



e-ISSN:2582-7219



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

Volume 7, Issue 6, June 2024



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.521



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Toni Morrison's Novels and the Quest for Identity

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ABSTRACT: Toni Morrison's novels address issues such as racial tension, sexism and lustful desires, apart from the many individual themes that apply to specific novels. The underlying themes in almost all of Morrisons's novels are; the effects of slavery, the rootlessness of the Black minority and their crises of identity both as Black citizens, and as freed slaves. In her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has depicted the dilemma of a Black, young girl who searches for her true identity and is frustrated by her blackness she yearns for love and acceptance, and a white complexion. In *Beloved*, the inhuman treatment of slaves and its consequent impact on their psyche has been depicted, through the characters. The similarity between the two novels, however, is the struggle to create an identity that each of the characters has to go through. In both these novels, Morrison has depicted the arduous that these characters embark upon, in order to make a place for themselves, in society - in order to be accepted as individual entities. Identity is a socially and historically constructed concept, of which we learn through interactions with; family, peers, social institutions, the media, and such other connections that we make in our everyday lives. According to Peter Weinreich, one's identity is, "Defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself is, in the present, expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future. (Weinreich, Peter, and Wendy Saunderson. *Analysing Identity: Cross-cultural, Societal, and Clinical Contexts*. London: Routledge, 2003) In light of this definition, it may be understood that the manner in which one sees him in the past, the present, and in the future, is what constitutes his identity. This understanding of oneself is, however, greatly by the perception of others around that person. The 'self' is located in a word defined by others.

KEYWORDS: Toni Morrison, novels, quest, identity, characters

I. INTRODUCTION

The leading example of Afro- American novel writer Toni Morrison belonged to an excellent wordsmith, a political worker, a dedicated scholar and an honest humanitarian. Toni Morrison has recently earned the highest appreciations for literary excellence and for her distinguished career as an academic. She is also an economist, a Nobel Prize laureate, and a winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Moreover, she was also awarded with an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature from the Universities of Oxford, Rutgers, and Geneva. Toni Morrison's professional resume is both academic and artistic accomplishments, but her enduring accomplishment is her literary legacy. Toni Morrison's writing is completely fluid and impressive. Her novels are excavations of the human psyche by uncovering the basic elements of the humanitarian soul in its cruelest and most dark scenarios. A respected voice of an acclaimed writer such as Toni Morrison can be heard from each beat of her sentences. This critical paper is an intense exploration of search for identity and entity in select novels of Toni Morrison. With this paper an endeavor has been made how the black people; especially the so-called 'other' who are labeled obnoxiously by the superior whites; articulate their voices in the colonized Africa. In this respect of postcolonial discourses no other writer is as copacetic as Toni Morrison in the realm of literature of Black transnational feminism.

Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*, depicts the self-identity quest of three black women, Eva, Sula and Nel, from men-centered consciousness acknowledgement to patriarchal oppression resistance and finally to the traditional black female fate transcendence. Based on the analysis of *Sula*, the author holds that the redefinition of black women's self-identity needs them to reaccept themselves, love themselves, and be well-equipped with extensive and profound knowledge. Only in this way, can they gain respect and love from the male, and eventually fight together for their rights and emancipation.[1,2,3]

II. DISCUSSION

The continuing debunking of the dominant social and cultural representations of American myths in general, as well as those related to African Americans, has become the mainstay in her opus, dedicated to "the dismantling of national narratives, a challenge to the flaws inherent in the myths of national self-definition, and a re-envisioning of what 'Americanness' might mean" (Roynon 2013a: 105). To this end, Morrison's literary production concentrates on the sense of identity; that is, how the formation of identity and the pressures of metanarratives at the collective level impact



African Americans' self-actualisation. According to critical opinion, Morrison "is intent on depicting the rich complexities and complicating differences—such as differences in gender, class, education, and culture—that shape African-American identities" (Bouson 2005: 21). In *Home*, Morrison writes about the physical and psychological consequences of the Korean War and the effect of racial violence on the identity construction of African American characters. The novel centers on a twenty-four-year-old African American war veteran by the name of Frank Money, who narrates most of the novel. He longs to leave his hometown of Lotus, [4]Georgia so he joins the army with his childhood friends at the age of eighteen. Frank is deployed to Korea, where he has many traumatic experiences, including witnessing the deaths of his two best friends and his murdering a young local girl in order to stop himself from abusing her. Burdened by feelings of guilt resulting from outliving his friends and of shame at being aroused by and then killing a child, he does not return to Lotus after his army service. Instead, he lives in the state of Washington, struggling with PTSD and seeking release in alcohol and violence while suffering racial injustices and being treated as inferior despite his veteran status. His homeland, for which he risked his life, snubs him. The only hope and stability in his life come from his moving in with his girlfriend, Lily, but his odd trauma-induced habits weigh their relationship down. When Frank receives a postcard with the alarming message that his sister Ycidra (Cee) is in trouble, he heads home, to Georgia, to help the person he loves most and who has been his only positive remembrance of home.

III. RESULTS

Frank's fate mirrors American society in the Jim Crow era, when racially discriminatory laws controlled social, economic, and political relationships between African Americans and whites. It is because of racial discrimination that Frank gets placed in a mental institution, from which he manages to flee and finds refuge in an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. During his entire journey south, the only genuinely friendly [2,3,4] encounter he has is when he meets Reverend John Locke, who warns him about the reality of the situation in his homeland: Well, you not the first by a long shot. An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back and they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better. [...] You won't be able to sit down at any bus stop counter. Listen here, you from Georgia and you been in desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous. (Morrison 2012: 18-19) Reverend Locke sees Frank's state of mind and what caused it. He warns him that the situation is the same all over the country, blacks are not equal or welcome in the South or the North. And not even the law can protect him as there are racist attitudes that are not lenient, even to veterans. The biggest irony is that Frank's position as a war veteran does not work to his advantage or grant him an equal status in society. Once he returns from combat duty, his service is promptly dismissed and forgotten; his medal is the sole recognition that he has served his country. America is not his home anymore, and he is so deeply traumatised that it seems that he can no longer find an environment in which to belong.¹¹ Despite these difficulties, Frank sets out on a mission to save his sister in order to reclaim his identity and reconstruct his masculinity. He takes a bus, regulated by racial segregation, that had "very few passengers, yet Frank dutifully sat in the last seat" (Morrison 2012: 19), and begins to reassess the past. He thinks back to the different relationships in his life and how he has tried "to assert a sense of self, he also becomes a good 'homeboy' to his friends, a soldier, and an ineffectual boyfriend to Lily" (Harack 2016: 373), and feelings of failure and disconnect overcome him. In his destitute and traumatised state of mind, Frank's hope for recovery is shaped through his urge to assume yet again the role of his little sister's brother/protector: No more people I didn't save. No more watching people close to me die. No more. [...] She was the first person I ever took responsibility for. Down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself—a strong good me tied to the memory of those horses and the burial of a stranger. Guarding her [...] I wonder if succeeding at that was the buried seed of all the rest. In my little-boy heart I felt heroic and I knew that if they found us or touched her I would kill. (Morrison 2012: 103-104) Frank intends to change his tendency to self-destruction and manage his trauma by re-examining his past actions and their present ramifications. He is tormented by memories of people he did not save, and he decides to stand up and never let that happen again. His words in the above passage indicate that his home is with Cee and his own identity is closely tied to her. Cee might be the last person who still has an image of Frank as a righteous masculine protector, and that is what he wants to be again. While protecting her, he felt heroic, but after leaving Lotus, he lost that feeling, along with the sense of self-direction and self-esteem. He questions his decision to leave Cee to enlist in the army and wonders if his life would have been different if he had not. In the words of Judylyn Ryan, Morrison's narrative juxtaposes "a character's internal spiritual battle as he contends with how [3,4] society interprets his racial and gender identity" and his self-perception, that is "how he views himself as a strong, good self and the lengths to which he will go to protect his positive identity" (2007: 156). When Frank fulfills his goal and rescues Cee, he not only saves her from eugenicist medical experimentation by a white doctor and probably death, but he also saves himself from losing any remaining feeling of belonging, support, and kindness, "thus recovering a sense of his original masculine identity [...], that enables him to face this traumatic memory" (Harack and



Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 291). This inward understanding of a new self surpasses the conventional physical and cultural aspects of home and underwrites the protagonist's self-worth and self-fulfillment.

The internal journey Frank embarks on confirms Morrison's belief that "the black-self cannot achieve self-definition without coming to terms with their traumatic memories" (López Ramírez 2014: 159). At first, this effort brings more suffering and trauma, mostly related to his remembering the Korean duty tour. The way his memory works brings to mind Toni Morrison on what she considers "the deliberate act of remembering" and defines "a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way" (Morrison 1984: 385). Frank has to force himself to revert to the dark recesses of his past and reassess what happened – or how it appeared to him – while understanding the reasons for it in order to gain clarity and resolution. His words, even if initially scant and ambiguous, imply the scale of his traumatic past: "Korea. You cannot imagine it because you weren't there" (Morrison 2012: 93). With one sentence it becomes clear that he went through unspeakable agony and atrocities. Only later in the novel, in chapter nine, does he explain the deepest injury to his psyche—the killing of a Korean girl: I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me. I felt so grieving over my dead friends. [...] My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame. [...] I shot the Korean girl in her face. I am the one she touched. [...] I am the one she aroused. [...] How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me? (Morrison 2012: 133-134) Frank admits that he was the one who killed the Korean girl, and the moment he accepts what he did marks his first step towards redemption. He had been avoiding blame until this moment of confession. For years, he felt shame and guilt for what he did but, as Jaleel Akhtar remarks, his forgetfulness of everything that happened represents the amnesia of a whole nation, guilty of forgetting the Korean War (2014: 138). Frank, who was a victim himself, cannot accept that he surrendered to the place where he became a victimiser.¹² Frank loses his humanity, and by taking the role of the oppressor, the shattering of his black self's identity is even more traumatic (López Ramírez 2014: 55). Saving his sister and returning to Lotus and the burial site are necessary to regain his identity and masculinity, but he also has to tell his story and process the events he was subjected to in order to define his identity fully. Through Frank's experiences of homes, the childhood house in Lotus and Lily's apartment, he builds his feeling of attachment or resistance to them, depending on his sense of place in each of them. His sense of loss, worthlessness, failure, and estrangement can be reversed through a space that is inhabited by the healing power of a community, helping him regain a sense of recognition, purpose and value. As critics note, Morrison's exploration of [1,2]memory and trauma related to the idea of home demonstrate "that physical homecoming is less significant than the finding of a true home, or safe space, within the self" (Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 283). Through the main characters' return to their home as a physical locality and after the reassessment of their past, involving remembrances of traumatic memories, their healing and return to a homeplace are made possible. This understanding of homecoming invokes hooks' idea of homeplace as a location that signifies care, self-respect and integrity, an environment that enables African Americans to feel their value as human beings, much in opposition to the conditions in the outside world. In hooks' words, homeplace is the "space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole" (1990: 49). In the characters' confrontation of the past and recuperation of memory, their identity conflict can be resolved, and they can affirm themselves as persons as well as restore the dignity commonly denied to them by the world. Both siblings construct new identities and emerge as strong individuals who manage to overcome their traumatic memories. hooks explains that home is that locus which enables varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality (1990: 148). This is the case for Frank and Cee, who grant a proper burial to the black man from their childhood and also symbolically bury their traumatic memories. Thus, the novel ends where it begins, at the burial site from their childhood, with Frank and Cee revisiting the scene of their initial trauma and "the slaughter that went on in the world" (Morrison 2012: 143). Frank and Cee dig up the grave in order to give the man a decent final resting place, but also to face their own past. They wrap the remains in Cee's quilt¹³ and bury them under the huge bay tree¹⁴, "split down the middle, beheaded, undead" (Morrison 2012: 144). As they carry the "gentleman" (Morrison 2012, 143) towards his final resting ground, Frank and Cee in some way pay homage [2,3]to their ancestors by restoring the dignity and identity stolen from the anonymous black man.¹⁵ To mark the grave, Frank nails a wooden epitaph to the tree with the words: "Here Stands a Man" (Morrison 2012: 144). This performative act of respect and compassion, in words and deed, has a healing and liberating effect on the protagonists, but especially for Frank as this act of burial and restoring dignity to a human being and a member of his community "shows Frank's sense of belonging and indicates that he has also reached his manhood" (Akhtar 2014: 142). At the same time, the secret burial at the farm from their childhood becomes a point of recollection of the collective trauma of all African Americans. The concept of two fighting horses "signaled what an ideal masculine behaviour was to be" (Wagner-Martin 2015: 172) and that it was important who would be the last man standing. Frank has returned to the site of trauma from his childhood and, as a grown man, paid his respects to his townsman. In this way, Frank is finally able to stand as a man because he is turning into a more balanced version of himself. With this action, Frank and Cee



pay their respects to the victim of racial violence and express solidarity with the community to which they belong. With this act of essential humanity and kindness, Morrison advocates the importance of facing the past, however traumatic and hurtful to the individual it may be, in order to re-examine it, resolve any personal responsibility in the events and gain identity definition through the recollection of them. This selfevaluation can contribute to one's own identity formation but also to the collective sense of belonging and solidarity as contributing members of the African American community. For Katrina Harack, this approach also signals the opposition of the author to the dominant standard of individualism tied to the "white, hegemonic, male ideologies of progress" (2016: 372). In her writing, Morrison counters this pattern with a celebration of the enabling community as [3,4]a "site of resistance" (bell hooks), offering support in the overcoming of traumatic memories and redefining of the self, thanks to "the communal, productive, healing power of women and men who have faced the past, celebrate the present, and look forward to a future that is not rigidly defined by existing race and gender ideologies"

Toni Morrison's captivating narratives, both novels and non-fictional writing, address diverse themes in the lives of African Americans and the mainstream society in the United States, but a crucial concern is the legacy of slavery and the significance of remembrance. Closely related to this thematic preoccupation is the sense of African American individual and collective belonging and self, shaped by white hegemonic forces and their metanarratives, that have contributed to the marginalisation, silencing and oppression of African Americans. This paper analyses Morrison's 2012 novel *Home*, set at the time Jim Crow laws were operative at both local and state levels that imposed discrimination and segregation on racial grounds in the southern US by exploring the impact of traumatic experiences during the Korean War. Specifically, the analysis focuses on how the memories of both the war and racial violence in the American South bear upon African American identity construction. Through the character of Frank Money, an African American war veteran, Morrison describes the ways in which his important service is simply dismissed, and he is subjected to racially-motivated aggression, aggravating his existing war-induced state of trauma. Concurrently, the discussion illuminates how the novel reflects on the impact of these experiences, both in a racially divided community and in "the Forgotten War", on individual and collective identity given the social and political changes in the life of the protagonist, his family, and his community. Recognising the importance of the 1950s for the subsequent nostalgic and misleading representation in mainstream culture and memory, this article introduces the necessary contextualisation of this period, set against the backdrop of earlier history and fate of African Americans. [3]

IV. CONCLUSION

Among the key questions that *Home* addresses is how the traumatised characters of Frank and his sister Cee can hope and strive to resolve the haunting memories in order to reach a "homeplace": to come "home" to self-esteem and a revived sense of self and of belonging; and home: a community where African Americans can support one another and, in that way, heal the wounds of white domination. Evidently, as the paper discusses, home is more than an idealised construct since it functions as the locus of personal and collective identities and a representation of self-identity. When at the end of the novel the main characters confront their violent past and resolve their traumatic memories through the burial of an unknown man, they are nearing their homeplace and the substantive reconstruction of their identity. This paper elucidates that by saving his sister and revisiting the burial site, Frank has the opportunity to complete his quest and reclaim his identity, partly also due to the renewed role of the strong protector as the essence of his reconstructed masculinity[4]

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4. Duvall, John N. (2000). *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness*. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 38. ISBN 978-0-312-23402-7. After all the published biographical information on Morrison agrees that her full name is Chloe Anthony Wofford, so that the adoption of 'Toni' as a substitute for 'Chloe' still honors her given name, if somewhat obliquely. Morrison's middle name, however, was not Anthony; her birth certificate indicates her full name as Chloe Ardelia Wofford, which reveals that Ramah and George Wofford named their daughter for her maternal grandmother, Ardelia Willis.



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