



EXAMINING CULTURAL MEMORY, COLONIAL HISTORIES, AND HERITAGE PRESERVATION IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THERE ARE RIVERS IN THE SKY*: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024) is a trans-historical novel that connects ancient Mesopotamia, Victorian London, and contemporary Iraq and Britain through the recurring motif of water and the survival of cultural memory. This article examines how the novel represents cultural memory, colonial histories, and heritage preservation from a postcolonial perspective. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the "third space," and postcolonial approaches to cultural memory and heritage, the study employs qualitative close textual analysis. Particular attention is given to Arthur Smyth's encounter with Mesopotamian antiquities, Narin's experience as a Yazidi girl facing displacement and cultural violence, and Zaleekhah's relationship with water, memory, and inherited history. The analysis argues that Shafak destabilizes conventional distinctions between Western "discoverers" and Eastern "objects of discovery" by exposing the unequal histories through which cultural artifacts enter Western museums. The novel also presents memory as a form of resistance against colonial erasure, religious persecution, displacement, and environmental destruction. Water functions as an alternative archive that survives political borders and human attempts to control history. Recent scholarship has similarly identified the novel's concerns with identity, hybridity, water agency, and postcolonial cultural negotiation (Kanwal et al.; Rehman et al.; Muzaffar). The article concludes that *There Are Rivers in the Sky* transforms historical fiction into a form of cultural remembrance, asking not only who preserves the past but also who possesses the authority to interpret, display, and narrate it.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Cultural Identity, Cultural Memory, Elif Shafak, Heritage Preservation, Postcolonialism.*

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1. Introduction

Literature often is the forum for the return of suppressed histories to public view. Historical fiction is especially good at contesting official history since it can bring individual lives, collective memories, material objects, landscapes, and forgotten communities to counter dominant historical narratives. *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, written by Elif Shafak, is an extremely notable case in point. The novel, released in 2024, spans centuries and continents from ancient Nineveh to Victorian London, to present-day Turkey and Iraq, to today's London. Situated in three distinct time periods and across different geographical, religious and social settings, the three main characters, Arthur Smyth, Narin and Zaleekhah, are bound together by water and by the culture and traditions of Mesopotamia. According to the publisher, the novel is a story of “one lost poem, two great rivers, and three remarkable lives” due to “a single drop of water” (*“There Are Rivers in the Sky”*).

The novel's main focus is thus not so much the history itself as the manner in which history is recalled, appropriated, forgotten, transmitted, and reconstructed. It is a book that rests on the Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest literary text of which fragments trace their way from Ancient Mesopotamia to nineteenth-century European scholarship and to the minds of characters in the present era. The poem's movement echoes the novel's movement: cultural knowledge goes from one place to another, but the circumstances are not equal to cross the borders. The novel examines the question of who may possess the right to preserve and interpret the past in the context of archaeological excavation, museum collection, imperial expansion, scholarship, migration, religious persecution, and environmental destruction.

The issue of cultural ownership is particularly relevant. The novel constantly explores the issue of what happens when objects from colonized or politically precarious areas become property of the more powerful western institutions. This concern is similarly reflected in the reactions to the novel in our own day. In *“There Are Rivers in the Sky”* (Snider), Library Journal calls the book a “perceptive exploration of the theft of artifacts, war, colonialism, environmental crises, and genocide,” while Mary Beard writes that the book “raises the question of 'who owns the past' in a very nuanced way” (qtd. in *“There Are Rivers in the Sky”*).

This article suggests that Shafak's approach to cultural heritage is essentially postcolonial in its aim to critique the inequalities of the production and circulation of cultural objects, historical narratives, and cultural identities. The novel challenges the notion of heritage as a neutral set of objects that exist in the past. The novel views heritage as a field of contestation of power. Excavating an artifact, naming it, carrying it, showing it, analyzing it and claiming it, are political questions. The novel instead is more than an account of the ancient civilizations' celebration. It raises the question of the

ethical implications of saving a culture and at the same time taking away the artifacts that would otherwise remain in the hands of the people who created them.

More recent scholarship has started to discuss other aspects of the novel connected with this. Kanwal, Anam and Hayat explore identity crisis and cultural hybridity with Stuart Hall, Will Kymlicka and Homi Bhabha, focusing on the characters' attempts at cultural belonging (Kanwal et al.). Rehman, Qasim and Zia also draw upon Bhabha's notions of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence and the third space to explain the fragmentations of belonging in this novel (Rehman et al.). In the novel, Muzaffar's 2025 study (following the post humanism perspective) focuses on the agency of water and the interconnections between human and nonhuman worlds. In the present study, these discussions are continued by incorporating cultural memory, colonial archaeology and heritage preservation within one postcolonial discourse.

1.1. Problem Statement

This study raises the central question of the relationship between cultural heritage and historical memory and institutional power, which are not necessarily equal. Colonial systems often entailed the removal, categorization, exegesis, and exhibition of cultural products of colonized or otherwise politically marginalized peoples. The preservation of these items in museums or archaeological sites can lead to their removal from their cultural and community context as well as their original location.

Edward Said's idea of Orientalism is especially germane given that Western institutions typically built up knowledge of the East in systems of representation that were closely tied to power (Said). *There Are Rivers in the Sky* thus does not only pose the question about preserving artifacts, but questions about who owns the right to interpret and represent them.

The novel takes this and goes beyond the material. Religious practices, oral traditions, sacred landscapes, collective memories, and community identities are also considered to be elements of cultural heritage. In the case of Narin, the displacement and persecution have been a threat to cultural continuity even in the face of the survival of historical objects.

The problem can therefore be summarized as follows: How do colonial structures influence the preservation, interpretation, ownership, and transmission of cultural memory and heritage?

1.2. Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. **Examine** the representation of cultural memory and historical identity in *There Are Rivers in the Sky*.
2. **Analyze** the novel's representation of colonial archaeology, museums, and the ownership of cultural heritage.

3. **Investigate** how displacement and cultural violence affect the preservation of living cultural heritage, particularly through Narin's narrative.
4. **Interpret** the symbolic function of water as a medium of memory, continuity, resistance, and cultural connection.
5. **Evaluate** how Shafak challenges dominant colonial narratives of cultural ownership and historical representation through a postcolonial perspective.

1.3. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does *There Are Rivers in the Sky* represent cultural memory and historical identity?
2. How does Shafak critique colonial archaeology, museum culture, and the institutional ownership of cultural heritage?
3. How does the novel represent displacement and cultural violence as threats to living cultural heritage?
4. In what ways does water function as a metaphor for memory, continuity, resistance, and cultural connection?
5. How does the novel challenge dominant colonial narratives of cultural ownership and historical representation?

1.4. Significance of the Study

The study is important because the scholarship on *There Are Rivers in the Sky* is still in the process of development. The novel has been recently studied along the notions of identity crisis and cultural hybridity with focus on the characters' struggle for belonging and cultural identity (Kanwal et al.). Rehman, Qasim, and Zia also use the ideas of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence and the third space to explore the sense of fractured cultural belonging (Rehman et al.).

Other recent scholarship has focused on the agency of water and novel's problematization of human-centred approaches to nature (Muzaffar). This study takes these approaches further by combining cultural memory, colonial histories and heritage preservation into a cohesive postcolonial analysis.

2. Literature Review

Postcolonial literary theory focuses on the political, cultural, psychological and epistemological implications of colonialism. The book *Orientalism* by Edward Said is one of the seminal texts on the topic. Said argues that Western representations of the East were not merely descriptive but were embedded in systems of power through which the Orient was constructed as an object of Western knowledge, representation, and authority. This point of view is directly applicable to *There Are Rivers in the Sky*. Arthur's interest in Mesopotamian culture is real, but his academic reconstruction of it is in the context of

19th century British institutions. The novel thus makes the admiration/appropriation connection more complex.

The importance of this issue in archaeology is especially great because archaeological excavation is not only a process of recovering historical knowledge, but also a process of transferring cultural materials from one geographical context to another. Shafak leverages Arthur's tale to reveal this paradox. The concept of hybridity presented by Homi K. Bhabha is useful to consider in understanding the novel's depiction of cultural identity. Bhabha insists on an idea that cultural identity is not a fixed category, or pure, but is created through interaction, translation and negotiation (Bhabha).

This can be especially significant to Zaleekhah, whose identity is defined by transnational travel, cultural traditions and British life. But Narin's removal also raises the issue of cultural identity and homeland. Kanwal et al. believe that Shafak is using the lives of her characters to examine cultural hybridity, identity crisis, minority identity and belonging. Rehman, Qasim and Zia also show how the novel's characters navigate the spaces of cultural ambivalence and hybridity (Rehman et al.).

This study is an extension of this discussion, as it also relates to hybridity and cultural memory. Cultural identities are not only being negotiated in contemporary encounters but also include inherited memories, histories, traditions and attachments to place. The model of cultural memory by Jan Assmann is helpful for outlining how societies transmit collective memory in texts, rituals, monuments, institutions and material objects. Cultural memory helps a community to hold onto the past through generations (Assmann).

There are several memorials of culture in Shafak's novel. The text of the Epic of Gilgamesh symbolises textual memory, the archeological objects material memory, the Yazidi rituals embodied memory, and water ecological and symbolic memory.

The vulnerability of cultural memory is also uncovered, as in the novel. Cultural knowledge may be disrupted by war, displacement, colonial extraction, environmental destruction and institutional appropriation. The novel has been the subject of much recent study, centered on the themes of identity, hybridity and water. Kanwal et al. explore the concept of cultural hybridity and identity crisis with a focus on the characters' sense of belonging and cultural identity (Kanwal et al.).

Using the theoretical lens of Bhabha, Rehman et al. explore notions of fragmented belonging, hybridity, mimicry and the third space in the novel. In his recent work, Muzaffar discusses water as a “beyond human” force and maintains that Shafak counters anthropocentric assumptions by using the novel to depict water (Muzaffar). The connection between water and memory is also a theme of modern literary criticism. According to the Guardian, the novel is based on “aquatic memory” and has a century-spanning parallel between the characters “*There Are Rivers in the Sky*”.

The present study focuses on a similar yet relatively neglected aspect of cultural heritage preservation, namely from a postcolonial perspective. This is an argument that posits that the novel's interest in memory and water must be linked to questions of colonial archaeology, who owns the museum, who is displaced and who is the authority on the past.

3. Theoretical Framework

Said's theory of Orientalism offers the main methodology in analyzing the interaction between the knowledge of the West and its cultural heritage in the East. Orientalism illustrates the ways in which an image of the East can be linked to forms of power and control (Said). The excavation and study of Mesopotamia is thus considered in this novel, not just as a scholarly enterprise but as a practice embedded in a historical imperial framework.

The characters who occupy the space between cultural, geographical and historical contexts are analyzed using Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Zaleekhah's transnational identity and Narin's displacement experience are ideal for this analysis. Hybridity enables the study to see the idea of identity as a process instead of a cultural category (Bhabha). This cultural memory concept is used to analyze how texts, artefacts, people, rituals, landscapes and community can transmit historical identity across generations (Assmann). Thus, the work of Gilgamesh, archaeological artifacts, Yazidi cultural practices and water can be analysed as various methods of memory transmission.

4. Research Method

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design based on close textual analysis. The method is appropriate because the research investigates literary representation, symbolism, characterization, narrative structure, cultural memory, and ideological meaning.

4.2. Primary Text

The primary source is Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024). The study focuses on the novel's three major narrative strands involving Arthur Smyth, Narin, and Zaleekhah.

4.3. Textual Selection

Selected passages were examined according to their relevance to the study's five objectives. Particular attention was given to passages concerning:

- the *Epic of Gilgamesh*;
- King Ashurbanipal and the library of Nineveh;
- Arthur's archaeological interests;
- the British Museum and cultural artifacts;
- Narin's Yazidi identity and displacement;

- Lalish and sacred water;
- Zaleekhah's relationship with the Thames;
- water and memory;
- cultural loss and environmental transformation.

5. Data Analysis

The study employs thematic close reading. The selected passages were interpreted according to five major analytical categories: cultural memory, colonial knowledge, heritage preservation, displacement, and water symbolism.

The textual analysis was then connected to Said's Orientalism, Bhabha's hybridity, and Assmann's cultural-memory theory. Recent scholarship was incorporated to situate the findings within contemporary research on Shafak's novel.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the most critical source of cultural memory for the novel. It continues to be of enduring cultural significance, having been left behind in the ancient lands of Mesopotamia and retained in contemporary literary and archaeological discourse. The poet also confronts assumptions about civilization that are Eurocentric. The fact that it ever was produced shows that there were well-developed literary traditions in Mesopotamia long before European literary institutions came into being. The fact that the poem has survived in pieces is significant. Memory is more often than not incomplete; it lives on in fragments of texts, objects, stories, interpretation. Shafak is attempting to show that the past is a process that can only be reconstructed continually by this fragmentation of survival.

The Epic of Gilgamesh therefore is a cultural resistance. It is a testament to the fact that Mesopotamian history has not vanished, and that the voices of the past continue to voice their opinions in the present day. The relationship of scholarship and Imperial power is complex, represented by Arthur. He is genuinely interested in Mesopotamian history but his intellectual growth takes place in Victorian Britain, which was at the heart of imperial expansionism. The novel thus poses the question: can there be any cultural admiration without cultural appropriation?

The archaeological interests of Arthur are indicative of the nineteenth-century European enthusiasm for ancient civilizations. However, his access to Mesopotamian heritage is mediated by institutions that have the economic and political strength to excavate, transport, classify and display artifacts.

For Said, this connection is a good example of the way knowledge can lead to power. In the eyes of the Europeans, Mesopotamia is the focus of their scholarship, and European institutions are recognized as authorities to define the significance of the region's history. So Shafak is not against archaeology per se. Rather than that, she asks about the unequal institutional conditions of the production of archaeological knowledge.

The British Museum is an important symbolic space in the novel as it is a place of preservation and appropriation. While museums safeguard artifacts from physical harm, the museum also decides how the artifact is interpreted and displayed. The issue is then one of preservation versus ownership.

The subject is very prominent in the critique of the western institutions that take “our past, our memories” (Shafak). The statement goes beyond the material to the cultural identity. The possessive “our” implies a common understanding of heritage. A piece of carry-over equipment is not a thing in itself, but rather a container for people, places, stories and traditions. Shafak, therefore, questions the notion that an institution can claim an artefact simply by having the funds necessary to keep it alive. The story of Narin shows that cultural heritage is not confined to artefacts. By linking cultural memory with religion, family, sacred landscapes, rituals and community, her Yazidi identity is underscored. Her displacement poses a risk to living heritage as cultural practices rely on communities and places. Heritage can become dispersed when communities are relocated. This is significant in a postcolonial context, as colonial/postcolonial violence often results in displacement. The loss of homeland is a loss of cultural continuity also.

Narin's story thus extends the definition of heritage conservation. The preservation of an ancient artefact should not be considered adequate if the communities to which cultural traditions are linked continue to be at risk. One of the most succinct expressions of the novel's philosophy is the statement: “Water remembers” (Shafak). Water becomes a symbol of continuity in history, as it moves across borders and through political changes.

Water is also an anti-archive. Unlike museums and national institutions it doesn't need ownership. It is constantly traversing different geographical and historical areas. This means that water is a particularly potent symbol of post colonialism. Rivers do not respect the boundaries of the colonial states. This interpretation is supported by recent scholarship. Water exists outside of human-made constructions in the novel, as Muzaffar states. In the present study, I expand on this understanding by highlighting the role of water as a medium through which cultural memories are carried.

Zaleekhah's life speaks of the complexities of transnational cultural identity. Her life crossing one culture to another presents an example of how Bhabha states that identity is constantly negotiating in the space of cultural encounter. Her bond with water is especially important as she studies water scientifically, as well as experiencing its emotional and cultural aspects. She thus represents an intersectional subject where the scientific facts, the cultural memory, migration, and inherited identity all intermingle. This is in line with recent work that reads Shafak's characters in terms of hybridity and fractured belonging (Kanwal et al.; Rehman et al.).

Another aspect of the novel is the connection between the degradation of the environment and the loss of culture. In addition to their ecological functions, rivers are also important for the communities that rely on them, and can be altered by political and technological processes, displacing people. Both the Tigris and Thames are different times and places, but both illustrate that water has been linked to human life and culture. The environmental dimension reinforces the novel's post-colonial argument since the power institutions go through a different process of environmental change from the marginalized communities.

In this way, the preservation of the environment and that of the culture are linked together. Conservation of a cultural landscape must also involve the conservation of the ecological systems that support a community.

7. Findings

The analysis identifies five major findings:

1. **Cultural memory functions as resistance:** The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, religious traditions, family memories, and cultural narratives resist historical erasure.
2. **Colonial archaeology is represented as contradictory:** Archaeological scholarship can recover knowledge while participating in unequal systems of cultural extraction.
3. **Museums are contested sites of preservation:** Museums can protect artifacts while simultaneously separating them from their original communities and contexts.
4. **Water functions as a counter-archive:** Water symbolizes memory, continuity, movement, and resistance to political and geographical boundaries.
5. **Heritage is living rather than exclusively material:** The novel presents communities, rituals, sacred landscapes, stories, and identities as essential components of cultural heritage.

8. Conclusion

- In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, Elif Shafak explores the postcolonial questioning of cultural memory, colonial history and heritage preservation. The novel's various historical threads in Arthur, Narin and Zaleekhah intertwine ancient Mesopotamia and Victorian Britain with the present, showing how the historical is alive in contemporary identities.
- The study shows that Shafak is questioning the authority of the past's preservation, interpretation and possession, and questioning the conventional approaches to cultural heritage. The archaeological interests of Arthur demonstrate the paradox between the scholarly appreciation and colonial cultural extraction, and the tension between preservation and ownership is represented in the British Museum.

- Narin's experience shows that heritage can go beyond tangible objects. Persecution and displacement can threaten cultural and religious traditions, sacred places, family memories and community identities, which are all considered forms of living heritage. The water is the most significant metaphor in the novel for cultural memory. Shafak's metaphor of water as a bearer of memory defies institutional and national barriers and holds history to be fluid, connected, and constantly "rebuilt."
- The novel ultimately implies that heritage preservation is about more than just protecting artifacts. It means safeguarding communities, cultural practices, landscapes, memories and identities in which heritage can still have meaning. *There Are Rivers in the Sky* challenges the colonial ownership of history, and calls for a more inclusive and ethically conscious perception of cultural memory and heritage, thereby contributing to the vibrant postcolonial literature of the present.

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