

Survival and Witness: Anti-Black Racism Sing, Unburied, Sing

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Abstract- Jesmyn Ward’s novel “Sing, Unburied, Sing” narrates the account of a rural Mississippi family from the perspectives of three distinct characters: Jojo, a thirteen-year-old grappling with comprehending his surroundings; his drug-addicted mother, Leonie, haunted by her deceased brother’s memory; and a ghost named Richie, who perished in prison when he was a young boy. Throughout the unfolding of the narrative, the family sets out on a journey to retrieve Jojo’s father, Michael, from jail. Along the way, they confront physical and emotional hurdles as they confront the ghosts of their past and the challenges of their present circumstances. The novel delves into themes of family, race, identity, and the legacy of slavery in the United States by exploring the characters of Jojo, Leonie, and Richie. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the consequences of poverty and imprisonment on individuals and their communities. In the end, “Sing, Unburied, Sing” paints a powerful and evocative picture of a family struggling with the burden of history and the intricacies of contemporary America.

Indexed Terms- Family, Memory, Race, Addiction, Dreams, Love

I. INTRODUCTION

Jesmyn Ward’s novel “Sing, Unburied, Sing,” which was published in 2017, has received widespread critical acclaim. The book chronicles the lives of a rural Mississippi family and delves into themes such as family, race, identity, and the aftermath of slavery in the United States.

A notable feature of the novel is its use of multiple narrators, namely Jojo, Leonie, and Richie, a ghost who haunts the family. This technique provides the reader with a more profound insight into the

characters and their individual experiences, as well as their interdependence.

The novel also tackles the effects of poverty and imprisonment on both individuals and their communities. At the start of the book, Jojo’s father, Michael, is released from prison, prompting the family to embark on a journey to retrieve him. On their way, they meet other characters who have been affected by the criminal justice system, including a white prisoner who offers Jojo guidance.

“Sing, Unburied, Sing” is fundamentally a profound examination of how the past and history continue to influence the present. The family’s encounters are intertwined with the aftermath of slavery, and they must confront their past ghosts to progress ahead.

Ward’s writing is both lyrical and accurate, and her capacity to portray the voices and encounters of her characters speaks to her expertise as a writer. “Sing, Unburied, Sing” is an unforgettable and haunting novel that delivers a scorching criticism of the injustices still affecting American society.

Jesmyn Ward’s “Sing, Unburied, Sing,” her third novel and second National Book Award recipient, examines childhood, family, poverty, race, and the Mississippi landscape. Though different from her first award-winning novel, “Salvage the Bones,” it similarly explores the coming of age of a young character amid family struggles. The novel mainly follows Jojo, a teenager residing with his drug-addicted mother Leonie, his toddler sister Kayla, and his maternal grandparents, while his father is incarcerated. The family embarks on a trip to the Mississippi State Penitentiary to bring Michael home, who is about to be released. Ward uses multiple character perspectives to tell the story, with beautiful writing that interconnects the past and present. The

novel investigates the concept of death through Jojo's contemplation and the sacrifice of a goat on his thirteenth birthday, while also exploring the unwavering familial love and resilience between Jojo and Kayla. Despite Leonie's addiction and absence, Jojo remains fiercely devoted to Kayla, and their bond remains unbreakable.

The novel demonstrates how the loss of Leonie's brother, Given, created a rift between her and her children, particularly Jojo and Kayla. This illustrates the way that grief can cause a divide between loved ones. Despite the fact that Given's death was ruled a "hunting accident," his killer, who was related to Michael, Leonie's partner, goes unpunished. When Leonie uses drugs, Given appears to her, and she cannot determine if he is a hallucination or a ghost. Leonie's sorrow is overwhelming, and she is unable to move forward from the loss of her brother. This affects her ability to care for her children, and she frequently takes out her anger on them. Mam informs Jojo that Leonie loves him but lacks maternal instincts. Leonie's grief has made her self-centered and unable to move beyond her own pain. This novel highlights how loss can transform families, leaving them feeling isolated and helpless.

During an interview with Natalie Moore in September 2017, Jesmyn Ward was asked about her writing process for the character of Leonie, who is not always likable. Ward admitted that she didn't like Leonie at first, but after learning more about her past and her relationship with her deceased brother Given, she began to understand her motivations. Leonie's inability to confront her grief has made her self-centered, and her pain is so overwhelming that she cannot see past it to be a better mother to her children. Ward's writing is both empathetic and poetic, and she captures Leonie's struggles with addiction and grief in a way that is both heartbreaking and insightful. When Leonie hits rock bottom, she begs Michael to run away with her, reflecting on the temptation of forgetting rather than remembering, much like the Lotus-eaters in Homer's *Odyssey*.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward expressed her aspiration to be her own hero, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* demonstrates her accomplishment of this goal by

giving each character a distinct and fully-realized voice, even if they are imperfect at times. Despite their struggles, Ward endows her characters with inherent dignity. The relationship between Leonie and Michael, although delicate and dependent, is depicted skillfully through the simile of their emaciated bodies being "fish-thin, slender as two gray sardines, packed just as tight." Even the ghost of a young boy, Richie, is given his own chapters, story, and the promise of resolution and reconciliation. Ward never abandons her ghosts or the history of their past, and tells Richie's and Given's stories alongside those of the living. Her attention to each character's story creates a harmony of voices, akin to Apollo's music and the idea of *stimmung*, or a "tuning" of the earth to a universal harmony.

Sing, Unburied, Sing is a novel that confronts the often-neglected stories of marginalized people, as Ward refuses to shy away from their struggles. Through her writing, she pays tribute to those individuals who persist despite facing various challenges and strive to achieve unity, even in the face of chaos and tragedy. In this way, the book serves as a memorial to those whose stories are often overlooked or dismissed.

The story of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is presented through the eyes of Jojo, a thirteen-year-old boy who reflects on his upbringing in a family that has been impacted by addiction and tragedy, and his relationship with his mother, Leonie and father, Michael.

According to Jojo's observations, his mother, Leonie, tends to be detached and unengaged in his life, choosing to devote her attention to her boyfriend Michael, who struggles with addiction. Jojo vividly remembers how his grandfather, Pop, has consistently taken care of him and his younger sister, Kayla, and how he frequently seeks Pop's counsel and encouragement.

The story takes a somber turn as Jojo recollects the traumatic events that have affected his family. He recounts how his uncle, Given, was fatally shot by a white man, and how his mother has struggled to come to terms with the tragedy. Additionally, Jojo remembers his father's conviction and imprisonment

for producing methamphetamine, and how he continues to be tormented by the memories of his father's detainment.

As Jojo gets ready to accompany his mother and Michael on a journey to retrieve his father from jail, he experiences apprehension and ambiguity. He is fearful of what lies ahead and uncertain about what the future has in store for his family and himself.

The book offers a potent and poignant examination of the intricate dynamics of family connections, substance dependence, and grief. By seeing things from Jojo's point of view, the audience obtains understanding into the hardships and obstacles that confront those who are left behind after a tragedy, and how they persistently carry those burdens with them over time.

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a harrowing and profoundly touching work of fiction that delves into the subjects of race, kinship, grief, and the apparitions that linger within us. The novel narrates the chronicles of a multiracial family residing in rural Mississippi, with emphasis on the journey of 13-year-old Jojo, his mother Leonie, who is addicted to drugs, and his younger sister Kayla.

Ward seamlessly interweaves magical realism elements throughout the novel, such as the apparitions of deceased relatives that haunt Leonie, Jojo, and other characters. These spectral entities act as a poignant reminder of the gravity of history and the persisting repercussions of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States.

Sing, Unburied, Sing ultimately presents a powerful reflection on family ties, mourning, and the unending impact of history on current times. Through Ward's skillful storytelling and nuanced portrayal of the characters, this book becomes a must-read for anyone interested in exploring the complex realities of contemporary America.

REFERENCES

[1] The New York Times published an article by Tracy K. Smith on September 22, 2017, titled "In 'Sing, Unburied, Sing,' a Haunted Road Trip

to Prison," which explores the themes and plot of the novel.

- [2] "Sing, Unburied, Sing" was named one of "The 10 Best Books of 2017" by the New York Times on November 30, 2017, which is a testament to the novel's literary merit and cultural significance.
- [3] Rhianna Walton conducted an interview with Jesmyn Ward, the author of "Sing, Unburied, Sing," which provides readers with insights into the writing process and inspirations behind the novel. The interview can be accessed at any time.
- [4] The Goat 2.0 published an article titled "Ghosts of Racism in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," which can be accessed until November 10, 2020. The article explores the theme of racism in the novel and its impact on the characters and plot.
- [5] According to the Innocence Project, the article "The Lasting Legacy of Parchman Farm, the Prison Modeled After a Slave Plantation" examines the historical context and enduring impact of Parchman Farm, and can be accessed as of April 3, 2023.