

Individual and collective memory in search of identity in Gazmend Kapllani's works

Edlira Gugu

ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This paper examines the relationship between individual and collective memory in the construction of exilic identity in Gazmend Kapllani's novels *The Worst of One's Own Self* (2018) and *The Last Page* (2021). It aims at identifying the narrative strategies through which mnemonic processes shape individual and collective selfhood in the context of the Albanian diaspora.*

Methodology: *The study employs a comparative literary method grounded in qualitative close reading by combining Ricœur's (2003) narrative identity theory, Halbwachs's (1992) collective memory framework, Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, and Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of dialogism and chronotope, as operationalized through Genette's (1980) narratological categories.*

Findings: *The analysis demonstrates that individual memory in Kapllani's fiction functions not as a static archive but as a ¹continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation, shaped by trauma, exile, and ideological pressure. Both novels mobilize memory as a narrative strategy for constructing a cultural, historical, and individual identity, in which the alienated subject negotiates selfhood across fractured temporal and spatial configurations. The narrative techniques of dialogism and chronotopic displacement are identified as the principal mechanisms through which personal memory is transformed into collective cultural testimony.*

Originality: *This study represents the first systematic application of a combined Ricœurian–Bakhtinian framework to Kapllani's two post-2015 novels, addressing a gap in existing scholarship, which has focused predominantly on his earlier memoir works and has not engaged with the narratological dimension of mnemonic identity construction in his fiction.*

Keywords: *individual memory, collective memory, identity, exile, narratology, Albanian diaspora literature, Bakhtin, Ricœur.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gazmend Kapllani is a writer who has developed his creative activity outside the borders of Albania. As such, his literary creativity, as part of Albanian diaspora literature and Albanian literature simultaneously and, more broadly, Balkan literature, is known for conveying the reflection of two or more social, cultural, political, literary, etc. realities, also conditioned by historical and political context (Vomvyla, 2013; Qose, 2023).

His two works *The Worst of One's Own Self* and *The Last Page*, with obvious autobiographical elements (Asimakoulas, 2013), reflect the unique experiences and challenges faced by

individuals in exile in search of their identity (Georganta, 2012). This identity is constructed and determined both from external phenomena (which are presented sparingly as contextual backgrounds²), and as myth, absence, memory, philosophical reflection, loneliness, alienation, thus touching on the essence of the existential problems of being, through close and distant human relationships.

These novels deal with the relationship of a person without a homeland presented through individual and collective memory in several dimensions: ideology, way of life, memory of historical events, memory of the city, as language, nostalgia (for objects), thus creating images of cultural, historical and individual identity. The latter, formed under pressure to ensure survival and adaptation, acquires a new dimension, but alienated from a country to which it no longer belongs.

Return, although claimed in a family microenvironment, raises numerous questions about the personal journey of the human being in time and space. Through selected narrative discourses, the discovery of the unknown through individual memory serves the formation and embedding of collective memory.

While the existing scholarship on Kapllani has made important contributions to understanding his migrant poetics and cultural identity construction (Georganta, 2012; Asimakoulas, 2013, 2016; Oikonomou, 2018), it has concentrated primarily on his autobiographical prose and has not addressed the narratological mechanisms through which individual memory is systematically transformed into collective cultural testimony in his later fictional novels. This study addresses that gap by applying a rigorous narratological and memory-theoretical framework to *The Worst of One's Own Self* and *The Last Page*, two works that have received limited systematic scholarly attention despite their significance in the Albanian diaspora fiction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly attention to Kapllani's work has focused on the migrant experience, cultural identity, and the intersection of Albanian and Greek literary traditions. Vomvyla (2013) examines the construction of identity and heritage among Albanian families engaged in cross-border connections, providing an important socio-cultural context for understanding Kapllani's diasporic perspective. Qose (2023) situates Kapllani within the broader framework of transnational Balkan literature, emphasizing the literary significance of the return motif. Asimakoulas (2013) analyzes Kapllani's use of migrant bitter wit as a coping mechanism, while his later study (2016) explores the dynamics of cultural intimacy through an Albanian-Greek lens. Georganta (2012) investigates the multiple and shifting identities in Kapllani's migrant narratives, and Oikonomou (2018) contextualizes his work within the wider phenomenon of migration literature in Greece.

The theoretical study of memory as a social phenomenon was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs,³ whose foundational contributions to collective memory theory remain central to any analysis of the mnemonic dimensions of literary texts. Halbwachs established that individual memory is always socially mediated and that the boundaries between personal and

² Historic events related to the totalitarian system in Albania and after its collapse.

³ Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) was a French philosopher and sociologist known for his foundational work in the field of collective memory. He made an important contribution in the study of how society and individuals remember the past.

collective remembrance are inherently porous (Halbwachs, 1992). This insight was subsequently elaborated by Assmann (2011), who distinguished between communicative memory, based on everyday oral exchange within living generations, and cultural memory, which is institutionalized, mediated by symbolic forms, and extended across longer historical time spans. Nora's (1989) concept of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) is equally relevant here, insofar as the cities, buildings, and spaces in Kapllani's novels function precisely as such mnemonic sites, condensing historical experience into spatial form.

Paul Ricœur (2003) further expanded this framework by exploring the relationships between memory, narrative, and identity, establishing narrative identity as a key concept for understanding how individuals and communities construct their self-understanding through storytelling. His distinction between idem-identity (sameness) and ipse-identity (selfhood as promise and responsibility) is especially productive for analyzing the exilic protagonists of Kapllani's novels, who are caught between a self they remember and a self they have become (Ricœur, 1992). Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory, the relationship of a generation to the traumatic experiences of the preceding generation, experiences transmitted so powerfully as to constitute memory, is also directly relevant to *The Last Page*, in which Melsi inherits and processes his father's traumatic history.

Walter R. Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm introduced the concept of homo narrans, foregrounding the primacy of narration in human communication. Mikhail Bakhtin's contributions, particularly his theories of dialogism and the chronotope, provide the conceptual tools for analyzing the polyphonic structure and spatiotemporal organization of literary memory in Kapllani's novels (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). Said's (2000) theorization of exile as a fundamentally contrapuntal mode of consciousness, always defined by what is absent as much as by what is present, provides an important supplementary framework for understanding the mnemonic dynamics of Kapllani's protagonists. Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity and the third space further illuminates the productive ambivalence of exilic identity, positioning the condition of being in between not as a deficit but as a generative site of new cultural formations. The narratological framework of Gérard Genette (1980) completes this theoretical apparatus by offering precise analytical categories for the study of narrative voices and modes in literary texts.

In literary studies, memory has been examined as a multifunctional phenomenon. Erll (2011) identifies three principal ways in which memory operates in literary texts: first, to determine the validity and importance of a text based on the expertise and reputation of the writers; second, as a means of evoking a sense of nostalgia; and third, more universally, as a method of constructing individual and cultural identity that moves from individual memory to collective memory. This tripartite framework, particularly, applies to Kapllani's fiction, where all three functions operate simultaneously and reinforce one another.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study draws on intersecting traditions of memory studies, narrative theory, and literary narratology.

According to Halbwachs (1992), memory is a complex dimension related not only to individual or collective experience, but also to the way in which a given historical event is read, transmitted, and interpreted in time. It is defined as a layered entity of human beings, as a unique capacity "to preserve traces of the past and to refer to it actively within current situations and influenced by the social group to which the individual belongs" (Halbwachs, 1967, p. 31). Furthermore, collective memory is not a simple collection of individual memories, but a specific social and cultural construct which is formed through shared stories, symbols, and rituals that shape a community's understanding of its past.

Ricœur (2003) distinguishes two ways of defining memory: memory as a habit, i.e., as an involuntary repetition of automated situations and actions, and memory as an active inclusion

of images of the past (Ricœur, 2003, p. 43). It is precisely the latter that finds scope in the works of Kapllani, in which through narration, the relationships built with the family, the environment, collective memory, etc. are evidenced. In individual memories, narration comes as a need to communicate about the past and its traces in human identity and life, that is, as a way of communication.

Ricœur's theory on narrative and memory also presents the idea that individual memory serves the creation of collective memory and the combination between them shapes our identity on one hand and the meaning of the past on the other (Ricœur, 2003, p. 95). According to his concept of narrative identity (Ricœur, 2003, pp. 96–119), individuals build a sense of self by organizing their experiences into coherent stories, at temporal and physical distances influenced by historical contexts and related to our experience in the past and present. These narratives connect past events with present actions and future aspirations, creating a continuous and meaningful picture of life. In this context, individual memory serves as raw material for the construction of the individual's narrative identity, realized through the selection, interpretation, and narration of personal memories that shape the identity of the individual and give meaning to his life (Ricœur, 2003).

According to Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984, pp. 1–22), people are *homo narrans*, or storytelling beings, who use narration as a primary form of communication. Through memories, individuals not only convey their experiences, but also construct meaning on the unknowns of the past and share their perspectives with others. This principle is incorporated into the fundamental axis of narration and elaboration of events in Kapllani's two novels. The narrative paradigm is evaluated through Fisher's principles of coherence,⁴ loyalty,⁵ and narrative rationality.⁶

According to Genette's (1980) basic modes of narrative presentation, literature may be characterized by the presence of two principal narrator types: the *homodiegetic*⁷ and the *heterodiegetic*.⁸ This distinction is central to the analysis of Kapllani's narrative strategies, as both novels employ combinations of these two narrative modes.

Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) dialogism emphasizes the interactive and dynamic nature of language and discourse. Meaning is constructed through dialogue, the interaction of different voices and perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 105). The presence of multiple characters, each with their own unique voices, views and experience, plays precisely this role in both novels.

⁴ Coherence implies the stability and internal logic of a narrative, where events, although taking place in different geographical and temporal spaces, are connected and make sense (Fisher, 1984).

⁵ Loyalty relates to the perceived truthfulness and authenticity of a narrative, regardless of whether it aligns with an individual's beliefs, values, and experiences (Fisher, 1984).

⁶ Narrative rationality involves evaluating a narrative based on its internal consistency, coherence, and ability to resonate with the values, emotions, and experiences of the audience (Fisher, 1984).

⁷ The *homodiegetic* narrator tells the story from a first-person perspective, as a character within the narrative.

⁸ The *heterodiegetic* narrator stands outside the story and narrates from an omniscient third-person point of view.

According to Bakhtin, chronotopes provide the context in which memory is placed and experienced, influencing the way characters remember and interpret their past. They capture the intersection of historical, cultural and personal dimensions of memory (Keunen, 2000, p. 12).

4. METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a comparative literary method as its primary analytical approach. The two novels under examination, *The Worst of One's Own Self* (Kapllani, 2018) and *The Last Page* (Kapllani, 2021), are analyzed in parallel in order to identify convergent and divergent strategies in the treatment of individual and collective memory, identity, alienation, and exile.

The methodology is grounded in qualitative close reading, which allows for an in-depth examination of textual evidence, literary quotations, and narrative structures that reveal the mnemonic and identity-constructing functions of the two works. Special attention is given to passages in which individual memories surface in dialogue with broader social, historical, and cultural contexts. The selection of textual evidence is guided by theoretical relevance: passages are selected when they exemplify, extend, or complicate the theoretical propositions under examination, with priority given to moments in which the literary text both confirms and productively resists the analytical framework applied.

The narratological analysis follows Genette's (1980) analytical framework for narrative discourse, with particular focus on narrator type (homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic), narrative time, especially analepsis (flashback) as the dominant temporal mode, and perspectival organization. This is complemented by the application of Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of dialogism and chronotope, which enable the study of polyphonic voices and spatiotemporal memory structures within the texts.

The study also applies Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm to evaluate the coherence, loyalty, and narrative rationality of the characters' individual memory narratives, and draws on Ricœur's (2003) and Halbwachs's (1992) theoretical frameworks to analyze the relationship between individual and collective memory and their role in identity construction. Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory is applied specifically to the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory in *The Last Page*, and Said's (2000) theorization of exilic consciousness is used to frame the protagonists' mnemonic relationship to their homeland.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Return and the identity relationship with the nation and the self

The novel *The Worst of One's Own Self* (Kapllani, 2018) features the story of two brothers, Karl and Frederik. They live in the city of Ters, a fictional city, like a collage of different cities in Albania and the Balkans. Karl returns from exile to his homeland to attend the death of his father, who had been a fanatical former communist (he named his sons after Karl Marx and Frederick Engels). While burying their father, the two brothers begin to exhume memories, misunderstandings, and old grudges between them. The first seeks to shed light on the dark era of communism, while the second seeks to leave it in oblivion.

The novel *The Last Page* (Kapllani, 2021) recounts the story of Melsi, an Albanian journalist and writer who has been living in Greece for twenty years. Hurriedly, he returns to his homeland after learning about the enigmatic death of his father in Shanghai. For twenty-five days, the hero faces the bureaucracy of the Albanian state to bring the body to Tirana. During this time, rummaging through childhood memories in his father's house, he finds a notebook in which he learns the shocking truth about his father and the origin of his family. The great events of the 20th century related to war and the totalitarian system have also affected Melsi's

family, which has resisted cruel systems through the love of languages and books, serving as strong evidence of the consequences of history on human destiny.

In both novels, the initial motif is the return to the country of origin, a motif known in the myth of Ulysses, the concept of which acquires a new dimension in the context of the modern man. The individual carries with him both identity and existential problems (Georganta, 2012) in the conditions of globalization as well as regional problems of the Balkan man (Asimakoulas, 2016). The alienated and changed individual establishes inverted relationships with the homeland, birthplace, family, and the surrounding environment. He maintains a cold and indifferent attitude towards it, because, for him, that environment is identified as the place of trauma experienced in various systems such as the totalitarian system and war (Qose, 2023). In this way, reflection on the past begins with facing the return (which proves to be more difficult and requires more courage than fleeing) and restoring severed relationships with people. This experience confirms Said's (2000) observation that the exilic subject possesses a fundamentally contrapuntal consciousness, always perceiving the present homeland through the lens of the absent one, and vice versa. Driven by the death of their father, through individual memories, the main characters Karli and Melsi reflect on the relationship with themselves, family, language, city, homeland.

Along two parallel lines of action for the past and the present, feverish issues of individual alienation and change in two systems are touched upon. Loneliness is strongly demonstrated, accompanied by racism, discrimination, persecution, physical and psychological violence, war, etc.

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self*, this relationship comes in two inversions: in Karl's father, who, as a prominent communist, aims to shape his son's same ideology, image, and relationship with the homeland; and the city named Ters (as an environment invented by the author which has characteristics of all Albanian cities). The relationship of the city with the main character is subjectively inverted into a metaphorical aspect since, in it, the individual experiences the pressure of the social and political system, of time, mentality, and collective memory associated with it.

In the novel *The Last Page* (Kapllani, 2021), the events take place in two countries, Greece and Albania, in the real cities of Tirana and Kavaja, while China and Shanghai are part of their background.⁹ The hero, although he wants to, cannot build a glorifying relationship with his homeland and birthplace, since this right is denied to him, and for this reason, he is forced to accept another country as his birthplace which, just like the denied homeland, pursues and persecutes the individual, distorting the true relationship with him.

Narrative techniques such as analepsis (flashback), change of perspective, multiple narrative perspectives, and the topographical conceptualization of being in between are the principal features through which the self-reflection of the heroes is realized in the two novels, each serving to displace the individual between competing temporal and spatial coordinates of memory.

5.2 Individual memory in Kapllani's works

Kapllani's two novels incorporate Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm into the fundamental axis of narration and elaboration of events. In the novel *The Last Page*, the narrative of the main character's father not only conveys personal experience in two different historical contexts and regional geographical spaces that are both similar and different, but also constructs individual meaning on the past. In this narrative constructed in the form of memoir notes in a notebook, the origins and history of the family are included in two different historical contexts of the 20th

⁹ The hero's family is obliged to leave due to persecution of Jews by Germans during the Second World War.

century, known for Albania and Greece, serving the collective memory. The structure of this transmission in which Melsi learns a traumatic history he did not live through, mediated by a written artifact, corresponds precisely to what Hirsch (2012) defines as postmemory: inherited trauma so powerfully transmitted that it comes to function as memory in its own right, shaping identity and perception across generations.

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self* the understanding of the individual and the event is shaped through Fisher's principles of coherence, loyalty, and narrative rationality. The narrator character Karl chooses to describe through memories the journey of formation as a being struggling to escape the pressure and persecution not only of the totalitarian system but also the persecutory policies towards immigrants and the problems they face. The conclusions in the novel emerge from the context of the microenvironment and progress towards the macroenvironment.

Thus, Karl, while returning home after his father's death, is haunted by memories of the city, the buildings, the people, which in a perverse way show his life, memories of the family, the relationship between his father, mother and brother. The relationship with his father was distinguished by his authoritarian and cold character in contrast to the gentle nature of his mother. Her death signifies the escape precisely from the authoritarian character and from the exercise of power over the individual.

In this context, there are memories related to: the events of the collapse of the totalitarian system in Albania; Karl's participation in the demonstrations of the time; his departure to Greece; his integration to a high degree into Greek reality; his attempt to obtain a Greek passport; his rejection and persecution by Golden Dawn; the decision to emigrate to America, the entire ordeal of suffering typical of an immigrant.

5.3 Individual and collective memory in relation to time, space, and individual identity

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self*, Karl stops at the most important stages of his life, such as childhood and adolescence, under the influence of the family, intending to form an individual worthy of his homeland. Memories of the past places and complex family relationships, the authoritarian character of the father; the imposition to read the works of Marxists; the silent nature of the mother; her disagreements with her husband's behavior and her suicide; the difference in the attitudes of the two brothers, model in miniature the family microcosmos and allow the reader to build analogies for the social structure in the macro.

Through Frederik's story, we understand Karl's special relationship with his mother, his fear that he might kill himself: Karl, like his mother, no longer accepts this reality, and he may choose to escape in the same way as she did (Kapllani, 2018).

Gradually, each of the family members constructs his own identity through the negotiation between inherited roles and personal experience. Yet this identity is never fixed: it is continuously renegotiated as new circumstances, exile, loss, bureaucratic persecution, reactivate and reframe the memories on which it rests. All this happens over time because the understanding of one's own self through past experiences is deeply connected to the experience of the present. One such episode is related to the funeral ritual when hoxha is expected to arrive. This element is surprising to Karl because his father was an atheist and strongly linked to communist ideology. After the fall of the system, his father, accustomed to dependence on ideologies, turns into a devout Muslim believer. While trying to understand his father, Karl simultaneously raises the dilemma of his own identity:

“My father always needed to believe in an absolute something”, Karl thought. Or maybe getting closer to God was a kind of attempt to have his sins forgiven? (Kapllani, 2018, p. 56)

The conduct of memories influenced by the temporal context demonstrates that individual memory is a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation, as individuals constantly

engage with their past in the light of their current circumstances. Individual memory is not a static archive but a process (Ricœur, 2003).

Karl tried to find solace in his broken promises, in the difficulties of the journey, in the distance or in the psychology of emigrants. They always promise to return, but most never do. For Karl the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca after a grueling journey was nothing more than a beautiful fairy tale with a king that had no connection to the reality of millions of Ulysses who abandon their Ithaca and head towards the unknown...after all, wasn't Ulysses one of the liars that history has known? (Kapllani, 2018, p. 27)

This passage illustrates Ricœur's (2003) conception of memory as active reinterpretation: Karl does not simply recall the past but rewrites it, using the mythological figure of Ulysses to contest the legitimizing narratives of return and belonging. The following passage from *The Last Page* demonstrates an analogous operation at the collective level, where the spatial memory of Kavaja condenses centuries of multicultural coexistence into a single mnemonic image:

They arrived in Kavaja. A small Albanian town where the main square was dominated by the Clock Tower, which surpassed in height the milky-colored minaret of the mosque from where the hoxha sang five times a day. To the right of the mosque lay the bazaar that every Sunday was filled with donkeys and horses of the villagers from surrounding areas... ..The days of the "Qafa e Muresha" bazaar reminded one of something from Thessaloniki. Imams and priests, dervishes and nuns, village girls who smelled of sweat and girls in beautiful clothes from the American college that the Germans had burned, passed by and exchanged with each other... (Kapllani, 2021, p. 53)

5.4 Narrative techniques in function of individual and collective memory

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self*, the narration is in third person by an external narrator, who, through the description and selection of events, presents Karl's point of view about the events that take place in an imaginary environment, such as the city of Ters. This narration is intertwined with the narration in first person by his brother Frederik, who, through memories, presents his subjective perspective on the events.

The heterodiegetic narrator focuses on external triggers of memories such as: the city of Ters, the large mosque square, the transformed buildings, the cemetery, the people in the square, the Crazy Pandi and his story, etc.:

Deaths and weddings, like everywhere else in the world, were the two ritual pillars of life in Ters. Participation in weddings was by invitation, while in case of death the house was opened and all visitors were welcomed with equal respect, from the richest to the poorest, from the most powerful to the beggars. In that town, in that place where people were born unequal, death was a kind of "homeland" that welcomed everyone without distinction. He remembered a phrase by Joseph Roth when he visited Albania in 1927: "In no place in the world is death so close to life as here." (Kapllani, 2018)

In the novel *The Last Page*, the heterodiegetic narrator narrates the event from two perspectives: from the perspective of Melsi, the ordeal of events that follows the hero after his father's death, and from the perspective of Melsi's father, who builds a personal narrative in the form of memoirs written in a notebook. This allows the main character Melsi to get close to the truth, since his perception at the age of 10 as a witness to the event was different.

Isa felt as if the ground had slipped from under his feet. He tried to convince himself that he had done nothing wrong... That his life would change after the investigation, he realized the next day when he went to work, and they told him that he should not

go to the library because he would be transferred. He did not say anything to his wife Bora. He tried his best so she would not understand... (Kapllani, 2021, p. 89)

5.4.1 Dialogism

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self*, the author constructs the narrative form through the voices of the two brothers who express their own views and experience:

Karl had the loneliness of a fugitive who was eager to leave the past behind and recreate himself from nothing. He had crossed the border and arrived in a world he had dreamed of, but did not understand... (Kapllani, 2018, p. 62)

Time after time I ask myself: Karl, who abandoned Ters and wandered the world, what did he gain more than Me who remained loyal to Ters? Did he become wiser, richer, happier?... Karl denied Ters for other cities, exchanged his language for other languages, denied his family and homeland hoping to find love and another homeland... I often think that Karl suffers from the same self-destructive disease that Albanians have suffered. Because the Albanian has been a fugitive, a nizam, a mercenary all his life. The Albanian easily forgets his homeland and serves foreign patriots with zeal...he has served Turkey, Greece, Italy, Egypt but rarely has he served his own homeland properly...people say it was a mistake that Enver closed the borders for half a century...but the intention was not bad: he wanted to make the Albanian connect with his land, teach him to love his homeland, discipline him to build a strong identity... (Kapllani, 2018, pp. 62–63)

Dialogism enables the author to describe the subjective and multifaceted nature of memory by emphasizing the fact that memories are formed in different ways but are contested and negotiated through interaction and confrontation with others (Bakhtin, 1981):

- “Mi-zi” found your father’s address a year ago. I don’t know how or in what way. I only know that when he received her letter, Ali was quite shocked. I remember that day well, because it was snowing and when the postman knocked on the door, we were trying to turn on the stove. I had never seen your father so shocked before...
- What happened to that woman after the story she had with my father? – asked Melsi, who didn’t want Eva to stop telling.
- Look, I feel a little embarrassed... I mean, your father had an affair with that woman... And then she was punished. They fired him from his job... he worked in a library in China, and they assigned him to a hard job... (Kapllani, 2021, p. 121)

5.4.2 Chronotopes

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self* the narrative begins by using the chronotope of his birthplace on his return 27 years after he had left to migrate to Greece, referring to several of its points such as: the main square of Ters, the minaret, the cemetery, the deformation of the buildings, the old city and the new city, the river that separated them named Scamander. After observing the city and the changes he has witnessed, his individual memories come intertwined with events related to the period of the totalitarian system:

The Crazy Pandi had remained unforgettable in the city’s memory when one day in the middle of that Square, completely drunk, he was posing between a tenor and a turkey and sang “International will be the New World”... they arrested him that same day... he returned to Ters ten years later...and not only did he not sing but he did not even speak anymore... (Kapllani, 2018, pp. 7–8)

Melsi’s parents’ house in Tirana was located on the fourth floor on a potholed street that, due to the rain, had turned into a narrow and long mud pool. (Kapllani, 2021, p. 9)

These spatial anchors function as what Nora (1989) calls *lieux de mémoire*, sites that condense collective historical experience into concrete, sensory form, triggering the involuntary activation of individual memory. The ideological dimension of chronotopic memory is equally

prominent in *The Worst of One's Own Self*, where domestic ritual merges with political indoctrination:

In their house, not only family birthdays were celebrated with ritual precision but also that of Marx... on this occasion they took turns reading selected parts from the Communist Manifesto in turn. Karli still remembered the first paragraph: "A ghost haunts Europe – the ghost of communism..." ...Such episodes returned to Karli's memory from time to time and, every time this happened, he felt something between hilarity and regret. (Kapllani, 2018, p. 14)

The only moment when Karl became part of the rebellion was the day the statue of Enver H fell, four months after the death of his mother, on February 20, 1991. It was Wednesday, it was cold and the sky in Tirana was covered with thick clouds... (Kapllani, 2018, p. 41)

Here, the chronotope binds individual biographical time (the mother's death) to collective historical time (the fall of the dictatorship), demonstrating how personal and collective memory are inseparable nodes in the same mnemonic network. This entanglement extends across national and historical borders, as the following passages show, the violence of mid-twentieth century Europe inscribed in both novels as a shared Balkan and Mediterranean traumatic heritage:

That episode of violence would stick to Karl like a leech on human flesh. That scene would visit his memory even in the most beautiful moments of his life... It was the look on his father's face the moment he said "I'm going to kill you"...

It all began with an anonymous story that Karl published on his personal blog. It was the story of an elderly Greek woman who had survived a massacre near the Greeco-Albanian border by the end of World War II, when Europe was engulfed in death, hunger, and hatred. It was the time when the troops of a Greek general named Zerva, who were roaming the mountains of Epirus, decided to wipe out once and for all the Albanian-speaking Chams living in those areas... The Germans wiped out the Jews. We will wipe out the Turks. (Kapllani, 2018, p. 93)

A few months after the Germans had forced all the Jews in the city to wear the yellow star and locked them in the ghetto, my father decided to escape... it was the most beautiful month of the year, May 1943, when they left for Albania. (Kapllani, 2021, pp. 46–49)

Through dialogism and chronotopes, literature captures the intricacies of memory, reflecting the dialogical nature of memory in relation to time, space, and personal memories. They serve as tools for authors to investigate the dynamic nature of memory, the diversity of perspectives, and the complex relationship between individual and collective memory (Keunen, 2000, p. 28).

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis reveal that both novels function as complex mnemonic constructions in which the boundary between individual and collective memory is continuously negotiated and ultimately dissolved through narrative. Neither Kapllani's protagonists nor the texts in which they appear allow memory to remain a private affair: each personal recollection is shown to be embedded within broader historical, ideological, and cultural structures that shape its form, its meaning, and its transmission.

The analysis confirms that individual memory in Kapllani's novels functions as a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation rather than a static archive, in direct alignment with Ricœur's (2003) theoretical framework. This finding extends Georganta's (2012) observation about the multiplicity of identities in Kapllani's migrant narratives: where Georganta focuses on the sociological dimensions of identity multiplicity, the present analysis demonstrates that this multiplicity is not merely a sociological condition but a narratologically

constructed one, produced through specific mnemonic techniques of temporal displacement, perspectival fragmentation, and dialogic confrontation.

The application of Fisher's narrative paradigm reveals that the coherence and narrative rationality observable in both novels serve to validate the existential experiences of exile. This complements Asimakoulas's (2013) findings on Kapllani's coping strategies: the narrative rationality of memory functions, in Fisher's terms, as a form of psychological and cultural survival, transforming fragmented traumatic experience into a coherent existential testimony. The narrative coherence achieved through memory thus serves not merely an aesthetic function but a deeply ethical one, in the sense articulated by Ricœur (1992) when he links narrative identity to moral responsibility.

The dialogic voices in both novels, particularly the contrasting perspectives of Karl and Frederik in *The Worst of One's Own Self*, embody Bakhtin's (1981) principle that meaning is constructed through the interaction of different voices. The contested and negotiated nature of memory revealed through these dialogic confrontations supports the theoretical position advanced by Erll (2011), who argues that literary memory is inherently polyphonic and that the intersubjective negotiation of the past is constitutive of cultural memory itself. Frederik's ideological complicity with the communist past and Karl's rejection of it do not represent two individual pathologies but two culturally available memory scripts, each with its own coherence and its own claim to legitimacy.

The chronotopic analysis shows that both novels employ specific time-space configurations to anchor individual memories within historical and cultural contexts. This finding resonates with Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*: the fictional city of Ters, the potholed streets of Tirana, and the distant geography of Shanghai collectively constitute a mnemonic landscape in which Albanian history, from totalitarianism to diaspora, is refracted through individual consciousness. In this respect, Kapllani's spatial imagination performs a function analogous to Nora's sites of memory: it materializes collective memory in spatial form, making it available for individual and collective renegotiation. This process also engages Assmann's (2011) distinction between communicative and cultural memory: the characters' oral exchanges of personal recollection (communicative memory) are progressively transformed, through narrative, into durable cultural testimony that transcends the individual and the generation.

In *The Last Page*, the intergenerational dimension of mnemonic transmission calls for Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory. Melsi does not merely remember his own past; he inherits, through his father's notebook, a traumatic history that predates him and that his father was unable to communicate directly. This structure of inherited trauma, mediated through material and narrative artifacts, is precisely what Hirsch describes as postmemory, and it adds a significant dimension to the understanding of how individual and collective memory operate across generations in the Albanian diaspora context.

Said's (2000) insight that exile produces a fundamentally contrapuntal consciousness, one that is always aware of more than one culture, is borne out by the textual evidence. The protagonists of both novels perceive their homeland, their exile, and themselves always through a double lens: what they remember and what they find, what they were and what they have become. This contrapuntal quality is not a weakness of identity but, as Bhabha (1994) would argue, a site of cultural hybridity and productive ambivalence, from which new forms of identity and belonging can emerge.

7. CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted in this study confirms that memory, in Kapllani's fiction, operates not as passive storage but as an active, ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation, always shaped by the present circumstances of the remembering subject and by the social and cultural frameworks within which remembrance takes place.

Both literary works demonstrate that the transition from individual to collective memory is not automatic but narratologically constructed: it is achieved through specific strategies of dialogism, chronotopic displacement, and perspectival multiplicity that transform private trauma into shared cultural testimony.

In the novel *The Worst of One's Own Self*, Karl stops at the most important stages of his life, such as childhood and adolescence under the influence of the family with the aim of forming an individual worthy of his homeland. Memories of complex family relationships, the authoritarian character of the father; the imposition to read the works of Marxists; the silent nature of the mother; disagreements with her husband's behavior and her suicide; the difference between the two brothers' attitude models, provide a miniature family microcosmos and allow the reader to build analogies for the social structure of that time. The characters shape their individual experience by showing the complexity of human nature and the fears that accompany it.

Dialogism allows the author to describe the subjective and multifaceted nature of memory by emphasizing the fact that memories are formed in different ways but are contested and negotiated through interaction and confrontation with others (Bakhtin, 1981).

Through dialogism and chronotopes, literature captures the complexities of memory, reflecting the dialogical nature of memory in relation to time, space, and personal memories. They serve as tools for authors to investigate the dynamic nature of memory, the multiplicity of perspectives, and the complex relationship between individual and collective memory (Keunen, 2000).

The present study has demonstrated that Kapllani's two novels represent a significant contribution to Albanian diaspora literature and to the broader field of European memory fiction, insofar as they articulate, through rigorous narrative strategies, the dialectical relationship between individual trauma and collective cultural identity. Future research might productively extend this analysis to Kapllani's earlier autobiographical works, examining the continuities and ruptures between his memoir and novelistic treatment of memory, or situate his work comparatively within the wider tradition of Southeast European diasporic writing.

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