



Black identity from the Afro-American and British African perspectives in selected novels by Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips



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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study is to explore how Black identity is portrayed in the novels by Morrison and Phillips. It seeks to understand the thematic concerns, narrative strategies, and character development employed by both novelists to articulate the Black experience. The article is a comparative qualitative study that employs a textual analysis methodology. The selected novels are meticulously examined focusing on themes such as racial consciousness, cultural heritage, oppression, and resilience. The article draws on post-colonial theory, feminism, critical race theory, and diaspora to provide a strong analytical framework. The comparative approach is essential, as it facilitates the understanding of the differences and similarities in the depiction of Black identity by an Afro-American author and a British-African author. The findings suggest that the narratives of Morrison and Phillips diverge in the portrayal of communal versus individual struggles, the impact of colonial history, and the role of memory and storytelling. Morrison's work emphasizes community ties and historical trauma, whereas Phillips often explores the fluidity and hybridity of identity in a post-colonial British context. In conclusion, this comparative study illuminates the distinct yet interconnected ways in which Afro-American and British-African authors navigate the complexities of race and identity.

Contribution/Originality: This study offers a comparative literary analysis, historical examination, and theoretical frameworks, specifically focusing on Toni Morrison's and Caryl Phillips' portrayal of Black identity. Through this comparison, we gain innovative perceptions of the Black identity from the Afro-American and British-African points of view.

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison (1931–2019) was a renowned American novelist and a Nobel Prize winner. She has always portrayed Black Americans, especially women, in her novels and depicted how they struggled in the American community. She always faced controversy and challenges for her powerful novels. In the sixties and seventies, the term 'internal colonialism' was used to refer to the experience of Black people in America, as contemporary America is a site of conflicts between Blacks and whites. Every character in Morrison's novels lives in a world that is characterized by Black people in a white society, which both upholds and rejects them. While overt physical violence is one way that the white cultural majority might cause destruction, psychological abuse is more common in Morrison's environment of tyranny. Her writing starts with the competition and struggles between conflicting

cultural perspectives, and in Morrison (1977) and Morrison (1987) her two greatest books, she continues this theme by attempting to bridge the gaps and silences in Afro-American history. Morrison employs flashbacks in *Beloved* to tell the slave story and, in doing so, makes the slave experience that it reflects more comprehensive for modern readers. Morrison employs memory to explore aspects of slave life that the traditional slave narrative overlooks. She does this to make slavery obvious to whom it is a distant historical truth best left forgotten. Morrison demonstrates in *Beloved* that the most extreme form of tyranny in American civilization was slavery.

For example, in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman only responds to the norms and expectations of the African-American society in his home in Michigan, but he soon finds himself drawn to his kinsmen's life in Pennsylvania. By the time he gets to Virginia, he is actively involved in the community. Therefore, his geographic trek from North to South is matched by a voyage through ever smaller communities that, rather than choking him, enable him to accept mankind and transcend death in his last flight. There are many major theoretical frameworks that automatically cross into Morrison's study of identity, such as African-American or Black feminist theory. This theoretical perspective focuses on the intersections between race, gender, and class in creating individual and collective identities. In that sense, one might say that Morrison's depiction of characters struggling with issues of slavery heritage, family relationships, and the quest for selfhood echoes African-American feminist discourse.

Moreover, Morrison engages with postcolonial theory, especially regarding her concern with cultural memory, trauma, and how historical subjugation affects contemporary identity formation. She pulls away from linear time, constantly bringing narrative techniques to the foreground of continuation, the traumatic past continuing into the present (the complexities of memory), and identity. Another framework that can be applied to the understanding of Morrison's works is critical race theory. In this framework, race and racism are social devices that conduct power relations and influence the personal experience of identity. Although in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, and throughout her works, the approaches adopted by Morrison to discuss identity are varied and cannot be reduced to one theory, her narratives are enriched by these critical frameworks which shed light on the intricacies of African-American experiences and identities. Caryl Phillips (1958–) is a Black British Novelist, essayist, and playwright who is often associated with the concept of the 'Black Atlantic'. His works explore the experiences of African immigrants to England, the United States, and the Caribbean. He is one of the writers who is concerned with the concept of 'in-betweenness'. He addresses 'multiculturalism' and 'hybridity' in his novels, whereas Black cultural nationalists, including Morrison, tend to identify with nationalist causes and endorse the need for communal solidarity. In the 1980s and early 1990s, many writers' geographic and cultural affiliations have become more divided and uncertain (Boehmer, 2005). Phillips is conscious of his dual ethnicity. His first two books, *A State of Independence* and *The Final Passage*, revolve around the migration of his folk to Britain, or the second exile. The main female character attempts to flee her miserable existence by traveling to Britain with her spouse and child. At the end of the novel, she returns to her home in Britain, where she has been forced into an even more miserable existence as a victim of discrimination in London. It portrays an emotional crisis, the end of a nostalgic dream, and a brutal awakening to the realities of ongoing political and social suffering.

The classic topic of the African immigrants since the start of the slave trade appears in Phillips's later works, *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*. *Cambridge* is limited to the eighteenth century, whereas *Crossing the River* spans two centuries, starting with the sale of three children into slavery by an African father and concluding with the diasporic existence of his offspring in the middle of the twentieth century.

In his depiction of the Black identity, Caryl Phillips engages in several theoretical frameworks in *Crossing the River*, which mirrors broader thematic concerns with migration, diaspora, slavery and colonialism's historical legacies. While Phillips does not stick to any one particular theory, his work has often been analyzed through the prism of postcolonial theory and diaspora studies.

Phillips explores postcolonialism and identity issues, especially how historical and cultural displacements forge both individual and collective identities. In *Crossing the River*, he probes into the experiences of African diasporic

characters negotiating the convoluted nature of belonging and cultural hybridity in the wake of slavery and colonialism. Moreover, Phillips's novel finds deep concern in the experiences of diasporic communities, looking into how individuals and communities bargain for identity across different geographical and cultural contexts. He brings in characters who are displaced from their homelands and have to negotiate complex dynamics of identity in new environments.

Phillips also draws from theories of cultural memory and trauma, focusing on how the shocks of history—the Atlantic slave trade and racism—still resound in contemporary identities. The narrative structure often travels across historical periods to underline the sameness of memory and how it surfaces in contemporary identity formations.

While Phillips structures his identity through various theoretical frameworks in *Crossing the River*, the most relevant theories that he adopted, and the most relevant approaches to probing into the issue of how this sense of displacement, cultural identity and history has been expressed in his novel, are postcolonial theory and diaspora studies.

This article answers the following questions:

1. What is the difference between the Afro-American and the British-African portrayal of Black characters?
2. How does the British-African writer treat the theme of displacement and uprooting in his novel *Crossing the River*, and how does the Afro-American writer treat the same theme in *Beloved*?
3. What are the changes in the notion of Black identity through different generations?
4. To what extent do the geographical settings (America, Africa, and Europe) influence the representation and evolution of Black identity in the novels by Morrison and Phillips?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Investigating Black identity has been one of the central themes of literature, especially through the works of Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips. The former's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* and the latter's *Crossing the River* dive into the convoluted identity formation process of Afro-Americans and British Africans. These are writers who use narrative methods where historical, cultural, and personal dimensions of identity are interwoven to a depth that offers incisive insight into the experiences and challenges that face African descendants.

Previous scholarship has demonstrated in detail how Morrison represents the heritage of slavery and its continuous effects on the identity of African Americans through novels such as *Beloved*, which portrays characters wading through the trauma of slavery and cultural dislocation. The ongoing struggle to reclaim and redefine identity within the postcolonial context comes to the fore in this way. Likewise, in *Crossing the River*, Phillips gave exposure to the diasporic experience of British Africans and the challenges that exist in assimilation, memory, and cultural heritage. While existing literature has considered the two authors separately, there is still a lack of comparison between their treatment of Black identity across geographical and cultural divides. This research suggests a comparative analysis between selected novels by Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips, which deal with how they negotiate issues on race, history, and identity within two different yet interlinked frameworks of Afro-American and British-African experience.

Wike (2017) examined motherhood in two novels: *Crossing the River* (Phillips, 1993) which focuses on the African diaspora from various perspectives, and *Beloved* by Morrison (1987) which addresses the trauma of enslavement from the viewpoint of Sethe, a slave who kills her daughter to rescue her from slavery. It portrays African-American soldier Travis and white British mother Joyce raising a child together. The essay assumes that the female characters, Sethe and Joyce, have been deprived of their maternal identities by the system of slavery in the United States. The investigation showed that both of the protagonists' parental losses are caused by race, or more specifically, skin color. Both women experience racial control. Both writers explore the mutual suffering and guilt experienced by both Black and white people, as well as the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized.

In the books *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison approaches the community as a source of healing and enrichment. Shilaja (2015) details this perspective. Morrison's writing aims to give her characters and readers a shared identity. She clarifies that her writing is done "with a specific aim to enlighten Black people." Morrison aims to re-establish a connection between African-American readers and their cultural and historical heritage. Through their collective identity, they reclaim history by standing testimony to their life as slaves, a tale that has gone unrecorded or has been forgotten. Her novels examine the different ways that trauma is present in the lives of the protagonists, who are meant to reflect different facets of African-American history and society. It also highlights the imaginative methods by which her African-American characters look for, exchange, and develop their own unique cultural memories as a foundation for their identities. The study examines Morrison's two best-known books, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, to recover a sense of collective identity. Generation after generation, African Americans have experienced identity disintegration due to enslavement. *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy* illustrate the difficulties associated with naming and misnaming among individuals who are trying to forge a strong sense of self amid a violent and dehumanizing history. Morrison draws attention to the fundamental importance that a person's name plays as an integral component of their identity by using intersectionality as an analytical tool. The first section of Schreiner's article contextualizes naming customs throughout the enslavement era:

"I talk about Morrison's use of over- and under-naming, merging identities, and character trinitities, with a special focus on female characters. After analyzing the characters' battles to claim their identities and themselves, the focus shifts to an investigation of depictions of corporeal fragmentation and mutability, which I use as a metaphor for the collapse of Black communal culture due to slavery. The yearning for identity and security that characters experience via attachment to a godlike other is examined in the article's conclusion." (Schreiner, 2019).

In his paper, Xu (2014) talked about Toni Morrison as a well-known modern American author who primarily focuses on the history and spirituality of Black people. Morrison intentionally includes information about African Americans' past and current circumstances in her widely read *Beloved*. This is because she hopes to use her narrative to replicate "A New History," or the real history of Black American people that was previously hidden by mainstream white American society. By doing this, she seeks to heal the psychological wounds suffered by Black people and inspire her people to rediscover their cultural heritage and rebuild their sense of ethnic identity. This study employs the theory of new historicism to examine how Morrison exposes the pitiful past of African Americans and the weaknesses in colonialism and domination in *Beloved*. This will challenge the dominant narrative, dismantle the Black community's underprivileged identity, and ultimately reconstruct the culture and subjectivity of Afro-Americans. Bellamy (2014) analyzed Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* to explain themes such as responsibility, representation, and historical ignorance. It speaks of traumatic narratives by African children and the haunting presence of their abandoned father. The current effort is to problematize traditional grand narratives by focusing on the complexities of race relations and the haunting impact of historical events on contemporary views. The conclusion focuses on the hesitancy between abandonment and reclamation within the characters' experiences. The responsibility now falls on contemporary readers to confront and bear the haunting remains of diasporic figures. Challenging dominant discourses, this study particularly underlines the complexities of race relations and historical legacies in shaping the modernist perspective. The result is a fresh perspective based on issues of responsibility, representation, and historical ignorance in Caryl Phillips's novel. One key takeaway from the study would be to charge modern readers with the reality of historical legacies and broaden their understanding of cultural memory and contemporary race relations.

Thapliyal (2018) discusses how Toni Morrison portrays identity through her works, bringing forth the complexities related to race, gender, and socially constructed expectations. In a descriptive study with a sample size of 183 respondents, the research pointed out how Morrison accentuates self-worth and self-acceptance in negotiating identity within the structures of oppression. The analysis brings out the complex and multi-

dimensional nature of identity and reveals how cultural heritage and self-acceptance are important in developing one's identity. Therefore, this study confirms the fact that Toni Morrison had an immense impact on understanding identity, especially the African American identity. Consequently, the works of Morrison recognize the detailed interplay between historical, cultural, and social elements as they struggle to shape individual identities. Through an emphasis on self-acceptance and self-love, Morrison's writings call for a greater understanding of the complexities of identity and cultural heritage.

DeGraff and Moloney (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of Black identity in Frederick Douglass' autobiography and Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. This comparison was made between two Afro-American writers of different generations. It explores how Black identities are constructed in relation to other external forces such as societal norms and current and historical influences. It discusses the role of literacy and education as tools of empowerment that enable individuals to resist social limitations, as demonstrated by Douglass' narrative. The parallels drawn between the two works reveal complexities inescapable for Black characters attempting to exist within the contemporary cultural constraints and conceptions of beauty that shape their identities.

Similarly, Zéphirin, Serge, and Ngassak (2023) compared the portrayal of cultural identity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe is a Nigerian writer nearly the same age as Morrison. The study highlights the use of oral tradition, ancestral representation, and the significance of names in defining cultural identities in the works of both authors. The analysis reveals how Achebe and Morrison effectively use different elements to construct and represent their cultural identities, shedding light on sociological, historical, psychological, and linguistic approaches in their works. Ultimately, both authors convincingly depict their cultural identities through their literary creations.

One of the most recent studies was by Goswami (2023) whose comparative research extensively analyzed Toni Morrison's literary corpus against selected Indian Dalit writings to understand identity construction amidst social oppression. The study discusses characters from Morrison and Indian authors to explore how race, class, and gender discrimination impact identity formation. The findings prove that both Morrison and Indian Dalit writers trace the characters having an identity crisis due to the pressure from society, causing them emotional turmoil. Like other studies mentioned, this study also showed how education has contributed to self-realization and introspection among marginalized groups. The paper concludes by stating the essence of self-realization, self-assertion, and self-consciousness in the works of both Morrison and Dalit writers.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts to deconstruct the complex representations of Black identity through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* and Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*. Such works are seminal in arguing for the African-American and British-African experiences and represent a number of deep insights into the complexities, struggles, and resilience inherent in the identity formation process of Blacks. The methodology of this paper is anchored on a comparative analysis between these texts with regard to how each author utilizes narrative techniques, historical contexts, and cultural frameworks in the picturing and questioning of Black identity. By juxtaposing their works, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Afro-American and the British-African dimensions of Black identity. This comparative approach shows how historical legacies and contemporary socio-economic conditions differently impact the concepts of self and community among Afro-Americans and British Africans.

This analysis is crucial in a globalized world where cross-cultural understanding and recognition of shared histories can foster more inclusive perspectives on race and identity. The study also contributes to a more comprehensive discourse on diaspora, memory, and resilience within Black communities by critically engaging with the works of Morrison and Phillips. The analysis employed in this paper includes literary analysis, intersectionality

and identity formation, historical context and cultural frameworks, critical race theory, and postcolonial perspectives.

This comparative analytical approach centers on a literary analysis of the narrative strategies and thematic concerns prevalent in each of the selected texts. An important aspect of the analysis is the exploration of intersectionality in identity formation. The theory of intersectionality emphasizes how multiple social identities—such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—influence individual experiences and social structures. By applying this theory, it examines how both Morrison and Phillips define how Black identities are formed, not just by race but also by gender, class, and historical circumstances. For example, in *Beloved*, Sethe's identity as a Black woman and former slave cannot be separated from motherhood, trauma, and the haunting legacy of slavery. In *Crossing the River*, Phillips continues with the intersection between race, colonialism, displacement and belonging among characters whose identities are marked by their African heritage and their encounters with European colonialism and racism.

Another crucial analysis is setting these texts in their proper historical contexts and cultural frameworks. Both Morrison's and Phillips's novels draw from the history and cultural traditions of the African-Americans to construct narratives against hegemonic views of history and identity. In *Crossing the River*, Phillips engages in the diasporic experiences of African descendants in Europe and discusses how slavery, colonization, and migration have interactively worked to configure Black identities across continents and generations. In this sense, it is hoped that contextualizing such narratives within larger historical and cultural frameworks will show how Morrison and Phillips negotiate the complexities of Black identity formation and representation.

The analysis incorporates critical race theory and postcolonial perspectives to bring further depth into the way Black identity is represented in these texts. Critical race theory challenges the traditional approaches that explain race and racism by pointing out the ways in which racism might be infused, systemic, and part of social structures and institutions. On the other hand, postcolonial theories underline the legacies of colonialism and imperialism in identity formation and power dynamics across the world. Drawing from these theoretical approaches, the paper examines the aspects that Morrison and Phillips criticize and subvert dominant discourses of race, identity, and power through their narratives.

The scope of this study includes selected novels by Toni Morrison (*Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*) and Caryl Phillips (*Crossing the River*) which focus on their depiction of Black identity. While other works also offer valuable insights, this selection was made to ensure a coherent and detailed comparative examination.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Literature is an important tool that Afro-American writers use that reflects societal backgrounds to reveal injustice, social inequality, and racism. The aim is to show the significance of the African-American experience, emphasizing the intricate “double standards,” “social conflict,” and “double vision” that constitute the curse of African-American identity.

Morrison tries to write a history for the Black Americans to help restore their identity. Her fiction “is pertinent to the four fundamental concerns that are present in current Afro-American literature: The search for location, the retrieval of history, the identity crisis, and the narrative framework. Being an important Afro-American writer, she took on herself to voice the experience of the Blacks in the United States. She voices the Black culture, values, and dreams that are totally different from the whites...She validates Black culture and reaffirms adaptive survival power, its creativity amidst oppression, life-affirming qualities, as well as its ancient wisdom and humanity and its capacity for survival.” (Heinze, 1993).

Morrison's most renowned novel and the winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Beloved*, depicts the romance of Paul D. and Sethe, two former slaves who were reunited in the United States during the Civil War. Yet, because Blacks were forbidden to have emotional interactions during slavery, their bond is made more unique by the

historical background. As a result, it plays a role in the process of recuperation that the author intended the story to facilitate. However, the bond that each of them has with Sethe's children problematizes their reunion. They are both demonized by what they have done to them, and they are equally plagued by their pasts.

Although many critics have categorized *Beloved* as a historical novel of the period of slavery, it focuses on the psychological effects of slavery. Morrison describes the inhumane treatment that the slaves endured by using their voices: Paul D. wearing the bit, Sixo being burned, and Sethe being milked and beaten. By voicing her characters and portraying them being trialed and deprived of their freedom, Morrison is indicting society as well as the system.

Beloved is not only the story of Sethe but also the story and vision of her friends, her mother-in-law, her daughter, her lover Paul D, and Beloved herself. They all constitute the voices that complete the narrative. Sethe's history builds up the major events in *Beloved*. Her incapacity to recall the past does not seem to be the source of her trauma, rather it seems that she has an unquenchable memory. Sethe was a mother who could not bear the thought of her young ones being dragged back into enslavement. Sethe appears to be trapped in her recollections of her own child's death and fleeing from enslavement throughout the novel. Despite her best attempts to forget the past, she cannot seem to overcome it. She cannot forget the past and she cannot see any future. She tells Denver that:

“Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my memory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the world.” (Morrison, pp. 35-36).

The continuous recalling in *Beloved* creates a memory for the whole race, for future generations who have not witnessed slavery so as not to forget. For example, Beloved did not experience slavery and did not have anything to recall about it as she had never been a slave or had a personal memory of it. Yet, she still has a racialized mental memory of being enslaved and shipped, of being aboard slave ships, and of travelling through the journey of slavery.

Paul D worked in “Sweet Home” as a slave. He learns to disregard and lose touch with his past emotions. He is just as hesitant as Sethe to face the events of the past. In fact, he is somewhat more reluctant to do so. He believes that “he has locked up the past for good in the rusted-shut tobacco tin which he carries around his neck...nothing in this world could pry it open.” (Morrison, p.113).

The recalling of stories exchanged among the characters of the novel is a tool for letting go of bad memories.

Paul D opens up to Sethe about the punishment he endured in the past and how he sees himself as a slave compared to his master. He says “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him, you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But there wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead.” (Morrison, p. 72).

In Morrison's novels, identity is always conditional. Sethe merges into a community of women which helps her merge into the community at large. The Black characters cannot separate from the community and be isolated. Yet, their identity is always temporary, as Morrison values African-American customs and promotes Black unity. She also refuses to acknowledge that race becomes marginal. As a result, the Black identity that *Beloved* creates is in conflict with the dominant white society.

In her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Morrison states:

“For three hundred years, Black Americans insisted that ‘race’ was no useful distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries, every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted that ‘race’ was the determining factor in human development. When Blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered differences, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as ‘race’,

biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it." (Morrison, 1990).

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is a remarkable and captivating work of art. It narrates the tale of Milkman Dead, the male lead, searching for himself in the community and his cultural identity. He gathers the information and inspiration necessary for his self-development and self-identification as a Black man throughout his voyage to the South.

Song of Solomon foreshadows Morrison's subsequent works both thematically and technically. It eloquently tackles the concept of family, identity, and culture amid an environment plagued by the heritage of slavery and its consequences of racial abuse. The novel strongly redefines what it means to be Black. A historical deprivation and a psyche ripped from its ancestors or collective sources are tied to the protagonists' hate for themselves and outraged confusion. Their tales record a major and forceful self-restoration, expressing personal wellness through the lens of the community.

Song of Solomon demonstrates how Morrison builds the Black family bond and Black male awareness. This aids in comprehending the unique Black identity that Morrison creates. A young Black man's quest for his legacy serves as the basis of the story. As the first Black baby ever born at Mercy Hospital, which the Blacks aptly nicknamed 'No Mercy Hospital', the main protagonist "Milkman Dead" was named as such when news spreads that his mother is continuing to nurse him far after it is deemed normal. Milkman was raised in a household where his father, Macon Dead, avoided his own Black neighborhood in an effort to become a highly esteemed businessman among white Americans.

For Macon Dead, "money is freedom, ... the only real freedom there is." (Morrison, 1977). Macon is at peace with his name, and he takes it as his motto. He says "My name is Macon, remember? I'm already Dead." (Morrison, p.118) He gets his sense of self from his belongings. He loves his house and automobile more than he loves his wife and children, and he gives a higher value for his rented property than the occupants. The members of his family are always disappointed, frustrated, and scared.

"His hatred for his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glance, they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves." (Morrison, p.10).

Despite her lack of wealth and position, Macon's sister Pilate Dead, who most represents his antithesis, has established a vibrant and caring atmosphere. She provides for a female-headed, multigenerational household that is deeply ingrained in the African-American milieu. She has made an effort to preserve what remains of their family heritage compared to her brother. Her ideals and views are completely at odds with Macon's, who ultimately disowns her since he doesn't think highly of her. Macon even prohibits his son from seeing his aunt and tells him, "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world...Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (Morrison, p.55).

Macon's materialistic character is due to his desire to achieve economic security because he saw his father murdered by the whites. Therefore, he wanted to reach equality and security through his wealth. From his name, it is suggested that his African identity was dead and gotten rid of in order to merge into the community of the whites and be respected among them. He is torn from his roots and his identity. Milkman Dead is a good-looking but fragmented, alienated character, "an individualist raised and trapped in the bourgeois world of the middle-class

family. His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot with other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for." (Morrison, p.107).

Until his father sends him to trace his aunt Pilate hoping to know where she is hiding the family treasure, he goes to the south where he finds his family and identity in his family history and community.

Milkman in *Song of Solomon* has a completely abnormal life. His life is void of love and affection from the beginning. He tries to conquer his own alienation and the falsehood that surrounds his own life in the second section of the novel.

"There was nothing here to help him - not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact, they hampered him. Except for his broken watch, and his wallet with about two hundred dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone: his suitcase with the Scotch, the shirts, and the space for bags of gold; his snap-brim hat, his tie, his shirt, his three-piece suit, his socks, and his shoes. His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with or had learned to use." (Morrison, pp.280-281).

Milkman's true identity is finally revealed with the help of his aunt, Pilate Dead, who is a strong free woman in contrast to her brother Macon. She is the "natural healer" (Morrison, p.150) of her nephew. She opens his eyes to Black culture and its magnificence. She tells Milkman:

"You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There are five or six kinds of Black. Some silky, some woolly. Some are just empty. Some like fingers. And it doesn't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of Black to another. Saying something is pitch Black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night Black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow." (Morrison, p. 40).

Even her materialistic brother realizes his alienation from his identity when he listens to her songs. It is in the song of the children of the village that he eventually discovers the family stories he is looking for. The children recite the tale of Solomon, a man who realized he possessed supernatural abilities and fled to Africa in defiance of his captivity.

Morrison frequently incorporates myth and folklore into her writings. Her novels are mystical and realistic at the same time. The past reality of the African-American struggle is portrayed in her works. Morrison employs these strategies to reclaim the Black identity in her setting. Therefore, *Song of Solomon* emphasizes how critical it is for Black people to understand and appreciate their past. At the end of his adventure, Milkman—who experiences dual consciousness—has undergone a complete transformation.

With Pilate's assistance, Milkman reconsidered his relationship with his family. He eventually rises beyond individuality and achieves peace with Black society. Milkman, like the characters in *Beloved*, must go back to the family and the Black community to regain a functional sense of Black identity that is only created among the Black community. This idea that liberation of the Blacks can only be achieved when they merge with their own Black community is a common denominator in Toni Morrison's novels.

Other Black authors from different social and cultural origins also wrote about Black identity in their books. Caryl Phillips is one of the modern writers whose work focuses on the way Black identity is created within a predominantly white society. Morrison and Phillips create quite diverse Black identities in their works since they come from different backgrounds and eras. If Phillips' *Crossing the River* is compared with Morrison's *Beloved*, the distinctions between the Black identities they have created will be highlighted.

Caryl Phillips was born in St. Kitts, and then moved with his family to England. His novels often portray Africans in European or British regions. He experienced the tensions of being Black growing up in a confusing white community which deprived him of his security and his history.

Afro-Americans have extensive historical links to British-African culture resulting from slavery's exile and dispersion. Similar to Morrison's *Beloved*, Phillips's *Crossing the River* delves into the dark side of African-American history and highlights the atrocities of slavery. *Beloved* is limited to the nineteenth century, whereas *Crossing the River* spans two and a half centuries, starting with the desperate decision of an African father to sell his three children into slavery. "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths until we reached the place where the mud flats are populated with crabs and gulls." (Phillips, 1993).

Phillips's work is devoted to 'those who crossed the river'. The novel centers on three people whose lives are connected solely by their African ancestry. It is a modern tribute to the African dispersion. The novel's introduction features an ancestral voice that serves as the preface, admitting to the hurt and shame of selling three children: "For two hundred and fifty years I have listened to the many-tongued chorus. And occasionally, among the sundry restless voices, I have discovered those of my own children. Sinking hopeful roots into difficult soil...I have longed to tell them: Children, I am your father. I love you." (Phillips, p.1).

The novel's four tales correspond to four of the voices heard in the chorus that follows Africans' migration to Europe; each voice is discordant and sings in its own unique tongue. The use of multiple voices in *Crossing the River* pictures 250 years of African heritage in each of the four episodes. In the first story, *The Pagan Coast*, Nash Williams is set free by his owner, Edward Williams, and travels to the newly formed colony of Liberia via the American Colonization Society's repatriation program. Instead of being given assistance and encouragement in their new lives, the enslaved individuals endured abuse and were then sent back to a foreign land where they were abandoned. They suffered from illness and poverty. As the narrator says, "Reports from early settlers told stories of great hardships. The initial work of clearing the bush, constructing shelters and building fortifications against native attacks resulted in a heavy toll of life." (Phillips, p.9).

A collection of letters documenting Nash's experience at his newly acquired residence reveals his growing instability and despair. In the beginning, he was persistent in his efforts to assist the Liberian locals, Nash's fervor progressively decreases when Edward Williams ignores his correspondences. When the tale comes to an end, Edward Williams travels to Liberia to see the area where Nash passed away after becoming a native.

The experiences of Martha, another former slave, are the main subject of the second tale, *West*. After losing her spouse and children to slave dealers in the South, Martha freezes to death in Colorado at the beginning of the story. As Martha passes away in an unfamiliar area, her past is shown in a sequence of memories, spoken in a voice that alternates between that of Martha and the narrator. Frequently, the two voices blend amazingly well in spontaneous conversation:

"Martha Randolph. Squatting like a filthy bag of bones. Watching the snow. Don't know nobody in these parts. Barely recognizing herself. No ma'am, she thought I doubt if I'll ever be able to stand by myself again. But no matter. I've done enough standing by myself to last most folks three or five lifetimes. Ain't nothing shameful in resting now. No ma'am, nothing shameful at all She squeezed. The woman's hand squeezed back. Can you stand by yourself Martha shook her head." (Phillips, p.75).

Martha, like Sethe in *Beloved*, is plagued by memories of the brutality of servitude and her daughter, Eliza Mae. Phillips tackles the difficult circumstances that Black people were going through and links her own experience to Western colonial history:

"Then the auctioneer slaps his gavel against a block of wood. I fall to my knees and take Eliza Mae in my arms. I did not suckle this child at the breast, nor did I cradle her in my arms and shower her with what love I have, to see her taken away from me. As the auctioneer begins to bellow, I look into Eliza Mae's face. He is calling out the date, the place, the time. Master would

never have sold any of us. I tell this to my terrified child. Slaves. Farm animals. Household furniture. Farm tools. We are to be sold in this order.” (Phillips, p.76).

In the third tale, *Crossing the River*, James Hamilton, the captain of a slave ship, uses his log to present a Western viewpoint. He proceeds with the task of gathering a large number of slaves from the coast of West Africa: “At noon the canoes once again on board, brought 8 slaves, viz., 2 men, 1 woman, 2 boys, 3 girls. All small, the girl slaves all below 4 feet.” (Phillips, p.113).

In contrast to Morrison's *Beloved*, this section of the novel is written from a white viewpoint, as the slaves are seen from Hamilton's perspective. The absence of any human feelings from the African slaves who are described as the items of sale set the captain's diary apart from the other portions of *Crossing the River*. Phillips conveys the inhumane treatment of the slave agents despite the absence of the voices of African slaves.

The last story, *Somewhere in England*, tells the story of Travis, an American soldier serving in England during World War II, and Joyce Kitson, a young English woman, who is the object of his affections. Joyce permits the child to be put up for adoption after Travis is killed in combat. When the son visits America after twenty years, he finds his mother has remarried and has children. The fact that English Joyce is the only one who perceives Travis in that part demonstrates the cross-cultural aspect of Phillips's work. The novel concludes with the ancestor's voice from the introduction who reappears to mourn Black people historically and globally.

Examining both *Beloved* and *Crossing the River*, it is obvious that *Beloved* is about mending oneself and reunifying the person who suffered with the community. *Beloved*, which is set in 1873, alternates between the past and the present. Different perspectives are employed in a narrative to review individual events from several points of view.

Beloved is a historical novel that blurs the lines between fiction and history in slave tales that are based on a verified occurrence. Morrison is 'creating a free tale' when she gives each character a unique inner existence and explores their memories, which are suppressed. There are differences between *Beloved* and *Crossing the River* despite their shape and structure being somewhat similar.

Morrison's novel *Beloved* is dedicated to the millions who perished during the African journey. Her goal was to provide a voice to those who have been forgotten or remain unidentified. She emphasizes the need to reclaim and regain historical property and makes an effort to reclaim her African slave ancestors following their historical transgression. Her devotion implies that creating the work was an act of reconciliation, and the story is organized around the idea of the suppressed returning. Yet the protagonists eventually become haunted by the past. The past, present, and future permit Africans to travel freely across time, with their 'dead' predecessors continuing to influence and guide them. African history, present, and future are all very similar, and this timelessness stems from the fact that the harsh circumstances Black people face have not altered throughout time, demonstrating an endless cycle of injustice and oppression.

According to Phillips, the history of emigration and exile has shaped the identity of the British, and the themes of “displacement” and “uprooting” are recurring themes in all of his works. His deeper concern is in the idea that people who were uprooted due to colonization and invasion are no longer able to find restoration via some kind of healing unity with the past. Phillips believes that historical reclamation is an ineffective means of mending the fractured and disjointed historical narrative. People of Black history, identity, and culture are shaped by the ideas of “hybridity” and “in-betweenness.”

His works thus have disjointed and fragmentary narratives. Phillips compares four disparate and contradictory historical tales in *Crossing the River*. These tales show how the lives of Nash, Martha, and Travis were impacted by capitalism, the slave trade, workers' migration, and World War II. In contrast to historical fiction, the three main characters don't always have a significant role. In fact, significant details are presented obliquely. For instance, Martha's story is conveyed through narrators, Nash's story is told through letters to his previous owner, Edward Williams, who serves as the novel's major storyteller, and Joyce provides an eyewitness account of Travis.

Furthermore, readers are not made aware until the very end of the novel that the tales of the African diaspora are symbolically represented via the stories of Travis, Martha, and Nash.

In *Crossing the River*, Phillips tackles the subject of hybridity in an unconventional manner while writing about what it's like to be a person rooted in exile. Nash asserts that the central theme of the novel revolves around the "unchangeable essence of history" and the recollections of the three characters spanning many centuries, as their African pasts fade, and their varied and uprooted lives build new personal histories.

The devotion of a person or group to the African motherland is a recurring theme in diasporic texts. However, the need for a sense of belonging to the diaspora's current location of residence balances this sense of connection. In fact, there are differences in the degree of loyalty to Africa among them. Africa, as Phillips says in *Crossing the River*, is irrecoverable: "There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return." (Phillips, 1993).

Phillips is unwilling to adapt to, or blend into, the prevailing culture, despite the fact that the novel unequivocally repudiates the idea of returning to Africa, the homeland. Black people's lives are discussed in *Crossing the River*, and the significance of reclaiming the Black identity in a racist culture is highlighted. He seeks to identify the distinctions within the dominant white culture by describing the experiences of Black people.

On the other hand, Morrison makes an effort to accept her African background, and she has a greater bond with the land of her ancestors than Phillips does. She understands that many Black Americans were uprooted, bewildered, and lonely as a result of the movement of Black Americans from the rural South to the industrial North in America, which corresponded with a conflict between traditional and drastically new beliefs. She claims to write for these individuals specifically.

Morrison values an understanding of ethnicity and cherishes Black communities. That is why the main topic of *Beloved* is its emphasis on shared connections and racial responsibility. For instance, Sethe's Black mother says to her: "If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." And Sethe answers: "Mark me, too...Mark the mark on me too." (Morrison, 1987). The "mark" here indicates Black people's racial identification and stands for inclusion rather than isolation. The suffering in *Beloved* is Sethe's suffering as well as the suffering of other characters, Paul D, Denver, and Baby Suggs.

In a racist society, it is the battle of all Black people. *Beloved* is centered on Black people, and it exclusively addresses their downtrodden and abused state. Morrison omits white viewpoints and seldom features white characters in her books. Consequently, one may argue that the Black identity that *Beloved* creates is in conflict with the prevailing white culture.

In contrast to Morrison, Phillips depicts Black identity through the lens of white perceptions. Only Joyce, the white character in *Crossing the River*, gives us a viewpoint on Travis. Joyce's suffering is portrayed as she becomes pregnant, and the Jim Crow segregation laws label her as a "traitor" for having married a Black man and prevent her from entering the country as Travis's wife. Her son's memory haunts her as she says, "My GI baby. No father, no mother, no Uncle Sam. It must go into the care of the Comity Council as an orphan, love. If you're lucky, it might be legally adopted into a well-to-do family." (Phillips, 1993).

Joyce's story also demonstrates Phillips' concern for the downtrodden status of white people. In fact, he views their presence as crucial to his novels. The dialogues of the slave merchant and the Black father oddly blend into the conclusion:

"For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To the haunting voices...I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have listened to the sounds of an African carnival in Trinidad. In Rio. In New Orleans. On the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten. A many-tongued chorus continues to swell. And I hope that amongst these survivors' voices, I might occasionally hear those of my own

children... I sold my beloved children. Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl. But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved." (Phillips, 1993).

To depict the history of the African diaspora, Phillips employs a variety of voices to highlight his nuanced, sardonic understanding of the African diaspora. Although *Crossing the River* confronts the atrocities of slavery and exposes the cruelty of its intermediaries, its main goal is to offer a psychological understanding of the individuals who were implicated in the system of slavery rather than blame them.

In an interview with Davison (1994) Phillips states the main objective of *Crossing the River*. He says, "I wanted to make a connection between the African world which was left behind and the diasporic world which people had entered once they crossed the water. I wanted to make an affirmative connection, a connection based upon a kind of survival." (p.93).

Phillips contends that this is what relates African diasporic communities to Africa and to each other; instead of a universal desire to go back to a retreating and receding ancestor's homeland, they ought to put down roots wherever they are and integrate into the prevailing society. In contrast to Morrison, Phillips is interested in the dynamics between Blacks and whites and values the politics around Black identity in today's multicultural society. As a result, the Black identity in *Crossing the River* is essentially related to the prevailing and dominating culture of the whites.

5. CONCLUSION

By analyzing Black identity through a comparative analytical approach from both the Afro-American and British-African standpoints in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* and Caryl Phillips' four narratives in *Crossing the River*, this paper examines the historical and cultural characteristics that shape the Black experiences in America and Britain and how literature is used as an essential tool for expressing diverse narratives and interrogating them.

Morrison creates Black identity in the conventional sense, leaving out the white viewpoint from her books. Her works are strongly identified with the African-American experience in a painful attempt to find a voice for a certain sense of cultural memory, trauma, and resilience. *Beloved* reveals a haunting legacy of slavery through its pervasiveness in identity and familial bonds. *Song of Solomon* is a quest for self-knowledge and heritage within an African-American context. Through these complex plot lines, Morrison points to historical consciousness and individual experience at the center of Black identity-making.

However, Caryl Phillips extends this scope to the diasporic dispersion and the consequent problems of identity of the British Africans in *Crossing the River*. Phillips deftly weaves different narratives across time, exploring the intergenerational impacts of slavery, colonialism, and immigration. His work is from a transnational perspective that gives a panoramic view of the focused portrayal by Morrison of African-American life and shows the larger and interlinked realities of the Black experiences from across the Atlantic. It is an idea of multiculturalism, not an idea of roots and homelands that is reflected in his work. People looking back with nostalgia at their ethnicity and their blessed home have no place in his novel. The bringing together of these different perspectives accounts for the complexities and diversities in the concept of Black identity, transcending geographical barriers, yet remaining attentive to localized histories and cultures. Both Morrison and Phillips question uniform visions of Blackness and provide a rich tapestry of voices and stories that add to a more inclusive and more empathetic worldview.

In conclusion, the works of both Morrison and Phillips deepen the insight available regarding the Black experience from their respective Afro-American vantage points. Both confirm the importance of literature in building an enhanced appreciation for all complex and multifaceted dimensions of Black identity.

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