

The “Tilted Man’s” Quest for Home: Mourning and Melancholia in Toni Morrison’s *Home*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the portrayal of the racial problem and its effects on the African American individual as depicted in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Home* (2012). The novel is similar to other works written by Morrison in that the events of the story are set in specific historical periods to portray the dangers of racism on the African American individual irrespective of gender and the threat it poses to the African American community and the American nation as a whole. The personal narrative of Frank's past and his journey can be understood within Hayden White's concept of "emplotment." Also, the researchers rely on Sigmund Freud’s notes on “Mourning and Melancholia” as a useful theoretical context that aids in explaining Frank’s psychological status which is a result of racism, homelessness, and estrangement. Morrison goes into the causes of how an individual becomes melancholic, ambivalent, and detached from himself/herself and the community. Finally, the implications of the novel's racial tensions in American society at large can be understood within Bhabha's postcolonial theory.

Keywords: Morrison; *Home*; African American literature; Melancholia; Mourning; New Historicism; Racism.

I. Introduction

“For larger and larger numbers of black people, this sense of loss has grown, and deeper the conviction that something valuable is slipping away from us, the more necessary it has become to find some way to hold on to the useful past without blocking off the possibilities of the future” (Morrison, *Rediscovering Black History*, 42).

The meaning and associations of "home" for individuals have been major themes for many writers in contemporary fiction. In many narratives, the home is typically associated with a feeling of belonging for the characters, and also encompasses a larger discussion on the idea of the national identity. As Bhabha puts it, "the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past" (1994, p.145). Thus, the novel's title and themes have postcolonial significance (Soleimani & Zarrinjooee, 2014, 498). Yet, the novel invites various readings because "home" entails individual feelings, a shared past, and an outlook on the future to foster a sentiment of belonging to a community and a nation.

The theme of 'home' has been of particular interest to African American female writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neal Hurston. The writers have used the historical background of the African American community who were deprived of a sense of home because they have been uprooted from their homeland to be slaves as a background to their literary work. The novels of these prominent African American writers often feature women as protagonists and occasionally men as major characters who face problems that can be traced by going back to their ancestors' history as they were detached from their native lands and found themselves obliged to find new ways to heal and rediscover their home again. In almost all her novels and critical works, the Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison declared that the obstacle that prevented the African Americans from belonging to their new world was deep-rooted racism which was a consequence of historical events: "in this country, it is quite the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen" (Morrison, 2008, p. 47). Therefore, critics have discussed her novels considering the history of the community in which her characters are shaped by its turbulent relationship with the larger American society and accordingly, her novels are to be considered as "funk" and as "the intrusion of the past on the present" (Willis, 2017, p. 690).

Her tenth novel *Home* (2013) carries the same ambition she attempts to in her novels and that is to "rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison...or, at the most, it became imperative for me to transform this house completely; counter racism was never an option" (Morrison, 1998, p.4). By visiting traumatic historical accounts in the past of the African American community, Morrison unravels the negative effects that racism still has on the African American individual and tries to find an alternative in the novel's conclusion as a basis for building a better present and future for the coming generations of multi-racial and multicultural American to live in harmony.

For Morrison, the world is combined of races, and that she has "never lived, nor has any one of us, in a world in which race did not matter" (Morrison, 1998, p.3). The novel offers critics with ample discussion on the major themes that Morrison revisits in many of her other works, especially on the personal and cultural sources of trauma.



Morrison's novels including *Home* are set at crucial historical moments in American national history when racism was rampant to show to her readers the effect of such matters on the psyche of African Americans. The events in the novel take place before and after the Korean War (1950-1953) which was a war between the South and the Northern parts of the country which could allude to the American civil war. White (1978) discusses the idea of representing historical facts through fiction and emphasizes the role of fiction in rewriting historical events. Therefore, this fusion between history and fiction creates a wider scope in which "we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable" (p.98). It is important here to mention that "novelists and historians share the act of representing a "verbal image of 'reality'" (p.122). This paper discusses how Morrison uses the historical setting in her novel *Home* (2012) to relate her characters' loss of a real and symbolic 'home' end up in daily suffering and how mourning leads to melancholia for the African American individual. Morrison portrays by focusing on Frank and his sister Cee how the African American character has become psychologically melancholic over time due to racial discrimination and the result of which was the ambivalent feelings in the individual concerning their home. Hayden White's idea of "emplotment" helps illuminate the historical conditioning of African Americans. Also, Sigmund Freud's notes on "Mourning and Melancholia" are useful in explaining Frank's psychological status which is a result of racial discrimination.

In *Home* (2012), Morrison sets the novel in the historical period of the 1950s, at the time of the Korean War, and also at an important time when the intellectual debate was at its peak concerning the social segregation in America. She sheds light on the life of a single character to discuss the African American community in particular and the American society in general. In the novel, she depicts an African American young man, Frank Money; a veteran who fought for the army in Korea and has returned to America. Readers encounter an individual whose deeply rooted sufferings which he had encountered in the war leave him internally wounded and he seems unable to heal both physically and psychologically. The historical details about the characters in her fiction conform to what Whites calls "emplotment." White explains that "histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called 'emplotment'" (1978, p.83). Morrison "emplots" these stories of African Americans in tragic scenes to show how certain problems, especially racism, leave negative effects on their lives, and how they gradually lose their worth and sense of belonging.

Morrison draws attention to turbulent historical incidents in American history that have left an impact on the present. Moreover, she represents her characters as detached, because they roam and wander through life trying to find any means of recognition. As a writer, she insinuates that this detachment is a result of racism throughout history. Her characters struggle to belong, but

they are rejected especially Frank Money who wanders like a lost soul from one town in America to the other without being recognized as an individual even though he is trying to come back to this world and live in peace with others. The readers sympathize with his attempts at trying to get rid of all the unbearable memories of his hometown, Lotus, or in the war in Korea that haunt him.

The story is tragic because racism seems to prevail over the male protagonist. Her choice to focus on a male character is her attempts at a more comprehensive view on the problems of the African American people as she "reveals the power of facing traumatic memory, the healing ability of a community, and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles." Therefore, in the novel "Morrison postulates a progressive model of race and gender, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility in confronting one's past to become a productive member of the community who can care for others, pass on knowledge, and aid in the self-actualization of the next generation" (Harack372). The characterization of Frank provides multiple readings as he might seem to be "Morrison's attempt to offer a restored portrait of African American masculinity that is timely and relevant in a contemporary context of legal persecution that facilitates the reinvention of new modes of being" (Cucarella-Ramon, 2017, p. 94). The interpretation of the story relies on the events that shape his personality. The narrative shows how Frank on his way back to save his sister, Cee, encountering many direct racial profiling acts that are present in every city. Therefore, it seems natural that ambivalent feelings towards home are present as he is not welcomed in the community. Bhabha explains that the feeling of abandonment can be encountered when the "violence of a racialized society falls most enduring on details of life; where you can sit, or not; how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love, or not" (1994, p.15). All those racial practices helped in reshaping the character of Frank to being melancholic.

II. The Protagonist

In the novel, Morrison presents to the readers the protagonist, Frank, as a person who has ambivalent feelings towards the home he left behind in the South. Frank is having trauma because of the negative memories that haunted him back in his hometown, Lotus. The painful past is always present in every detail of his life and any present encounter with other people would bring back sad memories. On his way back to his hometown, he encounters incidents related to different kinds of racism, but that tough journey is his only chance to heal and start a new beginning with his community. As Morrison explains that there should be "a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters" (Morrison, 1987, p.12). Therefore, the author through her narrative technique succeeds in shedding light on the effects of racism on the life and the well-being of the individual and places his problems within a historical context of the African American community who have encountered many traumatic times in the past. Frank's journey from the north to the south is a symbolic journey with significant historical purport as the main character mourns the painful past. Therefore, it becomes a therapeutic journey to reconcile with the past and to find a way out of it into a brighter and less racial future. Mourning

the loss of a home cause melancholy and lead to pathological problems and Morrison directs her readers' attention to racism historically to educate them about its dangers both on the individual's psyche and the community in general.

The understanding of Frank's psyche means resorting to psychoanalysis that relies on the understanding of childhood trauma and its effect on adults. Freud identifies mourning as the "reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on. In some people, the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition" (Freud, 1917, p.243). Freud's definition of mourning describes the natural humanistic reaction to loss that Frank Money suffered from while he was retrieving the sad memories of his lost home and his attempts at reclaiming his true identity. Mourning paves the way for the psyche to get over difficulties and gradually heal. But in the case of Frank, the process is difficult as he is not able to reconcile with the traumatic images that haunt his mind while he was at the hospital.

Frank is first introduced to the readers as a patient with mental issues because of the bloody images and the hideous memories he still remembers from the war. Throughout the novel, he suffers from his 'loss', because of many things that he cannot undo, fix, or get over with to live normally. Mourning in his case is persistent and shapes his melancholic existence. His loss is further accentuated whenever he recalls memories related to what he calls home where racial acts were the norm. He flees from Lotus at first to join the army because his hometown is a harsh place to live in, "the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefields." (Morrison, 2012, p.83) His purpose is to rediscover a new identity by joining an integrated army and when he comes back from the war, he quickly finds that his efforts were all futile because of the deep-rooted racism in his community. Fighting bravely, suffering from losing his self-esteem, and jeopardizing the well-being of his family were all in vain, sadly enough, and it helped in intensifying his melancholic status. As a result, he wanders the streets of Seattle after that, "not totally homeless, but close." (Morrison, 2012, p.68)

When Frank manages to escape from the hospital, he runs out in the streets shoeless, which is symbolic, and the experience reminds him of racial acts done to his family when they were forced to leave their homes because of segregation and the racial discrimination practiced at that time. He says: "you could be inside living in your own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move-with or without shoes" (Morrison, 2012, p.9). Such painful memories of sadness and the expulsion of the place he identified as home resulted in his detachment from the world surrounding him. Freud in his article states that "each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-catheted, and detachment of the libido



is accomplished in respect of it” (Freud, 1917, p.245). Accordingly, these melancholic episodes are essential to remember because Frank has to reconcile with them to heal.

To his surprise, when Frank gets back to America after fighting in an integrated army, he encounters segregation and discrimination which he wants to believe as non-existent. This discovery intensifies his personal, communal, and national loss. Therefore, mourning a lost home and the endless sufferings to regain the feeling of belonging results in what Freud calls 'melancholia.' Freud explains that melancholia “borrows some of its features from mourning, and the others from the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism” (Freud, 1917, p.250). In mourning, it is the world that is not going right, but in melancholia, the person “extends his self-criticism over the past; he declares that he was never any better” (Freud, 1917, p.246). The melancholic admits that it is his entire fault, and he starts blaming himself and his personal choices. Throughout the journey, every incident reminds Frank of something painful that happened to him, his family, or community, leaving him hesitant, undecided, and not much optimistic about the future of his homeliness. Frank's desperation is because he never had the chance to feel a sense of belonging to a home, and, therefore, he is imagining the concept of home. His original roots in Africa are never mentioned in the novel, so “lack”, as opposed to "loss", marks the psychological status of the melancholic Frank; Ziz'ek commented on such a conceptual fallacy:

insofar as the object-cause of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost. In short, what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void or lack of a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object. What we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss.... For this reason, melancholy is not simply the attachment to the lost object but the attachment to the very original gesture of its loss. (Z'iz'ek, 2000, p. 659-660).

In the conversation between Reverend Locke and Frank, the Reverend tells him to be careful of racist's attempts on the way back to Lotus. He informs him that it is everywhere, “listen here, you from Georgia and you been in desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be dangerous” (Morrison, 2012, p.19). Morrison mentions other forms of segregation that took

place in social domains as in the case of restaurants and hotels. Frank witnesses a black couple who are beaten and kicked out of a ‘Whites only’ coffee shop. All these incidents prevent Frank from assimilating in the “national fabric” with the other ethnicities, and that facilitates his transition into melancholia: “this suspended assimilation—this inability to blend into the “melting pot” of America—suggests that...ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal” (L. Eng, 2000, p.671). Furthermore, the sense of lacking a home was apparent and mutual between Billy and Frank in the restaurant when the first asked: "where you from, Frank?" "Aw, man, Korea, Kentucky, San Diego, Seattle, Georgia, name it. I'm from it" (Morrison, 2012, p.28). The inability to name his birthplace shows how ambivalent Frank is in defining the idea of the home.

III. The State of Ambivalence

The state of ambivalence has been discussed by many scholars such as Bhabha who related the postcolonial with identity formation. Freud considers ambivalence as one that is related to melancholia because it is “complicated by conflict”, as this uncertainty is “either constitutional, i.e., is an element of every love-relation formed by this particular ego, or else it proceeds from those experiences that involve the threat of losing the object” (Freud, 1917, p.256). Frank loves the idealized concept of home and is desperate to belong to a specific one from which he would not be forced out to leave repeatedly. This is according to Freud (1917) shows that: “constitutional ambivalence belongs by nature to the repressed; traumatic experiences in connection with the object may have activated other repressed material” (p.257). Frank as a result is melancholic because of being forced out of his hometown and transferred from one place to another due to racial segregation and that intensifies his negative feelings towards the people he encounters.

The novel focuses on his post-traumatic stress disorder as a mental illness disorder, and also as a source of the tragedy that has a historical context which is important for the reader to grasp as the main reason that helped shape the melancholic identity of Frank. The main character does not posit as an angelic person especially as he has killed a young girl in Korea during the war. Significantly, Morrison appears in her characterization as unbiased in her analysis of the violence prevalent in the community and American society. From Morrison's perspective, the war and its effects on people "defy American regard for the 1950s as a period of peace and prosperity" (Penner, 2016, 343). Moreover, the historical context of the novel's events was personal for her because "she both revives and rewrites elements in Woolf's and Faulkner's work that she first scrutinized in her 1955 master's thesis at Cornell University." (343) The incident appears to intensify his self-despise and blame because the melancholic- as Freud defines- is a person who “displays an extra diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on grand scale...he reproaches himself and expects to be cast out and punished” (Freud, 1917, p.246). As a result, he cannot socialize with others because he is doubly rejected by the African American community in addition to the larger American society. The trauma surfaces in his inability to confide in anyone even to his girlfriend,

Lily, or anyone that might be close to him. Frank is not able to come to terms with his inner struggles and regrets, so being melancholic is the logical outcome.

III. Recoloring the Western Landscape?

The attempts by Frank to take control are futile because he is trying to “recolor the western landscape” (Morrison, 2012, p.27). Morrison wants Frank to view his home as colorful, and not only through “black-and-white movie screen.” (Morrison, 2012, p.23). However, as readers we are aware that the mindset of Frank is naturally reflected in his surroundings because: “in mourning, it is the world which becomes poor and empty.” (Freud, 1917, p.246). But when the lost object or abstraction ends, the “ego becomes free and inhabited again” (Freud, 1917, p.245). Frank’s journey is originally meant to save his sister, Cee, but Frank admits that “Down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself — a strong good me.” (Morrison, 2012, p.104). He is trying to save himself to save his sister. Therefore letting go of the painful past, looking forward to a brighter future, living in harmony, and reconciling with what was lost in the past will prevent Frank from turning into a dark, pessimistic being because of his psychotic mourning of the past: “In Freud’s theory of mourning, one works through and finds closure to these losses by investing in new objects—in the American dream, for example” (L. Eng, 2000, 680).

IV. True Understanding of the Home

At the end of the novel, Morrison suggests a management technique in coping with the loss of a home and that is by manifesting the importance of the community in embracing the individual regardless of race, color, or ethnicity. The novel is optimistic because Frank manages to save Cee, and they go back to their community as it is the only place where they can ask for help. When they arrive at Lotus, they hear women singing together, it was like a call for them to reunite and feel home again: “through the screen door Frank heard singing, “Nearer, my God, to thee...” (Morrison, 2012, p.116). As in the other literary works by Morrison, African American women play an important role in the healing of a community and they express their concern that Frank’s male energy stands in the way of the healing process. The women through their conventional wisdom heal both the traumatized siblings in a symbolic act of healing both genders from feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. They also educate them on the need to rise above any psychological or social limitations imposed on them and they also point out that their struggles are part of a wider struggle for dignity and empowerment.

As Frank and Cee grapple with a true understanding of the home, they are accepted by the members of their community. With the help of the women, Ethel takes care of Cee physically and psychologically. The strong women of the African American community “handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping. They didn’t waste their time or the patient’s with sympathy and they met tears of the suffering with resigned contempt” (Morrison, 2012, p.121). On the psychological level, Cee has been convinced by Ethel

and the women that she is a worthy human being and not an animal to be used by doctors or others as they wish. Ethel expresses her belief as she says, “You ain’t a mule to be pulling some evil doctor’s wagon.” “you a privy or a woman.” “Who told you was trash?” (Morrison, 2012, p.122). Ethel also tells her that all humans are equal to God regardless of their color or race, “you good enough for Jesus. That’s all you need to know” (Morrison, 2012, p.123). Before coming back to Lotus, Frank once expressed that Cee “was broken. Not broken up but broken down, down into her separate parts” (Morrison, 2012, p.76). The act of quilting that Cee learns from Ethel signifies the gathering of her broken parts together.

V. The Process of Healing

This treatment from the ladies that put their lives together is in contrast to the treatment by their hateful mother which serves as a motif in the novel. The sad life the two major characters led can be traced to the postpartum depression which their mother Lenore had to deal with after the birth of her daughter. This is ironic as the cause of mental problems for both of them lies in the home and therefore, it is logical that the initiation of healing lies in going back to the source of the problem, which is the lack of maternal support. In this regard, both African American men and women share the burden of being broken and Morrison in this novel sought to correct the racial and gender problems by providing a male character that experiences a different world than those who are not black and who is prevented from reaching a state of completeness because of the negative things that they have assimilated into their psyche.

Thus, Frank’s psychological healing begins when he starts contacting people in his community and helping men in the fields. This dramatic change takes place because he can find peace and stability at the end of the novel and realizes that having a home means being accepted and acting as an active participant in the community. In the past, Frank “seemed to have no goals at all” (Morrison, 2012. p.76). But the “feeling of safety and goodwill, he knew, was exaggerated, but savoring it was real” (Morrison, 2012, p.118). Frank regains his peace by confessing at the end about killing the little girl in war. Forgiveness and healing take place when Frank hears the community singing while walking in the town, ““Take me to the water. Take me to the water. To be baptized”” (Morrison, 2012, p.117). It is quite obvious that Morrison wants to voice the belief that strong community ties can cure the most complicated disorders of grief and melancholia.

One of the most important themes that Morrison aims at directing at the end of her novel is the importance of the community in accepting the lost individuals and even though her novels revolve on mostly African American characters and her message is universal. The women in the novel guide the healing process as one that progresses from bondage to the tragedy that forces beyond their control imposed on them as individuals to an act of bonding that is within their reach. In one of her interviews, she says: “my editor said something about the main character being black, and I said, “How do you know he’s black?” He said, “I just know.” I said, “How? ’Cause I never

said it. I never wrote it. I only describe what's going on" (Bollen, 2012, p. 2). For this reason, Morrison has been called "the conscience of America" (Bollen, 2012, p.3). Thus, readers have realized that the novel "ends on a very positive and optimistic note" (Ibarrola, 2013, p.121) Morrison wants to project the idea of living in universal harmony regardless of color, race, or ethnicity. Moreover, she emphasizes that healing starts with the smaller community and then spreads to the other groups in America for a better future.

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