

Immigrants and Identity: American Fiction of Exile and Immigration from the Scholars' Perspective

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Abstract

This article discusses the core theme of identity in the emerging genre of Immigrant literature in American literature. In today's world of globalization which favours inclusion, immigrants continue ties or associations with multiple places. Still, they tend to identify with one country as home, which then impacts their identity formation along with integration. For this paper, three novels (*The Woman Warrior*, *Song of Solomon and Breath, Eyes, Memory*) have been selected to be discussed. The novels hail from the Chinese-American, African-American and Haitian-American backdrops respectively. Studying fiction from American immigrants of multiple descents gives more depth to the thematic and structural perspective on the genre. Each novel is first discussed with respect to its plot structure and then a detailed over-view is given on the scholars take on each novel. The discussion is based on the existing scholarship on the selected novels. This helps to create a perspective and build context on the American Fiction of Exile and Immigration for critics aspiring to get acquainted with the particular strand of literature.

Key Words: Edwidge Danticat, identity, immigrant identity, immigrant literature, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison.

The question of identity is relevant to the whole humanity, but it is especially important for migrants. They are people who try to amalgamate into the adopted land and culture while trying to remain true to their own roots. This sometimes create a conflict within them, their adopted community and their community of origin and sometimes create confusion that may be serious

enough to cause identity crises. Identity, therefore is a core theme of immigrant fiction, an emerging genre, immigrant literature helps us identify with and understand the immigrant narrative. When people move or migrate from the places of their origin to some other place, changes happen in their identities as well. This can be best studied in the second generation immigrants, who carry within them the attributes of both the place of their origin and the place of their adoption. The place/change of place results in complex transformations that give rise to hybrid identity formation amongst immigrants and exiles. The relationship between immigration and identity has been explained in detail by David H. Kaaplan and Elizabeth Chacko in their research article, “Placing Immigrant Identities”. They have discussed the importance of context and place in identity formation of immigrants along with the impact immigrants have on places, how they interact with places and the resultant formation of hybrid identities. In today’s world of globalization which favours inclusion, immigrants continue ties or associations with multiple places. Still, they tend to identify with one country as home, which then impacts their identity formation along with integration. Identity and identity formation is therefore a core theme in the migrant literature in general and American fiction of exile and immigration in particular. This paper seeks to study through various critical works on the selected texts how place/change of place results in complex transformations that give rise to hybrid identity formation amongst the characters that are immigrants and exiles.

Three texts have been taken to be discussed within the scope of this paper:

1. The Woman Warrior (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston
(Chinese American)
2. Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994) by Edwidge Danticat
(Haitian American)

3. Song of Solomon (1977) by Toni Morrison

(African American)

The texts have been selected to be included in the article on account of their subject matter as well as their relevance to the topic of discussion. The idea is to get a multidimensional perspective on the subject.

The Woman Warrior

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood among Ghosts is written by the Chinese-American author, Maxine Hong Kingston. It was published in 1976. The novel has received, National Book Critics Circle Award and was proclaimed as part of the list of “The Time Magazine’s top non-fiction books of the 1970s”.

Critics have mostly studied the novel with respect to the theme of identity. In their article, Margaret Miller and Steven V. Hunsaker have both taken up to study the “identity” in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. While, Hunsaker has compared Victor Perera’s *Rites* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* with an emphasis on Nation, Family and Language, Miller has put focus on different strands of identity she could identify in the novel. Both Miller and Hunsaker have read *The Woman Warrior* as an autobiography, with an attempt to maneuver the space between the Chinese and the American identity.

Malini Schueller has also discussed *The Woman Warrior* in terms of the national and racial identity. In her article, “Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in ‘The Woman Warrior’” Schueller studies the text as a dialogic feminist read, resting her argument on the theoretical framework by Cixious, Kristeva, Dostoevsky and Bakhtin. Schueller, like all the other critics on the novel, has termed it as an autobiography and has deemed articulation as an important aspect of it. She is of the view that articulation on part of Kingston

“is particularly a racial one” (423). Schueller also continues to analyze the novel in terms of the immigrant experience, with regards to the racial discrimination faced by the Chinese in the American context. She notices that, “Through her re-telling of the tale, Kingston, in addition to questioning gender-roles, also recreates the role of the avenger for her purposes” (426). The narrator’s voice is not considered autonomous but encompassing multiple narratives and so Kingston does not seek to establish another authority, but makes her marginality, a position of writing, a position, she seeks to celebrate.

In his criticism of *The Woman Warrior* in an article titled “The Naming of the Chinese American ‘I’: Cross-Cultural Sign/ifications in *The Woman Warrior*”, David Lwiwei Li has interpreted the text as a narrative of being an experience of a Chinese-American. He discusses the concept of identity in terms of gender, race and culture. Li reads the generational stories narrated through the mother to the daughter as a unique semiotic system that serves to exemplify different levels of feminine experience. He has also discussed “naming” as a semantic entity at the microcosmic level in order to re-inscribe the female entity at the macrocosmic level. Discussing the myth of Fa Mu Lan, Li establishes that through narrating the myth, “Kingston codes her material with cherished American values in order to win her readership” (506).

“The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?” by King Kok Cheung, reflects on *The Woman Warrior* as a feminine text, while at the same time dealing with the immigrant experience on a broader level.

In “Chinese American Women Writers: The Tradition behind Maxine Hong Kingston” by Amy Ling, Amy Ling’s commentary is also largely of the feminine perspective prevalent in

the novel, the immigrant experience and how addressing the two has made Kingston's voice bold in an attempt at seeking acknowledgement and perhaps validation for her struggles.

The identity developed of the protagonist/narrator of *The Woman Warrior* is deeply inspired by the tales that she has grown up listening to, both as she relates to them and she seeks to disassociate herself from them. While the story of the un-named aunt, warns her of developing any sexual relationships, the protagonist fills in the gaps in the story with her own details and romanticizes it. She does not scare away from inter-sexual relationships instead on the contrary she seeks to disassociate herself from the Chinese aspects of her personality that inhibits her from developing such relationships. "all the time I was having to turn myself American-feminine, or no dates" (47). She is however caught between the two worlds, the necessity to appease her family is integrated in her blood, she cannot shed it, the resultant personality has an identity of a mixed race, attempting to cloak herself in the American features of identity which are rejected by her own community as well as the Americans, leaving her in an amalgamated form of identity. In an attempt to be accepted by them, she rebels against them in a grown-up's version of tantrum throwing. "I refused to cook. . . . When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two. 'Bad girl,' my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (47). She could not however become a boy, a graduate of "Berkeley" (47), she attempted her best to be financially and emotionally independent, vouching never to marry so as not to disappoint a husband or become a cause of his failed professional endeavours, a legacy of the Chinese version of a good daughter in Kingston's world. While envying her American counter-parts who could ask for support and get it (48). She chooses not to live in her own community, "I live now where there are Chinese and Japanese, but no emigrants from my own village looking at me as if I had failed them. Living among one's own

emigrant villagers can give a good Chinese far from China glory and a place” (52). The protagonist aspires to be a savior of her community and be the “swordswoman” (53) yet chooses to live away from them denying herself the context and the sense of place that she may attain within her community, “My job is my only land” (49) she professes but is not accepted by the American community either, being addressed as “yellow nigger” (48) by her employer. She wears her American achievements as a medal, “I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl” (52), yet resents the Americans as well, “It’s not just the stupid racists that I have to do something about, but the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work” (49). The protagonist/narrator is therefore someone living in and relating to both China and America, she is a Chinese-American. Summing up her identity herself, she writes, “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. ... What we have in common are the words at our backs. I have so many words ... that they do not fit on my skin” (53). Language is then the sword of the protagonist through which she provides a representation to her community and continue the legacy of Fa Mu Lan in her own way. “The origins of the tale are communal and familial and the narrator’s continuation of it attests to the relatedness of her voice to other voices.... the intends of Brave Orchid’s and the narrator’s tales vary greatly; but the fascinating aspect of the tale is the narrator’s ability to tell her own tale both in opposition to, and in harmony with Brave Orchid’s tale” (Schuller 425). The narrator therefore both takes up from her ancestry and divert from it, paving her own way into the world as a character with an integrated identity.

Breath, Eyes, Memory

Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian American published *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994. It has, since then, received broad literary acclaim and was made a part of the Oprah Book Club Selection in 1998. The most prominent theme lying central to the novel is that of migration and an attachment

to land or place. The power of place in inflicting pain and offering solace at the same time is at the core of the novel, it is due to this that the novel has been selected as a part of this study.

In her dissertation for the MPhil degree, titled, “Identity Crises in Diasporic Writing: Critical Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*”, Yashoda Chaulagain has discussed diaspora and its consequent effects on the identity of the protagonist. Discussing *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Yashoda has discussed Sophie’s yearning for Haiti. The dissertation analyzes how diaspora leads to yearning for the homeland and failed attempts on the part of the protagonists to reconstruct “unhomeliness” despite the presence of a home on account of a hybrid identity.

Discussing dislocation, identity crises and the consequent construction of multiple identities for the protagonists of her selected novels, Yashoda discusses the lingual conflict and how the inability to speak English hampers the ability to settle in their new homeland. She also discusses the isolation of the characters due to the problems they face in settling for an identity. Yashoda relates how the themes of death, madness and social identity are incorporated in the concept of belonging and identity in the construction of characters. She discusses the themes of loss, exile and cultural exclusion and pain of separation.

In her article titled, “The Stories of Haitian Daughters: Disabled Bodies and Reconstructing Memory in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*”, Asami Watanabe, discusses the corporeal experiences of the Haitian-American women and their attempts at reclaiming control over their bodies. She focuses on the causes of this form of control, the practices through which this control is exercised and the after effects of the practices on the lives

of the individuals exposed to such injustice. She also discusses how this oppression is mainly exercised by women themselves, rather than the male members of the society.

Watanbe constructs a background of the female body and its social construct from the eyes of feminism. Feminism discusses how the cultural norms set to accept only a particular form of a female body leads individuals to self-criticize to the point of self-dislike. It is also discussed as an object used to exercise social and political control especially in the Haitian context.

Sharron Eve Sarthou in her article, *Unsilencing Defiles Daughters: Overcoming Silence* in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!* Discusses the themes of borders, identity and immigration in Edwidge Danticat's novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and her collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!* . She narrates how violence and silence operates in Haiti and in turn disrupts the continuation of history and makes the positivity of life impossible, both inside and outside of Haiti. Like many other critics of the novel, Sarthou also discusses the immigrant characters' linguistic struggles and how it hampers a formation of an integrated identity. She also discusses, how, this identity if formed disrupts these characters' relationship with their historical pasts. However, the construction of such an identity and a sense of globalization may actually empower the citizens from Haiti to talk freely about their country and so save "Haiti".

Sarthou's article predominantly talks about the silenced stories that exist within Haiti but fail to find their way out, mainly due to the central focus being on the violence of the war going on in the country. The critic thus enunciates the importance of Danicat's work in this respect for it releases these trapped voices and frees the unheard stories within. According to Sarthou, it is essential for these stories to be told from a Haitian-American so that they can play a middle-man

and tell the stories in a way which allows the Haitians to identify with them, while at the same time make it understandable for the readership outside of Haiti, in countries like America.

Jennifer C. Rossi in her article “Let the words bring wings to our feet”: Negotiating Exile and Trauma Through Narrative in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* discusses how exile and trauma are interlinked. According to her, forced migration, especially that of a child coupled with a desire to escape and return. The novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is the coming of age story of the female protagonist Sophie and discusses the very phenomenon.

Through the narrative, Danticat seeks to challenge the existing political discourses and encourages the readers to question the authenticity of the narrative. According to Francis, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* presents a narrative where an alternate version of history is presented through a focus on the female body intertwined with culture and migration along with empire and nation building in Haiti.

Memory is the factor that controls the process of identity formation for Martine and Sophie from *Breadth, Eyes, Memory*. Martine’s continuous nightmares on account of the memory that haunted her and which she was forced to face every day in shape of Sophie shapes the mother daughter relationship and the formation of their identities. “I looked at my red eyes in the mirror ... New eyes seemed to be looking back at me. A new face all together. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane” (49). This time machine however takes Sophie back in time instead of taking her forward. She now shares her mother’s paralyzing fear and lives it vicariously through her. The mother daughter bond is more of a trauma bond where Martine categorically forbids Sophie to indulge in a romantic relationship of any sort until she turns eighteen, “She will have a boyfriend when she

is eighteen" (56). She then conveniently changes her policy when Sophie does turn eighteen and forbids her any sexual relationship at all, the rule represented by the virginity tests that Sophie was subjected to regularly. After finding Sophie coming to her house stealthily late at night, Martine meets her livid, "She tapped the belt against her palm, her lifelines becoming more and more red. She took my hand with surprised gentleness, ... she made me lie on my bed and she *tested* me" (84). The act created a chasm between the mother and the daughter which resulted in Sophie violating her hymen with a "pestle" and leaving with Joseph to get married (88). A marriage she could barely consummate as Martine had transferred into Sophie a "sexual phobia" (201). Towards the end of the novel Sophie's therapist explains to her, her mother's motives behind this strictness. "your mother was so adamantly against your being with a man [because] ... She ... felt that you were the only person who would never leave her" (210). The mother and daughter became estranged for the next two years (103) only to be reconciled back in Haiti. "It's not right for a mother and daughter to be enemies" (162). It is where the two realize how they have transformed over the years, while Sophie had "become very American" (179), for she had "bulimia" (179), an eating disorder Haitians couldn't afford on account of scarcity of food. Martine on the other hand "looked very young and thin" (160). Sophie's daughter becomes a reconciliation in terms of looks for the women of Sophie's maternal family, Brigitte had her great grandmother's "black face" (101), she looked "more like Martine's child" (101) than Sophie's. The child then becomes a manifestation of all that Sophie couldn't be for her mother, her daughter in the true right. Haiti becomes the locus of memory for Martine and Sophie as the place where the incident happened whose memories the two women carried for life as scars, and also as the place where the two could find closure and reconciliation with their pasts in order to be free of its haunting memories. "You and your mother should both go there again and see that

you can walk away from it. Even if you can never face the man who is your father, there are things that you can say to the spot where it happened ... you'll be free ... There will be no more ghosts" (211). Martine could not go back, she died before she could ever confront her memories and find peace, her funeral however takes place in the cane field (site of her rape), Sophie attacked the cane stalks and beat it while it bent, the cane cutters saw her as she was possessed but her grandmother stopped the priest coming to stop her and "shouted", "'Ou libere?' Are you free? /Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs. /'Ou Libere!'" (233). It is then in that place that the time comes full circle and Sophie finally gets closure. "'Are you free, my daughter?'/My grandmother quickly pressed her fingers over my lips. 'Now', she said, 'you will know how to answer'" (234). The place then becomes the locus of memory as a witness to the perpetration of injustice and the means of salvation from it.

Memory is an important link within the narrative plots of *The Woman Warrior* and *Breadth, Eyes, Memory* whereas the undertaking of journey is what instigates the onset of a new identity formation for Milkman in *The Song of Solomon*. While Brave Orchid of *The Woman Warrior* makes dire attempts at the preservation of the memory of her land and its tradition while at the same time protecting her interests through the narration of familial story and the national folklore to her daughter, Martine from *Breadth, Eyes, Memory* seeks to escape desperately from her memories which are manifested in physical form through her daughter Sophie. Memory is nonetheless retained through the next generation through both the novels regardless of their character's attempts and motives. The memory gets objectified through various devices and memorabilia in *The Woman Warrior* and *Breadth, Eyes, Memory*, *The Woman Warrior* employs the support of the oral story telling tradition for the purpose while *Breadth, Eyes, Memory* makes use of objects and symbols for the purpose. In both the novels, memory serves as the deciding

factor that determines the mother-daughter relationship in the particular novel and affects the development of the identity of the protagonist. The places in both the novels act as the locus of memory by acting as the hub from which these memories originate and by preserving them through their inhabitants (who are the family members of the characters residing in America and hence the link that the immigrant characters have with their respective homelands). It is only through connection with these places that the protagonists find meaning in their memories and attain peace and closure.

Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon is Toni Morrison's third novel written in 1977. It earned her National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 1978. *Song of Solomon* is a story of African American heritage told through the characters of Milkman and his family. Born as a result of deceit and manipulation on part of his mother and aunt in form of a love potion, Milkman came as the only source of any semblance of comfort for his mother in her contemptuous marriage that was also devoid of any physical relationship what-so-ever. The novel is a chronicle of the physical journey of Milkman, who instigated by his father, sets out to find treasure but instead finds out his heritage in form of his lineage and ancestry that accomplishes for him, individuation and hence a bigger treasure than the one he had initially set out to find.

The novel is important from the point of view of the subject of this paper as it offers a perspective of the African-American community that immigrated to America multitude of years back but still failed to get integrated into their land of adoption. They are still, the other, where the whites are the self. The narrative also offers a formation as well as a revelation of the protagonist's identity through a journey across land. As he makes a trip through the terrain, he unearths the stories or histories buried within it. Each story makes the space, a place for him that

in turn allows him to discover himself and his identity. In this context, the novel enriches the scope of this discussion and has been selected to aid in the study of identity for the immigrants, in the case of this particular novel, African-Americans in America.

While discussing “*Song of Solomon*”, almost all the critics have rightly pointed out the identity formation as the most important element in the novel. Most of the critics have however; either referred to it fleetingly or studied it with reference to the myth of the flying African incorporated in the novel by Morrison: Hunsicker, Tolbert, Ramirez, Awkward and Cortes have all studied the myth in various lights in the *Song of Solomon*.

In her dissertation for Honours degree, Samantha Hunsicker traces the concept of folklore and talks about its significance in the oral tradition and later in written literature. In the last chapter of the thesis, she traces the myth of the Flying African in the *Song of Solomon*. The myth is recognized as a means of transfer of identity and cultural roots through generations and Milkman Dead’s journey to the town of Shalimar/Solomon in order to find his identity. The concept of identity and collective memory though discussed, has not been elaborated upon. Tolanda Tolbert, in her PhD dissertation, discusses in detail the myth of the flying African slaves and Ibo landing in the novel in comparison with two other texts by African-American women writers. She analyses how, “myth and ritual” (1) are used to form a link between an individual and the community. She discusses how the mere mention of these myths establishes different codes of conduct of a community and an individual’s role in it. Also, how the ritual is used as a strategy to make place for the marginal identities. Susana Texiera has studied the world of the *Song of Solomon* as created by language. Her main focus is how language establishes the unprivileged position of the black community within the white macrocosm and the position of

various characters with respect to each other as depicted by language, establishing the positions of the signifier, the signified and the responsive.

Terry has explored Morrison's portrayal of the engagements of the African Americans with the North American landscape. Much emphasis has been put on how the landscape stood for certain values for the African-American community. The article explores how Morrison has reworked the prevalent discourses pertaining to the geographical land and symbolic spaces and the corresponding power structures. It discusses how Morrison has attempted to give representation to the experience and identity of the African Americans, how she has revisited the accounts of belonging at the national level and their presence in the land, she also sometimes contests it. She unearths buried perspectives and from them weaves a new tale.

Juana Cortes in her dissertation, for the graduate degree, has discussed the rendering of the myth of the flying African, as she calls it. Her thesis is divided into two parts: part one deals with the history of the myth, while part two discusses the protagonist, that is, Milkman. She has, according to herself, as described in the abstract, sought to explore how the protagonist of the novel has attempted to construct an identity through the myth. Through coming to terms with his ancestry through folklore and oratory etc, he realizes and thus acknowledges his past that has been buried in the mainstream life. Cortes has discussed the protagonist's journey but this analysis does not focus on the geographical elements and their contribution in the development of the protagonist.

Ashley Tidey in her analysis of the novel has suggested multiple approaches to reading the novel. She begins by discussing Henry Louis Jr.'s suggested approach to reading and analyzing Afro-American texts, that is, by acknowledging and considering the duality of

meaning embedded in every Afro-American text. She suggests that any such text would always have dual interpretations, she furthers her argument by bringing Freudian psychoanalysis into the discussion and elaborating how Milkman's last jump would have contradictory meanings from an African perspective and an American perspective.

Milkman's question of identity is raised and answered through his journey that he undertakes in the novel. "Back to Africa. Tell Guitar he went back to Africa" (353). Geographically, this is where Milkman's journey culminates, not in America but in Africa. "by regarding American (particularly the South) rather than Africa as the 'home' in this land for Black people ... they automatically become rightful heirs to America's legacy" (Barnes 19). "You can't do the past over" (86) Milkman was told in the initial stages of the novel, he however, does just that, he traces his past in order to be able to pursue his future. By the end of the novel, Milkman who couldn't see Guitar's point-of-view or the misery of less privileged African-Americans around him or his parents for that matter, is able to think philosophically and speak metaphorically, "... he knew that anything could appear to be something else, and probably was" (356). He felt peace encircle himself like Pilate did on hearing what Milkman had to tell her (359). The novel comes full circle at the end, the image of flying at the beginning of the novel is completed at the end as Milkman leaps into the air with the awareness of Solomon's wisdom he acquires as his ultimate legacy, the treasure he had set out to find, "... now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (363). With the last sentence Morrison encapsulates the entire human race in her wisdom. Milkman's character then becomes bigger than his immediate self and by the end he carries the wisdom of not only his own people but of the entire human race. He is transformed and through his journey acquires a more profound and integrated sense of identity. "Myths come and go, passing slowly from one place to

another; every generation recounts them differently and adds new elements to the patrimony received from the past; but behind this changing reality, there is a permanent reality that in some way manages to elude the action of time” (Harvey 309).

The identity and its formation is an integral theme in the American fiction of exile and immigration. Maxine Hong Kingston, Edwidge Danticat and Toni Morrison have all integrated this theme within their novel in an attempt to articulate the voice of the underrepresented immigrant community of America. Through the stories of *Brave Orchid* and her daughter, Sophie and Martine and *Milkman*, we come across how the American immigrants struggle to cope with the demands of their adopted land while continuing to be true to their own cultural heritage. This dilemma results in complex transformations that result in amalgamated identity formation for these characters.

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