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Literary Remembrance as Resistance: Memory, Gender, and Archive in Oyeyemi's *Parasol Against the Axe* Sajjad Gheytsi ^{✉1} Erfan Rajabi ²

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Helen Oyeyemi's *Parasol Against the Axe* as a postmodern intervention in the politics of memory, gender, and national historiography. The novel situates Prague as a palimpsestic space, dramatizing the city and its archives as contested sites haunted by the silenced histories of women, whose spectral presences emerge to reclaim narrative agency. Informed by theories of cultural memory (Assmann, Nora), historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon), and feminist archival theory (Cvetkovich, Steedman), the analysis explores how Oyeyemi employs narrative fragmentation, intertextual play, and metafictional devices to challenge dominant historical discourses. Drawing on concepts such as Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" and Christina Sharpe's "wake work," this essay contends that the novel's formal experimentation—its textual gaps, unreliable narrators, and spectral encounters—constitutes an ethical mode of witnessing that resists narrative closure, insisting instead on the value of inhabiting unresolved historical absences as part of feminist remembrance. Significantly, the quest for archival knowledge becomes a metaphor for reclaiming gendered memory through speculative storytelling. Ultimately, *Parasol Against the Axe* is shown to enact a feminist poetics of memory, re-imagining the archive not as a repository of facts, but as a haunted and affective terrain of narrative possibility where fiction itself becomes a potent mode of 'archival dissent' against the epistemic violence of historical erasure.

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The city distributes its insults and outrages indiscriminately.

(Oyeyemi 2024, 7).

1- Introduction

Helen Oyeyemi's *Parasol Against the Axe* (2024) is a formal experiment in combining puzzles, postcards, and palimpsests in order to stage a reflection on memory, language, and the spectral remainder left by excluded women within historical narratives. Prague's symbolic resonance in *Parasol Against the Axe* is sharpened by its twentieth-century political history. Occupied by the Nazis during World War II, then controlled by a Communist regime for over forty years, and later transformed by the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the city has undergone multiple ideological shifts that left deep scars on its memory institutions and national identity. These transitions generated competing narratives of history and belonging, often marked by erasure, censorship, and repression. Set in a fictionalized Prague with no clear division between reality and illusion, the novel displays itself in a fragmented non-linear structural form in which the narrative itself is the mode of archival resistance. At the heart of the narrative is Hero Tojoso, a writer of color whose background suggests a South Asian heritage. Her journey to Prague is ostensibly to deliver a mysterious letter, but as an outsider to the city's dense history, her perspective becomes the lens through which Oyeyemi deconstructs dominant European metanarratives. These include the myth of a homogenous Czech national identity, the patriarchal silencing within Cold War histories, and the broader erasure of non-white experiences from the continent's historical record. Her task, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the epistemological chasms inherent in any attempt at historical reconstruction from a marginalized position. The novel questions the limits of archival knowledge, and advances the role of fiction to reclaim what official histories fail to acknowledge or overlook. The function of Prague in Oyeyemi's *Parasol Against the Axe* is not just a setting, but a stratified archive in which successive cultural, political, and written histories, engrave and erase each other. The city itself functions as a palimpsest, a space embodying layers of time where Austro-Hungarian spolia intertwine with the ideological remnants of Nazism and Communism. This historical mingling is mediated through the uncanny topographies of Kafkaesque legend and the haunting silence of gendered erasures, all within an urban fabric formed by the blending of its streets, edifices, and subterranean vaults.

Stated in Rianne Schiavone and Stijn Reijnders' essay as "multiple layers of significance," the architectural and symbolic stratification of Prague includes urban placemaking sewing together actual, historical, autobiographical, fictional, and mediated representation into a cultural text. Crystal casements and gothic patios are loci of marginalia (lost letters, phantom characters, and suspicious narrators) in Oyeyemi's hands, the elisions of official archives

dramatized. Such an approach echoes Greiner's use of Paul Ricoeur's tripartite model of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration – that shows how experiences and memories mix with audiovisual representations of history (Greiner 2021, 75-114). As such, Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptions of the chronotope help to understand how spatial forms in narratives blend social and historical time as a unified but unsettled textual world, making Prague itself part of the chronotopic space of feminist and political contestation (Ma et al. 2020, 4). Gendered exclusions are at the heart of the novel's archival politics. In *Parasol Against the Axe*, women's voices – or their present-day or even historical presence – are always in question, corresponding to Anna Clark's study of "the sounds of silence" in collective memory, where dominant historiographies systematically silence the voices of minority and indigenous histories (Clark 2020, 550-553). Moreover, Pamela Barmash meditates on cultural memories as always "a mixture of historical truth and fiction" – "folklore, ideological claims and narrative invention" to create contestable archives (Barmash 2005, 220-222). Oyeyemi's narrative stages an "archive of absences" in which spectral women and missing texts symbolize the institutional silencing of feminist knowledge.

To understand Oyeyemi's project, this essay will focus on her use of historiographic metafiction, a mode of writing that employs anachronism, intertextual references, and self-reflexive narratorial gestures to challenge the stability of historical knowledge. As critical work by scholars like Ricardo Noronha on historical mythologies demonstrates, fiction can powerfully question history's empirical claims to truth by revealing the imaginative effort inherent in its composition (Noronha 2019, 1090-1093). Accordingly, this essay will explore how *Parasol Against the Axe* mobilizes this strategy through its central motifs: letters that never reach their recipients, spectral women who haunt the narrative, and anachronistic encounters that disrupt linear time. By examining these elements, this analysis will argue that Oyeyemi dramatizes a politics of memory that interrogates who is remembered and on what terms. Ultimately, this essay contends that the novel's metafictional and fragmentary storytelling functions as a powerful mode of archival dissent, one that seeks not to restore the past, but to create a provisional, imaginative space for the silenced within Prague's haunted, palimpsestic landscape.

Herein, the central argument is signified through Linda Hutcheon's theory of "historiographic metafiction." For Hutcheon, such novels are fundamentally paradoxical: they are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 1988, 5). By overtly foregrounding their own narrative construction through fragmentation, anachronism, and unreliable narration, these novels do not seek to escape history but to interrogate it. They challenge the notion of a single, objective historical

truth, exposing the ways in which history itself is a narrative construct, shaped by power and vulnerable to erasure. In this regard, Oyeyemi's novel is a quintessential example of this mode. Its formal experimentation is not mere postmodern play but a political act. The unstable, metamorphosing book *Paradoxical Undressing*, the spectral characters, and the city-narrator that confesses its own memory lapses are all classic Hutcheon-esque strategies that force the reader to question how historical knowledge is produced, legitimized, and, most importantly, by whom. This framework provides the primary lens through which this essay will analyze the novel's engagement with the feminist archive and cultural memory.

This essay claims that *Parasol Against the Axe* enacts a feminist poetics of memory by reinventing the archive as a haunted and affective terrain of narrative possibility. Significantly, Oyeyemi uses fragmentation, intertextuality, and spectrality to critique patriarchal historiography and reinstate the narrative agency of marginalized women. In this regard, the novel's spectral figures align with the work of sociologist Avery Gordon, who defines haunting as a social phenomenon that reveals repressed histories and unresolved injustices (Gordon 1997, 2-5). Moreover, in foregrounding silences, discontinuities, and unresolved threads, Oyeyemi builds what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation"—a method of writing beyond the factual ruins of the archive to remedy a society's deficits and repudiate its wounded claims to selfhood (Hartman 2008, 12). While the text does not focus on the simple recovery of lost voices, it highlights the unarchivable while rejecting the epistemic violence of completeness.

A blending of non-linear structure, unreliable narrators, intertextual layering, as well as Oyeyemi's resistance to the archival imperative, fractures archival authority. It is not a city to be decoded; it is a city to be inhabited as a "palimpsest of overlapping cultural, political, and affective histories" (Schiavone & Reijnders 2020, 725). Its streets and courtyards are mnemonic territory for silenced women figures and counter-narratives. *Parasol Against the Axe* is an example of feminist historiographical practice that operates on more than one level in its engagements with literary form, theoretical questioning, and political critique, in which fiction is not a surrogate for history, but a form of 'archival dissent'. Fiction here does not just recall, it rethinks, hypothesizes, and intervenes. By doing this, Oyeyemi provides a radical literary counter-response to the silences engendered in archival institutions, and proposes that the politics of memory must include what cannot be neatly contained within it.

2- Methodology: A Framework for Reading the Archive

Given that Helen Oyeyemi's *Parasol Against the Axe* was published in 2024, a dedicated body of scholarly criticism has not yet formed around it. Acknowledging this gap, this essay constructs its analytical framework by drawing from three established and intersecting theoretical fields that provide the necessary tools for analyzing Oyeyemi's politically charged

and formally radical project: historiographic metafiction, cultural memory studies, and feminist archival theory. This approach allows the novel to be read in conversation with broader scholarly inquiries into the relationship between history, memory, and narrative. These frameworks, working in concert, provide the necessary tools to analyze Oyeyemi's politically charged and formally radical project. The novel's narrative architecture is best understood through Linda Hutcheon's theory of "historiographic metafiction." Hutcheon argues that certain postmodern texts "are intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 1988, 5). They use anachronism, overt fragmentation, and intertextual play to foreground the constructed nature of all historical accounts, challenging claims to objectivity. Oyeyemi's use of unreliable narrators, nested stories, and the physically metamorphosing book *Paradoxical Undressing* exemplifies this strategy. This approach is deepened by Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextual memory," wherein a text is a "mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1980, 66). Oyeyemi's Prague is an echo chamber of literary and historical voices – from Kafka to Czech surrealists – that are simultaneously honored and subverted, creating a dialogic space that resists any single, authoritative truth. Oyeyemi's Prague operates as a palimpsestic archive in which suppressed histories persist beneath the surface of everyday space. This spatial layering resists linear historiography and instead produces what Rezaei identifies as "palimpsest as multi-perspectival history," a narrative strategy that unsettles official memory by allowing marginalized and silenced narratives to coexist with dominant historical accounts (Rezaei 2026, 15). Through such palimpsestic structuring, *Parasol Against the Axe* aligns with broader contemporary practices of archival resistance that reimagine memory as a dynamic, contested process rather than a stable repository of facts. Hutcheon's framework thus serves as the critical spine of this analysis, providing the vocabulary to understand how Oyeyemi's formal choices function as a political critique of history itself, a critique that is then deepened and specified by theories of cultural memory and feminist archival practice.

This engagement with history and place connects directly to theories of cultural memory. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* – sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself – is essential for understanding Prague's role not just as a setting, but as a dynamic archive of conflicting pasts (Nora 1989, 7). The novel treats the city as a palimpsest, a layered text of overlapping histories, a concept explored in relation to Prague by scholars like Alfred Thomas and Angelo Maria Ripellino. This reading is further enriched by Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinction between "communicative memory" (lived, generational memory) and "cultural memory" (institutionalized history). *Parasol Against the Axe* stages the collision between these two forms, where the official cultural memory embodied by Prague's monuments is haunted by

the repressed communicative memories of its silenced inhabitants, demonstrating what Assmann calls systemic "cultural forgetting" (Assmann 2011, 59). The novel's engagement with archival absence further resonates with critical discussions of erasure and survival in modern literature. As Ansari and Baloo argue, literary narratives often construct subjectivity through tensions between erasure and persistence, revealing how memory survives even when historical continuity is violently disrupted (Ansari and Baloo 2026, 37). In Oyeyemi's work, such survival does not manifest as philosophical transcendence but as fragile, affective remembrance embedded in objects, spaces, and stories that resist archival closure.

Finally, and most crucially, this essay employs a feminist archival lens to analyze the novel's central political intervention. The methodology begins with Jacques Derrida's foundational concept of "archive fever," which posits that the archive is never neutral but is an active instrument of power, defined as much by what it excludes as by what it preserves. It is this act of exclusion that produces the "dust" Carolyn Steedman describes: the irreducible, material fragments of lives deemed insignificant that stubbornly remain (Steedman 2002, 16). Oyeyemi's focus on ephemeral texts – lost notes, notebook scraps, and excised letters – is a literary manifestation of this archival dust. To interpret these fragments, this analysis turns to Ann Cvetkovich's – a key theorist in feminist and queer studies – call for an "archive of feelings," which validates the affective traces of trauma, loss, and desire as legitimate forms of historical knowledge (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). The spectral women who haunt the narrative – whose stories are absent from any formal record – embody such an archive. Their presence aligns with Gordon's assertion that haunting is a social phenomenon signaling repressed histories and unresolved injustice (Gordon 1997, 8), a concept Derrida terms "hauntology." This haunting also functions as a form of Marianne Hirsch's, a leading scholar in memory and trauma studies, 'postmemory,' an experience where the 'second generation' grapples with the traumatic memories of their predecessors through imagination and creation, not direct experience (Hirsch 1997, 5). In response to these archival gaps and hauntings, Oyeyemi performs what Hartman, a scholar of African American literature and history, calls "critical fabulation": a method of writing that combines historical fact with fiction to narrate the lives of the unarchived (Hartman 2008, 11). This practice is a form of what Christina Sharpe, a professor of Black studies, terms "wake work," an ethical commitment to bearing witness to the violences of historical erasure (Sharpe 2016, 18). Accordingly, Oyeyemi's novel is read not as an attempt to recover a singular truth, but as a powerful act of "archival dissent" that weaves a counter-historiography from the affective and spectral remains of the past.

3- The Archive as Haunted Space

In *Parasol Against the Axe*, Helen Oyeyemi redeems the archive from being a sterile assemblage of facts to a haunted, gendered arena full of gaps that scream louder than their presence. This conception corresponds to Ann Cvetkovich's redefinition of the archive as "a repository of feelings" and affective traces, the latter of which are those marginalized by prevailing historical accounts (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). Oyeyemi's Prague, in turn, is an unreliable archon, a city-narrator confessing: "so much has happened. So much so that it can never be told. I feel stupid reminding you of that" (Oyeyemi 2024, 10), embodying Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive as not merely a site of memory but a structure governed by selection, power, and repression. As Derrida writes in *Archive Fever*, "The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know tomorrow. Perhaps. Or perhaps never" (Derrida 1996, 36). The archive is always shaped by what it excludes as much as by what it preserves, haunted by the "specter" of the unrecorded and the repressed. Oyeyemi mirrors this structure in Prague's fragmented memory, where silences and spectral gaps destabilize the authority of historical record, and the city itself becomes a mnemonic terrain marked by its constitutive absence. In the novel, this archive exists in fragments of stories, elusive women, miscatalogued records, and the haunting absence of a major female figure – or perhaps a male one, the elusive author "Merlin Mwenda" whose book *Paradoxical Undressing* changes its identity and content, becomes a spectral, unstable text, passed between characters as a kind of baseball between men.

The book itself mocks archival stability, with its narrative changing from one version to the next, asking the reader directly, "Where are you?" (Oyeyemi 2024, 31), destabilizing the reader's position and highlighting the text's elusive nature. The city's archive includes not just textual fragments like the Rudolfine notebook scraps found by the bookshop newbie, or Dagmar Dlouhá's suicide note with its gaping excisions, but also affective markers like the seventeenth-century "hunger stones" that surface in drought, bearing messages like, "If you see me, weep" (Oyeyemi 2024, 12). These material and textual fragments serve as Cvetkovich's affective traces, marking sites of historical trauma and feeling. The protagonist's journey to Prague becomes an archaeological excavation not of monuments but of ghosts – female lives like Dagmar Dlouhá's, whose story fractures into multiple, competing narratives shaped by grief, ideology, and the unreliability of memory itself, or the elusive Livia from the Rudolfine tale, whose "curative maltreatment" hints at buried histories of female agency and pain. Herein, one can recall feminist archival approaches that seek to uncover women's experiences often obscured or silenced within traditional historical records (Pape & Guta 2023, 1976-78). Oyeyemi's archive, therefore, is not only incomplete in intention but actively performs its absences as a fluid, haunted space between the lines of official record and further fragments of male-authored narrative. The absence performance is a basic tenet of historiographic

metafiction, where the text self-consciously points to its own gaps and inventions to problematize the very possibility of complete and objective historical recovery.

Oyeyemi's narrative apparatus evokes what Carolyn Steedman describes as "the dust of history"—the seemingly mundane yet stubbornly persistent residue of those whose stories, particularly women's, have been systematically erased or displaced from official accounts (Steedman 2002, 162). This "dust," the material trace that "will not go away" (Oyeyemi 2024, 16), manifests in Oyeyemi's Prague through fragmented memories and unstable texts. The city-narrator itself embodies this fragmentation, admitting, "Me and my rubbish memory, leaving me stranded with contusions that softly, so softly, glow" (Oyeyemi 2024, 9). Within the novel, the archive defies organization; instead, it functions like a palimpsest: layered one over the other, none readable in themselves, where previous inscriptions haunt the present (Dillon 2007, 12). Oyeyemi literalizes this archival instability through the novel-within-the-novel, *Paradoxical Undressing*. Its various, competing forms constantly supplant one another, confronting the characters and leaving the reader unsure of any stable e.g. (Oyeyemi 2024, 24-31, 47-52). Oyeyemi renders the archival instability through a series of fragmented and incomplete texts that exist at the margins of the main narrative. These include the scattered "scraps" of a sixteenth-century courtier's notebook discovered piece by piece (Oyeyemi 2024, 25-26); Dagmar Dlouhá's suicide note, a document rendered unreadable by words that have been physically cut out (Oyeyemi 2024, 60); and the unstable authorship created when Thea adopts Hero Tojoso's former pen name as her own (Oyeyemi 2024, 61). Such instances call into question the validity of historical preservation in turn, responding to feminist critiques of archival practices that frequently sustain violence by erasure and by silencing (Zecchi 2023, 16). Oyeyemi asserts that institutional memory often reinforces patriarchal silence by presenting unstable, layered, and haunted fragments instead of a coherent, authoritative record, leaving behind only the persistent "dust" of partially erased lives.

Furthermore, Oyeyemi deploys ghostly imagery not merely as a Gothic aesthetic, but as a political mechanism to recover erased subjectivities, signifying Derrida's concept of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* where the past persists spectrally within the present (Derrida 1994, 10). These ghosts are not just narrative devices, they are the embodiments of the affective pasts of those lives that are unrecorded, or systematically silenced. The city-narrator itself is this haunting, admitting its flawed, spectral memory: "I wrote that I didn't remember any of these incidents; nor did I remember any of the people involved" (Oyeyemi 2024, 7). This spectrality then reaches the core of the historical knowledge structure in the novel, which doubts the existence of a full or stable record: "So much has happened. So much that it can never be relayed. I feel dumb reminding you of this. You already know that about your own experience"

(Oyeyemi 2024, 10). In this regard, *Parasol Against the Axe* participates in a larger feminist archival practice that does not take the gaps in history to be ones to be filled with “truth,” but takes the very gaps to be meaningful (in themselves). Hartman’s concept of “critical fabulation,” which uses narrative to address archival silence and violence by imagining what might have been, resonates strongly here (Oyeyemi 2024, 11). Oyeyemi doesn’t try to definitively reconstruct the stories of characters like Dagmar Dlouhá; instead, the novel narrates how she lived, what she meant to a satirist, a grieving mother and a conflicted believer, and how there can never be one truth, and how female lives are broken by history and memory (Oyeyemi 2024, 57-59). Instead of being completed by surfacing lost facts, the archive here is revived by making absence and uncertainty audible through fiction. The *Paradoxical Undressing*, whose content reconfigures itself with each read (Oyeyemi 2024, 24-146), functions as an archive that does not bow to stability but rather embraces its own spectral, generative nature. This gesture of using fiction to explore the contours of absence is both reparative, offering a form of “hospitable memory” to the ghosts of the erased, as Derrida in *Specters of Marx* stated (Derrida 1994, 175), and insurgent, challenging the authority of traditional, often patriarchal, archival practices that demand completeness and certainty.

4- Palimpsestic Prague: The Architecture of Forgetting

Oyeyemi’s *Parasol Against the Axe* presents Prague not merely as a geographical setting, but as a textual and mnemonic construct—a palimpsest of overlapping cultural, political, and affective histories, a city that defies singular interpretation and challenges the reader’s assumptions about authenticity. The narrative voice (maybe even Prague itself) reiterates this internal ambiguity: “As far as I’m concerned, if you don’t know both languages [Czech and German], then whatever it is you think you know about Prague is fundamentally compromised. Only really matters, of course, if compromise or being compromised in this context really bothers you. A quick test: I didn’t write that WhatsApp message of mine in English, so all that you received just now is a series of paraphrases. What do you feel about that? Feels yucky, does it? Then farewell” (Oyeyemi 2024, 8). The city’s labyrinthine streets, half-translated inscriptions, and crumbling buildings become active participants in the narrative’s structure, mirroring the protagonist’s search for coherence within an unstable archive of memory. As a British-Malagasy woman whose mother tongue is English, Hero finds herself linguistically and culturally disoriented in a Prague saturated with Czech and German inscriptions—languages she cannot fully access. In this regard, Prague is a *lieu de mémoire*, a place where memory sediments in verities never replacing the past but which is constantly reconfiguring it (Nora 1989, 7, 9, 12). Thomas writes particularly about Prague using this prism, seeing the city as a layered text that is continually rewritten (Thomas 2010, 1-2).

The palimpsest is a metaphor and a method in the novel. For instance, the protagonist's (Hero Tojoso) encounter with the Astronomical Clock highlights how even iconic landmarks are sites of contested meaning and fragmented history. The clock itself is described as a spectacle of "representations of wisdom and unwisdom, each one warped yet unwisdomed... moving in the time apportioned to them, each joint and lever mobilized with the jerky dignity of remnants clinging to the trajectory of an explosion" (Oyeyemi 2024, 18-19). It is worth mentioning that this official feat is undermined by counternarratives from the onlookers: "Someone in the crowd began listing astronomical clocks in other towns and cities that were less hysterically hieroglyphic than this one... Peering about, Hero succeeded in tracking the commentary to a brown-skinned, silver-haired someone... 'Excuse me, but who's calling this a clock? There is no clock here. Now, Brescia—Brescia's got a clock,' she said... For all that it was being roundly ignored, the jingling timepiece under their very noses brought its spectacle to a dignified conclusion before it fell silent" (Oyeyemi 2024, 19). While straying about the city with a deceptive tourist book, the protagonist faces opposing histories. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, the legacy of communism, Czech nationalism, the literary ghosts of Kafka and Hašek, and the silenced stories, sometimes literally embedded within the city's fabric. An old bookshop becomes such a site, erected centuries back by a courtier of Rudolf II, its long-buried past appearing piece by piece:

This house was built by one of King Rudolf's courtiers... I'm guessing he didn't want too many people knowing this place was his anyway... In the days and weeks after, the novice discovered more scraps throughout the building... Your knowledge that it's absolutely none of your business surely makes you desire hearing it: But rather late in life a nobleman in Rudolf II's court was smitten with two physicians... The nobleman had gotten this physician [Livia] right in that she enjoyed a bit of intrigue. So with the help of a borrowed name... the nobleman contracted researches into curative maltreatment but without seeing Livia... His physical self he presented to Livia as a 'servant'... (Oyeyemi 2024, 25).

These layers are never really reconciled; instead, Oyeyemi offers the reader a chance to dwell in that tension between them. This instability questions prevalent notions of national identity that depend on linear, masculinist histories, which is also the case when criticising Czech history and feminism (Kelly 2002, 540). The novel specifically subverts the metanarrative of Prague as a purely Slavic or Western European city, instead revealing it as a space haunted by its German-speaking Jewish past and other erased identities, a history that official national narratives often seek to minimize.

Oyeyemi also turns the guidebook away from its traditional role of being a means of historical orientation and culture service. The fictional guide text in *Paradoxical Undressing* –

the fictional guide text in the novel itself – does become an unreliable narrator, blotting out almost as much as it makes visible and physically metamorphosing its own physical form and content. Hero discovers this instability firsthand, realizing after leaving the book unattended, "...come to think of it, this wasn't the book that she'd put to bed... The book was significantly heavier; there were more pages than there had been before" (Oyeyemi 2024, 47). This textual mutability precludes the reader, and Hero, from achieving stable historical ground to stand on as shown by the fact that much history is left unrecorded or actively obfuscated. "So much has happened. So much that it can never be told" (Oyeyemi 2024, 10). The guidebook's omissions—particularly concerning women's contributions and alternative histories—mirror real-world archival silences (Perkins 2012, 2), a recurring issue in reconstructing women's histories, including within Czech contexts (Hilmarova 2023, 12-14). The text wanders from narrative to narrative, sometimes clashing, leaving little besides disjunctive history, insufficient to constitute a guide. This narrative technique is an example of what Assmann calls "cultural forgetting" – a systematic exclusion of undesirable or marginal memory from the collective record – and thus makes the guidebook its own critique of the haphazard and partial nature of historical preservation (Assmann 2008, 67).

In addition, Oyeyemi's intertextual allusion to Kafka, Rilke, and Czech surrealism locates Prague as a literary space not merely as a canonical European modernism, but as a space with subversive, fragmented counter-narratives. The spirit of writers like Franz Kafka and the surreal lyricism of Rainer Maria Rilke loom large over the text's dreamlike urban palimpsest, as Oyeyemi deftly engages with Prague's "unsettled elegance" to interrogate how literature recodes historical trauma. Still, she willfully detaches this lineage by filling her novel with spectral women characters – Dagmar Dlouhá, Hero Tojoso, and Irma – who come to put this plot in crisis with living memory of disrupted memories and silenced voices. These women are not only partially seen or recalled, but also resist assimilation into any dominant narrative pattern: "I was ready for the boldness of those who aren't really able to be here with the rest of us and can't escape either" (Oyeyemi 2024, 90). Such spectral layering opposes linear historiography and the myth of single identity. Oyeyemi invents a metafictional architecture in which history resists disclosure. Prague, here, is no longer a city to be deciphered, conquered, or understood, but a living archive where contradictions must be inhabited rather than resolved. In this sense, the novel appeals to a broader literary tradition that envisions Prague as a surreal, layered city. Furthermore, Angelo Maria Ripellino, in his seminal work *Magic Prague*, famously described the city as a "phantasmagoria of memory" endlessly rewriting itself—a city shaped as much by legends, literary ghosts, and aesthetic dissonance as by its material history (Ripellino 1973, 2). Oyeyemi revives this vision but transforms it

through an intersectional and postcolonial lens, especially visible in Hero's embodied skepticism: "If the bruises were painted, then what about anything else?" (Oyeyemi 2024, 53). For Oyeyemi, the porousness of memory and cultural inheritance is no mere metaphor; it is an unsettling reality, mirrored in Hero's persistent narrative dislocation and inability to secure epistemological stability.

By reframing Prague with a multiplicity of haunted and haunting perspectives, Oyeyemi resists the centripetal pull of national identity preference, signifying what Svetlana Boym calls "reflective nostalgia," (Boym 2001, 41) – a mode of nostalgia that admits that it is impossible to come back and acknowledges the generative possibilities of the loss. The novel's recursive intertextuality further emphasizes this reflective stance; for example, the transiniscical novel *Paradoxical Undressing* within the text jeopardizes authorship and the reliability of textual history: "The text hadn't changed again. That notwithstanding, she still had to leave this place" (Oyeyemi 2024, 53). Prague, therefore, is a cipher and a labyrinth, a literary echo chamber that reverberates with the echoes of the long-pleaded voices. *Parasol Against the Axe* offers an uncontainable, newly defiant, and vibrantly transhistorical version of Prague – a city whose memory resists being flattened. As Oyeyemi writes, if "Prague never fails to be, then it was never a city in the first place" (Oyeyemi 2024, 10). Accordingly, by deconstructing the myth of national coherence, she foregrounds ambiguity, spectrality, and imaginative remembrance as radical strategies of engagement within culture.

5- Narrative Fragmentation and Intertextual Memory

Oyeyemi's formal strategies in *Parasol Against the Axe* are representative and reflective of the epistemological malaise at the heart of the novel. The narrative is a kaleidoscopic collage; it is an assemblage of postcards, meta-fictional digressions, ghostly insertions, and recursive plot lines that firmly refuse traditional chronologies. This fragmentation of structure is not just decorative; it performs the ruptures and discontinuities that lie within feminist practices that address cultural and historical memory. As the heroine in Oyeyemi's novel pages through a metafictional book entitled *Paradoxical Undressing*, she faces the evasiveness of meaning and polysemian interpretation frames. The novel therefore enacts the peripheries of textual authority through the form of its story in order to reflect the impossibility of reducing a stable historical purpose from the palimpsest of the lived or inherited. By rejecting closure in narrative, the literary non-fulfillment of the historical record, Oyeyemi echoes the ineffable nature of historical record, and comments on the impulsive modernist urge to impose cohesion upon the messiness of cacophonous, layered memories and forms of identity. The novel's hero is pestered on a continuity of latent thresholds and elusive symbolic borders: bookstores without currency, spectral architects of obsolescent handscrolls, and cityscapes that "melt time" as much as mimic

it. As one metafictional voice discloses, “Only a matter that rests on three separate points can be settled forever” (Oyeyemi 2024, 25)—a phrase that takes on the character of an emblem for the novel’s reverent rejection of a reduction of meaning to two-sided oppositions or absolute resolutions.

The novel’s intertextual web is both homage and resistance. Oyeyemi cites and reenacts canonical voices—Kafka’s absurdist architectures, Rilke’s poetic interiority and in-citations from the Czech surrealists’ folklore, yet situates them in a narrative that purposefully undermines their authority. Oyeyemi evokes, through the fictive stacking of factual and fictive texts, an “intertextual memory” (Kristeva 1980, 65-66, 69) of a dialogical space in which literary echoes fragment hierarchies of textual origin and production. Oyeyemi dramatizes this textual dynamic through the relationship between the author Hero Tojoso and her reader, Thea Gilmartin. When asked what she thought of Hero’s powerful but unnamed book, Thea dismisses intellectual analysis, confessing instead that it “walked all over me and wiped its feet on my hair” (Oyeyemi 2024, 62). This visceral metaphor reflects not only the book’s emotional force but also the overwhelming effect of its intertextuality: a narrative so dense with echoes, allusions, and layered voices that it resists straightforward interpretation. Thea’s reaction suggests that the novel operates as an embodied experience of memory and language—an intertextual mosaic that unsettles the reader by drawing them into a dialogic, affective exchange with multiple overlapping texts. These spectral female texts haunt the archive not as passive inclusions but as interventions which actively transform narrative logic and the historical discourse. This subversive usage places Oyeyemi within feminist literary traditions to question the masculinist myth of originality. Her layering of texts inside texts — using a metafictional novel with a lace umbrella wrapped in ice for a cover to create the “melting contradictions” of memory — sets in sharp relief not only the many voices, but the permeable borders between fiction and archive. Regarding Linda Hutcheon’s theory of “historiographic metafiction”, Oyeyemi’s narrative both appropriates and defies the conventions of historical realism through its self-reflexive strategies that expose the constructed nature of historical narratives. As Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, such texts are “intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages,” deliberately unsettling the line between fiction and history (Hutcheon 1988, 5). For instance, the librarian in the novel derives his interpretation of the text not from the plot but from what he calls “exercise for the books themselves” (Oyeyemi 2024, 24) – metafictional observation of the novel’s stance on text history, taking it as a performance.

However, *Parasol Against the Axe* transcends mere postmodern play; its recursive construction and multiplication of alter-egos, such as Dorothea Gilmartin and Hero Tojoso,

instead instantiate what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”: a belated mode of witnessing in which inherited trauma is imaginatively reassembled (Hirsch 1997, 22). Oyeyemi’s deliberately indeterminate narrative defies the cultural impulse to have things resolved, instead providing the “feminist killjoy ethics” that Ahmed may have in mind, allowing instead for fictionalized mourning and hanging on, and for cancellation rather than expungement (Oyeyemi 2024, 177). An insistence, the insistence on discomfort, on living with the slits. Therefore, fragmentation in Oyeyemi’s work is not just a simple formal device; it becomes a feminist ethics of remembrance, which refuses to erase the jagged edges of that memory, silence, and that history of violence. The postcards, crucial to both form and plot, can be seen as intimate partial records that go against the impersonality and epistemic violence of institutional archives. These missives are not linear or explicatory; instead, they surface as obscurity laden emotional gestures and semiotic dements that reflect the fleeting, affect-laden nature of memory as such. Their fragmentary character provides no view of the past from above; rather they are triggers of what Ann Cvetkovich calls an “archive of feelings” where affect functions as residue as well as method (Cvetkovich 2003, 7-11). These postcards frequently refer to places or persons that the reader cannot fully contextualize and, in turn, invoke the opacity of remembrance and the work of interpretation. One entry insistently says, “As she read the words of the man who’d fathered her, she made her peace with the strong probability that they wouldn’t exchange a single word as long as they lived” (Oyeyemi 2024, 63). The personal falls on the inarticulate, the historical collapsing into the inarticulate, leaving no neat solution.

Thus, Oyeyemi’s narrative strategy of fragmentation turns out to be an aesthetic of resistance to narrative mastery, an attempt at a historical silence, and the marginalization of feminine memory. Instead of a linear progress, the novel develops through the help of textual disruptions: variant editions of novels, changes of authorial role, and uncanny replication. For example, Hero Tojoso sees an old favourite book opened up and it has been changed: “This-this she rebelled against... come to think of it, this wasn’t the book she’d put to bed... there were more pages than there had been before” (Oyeyemi 2024, 47). And this instability of the text echoes the instability of memory and subjectivity. In this kind of narrative, meaning never stays the same; it has to be dug out by readerly engagement, that is, what Hartman describes as “critical fabulation”—the practice of the storytelling of the absences in the archive (Hartman 2008, 11-12). In the end, *Parasol Against the Axe* suggests a feminist ethic of narrative that accepts incompleteness, polyphony. The novel’s structure resists one single meaning, preferring what Moya Bailey and Trudy have referred to as “collective witnessing”: a feminist process in which readers are expected not to try and resolve but hold space for what is complex (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 66-67). This moral position is encapsulated in the reflections of Hero: “If the marks

may be painted on, what might there then be of all the rest” (Oyeyemi 2024, 53). Oyeyemi’s postcards are, therefore, not only aesthetic flourishes but narrative gambits which unsettle the coherence of dominant historiographies, and foreground the fragment as a point of feminist possibility.

6- Gendered Memory and the Feminist Archive

The act of remembering in *Parasol Against the Axe* is highly gendered and politically dramatic. Oyeyemi rejects the idea of memory as a neutral, reflective gesture; rather, she presents it as one that reconfigures the landscape as a contested ground subject to patriarchal epistemologies and archival silences. Her text resists dominant historical narratives because of the women who are not only forgotten but are also spectral, partial, or even fictive. These figures – Dagmar Dlouhá, Leah and the many nameless women who reappear in distorted forms – signal what Lisa Blackman refers to as “haunted data”: the affective residues that eschew the full process of incorporation into the knowledge systems (Blackman 2019, 4, 12). The instability is enhanced by the novel’s narrative composition. Thea, for instance, finds a letter from her mother in which the meaning is literally excised: “The missing words are cut out of the paper, and those who were there say that the words were never found” (Oyeyemi 2024, 60). Silence is physical – inscribed on the page, inscribed into Thea’s psyche – and it turns into a major metaphor for the condition of a gendered memory.

Such elusive withdrawals sound like Gordon’s idea of the haunting as a structure of feeling through which the perpetual existence of unresolved injustices is registered (Gordon 1997, 5-7). In her Prague, memory is sedimented in architectural strata and textual disjunctions, often through a mistrust of “memory itself, the parts of the past we latch on to and stretch further to cover up other parts we ignored” (Oyeyemi 2024, 58). Dagmar, Thea’s mother, is authored through opposing stories: a satirical martyr, a true Party member, or a political nostalgic hallucination. This instability is what Katharina Antweiler identifies as one necessary contradiction in collective memory itself, which challenges the universalizing impulse of historical discourse, and opens space for abolitionist and plural memory practices (Antweiler 2023, 282). Oyeyemi’s motif of unstable names, (Thea Gilmartin, Hero Tojoso, Dorothea) also produces destabilization of identity as a steadfast anchor of narration. At the point of convergence between her name and Hero’s pseudonym, Thea admits to intentional and inquisitive appropriation, thereby emphasizing that identity is built through intertextual haunting. Further, Oyeyemi’s hauntings are integrated within the language and structure of the novel itself. These textual gaps, recursive dialogues, and contradictory attributions operate, as Sharpe defines them, as “wake work”—a mournful literary practice of granting witness to the forgotten of histories’ violence (Sharpe 2016, 14). In this sense, the novel can be regarded as a

feminist archival labor; instead of failures, fragmented, unreliable, or lost narratives are sites for critical, and imaginative recoveries. One narrator notes with a guilty clarity: “You aren’t able to speak a single word of what you think, feel, or know. Not even your name” (Oyeyemi 2024, 60). That erasure, and the refusal to complete it, fills out the novel’s ethical heart.

Unlike the usual archival ‘recuperation’ of forgotten women, *Parasol Against the Axe* imagines an alternative remembrance: affective, imaginative, and grounded in the body. Oyeyemi’s protagonist is not destined to discover a true history or restore a settled identity; rather, she is involved in what Hartman has called “critical fabulation”, an experimental mode of historical narration that invents stories to fill in archival silences, a strategy of developing creative narrative out of the absence of archival material. The speculative dimension is also most intensely staged in the story of Thea’s mother, Dagmar Dlouhá, whose death is filled with ambiguity. The last note she leaves behind, mangled and illegible, also reveals this narrative absence: “The missing words are cut out of the paper, and according to those at the scene, they were never found” (Oyeyemi 2024, 60). This vacuum is not a failure of documentation, but the very condition by which remembrance functions in Oyeyemi’s counter-archive. The novel rethinks identity not as being passed down via linear genealogy but rather through narrative resonance and affective connections with the other who is otherwise literally out of reach. Thea is captured by Dagmar’s memory, not by fact reconstruction, but by narrative echo and performative reenactment. At one point, she reflects: “It isn’t Štěpán who Thea mistrusts, but memory itself, the parts of the past we latch on to and stretch further to cover up other parts we ignored” (Oyeyemi 2024, 58). This suspicion of memory’s reliability strengthens Oyeyemi’s opposition to historical closure and espousal of ambiguity. This approach is related to “speculative re-remembering,” as explained by KJ Cerankowski, an archival imagination that works not to return the lost, but to occupy the ghostly possibilities of unrecorded lives, especially those for which queer, Black feminist, and posthumanist frameworks provide the conceptualizations (Cerankowski 2023, 16-17).

Ethics of naming also works in this archival aesthetic. Thea adopts and can adopt and reshape identities – Dorothea Gilmartin, Hero Tojoso – and thus blurs the dividing line between autobiography and fiction. “You get to exist, because of me”, she says to the cartoon likeness of her former self, but the cartoon voiceover replies, “Yeah, well, because of me you get to pay for some scholarship to Dagmar Dlouhá on all continents” (Oyeyemi 2024, 61). Identity here is not one identity but a co-constitution across imaginary relations and bodily gestures. Herein, it can be stated that contradiction is not a flaw in memory studies, it is a prerequisite for pluralist, abolitionist modes of archival thinking. Therefore, Oyeyemi’s novel re-positions archival work from recovery to literary and ethical invention. Her ghosts, gaps, and gestures try not to return

a lost sense of coherence, but to inhabit the radical unknowability of lives wiped out by historical and patriarchal violence. In light of speculative embodiment and affective resonance, *Parasol Against the Axe* argues that when memory is freed from the need for evidence to prove its veracity, memory becomes a radical narrative imagination.

7- Conclusion

Helen Oyeyemi's *Parasol Against the Axe* is not a story about memory; it is a performative intervention in what memory means, how it is mediated and contested. The novel practices a feminist ethics of remembrance as it enacts a disruptive, incoherent, nonlinear form, and intertextual layering, and narrative spectrality that refuses closure and institutional control. Whereas the novel does not offer restitution to the archival silences it invokes, it dwells in their complexity as a prescription, foregrounding the ethical and imaginative work needed to engage with the historical silencing of women's experiences. It presents a compelling answer to appeals in feminist theory and memory studies to refocus attention from retrieval to reconfiguration – to what Gordon calls the “ghostly matters” that trouble normative historiography. The archive in Oyeyemi's Prague is not a site of fixed knowledge, but a haunted palimpsest of fragments, absences, and invented traces. Regarding Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, the novel's formal strategies are revealed not as an abandonment of history, but as a profound and political engagement with its narrative construction. The city, told by its own unreliable narrator, serves as a mnemonic terrain inhabited by spectral female figures, unsteady texts, and sliding names. By rejecting the conventions of chronology, unifocal perspective, and authoritative factuality, *Parasol Against the Axe* finds itself becoming 'critical fabulation': a method of storytelling that admits to archival violence while suggesting alternatives without suggesting a totalizing or “corrective” account of the past.

What is revealed is a very political conception of memory: one where affect trumps accuracy, speculation trumps certainty and, fragmentation trumps narrative closure. Oyeyemi's ghosted characters, reconfigurable texts, and affective postcards trouble the patriarchal logic of historical notation and attest to the validity of heterophonic, creative, and corporeal knowledge. Regarding the process of 'wake work', there is an ethical importance to stay with the never-resolved and the irresolvable. *Parasol Against the Axe* is not merely illustrative of this stance; it is pedagogical: it teaches readers how to dwell in it, and to meet the past not through mastery, but through mourning, care, and creative dissonance. Finally, Oyeyemi's novel is about the limits and possibilities of memory as a feminist and decolonial practice. It presents fiction not as an inferior form of historiography, but a critical tool by which to refigure what evidence is, who is a subject of memory, and how historical meaning is constructed. In this regard, *Parasol Against the Axe* becomes a part of an increasing number of feminist writings that exemplify

“cultural memory work” – i.e. active creation of common consciousness in the form of aesthetic practice, ethical involvement, and political imagination. It is a novel that hears ghosts, conjures speculative kinships, and recaptures the archive not as a crypt of facts, but as the living space of contestation and care.

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