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Dead Men Tell No Tales: Memory in Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14605970

Article History: Submitted-18/11/2024, Revised-18/12/2024, Accepted-22/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

The past does not belong to the dead. It never ends and it never rests. It is constantly told and retold and kept alive in the historical memory of man.

The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the role and function of memory, both within and outside the novel *Feeding the Ghosts* and to examine its significance within the tradition of the eighteenth-century Middle Passage slave trade. It will trace the politics and poetics of remembering and resistance, of forgetting and forgiving, and will look at the novel's reconstruction of historical memory through fiction as a project of mourning through memorialization.

Keywords: post-colonialism, memory, slave trade, remembering, forgetting, slavery, colonial, past.

But dead men tell no tales, they say!

Except old tales that burn away
The stifling tapestries of day:

Old tales of life, of love and hate,
Of time and space, and will, and fate.

- Haniel Long

The above lines are taken from the poem 'Dead Men Tell No Tales' by the American poet and author Haniel Long. They suggest the potential and possibility of the art of storytelling to keep the past alive, whether it be a past of hurt or of hope. It is comforting to believe in the idea that death is not the ultimate end. Whatever had happened, or is happening or will happen will somehow always survive and will have a part to play in who we are and what we become, whether we chose to acknowledge them or not.

Within the discipline of humanities, especially literature, one of the concerns within the field of postcolonial studies is with the exploration and examination of a post-Empire world. Such an engagement along with its analyses and findings have far-reaching implications in the world outside of academia, so much so that it has the power to influence and implicate many political policies and institutional ideologies.

The past is never dead and buried. It never ends and it never rests. It will always sing its siren song from beyond the grave, demanding to be heard and to be answered across ages. Every generation interacts with their inherited history in their own way, which usually tends to be different than how their preceding generation viewed it.

The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the role and function of memory, both within and outside the novel *Feeding the Ghosts* and to examine its significance within the tradition of the eighteenth-century Middle Passage slave trade. It will trace the politics and poetics of remembering and resistance, of forgetting and forgiving, and will look at the novel's reconstruction of historical memory through fiction as a project of mourning through memorialization.

The novel *Feeding the Ghosts* written by the British-Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar is a 1997 fictional novel inspired by the true history of the ruthless massacre of 131 Africans that took place on the transatlantic British slave ship Zong in 1781. Based on the archive of a legal case between the owner and insurer of the Zong, this creative work attempts to fill the gaps and build bridges between the blanks in received history by utilizing the potential of 'Storied memory'(Sarah De Nardi et al., 2019) to transgress and transform mainstream public memory. This novel is D'Aguiar's moving ode to the memory of those Africans who drowned in the waters of the Atlantic.

Walter Benn Michaels (quoted by Madsen) in his deconstructive essay about the Holocaust raises a very profound ethical and existential question: "Do memories come from my own life or from other lives lived long ago?". This leads us down a rabbit hole of concepts and

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

concerns whose answers can never be established with certainty: How do future generations respond and react to historical injustices such as slavery? How do they honour the memory of an event which is a part of their collective consciousness but in which they did not have an immediate part to play? How do they deal with its current results and continuing repercussions?

The genre of neo-slave narratives within postcolonial literature allows readers and writers to tackle the cultural amnesia surrounding the Trans-Atlantic slavery. The novel can also be said to fall under the category of auto-fiction, which fundamentally accepts the unreliability and ambiguous quality of memory and therefore seeks to represent not a factual version of the event but one which explores its importance and implications. They can be considered to serve as a powerful means of remembering; to keep alive while simultaneously re-crafting the memory of the past. Rather than trying to prove an accurate account of the tragedy, D'Aguiar consummately crafts a haunting tale of humans and of lost humanity. His writing style makes the characters all the more real and their sufferings all the more haunting. He uses simple words in an emotive and evocative language and his writing embraces the spirit of water. The lyrical poetics of the language employed by the author takes on the flowing essence of the sea which permeates through the pages.

What is memory, but a recognition and recollection of a lived reality? It is not a collection of our experiences nor is it a series of our impressions and perceptions. Memory, whether personal or social, is what determines who we were, are and will be. It cannot be relegated to the past as something which is done and dusted. Unlike the conventional notion of memory as a storehouse of past experiences which are preserved indefinitely within the human mind and can be accessed at will, memory in reality is a 'living history, the remembered past that exists in the present' (Sarah De Nardi et al., 2019). It is a part of one's very existence. It is through memory that we understand the past, make sense of the present and proceed towards the future.

Thus, it is paramount that we keep alive the memory of our past, not as a painful and traumatic relic but as a reminder of the endurance and resilience of those who came before us in the face of a harrowing reality. This by no way means to romanticize their trauma, but it is an attempt to bring forward onto the pages of public memory a past which was forcefully forgotten and made invisible for so long. The politics of the past cannot be reduced to a record of numbers and statistics. In his interview with Maria Frias, D'Aguiar describes his

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work as an 'attempt to fill in the gaps of an eradicated past and to understand history through personality, through people and their experiences rather than by a rehearsal of dates and events.' The dearth of narrative voices from the primary victims of the slave trade coupled with whitewashed official records make it necessary to engage with the past in a creative and imaginative way. The act of creative remembrance becomes very crucial in the face of the fact that the actual stories are lost to us. One has to painfully glean out their unheard voices and untold stories from the silence and stillness of the past. It is important to bear in mind the significance of the purpose and the politics of writing, especially when dealing with the destructive and devastating tradition of slavery, one of the most shameful chapters in the history of humanity.

Words are a powerful and potent tool of expression and writing her story is the only way available to Mintah to articulate her suffering and to heal her emotional wounds and psychological trauma. This is attested by her poetical statement that 'Writing can contain the worst things. So I forget on paper'. Elsewhere she says, 'Most of what I do is not worthy of being stored in my head. Or it hurts too much to store it. So I let it go'. The conflict that arises from the indelible duality in these statements is that in the process of recording her testimony, Mintah has to navigate the ambivalent and paradoxical politics of remembrance and forgetting. She tries to forget her pain through writing but by doing so, she is recovering and reclaiming the distorted and discarded stories of her subaltern society. Through Mintah's memories, we see her not just as a passive witness to the horrendous atrocities committed on the slaves but also as an equally active victim of these criminal brutalities.

Through his writing, D'Aguiar is engaged in a project of (re)construction of an erased past. He reimagines the historical trauma of the Atlantic slave trade and presents it to a modern audience through his recreation of the historical tragedy of the Zong massacre. He employs the 'potentially cathartic power of literary language in the fictionalized process of healing, where the special characteristics of poetic language can act as a mechanism by which the full horror of the traumatic event can be recovered in a moment of identity formation that brings together absence and loss in a compulsive repetition of past trauma' (Madsen, 2010). Here, writing becomes a coping mechanism and a form of creative therapy for both the author and the character.

Mintah chronicles her individual experiences and memories while D'Aguiar does the same for those enslaved. For the author, this is an attempt to represent something un-representable

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and to regain the lost identity of people through the written word. For Mintah, it is through the act of writing that she tries to make sense of her splintered sense of self and the brutal reality of her people.

A very prominent and powerful motif in the text is the element of water. It is all-pervasive and constitutes a crucial part of Mintah's memories. It is the graveyard of her dreams and desires. Mintah provides a 'solid testimony to the slaves'(Labaune-Demeule, 2017) lives as opposed to the liquid repository offered by the sea. As a recorder of her memory, Mintah parallels the sea as a reservoir of unrecorded memories of slavery. Nature can preserve memory and nature can preserve history. Thus, the sea becomes a storehouse of memory and it becomes a historical witness as well as a postcolonial witness. In the prologue, the author painfully yet poetically paints how the sea consumes the bodies of the drowned slaves. It has its own rhythm, its own music, its own history, its own memory. It embraces them into her memory. The sea is their salvation; their destroyer and their preserver. The sea is their witness.

Her journal starts with the powerful words 'I am Mintah'. This process of naming and asserting her existence emphasizes her selfhood and her ownership of her Self. Soon her identity metamorphosizes into a representation of her community and subsequently becomes their legacy. She is also the one who gives first-mate Kelsal an identity. This is precisely where her power over him flows from. Kelsal recognizes this and throws her into the sea not for disobedience or insubordination but for the knowledge that she possesses and her potential power over him that stems from this knowledge. She forces him to wake up from his selective amnesia and face his past. He remembers her as a care-giver who had tended and treated him through his sickness at the missionary station. This memory of Mintah is what forces him to record her name in the list of the sick slaves. He can no longer ignore her personhood but he can also not affirm her selfhood as on the ship and in their world, she will always amount to being a black slave and nothing more.

In the trial episode, the British court dismisses Mintah's testimony and ridicules the very idea of a black and that too a woman to be educated enough to record a journal. By discarding her testimony, the colonial masters become the custodians of history and through their selective elimination, decide the version of history that is to be recorded and preserved for the future. Her testimony as a counter-history is a challenge to this 'official History'. Mintah's perspective and personal narrative act as a counter- memory to the accepted account of

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slavery. This serves to highlight the tussle 'between History and story, between official records and subjective storytelling'(Labaune-Demeule). There will always be a clash while attempting to juxtapose competing memories which challenge the dominant narrative while providing a space for the presence of absent voices. Hence, we have a (much needed) confrontation between experience versus archived history, lived reality versus legal records, Mintah's testimony versus the British court. Hywel Dix sees the existence of the novel itself as a counter-monument, 'a monument in fiction that deviates from the ideological construction of the imperial past that dominates the memorial culture still prevalent in Britain'.

Dix explores how similar to the process of literary canonization, there is also a historical canon wherein certain events and episodes are selected to be representative of the past and are conferred with an authoritative and symbolic status. They are commemorated and engrained into the collective consciousness to such an extent that they begin to appear as the one and only authentic, original, and acceptable version of reality. He goes on to say that 'its effective functioning as ideology requires that the selective remembering of historical events is accompanied by a corresponding forgetting of some of the more morally ambivalent components of those events'. Thus, a postcolonial perspective is crucial to read into the ideological function of 'racialized memory' (Lambert, 2014).

In declaring the journal to be 'penned by a ghost', the British legal system denies Mintah's role as a writer. It is easier for them to accept the thought that it could be written by a spirit than by a slave. They conveniently forget and even question her existence in an attempt to silence her. This further leads to the creation and control, or in other words, to the hegemony of knowledge within the Empire. Through the creative remembering of the black experience, 'memory' becomes a 'discourse of the oppressed' (Lambert, 2014) which challenges exclusionary and institutionalized history.

Although Mintah's presence is strategically effaced from official records in the plot, in D'Aguiar's novel her voice solidifies the memory of the sufferers of slavery. After her escape, Mintah preserves the memory of the drowned slaves through the craft of wood carving. She builds a memorial to honour their memory. The dead are always hungry and refuse to be forgotten. This is her way of feeding their memory and keeping them alive. Thus, both D'Aguiar and Mintah engage in the creation of memory or rather in the process of

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memory-making, so as to remember a past which cannot and should not be forgotten, whether through wood or through words.

The 'ghosts' in the novel are not only the sick slaves jettisoned by the captain and his men, but also slaves like Mintah who 'by rights should have been killed', but escaped death and are forever 'plagued by dreams' held by the force and horror of their memories. The last section begins with Mintah's written account of the Zong and continues with her life in Maryland and Jamaica, haunted by memories of the Zong. She dedicates her entire life to keeping their memory alive, an occupation which the text refers to as 'feeding the ghosts'.

Thane looks at the significance of the memory of old men in legal affairs in *Oral History, Memory and Written Tradition: An Introduction*. For instance, in seventeenth century medieval Europe, disputes over customary law privileged male memories as more reliable and credible than female recollection. Such 'gendered separation of spheres of public testimony can provide incomplete histories.' Likewise, Mintah's memories have to navigate a gendered as well as a racial space. It becomes a contest between her individual memories and the social memory of the culture of her colonizers. It all the more highlights her precarious position as an educated female slave.

Within the disturbing history of colonization, women have had to face the double-edged sword of patriarchy and slavery. Interestingly in this narrative, it is Mintah who has the potential and the agency to preserve history and prevent her people from being forgotten. This oddly ties up with the onerous and oppressive notion of women as the custodians of customs, that is, as the preservers and transmitters of tradition and heritage. What she leaves behind is not just her individual record but also a cultural memory. After getting back on the ship, she transforms into a voice of collective consciousness and conscience for the rest of the slaves and it is through her that their story is kept alive and told to the world (though it is just as easily dismissed in the court).

Another feminist concept through which to view the idea of memory in the text is with regards to corporeal memory. The body remembers what it has suffered even if the mind wishes to forget. Memory manipulates in order to forget when remembering becomes too painful to bear. The gendered violence perpetuated on women is to such an extent that even their bodies forget their own functioning in order to keep the trauma at bay and survive. This is what the author says while writing about the waters of life: 'Amnesiacal wombs, forgetting

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to bleed, forgetting their function. Wombs that declared everything that had happened to this body had to end there. There would be no inheritance from these wombs.'

When Mintah is tortured by the crewmen, she transforms the claps of her fellow slaves into drumbeats and the hard wooden board of the ship into land. She taps into the cultural memory of her African culture; the songs, the dance, the stories etc. in order to survive. This memory connects her to her land, her past and her people that she lost. Thus, there is an interplay and interconnectedness between memory and folklore, and between memory and storytelling.

While exploring the relationship between land and memory, we come to the theory of landscape memory. When there is a projection of a character's psychological condition onto their physical surroundings, their emotional state is transferred and magnified onto a larger and natural canvas. (This notion resembles John Ruskin's concept of pathetic fallacy in literary theory). The two landscapes compared and contrasted here are that of the sea and of land along with the symbolic juxtaposition of wood and water. Both of these spaces have very different connotations for the slaves. In her testimony, Mintah poignantly recalls her family and homeland, whose loss has only been accentuated by time. They remember the land which they left behind. They have to protect themselves against the memory of this land from which they have been forcibly severed and displaced, never to return. Yet, this nostalgia and intense homesickness, for a distant yet fixed geographical position highlights how the memory of loss and absence, however painful and unpleasant, serves as an anchor to hold onto during desperate times. In their introduction to the Routledge Handbook of Memory and Place, the authors talk about the part played by such 'place-based remembering' in '(re)producing and maintaining a sense of identity'.

But the luxury of indulging in their lost past is not something which they can afford. The memory of their past does not provide them any comfort amidst their suffering nor does it offer a glimmer of hope that they can look forward to. It is present as a painful reminder of all that they had loved and lost. Also, of importance is the idea of the ship as a social space where one is transformed (socially, physically, emotionally) into a slave, which unfortunately falls beyond the purview of this paper.

I would like to conclude by quoting Andrew Opitz, 'Remembering Atlantic slavery is thus not about political correctness or about exorcising ghosts from the past; it is about salvaging a livable future from the soiled wreckage of history.'

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