

A Study of Frank's Quest for Individual Cultural Identity in *Home*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison, the first African-American female Nobel Prize winner for Literature, is always concerned with the miserable sufferings and survival of marginalized African Americans and her works depicts the physical and psychological trauma caused by slavery and racial discrimination. This paper makes an attempt to analyze the reasons why Frank in Tony Morrison's tenth novel *Home* feels homeless from the perspective of double consciousness and unhomeliness in post-colonial criticism and calls on the black to fight against racial discrimination, to go back to their black community and maintain and develop their culture and tradition if they want to find the sense of belonging and rebuild their culture identity in a white-dominated society. Only rooted in the rich soil of their own culture, can African Americans find their true self and rebuild their cultural identity.

Key words: double consciousness; unhomeliness; black community; cultural identity

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison is a great African-American writer and the first African-American female writer who wins the Nobel Prize for Literature. *Home*, the tenth novel of Toni Morrison, tells the story of Frank Money, a 24-year-old African-American veteran of the Korean War, and his journey home. After traumatic experiences on the front lines, Frank Money finds himself back in racist America with more than just physical scars and his shattered life has no purpose until he hears that Cee is in danger. So he journeys to his native Georgia to rescue his medically abused younger sister and take her back to the small Georgia town they come from and he's hated all his life. As Frank revisits his memories from childhood and the war that have left him questioning his sense of self, he discovers a profound courage he had thought he could never possess again and learns at last what it means to be a man, what it takes to heal, and above all—what it means to come home. This deeply moving novel tells us an apparently defeated man finds his manhood, his spiritual home and his desperate search for himself in a world disfigured by war and racial discrimination.

This thesis makes an attempt to analyze the reasons why Frank in Tony Morrison's tenth novel *Home* feels homeless from the perspective of double consciousness and unhomeliness in post-colonial criticism and calls on the black to fight against racial discrimination, to go back to their black community and maintain and develop their culture and tradition if they want to find the sense of belonging and rebuild their culture identity in a white-dominated society. Only rooted in the rich soil of their own culture, can African Americans find their true self and rebuild their cultural identity.

2. The concepts of double consciousness and unhomeliness

It is well known that the history of slavery is a history filled with “black sadness and sorrow, black agony and anguish, black heartache and heart break.” It is a “cry and moan, the deep black meaning goes back to the indescribable cries of African on the slave ships during the cruel transatlantic voyage to American.” (West, 1996:81-82)

In the white-dominated society, colonialism is a thing of a past, but cultural colonization is still deeply rooted in African American life. The white think their culture is civilized, sophisticated and superior while African American culture is savage and backward, so they regard themselves as the center of the world while ignore or sweep aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the black and marginalize them. From generation to generation, the black want desperately to be accepted by white-dominated society, and some of them feel ashamed of their own culture and even forget it.

Under this circumstance, Many African Americans experience the double consciousness, a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets in his book titled *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois describes “double consciousness” as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.(2007:56)

Double consciousness often produces an unstable sense of self, because blacks are frequently forced to leave from their rural farm or village to the city in search of employment. Even today, large numbers of African American descendants are scattered around the world, separated from their own original homeland. The feeling of being caught between two conflicting cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the culture displacement within which one lives, is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness. (Tyson, 2014:421) Being "unhomed" does not mean being homeless, but means feeling not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself. That is to say, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee.

African Americans struggle with a double consciousness, a double conception of self. They are constantly trying to reconcile the two cultures that compose their identities.

3. The reasons for Frank's quest for individual cultural identity

3.1 Racial discrimination prevailing in the United States

In 1865, American Civil War was over, and slavery was abolished, with about 4 million blacks gaining freedom. While racial discrimination still prevails in the United State and minorities in America, especially the Negro, still suffer an unequal treatment. Every year, many black Americans become victims of racial discrimination policy. In addition to the racial discrimination, social injustice further intensifies the divergence between whites and blacks in the United States. Black communities are marginalized. The black are still poor in economy and isolated in society, and receive little or even no education.

Lotus, Frank's hometown, is a place where racial discrimination prevailed and where black people were treated unequally; it is a place where the black showed no care to their current status and their future and never had the awareness to fight for their equal rights. This place is hopeless and intolerable. So Frank hated it and desperately wanted to run far far away from it and later no hesitation, he joined the army with his two friends to Korean war, and escaped this suffocating and disgusting place. He would never come back.

Frank still remembered that when he was four years old his family and the neighborhood were forced to leave their homes in Bandera County, Texas in twenty four hours, otherwise they would be killed. They were forced to leave purely because of their black skin. He witnessed an old man named Crawford who refused to vacate was beaten to death with his

eyes carved out and tied to the tree in his own yard. So for the black, even in their own home, they can be force to leave their own houses at any time with no reasons.

After Frank's family are forced to leave their house, they moved to his grandparents' home in Lotus, Georgia where Frank and his sister Cee witnessed a body (apparently a black, maybe still alive) was buried in a grave by a group of men. Frank, who is African American, does not explicitly describe the men who were doing the burying, but he implies that they were white. It was horrible and both Frank and his sister was startled.

On the train to Chicago to rescue his sister, he saw a black man got off the train at Elko to buy some coffee or something, but the owner or customers or both kicked him out of the shop. When his wife came to help, she got a rock thrown in her face. Apparently, the couple were beaten just because they were the black.

Being black is always exposed to danger at any time and any place no matter whether you are adults or kids. On the way to rescue his sister, Frank met a new friend Billy Watson whose son, Thomas, was shot by a white cop at the age of eight when he was running up and down in the street with a cap pistol only because "Cops shoot anything they want." Even a kid cannot escape the fate of being hurt by the white just because he was black.

Racial discrimination exists in every corner of American society and makes the black feel homeless even though they are in their homeland.

3.2 The cruelty of the war

The story was set in the early 1950s, a period in which racial discrimination prevailed everywhere in the United States and people were trapped the aftermath of the Korean War, a horrible war you didn't call a war where 58,000 people died. War is cruel just like Morrison described "Battle is scary, ... Orders, quit-quicken, covering buddies, killing-clear, no deep thinking needed." (Morrison, 2013:93)

In order to escape suffocating Lotus town, Frank Money joined the Korean War with two boyhood friends Mike and Stuff. But Mike died bitterly in Frank's arm in the war, which shook Frank badly and changed him a lot. Previously Frank had always followed orders on the battlefield, but he had never acted especially brave. And then Stuff bled to death with his arm blown off before the medic got there. He was unable to save Mike and Stuff in the war. He could no longer hear, talk to, or laugh with them. He did all he could for his friends, but they died anyway. For a long time, only alcohol dispersed his best friends, the hovering dead.

Although the Korean War was over a year ago, and he came back from Korea, the nightmares of the wounded and dead in the war and the haunting dreams of his dead friends often dance before his eyes as if the war just happened yesterday, which makes him go into deep despair, and even drives him crazy. Especially a secret, the cruelly killing of a starving Korean girl is deeply buried in the bottom of his heart and torments him mentally. He lives aimless and purposeless, and his life is like a desert.

3.3 The coldness of home

Home is a place where you feel warm and safe. It's a place which always give you support and help if you're in trouble.

While Frank almost didn't feel the warmth from home. Since childhood, Frank's parents, Luther and Ida, worked two jobs each, day and night and had little time to take care of them, leaving them in the care of Lenore, Frank's mean step mother. While Lenore, who hated them, showed no sympathy and care to Frank and Cee and often abused them. At that moment their grandfather Salem was silent.

The Indifference of parents, the hatefulness of Lenore and the silence of their grandpa make Frank unable to feel the warmth from home and get the love and care from family members. On the contrary, what they get from home is the psychological trauma and they are hurt emotionally. Being at home, they feel homeless. So Frank joins the Korea War to leave this cold home even though war is dangerous.

4. The ways to rebuild individual cultural identity

4.1 People uniting together regardless of the colors of their skins,

Above all, *Home* demonstrates a sense of community, not just within the physical environment of one's origins but also with the assistance that total strangers offer Frank Money. Frank's journey to home to save his sister is full of difficulties and hardships, but he gets a lot of help from strangers, whites and blacks.

One the way to rescue his sister, Frank received numerous help. It is Sarah who wrote a letter to Frank and told him that he must hurry home and rescue his younger sister from danger; Once again, it is Sarah who helps him rescue his sister out of the white doctor's house, taking the risk of being fired. It is John Locke who not only provides Frank with food and a pair of galoshes, so he can travel on, but also provides seventeen dollars, all the money they have, to pay for a part of Frank's journey.

Frank gets warm-hearted help from Billy Watson and his wife Arlene, African Americans. As a new friend, Bill Waston invited him to spent a night at their home and accompanied Frank to buy clothes and shoes at the risk of losing all the best day jobs. The Waston family's warm-hearted help makes Frank feel the warmth from home.

When the train reached Atlanta, Frank got off and wandered around in Auburn Street at night. Five young in-training gangsters attacked him and stole his wallet. While a man came to help, offered him a couple of dollar bills. Obviously, the man is a white for a black would not call the police when confronted with danger.

If it were not the help from the women in his hometown in black community, maybe his sister would die. It is them who take turns to take care of her, try different therapies, and at last cure Cee. Cee is getting better day by day and later healthy both physically and spiritually.

The help from these people is just like a light spring wind blowing warm air across Frank's heart and makes him realize that he is a person loved and needed. In this novel, Morrison indicates that if people all over the world unite together against racial discrimination, regardless of the color of their skin, a bright future will be in their hands and racism will be got rid of sooner or later.

4.2 The return to African American community and culture

Identity losing and searching cultural identity are recurring themes in Toni Morrison's novels. The characters in her novel are more or less the black who doubt themselves and lost themselves in the white-dominated society. Because of mental oppression for a long time by whites, they gradually lose heart in fighting against racial discrimination, forget their own cultural identity, and become the victims of slavery and racism. Morrison revealed that in American society full of racial discrimination if blacks abandon their own black culture and tradition, it means the loss of self-value and the loss of national nature, which eventually will lead to self-destruction. In order to help millions of black change their fate, Morrison points out for blacks possible solutions which are to go back to their community and preserve black culture.

It is in Lotus town that Frank finds the lost self, and gains the sense of belonging and the sense of security. He shows sincere gratitude to the women who cure his sister, shows respect to the people in his hometown, faces up to his two dead friends' parents and tries to be a member of this community. The haunting images of his two dead friends, the guilty for their families, and the terrible experiences in Korean War once torturing him now go away. And now his restless heart finds warm harbor where he can rest. His once hopeless, meaningless and purposeless life finds an oasis full of vitality. He gets the inner peace, lives harmoniously with his neighbors in this community, and returns to the normal life as the ordinary people. He becomes a real man and shoulders the responsibility not only for himself but also for his sister.

Lotus town is a miniature of African American communities, which serves as the practical home as well as spiritual home for African Americans. In this communities, blacks help each, care each other, live harmoniously, and unite together to fight against troubles and difficulties confronting them. In this warm community, Frank finds his value and spiritual home where his restless heart can rest. He becomes a new self, confident and cheerful, and begins a new life.

5. Conclusion

In essence, Frank's journey to home to rescue his sister is the journey to quest for his self identify. Back to Lotus town, a black community, Frank eventually recovers from trauma physically and mentally and gains recognition. With the support and help from the fellowmen

in black community, he realizes he is loved and finds the spiritual home he can rest freely.

The black community is the source of racial empowerment, and an isolation from community means a lack of nurturing, caring and support which may lead the character nowhere and gradually undermines the solidify of African Americans. Reverend Misner in *Paradise* points out “If you cut yourself from the root, you will wither”. (Morrison,1999:209)To bid farewell to unhomeliness, to gain recognition from the mainstream culture and to gain individual and collective cultural identity in a white-dominated society, African Americans need to go back to their spiritual home, to African American community, to revisit their history, to show respect to their culture and tradition and preserve them because they are the root for blacks from which African Americans could gain strength and nutrition to become giant trees.

Besides, people all over the world, regardless of the colors of their skins, should unite together to get rid of racial discrimination and fight for blacks’ equal rights. Through these ways, African American can find their sense of belonging and rebuild their culture identity.

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