



Cultural Memory and Narrative Ethics of Iraq Wars in English Fiction

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Abstract

The following study aims to argue that such British fiction produces an ethical charge and cultural memory concerning the wars in Iraq, in navigating and challenging dominant geopolitical narratives. The article also argues that Iraq is not a neutral work of art within literary imagination; in a way to implicate authors in a wide process of remember, forgetting, and moral claiming. A close examination of key texts— including Frederick Forsyth's *The Fist of God* (1994) and Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* (1994) — the study will demonstrate how British novels construct cultural memory while negotiating the ethical responsibilities of representing trauma, otherness, and political violence. Furthermore, the article argues that some British novels reveal distinct patterns of memory construction — patterns formed by imperial legacy, Cold War imaginary, and or political ambivalence — which require critical investigation rather than passive approval. Moreover, the article examines how modern British fiction accomplishes with Iraq's collective memory and ethical representation of war, concentrating upon authors struggling with the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the Iraq War (2003–2011). Through utilizing cultural memory theory and narrative ethics, particularly structure from Aleida Assmann and Paul Ricoeur, the article analyses selected novels, including Frederick Forsyth's *The Fist of God* (1994) and satirical or critical British texts that reference Iraq. The article argues that British fiction mirrors a broader cultural process of remembering and forgetting and wrestling with the moral accountability of representing conflict, trauma, and otherness. By placing British narratives alongside transnational memory constructs, the study shows both their contributions and limitations in forming public understanding of Iraq's wars. The article reveals the contributions and limitations of both British fiction with transnational memory, by placing them in one dialogue, in which some of the British novels help to understand the Iraq wars by constructing argumentative and critical analysis. Though, critically, the article calls for more engaged reading of British fiction not merely to understand the narration of the Iraq wars but to understand cultural memory very well.

Keywords: Narrative ethics, British Fiction, Cultural memory, and Iraq wars

الذاكرة الثقافية وأخلاقيات السرد لحروب العراق في الرواية الإنجليزية

علاء لطيف النجم

الخلاصة:



تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إثبات أن الأدب البريطاني يُنتج شحنة أخلاقية وذاكرة ثقافية فيما يتعلق بحروب العراق، وذلك من خلال التفاعل مع الروايات الجيوسياسية السائدة وتحديها. كما تُجادل الدراسة بأن العراق ليس عملاً فنياً محايداً في المخيلة الأدبية، بل يُشرك المؤلفين في عملية واسعة من التذكر والنسيان والمطالبة الأخلاقية. ومن خلال دراسة متعمقة لنصوص رئيسية، من بينها رواية "قبضة الله" لفريدريك فورسيث (1994) ورواية "يا له من ذبح!" لجوناثان كوي (1994)، ستبين الدراسة كيف تُشكل الروايات البريطانية الذاكرة الثقافية مع مراعاة المسؤوليات الأخلاقية لتمثيل الصدمة والاختلاف والعنف السياسي. علاوة على ذلك، تُشير الدراسة إلى أن بعض الروايات البريطانية تكشف عن أنماط مميزة لبناء الذاكرة، وهي أنماط تشكلت بفعل الإرث الإمبراطوري، وخيال الحرب الباردة، أو التناقض السياسي، الأمر الذي يتطلب دراسة نقدية بدلاً من مجرد الموافقة السلبية. علاوة على ذلك، تتناول هذه المقالة كيفية تعامل الأدب البريطاني المعاصر مع الذاكرة الجماعية للعراق والتصوير الأخلاقي للحرب، مع التركيز على المؤلفين الذين تناولوا حرب الخليج (1990-1991) وحرب العراق (2003-2011). ومن خلال توظيف نظرية الذاكرة الثقافية وأخلاقيات السرد، ولا سيما البنية السردية من منظور أليدا أسمان وبول ريكور، تحلل المقالة روايات مختارة، من بينها رواية "قبضة الله" لفريدريك فورسيث (1994)، ونصوص بريطانية ساخرة أو نقدية تشير إلى العراق. وتجادل المقالة بأن الأدب البريطاني يعكس عملية ثقافية أوسع نطاقاً من التذكر والنسيان، والصراع مع المسؤولية الأخلاقية لتمثيل الصراع والصدمة والأخيرة. ومن خلال وضع السرديات البريطانية جنباً إلى جنب مع مفاهيم الذاكرة العابرة للحدود، تُظهر الدراسة إسهاماتها وحدودها في تشكيل الفهم العام لحروب العراق. تكشف المقالة عن إسهامات الأدب البريطاني وحدوده في سياق الذاكرة العابرة للحدود، من خلال وضعها في حوار واحد، حيث تُسهم بعض الروايات البريطانية في فهم حروب العراق عبر بناء تحليل جدلي ونقدي. مع ذلك، تدعو المقالة، من الناحية النقدية، إلى قراءة أكثر تعمقاً للأدب البريطاني، ليس فقط لفهم سرد حروب العراق، بل لفهم الذاكرة الثقافية فهماً عميقاً. (الحلي، 2026)

الكلمات المفتاحية: أخلاقيات السرد، الأدب البريطاني، الذاكرة الثقافية، وحروب العراق

Introduction

Over the past three decades, international political discourse has repeatedly studied the wars in Iraq. The Gulf War (1990–1991) and the Iraq War (2003–2011) not only rearranged geopolitical treaties but also produced a range of cultural production that reflect on these conflicts. Alongside journalism and memoir as dominant modes of documenting war, novel plays an outstanding role in constructing how societies remember and interpret such events. Narrative, more than mere reportage, exposes possibilities for examining individual experience, moral complexity and selective memory.

Within British literature, fiction that engages explicitly with Iraq remains relatively sparse compared to American or Iraqi responses, yet it offers unique insights into cultural memory and ethical representation. Furthermore this article studies the key novels and narrative forms where Iraq appears as a site of ideological competition, moral responsibility, and historical memory.

The article addresses two central questions

A-How does British fiction represent the cultural memory of Iraq's wars?



B-How do these narratives grapple with ethical representation of trauma, conflict, and otherness?

The central aim of this article is that modern British fiction investigates institutionalized patterns of remembering that both reflect and resist dominant political discourses. These narratives work within a system of ethical responsibility: they are constructed by British historical involvement in Iraq and by the challenge of reflecting a wartime other without remaking reductionist tropes.

To examine these dynamics, the paper increase a sustained argument through cultural memory theory (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992) and narrative ethics (Ricoeur, 2006; Caruth, 1996), and then studies how selected British novels embody and contest these theoretical concerns in their imaginative structures.

To answer these questions, the article focuses on cultural memory studies and narrative ethics to analyze how storytelling participates in collective remembering and moral mediation.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach based on close textual analysis. It focuses on two novels: Frederick Forsyth's *The Fist of God* (1994) and Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* (1994)

These texts are selected for their thematic engagement with memory and their innovative narrative techniques. The analysis focuses on narrative voice, temporal structure, and the representation of historical events, examining how each novel constructs cultural memory and addresses ethical issues.

Theoretical Foundations

Cultural Memory in Literature

It should be noted that cultural memory constitutes a vibrant and dynamic process of remembering constructed by the present concerns. It is not a work of passive archive done in the past. Influentially; Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that memory can not be produced as an individualistic effort; but it is a social structure built within a specific social group. In this respect, Aleida Assmann (2011) elaborates the concept by recognizing the communicative memory (living, everyday recollection) from cultural memory (institutional and symbolic forms sustained through texts, media, and rituals). Critically, literary works function as a place of memory, encrypting selective works of historical events to produce narratives such as war. This distinction helps to underscore the authority of



cultural memory as a reconciled construction rather than an instinctive recollection.

Cultural memory means a collection of narratives, discourses, and symbols by which the writers of literature use it to help society remember and interpret the past events. Furthermore, literature is not just a store of reflecting our actions and cultural memory, it functions as an agency to transform and produce events. Building on this, literary texts actively construct a selection of understanding identity, nationhood, and war. Moreover, literary texts contribute to influencing how society remembers struggle and conflict by placing it in relation to it.

Contemporary British fiction configures very complex narrative constructs to mediate between public discourse, and imaginative interpretations. These narratives are involved in constructing a production of cultural memory by reshaping the experiences, causes, and consequences of war. In this respect, these narratives function as the main sites where cultural memory is contested and negotiated, reframing how readers come to comprehend the human and ethical conflict. Through combining imaginative storytelling with historical reference, British novels function to reconfigure the meaning of the past, national identity, trauma, and its influence. Consequently, these literary reflections and texts play an important role in reconstructing the public and cultural memory of Iraq, arguing that cultural memory is not merely as a fixed form rather than as a rearticulated construct through narratives.

Memory as Strategy in Fiction

The novel's narrative focuses on intelligence and military maneuvering and actively shapes a memory of war centered on strategic mastery. Rather than depicting the war through the lived experience of Iraqi civilians. Technically, the accurate description — as Roberts Cullen notes in the Los Angeles Times review — offers “page after page ... lucid, thoroughly researched descriptions of the weapons systems and communications technology that won the war.”

This approach exposed a system of cultural memory in which the Gulf War is remembered as an exercise in Western technological and strategic supremacy, aligning with official political narratives rather than grassroots testimony. Building on this, literature, then, contributes a collective memory, but in an active way it frames it by privileging how the war was won rather than who lived through it.

Narrative Ethics and Moral Representation

The focus of Narrative ethics is how fiction is constructed to meet moral understandings. Paul Ricœur shows that narrative constructions shape human



experience, by such extension, and ethical judgement. Storytelling produces a sense of relationships, actions, and consequences, particularly in contexts of conflict (Ricoeur, 2006). In narrating the war, authors are bound by ethical imperatives that require them to represent suffering without exploiting or aestheticizing it. And actively resist the simplification's narrative that reinforces dominant representation and political stereotypes.

The ethical dimension in fiction is prominent, particularly about culture and experience distant from the author's own. For British authors portraying Iraq, it involves a dual challenge: not merely narrating war — a historical and cultural complex event — and doing so in ways that respect the humanity of those who lived it. Therefore, narrative ethics serves as a lens for examining whether fiction merely replicates dominant discourse or critically interrogates it. Thus such reflection needs a careful debate between ethical responsibility and imaginative interpretation.

Historical and Literary Context: Iraq in British Fiction

The Gulf War and British Narrative Imagination

The Gulf War of 1990–1991 did not mark the first major post–Cold War conflict involving coalition forces, including substantial British participation. Media saturation and political discourse shaped public perceptions, often formed through strategic and technological prowess. British fiction responding to this conflict largely echoes these themes, positioning Iraq within narratives of intrigue, intelligence, and geopolitical maneuver.

Although the Gulf War's comparatively brief duration and rapid military conclusion made it less emotionally established in public memory compared to later conflicts, its representation in literature shows early attempts to struggle with the war's meaning and implications. In this context, fiction did not simply conserve the cultural memory of the Gulf War, it launched the critical work of unoccupied its premature narrative conclusion.

British fiction of this period did not only reflect contemporary concerns, but it echoed the distant British lens that established the questions of national identity, military legitimacy, and global influence. Frequently, Iraq becomes a narrative proxy for interrogating British global power, political identity, and military strategy. In this context, fiction tends to prioritize geopolitical frameworks over the lived experience of Iraqis, exposing how cultural memory of war often arranges within dominant public narratives.

Comparative Perspectives and Transnational Memory



A critical comparative study shows that narrative has an important divergence not merely in memory work but also as an aesthetic ideology in cultural context. As a good example of American war literature, Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* shows the subjective experience of soldiers. Frequently, he foregrounds soldier experience and psychological trauma, giving embodied reflections on war Iraqi literature, while often untranslated, tends to reflect conflict through spatial and communal memory, articulating war's impact on daily life, social networks, and cultural continuity.

By contrast, such British fiction frequently mediates between these patterns — compounding strategic analysis with ethical representation — but it rarely occupies the embodied Iraqi perspective to the extent seen in Iraqi narratives. Understanding these differences underscores that cultural memory is plural and contested, traversing national and linguistic boundaries rather than adhering to a single narrative frame.

The Iraq War: Occupation and Ethical Reckoning

The 2003 invasion of Iraq did not simply introduce an extended military engagement. It showed the far-reaching with British political culture and public consciousness. The decision was very complex to join the US army. The controversy over having biological weapons claims, and the human cost of that invasion stimulated substantial debate. Therefore, fiction emerging from this context often reflects moral ambiguity, ethical uncertainty, and the challenge of translating geopolitical events into personal narratives. In addressing Iraq, British novelists often navigate between strategic discourse and human story, attempting to relate between public knowledge and private experience. Consequently, British war fiction turned into a crucial site by which narrative is rebuilt through private concern, demonstrating what is understood as meaningful and what is known politically.

Case Study 1: The Fist of God by Frederick Forsyth

One of the most argumentative works in modern British English fiction is *The Fist of God* (1994) by Frederick Forsyth, by which he focuses his narrative on the wars of Iraq (1991, 2003). Through a thrilled and well-structured foreground, the story investigates the establishment of how the British intelligence worked with the operations strategy and coalition during the Gulf War. Furthermore, the narrative of the fiction emphasizes on the British agent Mike Martin who works secretly to reveal the danger of the weapon capability.

“Intelligence is the art of knowing what your enemy does not want you to know” (Forsyth, 1994). In this quote, Martin discusses the strategy used by Saddam Hussein's regime in using super weapons against the international coalition ruled



by the US government. It shows the limits and epistemology of the British intelligence system. Though Forsyth demonstrates his narrative to construct his fiction about Iraq.

However, the novel exposes the emphasis as a wide ideological framework in which intelligence jobs are apparently related to strategic and moral authority. The novel fosters the observation of Western countries, intervention, and interpretation, placing British intelligence as ethically reliable and justified. In building on, the story rebuilds the narrative hierarchy, it depicts the picture of Iraq as a dark place which entirely requires changing its external construct; while British operatives function as mediators of truth. In the following statement, Forsyth encapsulates the epistemological uncertainty underpinning both intelligence operations and their narrative representation "In war, nothing is ever exactly what it seems" (Forsyth, 1994). Moreover, some moments from the perspectives of cultural memory develop how narratives of the Gulf War are constructed by merely objective truth rather than by mediated interpretations, relating with Assmann's (2011) argument that collective memory is shaped through reflectional frameworks rather than direct experiences.

Forsyth's thriller demonstrates Iraq as a theatre of strategy rather than a home for people. However, the plot stresses on British intelligence officer Mike Martin and the coalition's efforts to uncover Iraq's hidden weapons. While the narrative is praised for its technical precision, it systematically benefits Western perspective, depicting Iraqi characters as plot devices rather than agents. Critically, this choice shapes the cultural memory of the Gulf War as a technically managed, morally sanctioned endeavor: "The novel's descriptions of intelligence operations and military strategy frame the Gulf War as a triumph of Western planning and technological mastery" (Cullen, 1994).

Memory & Narrative Focus

Forsyth argues that narrative in his fiction can actively work to participate in forming cultural memory. The story shows how the British intelligence participated in the international coalition to promote the role played by the British army during the Gulf War. Furthermore, the fiction demonstrates the high-level planning, strategy and the high technology of the British agency in relation with the other parts of the government to depict an excellent image about Britain during the war. This reflects a wide cultural memory in which the Gulf War is understood and remembered inside British society, as a fight against terrorists and tyranny to demonstrate the high technology and strategy of Western countries have.

The novel's portrayal of Iraq is mediated through Western epistemologies; Iraqi characters often lack fully advanced interiority, serving narrative functions rather than acting as ethically autonomous figures. This raises questions about the



extent to which cultural memory can ethically represent a foreign landscape: is the focus on coalition efforts at the expense of Iraqi subjectivity? Such narrative choices influence how readers remember the conflict.

The consequences of the narrative are well-structured to demonstrate that the aim of the coalition is to justify the war against the regime and to privilege the coalition and the command efficiency. In this context, the epistemological framework of the fiction arranges with broader Western discourse that renders war legible through system rather than subject.

In the context of Iraq, some of the Iraqi citizens emphasize on the oral evidence and historical account that marginalize within the imaginative construction. Such scholarships like Haider Al-Essawi (2009), alongside some of Iraqi narrative collections and testimonial literature focus on what Forsyth forgot to mention them precisely in his fiction: the immediacy of fear, fragmentation of daily life, the collapse of the infrastructure, and the psychological and social enduring of the consequences of the aerial bombardment. Therefore, these counter-narratives challenge the strategic abstraction of war by re-embedding it in human experiences, in showing the limits and exclusions of British fictional memory.

Forsyth's *The Fist of God* contributes to understanding the remembrance of the Gulf War with a contest over memory. While Iraqi narratives focus on what to be embodied ethically and charged memory, as a foreground for voice and experience which such fictional stories systematically sideline.

Ethics of Representation

Forsyth in his fiction has used multifaceted approaches to apply the ethical implications. It is very clear that the fiction engages readers with some geopolitical complexities, morality, stakes of war, and inspiring reflection strategy. On the other hand, what the Western narratives did during or after the war is they might marginalize the Iraqi lived experiences to increase one-sided memory of the war and conflict. Thus, Narrative ethics requires very attention to such imbalance. It demands also to assign agency and voice inside texts to impede simplification of non-Western subjects.

In fiction, the act of narrating Iraq from a British vantage point requires navigating ethical responsibilities: to avoid reducing Iraqi characters to plot devices, to acknowledge the human consequences of war, and to resist replicating dominant political discourses without critique.

Thus, *The Fist of God* contributes to participating in cultural memory, it does so in ways that increase the Western paradigms of war, rather than challenging them. The memory it constructs is one of managerial control and intellectual mastery, not of human consequence and moral complexity.



Case Study 2: Improvisations in British Fiction: Jonathan Coe and the Gulf War

As *The Fist of God* symbolizes a direct engagement with Iraq, other British novels intersect indirectly with Iraq's cultural memory. Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* (1994), is another fiction in British literature satirizes British politics and society in the leadup to the Gulf War. The fiction did not focus exclusively on Iraq, it has a critique of political elites and media complicity to offer insight to the cultural climate constructing British public memory of the conflict.

In the following quote, Coe satirizes the Britain policy and their coalition with the US to invade Iraq: "The truth is, nobody wants to hear about suffering unless it's wrapped up in something that entertains them". While this quote shows the rigidity and tyranny of the international coalition against weak countries like Iraq, Coe exposes this in his fiction to satirizing how Britain manipulates media, he also has a direct critique to relate it with narrative: "We live in a world where the powerful manipulate the weak, and the weak are told it's their own fault." (Coe, 1994).

Coe, unlike Forsyth, criticizes British political culture in its collation with the Wars of Iraq. What Coe did in his fiction is not using Iraq as a central setting in the fiction. He treated public and cultural memory through manufacturing mechanisms. Thus, the texts establish the foreground of the domestic process that constructs war perception, elite self-interest, media complicity, and ideological framing. There is a direct lampoon on the media elites and British policy: "whose self-serving narratives obscure the ethical stakes of conflict" (Coe, 1994).

Coe's work uses satire to question how national narratives are constructed and disseminated. In doing so, it engages with cultural memory by foregrounding the domestic political processes that influence international action, including Britain's role in the Gulf. Fiction like this underscores that cultural memory does not only reside in direct depictions of war but also in the socio-political contexts that produce and sustain public understanding.

Coe's satirical approach reveals how cultural memory is not monolithic; it is subject to contestation within the literary field. Coe dramatizes the ethical failures of political actors whose decisions materially shape war outcomes. Such representation problematizes the celebratory memory of military engagement and foregrounds the moral consequences of policy choices.

Through a direct satire, the fiction engages narrative ethics by implicating British political culture in collective memory construction. It challenges readers to recognize the ethical stakes of war narratives — not just as historical records but as practices of moral evaluation.



Post-2003 British Fiction and Ethical Narratives

Some of the sustained literary interests are created by the 2003 Iraq occupation. Though, such British novels are still limited to treat the setting and characters of the Iraq wars. Many narratives of British fiction come from the combat experiences and psychological trauma of the American authors. Nevertheless, British novels engage with the ethical dimensions of the war through diverse narrative strategies — not always positioning the Iraqi experience at the centre, but often interrogating moral and political consequences.

Due to the relative scarcity of British novels fully set in Iraq post-2003, comparative analysis highlights the ethical stakes of representation. They recognized the imbalance between British and Iraqi narrative production — where Iraqi voices are more likely to emerge in Iraqi-authored texts — clarifies the importance of transnational memory frameworks.

Some studies show how Iraq fiction examines war memory in different ways. Very often Iraqi fiction embed occupation and violence within everyday life and urban landscape, by producing narrative architecture that shows trauma space and memory.

Comparative Perspectives & Transnational Memory

Comparing British fiction with Iraqi and American narratives reveals important divergences in memory work and ethical focus. American war fiction tends to emphasize soldiers' firsthand experiences and psychological consequences of combat. Veteran authors produce works focused on trauma, guilt, and reintegration, exploring the emotional landscape of war from an insider perspective.

Through studying Iraqi fiction, some critics find that some of the literary works are untranslated into English. Most of the themes of Iraqi literature are about the daily impact of wars, displacement, and the lived experience within the zone. Moreover, the treatment of texts reflect the historical representation embodied through mapped trauma that is based on the fabric of community.

By contrast, British fiction contributes to examining transnational memory by studying the British conceptualization of Iraqi context to world readers. In addition, British fiction positions some traditions to blend such strategic perspectives with representative inquiry. Though it may not give a very deep understanding of the Iraqi civilian memory as Iraqi text.

Ethical Representation: Otherness and Agency

Otherness in Narrative



Otherness is the most ethical challenge in reflecting war and its cultural aftermath. Its linguistic, cultural, and historical may be far away from the experience of the author's own. Sensitivity, respect, and refusal are the call of the narrative ethics in reducing such characters to stereotypes. One of the responsibilities of fiction is to balance between ethical obligation and storytelling to produce nuanced, and multidimensional characters.

Thus some of the British novels about Iraq often struggle with this balance. When narratives prioritize Western strategic perspectives or fail to develop Iraqi characters' interior lives, they risk increasing reductive images. Ethical narration should strive for reflection that acknowledges agency, complexity, and shared humanity.

Discussion: The Politics of Memory

In the context of policy, cultural memory is an inherently political process, constructed by power. It is narrated, remembered, and competed through various ideological forces inside societies. Such institutions like journalism, media, state rhetoric, and literature all participate in this memory ecology. Recent studies demonstrated that cultural memory of the Iraq wars is negotiated by terrain, formed not merely by official narratives but by artistic production and public discourse.

In this respect, British fiction has a double role in the landscape. It plays a recessive and interventionist role rather than a reflective one. It depicts the political milieu in which war decisions were made and contributes to longer-term memory constructions that reach readers long after media coverage fades. Thus, literary analysis of war narratives serves not merely as an aesthetic purpose but also as an ethical and historical one. Literary reflection of Iraq wars must be analyzed in the light of ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

The article has studied the engagement of modern British fiction with Iraq's cultural memory and narrative ethics. Through a close reading and key examples such as *The Fist of God* and broader discussion of post-2003 narrative strategies, it has investigated that British literature actively constructs collective memory of Iraq's wars, even as it negotiated with ethical representation of otherness and trauma. As the British narratives might be distinguished from Iraqi or American ones in focus and perspective, they contribute to a transnational memory that helps the global audiences understand conflict.

Future research could benefit comparative analysis with Iraqi-authored fiction and further exploration of how multilingual and diasporic narratives enrich understanding of war memory. Furthermore, investigating narrative ethics across



genre boundaries — including television, film, and graphic narratives — may allow to deepen more insight into understanding in a global context the cultural memory of Iraq.

The article argues that studying British fiction contributes to understanding the cultural memory of Iraq, it is structured through the tension built between empathy, critique, representation, responsibility, and simplicity. Thus the article demonstrates that it is essentially to understand the cultural memory of Iraq in light of ethical perspectives without non-alignment, to circulate and produce it as a global cultural phenomenon.

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