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The Development of Cultural Memory Theory and Its Implications for Literary Studies

Nurida Ganbarova
Lecturer, PhD Candidate, Nakhchivan State University, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan
Email: nurideqenberova@ndu.edu.az
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1620-2343

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Abstract

This article examines the development of cultural memory theory and its implications for literary studies. It brings Maurice Halbwachs's account of the social frameworks of remembering into dialogue with Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory and Aleida Assmann's analysis of the canon and archive. The article adopts a selective conceptual review, comparing foundational accounts with work on postmemory, transcultural transmission, material commemoration, and digital mediation. Its central argument is that literature participates in the selection, interpretation, and transmission of the past through narrative form, linguistic choices, publication, and reception. A literary work can preserve experiences, challenge dominant representations, and acquire new meanings as its readers and institutional settings change. However, textual representations alone cannot establish what a community remembers; claims about collective memory also require evidence of circulation and reception. The review therefore distinguishes the analysis of memory within texts from the investigation of their public uses. It identifies comparative reading, translation history, archival research, and reception analysis as complementary directions for studying literature's role in cultural remembering.

Keywords: *cultural memory; collective memory; literature; canon and archive; postmemory; transcultural memory; digital mediation*

1. Introduction

Memory occupies a distinct place in contemporary humanities because engagement with the past shapes cultural meanings, collective identity, and a society's self-understanding. It is connected to history, language, art, education, and politics, yet no single discipline encompasses all its dimensions. Memory studies examines how the past is selected, interpreted, and symbolically organized, as well as how representations of it are transmitted between generations (Erll & Nünning, 2008).

This issue is particularly important for literary studies. Literature can preserve individual recollections, transform historical events into narrative images, and bring excluded experiences into public discussion. A literary work is therefore more than an illustration of an already established memory: its form and subsequent uses can participate in the production of

cultural meanings. The relationship between remembering and present interpretation is central to the interdisciplinary discussions collected by Bal et al. (1999) and to Erll's (2011) account of memory in culture.

The theoretical framework for this inquiry developed through several related approaches. Halbwachs (1992) examined remembering within social frameworks, while J. Assmann (2008, 2011) investigated the cultural forms that sustain accounts of the past beyond direct interpersonal communication. A. Assmann (2008, 2011) further distinguished the active circulation of selected cultural materials from their preservation in an archive. These approaches address related questions without describing identical processes: social participation, cultural transmission, and institutional selection each require attention.

The field also includes historical, spatial, intergenerational, and mediated perspectives. Repina's (2004) discussion of historical memory and historiography places the interpretation of the past within debates about historical knowledge. Ricœur (2004) examines the relationships among remembering, historical representation, and forgetting. Such perspectives encourage literary scholars to consider how narratives make claims about the past, what they leave unspoken, and how their imaginative dimensions relate to documentary evidence.

The objective of this article is to examine the development of collective and cultural memory theory and clarify its application to literary studies. It asks how the social conditions of recollection relate to enduring cultural forms, how literature preserves and transforms representations of the past, and what methodological limits arise when moving from textual analysis to claims about public memory. Its contribution is a comparative synthesis that connects foundational theory with contemporary questions about reception, translation, and digital circulation.

2. Review Approach and Scope

The article is a selective conceptual review rather than a systematic review or an empirical study. It compares foundational accounts by Halbwachs and Jan and Aleida Assmann with selected scholarship on literary mediation, postmemory, transcultural memory, commemoration, and digital media. These sources are used to clarify concepts and their relationships, not to claim exhaustive coverage of memory studies or a representative survey of current publications. No new participant data or literary corpus is introduced.

The comparison follows three questions: where remembering is socially situated, how representations of the past are maintained, and how their meanings change through mediation and reception. Literary applications are presented as analytical possibilities. Following Kansteiner's (2002) methodological critique, the presence of a memory motif in a text is distinguished from evidence that readers have adopted it. Establishing the latter requires additional materials, such as reviews, curricula, publication histories, interviews, or records of commemorative use.

3. The Development of Cultural Memory Theory

3.1. Origins and Conceptual Distinctions

Memory has a long intellectual history. A decisive development for the approaches examined here was the recognition that recollection cannot be understood exclusively as an isolated individual capacity. People remember as members of families, generations, religious communities, and other social groups. This does not eliminate individual experience; it directs

attention to the social categories through which experience is recalled and communicated. Halbwachs's (1992) analysis provides an important foundation for this perspective.

The focus of inquiry consequently extends from how an individual retains the past to how social groups establish conditions for preserving, transmitting, altering, and forgetting it. The past does not enter collective memory as an unchanging collection of facts. Its significance is reconstructed within present circumstances, including the relationships and expectations that give recollections their relevance. In this sense, remembering is both an activity of individuals and a socially situated process (Halbwachs, 1992).

This idea is directly relevant to literary studies. Artistic representations of the past need to be considered in relation to the historical and social contexts in which they are produced and read. A single historical subject can acquire different meanings in the literature of different periods. The questions posed to the past change alongside the artistic forms used to represent it. When historical material enters a literary text, it becomes a plot, image, symbol, metaphor, motif, or arrangement of voices. Literary remembering therefore involves creative interpretation as well as preservation (Erll, 2011).

Historical, social, communicative, and cultural memory should not be treated as interchangeable terms. They foreground different aspects of engagement with the past. Historical memory concerns socially meaningful representations of historical experience; social memory emphasizes the relations through which the past is recalled; communicative memory develops through everyday interaction; and cultural memory concerns relatively enduring, symbolically organized forms of transmission. The boundaries remain subjects of debate, so the meaning assigned to each term should be stated within a particular analysis (J. Assmann, 2008; Erll & Nünning, 2008; Repina, 2004).

Memory cannot be reduced to historical facts, individual recollections, or an official account of the past. These levels interact without necessarily converging. An event may be represented in a textbook or monument, recalled through family narratives, and transformed within a work of fiction. Differences among these versions are analytically productive because they reveal who can speak, which experiences receive recognition, and how authority is distributed among competing accounts (Erll, 2011).

Forgetting is also part of this process. The absence of a voice from a literary canon, the exclusion of an event from a public narrative, or the declining visibility of an author may reveal mechanisms of selection. Yet absence alone does not prove intentional suppression: loss, limited access, changing tastes, or insufficient evidence can produce similar effects. A. Assmann (2011) and Ricœur (2004) provide different but complementary resources for examining the relationships among preservation, selection, and forgetting. The task is to identify the conditions of an absence before interpreting its cultural meaning.

3.2. Maurice Halbwachs and the Social Frameworks of Memory

Halbwachs's turn toward the social foundations of remembering shifted the perspective of memory research. His work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, first published in 1925, examined the contexts within which a person's conception of the past is formed and recalled. The English-language volume *On Collective Memory* (1992), edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser, brings together selected writings rather than reproducing a single original work unchanged. It includes discussions of language, the reconstruction and localization of memories, and the memories of families, religious groups, and social classes.

The primary significance of this approach lies in its account of the social conditions of recollection. Families, religious communities, professional circles, and other groups provide

reference points through which individuals recognize and interpret the past. A social framework is therefore not a repository containing ready-made memories. It is a set of relations and categories that enables the organization of experience. Language, time, space, and collective representations all contribute to this process (Halbwachs, 1992).

The reconstructive character of memory also makes this approach useful beyond sociology. Remembering takes place from a particular position in the present, so recollection involves interpretation rather than the complete recovery of an untouched past. Changes in social circumstances can alter the significance attached to an experience. This does not mean that every interpretation is equally justified or that events themselves become arbitrary; it means that their remembered meanings depend partly on the circumstances in which they are recalled (Halbwachs, 1992).

Collective memory is consequently plural. The same event can hold different meanings for generations, social groups, and cultural communities, and competing versions can coexist within a society. The word “collective” should not imply that every group member possesses an identical account. For literary analysis, this plurality directs attention to differences among narrators, characters, and social perspectives rather than encouraging the treatment of a text as the expression of a single communal consciousness.

A literary work can bring official accounts into contact with family, local, and individual recollections. The resulting tensions may appear through shifts in narrative perspective, conflicting testimony, interrupted chronology, or silence. These are features available to textual analysis; whether they reshape public remembering remains a separate question. Erll's (2011) approach to literary mediation and Kansteiner's (2002) concern with reception help keep these two levels connected without conflating them.

Literature can represent how historical events are experienced emotionally and imaginatively. However, emotional complexity is not exclusive to fiction, and documentary writing is not simply a neutral record of facts. Both literary and historical narratives organize material through particular forms and perspectives, although their conventions and claims to evidence differ. A memory-oriented reading should identify those differences instead of assuming that literature supplies subjective experience while history supplies unmediated truth (Ricœur, 2004).

Language has particular importance in Halbwachs's account because it provides categories through which recollections become communicable. For literary studies, this suggests that narrative language can shape how the past is expressed, not merely report a pre-existing memory. An event may circulate through a recurring image, metaphor, character, or narrative pattern. Such forms warrant close reading, while their cultural reach requires evidence of their reuse and recognition (Halbwachs, 1992; Erll, 2011).

The spatial organization of memory offers another connection. Homes, streets, schools, religious buildings, and burial grounds can provide reference points for recalling experience. A literary setting can associate a location with particular voices or events and connect personal recollection to a wider social landscape. The analytical issue is how a text constructs that connection, rather than whether every remembered place automatically qualifies as an institutional site of commemoration.

Halbwachs's framework thus makes the social setting of recollection a starting point for literary inquiry. It encourages analysis of the groups, languages, and places through which narrators and readers approach the past. Jan Assmann's work extends this question by

examining how selected representations acquire continuity through cultural forms that survive beyond the lives of their original bearers (J. Assmann, 2008, 2011).

3.3. Jan and Aleida Assmann on Transmission, Canon, and Archive

Jan Assmann's theory places cultural forms of preservation and transmission at the center of inquiry. In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, J. Assmann (2011) relates memory to writing, cultural identity, and organized engagement with the past. The question is how particular conceptions of the past acquire continuity through practices, institutions, texts, and symbols, rather than simply how an individual retains information.

A culture does not preserve everything that has occurred. It selects and organizes events, images, narratives, rituals, and symbols, granting some materials greater significance than others. What enters sustained cultural circulation may influence later generations, while other materials remain inaccessible or receive little attention. Cultural memory therefore concerns both continuity and selection. Preservation creates possibilities for transmission, but those possibilities depend on the practices through which material is used and interpreted (J. Assmann, 2011).

The distinction between communicative and cultural memory is central to this framework. Communicative memory develops mainly through everyday interaction among contemporaries and through accounts exchanged across living generations. Family stories, conversations, personal accounts, and eyewitness testimony exemplify its interpersonal settings. Cultural memory relies more heavily on relatively durable symbolic forms and organized practices, including texts, rituals, images, architecture, and commemorative traditions. The distinction concerns modes and conditions of transmission; it should not be reduced to a rigid separation between informal speech and written documents (J. Assmann, 2008).

For literature, the temporal reach of cultural memory is especially significant. A work can outlive its author and original readership and later return to cultural attention. Yet the survival of its wording does not guarantee that its meanings remain unchanged. New readers encounter the same text through different educational settings, political circumstances, translations, and aesthetic expectations. Memory is sustained through this renewed engagement, which can alter the relationships between a work and the past it represents (Erll, 2011).

Aleida Assmann's distinction between canon and archive clarifies the institutional dimension of this process. The canon comprises selected materials that remain actively present through repeated use and interpretation. The archive preserves materials that may not participate in current cultural circulation but remain available for possible reactivation. In A. Assmann's (2008, 2011) account, the distinction identifies different conditions of cultural presence rather than dividing texts into permanently valuable and permanently obsolete categories.

Literary history is therefore more than an inventory of all works ever produced. Some texts are republished, taught, cited, translated, and adapted, while others receive limited attention. These practices can make the canon a form of active cultural memory. A work's peripheral position does not establish its lack of literary significance or imply its irreversible disappearance. Changes in scholarly interests, access, or public debate can bring neglected material into renewed discussion (A. Assmann, 2008, 2011).

The canon is not immutable. Its composition can change as institutions and readers reconsider which texts should represent a tradition. A writer previously regarded as marginal may acquire new significance when questions about gender, language, region, or historical experience change. Conversely, a once prominent work may circulate less widely. A memory-oriented study should document these changes through editions, curricula, reviews, anthologies, or other evidence rather than infer them solely from a critic's assessment.

Cultural identity is another important dimension. J. Assmann (2011) links cultural memory to the ways communities understand continuity and belonging. Literature can participate through historical novels, memoirs, war poetry, family chronicles, and other forms that organize relations between personal lives and collective experience. However, the identity associated with a work need not be homogeneous. A narrative can preserve a shared image of the past while also exposing conflict about who belongs within it.

Literature should consequently not be treated as a direct reflection of collective memory. A text can repeat dominant accounts, question them, or juxtapose them with familial and individual recollections. It may create room for experiences excluded from public narratives, but the social consequences of that intervention cannot be established from textual intention alone. The distinction between representation and reception remains necessary when evaluating claims that a work has transformed collective remembering (Erll, 2011; Kansteiner, 2002).

The recovery of neglected material is equally important. Archival preservation may allow a work to be republished or reinterpreted long after its initial circulation. This makes literary history a field for investigating how cultural selection operates and how previously inaccessible experiences re-enter discussion. Reading is part of that process: a preserved text becomes culturally meaningful through renewed acts of attention and interpretation. The work retains traces of its historical situation while acquiring a place in a different present (A. Assmann, 2011).

4. Literary Mediation and Contemporary Perspectives

4.1. Language, Embodiment, and Sites of Memory

A focus on literature needs to remain attentive to forms of remembering that are not primarily textual. Connerton (1989) emphasizes commemorative ceremonies and embodied practices, directing attention to how remembering can be sustained through repeated performance. This perspective complements the study of narrative by asking how a text relates to gestures, rituals, and social occasions. A literary description of a ceremony, however, is evidence of its representation within the work; it does not by itself establish the ceremony's historical practice or meaning for participants.

Spatial and material approaches also extend the analysis. Nora's (1996) work on sites of memory concerns the cultural investment through which selected places, objects, and symbols become significant to collective remembering. Young's (1993) examination of Holocaust memorials demonstrates the importance of attending to commemorative forms and their historical settings. For literary scholarship, these approaches support questions about how narratives represent monuments, landscapes, and memorial spaces. Their application should retain the specificity of the events and communities involved rather than assume that all meaningful locations perform the same memorial function.

Close reading also requires attention to linguistic form. Aslanova's (2022) comparative study examines negative phraseological units and their negative–affirmative transformations

in German and Azerbaijani. Although this is semantic research rather than a theory of cultural memory, it offers a useful methodological distinction: linguistic negation must be analyzed at the level of expression before it is interpreted as cultural denial or forgetting. A negative construction alone does not demonstrate historical suppression; that interpretation requires contextual evidence. This is an analytical application proposed here, not a finding reported by Aslanova.

4.2. Postmemory and Transcultural Transmission

Postmemory draws attention to relationships with a past that an individual did not experience directly. Hirsch (2012) develops the concept through the transmission of traumatic histories across generations, particularly in relation to the Holocaust, family narratives, and visual culture. It should not be equated with direct recollection or applied indiscriminately to every encounter with an earlier period. In literature, the concept can guide analysis of inherited stories, photographs, silences, and imaginative reconstruction, while maintaining the distinction between a witness's experience and a later generation's mediated relationship to it.

Transcultural approaches examine how memories move between languages, communities, and national settings. Bond and Rapson (2014) question frameworks that treat cultural memory as enclosed within a single national tradition. Rothberg's (2009) account of multidirectional memory provides a way to examine relationships among histories without assuming that recognition of one necessarily displaces another. Such comparison requires attention to historical differences: encounters among memories do not make the events interchangeable or remove inequalities in the conditions under which they are remembered.

Translation and reception offer concrete directions for literary inquiry. Mammadova (2023) discusses struggle and sorrow in Byron's Oriental poems alongside aspects of their Turkish and Azerbaijani reception and translation. Her study is not presented here as an empirical investigation of collective memory. Rather, it identifies a cross-cultural literary context in which a memory-oriented analysis could ask how translated works are selected, interpreted, and incorporated into later traditions. Establishing their contribution to cultural memory would require evidence from translations, prefaces, educational use, reviews, or other records of reception.

4.3. Digital Mediation and Reception

Digital media introduce further questions about access, circulation, and selection. Van Dijck (2007) examines personal memory in relation to media practices, while Hoskins's (2018) edited collection addresses transformations associated with digital mediation. Together, these perspectives encourage attention to the relations among stored material, media environments, and acts of remembering. The availability of a digitized text is only one condition of its cultural presence; discovery, contextualization, and continued use also matter.

For literary studies, this means examining how digital editions, online archives, and other mediated settings organize encounters with older texts. A work can become technically accessible without attracting sustained attention. Conversely, an extract may circulate widely while being detached from the work's original context. These are research questions to investigate in particular cases, not outcomes established by the present review. Studies could compare editorial framing, metadata, patterns of quotation, and reader responses to determine how meanings change across settings.

Across print and digital environments, the methodological distinction remains the same: a representation is not equivalent to its reception. Kansteiner (2002) cautions against moving too quickly from cultural products to claims about collective memory. A study can

establish how a novel represents the past through textual analysis, but stronger claims about public remembering require evidence about audiences and use. Combining close reading with reception history offers a practical way to connect literary interpretation to the social processes described by memory theory.

5. Conclusion

Cultural memory theory provides a framework for examining literature as an active participant in the preservation and interpretation of the past. Halbwachs's account directs attention to the social conditions of recollection. Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory clarifies the forms through which accounts of the past can outlast living generations. Aleida Assmann's analysis of canon and archive explains how continued use and potential availability constitute different conditions of cultural presence.

For literary studies, the central implication is that remembering involves form, selection, and reception. A work can connect personal recollection with broader historical representations, sustain inherited narratives, and make conflicting versions of the past available for interpretation. These possibilities are shaped by language, narrative structure, publication, translation, and institutional use. Postmemory, transcultural approaches, material commemoration, and digital mediation extend the questions that can be asked without removing the need for historically specific analysis.

The scope of this review limits its conclusions. It offers a selective conceptual synthesis and does not establish how particular audiences remember or how individual works have changed public memory. Future research should examine specific texts alongside their publication and reception histories, using archival, educational, and reader-related evidence where available. This combination would allow scholars to explain both how literature represents the past and how those representations become meaningful within particular communities.

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