical framework, the research investigates how episodic memories serve as a cognitive scaffold for maintaining self-continuity amid the psychosocial challenges of aging (Bluck & Alea, 2002). The SMS model, which posits that autobiographical memory is hierarchically organized to preserve coherence between the "working self" and long-term self-narratives (Conway, 2005), provides a robust lens to explain the prevalence of reminiscence in late adulthood. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of the Bollywood film *Aachari Baa* (2025), this article demonstrates how episodic recollections mediate emotional regulation (Pillemer, 1998), identity reaffirmation (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), and social behavior (Webster, 2003) in older individuals. Methodologically, the study adopts qualitative techniques, integrating scenic analysis to decode visual metaphors of memory, character analysis to trace identity evolution, and dialogic analysis to extract thematic patterns. Findings reveal how cinematic narratives reflect empirical phenomena, such as intergenerational estrangement exacerbated by fragmented memory recall (Fivush et al., 2011) or compensatory bonds with non-human companions (Richeson & Shelton, 2006). By situating filmic representations within gerontological and cognitive theories, this research advances discourse on aging and societal marginalization.*

Keywords: Episodic Memory, Gerontology, *Aachari Baa*, Self-Memory System

Introduction:

Gerontology is the study of the biological, psychological, and social aspects of aging. From early beginnings in research and theory, gerontology developed into a multidisciplinary field of study and, more recently, into a professional field commonly known as the field of aging. In the domain of cinema, gerontology encompasses the examination of films related to ageing with different approaches like narrative, humanistic, psychological, social, and philosophical. Films being the

major cultural resources have widely influenced our perspectives towards ageing and old age. Multidimensional process of ageing, influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors can often be noticed in popular and parallel cinema. Among the psychological or cognitive aspects of aging, memory plays a crucial role in maintaining identity and interpersonal relationships.

Memories are an indispensable part of human life. When it's about children or adults it's easy to digest the fact that it directly affects a person. But it may sound ironic that the reminiscences of the past or adulthood sometimes act as a panacea and sometimes as a slow poison for suffering in declining years, when diseases like Alzheimer's and dementia are usually associated with ageing. Especially the episodic memories, memories of personal life experiences and events, help the older adults in providing emotional comfort and sense of security which is especially crucial for the older people tackling with loss, illness and cognitive decline. Sharing these memories with others strengthens their social bonds and creates a sense of community in the same age group. From a psychological and health perspective, engaging with memories provides cognitive stimulation which can help build cognitive reserve and potentially delay their cognitive decline. Apart from all these luminous sides, delving too much into the past, particularly in distressing memories, have negative consequences. Immersing excessively into distressful memories the symptoms of depression and anxiety. Sometimes, nostalgia leads to the feelings of melancholy, and loss, particularly if older adults feel disconnected to the past or unable to recapture past experiences. Reminiscing past mistakes or regrets leads towards the feeling of remorse, guilt or shame, which eventually becomes distressing for them. Overemphasizing the past also disconnects them from the present and creates a sense of unrealistic expectations about the present or future and makes them critical about the present which further leads to miseries, disillusionment and sometimes strains the relationships with kins. In the film *Aachari Baa* these aforementioned situations are well cinemated that how the ageing female Protagonist having troubled relations with children is using her memories as armour from the pain, how she finds solace and motivation from their adulthood day, and sometimes how these memories aggravate her current sufferings.

The Self Memory System (SMS) theory, proposed by Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000), provides a framework for understanding how episodic memory functions to support self-coherence, emotional regulation, and goal-oriented behavior. According to this theory, episodic memories are dynamically constructed and integrated within an individual's autobiographical knowledge base, allowing them to maintain a coherent sense of identity across time. In the context of aging, episodic memory serves multiple functions as emotional regulation, self-Continuity, decision-making and social behaviour.

Aachari Baa: Pleasant Past Healing the Pickled Present:

The Gujarati film *Aachari Baa* (2025) (The Pickle Grandmother) is a poignant portrayal of

Jaishnavi, a 65-year-old widow residing in Rapar, Gujarat. Living alone, Jaishnavi navigates her daily life by maintaining a small pickle business with the assistance of two aging friends and a local boy. This entrepreneurial venture provides her with financial sustenance and serves as a tangible connection to her past. The film's narrative is interspersed with episodic memories of Jaishnavi's emotional life, revealing her deep-seated longing for her deceased husband and her son, who resides in Mumbai.

A poignant scene depicting Jaishnavi's emotional state shows her sitting alone in the courtyard, surrounded by an eerie silence, with two cups of tea placed in front of her. This powerful visual representation foregrounds her profound sense of loneliness and her longing for her deceased partner. As she gazes up at the sky, she attempts to share her feelings with him, illustrating the enduring emotional bond between them.

The arrival of an invitation from her son to join him in Mumbai sets in motion a chain of events that ultimately leads to Jaishnavi's disillusionment. Notably, Jaishnavi makes the sacrificial decision to leave behind her thriving pickle business, which has been her lifeline, in order to reunite with her son. Upon her arrival, she discovers that she has been misled into caring for her son's dog, Jenny, while the family embarks on a holiday. This revelation leaves her with feelings of abandonment and betrayal, and breaks her hope along with her sense of continuity.

As the narrative unfolds, Jaishnavi's initial apprehension towards the pet dog, Jenny, gradually gives way to a profound sense of connection. She begins to discern a resemblance between Jenny's circumstances and her own, intuitively sensing that she has been dehumanized by her son's actions. Over time, Jaishnavi finds solace in Jenny's companionship, as the dog serves as a reminder of her son and his childhood. The irony of her situation is not lost on her, as she recalls how she would previously accompany her son everywhere due to his fear of loneliness, only to be overlooked by him in her own time of need. A deeper emotional resonance is established when Jaishnavi discovers that Jenny is a male dog, prompting her to empathize with the animal's situation and reflect on her own experiences of identity erasure. Specifically, she recalls how she was given a masculine name, which has had a profound impact on her sense of self. In a powerful act of reclamation, Jaishnavi renames the dog Jigra, symbolizing her resilience. As Jaishnavi navigates this complex emotional landscape, she begins to heal and find closure. Her past experiences, though painful, serve as a foundation for her present. The pleasant memories of her past, though tinged with sadness, provide a sense of continuity and comfort. The pickle-making process, which has been a constant in her life, becomes a therapeutic outlet for her emotions. As she finds solace in the familiar rhythms of her craft, Jaishnavi begins to rebuild her sense of identity and purpose.

Ultimately, the film concludes on a triumphant note, as Jaishnavi's pickle business is shown to have flourished, and she receives an invitation from a prestigious London university to deliver a

lecture. This recognition serves as a testament to Jaishnavi's resilience and determination. As she stands on the threshold of this new chapter in her life, Jaishnavi's past experiences, though still poignant, no longer define her. Instead, they have become a source of strength and inspiration, healing the wounds of her pickled present and illuminating a brighter future. The film demonstrates how Jaishnavi's pleasant memories of the past, though bittersweet, serve as a source of comfort, continuity, and healing in her present. The pickle-making process, which has been a constant in her life, becomes a powerful metaphor for the way in which one's past experiences can be transformed and reinterpreted in the present, allowing one to find closure, healing, and ultimately, a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Episodic memory as emotional regulator and resilience agent:

Older adults often rely on positive episodic memories with current stressors and maintain emotional well-being (Schacter 432). Consciously or unconsciously they keep on revisiting their older days.

Jaishnavi's inner emotional struggle highlights the crucial role of episodic memory in building resilience. By recalling her past experiences of nurturing her son and comparing them to his present indifference, she undergoes a layered emotional reaction—one that intertwines nostalgia, disappointment, and a reaffirmation of her own worth.

As the film starts, she is seen in her courtyard, sitting alone, with two cups of tea, with the episodic memories of her deceased husbands. These memories provide her with emotional strength, reinforcing the marital bond that sustains her through adversity.

In another scene, while feeding Jenny Jaishnavi projects her son's identity onto him, which exemplifies episodic memory's role in emotional regulation. Her recalled caregiving experiences (Pillemer, 1998) transform the dog Jenny into an effective surrogate of her son, mitigating loneliness through nostalgic reenactment. This aligns with the "positivity effect" (Mather & Carstensen, 2005), showing how elders use autobiographical memory to preserve emotional equilibrium amid loss.

Psychological research suggests that older adults tend to exhibit a positivity bias in episodic memory, focusing on positive life experiences to regulate emotions (Mather and Carstensen 311). However, in Jaishnavi's case, her episodic recollections initially reinforce feelings of betrayal and sadness. Over time, these memories contribute to her cognitive reappraisal, allowing her to redefine her identity beyond familial obligations.

Episodic memory and Self-Continuity in later life:

Self-continuity, the perception of oneself as a stable entity over time, is crucial for psychological well-being in older adulthood. Episodic memories help older adults maintain a coherent sense of self despite changes in their social roles and physical health (Conway and Loveday 579). It plays a vital role in maintaining this continuity by allowing individuals to connect their past

experiences with their present identity. According to Conway and Loveday, autobiographical memories form a coherent self-narrative that integrates past events with current experiences, ensuring a stable sense of self across time (580).

In *Aachari Baa*, Jaishnavi's episodic recollections of her older life with her son reinforce her maternal identity, sustaining her emotional resilience despite familial adversity. Her ability to access emotionally significant memories enables her to maintain a consistent self-image as a mother.

Furthermore, Jaishnavi's episodic memories help her reaffirm her lifelong values and identity. Despite her Son's rejection in personal life and judges's rejection in food competition, Jaishnavi maintains a strong sense of self by recalling instances where she took care of him and how she started her business initially even after being discouraged. These memories serve as a foundation for her self-perception, preventing feelings of worthlessness and existential discontinuity.

Episodic memory thus serves as an essential cognitive mechanism for self-continuity, allowing her to construct a stable life narrative despite external challenges. Her recollections empower her to maintain her dignity and sense of purpose, ultimately shaping her decisions and emotional outlook. Without episodic memory, she may struggle with fragmented identities, leading to emotional distress and diminished well-being.

Episodic Memory and Decision-Making:

Episodic memory plays a crucial role in shaping decision-making and identity in later life. Decision-making in older adults is often influenced by past experiences, as they rely on personal memories to assess the outcomes of previous choices and apply this knowledge to current dilemmas. In *Aachari. Baa*, Jaishnavi's decisions—whether to continue seeking her son's approval or to embrace independence—are heavily informed by her episodic recollections of past sacrifices and familial devotion.

Studies indicate that episodic memory retrieval allows older adults to engage in reflective decision-making, where they analyze past experiences to make choices aligned with their values and life narratives (Bluck and Habermas 134). Jaishnavi's ultimate decision to distance herself from her son stems from her accumulated recollections of neglect and emotional pain. By revisiting memories of her unwavering support for her son, she recognizes the imbalance in their relationship and chooses to prioritize her dignity and emotional well-being

Research in gerontology highlights that autobiographical memory supports adaptive decision-making in older adults. By recalling past experiences, individuals can assess their current circumstances and make informed choices about their interpersonal relationships, expectations from family members and emotional investments (Bluck and Alea 33). Demonstrating the same how Jaishnavi's episodic memories ultimately empower her to reconstruct her self-narrative, choosing dignity over continued disappointment Hardik's *Aachari Baa* Concludes.

Episodic Memory Reconstructing Identity:

Episodic memory is integral to identity construction and maintenance in older adulthood. Identity in later life is shaped by an individual's ability to integrate past experiences into a cohesive self-narrative, reinforcing personal values and life themes (Conway and Loveday 581). The film consistently portrays Vaishnavi's identity—rooted in her role as a nurturing mother and selfless caregiver—as being undermined by her son's indifference. Yet, through the power of episodic memories recalling her unconditional love and sacrifices, she reclaims her dignity, resisting her son's ingratitude from reshaping how she views herself.

This pivotal renaming scene—where Jaishnavi changes Jenny to "Jigra" upon discovering the dog's male sex—epitomizes identity reconstruction through interspecies bonding. Drawing on Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000) Self-Memory System, the act demonstrates how episodic memories of her masculine name "Manoj," facilitate present identity work. The symbolic renaming operates as displaced selfhood (Cohen, 2013), allowing Jaishnavi to project her suppressed identity onto the canine companion while reclaiming agency through the Hindi word for courage. This mirrors Bluck's (2008) findings on reminiscence as late-life empowerment, with the dog becoming what Habermas and Bluck (2000) term an "autobiographical anchor"—a living repository for renegotiated selfhood. The scene visually manifests the positivity effect (Mather & Carstensen, 2005), showing selective focus on affectively meaningful connections in aging. Through this interspecies identity transfer, the film reveals how episodic memory serves dual functions: as a reservoir of personal history and a tool for its creative reworking.

Episodic memory affecting Social Behavior:

Episodic memory plays a crucial role in shaping social behavior, particularly in older adulthood. Social interactions are often guided by past experiences, which help individuals form expectations, interpret social cues, and navigate relationships. Research suggests that episodic memory retrieval enables older adults to regulate their behavior based on prior interpersonal encounters, fostering adaptive social engagement (Bluck and Alea 45).

The film depicts how Vaishnavi's episodic memories actively mediate her relationships—not only with her neglectful son and his family but also with her new acquaintances and, significantly, with Jenny, the pet dog. Her nostalgic recollections of familial intimacy stand in stark juxtaposition to her son's present indifference, thereby reconfiguring her expectations of filial bonds. This cognitive-emotional process precipitates her emotional disengagement from her son and a corresponding attachment to the dog, whom she symbolically adopts as a surrogate child. This narrative arc foregrounds the transformative role of episodic memory in reshaping social affiliations and relational priorities during advanced age.

Additionally, episodic memory fosters empathy and moral reasoning, enabling older adults to

maintain social harmony. Her memories of raising her son encourage her to continue demonstrating patience and forgiveness, even in the face of emotional distress. This aligns with psychological findings that suggest episodic memory enhances prosocial behavior by allowing individuals to reflect on past experiences of kindness and reciprocity (Mather and Carstensen 319).

Moreover, episodic memory helps older adults maintain a sense of belonging in social groups. Her recollections of shared experiences with her friends reinforce her social identity, preventing isolation. Research indicates that reminiscing about meaningful social interactions can strengthen social bonds and improve psychological well-being in older adults (Schacter 435). In *Aachari Baa*, Jaishnavi's engagement with memories of her earlier pickle business days and her dead husband ultimately helps her transition from familial disappointment to newfound social fulfillment.

Social Implications of Episodic Memory in *Aachari Baa*:

The film's depiction of aging and memory carries important consequences for comprehending relationships between generations in today's society. Episodic memory does not merely form personal identity but also affects family expectations and how society views aging. Jaishnavi's episodic memories act as a criticism of changing values in modern society, highlighting the emotional consequences of disregarding elderly parents.

The broader social implications of episodic memory in later life include:

Intergenerational Transmission of Values: The contrast between Jaishnavi's recollections and her son's behavior highlights the changing dynamics of familial responsibility (Kumar 157). Additionally, her monologue in the climatic scene and her advice to her grandson to not overlook her mother reflects towards the prevalent dimensions of relationship between older parents and middle-age children. It sharply directs towards the shortcomings of losing the generational value.

Cultural Narratives of Aging: *Aachari Baa* critiques the erosion of traditional elder-care values in modern India, exemplified when Jaishnavi's son deceives her into dog-sitting while the family vacations—a stark violation of the *matrudevo bhava* ideal (Nandy 48). Her abandoned pickle business symbolizes forsaken traditions, while renaming the dog Jigra reflects cultural reclamation. The film mirrors Nandy's concept of modernity's "assault on memory" (48), revealing how urbanization disrupts intergenerational reciprocity. Yet Jaishnavi's international pickle success proposes new elder dignity beyond familial structures, using tradition (pickle-making) to navigate modernity. The narrative affirms Nandy's emphasis on respect and reciprocity in aging, while suggesting adaptive paths when these values decline.

Psychological Well-being of the Elderly: *Aachari Baa* explores the dual psychological impact of reminiscence through Jaishnavi's episodic memories. While nostalgic recollections of her husband and son initially deepen her loneliness, these same memories ultimately become therapeutic when channeled into pickle-making—a process mirroring Bluck and Alea's (41) theory about constructive

memory integration. The film contrasts distressing fixation (her courtyard tea ritual) with adaptive processing (using recipes to preserve identity), demonstrating how elderly well-being depends on memory reframing. Jaishnavi's transition from paralyzing grief to entrepreneurial success validates Bluck and Alea's (41) findings that episodic recall can either hinder or enhance psychological resilience based on its functional application. The narrative thus offers a cinematic case study of episodic memory in aging.

Conclusion:

This study has systematically demonstrated the fundamental role of episodic memory in structuring the psychosocial landscape of later life, particularly in mediating emotional resilience, cognitive autonomy, identity continuity, and relational dynamics among older adults. Through an analytical engagement with *Aachari Baa* and the application of Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's Self-Memory System (SMS) framework, it has been elucidated how the protagonist's episodic recollections function as both a psychological anchor and a narrative device—enabling her to reconcile past attachments with present adversities while preserving selfhood amidst familial neglect.

The film's nuanced portrayal of aging transcends individual biography, offering a critical lens through which to examine broader socio-cultural tensions surrounding intergenerational care and the marginalization of the elderly. By foregrounding memory as an active, meaning-making process, this analysis challenges reductive perceptions of aging as mere decline, instead positioning episodic recollection as a site of agency and resistance. These findings carry significant implications for gerontological practice and policy. Future research should extend this inquiry through longitudinal studies measuring how structured episodic memory engagement influences well-being metrics, as well as cross-cultural comparisons of memory's role in aging narratives across diverse care ecosystems. Ultimately, this study advocates for a paradigm shift: recognizing episodic memory not merely as cognitive function but as a vital socioemotional resource in redefining late-life dignity.

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