

Ksenija M. Kondali<sup>1</sup>  
University of Sarajevo  
Faculty of Philosophy

Sandra V. Novkinić<sup>2</sup>  
University of Bihać  
Faculty of Pedagogy

## REASSESSING THE PAST: MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *HOME*

*Abstract: Toni Morrison's superior literary oeuvre reconsiders the American past by introducing memories of subjects who have been ignored or misrepresented in official history, with particular attention to their identity construction. This paper aims to examine how the neglected history of African Americans is reconstructed in Morrison's novel Home (2012) through remembrances of the protagonist, a Korean War veteran. His attempts to recall his personal and his family's past shape the quest for identity. Concurrently, the narrative about the characters' fates prompts a deeper retrospective of American race relations and debunks the myth of "the Fantastic Fifties" in the United States. Using scholarship on this topic and critical viewpoints of authors such as bell hooks about home in African Americans' lives, this analysis seeks to explore Morrison's novel Home, concentrating on how identity is constructed in the process of the main character's remembrances of the past and growth toward self-respect.*

*Key words: African Americans; American history; African American novel; memory; identity; trauma; Korean War; race relations*

### 1) Introduction

Toni Morrison's novels describe the lasting effects of slavery on African American culture with urgency and innovative revisions of traditional literary forms and devices. Her work has also addressed the way African American individual and

<sup>1</sup>ksenija.kondali@ff.unsa.ba.

<sup>2</sup>sandra\_novkinic@hotmail.com

collective identities are formed under the pressure of white mainstream culture and master narratives that have mostly silenced, ignored or misrepresented African Americans' past. The continuing debunking of the dominant social and cultural representations of American myths in general, as well as those related to African Americans, has become the mainstay in her opus, dedicated to "the dismantling of national narratives, a challenge to the flaws inherent in the myths of national self-definition, and a re-envisioning of what 'Americanness' might mean" (Roynon 2013a: 105). To this end, Morrison's literary production concentrates on the sense of identity; that is, how the formation of identity and the pressures of metanarratives at the collective level impact African Americans' self-actualisation. According to critical opinion, Morrison "is intent on depicting the rich complexities and complicating differences—such as differences in gender, class, education, and culture—that shape African-American identities" (Bouson 2005: 21).

In *Home*, Morrison writes about the physical and psychological consequences of the Korean War and the effect of racial violence on the identity construction of African American characters. The novel centers on a twenty-four-year-old African American war veteran by the name of Frank Money, who narrates most of the novel. He longs to leave his hometown of Lotus, Georgia so he joins the army with his childhood friends at the age of eighteen. Frank is deployed to Korea, where he has many traumatic experiences, including witnessing the deaths of his two best friends and his murdering a young local girl in order to stop himself from abusing her. Burdened by feelings of guilt resulting from outliving his friends and of shame at being aroused by and then killing a child, he does not return to Lotus after his army service. Instead, he lives in the state of Washington, struggling with PTSD and seeking release in alcohol and violence while suffering racial injustices and being treated as inferior despite his veteran status. His homeland, for which he risked his life, snubs him. The only hope and stability in his life come from his moving in with his girlfriend, Lily, but his odd trauma-induced habits weigh their relationship down. When Frank receives a postcard with the alarming message that his sister Ycidra (Cee) is in trouble, he heads home, to Georgia, to help the person he loves most and who has been his only positive remembrance of home.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> While her brother was in the army, Cee was vulnerable without her protective brother. She married too young, only to be taken advantage of and abandoned. In her efforts to look out for herself and recover from this situation, she is subjected to the eugenic experiments of a white doctor at a time when abusive medical trials on African Americans were not uncommon. Due to the scope limitation and central issue of this paper, her character's struggle will not be analysed here. For more information on this topic, see Harack 2016, López Ramírez 2014, and Wyatt 2017.

Like Morrison's other novels, *Home* (2012) is concerned with the (re)telling of history by focusing on a certain period from America's past from the perspective of those "who have largely been written out of that history" (Smith 2012, 30), with narrative approaches that might be considered "typical of Morrison's refusal to accept mythologised history at its face value" (Roynon 2013a: 104). As the title suggests, the novel deals with notions of home and what it means for protagonists who have undertaken their search for home.

## 2) The 1950s: Debunking Myths About the Age of Conformity and the Forgotten War

The novel also portrays a brother-and-sister relationship and their quest for identity during the 1950s, a decade for which, as Valerie Smith points out, many late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Americans have become nostalgic (2012: 132). Although set in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, the novel incorporates retrospective glimpses of the 1930s and 1940s, together with haunting implications of the Middle Passage, which is why the novel is described "as a historical trauma narrative, [that] deals with the fragmented identities and collective hauntings of African Americans, which have to do with slavery and its legacy, but also with the Korean War" (López Ramírez 2015: 128). *Home* shows us a different perspective on this age that had lingering effects on African Americans and the US as a whole, also evident in interviews in which Morrison explained her strategy regarding the Korean War and the period in this novel:

It was called a "police action" then—never a war—even though 53,000 soldiers died. And the other thing going on in the '50s was [Joseph] McCarthy. And they were killing black people right and left. In 1955, Emmett Till was killed, and later there was also a lot coming to the surface about medical experimentation. Now, we know about the LSD experiments on soldiers, but there was experimentation with syphilis that was going on with black men at Tuskegee who thought they were receiving health care. [...] But it was those four events that seemed to me to be among the seeds that produced the '60s and '70s. I wanted to look at that, so I chose a man who had been in Korea who was suffering from shell shock. He goes on this journey—reluctantly. He didn't want to go back to Georgia, where he was from. Georgia was like another battlefield for him. (Morrison 2020: 65)

In her critical reassessment of "the Fantastic Fifties" grand narrative, Morrison points out the absurdity of the nature of this war that was largely misrepresented in

mainstream society and its lingering consequences. She also denounces the cruelty towards African Americans who were used as guinea pigs for medical research and points out the strong impact this decade had on race relations. Although dubbed “the forgotten war”, the Korean War had long-lasting consequences not only domestically but also internationally because it expanded America's involvement in Asia, “transforming containment into a truly global policy” (Henretta 2008: 812). However, the Korean War was overshadowed in American cultural memory since it followed the US triumphalism of the “Good War”, as World War II was often known. Thanks to Harry Truman's 1948 executive order,<sup>4</sup> for the first time in the history of the United States, men served in racially integrated combat units. In this sense, the Korean War changed the face of the American military and had ramifications, especially for African American war veterans. When the soldiers returned from the battlefields, they were deeply transformed by their suffering, and some of them were unable to find a place they belonged, as exemplified by this novel's protagonist, Frank.

In the record prosperity and accelerated development of a consumer society post-WWII, millions of white Americans moved to the suburbs, prompted by a baby boom and the benefits of the veterans' legislation package known as the GI Bill. However, most of the US was segregated due to Jim Crow laws that made millions of African Americans the victims of dislocation, poverty, and racial violence. While urban renewal and the building of highways mostly benefited the white population, some 1.4 million people were displaced, most of them African American, justifying the argument that in the Fifties, the notion of home was under attack (Smith 2012: 132). These developments underlie the reappraisal of the dominant perceptions of history, the role of African Americans, and the formation of their individual and collective identity as portrayed in Morrison's novel *Home*.

### 3) Home and Homeplace in the Quest for Identity

The theoretical framework of this paper encompasses bell hooks's<sup>5</sup> ideas from her essay “Homeplace: a site of resistance”, in which she wants to remember a

---

<sup>4</sup>Under pressure from civil rights activists and A. Phillip Randolph's Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 desegregating the armed forces in 1943. But, as recognised by historians, the first military desegregation in US war annals was neither comprehensive nor immediate.

<sup>5</sup>African-American author, feminist, and social activist Gloria Jean Watkins took the name of her great-grandmother Bell Hooks as a pseudonym, writing it in lower case (bell hooks). In this way, she

specific aspect of the African-American past and share her own vivid memories that instilled in her an awareness of the central role of black women in “making home a community of resistance” (1990: 42). hooks explains how, historically, African Americans believed that constructing a homeplace had a radical political dimension, striving to create “a site of resistance and liberation struggle” (hooks 1990: 43). Home was the only place where an African American could avoid the prevailing racist attitudes (1990: 42). Only inside their homes could African Americans assert themselves as persons and restore the dignity commonly denied them by the mainstream public. Constructing a home meant creating a safe place where “black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (Ibid.). With this essay, hooks advocates a new dedication to and appreciation of home while paying tribute to black women who made and developed home spaces for African Americans. She urges an acknowledgement of how instrumental black women’s construction of homeplaces has been in the struggle against “racism and the colonizing mentality which promotes internalised self-hatred” (hooks 1990: 45).

In *Home*, we find a reworking of many of the tropes and themes that run throughout Morrison’s fiction, including the resistance to white hegemony, the notion of home(lessness), community, and healing. The author addresses the complexities of African American identity and their struggle to find a home, a place to belong, in opposition to, and protection from, mainstream racist pressure and practices. According to Elizabeth A. Beaulieu, the notion of home for African descendants cannot be connected with something stable but rather with something that is “lost and gained, gained and lost” over and over again (2003: 31). These elements are noticeable in the narrative of Frank Money and his family as the very first passages of the novel depict Frank’s hometown as a locality with “plenty of scary warning signs. The threats hung from wire mesh fences with wooden stakes every fifty or so feet” (Morrison 2012: 3).

The novel begins with Frank’s recollection of the scene when, on their way home, he and his sister Cee stop to watch two horses fighting but then they see some men burying the body of a black man and hide. In their hiding-place, observing the secret burial, Frank tries to calm his little sister, who is shaking with shock: “I hugged her shoulders tight and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because, as a brother four years older, I thought I could handle it” (Morrison 2012: 4). The description is written in italics, indicating that Frank is narrating an experience

---

wanted to avoid the selfishness of writing names in capital letters and to emphasize the importance of her work, not the name.

that he claims to have forgotten until the moment of relating it—he says that for most of his life he had only recalled the beautiful horses the children saw in the meadow: “I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. They stood like men” (Morrison 2012: 5). The trauma of this event and the role he assumes to save their lives pushes him into premature maturity and manhood, intimidated by his deflection of this memory, that is, his persisting on the recollection of the horses and not the burial.<sup>6</sup> As critics state, these horses are symbols of “masculinity, strength, and freedom, and serve as the direct antithesis to his position as a young, black boy encountering white men”<sup>7</sup> (Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 288). In this case, an African American boy witnesses racial violence and hatred that will forever remain inscribed in his psyche. As a child, Frank cannot comprehend the events he witnessed, and this compels him to carry the traumatic event for years to come. According to Katrina Harack, “Frank’s impulse, from that moment on, is to regain a sense of empowerment in a racist society by creating his identity as a masculine protector [...]” (2016: 373). Events from Frank’s childhood mark him for the rest of his life and trauma becomes an element that controls his identity construction. Although he claims he does not remember the burial, it is evident throughout the novel that this memory haunts him. As Wagner-Martin explains, the burial scene inflicts a “deep and long-lasting injury to Frank’s moral behaviour” (2015: 167) even though he is not connected with that man’s death in any way. He is a child who encounters an event which “shatters[s] the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” and “casts the victim into a state of existential crisis” (Ibid.). In order to save himself, he leaves Lotus as soon as he gets a chance and joins the army.

After witnessing the burial, Frank and Cee make their way home, but the grown-ups do not notice their distress because “[s]ome disturbance had their attention” (Morrison 2012: 5). These incidents impact Frank’s struggles to construct his identity and self-articulation that “stem from this pivotal, defining childhood memory” (Smith 2012: 133), coupled with the displacement that occurred when Frank was four: his family and fourteen others were forced to leave their home in Bandera County, Texas, under the threat of death<sup>8</sup> (Morrison 2012: 10). This

---

<sup>6</sup>Valerie Smith discusses this scene as reminiscent of literary and oral narrative accounts of lynching, even though Morrison does not explicitly describe it as such (2012: 133).

<sup>7</sup>Here, in the words of Katrina Harack and Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz, Morrison presents an example of a screen memory, which can be seen as a safety mechanism of the unconscious (2017: 288).

<sup>8</sup>Whites who wanted their land chased them out off their property. An elderly man who refused to leave his home was brutally murdered. See Morrison 2012: 10.

intimidation forced them to go to Lotus and live with their grandfather and his wife Lenore, who did not welcome them. The description of the family house suggests a stifling space where Frank and Cee are not wanted or made to feel at home. In critical opinion, it seems as if Morrison is asking: "What is 'home' for the African American child when its own community is in chaos?" (Beaulieu 2003: 78). The sense of danger and want that permeates the dysfunctional home in which Frank grows up is evident in the following excerpt:

Because Mama and Pap worked from before sunrise until dark, they never knew that Miss Lenore poured water instead of milk over the shredded wheat Cee and her brother ate for breakfast. Nor that when they had stripes and welts on their legs they were cautioned to lie, to say they got them by playing out by the stream [...] Even their grandfather Salem was silent. Lenore's house was big enough for two, maybe three but not for grandparents plus Pap, Mama, Uncle Frank and two children [...] Over the years, the discomfort of the crowded house increased, [...] young Frank slept on the back porch, on the slanty wooden swing, even when it rained. (Morrison 2012: 43-45)

As exemplified by this passage, Morrison deconstructs the image of home as a safe haven and presents it as a place also subjected to the corrupting influences of the outside world, where even family is no locus of stability and comfort. In the view of Manuela López Ramírez, Morrison focuses on the family as one of the main sources of identity fragmentation in this novel (2014: 146). She highlights the image of a broken, racially and economically oppressed family that cannot provide the reassuring environment every child needs. Other critics conclude that "Frank and Cee lack a sense of rootedness and have never experienced nurturing by others" (Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 287); simultaneously, the suffering Money family stands for many African American families in the mid-twentieth century, when black citizens were exposed to violent and discriminatory situations.<sup>9</sup> From an early age, Cee and Frank had to carry the "dead-weight of social degradation" (López Ramírez 2014: 146). In order to escape, both seize the first chance to leave "the worst place in the world" where there is "no future, no goal other than breathing, nothing to survive or worth surviving for" (Morrison 2012: 83). With parents who do not have time for their children,

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, the novel mentions that when Lily decides to purchase a house, she is unable to do so due to certain "restrictions." Even though she has financial means to buy the house she likes, her skin colour restricts her from doing so in a Jim Crow regulated and racially intolerant society. See Morrison 2012: 73.

the siblings create a special bond, thus finding a way to preserve a sense of trust in people.

Memories of expulsion and the fact that “you could be inside, living in your house for years and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you [...] to pack up and move” (Morrison 2012: 9) make a weighty impression on Frank’s sense of self-worth and collective belonging. These circumstances force him to undertake a quest to find his selfhood and self-definition as well as “a site of resistance” (hooks 1990). Frank’s first chance to escape occurs when he signs up to fight in Korea with his childhood friends, the “homeboys”. He sees the war as a way to leave Lotus for good, but in combat he loses the very friends who constituted his identity and for months afterwards he is troubled by this loss: “But I know them. I know them and they know me” (Morrison 2012: 46). In critical view, these “homeboys” are a link between Frank and his sense of self, and that is why “he needs their gaze, which he associates with a concept of home, for self-definition. Now they are dead and, [...] he insists that this fact is what keeps bothering him about the war” (Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 290).

In the exploration of the relationship between home and identity formation, this narrative emphasises the disorientation and vulnerability when the elements associated with stability, care, and belonging are shattered or lacking. Frank’s journey home<sup>10</sup> starts when he gets a letter informing him that his sister’s life is in danger. When Frank comes back from the war, he manifests symptoms of PTSD and is more lost than before. Everything he saw and lived through in Korea left him even more damaged and disconnected from his family, homeland, and culture, which is why he does not go back to Lotus. But, prompted by the letter of alarm for his sister, Frank embarks on this journey home across the racially intolerant country that he served abroad. For Jean Wyatt, this “search of a ‘home’ reflects African Americans’ quest for a place in a land that excludes them”, and her interpretation rests on the historical context in support of “Morrison’s intention to show how history shapes each individual’s story” (2017: 11). Through Frank’s external journey, Morrison shows the racial prejudice and violence of twentieth-century America. Frank, like many African Americans at the time, undergoes cultural displacement and social discrimination (López Ramírez 2014: 155). He is forbidden to enter public restrooms, hotels and waiting rooms and lives in constant fear that he might

---

<sup>10</sup>Tessa Roynon offers an insightful analysis of how in *Home* Morrison creates “a complex, revisionary dialogue with Homer’s epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in its explorations of mid-twentieth-century America: of its military combat on foreign soil, and of its racially-motivated violence at home” (2013b: 117-130).



be arrested if he is found walking or standing anywhere with no apparent purpose (Smith 2012: 133). Frank's fate mirrors American society in the Jim Crow era, when racially discriminatory laws controlled social, economic, and political relationships between African Americans and whites. It is because of racial discrimination that Frank gets placed in a mental institution, from which he manages to flee and finds refuge in an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. During his entire journey south, the only genuinely friendly encounter he has is when he meets Reverend John Locke, who warns him about the reality of the situation in his homeland:

Well, you not the first by a long shot. An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back and they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better. [...] You won't be able to sit down at any bus stop counter. Listen here, you from Georgia and you been in desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous. (Morrison 2012: 18-19)

Reverend Locke sees Frank's state of mind and what caused it. He warns him that the situation is the same all over the country, blacks are not equal or welcome in the South or the North. And not even the law can protect him as there are racist attitudes that are not lenient, even to veterans. The biggest irony is that Frank's position as a war veteran does not work to his advantage or grant him an equal status in society. Once he returns from combat duty, his service is promptly dismissed and forgotten; his medal is the sole recognition that he has served his country. America is not his home anymore, and he is so deeply traumatised that it seems that he can no longer find an environment in which to belong.<sup>11</sup> Despite these difficulties, Frank sets out on a mission to save his sister in order to reclaim his identity and reconstruct his masculinity. He takes a bus, regulated by racial segregation, that had "very few passengers, yet Frank dutifully sat in the last seat" (Morrison 2012: 19), and begins to reassess the past. He thinks back to the different relationships in his life and how he has tried "to assert a sense of self, he also becomes a good 'homeboy' to his friends, a soldier, and an ineffectual boyfriend to Lily" (Harack 2016: 373), and feelings of failure and disconnect overcome him. In his destitute and traumatised state of mind, Frank's hope for recovery is shaped through his urge to assume yet again the role of his little sister's brother/protector:

No more people I didn't save. No more watching people close to me die.  
No more. [...] She was the first person I ever took responsibility for. Down

<sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of Frank as a shell-shocked veteran, see López Ramírez 2016.

deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself—a strong good me tied to the memory of those horses and the burial of a stranger. Guarding her [...] I wonder if succeeding at that was the buried seed of all the rest. In my little-boy heart I felt heroic and I knew that if they found us or touched her I would kill. (Morrison 2012: 103-104)

Frank intends to change his tendency to self-destruction and manage his trauma by re-examining his past actions and their present ramifications. He is tormented by memories of people he did not save, and he decides to stand up and never let that happen again. His words in the above passage indicate that his home is with Cee and his own identity is closely tied to her. Cee might be the last person who still has an image of Frank as a righteous masculine protector, and that is what he wants to be again. While protecting her, he felt heroic, but after leaving Lotus, he lost that feeling, along with the sense of self-direction and self-esteem. He questions his decision to leave Cee to enlist in the army and wonders if his life would have been different if he had not. In the words of Judylyn Ryan, Morrison's narrative juxtaposes "a character's internal spiritual battle as he contends with how society interprets his racial and gender identity" and his self-perception, that is "how he views himself as a strong, good self and the lengths to which he will go to protect his positive identity" (2007: 156). When Frank fulfills his goal and rescues Cee, he not only saves her from eugenist medical experimentation by a white doctor and probably death, but he also saves himself from losing any remaining feeling of belonging, support, and kindness, "thus recovering a sense of his original masculine identity [...], that enables him to face this traumatic memory" (Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 291). This inward understanding of a new self surpasses the conventional physical and cultural aspects of home and underwrites the protagonist's self-worth and self-fulfillment.

#### **4) Traumatic Memories, Self-Definition, and Idea(l)s of Masculinity**

Some critics, including Linda Wagner-Martin, claim that Frank is in search of both his identity and his masculinity, while Justine Baillie states that the Korean girl was sacrificed to his masculinity (2015: 200). In this novel, Morrison offers different versions of manhood and reconstructs some of them. Frank abandons the role of brother and protector, soldier, lover, and provider. In Frank's case, these "constructions of masculinity are revealed to be fictitious" (Ibid.). As an older brother, Frank thought he could handle the role of a protector to his sister, but he leaves her and Lotus. As a soldier, he kills an innocent, harmless civilian. When he

comes back from the war, he is unable to keep a proper job and live up to the roles of lover and provider to Lily. His masculinity is completely destabilised and he has to undertake a quest to reconstruct his identity. The internal journey Frank embarks on confirms Morrison's belief that "the black-self cannot achieve self-definition without coming to terms with their traumatic memories" (López Ramírez 2014: 159). At first, this effort brings more suffering and trauma, mostly related to his remembering the Korean duty tour. The way his memory works brings to mind Toni Morrison on what she considers "the deliberate act of remembering" and defines "a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way" (Morrison 1984: 385). Frank has to force himself to revert to the dark recesses of his past and reassess what happened – or how it appeared to him – while understanding the reasons for it in order to gain clarity and resolution. His words, even if initially scant and ambiguous, imply the scale of his traumatic past: "Korea. You cannot imagine it because you weren't there" (Morrison 2012: 93). With one sentence it becomes clear that he went through unspeakable agony and atrocities. Only later in the novel, in chapter nine, does he explain the deepest injury to his psyche—the killing of a Korean girl:

I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me. I felt so grieving over my dead friends. [...] My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame. [...] I shot the Korean girl in her face. I am the one she touched. [...] I am the one she aroused. [...] How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me? (Morrison 2012: 133-134)

Frank admits that he was the one who killed the Korean girl, and the moment he accepts what he did marks his first step towards redemption. He had been avoiding blame until this moment of confession. For years, he felt shame and guilt for what he did but, as Jaleel Akhtar remarks, his forgetfulness of everything that happened represents the amnesia of a whole nation, guilty of forgetting the Korean War (2014: 138). Frank, who was a victim himself, cannot accept that he surrendered to the place where he became a victimiser.<sup>12</sup> Frank loses his humanity, and by taking the role of the oppressor, the shattering of his black self's identity is even more traumatic (López Ramírez 2014: 55). Saving his sister and returning to Lotus and the burial

<sup>12</sup> At this point, Frank can be compared to Dr. Beau, who destroyed the life and dignity of his sister Cee, who seems to resemble the innocent Asian girl. For more insight into this argument, see López Ramírez 2014: 155.

site are necessary to regain his identity and masculinity, but he also has to tell his story and process the events he was subjected to in order to define his identity fully.

Through Frank's experiences of homes, the childhood house in Lotus and Lily's apartment, he builds his feeling of attachment or resistance to them, depending on his sense of place in each of them. His sense of loss, worthlessness, failure, and estrangement can be reversed through a space that is inhabited by the healing power of a community, helping him regain a sense of recognition, purpose and value. As critics note, Morrison's exploration of memory and trauma related to the idea of home demonstrate "that physical homecoming is less significant than the finding of a true home, or safe space, within the self" (Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017: 283). Through the main characters' return to their home as a physical locality and after the reassessment of their past, involving remembrances of traumatic memories, their healing and return to a homeplace are made possible. This understanding of homecoming invokes hooks' idea of homeplace as a location that signifies care, self-respect and integrity, an environment that enables African Americans to feel their value as human beings, much in opposition to the conditions in the outside world. In hooks' words, homeplace is the "space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole" (1990: 49).

In the characters' confrontation of the past and recuperation of memory, their identity conflict can be resolved, and they can affirm themselves as persons as well as restore the dignity commonly denied to them by the world. Both siblings construct new identities and emerge as strong individuals who manage to overcome their traumatic memories. hooks explains that home is that locus which enables varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality (1990: 148). This is the case for Frank and Cee, who grant a proper burial to the black man from their childhood and also symbolically bury their traumatic memories. Thus, the novel ends where it begins, at the burial site from their childhood, with Frank and Cee revisiting the scene of their initial trauma and "the slaughter that went on in the world" (Morrison 2012: 143). Frank and Cee dig up the grave in order to give the man a decent final resting place, but also to face their own past. They wrap the remains in Cee's quilt<sup>13</sup> and bury them under the huge bay tree<sup>14</sup>, "split down the middle, beheaded, undead" (Morrison 2012: 144). As they carry the "gentleman" (Morrison 2012, 143) towards his final resting

<sup>13</sup> Cee starts quilt-making as part of her healing process. bell hooks explains that quilt-making was woman's work that gave balance and harmony to the psyche and enabled her to "come back to herself" instead of attending the needs of others. For more on this significant aspect, see hooks 1990: 115-17.

<sup>14</sup> Trees have strong symbolism in myths and bay trees are associated with honor, glory and great men. For more details, see López Ramírez 2014: 160.

ground, Frank and Cee in some way pay homage to their ancestors by restoring the dignity and identity stolen from the anonymous black man.<sup>15</sup> To mark the grave, Frank nails a wooden epitaph to the tree with the words: "Here Stands a Man" (Morrison 2012: 144). This performative act of respect and compassion, in words and deed, has a healing and liberating effect on the protagonists, but especially for Frank as this act of burial and restoring dignity to a human being and a member of his community "shows Frank's sense of belonging and indicates that he has also reached his manhood" (Akhtar 2014: 142). At the same time, the secret burial at the farm from their childhood becomes a point of recollection of the collective trauma of all African Americans. The concept of two fighting horses "signaled what an ideal masculine behaviour was to be" (Wagner-Martin 2015: 172) and that it was important who would be the last man standing. Frank has returned to the site of trauma from his childhood and, as a grown man, paid his respects to his townsman. In this way, Frank is finally able to stand as a man because he is turning into a more balanced version of himself. With this action, Frank and Cee pay their respects to the victim of racial violence and express solidarity with the community to which they belong. With this act of essential humanity and kindness, Morrison advocates the importance of facing the past, however traumatic and hurtful to the individual it may be, in order to re-examine it, resolve any personal responsibility in the events and gain identity definition through the recollection of them. This self-evaluation can contribute to one's own identity formation but also to the collective sense of belonging and solidarity as contributing members of the African American community. For Katrina Harack, this approach also signals the opposition of the author to the dominant standard of individualism tied to the "white, hegemonic, male ideologies of progress" (2016: 372). In her writing, Morrison counters this pattern with a celebration of the enabling community as a "site of resistance" (bell hooks), offering support in the overcoming of traumatic memories and redefining of the self, thanks to "the communal, productive, healing power of women and men who have faced the past, celebrate the present, and look forward to a future that is not rigidly defined by existing race and gender ideologies" (Harack 2016: 372).

<sup>15</sup> This scene is reminiscent of the event from Frank's childhood when his neighbour, Mr. Crawford, was murdered for refusing to leave his home. He was hanged from his mother's prized magnolia tree in the yard of his home. The tree, a symbol of the South, was planted by Crawford's great-grandmother and stood as the oldest magnolia tree in the county, designating how the African American presence is as old as America itself (Baillie 2013: 201). The tree implies some kind of entitlement to call this place a home and this proves to be fatal for Mr. Crawford, whose death prompts the reader to think about the victimisation of African Americans in twentieth-century United States. The burial of a black man beneath the tree repeats itself at the novel's conclusion but "this time as a redemptive burial of the past" (Ibid.).

## 5) Conclusion

Toni Morrison's captivating narratives, both novels and non-fictional writing, address diverse themes in the lives of African Americans and the mainstream society in the United States, but a crucial concern is the legacy of slavery and the significance of remembrance. Closely related to this thematic preoccupation is the sense of African American individual and collective belonging and self, shaped by white hegemonic forces and their metanarratives, that have contributed to the marginalisation, silencing and oppression of African Americans.

This paper analyses Morrison's 2012 novel *Home*, set at the time Jim Crow laws were operative at both local and state levels that imposed discrimination and segregation on racial grounds in the southern US by exploring the impact of traumatic experiences during the Korean War. Specifically, the analysis focuses on how the memories of both the war and racial violence in the American South bear upon African American identity construction. Through the character of Frank Money, an African American war veteran, Morrison describes the ways in which his important service is simply dismissed, and he is subjected to racially-motivated aggression, aggravating his existing war-induced state of trauma. Concurrently, the discussion illuminates how the novel reflects on the impact of these experiences, both in a racially divided community and in "the Forgotten War", on individual and collective identity given the social and political changes in the life of the protagonist, his family, and his community. Recognising the importance of the 1950s for the subsequent nostalgic and misleading representation in mainstream culture and memory, this article introduces the necessary contextualisation of this period, set against the backdrop of earlier history and fate of African Americans.

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

his sister and revisiting the burial site, Frank has the opportunity to complete his quest and reclaim his identity, partly also due to the renewed role of the strong protector as the essence of his reconstructed masculinity.

## References

1. Akhtar, Jaleel (2014), *Dismemberment in the Fiction of Toni Morrison*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
2. Baillie, Justine (2013), *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
3. Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann (2003), *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, Westport, CT: Greenwood.
4. Bouson, Brooks J. (2005), "'Speaking the Unspeakable': Shame, Trauma and Morrison's Fiction", *Toni Morrison*, Ed. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 7-23.
5. Harack, Katrina (2016), "Shifting Masculinities and Evolving Feminine Power: Progressive Gender Roles in Toni Morrison's *Home*", *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol 69, Issue 3: 371-396, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26536933> (accessed on 26/6/2020).
6. Harack, Katrina and Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz (2017), "Trauma, Screen Memories, Safe Spaces and Productive Melancholia in Toni Morrison's *Home*", *Traumatic Memory and the Ethical, Political and Transhistorical Functions of Literature*, Ed. Susana Onega, Constanza del Río, and Maite Escudero-Alías, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 279-310.
7. Henretta, James A., David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil (2008), *America's History*, Sixth ed., Vol. Two: Since 1865, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
8. hooks, bell (1990), *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Boston, MA: South End.
9. López Ramírez, Manuela (2014), "'Hansel and Gretel' in Toni Morrison's *Home*", *49th Parallel*, Vol. 34 (Autumn 2014): 143-68, available at <https://fortyninthparalleljournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/lopezramirezautumn2014.pdf> (accessed on 26/6/2020).
10. López Ramírez, Manuela (2015), "Hurt Right Down the Middle... But Alive And Well: Healing In Toni Morrison's *Home*", *Odisea*, No. 16: 127-146, available at <http://repositorio.ual.es:8080/bitstream/handle/10835/4837/MANUELALOPEZ.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed on 28/6/2020).
11. López Ramírez, Manuela (2016), "The Shell-Shocked Veteran in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Home*", *Atlantis*, Vol. 38, No. 1: 129-147, available at <https://www.atlantisjournal.org/index.php/atlantis/issue/view/15> (accessed on 26/6/2020).
12. Morrison, Toni (1984), "Memory, Creation, and Writing", *Thought*, Vol. 59, Issue 4: 385-390, available at <https://doi.org/10.5840/thought198459430> (accessed on 26/6/2020).

13. Morrison, Toni (2012), *Home*, New York: Vintage.
14. Morrison, Toni (2020), "Toni Morrison's Haunting Resonance", Interview by Christopher Bollen, *Interview Magazine*, March 2012, *Toni Morrison: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, Ed. Nikki Giovanni, New York and London: Melville House Publishing, 63-73.
15. Roynon, Tessa (2013a), *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
16. --- (2013b), *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
17. Ryan, Judylyn S. (2007), "Language and Narrative Technique in Toni Morrison's Novels", *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, Ed. Justine Tally, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 151-62.
18. Smith, Valerie (2012), *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley.
19. Wagner-Martin, Linda (2015), *Toni Morrison: A Literary Life*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
20. Wyatt, Jean (2017), *Love and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's Later Novels*, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.

Ksenija M. Kondali  
Univerzitet u Sarajevu  
Filozofski fakultet

Sandra V. Novkinić  
Univerzitet u Bihaću  
Pedagoški fakultet

## NOVO PROMIŠLJANJE PROŠLOSTI: SJEĆANJE I IDENTITET U ROMANU *DOM* TONI MORISON

### *Rezime*

Književni opus Toni Morison, vanredan po raznovrsnom i širokom obimu pripovjedačkih pristupa i tematskih zahvata, odlikuje postojana posvećenost razmatranju američke prošlosti sa stanovišta i pomoću sjećanja onih koji su u zvaničnoj istoriji bili izbrisani ili pogrešno predstavljeni. Cilj ovog rada jeste da analizira kako Morisonin roman *Dom*, koji je objavljen 2012. godine, rekonstruiše zanemarenu istoriju Afroamerikanaca kroz prisjećanja glavnog junaka, veterana Korejskog rata. U potrazi za identitetom, glavni lik pokušava dozvati u sjećanje prošlost, kako svoju ličnu, tako i svoje porodice. Istovremeno, priča o sudbinama likova u ovom romanu priziva dublje sagledavanje rasnih odnosa u Americi i raskrinkava mit o „fantastičnim



*Reassessing the Past: Memory and Identity in Toni Morrison's Home*

pedesetim" dvadesetog vijeka u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama. U analizi romana *Dom* Toni Morison rad se oslanja na teorijsko-kritičke uvide autora kao što su bell hooks, da bi se ispitalo kako se oblikuje identitet glavnog junaka uz prisjećanja na prošla dešavanja i sa razvojem samopoštovanja.

► **Ključne riječi:** Afroamerikanci, američka istorija, afroamerički roman, prisjećanje, identitet, trauma, Korejski rat, rasni odnosi.

Preuzeto: 12. 4. 2021.  
Korekcije: 16. 5. 2021.  
Prihvaćeno: 17. 5. 2021.