



Women Who Remember Differently: Magic Realism and Feminist Counterhistories

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Abstract

This paper explores how women writers employ **magic realism** to construct **feminist counterhistories**—alternative narratives that challenge the linear, patriarchal, and nationalist versions of history. Drawing upon the works of Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) and Shahrnush Parsipur (*Women Without Men*), and extending the discussion to Isabel Allende and Arundhati Roy, the study investigates how female protagonists remember trauma, silence, and resistance in ways that defy rationalist historiography. Grounded in feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and memory studies, this research examines how myth, the body, spirituality, and collective memory become tools for narrating what official records erase. These texts illustrate how remembering differently is not merely a narrative choice but a political act—resisting erasure and asserting agency. By revealing the imaginative power of magic realism in revising cultural memory, this paper affirms the genre’s significance in feminist literature and its potential to shape socio-cultural consciousness. This paper explores how women writers across cultures use magic realism to rewrite dominant histories, memorialize trauma, and articulate feminist resistance through nonlinear, mythic, or alternative forms of memory. By doing so, they create *counterhistories*—narratives that challenge patriarchal, colonial, and state-sponsored versions of the past.

Keywords

Magic Realism, Feminist Counterhistory, Memory, Trauma, Toni Morrison, Shahrnush Parsipur, Decolonial Feminism, Myth, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

In dominant historical narratives, women’s voices—especially those shaped by colonialism, patriarchy, and war—are often silenced or erased. Against this backdrop, magic realism emerges as a powerful literary mode through which women authors reclaim memory, disrupt historical linearity, and offer counterhistories rooted in the body, myth, and community. This paper argues that by “remembering differently,” women writers reimagine the past not as fixed chronology, but as a layered, affective space shaped by trauma, desire, and resistance.

Magic realism, with its blurred boundaries between the real and the surreal, allows these authors to reanimate suppressed memories, foreground spiritual and ancestral presences, and offer radical alternatives to official truth. The paper explores this mode through a feminist and postcolonial lens, focusing on writers from diverse geopolitical contexts whose characters navigate personal and collective upheavals.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on:

- **Feminist theory** (Hélène Cixous, Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Butler) to analyse gendered memory and the politics of voice.
- **Postcolonial theory** (Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Walter D. Mignolo) to critique hegemonic historiography and cultural erasure.
- **Memory studies** (Marianne Hirsch’s *Postmemory*, Cathy N. Davidson) to understand intergenerational trauma and embodied remembrance.
- **Magic realism theory** (Wendy Faris, Alejo José G. Sison) to interpret how narrative forms challenge realist conventions.

Together, these approaches support the reading of magic realism as a feminist tool of remembering and rewriting.

Memory as Resistance: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, Morrison reimagines the haunting legacy of slavery through Sethe, a mother tormented by the trauma of infanticide and loss. The ghost of her dead daughter personifies traumatic memory—relentless, nonlinear, and embodied. Morrison's use of magic realism (the supernatural presence of *Beloved*, the collapse of time) transforms the personal into the political: the act of remembering is an act of resistance. Here, Morrison crafts a counterhistory that centres the enslaved woman's psyche, presenting memory not as evidence but as affect and atmosphere—what official archives cannot hold.

Sethe "remembers" not only her own past, but a collective history of black womanhood under bondage. The novel thus becomes a ritual of reclamation, asserting that memory, even when painful, is a precondition for healing and identity.

The Ghost as Historical Memory

The central magical realist element of *Beloved* is the character of the ghost-child *Beloved*—Sethe's dead daughter who returns as a physical and spectral presence. Her reappearance collapses time and space, forcing the characters—and the reader—to confront the trauma that official histories refuse to acknowledge. The ghost is not just a supernatural device but a personification of historical memory, one that is intrusive, haunting, and deeply emotional. *Beloved* does not come from the past to offer closure, but to insist on remembering, even when it is unbearable.

"It was not a story to pass on." (Morrison, 2004, p. 274)

This paradoxical line—appearing at the end of the novel—reflects Morrison's belief that some histories, particularly those rooted in racial and gendered trauma, must be told, even if language fails to fully contain them.

The Structure of Memory: Fragmentation and Repetition

Beloved does not follow a linear chronology. Instead, it uses a disrupted and cyclical narrative that mimics the way trauma is experienced and remembered. Characters like Sethe, Denver, and Paul D relive their memories not through rational retrospection but through flashbacks, repetition, and embodiment. The nonlinear structure is not a stylistic choice alone but a deliberate formal strategy that resists the neat closure of official narratives.

According to Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma is "the confrontation with an event that...has not been fully assimilated...but returns, belatedly, in the form of a haunting." Morrison mirrors this phenomenon through *Beloved*'s fragmented and obsessive language, such as the stream-of-consciousness chapter spoken in *Beloved*'s voice:

"I am *Beloved* and she is mine." (Morrison, 2004, p. 210)

This merging of identities between mother and daughter symbolizes how memory invades the present, especially when it has been repressed or unspeakable.

The Female Body as Archive

Sethe's body itself becomes a site of memory—a living archive that bears physical and psychological scars. Her back, whipped into a "chokecherry tree," is a symbol of both personal trauma and collective history. In this context, Morrison offers a feminist intervention: the body remembers what the nation forgets.

Sethe's act of infanticide, while horrifying, is framed not as madness but as a radical act of resistance against the institution of slavery. It is her attempt to reclaim agency over her child's fate in a system that dehumanizes motherhood.

"If I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her." (Morrison, 2004, p. 236)

By cantering Sethe's perspective, Morrison refuses moral simplification and instead explores how resistance can emerge in impossible ethical terrains. While much of *Beloved* is about the cost of remembering, it ultimately suggests that remembrance is necessary for healing. Denver's emergence into the community and Sethe's slow return to social life represent how collective recognition and shared memory are essential to recovery, as communal and feminist healing. Memory in *Beloved* thus becomes not just a personal burden but a shared ethical project—a way of honoring the dead, resisting oppression, and imagining new futures.

Rewriting Patriarchy: Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*

Parsipur's *Women Without Men*, set against the backdrop of the 1953 CIA-led coup in Iran, portrays five women who escape patriarchal violence to form an alternative community in a magical orchard. Magic realism in this novel enables a subversion of religious and political norms—a woman grows wings; another is reborn from a river. These elements are not escapes from reality, but metaphors for spiritual autonomy and dissent.

Parsipur's work challenges both Islamic orthodoxy and Western feminist expectations. The orchard becomes a utopian memory-space, where silence, care, and ritual replace state violence and domestic abuse. Memory here is nonlinear and symbolic—rooted in myth and mysticism, offering space for renewal and rebellion.

Magic Realism as Subversion in an Islamic Patriarchy

Parsipur uses magic realism not as escapism but as a literary strategy to destabilize patriarchal realism, especially in a society where women's bodies, mobility, and desires are policed. The novella's five central women—Mahdokht, Munis, Faezeh, Zarrinkolah, and Farrokhlaha—each represent different facets of womanhood in Iranian society. Their eventual convergence in a garden outside Tehran serves as a utopian microcosm, a space unmoored from the patriarchal laws of both the state and the family.

For instance, Mahdokht's transformation into a tree, and her dream to plant herself and scatter seeds across the world, is both surreal and revolutionary. It is a poetic response to a world that offers her no space for expression or growth. Her literal rooting in the earth can be read through the lens of eco-feminism, suggesting that rebirth and fertility can occur outside patriarchal reproduction.

"She looked down at her body and saw that she had grown bark on her arms." (Parsipur, 2004, p. 21)

It can also be seen as a desire to be stable, strong, and nurturing as humans are intended to be; neither to be compared and definitely nor to be enslaved by the other.

Sexuality, Shame, and the Body

Parsipur does not shy away from the themes of female sexuality, desire, and shame, which are often taboo in Iranian culture. Zarrinkolah, a prostitute, one day wakes up unable to see the faces of men—an absurd, magical event that leads to her spiritual awakening. Her journey suggests that female liberation is possible outside sexual commodification, but not through moralistic repentance—rather, through reconnection with the self.

Similarly, Munis's journey is explicitly political: after committing suicide to escape a stifling home, she is resurrected and becomes politically engaged. Her literal resurrection is a symbolic rebirth into awareness, autonomy, and activism. This act collapses death and life into a continuum of awakening, where even the most oppressed can reclaim agency.

“She understood that no woman can live in peace unless she first kills the man inside her.” (Parsipur, 2004, p. 39)

This sentence is a radical feminist call to deconstruct the internalized patriarchal voice. Parsipur's women do not merely escape their men; they exorcise them.

The Garden as Feminist Heterotopia

The mystical garden the women retreat to is not just a physical space but a heterotopia (to use Foucault's term)—an “other space” where societal norms are suspended and new possibilities emerge. It represents a world beyond patriarchal structures, where solidarity, difference, and healing coexist. The garden is deliberately contrasted with the public sphere of Tehran, marked by violence, surveillance, and gender segregation.

In this sense, *Women Without Men* enacts what Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) describes as narrative performativity—a form of storytelling that brings new social realities into being. The novella's narrative arc is less concerned with linear progress than with the creation of a mythic counterhistory, one where women not only survive but thrive beyond the gaze of patriarchy.

Resistance Through Narrative Form

Parsipur's style—fragmented, nonlinear, and infused with the surreal—is itself a form of resistance. By refusing the conventions of realist storytelling and moral closure, she challenges both literary tradition and societal expectations. Her deployment of magic realism is deeply political: it camouflages critique while amplifying it, allowing taboo subjects to surface under the guise of the fantastical.

Moreover, the novella destabilizes the dichotomy between the public and private spheres. The personal experiences of these women—rape, shame, motherhood, solitude—are rendered as political realities, echoing the feminist maxim that the personal is political.

Comparative Voices: Isabel Allende and Arundhati Roy

In Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, memory is matrilineal—carried through Clara, a clairvoyant, and passed to her granddaughter Alba. The interweaving of political violence in Chile with familial trauma allows Allende to show how memory is preserved not in monuments, but in stories, visions, and bodies. Her use of magic realism blurs generational boundaries, creating a feminine continuum of remembrance.

Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* constructs counterhistories through the fragmented lives of women, hijras, Dalits, and Kashmiri rebels. The “magic” in Roy's narrative arises from the absurd, surreal cruelty of real-life India—and the deep intimacy of loss. By embedding real political events into a surreal narrative structure, Roy collapses history and memory into one mutable space.

Allende: Ancestral Memory and the Female Lineage

In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende constructs a matrilineal archive where female voices, dreams, and visions guide the narrative. The novel chronicles four generations of the Trueba family and centres on Clara, whose clairvoyance and telepathy symbolize a deeper, intuitive access to history. Her diaries, eventually inherited by Alba, form the basis of the narrative—making the novel a product of feminine remembrance, passed down and preserved in defiance of patriarchal erasure.

Magic realism in Allende's work becomes a genealogical tool: it honours the irrational, the emotional, and the spiritual as legitimate forms of knowledge. Unlike Esteban Trueba, whose political and patriarchal violence defines the historical trajectory, Clara and Alba offer alternative visions of truth, deeply intertwined with personal memory, intuition, and resistance.

“Memory is fragile and the space of a single life so brief, passing so quickly, that we never get a chance to see the relationship between events...” (Allende, 1982, p. 384)

This emphasis on memory as partial but powerful allows Allende to represent history as contested terrain, written not by victors, but by survivors—especially women.

Roy: Political Palimpsests and Subaltern Testimonies

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* performs a similar function, but through a more overtly political and fragmented form. The novel is a palimpsest of voices—queer, Dalit, Muslim, Kashmiri, and female—written across the landscape of modern India. Roy constructs a feminist counterhistory by elevating the voices that are usually rendered peripheral or subhuman in national narratives.

The protagonist, Anjum—a transgender hijra—resides in a cemetery-turned-home called the Jannat Guest House, which, much like Allende's big house on the corner, becomes a heterotopic space of memory, mourning, and belonging. Roy invokes magical realism less through overt fantasy and more through hyperreal grotesque, blending surreal juxtapositions (births in graveyards, floating bodies, talking animals) with the harsh political realities of Gujarat riots, Kashmir insurgency, and caste atrocities.

“She had never imagined that she could become something as grand, as tragic, as a memory.” (Roy, 2017, p. 228)

Memory in Roy's work is not just a personal phenomenon—it is archival, insurgent, and collective, challenging official state histories that seek to sanitize violence. Much like Morrison and Parsipur, Roy deploys counter-archives to confront national amnesia.

Magic Realism as Testimony

In both Allende and Roy, magic realism functions as testimonial literature—a witness to trauma, gendered violence, and political silencing. The genre enables the crossing of boundaries: between the living and the dead, the real and the imagined, the personal

and the political. It allows women and other marginalized characters to inhabit a liminal space, where they can speak back to structures of domination.

The hauntings in both novels—whether the ghost of Clara in *The House of the Spirits* or the spectral presence of Musa Yeswi in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*—are not narrative embellishments but serve as political interventions. They remind the reader that history's ghosts are never quite buried, and that memory—particularly women's memory—is an act of survival and resistance.

Shared Feminist Aesthetics Across Continents

Despite their different settings, Allende and Roy participate in a transnational feminist project. Their texts articulate a resistance to militarism, capitalism, patriarchy, and religious extremism. They prioritize female collectivity, embodied archives (diaries, oral histories, bodies), and the importance of reclaiming space—whether in cemeteries, ancestral homes, or makeshift sanctuaries.

Moreover, both writers disrupt narrative linearity, favouring cyclical, recursive storytelling, mirroring how trauma and memory operate. This technique resonates with feminist theorists like Marianne Hirsch and Gayatri Spivak, who emphasize that history is never neutral and that literature must intervene where official discourse fails.

Remembering Differently: Feminist Counterhistory in Form and Content

“Remembering differently” in feminist counterhistory is both a political act and a literary technique through which silenced voices reclaim agency, particularly in postcolonial and patriarchal societies. Writers like Toni Morrison, Shahrnush Parsipur, Isabel Allende, and Arundhati Roy subvert dominant historical narratives by deploying non-linear structures, fragmented time, polyvocal storytelling, and magical realism, challenging the conventional realism that has often excluded women's truths. These texts expose how history is constructed, who gets to record it, and who is left out, offering alternative archives rooted in trauma, embodiment, and intergenerational memory. Memory in these works is not a passive recollection but a site of resistance—alive in the scars of Morrison's *Sethe*, the mystical transformations of Parsipur's protagonists, the spectral presences in Allende's multigenerational saga, and the hybrid identities and suppressed political histories in Roy's *India*. By using formal disruptions and supernatural motifs, these authors assert that truth-telling about gendered violence, colonial trauma, and social marginalization cannot be fully captured through rational or linear historiography. Instead, these feminist counterhistories create space for emotional, intuitive, and embodied truths, revealing memory as an ethical practice—one that demands witness, healing, and the refusal to forget. The act of storytelling becomes a powerful feminist intervention, rewriting not only the past but also the possibilities for justice, empathy, and resistance in the present.

Conclusion

The women who “remember differently” are not merely literary figures—they are symbolic of global struggles for voice, agency, and historical justice. Through magic realism, feminist writers resist the reductive truths of official histories, constructing counterhistories where memory is sacred, embodied, and transformative. Their work not only reclaims forgotten pasts but also offers new imaginaries for futures grounded in justice, healing, and plurality. In an age of historical revisionism and cultural silencing, these narratives are more than fiction—they are acts of resistance and repositories of collective truth.

When official histories forget, women remember—and in their remembering, they rewrite the world. They remember not in dates or decrees, but in scars, lullabies, broken silences, and inherited dreams. Their memory is not archived in state documents but etched into bodies, buried in kitchens, whispered in stories, or carried by ghosts. What history silences, memory revives. And when women dare to remember differently—through magic, myth, and multiplicity—they do more than preserve the past: they reclaim power, reimagine justice, and resist erasure. To read these stories is not merely to witness memory—it is to be unsettled, transformed, and called to remember anew.

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