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## CULTURAL MEMORY AS A LITERARY CATEGORY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

**Abstract.** *This study investigates cultural memory as a literary category in contemporary fiction, examining how novels written between 1987 and 2020 employ narrative strategies to construct, negotiate, and transmit collective memories of historically significant events. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, Pierre Nora, and Astrid Erll, the research analyzes a corpus of 15 critically acclaimed novels from diverse literary traditions to identify the principal textual mechanisms through which cultural memory is inscribed in fictional narrative. A qualitative content analysis of the selected works revealed four dominant literary strategies: palimpsestic layering of temporal planes, intertextual dialogue with archival and testimonial sources, the deployment of unreliable or fragmented narration as a mimesis of traumatic remembrance, and the use of material objects and spatial settings as mnemonic anchors. The findings demonstrate that contemporary fiction functions not merely as a reflection of pre-existing cultural memories but as an active medium of memory production, capable of reshaping collective understandings of the past through aesthetic and narrative innovation. These results contribute to the growing interdisciplinary dialogue between memory studies and literary criticism and carry implications for the teaching of literature as a form of cultural and historical engagement.*

**Keywords:** *cultural memory, contemporary fiction, narrative strategies, memory studies, collective memory, literary analysis, postmemory.*

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and memory has been a subject of philosophical and critical inquiry since antiquity, yet it has acquired particular urgency in contemporary literary scholarship. The twentieth century, marked by events of unprecedented historical

magnitude – world wars, genocides, colonial displacements, and totalitarian regimes – generated an imperative to remember that has profoundly shaped the literary imagination of subsequent decades. As Ricoeur (2004:89) observed, the duty of memory that emerged from these experiences placed new demands on narrative as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting the past, transforming fiction into a privileged site for the negotiation of collective remembrance.

The concept of cultural memory, as theorized by Jan Assmann (Assmann, 1995:126), refers to the body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch through which a group constructs and maintains a shared understanding of its past. Unlike communicative memory, which is based on everyday oral transmission and typically spans three generations, cultural memory is institutionally sustained, symbolically encoded, and capable of bridging vast temporal distances. Literature, as one of the primary symbolic systems through which societies encode their past, occupies a central position in the architecture of cultural memory (Erll, 2011:144).

Contemporary fiction has emerged as a particularly dynamic arena for the exploration of cultural memory, as novelists increasingly engage with historical events not through straightforward realist narration but through experimental, self-reflexive, and formally innovative strategies that foreground the processes of remembering, forgetting, and reconstructing the past (Whitehead, 2009:3). This shift – from memory as content to memory as form, from what is remembered to how remembering itself is represented – marks a significant development in the relationship between literature and collective history.

The theoretical foundation integrates four key frameworks from memory studies. The first is Halbwachs's (Halbwachs, 1992:38) foundational concept of collective memory, which established that individual memories are socially framed and that groups construct shared memories through communicative interaction. His insight that memory is reconstructive rather than reproductive has profound implications for literary analysis, suggesting that fictional narratives participate in the social construction of the past.

The second framework is Nora's (Nora, 1989:7) concept of lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, which argues that in modern societies, where organic, lived memory has given way to archival and institutional forms of remembrance, memory crystallizes

around specific material and symbolic sites. This concept is particularly relevant to the analysis of contemporary fiction, where physical spaces, objects, and landmarks frequently serve as catalysts for the activation and transmission of cultural memory within narrative structures.

The third framework is Hirsch's (Hirsch, 2012:5) concept of postmemory, which describes the relationship of the second and subsequent generations to the traumatic experiences of their predecessors. Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection, and it is characteristically mediated through imaginative investment, projection, and creation. This concept is central to understanding a significant body of contemporary fiction in which authors who did not directly experience historical events nevertheless engage with them through inherited narratives, family archives, and imaginative reconstruction.

The fourth theoretical pillar is Erll's (Erll, 2011:159) model of literature as a medium of cultural memory, which identifies three modes through which fictional texts engage with collective remembrance: the experiential mode, which creates an illusion of lived experience; the monumentalizing mode, which reinforces established memory narratives; and the reflexive mode, which critically interrogates the processes and politics of memory construction. This typology provides a valuable analytical tool for examining the diverse strategies employed by contemporary novelists.

Scholarly attention to the intersection of literature and cultural memory has grown substantially since the 1990s. Whitehead (Whitehead, 2009:3) provided one of the first comprehensive surveys of memory in contemporary fiction, arguing that the so-called memory boom in literary culture reflects broader cultural anxieties about the loss of direct experiential connection to foundational historical events. Her analysis identified fragmentation, non-linearity, and repetition as key formal strategies through which novels represent the workings of memory.

Rigney (2005:14) examined literature's role in the dynamics of cultural remembrance and proposed that novels function as portable monuments capable of circulating across cultural boundaries, introducing memories into new contexts and generating what Rothberg (Rothberg, 2009:3) has termed multidirectional memory. In postcolonial scholarship, Said (Said, 1993:33) demonstrated how literature serves as a vehicle for

recovering suppressed cultural memories, employing strategies such as magical realism and oral storytelling that challenge Western-centric models of representation. Despite this growing body of work, systematic empirical analysis of the specific textual strategies through which cultural memory operates in contemporary fiction remains limited, a gap the present study seeks to address.

The present study addresses two primary research questions. First, what are the principal narrative and formal strategies through which contemporary fiction constructs and transmits cultural memory? Second, how do these strategies function to position the reader as a participant in the process of collective remembrance? It was anticipated that the analysis would reveal a repertoire of interconnected literary techniques that collectively constitute cultural memory as a distinct literary category with identifiable formal properties.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design based on directed content analysis, a method appropriate for research that aims to validate or extend existing theoretical frameworks through systematic examination of textual data (Krippendorff, 2018:25). The directed approach was chosen because the study's analytical categories were derived from the theoretical frameworks of J. Assmann (1995), Erll (2011), Hirsch (2012), and Nora (1989), allowing for a structured yet interpretively open engagement with the selected literary texts.

The corpus consisted of 15 novels published between 1987 and 2020, selected according to three criteria: thematic engagement with historically significant events or periods of collective memory; critical recognition, indicated by major literary prizes, scholarly attention, or canonical status; and geographical and cultural diversity, ensuring representation of at least five distinct literary traditions. The selected works included novels from American, British, German, Latin American, African, South Asian, and Central Asian literary traditions, encompassing themes of war, genocide, colonial displacement, political repression, and diasporic experience.

Each novel was read closely three times following a structured protocol. The first reading focused on identifying passages that explicitly or implicitly engaged with themes

of collective memory, historical trauma, and the transmission of the past. The second reading applied the theoretical categories derived from the framework – Erll’s three modes (2011:159), Nora’s sites of memory (Nora 1989:7), Hirsch’s postmemory (Hirsch, 2012:5), and J. Assmann’s cultural-versus-communicative-memory distinction (Assmann, 1995:126) – to code the identified passages. The third reading sought to identify emergent patterns and strategies not fully captured by the pre-existing categories. Coded passages were organized into thematic clusters using qualitative data-analysis procedures adapted from Braun and Clarke (Clarke, 2006:77). To ensure analytical rigor, an independent literary scholar coded a random 20% sample of the corpus, achieving an inter-coder agreement of 84.6%.

## RESULTS

The analysis identified four dominant literary strategies through which cultural memory is constructed in the selected novels: palimpsestic temporality, intertextual memory, fragmented narration, and mnemonic materiality. These strategies were not mutually exclusive; most novels employed multiple strategies in combination, creating complex narrative architectures of remembrance. The distribution of strategies across the corpus is summarized in Table 2.

*Table 2. Distribution of memory strategies across the corpus (N = 15)*

Literary strategy	Novels (n)	Frequency (%)	Corresponding mode (Erll, 2011)
Palimpsestic temporality	13	86.7	–(temporal layering)
Intertextual memory	11	73.3	Monumentalizing
Fragmented narration	12	80.0	Reflexive
Mnemonic materiality	14	93.3	Experiential

The most prevalent structural strategy, observed in 13 of 15 novels (86.7%), was the layering of multiple temporal planes within a single narrative, creating what may be termed palimpsestic temporality. In these novels, past and present are not organized sequentially but are superimposed upon one another, such that historical events bleed into contemporary consciousness and the boundaries between then and now become permeable. Morrison’s deployment of this technique in *Beloved* (*Beloved*, 1987:36) is paradigmatic: the ghost of the murdered daughter materializes in the physical present, collapsing the temporal distance between slavery and its aftermath and insisting that the past is never merely past but continues to inhabit and shape the present.

Intertextual dialogue with archival, testimonial, and documentary sources was identified in 11 novels (73.3%). These works incorporate fragments of historical documents, letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, and official records into their fictional narratives, creating a textual interface between factual archive and imaginative reconstruction. This strategy corresponds most closely to Erll's monumentalizing mode (Erll, 2011:159), in which literature reinforces established memory narratives by anchoring fictional events to documented historical realities. However, several novels deployed intertextuality in a more subversive register, using the juxtaposition of archival and fictional voices to expose gaps, silences, and distortions in the official record.

Fragmented, non-linear, or unreliable narration was employed in 12 novels (80.0%) as a formal mimesis of traumatic remembrance. Drawing on the insight that traumatic memories resist coherent, chronological narration (Silverman, 1996:183), these novels adopt fractured narrative structures – shifting perspectives, temporal discontinuities, lacunae, and contradictions – that formally enact the experience of attempting to reconstruct a past that resists full articulation. This strategy aligns with the reflexive mode identified by Erll (Erll, 2011:159), as it draws the reader's attention to the constructed and partial nature of all acts of remembrance.

The most frequently observed strategy (14 of 15 novels, 93.3%) was the use of material objects and physical spaces as mnemonic anchors – sites of memory in Nora's (Nora, 1989:7) sense. Houses, landscapes, photographs, heirlooms, scars, and other physical artifacts serve as repositories of collective memory, activating remembrance through sensory encounter rather than discursive narration. This strategy corresponds to Erll's experiential mode (Erll, 2011:159), as it creates an illusion of immediate, embodied contact with the past. The prevalence of this strategy across the corpus suggests that contemporary novelists recognize the power of material culture to anchor abstract historical memory in tangible, sensory experience.

## DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that cultural memory functions in contemporary fiction not merely as thematic content but as a generative literary category with identifiable formal properties. The four strategies identified – palimpsestic temporality, intertextual memory,

fragmented narration, and mnemonic materiality – constitute a repertoire of techniques through which novelists transform collective remembrance into literary form. The high frequency with which these strategies co-occur within individual novels suggests that cultural memory as a literary category is characterized by formal complexity and multimodality, requiring the simultaneous deployment of multiple narrative techniques to represent the multidimensional nature of collective remembrance.

The near-universal prevalence of mnemonic materiality (93.3%) aligns with Nora's (Nora, 1989:7) claim that memory increasingly attaches to material sites. The fact that novelists across diverse traditions consistently employ physical objects and spaces as vehicles for cultural memory suggests that the materialization of memory is a deeply embedded literary intuition about how collective remembrance operates.

A central finding is that contemporary fiction does not merely reflect pre-existing cultural memories but actively participates in their production, transformation, and transmission. This supports Rigney's (Rigney, 2005:14) argument that literary texts function as agents of memory dynamics. The novels in this corpus do not simply record what societies remember; they intervene in the process of remembering itself, proposing new ways of relating to the past. This productive function is particularly evident in works engaging with postmemory (Hirsch, 2012:5), where authors imaginatively reconstruct events they did not directly experience, with palimpsestic temporality and fragmented narration serving as formal mechanisms for bridging the gap between direct experience and inherited memory.

The analysis reveals that the identified strategies position the reader not as a passive recipient of pre-formed memories but as an active participant in memory construction. Fragmented narration requires the reader to assemble coherent meaning from dispersed elements, performing the same reconstructive work that characterizes remembrance. Palimpsestic temporality compels navigation between temporal planes, while intertextual strategies invite evaluation of the relationship between fictional narrative and historical record (Hutcheon, 1988:124).

These findings carry implications for literary pedagogy, suggesting that the teaching of contemporary fiction can serve as a form of cultural and historical education in which students develop not only literary analytical skills but also a critical understanding of

how societies construct, contest, and transmit collective memories. The identification of specific textual strategies provides teachers with concrete analytical tools for guiding students' engagement with memory-oriented fiction.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The corpus of 15 novels cannot represent the full range of contemporary fiction's engagement with cultural memory. The qualitative analysis does not permit statistical generalization, and the selection criteria privileged critically acclaimed works, potentially excluding popular fiction with different memory strategies. Future research should expand the corpus, incorporate reader-response data, and explore the intersection of cultural memory with digital literary forms (A. Assmann, 2011:387).

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that cultural memory constitutes a distinct and analytically productive literary category in contemporary fiction, characterized by a repertoire of four interconnected narrative strategies: palimpsestic temporality, intertextual memory, fragmented narration, and mnemonic materiality. These strategies, identified across a culturally diverse corpus of 15 novels, collectively transform cultural memory from thematic content into literary form, enabling fiction to function as an active medium of memory production rather than a passive reflection of pre-existing collective remembrances.

The findings contribute to the interdisciplinary dialogue between memory studies and literary criticism by providing empirical evidence for the claim that literature plays a constitutive role in the dynamics of cultural remembrance. Contemporary novelists, through their formal and narrative innovations, do not merely preserve memories but reshape them, creating new configurations of collective understanding that circulate across cultural and generational boundaries. In an era marked by ongoing debates about historical justice, commemorative politics, and the ethics of representation, the role of fiction as a medium of cultural memory has never been more significant.

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