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Familiarity in the Unfamiliar: The Cyclical Nature of Time

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The gentle sea breeze swept the locks of my hair from my eyes as I was greeted by the sight of an island off the coast of Singapore. The children on the ferry exclaimed jovially as their eyes gazed upon Pulau Ubin. As the ferry docked at berth, I looked out to see myself surrounded by hundreds of towering tropical trees. “Stop running lah!”, a voice thundered as a father called out to his rowdy children. He lunged forward to hold their hands, causing the children to furrow their eyebrows in displeasure. As I looked down to get a clearer glimpse of their faces, I noticed a family of grunting wild boars crossing the narrow and muddy pathway. Despite being very different at first glance, I chuckled at the uncanny similarities between both family units. As I began to make my way into the deeper parts of the island, my eyes were drawn towards a man seated by the side of a pavement. With a large wooden canvas propped upon a stand, he sat calmly with his eyes focused on his art. He appeared as though he was in a trance, completely and wholly transported into the world depicted on his canvas, a dimension mirroring the one around him, freezing the moment, immortalising it in time.

As I walked along the narrow dirt path, the scent of the damp earth filled up my lungs; a scent that had lingered on the island for thousands of years. The high-rise settlements that I was used to on the mainland seemed to be missing and were instead replaced with wooden houses with visible marks on the paint and moss growing in the cracks, a testament to how it has stood the tests of time. People on this island strongly prefer using bicycles instead of the motorised vehicles that I am extremely comfortable using on the mainland, sparking my imagination of a time where cars did not even exist - a glimpse into the distant past. As I walked past many shops on the island, I heard shopkeepers conversing in their own mother tongues, just like the way it would have been decades ago before the English language was introduced here both formally and informally. As I walked along the jetty, the wooden planks creaked under my flip flops, and I started to ponder more on the generations who walked on these planks

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before me. I stared out into the vast sea, and I heard unfamiliar whispers in my mind, as if I my ancestors were whispering words in my ears. Did they also appreciate the way the sunset painted the kaleidoscopic skies with hues of crimson as it dipped into the horizon? Were they also enchanted with how the stars scattered across the night sky? Did they also feel a sense of peace as they retired into the night with the calming chirps of crickets and the hoots of owls? The experiences of different people from different walks of life have been intricately woven into the foundation of the island. Despite never experiencing a life like this before, the unfamiliarity of Pulau Ubin had become strangely intimate, as though I had returned to a place that I had known before, as though I had been here some time ago. This made me wonder: Is the familiarity that we find in the unfamiliar a testament to the possibility of a cyclical nature to time – the constant repetition of history in new forms?

In his book, “Philosophies of India” (1952), renowned German Indologist and linguist, Heinrich Zimmer, provided a comprehensive guide on how Indian philosophy conceptualises time as cyclical and not linear, essentially mirroring natural rhythms. According to Jain philosophy, the universe is governed by endless cosmic cycles of time and is eternal. Due to the continual repetition of time, events will occur in a similar pattern despite happening in different forms every time. Our ability to recognise such patterns is deeply embedded in our consciousness and manifests in the form of experiencing familiarity even in the unfamiliar. The philosophy of Samsara in Buddhism strengthens the idea of how everything in the universe relates to one another while also constantly repeating; we do not experience new things but instead experience the echoes of past lives; and we thrive in these repeated experiences. This constant mixing of the past and future helps us to view time as a cyclical structure where we are constantly re-living the experiences of our souls in our past lives. In Hindu philosophy, there are four cosmic ages (yugas), which repeat indefinitely. Zimmer’s (1952) analysis of various Indian philosophies advances a worldview in which time is not linear but pays an ode to the idea of the constant resurgence of ideas and experiences with the passage of time.

Carl Jung, a Swiss psychologist, widely renowned for his book, “The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious” (1968) believed that collective consciousness is something that we are born with and is structured around archetypes that mould the way in which we analyse this life that we are living and the world around us. Certain places and historical events have the ability to trigger memories that have been inherited from generations before us, resulting in us experiencing moments of *déjà vu*. Since our ancestors have constantly experienced similar environments, their experiences, thoughts and emotions may be deeply rooted in our collective unconscious which allows us to feel connected to places, spaces, and circumstances that we

may have never been to before. For example, when walking along the creaky planks near the jetty or observing the magnificent sunset in the skies of Pulau Ubin, I may have felt a strange sense of belonging to the place because its forces, energy, and symbolism has been embedded into my very psyche! If the collective unconscious stores the remnants of past experiences, every new age is a resurrection of historical patterns, simply in a different form. This idea draws a parallel to the philosophical view that time is indeed a cyclical concept (as opposed to how we often perceive it to be a linear construct), with each epoch echoing the ones that preceded them.

Zimmer's (1952) philosophy on cyclical time and Jung's (1968) theory of collective unconscious both reveal that the familiarity that we find in the unfamiliar may be a testament to the deep, recurring patterns of human existence. Despite the same underlying message, their approaches are made from different perspectives. Zimmer (1952) approaches this idea by showing that our souls are experiencing the same frame of time over and again, whether it be due to reincarnation or the actual repetition of time. However, Jung (1968) makes the claim that we are reliving the experiences that our ancestors have gone through due to their memories being passed down, a form of epigenetics in a way.

Both the authors have supported the idea that the sense of familiarity that we may feel in unfamiliar places could be a result of echoes of the past in one way or the other due to the cyclical nature of time. However, what if the feeling of familiarity was truly not related to time at all?

The creaking of the planks as I walk past the jetty, the vibrant colours of the sunset, and constellations in the sky pose a stark juxtaposition to that of the life that I live – an absolute pandemonium. From the moment we arrive on the planet to the second that we leave, we are in a constant state of frenzy - exposed to the harsh realities of our rapidly changing world. As we start to take in the environment around us, we are always greeted by something new.

What if the idea of familiarity to us is adjacent to the idea of a mirage to dehydrated vagabonds wandering about a vast desert? Maybe my consciousness in this world mirrors the state of a tree desperately gripping onto thin soil, grabbing onto anything to be able to stand. If we are able to find comfort in familiarity, is there a possibility for us to also find a sense of familiarity in comfort? The feeling of comfort perpetrated by the illusion of familiarity may indeed be a way for our souls to find a sense of solace in this ever-changing world - our attempt to stay grounded in experience and existence, even as they unfold within the unfamiliar, the ever-changing, and the impermanent. Like shadows dancing on the walls of our memory, this familiarity offers warmth not because it is true, but because it is ours.

Bionote

Jayanty Maha Ananya is a passionate learner currently pursuing a degree in Mechanical Engineering with a Second Major in Data Analytics at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore. With a strong appreciation for both technical knowledge and creative expression, she enjoys exploring the intersections between science, art, and human experience. She is an avid guitarist and tennis player and often finds inspiration from these experiences to shape her personal growth. She believes in staying open to new perspectives and challenges, viewing each experience as an opportunity to learn and evolve. In the future, she hopes to combine her engineering background with her creative interests to contribute meaningfully to both technical innovation and the broader conversations that connect people across disciplines and cultures.

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