T.C.
ISTANBUL KÜLTÜR UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

THE WEIGHT OF REMEMBERING: CULTURAL TRAUMA OF SLAVERY AND ITS IMPACT ON IDENTITY FORMATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON* AND TA-NEHISI COATES'S *THE WATER DANCER*

Master of Arts Thesis by

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Department: English Language and Literature

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PLAGIARISM

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ABSTRACT

THE WEIGHT OF REMEMBERING: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON AND TA-NEHISI COATES'S *THE WATER DANCER*

Deniz Yıldız

This thesis examines the cultural trauma of slavery and its destructive impact on the formation of African American identities in the works of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer.* Since the two novels are set in distinct historical periods (the Civil Rights Movement and the late antebellum America), they provide the brutal realities of slavery both as a lived experience and as an inherited trauma. They also reframe the existing historical narratives by putting forth a counter history against historical erasure. In doing so, each novel is enriched with African American cultural myths and motives incorporated with magical realism. Through this, both novels put emphasis on memory, remembering of one's heritage, and the necessity of communal engagement for the betterment of the self. In exploring these intersecting themes, this study draws on the theoretical frameworks of trauma theory, memory studies, postcolonialism and postmodernism.

Key words: African American Literature, The Legacy of Slavery, Cultural Trauma, Cultural Memory, African American Identity, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Magical Realism.

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ÖZET

HATIRLAMANIN YÜKÜ: TONI MORRISON'IN *SÜLEYMAN'IN ŞARKISI* VE TA-NEHISI COATES'IN *SU DANSÇISI* ROMANLARINDA KÜLTÜREL TRAVMA VE KIMLIK İNŞASI

Deniz Yıldız

Bu tez, Toni Morrison'ın *Süleyman'ın Şarkısı* ve Ta-Nehisi Coates'in *Su Dansçısı* kitabında köleliğin kültürel travmasını ve bunun Afrika kökenli Amerikalıların kimlik inşasını nasıl etkilediğini analiz etmektedir. Farklı dönemleri kapsayan (Sivil Haklar Hareketi Dönemi ve İç Savaş Dönemi Öncesi) bu iki kitap, köleliğin acımasız gerçekliğini hem direkt yaşamış kişiler üzerinden hem de bunu kuşaklar arası aktarım yoluyla benimsemiş bireyler üzerinden incelemektedir. İki kitap da halihazırda var olan tarihsel anlatıyı yeniden çerçevelemektedir. Bunu yaparken de büyülü gerçekçilik kuramından faydalanarak kültürlerine ait olan mit ve sembolleri anlatımlarında kullanmışlardır. Bu sebeple iki metin de kültürel bellek, kültürel mirasın hatırlanması ve kolektif bütünleşmenin bireyin gelişimi için önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, bahsedilen tematik bağlantıları travma teorisi, bellek çalışmaları, postkolonyal, postmodern kuramlarını kullanarak incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrikan-Amerikan Edebiyatı, Köleliğin Mirası, Kültürel Travma, Kültürel Bellek, Afrikan Amerikan Kimliği, Postkolonyalizm, Postmodernizm, Büyülü Gerçekçilik.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The impact of cultural trauma, which permeates multiple areas in one's life, is intricately woven into the identities of the members in the affected community. By definition, cultural trauma may vary in its driving force. It generally includes major events that leave colossal damage to the physical and the emotional well-being of the members in the affected group. However, for a group trauma to transform into a cultural trauma at a broader level that spans generations, collective memory plays a pivotal role. The case of American slavery, as this thesis centralizes on, is an illustration of this phenomenon. The history of slavery has always had a prominent place in the African American socio-political reality. Despite the fact that the institutionalized slavery was dismantled almost two centuries ago, the dehumanizing treatment along with the physical and psychological violence directed at the Black population has had a long-lasting imprint on the African American collective memory. This led to the legacy of slavery to function as one of the distinct features of African American identity. Its memory has been preserved through numerous methods, including oral art forms such as storytelling, folklore, myths and songs; as well as slave narratives, and socio-political movements that have enabled African Americans to voice their marginalizations. These cultural forms and political actions have fostered a shared history and a shared understanding of the history of slavery, shaping both the collective and personal identities of Black Americans[1]. Drawing on these insights, this thesis seeks to examine how the cultural trauma of slavery is created through a collective effort and how its traumatic remembrance shapes African American identity both on an individual and a collective level.

The primary texts of this study are Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*. Both novels focus on racial trauma, systematic racism, familial isolation, memory, and the search for an identity. Drawing on factual history while also fusing magical elements within their narratives, both Morrison and Coates bring us to the African American social reality, paying tribute to their ancestral heritage and heritage of slavery. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison aims to demonstrate the importance of community consciousness and its impact on the construction of personal identities through the fictional story of the Dead family. Written as a bildungsroman that merges the elements of spirituality and fantasy together with the Black experience in the Civil Rights Movement, Morrison focuses on the psychological turbulence of the traumatized Black Americans and their shattered self-images that persist even in the post-slavery era.

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[1] The terms "Black Americans" and "African Americans" are used interchangably throughout this study. The capitalization of "Black" when referring to the Black identity and Black Americans reflects a cultural and racial identity of a group that shares a common history.

In a similar approach, in his novel *The Water Dancer*, Coates incorporates the historical figures as well as the significant historical movements and individuals in the late antebellum America, such as Harriet Tubman, The Underground Railroad and the Abolitionist Movement, in order to challenge the traditional, white-centered narrative that puts forth only one side of history that relegates other views to the margins. Through the role of community and cultural/individual memory, Coates emphasizes the notion that identity and individual memory intersect with one's connection to their past. Even though the two novels that I have analyzed are set in different periods in the African American history, they complement each other in depicting the transition of Black Americans' journey from bondage to a questionable amount of liberation. Thus, their works, reflective of their socio-cultural and socio-political environment, offer an insight to the challenges of being a part of an otherized community, both through a retrospective and contemporary lens. Additionally, the novels shed light on trauma's long-lasting impact on memory and identity by demonstrating how the subsequent generations carry the effects within their psyche. Building on these themes, this thesis aims to analyze the impact of cultural trauma and collective memory on the formation of individual and collective identities in the works of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*. Through the novels that are under discussion, I aim to demonstrate how the African American identity is affected by and shaped around the cultural trauma of slavery by drawing on the theoretical frameworks of literary trauma theory, postcolonialism and postmodernism.

The primary motivation regarding this study included questions on a variety of topics. How does memory function in one's life? How does it coincide with the collective memory? To what extent can we trust official History? Can a traumatic experience that we have witnessed in a second-hand manner lurk into our lives and alter our perception?

Can it also shape our identities while inflicting pain in our psyche- so much so that it requires attention? As much as the subject of trauma itself encompasses various fields in its scope, and thus requires multiple approaches for each discipline alone, I attempt to scrutinize the parts where literature crossroads with traumatic remembrance, healing and reclaiming an identity. Additionally, through the postcolonial and postmodern perspective I aim to present how history glosses over certain groups and centralizes sanitized facts, muting the experiences of those that the white culture has marginalized.

The introductory chapter, which is organized in three sub-sections, traces the history of trauma studies, the emergence of literary and cultural trauma theory and the formation of African American identity through a postcolonial lens. In the first section entitled "History of Trauma Studies", I provide a chronological history of how the understanding of trauma has shifted from an individual based to a cultural one. Even though my focus is primarily on trauma's collective and cultural aspect, I intended to include the historical background to pinpoint the transition where trauma has become a site of cultural and collective phenomenon with the emphasis on the idea that it may also generate separately from one's personal history. In this case, since trauma interferes with memory, this section also includes prominent names in memory studies such as Maurice Halbwachs, Jann Assman and Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch's concept of "postmemory," Halbwachs's theory of "*cadres sociaux"* (the social frameworks of memory), and Assmann's concept of "cultural and collective memory" are central to my argument.

The second sub-section, the "Literary Trauma Theory and The Cultural Trauma", turns its focus to the representation of trauma in literature. The key publications of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra are included in the discussion. In light of their theories, I explore the nature of trauma and the possible ways of resolving it. Furthermore, this part also serves another necessary foundation for my argument as it introduces the concept of cultural trauma theory developed in the early 21st century, grounded in the works of Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey Alexander whose theories this study highly draws on. They emphasize how the cultural trauma centralizes the experiences of the marginalized voices, such as African American community, queer communities, or the Holocaust survivors in order to help us see trauma's extensive reach.

By establishing these points, I aim to underline how a group trauma transforms into a cultural trauma, influencing not only a group of people but across generations.

Gradually narrowing down my argument, in the following section "Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity", I begin to explore the historical background of the emergence of African American identity. Starting from the Reconstruction era and Harlem Renaissance, I delve into the Black Americans' collective effort to establish a cultural and collective memory to claim their full citizenships in the USA. By doing this, I aim to demonstrate how the collective memory and the legacy of slavery is established in the minds of the Black community. Using postcolonial criticism as a framework of this study, following section incorporates W.E.B Du Bois's term of "double consciousness", Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" as well as the main pillars of Frantz Fanon's theoretical framework to illuminate the struggle that Black Americans have experienced through their fragmented identities. These conceptual frameworks facilitate the articulation of my core argument which is that our personal identities are tightly bound to the cultural experiences that we have lived or inherited collectively. Finally, in Chapter II and Chapter III, I analyze the novels *Song of Solomon* and *The Water Dancer* respectively through the theoretical frameworks and central themes that are introduced earlier.

1.1 History of Trauma Studies

The study of trauma has transformed over the course of time. It followed a transition from an individual based mental disruption to a phenomenon that affects communities on a larger scale. In the late 19th and early 20th century, significant theorists in psychology and psychiatry, particularly Jean-Martin Charcot and his student Sigmund Freud, began tracing the origins of trauma. Despite their varied approaches, their common method to investigate trauma was to focus primarily on the individual psyche, treating it as a disease under a medicalized setting.

Charcot, known as the father of the neuropathology who did most of his investigations on female subjects at the Salpêtrière laboratory in 1882, believed that trauma had hysterical origins, arguing that the symptoms occurred, as Balaev summarizes, when "an individual with a hereditary predisposition to a nervous collapse was faced with an unexpected external shock" (*Contemporary Approaches in Literary*

Trauma Theory 28). The emphasis on the "hereditary predisposition" asserted that trauma was thought to be caused by the dysfunctions in the nervous system, which disregarded the underlying affective forces that might have been triggering its occurrence.

Influenced by his teacher's view on hysteria and trauma, Sigmund Freud further explored the concept by including his own theory of "return of the repressed" to the equation. In *Studies on Hysteria,* one of the founding texts of psychoanalysis, written in collaboration with the physician Joseph Bruer in 1895, both theorists argued that the memory pertaining to the traumatic event is not accessible to the consciousness. Therefore, since "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" the traumatic remembrances could persist and reemerge under specific circumstances, causing the person to experience physical and psychological symptoms (38). Referring to this situation where the forgotten materials linger through someone's life as "return of the repressed", Freud emphasized the significance of the "unconscious" mind, where those repressed materials were stored without the conscious awareness of the traumatized person. From this perspective, he believed that these involuntary outlets brought forward by the unconscious mind were responsible for the turmoil and disruption in the psyche. However, even though Freud's theories are of particular relevance as it has shaped the skeleton of the modern-day trauma studies today, his approach to trauma was subject to limitations both in scope and focus as to how he explained it under diagnostic terms, disregarding the cultural and social parameters behind it.

The understanding of trauma gained momentum as a result of the First and the Second World War's tremendous aftereffects on the individuals, such as the war neuroses or the shellshock syndrome. As the returned soldiers kept displaying a heightened level of anxiety, panic and terror which disabled them to function properly, people began to acknowledge trauma's broader influence on individuals. Specifically, it was the aftermath of Holocaust that trauma studies began to widen its focus from an individual understanding to a cultural one. Holocaust was instrumental in reframing the discourse around trauma as to how it showed people that the repercussions of such atrocity exceeded the scope of individual trauma.

In her book, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Marianne Hirsch addresses the detrimental outcome of Holocaust to illustrate the intersecting nature of individual trauma with collective memory. As a person who remembers her parents' wartime stories in Romania rather than her own childhood memories, Hirsch argues that children whose parents are the direct victims of a traumatic event have trauma deeply engraved in their psyche, which, as she argues, makes them "postgeneration" (4). To refer to this intergenerational aspect of trauma, she coins the term "postmemory" which she defines as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (6). In other words, she believes that it is different than the memory itself, on the basis that the traumatic experience itself is not directly experienced by the subsequent generation, it is only recalled by "imaginative investment, projection and creation" by the people who have directly experienced the event and passed it on to their children "in the form of vivid narratives and conjured images" (5). With this viewpoint, Hirsch argues that even though the later generation has not experienced the traumatic event personally, they have connected deeply to the memories of their ancestors as if they are the direct victims of it. It signifies that the collectively shared past, and the reminiscence of the traumatic events by the direct victims are embedded in the minds of the following generations, shaping their identities.

Hirsch's ideas are rooted in the concepts that are established in memory studies. One of them is the concept of "collective memory", which is developed by Maurice Halbwachs, who is known as the father of memory studies. Halbwachs argues that the individual memory cannot be separated from one's socio-cultural upbringing. In his book *Social Frameworks of Memory (Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire,* 1925*)*, he suggests that "the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressures of society" (51). By means of viewing individual memory as an outcome of a cultural phenomenon, he situates memory in a social context, which is relevant for the shift in the understanding of trauma. Asserting that the family environment of an individual is one of the major social frameworks as "our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things", Halbwachs emphasizes that the individual memory and the collective memory are intertwined (58).

Building upon this theory, Jan Assmann, another prominent figure in the field of memory studies, has developed Halbwachs's ideas on memory to a further point. In his book, published in 2011, *The Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination,* Assmann argues that Halbwachs's theory of collective memory lacks 'cultural sphere' such as 'the realm of traditions, transmissions, and transferences' (110). As opposed to Halbwachs, Assmann divides the concept of collective memory into two separate terms: one being the "collective memory" and the other; the "cultural memory". "Communicative/collective memory", as he argues, is based on "on everyday communications" which are "socially mediated" as "every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others" (127). The "cultural memory", on the other hand, "is characterized by its distance from the everyday […] which are maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)" (129). In essence, according to Assmann, collective memory is an informal way of transmitting the cultural and personal experiences such as the stories that are passed on to us from our parents. This aligns, to some extent, with Hirsch's conceptualization of postmemory as to how these communicative memories are passed down to us through communication, affecting our perception of ourselves and our identites. However, cultural memory has a fixed point. It is embodied in institutions, practices or cultural artifacts that are not easy to change. The national holidays, rituals, and literary texts that embody the cultural history of a community can be the illustrations of this. From this perspective, for Assman, both the collective and cultural memory of a community are the foundations of personal identities as to how identity and self-hood intersect with one's connection to their pasts.

Thus, the role of memory studies that is discussed in this part is vital for the development of trauma studies in terms of how it forms a critical starting point in exploring how a group memory shapes the personal and cultural identities. Through the establishment of cultural and collective memories, the legacy of a traumatic event is commemorated and is continuously passed on to the newer generations. This suggests that our sense of self is intertwined with our cultural past. They constantly shape one another, which puts emphasis on the necessity of collective remembering for cultural continuity.

1.2. Literary Trauma Theory and Cultural Trauma

As the unprecedented extent of psychological consequences of the World War II -especially the Holocaust- as well as the postmodern and postcolonial influences brought a new dimension into the literary landscape, the impact of trauma began to be studied in literary criticism, drifting apart from a medicalized approach. It led to the emergence of literary trauma theory, specifically with the canonical works of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra.

Through the witness testimonies of the Holocaust, which were the first-hand accounts that were collected from the victims, people began to view trauma's disruptive intervention in language and memory at a deeper level. Despite their pivotal role in demonstrating the heinous acts that were perpetrated during the Nazi Germany, survivor testimonies also became instrumental in articulating that the magnitude of such distressing experiences resisted smooth and direct representation in language. It was for the reason that victims were unable to recall and convey coherent stories pertaining to their trauma. Their accounts were filled with narrative pauses, fragmented storylines as well as repetitions and flashbacks, which were the direct reflections of their disoriented psychological state.

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing,* one of the fundamental texts in the early literary trauma theory published in 1992, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman explore the testimonial process of a traumatic event. They assert that the act of articulating a traumatic event, in other words giving testimony, requires an active listener, "a participant, a co-owner of the traumatic event [who] partially experience trauma in himself" (57). Referring to this situation as "bearing witness" to trauma, they argue that trauma can only be processed through an engagement with a witness who will validate, hear and share the pain of the survivor. Since there will be gaps and silences in their narratives, survivors need a witness who will help them co-construct their disrupted narrative. As an example to this, Laub includes an interview with a Holocaust survivor who narrates her tragic experience at Auschwitz. He states that the victim misinterprets certain parts in her account and is unable to recall which inmate group she was from. Retaining himself pushing any further questions, he suggests that during their interview it was "the silence out of which this testimony spoke" (60). Here, he asserts that these involuntary silences, which are caused by the incapacity of language to fully articulate trauma, should not be seen as weaknesses as they are an integral part of the testimony itself. The problem, as argued by Laub, is the fact that “many have survived in silence and passed the silence on to their children and grandchildren” due to the fact that they could not speak about their suffering (*Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Testimony* 172). Resembling postmemory, albeit with a different emphasis, this shows that silence can also be transmitted to the next generations. Therefore, relational space of testimony and bearing witness are essential steps in acknowledging the impact of the collective and personal traumatic experiences.

Apart from Laub and Felman, the early literary trauma theory included another significant name: Cathy Caruth, who also drew on psychoanalysis in her take. In her preliminary work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Caruth defines trauma as an “unclaimed experience”, like a “shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (4). Building upon Freud’s concept of “return of the repressed”, Caruth emphasizes trauma’s presence in the unconscious, which “is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). She holds the opinion that traumatic experiences are not consciously acknowledged by their possessors, and thus, they manifest through various outlets. As the traumatized mind cannot adjust itself to the intensity of the pain, it fails to register the traumatic memory in the same manner that of the regular ones. It results in traumatized people failing to verbalize how they feel and even to certain extent forgetting the event itself. Thus, according to Caruth, trauma is nearly impossible to overcome as the traumatized individual is not consciously aware of the traumatic event in the first place. Even though Caruth’s, Felman and Laub’s theories have contributed immensely into the academic landscape, the traditional model of trauma has gradually lost its spark due to its heavily involvement with psychoanalysis that scrutinizes trauma through diagnostic terms only. In view of this, in *A Companion to Literary Theory,* Michelle Balaev suggests that a new form of model was brought about by certain scholars, including herself, in which these critics focused on the “rhetorical, semiotic, and social implications of trauma” which were created with “neoLacanian, neoFreudian, and new semiotic approaches” (3).

As a critic to the early literary trauma theorists, in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), Dominick LaCapra situates trauma in a broader context and underscores its relation to one's cultural and historical environment. Similar to Caruth, LaCapra acknowledges trauma's nature of unspeakibility and its irrepresentability. However, he believes that even though trauma disrupts time and is not easy to be represented through language, there are ways of resolving it. He puts forth the concept of "working through" trauma which is the "processes of mourning [that] requires confronting and elaborating the effects of the past in a manner that opens modes of critical and ethical agency" (70). Here, LaCapra suggests that if an individual works through their trauma, they reflect on the traumatic event and the pain it causes. They do not let trauma dictate their life; they attempt to critically analyze it from a distance. Those who cannot manage to work through their traumas find themselves in a process of "acting out" where their "past is compulsively repeated as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory" (70). Drawing on Freud's conceptualization of "mourning" and "melancholia" and analyzing them beyond clinical setting, he asserts that healthy form of "working through" involves mourning which "allows one to begin again" (86). Melancholia, on the other hand, brings forth "compulsive repetition" for the loss that an individual experiences" (66). Therefore, according to LaCapra, through a process of "working through", it is possible for traumatized individuals to withdraw themselves from a constant loop of traumatic hauntings.

Contrary to others, LaCapra also divides trauma into two categories: the "transhistorical (or structural)" and the "historical trauma" (44). For him, the structural trauma refers to the existential vulnerability of human beings. It is not caused by a specific "event", it is simply an "anxiety-producing condition of possibility" (82). In other words, it is the feeling of "absence", another core term in his framework, which suggests that there is a lack inherent in us which disallows us to feel as a whole. This absence, as he argues, is a universal human experience that creates anxiety, a form of alienation that generates fear against a potential, impending crisis. As it is inherent in all human beings, it is transhistorical and "appears in different ways in all societies and all lives" (76). "Historical trauma", on the other hand, "is related to particular events that do indeed involve losses, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese cities"

(80). Thus, unlike structural traumas that is linked to the concept of “absence”, historical traumas involve real historical “losses”, such as the violence and deaths that are caused by injustices of slavery or the Holocaust. According to him, “historical losses call for mourning-and possibly for critique and transformative sociopolitical practice” which brings forth another key concept in his approach to historical traumas: the founding trauma (46).

> Where one should situate the founding trauma—the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both. The Holocaust, slavery, or apartheid—even suffering the effects of the atom bomb in Hiroshima or Nagasaki—can become a founding trauma. Such a trauma is typical of myths of origin and may perhaps be located in the more or less mythologized history of every people” (80).

In LaCapra’s framework, “founding traumas” occur when a historical trauma has an extensive impact across generations. These traumas that affect specific communities, such as the African American, Japanese or Jewish community, transform into a powerful cultural myth. Through reflecting on these powerful stories, the affected community begins to reflect on who they are by taking the traumatic event as a reference point, or a form of origin story. Relevant to this understanding, in her book *An Archive of Feelings Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures,* Ann Cvetkovich remarks that “from critical race theory, especially African American studies, comes an understanding of trauma as foundational to national histories and passed down through multiple generations” (20). A clear example of this is the legacy of slavery in the USA which marks a starting point when narrating Black Americans national history.

In synthesis, these concepts and theoretical frameworks marked the paradigm shift of trauma studies where the emphasis transitioned from a psychiatric perception of trauma to a much more “social and cultural category” (Cvetcovich 17). In this sense, through the contributions of Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey C. Alexander, the cultural trauma theory emerged in the 21st century as an academic study. Defined by them, cultural trauma is regarded as a form of trauma where the “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 12). From this standpoint, we can see that the emphasis of cultural trauma is placed on the sociocultural consequences of a traumatic event which distorts both the identity and the memory of the affected group. However, they argue that "trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by the society. It requires a narrative — a story of pain and suffering that is connected to a larger whole" (2). As a key element in their argument, cultural trauma -so much so that it spans generations- does not emerge organically. Members of the affected community construct a common perception of their trauma where it encompasses everyone identifying with the community to share the same understanding and similar sentiments towards it. This is, as they pinpoint, created through a combination of cultural narratives that are passed down to the newer generations through mass media, or other forms of memory practices in an attempt to remind them of their cultural and historical pasts. These memory practices parallel with what Hirsch, Halbwachs, and Assmann articulate in relation to the transmission of collective and cultural memories. Individuals belonging to these cultural groups gradually come to associate themselves and build their identities, adjust their values in accordance with their communities, which eventually leads people to form a broader collective. Eyerman calls this process "*we* formation" which as he argues is "a process both historically rooted and rooted in history" (14). Therefore, through these socially created narratives, a collective representation of trauma emerges. This allows people to identify and unify under a social group with whom they hold a common past, experience the same traumatic event, or if not experienced directly; commemorate a retrospective trauma all together.

Additionally, Cvetcovich also puts forth that "in the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource (21). This aligns with Assman's conceptualization of the term the "cultural memory". Having been brought up with the cultural and historical awareness of their heritage and their past, Black Americans have commemorated the traumatic experiences of colonial oppression through cultural artifacts and institutions. Through historical knowledge, cultural awareness as well as an inherited trauma through postmemory, they live the legacy of slavery both on an individual and collective level. Thus, cultural trauma does not only represent the trauma of the past but also how the trauma is remembered, socially represented and internalized as a collective identity in the present.

1.3 The Formation of African American Identity through Postcolonial Criticism

"In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate."

-Toni Morrison

The brutal exercise of the transatlantic slave trade that transported people in Africa to the New World during the years between 16th and 19th century plays a decisive role in shaping the African American identity. However, even the term itself has a discriminatory tone to it. Why do we need to emphasize the African ancestry of the people who also have been born and raised in the USA? What is the requirement of being a fully "American"? As stated by Ron Eyerman: "the notion African American is not itself a natural category, but a historically formed collective identity" that emerged out of a colonial struggle (*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* 16). On the positive note, it honors and pays tribute to one's enslaved lineage by linking them to the African diaspora. On other hand, the hyphenation constructs a common narrative that questions whether the Black Americans are fully American in the national imagination or not. Critiquing this situation, this subsection will trace the construction of the African American identity through the theory of postcolonial criticism. I will be first exploring the period of Reconstruction era, the Harlem Renaissance, New Negro Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, and then I will be discussing the condition of identity fragmentation that is tied to colonial subjectivity through the theories of W.E.B Du Bois, Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha.

When it comes to the starting point of the African American identity construction, the Reconstruction era (1865-1877), following the American Civil War, becomes a significant period. Even though the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation had legally terminated slavery in the North, it was with The Thirteen Amendment that all slaves were liberated fully. The Reconstruction era, thus, covers the period of the abolishment of slavery. Despite the fact that much had been planned about the liberty of the enslaved people regarding their civil and political rights, the reality did not align well with what had been theorized at the beginning. Racial degradation and control still continued within the socio-political system. To demonstrate the failure of the abolition of slavery, Jeff Wallenfeldt states that "the end of the war brought freedom to the slaves, but without land ownership or money, they were forced to return to the same fields they worked as slaves. The economic reality was little better than slavery" (*The American Civil War and Reconstruction* 21). That is, as the institution of slavery had left a long-lasting psychological and emotional damage to the enslaved, the racial injustices were not completely left behind as the privileged white community found other methods to reinsure their power over the Blacks. This paved the way for the long-held structural discrimination against African Americans to be reinforced in the social and political spheres. One of the practices of this was the enactment of the 'Black Codes' that was issued by the Southern white legislators after the Civil War, which "intended to assure the continuance of white supremacy" through restrictive laws to control African Americans (Black Code). In *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, Richard Wormser states that the goal of these codes "was to restore slavery in substance, if not in name, with the state taking the place of the former 'master'" (20). The restrictions included in these codes, as Wormser puts forth were that:

> [Black Americans] could not lease or rent land, nor were they allowed to buy it. Some states denied African Americans the right to vote, hold office, and work and travel where they wanted to. Black people could not live in cities without a special permit. Tax laws were passed that forced blacks to pay poll taxes and occupation taxes that crippled them economically and often allowed the state, as a result of nonpayment, to arrest them and send them into forced labor (21).

It can be seen that Black Codes were issued for the primary purpose of stripping the newly freed slaves of owning any legal rights so that they can still maintain their subordination to the whites. To solidify this systematic oppression of the Black community, Jim Crow laws, enacted in 1828, was another legal attempt that was designed to ensure that "blacks were segregated, deprived of their right to vote, and subjected to verbal abuse, discrimination, and violence without redress in the courts or support by the white community" (5). Emphasizing the importance of Jim Crow laws that lasted until 1965 as “the most significant element in African American life after the Civil War”, Wormser asserts that “what slavery was to the generations after the Civil War, Jim Crow is to the generations following the Civil Rights Movement” to underscore the brutality and terror it left on people (22). These harsh restrictions disallowed Black Americans to assert their identities, and thus hindering their path to freedom which they were promised to at the beginning.

Amongst the other elements that contributed to the construction of the African American identity was the period of Harlem Renaissance. During this period, spanning the time between the end of World War I and the beginning of The Great Depression, there happened a “blossoming (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts in the Harlem district of Manhattan”, a period of which came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance (Harlem Renaissance). In her book *Harlem Renaissance,* Kelly King Howes argues that “black people had lived in the United States for several hundred years and had already produced art, music, poetry, and novels. But never before had they done so much, at such a fast pace, and with such confidence and enthusiasm” (5). Even though the Jim Crow laws were still in effect and Black Americans were still forced to live under systematic cruelty, they began to form their authentic ways of living by means of incorporating Black culture into their American lifestyles which ranged from art, music, dance to politics. This influenced Black intellectuals to work on establishing race consciousness and racial solidarity through the revival of cultural and creative expressions. Referring to this movement as the “Negro Renaissance” and Harlem as the “Mecca of the New Negro”, Alain Locke, an influential African American writer, coined the term “The New Negro” in 1920 which, as put by Jeffrey C. Stewart, was the belief that “the Negroes had to transform their vision of themselves, to become New Negroes, and see the world with a new vision of creative possibility” (*The New Negro The Life of Alain Locke* 12). Among the most influential intellectual figures identifying with the New Negro Movement was W.E.B Du Bois, who, in his essay “The Talented Tenth” published in *The Negro Problem*, put emphasis on the role of educated Black people, arguing that they had pivotal role in leading African Americans to full liberation.

> The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented

> Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races (1).

To highlight the contributions of these movements to the African American racial identity, Eyerman suggests that “belonging to a race […] involves mission and duty, giving a message to the world, producing the “greatness” that a great race is capable of” (*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* 62). By means of cultivating this mindset, Black artists and intellectuals who became the pioneering figures in the Black Renaissance created a common space where they encouraged people to take pride in their African heritage, and African American identity. In addition to that, during this time, as artists and intellectuals identifying with this movement argued against racial discrimination and racial tension, they came together to form the organization of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to fight against the social and political inequality between the blacks and whites. Instilling a pride for Blackness and community-oriented consciousness, Harlem Renaissance set a precedent for the future socio-political movements such as the Civil Rights Movement that spanned the period between 1950s to 1960s “when people fought hard to earn rights for African Americans” (Rissman, *African American History, The Black Power Movement* 5). As the segregation of Blacks in the South was commonly practiced at the time, the Civil Rights Movements “led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965” which overall “made discrimination based on race against the law” (5). Nonetheless, Black Americans still had to advocate for their human rights as they continued to face heavy racial discrimination and socio-political inequalities across the country. This led to the occurrence of non-violent and radical ideologies in the African American community, one of them being the Black Power Movement which, as defined by Peniel E. Joseph, “attempted to radically redefine the relationship between blacks and American society” (*The Black Power Movement, Rethinking the Civil Rights–Black Power Era* 2-3). Black Power “focused on increasing black political power through conferences, community organizing, independent schools, and the strategic use of electoral politics” which included “Malcolm X and the cadre of radicals” (11). Malcolm X defended separatism and then later in his life Pan-Africanism and advocated against integrating into white culture. Apart from Malcolm X, another significant key figure that contributed and advocated for social change was Martin Luther King Jr, who as opposed to Malcolm X, had non-violent and integrationist approach to racial identity. Even though their philosophies differed, their role had a significant impact in Black society shaping the course of the Black movements.

Nevertheless, common to all Black Americans was the feeling of cultural displacement, and fragmented identity. In *The Souls of Black Folk (1903).* W.E.B Du Bois coins the term of "double consciousness" which is defined as an experience when "one ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body…" (38). He argues that this form of double identity creates an internal conflict in their perception of themselves. The individual keeps questioning the deeper layer of his identity, such as Du Bois himself who asks "what, after all, am I? Am I an American or a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American?" (40). This state of "inward doubleness" or "two-ness" places Black Americans in a dubious situation where they find themselves unable to fully merge both parts into one. To exemplify this situation, he further claims that:

> …to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (45).

Illuminating the duality in African American identity, Du Bois argues that the hardships of having a different heritage from the one that an individual has grown up with leads to a social and cultural confusion. The colonial subjects do not feel completely involved in conforming to the white ways of living, while also having difficulty to fully identify with their own ethnic or racial background.

In a similar fashion, Frantz Fanon, one of the critical names in the anti-colonial framework, basis his theory on the sociological and psychological impact that colonialism has left on the colonized individuals. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* he argues that the colonial mindset puts forth the idea that "for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (9). As a result of this, "the black man wears the white mask" out of an internalized racism and in an attempt "to be accepted" by the white community (17). In doing so, he ultimately ends up with becoming "alienated" from his community and becoming "a stranger to himself" (17). Similar to what Du Bois suggests, this causes a fragmentation in their identities and a loss of a coherent self. As an example of this, Fanon illustrates that even though he was born in a French colony, attended French schools, spoke French and was a legal French citizen, he was never seen as a French person in the eyes of the white community. Adopting the language, culture and the manners of the whites did not grant him the same opportunities as them. As a result of this, Fanon asserts that colonized individuals, just like himself, begin to perceive themselves through the white gaze, which overall causes them to develop "epidermalization of inferiority" where "confronted with the white man, the black man feels a sense of bodily inferiority" (90). In other words, Black individuals perceive this level of inferiority not only internally, but also externally as to how their inferiority is marked on their epidermis/skin. Confronted with these realities, Fanon suggests that colonized subjects also display a kind of "situational neurosis", where they become fixated on how they are perceived through the white gaze. Through this, they develop a split consciousness, an in-between state where they are constantly in a state of self-surveillance.

Offering a different perspective on the same concept, through the notion of "hybridity", Homi Bhabha, a prominent name in the field of postcolonial studies, problematizes the duality of identities through a different angle. Bhabha describes hybridity as "a Third Space of enunciation which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process" (*In The Location of Culture* 54). For him, the concept of a pure identity does not exist. Therefore, the individuals under colonial domination should strive to find a separate "Third space", a hybrid form, where they create a new identity that shares the qualities of both. The concept of hybridity, thus, takes on a more positive outlook on the nature of in-between identities. As opposed to this, Bhabha proposes the term of "mimicry", where the colonized subject imitates the language, and the values of the colonizer and becoming "almost the same, but not quite" ("Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" 2). As the colonized group will never achieve a fully intact white identity, similar to what Fanon suggests, they eventually feel a sense of racial inferiority which causes them to detach and alienate from their cultural identities.

Therefore, as discussed above, colonial mindset ruptures personal identities and leaves individuals in an in-between state where they struggle to find a fixed ground to secure their selfhood. This understanding is vital for this study as to how both novels incorporate characters who struggle to balance their dual identities in an environment where they are oppressed and -directly or indirectly- traumatized by.

Thus, in this chapter I explored how the cultural trauma of slavery is established through a collective effort, and how the African American identity is shaped and affected by the historical trauma of slavery. Through the theoretical frameworks that I have discussed in this chapter, in the next two chapters I will analyze the novels: *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison and *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates respectively. I intend to highlight how the cultural trauma of slavery distorts memory and hinder identity formations of those who are both directly and indirectly affected by it.

CHAPTER II

FLYING TOWARDS THE SELF: MYTHS, CULTURAL TRAUMA AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

This chapter analyzes Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* through the theoretical lenses of cultural trauma, memory studies and postcolonial theory. The novel is set in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Virginia during the years between 1931 and 1963, reflecting the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. It traces the journey of the protagonist Milkman Dead who is born into a middle-class Black family. Brought up by his father's obsession with wealth and ownership, Milkman is estranged from his cultural roots, and the historical past of Black Americans. Through his encounter with his aunt Pilate, Milkman's perspective on life changes. In the novel, the legacy of slavery and its lasting repercussions keep haunting the characters, manifesting through fractured identities and psychological disturbances. Despite its traumatic impact on the affected group, Morrison believes that the establishment and the cultivation of the collective memory of slavery is essential. Thus, viewing the memory of slavery as a shaping force on identity, Morrison highlights the necessity of unearthing the ancestral past through Milkman's discovery of the self, through which he connects with Black history and the historical past of slavery.

In the first section entitled "African American Oral Tradition, the Generation of Myths and Magic Realism", I attempt to highlight the role of oral literature in African traditions- particularly the myths and songs- with their ability to convey the past into the future. By means of providing Morrison's own opinions on this matter, I aim to illustrate how cultural myths and songs preserve cultural memory and hinder historical erasure. In the novel, Milkman must decode the meaning behind the Solomon's song. Only after he decodes the song can he find his true self. Through this aspect, I argue that oral folk myths that operate as cultural archives solidify cultural memory, and thus, help individuals anchor their identities. In the second section, "Cultural Trauma and the Crisis of Selfhood", I explore how the impact of systematic racism and the effects of the cultural trauma of slavery is reflected on the characters' identities. In the third section, "Recovering the Ancestral Past: Pilate and Milkman", I aim to demonstrate how the characters' inner struggles are not only caused by their dual identities but also by their detachment from their cultural past. Additionally, the protagonist Milkman's odyssey in search of his roots is central to my argument as to how his quest to find himself is only enabled through unearthing the missing pieces of his cultural roots through the help of his ancestral guide Pilate. Finally, I underscore the significance of building connections with one's ancestral past as well as the necessity of communal engagement for the construction of healthy individual identities.

2.1. African American Oral Tradition, the Generation of Myths and Magic Realism

In her article "Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture", Janice D. Hamlet states that "during the Africans' transportation to America, their language, primarily their dialect, was one of the first overt African cultural traits slave traders tried to suppress" (2). Regardless of their attempts, the oral communication style still carried its prominence within the African culture as most of them believed in the concept of "Nommo, which means the generative power of the spoken word [that is] necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things" (2). It shows that for the diverse African communities, the act of storytelling itself has always been a tool to navigate their life and interpret their surroundings. Regarded as a verbal art form, it has operated as a device to culturally transmit African traditions, and thus, fueling their community awareness. To deepen our understanding, in her timeless work *Oral Literatures in Africa*, Ruth Finnegan illustrates the rich history behind the oral tradition in African culture which is mostly overlooked by the cultures like "those of contemporary Europe".[2] The work regards the unwritten African literature as something that "possesses vastly more aesthetic, social, and personal significance than would be gathered from most general publications on Africa" due to its unique style and lyrical quality which are hard to locate in written materials. (75). In addition to this, functioning not only on an individual level but also on a communal level, as stated by Graham Furnis and Liz Gunner, "oral literature plays as a dynamic discourse about society and about the relationships between individuals, groups and classes in society" as it provides us with a detailed account of social reality of a specific community (*Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature* 1). From this perspective, since the cultural products, such as the local legends, myths or songs, take their source materials from the environment they have been generated from, they reflect the social and cultural traces of trauma within their bodies. In a way, they function as a site of “cultural memory” that Assman puts forth. These cultural memory practices, such as myths, songs or texts, are not primarily concerned with historical accuracy, but with how a group seeks to make a meaning out of their past. It is more about what the event means to them, regarding who they are and what their historical origin is, rather than what happened in the past.

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[2] Here, Ruth argues that "the concept of an oral literature is an unfamiliar one to most people brought up in cultures which, like those of contemporary Europe, [as they] lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition" (48).

In the case of the trauma of slavery, it can be clearly pointed out that the psychological consequences of this traumatic past can be spotted in certain African American myths, legends and folktales. In other words, how people chose to remember the past slavery experience is stored in their cultural memories in the form of certain myths, one of which -as the novel *Song of Solomon* incorporates- is “The Myth of Flying Africans”. As the theme of flight and escape has been commonly adopted within folk tales in various parts of the world, it also has had its place in African American oral tradition through its association with the transatlantic slave trade. The context of the tale, as explained by Gay Wilentz, is the “captured Africans who arrived on slave ships [realized] their position in the New World, [and] flew back to Africa rather than submit to slavery” (“If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature” 2) Questioning the origins of the legend and arguing that “no one alludes to the origin of the tale except to note that all versions stemmed from American-born African slaves repeating what had been told to them by their ancestors”*,* Therese E. Higgins puts an emphasis on the fact that Black “Americans remembered their ancestors and their ancestors' stories about their homeland” and thus, preserved their connections to their past via a narrative form (*Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison* 6).

As a writer who prioritizes offering alternative perspectives of African American history in her novels, Morrison takes the story of “The Flying Africans” and reworks the myth through highlighting its impact on the identity formation of the Black Americans and the necessity of remembering their historical past. In his article, "Unruly And Let Loose": Myth, Ideology, And Gender In *Song Of Solomon”* Michael Awkward argues that “Morrison does not simply "draw on" this myth; rather, what she offers in the narrative of Solomon's mythic flight is a radically transformed version of this legend which suggests the immense, and in many respects injurious, changes that have occurred over the course of the history of blacks in America" (1). Thus, Morrison is not merely borrowing the myth as it is but re-imagines it, decoding what the myth may mean deep down in the collective memory of the Black Americans. In other words, by reframing the narrative and rather than focusing on theme of escape, she emphasizes the knowledge of cultural heritage to heal one's present. In the novel, the emphasis is not on escaping slavery but the symbolism behind the song about the flying African Jake, who happens to be Milkman's great grandfather. Milkman has to decode the meaning behind the Solomon's song. The song represents his historical heritage, and ancestral past. Only after he decodes the song can he find his true self.

> … the myths get forgotten. Or they may not have been looked at carefully. Let me give you an example: the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*. […] it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere—people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking—escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon* ("An Interview with Toni Morrison" 27).

Growing up in an environment where she was endowed with racial and cultural awareness, Morrison was well-informed about the cultural myths that were produced by her community which passed on to her through storytelling. She regarded these mythical stories as real historical facts, rather than creative outputs. Believing that these forms of cultural materials are necessary for the establishment of cultural solidarity, Morrison finds them essential to be passed on to the next generations. In "Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation", she presents her views upon preserving cultural expressions in her creative outputs by stating that "if anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything" (2). In "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" Gay Wilentz argues that by means of taking the role of actively maintaining the memory of the Black American's historical past to the recent generations in her works, "Morrison hopes to recreate [a] participatory experience in her fiction" where the "artists are both participants in and representatives of the community" (1).

Furthermore, Morrison also argues that "for a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music", emphasizing that oral literature for Black people has had a significant position in their cultural upbringing (4). However, as people "don't live in places where [they] can hear those stories anymore" as "parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that [they] heard years ago"; as a person who has the platform to spread cultural awareness and racial consciousness she feels the need to represent and convey those lost images and stories of Black culture in her works. Through the emphasis on the significance of orality, she aims to preserve the qualities of the Black folktales while transforming them into written form, and thus, becoming the active preserver of her community's cultural memory, which she assumes to be under threat of erasure.

As the novel *Song of Solomon* engulfs mythical qualities in its narrative, it is mostly categorized under the genre of magical realism. In "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Aesthetics in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures", Ousmane Ngom argues that magical realist novels "use mythical characters and circumstances to aesthetically reveal the unreal reality of postcolonialism by narrating the unnarratable" (1). In addition to this definition, Homi Bhabha argues that magical realism "becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" to locate its eminence in the postcolonial literary landscape (*Nation and Narration* 18). However, in an interview with Christina Davis published in *Présence Africaine*, Morrison openly contends that she does not like her works to be defined under the mode of magical realism for the very reason that:

> I was once under the impression that that label "magical realism" was another one of those words that covered up what was going on. I don't know when it began to be used but my first awareness of it was when certain kinds of novels were being described that had been written by Latin American men. It was a way of not talking about politics.…If you could apply the word "magical" then that dilutes the realism, but it seemed legitimate because there were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text. But for literary historians and literary critics it seemed to be a convenient way to skip again what was the truth in certain writers […] it always seemed to me that it was just another evasive label (143).

For Morrison, the labelling act of her work as a “magical realist” undermines the socio-political commentary that she aims to deliver as to how the main focus would then be primarily on the supernatural components of the story. She believes that all the supernatural elements she incorporates in her novel are highly possible events that could happen in real life, for the very reason that she grew up in an environment where she “had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable” (144). This reflects on Assman’s theory where he argues that "in the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes” (*Collective Memory and Cultural Memory* 113). This suggests that both genres share more similarities than differences. Cultural memory does not reinforce the idea whether a story, a text, or o symbol has historical accurateness. We are tended to remember the past in relation to what it evokes in us. In the case of cultural trauma, it provides a framework for individuals to negotiate their sense of selves in respect to their memorial practices. From this perspective, for Morrison, as Higgins suggests; the theme of flight in *Song of Solomon* has “no metaphors, no symbolism, just pure African American belief in the power of a person to fly” (14). In other words, what Morrison does in *Song of Solomon* does not stem from a merely fantastic imagination. Instead, as she herself argues, her creative output serves the notion that “the work must be political” as artists could feel a “tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (“Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation” 4). This approach accentuates the idea that *Song of Solomon*, and her novels in general, are more than merely fictional stories that are tied to the cultural trauma of slavery. They reflect the Black American reality, capturing and preserving its legacy.

2.2. Cultural Trauma and the Crisis of Selfhood

At the heart of the novel lie racial discrimination and the post-slavery experiences of Black Americans, portrayed through the characters’ deep-seated trauma, the racial injustices they endure, as well as the internalized racism they develop. Macon Dead, the father of Milkman, denies his cultural link to his Black heritage and constantly seeks to be seen as a successful Black man in a constant attempt to prove his worth. Macon’s wife, Ruth Foster, represents all the Black women whose sense of agency has been suppressed through the cultural trauma of slavery. Similarly, Hagar, the granddaughter of Pilate and cousin to Milkman, embodies internalized racism caused by the white beauty standards. Guitar Baines, the friend of Milkman, on the other hand, represents the radicalized spectrum in the aftermath of slavery as he becomes the living embodiment of the cultural trauma of slavery. Through an analysis of these characters, this part will explore post-slavery Black life in America and examine the repercussions of the cultural trauma of slavery on individual identities through the theories of Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Dominick LaCapra.

Since the story revolves around the period of 1930s to 1960s, during which the Civil Rights Movement with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. gained momentum*,* the plot of *Song of Solomon* captures the social turn that is brought into the life of Black Americans. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Civil War in 1865 has been a critical turning point for the African Americans in terms of the emerging opportunities that have provided them with a certain degree of economic, social, and political standing. Despite the failure of Emancipation Proclamation, which failed to emancipate all Black Americans with the equal opportunities and rights, only few African Americans had the chance to obtain lands or properties. This affected and disturbed the minds of the Black community as to how most of them faced economic hardships, and thus, were forced to work under low-paying jobs. The novel illustrates this shift through the Dead household's privileged position in comparison to the other Black residents. In the article "In Quest of Authority: "Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and the Rhetoric of the Black Preacher"", Dolan Hubbard argues that "the Dead family becomes a trope for those blacks who migrated to the North and Midwest in the wake of Reconstruction in order to escape from oppression and in search of freedom" (1). As a person belonging to this group who manages to become successful in his financial status compared to other Black Americans is Milkman's father Macon Dead I. Macon is an ultimate representation of Homi Bhabha's term of the "mimic man". Adopting the white ideals, he represents a group of Black Americans who voluntarily surrendered to cultural assimilation for the possible social mobility and opportunities it offered at the time. As a mimic man, Macon refuses to engage with any kind of African traditions and does not want to be involved with anyone that reminds him of his racial standing. Overtaken by the illusion that money is the ultimate means to success and power, he subscribes to the white capitalist socio-economic norms. In Fanon's framework, he is a captive of "internalized racism" which alienates him from those who share an African heritage. Prompting to adapt his ideals on to his son Milkman, he gets on his mind by saying that "...Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). As seen from his obsession, Macon is deeply fixated on the act of ownership, which as he believes, gives the person a sense of control and freedom, albeit a false one. He exhibits a sense of superiority over other Black individuals, which in Fanon's frameworks, is an illustration of "epidermalization of inferiority" where he views his Blackness and his Black heritage as a visible trait of inferiority. Through his separation from his cultural practices, he assimilates into the colonial culture, which in Fanon's terms, puts him through an "alienated" state. As he persists in living by the colonial mindset, he loses his connection with his cultural heritage. Hubbard argues that this stems from the fact that he makes "an uneasy peace with his past, and in his hasty retreat from agrarian culture" because "his embrace of industrial culture made him hard and indifferent toward the needs of his family" (1).

> There was no music there, and tonight he wanted just a bit of music— from the person who had been his first caring for. He turned back and walked slowly toward Pilate's house. Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. Treading as lightly as he could, he crept up to the side window. […] As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down (*Song of Solomon* 34).

This passage highlights that even though detaching from his cultural heritage is a conscious choice that Macon makes, it does not bring him any happiness. Hearing the song awakens his suppressed memories. Considering the fact that songs have a prominent place for the cultural transmission of traditions, they function as Assmann's version of cultural memory with their ability to convey the past into the future. By rejecting the oral tradition which is highly valued in his culture, Macon represses the cultural memory, and thus, distances himself from his past. However, even though he is estranged from the African American cultural reality, he is not completely indifferent to the Black traditions he has inherited. He lets himself listen to Pilate and her family sing the song. It reminds him of his childhood. Torn between his materialistic prison that provides him a sense of security, and the Black ways of living that he has grown up with and then drifted away; Macon becomes one of the complex and traumatized characters who represents the dangers of becoming a mimic man.

Apart from Macon, one of the "in-between" characters is Macon's wife; a depressed, melancholic woman, Ruth Foster. Being the daughter of a prestigious man who is the first Black doctor in the community, Ruth is depicted as a person, similar to Macon, who positions herself above than other Black Americans. In *Black Skin White Masks,* Fanon argues that "the black man's behavior is similar to an obsessional neurosis; or, if you prefer, he places himself in the very thick of a situational neurosis" (46). Drawing on psychoanalysis, Fanon argues that Black individuals become fixated on how they are perceived in the eyes of the white community. It manifests as a form of "situational" neurosis as to how it is based on the environment in which they dwell. Through Fanonian insight, Ruth displays the symptoms of racial neurosis. As a result of her family's affluence and her light skin color that gives her white passing privilege, she believes that she is in every aspect different than others. In her article "Women Who Make a Man: Female Protagonists in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" Sophia Ahmad argues that "Ruth has been brought up without a native, ethnic cultural identity, she lives under the misapprehension that she is superior to other black folks (3). Through this lens, the lack of ancestral and communal connection to her cultural heritage leaves her as an outcast, not only in the Black community but also in the white community since her white passing does not grant her a white identification. Therefore, Ruth becomes a mimic woman, she is "almost the same, but not quite" with the white community she aspires to be a part of.

As a result of having a "ruthless" husband, who looks down on her and is disgusted by her existence due to the reason that he thinks she has had an incestuous relationship with her father, Ruth gradually becomes more isolated and displaced.[3] Grieving the death of her father, she frequently visits his grave and even sleeps on it on certain occasions.

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[3] Phrase taken from Ahmad who argues that "[Macon] is literally "Ruth-less ' because he does not even acknowledge her presence" ("Women Who Make a Man: Female Protagonists in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* 1").

As cut-off from the world as she is, Ruth begins to grow a fixation on a stain, a mark that is present on her mahogany table.

> Ruth looked for the water mark several times during the day. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself. That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself. (*Song of Solomon* 19)

In a similar fashion that of Macon's money greed, the watermark on the table gives Ruth a sense of security. In *Writing Trauma, Writing History*, LaCapra engages with the concepts of "melancholia" and "acting out" in identifying the unresolved traumatic behaviors. Similar to Freud, he states that the melancholic state happens when the "depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self" cannot process their trauma and because of this, they are "locked in compulsive repetition" where they "remain narcissistically identified with the lost object" (66). Ruth, as a psychologically haunted character, is fixated on loss. She cannot process the death of her father and cannot process her husband's emotional and physical detachment. She is excluded both from the white and the Black community. However, as LaCapra puts forth, the crucial element for a healthy process of grieving is "remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting [the traumatic memory] (70). In the case of Ruth, she is trapped in the past and cannot move beyond. In *Dangerous freedom: Fusion and fragmentation in Toni Morrison's novels,* Philip Page argues that "she perpetuates the ghost of her father and the ghost of time past, as symbolized by the water mark on her table" (86). This is in line with what LaCapra argues when he states that during the process of acting out "the past returns, as it were, in the form of the ghost" (148). Through this perspective, we can say that Ruth's untapped trauma can also be seen as a symbolic manifestation of a cultural and racial trauma. Despite her numerous attempts to free herself from it, she feels pleased by the security it provides to her. She lives in nostalgia, in the memory of her father. As the stain becomes "more pronounced as the years pass" by, the more she becomes "like a lighthouse keeper drawn to his window to gaze once again at the sea, or a prisoner automatically searching out the sun as he steps into the yard for his hour of exercise" (*Song of Solomon* 19). As seen by the overwhelming feeling it exudes, it reminds her that even though everything seems to be faded, in-between, or inconsistent in her life, some things can still persist and impose her life a sense of stability.

Estranged by her surroundings, and even to certain extent has become numb, the only accomplishment Ruth feels she has achieved in her life is giving birth to Milkman, as the storyline conveys: "she had the baby anyway, and although it did nothing to close the break between herself and Macon, there he was, her single triumph" (123). Regarding Milkman as her only triumph demonstrates Ruth's unhealthy emotional attachment where she constantly looks for an emotional substitute that could ground her mentally and physically to her present. It is similar to her fixation on the mahogany table and her fixation on breastfeeding Milkman beyond infancy. To touch upon the symbolism behind the nursing scene; in her article "To Wipe out the Past": Generational Trauma in Song of Solomon and Housekeeping" Emily Kane argues that:

> The power that she imagines for herself, and the intimacy that accompanies nursing a child, are small ways that Ruth can reclaim her control over her own life, and, in turn, a way that she can separate herself from the traumas of her past with people thinking she was odd and setting her apart from the community because of her father's status, and her current relationship with Macon (20-21).

In a different approach, in her thesis *Mother Memory: The Maternal Figure and Memory in Song of Solomon and Beloved,* Hannah Zinker touches upon the historical fact that Black women in the South used to breastfeed their children "longer than the accepted range in the white community" and suggests that "breastfeeding is both a gendered act and a connection between mother and child; it is also a connection to a Southern, ancestral past" (5). Making parallelisms, she further claims that through breastfeeding beyond infancy, "Ruth is anchoring herself and her son to this ancestral past" (5). In both perspectives, Ruth compensates for her sense of not belonging by depending on Milkman and making him an emotional substitute of her husband.

. She needs community, engagement and cultural anchoring to unresolve her fragmented selfhood.

Similarly, another female figure who grapples with her fragmented identity and emotional dependency due to her hostile environment is the character Hagar, the granddaughter of Pilate and cousin to Milkman. Falling victim to the beauty myths of the elitist white America, Hagar develops low self-esteem which manifests itself as a form fixation she grows on her appearance. It accentuates particularly after her co-dependent relationship with Milkman ends. Succumbed to jealousy after seeing Milkman with a woman who has the bodily characteristics that feed her body dysmorphia, such as having "copper colored hair" and "gray eyes", devastates her sense of worth. When Pilate passes the mirror to her in an attempt to remind her of her authentic beauty, she tells Pilate: "Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible […] I need to get up from here and fix myself […] I look like a hound dog" (272). As seen from her self-derogatory language, Hagar believes that the reason behind Milkman's separation from her stems from the "less desired" physical features she believes she possesses. In an attempt to win him back, she tries to transform herself and adapt to the Westernized beauty standards. After spending hundreds of dollars on clothes, cosmetics and hair salon, she comes back home, wearing "wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair" which are considered to be the common attires of white people during that period (277). Realizing her futile attempts to turn herself into someone else, she bursts into tears to such an extent that her bawling causes fever, which tragically leads to her death. Her fixation on the concepts of beauty and her low level of self-acceptance show itself when she tells Pilate that Milkman likes "curly, wavy, silky hair", "penny-colored hair", "lemon-colored skin", "gray blue eyes" and "thin nose" (279). Even in her last words which are "he's never going to like my hair" comment on her desperate search for something unattainable yet is imposed on her (279). Her attempts of mimicking white women end tragically with her death, illustrating that no matter how much she tries to fit into the traditional beauty ideals, nothing nurtures her sense of worth. This is what Fanon illustrates with the concept of the "white mask". By wearing the white mask, Hagar becomes "constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal formed through contact with the white world"

(*Black Skin, White Masks* 211). The white mask traps her Black subjectivity, which causes profound damage on her psyche. Fanon proposes that “the black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity… For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world.” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 52). Therefore, Hagar cannot see herself directly as she is. She is heavily involved with analyzing herself through the white gaze and is attempting to establish an image where she only defines herself through the white imagination. In “Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation”, Morrison comments on Hagar’s situation by highlighting the necessity of having communal connection

> The difficulty that Hagar has is how far removed she is from the experience of her ancestor. Pilate had a dozen years of close, nurturing relationships with two males- her father and her brother. And that intimacy and support was in her and made her fierce and loving because she had that experience. Her daughter Reba had less of that and related to men in a very shallow way. Her daughter [Hagar] had even less of an association with men as a child, so that the progression is really a diminishing of their abilities because of the absence of men in a nourishing way in their lives (5).

Living in an environment where Black people and their physical features have been stereotyped with negative attributions for centuries, Black women particularly become susceptible to the patriarchal values and notions on beauty and love. Thus, unlike Pilate, Hagar cannot escape society’s idealization of romance and beauty imposed on women, which traditionally assumes that women should fulfill their emotional needs by seeking connection with men. As also highlighted by Morrison in her interview with Donald M. Suggs JR, communal support is another form of resistance against this colonial mindset as:

> I do know that no one parent can raise a child completely. But it is also true that two parents can’t do it either. You need everybody. You need the whole community to raise a child. And one parent can get that community. You have to work at it. You have to decide. I mean community, not meaning neighborhood the way it was meant when I was a little girl. There was a street and a block. That doesn’t exist now for most of us, particularly if you’re a single working parent. You have to collect around you the people who can serve that function for you

> and provide multiple kinds of resources for your children. I have women friends who raise their children alone and are working, whose children relate to her friends like family members. They call on one another in times of crisis and duress. They really use each other as a kind of life-support system, so that you don't have this kind of single, one-on-one relationship that is too tense for the child and too tense for the parent. Nobody can deliver that much. The parent can't and the child can't, so you do need these other people. You need a tribe. I don't care what you call it, extended family, large family. That's what one needs (4).

As demonstrated above, Morrison believes that communal engagement is accepted as an essential element for the development of balanced identities, particularly in the Black community. Seen by Hagar's situation, she has grown up in a close-knit environment, which disallowed her to have an active communal support and engagement that might helped her against the feelings of insecurity and racial inferiority. This notion is also highlighted in the novel through the character Guitar, who contends that Hagar "needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girlfriends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it" (271). However, as she did not receive any form of communal support, Hagar struggled more acutely to resist racialized ideals of beauty and love. As a result of this, she remained attached to her trauma, just like Ruth.

The close friend of Milkman, the character of Guitar Baines represents the other end of the spectrum in Black American's responses to the cultural trauma of slavery. As a member of the avenge seeking group, "Seven Days", Guitar is separated from Milkman in his close connection to Black community and his violent seeking approach to racialized oppression. The revolutionary secret organization of the Seven Days that Guitar is a member of is "made up of seven men" and is founded for the purpose of avenging the deaths of the innocent Blacks who were killed by the racist whites. The motive of the organization is "when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can" (*Song of Solomon* 142). The idea that he is not killing people but "killing whites" to "keep the ratio the same" is suggestive of Guitar's delusional and traumatized psyche which is caused by his unhealed rage towards the viciousness of the racist community. In *Wretched of the Earth,* Fanon posits that "at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (94). Violence for Guitar becomes a tool for the reclamation of his lost identity and lost purpose against the ongoing systematic violence. Without weighing the consequences of his actions, his desire for revenge shapes him into a killer who holds the belief that every white individual is equally cruel, and therefore, "it doesn't matter who did it. Each and every one of them could do it." (143). Through his "a life for a life" ideology, Guitar believes that they are the ones who bring justice in their own ways:

> We poor people, Milkman. I work at an auto plant. The rest of us barely eke out a living. Where's the money, the state, the country to finance our justice? […] Do we have a court? Is there one courthouse in one city in the country where a jury would convict them? There are places right now where a Negro still can't testify against a white man. Where the judge, the jury, the court, are legally bound to ignore anything a Negro has to say. What that means is that a black man is a victim of a crime only when a white man says he is. Only then. If there was anything like or near justice or court when a cracker kills a Negro, there wouldn't have to be no Seven Days. But there ain't; so we are (*Song of Solomon* 161).

Guitar assumes that Black Americans' rights can only be obtained through aggression and violence. As a response to Guitar's reasoning above, Milkman calls him the "X Bains": comparing his ideology to that of which Malcolm X's who, as Gladys L. Knight puts forth, "lambasted all whites, making little, if any, distinction between those who were and those who were not racists" (*Icons of African American Protest* 366). In light of this, in his article "An Excursion into the Black World: The "Seven Days" in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", Ralph Story states that:

> This dissonance, tension, or Yin-Yang polarity unfolds principally through the relationship between Guitar Bains, […] their socioeconomic differences, consequential socializations, and their divergent experiences are a microcosm for the two most distinguishable Afro- American ideological streams and their

> respective historical advocates, e.g., Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. […] the present-day conflict within the Negro ethnic group, between integrationist and separatist tendencies.... (3).

Morrison, who dramatizes the actual Black history in her work, incorporates the two opposite ideologies which were popular in the climate of 1960s through the sharp contrast between the two characters: Guitar and Milkman. During the Civil Rights Movements, the two prominent figures who were associated with "integrationist and separatist tendencies" was Martin Luther King Jr., who advocated for racial integration of Blacks with equal rights as whites especially in his notable "I Have a Dream" speech; and Malcolm X, who held the belief that integration to the white people's lands is a futile exercise by arguing that:

> This new type of black man, he doesn't want integration; he wants separation. Not segregation, separation. […] We don't go for segregation. We go for separation. Separation is when you have your own. You control your own economy; you control your own politics; you control your own society; you control your own everything. You have yours and you control yours; we have ours and we control ours ("The Race Problem" 2).

Through the presentation of two different camps for the solution to the plight of African Americans in the United States, Morrison borrows from the dominant political thoughts within the socio-political atmosphere at the given time and dramatizes how the complexities of African American life leave an impact on the individual identities. In LaCapra's term, Guitar is "acting out" rather than resolving his trauma. As a kid, he goes through a tragic experience where he loses his father in a sawmill owned by a white man. The graphically described image of his father who was tragically "sliced in half" so much so that his body did not fit into the coffin, and thus, "were placed cut side down, skin side up, facing each other", obviously left a haunting trace on his psyche (200). Expressing that the sawmill's "boss came by and gave [the] kids some candy" and "instead of life insurance "gave his mother forty dollars" imprinted a long-lasting impact on him (61). Seeing the boss who believed that their grief could be easily diminished, or his father's death could be compensated with a candy aggravated his hatred towards the white community. Traumatized by this, Guitar develops an aversion to sugar, where eating it "makes [him] think of dead people. And white people. And [he] starts to puke" (61). In an alternative perspective, in her book *Morrison's Song of Solomon*, Durthy Washington argues that Guitar's reaction to sugar could also be an allusion to:

> …the vital connection between sugar and the African slave trade" as to how "in 1645, when the first American slave ships sailed from Boston, African slaves were forcibly brought to the West Indies in exchange for sugar, tobacco, and wine, which were then sold for manufactured goods back in Massachusetts. African slaves also worked on United States sugar cane plantations in the South (40).

Taking all these as possible reasonings, Guitar's violent and radical tendencies might not only be driven by his individually experienced racial trauma but also the trauma of slavery. He becomes a carrier of history, embodying and internalizing the anger and the frustration of everyone affected by it. At the end, he also sees Milkman as an enemy and attempts to shoot him but shoots and kills Pilate instead. This demonstrates how Guitar has become dissociated from his community. Trapped and blinded by his trauma, Guitar stands as a narrative warning and represents the perils of unchecked rage and alienation.

Through the representation of the characters Macon, Ruth, Hagar and Guitar, the novel emphasizes the idea that the effects of slavery manifest differently in each person, depending on their environment and psychological well-beings. A shared trait among them is that all of them carry the burdens of the trauma of slavery both on their individual and collective identities.

2.3. Recovering The Ancestral Past: Pilate and Milkman

In the novel, Pilate Dead, the paternal aunt of Milkman, functions as a driving force in Milkman's journey of self-discovery. Unlike other characters, Pilate embodies her African heritage and stands out as the only person who successfully preserves her essence of Africanism without conforming to the white ideals. Portrayed as the ultimate opposite of what Macon Dead is, Pilate rejects white materialist culture and is deeply connected to her ancestors. Functioning as an epitome of an ancestral guardian in Milkman's life, Pilate guides Milkman and becomes a catalyst in his personal quest for transformation.

The novel highlights that the distinct feature that separates Pilate from Macon is her connection to her ancestral line and racial heritage, as opposed to Macon who willingly assimilates into the dominant white culture and withdraws his ties from his community. Through the course of the novel, Pilate is associated with the imagery of nature. The first time Milkman meets her at her house with his friend Guitar Baine, he describes Pilate as someone who looks “like a tall black tree”, wearing no stockings and using no furniture with “a moss-green sack hung from the ceiling” accompanied with “the odor of pine and fermenting fruit” that pervades everywhere (41). Raised in a household who sees wealth and luxury as pivotal markers for success and happiness, Milkman is astonished by Pilate’s unconventional lifestyle. Noting that even her name, which was chosen through a blind selection from the Bible by her father Jake, reflects her authentic, effortless nature. As an illiterate person, Pilate’s father Jake chooses a “group of letters that [seems] to him strong and handsome” and [combines] them together to come up with a name, which [turns] out like an image of “a tree hanging in some princely but protective way” (24). Jake’s self-determined nature might have passed on to Pilate that the association regarding her name is reflected in her identity. Honoring her father, she wears an earring in the form of a brass box which contains her name copied out from the Bible. Referred by Macon as a “foolish earring”, it charges Pilate with solace and guidance. The same situation similarly applies to the human bones that she carries in a sack, which she finds out that it actually belongs to her father towards the end of the novel. Carrying them in a green sack, despite not knowing it belonged to her father who was a target of racial violence, she sustains her ties with him. Functioning as a reminder of her bond with her ancestral roots, they reconnect her to him, and thus, to her ancestors. As a key symbol in the novel, they also put emphasis on the importance of one’s spiritual need to reconnect with their lost beloveds, reminding them of the significance of sustaining connections and genuine bonds they still have with them. From another aspect, in her article “Gold and Bones: Remains of the Quest in Song of Solomon”, Claudine Raynaud argues that “the bones in the bag” represent “what stays unresolved, and what consequently needs to be put to rest” (2). Therefore, the bones may also be regarded as the symbolical representation of the traumatic burdens of slavery. Almost all of the characters in the novel struggle to confront their traumas. These untapped traumatic hauntings manifest through fragmented identities, internalized racism, alienation or pathological fixation. Pilate, for instance, cannot confront her father’s death. In a way, by carrying the bones, she “bears witness” to the forgotten history, and as Laub and Felman asserts “partially experiences trauma in [herself]" (*Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* 57). She could resolve this trauma by engaging in what LaCapra terms "mourning" and "working through", which she actually does towards the end of the novel after burying the bones, and thus, her suppressed memories.

As we touched upon the importance of orality, particularly the presence of songs, in African American culture, Pilate's epithet as "the singing woman" carries thematic significance within the novel as to how it underlines her ancestral connection. In "Spiritually Enslaving or Being Enslaved—On the Female Images in Song of Solomon", Feihong Wang argues that since "laws prohibited the teaching of slaves and oral communication between the slaves […] by singing folk songs about Sugarman's flight, Pilate recreates a past in which her ancestors shed the yoke of oppression" (2). In chapter 1, where Mr. Smith emerges with his wings on the roof of Mercy hospital, Pilate is referred not by her actual name but her epithet "the singing woman" while singing the song of "O Sugarman done fly away" (14). It is later towards the end of the novel that we learn that the song has always been a clue for Milkman to unearth his family history as the Sugarman in question turns out to be Milkman's great grandfather who is a flying African that has escaped slavery. Her song carrying the ancestral history and collective memory within its reach functions almost like a portal that opens a door for the past that is about to be slipping into oblivion.

In another aspect, in her book *Historical Archeology*, Laurie A. Wilkie postulates that "ethnographic, documentary, and oral historical sources suggest that African Americans exercised magical control over many aspects of their lives, including healthcare, protection from spirits, to maintain family relationships, to attract or dispel love, to gain a job, to attract money, or even harm one's enemies or rivals" (86). Depicted as a spiritual, almost like a figure with a gift of prophetic knowledge, Pilate carries out the spiritual practices of her ancestors. One of them is depicted through the potion she gives to Ruth who consults her about Macon's lack of intimacy. In her account of the event where she confronts Milkman, Ruth states that:

> It worked too. Macon came to me for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came. Then it was over. And two months later I was pregnant. When he found out about

> it, he immediately suspected Pilate and he told me to get rid of the baby. But I wouldn't and Pilate helped me stand him off. I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life. And yours, Macon. She saved yours too. She watched you like you were her own. Until your father threw her out (*Song of Solomon* 117).

It demonstrates that Pilate spiritually guides those around her, preserving and practicing the traditional practices of her ancestors. Another manifestation of this also occurs back in Chapter 1, the beginning of the novel where people are occupied with watching Mr. Smith's flight. Here, the singing woman (Pilate) tells the pregnant rose-petal lady (Ruth) that she should make herself warm, as "a little bird'll be here with the morning" (16). Predicting the birth of Milkman and referring to him as a little bird demonstrates Pilate's pre-cognitive abilities. Wang suggests that "it is Pilate who transfers their African American heritage to next generation like a pilot" (2). Considering that Pilate is the only person in Milkman's immediate circle to successfully achieve a fully integrated and preserved Black cultural identity in the Urban north, she becomes the chosen ancestor to guide Milkman in his journey to find himself and depart from the world of the Black bourgeoisie. Through this, similar to a "pilot", Pilate will pass the cultural and familial legacy on to Milkman, who will be the only individual in his circle who has the potential to fly.

Combining the two different approaches of identity construction in the post-slavery era; central to the novel, the protagonist Milkman Dead, and his spiritual quest serve a crucial function in the exploration of identity, collective memory and history. Throughout the story, Milkman's potential ability to fly has been pointed out numerous times, which foreshadows his quest towards retracing his roots and particularly his selfhood. One of the early implications of his ability is mentioned on the day of his birth where the narrator says:

> The next day a colored baby was born inside Mercy for the first time. Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself (*Song of Solomon* 17).

The narrative opens with the flight of Mr. Smith, through whom Morrison foreshadows Milkman's future quests, setting the primary themes of the novel.

> By the time Milkman was fourteen he had noticed that one of his legs was shorter than the other. When he stood barefoot and straight as a pole, his left foot was about half an inch off the floor. So, he never stood straight; he slouched or leaned or stood with a hip thrown out, and he never told anybody about it—ever (*Song of Solomon* 62).

These introductory passages of Milkman, which are fully comprehended only after the second half of the novel, demonstrate his feeling of dislocation. The symbolism behind his physical deformity is suggestive of his lack of wholeness, or a search for wholeness. It shows that even in his childhood, he has had a form of inner struggle in balancing his two-ness, in-betweenness.

> Gradually his fear of and eagerness for death returned. Above all he wanted to escape what he knew, escape the implications of what he had been told. And all he knew in the world about the world was what other people had told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people. He himself did nothing. Except for the one time he had hit his father, he had never acted independently… (*Song of Solomon* 113).

Demonstrating the identity crisis Milkman has been going through, this passage serves the aftereffects of racial trauma as well as Macon's ultra-controlling behavior that does not leave any space for Milkman to grow and find himself. Feeling a sense of rootlessness, Milkman's isolation deranges his psyche and fractures his ability to form a balanced identity. Imprisoned by his father's wealth obsession, Milkman's life only begins to get to a better direction when he sees the other side of the same coin: his aunt Pilate who bore witness to the same tragedy with Macon. Evaluating both camps of materialism and spirituality respectively from his father and his aunt Pilate respectively, Milkman's self-discovery journey begins to unfold.

His initiating attempt to steal gold in Pilate's house that sets the theme for the second half of the novel is an initial towards his journey. Influenced by the narrative that his father Macon has imposed on him, Milkman is driven towards the so-called gold that Macon assumes Pilate has stolen from the cave. In chapter 8, Guitar and Milkman discuss about their motives to steal the gold. Guitar explains that he wants the gold to help his family. Milkman, on the other hand, becomes much more detailed in his description by saying that he “wants boats, cars, airplanes […] new people, new places […] and a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well” (163-164). This illustrates that Milkman wants the gold only for himself, which as Awkward suggests makes his quest “inspired by an urge to avoid emotional commitment and familial responsibility” (“Unruly and Let Loose’: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in Song of Solomon” 9). Accompanied by his friend Guitar who helps him out of his own financial interest, Milkman decides to break into Pilate’s house to steal the sack of gold and divide it among his father, himself and Guitar. Seeing that the sack did not contain gold but rather the bones of someone whom they have no idea of, they are caught off-guard by Pilate. Taken to the police station where they defend themselves by claiming that their aim was to make a joke, Pilate lies for them and rescues them. The fact that Milkman finds bones rather than the gold that he has been enthusiastically seeking confuses him. He will then direct his route to the South, remaining eager to find where the actual gold is. Thus, even though his journey to the South is motivated by a material greed, he finds something of comparable value: his ancestral and cultural line.

The shift in settings in the novel also operates as a symbolism in the process of Milkman’s identity formation. The novel begins in an unnamed town of Michigan where the Dead household and Pilate’s family live. Described as a town in the North where the white ideals are abounded together with heavy industrialism, Milkman’s journey from the North to the rural South where Black Americans live in a group cohesion play a significant shift in his identity transformation. Following the steps of his father’s obsession with property, Milkman carries with him “two bottles of Cutty Sark in his suitcase, along with two shirts and some underwear” as well as “the gold Longines his mother had given him” (202). His property-oriented worldview gradually transforms as he meets people from the South who welcome him with kindness. Visiting Danville gives him a sense of comfort, especially after his talk with Reverend Cooper from whom he learns that “his people” have always been respected there.

> Milkman felt a glow listening to a story come from this man that he'd heard many times before but only half listened to. Or maybe it was being there in the place where it happened that made it seem too real. Hearing Pilate talk about caves and woods and earrings on Darling Street, or his father talk about cooking wild turkey over the automobile noise of Not Doctor Street, seemed exotic, something from another world and age, and maybe not even true. Here in the parsonage, sitting in a cane-bottomed chair near an upright piano and drinking homemade whiskey poured from a mayonnaise jar, it was real (206).

Hearing all these stories about his familial background in its actual place amazes Milkman and brings him to the realization that he has been alienated from the long history of the Dead family. Learning from Reverend Cooper that his grandfather was brutally killed by a white man who was from a well-known family called the Butlers in Danville, Milkman gets confused. As he lives in the North, where there is a certain level of Black equality compared to the South, he questions how his grandfather's murderer has not even been trialed. Naively asking Reverend Cooper:

> "I mean did they have a trial; were they arrested?"
> "Arrested for what? Killing a nigger? Where did you say you was from?"
> "You mean nobody did anything? Didn't even try to find out who did it?"
> "Everybody knew who did it. Same people Circe worked for—the Butlers."
> "And nobody did anything?" Milkman wondered at his own anger. He hadn't felt angry when he first heard about it. Why now?" (*Song of Solomon* 232).

His confusion comes from the fact that he has never been exposed to the harsh treatments that his ancestors have endured under the hegemonic white community, particularly in places such as the South. Even though his own family members, both Macon and his grandfather Jake, are the direct victims of racially targeted violence, Milkman has been denied the folk and race consciousness, which if given to him might have informed him about the long history of the legacy of slavery as well as the plight of African Americans who were segregated for quite a long time.

As he spends his time in Danville and later in Shalimar (or Solomon), Milkman realizes that "there isn't a white face around, and the Negroes are as pleasant, wide-spirited, and self- contained as [they] could be" (230). Comparing the two opposing environments, Milkman wonders "why black people ever left the South?" (230). This serves as an example of his complete ignorance of his racial history. Observing women on the street whose hands are empty with "no pocketbook, no change purse, no wallet, no keys, no small paper bag, no comb, no handkerchief" puzzles him as "he had never in his life seen a woman on the street without a purse slung over her shoulder, pressed under her arm, or dangling from her clenched fingers" (230). Living a privileged existence has made him assimilate into the white culture, despite never been fully accepted by them.

Having raised with a different mindset, Milkman is also frowned upon by Southern men due to his objectifying remarks directed at the town's women. His snobby attitude, particularly when he says that he will "buy another car to get back home" gains him extra hatred from the local men, as in their eyes he seems to be just a "negro with the Virginia license and the northern who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken" (236). Even though the town of Shalimar is a special place for Milkman's origins, and even the town itself is named after his great-grandparent Solomon, he cannot identify himself with the customs and the locals. The locals, similarly, do not claim him as a part of their community either. Unable to fully grasp the real reason behind his social exclusion, Milkman assumes that the reason for the local men's hatred and their lack of "welcome and admiration" towards him is driven by their obsession with "what he did with his money" (244). It conveys the notion that Milkman's mentality is still structured through materialistic gains, which echoes the mindset of his father's. Even though the ulterior motive behind Milkman's journey to South was to find gold and become financially and physically independent, his mentality gradually shifts by the time he comes into contact with the lands of "his people" together with the southern hospitality that he has not found back in the North. He ponders on the fact that "it wasn't true what he'd said to Susan Byrd: that it wasn't important to find his people. Ever since Danville, his interest in his own people, not just the ones he met, had been growing" (259). Referring to his ancestors as "his own people" is a vital point in Milkman's journey as he begins to show heightened interest in finding out the Dead family's heritage rather than the gold itself. Additionally, as stated by Ge Jiang, "he loses an expensive watch once very important to him unknowingly, but he doesn't care it at all. All of these indicate that he begins to be away from his previous materialistic life and approach spiritual freedom step by step" ("A Study of Milkman's Growth in *Song of Solomon from* Freud's

Personality Theory" 3). Thus, the gold in fact becomes a metaphor for his desire to find his roots, through which he reclaims Black cultural memory and cultural identity.

The part where he arrives at "Solomon's General Store, which turns out to be the heart and soul of Shalimar, Virginia", Milkman hears, once again, a children's song sung by the children on the street, a scene that gives momentum to his growing interest to learn about his roots (231). Watching children imitating an airplane while singing the lines "Jay the only son of Solomon" Milkman reflects that "he'd never played like that as a child" as his upbringing involved no traditional elements of a black life (234). Likewise, he notices that the song is the "one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time: "O Sugarman don't leave me here" (265). The difference is that they changed the lyrics into: "Solomon don't leave me here" (265). Having an epiphany, Milkman makes a connection between the lyrics of the song and the names within it, such as how Jay stands for Jake. Memorizing all the lyrics, Milkman decides to visit Susan Byrd once again, from whom he learns the rest of his family history and most notably the fact that his grandfather Jake "was one of those flying African children […], Solomon's children" (284). Through decoding the song, Milkman moves one step closer to getting in touch with his Black identity. In *Fly Away Home: Tracing the Flying African Folktale from Oral Literature to Verse and Prose,* Samantha R. Hunsicker argues that Milkman "cannot resort to written language as he has been taught but is forced to commit the song to his oral memory much as his illiterate ancestors learned their folktales and songs" (50). In Assmann's terms, Solomon's song is both a product of collective and cultural memory. It is a form of collective memory for Milkman. It is the story of his grandfather, similar to a recollection that is told from elders to their children. Even though there was no one to narrate the familial history to Milkman, he had to decipher his ancestral past through verbal memory. On the other hand, the song also functions as a cultural memory for those who keep singing, preserving and reliving the experiences of the historical past.

At the end, the discovery transforms Milkman's perception of himself. He becomes spiritually awakened and tell Pilate that the bones actually belonged to her father Jake. Together they go to Solomon's Leap to bury the bones. Here, Pilate takes out her earrings, which she has been carrying as a reminder of her father and puts it on the grave. Burying Jake gives Pilate the period of "mourning", a form of closure that she needed to confront her traumatic past. After successfully navigating their traumas, both feel less burdened and more connected. Even when she was tragically shot by Guitar, she asks Milkman calmly: “sing a little something for me” (286). As the only song Milkman knows is the Solomon’s song, he changes the lyrics and sings “Sugargirl don’t leave me here” (296). During her last moments, a bird comes and takes “something shiny”, presumably her earrings in which her name is written on it, from the grave. Milkman cries and realizes “why he loved her so” because “without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (296). Pilate becomes a living memory. Her legacy will endure, and her name will live on.

Similar to how it begins, the novel also ends with flight. Milkman leaps into air towards Guitar, who has put his weapon down. It is unclear which one dies, or whether they die or not, at the end. As the narrative says, “it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother” (297). Morrison does not say whether Milkman is avenging the death of Pilate or forgiving Guitar, whom he calls his brother. The emphasis is on the act of “leaping”, letting go of control and embracing uncertainty. In his physical or metaphorical leap, Milkman is reborn and is jumping towards freedom, surrendering to history, to transformation just like how he says at the end: “if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (297).

To conclude, through the fictionalized story of the Dead family as well as the wounded other characters, Morrison sheds light on the debilitating effects of the cultural trauma of slavery, particularly its impact on the fractured identities. Employing songs, and mythical patterns as narrative details, she describes the African American life in its most organic and authentic form. Building two opposite realms through the siblings of Pilate and Macon, she conveys the importance of having a supportive and grounded environment which is vital in the process of developing solid identities; as opposed to the hostile environment that puts people, such as Macon and Milkman in a materialistic prison, Ruth in a dissociative position, Hagar in a racially based inferiority or Guitar in a radical ideology. Thus, by means of presenting two opposing views that is developed during the Civil Rights Movement era in the United States, Morrison underscores the importance of one’s connection to their communities which has a vital link to the construction of their individual identities. Demonstrating the political atmosphere of the specific period, she illustrates that some people who tried to adapt themselves to

Eurocentric ideals left their traditions, values and gradually their sense of selves behind, while some others involved in radical activities as a result of their unprocessed racial traumas. Fighting in a constant battle between the two opposing ideals, these people felt a sense of rootlessness as a result of their ongoing alienation from their heritage as opposed to the people who lived by communal unity, such as the people in the South as the novel displays, who live by communal engagement and support.

All of the discussions combined, the title *Song of Solomon* which is an allusion to the biblical story also gives the similar message. The original story of *Song of Solomon*, which is translated as *Song of Songs*, covers a collection of love and erotic poems. In Morrison's version, the allegory of love changes into self-love or search for oneself as the character Solomon and the song that is dedicated to him hold a key part in the novel for Milkman to unravel his family history, and therefore, himself. On the journey that he takes to the so-called gold, which organically turns into a journey of self-discovery, he finds himself in a position where he feels at ease and in his own element. Overall, it highlights the notion that cultural past that brings people in the same pot plays a significant role in determining one's identity.

Thus, through the topics that are discussed above, this section sought to demonstrate how the act of erasing one's historical and cultural past brings forth a fragmented, alienated selfhood. Following chapter will analyze Ta-Nehisi Coates's novel *The Water Dancer* through the similar themes and conceptual frameworks that are discussed here. However, unlike *Song of Solomon* which deals with the descendants of the enslaved community and their inner struggles in the post-slavery era, *The Water Dancer* will explore the actual time of slavery and the direct survivors who are resisting against the physical and psychological trauma in the late antebellum America.

Chapter III

WATER AS WITNESS: RECLAIMING HISTORY, TRAUMATIC HAUNTINGS AND IDENTITY IN TA NEHISI COATES'S *THE WATER DANCER*

"I felt like African American history is often presented like eating vegetables, I want, and I wanted something closer to Lord of the Rings."

-Ta Nehisi Coates

This chapter explores Ta-Nehisi Coates's novel *The Water Dancer* through the combined lenses of postmodern, postcolonial and literary trauma theory. As a historical fiction, *The Water Dancer* is set in a fictionalized Virginia plantation called Lockless. The novel follows the protagonist Hiram Walker, who possesses a form of supernatural ability called "Conduction". Through the power of Conduction, Hiram is able teleport enslaved individuals to safer lands by channeling the power of memory mediated by water. However, the narrative focuses on Hiram's inability to remember that prevents him mastering the ability of Conduction that requires deep and emotional memories to function. Through Hiram's fragmented memories, particularly the ones that are linked to his slave mother from whom he is separated at a young age, Coates illustrates the debilitating effects of slavery which distorts not only personal but also the collective memory of the culturally traumatized group.

In the first section, entitled "Re-framing History and the Civil War Narrative", I will be first discussing how the novel operates at the intersection of postmodernism and postcolonialism through its incorporation of historical narratives pertaining to the pre-Civil War era. It serves one of the basic tenets of postmodern thought, such as bringing alternative perspective of Black Americans to the forefront so as to challenge the dominant narrative of Civil War. In the second section "The Role of Community as a Power of Resistance", I examine the community's role as a regenerative force in the reclamation of a fragmented individual identities. In the third section "The Significance of Memory and Cultural Anchoring in Restoring Identity", I focus on how the act of recalling both individual and collective past is foundational for resisting the fragmentation of selfhood.

3.1. Re-framing History and the Civil War Narrative

Ta-Nehisi Coates tells us a story set in the early to mid-19th century, around the years between 1820s and 1850s, where he captures the brutal and dehumanized treatments of the enslaved Black Americans in a fictionalized plantation in Virginia. It covers the period during which the American Civil War was burgeoning and the movements such as the Underground Railroad were being established. Through displaying the struggles of the slave system and the power of resistance against colonialism, the novel engages with the central themes of postcolonial literature, while also reflecting a postmodern thought by reinterpreting historical events from an alternative perspective. Coates does not simply narrate a story of the slave past; he re-imagines the collective resistance that is undertaken by Black Americans. Through this, he puts forth an alternate history against the dominant historical narrative. In this regard, in order to highlight the novel's approach and its commentary on the colonial oppression and the African American marginalization, I will be discussing how the novel's incorporation of the historical narratives pertaining to Civil War serves one of the basic tenets of postmodern thought, such as bringing alternative perspective of Black Americans to the forefront in order to challenge the established narratives of colonialism.

As a broad intellectual movement, postmodernism emerged in the mid to late 20th century as a reaction to modernism. Defined by Jean François Lyotard as the "incredulity towards metanarratives", postmodernism questions the veracity of the totalizing concepts which are universally acknowledged as objective truths (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 24*)*. To critically dismantle these overarching frameworks, postmodernists began to employ the theory of "deconstruction", which is introduced by Jacque Derrida in his book *Of Grammatology*, a French philosopher and one of the forerunners of postmodern and poststructuralist theory in 1960s. The deconstruction theory challenges and breaks down the concepts of grand narratives that explain the world under a single, accepted, universal truth. For instance, the colonial grand-narrative justifies European colonialism as a quest for civilization and frames it as a noble act. However, postmodernists argue that these totalizing narratives should be broken down, deconstructed, as they silence certain voices, marginalize communities, erase their histories and legitimize oppression under a dominant story.

When we come to think of a totalizing structure, one of the major grand narratives that comes to forefront is the official history, or History with a big H. With the shift brought about by postmodernism, the idea of an official history that accounts for actual truth came to be re-centered. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that before the clear-cut categorization of history to the literary, "in the nineteenth century […] literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree which sought to "interpret experience, for the purpose of guiding and elevating man" (105). However, through Derrida's deconstruction theory in 1960s as well as the school of New Historicism in 1980s that offered a new perspective on historiography, the postmodern thought focused "more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ" (105). This drew attention to the interconnectedness of history and fiction. In our general lexicon, history is associated with merely factual data. In this common-sense view of history, its accuracy is elevated to an ultimate truth, a grand narrative that accepts no counterarguments or questions. Demonstrating a criticial attitude, in his book *What is History,* E.H Carr's discusses the dubious nature of history-writing where he argues that:

> History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fish monger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him (3).

In his analogy, Carr remarks upon the notion that what a historiographer does is similar that of a simple worker as to how he subjectively selects which events to be written down in a historical narrative and which ones should be removed. Not dismissing the factual aspect of history, he argues that "the belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy" (4). In other words, the historical narratives are built upon the interpretation of the history writer. Through pinpointing to its potential biases and practical limits, Carr sheds light on the synthetic and subjective nature of historiography.

In a similar approach to that of Carr's, Keith Jenkins states that "history is the labor of historians, it is what historians make when they go to work" (*Re-thinking History* 8). By distinguishing the past from history, she argues that "the known past (history) is an artefact of ours, [it] always comes to us already as stories (narratives)" and "we cannot get out of these stories to check if they correspond to the real world/past" (15). Calling attention to the historical distance that prevents us from seeing the actual and broader narratives of the past, she argues that "the past has gone and can only be brought again by historians in very different media: books, articles, documentaries" and "not as actual events" (15). Here, by proposing the idea that what the historian does is similar that of a fiction writer, Jenkins portrays historical accounts as subjective narrations, which makes them incapable of achieving an absolute accuracy.

The subjective nature of historiography also began to be studied in literary theory. In light to this, the prominent Canadian literary theorist who specializes on postmodern literature, Linda Hutcheon coins the term of "historiographic metafiction" to display the interplay between history and fiction. Similar to Carr and Jenkins, Hutcheon argues that history should be treated as a story, rather than a transparent account of the past. According to Hutcheon:

> Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim and also questions whether history is the only way of knowing about the past (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 93).

Through the genre of historiographic metafiction, the authors blend historical events/figures (historiographic) with fictional elements that draw attention to its constructed nature (metafiction). Through the presentation of both, these novels urge us to critique our capability to know about the past. Historiographic metafiction novels, thus, "play upon the truth" and destabilizes grand historical narratives by pinpointing to the fact that there might be other stories/truths of any historical account that seems to recount the past objectively. It is for the reason that as the historiographic metafiction novels "install and then blur the line between fiction and history", they take on the mission to challenge official history to problematize "the entire notion of historical knowledge (113). These novels do not aim to offer a new grand narrative that everyone should take it as an ultimate fact, they aim to remind readers that both history and fiction are constructs.

From what has been discussed above, as postmodern rhetoric challenges the westernized, Eurocentric ideals that have constituted the logocentric worldview, its premises also conjunct with postcolonial criticism as to how both theories aim to deconstruct the existence of grand narratives such as the colonial ideologies or Eurocentric history. Through their shared sceptic outlook, both postmodernism and postcolonialism put emphasis on the marginalized individuals that have long been silenced as a result of an asymmetrical distribution of power and monolithic cultural narratives.

Combining the premises of both theories, in his novel *The Water Dancer*, Coates reimagines the period of pre-Civil War America through the fictionalized story of a young, enslaved man Hiram Walker. Hiram is unable to master Conduction as to how he cannot tap into his deepest memories, particularly the memories that are linked to his mother. The whole narrative centers on Hiram's quest to reclaim his lost memories, which will heal and set him and many other enslaved mentally and physically free. Coates uses Hiram's mystical ability of Conduction as one of the central keys in his reinterpretation of the historical narrative that pertains to Black resistance and liberation in the antebellum South. Through Hiram's incapacity to tap into his lost memories, as well as his escape and involvement in the organization of the Underground Railroad, Coates re-visits a dark chapter in history and brings a different perspective into focus. In his framework, he integrates a different version of the significant events and mythical figures in the history of African American liberation such as the secret network of Underground Railroad, the legendary Harriet Tubman, the Abolitionist Movement as well as the impending Civil War. In other words, one of the core elements in his narrative is not the integration of history into his fiction but his re-framing of the one-sided narratives. In his essay "Why Do So Few Blacks Study the Civil War?" which is published in The Atlantic, Coates discusses the prevailing discourse on the Civil War by arguing that "in my study of African American history, the Civil War was always something of a sideshow". This highlights his central approach to history writing where he believes that official history is manipulated to push certain groups to the margins by minimizing their experiences.

> Our alienation was neither achieved in independence, nor stumbled upon by accident, but produced by American design. The belief that the Civil War wasn't for us was the result of the country's long search for a narrative that could reconcile white people with each other, one that avoided what professional historians now know to be true: that one group of Americans attempted to raise a country wholly

> premised on property in Negroes, and that another group of Americans, including many Negroes, stopped them. In the popular mind, that demonstrable truth has been evaded in favor of a more comforting story of tragedy, failed compromise, and individual gallantry. For that more ennobling narrative, as for so much of American history, the fact of black people is a problem (The Atlantic).

In this lengthy quotation, Coates touches upon the fact that the historical narrative of the American Civil War has ignored and denied the significant role that Black Americans have played in their own emancipation. Stating that the Civil War is widely commemorated, especially through the popular culture, as a war between the North and the South rather than the abolishment of slavery as the main cause, understates the existence of Black agency. One of the main reasons behind this, as he argues, is the myth of "Lost Cause" that emerged after the Civil War and persisted thereafter as an ideological and cultural framework. As stated by Gary W. Gallagher, the myth is put forth by the Confederates who "collectively sought to justify their own actions and allow themselves and other former Confederates to find something positive in all-encompassing failure" (*The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* 4). Portraying the Confederate leaders as heroic, noble and valiant who fought against the so-called aggressiveness of the North, rather than to protect the right to "own" black people; the lost cause myth is purposefully situated as a "correct" narrative in written history, "shaping how Americans have assessed and understood the Civil War" (4). The novel, however, shifts the focus of this prevailing historical narrative, and instead, centralizes the agency of the enslaved Americans who strived for their rights and freedom. One of the examples of this is the involvement of the Underground Railroad which was historically neither a railroad nor an underground but "a series of paths, roads, rivers, and safe houses" that helped slaves to flee from their masters (Burgan, *The Underground Railroad* 14). Coates's imagination of the Underground Railroad differs from the historical one on two levels. The first one is its involvement of supernatural elements, which is obviously not seen in the historical narratives, and the second one is its symbolic connection to the cultural memory. As an Underground agent, Hiram helps people escape slavery through forging their legal documents. However, his magical ability of Conduction is needed for it will shorten the length and risks of the dangerous journey of escaping slavery. In order to perform

Conduction and save more enslaved people, Hiram has to evoke powerful emotions. To do this, he has to remember, remember his mother, remember his cultural past. This demonstrates that Coates's version of the Underground Railroad functions more than just an organization that enables the emancipation of the enslaved. It also functions as Assmann's concept of cultural memory. For Hiram to save enslaved people from the shackles of slavery, he has to unlock the historical past of slavery.

In addition to this, the Abolitionist Movement which is related to the emancipation of slaves as well as the outbreak of Civil War, is also integrated to the storyline. Defined by Tim Mcneese, Abolitionists were "opposed to the existence of slavery and […] demanded its immediate eradication" (*The Abolitionist Movement* 8). They were "considered radicals and extremists, the mid-nineteenth-century version of homegrown American terrorists […] small in number, [they] included both whites and blacks" within their group (8). Coates's inclusion of Abolitionists is crucial as it provides a rich background for the multifaceted layers of how whites and blacks together fought against the abolishment of slavery, again through a communal effort regardless of their racial standings.

Moreover, another figure in the novel that contributes to the reframing of the traditional historical narrative is the legendary woman, Harriet Tubman. Historical figure of Harriet is born into slavery before she escapes and becomes a conductor in the Underground Railroad, helping hundreds of slaves to find their own freedom. Sharing a few characteristics with the historical one, Coates's reimagining of Harriet Tubman involves mythical qualities. Referred to as the "Moses" who has "majestic powers", Coates's Tubman also possesses an extraordinary gift called "Conduction". Explaining the reason for incorporating Tubman, in his interview with Democracy Now, Coates states that:

> I'm from Baltimore Maryland. Harriet Tubman was from Maryland. […] She was probably my earliest notion of like a superhero, you know I mean it really. You know these tales that they would tell us, some of them exaggerations, but even when I got to reading and found out the kernel of truth they were still these incredible tales and I can remember when I was reading biographies when I first started getting

> the idea to include her in the book […] she was like my first notion of the super heroic (15:03-16:30).

Influenced by the stories of Harriet in his childhood, Coates's mythologized version elevates Harriet beyond an historical figure to a mythical hero, a savior of her own people. As opposed to the colonial rhetoric, the centralization of Harriet provides an alternative story to the colonialist accounts which assume Black Americans to be passive against colonial oppression. However, by means of portraying Tubman as a significant character in the Abolitionist movement, Coates highlights the existence of Black agency, reframing the one-sided narrative through conveying the idea that enslaved did not only challenge the oppressive system of colonialism but also actively participated in dismantling it. Additionally, from the point of Assman's theory of cultural memory, Harriet's existence contributes to the African American cultural memory. She becomes a living legacy of resistance, which will live on upcoming generations. It is similar to what Morrison does in her depiction of Pilate. Both figures stand as a living symbol of Black resistance. They embody the cultural memory of slavery, reminding Black Americans of the brutal system and the efforts their ancestors have made against it. This explains the motivation behind African American authors who engage with the legacy of slavery in their works. Through his reimagining of the antebellum America, Coates puts forth a "counter-memory", as Michel Foucault conceptualizes, where he not only questions selective history, but also puts forth an alternative.[4] Through providing a counter-history that foregrounds Black experience; Black Americans remember, grieve and heal from their traumatic past. These cultural narratives, memories, and counter stories empower the younger generations for a better future both for their own individual betterment and the communal betterment as a whole.

3.2. The Role of Community for Individual Liberation

Community, being one of the common denominators in African American fiction that pertains to slavery, also takes its place in *The Water Dancer,* particularly through the significant role that family and kinship play in one's life. Framing his story within this standpoint, rather than merely focusing on the physical trauma of slavery, Coates employs the theme of family separation as one of the main causes of the fragmented selfhood among Black Americans. As a cure for this, he underscores the community's impact on individuals as well as the necessity of building connections for the betterment of the self and the communal good. When asked about the reason for his emphasis on family separation in the same interview Coates states that:

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[4] In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", Foucault questions the traditional notions of historiography and encourages history to include multiple perspectives in itself through his term of counter-memory which he defines as "a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (17).

> I think traditionally when we think about slavery what we think about, what immediately comes to mind, is physical torture, you know, being beaten being worked to death. All of you know horrible things that actually happened and actually again in the course of research in us and looking at the narratives probably the most painful thing that struck me was family separation which was basically family separation for profit (Democracy Now 08:15-08:36).

As we discussed earlier, one of the important social frameworks, as Halbwachs puts forth, is our families and our kins who "communicate to us our first notions about people and things" (*Social Frameworks of Memory* 58). That is, family units, being one of the core ingredients of personal and collective identity, hold greater significance in the communities that are subjected to a long period of trauma. In the case of African American community, slavery's role is central to the foundation of African American family dynamics. As the colonial system frequently dehumanized Black Americans and viewed them as commodities, the slave owners prevented any form of family ties to emerge within them. Despite their control over the family ties, slave owners could not manage to control the community and kinship that African Americans have established among themselves. In "Kinship in the African American Community", Crystal S. Mills states that "although individual families may not have remained together for long periods of time, the family was an important institution that was retained throughout the era of slavery" (6). It was for the reason that even though the nuclear family forms were distorted, the system of kinship among Black Americans was sustained, playing an instrumental role in providing emotional and physical resistance to the enslaved, and becoming "one of the most important survival mechanisms for African people held in bondage" (6). Through this lens, exploring the significance of family and kinship in one's life against fragmented identities, *The Water Dancer* revolves around the story of Hiram Walker's journey. Hiram is the son of the slave master of the Lockless plantation, Howell Walker, and the son of the enslaved woman Rose. The pinnacle of the novel is that even though Hiram has a remarkable mastery in remembering everything through its tiniest details, he is unable to recall his mother, and therefore, his ancestral past.

Throughout the novel, Coates presents us with a unified neighborhood of Blacks, The Street, where all enslaved people in the novel reside. Described by Hiram as a "communal place", the Street can be seen as a microcosm of the authentic, bonding, Black life that compensates for the broken family ties (15). Despite the subjugation and the dehumanization of the Blacks, its existence allows enslaved people to forge social bonds and maintain their group solidarity while also endowing them with a place to preserve their culture. Living in a state of abandonment after his forced separation from his mother, Hiram finds Thena on the Street and chooses her as his new "mother". Even the autonomy to "choose" his mother is suggestive of how Black community has been intact, and unified, encouraging to help one another regardless of who their biological parents are. Thena is described by Hiram as "the meanest woman on the Street" (15). Separated from her children, just like every other slave mother, Thena's grief and pain is reflected through her emotional isolation. Adopting Hiram as a surrogate son, Thena gradually develops an emotional bond with him. Through LaCapra's trauma theory, Thena displays the symptoms that is associated with the concept of "working through". Even though she is not completely healed from the loss of her children, she attempts to endure the traumatic past and rebuild her connection with her community. Guiding Hiram to be aware of his culture; Thena's existence puts an emphasis on the role of community in one's upbringing. As "a mother not just to five children of her own but to all the children of the Street", Thena appears as a mythical figure, a goddess like her name, matching the assertive and strong energy of Athena (15). Through Thena, Coates creates another mythical figure like Tubman. Both are depicted as models of endurance. Thena brings a maternal and emotional resilience to Hiram while Tubman becomes a source of spiritual guidance for him to liberate himself and others.

Through Hiram and Thena's connection, the readers delve into the traumatized psyche of both the mothers and their children who bear the lasting emotional damage caused by family separation. Growing up without a direct parental care, Hiram's lack of remembering of her mother Rose is a direct output such traumatic separation.

> Some part of them has died, and like surgeons, they know that amputation must be immediate. So that was me, that Sunday afternoon, when I rose, still in those same brogans and osnaburg, and wandered out again, this time finding my way to the storehouse where I would collect the weekly peck of corn and pound of pork deeded to my family. I brought them back to my home, but I did not stay. Instead, I retrieved my marbles, my only possession besides the sack of victuals and the clothes I was wearing and walked back out until I reached the last building on the Street, a large cabin set back from the others. Thena's home (14).

Comparing the separation of Black children from their mothers to that of the sick people, Hiram feels as though a certain part of himself has vanished and the "amputation must be immediate" (15). Here, what amputation means for Hiram is the immediate suppression of his memories pertaining to his mother. Hiram, similar to every other enslaved, has no other choice but to be physically and emotionally resilient through each devastating hostility. The only possession he takes with himself apart from some clothes and victuals when he decides to leave is his "marbles" (15). As a kid whose sole preoccupation is supposed to be playing around, Hiram must be proactive to find himself a new place. So, he chooses Thena. Yearning for his mother, Thena's reminiscence of his mother as "a beautiful woman, with the kindest heart" pleases him deeply as he states that "Thena could not know how much I needed those small jigsaws of my mother, which together, over the years, I forged into a portrait of the woman who lived in dreams […] but only as smoke" (18-19). The ghost-like picture of his mother is created through the fragmented stories that he has "collected from the people on the Street" (18). Despite being brought up by Thena and receiving the communal support, Hiram still longs for a connection that he has lost with his mother. The fact that he is also not acknowledged by his father, the slave master, aggravates his situation.

> And what of my father? What of the master of Lockless? I knew very early who he was, for my mother had made no secret of the fact, nor did he. From time to time, I would see him on horseback making his tour of the property, and when his eyes met mine, he would pause and tip his hat to me. I knew he had sold my mother, for

> Thena never ceased to remind me of the fact. But I was a boy, seeing in him what boys can't help but see in their fathers—a mold in which their own manhood might be cast (*The Water Dancer* 19).

The complex nature of their relationship puzzles Hiram's understanding of himself. He is torn between two identities. In Du Bois phrase, he embodies "double consciousness". However, compared to the other enslaved individuals, Hiram's sense of double identity reflects a greater degree of complexity due to his position as a mixed-race. In the article "The Mulatto Advantage: The Biological Consequences of Complexion in Rural Antebellum Virginia" Howard Bodenhorn discusses the conditions of the racially mixed slaves who are called as "mulattoes". Bodenhorn states that "mulattoes faced all the disadvantages of being black and none of the benefits of a white heritage" (23). Despite being the biological child of a white man, Hiram cannot change the Virginia law that regards "the mulatto child of a slave woman a slave" (26). This creates a split in his perception of himself.

> I could see the blood that carried me across the river in the eyes of Maynard Walker, my half-brother […] I was the black son of the white man who owned Lockless, and this alone made me special. But it did not make me free (*Song of Solomon* 12).

He finds it difficult to comprehend why he cannot be equal to his brother, whom he clearly shares physical traits and a biological link with. His racially mixed status traps him between two worlds. He sees himself as a "property, even if [his] skin was closer to the color of Maynard's than of Thena's." (22). His position as a slave is not primarily determined by his appearance, or his comparatively lighter skin color, but by the racial classification that has been imposed on him.

Living under the guidance and protection of Thena who persistently reminds him not to trust white men in general, Hiram's life suddenly changes as one day Howell comes and takes him to the Lockless plantation. In the moment of his separation from Thena, she warns him as:

> White folks come down to say your days in the fields is over, that you going up top. But they ain't your family, Hiram, I want you to see that. You cannot forget yourself up there, and we cannot forget each other (*The Water Dancer* 20).

Thena aims to express Hiram the significance of maintaining close-knit connection with the people on The Street, his "own" people that were abused and dehumanized by such people like Howell himself. Hiram, on the other hand, suffers from an inner dilemma as he cannot come to terms with both parts of himself, as one belongs to the enslaved community and the other to the Lockless.

> I imagined that my own quality might someday be recognized and then, perhaps, I, one who understood the workings of the house, the workings of the field, and the span of the larger world, might be deemed the true heir, the rightful heir, of Lockless (32).

Ignoring the legal and social realities of the slave system, Hiram believes that he has both the wits, the necessary skills as well as the paternal lineage to claim to be the rightful and legitimate heir of the plantation. The intricate family dynamic where he is both a son and a servant in the Lockless plantation, Hiram's life becomes complex and dysfunctional, as he is "torn between two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* 38).

Apart from Thena, his love for Sophia, a slave woman who is constantly sexually abused by Howell's brother Nathanial, also contributes to his healing journey. Portrayed as an independent woman, Sophia's involvement in Hiram's life shapes the novel and stimulates his actions. Their shared trauma, which becomes the basis for their connection to grow, navigates them through threatening environments and the constant fear of being sold to Natchez-way, a major slave trading town in Mississippi where Hiram's mother and aunt were sold off at. Even though they are not sent to that place, their failed escape deepens their bond. Having discovered a deeper sense of purpose, Hiram's desire to escape is further amplified. Through their relationship, Coates does not only aim to present the existence of a shared trauma, the collective effort and commitment in the path to healing, but also the determination of a woman to risk her life to control her fate. Her adamant nature demonstrates Black women's agency in dismantling oppressive system as opposed to the dominant historical narrative that disregards Black women as passive victims.

Apart from the existence of the Street, the organization of the Underground Railroad that helps enslaved people escape slavery also functions as a space that fosters communal bond and resistance. The climax of the novel happens right after Hiram is kidnapped by Corrine Quinn and Mr. Fields/Micajah Bland, the Underground Agents who train Hiram for his role in the secret organization. In the novel, we learn that the white characters Corrine and Micajah have met in an abolitionist meeting, fighting against the systematic oppression regardless of their white privileges. Another agent named Otha, a Black man who helps Hiram in his time in Pennsylvania, becomes devastated when he hears the news of Micajah's death. "He was my brother" he says, which highlights the idea that common purpose and collaboration is needed for liberation, regardless of one's race or freedom (259). To emphasize the significance of this, in one of the speeches he gives for Family Action Network, Coates states that "Freedom is not individual undertaking, at least for black people, [Hiram] has to come to the understanding that his freedom is ultimately tied to other several people's freedom even people's freedom who he doesn't actually know" (4:58-5:07). After his active role in the Underground Railroad, Hiram comprehends the necessity of collective liberation. In hindsight, he realizes that the outcome would have been different if he had gathered external support in his failed attempt to escape with Sophia. "On the underground I found meaning" he says, highlighting the communal impact on his individual identity (220). Despite being hardened by the work in the Underground as an agent, Hiram acknowledges the principal difference between Underground and Lockless, by stating that "when I was down back there, back at Lockless, I had my freedoms, more than most I should say but I was still a property of another man" (168). Even though he finds himself missing Lockless at certain points, Hiram is conscious of what Amy, another Underground agent says to him: "we need each other, we work together. Same army Hiram. Same army" (142). Feeling a sense of belonging with people who collectively struggle to achieve a shared goal, Hiram's understanding of home also shifts. How he defines home becomes a question that he must grapple with. When Corrine asks him why he makes the library in the Underground his quarters, the place where he spends his majority of time, Hiram answers that:

> "It reminds me of home," I said.
> "And would you go back, if you could? Home?" she asked.
> "No. Never," I said (*The Water Dancer* 167).

The library back at Lockless has always been Hiram's home. He was surrounded by "the instruments of science and discovery—great maps of the world, electrostatic generators", however, he still felt like a trivial person, seeing himself as just "a slave, dreaming amid those books" (37). In the Underground library, the same feeling evokes in him. The core difference is that he is not enslaved there. This demonstrates that Hiram's concept of home is affected by the memory of his past. The questions of whether he thinks he fully belongs to Lockless or merely wants to go back to see Sophia and Thena encapsulate his thoughts. He realizes that home is not restricted to a physical place. The sense of home for him evolves as he connects with a community, finds a purpose, falls in love and also fights for freedom.

3.3. The Significance of Memory and Cultural Anchoring in Restoring Identity

In addition to the role of community, *The Water Dancer* also underscores the significance of individual and cultural memory in restoring one's colonial fragmented selfhood. Throughout the novel, Hiram is incapable of processing his trauma of familial separation and suffers from the effects of colonial subjectivity. In LaCapra's framework, "working through […] requires confronting" (70). From this perspective, the narrative highlights that for Hiram to work through his trauma or be able to master Conduction, he must go through a process of confrontation with his suppressed memories. His ability to perform Conduction, which has its roots in his trauma response to separation, begins on the day after her mother is taken away from him, accompanied by a blue mist appearing out of nowhere.

> It had happened before. It had happened when I was nine years old, the day after my mother was taken and sold. I awoke that cold winter morning knowing she was gone as a fact. But I had no pictures, no memory, of any goodbye, indeed no pictures of her at all. Instead, I recalled my mother in the secondhand, so that I was sure that she had been taken, in the same way that I was sure that there were lions in Africa, though I had never seen one. […] I saw the Tasked who'd once lived down on the Street but were now lost to me. A blue mist began rising up out of the inky darkness, illuminated from within by some source. […] But when the blue light cleared, I saw not my mother but a wooden gabled ceiling, which I

> recognized as the ceiling of the cabin I had departed only minutes before (*The Water Dancer* 12).

Similarly, his second Conduction occurs while he is crossing the bridge on the River Goose with his half-brother Maynard and Maynard's girlfriend at the back of the carriage. "I had always avoided that bridge, for it was stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way" says Hiram, touching upon the traumatic remembrance that the bridge evokes in him (5). The visions he encounters through the blue light represent the people whom he has lost, such as his mother and his aunt, who gradually have become merely distant and fragmented memories. The blue mist, which functions as a premonitory sign for Conduction to occur, operates like a portal for Hiram to channel his most profound memories. However, Conduction is also enabled with the involvement of water. As Coates takes his source materials from long-held cultural traditions of his African heritage, the involvement of water imagery, which is necessary for Conduction to be fully actualized, is in line with African American spiritual practices. In his book *Of Water and Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*, Malidoma Patrice Somé, a spiritual teacher that comes from the Dagara community, brings light to certain African spiritual practices. Somé presents a fragment from his conversation with his grandfather who guides him to be an "initiated man", which is similar to that of a rite of passage where one can gain insight about their community's spiritual practices:[5] In their conversation, his grandfather informs him that he comes from water "which in [their] tradition is the symbol of peace and reconciliation" (40). Some also underlines that the water is often used in ancestral rituals as it is believed that "the life energy of ancestors who have not yet been reborn is expressed in the life of nature, in trees, mountains, rivers and still water" (20). Combining the associations of water and linking it to Coates's presentation of events; the water, which is an essential element for bringing back ancestors, as it does with Hiram, is a compulsory element for him to perform Conduction. It is also projected by Harriet who makes him aware of his failed attempts by saying that "water, Hiram, water. Conduction got to have water" (245).

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[5] Somé illustrates that in Dagara culture, "when a child grows into an adolescent, he or she must be initiated into adulthood. A person who doesn't get initiated will remain an adolescent for the rest of their life, and this is a frightening, dangerous, and unnatural situation" (33).

In addition to that, Coates illustrates the motivation behind his choice of the water allegory as:

> I would hear stories about the transatlantic slave trade, about the Middle Passage. There were a lot of stories about people that would leap off the boat into the water and there's some rather beautiful renditions that it's of people reporting these folks actually leaped off, they seemed like they were dancing among the ways. […] I was also thinking about these myths within African American culture of people flying. There were these notions that people that leaked off the boat didn't drown and go to the sharks, they actually flew. So that was the immediate thing I thought about the very idea of the Middle Passage. It felt natural to use water. I was probably pulling some from my own biography going back as a kid to the Eastern Shore of Maryland. We would very often go to the beach, and there's something to be on the land where your ancestors were actually enslaved, and the ocean is right there. You know ocean is like 10 miles away and so water was always in the back of my mind. And so again, it just felt natural to pull from that (Family Action Network 04:15-04:57).

Underscoring the critical position the water imagery has in the transatlantic slave trade; Coates employs the existing African American mythical stories in his narrative to delve into the subject matters of freedom and liberation for one's own physical and mental healing journey. In their "Book Review: The Water Dancer (Oprah's Book Club): A Novel by Ta-Nehisi Coates", Khanam and Zameer argues that there is a similarity between Morrison's portrayal of flight in *Song of Solomon* to Coates's symbolism of "water" in *The Water Dancer,* arguing that similar to the flight symbolism "water here becomes a symbol of transcendence and of hope" (4). Just as Morrison who was influenced by the myth of the Flying Africans in writing her novel *Song of Solomon*, Coates was similarly influenced by a cultural myth that pertains to the possibility of hope and freedom under slavery.

> I was a man born between two rivers, both of them wide and errant, neither of them solid. The first was my father, who was my master, and I was his son, and his tasking charge. The second was the river Goose, the river of my blood mother, the lost and the damned, and all that blood held down in the water (*The Water Dancer* 143).

As a person being in an in-between situation both as a Black American, and as an illegitimate son of a plantation owner, Hiram is unable to fully embrace neither of his racial identity. His dual identity sails him to a land of isolation. Not being acknowledged by his father leads to resentment and a sense of inferiority; and his early separation from his mother as well as his incapacity to remember her detaches him from his Black heritage, which would be an essential steppingstone in his understanding of his "self". Given to that the one-drop rule, which legally accepted that "someone with trivial African ancestry is considered Black", Hiram's white lineage is relatively unspoken in the equation (Holmes, *Legal History of the Color Line: The Rise and Triumph of the One-Drop Rule* 292). As the formation of Hiram's identity necessitates a direct connection with his heritage, which can be brought about through remembering and honoring the lost family members of his Black ancestry, he has to utilize the power of Conduction and remember.

Why does Hiram need to remember? Why is his ability to remember seen as a powerful thing? Why does the novel emphasize the necessity of remembering one's past? In a broader context, Conduction serves as a powerful symbol, which is the excavation of the traumatic legacy of slavery. In other words, Hiram's mission is not only to remember his mother, but to remember all the enslaved who have remained absent from the collective memory.

> But knowing now the awesome power of memory, how it can open a blue door from one world to another, how it can move us from mountains to meadows, from green woods to fields caked in snow, knowing now that memory can fold the land like cloth, and knowing, too, how I had pushed my memory of her into the "down there" of my mind, how I forgot, but did not forget, I know now that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost (*The Water Dancer* 5)

Here, through the symbolism of the bridge, Hiram argues that the power of memory evokes the images of the long-lost ancestors. In chapter 24 where Hiram and Harriet are discussing the reasons for his inability to remember his mother and the potential reasons behind it, Harriet suggests that:

> I can't say what done happened to you, Hiram. But if I were to venture a guess, I would say that there is some part of you that wants to forget, that is trying with all its might to forget. And what you need is something outside of yourself, something beyond you, a lever to unlock that thing you done shut away. Only you know what the thing might be. But I think if you can find that lever, then you can find your mother, and when you find your mother, you will find that bridge (*The Water Dancer* 244).

Harriet believes that remembering is a conscious choice and that Hiram is consciously not involving himself in the process of retrieving his memories. Individual liberation awaits him, healing and reclaiming his identity is possible for him. However, it is only after he finds his mother, reclaims his suppressed memories and resists the urge to forget that he can succeed.

> But you, friend, you are different. Because you, unlike the others, can see a bridge across that river, many bridges even, connecting all the islands, many bridges, each one made of a different story. And you cannot just see the bridges, you can walk across, drive across, conduct across, with passengers in tow, sure as an engineer conduct a train. That is Conduction. The many bridges. The many stories. The way over the river (*The Water Dancer* 243-244).

Here, Harriet believes that the gift of Conduction serves a higher purpose. The conductors are there to shed light on the overlooked stories of the unvoiced Black experience. The fact that there are "many stories over the river" and that they can only be excavated through a bridge that connects both worlds serve both a metaphorical and a literal idea. Being born between the cusp of two different worlds- the river goose that is associated with his mother at one side, and the plantation for his father on the other side; Hiram becomes a bridge himself. In fact, both Harriet and Hiram are the metaphorical bridges whose unique gifts have been tightly bound to the communal good. Harriet states that "I think about 'em sometimes, think about all that happened out there, and I like to break down and cry. It is a painful thing; what they have done to us. And there is a part of me that would like to forget. But when I grip that branch of sweet gum, I cannot help but remember" (244). Her remark undoubtedly touches upon her conscious choice to remember in defiance of historical amnesia.

> “We forgot nothing, you and I,” Harriet said
>
> “To forget is to truly slave. To forget is to die.”
>
> “To remember, friend,” she said. “For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom” (*The Water Dancer* 235).

The allegory of memory as a chariot and as a bridge suggests that memory functions as a resistance to pain. Harriet believes that they will only become slaves once they forget their cultural and historical past. In other words, erasing the historical past brings forth the individual and cultural death. When we think of the consequences of slavery and systematic racism, we see that it has disturbed and heavily damaged the psychological and physical state of the Black Americans. As a coping mechanism and as an attempt to ease their pain, traumatized individuals display a tendency to suppress and silence their emotions. This is similar to what Caruth suggests in her concept of the “unclaimed experience”. The traumatic memory keeps resurfacing in the form of flashbacks and repetitive actions as a result of trauma’s disruptive and uncontrollable nature. For Caruth, there is no remedy to resolve trauma’s intrusive nature as to how it was never fully known in the first place. However, in LaCapra’s understanding, trauma can be healed through the process of “mourning” and “working through”. Even though the memory keeps inflicting pain, individuals have to consciously re-visit their traumas and critically mourn it. This illustrates Harriet’s approach to the legacy of slavery. Remembering is a critical component for the individual and collective healing. It is through memory that Hiram gains power. And it is through Conduction, through tapping into the cultural and individual memory that he heals his colonial subjectivity.

To conclude, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s novel *The Water Dancer* explores the enduring psychological scars that slavery left on Black Americans. The characters are haunted by their unresolved trauma that is caused by the forced family separation and systematic dehumanization. The novel highlights that these forms of unhealed wounds create a rupture in one’s selfhood, which cannot be resolved in isolation and amnesia. Therefore, remembering and freedom function as the prevailing themes throughout the novel. Hiram has to remember because his memory is anchored in his historical and cultural past. Remembering not only liberates him but also enables the emancipation of many other enslaved Black Americans. Through this, the novel conveys the idea that liberation and healing from one’s personal and cultural trauma is possible through collective effort and a conscious choice to remember one’s past and cultural history.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the significant point was to demonstrate that the legacy of a cultural trauma is constituted through an establishment of a collective memory, which not only affects the identities of the direct survivors but also the descendants of it. This nature of interconnectedness of individuals with their cultural pasts underlines the idea that isolation and separation from one's cultural heritage might result in developing fragmented identities. Framed by the theories on cultural trauma, memory studies, and postcolonial studies, this study was driven by the premise that who we are and how we define ourselves cannot be easily divorced from the cultural practices as well as communal and collective history that we have grown up with.

To highlight this, in the selected novels; Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer,* I aimed to focus on the representation of the cultural trauma of slavery and its debilitating impact on the construction of individual identities. The novels, which are set in the period of Civil Rights Movement and the late antebellum America respectively, capture the struggle of Black Americans, who are desensitized with their fragmented/dual identities caused by the effects of systematic oppression and marginalization. From this perspective, both novels capture the juxtaposition where those damaged individuals get in touch with their communities and revisit their ancestral heritage to heal their untapped traumas.

The characters in *Song of Solomon* carry the psychological consequences of racial violence, and the cultural trauma of slavery imprinted on their identities. Despite not having experienced the same brutal treatments with their ancestors, each character in the novel, except for Pilate, holds a certain level of fear and prejudice for their ethnic and cultural identities. Deeply affected by the white gaze, they grapple with the question of where they stand in their society. This attitude and inclination reveal itself as an internalized racism and "epidermalization of inferiority" in LaCapra's phrase, or "mimicry" as Bhabha theorizes, which are reflected in their actions where they adhere to the continued oppression and marginalization that their community has long been exposed to. Morrison structures her narrative to convey this idea through the dichotomy of spirituality and materialism. She emphasizes that acknowledging one's historical past provides a sense of stability in the face of fragmented identity. Thus, it is only after

Milkman learns about his past, his own people that he can find himself and can eventually “fly”.

Operating upon a similar concern of underscoring the significance of communal solidarity in the path to develop a solid identity, Coates assesses the cultural and personal wounds that are caused by family separation in the Black American family units in the late antebellum America through the story of Hiram Walker. Unlike Morrison who frames her work around the theme of exploring one’s ancestral past for their own individual betterment, Coates stresses the notion that not only discovering the ancestral past but also excavating individually suppressed or forgotten memories caused by the effects of a cultural trauma is significant on the route to healing and cultivating a stronger sense of self. His narrative which accentuates the necessity of remembering personal history is linked to the history of the whole African American diaspora. In this sense, while Hiram tries to excavate his personal memories which he unconsciously has suppressed, he also discovers the long history and the legacy of slavery. In line to this, the novel also puts emphasis on the act of re-framing colonial narratives. Through presenting a different side of the upcoming Civil War era, Coates deconstructs the canonical historical narratives that disregard the existence of Black agency by means of putting the silenced and overlooked narratives of Black Americans at the center.

As both novels are set against the backdrop of historical events, both Morrison and Coates pay tribute to their ancestral pasts through crafting a rich narrative to become the voices of those that have been silenced in the historical past. Both authors underscore the idea that the act of remembering is a catalyst for identity formation both on communal and on individual level. As Madan Sarup states:

> …to know oneself is to discover the forgotten influences that have made us what we are. In reaching back to origins to recollect fragments of our experiences, memory makes us whole once more by reaffirming our connection with the past” (*Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, 86).

The cultural anchoring reinforces the idea that the individual identity is deeply tied to our cultural memory. This explains the motivation behind African American authors, such as Morrison and Coates, who engage with the legacy of slavery. They foreground the Black experience, and the historical past in an attempt to keep the cultural legacy alive.

Additionally, through the employment of folkloric elements of authentic Black culture, such as the incorporation of songs, myths and mystical powers, as well as the significance of ancestors in one's life, both novels aim to present a microcosm of African American culture, drawing attention to the fact that these cultural artifacts are essential stones for commemorating and acknowledging one's past. Individuals who are subjected to cultural trauma need to reclaim their communal history by means of giving voice to their erased narratives, which will foster a sense of collective belonging and a resilient identity.

In the final analysis, I believe that these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the importance of connection; connection to a community, to ancestors and to a historical past, as well as connection to a cultural and racial heritage that fuels the survival of individual identities. Ancestral connection helps culturally traumatized group to solidify their personal and cultural identities while also nurturing their pasts. Finally, as this thesis concentrated on the individuals who are affected in the late antebellum and Civil Rights Movement period only, future research might investigate how other novels address the magnitude of this legacy on the contemporary African Americans, investigating the myriads of other aspects that still persists in the recent generation as well.

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