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Contemporary Arabic Novel and Collective Memory: Transformations of Identity, Language and Narrative between Globalization and Digitality

الرواية العربية المعاصرة وحقل الذاكرة الجماعية: تحولات الهوية واللغة والسرد بين
العولمة والرقمنة

Dr.Tamen Kaoutar

Lecturer, Larbi Ben M'hidi University- Oum Elbouaghi, Faculty of Letters and Languages,
Department of Arabic language and Literature

kaoutar.tamen@univ-oeb.dz

د. كوثر تامن

أستاذة محاضرة "ب"، جامعة العربي بن مهيدي – أم البواقي، كلية الآداب واللغات، مخبر الدراسات الاستشرافية

الحماية اللغوية والاجتماعية

kaoutar.tamen@univ-oeb.dz

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص تمثيلات الذاكرة الجماعية في الرواية العربية المعاصرة، وتحليل صلتها بتحويلات الهوية واللغة في سياق العولمة والرقمنة، وقد اعتمد البحث تصميمًا نوعيًا قائمًا على التحليل النصي والثقافي لعينة من ثلاث روايات: "ذاكرة الجسد" لأحلام مستغانمي، و"دروز بلغراد" لربيع جابر، و"بنات الرياض" لرجاء الصانع، وقد وظفت الدراسة مفاهيم الذاكرة الجماعية، والذاكرة الثقافية، والتهجين، والوسيط الرقمي. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن الرواية العربية المعاصرة تؤدي وظيفة أرشيفية مضادة، لا تحفظ الماضي فحسب، بل تعيد تأويله عبر الجسد والمنفى والرقمنة، كما كشفت النتائج أن اللغة العربية، في صيغها الفصيحة والهجينة والرقمية، أصبحت وسيطًا لإعادة تشكيل الهوية، وأن الذاكرة الروائية لم تعد وطنية كبرى فقط، بل غدت ذاكرات متجاوزة: جندرية، عائلية، طائفية، ومنفية ورقمية. الكلمات المفتاحية: الرواية العربية؛ الذاكرة الجماعية؛ الهوية؛ العولمة؛ الرقمنة.

Abstract:

This study examines representations of collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction and their relation to transformations of identity and language under globalization and digitality. It adopts a qualitative design based on textual and cultural analysis of three purposively selected novels: *Memory in the Flesh* by Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *The Druze of Belgrade* by Rabee Jaber, and *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea. Drawing on theories of collective memory, cultural memory, hybridity and digital mediation, the study argues that the contemporary Arabic novel functions as a counter-archive. It not only preserves the past but also reinterprets it through the body, exile and networked narration. The findings show that Arabic, in its classical, hybrid and digital forms, becomes a medium for reconfiguring identity, while narrative memory shifts from a single national frame to plural memories: gendered, familial, sectarian, exilic and digital.

Keywords:

collective memory; identity; globalization; digitality; narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Arabic novel can no longer be read merely as a literary genre that narrates individual events or isolated social experiences. It has become a cultural and epistemological space in which the relationship between the individual and the community, the present and the past, language and identity, is constantly reconstructed. Since the final decades of the twentieth century, Arabic fiction has entered a phase marked by formal experimentation and by the expansion of themes such as exile, war, the body, gender, censorship, urban

transformation, and new media. Roger Allen's historical study of the Arabic novel shows that the genre moved from its early formation into a mature literary form capable of addressing nationalism, identity, exile, gender, and experimentation.¹

This transformation is not only the result of internal developments within the Arabic literary field. It is also connected to wider global changes: cultural globalization, the expansion of translation, the rise of literary prizes, the transnational circulation of books, and the emergence of digital platforms as new spaces of reading, writing, and

reception. Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi's work on the postcolonial Arabic novel confirms that modern Arabic fiction participates in debates about identity formation, nationalism, the modern state, gender, class, and cultural ambivalence.²

Within this context, collective memory has become a central concept for reading contemporary Arabic fiction. The novel does not simply retrieve the past; it reconstructs it through narrative selection, silence, repetition, perspective, and symbolic displacement. The past represented in fiction is therefore not a stable historical object. It is a contested field shaped by the narrator, language, place, the body, and the conditions of reception. Maurice Halbwachs laid the sociological foundation of collective memory by arguing that remembrance takes place within social frameworks that give the past its meaning.³ Jan Assmann later developed this perspective by distinguishing between communicative memory, linked to living generations, and cultural memory, which is preserved through texts, rituals, symbols, and institutions.⁴

This study also draws on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity. For Bhabha, identity is not produced in cultural purity but in a negotiated "third space" where languages, histories, and powers encounter one another.⁵ This idea is particularly useful for reading contemporary Arabic novels that move between homeland and exile, Arabic and foreign languages, print and screen, private memory and public circulation. Translation is also central to this discussion. Lawrence Venuti reminds us that translation is never a transparent transfer of meaning; it is a cultural act that may reshape the text according to the expectations of the receiving culture.⁶

The central question of this article is: How does the contemporary Arabic novel reshape collective memory under the pressures of globalization and digitality? This question leads to a set of subsidiary questions: How do revolution, exile, sectarian violence, gendered silence, and digital communication become narrative memories? How does

language participate in the construction of memory? How does the Arabic novel become a counter-archive that contests official history? And how do translation, global circulation, and digital mediation affect the reception of Arabic memory?

The originality of this study lies in comparing three modes of collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction: bodily-national memory in *Memory in the Flesh*, exilic-sectarian memory in *The Druze of Belgrade*, and digital-gendered memory in *Girls of Riyadh*. Rather than treating memory as a single theme, the article reads it as a narrative mechanism that organizes time, voice, place, identity, and language. The study argues that the contemporary Arabic novel does not merely preserve memory; it redistributes the right to remember and to speak.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative textual-cultural approach. The novels were chosen purposively because each represents a different configuration of memory: the wounded revolutionary body in the Algerian postcolonial context; forced exile and sectarian misidentification in the Lebanese-Ottoman historical context; and digital confession and gendered urban memory in the Saudi context. The analysis focuses on six units: narrative time, narrator, place, body, language, and medium. This approach allows the study to move beyond thematic description toward an examination of how memory is formally and culturally produced inside the literary text.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The study of memory in fiction requires a distinction between memory as an individual psychological act and memory as a social construction. Halbwachs argues that individuals remember within groups, and that family, religion, class, language, and place provide the frameworks through which the past is interpreted.⁷ The past, therefore, is not simply recovered; it is reconstructed from the standpoint of the present. This insight is essential for literary analysis because the novel does not reproduce history as it

happened. It reshapes it through narration, selection, imagination, and forgetting. Assmann's concept of cultural memory extends this perspective by focusing on the ways in which societies preserve memory beyond direct personal experience. Cultural memory is stored in texts, symbols, monuments, rituals, and institutions.⁸ The novel, from this point of view, becomes one of the cultural forms through which societies preserve and reinterpret the past. Yet the novel differs from the official archive. Whereas the archive often seeks order, classification, and documentary stability, the novel exposes ambiguity, contradiction, silence, and the plurality of possible versions of the past.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* is also relevant because it shows how places, objects, and symbols become sites where memory condenses and is contested.⁹ In the novels studied here, Constantine, Beirut, Belgrade, and Riyadh are not neutral settings. They are symbolic spaces where memory is stored, fractured, or publicly negotiated. Paul Ricœur's work on memory, history, and forgetting further clarifies that memory is never separable from interpretation and that forgetting is not merely absence but an active component of historical and narrative construction.¹⁰

In Arabic literary criticism, the rise of the novel has often been linked to the genre's capacity to represent social complexity. Jaber Asfour argues that the modern age is, in many respects, the age of the novel because this genre can absorb plurality, contradiction, and the changing relation between individual and society.¹¹ Said Yaktine's work on narrative discourse is important here because his concepts of time, narration, and focalization help us understand how memory is technically organized within fiction.¹² Memory in the novel is not only a theme; it is also a structure produced through flashback, delay, repetition, and shifting perspective. Identity is inseparable from memory. Individuals and communities define themselves through what they remember, what they forget, and what they choose to

narrate. In postcolonial contexts, identity is often shaped by linguistic conflict, displacement, colonial legacies, and hybrid cultural positions. Bhabha's theory of hybridity allows us to understand identity as a process of negotiation rather than a fixed essence.¹³ This is especially relevant to Arabic fiction, where the subject is frequently suspended between Arabic and foreign languages, homeland and exile, inherited memory and global circulation.

The methodology of this study is therefore qualitative and interpretive. It does not aim to offer a statistical survey of contemporary Arabic fiction. Instead, it examines how memory operates within three representative texts. The selected novels are analyzed according to six levels: first, narrative time; second, the position of the narrator; third, place as a memory container; fourth, the body as a historical trace; fifth, language as a site of identity; and sixth, the narrative medium, especially in relation to digital communication. The study's limitation is that its sample is restricted to three novels. However, this limitation is methodologically justified because the aim is not comprehensive coverage, but comparative depth.

3. The Contemporary Arabic Novel between Globalization and Digitality

The contemporary Arabic novel developed out of the historical contexts of the Nahda, colonialism, national liberation, and the formation of the modern Arab state. However, since the second half of the twentieth century, it has increasingly become a space for representing fractured identities, political violence, exile, urban transformation, and silenced memories. Arabic narratology, especially in the works of Said Yaktine and Abdullah Ibrahim, shifted critical attention from story as content to discourse as structure.¹⁴ This shift is crucial for memory studies because memory is produced not only by what is narrated, but also by how time, voice, and perspective are arranged.

Jaber Asfour's discussion of the novel as the genre of modern complexity helps explain

why the Arabic novel became a privileged space for representing collective memory.¹⁵ The novel can bring together official history and private experience, documentary traces and imagination, public events and intimate wounds. Mohammed Berrada also emphasizes that renewal in the Arabic novel concerns not only formal experimentation but also the opening of narrative discourse to marginalized themes and voices.¹⁶ In this sense, contemporary Arabic fiction has expanded the field of the sayable: women's memory, the memory of defeat, the memory of prison, the memory of exile, and the memory of minority communities.

Globalization has changed the conditions under which Arabic novels are produced, translated, and received. Arabic fiction now circulates through literary prizes, international publishing networks, book fairs, translation programs, university syllabi, and online platforms. This circulation gives Arabic memory a wider audience, but it also exposes it to simplification. A novel may be read by local readers as an aesthetic reconstruction of a complex historical experience, while global readers may receive it as a cultural document about "Arab society." This tension is central to the contemporary Arabic novel's position between local specificity and global readability.

Digitality adds another layer to this transformation. Digital memory is not stable in the traditional archival sense. It is circulated, copied, commented upon, modified, and sometimes deleted. Laila Shereen Sakr argues that digital humanities in the Arab world require new conceptual and methodological tools because digital culture challenges the boundaries between archive, technology, and cultural production.¹⁷ Reham Hosny's study of Arabic electronic literature also shows that Arabic digital writing has been underrepresented in global electronic literature discussions, despite the existence of significant Arabic digital practices.¹⁸

The contemporary Arabic novel is therefore situated between two forms of circulation: the

global circulation of print through translation and prizes, and the digital circulation of texts through screens, networks, and online communities. The novels studied in this article show different degrees of engagement with these transformations. *Memory in the Flesh* represents the postcolonial struggle over language and national memory; *The Druze of Belgrade* returns to the historical archive in order to humanize forgotten exile; *Girls of Riyadh* incorporates digital mediation into its very narrative structure. Together, they show how the Arabic novel moves from body to exile to network.

4. Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*

Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* is one of the most influential contemporary Arabic novels to make memory both its theme and its narrative structure. The novel does not simply narrate a love story between Khaled Ben Tobal and Hayat. It rewrites Algerian postcolonial memory through the wounded body, the lost revolutionary dream, painting, and the symbolic recovery of language. The paratext of the English edition frames the novel as a narrative spanning more than four decades of Algerian history, from the 1940s to the 1980s. It centers on Khaled, a former militant who turns to painting after losing his left arm in the liberation struggle, and on Hayat, the young fiction writer and daughter of Si Taher, Khaled's friend and freedom fighter. This framing is crucial because it connects national history, bodily loss, artistic practice, and intergenerational memory from the outset.¹⁹

In Mosteghanemi's novel, memory is not presented as a purely mental or abstract process. Khaled addresses a past that he has never truly left, describing memory as something he lives in because it has become his body.²⁰ The novel's title is therefore not metaphorical in a superficial sense. It announces a deeper narrative logic: the body does not simply remember history; it becomes the material place where history persists.

Khaled's amputated arm is the central sign through which the novel transforms national

history into bodily memory. The amputation is first narrated as a direct consequence of revolutionary violence. Khaled recalls that six mujahideen were lost in battle and that he was among the wounded after two bullets penetrated his left arm. The only possible treatment was amputation, since the bullets could not be extracted.²¹ The wound is therefore not initially symbolic; it is a concrete trace of the liberation war. Yet the narration quickly transforms this physical injury into an existential rupture: the pain moves from the arm to the whole body and becomes associated with deception, fear, and the unknown.²² Through this movement from the injured limb to the entire body, the novel turns the revolutionary wound into the first archive of postcolonial memory.

The importance of the body lies in its double function. On the one hand, it confirms Khaled's participation in the collective struggle. On the other hand, it isolates him from the political order that emerged after independence. The missing arm is not a decorative biographical detail; it is the visible remainder of a revolution whose promises remain incomplete. During the liberation struggle, the body appears as a site of sacrifice and collective belonging. After independence, however, the same body becomes evidence of betrayal, disappointment, and the gap between revolutionary ideals and postcolonial reality. This wounded body functions as a counter-archive. Khaled explicitly refuses to separate the man from his wounds. He describes himself as "the broken memory" and his body as its external display.²³ This formulation is central because it turns the body into a readable surface of historical fracture. What official discourse may reduce to heroic sacrifice appears in the novel as a living, broken, and unresolved memory. The revolution is not rejected, but it is stripped of mythic closure. Memory becomes a field of ethical interrogation.

Painting enters the novel as a response to bodily loss. Khaled explains that his first painting after the amputation was made only a month after the operation. It was not an

attempt at creativity or fame, nor an attempt to enter history, but an attempt to continue living.²⁴ The Yugoslavian doctor's advice is decisive: Khaled must build a new bridge with the world through writing or painting, since these practices may function as tools of inner restoration.²⁵ Art, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic activity in the novel. It becomes a secondary archive through which the wounded subject reorganizes trauma and re-enters the world after revolutionary violence.

The novel also associates writing with truth and wounded memory. Early in the text, the pen is described as an instrument that does not know how to lie or conceal a gaping wound.²⁶ This image places writing against concealment. The act of writing becomes a way of exposing rather than masking the wound. In this sense, the novel's narrative voice does not simply confess private pain; it transforms the wound into a readable form of historical testimony.

Place also plays a decisive role in the novel. Constantine, or Casantina, is not merely a geographical setting; it is a symbolic structure of memory. Its bridges, heights, and fractures mirror Khaled's divided consciousness. The bridge connects, but it also reveals distance. It links past and present, revolution and disappointment, love and loss. Khaled recalls that the first thing he painted after losing his arm was a bridge, and later another character asks why he surrounds himself with bridges.²⁷ The bridge thus becomes more than an architectural feature of Constantine; it becomes the symbolic structure of Khaled's suspended existence between Algeria and exile, wound and art, memory and survival.

Language is another decisive dimension. In the Algerian postcolonial context, writing in Arabic has a symbolic and political charge. Mosteghanemi's Arabic does not function only as a medium of narration; it becomes an act of cultural recovery after colonial linguistic domination. The translator's note to the English edition is significant here because it acknowledges the difficulty of rendering the contrast between classical

Arabic and Algerian Arabic, as well as the cultural tension between France and Algeria.²⁸ This confirms that the novel's memory is not only thematic but also linguistic. The poetic density of the prose insists that Arabic can carry love, history, trauma, and philosophical reflection at once. The novel therefore transforms language into a site where the postcolonial subject attempts to heal the fracture between body, nation, and memory.

The relationship between Khaled and Hayat intensifies this conflict. Hayat, the daughter of a martyr, belongs to a generation that inherits the revolution without having lived it directly. She is both an object of Khaled's desire and a symbolic figure of inherited memory. Their relationship is therefore not simply romantic; it is a struggle over who has the right to speak for the past. Khaled remembers as a wounded participant, while Hayat rewrites memory from the position of inheritance and authorship.

The first encounters between Khaled and Hayat are mediated by bodily and material signs. Hayat's gaze moves toward the empty sleeve of Khaled's jacket, while Khaled observes the bracelet on her hand. The narrator remarks that each of them carries a memory.²⁹ This moment condenses the novel's logic: memory is not hidden inside consciousness alone; it is displayed on bodies, gestures, objects, and inherited signs. Khaled's missing arm and Hayat's symbolic inheritance make both characters readable as carriers of different memories of the same national past.

Hayat's name itself also becomes a site of memory. Khaled recalls the story of her naming and treats "Hayat," meaning life, as a secret bond linking her to her parents, to Si Taher, and to the revolutionary past.³⁰ The name is therefore not merely personal; it functions as a symbolic inheritance through which the absent father and the unfinished memory of the revolution continue to survive in the next generation.

The shared wound between Khaled and Hayat becomes explicit when he distinguishes between his visible wound and

her hidden one. His arm was amputated, while her childhood was amputated by the loss of her father. He concludes that both of them are the remains of war.³¹ This passage is fundamental for understanding intergenerational memory in the novel. War does not end with the battlefield; it continues in amputated bodies, orphaned childhoods, inherited silences, and the emotional lives of those who did not directly choose the historical event but are forced to inherit it.

The originality of *Memory in the Flesh* lies in the way it refuses to separate personal loss from national disappointment. Khaled's love, his missing arm, his paintings, and his memories of Constantine are all connected to the unresolved meaning of Algeria after independence. The novel shows that collective memory is not owned by the generation that produced the historical event. It is continuously rewritten by later generations, by women writers, by wounded subjects, and by those who challenge official narratives.

Finally, the novel's critique of national memory culminates in the idea that Khaled's body is both visible and unread. When another character tells him that he carries his certificate in his flesh, the body replaces the bureaucratic document and becomes more truthful than institutional recognition.³² Yet the novel also suggests that the nation may fail to read the very bodies that made its independence possible. Khaled's bitter observation that his body was present but unread, and that nations can become illiterate, transforms bodily memory into a political accusation.³³ The problem is not that the wounded body lacks memory; the problem is that the nation has lost the ability, or the will, to interpret the traces written on it.

5. *The Druze of Belgrade: Memory, Borders and Forced Exile*

Rabee Jaber's "*The Druze of Belgrade*" presents a different configuration of memory. Whereas *Memory in the Flesh* is organized around revolutionary memory and the wounded body, Jaber's novel is structured around exile, borders, sectarian classification, and historical

misidentification. The novel begins after the 1860 conflict in Mount Lebanon, when a group of Druze is exiled to Belgrade as part of an Ottoman punitive measure. Hanna Yaacoub, a Christian egg seller, is mistakenly taken with them. The novel presents Hanna Yaacoub's tragedy as the result of a fatal historical accident. The narrator describes him as an ordinary egg seller who happens to be "in the wrong place at the wrong time." This formulation is crucial because it shifts the focus from heroic historical actors to an ordinary man caught in the machinery of political punishment. Hanna is not punished for an action he has committed; he is absorbed into a collective category produced by war, sectarian violence, and imperial administration.³⁴

The power of the novel lies in this mistake. Hanna does not belong to the punished group, yet he is forced to carry its punishment. His fate exposes the violence of classification. Political authority does not see him as an individual; it inserts him into a collective category. Identity here is not chosen, remembered, or inherited freely. It is imposed by the state, by the archive, and by the administrative logic of punishment.³⁵ The violence of misidentification becomes explicit when the officer instructs Hanna to memorize another name: "Sulayman Ghaffar Izz al-Din." Hanna is ordered to behave as if the Druze prisoners were his brothers and to answer only if the consul asks for his name. The imposed name is not a minor disguise; it is an administrative replacement of identity. In this moment, the archive does not merely record reality; it manufactures a false one and forces the body to inhabit it.³⁶

The novel transforms exile into a test of identity. The scene at the Beirut port makes exile visible before it becomes narrative memory. Hanna sees the Druze prisoners kneeling in a long line, their hands tied behind their backs, bound to one another like animals. The image transforms sectarian punishment into a bodily spectacle. Hanna's body immediately registers the violence of this imposed identity. He is tied so tightly that blood comes out of his wrists; fear paralyzes

him, and humiliation overwhelms him before the journey even begins. The body thus becomes the first site where forced exile is inscribed. Unlike Khaled's amputated arm in *Memory in the Flesh*, Hanna's body does not carry the sign of heroic sacrifice; it carries the marks of administrative violence and accidental punishment.³⁷ Exile begins not with movement, but with immobilization: tied hands, kneeling bodies, fear, and the sea as the threshold of forced departure.³⁸ Hanna's movement from Beirut to Belgrade is not a journey of discovery; it is an uprooting. Each new space marks a further distance from his former life. Roads, prisons, ships, foreign languages, hunger, cold, and waiting become elements of a memory produced by coercion.³⁹ The geography of the novel is therefore a geography of pain. Borders do not merely separate territories; they produce historical wounds.

Unlike Mosteghanemi's lyrical confession, Jaber's narration is restrained and detailed. This restraint gives the novel its archival force. The narrative accumulates small details: names, gestures, food, illness, exhaustion, orders, weather, and distances. These details do not turn the novel into a historical document, but they allow fiction to perform an archival function. Abdullah Ibrahim's concept of historical imagination is useful here: the past is not reproduced as a fixed record; it is imaginatively reconstructed in order to reveal what official history overlooks.⁴⁰

The novel also complicates sectarian memory. Hanna the Christian lives the destiny assigned to the Druze; the Druze themselves become subjects of collective punishment; and Ottoman authority transforms human beings into entries in an imperial logic of discipline.⁴¹ The novel does not deny sectarian difference, but it refuses to treat it as an essence. Instead, sectarian identity appears as a political and historical construction whose consequences are borne by vulnerable bodies.

Hanna's tragedy is therefore not only that he is exiled, but that he is misnamed. The most violent form of erasure occurs when Hanna

tries to recover his name. He cries out that he is Hanna Yaacoub, a Christian from Beirut, but the translator deliberately distorts his words and tells the French consul that the prisoner has confessed to killing Hanna Yaacoub. This scene is central to the novel's critique of mediation: language, translation, and testimony do not guarantee truth. They may become instruments through which identity is falsified and memory is violently redirected.⁴² He becomes the victim of a false identity that the archive treats as true. This gives the novel its critical force. It shows that official memory may be violent not only because it forgets, but also because it records wrongly. The counter-archival function of the novel lies in restoring the human face behind the category. Hanna is not a symbol of sectarian history alone; he is the ordinary person crushed by the machinery of historical classification.

6. *Girls of Riyadh*: Digital Memory and Gendered Confession

Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* introduces a third form of memory: digital and gendered memory. Unlike *Memory in the Flesh*, which returns to revolution, or *The Druze of Belgrade*, which reconstructs historical exile, *Girls of Riyadh* captures the emotional and social lives of young women in contemporary Riyadh through the form of e-mail. Published in Arabic in 2005 and later translated into English, the novel became controversial because of both its subject matter and its narrative form.⁴³

The e-mail structure is not a superficial technique. It determines how memory is produced. The narrator sends weekly messages to an imagined public, turning private stories into serial digital narration.⁴⁴ Memory here is not a retrospective return to a distant past. It is produced almost in real time through circulation, reception, and anticipated commentary. The intimate becomes public, and the private becomes part of a networked social memory.

The novel constructs a feminine memory of Riyadh. The city appears not through official institutions or public monuments, but through phone calls, weddings, restrictions,

friendships, emotional disappointments, travel, family expectations, and the politics of reputation.⁴⁵ These details form an alternative archive of urban female experience. They are minor from the standpoint of official history, but central to the lived memory of gendered subjects.

Globalization appears through the characters' movements between Riyadh, Dubai, London, and the United States, and through their exposure to global popular culture. Yet globalization does not dissolve local identity. It intensifies its contradictions. The young women negotiate between romantic desire and family reputation, education and social restriction, Arabic and English influences, local norms and global aspirations. Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps explain this condition: identity is produced in negotiation rather than in purity.⁴⁶

Language in *Girls of Riyadh* reflects this hybridity. The novel mixes standard Arabic with colloquial expressions, digital forms, and references to global culture.⁴⁷ This linguistic mixture should not be reduced to stylistic looseness. It corresponds to the social and technological world the novel represents. Memory in this text does not require the solemnity of the classical archive; it takes shape through messages, fragments, jokes, confessions, and circulation.

However, digital memory is ambivalent. It gives voice to experiences that may otherwise remain hidden, but it also exposes them to judgment, scandal, and consumption. The anonymous narrator gains power through concealment, yet she also turns the lives of her friends into material for public reading.⁴⁸ The novel therefore raises an ethical question: does digital narration liberate memory, or does it convert intimacy into spectacle? Its importance lies in refusing a simple answer. It shows that digital mediation does not merely transmit memory; it changes the conditions under which memory appears.

7. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the three novels confirms that collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction is not unified, stable, or exclusively

national. It appears instead as a plural field shaped by body, exile, gender, language, and medium. *Memory in the Flesh* produces a bodily-national memory; *The Druze of Belgrade* produces an exilic-sectarian memory; and *Girls of Riyadh* produces a digital-gendered memory. The comparison shows that memory in the contemporary Arabic novel is not merely represented; it is narratively manufactured.

➤The first result is that the contemporary Arabic novel functions as a counter-archive. In *Memory in the Flesh*, this counter-archival function is most clearly embodied in Khaled's wounded body. The novel repeatedly opposes official recognition to embodied evidence. When Khaled is told that he carries his certificate in his flesh, the body replaces the bureaucratic document and becomes a more authentic archive than institutional memory.⁴⁹ This result is crucial because it shows that the novel does not merely narrate revolutionary history; it questions who has the authority to recognize sacrifice, who owns the memory of the revolution, and what happens when the nation fails to read the wounds of its own subjects.

In the three novels, fiction gives narrative presence to experiences that official history may simplify, marginalize, or erase. Khaled's wounded body questions the heroic closure of revolutionary memory. Hanna Yaacoub's forced replacement by the name "Sulayman Ghaffar Izz al-Din" exposes the violence of historical classification. His attempt to recover his real name is immediately distorted by the translator, who turns his testimony into a false confession. In this way, *The Druze of Belgrade* shows that archives and mediating languages may not only preserve memory; they may also falsify it.⁵⁰ The e-mails in *Girls of Riyadh* transform private female experience into public narrative memory. This confirms Halbwachs's idea that memory is socially framed, while also showing that literature can contest the dominant frames through which society remembers.⁵¹

➤The second result concerns the movement from national memory to plural memories. *Memory in the Flesh* begins from the national frame of the Algerian revolution, but it does not remain within patriotic celebration. It reveals disappointment, loss, and symbolic amputation. *The Druze of Belgrade* begins from a historical-sectarian episode, but it displaces attention from collective categories to the suffering of an ordinary individual. *Girls of Riyadh* begins from intimate stories of young women, but it turns them into a broader commentary on gender, class, urban modernity, and digital circulation. Memory thus becomes multiple: national, bodily, sectarian, familial, gendered, exilic, and digital.

➤The third result concerns the role of the body. In the three novels, the body is not passive. It is a surface on which history writes itself. Khaled's amputated arm materializes national sacrifice and postcolonial disillusionment. Hanna's exhausted body registers forced movement, hunger, and punishment. The female bodies in *Girls of Riyadh* are regulated by family, marriage, reputation, and public visibility. The body therefore becomes a memory medium, not merely an object of description.

The symbolic function of bridges further clarifies the relation between memory and form. Khaled's repeated return to bridges in his paintings shows that the bridge is not simply an image of Constantine. It is the structural figure of his memory: a passage between Algeria and exile, body and art, past and present.³⁸ Through this image, the novel gives visual form to the fractured temporality of postcolonial memory.

➤The fourth result concerns language. Arabic appears in the three novels as a field of identity struggle. In Mosteghanemi's novel, Arabic is a postcolonial recovery of national and personal memory. In Jaber's novel, Arabic becomes a calm narrative instrument for reconstructing a forgotten history. In Alsanea's novel, Arabic is hybridized through digital communication and global cultural references. Language is therefore not only a vehicle of memory; it

shapes the form, legitimacy, and audience of memory.

➤The fifth result concerns narrative form. Each novel produces memory through a different formal strategy. *Memory in the Flesh* relies on lyrical monologue and wounded confession. *The Druze of Belgrade* relies on historical reconstruction and documentary detail. *Girls of Riyadh* relies on serial e-mail narration. These forms are not neutral containers. They determine how memory is organized, how readers receive it, and how the past becomes meaningful. This supports Sabry Hafez's argument that transformations in Arabic narrative form are connected to transformations in social and political reality.⁵²

➤The sixth result concerns globalization and digitality. Globalization expands the circulation of Arabic fiction through translation, literary prizes, and international readership. Yet this circulation creates a risk: complex literary memories may be reduced to cultural documents for external consumption. Venuti's theory of translation is useful here because it reminds us that translated texts are reshaped by the norms of the receiving culture.⁵³ Digitality, on the other hand, changes the structure of memory itself. In *Girls of Riyadh*, memory is not stored in a stable archive; it circulates through messages, readers, and public reaction. This anticipates broader transformations in Arabic digital literature and digital humanities.

The comparison between the three novels allows us to propose a three-axis model for reading collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction. The first axis is **language**, including standard Arabic, hybrid Arabic, translation, and digital registers. The second axis is **memory**, including flashback, silence, archive, bodily trace, and networked circulation. The third axis is **identity**, including national, sectarian, gendered, exilic, and digital identity. These axes demonstrate that memory in contemporary Arabic fiction is not a static content but a dynamic structure shaped by narrative form and cultural mediation.

8. Conclusion

This study has argued that the contemporary Arabic novel no longer merely represents collective memory; it actively produces and reorganizes it. Through the analysis of *Memory in the Flesh*, *The Druze of Belgrade*, and *Girls of Riyadh*, the article has shown that memory is constructed through body, exile, gender, language, and digital mediation. The Arabic novel emerges as a counter-archive that gives voice to wounded, displaced, misclassified, and marginalized subjects.

The study confirms that collective memory in contemporary Arabic fiction is not homogeneous. It is composed of competing and adjacent memories: national memory, bodily memory, sectarian memory, familial memory, gendered memory, exilic memory, and digital memory. These memories do not always harmonize. Their conflict is precisely what gives the contemporary Arabic novel its critical power. The novel does not present the past as consensus; it turns the past into a field of questioning.

The article has also shown that globalization and digitality do not erase the local. Rather, they reshape it. Constantine, Beirut, Belgrade, and Riyadh remain specific memory spaces, but they are also inserted into broader circuits of translation, publication, digital communication, and global reception. This produces a double movement: the novel remains rooted in local histories while becoming available to transnational interpretation.

Language is central to this process. The choice of Arabic, the poetic intensification of Arabic, the restrained historical use of Arabic, or the hybrid digital use of Arabic are not merely stylistic decisions. They are positions toward memory and identity. In the three novels, language does not simply describe memory; it participates in making memory possible.

The study is limited by its focus on three novels. Future research could expand the corpus to include Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, and Maghrebi novels dealing with occupation, civil war, prison, migration, and asylum. Another important direction would

be to compare Arabic originals with their translations in order to examine how collective memory changes when it moves across languages. Finally, further research may examine novels and narratives published directly on digital platforms, where memory is increasingly shaped by images, comments, hyperlinks, algorithmic visibility, and rapid deletion.

The analysis of Memory in the Flesh makes this conclusion especially clear. Khaled's wounded body is not only a reminder of revolutionary sacrifice; it is the document through which the nation should read its own history. Yet the novel shows that the nation may become unable to read the very bodies that made its independence possible. This is why bodily memory in the novel is not nostalgic. It is accusatory, ethical, and political.

The main contribution of this study lies in proposing that the contemporary Arabic novel should be read not only as a narrative of memory, but as a site where the right to remember is redistributed. From the wounded body to forced exile and from historical misnaming to digital confession, the Arabic novel transforms memory into a living field of ethical, linguistic, and aesthetic struggle.

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