



06

**REWRITING THE NARRATIVE OF WAR: AN EXPLORATION OF TONI
MORRISON'S *HOME***

Aman Preet Kaur

Research Scholar

Department of English.

Himachal Pradesh University,

Shimla, Himachal Pradesh

Abstract:

The setting of the novel revolves around the consequences of Korean War some came up with more money, as may be the case of whites and others with less money, but the major problem is how they came back to the United States, with a mental trauma for the consequences of war, the pain and suffering of what they had done or seen there. Morrison perfectly, with the protagonist, Frank Money, portrays the mental problems which soldiers soldier could have after the war. His destination is Lotus, Ga., which he's been avoiding because it harbors hated childhood memories and because he dreads facing the families of the two Hometown friends whose deaths in Korea plague his dreams. What draws him back now is a letter informing him that his younger sister, Cee is in trouble and needs the help of Frank. It is at the end of the book when Frank confesses that he is guilty for the murder of the Korean girl, who had nothing to do with him and the war. War memories, psychological injury, and loss have become a part of him, so that his wartime and peacetime selves have become one. It could be argued that the concept of Home in the novel is not so much related to a particular place but, rather, to that psychic space where the memory of the self dwells.

Keywords: *Mental trauma, War Memories, Psychic Space, Individual Recovery, etc.*

Black soldiers and war veterans play a key role in a number of Morrison's novels. And the violence these character experiences comprises a significant element of Morrison's critique of narrative of national and racial identity in the United States. Toni Morrison is a famous American novelist and professor. She was born in 1931, at the beginning of the Great Depression, in Ohio. She is the only living American Nobel Prize winner for Literature; when she received the prize in 1993 she was the 8th woman, and also the first black woman, who had received it at the time. Throughout the 1950s, American white people underwent some changes in their lives. These changes were good, except the one that happened at the beginning of 1950: the outbreak of Korean War (1950-1953) with the participation of many American men. Truman ordered many men to go and fight on the side of South Korea, and also to fight the communism that existed in North Korea with the presence of the Soviet Union, so that communism would not spread in the south. This war brought many new jobs for American soldiers, nurses, etc. because Truman needed many soldiers to fight for his ideals in Asia. The U.S. Army expanded to 3.6 million men, six times its size when the Korean War began and not only that, but also it lasted three years and involved over 3 million U.S. military personnel.

Therefore, on the one hand, it was good for Americans because they had new jobs, new opportunities and after the war the veterans had their pay, but on the other hand it brought misery and trauma, as many people died or were injured. Then, we must add the great problem that caused the



Korean War to the soldiers. Some came up with more money, as may be the case of whites and others with less money, but the major problem is how they came back to the United States, with a mental trauma for the consequences of war, the pain and suffering of what they had done or seen there. Morrison perfectly portrays the mental problems that any soldier could have after a war with the protagonist, Frank Money.

Toni Morrison is one of the leading 20th Century African American Woman novelists, who have endeavored to articulate problems of prejudice and discrimination through her fictional world. Morrison's novels have been almost universally praised by reviewers, and have been the subject of numerous academic books and essays in the fields of gender studies, ethnic studies, postmodern theory, literary theory, and cultural studies. Many critics praised Morrison's complex treatment of issues of African-American identity in her novels as various influences shaped the author as an artist which is important to study in connection with the aspect under scrutiny. Toni Morrison's writing was greatly influenced by her family. Her grandparents had relocated to Ohio during the national movement of blacks out of the South known as the Great Migration. After leaving their farm in Alabama, Morrison's mother's parents (Ardelia and John Solomon Willis) moved to Kentucky, and then to Ohio. They placed extreme value in the education of their children and themselves. One of the most critically acclaimed American writers, Morrison was a major architect in creating a literary language for African Americans. Her work is told in black vernacular, black settings, and is focused on blackness - deeply unusual for her time. Her work formed a distinctly black literary sensibility, while drawing a reading audience that cut across racial boundaries.

The structure that Morrison uses in her book *Home* is very simple but at the same time it has much to talk about. It is a very short novel with seventeen chapters; Morrison separates these chapters in an experimental way. We have two narrators in the novel, in first instance, we have Frank Money, the protagonist who speaks in first person, and he is the one who opens the book. Frank narrates his own story, his own memories and he also argues with the other narrator, who speaks in the third person. They have different points of view about reality; they see the same story in a different way, one in a more positive way and the other one in a more negative way. The action begins with Frank literally out of action: wearing restraints in a hospital bed, faking sleep in order to avoid yet another deadening shot of morphine. Confined to the 'nuthouse' by the police for an infraction he can't remember, he plans and quickly executes his escape: first through the fire exit, thence to Zion — the A.M.E. Zion church, that is, whose sign he spotted earlier from the squad car. There he's given shelter by Reverend Locke (the first in a succession of 'locks' that, one way or another, fit Frank's key), who helps him on his way. His destination is Lotus, Ga., which he's been avoiding because it harbors hated childhood memories - and because he dreads facing the families of the two hometown friends whose deaths in Korea plague his dreams. What draws him back now is a letter informing him that his younger sister, Cee, is in trouble. "Come fast. She be dead if you tarry" (Morrison, 8).

Morrison starts her tale and Frank's odyssey in a hospital: Frank wakes up, bound and sedated, but has no recollection of how he came to be there. He receives a mysterious letter urging him to hurry home to his sister. "She be dead if you tarry" (Morrison, 8). Frank, bitter and brimming with self-loathing, has been back in America for a year but has been unable to bring himself to head back to his native Georgia. The letter gives him the spur he needs. He breaks out of his 'crazy ward' and starts his journey, first barefoot through snow, then shod and fed and with \$17 in his pocket from a charitable minister. Soon he is weaving from state to state, plagued by post-traumatic stress disorder, but finally charged with both direction and purpose. Frank travels in the present but on the way his troubled mind casts back, conjuring up scarred thoughts and memories from his time in Korea. He witnessed the deaths of his two childhood friends - the three of them joining the army to escape the hometown they loathed and the limited job prospects of work in cotton fields they didn't own, just like their parents



before them. Reliving their deaths goads him on. “No more people I didn’t save. No more watching people close to me die. No more” (Morrison, 103). Frank’s unwavering loyalty to his sister means he will stop at nothing to complete his quest. War has left plenty of residual cruelty sloshing around in him. He will kill anyone who has touched her. He fights a pimp and keeps punching him when he is unconscious, fuelled by a reawakened lust for blood — “The thrill that came with each blow was wonderfully familiar” (Morrison, 101). Morrison is sparing in detailing the carnage of war, but there is one neat twist that she withholds until the end, which suggests that Frank is so corroded by remorse that his sister-saving will only grant him so much redemption. The plot of *Home* is a standard one in American literature. Frank Money is suffering from a mysterious psychiatric ailment that today we could call post-traumatic stress disorder, but in the 1950s had no name. Not only does Frank return to a country that is racist in general, but he must travel to the Jim Crow South to rescue his sister, Cee. The message of this novel is sobering. Whatever home might be for Frank, it is not a place where war is absent, as he brings Korea along with him as he travels. If peace is thought of as an absence of war, it is a state that Morrison’s character is unable to experience. War memories, psychological injury, and loss have become a part of him, so that his wartime and peacetime selves have become one. His army jacket and dog tags are outward signs of an inner melding. Home for this soldier/citizen cannot be a place apart. And so a central theme in the novel is the kind of space home can be for a broken veteran like Frank.

When Frank was a child, his family was run out of Bandera County, Texas — they had to abandon their land, their crops, their livestock — and were forced to move in with relatives in Georgia. His father took a job as a fieldworker, and his mother picked cotton in the day and swept lumber shacks at night. Memories of their expulsion from Texas will haunt Frank the rest of his life. Frank Money is an angry, self-loathing veteran of the Korean War who, after traumatic experiences on the front lines, finds himself back in racist America with more than just physical scars. His home may seem alien to him, but he is shocked out of his crippling apathy by the need to rescue his medically abused younger sister and take her back to the small Georgia town they come from and that 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. Since returning from Korea, Frank has suffered frightening episodes in which he is overwhelmed with gruesome hallucinations. He has done a stint in a mental hospital, and nearly kills a man at a train stop on the way back to Georgia.

Here, we can see that he does not feel well in any place, he feels dislocated, because he has been tormenting himself for something that he had done in Korea, and also because he has lost his friends, Mike and Stuff. But not only that but also now he has to face a new battlefield, his “mission” (Morrison, 15). Rescuing his sister becomes for him something restless and uncomfortable because he must return to Lotus, the place of his childhood which he hates deeply, “he didn’t want to go home without his ‘homeboys.’ He was far too alive to stand before Mike’s folks or Stuff’s. His easy breath and unscathed self would be an insult to them” (Morrison, 15). Here we can see how he tries to stop the memories of his friends by not facing reality and confronting his own fears becomes a difficult task. One more example of how war has affected his mind is when he argues with the narrator about the conditions that he and the others had to suffer in a place like that: “Korea. You can’t imagine it because you weren’t there.” You can’t describe the bleak landscape because you never saw it. First let me tell you about the cold, [...] Korea cold hurts [...] Battle is scary, yeah, but it’s alive. Orders, gut-quickenning, covering buddies, killing- clear, no deep thinking needed. [...] Worst of all is the solitary guard duty” (Morrison, 93). Here we can see how his post-traumatic stress disorder comes from his experience in the war; in fact, the most important reason for his trauma comes from something horrible that he did during his solitary guards. There was a Korean girl who was always seeking for



food on their trash, and Frank felt attracted to her, sexually abused the girl, and finally killed her. The way he narrates his atrocious action is very shocking for the reader. One day, the girl “smiles, reaches for the soldier’s crotch, touches it. It surprises him. Yum-yum? [...] he blows her away” (Morrison, 95). At this point in the story Frank has not said that that guard was himself and that this was what was torturing him, because he did not want to face the reality. He also said, still implying that it was not him who had abused the girl: “I think the guard felt more than disgust. I think he felt tempted and that is what he had to kill. Yum-yum” (Morrison, 96). It is at the end of the book when Frank confesses that he is guilty for the murder of the Korean girl, who had nothing to do with him and the war: I have to tell you 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 proud grieving over my dead friends. How I loved them. How much I cared about them, missed them. 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 who saw her smile.
I am the one she said “Yum-yum” to.
I am the one she aroused.

A child. A wee little girl (Morrison, 133).

This terrible confession seems to have alleviated his trauma, and this happened because he just wanted to keep what had happened in the war as a secret. All this time he had felt miserable when he remembered his actions and he did not feel as a man: “How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn’t know was in me? How could I like myself, even be myself if I surrendered to that place where I unzip my fly and let her taste me right then and there? [...] What type of man is that? And what type of man thinks he can ever in life pay the price of that orange?” (Morrison, 134). In her article for *The Guardian*, Churchwell has stated her disagreement of the end of the novel: “Frank’s post-traumatic stress disorder disappears as easily, effecting one of the least satisfying ‘redemptions’ I can remember – and like most Americans, I am a sucker for redemption stories.” As I commented above, it seems too easy to be relieved of the pain and trauma that Frank has suffered in the way it is presented in the novel. It is difficult to believe that just confessing his mistakes everything bad seems to disappear. In my opinion, as Churchwell says, something is missing in the novel: you cannot be cured of a trauma like the one he had during the war so easily.

Perhaps the most evident sign that Home is a “trauma story” is the recurrent visits that the protagonist receives of ghosts from his past, which he has been trying to forget –mostly by drinking heavily–, but that insistently return to disturb his peace of mind. Caruth explains that “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth, 17). The broken memories that Frank Money has of his war experiences reveal this quality of not having been sufficiently grasped when they occurred and returning to haunt him now as if they were being experienced for a first time:

So, “as was often the case when he was alone and sober, whatever the surroundings, he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in, holding them in his palms like a fortune-teller’s globe shattering with bad news; or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama. And he was stepping over them, around them, to stay alive, to keep his own face from dissolving, his own colorful guts under that oh-so-thin sheet of flesh. Against the black and white of the winter landscape, blood red took center stage. They never went away, these pictures” (Morrison, 20).

No doubt, the fact that Frank lost his best two friends, Mike and Stuff, in Korea does not help him much in terms of being able to assimilate those terrifying memories. The reader soon realizes that the loss of his two ‘home boys’ is closely related to his incapacity to build connections with the surrounding world and to reorient his existence.



In spite of evident hints in *Home* suggesting that, besides their individual wounds, the main characters suffer from a more serious form of cultural trauma, it would be difficult to argue that no degree of working through is accomplished in the novel. As a matter of fact, several reviewers have affirmed that the novel. It could be argued, indeed, that Frank and Cee's partial recovery at the end of the novel is especially remarkable because of the intense pain and isolation that we have seen them experiencing throughout the narrative. Elaine Scarry (1985) has described in great detail how physical and psychological pain come to deconstruct the victims' world, dislocating the self, and making it extremely difficult for them to grasp and communicate the roots of their problems. Frank and Cee would definitely be cases in point, since both their childhood memories and their brutal experiences away from home have left profound scars on their psyches. Morrison's novel, however, offers a number of clues about the ways in which love and duty can redeem a blighted past.

Before they return to Lotus to have Cee healed by the local community of wise women, both siblings have been gravely damaged and adrift for some time. Ycidra had fallen victim of a pretentious young man who claimed to love her and married her, only to abandon her soon afterward, leaving her utterly defenseless in Atlanta. Because she was used to being protected by Frank, now on her own and with a deficient education, she is an easy prey for a wicked doctor who uses her as a guinea pig in his eugenics-based experiments. By the time her brother comes to rescue her, she is near death and her physical integrity will never be restored. Nonetheless, after a few months in the care of Ethel Fordham and the other women with the "seen-it-all-eyes" in Lotus, Cee is turned into a radically different person: "Cee was different. Two months surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her. The women handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping" (Morrison, 121). Not only does Cee manage to make it through her serious physical illness but, more remarkably, she becomes an independent and strong woman who "would never again need rescue" (Morrison, 129). Both she and Frank realize that his excessive care in her youth had probably done little favor to her, and now she is ready to confront the future on her own, aware of her limitations: "[...] her brother was there with her, which was very comforting, but she didn't need him as she had before.

He had literally saved her life, but she neither missed nor wanted his fingers at the nape of her neck telling her not to cry, that everything would be all right" (Morrison, 131). By the end of the novel, Cee is presented as having acquired a "newly steady self, confident, cheerful and occupied" (Morrison, 135), and the fact that she spends most of her time piecing together quilts may also be a convenient symbol indicating that she is also succeeding in finally putting together all those fragments of her life. As mentioned earlier on, Frank begins to give signs of his slow recovery process even before he arrives in Lotus: "This feeling of safety and goodwill, he knew, was exaggerated, but savoring it was real. He convinced himself that somewhere nearby pork ribs sizzled on a yard grill and inside the house there was a potato salad and coleslaw and early sweet pees too" (Morrison, 118). Despite his earlier reluctance to return to the South, as Frank gets closer to the region he realizes that there are certain things there –the weather, the food, the pace of life– that he immediately identifies with. So once he has fulfilled his main mission of saving his sister, he knows he is now ready to battle against his own "ghosts" in this more welcoming context: "Waving occasionally at passing neighbors or those doing chores on their porches, he could not believe how much he had once hated this place. Now it seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding. [...] Frank tried to sort out what else was troubling him and what to do about it" (Morrison, 132). After witnessing his sister's physical and spiritual recovery, Frank realizes that it is time to confront his own traumas: one dating as far back as his childhood days in Lotus, when they saw the secret burial of a black man; the other related to the murder of the scavenging girl –who looked like Cee – that he himself committed in Korea after she sexually propositioned him. Frank had repressed the memories of these incidents by using some screen



memories connected with those ‘primal scenes’ of trauma: the beautiful horses on the farm, in one case, and the loss of his two homeboys and the fact that “the guard” (Morrison, 100) had been the one who brutally killed the girl, in the other. But now, as he tells the scribe, he seems ready to face the truth of those past events and to recover his deeply-hurt black male identity: “I have to say something to you right now. I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you and lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me. I felt so proud grieving over my dead friends” (Morrison, 133). Frank demonstrates that he has come full circle by first admitting that “he had covered his guilt and shame with big-time mourning for his dead buddies” (Morrison, 135), which had allowed him to keep his murder of the Korean child hidden: “Now the hook was deep inside his chest and nothing would dislodge it. The best he could hope for was time to work it loose” (Morrison, 135). Soon after, Frank convinces his sister to go back with him to the stud farm where they had originally witnessed the burial. They dig up the body of the black man –itself a symbol for uncovering memories– and wrap it in the first quilt that Cee had made. With this unearthing and reburial of that ‘ghost’ from their past, Frank and Cee finally come to face their childhood trauma, and the reader feels that they are now progressing toward maturity and responsibility.

It is undeniable that *Home* ends on a very positive and optimistic note, since the main characters have journeyed deep within themselves to come to an understanding and a partial assimilation of the memories that had previously haunted them. In this sense, it could be argued that the concept of home in the novel is not so much related to a particular place but, rather, to that psychic space where the memory of the self dwells. It would be difficult to understand the tortuous road that Frank and Cee have had to travel in the novel if one did not take into account the kind of prejudice and injustices that they suffered as children in Lotus, first, and in exile, later. As a few reviewers of the novel pointed out, these characters are representative of a new generation, coming of age in the 1950s, which were aware of the traumatic past of most African Americans and will carry on the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Within the scope of the novel, however, it is difficult to speak of a mourning process that would transcend the very immediate reconstruction of the main characters’ individual pasts or of a recovery that would involve a consideration of the broader cultural traumas. It could be argued that while *Home* suggests that individual recovery from past traumatic experiences is usually possible, it is not so easy to bring the insidious effects resulting from cultural and collective negation to a closure.

References

- Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma, Narration and History*, USA: John Hopkins Press, 1996. Print.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The body in pain: the making and unmaking of the world*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.
- Tally, Justine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- “Toni Morrison *Home*: Authors at Google.” Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 4 Mar. 2013. Web. 10 June 2015. Web.





This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: Kaur, Aman, Preet, "Rewriting the Narrative of War: An Exploration of Toni Morrison's Home". Literary Cognizance, II-4 (March, 2022): 30-36. Web.

