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**The Burden of Remembering: Exploring Trauma, Memory and the Past in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep***

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**Abstract:** The concepts of memory, history and trauma are widely used as tools in the analysis of literary works in contemporary times as they play a significant role in the construction of individual and collective identities. There are numerous literary works that discuss how individuals and groups remember their past and mould their identities based on their recollected memories. Written by Rivers Solomon along with Daveed Diggs, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, *The Deep* is a novella that memorializes the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the brutalities of the Middle Passage, by placing the focus on intergenerational memory and trauma caused by slavery. The narrative centres around wajinru, an underwater race born of the pregnant slave women thrown overboard the slave ships during the Middle Passage. Drawing on the theories of memory and trauma, the paper analyses how Solomon reimagines the Transatlantic Slave Trade and discusses the lasting impact of traumatic events not just on those who suffered the terrible experiences but on subsequent generations as well. The paper looks into the significance of memory and history in moulding individual and collective identity focussing on its curative and destructive powers. The complex way memory is dealt with in the narrative both as a form of violence and as a means of survival will also be discussed. Collective sharing of traumatic memories rather than collective forgetting or individual suffering is suggested as the solution to recover, heal and come to terms with a disturbing past. Though distressing and traumatic, the collective history, the trauma and its memory, shared by the members can unify a community bestowing them with a sense of identity and belonging.

**Keywords:** *Memory, History, Trauma, Transatlantic Slave Trade, Middle Passage*

History, memory and trauma are concepts that are mutually constitutive as they intersect and inform one another, playing a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective identities. They continuously interact, and reshape one another and help individuals and communities forge their understanding of their self. In the Afrofuturistic novella *The Deep*, Rivers Solomon discusses how traumatic memories passed down across generations constantly interfere with the community's everyday existence. The novella, set against the backdrop of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, illustrates the significance of memory and history in defining a person's sense of self as well as collective consciousness. The novella addresses the enduring effects of Transatlantic Slave Trade by imagining an aquatic race that lives underwater far away from human interference. Even when the race enjoys an idyllic life, the community's practices bring to light the deeply embedded trauma that underlies their existence. Memory, in the novella, is pictured both as therapeutic and emotionally overwhelming, wielding its power like a double-edged sword - preserving identity on one hand while perpetuating trauma on the other. The narrative suggests that trauma is transgenerational as it is passed down across generations even without direct experience, destabilizing lived realities and sense of being experienced by individuals and communities. However, sharing trauma lessens the burden as it redistributes it among the group, thus facilitating collective engagement.

The Transatlantic Slavery or the Black Holocaust, a defining event in the history of the human race has had far-reaching implications, as generations of Black people's lives were forever changed by this inhuman system. Though slave trade was abolished in the nineteenth century, the Black communities in the Americas, Britain, and the Caribbean islands still bear its scars. The slave trade started in the 15th century when the discovery of the Americas, hitherto inhabited by the indigenous communities opened up new possibilities for wealth before the Europeans. This urged them to turn to the African continent for human labour force, resorting to abduction and human trafficking to smuggle millions of Africans to the European colonies. The Europeans driven by greed for wealth and power recognized the immense potential that lay in enslaving the Africans and taking them as captives. Assisted by local African rulers, the Europeans forcefully transported millions of Africans across the Atlantic during the period.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade that involved a triangular trade route transported enslaved Africans to various European colonies along with the goods from Europe and America to Africa, and the produce, mostly sugar and cotton, back to the home ports in Europe and America. The Africans were carried across the Atlantic Ocean in slavers notorious for the cruel treatment that the inmates endured inside them. The captured slaves were subjected to inhuman handling in the slave ships that took months to reach the destination ports. Deprived of basic facilities and clean environment, many often succumbed to disease and death.

The slaves endured severe persecution from the moment of their capture. The slave procession called *coffle* put to test their physical and mental faculties. On these journeys that lasted longer periods they had to deal with “. . . poor food, cold, and new diseases. Large numbers of the old and very young died on the trail, and all were weakened. Whether they walked or travelled downriver in canoes, they suffered and sickened” (Schneider & Schneider 10). The *barracoons* on the coasts were also sites of extreme suffering for the captured slaves. Many yielded to ill-health and difficult living conditions. They were denied good food and water, and the places were not sanitized. Those who were slow, fell ill, or showed signs of disability were murdered. Fear of contagions among the captives led the slave traders to take precautions to ensure the safety of the healthy captives. Further suffering and persecution awaited the captives in the slave ships. Schneider & Schneider remarks:

Dazed by capture, the *coffle*, and the *barracoons*, these men, women, and children were thrust into ugly, strange, inhumanly crowded environments, far from home. Few understood the languages of their oppressors. Worse still, they often could not understand one another, so many different tribes did they represent, and so far from home had they been driven. The branding to which the traders subjected them (to prevent the substitution of inferior slaves) further humiliated people used to signifying status by tattooing their skins. Many of them had never seen an ocean or a large ship. (11)

Life inside the *slavers* turned out to be horrible nightmares for the poor captives. They underwent every form of persecution in the course of their long voyage. Nothing except endless suffering and death awaited the captives as they set foot on land after months of persecution on the slave ships. Olaudah Equiano (2007) in his autobiography relates his experiences in the slave ship in vivid detail:

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time. . . . [N]ow that the whole ship’s cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died . . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs [toilets], into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. . . . (26-27)

This traumatic episode in the history of African people occupies a significant space in the African American literary canon. It started with the autobiographical slave narratives of the early 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries which brought to light, in slaves’ own words, the extent of the suffering they endured

under white masters. These narratives, originally commissioned by white abolitionists, and in which the slaves recalled their horrible experiences, played an important role in the abolition of slavery. Slavery, ever since, occupies a significant space in African American literary tradition. Though it stayed out of literary bounds for a period after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1863, slavery as a theme returned to African American literature in the 1960s inspired by Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement. These movements brought about a new revival in African-American arts, music and literature that made writers, artists and musicians to return to their black roots and culture seeking inspiration for their artistic and literary endeavours. A new genre took birth around this time in literature with slavery at its centre. Later termed as neo slave narratives by Bernard W. Bell in his book *The Afro- American Novel and its Tradition*, these fictional narratives reimagine the ante/post bellum era and gained huge popularity starting with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in the year 1966. The genre started attracting wider audience and emerged a significant literary mode in the hands of writers like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, and Charles Johnson who gave it newer scope, possibilities and directions. Toni Morrison, one of the foremost practitioners of this genre, wanted writers of African descent to bring to light the actual horrors of slavery. She wanted books to take the place of memorials as she felt there weren't enough memorials of slavery, especially in America, to commemorate the struggles her ancestors went through. Inspired by these pioneers, Black writers took up the responsibility of chronicling this important episode in the history of their community through their writings, as it continues to define their identity and essence. Their task involves resisting public amnesia regarding slavery and to keep alive the traumatic history of their community thereby preventing it from being erased from public memory. They keep exploring slavery and its impacts on the black community through their works. Though fictional in nature, these works act as memorials that remind people of slavery's painful and enduring legacy, resorting to numerous styles of writing to deal with this distressing memory, which include realist historical fiction, satire, speculative fiction, postmodern narratives etc.

Written by Rivers Solomon along with Daveed Diggs, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, *The Deep* is a novella that uses Afrofuturism to discuss the lasting impact and traumatic legacy of slavery not just on those who endured it but their subsequent generations as well. Afrofuturism is a term coined by cultural critic Mark Dery and he defined it as “. . . speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture. . .” (180). Ytasha L. Womack, in her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*, refers to Afrofuturism as “. . . an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (9). Afrofuturists seek to reimagine alternative futures through Black cultural consciousness and to “. . . unearth the missing history of people of African descent and their roles in science, technology, and science fiction” (17). *The Deep* reimagines the African experiences in

the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and explores the lasting impact caused by this dehumanizing practice.

*The Deep* owes its origin to the Detroit techno-electric duo of James Stinson and Gerald Donald who came up with the original mythology of the Derxciyans - the descendants of the pregnant African women thrown overboard the slave ships during the Middle Passage -in their 1992 album *Deep Sea Dweller*. The idea was born of the possibilities of an alternate existence for those who met a tragic end during their journey across the Atlantic: what if those pregnant women gave birth to babies who could breathe underwater just as they did inside a mother's womb; what if they formed a distinct race that lived a life unaffected by any human interference. Thus, in the original mythology, Derxciyans are water-breathing descendants of women who fell victims to human cruelty and violence. The idea of this aquatic community further inspired clipping., the American experimental hip-hop group with rapper Daveed Diggs and producers William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes as its members, who created the musical album *The Deep*.

Inspired from Daveed Digg's album, Rivers Solomon came up with the novella *The Deep* that reimagines the lives of pregnant African slave women, thrown overboard the slave ships during the Middle Passage, and their descendants. The race called wajinru that originated from the children born of the dead African slave women thrive underwater. This aquatic race that occupies the deep-sea lives mostly unaffected by the memories of the traumatic experiences of their ancestors as only the community's historians remember everything for them. Each member of the community experiences the ancestral memories in an annual ceremony called the Remembrance during which the historian passes on the memories to the present members who then experience it for a few days and forget it. The novella thus acts as a powerful meditation on the enduring legacy of slavery and emerges as a powerful memorial reimagining a dreadful episode from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Speculating the afterlives of pregnant slave women thrown from the slave ships during the Middle Passage, the narrative transforms their tragedy into a narrative of resilience and survival.

Ron Eyerman, in his discussion of the formation of a distinct African American Identity during the post-Civil war period, identifies slavery as a cause of cultural trauma "not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (1). In his book he differentiates cultural trauma from psychological trauma or physical trauma and defines it as "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (2). In the novella, the wajinru are victims of cultural trauma caused by slavery though they have no direct experience of it.

*The Deep* deliberates on the intricate workings of memory, trauma and the past in defining identities on individual and collective level, shaping a community's present and future. A close analysis of the wajinru life and culture reveals the importance of a shared history, trauma and its memories in forging and sustaining a community's identity and existence. As vital tools in the analysis of literary works, especially in contemporary times, these concepts help us see how individuals and groups remember their past and mould their identities based on their recollected memories. In the novella, what sustains the wajinru as a close-knit group is its unique history along with its traumatic past and memories. It becomes obvious how individual and collective identities are intertwined with shared past and common history as they bind any group, community or race without which the members would feel lost.

The wajinru as a race is bound by its shared past, though it is rooted in pain. Unique in its history, culture and tradition, they have evolved as fish-like creatures - scaled and boneless -nurtured initially by their second mothers, the whales. Though the race has now grown to a 5000-to-6000-member community that inhabits the depths of the sea, their early days were marked by loss, suffering, and dispossession until Zoti – who later became the first Historian of the race- set out to unite the scattered wajinru. Her chance encounter with a slave woman named Waj changed wajinru's fortunes. Zoti felt sympathy for Waj, rescued her and took her to the shore. She learned the language of the surface dweller (human beings) and built the community from scratch, travelling the length and breadth of the deep sea uniting the scattered fish creatures. The mystery surrounding wajinru's creation and existence and its kinship with the two-legged surface dwellers was unravelled when Zoti witnessed the birth of *zoti aleyu*, meaning strange fish - creatures that looked exactly like them - from a pregnant woman (surface dweller in wajinru's terms) while being thrown away from a ship. *The Deep* imagines an idyllic life for these descendants of the victims of the Middle Passage as the community now lives underwater, enjoying a peaceful life.

Collective history operates as a cultural force that unifies the wajinru. A shared historical consciousness binds the community together. The concept of history appears throughout the novella as an element that serves as a source of unity and belonging for the community. History thus becomes a significant trope in the narrative. As Meir Litvak remarks:

No group identity exists without memory as its core meaning; the sense of continuity over time and space is sustained by remembering, and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity. Every group develops the memory of its own past and so highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups. These reconstructed images of the past provide the group with an account of its origin and development and thus allow it to develop a historical identity. (1)

The wajinru's existence as a community rests on its collective history and shared past. Though the collective history of the race is remembered only by the historian, the annual ceremony of Remembrance ensures that they are fed with their shared history and its memory at regular intervals which in turn ensures the community's peaceful existence for the rest of the year. While the Historian acts like a god for wajinru, history for them is their religion. The members show their devotion to their religion and God by ensuring that their history is preserved without getting lost. This places the historians as the most important members in the community and they are the ones who roam the ocean, collect the memories of living wajinru and preserve it for the future generation. The historian carries, and passes on the memories as this prevents others from being burdened by the traumatic ancestral memories. Without the historian, the race would be lost completely. The founders of the race realized how memories could be tormenting and allowed only the historian to carry it all. Nevertheless, for the wajinru history is a necessity and to be without one is death. As Amaba remarks, “. . . a people needed a history” (Solomon et al. 100).

The system of the historian being the sole custodian of ancestral memories was instituted by the founding members of the race to prevent others from being burdened by the traumatic history and its memories. Sensitive and fragile, the current historian Yetu is grappling with the memories of six hundred years of wajinru culture and customs and feels emotionally overwhelmed to carry on the task of the historian. Unlike the previous historians, the traumatic memories of her ancestors torment Yetu to the point that she leaves her people to enjoy the freedom and comfort of a normal life. During the annual ceremony of Remembrance, when the wajinru is lost in the rememberings, Yetu makes her escape putting their lives in danger as the wajinru has no existence without its history and the memory of its race.

The narrative further uses the characters of Yetu and Oori to reveal the significant role that history holds for any community. The novella presents Oori, a two-leg who lives on the shore, as a foil to Yetu. There is stark opposition in the way they perceive their past and history. Whereas Yetu has given up her memories, so she could live freely, Oori laments the loss of her people and her history. She is ready to endure any amount of pain to know all the pains of her tribe, Oshuben. It torments her that she does not remember her language and has no memories from her parents' generation. For her, it is painful not to know who she is. Oori has lost all the members of her tribe to some disease until she was the only one left behind.

Though Yetu is constantly haunted by the fear of History, once she leaves her people and their collective history, she feels lonely and sad. She finds herself in a dilemma wanting to be free of the history that torments her, and to be a part of it too. She feels troubled by the emptiness that surrounds her.

While commemorating the traumatic effect of Transatlantic Slave Trade, the book also discusses how such events continue to have a lasting impact not just on those who suffered but on the subsequent generations as well. But however traumatic the memories are, the shared history unites individuals and communities and sustains them as a single entity. History thus unifies individuals and communities. Wajinru's identity as a race is founded on its common history and its evolution into a unique race was made possible only because of the founding members who travelled the length and breadth of the vast ocean uniting scattered zoti aleyu to form the wajinru thus giving them a sense of belonging and purpose and meaning in life.

Along with history another concept that runs throughout the narrative is that of memory, though in much complex ways. The annual ceremony of Remembrance officiated by the historian ensures that the wajinru remain rooted in its past as the members feel hollow without their memories. Memories define them, their identity and existence and they need to be fed with their memories at regular intervals to carry on with their lives peacefully. As the narrator says, “. . . a sense memory of the past sustained them throughout the year until the next Remembrance” (8). The Remembrance replenishes the wajinru with ancestral memories that sustain them for the rest of the year giving them a sense of identity and fullness. The Remembrance held each year in the mud womb after elaborate preparations lasts for days and begins with the historian's command “Remember”. The first part where the historian passes on the memories lasts for hours and the next part where the wajinru take in all the ancestral memories lasts for days. During the ceremony officiated by the historian, wajinru experience the remembering of their ancestors, as though they were reliving their own memories. This ritual suggests the significance memories hold in sustaining individual and collective identities. Though the ritual is extremely tiring for the historian, the community's identity is completely dependent upon these memories.

Nevertheless, right from the beginning of the narrative, memory is pictured as troublesome and as an unbearable burden especially for the historian. Yetu is overwhelmed by the memories of the wajinru that possess her not just during the Remembrance but during other times as well. Lost in the memories of her ancestors she often finds herself drifting off the reality around her, putting even her life at risk. Memory for Yetu is violent and burdensome. It harms her and often throws her life at risk. For her memory is not something that belongs to the past, but an ever-present phenomenon that even disrupts her everyday life. Though the wajinru themselves have not had traumatic experiences, the Remembrance gives them an experience of what their ancestors went through which in turn makes their experiences collective and shared, rooted in cruelty, violence and loss. Collective forgetting, thus, is the strategy used by the wajinru to ensure a peaceful life for the race.

However, the wajinru's strategy of collective forgetting to sustain the race places the burden of remembering completely on the historian. Quite different from the race's previous historians, Yetu struggles with shouldering the huge responsibility that she is entrusted with. Though collective forgetting in a way is a mechanism used by the wajinru to lead a life unburdened by the past, it raises some serious questions regarding the unequal distribution of the burden holding the Historian responsible for carrying the emotional load all alone. The narrative, however, suggests solutions towards the end.

In *The Generation of Postmemory* Marianne Hirsch discusses how the memories of traumatic events are passed on, dealt with and remembered across generations. Even when the individuals have no direct experience of the original events, they inherit its memories and effects through various cultural practices, stories, rituals etc. Among the wajinru, this is actualized through Remembrance with the historian acting out the role of a conductor who oversees a ritual. Hirsch uses the term "postmemory" to discuss how a generation relates the personal, collective, and cultural trauma experienced by those before them. The inherited memories deeply influence individual identities as the unresolved traumatic memories of the previous generations affect them deeply. The term was originally developed to exemplify how children of trauma survivors inherit and are shaped by their parents' memories of traumatic events, especially in the context of the Holocaust.

Even if distressing and psychologically damaging, memory is at the core of the wajinru's customs and beliefs. Memory becomes a tool of resistance for the wajinru, as they use it to remain anchored to their roots. It acts as a connecting link tying the wajinru to its distinct and unique culture and heritage. Rather than choosing to forget the past and move on as a race, wajinru have chosen to use the same violent harrowing memories as weapons of resistance and survival and as means to preserve their identity.

Memory is both curative and destructive as is evident in the way different characters perceive it in the novella. Yetu experiences excruciating pain as she is taken over by the memories of her ancestors who suffered. She refers to those memories as "ugly remembering," feeling suffocated each time she goes through it. Unable to withstand the pain, Yetu often thought of abandoning History so that the "wajinru could live in peace, unburdened by the past" (Solomon et al. 100). Left alone to carry the burden of the past, she fails in convincing her people of the weight she is destined to carry. Yetu took over as the historian when she was a girl of 14 and it has been two decades now. The previous historian Basha had chosen her as his successor since her electro receptors were found to be so sensitive as to carry out the task of the historian efficiently. As Yetu struggles with her role as a historian, her mother Amaba stands by her, constantly helping her in lifting her spirits up. Yetu feels tormented by the fact that she has failed to live up to the expectations of her community. As Amaba

thinks Yetu is so fortunate to have been blessed with the “rememberings”, Yetu feels overwhelmed to hold the memories any longer. Amaba tells Yetu, “. . . Where do I come from? What does all this mean? What is being? What came before me, and what might come after? Without answers, there is only a hole, a hole where a history should take the shape of an endless longing. We are cavities. You don’t know what it’s like, blessed with the rememberings as you are” (8).

Yetu’s dilemma disrupts her daily life and her personal connection with her community. She has often thought of giving up her role as the historian. With the intention of appeasing her ancestors and freeing herself of the History, she once offered them a sacrifice which unfortunately was interrupted by Amaba. Yetu feels she has failed in fulfilling her responsibilities to her people. She finds herself caught between what she wants as an individual and what is expected from her as the historian. Unable to withstand the pressure, she delays the Remembrance, and finally when the ceremony is held, she makes her escape in its midst.

Though Yetu is constantly tormented about having had to abandon her race, leaving them to immeasurable suffering, she knows she cannot bring herself to go through the excruciating pain caused by the memories. By leaving Wajinru, Yetu has dared to do what no other historian has done. Abandoning her people in the midst of the Remembrance meant she was leaving them to endure the full weight of history. Going away from her race she reaches the surface of the sea and “for the first time in many years she felt weightless” (69). Here she is not haunted by the rememberings and feels calm as “there is so much freedom from the pain” (70) she had endured for years. However, Yetu’s initial relief turns into emptiness as she starts feeling hollow, devoid of the memories of the race she is part of.

Yetu’s response towards her problematic memory reveals her ambivalent attitude regarding her past. Initially she feels relieved when she runs away and is free of all the burdens she had been carrying for years. She feels calm and peaceful on the shore. She realizes for the first time what it is like to be without the troubles and burdens of the past. But soon she starts feeling guilty for having left her people alone in the midst of Remembrance. Usually when the historian officiates the ceremony only one person suffers, and now everyone is suffering. She believes her people will recover though she knows without her they are feeling lost. Even Yetu starts feeling empty without the race and its memories. The narrator says, “She missed being connected to all” (83).

The novella, towards the end, suggests collective sharing of the traumatic memories rather than collective forgetting and individual suffering as strategies to deal with the past. In the narrative, Yetu is burdened with the ancestral memories allowing the community to lead a life free of the memories of the past. Yetu’s encounter with the surface dwellers opens her eyes and teaches her the importance of memory and history for individual as well as communal identity. She returns to her people and takes

back the memories she had abandoned. She then initiates a new kind of Remembrance where everyone shares the burden equally and it marks the beginning of a new kind of Remembrance where every member of the race shares the burden hitherto carried only by the historians. As Judith Herman says, “Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms” (214). Yetu’s return, thus, marks a turning point in the history of the wajinru race where they start embracing their collective past and its distressing memories thereby relieving the historian of the burden. They come forward to share these memories rather than leaving the historian to carry it alone. The novella, thus, reinforces the unifying power of shared memory and history as the wajinru realise that their identity is closely intertwined with their history and disturbing memories.

*The Deep*, thus, truthfully captures the poignancy of the brutalities of the transatlantic slave trade, its enduring effect not just on those who fell victims to this system but also on subsequent generations as well. The novella functions as a literary memorial reimagining an idyllic existence for those who were subjected to unimaginable brutality during the Middle Passage. The narrative emerges as a powerful medium that justifies the relevance of history and memory in holding people together, reinforcing the significance of collective sharing as a means to recover, heal and come to terms with a disturbing past. Though distressing and traumatic, the collective history, trauma and its memory shared by the members of the community give them a sense of identity and belonging.

To conclude, cultural trauma transcends generational boundaries and continues to oppress even those who inherited its memories from their immediate ancestors. However, these psychologically damaging memories have become a part of their identity on individual and collective levels constantly engaging with their lived experiences. As these memories are inseparably intertwined with who they are and how they perceive themselves it becomes imperative to resort to collective sharing and communal engagement to foster a sense of togetherness and belongingness to deal with trauma and to achieve emotional healing from the tormenting past.

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