

# Collective Memory and the Recasting of Post-Civil War African-American Identity in Selected Toni Morrison's Novels

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**Abstract**—After the emancipation, the African-Americans come to recognize the necessity of rebuilding their identity and redefining their blackness. This recognition is seemingly motivated by their post-civil war need to demolish the negative stereotypes long established and believed about them, change the American cultural context and enhance their living conditions. Taking into consideration its performative role and discursive nature, the African-American writers arrive to make an exceptional use of collective memory and its genuine narratives in order to recast their unique identity. As it has formerly been noticed, the process of collective remembering follows three major steps that are: construction, reconstruction and deconstruction. No doubt, these techniques have helped to condemn the lingering racist practices and their destructive outcomes, provide a more accurate conception of blackness and ultimately transcend the earlier established blacks' image into another one which is strong, innovative and full of possibilities. The theoretical background of this research will subsequently be applied on a number of Toni Morrison's novels.

**Index Terms**—collective remembering, shared identity, African-American identity, counter memory

## I. INTRODUCTION

By the abolition of slavery in the United States of America, the African-Americans have attained the right of 'citizenship' along with other rights that were supposedly issued to protect them and integrate them in the American society. However, these rights were very often violated or rejected by the white Americans. The 'Reconstruction' epoch has consequently noticed some serious social, political, and intellectual efforts from the side of African-Americans to put an end to the still lingering post-civil war racism and discrimination. The African-American intellectuals have seemingly come to recognize that their liberation by means of law is not enough for they further need an independent identity which is well-identified, solid, confident and proud so that they can impose it on the larger white American existence. Their search for a mechanism of representation has led them to discover the highly experimental role of collective memory, especially when things are related to resistance, reconstitution, and empowerment. On this account, the African-American intellectuals arrive to make a brilliant use of collective memory to release their authentic African-American identity and acquire greater gains in the future.

After the emancipation, the African-Americans have started to realize the necessity of rebuilding, fixing, and endorsing their identity in order to set it functionally independent from that of the white Americans. As Oluo (2018) states in her book **So You Want to Talk about Race**, when "we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else's oppression, we'll find our opportunities to make real change" (p. 78). Taking into consideration its exceptionally representative position, collective memory is used by the African-American intellectuals to achieve their existentialist goals. What they derive from their former experiences is that they need to define themselves if they do not really want the others to define them. In the process, they decide to regain their store of knowledge and past incidents hidden in their collective memories and genuinely applying this to show their true and unique essence which deserves appreciation, respect, and having a proper life within that given American cultural context. To begin with, the African-American intellectuals and writers come to use collective memory and its skilled techniques to defy a long existing history of racism and undermine the power of the negative stereotypes previously coined about their blackness and which aimed to subordinate them.

## II. DISCUSSIONS

Collective memory is an 'ideological' discourse which is formed and transmitted via a narrative. Such mode of perception basically generated from collective remembering indeed occurs in 'individual minds' but transcends it to be shared by a smaller or a larger group of people (Olick, 1999, p. 341). Collective memory obtains its prominence when the participants in the act of remembrance are subject to any form of oppression, injustice, or prejudice. In this case, collective memory becomes not just a mere process of evoking past memories. It further cares to display its discursive patterns of confrontation, restoration, and restructure. The proficient exchange of memories between the members of the same group necessarily enables them to overcome their present dilemmas (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 8). For all these dynamic

and potent characteristics, the African-American writers resort to exercise the power of collective memory in their writings in order to recast the African-American identity and help the African-Americans to reach their free and assertive entity.

As a discourse, collective memory is deeply embedded in the issues related to ethnic conflicts and identity construction despite the fact that its employment can be for boundless and more complicated meanings. Powerless and subjugated people can find in their collective memory a refuge where they feel stronger, truly know who they are, and appreciate their singularity (Zerubavel, 2003). However, this store of knowledge can be utilized for other purposes that may include the manifestation of national glory, revealing the oneness of a powerful or a privileged group, or showing the level of progress that happened to a particular nation or community (Judt, 2005). To avoid any sort of confusion or misunderstanding concerning this concept and its usages, this research will take into consideration to limit the theoretical framework of collective memory within the frontiers of identity formation as associated with the African-American case. Therefore, this study will embark on a journey to define collective memory, to discern its operative role in identity reconstruction, and to provide us with the mechanisms implemented for the accomplishment of this task.

Regarding the broad and difficult approaches of collective memory, this paper will conveniently apply the theoretical part of it on a number of Toni Morrison's novels that are: **The Bluest Eye** (1970), **Sula** (1973), **Song of Solomon** (1977), **Tar Baby** (1981), **Beloved** (1987) and **God Help the Child** (2015). The application of theory will be fundamentally reliant on the distinctive relationship between collective memory and the African-American situation after the civil war. Such theoretical, analytical, and critical research will pave the way to understand the different steps that led to the emergence of an independent African-American identity and how collective memory contributed to this emanation. As a result, the vagueness of this notion will be reduced, as we will have a better illustration of it through the elaborate analysis of Morrison's formerly mentioned works.

This study is significant in that it constructs, reconstructs, and deconstructs meanings about the shared remembrances and their crucial performance in the case of ethnic conflicts. Concerning the African-Americans' quest, this investigation is very helpful since it brings the black self into being in a way that gradually but surely gives credit to blackness and tributes the distinct black character. Moreover, collective memory proves to be haunting to the American history; it subverts and redefines the white Americans' master narrative and confirms that the truth is ceaseless and multiple as well. The research likewise finds that collective memory, in the form of a narrative or a text, affords a criticism to history and affects the relationship of power within the society. It is yet worth to notice the improvement in the African-Americans' narratives after their liberation. With the great outcomes of Harlem Renaissance and the patronage of African-American art and literature by the white Americans, the African-Americans learn that they are capable of freeing their remembrances from the past constraints since "The past is not simply 'received' by the present. The present is 'haunted' by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present" (Assmann, 1997, p. 9). The result is a countless number of genuine narratives which defend them and reveal their genius, something that was absent during the slavery era for there were only silenced slaves and unskillful slave narratives.

The research equally draws its significance from the way it introduces the idea of collective memory and shares in the identification of its developmental role. Before Maurice Halbwachs' introduction of the concept, collective memory was no more than a collective process of remembering. Halbwachs extensively succeeds in determining the substantial role it plays in the creation of shared identities. Other researchers like Jan Assmann, Paul Ricoeur, Jeffrey K. Olick, and Yael Zerubavel build upon Halbwachs' study and permit to disclose and specify the discursive tools of collective memory that are very practical in the opposition of the different forms of injustice. Although these contemporary researchers have traced the general theoretical ground through which a researcher can proceed his/her research, the theoretical paradigms concerning collective memory and identity formation are undeniably scarce. Fitly, this study comes up with a theoretical sample based on the above researchers' findings and conclusions; a sample that other researchers can follow or expand during their scientific attempts to reinstate a certain identity which is ultimately in need of the competence of collective memory.

In order to set the theoretical framework of this paper, we primarily need to have an access to the accurate meaning of collective memory and its inclusive relations. The term 'collective memory' was first introduced by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his book **Mémoire Collective** (1950). Halbwachs has systematically developed the signification of the concept. According to him, collective memory refers to the process by which a group of people remembers the past and evokes the bygone memories. Moreover, Halbwachs highlights the major role played by collective memory in the formation of 'group identities'. He correspondingly insists on the productivity of 'commemorative acts' which usually result a deeper and more consolidated community (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 11). Halbwachs' core diagnosis of memory helps other researchers in the field to distinguish between individual memory and collective remembering, between collective memory and collective remembering, and between history and collective memory. These distinctions are requisite to comprehend the working of shared remembrances.

Collective memory and individual memory are two notions that are strongly interrelated. Each of them nourishes, supports, and strengthens the other in various and quite unexpected ways. They also need to be 'in harmony' with each other if they want to get better communal outcomes; something which can be checked through participation and positive communication (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 48). Every collective remembering is actually processed within an individual

mind. Since human existence is embodied and often connected with else existences, the individual finds it difficult if not impossible to carry out his/her remembrance without referring to others. In states of conflict or search for cultural roots, people tend to use their collective remembering which is originated by individuals and their recall of prior experiences for the sake of inquiry, criticism, and the exploration of truth. It is only in such situations that this given relationship flourishes and attains a discursively reorienting pattern.

Another ambiguous relation is that which binds collective memory with its relative which is collective remembering. Superficially, they appear as if they are one, nevertheless they come to occupy different positions. Collective memory is the store of knowledge that gathers all those past memories. In addition, it is the substance which supplies those who are interested in their past with the appropriate awareness whenever they ask for it. Collective memory is viewed as a static base of knowledge though it comprises a number of veritable and sophisticated gone occurrences (Neal, 2005). On the other hand, collective remembering is the active and permanent action responsible for the evocation of the past and the reclaiming of memories. As Faulkner (1951) puts it, "The past is never dead...It's not even past" (p. 92). This process is ever creative, innovative, and imaginative; something which makes of it an endless source of insights. Both collective memory and collective remembering are knowledgeable despite the fact that one is more vigorous than the other due to its representative essence.

History and collective memory are two modes of documenting the past with different principles, needs, and mechanisms. History opposes the regaining of the past for the sake of rebuilding the present whereas the collective memory's main interest is the reconstruction of the present by going back to the past, 'modifying', and 'sophisticating' it. In addition, history has a hard belief that every historical period is separated from the other and should be treated on that basis, something which justifies its 'loyalty only to facts'. However, collective memory believes that each part of history is inevitably related to the other that is why collective memory is much 'loyal to narrative' (Gillis, 1994). Since history is static, interim, and strict, collective memory frequently makes use of its lively narratives to revive and reform the past. It is an "exercise in *telling otherwise*, and also in letting others tell their own history, especially the founding events which are the ground of collective memory" (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 113). Undoubtedly, history serves the victors more than it serves the losers for when it closes its historical doors, only the winners are gainers. The losers' desperate need to find their origins, resist oppression, or empower themselves eagerly leads them to employ collective memory and its narratives against the rigidity of historical facts.

On this stage, it is worth recognizing that every constructive working of collective memory is dependent on its main substance which is narrative. In his book *Mémoire Collective*, Maurice Halbwachs has notably paved the way to perceive collective memory as an exceptional narrative shared by a number of people with some restructuring and redefining privileges. Later on, Jan Assmann, the German Egyptologist, who has significantly contributed to the identification of collective memory, arrives to deduce its communicative role and ability to reestablish knowledge through interaction. Accordingly, Assmann prefers to deal with it as a sort of 'self-reflexive' narrative. By this conception, Assmann aims to set the highly discursive function of collective memory reinforced by its methods of explanation, argumentation, verification, reinterpretation, reformulation, criticism, and censorship (Assmann, 1997, p. 17). And this what Ricoeur (2003) maintains when he says that "Once one recognizes that one's identity is fundamentally narrative in character, one discovers an ineradicable openness and indeterminacy at the root of one's collective memory" (p. 95). Overall, any approach of collective memory can be seen to be overly troublesome without the consideration of its earlier mentioned relations and narrative nature.

Now, after having a general idea about the notion of collective memory and reducing the level of its complexity, this research will essentially focus on the role it has played in the recasting of African-American identity after the emancipation and aims to detect whether it has truly fulfilled its duty and to what extent. Theoretically, collective memory participates in the reconstitution of African-American identity through three major steps that are: construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction. In other words, we will go through the constructive, reconstructive, and finally the deconstructive performances of collective memory as an inherently discursive and productive narrative by the application of these techniques on Morrison's six novels **The Bluest Eye**, **Sula**, **Beloved**, **Song of Solomon**, **Tar Baby**, and **God Help the Child**. The theoretical, analytical, and critical treatments of Morrison's novels will help us to evaluate the efficiency of collective memory. The latter will regularly be assessed by testing the development of African-American identity through time and by watching whether African-Americans have honestly achieved their goals during the Reconstruction and even after the Civil Rights Movement.

The first part of this paper essentially tackles the constructive role of collective memory and its contribution to the formation of African-American identity. This part of study is hugely important because it is the first step towards the release of an independent African-American character. In this section, collective memory constructs a narrative which condemns the enduring racist and discriminatory practices that existed after the abolition. It becomes clear that there can be no true establishment of an African-American identity without first showing how much the African-Americans were oppressed by the white Americans, the gravity of their situation, and the impact of the white Americans' oppressive behaviors on their lives and psyche. In this sense, collective memory will operate on two levels. First, it will deliver a narrative that manifests the different racist patterns exercised by the white Americans to subjugate the African-Americans which are: the discrimination against blackness, othering and stereotyping, exclusion, and violence. Second, collective memory will reveal the impact of racism on the oppressed, including its social, economic, and psychological

effects in a way that drives to sympathize with them and pathetically perceive their undisputable vulnerability. The study will suitably be applied on Morrison's **The Bluest Eye** and **Sula** for a better illustration, clarification, and interpretation.

After the leading condemnation of racism and its outcomes, the second part will expose us to the reconstructive function of collective memory. Effectively, this phase is very influential for it is the first serious effort to redefine the African-American identity. Since the slavery era, the African-Americans were subject to a limitless number of 'stereotypes' that portrayed them as people without 'history' or 'heritage', people who are uncivilized, and people who have no intellect or proper behavior (Ellis, 2020). All these abusive stereotypes played a crucial part in the process of their subjugation. As a reconstructive technique, collective memory will endeavor to undermine the power of these stereotypes by reflecting some accurate and good aspects of African-Americans along with their persistent and strong character which merits admiration and appreciation. In order to achieve its goals, collective memory needs to dismantle the whites' discourse, produce another one which stands for the African-Americans and protects them, and focus on the importance of racial and ethnic values. The arrival to this level of comprehension will be managed via an application of the above analytical styles on Morrison's **Beloved** and **Song of Solomon**. No doubt, this section is quite contributory in showing the solidity and resistant nature of African-Americans.

The final part of this paper will definitely mark the deconstructive functioning of collective memory and its consequent production of an autonomous and an unparalleled African-American character. In any case of oppression, those who are oppressed find it tough to set themselves free from their oppressors that is why the deconstructive performance of collective memory is exceptionally called for in this special stage of attainment. The basis of deconstructive criticism and analysis is the ideological working of language. By trying to make distinction between two different worlds in which one is more advantaged than the other, the language starts to 'deconstruct itself' and 'turn things upside down'. This very characteristic is required in representative and constructive actions due to its ability to liberate authentic identities. The fluidity and play of language generally result infinite and 'irreducible' meanings, a 'heterogeneous' world, and conflicting interpretations (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). As a narrative, collective memory uses its highly deconstructive techniques to aid the rebirth of African-American identity; an identity which is detached, different, strong, originative and respectable. For a further understanding of these meanings, there will be a convenient application of the forgoing analytical modes on Morrison's **Tar Baby** and **God Help the Child**.

To start with, the constructive working of collective memory embodies an attack on the persistent discriminatory behaviors that characterized the post-civil war era. As a narrative, collective memory takes into consideration to unveil the several racist and inhumane violations which were directed against the African-Americans at that time among which are othering, stereotyping, social exclusion, and violence. It ostensibly becomes the eye that exposes the various vehicles of discrimination which are marginalization, exclusion, and the continuum of violence. Here, the memory's narratives are about the exposition of prejudice against individuals, racial conflicts, the authority of 'in groups', and the humiliation of 'out groups' (Silver, 2021, p. 10). It can be regarded that they are truly active in reflecting the disparate shapes of systematic and institutional prejudices.

Collective memory tends to reveal the way the African-Americans are 'othered' and 'stereotyped' by the white American community. It further criticizes the whites' superior behavior which seems both exaggerated and non-logical. Usually, the process of stereotyping is associated with the act of othering, mainly when things are related to ethnic conflicts and identity quest. Collective memory succeeds to expose the white Americans' prejudice and their stereotypical representation of the subordinated African-Americans. These practices apparently weaken the social position of the 'targeted', degrade and confine them, and separate them from those who produce the stereotypes (Perkins, 1979, p. 15). No doubt, memory helps to transfer some of the whites' patterns of othering and stereotyping that serve their powerful status quo.

Other discriminatory practices that are exposed through the discursive functioning of collective memory are social exclusion and violence. The African-Americans' past narratives allow to see how they were segregated from the white Americans. These narratives generated by memory intensively divulge the social, economic, democratic and institutional exclusions of African-Americans which put constraints on their participation as "workers, consumers, and owners" as well as limited their role as citizens to make decisions that concern the "nation or community" (Anderson, 2016, p. 140). Putnam (2000) believes that memory confronts the most serious and difficult pattern of exclusion which is the institutional exclusion that excludes the African-Americans from job opportunities (p. 9). The bottomers and Lorainers in Toni Morrison's **The Bluest Eye** and **Sula** evoke memories of a valueless life, poverty, and unemployment caused by the whites' institutional exclusion of them. Collective memory equally tends to document the African-Americans' subjection to violence. As Silva (2017) contends, they become "scapegoats, the unleashing of aggression is allowed" (p. 85). The bottomers and Lorainers' collective memory evokes acts of physical, psychological, and verbal violence practiced against the African-Americans. Its narrative seemingly succeeds to transfer the kind of psychological violence that African-American women were subject to and which attributed 'animalistic' features and 'nicknames' to them or 'reduced' them into 'things' (Vanucchi, 2017, p. 67). It also brings to mind sites of verbal violence that assault the physical aspects of African-Americans. Social exclusion and violence are some unfair racist practices that are repeatedly evoked by the African-Americans' shared memory for the sake of denunciation and construction.

No doubt, collective memory offers a strong and deep vision of the impact of racism on the African-Americans' existence after the emancipation. Its narratives bring about the heavy outcomes of racist exercises which are chiefly dissatisfaction, 'social withdrawal', and the denial of self. The memory's documentation of past events represents the African-Americans' psychological dilemmas manifested in a lowered self-esteem, sadness, and a huge feeling of guilt. These negative feelings are related to their experience of 'loss' caused by their failure in being themselves, becoming what they want, and preserving their dreams (Broman, 1997, p. 45). The African-Americans' social and economic realities at that time were directly responsible for the previous conclusions. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the different characters' shared memories mirror African-Americans who are either socially excluded or racially harassed by the white oppressive system. They consequently reach a stage of 'reassessment and realignment' followed by 'social withdrawal' and expressed in the "rejection of dominant culture" (Simpson, 1985, p. 17). Their economic situation is shifted to us as weak, poor, and miserable. Most of them are unemployed because they lack qualifications. All this is caused by their being denied the appropriate educational formation and being excluded from the highly classified institutions. Therefore, they are "underrepresented in higher levels of occupation and continue to be over represented among the unemployed" (Pettigrew, 1964, p. 20). Performing its constructive role, collective memory does not only evoke the history of racism but also helps through its constructed narratives to denounce this destructive institution and sympathize with the African-Americans' suffering.

The reconstructive performance of collective memory mostly centers on the dismantling of white superiority and the building of African-Americans' concrete identity along with the detection of their good and factual aspects. Now, collective memory is reconstructive through both its power of revelation and its dynamics of construction. It will be noticed that it prospers in doing this via the return to ethnic values, the establishment of a counter narrative and the functional organizations of discourse and disclosure. The post-civil war literary works witness a change in characterization. We are exposed to a limitless number of informed African-American characters who make use of their collective memory to bring their selves into being. One way of accomplishing this is the reconquest of racial identity by the insistence on community in which they help each other, communicate with each other, keep friendship and familial bonds and preserve their cultural values in contrast to the whites' individualism and sterile standards (Erikson, 1996, p. 154). Going back to the old traditional African values is one way of disrupting the whites' ideology and proving its insufficiency. This stage is initiated, reinforced, and nourished by the African-Americans' shared remembrances.

A part of the subversion of the whites' discourse occurs when collective memory exhibits its counter narratives that are opposed to the 'colonial stereotypes' ascribed to the African-Americans. Again, collective memory is provocative of change as well as subversive and creative. It operatively reveals and recreates new sense of blackness with which the African-Americans reject the white Americans' "institutions and values" and emphasize their "positive self-image" (Biko, 1978, p. 26). Their new slogan "black is beautiful" is a strong and well-studied plan released for the confrontation of the stereotypes that were long held by the white Americans and which suggest that the African-Americans are inferior and under classification. As Sanders (1988) maintains, the African American constructed memories definitely arrive to "demetaphorize the figure of the blacks and make that of the white metaphorical" (p. 3). By doing this, they arrive to improve themselves, positively reintroduce the African-Americans' image, change the way the others view them, and reject the white Americans' paradigms of deprivation.

The reconstructive process of collective memory carries on with its two basic substances that are discourse and disclosure. Collective memory is both demonstrative and interpretative in a way that is 'conscious' and 'non-conforming'. All these characteristics help to introduce and produce varied meanings about blackness. The African-American is newly signified as a 'dynamic subject' and blackness to be workable and 'undefeated'. The 'moral' and 'intellectual abilities' of African-Americans are pushed forwards to let the others see their goodness and impartial qualifications (Heilbron, 1999, p. 296). As a discourse, collective memory provides improved methods for understanding blackness and its vitality; something which reinforces the African-Americans' 'future wellbeing'. It also appreciates their efforts to heal and empower themselves despite all the bad circumstances that conspire against them. Furthermore, memory tends to be quite helpful in observing, sustaining, and reproducing the African-Americans' "will of survival" (Gatson, 2011, p. 17). It practically challenges the white Americans' common understanding about blackness and improves its meanings.

As a deconstructive narrative, collective memory asserts the irreducibility of blackness and highlights the African-Americans' lately emerging genuine features. This final stage that concerns the reestablishment of African American identity insists on its distinctiveness, uniqueness and rebirth. The African-Americans' shared remembrances essentially produce some operatively deconstructive narratives which expose their peculiar culture, their processes of birth and rebirth as well as their difference and distinct character. The same narratives maintain that their specific culture is responsible for the release and solidification of their identity for "there can be no people without culture" (Antia, 2005, p. 17). The cultural memory of African-Americans provides a store of knowledge that represents their distinguished language, myths, proverbs, oral tradition, and dialects; all of which make of them a unique race. Their past accounts as confronted with their present reality offer them the possibilities of birth and rebirth. And this can be widely noticed in their lately adopted sense of freedom and 'spiritual' awakening, their pride in blackness and 'African values', and their display of selfless and unconditional love (Umoh, 2005, p. 23). The African-Americans' collective memory moreover comes to spotlight their difference exhibited in their aesthetic and beauty sense along with their creative and innovative

spirit. Regarding this stage, collective memory is not only deconstructive of blackness but also helps the African-Americans to deconstruct, rediscover, and reinterpret themselves.

### III. CONCLUSION

This paper principally aims to detect the effectiveness of collective memory and the levels of its functionality, especially in the establishment of a specific identity. Besides that, this investigative study helps to understand how much collective memory is active in generating meanings, claiming the truth, and reflecting the hidden areas of history. The research is similarly supportive to know how collective memory has helped the African-American communities to recover from their past traumas, develop their unity, and cherish their peculiarity. It will also be exigent to see whether the effects of racism have decreased through time, and if African-Americans have finally realized their true and independent self. As an ultimate objective, we will discover how collective memory has inaugurated itself as a powerful discourse through its persuasive narratives and discursive techniques.

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