



The Preservation of Cultural Memory in African-American Fiction

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Abstract— *The aim of this paper will be to attempt an examination of how folktales have been a part of the cultural memory of African-Americans and how it has been explored through literature, especially a reworking of these tales into short stories and other forms of fiction. It will further be attempted to explore the sense of identity in the African-American community as can be found in these stories and how much of that still persists in their consciousness and imagination to this day.*

Keywords— *culture, memory, folktales, identity.*

It is important to be rooted in one's ancestry and heritage. This is the underlying theme of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Preserving cultural memory and being empowered by it are crucial for the realization of the self in Morrison's text. Language, traditions, norms, values, all contribute to the wholeness of the self and a sense of identity. The modes of preservation of cultural heritage and traditions are numerous but the oral tradition tops the chart, primarily because of its wide circulation and existence in various forms, through generations. Folk tales are one such example of past traditions or values or cultural memory preserved through words and fascinating fables, moulded by time and generations. The Yoruba folk tales of the flying Africans have among its takers several modern and post-modern litterateurs and their renditions have not merely enthralled the modern reader but have made him more sensitive about his past heritage. In fact, the whole myth of the flying African developed as a resistance against the New World and its cruelty. Flying signified a bid to return to one's own heritage and a movement back to freedom. The natives forcibly uprooted from their homelands and brought to a foreign land as slaves constitutes a revolt in their sense of identity and it is to reclaim what was once their own—their very identity and sense of the self—that they flew like "blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flapping against the blue up there" (12, Hamilton). Imagination and ancestry inform these oral traditions and help one to be

connected to one's roots in changing and challenging times. It is, therefore, important to examine such literature that holds the potentiality of past tradition and value and how they have been reworked in modern texts. Toni Morrison, Virginia Hamilton, Robert Hayden, Paule Marshall and others have pondered on the myth of the flying African and the power of such (lived) tales have on the lives of the people of their community. This paper aims to examine those facets that enable such myths to survive in the modern world in modern art forms, other than the folk tale form, and to probe further into the question as to why is it important to appropriate these myths in life through Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Virginia Hamilton's *People Could Fly* and folk tales such as "The Flying Man" and "All God's Chillen Had Wings".

The myth of the flying African generated from the acts of resistance that the slaves posited against their masters. Flying was the code word for escape—escape from torture and bondage. Several narratives developed along such tales of brave men who dared to voyage back to their homeland and chart out a new and free life for themselves. Such tales of asserting one's individuality and resisting the white man's onslaught became more popular after the Igbo Landing incident of 1803 where several captive Igbo natives killed their captors and started walking back to their homeland on water, thereby committing suicide.

Waterwalkers, as they were famously called, and numerous others who ventured to cross creeks and rivers to safety, inspired many such tales that were an affirmation of individuality and selfhood. The flying Africans symbolize the “African struggle for freedom and...Black affect and need” (McDaniel, 36). Flight in the Afro-American context has emerged from a socio-historical context and represents acts of courage and defiance. In “All God’s Chillen Had Wings” the unnamed woman with a child on her back regains her power of flying when she grew tired of the abuses hurled at her and overwork in a foreign land under unforgiving circumstances. The power of flight was always inherent in the natives; it only had to be realized at the right moment—after suffering comes redemption. Christian spirituality lends a framework to these folktales as the theme of transcendence looms large. Often, the spirits are invoked to help them in their suffering and in the very act of flying high above to the skies, we find a Christian resonance. Spirituality forms the backdrop of Morrison’s novel. Milkman Dead, the protagonist of Morrison’s novel, “lacks coherence, a coming together of features into a total self” (Morrison, 69) and this Morrison attributes to his ignorance of his own culture and ancestry.

The flight from mental bondage to spiritual freedom is informed by the knowledge of one’s culture and heritage. Ancestry forms a connection between the past and the present and is a means of sustenance for the soul. For Morrison, spiritual knowledge comes from a rootedness in one’s history and tradition. Ancestors are the sources of wisdom that guide one through difficult times. “When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t always happen to the self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (Morrison, 344). A link with the past is important for the realization of the self in Morrison. Milkman is an entity without any sense of belonging. He feels alienated in his family, has no connection with his sisters, but he is drawn towards Pilate, his aunt, and her family. Morrison, through Pilate, shows the maternal instinct inherent in nature and has an aura of the primordial soul of her country and community. She is the link to Milkman’s past and community which he previously missed in the urban setting of Chicago. Once he undertakes the journey to discover his past and ancestry, he feels one with himself. He achieves an understanding of his heritage and identity, which Morrison considers to be essential for the discovery of the self: “In yielding to the soul (air), you win control of it. In union with the whole (community), you can define the part (self). In losing personal ego, you find it. Out of death comes birth. Most wonderfully, transcendence follows the discovery of self” (Evans, 354). Through Milkman Morrison instructs her readers to not lose their connection with their soil, their

past. Everybody has the power to fly, they only have to realize it. The community is crucial to the understanding of the self and it is through experiencing the community, the cultural memory, that the individual blossoms, flies.

According to Tiffany Ruby Patterson, “it is possible to reconstruct the consciousness of a people who left scant written records but had a rich oral tradition” (McDaniel, 33). The tales of the flying Africans exist through word of mouth—everyone knows about it but no one has ever witnessed it happen. In *Drums and Shadows*, a Georgia Writer’s Project initiative, several people were interviewed about their indigenous tales and myths and a certain Charles Hunter recalled this regarding the flying Africans: “He was a small man, slim an bery black. Alexanduh say he could fly. He say all his fambly in Africa could fly. I ain see em fly muhsef but he say he could do it” (169). It is a legend, a myth, a superstition in which is invested a power derived from the ancient times and from which the people derive power for in it is latent their sense of being. The troubles of the past have forged such a consciousness that envisioning a future and living the present without it is impossible. One may try to evade the past but the past catches on to him eventually where he has to face not only the brutality of the past but also the struggles of his men leading to their victory. Morrison tries to inform her modern readers of such a consciousness inherent in them by virtue of their being black. They are but fragmented parts of their whole self and this wholeness can be achieved by a union with the community. Identity to her is “a collective rather than an individual construct”; it is related to a broad sense of history and community. Such an Afrocentric consciousness is important for the individual to develop a wholeness as Milkman, too, in Shalimar, the land of his ancestors, “found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp” (Morrison, 281). Milkman’s limp was symbolic of the incompleteness in his life. He was never one with himself for he was never one with his community. Upon reaching Shalimar, and getting acquainted with his community people and knowing about his ancestors, he achieves a wholeness of being—his limp is no longer an impediment, a shortcoming—the earth in Shalimar is adjusted to his feet. In Chicago, he had to manoeuvre his gait so as to hide his limp. “The miraculous healing of Milkman’s limp and his transcendent flight from Solomon’s Leap would signify the protagonist’s spiritual rebirth and connection to his ancestral past” (Tidey, 51). The search for wholeness concludes in the without where he feels pride in his ancestors and consequently, himself. His spiritual quest

finds fulfillment with the knowledge that he had till now “discredited”. Morrison is interested in highlighting this knowledge because like Milkman the Afro-American generation today is on the verge of losing its innate connection with its own soil. It is through such folk tales that a consciousness of their being and belonging can be forged. Morrison aims to recreate the folk tales that were very natural to her and every household because the “discredited knowledge” that imparted strength, honour and pride to her people is today lost and needs to be rediscovered so that one may truly know oneself.

Virginia Hamilton’s reworking of “All God’s Chillen Had Wings” into *People Could Fly* indicates the importance of the theme of the flying man invested with a secret power. Such reworkings are common as in Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage” and “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home”. The latter poem, a refashioning of the legend of the flying African, from the folklore of Georgia Sea Island blacks, voices a desire to return to Africa. Through the character of the “gran” who “spread his arms and/flew away home” we have explicit tones of nostalgia and longing to be one with the homeland, as is evident in the urgent plea: “O cleave the air, fly away home” (Hayden, 55). Hamilton, through Toby and Sarah makes the deplorable plight of plantation workers palpable but in their flight, one by one, and then, collectively, we have instead of a sense of spiritual transcendence, a collective liberation. The “Kum...yali, kum buba tambe”—the chant used to propel the flight becomes the means of emancipation, that is indigenous language or culture is the means to freedom. “Language—charged, incantatory, and active—becomes a tool of collective liberation” (Gates Jr., 188). Historical and social consciousness comes forth through these reworkings of the popular myth which is distinct from that of Morrison’s treatment of the same.

O sugarman don’t leave me here
cotton balls to choke me

O sugarman don’t leave me here

Bukra’s arms to yoke me...

Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman gone home. (Morrison, 49)

The song that Pilate breaks into has a connotation of its own—socio-historical and spiritual. The myth of the flying African has been reworked in different art forms—poetry, novel, short story, novella, and folk tales but the underlying theme of emancipation from slavery and spiritual transcendence inform all such narratives. In reinvigorating such folk narratives, the author intends to refresh the cultural memory as well as a socio-historical past that forms an indelible part of the black community.

CONCLUSION

Folk tales such as the “Flying Man” are important points of departure from the harshness of reality but they can very easily be discredited as myths. It is by “dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal” that Morrison intends to rediscover the Flying Africans for the newer generations. Beneath the superficial ‘myth’ is the knowledge of the community, the ancestral wisdom which had long since been discredited because “Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was ‘discredited’”. And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work” (Morrison, 342). The universal longing for freedom of the body and soul—a trope found in many works of art lies deep beneath this ‘myth’. These myths are the cultural repositories and it is through an understanding of these narratives that one realizes “[w]e are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, ‘other’. We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self”. (Morrison, 133). Significantly for Afro-Americans, a sense of belonging is important else they would be half-formed individuals facing a crisis. It is important to go back to the past and derive strength and knowledge from it. The wisdom of the ancestors will enable them to live fully in a foreign land, not bereft of their tradition but better informed by their indigenous values and culture. It is, therefore, a bid to reclaim from the Afro-American the Afrocentric.

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