



Book Review

The Water Dancer (Oprah's Book Club): A Novel. By Ta-Nehisi Coates One World, 2019, 416 pages ISBN: 978-0-399-59059-7

Azra Khanam^{1*}; Noreen Zameer²

¹ Research Scholar, IUB, Pakistan. Email: azrashabbirjaan@gmail.com

²Visiting Lecturer, The University of Sahiwal, Pakistan. Email: noreenzameeruo@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Publication Details:

Article Received: April 3, 2020

Article Published: June 01, 2020

Article DOI: 10.53057/irls/2020.2.1.3

Journal DOI: 10.53057/irls

Recommended citation:

Khanam, A., & Zameer, N. (2020). Book Review: The Water Dancer (Oprah's Book Club): A Novel By Ta-Nehisi Coates. *International Review of Literary Studies*, 2(1), 15-19.

Retrieved from <https://irlsjournal.com/index.php/Irls>

Published by Licensee MARS Publishers. Copyright: © the author(s). This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

The Water Dancer is a debut novel by the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, Ta-Nehisi Coates. This novel is a story of the dreadful treatment of human beings under slavery, portraying the life of slaves on a tobacco plantation in Virginia, bringing for the separation of children and their parents, separation of husbands and wives, of the pains and sufferings of the people in the Underground Pathways to carry the people to freedom, in the south in the mid-1800s. The writer brings fore the story of the demise of Southern tobacco plantations, resulting in the sale of enslaved. The writer brings fore not only the interactions between the “Quality -the plantation owners” and the “Tasked the enslaved” on a tobacco plantation, but also the mindsets of the Low Whites, who transmit their deprivation to the enslaved blacks, inspired by having a feel of power and dominance. The deep personal thoughts make this book very influential as a black reader can relate to the characters on a realistic level. The story goes deeper into the politics and the freedom of slaves.

The Water Dancer brings for the life story of Hiram Walker, the black son of a black mother and a white plantation owner, a young man who efforts to free confined people from servitude in the American South. He has a mysterious, supernatural capability to be wiped out from one place and appear in another in a wink of time. Through this superhero-like quality, he is able to bless with freedom a large number of enslaved people (in the novel, “the Tasked”). Additionally, he is able to commune telepathically with his beloved dead mother. The Underground, the network joined by Hiram Walker, finds Hiram as a man of exceptional caliber because of having been gifted with the power of mysterious visions based on brilliant memory. Hiram’s visions include the image of a woman (her dead mother Rose) dancing on a bridge and coming under the category of magical realism. This magical realism part reveals how important are the memories and experiences to guide us in moving forward in our future.

For a better future of humanity, this book reiterates: “A more productive alternative, however, requires constructive ideas, ideas based on the universality and equality of all humans” (Ahmad, 2011, pp.31). Other than the description of the dreadful past, this work brings into limelight the psychological suffering and strength of the black slaves. Some of the scene descriptions, associated with past slavery are so powerful they shake the brain of its reader. The life and brutality of the slave life are forcefully portrayed, the daily damages, the death of self. Coates gives us overwhelmingly traumatic, heartbreaking and moving storytelling that troubles us. Like Colson Whitehead’s fictional train in *The Underground Railroad*, Coates creates a sort of spiritual and magical way to freedom called “The Conduction”. There are some remarkable statements on slavery in this great work of creativity: “Sloth was literal death for us, while for them it was the whole ambition of their lives” (Coates, 2019, pp. 792). It can be said that the book is essentially a retelling of American history, the repercussions of which are still vibrantly present in contemporary America. It is a call for the uplift of black voices against continual killings of black Americans as George Floyd and brings for a fresh account of America’s skirmish with the past slave-trade history as freedom is gained by the spiritual force of conduction. Its reading brings into mind another work “Tracing the Voices of the Downtrodden: A Reading of Khaled Hosseini’s novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*” (Imran, Muhammad, et al., 2020), where the writers have highlighted the importance of identifying the desires and viewpoints of the downtrodden people. Furthermore, its reading brings into mind another article “Veiled Courage: Inside the women’s resistance against violence through their writings (Imran, et al. 2020)”, which focuses on Afghan women’s courage in resisting physical and other violence and victimization through their writings.

There is another significant theme in this book, the importance of family, to highlight the value of family in one’s life, especially in the lives of the downtrodden and ignored people. It seems to deal with certain significant questions: What constitutes a family for a black American? And when someone’s own family members are ripped from him/her then who can fill that void that every human being must seek to fill? Hiram considers his White father and brother Maynard as his family but Thena reminds Hiram, “They are not your family.” It’s something that is considerable for Hiram as he is a boy looking for the love of the father when the mother is gone. The broken families, displaced mothers, and fathers, are an essential element of African Americans and other black people in

America with slave past. In this sense, this work finds a correlation with other similar works on the issue of a family as Parental Hunger and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Ahmad, et. al., 2020) and *Illness, Care, Love and Today's American Family* (Ahmad, et. al., 2020), where the writers have analyzed the need of family in order to combat various challenges of life, especially in the lives of the people considered to be on the margin of the society like the black people in America. Thus this work has echoes of other canonical writers of black fiction as Toni Morrison.

Memory is an important theme in this book like it is in *Beloved* by Morrison. Thus there are many inter-textual similarities with Morrison's works. Morrison speaks in *Beloved*: "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 1987, pp. 324) signifying that it is a story that must be remembered as well as forgotten by the African Americans to move forward. Similarly, Coates talks of memory in this novel:

But knowing now the awesome power of memory, how it can open a blue door from one world to another, how it can move us from mountains to meadows, from green woods to fields caked in snow, knowing now that memory can fold the land like cloth, and knowing, too, how I had pushed my memory of her into the "down there" of my mind, how I forgot, but did not forget, I know now that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost. (*The Water Dancer*)

The above lines highlighting the role of memory in the families with slave past are also an example of the poetic quality of the book. The above sentences show that the work has a resemblance to the free verse (blank verse) quality of the classic poets and artists such as Milton, Marlowe, and Shakespeare. Furthermore, there are certain artistic sentences in the book that have an everlasting impression on its readers because of their powerful wording and concise composition. Some examples are:

"We believed in the rumor, in the underground".

"I was running when what I needed was to fly".

"Slavery does not bargain, does not compromise, it devours".

"For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to freedom".

I was in back of the quarter, between the fields and the Street, calling out a song:

Oh Lord, trouble so hard

Oh Lord, trouble so hard

Nobody know my troubles but my God

Nobody know nothing but my God

I went on for verse after verse, taking the song from trouble to labor to trouble to hope to trouble to freedom. (*The Water Dancer*)

Thus it can be safely said that a close look at the text of this book creates an effect just like the works of great canonical writers of black history and slavery as works by Toni Morrison. The work can be compared to *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. In the character of Hiram, we find an echo of this line of Morrison's *Beloved*: "Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison, 1987, pp. 95). It is a thrilling novel that amalgamates the slavery narrative with the genres of fantasy novels. The novel in fact tries to merge a Toni Morrison's accounts of plantation with the supernatural cracklings of Stephen King and reminds one what Toni Morrison had said about the probabilities of "liberation that lie within the process" of the inevitability of memory. It reminds me of *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison which portrays legends of (literal) flights to freedom under slavery, "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Morrison, 1977, pp.337), however here it is not air but water. The sketch of a Black man in a floating position, his arms stretching out, encircling, is captivating; and on the back cover, a hand elevated, a symbol of the effort to survive. The water here becomes a symbol of transcendence and of hope.

There are so many reasons to be attracted to this book frantically. When one starts reading this book, he/she is enchanted by the lyrical, emotional, poetic, and amazing words created by the author with magical strength. However, it can be said for most of the first parts of the book where

you feel the words strolling on your mind revitalizing your soul. Many images of the book are worthy of admiration: the image of the water dancer, earthenware jars filled with water on the head, dancing and bending, without dropping a drop. A new sort of vocabulary is found in this book for the blacks and whites. The slaves are called the tasked. The white masters are called the Quality. The plantation has been called Lockless. Coates' division of the classes into "the tasked", "the quality" and "the low" is a brilliant use of language.

Although the book is a marvelous work by the writer on the subject of slavery, it has certain elements that need to be critically commented. One point to be noticed is why a male, the protagonist here? When there are powerful female characters such as Hiram's mother Rose and surrogate mother Thena. Thus, the feminists may have a different look at the book. Furthermore, on a purely aesthetic level, the novel has certain demerits — it has little forward momentum or plausible dialogue, and the prose has sentimental conceits and out for the count adjectives as clear from this line: "The yellow spray of sun would soon be peeking over the trees." One drawback of the book is that there are very long sentences which make the reading process tedious and tiresome; hence the reader may lose concentration and interest in reading. One example of such long sentences is being given here:

And I could only have seen her there on the stone bridge, a dancer wreathed in ghostly blue, because that was the way they would have taken her back when I was young, back when the Virginia earth was still red as brick and red with life, and though there were other bridges spanning the river Goose, they would have bound her and brought her across this one, because this was the bridge that fed into the turnpike that twisted its way through the green hills and down the valley before bending in one direction, and that direction was south. (*The Water Dancer*)

The presence of the above lengthy sentence makes this book a difficult read. Additionally, this book is slow, reflective, and contemplative so the reader may feel to turn the pages quickly to go to the last pages to finish it because the magical realism part is not developed with full mastery. The beginning pulls you but then you can feel forced yourself to read through. It is yet possible to say that this book is not a fast read because it invites its readers to ponder over the words.

The magical realism parts of the book give a feeling that these are used as a portrayal of how our memories hold onto us and how important they are as a guide for us in our future. However, one major weakness that can be found in this book is its use of the element magical realism to bring fore the magical experiences of the past. It is not something objectionable; however, it is made to fit in the storyline in an unbelievable style. The mixing of historical facts with magical realism is not impressive. The reader does not feel that the writer has any exposure to the horrors of past slavery as the book focuses on a temporary fantasy that all the people who got off slave ships were not in frenzy with terror and agony but going home. For a black American, the pages embroidered with magical realism may not fit the punitive and disgraceful real history. It can be easily commented that one can fall from loving this book and change opinions about the book because those parts embellished with beautiful magical realism don't fit the harsh realistic history.

Moreover, the author is mainly known for non-fiction, and fiction writing was a new test for him, thus, one who compares it with his nonfiction masterpiece *Between the World and Me* (1915), may feel it is not as strong as is his nonfiction. It comes into mind while reading this book that the author has always focused on non-fiction writing. So this book was a different challenge and a new kind of task for him. He is a wonderful writer of non-fiction. His *Between the World and Me* is an astonishing work of art that is an amazing reading experience. He has made a non-fiction piece of work to function like poetry and one can expect that he would write fiction too very well. However, this book *The Water Dancer* is slow, introspective, ruminative and one gets a feeling that Coates should have written this as another non-fiction piece of work on slavery. Even then this book is good work of literature and is a very meaningful read on the issue of slavery in American literary history.

All in all, on a purely aesthetic level, the novel has credible dialogues, appealing conceits, scientific adjectives, new terminology, and a new vocabulary creation for black slaves and the whites. Students of postcolonial and postmodern literature should find this novel a valuable addition to the library. However, this book brings for some other similar works as "Redefining Americanism and

American Literary Tradition: Hospitality, Ethics and A Transcendent Humanism in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction (Ahmad, Shabbir, et. al. 2020)" where the writer has emphasized creating and redefining a new American Literary Tradition based on mutual understanding and harmony rather than battling with each other. Mostly the power structure use violence to achieve targets while the powerless uses a gun to grow muscles to fight back or uses the power of a group he belongs to, however, Ta-Nehisi does here something different, uses the positive way of fighting forward and creates something greater than violence and cry. Thus this book can be compared with an article, "Belatedness of Trauma, Self-Reflexive Conscious and Narrative Vicissitude in Child in Time (Ahmad, et. al. (2020)" where the focus is on persistent trauma of the affected in a community whereas in this novel the emphasis is on coming out of trauma caused by the cruelties of the past in black history. In fact, this book offers the possibility of alternate history, another perspective to look back.

With the metaphor of conduction by water, he makes his readers look at history differently and beyond protest politics. The writer has used the technique of magical realism and the spiritual force of conduction very artfully for the depiction of a broken family, of love, and the longing for freedom in this novel. The writer weaves humanity and morality, with fresh insight, to the history with new terminology as conduction with the effect to revitalize the story above the one we read about in history books, with the thought of knowing already all.

Works cited:

- Ahmad, Shabbir, et. al. (2020). Parental Hunger and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *International Review of Literary Studies*, 2(1), 22-31
- Ahmad, Shabbir. (2011). Mission Civilization as Mission Failure, *English and American Literary Studies*, 2, 207-219
- Ahmad, Shabbir, et. al. (2020). Belatedness of Trauma, Self-Reflexive Conscious and Narrative Vicissitude in Child in Time, *International Journal of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity*, 11(3), 160-165
- Ahmad, Shabbir, et. al. (2020). Redefining Americanism and American Literary Tradition: Hospitality, Ethics and A Transcendent Humanism in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction, *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 4(I), 849-861
- Ahmad, Shabbir, et. al. (2020). Illness, Care, Love and Today's American Family. *Research Journal of Social Sciences & Economics Review*, 1(4), 307-313.
- Coates, T.-N. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.
- Coates, T.-N. (2019). *The Water Dancer*. (Oprah's Book Club): One World
- Imran, Muhammad, et al. (2020). Veiled courage: Inside the women's resistance against violence through their writings. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(1), 74-93
- Imran, Muhammad, et al. (2020). TRACING THE VOICES OF THE DOWNTRODDEN: A READING OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S NOVEL *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*. *Alqalam*, 25(1), 309-319
- Morrison, Toni. (1977). *Song of Solomon*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf
- Morrison, Toni. (1987). *Bleoved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf
- Walker, Alice. (1992). *The Color Purple*. London: Women's Press
- Whitehead, Colson. (2017). *The Underground Railroad*. London: Fleet.

