



Synergic Echo in Postcolonial Literature and Cinema: A Critical Study

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Abstract

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*This article undertakes a sustained critical examination of synergic echo as a constitutive force in postcolonial literature and cinema. Drawing on foundational memory studies scholarship — from Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora to Paul Connerton and Astrid Erll — alongside postcolonial theory as articulated by Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Achille Mbembe, the study argues that postcolonial cultural production is fundamentally organised around the politics of remembering and forgetting. Through close readings of canonical and emergent literary texts — including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* — and cinematic works such as Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl*, Deepa Mehta's *Earth*, Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, and Warwick Thornton's *Samson & Delilah*, the article traces how collective memory operates as a site of contested identity, trauma transmission, subaltern resistance, and counter-hegemonic archive-building. The analysis further attends to the gendered and diasporic dimensions of postcolonial memory, demonstrating that mnemonic processes are never politically innocent. The article concludes that postcolonial literature and cinema constitute what may be termed 'living archives' — dynamic, embodied, and contestatory repositories of memory that resist official nationalist*

historiography and imperial erasure alike.

Keywords: synergic echo, postcolonial literature, postcolonial cinema, trauma, subaltern, counter-memory, archive, diaspora, identity



1. Introduction: The Burden and the Bequest of Colonial echo

Memory, in the postcolonial context, is never simply a private affair. It is a public, often fiercely contested, terrain upon which the meaning of colonial history, national identity, and collective selfhood are continuously renegotiated. The act of remembering — who remembers, what is remembered, how, and to what political end — is, in the aftermath of colonialism, inseparable from the exercise of power. Postcolonial literature and cinema have emerged, over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as the most vital and formally inventive domains in which these mnemonic politics are played out, challenged, and reimaged.

The theoretical grounding for this inquiry rests on the concept of 'collective memory', first systematically elaborated by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950). For Halbwachs, memory is inherently social: individuals remember only within the frameworks provided by the groups to which they belong — families, religious communities, social classes, and nations. This insight has been elaborated, critiqued, and radicalised by subsequent theorists. Pierre Nora's influential formulation of lieux de memoire (sites of memory) draws attention to the paradox at the heart of modern commemorative culture: that we construct artificial mnemonic monuments precisely because living memory has been evacuated from the social fabric (Nora, 1989). Paul Connerton (1989) locates collective memory not in monuments or texts but in bodily habits and commemorative performances — a dimension particularly salient when we attend to indigenous and oral cultures that have been subjected to colonial disruption. Astrid Erll (2011) synthesises these strands within a framework of 'cultural memory studies', insisting on the mediated, remediated, and transnational character of mnemonic processes.

For postcolonial cultural production, these theoretical frameworks require significant adjustment. The colonial encounter did not merely disrupt social memory; it systematically destroyed it — through forced displacement, the suppression of indigenous languages, the burning of archives, and the imposition of alien historiographical frameworks that rendered subaltern experience invisible or unintelligible (Fanon, 1961; Spivak, 1988). Postcolonial literature and cinema respond to this destruction not merely with nostalgia for a pre-colonial past (which would be its own ideological mystification) but with a critical, often painful, engagement with what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) calls 'the unhomely' — the uncanny disruption of settled identity that colonial history has bequeathed.

This article proceeds through several interconnected critical movements. Section Two situates synergic echo within postcolonial theory. Section Three examines the literary articulation of traumatic and counter-colonial memory. Section Four extends the analysis to the cinematic medium. Section Five attends to the gendered and diasporic dimensions of postcolonial memory. Section Six considers the politics of the archive. A concluding section draws together the argument's threads.

2. Situating Memory With in Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory has always been, at its deepest level, a theory about history — specifically about whose history counts, who has the authority to narrate the past, and how the violence of that past continues to structure the present. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) offers perhaps the founding postcolonial account of memory's political stakes: the colonised subject internalises the coloniser's history as the only legitimate history, and decolonisation necessarily involves the painful and violent recovery of a usurped historical self-understanding. Fanon's account is visceral and urgent, insisting that cultural memory is not a luxury but a condition of psychological and political liberation.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 'decolonise the mind' project (1986) extends Fanon's insight into the domain of language and literary production. For Ngugi, the colonial imposition of European languages was



simultaneously an act of mnemonic violence — severing African communities from the oral traditions, histories, and cosmological frameworks encoded in their vernacular tongues. His novels in Gikuyu, and his theoretical writings, constitute an attempt to restore collective memory through the medium of language itself. The act of writing in Gikuyu is not merely a linguistic choice; it is a mnemonic and political act, a refusal of the epistemic erasure that colonial education institutionalised.

Homi K. Bhabha's influential concept of 'hybridity' (1994) introduces a significant complication into this picture. Rather than positing collective memory as a recoverable pre-colonial essence, Bhabha argues that colonial encounter has produced subjects whose identities are constitutively hybrid — formed in the ambivalent 'third space' between colonial and indigenous cultures. Collective memory, on this account, cannot be a straightforward recovery; it is always already contaminated, translated, and renegotiated. This insight has been productive and controversial in equal measure: critics such as Aijaz Ahmad (1992) have argued that Bhabha's emphasis on hybridity aestheticises and depoliticises what are fundamentally material structures of power and dispossession.

Achille Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics' (2003) — the power to determine who may live and who must die — opens another dimension of postcolonial memory work: the memory of the dead, and the politics of mourning. In many postcolonial contexts, the dead cannot be properly mourned, because colonial and neocolonial violence has disrupted the social and ritual frameworks within which mourning takes place. Literature and cinema become, in this context, surrogate spaces of mourning — what Anne Whitehead (2004) calls 'prosthetic' memory, in which cultural forms substitute for failed social rituals.

Walter Dignolo's concept of 'colonial difference' (2000) and the broader decolonial turn further enrich the theoretical landscape by insisting that not merely the content but the very form of knowledge production has been shaped by colonial epistemology. This has profound implications for memory studies: the frameworks through which postcolonial societies understand and transmit their collective pasts have themselves been structured by colonialism. Recovering subaltern memory thus requires not only new content but new epistemological frameworks — a project that postcolonial literature and cinema undertake with particular urgency.

3. Trauma, Counter-Echo, and the Postcolonial Novel

The postcolonial novel has been the pre-eminent literary form for the articulation of collective memory and its disruptions. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) may be read as a founding act of postcolonial counter-memory: against the colonial archive that had represented Igbo society as barbaric, pre-literate, and without history, Achebe's novel constitutes a meticulous mnemonic restoration. The novel's formal choices — its deployment of Igbo proverbs, its embedding of oral narrative conventions, its focalization through Okonkwo — are simultaneously aesthetic and archival, reclaiming a mode of collective self-understanding that colonial historiography had suppressed. As Simon Gikandi (2001) has observed, Achebe's project is not mere nostalgia; it involves a critical engagement with the internal contradictions of Igbo patriarchal culture, including its exclusions and hierarchies.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) engages the legacy of American slavery — itself a colonial and postcolonial problematic — through what Morrison herself has termed 'rememory': a mode of involuntary, traumatic remembering in which the past is not simply recalled but relived, not merely personal but shared and transmissible. The ghost of *Beloved*, the murdered daughter whose spirit returns to haunt Sethe's household, is a figure of collective traumatic memory that cannot be integrated into normal narrative time. Morrison's formal innovations — the fragmentation of chronology, the disruption of narrative voice, the refusal of closure — enact at the level of form the disruption that slavery has visited on African American collective memory. Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' (2012) — the transmission of traumatic memory to



subsequent generations who did not experience the originary events but are nonetheless shaped by them — is illuminated by Morrison's novel, in which trauma is transmitted across generations precisely through its unspeakability.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) situates collective memory within the overlapping structures of caste, colonialism, and gender in Kerala. The novel's non-linear chronology — its refusal to tell the story in the order in which events occurred — enacts the traumatic distortion of memory under conditions of social violence. The 'Love Laws' that govern what may be said and what must remain silent are mnemonic laws as much as social ones: they determine not only what can be done but what can be remembered and articulated. Roy's narrative formally dismantles these laws by insisting on the unsayable, recovering the stories of the Untouchable, the woman, and the child that official history — both colonial and postcolonial nationalist — has suppressed.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) offers a different but complementary approach: the novel explicitly frames collective memory as a problem of narration, of whose voice gets to tell the national story and with what authority. Saleem Sinai's extraordinary and unreliable memory — 'memory leaks', it constantly reminds us — becomes a figure for the instability of national collective memory itself. The 'cracks' in Saleem's body at the novel's close figure the fragmentation and disintegration of a national memory that has been constructed on violence and exclusion. Rushdie's 'chutneyfication' of history — a mixing, pickling, and preservation of heterogeneous mnemonic materials — offers an alternative to both colonial historiography and nationalist myth.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) is paradigmatic in its treatment of the relationship between collective memory, guilt, and anti-colonial resistance. Set in the days leading up to Kenyan independence, the novel weaves together multiple overlapping narratives of collaboration, betrayal, and heroism during the Mau Mau emergency. Memory here is both community-sustaining and community-fracturing: the community of Thabai is held together by its shared history of anti-colonial struggle, but it is also threatened by the suppressed memories of collaboration and betrayal that each character carries. Ngugi's novel powerfully demonstrates that postcolonial collective memory is not a unified, celebratory narrative but a contested, painful, and morally complex terrain.

4. Postcolonial Cinema as Mnemonic Practice

If the novel has been the dominant form of postcolonial literary memory, cinema — particularly from the 1960s onwards — has emerged as an equally powerful and formally distinct site of mnemonic production. The visual and sonic dimensions of cinema — its capacity to embody memory in image and sound, rather than merely representing it through language — give it a particular relationship to collective memory that literary scholars have been slow to theorise adequately. The work of film scholars such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994), and more recently Hamid Naficy (2001) and Patricia White (2015), has begun to map this terrain.

Ousmane Sembene, the Senegalese filmmaker widely regarded as the father of African cinema, offers a foundational example. His film *Black Girl* (*La Noire de ...*, 1966) — arguably the first sub-Saharan African feature film — is a sustained meditation on the psychological effects of displacement and the erasure of African identity under colonial and neocolonial conditions. Diouana's suicide, preceded by her donning of the African mask that her French employers had appropriated as decoration, is at once an act of despair and an act of mnemonic resistance: she reclaims, in her death, the symbolic memory of a culture that has been commodified and stripped of meaning by the colonial gaze. The mask, circling back at the film's close to haunt the French employer in Dakar, suggests that collective memory cannot be permanently suppressed; it returns, uncannily, to demand reckoning.



Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998) — the second film in her *Elements* trilogy — depicts the 1947 Partition of India through the experiences of a Parsi household in Lahore, and more particularly through the figure of Shanta, the Hindu ayah whose story threads through the narrative. The film engages directly with the problem of mnemonic testimony: the Partition was characterised not only by mass violence but by the systematic suppression of its memory, both in official Indian nationalist historiography (which preferred a narrative of independence and celebration) and in the personal testimonies of survivors, for whom the events were often literally unspeakable. Mehta's film insists on the visible and the embodied character of mnemonic trauma — the scarred and violated body as archive, as a form of memory that cannot be officially suppressed.

Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) represents a radical intervention in documentary memory practice with respect to the Indonesian mass killings of 1965-66. Rather than representing the perpetrators' memories through conventional testimonial modes, Oppenheimer invites the perpetrators themselves to re-enact — in the genres of Hollywood gangster films, musicals, and westerns — the murders they committed. The resulting film is a deeply disturbing meditation on the relationship between collective memory, perpetrator impunity, and the cultural forms through which violence is simultaneously performed, glorified, and disavowed. The film demonstrates that collective memory is not only a property of victims and survivors; perpetrator societies also develop their own collective mnemonic frameworks, often structured around denial and heroisation.

Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009), an Australian film centred on two young Aboriginal people, engages the colonial history of dispossession and cultural erasure through a formally minimalist, almost wordless aesthetic. The film's near-absence of dialogue — a formal choice that has been read as a response to the insufficiency of colonial language to represent indigenous experience — places the burden of mnemonic transmission on image, landscape, and body. The Australian landscape in the film is itself a site of memory: it carries traces of pre-colonial indigenous life that the official colonial cartography has sought to overwrite. Thornton's film insists on the continued presence of this prior landscape — a mnemonic persistence in the face of colonial erasure.

Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Fernando Meirelles's *City of God* (2002), and Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* (2014) extend the analysis of postcolonial cinema as mnemonic practice across distinct national and regional contexts. What unites these films is a commitment to registering the collective memories of communities — the urban poor, the colonised, the occupied — whose experience has been systematically excluded from dominant archival and historiographical frameworks.

5. Gender, Diaspora, and the Politics of Postcolonial Echo

The intersection of collective memory with gender and diaspora constitutes a critical but sometimes underthematized dimension of the postcolonial mnemonic field. Feminist postcolonial scholars — including Spivak (1988), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), and Sara Ahmed (2004) — have consistently argued that the category of 'the postcolonial subject' has been implicitly masculinised in dominant theoretical frameworks, and that the specific ways in which women remember, transmit, and embody colonial history require distinctive analytical attention.

Women's bodies in postcolonial contexts are often literally inscribed by colonial and postcolonial violence — through sexual violence, forced labour, the disruption of reproductive and familial life — making them, in Connerton's (1989) sense, repositories of embodied social memory in an especially intense form. Veena Das's (2007) anthropological work on women survivors of Partition violence in India demonstrates that the testimonial modes through which women articulate their memories are often markedly different from those available to men: women frequently displace traumatic memory into somatic symptom, ritual practice, and domestic narrative rather than public testimonial speech. Morrison's *Sethe*, Roy's *Ammu*, and Mehta's *Shanta*



are literary and cinematic figures that register this gendered dimension of postcolonial mnemonic experience with particular acuity.

Diasporic literature and cinema have developed their own characteristic relationship to collective memory, one structured by the experience of displacement, the longing for an originary homeland (which is itself always already a construction), and the negotiation of memory across generational and cultural distance. Stuart Hall's (1990) account of Caribbean diasporic identity as constituted by two logics — 'being' and 'becoming', continuity and rupture — provides a conceptual framework for understanding diasporic memory as irreducibly doubled: it is always both a memory of what was and an awareness that it cannot be simply recovered. Hanif Kureishi's fiction, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) all engage this diasporic mnemonic condition: the experience of living between two collective memories — the received memory of the homeland and the lived experience of the diasporic present — neither of which is fully adequate to the diasporic subject's complex reality.

Hamid Naficy's (2001) concept of 'accented cinema' — films made by diasporic and exilic filmmakers that bear the formal traces of displacement — is productive here. The formal characteristics of accented cinema — its chronotopic disorientation, its oscillation between the space of origin and the space of settlement, its linguistic heteroglossia — are simultaneously aesthetic and mnemonic: they embody, at the level of film form, the mnemonic experience of the diasporic subject who is caught between worlds. Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *What's Cooking?* (2000), Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006), and Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002) — which deals with the Armenian genocide and its transmission across diasporic generations — all exemplify this formal mnemonic negotiation.

6. The Postcolonial Archive: Counter-Echo and the Politics of the Sayable

The concept of the archive — understood not merely as a physical repository of documents but as a regime that governs what can be preserved, what can be remembered, and what must be consigned to silence — has become a key site of contestation in postcolonial cultural theory. Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) raised fundamental questions about the archive's relationship to power, authority, and the death drive: the archive both preserves and destroys, both opens the past to retrieval and forecloses certain modes of historical knowledge. Ann Laura Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain* (2009) has demonstrated, through meticulous colonial archival research, that colonial archives are not transparent repositories of the past but are structured by the anxieties, desires, and power relations of colonial administration — they record, above all, what the colonial state needed to know in order to govern.

The implications for postcolonial memory are profound. The subaltern — in Spivak's (1988) formulation — cannot speak, not because she is literally voiceless, but because the archival and discursive frameworks within which speech is recognised and recorded have been structured in ways that render subaltern enunciation unintelligible or inaudible. Postcolonial literature and cinema can be understood as sustained attempts to construct counter-archives: to develop forms of recording, transmission, and preservation that exceed the limits of the colonial archive and make audible what it has suppressed.

The oral traditions of African, Caribbean, and indigenous communities have functioned as counter-archival forms of memory throughout the colonial period, preserving historical knowledge, cosmological frameworks, and collective identities in forms that colonial archivism could not easily penetrate or destroy. The 'griot' tradition in West African cultures — the hereditary keeper of oral history, genealogy, and communal narrative — represents, in Paul Connerton's (1989) terms, a 'commemorative performance' that transmits collective memory through embodied, vocalized practice rather than written record. Sembene's films, and the literary works of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Amadou Kourouma, and Birago Diop, engage this



oral tradition self-consciously, deploying its formal resources within the medium of the written novel and the cinematic image.

The digital turn has introduced new possibilities and new threats to postcolonial counter-archival practice. Digital platforms have enabled the proliferation and global circulation of subaltern memory — testimonial narratives, oral histories, documentary footage — that would previously have been confined to local circulation or suppressed altogether. At the same time, digital archives are subject to new forms of commercial and political control, and the digital divide means that communities already disadvantaged by the colonial legacy may have less access to the means of digital mnemonic production and preservation. The emergence of 'digital postcolonialism' as a critical subfield (Risam, 2019) reflects the urgency of these questions.

7. Conclusion: Postcolonial Literature and Cinema as Living Archives

The analysis undertaken in this article suggests that postcolonial literature and cinema are not merely representations of collective memory but are themselves constitutive mnemonic practices — ways of doing memory rather than simply depicting it. In their formal innovations, their generic negotiations, their linguistic and visual choices, and their modes of address, postcolonial literary and cinematic works produce new possibilities for collective remembering, new forms of archival preservation, and new frameworks for historical understanding.

The concept of the 'living archive' — developed in recent years by scholars including Awam Amkpa (2007) and adapted here — captures something essential about this dimension of postcolonial cultural production. Unlike the official archive — static, institutional, and governed by the logics of colonial and nationalist power — the living archive is dynamic, embodied, contestatory, and open to revision. It lives in the performances, the readings, the screenings, and the conversations that literary and cinematic works generate across communities and generations. It is not a repository of fixed meanings but a site of ongoing mnemonic negotiation.

This study has demonstrated that collective memory in postcolonial contexts operates simultaneously across multiple axes: the axis of colonial trauma and its transmission; the axis of counter-colonial resistance and recovery; the axis of gender, which marks women's embodied memories as a distinctive and often suppressed mnemonic resource; the axis of diaspora, which generates doubled and dislocated memory formations; and the axis of the archive, which governs what can be preserved and what must be forgotten. Postcolonial literature and cinema engage all these axes — sometimes simultaneously — in their sustained, formally inventive, and politically committed attempts to renegotiate the meaning of colonial history for postcolonial presents and futures.

The stakes of this renegotiation could not be higher. In contexts where the legacies of colonialism continue to structure material inequality, political disempowerment, and cultural marginalisation, the work of postcolonial cultural memory is not merely academic: it is a form of political and ethical practice, a contribution to the ongoing, unfinished, and contested process of decolonisation. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) insisted, and as the works examined in this article collectively demonstrate, to decolonise the mind is to decolonise memory — and to decolonise memory is to open the possibility of genuinely postcolonial futures.



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