

Identity, Pain, and Choice, the Functions of Memories in *The Deep* and *Black-Eyed Woman*

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Abstract

In the novels, *The Deep* and *Black-Eyed Women*, memories play an important role. They run through the main parts of the two novels and assume a pivotal role in revealing the characters' identities, depicting their sufferings, and showcasing their choices. Based on this, from the perspectives of memory and identity, memory and pain, and memory and choice, this paper compares and analyzes how these two novels reveal the collective identity and individual identity of the characters through memory, how the pain represented by memory is displayed, and how the main characters in the two novels make choices in the face of remembering and forgetting.

Keywords

Memory, Identity, Pain, Trauma, *The Deep*, *Black-Eyed Women*

1. Introduction

Memory is a powerful tool that shapes our understanding of our past, influences our present experiences, and guides our future decisions. In literature, memories often serve as a crucial element in the development of characters, plotlines, and themes (Neumann, 2008: p. 333). The novels *The Deep* and *Black-Eyed Women*, both explore the complex relationship between memory, identity, pain, and choice in the lives of their characters. Despite their different settings and characters, both narratives delve into how collective and individual memories shape identities, the enduring pain caused by traumatic memories, and the choices characters make in dealing with these memories. By delving into the intricate connections between these elements, the authors of these novels reveal thought-provoking insights into the human condition and the role of memory in shaping our lives.

The Deep, written by Rivers Solomon is a captivating tale that follows the journey of Yetu, a young “historian” who holds the collective memories of her people, the wajinru. The wajinru are a community of merfolk, descended from the pregnant African women who were thrown overboard from slave ships during the Middle Passage. The story shows Yetu’s choices in the face of painful memories, and the thoughts that being a historian brings to Yetu about the collective and individual identity.

Black-Eyed Women, a compelling short story by Viet Thanh Nguyen, explores themes of memory, trauma, and identity through the eyes of a Vietnamese-American ghostwriter. Haunted by her past as a boat refugee and the apparition of her deceased brother, the protagonist confronts her suppressed memories and struggles to come to terms with her family’s tragic history. Nguyen masterfully delves into the complexities of immigrant experiences, survivor’s guilt, and the resilience of the human spirit in this powerful narrative.

In this paper, we will compare and analyze the portrayal of memory and its impact on the characters’ collective and individual identities in both novels. Drawing upon the perspectives of memory and identity, memory and pain, and memory and choice, we will discuss how these works of fiction reveal the characters’ identities through their memories, showcase their sufferings, and ultimately demonstrate the choices they make in response to the act of remembering and forgetting. By examining these themes, we aim to illuminate the profound role memory plays in shaping our lives and the universal truths that these novels convey about human nature.

2. Memory and Identity

In fiction, a character’s identity can be divided into collective identity and individual identity. Collective identity, refers to the shared sense of belonging and identification with a particular group or community. It provides individuals with a sense of connection and solidarity with others who share similar backgrounds or affiliations. Individual identity, on the other hand, refers to the unique attributes, characteristics, and experiences that define a person as an individual. In both novels, the collective and individual identities of the two main characters are not revealed at the beginning of the novel but gradually revealed through their memories. In *The Deep*, “Yetu had been weeping for days, lost in a remembering of one of the first wajinru.” (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 5) This reveals Yetu’s identity as a historian by describing her immersion in memories that are not her own. In the following text, Yetu’s mission as a historian to carry memory is further explained. The sentence “A historian’s role was to carry the memories so other wajinru wouldn’t have to” (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 8) shows that Yetu’s identity is inextricably linked to the memories she carries, and these memories make up her unique identity, as a historian. In *Black-Eyed Women*, the ghost writer still reveals her individual identity through a piece of memory. She uses her memory to elicit her past. In the sentence “I had not forgotten our nameless

blue boat and it had not forgotten me” (Nguyen, 2016: p. 14), the tragic experience that the ghost writer was raped on a boat and her brother was killed is introduced by her state of “not forgetting”, and the identity of her as a victim in the war is gradually clear.

In addition to individual identity, the memories in the two novels also reveal collective identities. In *The Deep*, wajinru’s identity is realized by themselves along with Yetu’s memories. “Remember,’ she said. This was their story. This was where they began. Drowning.” (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 22) When Yetu shares her memories with other wajinru and tells them to remember, they learn they are the descendants of drowned slaves. Similarly, in *Black-Eyed Women*, there are also other victims in the writer’s memory, they are screaming, and crying, and they are girls from other villages (Nguyen, 2016: p. 15).

In the two novels, although the collective identities of wajinru and those girls who were raped are victims of harm and oppression, their attitudes towards these memories and their identities are different. In the conversation between Yetu and Amaba, Amaba states the importance of memory to wajinru. She said, “One can only go for so long without asking who am I? Where do I come from? Without answers, there is only a hole, a hole where a history should be that takes the shape of an endless longing.” (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 9) This sentence shows Amaba’s attitude towards memory. She believes that memory constitutes the identity of wajinru as a group. Memory can reveal their past and guide their future, so they attach importance to memory and their collective identity. As Yetu shares the memories with wajinru, though they feel the pain of carrying these memories, they still shout “Tell us” (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 22). One wajinru even said, “I’m here, I’m alive” (23) after acquiring the memory. This proves that wajinru considers memories as important as their lives. Although they are painful memories, they can make wajinru feel the meaning of their existence. In *Black-Eyed Women*, there is no other girl’s perspective on the memory of being raped, but we can see the perspective of the ghost writer. In her account, the victims are forced to come to terms with the painful memory and the collective identity (Rody, 2018: p. 400). In the sentence, “I cried for those other girls who had vanished and never come back, including myself” (Nguyen, 2016: p. 18), the ghost writer shows her compassion for these girls and herself. In her view, having such an identity does not make her “alive”, but makes her and other girls “vanished”. “Vanished” here not only refers to the disappearance of those girls without suffering in the past but also refers to the vanishing of victims of sexual violence in society due to their identity. They face the double trauma caused by the wounds of the soul and social death.

3. Memory and Pain

In the two novels, memories are linked to pain, and these memories represent the inner entanglement and trauma of the main characters. Both Yetu and the ghost writer are controlled by their memories. For Yetu, as a historian, her mis-

sion is to control memory, but she is always pulled backed into her ancestors' memories, and she loses control of her ability (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 6). The sense of loss of control is one of the sources of her pain, and even because of this, she almost lost her life. For the ghost writer, she has always been trapped in the memory on the boat. Her brother's words "You died too; you just don't know it" (Nguyen, 2016: p. 17) indicate that she is trapped in the memories of her brother's death and her own experience of rape, and this state of being controlled by memories and unable to move forward is called "death" by her brother. This "death" is the exhaustion of the inner life caused by being controlled by painful memories for a long time.

Although the pain of Yetu and the ghost writer has to do with being controlled by their memories, there are also differences in the specific causes of their suffering. Yetu's pain comes partly from memory itself, which is the memory left by ancestors of each generation of wajinru, containing a past in which their ancestors, as slaves, were thrown into the ocean. As a historian, Yetu can empathize with their pain. This is why Yetu is reluctant to make the memories into melodies, and in her thought, "she wants people to remember what she remembered, with screams" (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 10). These screams are the pain of her ancestors in the depth of her memory, and the cause of her pain for so long. Another reason for Yetu's pain is the contradiction between the identity bestowed upon her by memory and the pursuit of her true self. In Yetu's view, the pain that memories bring to her about her ancestors is something she should not have to bear, and the identity of a historian is only for the wajinru community. Her thought "Was this pain real? It didn't even belong to her. Was there anything about her that wasn't a performance for others; gratification?" (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 21) reveals her doubts and dissatisfaction with her identity as a historian. She thinks she is just a container for memories, and that her existence is to serve wajinru's need for memory. But without memories, she would lose her identity and the meaning of her existence. Her thought "Absent the rememberings, who was she but a woman cast away?" (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 48) Therefore, we can see that Yetu's pain also comes from the identity brought by memories. On the one hand, this identity makes her think that she is just a container of memories, which makes her resist and want to pursue her true self; on the other hand, she cannot leave memories, because giving up memories means that she will fall into emptiness.

For the ghost writer, her pain comes from a state that she wants to forget but can't. Her words "I remembered how he looked the last time, I had long struggled to forget him, but just turning a corner in the world or in my mind I could run into him, my best friend" (Nguyen, 2016: p. 5) show her struggling between "remembering" her brother and "trying to forget" him. Neumann's words "our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer's present, his or her desire and denial" (Neumann, 2008: p. 341) can explain the state of the ghost writer. Although she tries to forget, she can still remember how her brother looked the last time, and

this shows that her brother's death is a trauma in her heart. The ghost of her brother always maintains the appearance when he dies, which represents in the mind of the ghost writer, the pain and guilt brought by the death of her brother never change. The ghost of her brother is a representative of her painful memory. And the talk between her and her brother's ghost can also be seen as a talk with her memory. After recalling the memory on the boat, the ghost writer said, "Why did I live and you die" (Nguyen, 2016: p. 17) at this moment, her guilt and pain reach a peak with the end of the memory.

4. Remembering or Forgetting

In the two novels, the main characters experience the pain brought by memories, and they also make choices between remembering and forgetting. After leaving the wajinru community and going through a mental struggle, Yetu ultimately chooses to take responsibility and decides to remember those memories. It doesn't mean she chooses to give up on pursuing her true self; rather, she discovers that each individual's identity is just as important as the collective identity (Solomon et al., 2019: p. 88). Yetu chooses the heavy memories instead of emptiness because she understands that if everything around her is an abyss without memories, she too will cease to exist. Yetu's choice doesn't mean that the pain brought by memories disappears. Instead, she chooses to reconcile with the pain brought by memories. In Nguyen's words, in the end, Yetu finds a "just memory" that is a memory contains one's own and others. For the ghost writer, she doesn't choose to forget the painful memory, but to face it and remember it. She said, "It came to me that letting it speak was the only way to get rid of it" (Nguyen, 2016: p. 17). She is not trying to get rid of the memory, but trying to find an outlet for her pain by facing the memory. Talking to her brother's ghost is also a reflection of her choice to remember.

5. Conclusion

In the novels *The Deep* and *Black-Eyed Women*, memories run through major parts of the stories. Through the analysis of memory in the two novels, this paper finds out the functions. In *The Deep*, memory constructs both Yetu's individual identity as a historian and the collective identity of wajinru, revealing wajinru's past and Yetu's mission. In *Black-Eyed Women*, memory uncovers the identity of the ghost writer and the girls on the boat, they are all victims of sexual violence in war. The paper also contrasts the different attitudes of wajinru and victimized girls towards their collective identities. In addition, the paper analyzes the control of memory over Yetu and the ghost writer, and the pain different memories bring to them. In the face of painful memories, Yetu and the ghost writer don't choose to forget, but carry their memories and move on.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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