

Forgetting/Remembering Trauma: Reclaiming the Lost Identities in Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon", S. J. Watson's "Before I Go to Sleep" and Bothina El-Eisa's "Aisha Descends to Underworld"

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Abstract

This paper focuses on reclaiming lost identity – both collectively and individually – through remembering the traumatic events in three novels: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), S. J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep* (2011), and Bothina El-Eisa's *Aisha Descends to Underworld* (2012). Trauma affects identity formation in which traumatic experience creates a fragmented identity since the traumatic event marks a departure from the coherent life story. Trauma is associated with a forgotten event in which memories have been repressed even without the individuals active knowledge of repression. Forgetting traumatic events refers to the victims inability and unwillingness to confront the trauma he/she experienced. The act of remembering helps the fragmented self to negotiate and transform his/her past and in that way provide agency and meaning to individual's sense of self. Memories of the trauma haunt the traumatized individuals to be remembered and to speak within the person's memory. Remember is a vision rooted in the need to witness history in order to reclaim what must not be forgotten. In the three novels, the protagonists find healing by remembering their traumatic past. For the three protagonists, forgetting or denying the traumatic past lead to lose their identities and lose their social connections. The loss which protagonists suffer either because of dementia, or death, or forgetting the history of family, causes the loss of their own identities. To be able to reclaim their identities they must remember and confront their traumatic past.

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نسيان / تذكر الصدمة : استعادة الهويات المفقودة فى كلمات تونى موريسون
سليمان ، S. J. واتسون وقبل أن تذهب إلى النوم وعائشة Bothina شركة
العيسى لينزل إلى الجحيم
لمياء حسن ابراهيم

ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث كيفية استعادة الهوية المفقودة بسبب الفجوة و الدور الذى يلعبه تذكر الماضى فى استعادة هوية الاشخاص الذين مروا بتجارب مؤلمة فى الماضى سواء على المستوى الفردى والجماعى ويتناول البحث تحليل لثلاث روايات هى: أغنية سولمون لتونى موريسون وقبل أن أخلد للنوم لستيفن واتسون وعائشة تنزل الى العالم السفلى لبثينة العيسى. الفجوة غالبا ما تؤثر على هوية الافراد بحيث أنها تؤثر سلبا فى تكوين هذه الهوية وتؤدي الى نوع من التشتت وعدم القدرة على تكوين صورة ذهنية جيدة للفرد عن نفسه. بالإضافة إلى أن الفجوة الشخص غالبا ما ترتبط بنسيان الشخص لهذا الحدث المؤلم أو كبتة لرغبته فى عدم التحدث عنه وهو ما يؤدي إلى فقدان الشخص لهويته وقدرته على التواصل مع الآخرين. ومن أجل استعادة هذه الهوية المفقودة يلعب التذكر الدور الرئيسي حيث أن تذكر هذه الأحداث غالبا ما يؤدي الى أن الفرد يستطيع التعامل مع هذا الماضى كما انه يستطيع أن يواجه المستقبل من خلال استعادته لهويته التى فقدها نتيجة للأحداث المؤلمة التى مر بها فى تاريخه. و فى الروايات الثلاث يعانى أبطالها من فقدان لهويتهم نتيجة لمرورهم بأحداث مؤلمة فى الماضى سواء كانت فقدان للذاكرة أو فقدان شخص عزيز أو فقدان تاريخ جماعته أو أسرته. ويساعد تذكر الأحداث الماضية المؤلمة للشخصيات الثلاث على استعادة هويتهم ويساعدهم أيضا على التعامل مع هذا الماضى من خلال الهوية المستعادة مما يؤدي الى قدرتهم على مواجهة المستقبل كأفراد مستقلين و كأفراد ضمن مجتمعهم.

Studying trauma has become prominent in literary studies, especially postmodern literature that problematizes the concept of history and identity. The loss of histories was revealed to be directly linked to social and individual trauma, so that the recovery of lost histories becomes an obvious way of beginning to treat trauma and reclaim the lost identity. Since trauma is rooted in individual as well as collective forms of identity, it may affect the process of both collective and personal identity formation. This paper focuses on reclaiming lost identity – both collectively and individually – through remembering the traumatic events in three novels: Tony Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), S. J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep* (2011), and Bothina El-Eisa's *Aisha Descends to Underworld*¹ (2012). "عائشة تنزل الى العالم السفلي"

Trauma includes works around the experience of catastrophic personal and collective experiences. It refers to negative events that produce distressful memories as well as the person's response to this event. This response must involve intense fear, helplessness and horror. In other words, the event is traumatic if it is temporarily overwhelmed the individual's life and repeats itself against individual's will. Thus, the experience of trauma repeats itself through the unknown act of the victim and against his/her will. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, remarks that the traumatic experience is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive action of the survivor. Therefore, as Caruth suggests, trauma "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (3).

Trauma theory suggests that there is a relationship between representation and actuality. Studying trauma raises questions about the meaning and implication of a general theory of representation. In other words, a theory of subjectivity is implicit within trauma theory. Bent Sorenson defines trauma as "an event in the subject life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapability to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (99). In this sense, the ability to tell a coherent life story produces a coherent self. Retelling

1. All translation of quotations from Primary Arabic source is done by Lamiaa Hassan.

a traumatic experience is not pleasant. So the mind protects itself by forgetting the traumatic experience. Yet time is not linear, rather it is a space wherein one can turn back and find that all moments of time have coexisted simultaneously.

This non-linearity of history – especially traumatic history – leads to fragmented identity.

A traumatic event or experience creates a fragmented identity since the traumatic event marks a departure from the coherent life story. Therefore, trauma causes disruption in identity formation. The traumatized self is often haunted by the original event and caught up in compulsive repetition. A traumatic experience is understood later, after the event has ceased to take place. Accordingly, this traumatic event returns to the survivor in flashbacks and nightmares. The flashback possesses the survivor against his/her will. According to Caruth, the flashback represents "the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an un-pleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in anyway" (59). Trauma is not experienced in the moment it occurred, but is lived over and over again in flashbacks.

Moreover, trauma is associated with a forgotten traumatic event in which memories have been repressed even without the individual's active knowledge of the repression. Forgetting a traumatic event denotes to the victim's inability and unwillingness to confront the trauma he/she experienced. Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susan Onega assert that the crucial perception that trauma goes along with is a failure of memory. They add that the traumatized person repeat the traumatic event, relive the past and disrupt the linear model of temporality (10). In this sense, forgetting has a negative connotation: to forget means to be unwilling to retain something. It leads to an absence or emptiness where memory should be. Trauma centers around absence and repression. Caruth explains that trauma is a shocking event that the mind is unable to adequately process as it takes place and which is thus not really felt to have happened (*Unclaimed Experience*, 17).

Trauma victims cannot recognize their identities because new identities are created because of trauma. The new identity is created outside the individual's consciousness. Constance Lieber remarks that

The pre- and after-event identities are not equivalent and cannot be reconciled or understood by the trauma victims. Thus, a victim's

identity before the traumatic event is, according to the victim, the original and true identity (52).

Several traumatized individuals show loss of memories of the past that support a continuing sense of selfhood. In other words, trauma victims show significant incapacities in the memory in form of amnesia. This amnesia disrupts continuity of identity. Whatever experienced, the realm of memory is the central feature of the personality and identity.

Trauma leads to the failure to develop a cohesive self-image. It causes changes upon the self in which self representation cannot be defined as a cohesive self. The self refers to images, memories, meanings and emotion. It is, in other words, an integral, organizing structural part of personality. In case of traumatized individual, the self remains as torn apart and incomplete within lost unity and its wholeness. David Gross asserts that "in fact, without memory, it was argued, one would literally be nothing, have no identity, possess no real personhood" (2). In this sense, the self loses its wholeness and it exists out of its structural component. Accordingly, the traumatized individual experiences a new self or no self at all. The self representation is highly unrealistic and confused at some level. Therefore, trauma victim experiences a loss of self continuity and wholeness. It is common that the self loses its sense of autonomy and integral coherence. In such case the self structure is disintegrated into disconnected parts with a loss of functionality as well as loss of memory.

The memories of the traumatic experience are personal. With a negative impact upon the self, it is common that the victim experiences a sense of loss of memories of the event because such memories cannot be willingly shared with the self or others. The failure to restore its coherence makes the self dysfunctional and leads to a weak and fragile sense of identity. The self of the trauma victim experiences a diffusion of its identity which leads to a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. Michelle Balaev asserts that "because a traumatic event is never properly experienced or registered as a memory, it is never normally incorporated into consciousness. This leads to a fractured pathological self and memory" (6). Thus, an important aspect of such lost identity is the individual's lack of a personal history. The self of an individual with a traumatic past is

shaped by painful memories, buried outside its cohesion and continuity with the space as if there was nothing else. Balaev adds that

A traumatic experience disturbs consciousness to such a degree that identity and memory remain confused and divided, and only in the attempt to abreact the event through the act of narration may the individual come close to experiencing it (6).

Memory is crucial in giving people a consist sense of identity. Gross remarks that "by remembering one's own continuity in time, one achieved some degree of ontological security, some sense of who one had been in the past and still was in the present" (2). Memories belong to the individual, helping to build identity by differentiating this individual from others. Memory is constructed in such way as to reflect the interests and needs of the person who creates them. In this sense, the act of remembering is a subjective process. Yet, as a result of trauma, the traumatized individual is unwilling to remember. This amnesic state shows that the sense of personal identity and memory of the past is unclear, fragmented or disappeared. The desire to forget the traumatic event leads not only to forget it but also to forget one's own identity. The loss of identity becomes a defense against intolerable conflict.

Identity resides in memory that is why identity politics are attempting to claim the right of self representation via the act of remembering. Thus, the constructions of memory and identity have to be seen side by side. Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn remark:

Identity depends on memory, whether we mean by that a core self that remembers its earlier states or, poststructurally, the narratives that construct (and deconstruct) identities by comparing 'once upon a time' and 'here and now'" (4).

Hence, memory is not only a psychic component of identity, it is also an entity which constitutes subjectivity. Therefore, memory and identity depend on each other. Not only is identity rooted in memory, but also what is remembered is defined by assumed identity.

The act of remembering helps the fragmented self to negotiate and transform his/her past and in that way provide agency and meaning to individual's sense of self. Remembering becomes an intervention to claim back the lost identity and past. It becomes a

counter discursive strategy where the individual must arrive at a new state of self recovery by breaking out of a repressive paradigm and construct new relation to the past. In this sense, retelling memories is not a simple chronological recounting of the past events, but is a result of a very specific agenda-based narrative series of choices made by the teller, who manipulates the raw materials to create a narrative to serve his/her own purpose. Barbra Misztal points out: "Today, memory is widely called upon to legitimate identity because the core meaning of any individual or group identity is seen as sustained by remembering" (133).

Remembering and retelling of the stories about the past produce the self. Madan Sarup and Tasneem Raja assert that "the past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and, in so doing, create history, identity, and ourselves" (46). Remembering may frame identity in terms of nostalgia and loss, causing a disjuncture with the present identity. In the postmodern world, our contemporary culture suffers amnesia and it's accompanied of mourning and obsession with lost identity. Trauma theory becomes part of the ideology of the history. In postmodernism as well as postcolonialism, writers and novelists, in particular, base their writings on the field of trauma. The need to write memories, especially traumatized memories, conveys an anxiety about the possibility of loss: it works to preserve what will inevitably be lost.

Trauma may occur to a group of people who feel that they have been subjected to a horrible event that leaves marks upon their consciousness and changing their future identity. Like individual trauma, collective trauma reflects a sense of fear, sense of danger and feeling of personal insecurity. Arthur Neal remarks that "the enduring effects of a trauma in the memories of an individual resemble the enduring effects of a national trauma in collective consciousness" (4). Accordingly, the concept of trauma may be applied collectively to the experiences of an entire group of people. Yet the difference between individual and collective trauma is that collective trauma is shared with others. Neal adds that in contrast to individual trauma,

... a national trauma is shared collectively and frequently has a cohesive effect as individuals gather in small and intimate groups to reflect on the tragedy and consequences. Personal feelings of

sadness, fear, and anger are confirmed as appropriate when similar emotions are expressed by others" (4).

In this sense, members of the group define their relationships in ways that allow them to share the sufferings of others. In this sense, trauma becomes central to group's attempt to forge a collective identity via the act of remembering.

Remembering national or collective trauma foregrounds the identity formation of a group of people. Ron Eyerman suggests that cultural trauma refers to "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in a social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (2). That is to say, collective trauma has a cohesive effect not only on individuals, but also on the group of people who share the same traumatic feelings. Therefore, the concept of trauma as timeless and repetitious helps to restate a binary relationship of traumatic experience between the individual and group. Balaev remarks:

The theory of intergenerational trauma combines loss and collapses the boundaries between the individual and group, thereby suggesting that a present identity can be vicariously traumatized by reading a historical narrative or due to shared genealogy that affords the label of victim as part of personal or public identity" (13).

In this sense, trauma can be of a great value in the study of history and historical narration, in general, as a verbal representation.

Unlike individual trauma, collective trauma must be understood and remembered through public reflection and discourse. Eyerman asserts that there is a difference between individual and cultural or collective trauma. He explains that "as a cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory" (1). Therefore, it is the collective memory that defines and shapes individuals as a group. Caruth adds that it is not the experience that produces a traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it (17). So representing and remembering trauma links past to present and construct the individual and collective identity.

Memory is part of the development of the self and personality; it conceptualizes the identity formation both individually and collectively. Debra Blake remarks that "not only is memory an important source of history; it is also crucial in defining identity, whether individual or collective" (23). In this account, the past becomes present through the act of remembering. Caruth suggests that "past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them" (101). Remembrance is concerned with specific struggle over history and power. Remembering a traumatic experience, is an act of trying to present what has not been presentable, reinstatement of silenced voice and ignored history. Thus, the role of memory is to secure a sense of self, especially in postmodern world which decentred human subject.

The traumatized individual does not experience a degree of wholeness and sense of unity. That is why remembering is crucial in bringing together the fragmentary pieces of self. David Midelton and Steven Brown add that "memory is seen as an activity that involves the bringing together of fragmentary pieces of information into a whole from which technical decision can be made" (4). Memory in this sense is a site of conflict between the desire to retain the past as it was and the desire to change by erasing those traumatized memories. In this sense, memories help to build identity by differentiating this individual from others.

Since postmodernists criticize the notion of history as a "grand narrative", memory and trauma fiction help them to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit. Anne Whitehead remarks that "in testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event" (82). The role of memory might also mark a renewed desire to secure a sense of self in the postmodern theories of decentred human subject. Postmodernism has reacted against the unitary self. Steven Levine believes that postmodernism is a philosophy traumatized by history. He adds that "post-modernism enacts fragmentation as if it were truth" (82).

Postmodernism criticizes the notion of the unified subject. In the postmodern world, identity is contradictory and fractured. Sarup and Raja remark that "identity in postmodern thought is not a thing;

the self is necessarily incomplete, unfinished – it is 'the subject in process'" (47). In other words, postmodernism argues that the human subject has been decentred and fragmented. Moreover, postmodernism criticizes the notion of history as a “grand narrative” and emphasizes on the complexity of memory. Postmodernism argues against memory because memory is a reconstruction of the past based on present concerns and purposes. Memory only stores fragments and pieces of the past, that later serves as a foundation for the reconstruction of these past experiences. Accordingly, memories of the past can lead a recovery of the present identity and freeing it from the repressed and traumatized past.

In postmodern era, metanarrative of truth had collapsed. Like the postmodern narrative, the victim's narrative is often fragmented; filled with large gaps or discontinuities. Narrative of trauma is interested in the complex relationship between the sense of repetition of the traumatic event and the way this repetition is shaped by the event that lies behind it. In this sense, repetition is not symptomatic of trauma but becomes a challenge to trauma. This repetition is not unconscious but conscious and desired. That is to say repetition is not passive; we repeat because we need to understand. Repetition functions as a way of remembering since traumatic experiences are hard to verbalize. "By writing about one's traumatic experiences may also facilitate the transformation of speechless threats into embedded and narrative memory" (Haunted Narrative, 10).

Memories of the trauma haunt the traumatized individuals in order to be memorized and to speak within the person's memory. The protagonists of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*, and El-Eisa's *Aisha Descends Underworld* are in danger of losing their identities if they do not find a way to remember and confront the memories of trauma that haunt their past, present and future, and destroy their sense of self as well. The three protagonists: Milkman, Christine and Aisha need to create a new sense of self, an identity that integrates their pasts with their present to be able to face the future.

The three protagonists have a fragile sense of self because of the traumatic experiences they suffer during their lives. Milkman has a fragile sense of self because of his legacy of slavery and racism, Christine's dementia leads her to fragile sense of self and Aisha's death of her son destroys her sense of wholeness and constant self.

The act of remembering help the fragmented self to negotiate and transform his/her past and in that way provide agency and meaning to individual's sense of self.

Accordingly, remembering may frame identity in terms of nostalgia and loss, causing a disjuncture with present identity. In the postmodern world, our contemporary global culture suffers amnesia and its accompany of mourning and obsession with the lost identity. In S. J. Watson's novel, *Before I Go to Sleep*, Christine, the protagonist, does not recognize herself. She suffers from dementia and memory-loss. She has amnesia for more than twenty years. She cannot retain new memories, so she forgets much of what has happened to her for her entire adult life. Every day she wakes up as if she is a young woman. She wakes up every day not able to recognize her face or her body. Her husband, Ben, tells her a story about how she forgets her memories, but her doctor, Nash, advises her to keep a journal to write things she remembers during the day. Through writing her diaries, Christine is able to challenge her husband's story, be able to discover her own traumatized past, and to reconstruct her own identity.

Trauma leads to the failure to develop a cohesive self image. Christine, because of her traumatic past, is not able to develop a constant sense of identity. Every morning she does not realize her own self. Christine feels that she is not the same person because she is not able to retain her memories. She describes her situation:

"There are two of me, now, in the same body: one is a forty-seven-year-old woman, calm, polite, aware of what kind of behavior is appropriate, and what is not – and the other is in her twenties, and screaming. I can't decide which is me" (18).

Twenty years ago, Christine lost her memory because of an accident in Brighton where her lover tried to kill her when she decided to end their affair. This accident leaves Christine without memory. After twenty years Christine does not recognize herself. She wakes up every day without being able to identify herself, her body, her age, her home, or her husband. She writes in her diary:

The face I see looking back to me is not my own. The hair has no volume and is cut much shorter than I wear it, the skin on the checks and under the chin sags, the lips are thin, the mouth turned down. I cry out, a wordless gasp that would

turn into a shriek of shock were I to let it, and then notice the eyes. The skin around them is lined, yes, but despite everything else I can see that they are mine. The person on the mirror is me, but I am twenty years too old. Twenty-five. More" (9-10).

Forgetting the traumatic event in Christine's past leads her to this sense of fragile identity. Christine's identity crisis resembles postmodern identity crisis in which identity is in flux. Her identity is in flux; she believes that:

Everything is fluid, everything shifts. I think one thing and then, a moment later, the opposite. I believe everything my husband says, and then I believe nothing. I trust him. And then I don't. Nothing feels real, everything invented. Even myself (120).

Postmodern literature treats identity as fluid, fragmentary, dependent and constituted in discourse. In postmodern era, identity is being redefined. Marilyn Metta remarks that in postmodernism a new consciousness is emerged. For Metta, this new consciousness is a vital struggle for identity. She adds that "it is also the site of a constant struggle between the interplay of race, nationality, class and gender to seek a new consciousness of identity and belonging" (199). Christine's identity is in flux not only because she lives in a postmodern world but also as a result of her traumatic past.

Trauma victim does not experience degrees of vitality, connectedness to self and others, wholeness, and a sense of unity. Susan Brison asserts that "a traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening. The immediate psychological responses to such trauma include terror, loss of control, and intense fear of annihilation" (*Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, 39). Aisha, in *Aisha Descends to Underworld*, experiences this sense of loss of control and the sense of annihilation because of the death of her son. Aisha praises death because she thinks that life is meaningless. She believes that she fails as a mother and death is the only way to reconnect with her child to be a good mother. In the novel, Aisha loses her son in a car accident. Her son, Aziz, was only five years old and she believes that she is responsible for his death. This traumatic event changes her life and her sense of self as well. Aisha describes this situation:

في الثامن عشر من إبريل للعام 2007، توفي عبد العزيز، و لدى الوحيد، عن عمر يناهز الخامسة و النصف، بفعل حادث سيارة، وهو يقف في وسط الشارع و يحاول التقاط لعبه. في ذلك اليوم بدأت حياتي تفقد زيفها وتصبح أكثر حقيقية ، صارت أقل فراغا و أكثر استحالة. و في ذلك اليوم بدأت ذاكرتي ترصد أيامي، و بدأ قلبي ينبض ألما، و بدأت عيناي تفيضان، و صارت عندي خطايا تنهش روحي ، و آثار عضات ندم على كفيّ ، و ساعديّ ، و زنديّ ، و ... صار للحياة لون ، و معنى.

In 18th of April, 2007 my only son Abdulaziz died. He was only five years and half. He died because of a car accident while he tried to collect his toys in the middle of the street. Since that day my life has begun to lose its falsity. It becomes less empty and more impossible. And on that day my memory started to monitor my days. My heart began to beat with pain and my eyes flooded by tears. I had sins nibbling my soul, and I had also effected of the bites of remorse in my palms, arms and shoulders. And life began to have a color and meaning (18).

In El-Eisa's *Aisha Descends to Underworld*, Aisha suffers because of the death of her son; Aziz. Unlike Christine, Aisha refuses to forget this traumatic event. This traumatic event repeats itself every year and destroys Aisha's sense of identity. Every year in the anniversary of her son's death, Aisha experiences death in different ways; Aisha almost dies every year. In the fourth anniversary, Aisha decides to write a diary. She does not write a documentary about her life but she writes because she does not recognize her own sense of self. She states at the beginning of her diary:

لقد قررت أن تكون أيامي الأخيرة على هذه الشاكلة. أقصد: على شاكلة الكتابة.
الكلمة كائن هش و متهافت، إنها تشبهني

I decided that my last days will be in that way; the way of writing. Words are fragile creatures. Those words look like me (11).

Aisha decides to write her story before she died for the fourth time since the death of her son. She laments her son

أه أيها العزيز، ... و قد مت ثلاثا، و عدت ثلاثا، و أنت مازلت تستعصي

Oh my darling... I have died three times and come back to life three times and you are still away (39).

The memory of his death destroys her life and she believes that death is the only way to reconnect with her child. Aisha's life is meaningless since this accident.

Memory is essential in giving the individual a consistent sense of identity. People must confront their traumatic past and seek to understand their present. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* offers an opportunity to engage with the legacy of traumatic memory. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman, the protagonist, lives a restricted existence. He becomes an unwilling keeper of the memories of his family's history. Milkman is born in the aftermath of trauma. The legacy of slavery traumatized his family and leads to his lack of maturity. This immaturity stems from his lack of knowledge about his history. He dreams only to be free of everything. Milkman has been denied full access to the past that shaped his identity. His parents, Macon and Ruth, focus on their anger towards each other more than the legacy of their fathers. This prejudice contributes to the trauma of the protagonist. In addition to his personal trauma, Milkman carries the burden of collective cultural trauma.

One of the major effects of trauma is that it destroys the traumatized individual's sense of self. Susan Brison asserts that the self is "undone" following trauma due to a 'radical disruption of memory, a serving of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future' (39). Milkman is a young black man living in his own fog world and disconnected from his own family. He is not a serious person; Guitar, his friend tells him that: "No. A man that can't live there. If things ever got tough, you'd melt. You're not a serious person, Milkman" (69). At the beginning of the novel, Milkman is alienated from his family name and his cultural heritage. His grandfather is renamed by a white clerk as Macon Dead. Macon Sr. discovered this later, but his wife convinced him to keep the new name because "it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (54). This act is a kind of "radical disruption of memory" that haunts the members of Dead family. Catherine Carr Lee points out that "losing the name of the ancestors causes the Dead family to lose history, community, and tradition as well; the past becomes 'dead,' and the loss of name damages the present understanding of the past" (46).

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* highlights the trauma of African-Americans which passes from generation to generation

through fragmented stories. Macon and Ruth give Milkman fragmented pieces of family history. Milkman's father tells him only a part of the story. Macon confronts Milkman with a story of him witnessing Ruth lies naked in bed with her dead father, "in bed. That is where she was when I opened the door. Lying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (73). Macon claims that he tells Milkman this because he wants him to know the whole truth. Hearing this story has traumatized Milkman. But later when Milkman confronts his mother with this truth she tells him her part of the story. Ruth tells Milkman that Macon tried to kill her father by hiding his medicine and then he tried to kill her when she was pregnant. These fragmented stories leave Milkman confused and disappointed. If Milkman is given only the pieces of the traumatic story, then how is he to be certain of his interpretation of it? Milkman concludes that he does not want to know any of his family history. He wishes for death to be rid of this trauma.

The basic trauma that the three novels reveal is the trauma of loss. It is the loss of memory, of a beloved person, and the loss of history. Christine, in *Before I Go to Sleep*, experiences the loss of memory that disrupts Christine's sense of identity. While Aisha, in *Aisha Descends to Underworld*, experiences another kind of loss which is the loss of her son which leads to a fragile sense of self and nearly destroys her life. The sense of loss in *Song of Solomon* takes different shapes; it is the loss of history, family name and the loss of a male the woman loved and trust. This sense of loss that the three protagonists experience can lead to feelings of helplessness and helplessness which lead to a self destruction.

The self of an individual with a traumatic past is shaped by painful memories, buried outside its cohesion and continuity within the space as if there was nothing else. Moreover, trauma combines with loss and absence. The three protagonists experience the sense of loss because of their traumatic past. Christine not only loses her memory but also she loses her connection with her entire family. Aisha experiences loss when her son dies. The loss of her son is not the only loss in her life; from the beginning Aisha experiences loss of sense of herself as an independent woman in patriarchal society,

as a wife and as a mother. Milkman experiences a different sense of loss; he loses his family name and his family heritage.

Trauma causes disruption in identity formation. The traumatized individual is often haunted by the original event and caught up in its compulsive repetition as well as social isolation. In case of the traumatized individual, the self remains torn apart and incomplete – within lost unity and its wholeness – the self-structure is no longer stick together as a whole. In such event, the self losing its fundamental interrelatedness, wholeness, and reality, and the self exists out of its structural components. With weakened sense of self belongings, traumatized individuals feel more alienated from the own self and others. The traumatized self becomes isolated, hostile and unable to restore its disintegrated structure. According to Waites,

A main effect of trauma is disorganization, a physical and/or mental disorganization that may be circumscribed or widespread,' and this disorganization causes "fragmentation of self, shattering of social relationships, erosion of social supports" (22).

Social alienation is a problem for trauma survivors. Christine suffers from social alienation not only because she does not remember herself and her family but also because Ben convinces her that she lost her son; she has nobody else except him. Christine believes that her life is destroyed when she lost her memory and she lives in isolation since the accident. She asked herself "who would miss me? My husband. A doctor, perhaps, though to him I am only a patient. But there is no one else. Can my circle have drawn so tight? Did my friends abandon me, one by one? How quickly I would be forgotten, were I to die" (79). Christine believes that the accident which leads her to this situation destroys her life because it left her without memory.

Unlike Christine, Aisha, lives alone, though she lives with her husband and near her family. Yet, as Christine, Aisha believes that she has nobody. She expresses this loneliness:

أنا وحدي كما أنا لحظة قذفت في الحياة، ووحدي أيضا، كما سأكون .. تحت
التراب، قريبا جدا. الوحدة – إذا – هي الشيء الوحيد المؤكد، الحقيقي، في هذه
الحياة. الأهلون خرافة، الأصحاب كذبة، و الزواج نكتة .. لقد هجرني الجميع،
لماذا! لأنني أموت في كل عام مرة وأعود! لنني أخيفهم

I am alone just at the moment I was thrown into this life, I am alone too as I will be under the dust very soon. Loneliness, then, is the

only true and certain thing in this life; family is a myth, friends are a lie, and husband is a joke. Everyone abandoned me. Why? Because I died and came back every year, because I scare them (19).

The traumatic past leads Aisha to loneliness; Aisha refuses life and she thinks that her family and her husband refuse to talk to her. As Erica K. Johnson and Julie Chronister suggest, trauma may "indirectly affect psychological health by weakening or destroying social networks, thereby reducing the availability of social support and increasing social isolation" (280). Aisha lives in her room with her books about death, she refuses to talk to her family and she refuses to eat and sleep. The only thing she wants to do is to write about death and about her experience with death.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman is doomed to a life of alienation from himself and others. Because he was alienated from his past, he abuses the people around him. His father gives him only fragmented pieces of this past. Macon tells Milkman that he must stop seeing his aunt Pilate. Macon instructs his son: "To stay away from Pilate." (34), but Milkman does not understand what happened: "But you never told me why. They're our cousins. She's your own sister (34)" Macon insists that Milkman must do what he tells him: "And you're my own son. And you will do what I tell you to do. With or without explanations" (34). Later, Macon tells Milkman about what happened in the past, but it was not the whole story which makes Milkman more confused about his father and his family because his father does not tell him the truth. Milkman's relation with his father becomes unstable:

I know I'm the youngest one in this family, but I ain't no body. You treat me like I was a baby. You keep saying you don't have to explain nothing to me. How do you think that makes me feel? Like a baby. That's what. Like a twelve-year-old baby! (34).

Macon is not able to tell Milkman the whole story because of his traumatic past. Macon was a witness of his father's murder. Witnessing this accident traumatized Macon. While he is talking to Milkman, Macon recalls his feeling about this accident: "the numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall of the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching in the dirt" (50-1). This trauma makes

Macon abandons everything; his sister, his community and everything that connects him with his family's past.

Milkman is not only alienated from his father but also from his girlfriend; Hagar, Pilate's daughter. After fourteen years, Milkman decides to leave Hagar by writing her a letter. He ends his letter: "Also, I want to thank you. Thank you for all you have meant to me. For making me happy all these years. I am signing this letter with love, of course, but more than that, with gratitude" (66). His letter to Hagar reveals his inability to understand her feeling. Milkman, as immature person, fails to accept his responsibility of ending his relation with Hagar. He thinks that leaving his past and his responsibilities will lead him to find his own identity.

Moreover, the relationship between the traumatized individual and others is ambivalent. Because of the traumatic experiences both Christine and Aisha's sense of their husbands are ambivalent. Christine does not remember her husband and how they met. She does not know if she can trust him or not. At the beginning of her diaries she writes "DO NOT TRUST BEN" (24). Christine is not sure if Ben tells her the truth about her life and the accident that left her without memory. She realizes that "though I may choose to keep my journal secret from Ben, nothing terrible would happen if he were to find it. He is my husband. I can trust him" (52). But later she discovers the truth and discovers that she cannot trust Ben because he is not her real husband. Later, Christine discovers that she cannot trust Ben not only because he is not her real husband but also because he is responsible for her trauma and memory loss.

Aisha as well does not trust her husband. They do not speak to each other for days since the death of their child. She married him only because her family thought that he is a suitable husband for her. She writes:

لم ار عدنان اليوم. في العادة يترك لي رسالة بأنه سيتأخر، لكنني منذ أسبوع تقريبا، أعيش وحدي. أنام وحدي، أكل وحدي، و أكي/أكتب وحدي أيضا. شجارنا الأخير لم يكن هينا، و لكنه أيضا لم يكن من الشدة الكافية لكي تتصدع زيجتنا على هذا النحو. المؤلم في الأمر، أن غيابه بات مريحا، و فكرة أنني لم أتزوج منه قط تبدو أكثر قابلية للتصديق. الصمت الفاحش هو الشيء الوحيد الصحيح في حياتنا

I did not see Adnan today. He usually left me a message if he will be late. Yet I live alone almost for a week. I sleep alone, I eat alone, and I cry/write alone. Our last fight was not easy, but was not difficult enough to destroy our marriage. What is more difficult

is that his absence becomes very comfortable. The idea that I never married him is more credible. The only right thing in our life is silence" (32).

Though Adnan is not responsible about Aisha's trauma but he fails to communicate with her. Also, Aisha's family fails to communicate with her; Aisha refuses to be part of her family because she thinks that she is responsible about the death of her child and the only acceptable thing in her life is to write until she is able to die to communicate with her child in the other world.

In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth's relationship with her husband is ambivalent too. At the age of twenty, Macon stops touching Ruth and even tries to kill her. He confesses to his son that he never loved Ruth. This relationship traumatized Milkman in some way. Instead of leaving Macon, Ruth suffers from rejection and the lack of intimacy in her life. This kind of ambivalent relation affects on Milkman's relationship with Hagar. Hagar is traumatized by being left by the man she loves. She experiences the same trauma as other female characters in her family, especially Ruth. Because of the trauma of rejection both Ruth and Hagar have low self esteem. The traumatic affects on their self image; it leaves them with no sense of identity. Yet Hagar, unlike Ruth, tries to kill Milkman because she does not imagine her life without him. Morrison describes Hagar's situation:

She loved nothing in the world except him (Milkman), wanted him alive more than anybody, but hadn't the least bit of control over the predator that lived inside her. Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own" (136-7).

Morrison describes the shameful family secret that haunts the Dead family and they try to hide it. Both Milkman and Hagar falls victim to family secrets and trauma. The separate home life of Milkman and Hagar has made them self-centered and unable to discover an authentic self. Hagar believes that without his love she feels worthless. She thinks that Milkman abandoned her for a light-skinned woman. In this sense, Morrison asserts that racism is trauma; it is traumatized both Hagar and Milkman. For the traumatized individual, the trauma of racism is the severe

fragmentation of the self and seems to cause the failure to develop self cohesive image. According to Maria Root, "trauma fragments the self and can disconnect an individual from their community and at its extreme, humanity" (70).

The three protagonists experience the trauma of loss and social alienation. Also, they experience the trauma of death. They experience death in different ways. In *Before I Go to Sleep*, Christine forgets her past and almost her entire life. This life for Christine is a kind of death. Christine believes that without her memory she is dead. She wrote when she was in the hospital: "*It was like being DEAD*"(112) because she was unable to remember what happened to her. Death is central to human life according to the psychological theory. It is synonymous to life. It belongs to the continuum of history. There is no being without death, whether it is being in the world or being symbolically speaking. Christine's death is symbolic in which her loss of memory is a kind of death which she seeks to resist by remembering her past. Yet, in *Aisha Descends to Underworld*, Aisha's death is not symbolic; it is the reality to her.

Death is the core of Aisha's trauma. Death intervenes recurrently in the making and unmaking autonomous individuals as well as nations, cultural and social group. Therefore, there is a close relationship between life and death in which death plays an essential role as a site of knowledge. Aisha believes that through death she can stand up against oppression and fragmentation. But death in Aisha's life accompanied by the sense of shame because she thinks that she is responsible for the death of her son. This sense of shame and guilt leads Aisha to reject her life because she thinks that time stands still on this traumatic past. Time stops in Aisha's world and her traumatic experience repeats itself every year. So Aisha recalls Anana; the queen of death, to help her to understand death and help her to connect with her son on the other world. Aisha accompanies her trauma with fantasy which helps her to reclaim her lost identity by understanding the meaning of life and death.

In *Song of Solomon*, death is both symbolic and real in which the Dead family experiences the death because the family members are separate from their past. Macon Sr. is renamed as Dead by a white clerk and he never rejected this name. Death becomes an important part in this family since they decide to ignore their past. Death traumatizes both Macon and Ruth. They refuse to accept the

death of their fathers. Ruth denies the death of her father. Like Aisha, the time stops in Ruth's life, especially when Macon refuses to touch her since the death of her father. The traumatic experience of the death of her father repeats itself in Ruth's life by trying to reaffirm her identity, according to the conception of her fixed family role. She kept nursing Milkman until he was old enough to eat food himself. For Ruth, nursing Milkman is a way to hold some pleasure in her life. While Macon's trauma of the death of his father leads him to abandon everything and turn to be a cold and cruel person.

The three protagonists, in the three novels, represent progressive models of either forgetfulness or rejection of the traumatic past. Morrison represents, in her novel, a model in which the characters reject the past and the ancestral home as obstacle to the future, as insufficient for complete selfhood. Macon tells Milkman that he cannot be a "whole man" until he can "deal with the whole truth" (70) but Macon never tells her son the whole truth. As a result of this incomplete truth about the past, Milkman decides to ignore her family and experiences self-enclosure. Aisha, like Milkman, rejects her life and ignores her family because of the trauma. She isolates herself and decides to die. While Milkman decides to fly and flee, Aisha decides to experience death to be able to understand and to reclaim her identity. Christine forgets her traumatic experiences because she is unwilling to remember it because it accompanies with shame. Forgetting the traumatic experience is a kind of rejection for Christine. Yet the three protagonists must face their traumatic past in order to be able to reclaim their own identities.

Trauma narrative is characterized by its fragmentation and lack of coherence. Yet, traumatized individuals find ways to reconstruct their identities by remembering traumatic experiences. Novelists often have to reflect on the function of memory, in which memory is the heart of both inner life and human experience in general. Memory, like history, pursues the past. Yet there is no pure memory totally faithful to the past. Instead, memory is a reconstruction of the past. This reconstruction of the past is not only a result of telling stories that have not been told before, but it is also a result of how to tell these stories. Susan Brison, in her article "Trauma Narrative and the Remaking of the Self", points out:

The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates this shift, not only by transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, but also by integrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood" (39-40).

Remembrance is a process rooted in the need to witness history in order to reclaim what must not be forgotten. Memories of trauma can be traumatic themselves. But the traumatized individuals need to remember and narrate their traumatic experience in order to open up a space for stories that have so far been left out because of trauma. Brison asserts that

Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self" ("Trauma Narrative" 40).

In the three novels, the protagonists find healing by remembering their traumatic experiences or, in other words, turning their traumatic memories into what Susan Brison calls "narrative memory" ("Trauma Narrative" 40). This transformation into narrative memory helps the traumatized individual to establish a connection to selfhood. To transform the traumatic narrative into narrative memory the protagonists need help from others. Both Christine and Aisha write diaries, while Milkman returns to his homeland to reconnect with his family heritage. Turning to the traumatic events help the protagonists not only to face their past but also to reclaim their own identities and to approach the future. Through remembering their traumatic events, the protagonists are able to reconstruct their sense of identities in a way that can heal them.

The burden of the past affects the present so remembering this past plays an essential role in helping the traumatized individual to understand his/her own identity and be able to be whole again. Eyerman points out that "memory provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going" (161). In the three novels, remembering traumatic experiences helps the protagonists to see and

understand the pattern of the past, present and future and also find themselves in this pattern.

Writing diaries helps Christine and Aisha to develop coherent narratives out of their traumatic experience. A coherent narrative often arises naturally from repeatedly revisiting the traumatic events. Christine's journal is a kind of repetition to what happened to her everyday but this repetition helps Christine to develop a coherent narrative to her trauma. Aisha's trauma repeats itself in Aisha's journal, and like Christine, this repetition helps Aisha to understand her feelings. Diaries become their way of combating their traumatized situation. Both protagonists are totally alone during writing their diaries. Edward Mangel asserts:

Since traumatized people frequently cannot talk about their trauma, writing it down in privacy is an alternative way of coping with it, a first attempt at "claiming" hitherto "unclaimed" experience (Caruth). Writing a diary is an attempt at coming to terms with something about which one cannot speak openly. The physical activity that goes along with handwriting is also important in this context (155-56).

Both Christine and Aisha are invisible and they are able to represent themselves through the act of writing. In their diaries they record their inability to be self-defining. Through the act of writing they are able to identify themselves.

Christine suffers from a sense of wounded self, but she is unable to trace the source of the trauma because of her memory loss. Her doctor; Dr. Nash, advises her to keep a journal to record what she remembers during the day. This diary is an attempt to remember what happened. In other words, Christine's diary is an attempt to piece together the shattered knowledge of her own life. Aisha as well writes her diary to bring pieces of her life together again in order to be able to understand what happened and trace the source of her trauma.

Both Christine and Aisha write for no reader but through writing they deconstruct and reconstruct the past that exclude them for a long time. The aim of writing diaries for both protagonists is emotional and psychological. Diaries provide for both protagonists a kind of therapy. Through writing, both Christine and Aisha confess

feelings and thoughts that they are unable to tell anyone. In this sense, writing diaries plays an important role in both novels. It provides a space for both protagonists to face their traumatic experiences. Writing diaries acts as "the talking cure", as Deborah Horvitz suggests. She adds that:

As if mimicking the "talking cure", each text functions as an analyst. The rhetorical structure or analyst provides for the character or patient a framework wherein repressed memories can surface into consciousness. And the latter finds, to varying degrees, that historical symptoms diminish when repressed memories and their accompanying feelings are recalled and verbalized" (19).

Writing diaries is a kind of confession. This act of confession indicates the sense of guilt both protagonists feel. Writing diaries, for both protagonists, becomes a process of self-discovering and self-understanding which eventually leads to the protagonists' liberation from their oppressive circumstances.

In order to recover, traumatized individual needs to be able to regain control over traumatic memories and be reconnected with humanity. Milkman suffers because of fragment stories and memories which haunt and terrorize him. He wants to fly away from his family, his history, and his own aimless life. Yet the solution is not run from the trauma but to find where these stories fit into the narrative circle so that they can be whole again. The solution, then, lies in remembering, loving and, living: remembering the history of the ancestors; loving one's self and knowing that one is loved by others, and living actively in the world. Milkman needs to go back to his ancestors' land to be able to face his fragmented past and be able to face the future.

Yet, Milkman needs a guide to go back to the past. Pilate is the guide who helps Milkman in his journey. She uses magic to protect him. For Milkman, Pilate is not only a helper but a healer as well. While Ruth fights for her life and full of her memories about her father and Macon is busy to acquire the freedom from his oppressed past, Pilate becomes Milkman's new mother. As Trudier Harris states Pilate "is this new mother, who must guide him beyond the peacock plumage of materialism that binds him to earth and teach him how to fly" (91). While Christine and Aisha's diaries play the most important role in their recovery, Pilate plays the most

important role in Milkman's healing process because Milkman's trauma is related to the community so the healing process must develop via and through community.

The journey to the homeland is connected to the painful process of telling and remembering the unspeakable traumatized past. It is a trigger for the coherent storytelling. Throughout his journey, Milkman realizes that the song Pilate has been singing all her life is the story of his people and it carries the legacy of his ancestors and their names as well. This song reminds him of the connection to his family and makes him think that all members of his family share the same history and they must not forget it. For Milkman, redrawing lines between inside and outside, self and other serve as a response to the traumatic past. The struggle to reassert order as well as delineate the lines between inside and outside, past and present, and self and other helps Milkman to fix his identity at the end of his journey.

Milkman laments his sense of loss: "I'm tired... tired of running up and down these streets and getting nowhere" (120), so he decides to go back to his ancestors' land in order to find the gold but he discovers that there is no gold. Instead, what he finds the missing pieces of the history of his family. Throughout his journey, Milkman discovers the real treasure which is the lost history of his family and their real names. For Milkman, journeying out of the home leads to a new sense of identity and belonging: "he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged to it" (281). The journey to the homeland and listening to the song of his ancestors bridge the boundaries between individual and community, self and other, and finally leads to a greater sense of connection and maturity.

Milkman's journey to his ancestral homeland is a kind of remembering not only his family history, but also the African Americans memory and history. Christine's journey to Brighton helps her to remember her traumatic past. When her husband decides to go to Brighton, Christine feels that something is wrong. Brighton, as Christine describes, is "the place of my disaster" (172). She finds herself in a hotel room that she recognized, she starts to remember this place:

I go towards the door, and then I see it. To my right. A bathroom, with the door open. A bath, a toilet, a basin. But it is the floor that draws me, fills me with horror. It is tiled, and the pattern is unusual; black and white alternate in crazed diagonals my jaw opens. I feel myself go cold. I think I feel myself cry out.

I know, then. I recognize the pattern.

It is not only Brighton that I have recognized.

I have been here before. In this room" (172).

Christine's journey helps her to remember her trauma. Remembering the accident leads her to be able to remember and reclaim her true identity. Finally, she can remember: "I am lying down. I have been asleep, but not for long. I can remember who I am, where I have been" (206).

Aisha's journey, on the other hand, is symbolic. She decides to go to the other world; her journey is not to a certain place, but to death: "to this great depth, where I will descend by my own will" (213). Anana is her guide in this world where she abandons everything: the place, the time, the family, the husband, the writing, and finally the son. Throughout this symbolic journey to the land of death, Aisha is able to understand her own self and reclaim her own true identity:

كنت اقوض كل جسر يربطني بهذا العالم ، و اقطع كل صلة ممكنة ، المكان ،
الزمان و الذاكرة ، الجرح و الحب و العائلة. كنت اتخفف من كل شيء ، كنت
اكوننى. كنت أنا لأول مرة فى حياتى استطعت أن أكوننى ، بدون أن اكون
الزوجة أو الأم أو الابنة ، بدون ان أكون أى شيء بخلاف ما أنا عليه ، روح
محضة" 224

I was destroying every bridge that connects me with the world. I was destroying every possible relation: place, time, memory, wound, love, and family. I abandoned everything, except being me. I was me, for the first time in my life I can be myself, without being a wife, mother, or daughter; without being anything except who I am, just a spirit (224).

This journey, like Milkman and Christine's journeys, help Aisha to understand her traumatic past. She is able to see life in a different way. In her last dream, she asks Anana:

سألتها (انانا) متى عدت من العالم السفلى قالت: لقد انتهى الأمر. انها تشع ضوء أبيض
الأبيض منشأ الألوان. سألتنى هل فهمت الآن يا عائشة

I asked her (Anana), when did you come from the other world? She said: everything is over. She was in white. White is the main source of all colors. She asked me, Aisha do you understand now? (207).

Aisha understands her trauma through remembering and being able to speak about it. Finally, Aisha decides: " فلاكف عن الكتابة إذا و أذهب " "التجربة العالم " "I will stop writing now and I will go to experience the world" (225).

Finally, trauma causes disruption in identity formation. Trauma creates a fragmented identity both individually and collectively. In order to reclaim this lost identity, the individual needs to remember the traumatic experience. In the three novels, the protagonists suffer from losing their identities as well as identity fragmentation because of their traumatic past. For the three protagonists, forgetting or denying the traumatic past lead them to lose their identities and lose their social connection. The loss which protagonists suffer either because of dementia, or death, or forgetting the history of family, causes the loss of their own identities. To be able to reclaim their identities they must remember and confront their traumatic past. The three protagonists journeying back to the past in different ways, but this journey helps them to re-experiencing and re-remember their trauma and they able to reconstruct and reclaim their own identity. Remembering the past and creating a coherent life-story help the protagonists to be free from their oppressive traumatized past.

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