

# Collective Memory and Counter-Narratives: Reading K.R. Meera's *Qabar* as a 'Fiction of Memory'

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## Abstract

*This paper examines K.R. Meera's novella *Qabar* through the intersecting frameworks of memory studies and magical realism. By using the theory of collective memory propounded by Maurice Halbwachs, the concept of 'counter-memory' by Michel Foucault and 'fiction of memory' by Birgit Neumann, this paper focuses on how the novella employs magical realism to challenge dominant narratives and create alternate spaces for marginalised voices. Through close textual analysis, this research demonstrates how the novella critiques the power dynamics inherent in collective memory formation while illustrating the traumatic consequences of selective forgetting on individual and communal identities.*

**Keywords:** Collective Memory, Counter-Memory, Fiction of Memory, Selective Forgetting.

## Introduction

One of the primary objectives of Memory Studies is to study how memories get constructed, preserved, and transmitted by individuals and within society. Influenced by fields such as anthropology, literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, Memory Studies investigates memory's complex mechanisms in shaping individual and collective identities in diverse perspectives. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs spearheaded the theoretical foundation of Memory Studies with the publication of his seminal work *Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925, in which he introduced the concept of 'collective memory'. He argues that individual memories are inherently social constructions influenced by the groups people belong to. According to him, collective memory focuses on how individuals comprehend and emotionally connect with their past events and how it influences their moral judgments about historical occurrences, their sense of belonging to those events, and how they draw from the past to shape their behaviour and identity. This theory has been influential in the academic disciplines for several decades. But, individual subjectivity and the unconscious gained

prominence with the arrival of psychological and psychoanalytical frameworks, which altered this trend forever. As Keightley and Pickering note, the focus was primarily on “how these forms of remembering operate as collective representations of the past, how they constitute a range of cultural resources for social and historical identities, and how they privilege particular readings of the past and subordinate others.” (207). As it is noted, history can never be complete and it is such partial readings of the past can provide a seemingly unified version of history.

Halbwachs’ collective memory hardly escaped critics for its too much focus on the societal influence on the individual memory formation. Whatever the group decides to believe gets transferred across generations and posed as the one historical truth. Such preservation of partial memory also risks erasing individual memories that represent the other half of the truth. At this juncture, Foucault’s dynamic concept of ‘counter-memory’ gains currency as it questions the fundamental assumptions about historical construction. Marginalised groups resist historical erasure through various means by creating alternative narratives that challenge dominant historiography. Only by questioning the legitimacy of such mainstream narratives, the alternate versions of history assert themselves.

At a time when social groups contest with each other, claiming their authenticity of belonging to a place or a region, Meera’s novel is the proper arrival as a solution. Each group hold on to a version of history and ardently believes in its version, whereas the other histories are getting nullified. Naturally, the dominant group gets the upper hand, and their narrative gets legitimatised, directly or indirectly leading to the erasure of alternate narratives. When political power backs up such a majoritarian narrative, it becomes mainstream. But there is always a place for dissent. Alternate narratives, though threatened by the dominant ones, often come up to the fore and pose a challenge. The degree may differ, but there has always been a question on the legitimacy of such narratives. K.R. Meera’s *Qabar* exemplifies this resistance through its use of magical realism to contest dominant hegemonic discourses and amplify marginalised voices. The novella explores how collective memory impacts individual identity formation while simultaneously silencing alternative narratives. It lays down the need to preserve such alternate narratives and the importance of having a critical stance on everything considered legitimate by the majority.

This paper examines how *Qabar* employs counter-memory and magical realism to resist the erasure of marginalised voices. The first section is an analysis of collective memory and its impact on Bhavana’s inherited narratives, the second is an exploration of counter-memory through KhayaluddinThangal’s alternate history of the grave site, and the final section discusses magical realism as a subversive literary device to challenge dominant narratives.

### ***Qabar* as a ‘Fiction of Memory’**

According to Birgit Neumann, a ‘fiction of memory’ is characterised by four distinctive features: it imaginatively reconstructs the past in response to contemporary needs; combines real and imaginary, remembered and forgotten elements; explores the workings of memory to offer new perspectives; employs a retrospective or analeptic narrator; and focuses on the interplay between individual memory and identity. The novella exemplifies a ‘fiction of memory’ through its complex exploration of personal and collective memory and employing narrative techniques that reconstruct the past while responding to contemporary social imperatives. The story revolves around a contested *qabar* (grave) with two social groups claiming it to be their own.

*Qabar* is a first-person account narrated by Bhavana Sachidanandan, an Additional District Judge presiding over a legal dispute on a contentious qabar. Khayaluddin Thangal, a djinn-worshipper and practitioner of mystic arts, sought court intervention to prevent the destruction of his ancestral grave, which was sold to a private entity by his relatives without his knowledge. Interestingly, his

entry has a magical effect on Bhavana and disrupts her routine. In instances like the levitation within the courtroom and using a snake to write a legal judgment, the flying car creates an alternative realm that is magical and extraordinary. Her reality is further modified by visions of her ancestor, Yogishwaran *Ammavan* and the two mystic girls haunting her consciousness. By giving herself to the magical realm and the memories invoked by Thangal, Bhavana undergoes a transformative journey of self-discovery to confront her buried identity. This psychological journey catalyses an exploration of how memory influences the formation of identity and the dynamics of social relationships. Along with Bhavana's personal story, the novella delves into the complexities of perception, the fluidity of memory, and how these elements intertwine to shape individual and collective understanding and ultimately question and subvert the traditional belief that history is the domain of those in positions of power.

Neumann's framework highlights how the 'fiction of memory' blends real and imaginary elements - a feature highly evident in *Qabar* through the spectral presence of Yogeshwaran *Ammavan* (*Maternal uncle in Malayalam*) and Bhavana's supernatural moments of Khayaluddin. Both Yogeshwaran *Ammavan*'s memory and the supernatural occurrences with Thangal haunt Bhavana's consciousness once she takes up the case of the *qabar*. The supernatural element works more than a literary device as it serves as a mechanism for discovering truths that her family has selectively suppressed over time. The spectral figures of Yogeshwaran *Ammavan* and the supernatural Khayaluddin symbolise the resurgence of buried historical realities. It challenges the carefully constructed narratives that her social group preserve to maintain their social standing. Through these spectral presences, the narrative interrogates the fragility of constructed memories and the enduring impact of suppressed truths on identity and social relationships. The novella reveals how communities selectively construct and transmit historical narratives. The various accounts of Yogeshwaran *Ammavan*'s life and death are examples of this selective memory transmission. While Bhavana's father portrays him as a legend who has returned from Kashi with levitating twins, "Yogishwaran *Ammavan* hoisted the girls whose feet didn't touch the ground on his shoulders and took them inside the house ... the children asked for food untouched by fire or rain" (Meera 29). Her father says, "He is still here; he is the one who keeps this family safe" (28). This version tries to portray him as a guardian of the family and gives a valorized picture of him. However, her mother reveals another version of the story of his conversion to Islam and his subsequent murder for becoming a Muslim. Khayaluddin's version states that Yogeshwaran *Ammavan* and his ancestor Hassan Koya Thangal were the same person who had gone to Mecca with Cheraman Perumal, the Chera king, and returned as Muslims.

The revelation that Khayaluddin's ancestor, Hasan Koya, and Bhavana's ancestor, Yogeshwaran *Ammavan*, are the same person is a powerful critique of communal divisions perpetuated through selective memory. "Oh, it was a Nair aristocrat, the first one in the area to convert to Islam. The nephews got together and buried him in a pit... they said he had gone to Kashi" (Meera 110). This discovery shows how deliberate forgetting and mythmaking maintain artificial boundaries between communities. As Bhavana's mother says, "This is what happens when you have too much pride in your traditions. You can't talk about everything openly. Then you end up manufacturing a new legend" (44), highlighting how families construct narratives to protect their reputations at the cost of historical truth. The novella's employment of the analeptic technique creates what Astrid Erll describes as a "kaleidoscopic presentation" of past events, "bringing together and re-connecting, in a single space, the manifold discrete parlances about the past" (151). Meera uses this narrative strategy to present multiple versions of the same historical event and exhibit how memory is a dynamic process of negotiation and reconstruction. Bhavana's journey from legal objectivity to personal involvement in the case symbolises her path to achieving a sense of completeness in her

identity through her imaginary construction of Khayaluddin.

Initially, Bhavana relies strictly on the legal protocols and tries to dismiss the *qabar* case. However, she understands the limitations of legal frameworks in addressing marginal narratives as she gets personally invested in the case. This also means that she reconciles with her own past with the suppressed truths embedded within her family and society. Bhavana says, “I felt like Yogishwaran *Ammavan*’s story was not just a story. There was a story of mine in there, one that I didn’t recognise. Kakkasserithangal had entered my life to reveal this truth. But my eyes were blindfolded. I couldn’t read what was written between the lines” (Meera 52), which marks her recognition of how personal and collective histories are intertwined. The novella’s treatment of historical truth as something that must be actively negotiated rather than passively received resonates with Neumann’s conception of memory fiction as a genre that responds to contemporary needs while engaging with historical complexity.

### **Collective Memory and Counter-Memory in *Qabar***

As a complex system of power dynamics, collective memory sometimes works grand narratives that threaten the existence of individual experiences. Such grand narratives often create homogenised historical representations of the past. Such representations serve the cultural and political interests of the dominant group that directly or indirectly erase the alternate narratives. To challenge this, counter-memory helps as a subversive narrative strategy that challenges such institutionalised memory structures and the dominant narratives. For instance, the main narrative of *Qabar* unfolds itself as a complex counter-narrative that exposes the biased mechanisms in constructing and preserving specific memories while throwing the rest into oblivion. The central thrust of the novella deconstructs how Bhavana’s family strategically suppressed the truth about Yogeshwaran *Ammavan* and transferred a limited version across generations. With Thangal’s entry into Bhavana’s life, this partial history gets destabilised, and his magical presence compels her to face the selective amnesia that her family has perpetuated. Bhavana develops a sense of guilt and disillusionment after realising her prejudice toward Khayaluddin and the distorted history that she bears from her family. Her consequent interactions with him shatter her preconceived notions and give her a new understanding of Khayaluddin, more than a typical “Mappila” Muslim. Multiple strands of memory are interwoven in Meera’s narration with incredible technical precision to provide the competing truths.

Bhavana’s journey represents a critical process of memory reconstruction. She actively challenges the dominant versions of history through her constant encounter with the silences in mainstream history and the sidelined alternate narrative fragments. The process of systematic reclamation starts with Meera and throws new light on the historical truths. Ultimately, *Qabar* explores how collective memory works as a dynamic and power-infused mechanism and how the acts of remembering and forgetting function as deliberate cultural and familial self-preservation strategies. The text presents selective forgetting as a central mechanism that shapes both individual and collective identity formation. While the traumatic manifestations of memory operate differently in the protagonists Bhavana and Khayaluddin, their experiences illuminate the profound psychological consequences of historical erasure and manipulation of truth. She experiences a fundamental developmental trauma through the “vanished twin syndrome”, which is the reason for her foundational sense of incompleteness.

It is clear that she undergoes a transformative journey with the arrival of Khayaluddin. As mentioned, once she starts unearthing about her family’s past, she realises it differs from person to person. Her father’s version is more patriarchal and is more glorious compared to the mother’s version, which brings the other side of it. To add more to her understanding, the spectral presence

of *Ammavan* displays itself as a symbol of the forgotten past. She says that *Ammavan*'s story is not just his own but hers. She also believes that Thangal entered her life only to reveal this truth. Her claim that her eyes are blindfolded reflects not only her limited understanding of her past but also her biased perception of Khayaluddin.

Khayaluddin's entry and assertion of his past made Bhavana more conflicted about her own past. From the monolithic understanding of her past, she opens herself to a more dynamic understanding of the past by learning every version. More than all of these, her position as a woman who has been denied her presence in history and culture, she earns to know more about it. This not only has a considerable effect on her memory but also on her identity. Here, the counter-memory works more like a negotiator with the dominant narratives by questioning its legitimacy. Furthermore, she has been accused of having "eaten" her sister in the womb, which functions as a social reinforcements that compound her original trauma. It is clear that her fractured self-concept stems directly from this loss. Bhavana's complicated marital relationship further traumatises her already fragile self. Raising an ADHD son as a single mother, she is made to feel desolate despite being in a top legal position. Her stature as an additional judge triggers masculine insecurity in her spouse, which leads to an environment of psychological hostility. It is at this juncture that we should correlate Khayaluddin's entry with the liberation of Bhavana from her trauma. After a few interactions with him, she says, "For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of completeness in someone else's presence" (Meera 95). She utilises the magical realm constructed by Khayaluddin to come to terms with her trauma and to construct a new self. She feels like a new individual after the advent of Khayaluddin. Recollecting her former self, she laments, "...that woman never wore a sari that Pramod didn't like. She didn't speak to anyone Pramod didn't like. She found no joy in things unless they gave Pramod joy. She didn't want to breathe without asking Pramod for permission..." (Meera 35). The collective trauma depicted in *Qabar* emerges from personal experiences and the deliberate manipulation of historical narratives across generations. By portraying these psychological consequences in such detail, Meera's text serves as both literary work and theoretical intervention that illustrates how selective forgetting creates intergenerational wounds that require conscious confrontation to begin the process of healing.

### Memory Magical Realism in *Qabar*

Wendy B. Faris, in her work *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Demystification of Narrative*, provides five primary characteristics that define magical realist fiction. They are as follows: "an irreducible element of magic, the presence of a phenomenal world, the prevalence of unsettling doubts, the merging of realms and the disruption of time, space, and identity" (Faris 167). Meera's novella contains all the given characteristics and stands as an illuminating example of the genre. For instance, Khayaluddin's presence and supernatural deeds exemplify the irreducible element of magic, where he constantly pulls the narrator out of her reality. As the narrator keeps shifting between the worlds of the ordinary and the extraordinary, we can see her contradicting her narration, making her unreliable. She is full of unresolved doubts. This partially results from the traumatic family history, her failed marriage, and the magical presence of Khayaluddin. The characters sometimes occupy an in-between hybrid space as there are two realms. For instance, in the theatre where a cauldron suddenly disappears, Bhavana and Khayaluddin exemplify this merging of the two worlds. Here, there is no time, no identity, and no space. The characters are licensed to let go of their preconceived identities and prejudices. In the global literary scene, women writers like Isabel Allende, Jeanette Winterson, Laura Esquivel and Shahrnush Parsipur are the forerunners in utilising magical realism to subvert societal norms and create a space for women.

K.R. Meera employs the literary device with remarkable ingenuity and creates not merely

stylistic flourishes but a transformative space where characters confront buried histories. This narrative strategy is ubiquitous throughout the text and lets Bhavana and Khayaluddin bridge their seemingly insurmountable differences. What makes the magical realm necessary in the story is its role in bringing both the characters together to have a dialogue. If not for the magical realm, both characters, given their social positions, would still be prejudiced about each other and confine themselves to their bubble. Meera dismantles the cacophony of dominant historical narratives by deliberately blurring boundaries between reality and imagination. This technique draws a magical realm where suppressed truths can resurface from the vestige of collective memory, and the characters are licensed to come out of their given memories and identities. Mentioning the silenced narratives, Bhavana says, "Someone ought to write it, lest we forget what we were and what we will be" (Meera 114). As mentioned, the novel's magical elements serve as alternate realms for characters to come to terms with their traumas. Bhavana finds her emotional crutch in an idealised version of Khayaluddin. She says, "All around, I could only see darkness. Not even a firefly visible... Heavy objects hit my throat one after the other" (Meera 111), which reveals the onerous process of confronting buried truths. Khayaluddin's uninformed entry into Bhavana's ordered world subverts her established certainties.

Bhavana is forced to confront her partial historical memory through the supernatural realm created by Khayaluddin. The evocations of the spectral figure intensify this confrontation. The ghostly manifestation symbolically represents the oppressive weight of collective memory that both characters - Bhavana and Khayaluddin - must painfully sift through to uncover buried truths. The spirit serves as a physical manifestation of hidden history that can no longer be denied when it appears before them. The novella presents several striking magical moments that illuminate Bhavana's journey between worlds. For example, in the very first scene where she meets Khayaluddin, she experiences a levitation and wakes up in a hospital. Her assistant explains she just fainted. From this moment, the supernatural starts troubling Bhavana's reality. In another instance, her pen transforms into a snake, and she writes a legal statement about it. Describing her experience in the flying car, Bhavana describes the magical realm in the following words: "It began to rain, it was raining flowers. I was bewildered. I rolled down the window and looked up. The sky had turned pink. Flowers fell, knocking against my nose and throat" (Meera 86).

Such supernatural occurrences create an alternate space and serves as a trenchant criticism of the limitations of the collective memory that has shaped Bhavana's understanding of herself and her community. This critique gains further dimension through Khayaluddin's own supernatural abilities - his uncanny mind-reading and his power to summon spirits from the past. He deliberately employs these magical demonstrations to test and expose her deep-seated biases and reveals her immediate prejudiced assumptions about his identity as a Muslim man. Yet what makes their relationship possible is his honest acknowledgement of his failings: "It was my fault too. I was prejudiced too. In any case, when one has one setback after the other, one becomes very prejudiced" (Meera 92). This mutual recognition of their biased perspectives, rather than one-sided enlightenment, forms the authentic foundation upon which their connection begins to grow. In this magical realm, a shared territory is materialised where Bhavana and Khayaluddin begin to understand each other. Bhavana's transformative experiences allow her to grapple with the quotidian oppression that has shaped her existence. The spectral figure of Yogeshwaran *Ammavan* gains prominence here as a conduit for reconstructing her understanding of family history.

These moments highlight magical realism's potential to foster understanding across seemingly unbridgeable divides. When Bhavana reads Khayaluddin's mind, she finds it "more intoxicated" than her own. The experience begins as "fun... Like reading Neruda, Hemingway, and Rumi" but transforms when "his mind became the stories of Saadat Hasan Manto" (Meera 105). This

progression from Western literary giants to the raw Partition narratives of Manto illustrates how marginalised stories get pushed aside in historical discourse. It is commonplace that dominant narratives erase minority experiences, but Meera makes this erasure viscerally apparent through supernatural means. Magical realism as a technique has created spaces for silenced memories to emerge from obscurity. This device also liberates both the characters to confront their respective traumas - Bhavana's guilt and Khayaluddin's victimisations and challenges dominant memory mechanisms. Those bearing the brunt of historical erasure gain agency through this device to fight against societal amnesia. Meera has upped the ante on conventional narrative techniques. Her restrained yet powerful deployment of magical elements creates a framework where historical reclamation becomes possible. In the novella, Meera constructs a narrative that befits our complex social reality, where truth often hides beneath layers of convenient fiction.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed K.R. Meera's *Qabar* through collective memory and counter-memory frameworks and examined how dominant narratives erase marginalised histories. Using Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Foucault's counter-memory, and Neumann's fiction of memory, the study shows how magical realism creates an alternate space for suppressed voices. The characters, Bhavana and Khayaluddin, come from two sides of historicity - one from the oppressor's side and the other from the oppressed. While Bhavana struggles to grapple with the multiple versions of her own past and tries to evade it, Khayaluddin firmly holds on to the past to assert his identity. In this light, the novella is a unique contribution to the literary world, adding another dynamic understanding of how history, memory and identity operate. The novel is an illuminating example of a magical realist fiction that posits memory as a site of resistance and the need to reclaim silenced narratives.

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