New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

ONLINE ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. 14, Issue 2, April 2025**

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

CHRONOTOPIC DISLOCATIONS: RECONFIGURING TIME AND SELFHOOD IN *HOW TO TRAVEL LIGHT* BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the temporal and psychological disjunctions in Shreevatsa Nevatia's memoir How to Travel Light, situating it within the conceptual framework of chronotopic dislocation as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. Nevatia's account of living with bipolar disorder unfolds in a narrative space that constantly shifts across fragmented memories, disrupted chronology and affective time. The memoir resists linear storytelling in favor of an episodic and recursive structure, where the past invades the present and the boundaries of the self become porous and unstable. Through an analysis of Nevatia's temporal oscillations-between manic euphoria and depressive inertia-this paper argues that How to Travel Light reconfigures not only the perception of time but also the construction of selfhood under psychological duress.

The study draws on literary theories of narrative time by Paul Ricoeur, trauma and memory theories by Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub and Bakhtinian notions of chronotopes to demonstrate how the text subverts conventional memoir structures. Nevatia's memoir becomes a site of both temporal disintegration and reconstruction, where the writer explores not only the clinical experience of bipolarity but also the existential crisis of being a subject within a fractured temporality. In doing so, How to Travel Light participates in a broader literary movement that seeks to narrativize mental health conditions through experimental form, making the experience of altered consciousness legible and affectively vibrant. The memoir, therefore, is not merely a testimony of illness but a profound literary intervention in the aesthetics of time, memory and identity.

Keywords: Chronotope, Time, Disrupted, Memoir, Memory.

Introduction

In the increasingly visible panorama of Indian English life writing, Shreevatsa Nevatia's *How to Travel Light: My Memories of Madness and Melancholia* stands out as a unique narrative that articulates the affective and existential ruptures of living with bipolar disorder. Memoirs of mental illness often grapple with the paradox of trying to render disorder in the grammar of order; they attempt to impose narrative structure on a condition that is, by its nature, disorienting and discontinuous. In Nevatia's text, however, this contradiction becomes a site of creative experimentation. The memoir refuses linear progression in favor of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls chronotopic dislocations-fractures in the literary space-time continuum that reflect both psychological instability and narrative innovation. These dislocations allow the author to move beyond mere testimony toward a deeper engagement with the nature of time, memory and identity as experienced under the strain of a bipolar life.

Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope-literally "time-space"-posits that every narrative operates within a particular configuration of temporal and spatial relationships and that disruptions in these configurations are often sites of thematic and formal complexity. In *How to Travel Light*, such dislocations are not just stylistic choices but existential necessities. The memoir enacts the volatility of manic and depressive states through episodic ruptures, recursive memories and a non-linear timeline that challenges the stability of selfhood. As Paul Ricoeur notes in his book *Time and Narrative*: "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative" (3). Nevatia's memoir, however, is marked by the breakdown of this organization-by a disordering of time that mirrors a disordering of the self. This paper argues that Nevatia's text reconfigures not only the chronology of experience but also the very ontology of being. It examines how *How to Travel Light* mobilizes chronotopic instability as a formal and thematic strategy to depict the psychological, emotional and existential consequences of bipolarity. Through close textual analysis and engagement with literary theory, this study reveals the memoir's innovative intervention in the aesthetics of mental experience.

Chronotope and the Bipolar Narrative: Theoretical Groundwork and Textual Resonance

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope-"the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84) - offers a productive framework to analyze Nevatia's memoir. Chronotopes are not merely formal devices; they are imbued with ideological meaning, shaping the way characters inhabit time and space. In *How to Travel Light*, time is not experienced as linear or progressive; rather, it is fractured, recursive and

often collapses in on itself. This distortion mirrors the manic-depressive cycles of bipolar disorder, where time can either accelerate to the point of incoherence or slow to a stasis that borders on existential paralysis. Nevatia writes, "Though imagined, I had seen beauty I never thought could exist. I had been to places—hospitals, Brighton and Benares—that had inadvertently made me abjure despair. Despite the discipline, the antipsychotics and abstention from marijuana, a lasting sanity could not be guaranteed. I had, however, discovered a levity that helped me laugh and love with abandon… This is the story of my life as I remember it. My memories might compete with those of the people I mention, but I now have more faith in my history" (Preface). This elastic and unstable relationship with time is not simply a symptom of the illness but becomes the very texture of the memoir's narrative form. The memoir refuses chronology as its organizing principle. Instead, it is structured around emotional intensities, mood fluctuations and memories that intrude unbidden, disrupting any sense of narrative coherence. This mirrors Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as "the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred's first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, tobe fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (3-4). In this sense, Nevatia's text is not simply about remembering, but about re-living-a temporal return that makes the act of writing itself a site of re-traumatization and, paradoxically, catharsis. These oscillations between memory and immediacy, between the present and the "returning past," instantiate what Paul Ricoeur terms "narrative identity"-an identity constructed not through stable continuity but through storytelling, however fractured (246).

The memoir's structure of episodic flashbacks and nonlinear episodes resists the forward momentum typical of recovery narratives. This resistance aligns with what Anne Whitehead, in her work *Trauma Fiction*, calls the "temporal hybridity" of trauma writing-a mode where multiple temporalities exist simultaneously and destabilize the reader's expectation of narrative order (5). Nevatia's temporality is not simply nonlinear; it is unstable, unanchored by conventional markers of time such as years, seasons, or even events. Instead, time becomes mood-dependent-a melancholic loop, a manic sprint, a dissociative blank. The physical spaces in the memoir are similarly imbued with psychological charge. The hospital, the bedroom, the psychiatrist's office and the metro become chronotopes of containment and crisis, where the distinction between interior and exterior dissolves. These spaces function not just as backdrops

but as active participants in the psychic drama unfolding in the text. For example, Nevatia recounts a manic episode in Calcutta, where the city's frenetic rhythm appears to sync with his heightened mental state: "I returned to Calcutta to break ashtrays and porcelain. My mania was obstinate" (ch. 8). In this moment, time-space collapses into affect-there is no distance between environment and emotion. In such passages, *How to Travel Light* enacts what Bakhtin called the "dialogism" of chronotopes-spaces and times that speak back to the characters, alter their trajectories, or mirror their internal states. The manic city becomes an extension of the manic mind; the closed hospital ward becomes a spatial metaphor for psychic entrapment. These dislocations, then, are not only formal disruptions but also existential commentaries on what it means to inhabit a body and mind in flux.

Memory Loops and the Nonlinear Self: Repetition, Recollection and Narrative Resistance

In *How to Travel Light*, memory functions less as a repository of chronological experience and more as a discontinuous, recursive phenomenon-a series of emotional fragments that defy temporal logic. The memoir does not present a linear sequence of events; instead, it creates a looping consciousness, wherein certain episodes are revisited multiple times, each recurrence filtered through shifting emotional registers. These narrative repetitions mimic the psychological compulsion of bipolarity itself, which often traps the sufferer in cycles of manic euphoria and depressive collapse. As Nevatia notes, "Mania deludes me into believing my memory is eidetic, while medication and depression can sometimes give rise to an amnesia that seems permanent. The pickle jars of literature and film have proved to be reliable preservatives" (ch. 4)." This statement evokes what literary theorists like Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth have observed in trauma literature: the non-narrativizable quality of certain memories, which do not lend themselves to linear explanation but erupt as affective traces. According to Caruth, trauma is often experienced so suddenly and intensely that it cannot be fully comprehended at the time, and it later resurfaces in the form of haunting memories and repetitive behavior (4). Nevatia's memories are not recollections; they are hauntings. These hauntings interrupt the flow of the memoir with what Roland Barthes might have called "punctum"-not in the visual sense, but in the psychic sense: sudden moments of emotional intensity that pierce the surface of narrative coherence (27). For example, when Nevatia describes the moment of his diagnosis, he does not narrate it as a singular event but allows it to reappear multiple times, each version shaded by different degrees of fear, denial and ironic detachment. The diagnosis, then, becomes not a stable fact but a narrative node-a site of return, reinterpretation and emotional volatility. This repetition of key emotional moments parallels what theorists like Sigmund Freud and later, Dominick

LaCapra, have described as "acting out" versus "working through" in trauma response. Nevatia's memoir leans toward acting out-an involuntary re-experiencing of events-rather than a clinical or therapeutic linear processing. It is important to note, however, that the text doesn't fetishize suffering; instead, it formally enacts the very difficulties of narrating from within a disordered temporality. In this context, the self that emerges from Nevatia's text is not a unified subject moving smoothly through life events but a discontinuous assemblage of moods, memories and absences. The gaps in the narrative-blank spaces between episodes, elisions of chronology and abrupt shifts in emotional tone-are not flaws in storytelling; they are integral to how the text represents psychic disarray. The self is not portrayed as an origin but as an effect-an unstable consequence of inconsistent memory and mood.

Paul Ricoeur's distinction between "*idem*-identity" (sameness over time) and "*ipse*-identity" (selfhood as promise, narrative, or character), as discussed in his book *Oneself as Another*, becomes especially useful here. Nevatia's narrative challenges the very premise of idem-identity; the self is never the same from moment to moment. Instead, the memoir enacts a precarious ipse-identity: "When I interpret myself in terms of a life story, am I all three at once, as in the autobiographical narrative? Narrator and character, perhaps, but of a life of which, unlike the creatures of fiction, I am not the author but at most, to use Aristotle's expression, the coauthor, the *sunaition*" (160). Interestingly, Nevatia often positions himself as both subject and object of narration. There are moments when the narrator seems estranged from his past self, describing him almost as a character in a novel: "No longer was I 'Shreevatsa Nevatia'. Shreevatsa was someone I was inventing as I went along" (ch. 6). This narrative distancing technique-what Gérard Genette might call "focalization décalée" or oblique focalization-intensifies the sense of self-alienation, allowing Nevatia to both critique and empathize with the person he was during manic or depressive episodes. Thus, memory in *How to Travel Light* is not just a tool of retrospection; it is a mechanism of ontological inquiry. It becomes the space where time collapses, where the self unravels and is temporarily stitched back together through the act of writing. The memoir resists conventional structures not for stylistic novelty, but because the architecture of disordered memory demands a non-linear form. The "looping mind," as Nevatia describes it, cannot conform to a straight timeline because its emotional logic is circular, recursive and unpredictable.

Spaces of Displacement: Urban Chronotopes and Affective Geography

In *How to Travel Light*, space functions not as a neutral backdrop but as a deeply affective and unstable domain-what can be understood, borrowing Bakhtin's term, as

chronotopes of emotional resonance. Urban spaces in particular-Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi-become extensions of Nevatia's fluctuating inner world. These cities are not static geographical entities but psychic terrain, mirroring the bipolar intensities of the narrator's experience. The memoir constructs these urban spaces as sensitive ecosystems, capable of amplifying mental states or triggering dissociative episodes. Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope insists that spatial and temporal coordinates are always ideologically charged. In Nevatia's memoir, the city is not only a setting but a shifting character-chaotic, seductive, indifferent. During manic phases, the urban world becomes electric: "On 24 January 2016, when my taxi picked up speed on the Bandra–Worli Sea Link, I eased my head out of its window to let my tongue lap at the wind. Surrounded by the Arabian Sea, Bombay can be unkind to those who dread the ocean, but at two-thirty in the morning, with serotonin, dopamine, adrenaline and alcohol coursing through me, I felt indomitable. I had given up on lithium and sleep" (ch. 7). Here, the city is not a fixed location in physical space but a reflection of manic thought patterns-hyper-associative, grandiose, euphoric. The city's temporal rhythm aligns with the disorder of thought, creating what we might call a *manic chronotope*-a space-time fused with velocity and affective excess. Conversely, during depressive episodes, urban space becomes oppressive, indistinct and heavy. Nevatia describes days when "Manic and undiagnosed, convinced I had found a key to unlock the secrets of Márquez and Kundera, I'd spend my nights walking the streets of Calcutta in the summer of 2007" (ch. 9). In this depressive mapping of space, the city loses its contours-time stagnates, motion becomes automatic and the world appears veiled. These passages align with what geographer Yi-Fu Tuan calls topophilia turned inward: a disorientation in space that reveals a deeper disorientation in the self. This spatial affectivity finds its most acute articulation in the hospital and clinic, recurrent motifs in memoirs of mental illness. However, Nevatia's approach avoids the trope of the hospital as a site of mere institutional critique. Instead, it becomes a chronotope of in-betweenness-an interstitial space between lucidity and breakdown, between self-control and medical containment. Even a week after I had been admitted, I still could not read the clock. Thinking it was five in the evening, I knocked on the door of a recovering alcoholic at dawn, asking if he wanted to play Scrabble" (ch. 8). The clinical environment here is marked by temporal dislocation, a condition compounded by medication that slows thought and disorients perception. The chronotope of the hospital functions as both asylum and prison, echoing Foucault's notion of the clinic as a site where the medical gaze reduces the subject to an object of pathology (110).

Writing the Disintegrating Self: Literary Form and Affective Authenticity

If *How to Travel Light* communicates disordered time and fluctuating space, it does so not merely through content but through form itself. The memoir resists classical narrative arcs, tidy resolutions and causally coherent progressions. Instead, it adopts a fractured, elliptical structure, in which episodes begin without exposition, reflections interrupt chronology and narrative cohesion is continually deferred. This formal dissonance is not stylistic ornamentation-it is integral to the memoir's effort to embody the affective texture of bipolarity. In many respects, the memoir exemplifies what critic Suzanna Paola has described as the "aesthetics of fragmentation" in illness narratives. Such aesthetics refuse the closure demanded by traditional autobiography in favor of the jagged, open-ended and recursive. "We look to stories of illness to be redemptive," Paola writes, "but the most honest ones often resist this, allowing the pain to remain unresolved and incomprehensible" (58). Nevatia's memoir shares this resistance. Even in its most hopeful moments, there is no illusion of a fixed or final self. The narrator himself expresses ambivalence about coherence. "At any point, memory is at best a collection of fact and some fiction, but when I am manic, even my inventions start to seem persuasive. A psychotic subject is first an unreliable narrator" (Preface). Here, Nevatia breaks the fourth wall, asserting that the disorganization of the text mirrors the disorganization of thought. The memoir's refusal to follow a conventional arc-diagnosis, struggle, treatment, recovery-foregrounds a more honest rendering of what it means to live with a cyclical, lifelong condition. This approach very well aligns with the genre of pathography, defined by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins as "form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experiences of illness" (1). Hawkins emphasizes how pathographies often function as counter-narratives to medical case histories, which reduce patients to symptoms and ignore subjective experience. Nevatia's memoir, in contrast, reclaims narrative authority, presenting his psychic vista not as a clinical case but as a lived, literary reality.

A notable feature of *How to Travel Light* is its self-reflexivity-its consciousness of writing as both process and product. In several instances, Nevatia reflects on the impossibility of capturing his condition in words: "I had written my essays in a state of mild euphoria, and over that sleepless week, I was continuously surprised by how malleable language had begun to seem. Words which were once remote miraculously made themselves available… Without the structure of formal assignments, however, my thoughts grew unruly, racing from one suggestion to the next" (ch. 6). These meta-narrative intrusions foreground the limits of representation, echoing Maurice Blanchot's claim that "To write is… to withdraw language from the world, to detach it from what makes it a power... Writing is the interminable, the incessant" (26). Writing, for

Nevatia, is both a search for coherence and an acknowledgment of its absence. The form of the memoir-comprising short, discontinuous vignettes-evokes Walter Benjamin's concept of montage in *The Arcades Project*, where meaning emerges not through linear development but through the juxtaposition of fragments. Each vignette in *How to Travel Light* operates as a moment of temporal condensation, a crystallized episode that resists narrative assimilation. The effect is cumulative rather than progressive: the memoir does not unfold; it accretes, much like the layers of memory and mood in bipolar experience. At the heart of this form lies a commitment to affective authenticity. The text does not smooth over the discomfort of mania or depression; it inhabits it fully. It presents the reader not with a tidy narrative of overcoming but with a complex phenomenology of being. This is especially evident in Nevatia's stylistic shifts-sentences in manic episodes are long, associative and euphoric, while those in depressive sections are short, clipped and tonally flat. These stylistic choices enact what critic G. Thomas Couser terms the "rhetoric of embodiment" in illness narratives: the ways in which form itself conveys bodily or psychic experience (14).

Nevatia's use of intertextuality-quoting Leonard Cohen, Virginia Woolf and Bob Dylan-also serves a dual function. On one hand, it positions his memoir within a broader cultural tradition of creative minds who have grappled with mental distress. On the other, these references act as anchor points in a drifting narrative, offering glimpses of coherence in moments of disorientation. They are not mere citations but echoes, helping the narrator locate himself in a lineage of fragmented selves. Ultimately, the memoir's form becomes its ethics. In refusing to narrate disorder through the grammar of order, *How to Travel Light* enacts a literary ethics of vulnerability. It makes legible the incoherence of illness without aestheticizing it, allowing for a mode of truth-telling that is both affectively faithful and formally innovative. The disintegrating self, then, is not a failure of narration but its truest expression.

Conclusion: Temporal Ethics, Narrative Vulnerability and Literary Contribution

Shreevatsa Nevatia's *How to Travel Light* is not merely a memoir of living with bipolar disorder; it is a work of literary innovation that interrogates the very frameworks through which time, memory and identity are constructed in narrative form. Through its strategic deployment of chronotopic dislocations, the memoir rejects linear temporality and singular selfhood in favor of a fragmented, recursive and affectively dense representation of experience. Time in the memoir is elastic-contracting in depressive states, accelerating in mania and collapsing entirely in episodes of dissociation. These distortions of time are not simply symptoms of illness but serve as formal metaphors for the instability of consciousness and the fluidity of identity. Drawing on

Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, this study has demonstrated how the memoir's manipulation of time-space relationships contributes to its aesthetic and ethical project. The memoir foregrounds spaces-urban, clinical and domestic-as emotionally saturated zones that reflect and refract the narrator's psychological states. These chronotopes are not passive; they shape and are shaped by the protagonist's internal rhythms, creating a kind of affective cartography that charts the movement of the mind through the geography of distress. Equally central to Nevatia's narrative strategy is the form of the text, which resists closure, coherence and redemption. The fragmented structure-marked by non-linearity, episodic memories and stylistic fluctuations-mirrors the cyclical nature of bipolar disorder. As argued throughout this paper, the memoir operates within the aesthetics of disintegration, not to glorify suffering but to faithfully represent its narrative implications. This refusal to conform to traditional narrative expectations-of recovery, progress, or rational continuity-constitutes what can be termed a temporal ethics, wherein the truth of psychic life is privileged over narrative neatness.

By incorporating literary theory, especially from trauma studies, narrative time theory and Bakhtinian chronotope analysis, this paper has located *How to Travel Light* within a broader literary and philosophical discourse on the challenges of narrating unstable subjectivities. The memoir belongs to a lineage of texts that include Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*-works that have sought to render the invisible visible, to make interior chaos narratable without flattening its complexity. What sets Nevatia's work apart is its cultural specificity and its engagement with Indian urban modernity. The cities of Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai are not generic backdrops but distinctly textured environments that shape the protagonist's experience. The pressures of neoliberal mobility, the anonymity of urban life and the stigmatization of mental illness in Indian society form an unspoken yet palpable subtext to the memoir. Nevatia's dislocated self is not just psychically fragmented but also socially and culturally unmoored. Ultimately, *How to Travel Light* contributes to both the literature of mental distress and the aesthetics of narrative experimentation. It offers no neat answers, no final reconciliation between self and illness, memory and time. Instead, it asks readers to dwell in the discomfort of ambiguity-to witness what it means to live with a mind that does not conform to the world's chronologies. In doing so, Nevatia challenges dominant paradigms of autobiography and illness narrative, insisting that the most authentic stories are often the most broken ones.

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