

Mnemonic Violence and Narratives of Pain: Contesting Saudi Cultural Memory in *The Goat Life*

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ABSTRACT

*When the three-hour film *The Goat Life* was streamed by Netflix in July 2024, it faced strong opposition and severe criticism from countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), leading to a ban on it all over GCC except the UAE, for misrepresenting Saudi Arabia and its people. The movie highlights the harrowing experiences of Najeeb Muhammad, a migrant labourer from Kerala (India) who arrived in Saudi Arabia but was abducted, tortured, and forced to live on a goat farm in the desert. In view of Saudi Arabia's centuries-old cultural tradition, centred on karam (hospitality), rahmah (compassion), and ihsan (moral excellence), this paper uses the interrelated theoretical concepts of cultural memory wars and mnemonic violence from the broader theoretical framework of cultural memory studies to analyse the movie's portrayal of Saudi Arabia and its people. Although the narrative is rooted in a deeply affective recollection of migratory precarity and indentured labour, its epistemic imbalance facilitates the slippage from personal memory to collective misrepresentation. Despite the fact that rahmah, karam, and ihsan form an interlocking ethical grammar that challenges reductive representations of Saudi society, these concepts do not deny the possibility of injustice or abuse; however, these codes refuse the elevation of such incidents into cultural essence. The study concludes that theologically grounded, socially operative, and ethically aspirational, these cultural and ethical codes offer a counter-discursive framework through which cinematic narratives like *The Goat Life* can be read as partial, selective, and ideologically overdetermined rather than representative.*

Keywords: mnemonic violence; memory wars; the goat life; narratives of grief; Saudi culture

INTRODUCTION

In the booming bazaar of *brand-(ish)* stereotyping, where hyperrealities are (mis)-represented and showcased as cultural identities in a bid to not just shape but also contest and mediate memories, Saudi Arabia has been one of the targets of cultural memory wars, resulting in its stereotyping in a negative limelight (Althobiti, 2024; Shaheen, 2001). From the sensationalised portrayals of religious extremism to the oft-repeated tropes of gender repression and desert archaism (Alotaibi, 2024; Wahid, 2023), the warring gaze has historically framed Saudi culture through an essentialist and totalising lens (Shaheen, 2001). Such misrepresentations not only obscure the country's richly layered heritage but also actively participate in epistemic violence. This leads to cultural erasure. What these cultural productions achieve through such reductive portrayals is not limited to a record-high Box Office rating, booming revenues and a misplaced public applause but also a steady reinvigoration of stereotypes which are the direct result of such

public displays of xenophobia, hatred and disinformation. These depictions do a lot more than entertain. They erect ideological boundaries, pitching the country as well as the region as the Other, both culturally and religiously. Ironically, cultural productions have mostly been the carriers of such wholesale stereotypical portrayals.

In the given context, the field of cultural memory studies offers a critical theoretical framework through which such cultural productions can be scrutinised. The cultural milieu of a society is required to be taken into consideration in a bid to carry out such investigations. This is how such reductive portrayals and efforts of stereotyping can be dismantled (Ullah, 2025). The role of Saudi literature as a carrier of cultural memory is pivotal in this case (Ullah, 2026). It serves as a site of resistance and identity re-inscription known as counter-memory (Assmann, 2011). This stands for the deliberate recovery and reactivation of silenced or marginalised cultural narratives. Similarly, the concept of cultural memory wars sheds light on how certain portrayals gain dominance while others are rendered invisible. Jan Assmann (2011) explains that memory is never static, adding that it is shaped by institutions, media, and political interests that determine what is remembered and what is forgotten. Moreover, different cultural positions mobilise victimhood to assert moral authority, legitimise suffering, and frame responsibility for violence (Alosman & Raihanah, 2024). Within this contested terrain, *The Goat Life* (2024) carries a disproportionate weight. It limits Saudi Arabia to a void of desert. It strips it of kindness and generosity. It paints the country, its people, and its hundreds-of-years-old cultural memory with a single stroke of cruelty and torture. On the contrary, there is a growing body of Saudi literature that seeks to restore balance, while narrating the lived realities of the region from within rather than from the outside (Alhazmi, 2020). Even then, the appeal of cinematic productions, such as the stereotypical theatrics of *The Goat Life*, draws more viewership and scores higher ratings from audiences in most parts of the world.

Being the physical setting of *The Goat Life* (2024), Saudi Arabia is situated on the Arabian Peninsula, holding a unique historical and territorial significance in the Middle East. The region's legacy predates modern nation-states. The country is rooted in ancient trade routes and tribal confederations which lived in the desert for centuries. Since its unification under King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud in the year 1932, the Kingdom has grown to encompass over 2 million square kilometres. It is the largest country in the Middle East and the fifth-largest in Asia.

When the three-hour film *The Goat Life* was streamed by Netflix in July 2024, it faced strong opposition and severe criticism from countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), leading to a ban on it all over GCC except the UAE, for misrepresenting Saudi Arabia and its people. The movie highlighted the harrowing experiences of Najeeb Muhammad, a migrant labourer from Kerala (India) who arrived in Saudi Arabia but was abducted and subjected to torture on a goat farm in the desert. Inspired by the real-life ordeal of a man with the same name, who was abducted and forced into slave-like labour as a goat-herder in the desert in the 1990s, the movie is still banned in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Based on a 2008 semi-autobiographical novel in the Malayalam language by Indian author Benyamin, the movie did exceedingly well in other parts of the world, grossing over USD 10.4 million worldwide in the first week of its release. The novel itself, which was adapted for this cinematic production, was also banned in these countries.

The movie begins with Najeeb Muhammad's hopeful departure to Saudi Arabia. However, it takes a grim turn when he is abducted and forced to work in near-slavery on a remotely located desert goat farm. He is stripped of autonomy and cut off from language. On a desert(ed) goat farm, the only living beings that he is left with are goats, sheep and camels. Subjected to relentless physical and psychological suffering, his only company becomes the herd of animals that he tends.

With no human being to identify with, these animals embody his captivity as well as his only lifeline to sanity. Najeeb Muhammad was finally able to escape from that captivity. However, throughout his long stay at the goat farm, he suffered immensely. Nothing pleasant came his way during his stay there. The whole account is that of suffering and torture: both physical and psychological.

The objective of this study is to investigate how the film provides a reductionist portrayal of Saudi Arabia and its people, leading to stereotyping. The study borrows from cultural memory studies as well as Saudi Arabia's theologically grounded, socially operative, and ethically aspirational cultural and ethical codes of life to analyse the depiction of Saudi Arabia and its people in the movie. It endeavours to use the country's cultural memory with reference to *karam* (hospitality), *rahmah* (compassion), and *ihsan* (moral excellence) in a bid to evaluate the essence of the cinematised cultural memory in the movie. The selective representation, which is narratively compelling, raises important questions when examined through the lens of cultural memory studies and the politics of representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of how Saudi Arabia and its people are portrayed becomes more pertinent in the view of cultural productions like *The Goat Life*. In the field of memory studies, literature is more than just a reflection of personal or national trauma. It becomes a vessel through which certain collective memories are preserved, distorted, or erased (Erl, 2011; Ullah, 2020). In this domain, the works of Saudi writers serve as the carriers of Saudi culture and code of conduct. Works like Yousef Al-Mohaimeed's *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* (2007), *Munira's Bottle* (2010), and Badriah Al-Bishr's *Hend and the Soldiers* (2009) challenge the dominant cultural narratives by giving voice to marginal identities and silenced experiences. Novels written by Saudi writers, such as Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), Abdo Khal's *Throwing Sparks* (2011), Mohammed Hasan Alwan's *A Small Death* (2016), Nima Ismail Nawwab's *The Unfurling* (2004), and Laila Aljohani's *Days of Ignorance* (2011), reinterpret collective and personal memory in relation to gender, religion, and modernity. Such works exemplify what Jan Assmann (2011) describes as cultural memory proper: a mode of remembrance that is institutionalised, canonised, and transmitted across generations, forming the symbolic horizon through which communities understand themselves. Despite being the cultural carriers of the Saudi heritage, these works seldom receive global attention.

Several studies were carried out on *The Goat Life* after the publication of its English translation (*Goat Days*). Its cinematic adaptation in 2024 further expanded the viewership. From narrative ethics to migration studies and visual cultures, several studies were carried out to investigate the work from varying standpoints. Migrant labour and structural exploitation have been the major points of interest for most of these studies. Muraleedharan's (2015) research asserts how the narrative offers a documentary-like testimony that shows the lived conditions of Gulf labour migration. He discusses how the formation of social belonging and identity takes place in such conditions. In the same vein, Nair and Samuel (2018) also investigate personal sufferings and subaltern subjectivities as shown in the movie.

The transition from text to screen has also become a major site for scholarly debate. Shankar (2024) observes that the movie provides a visual representation of the sufferings of the protagonist. Labour extremity and dignity have also been the points of discussion in certain

research in migration studies. Zetter (2022) investigates the narrative from the standpoint of forced labour. He observes that the movie is important as it details the failure of the labour system in the country. Similarly, the movie is also appreciated for criticising the labour practices in the country (Kapiszewski, 2023).

In the domain of film studies, researchers have analysed the movie with reference to cross-cultural reception, narrative pacing and cinematic realism. Ajith (2024) compares the movie to other similar films of survival from the West. Singh (2024) declares the movie as an important contribution to discussions on the rights of labour in the Middle East. He also hails the work as an addition to the debates on the rights of foreign workers in these countries, adding that such works are especially valued on account of their placement in a different socio-cultural setting. Film critic Varma (2024) notes that the visual grammar of the movie mediates between the protagonist's inner life and structural forces.

Several other works have examined the ban on the movie. Al-Mahmoud's (2025) analysis of the movie discusses the controversies around *The Goat Life*. His work focuses on the Gulf media with reference to the discourses of representation, national image and labour migration. Al-Mahmoud's research shows that concerns about preserving socio-economic reputation lead to official censorship. He also asserts that such bans are preferred over actions to address the complaints of migrant workers.

Finally, *The Goat Life* caused discussions on storytelling, ethical witnessing and cultural memory. In summary, the literature on *The Goat Life* positions the work at the juncture of migration studies, film theory, cultural politics, and narrative ethics, but falls short of analysing the portrayal of Saudi Arabia and its people in the movie. Despite the fact that the emerging research underscores the importance of examining both textual strategies and representational practices, situating *The Goat Life* just as a singular artistic product but as part of a broader conversation about labour, dignity, and cross-cultural representation in the twenty-first century, none of the studies investigates the reductive and essentialist depiction of Arabs in this film. The current research endeavours to address this research gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Keeping in view the fact that *The Goat Life* participates in a cultural memory struggle, where a non-Arab narrative dominates the global imagination, overshadowing the rich and nuanced history of Saudi Arabia and its people, this study uses theoretical underpinnings from cultural memory studies in general and the works of Andreas Huyssen (2000), Astrid Erll (2011), Aleida Assmann (2011) and Jan Assmann (2011) in particular. Similarly, as the focus of the novel is on cruelty and isolation, though rooted in a single real-life experience, which is presented without sufficient attention to the longstanding cultural traditions of the Arabian Peninsula - traditions that are deeply grounded in hospitality, shared solidarity, and mercy (Al-Dabbagh, 2019), the study borrows from Saudi Arabia's centuries old cultural practices of *karam* (hospitality), *rahmah* (compassion), and *ihsan* (moral excellence) in a bid to weigh the movie's single-event-based-generalizations against the community's centuries-old values that stand as the accepted codes of life for them. This parallel needs to be drawn as Aleida Assmann (2011), being the pioneer of memory studies as a theoretical paradigm, asserts that memory is more than recalling the past; it is a contested space where narratives vie for cultural legitimacy and endurance. Therefore, the selection of memory studies as a broad theoretical perspective, wherein the works of the relevant theorists have been used as a

lens to debate the authenticity of the claims which are made in *The Goat Life*, conforms to Assmann's (2011) declaration of the contested nature of memory.

In the Islamic moral discourse, *karam* (hospitality) occupies a prominent position. Generosity is not only valued highly in the Arab culture but also placed with great respect in the relevant theological grounding. The Qur'an repeatedly advises in favour of generosity when it comes to dealing with strangers, labourers, and those in precarity (Qur'an 76:8-9). Al-Ghazālī declares generosity as a phenomenon that counters greed among humans. He adds that it also cultivates social cohesion (Al-Ghazālī, 2010). Prophetic Muhammad (PBUH) grants *karam* the value of a communal norm among the believers. Numerous hadiths emphasise the ethical obligation to honour guests and safeguard those under one's care (Al-Bukhārī, 2002).

In Islamic theology, *rahmah* (mercy) is not just an individual virtue but an important principle of social life. The Qur'an advises believers to show mercy to each other. By means of the recurring formula "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate" (Qur'an 1:1), the Creator's liking for mercy and compassion has been clearly worded. Classical exegetes al-Ṭabari and Ibn Kathīr emphasise that this invocation establishes mercy as the ethical horizon within which all human action is to be understood (Ibn Kathīr, 2000). The traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) explicitly link divine mercy to human social conduct. His oft-quoted saying is: "Those who show mercy will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful" (Al-Nawawī, 2007). This shows how mercy is not only an obligation from the religion but also an expectation from society. Operationally, social relations, actions and conduct may be evaluated through *rahmah* as a cultural and ethical lens.

Ihsan (ethical excellence) provides the most comprehensive ethical framework in Islam. Ibn Taymiyyah (1995) describes *ihsan* as the highest ethical station which regulates power, authority and interpersonal relations by means of divine consciousness. In relationships between employers and workers, *Ihsan* plays an important role in a bid to ensure restraint against abuse. It encourages justice (Kamali, 2010). For the investigation of narratives that carry labour exploitation, *ihsan* serves as a particularly relevant discursive tool. Its theological logic insists that ethical excellence is measured not by legal minimums alone but by the quality of moral intention and action.

Despite the fact that the novel's narrative is based on a real-life experience, it engages in what Astrid Erll (2011) describes as the mediatization of memory. In this process, the medium of cultural production is used to shape and circulate individual memory. The 2024 cinematic adaptation of *The Goat Life* only intensifies its cultural impact. It extends the story's reach to viewers who may not be familiar with the socio-historical realities of the region. Without the relevant information about the history and culture, the story may end up as the only tunnel-vision into the region and its people. Such a possibility results in a reductive image. Assmann (2011) asserts that such trauma narratives can inadvertently engage in mnemonic silencing. It leads to the suppression of counternarratives. Hence, a single narrative with a popular appeal survives and grows (Ullah, 2025). This paper questions the reductive rendering of Saudi Arabia and its people in *The Goat Life*. The article uses the subtitles of the movie for the textual analysis. It foregrounds the deep ethical and cultural traditions embedded in Saudi Arabia's memory-scape. Along with the relevant theoretical underpinnings from cultural memory studies, the paper uses Saudi cultural traditions centred on *rahmah*, *karam* and *ihsan* for the analysis and discussion. Ironically, none of these traditions found a space anywhere in the three-hour-long movie.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The film's narrative relies almost entirely on the desert as its geographical frame. Viewers are hardly given a chance to witness any of the multiple attractions of the country. The desert has been shown as a horrifying place with devastation all around. Such a depiction significantly shapes the viewer's understanding of the country. The protagonist's experience has been restricted to a sparsely populated desert landscape. It is through this singular geographical frame that his sense of isolation seems multiplied. The movie does not show the viewer any glimpse of the social, cultural and urban diversity that characterises contemporary Saudi society. This spatial narrowing is not incidental. It produces a form of narrative tunnel vision in which the desert comes to stand in for the nation as a whole, thereby reinforcing a monolithic cultural imaginary.

On the contrary, indigenous Saudi literature has been showing a different picture with reference to the portrayal of the desert. For centuries, Arab poets and prose writers have been showing deep love and admiration for the desert. They have been declaring it a space of poetic inspiration, memory and belonging. The traits of moral endurance, loyalty and love have been associated with the desert as an intimate landscape in most of the classical Arabic poetry, particularly within the Bedouin and Najdi traditions. One such example is the oft-quoted legend of Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, where the desert environment has been shown as a parallel to the human emotional depth (Allen, 2000). This tradition is still alive among the modern Saudi poets as well. The movie *The Goat Life*, however, also omits the rest of the alternative geographies: Saudi Arabian cities, villages, coastal regions, and everyday social spaces. As a result, the representation of the whole country has been limited to one stark solitude. The desert has been stripped of the indigenous meanings of love, belonging and memory that have been associated with it for centuries. As a result, the desert's cinematic function becomes less a culturally situated landscape and more a narrative device that amplifies isolation while obscuring the multiplicity of Saudi lived realities.

The fact that the Arab engagements with the desert have historically been shaped less by ideas of emptiness than by intimacy, memory, and ethical belonging further highlights the movie's attempt to paint the desert with a negative stroke. Classical Arabic poetry repeatedly figures the desert not as a void but as a space saturated with meaning. Its traces (*āthār*) of loved ones, camps, and journeys have been generating affective attachment for centuries. In pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah*, the poet's pause at the abandoned campsite (*wuqūf 'alā al-aṭlāl*) has affirmed continuity between land and human presence. Sand was turned into an archive of social life (Zwettler, 1978). In Najdi and Saudi literary traditions, the desert is often associated with dignity, endurance and moral clarity. Cultural productions never show it as a site of annihilation. Abd al-Rahman Munīf's (1987) portrayal of the desert is nothing short of a formative ethical environment where relationality and restraint are promoted. Similarly, Saudi cultural historiography's record about desert as a lived homeland is showcased with hospitality, loyalty and ecological attentiveness (Al-Rasheed, 2010). These works show the desert as a space where humanity is articulated in ways that are different from urban geographic frames. On the contrary, *The Goat Life* simply bypasses this desert-related cultural milieu. It resorts to painting the landscape with completely different but negative meanings.

Connected to this is the portrayal of Saudi Arabia as a space of suffering, dehumanisation, and emotional desolation. The movie so reductively shows a nameless and faceless Arab character as the sole representative of the centuries-old traditions of the society. The setting depicts the desert landscape where basic human dignity is lost. The description of his captor carries no nuance and

no cultural complexity. In Najeeb's words, "He was not cruel because he enjoyed it, but because it was his nature. Like the sun in that land, he burned without apology." A reductionist representation of the country and its people is pretty visible here. A single individual has been turned into the symbolic representation of the whole country and its people. Cruelty has been shown to be intrinsic rather than circumstantial. The cultural vibrancy of Saudi Arabia has been silenced through the lingering showcasing of wide, arid horizons of the desert. The only interactions Najeeb experiences are with the master, the goats, and silence. Such a selective and reductive dealing of a culture is known as the "monopoly of memory" (Assmann, 2011). This unidimensional narrative blocks the complexity of a real, living culture. Consequently, the film does not merely depict trauma; it universalises it as a truth about a place and its people.

Such cinematic representations that frame Saudi Arabia as culturally inhospitable or ethically deficient are difficult to sustain when read against the historically attested moral vocabularies of the Arabian Peninsula. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to the documented history of hospitality and human care, embedded in the Saudi and broader Arab culture. Pre-modern Arabic and Islamic sources consistently identify *karam* as a foundational social obligation grounded in generosity toward the guest, protection of the stranger, and the redistribution of resources within the community. Classical Arabic poetry and early historiography show hospitality as a proud cultural code among people in the region. It is declared as an essential public ethic that represents honour, reputation, and moral legitimacy (Irwin, 1999). The analysis of Arabian social formations by Ibn Khaldun (1967) situates *karam* within a broader system of moral reciprocity. He asserts that generosity and care for others are indispensable to the maintenance of social cohesion. The movie, however, does not mention or touch upon this centuries-old code of conduct.

Theological sources also support the obligatory role of *Karam* or hospitality. According to Al-Dabbagh (2019), the values of "welcoming the stranger" and "feeding the hungry" were moral imperatives, long before the advent of the modern Saudi state. In the hadith tradition, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) says, narrated by Abdu Hurairah: "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should honour his guest" (Sahih Bukhari, Hadith 6136 & 6475). Foundational to the Bedouin way of life, hospitality was a basic element of life even in the past. It was a general trait where survival in harsh environments depended on mutual care and solidarity (Al-Rasheed, 2013). The cultural memory of such values, however, is absent in *The Goat Life*. The movie reduces the Saudi society to a singular act of violence and captivity. It, thus, perpetuates what Jan Assmann (2011) refers to as a "communicative break" in cultural memory. Moreover, it fails to distinguish between personal trauma and societal character. The viewer is offered no chance to witness whether any kind of kindness, beauty and moral complexity exist in the country.

Surprisingly, the novel never questions whether the protagonist's suffering is the result of a systemic flaw (such as the *kafala* system) or simply the cruelty of one individual. The movie fails to contextualise Najeeb's ordeal within the broader socio-political frameworks. This leads viewers to draw essentialist conclusions. Andreas Huyssen (2000) critiques such "selective globalisation of memory," in which traumatic stories like this gain visibility only when they align with Western expectations of otherness, backwardness, or moral inferiority. This is the reason why the absence of counter-memory inside the novel becomes so glaring. Unfortunately, the movie shows no Saudi characters who exhibit mercy. There is no coverage of Islamic injunctions that order treating workers with kindness. In the same vein, the movie does not gesture at any kind of cultural introspection or internal diversity. This generalised culpability exemplifies the process that Aleida Assmann (2011) terms "memory integration." Assmann explains how specific recollections are absorbed into a collective mnemonic framework, leading to the exclusion of the

counterbalancing alternative narratives. This is how the coexistence of competing memories within the Saudi society is obscured. Memories of generosity, community cohesion, and ethical obligation that continue to be actively transmitted through religious and social rituals in the Saudi culture (Al-Rasheed, 2013) have been made absent altogether from the narrative. As a result, Saudi society has been reduced to a dystopia.

It is on the basis of these mnemonic strategies, as well as the portrayal of societal complicity, spatial desolation, and erasure of competing memories, that *The Goat Life* participates in a cultural memory war. The movie acts as an agent of mnemonic exclusion. It privileges a single incident at the expense of the richly textured and contested memory-scape of Saudi Arabia. The global acclaim that *The Goat Life* received, both in its original Malayalam and its translation and movie, testifies to its emotional impact and narrative intensity. Astrid Erll (2011) calls such a phenomenon the medial construction of memory. He explains how literature can be used to manufacture memory through repetition, framing and selective emphasis.

The description of the Saudi people is also absolute in its judgment. At one point in the movie, Najeeb says, “There was no smile in the air of this land. The people here had faces carved out of stone.” It is understandable that such statements may emerge from the trauma of captivity; however, the narrative does not attempt to counterbalance them at other places. It seems as if indifference and cruelty are the only lenses used to interpret all aspects of Saudi society. The movie mirrors Najeeb in the treatment of the goats, which are beaten and refused water. A concerted effort has been made in the movie to promote a broader cultural insensitivity to life itself in the country. One particular shot lingers on Najeeb’s master, who methodically slices the ears of goats for identification. This scene has been used as a cultural norm of brutality.

Counterbalancing of such negative portrayals of Saudi Arabia and its people has been absent in the movie. *Ihsan*, or ethical excellence, seems to have been removed altogether from the society that is presented in the movie. In the Saudi society, *Ihsan* functions as an aspirational ethic that links intention, conduct, and social responsibility. It encourages generosity, patience, and compassion (Nasr, 2003). Collectively, *karam*, *rahmah*, and *ihsan* form an interlocking moral framework that structures social life in Saudi Arabia. They privilege relational ethics, communal care and moral accountability. Anthropological and historical studies confirm that modernity failed to displace these ethical orientations. They confirm their presence in the modern-day Saudi Arabia (Alhumood, 2023). Ethnographic research also documents how hospitality, charitable giving, kin-based obligation and neighbourhood solidarity continue to shape moral expectations and social interaction (Yamani, 2009). Scholars caution that external representations often abstract political critique from selective practices that result in reductive portrayals (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

Such portrayals gain particular potency when disseminated to a global audience. The impact is increased manifold when viewers are unfamiliar with the historical or religious context of the region. These narratives risk congealing into fixed truths within the collective imagination. Sedimented memory is the name given to this phenomenon (Ricoeur, 2004). In the whole scheme of events in the movie, Saudi ethical traditions have been silently sidelined. The tribal codes of honour, Islamic compassion for animals and the deeply ingrained moral imperative of mercy (*rahmah*) have also been completely absented. Despite the fact that classical Islamic texts contain clear injunctions against cruelty, the movie normalises torture as a part of society. Even on the treatment of animals, explicit directives have been issued on how to slaughter them (Sahih Muslim, Book 21, Hadith 4810). *The Goat Life* does not provide any coverage to such ethical guidance despite the fact that it is widely cited and internalised across generations. In the Saudi cultural code of conduct, practices of animal care, kindness and hospitality towards guests are vital symbols of

identity throughout the country. As Alhazmi (2020) asserts, traditional Saudi life is not simply marked by hierarchy and power, adding that it is based on the concept of interdependence among fellow beings, mutual respect for each other and also a deep sense of religious duty that carries not just worshipping the Creator but also fulfilling the rights of other human beings. In the words of Assmann (2011), the omission of such values from the movie leads to an archival silence.

Despite the fact that *The Goat Life* is valuable for its personal truth, it also goes on to flatten a culture. With the universalising tone and presentation of a particular incident, an effort has been made to memorialise a single version of Saudi society and its people. Consequently, it simply leaves out the rich ethical traditions and human depth of the society. The collective memory of Saudi Arabia and its people is shaped by the Qur'anic emphasis on mercy and compassion. Similarly, the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also provide guidance on kindness to neighbours, protection of the vulnerable and humane treatment of animals (Sahih Al-Bukhārī, 2002.; Sahih Muslim, n.d.). These ethical teachings inform the daily social life of the people in this geographical location. Such religious obligations are reinforced through communal remembrance. Assmann (2011) terms these acts of remembrance as memory carriers, through which these customs, traditions and practices are transferred to the coming generations. Kindness is also memorialised through Saudi oral poetry and storytelling. This turns out to be an act of counter-memory (Al-Dabbagh, 2019). Nimah Nawwab's (2004) poems celebrate such acts of kindness in times of hardship. Her stories about communal support during pilgrimage seasons also depict the same essence of Saudi society. This demonstrates how memory not only embodies resilience but also promotes moral strength.

In the same vein, the ritual of the Hajj pilgrimage provides an important site of collective memory. Erll's (2011) performative memory finds a perfect demonstration on this occasion. The values of unity, compassion and spiritual renewal are reinforced on this occasion. It forms the backbone of Saudi cultural identity. These ritual practices go on to offer a living mnemonic framework that also actively challenges any kind of static or negative stereotypes. Its embodiment of ethical principles in communal life is visibly displayed in the presence of hundreds of thousands of people at the same place. Together, these examples show how Saudi Arabia's cultural memory is formed through diverse, dynamic and emotionally rich practices. Any simplistic or reductive portrayals are complicated by this cultural fabric. According to Paul Ricoeur (2004), responsible memory work requires the recognition of multiple narratives, adding that it also requires the ethical responsibility to resist excluding certain memories. Seen in this light, the portrayal in *The Goat Life* needs to be seen and understood within a wider mnemonic landscape that honours not just an individual's ordeal of trauma but also the cultural milieu of a country and its people.

CONCLUSION

The story told in *The Goat Life* is undeniably powerful. It is a searing account of human endurance in the face of enslavement and abandonment. However, the study argues that the narrative is decontextualised from the relevant socio-cultural and historical complexity, leading to essentialist portrayals of Saudi Arabia and its people. What begins as a personal memoir slips into the realm of cultural generalisation. A single traumatic memory of an individual is projected onto an entire nation and its history. In doing so, the movie contributes to a cultural memory war, wherein the dominant narrative uses the support of a powerful cinematic production to gain authority and appeal. It simultaneously attempts to silence or overshadow the authentic other.

This dynamic is especially problematic when the memory in question reinforces the oft-propagated and reductionist images of Arabs as cruel, inhumane, or emotionally void. The protagonist's suffering is real, and his perspective deserves attention. But the absence of counternarratives within the text, and the erasure of Saudi values of *karam* (hospitality), *rahmah* (mercy), and *ihsan* (ethical excellence) for guests and animals, renders the movie a one-dimensional account of this multifaceted society. As scholars, such as Huysen (2000) and Erll (2011) remind us, memory is always mediated, and the stories that survive often do so at the expense of more complex or uncomfortable truths. Saudi Arabia's cultural memory, rooted in tribal ethics, Islamic principles, and centuries of lived traditions, stands in tension with the image presented in *The Goat Life*. Where the movie shows a landscape of silence and brutality, Saudi literature and cultural history offer rich testimonies of moral deliberation, compassion, and community. From the hadiths that elevate the treatment of workers and animals, to literary works by authors like Ghazi Al Gosaibi, Raja Alem, and Yousef Al-Mohaimeed, an entire body of memory has been marginalised in the popular reception of the movie.

Such reductionist and monolithic treatment can be meted out to the dominant nations as well, and their people can also be subjected to a similar mnemonic violence when their collective image is disrupted through similarly appealing cinematic productions that highlight a single incident at the cost of the cultural memory of the whole nation. This is how memory wars contribute to competing national narratives on the cultural and historical front. This paper does not seek to discredit *The Goat Life* as literature, nor to deny the realities of migrant exploitation that do exist in parts of the Gulf. Rather, it seeks to restore balance to the conversation by framing the movie as one voice among many, not the voice of an entire culture. As Jan Assmann (2011) and Paul Ricoeur (2004) argue, responsible memory work involves not only remembering but recognising what has been forgotten. In this case, it involves remembering Saudi Arabia not solely as the backdrop for trauma, but as a society with deep ethical traditions, internal debates, and cultural self-awareness.

Future studies on *The Goat Life* may explore the related perspectives, such as reception studies. This will explore how viewers interpret and make meanings from such cinematic productions. Comparative cultural analysis of the movie may prove to be another option for future investigation, leading researchers to study social structures, beliefs and cultural practices across various societies in order to uncover universal patterns that shape human behaviour. In an era that has turned into a bazaar of stereotyping of varied forms and manifestations, where literary narratives travel far and fast, and where memory is increasingly shaped by global media and translation, the responsibility to contextualise, nuance, complicate, and question such representations with a critical eye becomes urgent. Only then can we begin to dismantle the stereotypes that continue to shape how cultures are remembered, or misremembered, on the world stage.

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