

Historical Trauma And Cultural Dislocation In Leon Forrest's The Bloodworth Orphans

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Abstract

Leon Forrest is a prominent African American novelist. His novels deal with emotional and psychological feelings of abandonment and disconnection, particularly the cultural displacement of men in the postcolonial period. These men engage in the struggle to find a way out of no way as they are entangled in the web of slavery and traumatic experiences of the community's past. The present article attempts to study a few characters from Leon Forrest's *The Bloodworth Orphans*, like Rachel, Regal Pettibone, La Donna, Nathaniel, and Abraham Dolphin, the cultural dislocation generated by the Great Migration, segregation, and cultural erasure of centuries-long enslavement of the Black people inflicted unimaginable sorrows and misery.

Keyterms: cultural erasure, segregation, family dislocation, alienation, orphanhood, cultural disconnection.

Introduction

Leon Richard Forrest is an acclaimed American novelist, essayist, and educator. He is one of the most prominent voices advocating modern black African American cultural identity. He drew his inspiration from the South side of Chicago where he witnessed the struggles and resilience of African American Communities. His works focus on the African American experience, identity, and cultural legacy. Forrest's writing is influenced by the black church experience. He was the son

of a catholic mother and a protestant father. Hence he was impressed by the ritual aspect of catholicism and folk preaching of protestant faith.

The novel *The Bloodworth Orphans* represents the emotional and psychological sense of abandonment and disconnection of the Blacks. It provides the recollection and meditations of its central character Nathaniel Witherspoon. Nathaniel's self is fragmented by catholicism and his mixed racial past. It centers on the issue of blood as origin. Forrest emphasizes the bloodline as a source of identity.

The present article focuses on the cultural dislocation suffered by a few characters like Rachel, Regal Pettibone, La Donna, Nathaniel, and Abraham Dolphin in *The Bloodworth Orphans* due to the Great Migration. It results in significant emotional, psychological, and social losses. These characters undergo identity confusion and disorientation. They also feel nostalgia for lost cultural practices. They sense isolation, disconnection, and disruption of cultural norms because of this uprootedness.

Cultural dislocation refers to the feeling of disconnection from one's cultural identity, traditions, or community. The title *The Bloodworth Orphans* represents the disconnection from African American cultural heritage. Forced slavery leads to forced separation from families during slavery. These separated individuals lose their cultural heritage, identity, and community. They are disconnected from ancestral roots and cultural traditions. The Bloodworth family's history is a document of miscegenation, incest, abandonment, and adoption. It symbolizes the rejection of Black Americans as human beings by the Whites. Whites uprooted their ancestors, enslaved them, and sexually exploited them to produce a new race of mixed blood and culture. The mixed blood and hybrid culture are neither accepted by Africans nor by the dominant American culture.

The Bloodworth is a habitational name from Blidworth in Nottinghamshire derived from old English Blitha and worth. The founder of the Bloodworth line was Arlington Bloodworth Sr, a white Mississippi plantation owner who had nine children. One among them is Arlington Bloodworth II, who has two white sons and two mixed-blood children. One of the two sons is Arlington Bloodworth III, who seduced Rachel Carpenter, a young black woman, and fathers two mulatto sons Industrious and Carl-Rae. Both the children met tragic death within a year in 1948. Rachel marries Bee-More Money-Czar and adopts Regal Pettibone, another Bloodworth orphan. Another mixed child of Arlington Bloodworth II is William Bloodworth. He changed his name to Body and fled to Europe. He has an incestuous relationship with his half-sister Lavinia Masterson, the daughter of the plantation owner. The offspring of this relationship is abandoned near the riverside and is found by Lavinia Masterson. This child is raised as Abraham Dolphin on the Masterson plantation. The old governor helped him with medical schooling, later he moved to Chicago where he became a successful physician. He committed suicide with his "favourite gun" (194) in 1970.

Pourty Ford Bloodworth escaped from the Bloodworth plantation after he participated in a gang-rape of his adoptive half-sister Carrie Trout Picou. He is cursed by old Arlington Bloodworth that if he ever has a child, that child will destroy him. Despite the curse, Pourty Ford Bloodworth

flees to North and fathers three children namely, Regal Pettibone, La Donna Scales, and Amos Otis Thigpen. This family history forms the background of the story of *The Bloodworth Orphans*.

African Americans have a dual heritage which leads individual selves to fragment. The fragmented self involves a negotiation between two traditions. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, over 10 million to 12 million Africans were carried to America as slaves via the Atlantic Ocean. This TransAtlantic Slave Trade led to widespread orphanhood among enslaved Africans. Due to slavery, there emerged a mixed group of people with a hybrid culture. They blended African and American traditions which resulted in cultural displacement. They always feel alienated and estranged. They sense a deep emotional attachment to Africa. These emotions are inherited and passed on through generations within a family or community. This intergenerational trauma affects the characters in the novel *The Bloodworth Orphans*.

The novel begins with Regal Pettibone, one of the doomed Bloodworth triplets. He endures emotional trauma due to cultural dislocation. In the beginning, he rides a “gold and white Lincoln Chariot” (3) and heads to the River Rock of Eden Church to pick up his stepmother, Rachel Carpenter flowers. Regal Pettibone, the adopted son of Rachel undergoes emotional trauma because of his disconnection with society. His emotional trauma has a profound effect on him. He is a melancholy man. He is called the golden whale. He is a violent man but has great patience. His friend Nathaniel ponders, “if you saw past the well preserved poker mask of calmness, you might hear the throbbing, clamped-off blood underneath that echoed deep well inside the pinched-nerve masks... (4). This line emphasizes the sense of introspection of Nathaniel. ‘The pinched nerve’ symbolizes the emotional pain while the ‘masks’ represent hiding one’s true feelings. ‘Deep well’ implies the depth of emotion hidden beneath the protected mask.

Regal Pettibone is a representative of Africa. He is a “man hungry for a branch bearing, life-giving harmony”(6). He is hungry physically, materially, emotionally, and psychologically because he longs for his cultural connections. “He wailed in his pitched silence for nourishing root connections” (6). This expression clearly shows a deep sense of connection to Regal’s ancestral heritage. His ambition is to have a home. He says to Nathaniel “I want a home like you do, but there is no hiding place down there” (6). Home refers to a sense of belonging and emotional comfort. Here Regal longs to have a home in the “fatherless world” (6). The absence of a father shadows over generations. Since they are the community stolen from Africa, the people who are separated from Africa frequently try to find their origins. Regal considers it a curse to be homeless. He is driven to know his origins. He thought that his true father must have been some sky god, in the deep rivers of time.

Regal always felt proud of his unknown origin. He envisions himself as “an orphan of royalty in search of the true inherited treasures of his lost found lost father and that he was being starved to death, spiritually in order to prove himself fit and the rightful son and worthy of his father’s wonder working wealth and prayerfully of his returning, redeeming love embrace amid a vast estate” (7). In his vision the door always shut in the face of Regal. He is rejected by society because of his mixed heritage. In another nightmare Regal leads “seven drifty eyed brothers and seven alluring sisters in frenzy of love” (7). His longingness for a communal identity is clearly

viewed through this line. He taught them hunting, fishing, riddles, the art of rainmaking, tricks with knives, singing, dancing, reading maps, cooking, how to think, how to pray, and to defend themselves in case of attack. Through teaching the sisters, Regal is actually empowering through shared experiences.

Regal is “constantly trying to find the power centers of his origins and of his life, and to manipulate them, use them, employ them” (9). This expression shows the longing of Regal to have his ancestral homeland. He imagines himself a sorrowful pilgrim without brothers and sisters “torn, driven and tossed in many directions, yet crying out that he couldn’t stay away from the questions tormenting his soul”(9). This explains the inner turmoil of Regal in which he is pulled in multiple directions emotionally and mentally. In despair he exclaims “I wish I had died in Egypt’s land” (9). This clearly shows Regal's connection to African roots. Regal adds “we’ve gone from a whorehouse to a madhouse ... what next?” (12). This reflects the consequences of exploitation and objectification. He awaits a future with hope despite the exploitation and chaos. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk rightly points out, “Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their self.” (97). In *The Bloodworth Orphans*, Regal is belittled and neglected by the society. He learns to hide his inner emotions. Through these instances, it is evident that his emotional loss is due to his estrangement from his family.

Another character Rachel Carpenter Flowers endures social isolation by losing social connection. She is the high spirit of River Rock of Eden Church and patroness of orphans. She runs to find “long lost found brothers and sister” (33). This shows that she constantly tries to reconnect with her roots. She succeeds as Chicago’s church civic leader and choir director. She is seduced by Arlington Bloodworth III but later marries Bee More Money-Czar Flowers. She is blind and used to pray hoping for the next step home, out of chaos, still grieving and “crying for her grandmother I oughta say-and especially freedom Not yet free, yet free of one Demon” (35). This expression states the plight of African Americans who are bonded. She explains the condition of African Americans in an alien land, “This... is a child’s play... You go lay down streets and they come and cart you off to the jailhouse” (59). Moreover, she contemplates the “depth of her ancestral roots” (60). She used to weep thinking about the fatherless, motherless condition of “Regal’s own origin”(64).

Rachel is a motherless child who was created in an incestuous affair. She is looking for her “grandmother- mother, I should say- and behind that for true father royal” (38). This clearly shows that Rachel is longing for a paternal connection. She tries to reclaim African roots and heritage which is long lost because of the forced migration. Her foster mother “had nineteen children and lost seven before they were two years old; who was born two generations after her people were set free” (23). Rachel declares “Lord I have none” (19). This indicates that she feels helpless. She rarely sleeps. She thinks her blindness is a blessing. Her favourite song is “He is my Light”(43). Her son Industrious is sweaty, funky, and money-obsessed says “my daddy who was never no

nonono, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” (44). He died in a bet with poker faced Brown Bomber on the occasion of Christmas. Another son of Rachel Carl-Rae was a part-time vegetable peddler, gone mad and committed suicide. He says “ I was a by-chance rain gatherer and a cave dweller, a dropout between the stagecoach links of deliverance and the section’s bosses’ abuse” (54). He feels “homeless, wing clipped, asylum-lumped, as a bin of coal in the prison plantation of my soul” (54). This line highlights the pitiable condition of African Americans because their life in America is like living inside an asylum or prison. Rachel married Bee-More Flowers who was born in 1917 in Mississippi. She met him during the flood of the Mississippi River in 1927. Bee More has huge eyes belched out of a rhinoceros-bloated face, and landsliding, waste-gutted jowls. Rachel says “I was like a lost lamb” (71). She exclaims that she was running through the streets, slipping, and sliding. It is clear from these incidents that Rachel’s agony leads her to emotional loss.

Another character who suffers cultural displacement is Dr. Abraham Dolphin. He is a political figure, physician, perfectionist, humanitarian, and entrepreneur. He is a leading voice of the negro. He is the son of one of the mulatto children of Arlington Bloodworth II. Like most of the Bloodworth orphans, he doesn’t know his true parentage.

Abraham Dolphin's life story begins when he is abandoned by his parents. He was found in a muddy swamp by the governor's daughter. He was raised as one of the governor's sons. “Motherless, but how come my mother put me in swampy waters, and wiped my body down in mud all over me to drown me, hide me, to bury me, too ashamed to look at me or herself, to destroy me, or was it to protect me against something, an agony not to be seen, too wounding to be revealed” (188).

Dolphin is aware of his blackness. After completing medical school, he becomes a successful doctor who treats black patients. He earns “thousands of dollars weekly” (162) by performing abortions. On the walls of the main Eden Basement Lounge, there were twelve paintings, detailing epochs of negro of the period. In his lounge, female customers received charm bracelets. Each bracelet fashions miniature reflections of Dr. Dolphin. The last charm appeared as a coffin that looked like a swaddled baby. Dolphin had decided to uplift himself and his people through medicine. He has a flowing moustach and she has a golden cane given to him by a noted Rajah. He married a lily-spun maiden. He stood up like a white man. Dolphin had been banished from the state for trying to politically direct his awakening campaign upon his black patients. He insisted on voting rights and registering the populace. He naturally endured the wrath of the powerful whites. He tried to bring improved health care to the poor. When he tries to help poor whites, he is called a communist. He is called the race leader. He was accused of being a traitor to his people’s real higher interests. He highly publicized statements against segregation during the election of 1952. He often quotes “Actually the life line of the negro is as stocked with the bloodstream, body blood and soul of the old South and its fitfulness thereof, as the very seeds of birth and deliverance of a water melon.... You can’t take a bite anyplace without spitting out his black, seedy-assed foamy genesis, I don’t care how high or how low-down you slice into that watermelon’s longheaded hide; and spit that seed in any direction and it’ll grow up right under

your window spitting you out, right back into your face” (165). His success in the South abounds until he becomes an activist for civil rights before the movement became full swing. He is forced to flee to the North hidden in the casket of Chesterfield Berry, a Korean War Veteran. Dolphin is grateful for his safe passage and so he sends care packages to Berry’s son every Christmas. Dolphin retreats to the mountains to seek the face of God and to have “a confrontation with God for the very resources of the inner meaning of his life. The mountains had revealed no answers from the God” (182).

Dolphin is attacked by a group of white punks. It was common in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. Young white punks harass and assault African Americans. This incident clearly states that systemic racism and intolerance were prevalent during the time. He was disturbed with madness “as the very definition of life” (184). He adds “life has become the slaughter not only of the wealthy but of the innocent (184). He feels “Motherless, but how come, my mother, put me in swampy waters, and wiped my body down in mud all over me to drown me, to hide me, bury me, too ashamed to look at me, or herself, to destroy me, or was it to protect me against something an agony not to be seen, too wounding to be revealed” (188). Dolphin discovers that the young man he shot and killed after being attacked by a gang is Chesterfield Berry’s son. Out of agony, Dolphin commits suicide.

Dolphin is convinced that his inability to have a son is God’s punishment for performing abortions. His wife abandoned him. Dolphin created and recreated a professional identity. He must create a personal identity that will help him transcend the spiritual agony. He cannot get past the mystery of his origins. His lack of biological parents and fear of abandonment entail his spiritual quest to find peace in his personal agony.

“The forest of orphans were weeping and wailing in the foreground for a home over there” (57). Here ‘weeping’ and ‘wailing’ poignantly capture the heartbreaking longing of orphaned children. They long because they are separated from their family and loved ones. These children who are orphaned are uncertain about their future. Aunt Dupont keeps on complaining about the mulatto children who are under her care. They have nappy hair and they are like “cloistered monster in the horror house” (58). Nappy is a derogatory term used to devalue and dehumanize people of African descent.

Another prominent character who confronts cultural fragmentation and psychological loss is La Donna Scales. She was a timeless clock who could “make a way out of no way”(16). She is the beautiful, reconverted catholic, the orphaned nurse whom Mother Witness cherished. She doesn’t know her biological parents. Although her parents tried the convent twice, she didn’t know her parents. She is raised in a catholic orphanage. She has been a “long ways from home” (29). She was nameless in the councils of men. She is haunted by Bloodworth. When sister Stella says about old filthy Bloodworths her cheeks dampen with hot raging tears. Her adulterous parents are brother and sister themselves. Her paternal grandfather sought to have her aborted when she was forming from her mother's womb. She is denied the right to live even in her mother’s womb. After her birth, she was plucked from her mother who became mad and given to the shepherd. She was “sold as a sacrifice” (31). The shepherd gave thirty pieces of silver. She grew up in a cave and

nourished the lessons of survival like how to walk, make food from leftover, pronounce words, write upon slate, and make offerings of words. “You can float on top of the water and remain weightless... It all kept her from sinking fast. even though she was sacked in a cave dungeon of stark dissolution, that terrible passageway, a way out of no way” (32). This clearly signifies that La Donna overcomes obstacles and challenges despite all the hardships. She affirms “being tossed from hand to hand made her turn even more deeply to the arms of myriads of foster parents, fragmented from other worlds” (104). The children who moved from hand to hand in foster homes struggled to define themselves. Here La Donna undergoes emotional trauma. She envisioned herself as Cordelia. She felt entrapped and starved for affection. She always wants to be someone’s little fairy tale. She had a premonition that she would be abandoned eternally. This resulted in constant mistrust of her friends.

La Donna was certain that she would be banished from the world “For what? For being an orphan? For not knowing her parents? Her past? Feeling guilty about that. For her parents and herself” (105). She went through a chaotic phase. She fears to sleep. She continues to think about abandonment, death, and banishment. She loves maypoles, jacks, and boys more than dolls when she is growing up. She often dreams of herself as a migrant urchin who arrived at the circus carnival. In her dream, she wears a kitten mask. During the 19th and 20th centuries, kitten masks were used to show racist stereotypes. La Donna's masks symbolize resistance against oppression. She observes an abandoned man who went to his death with pride by “clutching the body of the voodoo doll” (109). Voodoo practices originate from African traditions symbolizing spiritual, mystical, and protective powers. Miss Emily Scales used to check La Donna’s virginity every week. Emily’s husband Felton Norwood howled into her ears “origins, origins origins, as though he thought he was saving her by telling her of home” (111). La Donna is introduced to a beautiful woman who is the Cardinal's sister “therefore your aunt; your new mother, my child” (115). She was killed by her stepfather. In *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, Carl G. Jung asserts “I am utterly one with the world, so much a part of it that I forget all too easily who I really am. "Lost in oneself" is a good way of describing this state. But this self is the world, if only a consciousness could see it. That is why we must know who we are" (22).

Another character who suffers cultural dislocation is Nathaniel Whitherspoon. He went to the Refugee Hospital for the first time. Here he met Ironwood Landlord Rumble, the tall blond man. Rumble asked him “Can you FLY?”(78). It clearly expresses Rumbles' fondness for overcoming obstacles and soaring to new heights. He is a blind man who plays a sad musical deluge. He unleashes long-lost images, homeless visions, memories, signs, wonders, and miracles inside the “inferno” (81). Refugee Camps emerged during the Great Migration. It provides temporary housing, offers resources, and support. Nathaniel witnessed the passageway filled with empty picnic baskets, chicken bones, sheets of toilet paper, ripped-up fashion magazines, the shattered parts of rifles, satchels, bullets, notebook bindings, sputtered-out balloons, blindfolds, wigs, dark glasses, rolls of used and bleached motion picture film, sanitary napkins, umbrellas turned inside out, tattered sunbonnets, broken tambourines, cracked whiskey bottles that shuffled back and forth, pucks of shuffleboard, fast flying rats, prophylactics, raincoats, bows, and arrows,

carving knives, snowshoes, flour sacks of bloody clay, carved rawbone figures, tree branches, slips, drumstick and drums. Ironwood had straps of nine instruments. He appears like “a sculptured scarecrow. Homeless” (83). Homelessness is often the recurring image of the novel. He adds he “didn’t have no place to go. Fee fi foe fum, i smell the blood of an englishman” (83). Nathaniel exclaims “I too dwell in a cave, yea though my grotto be my dungeon” (25). The two surviving characters of the novel are Nathaniel and Noah who escape the impending doom and have learned the significance of blood. They have mastered the art of transformation. They spotted a baby and took it to protect it as adoptive guardians.

Through the characters Rachel, La Donna Scales, Regal Pettibone, and Abraham Dolphin one can understand that the reason for their cultural displacement is the result of orphanhood i.e. their disconnection from their roots. They found solace in music and religion during their difficult times. By staying connected to their origins, and focusing on cultural resilience they try to maintain their cultural identity. Moreover, they try to cope, adapt, and thrive despite the challenges that they face due to cultural displacement.

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