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Digital Hegemony and Cultural Resistance: AI and the Crisis of Belonging in Iraqi Narratives

Assistant Professor Rasool Mohammed A.AI

Al-Muslimawi

E-Mail: rassolhammodi@gmail.com

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E-mail Jaa@tu.edu.iq

ABSTRACT

This study examines the intersection of digital hegemony, artificial intelligence, and cultural dissent in contemporary Iraqi narratives. This study argues that the expansion of AI technologies reproduces forms of intellectual hegemony that parallel analogous earlier structures of imperial domination, which ultimately compound crises of generative identity among Iraqi communities. By situating this discussion within postcolonial theory and critical cultural studies, the study demonstrates how algorithmic regimes reconfigure the politics of identity and representation. Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony that underpins the analysis of digital dominance. Said's critique of Orientalism and Bhabha's hybridity are used to interpret forms of resistance. The situation in Iraq, exile, war, and fragmented identities, reveals a unique perspective on the struggle of cultural production against technological homogenization. Based on readings of Iraqi literature, cinema, and digital art, the study considers resistive strategies including memory as reclamation, hybrid narrative modes, and creative repurposing of AI tools. The study introduces the concept of "cultural sovereignty in the digital age," calling for the localization of ethically guided AI practices. This contribution argues that Iraqi narratives do not only respond to digital hegemony but actively construct counter-discourses that transfigure belonging and identity. By connecting AI research to postcolonial Iraqi criticism, the work opens a new theoretical perspective that contributes to debates on digital colonialism and cultural sovereignty.

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الهيمنة الرقمية والمقاومة الثقافية: الذكاء الاصطناعي وأزمة الانتماء في السرديات العراقية

م.د. رسول محمد عبد الحسين المسلماوي / المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة النجف الاشرف

المستخلص:

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تقاطع الهيمنة الرقمية والذكاء الاصطناعي وأشكال المقاومة الثقافية في السرديات العراقية المعاصرة. وتفترض أن التوسع المتسارع في تقنيات الذكاء الاصطناعي يعيد إنتاج أنماط من الهيمنة الفكرية الموازية لبُنى السيطرة الإمبريالية في تجلياتها التاريخية، الأمر الذي يسهم في تعميق أزمت الهوية التكوينية داخل المجتمعات العراقية. ومن خلال الاستناد إلى نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار والدراسات الثقافية النقدية، تكشف الدراسة عن آليات إعادة تشكيل سياسات الهوية والتمثيل في ظل الأنظمة الخوارزمية. ويُسكّل مفهوم الهيمنة عند أنطونيو غرامشي الإطار النظري لفهم ديناميات السيطرة الرقمية، فيما توفر قراءة إدوارد سعيد للاستشراق ومفهوم الهجنة عند هومي بابا أدوات تحليلية لفهم استراتيجيات المقاومة. ويقدم السياق العراقي، بما يحمله من إرث الحرب والمنفى والهويات المنشطية، نموذجاً خاصاً لصراع الإنتاج الثقافي في مواجهة نزعات التجانس التكنولوجي. وبالاستناد إلى قراءات معمّقة للأدب والسينما والفن الرقمي العراقي، تستعرض الدراسة استراتيجيات المقاومة المتمثلة في استعادة الذاكرة كفعل استرداد، واعتماد السرديات الهجينة، وإعادة توظيف أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي في مسارات إبداعية بديلة. ومن هذا المنظور، تطرح الدراسة مفهوم "السيادة الثقافية في العصر الرقمي"، بوصفه إطاراً نظرياً يدعو إلى محلية الممارسات التقنية للذكاء الاصطناعي في ضوء معايير أخلاقية أصيلة. وتخلص النتائج إلى أن السرديات العراقية لا تكتفي بمجابهة الهيمنة الرقمية، بل تنتج خطابات مضادة قادرة على إعادة تشكيل معاني الانتماء والهوية. وبذلك يفتح هذا البحث أفقاً نظرياً جديداً يربط دراسات الذكاء الاصطناعي بالنقد العراقي ما بعد الاستعماري، ويسهم في إثراء النقاشات المعاصرة حول الاستعمار الرقمي ومفهوم السيادة الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهيمنة الرقمية – الذكاء الاصطناعي – المقاومة الثقافية – السرديات العراقية – أزمة الهوية

Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into worldwide cultural systems has deeply unsettled power, representation, and belonging. Although AI is typically represented as a neutral enhancer of progress, it deploys structural asymmetries that sustain dominant narratives and isolate others. This phenomenon could be labeled as digital hegemony – a modern extension of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony in the digital age in which algorithms and platforms repeatedly create hierarchies in the name of neutrality (Gramsci 210). In a place like Iraq, which has had decades of war, occupation, and forced migration, this form of digital hegemony uses the silence of voice along with the spectacle of trauma that is packaged by algorithmically curated media streams. Within this context, Iraqi cultural production, literature, cinema, and digital art become a site of resistance. These stories disrupt the hegemony of Western technocentric imaginaries and offer alternative visions of being.

Homi Bhabha’s writing on hybridity is relevant to this function as these artists need to mediate between prescribed global paradigms as well as local cultural memory to produce works that resist naturalization (Bhabha 154). Meanwhile, Walter Mignolo’s concept of “epistemic disobedience” illustrates how Iraqi narratives resist algorithmic deletion by producing counter-archives grounded in lived experience (Mignolo 132).

This study contends that Iraqi stories are not merely negotiating AI as a “given” technology, but as a symbolic presence that informs memory, identity, and recognition. Analyzing certain novels, films, and digital projects, the study illustrates how cultural resistance in Iraq reconfigures human belonging in the era of artificial intelligence.

Literature Review

The convergence of technology and cultural power has been much theorized in critical literature. Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is foundational, describing how dominant groups gain consent through cultural institutions rather than repression (Gramsci 245). Within the digital, this is mediated by algorithms, platforms, and data infrastructures, a development increasingly referred to as digital hegemony. As Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias conceptualize it, it is a kind of “data colonialism,” in which the everyday existence of human life becomes woven into logics of extraction and systems of control (Couldry and Mejias 8). Such views demonstrate how AI is not neutral and works to serve global capitalist and imperial systems.

Parallel to such critiques, postcolonial theory offers an analysis of resistance. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* shows how Western narrations portrayed

the East as inferior and silent (Said 32). AI systems reflect the same dynamics, collocating language models with dominant cultural datasets and silencing the voices of non-Western languages. The provocative question posed by Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, emphasizes the struggle for representation of the marginalized communities that inherently silence them (Spivak 271). Iraqi testimonies challenge this silence by asserting sound and memory against algorithmic invisibility.

Stuart Hall suggests that identity is not a fixed thing but something that is constantly produced by history, culture, and representation (Hall 225). This resonates with Iraqi cultural production, where belonging is enacted in the midst of war and displacement, as well as digital mediation. Equally, Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity stresses how resisting is the result of cultural negotiation rather than simple opposition (Bhabha 112). Through hybridity, Iraqi writers and filmmakers narrate a sense of belonging that transcends colonial erasure and challenges digital homogenization.

The emerging literature on AI and cultural identity is disproportionately centered around Euro-American society, with less attention given to the situated experiences of postcolonial cultures. According to scholars like Walter D. Mignolo, “epistemic disobedience” involves rejecting the idea that Western epistemologies are universal (Mignolo 135). Iraqi narratives embody this disobedience in offering other archives of memory and belonging that resist algorithmic reduction. By framing AI within the Iraq experience, this study helps address this gap by connecting digital hegemony to a society that has seen its history and culture transformed by colonial encounter and technological peripherality.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework drawing on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, postcolonial critiques of representation, and contemporary conceptions of AI as a technology of power. These perspectives complement each other and enlighten the predicament of belonging in Iraqi institutions of discourse and the strategies of cultural opposition. In particular, Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony argues that the operation of domination is not merely through force, but through consensus, carried out by cultural and intellectual institutions (Gramsci 245). In the digital world, algorithms, recommendation systems, and AI infrastructures function as such institutions, determining what is seen, what is recognized, and what is valued on the global stage. AI serves in this sense as a modern technique of domination, enacting dominant epistemologies and subordinating subaltern voices.

The framework can be further enriched by postcolonial theory, which examines historical and continued imbalances of power. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said highlights how Western discourses shape non-Western identities as inferior or static (Said 27). AI systems tend to reproduce similar patterns by favoring Western languages, cultural norms, and aesthetic values. The question posed by Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that highlights the difficulty of representing the subaltern within discourses that are created to exclude them (Spivak 271). Iraqi narratives, written and visual, resist as they reclaim memory and identity, as they assert presence into spaces perhaps algorithmically made invisible.

Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity is a key to explaining the narrative strategies used in Iraqi narratives. Resistance is often posed not in terms of rejection, but negotiation and synthesizing, the blending between the local and global overcomes the latter’s tendency towards homogenization (Bhabha 113). Hybridity of storytelling breaks down the AI-fabricated classifications trying to categorize texts, images, and cultural practices into fixed, legible datasets.

Finally, the epistemic aspects of AI are also highlighted in recent scholarship. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias write of “data colonialism,” under which human experience is extracted, commodified, and governed (Couldry and Mejias 5). Walter Mignolo’s concept of “epistemic disobedience” emphasizes the production of knowledge outside hegemonic discourses (Mignolo 132). The cultural production taking place in Iraq illustrates this disobedience, developing counter-archives, digital art, and narratives that resist erasure by algorithms.

Within this framework, the crisis of belonging can be construed as a simultaneous historical and digital phenomenon. Not only are Iraqis alienated by war, displacement, and state collapse, but they are also rendered invisible by global AI infrastructures. Resistance, in this case, occurs across several registers: redeeming memory, generating hybrid narratives, and in the inventive use of digital platforms. This theoretical orientation intersects Iraqi narratives as agents that contest digital hegemony and claim new cultural sovereignty.

The Crisis of Belonging in Iraqi Narratives

Identity in Iraq is profoundly influenced by historical traumas, political fragmentation, and cultural dislocation. Since the British mandate of 1921, Iraq has experienced a succession of political upheavals, monarchy, dictatorship, war, sanctions, and occupation, which fractured national identity along ethnic, sectarian, and geographic divisions. Like Benedict Anderson’s conceptualization of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 6), collective identity relies on narratives of shared memory and recognition. In

Iraq, however, these narratives are constantly disrupted, producing a persistent crisis of belonging.

Literature and art offer a lens through which this crisis is articulated and critiqued. Iraqi writers like Sinan Antoon (*The Corpse Washer*) and Hassan Blasim (*The Madman of Freedom Square*) create characters haunted by displacement, violence, and memory. Indeed, Antoon's protagonist acts, for example, as an intermediary presence between the rituals of death and the disappearance of communal life; the latter are seen as rendered ambivalent, expressing an oscillation between being present and absent (Antoon 89). Blasim's surrealist narratives reveal the absurdity of belonging in exile, how war and dislocation can destabilize identity. These works don't just reflect trauma; they also question how belonging is fabricated, challenged, and effaced.

This crisis is exacerbated by AI in the digital age. Western-taught algorithms falsely represent and marginalize to erase Iraqi cultural entities. As Safiya Noble argues, search engines and recommendation systems are designed with structural bias towards dominant narratives (Noble 87). This digital marginalization is an echo of the historiographical erasure of Iraqis, and creates a double estrangement of local recognition and of external representation.

Moreover, generational dynamics complicate belonging. For young Iraqis using global digital spaces, the tension between connectivity and cultural invisibility is experienced. Cultural and academic practices are also internalized in the sense intended by Pierre Bourdieu, alongside his notion of the habitus that is part of the social world, in which habits and dispositions are formed: The digital consumption of culture may replicate dominant cultural values in which audiences reproduce culture, and the sense of lack and cultural deficiency (Bourdieu 164). These conditions, however, also provide resistance. Iraqi stories reappropriate belonging through a focus on memory, ritual, and hybrid identity, articulating that alienation may catalyze creative assertion.

The crisis of belonging in Iraqi narratives is therefore not only a consequence of political or social upheaval, but also intertwined with digital infrastructures that mediate recognition, understanding, and cultural value. In literature, film, and digital projects, Iraqi peoples produce and navigate spaces of belonging in the face of historical trauma and AI (Artificial Intelligence)-mediated marginalization, creating alternative spaces of identity, memory, and cultural sovereignty.

Mechanisms of Cultural Resistance

Iraqi cultural production challenges digitally-entrenched hegemony by strategies that reclaim memory, hybrid storytelling, and creative playing with

digital technologies. These mechanisms of belonging declare their presence in the face of historical trauma and algorithmic marginalization.

Reclaiming Memory

Memory is central to resistance. Aleida Assmann differentiates communicative memory carried by living generations from cultural memory upheld by texts and rituals (Assmann 42). Iraqi literature and film document experiences that are easily forgotten by global or digital memory. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon provides dignity to the dead, against war-generated oblivion and algorithmic invisibility (Antoon 91). Filmmakers like Mohamed Al-Daradji (*Son of Babylon*) also visually record the displacement and loss, using the medium of counter-archives to disrupt global media narratives that seek sensationalist spectacles over the local experience.

Hybrid Storytelling

The narratives of Iraqis often blend local traditions with international forms, realizing Homi Bhabha's "third space" of hybrid structure (Bhabha 113). Blasim Hasan combines folklore with European literary methods to defy Orientalist representation and algorithmic categorization (Blasim 57). Inaam Kachachi's diasporic fiction embeds Iraqi oral memory in global literary traditions, negotiating issues of belonging across linguistic and cultural divides. Hybridity, therefore, exists to challenge categories and claim agency within hegemonic digital realms.

Creative Engagement with Digital Tools

The digital technologies themselves become resistance sites. Thus, the Iraq Memory Project archives testimonies, images, and documents that are beyond state and corporate control, with these projects constructing sites of participation that contest the AI-led invisibility (Jenkins 142). Digital artists manipulate AI outputs to critique surveillance and displacement by revealing biases encoded in algorithmic logic (Mignolo 129). Through these practices, an "epistemic disobedience" is performed, producing other knowledges outside those that are central.

Community and Solidarity

Cultural opposition is embedded in collective forms of resistance. Book readings, festivals, and diasporic networks keep the belonging alive despite the visibility of the algorithms. And as Raymond Williams insists, culture is practised (Williams 124). Iraqi stories depend on these networks to preserve identity, memory, and agency in concert, resisting hegemonic oblivion.

By repossessing memory, hybrid storytelling, creative digital engagement and communal solidarity, Iraqi cultural production subverts the digital darkness that is the digital hegemony. Such strategies claim belonging not only as a right to space and history but also as a negotiation with technologies that mediate visibility, representation, and recognition.

AI and ‘Iraqi Narratives’ Case Readings

To demonstrate how Iraqi narratives thwart digital domination, this section examines three examples: Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* (novel), Mohamed Al-Daradji’s *Son of Babylon* (film), and Iraqi digital art projects that are engaged with artificial intelligence. They all describe strategies for recuperating memory, construing identity, and claiming belonging in the digital era.

Novel: *The Corpse Washer*

In Antoon’s novel, the story is centered on Jawad, a man who inherits his father’s responsibilities as a corpse washer during the various wars and battles that plague Iraq. The work is about the intimate acts of caring that keep memory and humanity alive, in resistance against erasure in the physical and digital archives. Antoon writes, “The dead bodies I washed held the burden of a history no one cared to read” (112). At a time when artificial intelligence and the global media system reduce Iraqi experiences into statistics and stereotypes, the novel restores visibility to lives at the margins. Its hybrid literary form, blending lyrical reflection with brutal realism, confounds algorithmic classification, a model of cultural sovereignty over digital supremacy.

Film: *Son of Babylon*

Al-Daradji’s movie is a folktale about a boy and his grandmother looking for a father who disappeared after Saddam Hussein’s fall. The story itself demonstrates the fragility of memory and recognition in both state and global media archives. As Al-Daradji writes, the film is a way of “keeping stories that would otherwise be forgotten alive” (Al-Daradji 77). By reframing the ordinary as historic trauma, the film resists the invisibility of the algorithm. Its transnational distribution is also one example of hybrid resistance, locating the Iraqi self in the framework of global discourse, while keeping a sense of locality.

Digital Art and AI

Some Iraqi digital artists have begun using AI subversively to resist hegemony. Iraq Memory Project crowdsources testimonies, photographs, and documents to collect alternative histories that exist outside state and corporate

archives. Artists manipulate AI-created images to undermine surveillance, displacement, and algorithmic bias. These are practices of “epistemic disobedience” according to Walter Dignolo, which create knowledge, memory, and history outside the loop (Dignolo 129). Projects like these digital ones proclaim membership in the very digital realms, and sites of negation, where erasure takes place, turning resistance from merely symbolic into a material act in the present.

Synthesis

Throughout literature, film, and new media art, Iraqi stories re-appropriate memory, utilize hybrid formats, and manipulate digital media to resist AI hegemony. These texts illustrate that belonging is not a state but an ongoing process, contested through narrative, visual, and digital construction. AI is not neutral; it forges visibility and constitutes cultural value; Iraqi stories intervene to register agency, contain memory, and form alternative registers of recognition.

Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Significance

The case studies show how Iraqi storytelling finds its way around the overlapping pressures of historical trauma, digital dominance, and algorithmic exclusion. These works show that belonging is never static, and is always the subject of negotiation: culturally, literarily, technologically. The results of the study have theoretical and practical implications, contributions to AI and cultural resistance, and also identity in a post-colonial context.

Theoretical Implications

In the first place, the study confirms that AI is a tool of modern hegemony, mirroring Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 245). Algorithms mediate visibility, give priority to some narratives and marginalize others, replicating structural inequalities in the digital world. Iraqi stories, colonized through hybrid storytelling, remembrance recapturing, and digital participation, are counter-hegemonic, constituting what Homi Bhabha refers to as resistance in the “third space” (Bhabha 113).

Secondly, the research focuses on the epistemic aspect of resistance. As Dignolo argues, Iraqi narratives perform “epistemic disobedience” by creating knowledge and cultural memory that falls outside of hegemonic systems (Dignolo 132). These disobediences problematize the neutrality of AI, revealing the biases inscribed in the data, training sets, and global algorithms. In this process, they redraw the boundaries of membership and claim cultural sovereignty.

Thirdly, the results indicate the relevance of postcolonial critique in and across digital contexts. Representation is a site of power, as Said pointed out in

Orientalism (Said 27). AI, as an art of representation, projects these logics further into digital architectures. Iraqi narratives reclaim agency over representation as they place local memory, experience, and hybridized identities at the center, countering algorithmic silencing.

Practical Implications

On a practical level, the study highlights the need for universal digital infrastructures. Any platforms supporting the Iraqi cultural life, literature, cinema, and digital archives must prioritize representation, multilingual support, and culturally sensitive algorithmic design into account. Collaborative projects, such as the Iraq Memory Project, demonstrate the possibilities of participatory digital spaces that do not simply work against erasure but also invite global audiences.

Similarly, cultural institutions, publishers, and diaspora networks are integral to sustaining resistance. Through literary workshops, digital exhibitions, and film festivals, Iraqi creators can assert belonging and find an audience beyond the spaces of hegemony. These practices demonstrate that cultural resistance is both local and transnational, utilizing community, technology, and memory to challenge digital hegemony.

Iraqi narratives exemplify how creative encounters with AI might not be just passive critique. Artists convert tools of hegemony into sites of empowerment when, for example, they employ AI tools to generate counter-archives, manipulate images, or create participatory storytelling. This method can serve as a model for other postcolonial expressions of cultural presence in the digital age.

The discussion exposes a dual dynamic: AI is both mediating digital hegemony and providing the tools for resistance. Iraqi narratives show that belonging is made in memory, hybridity, and creative participation, which undermine historical and algorithmic marginalization. These findings add to discussions about digital culture, postcolonial epistemology, and ethics of AI, as well as the potential of asserting cultural sovereignty even in technologically mediated settings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study has explored the entanglement of digital hegemony with AI and the crisis of belonging in Iraqi narratives. Through literature, film, and digital art, Iraqi creators mediate between tensions of possible marginalization and agency, prompting resistance forms that retake memory, assert hybridity, and play with technology creatively. Such narratives convey

that belonging is not a state but an ongoing activity, always reconstituting itself through cultural practice, and both historically shaped and digitally mediated.

The study reveals that AI serves as a modern tool of hegemony; as it uplifts hegemonic discourse, it also silences the discourses of the subaltern. This persistence of historical inequalities in digital spaces underscores the need for further questioning of the ethical, cultural, and social impact of algorithmic mediation. Iraqi narratives react to these pressures by performing acts of epistemic and cultural resistance through hybrid storytelling, participatory digital practices, and archival projects, which claim agency and memory. By doing so, these works question the neutrality of AI and express the potential of cultural production to counter structural erasure.

The crisis of belonging depicted in Iraqi literature is one of generation and diaspora, compounded by the regulation of visibility by global media and algorithmic networks, but it is also one countered with communal solidarity, hybrid modes of expression, and memory's stories of resistance. Literary and cinematic depictions as *The Corpse Washer* and *Son of Babylon*, as well as digital arts, show that cultural resistance is not simply reactive – it is productive. In recollecting memories, reconciling hybrid identities, and generatively appropriating digital media, Iraqi narratives invent new forms of cultural articulation, communication, and sovereignty.

Practically, this study indicates that an enabling digital infrastructure and supportive cultural institutions, along with the critical use of AIs, are important if Iraqi cultural production and belonging are to be maintained. Multilingual and culturally sensitive algorithms and participatory archives can be the platform for amplifying Iraqi voices and opposing erasure. Cultural Festivals, literary workshops, and digital art programs support creative expression and transnational networks, which contribute to identity and memory. In addition to using AI to counter-archives and participate in storytelling, Iraqis can subvert systems of control and reconfigure them as tools of empowerment.

In conclusion, Iraqi narratives reveal that resistance to digital hegemony is strategic and imaginative. They assert belonging and cultural continuity in places marked by historical trauma and algorithmic marginalization, providing a model for how postcolonial societies may engage critically and creatively with technology. It is in foregrounding memory, hybridity, and the participatory that these narratives suggest alternatives for cultural sovereignty, recognition, and sustained agency in a globalized, mediated world.

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