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Memory in Tension-Multi directionality and Antagonism in postcolonial and post -conflict Narratives

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Abstract:
This paper critically examines the intricate entanglement of memory, identity and power within postcolonial and post-conflict literary narratives, engaging with Michael Rothberg's paradigm of *multidirectional memory* to illuminate the ways in which collective remembrance functions not as an isolated or monolithic act, but as a palimpsestic process marked by interwoven, and often contested, historical traumas. Through nuanced close readings of selected texts emerging from formerly colonized and war-afflicted geographies, this study investigates how literary memory subverts linear historiography and singular narrative authority, instead manifesting through dialogic and polyvocal structures that both forge solidarities and reveal antagonisms across sociopolitical and cultural terrains. The paper contends that these narratives not only bear witness to suffering but also destabilize dominant historical discourses by foregrounding intersecting, and at times oppositional, recollections—whether of imperial domination, internecine conflict, or mass atrocity. By accentuating the contrapuntal nature of memory, this research positions literature as a crucial site of ethical confrontation and mnemonic negotiation, wherein victims and perpetrators, descendants and bystanders, coexist within a fraught and fragmented archive of historical truths. Ultimately, this study argues that postcolonial literature possesses a disruptive mnemonic agency, capable of unsettling hegemonic regimes of remembrance and fostering a more layered, reflexive, and ethically attuned engagement with the specters of the past in the pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

Introduction

In the wake of colonialism, war, and mass violence, memory becomes a battleground for competing narratives, ethical dilemmas, and political struggles. Far from offering a singular or unified account of the past, memory in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts exists in a state of tension marked by conflicting voices, histories, and identities. This research examines the dual dynamics of multidirectionality and antagonism within the memory narratives found in postcolonial and post-conflict literature. It investigates how cultural texts not only open spaces for collective remembrance and cross-cultural dialogue but also expose the fractures, silences, and resistances that memory work entails in contexts of historical trauma and historical identities.

The theoretical foundation of this inquiry lies within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, which began to emerge in the early 20th century through the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who theorized collective memory as a social phenomenon shaped by group identities. Halbwachs's work laid the groundwork for later explorations into how societies remember, forget,interpret and construct the past. Expanding on this, Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire (1989) highlighted the material and symbolic sites of memory, particularly those used in nation-building processes. Nora's framework focused largely on national memory, but it did not sufficiently address the transnational and postcolonial dimensions of memory in post-conflict societies.

A significant shift occurred with Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (2009), which expanded the boundaries of memory studies by suggesting that memories of traumatic events are not isolated or in competition, but rather interact and inform one another. Rothberg introduced the idea of multidirectional memory, where various histories of suffering, such as the Holocaust and colonial violence, interact, overlap, and sometimes conflict with one another. He argued that memory is formed through dynamic processes of negotiation and comparison, offering opportunities for dialogue between historically oppressed groups.

Rothberg's work was pivotal in challenging the traditional, competitive model of memory. However, his framework has also been critiqued for its optimism. Scholars like Stef Craps in Postcolonial Witnessing (2013) and Max Silverman in Palimpsestic Memory (2013) argue that memory in postcolonial contexts is often shaped by power asymmetries that limit the potential for mutual recognition. They highlight how memories from the Global South are frequently marginalized or appropriated within dominant Eurocentric memory frameworks, giving rise to memory antagonism—a phenomenon where narratives of trauma not only fail to cohere but actively clash or undermine one another.

Antagonism memory refers to the conflictual, resistant, and opposing forces within collective memories, especially in contexts of postcolonial and post-conflict societies. It describes a situation where competing memories of historical events clash, rather than coexist harmoniously, revealing the tensions between different groups, often with unequal power dynamics. This concept highlights the fractured nature of collective memory, where historical trauma, injustices, and silences are contested and resisted.

This antagonism is especially pronounced in post-conflict societies, where official narratives of reconciliation or truth-telling may obscure or silence counter-narratives. Scholars such as Elizabeth Jelin (State Repression and the Labors of Memory, 2003), Veena Das (Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary, 2007), and Antjie Krog (Country of My Skull, 1998) have explored how memory is contested in post-conflict societies. These works highlight the emotional, ethical, and political challenges of witnessing and narrating histories of violence, where official memory projects are often at odds with lived experiences of survivors and marginalized communities.

In literature, these dynamics of memory in tension are vividly portrayed. Early postcolonial works such as Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat (1967) challenge colonial narratives by foregrounding indigenous histories and memories of resistance. These texts introduce the idea of memory as a tool of resistance and cultural survival. Similarly, Wole Soyinka's A Play of Giants (1984) addresses the legacies of dictatorship and the struggles over historical memory in postcolonial Africa, while Aminatta Forna's The Memory of Love (2010) explores the trauma of Sierra Leone's civil war, revealing how memory serves both as a source of healing and as a site of ongoing conflict.

The South African context also provides powerful examples of memory's complexity, with works like J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace (1999) and Zoë Wicomb's Playing in the Light (2006) grappling with the aftermath of apartheid. These authors examine how the reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa requires negotiation between conflicting memories of oppression and complicity. In Coetzee's novel, memory is framed as both an ethical responsibility and a tool for personal and national reckoning, while Wicomb's work interrogates the racialized violence embedded in South African memory culture.

In films, the tension between multidirectional memory and memory antagonism is similarly explored. Films such as Rithy Panh's The Missing Picture (2013) engage with personal memory in contrast to state-imposed narratives, offering a poignant critique of official memory in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. John Torres' Todo Todo Teros (2006) merges experimental film techniques with political memory, offering a postcolonial perspective on collective trauma in the Philippines. Additionally, Ari Folman's Waltz with Bashir (2008) examines how memory of the Lebanon War is fractured, with Israeli memories of the conflict in tension with Palestinian suffering, highlighting the intersection of personal and collective memory. Raoul Peck's I Am Not Your Negro (2016) brings James Baldwin's reflections on racial violence and memory into dialogue with contemporary struggles for racial justice, providing a Trans historical and transracial perspective on memory's on-going tensions.

This research contends that memory in postcolonial and post-conflict narratives cannot be reduced to a harmonious or singular truth. Rather, memory in these contexts must be understood through its inherent tensions where solidarity and conflict, recognition and erasure, visibility and silence, often coexist. Drawing on a diverse array of literary works and films from Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and diasporic communities, this study explores how memory is constructed, resisted, and transformed in response to historical trauma. By critiquing Rothberg's framework of multidirectional memory and incorporating the concept of memory antagonism as a necessary complement, this research acknowledges that memory is not merely about reconciliation, but also about the ongoing negotiation of justice, power, and historical responsibility.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing debates in memory studies, postcolonial theory, and trauma studies by offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural memory functions in a globalized, post-imperial world.

2. Literature review

Memory studies have emerged as a critical field for understanding how societies engage with their pasts, particularly in the aftermath of colonialism, war, and mass violence. In postcolonial and post-conflict contexts, the exploration of memory reveals a landscape marked by deep tensions, as competing historical narratives and fragmented identities vie for legitimacy and visibility. This literature review surveys key theoretical frameworks and foundational texts in memory studies, with a particular focus on the concepts of multidirectional memory and memory antagonism, as well as their articulation in literature and film.

The foundational work of Maurice Halbwachs in The Collective Memory (1925) was instrumental in establishing memory as a socially mediated phenomenon. Halbwachs posits that memory is not merely the sum of individual recollections but a construct shaped by collective identities and group dynamics. His theory underscores how memory is embedded within social frameworks that influence what is remembered and how. While Halbwachs' insights laid essential groundwork, his framework offers limited engagement with the complexities and conflicts that arise in societies marked by colonial and post-conflict legacies.

Expanding on Halbwachs, Pierre Nora introduced the influential concept of lieux de mémoire in Between Memory and History (1989), referring to physical or symbolic sites—such as monuments, memorials, and museums—that serve as repositories of collective national identity. Nora's model emphasizes the importance of preserving memory in the face of what he sees as a decline in "real" memory in modern societies. However, his framework has been critiqued for privileging national memory over transnational or postcolonial experiences, thereby marginalizing the plural and often conflicting memories of colonized and diasporic communities.

A significant paradigm shift in memory studies came with Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (2009). Rothberg challenges the zero-sum, competitive model of memory and proposes instead that memories of traumatic events—such as the Holocaust and colonial violence—are not discrete or mutually exclusive. Rather, they intersect, overlap, and inform one another in complex ways. His concept of multidirectional memory posits that remembrance operates through a dialogic process, opening up spaces for solidarity and cross-cultural engagement. Rothberg's work has been foundational in rethinking memory beyond national or identity-bound frameworks, offering a more relational understanding of historical trauma.

Despite its influence, Rothberg's framework has drawn critical responses. Scholars such as Stef Craps, in Postcolonial Witnessing (2013), and Max Silverman, in Palimpsestic

Memory (2013), argue that Rothberg's model, while generative, risks underestimating the entrenched power asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. They contend that marginalized memories—particularly those rooted in colonial histories—are often subordinated, erased, or instrumentalized within dominant Eurocentric narratives. These critiques have foregrounded the concept of memory antagonism, wherein conflicting memories not only fail to coexist but actively contend with one another, reflecting deeper political and epistemic struggles over historical representation.

The notion of memory antagonism highlights the fractures and contestations within collective remembrance, especially in postcolonial and post-conflict societies. In such contexts, hegemonic discourses of reconciliation, nation-building, or transitional justice often suppress the memories of subaltern groups. Scholars like Elizabeth Jelin (State Repression and the Labors of Memory, 2003) and Veena Das (Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary, 2007) have examined how memory becomes a site of political struggle. Their work underscores how acts of remembering—particularly those related to state violence and systemic oppression—are frequently met with efforts to silence, appropriate, or delegitimize them in service of dominant political agendas.

Literature and film provide a vital and dynamic medium through which these tensions are explored and contested. Novels such as Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat (1967) reframe colonial history by foregrounding indigenous perspectives of resistance, loss, and resilience. More contemporary texts, including Aminatta Forna's The Memory of Love (2010) and Wole Soyinka's A Play of Giants (1984), engage memory as both a site of personal healing and political rupture, interrogating the ethical complexities of narrating trauma. In cinema, works like Rithy Panh's The Missing Picture (2013) and Ari Folman's Waltz with Bashir (2008) visually dramatize the collision of personal and collective memory, revealing how artistic forms can challenge dominant historical narratives and provide counter-memorial spaces for reflection, mourning, and resistance.

Taken together, these theoretical and cultural texts reveal memory not as a static archive of the past but as an active, contested, and often antagonistic process—one deeply implicated in questions of power, identity, and justice. In postcolonial and post-conflict settings, memory emerges as both a medium of historical reckoning and a terrain of struggle, where competing narratives vie to shape the future through the lens of the past.

In conclusion, memory in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts is deeply contested, shaped by power imbalances and the struggle for recognition. The interaction between multidirectional memory and memory antagonism highlights the complexities of collective remembrance, where historical traumas are negotiated, resisted, and transformed. Through the lens of literature and film, these tensions are vividly portrayed, offering a nuanced understanding of the emotional, ethical, and political dimensions of memory work. This body of scholarship underscores the need to expand memory studies beyond the boundaries of

traditional nation-building frameworks, embracing the fractured and often contradictory nature of remembering in a postcolonial, post-imperial world.

3. Research methodology

The study will take a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that integrates theoretical exposition with critical readings of literary and film texts. It will start with a careful review of current literature on memory studies, postcolonial theory, and trauma studies to lay out the conceptual framework for grasping multidirectional memory and memory antagonism. The study will draw on the theoretical work of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Michael Rothberg, and other thinkers to synthesize main theoretical insights into collective memory in light of their application to postcolonial and post-conflict environments. Close readings of chosen literary texts and films from post-colonial and post-conflict communities will be the main means of data collection. These works will be examined for their representation of memory as both healing process and conflict site, and how narratives of historical trauma are constructed, contested, and negotiated. Texts by writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, J.M.

Coetzee, and films like Waltz with Bashir and The Missing Picture will be the focal point of the analysis. Secondly, the study will make use of historical records, interviews, and individual narratives, where accessible, in order to better explore the practical consequences of memory dynamics within postcolonial and post-conflict societies.

The research will utilize comparative analysis to examine how various cultural contexts influence memory's interaction, specifically how colonial violence, civil wars, and other traumatic experiences affect the construction and resistance of collective memory. In addition, the research will incorporate discourse analysis to analyze the language of memory in official narratives and counter-narratives, specifically how power relations and marginalization are expressed within collective memory. Through the integration of these analytical methods, the study seeks to reveal the multifaceted and complex nature of memory in post-conflict and postcolonial societies, gaining a deeper insight into how memory, power, and justice are interwoven in negotiating historical trauma. Through this approach, the research will critically build on current paradigms of memory studies and provide new knowledge about the continued negotiation of historical responsibility and collective memory.

4. Analysis

Postcolonial literature frequently stages memory as a dialogic and multidirectional process, challenging the idea of historical trauma as bounded or exclusive to a singular cultural group. This is evident in Aminatta Forna's The Memory of Love (2010), which navigates the overlapping personal and political traumas of Sierra Leone's civil war through the perspectives of both local survivors and foreign observers. The protagonist, Adrian, a British psychologist, becomes increasingly entangled in the memories of his patients, particularly those of Elias Cole and Kai, whose recollections of loss, betrayal, and survival refuses linear coherence. Forna's narrative structure, shifting between timelines and perspectives, enacts Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory, wherein "memories of

the Holocaust and of colonialism emerge not as rivals but as dialogically entangled" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). The juxtaposition of Elias's sanitized recollections with Kai's visceral, repressed trauma highlights how memory functions not as a static archive, but as a site of negotiation, shaped by silence, power, and ethical ambiguity.

Literature here becomes a medium through which various memory cultures intersect, revealing affinities and tensions that challenge the singularity of national memory narratives. The novel's refusal to prioritize one memory over another aligns with Rothberg's argument that collective remembrance can foster solidarity rather than competition, especially when trauma is transnational in scope.

While The Memory of Love illustrates the productive intersections of multidirectional memory—where different histories resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries—such dialogic memory is not always possible. In many postcolonial contexts, the coexistence of conflicting memories becomes fraught, giving rise to antagonism rather than empathy. The failure of dominant narratives to accommodate plural histories often results in suppression, distortion, or outright erasure. This dynamic is sharply explored in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat, where memory becomes a contested terrain, shaped by political expediency and national mythmaking.

Though the multidirectional model identifies the dialogic potential of memory, numerous postcolonial fictions instead discover a much more hostile dynamic—one characterized by memory antagonism, in which rival accounts of the past deny or repress each other within dominant discourses. This antagonistic aspect is beautifully staged in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat (1967), wherein the collective and individual memories of the Mau Mau resistance against British imperialism are explored. In a fragmented and non-linear format, the novel exposes the way post-independence nationalist rhetoric tends to hijack anti-colonial memory at the expense of inconvenient histories, including betrayal, complicity, and violence among members of the same community. The figure of Mugo, who is falsely heroized by society, typifies this conflict: his personal shame at having betrayed a friend continues to stand in sharp juxtaposition to the mythologized perception of his actions within the community. Such a memory-split between individual memory and public narrative resonates Elizabeth Jelin's statement that "remembrance is a terrain of dispute. mobilized to support conflicting political positions" (Jelin, 2003, p. 15). Ngũgĩ condemns the postcolonial state's instrumentalization of memory, revealing how the whitewashing of history is used to reinforce hegemonising power relations and exclude subaltern voices. The novel highlights the profound ethical stakes involved in the creation of a unified, state-endorsed memory by sacrificing multiplicity, and hence laying bare the long-standing chasm between remembrance and effacement in the wake of colonial violence.

While Ngũgĩ's novel reveals the internal fissures of postcolonial collective memory, forged by betrayal and political revisionism, visual media like film provide different ways of engaging with and resisting historical effacement. In its formal experimentation and

aesthetics of absence, film can render memory in forms that bypass or subvert the limits of narrative linearity and state control. Rithy Panh's The Missing Picture (2013) is an example of this resistant potential, creating a film language that both protects and resists the erasure of traumatic histories.

Outside of literary accounts, film becomes a powerful tool for the articulation of memory in its most recalcitrant and disjunctive forms, especially where official histories represent erasure or silence. Rithy Panh's The Missing Picture (2013) is a prime example of this counter-mnemonic approach, employing clay figurines carefully crafted by hand in conjunction with archival images to represent the Cambodian genocide through the filmmaker's own early childhood trauma. Through abandoning traditional documentary realism, Panh upends hegemonic representational codes, demanding that the unrepresentability of trauma requires other forms of expression. Enacting Foucault's theory of "insubordinate remembrance," wherein memory resists institutional history and recovers repressed or invisible pasts, the symbolic aesthetics—figurines immobilized in arranged tableaux—represent the hardness of official memory as well as the stagnation of trauma. As consistent with Veena Das's suggestion that "violence is absorbed into the ordinary" (Das, 2007, p. 69), the film places memory away from monumental proclamations and into the intimate terrain of everyday life, silence, and loss. Through its fractured visual narrative, The Missing Picture puts the impossibility of totalizing trauma at the forefront and situates absence, distortion, and rupture instead as valid forms of remembrance. Similar to postcolonial fiction, Panh's film requires that voices erased by memory forgetfulness be kept alive, providing an act of political and aesthetic resistance to homogenizing collective memory Collectively, these works expose the complex and frequently contentious dynamics of memory in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts, walking a tightrope between the utopian potentialities of multidirectional, dialogic remembering and the profound breaks created by memory conflict. By a complex dialogue with literary and filmic modes, this analysis proves that memory is more than simple recollection—it is a contested and ethically charged territory where stories of the past are forever negotiated, contested, and reformed. In this process, memory becomes a crucial site for the struggle for historical justice, political acknowledgment, and the rearticulation of identities torn apart by violence and oppression.

5. Conclusion

In summation, this research sheds light on the complex and frequently explosive landscape of memory in postcolonial and post-conflict cultural productions, as it unravels how the acts of remembrance are inevitably entangled in identity, power, and historical justice. By situating the dialogic potential of multidirectional memory alongside the schisms created by antagonistic remembrance, the analysis places memory at the center, not as a fixed archive of the past but as a dynamic, contested, and ethically fraught site of mnemonic negotiation. By literary and cinematic representations, these fictions counter hegemonic historiographies aiming to impose unitary, sanitized histories to instead privilege plural, polyvocal, and at times cacophonous memories that deface themselves against erasure and elicit critical reflection on traumatic legacies.

This question also illustrates that memory's subversive power is its ambivalence—both its potential to create solidarities between culture and time and to reveal the fault lines and silences that haunt collective identity formation. Memory antagonist theorizations force us to encounter the long-lasting impacts of power imbalances that sideline subaltern voices, and the concept of multidirectionality provides a prospective but crucial model for ethical cross-cultural debate and mnemonic alliance. In the end, postcolonial film and literature become essential sites where memory's political and ethical horizons are performed in visceral terms, challenging ongoing reexamination of how histories are remembered, abandoned, and reconstructed.

Here, memory takes on its important role not simply as a channel for historic accountability but as a redemptive force capable of disturbing dominant hegemonies and raising a more reflexive, inclusive, and justice-minded encounter with the past. This research therefore adds to the progressive debate on memory studies in that it highlights the need for embracing memory's complexity—its contradictions, tensions, and potentialities—in the process of continually trying to make sense of the legacies of colonialism, violence, and displacement in a globalized and post-imperial world.

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