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Cultural Memory, Colonial Erasure, and the Reconstruction of Identity in Rachid Boudjedra's *A Thousand and One Year of Nostalgia*

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Abstract

This article re-examines Rachid Boudjedra's *A Thousand and One Year of Nostalgia* through the interconnected concepts of cultural memory, colonial erasure, and postcolonial identity. Rather than treating history as a static background to the narrative, the study approaches remembrance, forgetting, naming, and historical reference as active mechanisms through which the novel constructs and contests identity. Using a qualitative close-reading method informed by cultural-memory studies and postcolonial criticism, the analysis focuses on four interrelated dimensions: the social amnesia of Al-Manama, the symbolic function of Ibn Khaldoun, the colonial deprivation and distortion of family names, and the ambivalent encounter between inherited cultural memory and economic modernity. The analysis argues that Mohammed, the man without a surname, embodies a subject whose identity has been fractured by both colonial inscription and communal disconnection from the past. His return to manuscripts, genealogy, and Arab-Islamic intellectual memory is therefore not a nostalgic retreat but a search for historical intelligibility. At the same time, the novel refuses a closed or essentialist identity. Through the economic transformation associated with Shajarat al-Durr and the town's encounter with external capital and cultural difference, Boudjedra presents modernity as simultaneously enabling and threatening. The novel ultimately frames identity as a negotiated process in which historical memory, cultural inheritance, colonial trauma, and openness to change continually



interact. This reading contributes to scholarship on Algerian narrative by showing how Boudjedra converts memory into a critical instrument for reconstructing the postcolonial self.

Keywords: cultural memory; colonial erasure; postcolonial identity; historical consciousness; Rachid Boudjedra; Algerian novel

1. Introduction

The modern Algerian novel has repeatedly returned to history because the past remains inseparable from questions of cultural belonging, colonial experience, language, social transformation, and national memory. In this context, historical reference does not merely supply material for fictional reconstruction. It also enables the novelist to interrogate the processes through which communities remember themselves, forget parts of their past, and negotiate identities under changing political and cultural conditions. Rachid Boudjedra's fiction is particularly relevant to this problem. His work consistently engages collective and individual memory, family history, political contradiction, and the cultural consequences of colonialism, often through formally experimental narrative strategies. His novel *A Thousand and One Year of Nostalgia* provides a particularly productive site for examining the relationship between historical consciousness and the construction of identity.

Earlier readings of the novel have emphasized its dialogue with historical discourse, its mythic and cultural spaces, and its concern with identity. Boukhalfa (2009), for example, considers the text's interaction with historical writing, while Sari-Ali Hikmet (2009) explicitly approaches the novel through the problem of identity in mythical space. More recent work has also foregrounded the relationship between Islamic history and the implicit structures of identity in the novel (Boubasla & Selaimia, 2024). These approaches establish the centrality of history to Boudjedra's narrative project. Nevertheless, the specific mechanisms through which historical memory is preserved, distorted, erased, or reactivated deserve further attention. In particular, the loss of the protagonist's surname, the community's indifference to Ibn Khaldoun, the repeated return to manuscripts, and the town's contradictory encounter with modernity can be read together as parts of a larger struggle over cultural memory.

The present study therefore shifts the analytical emphasis from identifying forms of identity to examining how identity is produced through acts of remembering and forgetting. It asks the following question: how does Boudjedra transform cultural memory and colonial erasure into narrative mechanisms for reconstructing postcolonial identity? Three subsidiary concerns organize the discussion. First, how does the social amnesia of Al-Manama expose a rupture between the community and its Arab-Islamic historical inheritance? Second, how does the colonial manipulation of names produce a crisis of personal and collective identity? Third, how does the novel negotiate the tension

between cultural continuity and modernity without reducing identity either to a fixed heritage or to complete assimilation into the external world?

Methodologically, the article adopts qualitative textual analysis and close reading. The primary text is read alongside selected concepts from cultural-memory studies and postcolonial criticism. The analysis does not treat these theoretical perspectives as rigid categories imposed on the novel; rather, they provide a vocabulary for understanding the novel's recurring concerns with memory, historical transmission, naming, cultural rupture, and the ambivalence of modernity. The argument proceeds from the assumption that literary narrative can function as a site in which historical knowledge is reorganized, contested, and imaginatively reconnected to present identity.

2. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

2.1 Identity as a Historical and Relational Process

Identity is often discussed as if it were a stable possession that individuals or communities either preserve or lose. Such a formulation, however, is insufficient for a novel in which the self is continually shaped by historical knowledge, social recognition, colonial violence, and cultural change. Mucchielli (1993) stresses the changing and developmental character of identity, while Sen (2006/2012) warns against reducing individuals to a single determining affiliation. These positions are compatible with Stuart Hall's influential argument that cultural identity involves both continuity and transformation. For Hall (1990), identity is not only a matter of recovering an already completed past; it is also a process of positioning, becoming, and producing meaning within history.

This relational understanding is useful for Boudjedra's protagonist. Mohammed's lack of a surname is not simply a missing administrative label. It represents a break in the social signs through which lineage, recognition, memory, and belonging are communicated. His effort to recover historical connections therefore becomes a struggle to reposition himself within a cultural narrative from which colonial administration and collective forgetfulness have partially displaced him. At the same time, the novel does not allow his identity to become a simple return to an untouched origin. The past itself is mediated by manuscripts, dreams, stories, distorted communal knowledge, and present political concerns. Identity consequently emerges as a historical construction that must be repeatedly interpreted.

2.2 Collective Memory, Cultural Memory, and Historical Consciousness

The distinction between individual recollection and socially organized memory is central to this study. Halbwachs (1992) argues that memory operates within social frameworks: people remember through the categories, narratives, and relationships provided by groups. Cultural memory extends this process beyond immediate interpersonal recollection. Assmann (1995) explains that communities preserve

forms of identity through texts, rituals, symbols, monuments, and other media that transmit selected representations of the past. Memory is therefore neither a complete archive nor a neutral reproduction of history. It is selective, socially organized, and vulnerable to interruption.

Nora's (1989) distinction between living memory and sites of memory further illuminates Boudjedra's narrative. When a community no longer sustains an active relationship with a historical figure or event, material or textual traces may become necessary to preserve what communal practice no longer remembers. In *A Thousand and One Year of Nostalgia*, manuscripts, historical books, names, places, and the memory of Ibn Khaldoun repeatedly perform this compensatory function. Mohammed turns toward textual traces precisely because the social environment around him does not adequately sustain the past he seeks. Ricoeur (2004), moreover, reminds us that memory, history, and forgetting are intertwined processes. Forgetting may result from ordinary distance, but it may also be linked to repression, distortion, unequal power, or the institutional production of historical narratives. The novel's concern with colonial naming and communal amnesia makes this interaction particularly significant.

2.3 Colonial Inscription and Postcolonial Subjectivity

Colonialism operates not only through territorial occupation and political administration but also through symbolic classifications. Names, legal records, educational systems, linguistic hierarchies, and cultural representations can become instruments for reorganizing how colonized subjects understand themselves. Fanon's analysis of colonial subjectivity demonstrates the psychological force of a social order in which recognition is mediated by categories established by the colonizer (Fanon, 2008). Said (1993) similarly emphasizes the relationship between imperial power and cultural representation, showing that domination also depends on the authority to describe, classify, and narrate other peoples.

Bhabha's (1994) work complicates any simple opposition between an authentic native identity and an external colonial identity. Postcolonial culture is frequently marked by ambivalence, negotiation, and hybridity. These concepts are important for the final movement of Boudjedra's novel, where the encounter with trade, external capital, and cultural difference cannot be interpreted only as contamination. The novel recognizes both the productive possibilities of openness and the danger that economic and symbolic domination may reappear in new forms. The postcolonial self must therefore negotiate history and modernity rather than choose absolutely between them.

3. Al-Manama and the Crisis of Cultural Memory

3.1 Social Amnesia as a Form of Historical Disconnection

The town of Al-Manama is not merely the geographical setting of the novel. It is a symbolic space in which historical disconnection becomes visible. The inhabitants live within a landscape saturated with traces of the past, yet their relationship to those traces is weak, fragmented, and frequently mediated by superstition. This contradiction is most clearly dramatized through their response to Mohammed's interest in Ibn Khaldoun. Mohammed is deeply affected by the possibility that the renowned historian once lived in the town and wrote there, whereas the people around him remain largely indifferent to this historical connection (Boudjedra, 2002, pp. 13–14). The gap between physical proximity to historical memory and social ignorance of it reveals a community whose past is present spatially but absent culturally.

The problem is not simple illiteracy. Boudjedra represents a broader breakdown in the transmission of historical knowledge. When the townspeople treat the story of Ibn Khaldoun as something closer to fantasy than historical reality, the narrative exposes a crisis in collective memory. The community can preserve legends, fears, habits, and repeated social practices while losing the capacity to distinguish historically meaningful knowledge from rumor. In cultural-memory terms, transmission has become unstable. The past no longer functions as an organized source of communal orientation but survives in scattered and sometimes distorted forms.

This disconnection is reinforced when Mohammed's mother reproduces the absurd claim that Ibn Khaldoun was Jewish, a mistake that the protagonist initially does not correct (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 15). The episode is comic at one level, but its implications are serious. The misidentification of a major figure of Arab-Islamic intellectual history demonstrates how historical memory can be emptied of specificity when the institutions of transmission are weak. The scene also shows that forgetting is rarely a complete blank. More often, it is filled by substitute narratives. False memory occupies the space from which historically grounded knowledge has receded.

Al-Manama can therefore be read as a community living within what Nora (1989) would describe as a weakened environment of living memory. Mohammed compensates for this weakness by seeking texts, manuscripts, biographies, and material traces. His historical research functions as a private effort to reconstruct a framework that the community no longer collectively maintains. The novel converts this personal search into a critique of cultural amnesia: a society that loses access to the complexity of its past also loses resources for interpreting its present.

3.2 Ibn Khaldoun as Counter-Memory and Intellectual Genealogy

Within this context, Ibn Khaldoun functions as more than a historical allusion. He becomes a form of counter-memory. The concept of counter-memory is useful for describing practices that challenge dominant, simplified, or imposed narratives by reactivating suppressed or neglected pasts.

Mohammed's attachment to Ibn Khaldoun resists both the community's indifference and the colonial legacy that has damaged his family's genealogical continuity. By searching for Ibn Khaldoun, he also searches for a historical language through which the present can be reinterpreted.

The significance of Ibn Khaldoun lies partly in his intellectual stature. He represents a tradition of Arab-Islamic historical thought that contradicts narratives of cultural inferiority. Mohammed's fascination with this figure allows him to imagine belonging not simply through bloodline but through intellectual genealogy. His sense of identity is strengthened by connection to a historical culture capable of producing knowledge, interpretation, and critical thought. This helps explain why the community's indifference causes him such distress. What others see as irrelevant antiquarian information, he experiences as evidence that the present need not be intellectually severed from the past.

This dimension also prevents the novel's historical orientation from being reduced to sentimental nostalgia. The past matters because it can generate critical consciousness. A contemporary review of the original French novel similarly observed that nostalgia in Boudjedra is connected to a forward-looking dynamic rather than passive idealization of what has been lost (Carpentier-Thomelet, 1980). Mohammed's historical obsession is certainly excessive and at times comic, but it still performs a constructive function: it produces questions, challenges social complacency, and exposes the mechanisms through which historical awareness has been weakened.

The gradual improvement in the relationship between Mohammed and his mother also suggests that historical knowledge can be transmitted through dialogue. When she becomes curious about Ibn Khaldoun and asks her son to explain his origin and history, the narrative marks a small reversal of communal amnesia (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 47). Memory here is not restored through institutional proclamation. It re-enters social life through conversation. The scene demonstrates that cultural memory remains recoverable when historical knowledge moves from isolated individual obsession toward shared interpretation.

4. Colonial Naming and the Production of a Fragmented Self

4.1 The Missing Surname as Symbolic Violence

The most striking sign of identity crisis in the novel is the protagonist's condition as a man without a surname. His namelessness condenses the relationship between colonial administration, humiliation, and the disruption of genealogy. Mohammed's desire to know why the foreign authority deprived him of a name indicates that the injury is simultaneously bureaucratic and existential (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 8). A surname situates an individual within a family history and creates continuity across generations. Its removal therefore produces a symbolic break in the chain through which the self locates itself socially and historically.

Boudjedra links this deprivation to the colonial civil-status system. The family is described as having remained without a proper surname since the nineteenth century, when a colonial official humiliated an ancestor and imposed degrading signs in place of a legitimate family name (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 46). The narrative thus transforms an administrative act into a technology of symbolic domination. The colonized subject is not only governed; he is recorded, classified, and renamed through an external system of authority. The resulting wound survives political decolonization because the administrative inscription continues to structure personal memory and social recognition.

Fanon's account of colonial subjectivity helps illuminate this episode. Colonial domination creates a world in which the colonized person is compelled to encounter himself through categories established by an unequal order (Fanon, 2008). In Boudjedra's novel, Mohammed's lack of a surname is an extreme representation of this process. He is forced to ask who he is through the very absence produced by colonial classification. The problem is intensified because the community itself has partly normalized the rupture. His anxiety is therefore not only directed at the historical colonizer but also at a postcolonial present that has not fully repaired the symbolic consequences of colonial rule.

The naming episode also clarifies why identity in the novel cannot be treated as purely psychological. Mohammed's inner fragmentation is connected to institutions, documents, historical events, and public systems of recognition. The self is wounded through a political history that enters everyday life at the level of the name. Boudjedra thereby demonstrates how colonialism can persist as an afterlife within apparently ordinary signs.

4.2 Manuscripts, Genealogy, and the Search for Historical Legibility

Against the colonial disruption of genealogy, Mohammed repeatedly turns to manuscripts and historical books. The grandfather's apparition directs him toward the documents he continually reads, suggesting that the recovery of identity requires interpretation of textual traces (Boudjedra, 2002, pp. 70–71). The manuscript becomes a counter-document to the colonial civil register. One documentary system has obscured or degraded identity; another archive may provide material for reconstructing it.

This opposition should not be understood as a simple contrast between false colonial documents and completely transparent indigenous manuscripts. Boudjedra's narrative is too unstable and self-conscious for such certainty. Dreams, hallucinations, historical references, and fictional invention overlap. The past is never recovered in an untouched form. What the manuscript offers is not absolute proof but historical legibility: it gives Mohammed a way to read himself within longer temporal structures. Ricoeur's (2004) reflections on memory and historical representation are relevant here because they emphasize that access to the past is mediated by traces, testimony, interpretation, and the possibility of forgetting. Mohammed's reconstruction of identity is similarly mediated.

The grandfather is particularly important in this process. Although he belongs to a past marked by poverty and illiteracy, he appears in a dream associated with an ancient Arabic manuscript (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 16). The paradox destabilizes literal realism but strengthens symbolic meaning. The ancestral figure becomes a carrier of memory that exceeds his historical literacy. Through him, the family past acquires a voice capable of confronting the silence imposed by colonial naming. The episode suggests that cultural memory is transmitted not only through formal scholarship but also through imaginative, affective, and familial forms.

The protagonist's search for genealogy should therefore be understood as a struggle against historical illegibility. To possess an identity is not merely to recover a lost label; it is to reconstruct a meaningful relation among personal experience, family memory, collective history, and cultural inheritance. The novel's manuscripts function as instruments in that reconstruction.

5. Heritage, Modernity, and the Negotiation of Difference

5.1 Beyond the Opposition between Tradition and Modernity

If the novel ended with the recovery of historical memory, its model of identity could be interpreted as a straightforward return to origins. Boudjedra avoids that closure by introducing a second problem: how can a community preserve historical continuity while engaging with modern economic and cultural transformation? The issue becomes visible in Al-Manama's isolation. The town is represented as marginalized, materially deprived, and cut off from wider centers of development (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 33). Such isolation cannot be romanticized as cultural authenticity. It is associated with stagnation, ignorance, and restricted horizons.

The heritage/modernity debate has long shaped Arab intellectual thought. Al-Djabri (2000) argues that engagement with modernity need not require rejection of heritage; rather, heritage itself must be approached critically and contemporaneously. This position is useful for reading Boudjedra because the novel does not defend self-enclosure. Historical consciousness should provide resources for entering the present, not a justification for refusing change. Mohammed's attachment to history is valuable when it generates critical understanding, but it becomes problematic when it develops into isolation from the transformations occurring around him.

Bhabha's (1994) emphasis on cultural negotiation also helps move beyond a binary opposition between an authentic self and a contaminating other. Identities in postcolonial societies are formed in spaces of encounter. The question is not whether contact with external cultures occurs, but under what conditions it occurs and how power is distributed within that contact. Boudjedra dramatizes precisely this ambivalence through the economic transformation of Al-Manama.

5.2 Shajarat al-Durr, Economic Transformation, and Ambivalent Openness

Shajarat al-Durr introduces a new economic dynamic into a town whose livelihood had been narrow and repetitive. The development of the silk-shroud industry transforms Al-Manama's economy, expands its commercial connections, and attracts external investment (Boudjedra, 2002, pp. 132–136). At one level, this development breaks the town's isolation. It demonstrates initiative, creativity, and the possibility of entering wider networks of exchange. The community is no longer sealed within inherited limitations.

Yet the narrative immediately complicates this apparent success. Outside traders, brokers, and investors obtain disproportionate profits, and commercial capitalism begins to reshape local relations (Boudjedra, 2002, pp. 135–136). Openness therefore creates opportunity and vulnerability at the same time. This double movement reflects the postcolonial problem of modernity: participation in global economic structures may produce material advancement while also reproducing unequal forms of dependence. Said's (1993) analysis of culture and imperial power reminds us that domination can survive beyond formal colonial rule through systems of representation, economic hierarchy, and cultural authority.

Mohammed's discomfort with the new prosperity reveals this tension. Rather than rejoicing unreservedly, he becomes increasingly isolated as trade flourishes (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 137). His reaction can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it reflects an excessive attachment to historical models and a fear that economic change will dissolve cultural continuity. On the other hand, his suspicion is not entirely irrational because the new commercial relationships include exploitation and external control. Boudjedra thus refuses to identify modernity automatically with liberation.

The figure of Shajarat al-Durr deepens this ambiguity. Mohammed is troubled by the distance between his wife's commercial activity and the historical queen whose name she bears (Boudjedra, 2002, pp. 138–140). The comparison shows how historical names themselves become contested. Is historical identity preserved by imitating the past, by repeating its symbols, or by translating its emancipatory possibilities into new circumstances? The novel favors no simple answer. Instead, it stages identity as a negotiation between memory and transformation.

6. Discussion: From Lost Identity to Negotiated Identity

The preceding analysis suggests that the novel's central problem is not simply the loss of identity but the loss of the frameworks through which identity becomes intelligible. Mohammed's missing surname, the community's indifference to Ibn Khaldoun, the distortion of historical knowledge, and the town's isolation are different expressions of the same structural difficulty: the connection between self, community, and history has been damaged. Identity becomes unstable when the mechanisms that transmit memory no longer function reliably.

Cultural memory provides a useful way to connect these apparently separate narrative elements. Halbwachs (1992) shows that remembrance depends on social frameworks, while Assmann (1995) emphasizes the institutions and symbolic media through which cultural continuity is maintained. In Al-Manama, these frameworks are weak. Mohammed therefore attempts to construct alternative ones through reading, genealogy, manuscripts, historical figures, and conversation. His historical search is a compensatory practice of memory.

However, the novel does not suggest that recovery of the past can restore a pure and complete identity. Hall's (1990) conception of cultural identity as both continuity and becoming is especially relevant here. Mohammed cannot simply return to the precolonial past because both he and his community inhabit a postcolonial present shaped by colonial history, economic change, new forms of exchange, and internal social transformation. The past can orient identity, but it cannot mechanically determine it. This is why the novel's movement toward modernity is essential rather than secondary.

The colonial name problem further demonstrates that postcolonial identity is constructed within traces of power. The surname imposed, removed, or distorted by colonial administration continues to influence the protagonist long after the colonial moment itself. Such persistence resembles what postcolonial criticism describes as the afterlife of colonial structures. Decolonization at the political level does not automatically erase administrative categories, psychological wounds, cultural hierarchies, or broken genealogies. Mohammed's search is therefore a form of symbolic decolonization: he attempts to recover the capacity to name and interpret himself.

At the same time, Boudjedra exposes the danger of turning historical recovery into cultural closure. Al-Manama's previous isolation has not protected a rich, self-sufficient identity; it has produced marginality and stagnation. Shajarat al-Durr's economic initiative demonstrates the need for openness. The problem emerges when openness becomes another route to exploitation. The novel's most complex insight is thus that identity must remain open without becoming disposable, and historically grounded without becoming imprisoned by nostalgia.

This interpretation also clarifies the function of Islamic history in the novel. Historical figures such as Ibn Khaldoun do not operate merely as decorative references to a glorious civilization. They provide counter-images to historical inferiority and cultural amnesia. They permit the protagonist to imagine an intellectual genealogy that colonial discourse cannot exhaust. Yet their value depends on critical reactivation in the present. A historical figure who is merely celebrated but not understood would reproduce another form of empty memory. Boudjedra therefore links memory to interpretation rather than commemoration alone.

The novel can ultimately be read as proposing a relational model of identity. The self is produced through relations with ancestors, texts, historical figures, family narratives, colonial institutions, contemporary economic forces, and cultural others. These relations may support or damage identity, but none can simply be removed from the postcolonial condition. The task is to reorganize them into a more conscious historical position. Mohammed's search remains incomplete because identity itself remains unfinished.

7. Conclusion

A Thousand and One Year of Nostalgia transforms the question of identity into a problem of memory, historical transmission, and postcolonial interpretation. Through *Al-Manama*, Boudjedra depicts a community whose physical proximity to the past does not guarantee cultural knowledge of it. The inhabitants' indifference to Ibn Khaldoun and their distorted recollections illustrate a form of social amnesia in which the past survives without providing coherent historical orientation. Against this condition, Mohammed's attachment to historical figures and manuscripts functions as a counter-memory that attempts to reconnect individual experience with Arab-Islamic intellectual history.

The protagonist's missing surname intensifies this crisis by locating the fragmentation of identity within colonial administration. Naming becomes a political act: the colonial system's capacity to classify and humiliate enters the intimate structure of family memory. Mohammed's search for genealogy and documentary traces is consequently an attempt to restore historical legibility to a self whose continuity has been damaged. The novel nevertheless avoids imagining identity as a simple recovery of an original essence. Its treatment of modernity, commerce, and external contact shows that cultural survival requires transformation as well as remembrance.

The analysis therefore supports three main conclusions. First, memory in the novel is an active cultural practice rather than passive recollection. Second, colonial erasure persists through symbolic and administrative traces that shape postcolonial subjectivity. Third, the reconstruction of identity depends on negotiating heritage and modernity rather than choosing absolutely between them. Boudjedra's narrative is important precisely because it refuses both historical amnesia and nostalgic closure. It presents cultural identity as an unfinished process in which the past must be critically recovered so that the present can be understood and the future imagined.

From this perspective, the novel's engagement with Islamic history is not a retreat from contemporary reality. It is a method of interrogating that reality. Historical consciousness gives the protagonist a language for identifying loss, contesting colonial inscription, and evaluating the transformations of his community. Boudjedra thus converts literary memory into a critical practice: a way of recovering what

has been marginalized while simultaneously questioning how inherited identities can remain meaningful under new historical conditions.

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