

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Memory as Resistance: Nostalgia, Trauma, and the Narrative of History in Habib Abdulrab Sarori's *Suslov's Daughter***

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**Abstract**

This article examines Habib Abdulrab Sarori's *Suslov's Daughter* (2014, trans. 2017) through the lens of memory studies, arguing that the novel transforms personal remembrance into a mode of cultural resistance. Narrated retrospectively by Imran as a testimony to Death itself, the text weaves together nostalgia for Aden's cosmopolitan past, the trauma of South Yemen's socialist experiment, and the disillusionment following civil war and religious radicalization. By juxtaposing intimate memories of love, friendship, and loss with the violent upheavals of Yemeni history, Sarori destabilizes official narratives and foregrounds the affective dimensions of historical consciousness. The article explores how nostalgia functions not merely as sentimental longing but as a critical engagement with lost utopias, while trauma structures the silences, ruptures, and repetitions in the narrator's testimony. Ultimately, *Suslov's Daughter* positions memory as an act of resistance against erasure, authoritarian history, and ideological binaries, offering a counter-archive of Yemeni experience. In situating Sarori's novel within postcolonial debates on memory, nostalgia, and testimony, this study highlights the text's contribution to broader conversations on the politics of remembering in Arabic literature.

**Keywords:** Memory Studies, Trauma, Nostalgia, Yemeni Literature, Narrative of History

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Introduction**

Habib Abdulrab Sarori (b. 1956) stands as one of Yemen's most prominent contemporary writers whose fiction engages critically with questions of history, ideology, and memory. Trained as a computer scientist and a professor in Rouen, France since the early 1990s, Sarori writes across French and Arabic, producing a body of work that reflects both his cosmopolitan intellectual background and his rootedness in the tumultuous history of Yemen. His first novel, *La Reine Étripée* (1998), written in French, announced his dual interest in experimental narrative forms and political critique. This was followed by several Arabic works, among them *The Bird of Destruction* (2005), *Suslov's Daughter* (2014), *Arwa* (2017), and *The Last Hour* (2019), alongside collections of short stories and poetry. Across these texts, Sarori consistently explores how private lives are shaped by collective upheavals and how memory serves as both witness and resistance to violence and forgetting.

Among his works, *Suslov's Daughter* (Ibnat Suslov, 2014; trans. Elisabeth Jaquette, 2017) has achieved particular prominence, marking Sarori's international breakthrough. The novel's critical reception has highlighted its historical breadth, weaving together South Yemen's socialist experiment, the 1986 civil war, the unification and subsequent marginalization of the South, and the rise of Islamist radicalism. Its very title invokes the legacy of Mikhail Suslov, the Soviet ideologue, while embedding that legacy within Yemeni history through the figure of Hawiya (Faten), the daughter of a local Marxist ideologue. Her symbolic trajectory from childhood innocence to Salafi preacher encapsulates the ideological pendulum that has defined Yemen's modern history, moving between socialism and religious extremism. The narrator Imran's lifelong fascination with Hawiya becomes a lens through which political convulsions are refracted as intimate experiences of love, loss, and nostalgia.

At the structural level, the novel frames itself as a testimony addressed to Death, the "Reaper" who listens to Imran's retrospective account. This narrative device foregrounds questions of memory, testimony, and historical reckoning, while also situating the act of narration within a liminal space between life and afterlife. It is this centrality of memory at once personal, collective, and intergenerational that makes *Suslov's Daughter* particularly relevant to critical conversations in memory studies, postcolonial literature, and trauma theory. The text mobilizes nostalgia not as mere sentimental longing but as a form of critical remembrance, interrogating lost utopias and highlighting the ruptures between aspiration and lived history. At the same time, trauma manifests in silences, repetitions, and ruptured temporalities, reflecting the violence of ideological betrayals and civil wars that haunt both individual and collective consciousness.

This article argues that *Suslov's Daughter* transforms memory into a form of resistance, resistance to authoritarian erasure, to the official historiography of state and party, and to the ideological binaries that have polarized Yemeni society. By placing personal experience against the backdrop of larger historical shifts, Sarori destabilizes the linearity of history and offers instead a counter-archive of Yemeni experience that foregrounds the affective dimensions of remembrance.

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The novel's invocation of Aden's cosmopolitan past, its engagement with the traumas of socialist collapse, and its critique of religious radicalism all converge to position memory as a political act, a strategy of survival against cultural and historical annihilation.

In situating Sarori's text within broader debates on nostalgia, trauma, and testimony in postcolonial literature, this study seeks to demonstrate how *Suslov's Daughter* exemplifies the entanglement of the personal and the political in narrative form. It contributes to an understanding of how Arab literature grapples with questions of historical memory and ideological disillusionment, while also offering insights into the Yemeni context a context often marginalized in global literary scholarship. Ultimately, the novel illuminates how memory functions not only as mourning but as resistance: an act of preserving alternative histories, reimagining identity, and contesting the silences imposed by dominant powers.

**Nostalgia as Critical Memory**

In *Suslov's Daughter*, nostalgia operates not merely as longing for a lost past but as a critical lens through which the narrator interrogates both personal identity and collective history. Imran repeatedly recalls Aden's cosmopolitan modernity, framing memory as a resource against both authoritarian amnesia and Islamist retrenchment. He observes: "Adeni life, dear Reaper, was secular and modern in those days. Women didn't wear religious clothes. They were educated, worked, and took part in senior party leadership. There were co-ed schools. Books (especially progressive and revolutionary ones) were everywhere" (Sarori 201). This evocation of an open, cosmopolitan city resists the homogenizing narratives that reduce Yemen to tradition and conflict. Instead, memory preserves an alternative history in which Aden figures as a modern, pluralistic society.

At the same time, nostalgia is not depicted as naïve or restorative. It is reflective in the sense that Svetlana Boym describes: "Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones" (Boym xviii). Moreover, this reflective mode resists temporal closure, as Boym observes, "Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude" and seeks to take "sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars" (Boym 15). Imran's simultaneous longing for Aden and enchantment with Paris underscores this reflective mode. As he recalls: "Paris: the one city in the universe with the power to reshape everything about me. ... The strangest thing was that this new love, however intense, didn't detract from my feelings for Aden, or my ever-present memories of its customs, traditions, and every moment of its everyday. ... At every moment, a current flowed between opposite poles: Paris and Aden" (Sarori 122–23). This double nostalgia demonstrates how memory connects disparate geographies, refusing to reduce identity to either local rootedness or diasporic assimilation.

Significantly, Sarori's treatment of nostalgia aligns with Walter Benjamin's understanding of ruins and memory. Benjamin saw in ruins "allegories of thinking itself," suggesting that they "make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place" (qtd. in Boym, "Tatlin"). Imran's nostalgic gaze functions similarly, contemplating Aden's ruins not as romantic decay but as

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fragments of unrealized possibilities. The narrator's memory work exemplifies what Boym calls "ruinophilia"—a contemporary fascination with ruins that "tantaliz[es] us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time" ("Tatlin"). Yet unlike romantic ruinophilia, Imran's nostalgia maintains critical distance, acknowledging both the socialist experiment's promise and its violent collapse.

The novel's temporal complexity further reveals nostalgia's critical function. Imran's memories resist linear chronology, creating what Andreas Huyssen describes as a condition where "temporal boundaries have weakened" and "the past has become part of the present in ways simply unimaginable in earlier centuries" (Huyssen 57). This temporal instability is not merely formal but politically charged: by refusing historical closure, nostalgia keeps alive alternative possibilities. As Huyssen argues, "memory is always more than only the prison house of the past" (12), and Sarori's novel demonstrates how nostalgic memory can function as a form of resistance to authoritarian forgetting.

The personal affect of nostalgia is thus politicized. In contrast to state-sanctioned histories, Imran's memories create what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory"—an affective transmission of the past that sustains itself even when official narratives attempt to suppress it. Hirsch argues that such memory "is not mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (106). Moreover, as she notes, "these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 5). Imran's memories of Aden, refracted through the distance of Paris and the temporal frame of speaking to Death, exemplify this postmemorial dynamic: his nostalgia imaginatively sustains the memory of a cosmopolitan Yemen that official discourses have erased.

Crucially, the novel's nostalgic discourse operates through what Edward Said terms "affiliation" rather than mere "filiation." While filiation refers to "lines of descent in nature," affiliation involves "a process of identification through culture" (Said 174). Imran's nostalgic attachments transcend blood relations or ethnic boundaries, creating affiliative bonds with Aden's cosmopolitan culture, Parisian intellectual life, and transnational socialist ideals. This affiliative nostalgia challenges essentialist identity categories, embodying Said's insight that "No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points" (Said 336). Imran's nostalgic subjectivity refuses such categorical reductions, instead embracing what Said calls the "connections between things" (Said 186).

The novel also demonstrates how nostalgia functions as what Paul Connerton identifies as "habit-memory"—embodied practices that preserve cultural knowledge beyond conscious recollection. Connerton argues that communities sustain memory through "having the capacity to reproduce a certain performance" (Connerton 72), and Imran's nostalgic recollections often center on such embodied practices: the rhythms of Aden's café culture, the texture of socialist meetings, the physicality of revolutionary fervor. These habit-memories resist the "planned obsolescence" that Connerton sees as characteristic of modernity's forgetting mechanisms (Connerton 59), preserving

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alternative temporal rhythms against capitalist acceleration.

Furthermore, Sarori's nostalgic discourse anticipates José Muñoz's notion of "queer futurity," where marginalized subjects use memory not to restore the past but to imagine alternative futures. Muñoz argues that "queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (Muñoz 22). Similarly, Imran's nostalgia for Aden's cosmopolitanism functions as what Muñoz calls "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (Muñoz 1). The novel's nostalgic imagination opens possibilities for Yemen beyond the binary of socialist authoritarianism and Islamist fundamentalism.

Critics of Sarori's fiction have noted this function of nostalgia as counter-history. Contemporary Arabic literary scholarship demonstrates how "novels have begun to appear, side by side with religious books, in the main libraries, bookshops and kiosks," often "run by editors and columnists who came from the literary field, which is mostly dominated by the secular leftist intelligentsia of the country" (al-Rubaidi 46). *Suslov's Daughter* participates in this project by transforming nostalgia into a mode of resistance. Far from being a retreat into sentimentality, it becomes a deliberate act of cultural survival, preserving the affective textures of a cosmopolitan Aden that challenges both Islamist retrenchment and post-Cold War political erasures.

The novel's nostalgic strategy also employs what Benjamin calls "Messianic time"—moments when the linear progression of history is "blasted out of the homogeneous course of history" (Benjamin 261). Imran's nostalgic recollections function as such messianic interruptions, creating what Benjamin describes as "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin 255). Each memory of Aden's cosmopolitanism constitutes a momentary suspension of the present's totalizing narrative, opening space for alternative historical possibilities.

Thus, in *Suslov's Daughter*, nostalgia is inseparable from resistance. It is reflective, multidirectional, and politically charged, functioning not only as remembrance of a lost cosmopolitanism but also as a challenge to the silencing power of history written by victors. Through its affiliative rather than filiative structure, its embodied habit-memories, and its messianic interruptions of linear time, nostalgia becomes what Huyssen calls a practice of "productive remembering" that refuses to let "the fear of forgetting overwhelm us" (Huyssen 28). In this sense, nostalgia is memory's first strategy of defiance.

**Trauma and the Ruptures of Memory**

If nostalgia in *Suslov's Daughter* preserves a cosmopolitan vision of Aden, trauma disrupts and fractures memory, inscribing silences and disillusionment into the narrative. Imran's recollections are punctuated by episodes of violence, betrayal, and political collapse, where memory becomes not continuity but rupture.

The most significant trauma in the novel is the South Yemen Civil War of 1986, which devastated the socialist experiment and left lasting scars on its survivors. Imran recalls the ideological collapse with bitter clarity: "Ideals of socialism, internationalism, and the proletariat were just masks worn by illiterate Marxists. In reality, they were no more than barbaric, backwards tribes" (Sarori

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178). This statement marks a rupture in belief, exposing the betrayal of revolutionary ideals that once animated his youth. The violence of the civil war is remembered not only in terms of death tolls but also as a trauma that shattered the utopian promise of socialism, leaving disillusionment and bitterness.

Trauma also manifests in the fate of Hawiya (Faten), whose symbolic trajectory embodies Yemen's descent into ideological extremism. Initially remembered as the silent, angelic girl whose gaze haunts Imran's adolescence, Hawiya later reappears transformed: "Their only daughter endured it all: Hawiya, poor thing, neglected by her parents in their relentless daily struggle. She was left only with the dream of fleeing far from that hell" (Sarori 210). Eventually, she resurfaces as a Salafi preacher, symbolizing the traumatic ideological pendulum that swung Yemen from socialism to fundamentalism. Her transformation is not presented as a simple choice but as a survival strategy in the ruins of a collapsed political order. For Imran, this turn is deeply wounding, as it signifies the loss not only of a beloved figure but of an alternative future.

The novel frames trauma through its very form. Imran's narrative, addressed to Death, is fragmented and digressive, circling back to moments of loss and disillusionment. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (Caruth 153). This definition underscores how the rupture of trauma defies coherent narration, producing a reactive, recursive structure. Dominick LaCapra suggests that trauma's "insistent return" calls for a balance between acting out and working through, where "empathic unsettlement" allows historical wounds to resist closure (LaCapra 47). Imran's repeated returns to moments of betrayal—the civil war, the forced re-education of Riverhemp prostitutes, the Arab Spring's collapse—embody this dynamic, resisting premature reconciliation.

Scholars of Arabic literature have noted the centrality of such ruptures. Muhsin al-Musawi observes that "modern Arabic fiction turns increasingly to the scars of civil conflict, staging them as open wounds that refuse the closure of official history" (al-Rubaidi 228). Sarori's narrative aligns with this observation: trauma is not resolved but performed, woven into the act of storytelling itself. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize that "testimony is the process through which trauma is transmitted, linking individual suffering to collective memory" (Felman and Laub 74). Imran's confession to Death thus functions as testimonial rupture—bearing witness to events that official narratives omit.

Moreover, trauma in *Suslov's Daughter* is collective as well as personal. Imran's grief over Najaa—his French-Yemeni partner killed in a Paris terrorist bombing—is inseparable from his grief for Yemen's political collapse. He reflects that "Part of my life stopped that day, forever" (Sarori 154). This layering of personal and political loss demonstrates what Michael Rothberg terms "multidirectional memory," where "the remembrance of one history does not displace another but allows them to enter into a dialogical relation" (Rothberg 3). Najaa's death, linked to Islamist terrorism in France, resonates with Yemen's own struggles with religious extremism, turning trauma



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into a transnational condition.

Aleida Assmann argues that cultural trauma is preserved through “symbolic forms such as texts and rituals that survive temporal change” (Assmann 17). *Suslov’s Daughter* itself becomes such a symbolic form, encoding the ruptures of Yemen’s history into literary memory. By recording these traumatic fissures, the novel creates a cultural memory that resists state-sanctioned forgetting and insists on the ethical imperative to remember.

Through these fractured memories, *Suslov’s Daughter* illustrates that trauma is not only an individual wound but a historical condition. The novel testifies to the violence of ideological betrayal and civil war, while dramatizing trauma’s resistance to assimilation into linear narratives. In this way, memory becomes an act of survival, bearing witness to what official histories seek to silence.

**Narrative of History as Counter-Archive**

If nostalgia preserves alternative visions of the past and trauma inscribes rupture into memory, *Suslov’s Daughter* ultimately mobilizes both to construct a counter-narrative of Yemeni history. Rather than reproducing official accounts of revolution and unification, the novel situates historical experience within personal testimony, reimagining history as lived affect and embodied memory.

The structure of the novel itself foregrounds history as narrative contestation. Imran’s retrospective testimony is addressed to Death—a figure both impartial and inexorable—transforming the act of narration into a reckoning with history. As Imran admits: “Here we are, at the end of an era of scientific socialism, entering an era of immaturity, obscurantism, and self-destruction” (Sarori 41). This moment encapsulates the novel’s historical arc: from revolutionary optimism to ideological collapse and finally to the rise of religious extremism. By framing this trajectory as personal confession rather than historical chronicle, Sarori underscores the subjective and contested nature of historical memory.

The intertwining of love affairs with historical epochs further reinforces this reimagining of history. Each of Imran’s relationships marks a political moment: Hawiya embodies the socialist promise and its demise, Najaa reflects transnational solidarity and the trauma of Islamist terrorism, and later relationships signify the shifting landscape of Yemeni and global politics. As Muhsin al-Musawi notes, modern Arabic fiction often “writes the nation through the body, turning intimate relations into allegories of collective fate” (al-Rubaidi 233). *Suslov’s Daughter* exemplifies this strategy, as Imran’s intimate attachments become allegorical registers of Yemen’s historical transformations.

This method challenges conventional historiography by privileging subjective memory over official record. Aleida Assmann has argued that cultural memory often functions as a “counter-memory,” preserving those aspects of the past that states and institutions seek to suppress (Assmann 19). Sarori’s novel aligns with this, recording not only the “Seven Glorious Days” of revolution but also the betrayals, humiliations, and silences that followed. The narrator reflects on the erasure of women’s voices, the forced re-education of prostitutes, and the 1986 civil war’s brutality, all events

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marginal in official accounts but central in lived experience.

By situating history within embodied practice, the novel enacts Paul Connerton's observation that "memory must be performed, re-enacted, and communicated through ritual and habit" (Connerton 13). Imran's recollection of sitting in Aden's leftist cafés, chanting party slogans, and attending clandestine meetings becomes a form of ritual remembrance, resisting historical erasure. At the same time, the narrative resists closure. Imran admits: "Honestly, I don't understand anything. I'd be grateful, dear Reaper, if you'd help me grasp it all by explaining a thing or two" (Sarori 44). This confession of incomprehension reflects the impossibility of mastering history, suggesting instead that history must be narrated as fragments, questions, and unresolved traumas. In this way, *Suslov's Daughter* performs what Hayden White calls the "emplotment" of history—the transformation of chaotic events into narrative form—while simultaneously exposing its limits (White 9).

Furthermore, the novel's counter-archive echoes Michel-Rolph Trouillot's insistence that "silences enter the production of history at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation, the moment of fact assembly, the moment of fact retrieval, and the moment of retrospective significance" (Trouillot 26). Sarori's text intervenes at each of these moments: by testifying to suppressed episodes, assembling them into narrative form, retrieving forgotten voices, and reassigning significance to marginalized experiences.

Thus, the novel constructs history as memory: fragmented, affective, and resistant. It reclaims silenced experiences from oblivion without reducing them to a singular truth. Instead, Sarori's text opens a space for multiplicity, where nostalgia and trauma coexist as competing registers of historical experience. This counter-archive not only challenges authoritarian erasures but also affirms the capacity of literature to serve as testimony.

**Conclusion**

Habib Abdulrab Sarori's *Suslov's Daughter* demonstrates how memory functions as resistance in a context marked by ideological betrayal, political violence, and cultural erasure. Through the interwoven registers of nostalgia and trauma, the novel challenges dominant historiographies and constructs a counter-archive of Yemeni experience. Nostalgia, as the novel depicts it, is not a sentimental longing for a vanished past but a reflective act that preserves Aden's cosmopolitan modernity against narratives of decline. Trauma, meanwhile, reveals the ruptures of history, inscribing the violence of civil war, ideological disillusionment, and terrorism into the very form of the narrative. Together, these two modes converge in a historical vision that resists closure, acknowledging both the utopian aspirations of revolution and the abyssal losses of its aftermath. By staging its narrative as a confession to Death, *Suslov's Daughter* underscores the urgency of memory as testimony. The personal becomes inseparable from the political, as love affairs double as historical allegories and private recollections become vehicles for collective remembrance. As Aleida Assmann argues, cultural memory "ensures continuity in the face of discontinuity" (19), and Sarori's novel exemplifies this function: it gathers fragments of Yemen's fractured history and reanimates



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them through literary form.

Ultimately, Sarori offers not a definitive account of Yemen's past but a resistant narrative, one that foregrounds what official historiography silences. In doing so, *Suslov's Daughter* affirms the power of literature to bear witness, to resist oblivion, and to preserve the complexities of lived experience. Memory here is more than recollection; it is a political and ethical act — a refusal to let history be written solely by those in power, and a testament to the enduring capacity of storytelling to resist erasure.

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