

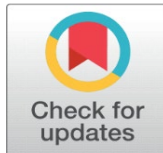
# LEGACY OF SLAVERY IN LEON FOREST'S TWO WINGS TO VEIL MY FACE

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## ABSTRACT

Leon Forrest is one of the foremost African American novelists. He has always been concerned with the problem of identity, specifically the fragmented identity of man living in the postcolonial era. Such characterization is evident in his Forest County trilogy. This article attempts to demonstrate the legacy of slavery in Sweetie Reed, Nathaniel Witherspoon, and Angelina in *Two Wings to Veil My Face*. Social, historical, and psychological factors influence the misery and suffering of these Black slaves. They often engage in the struggle to find out their final image of self as they are entangled in the web of slavery and traumatic experiences of the community's past.

**Keywords:** Identity, Family, History, Trauma, Redemption



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leon Richard Forrest is a renowned American novelist, essayist, and educator. He is one of the prominent voices who stood for contemporary black African American cultural identity. He is acclaimed as the most innovative and ambitious African American novelist of the twentieth century. He drew his inspiration from the South side of Chicago where he witnessed the struggles and resilience of African American Communities. He creates a deeper understanding of the collective consciousness of the black race. His novels explore the African American experience, identity, and cultural heritage. He recreates his fiction by drawing from African American cultural traditions.

Forrest's County Trilogy includes *There is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden* (1973), *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977), and *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984). His novels share a common theme of black identity. He was awarded the National Book Award in 1974 and 1985, the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1985, and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1974. His experiences and writings are shaped by the legacy of slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and systemic Racism.

The legacy of slavery is a complex and multifaceted issue that continues to impact Africans. The present article attempts to demonstrate the legacy of slavery in Sweetie Reed, Nathaniel Witherspoon, and Angelina in *Two Wings to Veil My Face*. Slavery caused them an intergenerational trauma which has a lasting impact on African American families too. It results in disrupted family structures, cultural heritage, and identity ultimately leading to fragmentation. The term fragment refers to the process of breaking something into smaller parts which results in loss of unity, coherence, or wholeness. It is often characterized by disconnection, disintegration, disorganization, loss of unity, isolation, and separation within themselves and from society. As Fredric Jameson, a critique of postmodernism states the reason for the fragmented identity is the lack of any coherent relationship with the past.

Forrest's *Two Wings to Veil My Face* is an incantatory novel which derives its rhythms from powerful oral traditions of African American spiritual life. The novel explores the individual and collective identity crisis within the family of Sweetie Reed. It explores the themes of identity, trauma, and redemption. The title *Two Wings to Veil My Face* has a biblical reference. It is taken from Isaiah 6:2 which says "Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying." The term 'wings' in *Two Wings To Veil My Face* represents or symbolizes Sweetie's search for freedom, protection, and spiritual ascension. It also symbolizes duality of belonging. The term 'veil' symbolizes her struggle with identity- the fragmentation of identity, culture, and self-concept.

Forrest's novels compel the reader to contemplate on two great issues of black literature: the means of discovering a personal and a racial identity, and the need for finding a redemptive power. The protagonist laments for their ancestral heritage and cultural identity, longing for lost loved ones and community. They regret historical traumas i.e forced migration, and ongoing injustices.

Sweetie Reed, the protagonist, is introduced as "Sweetie Reed, with her heart full of wonder, her soul full of pain" (12). The above lines beautifully capture the complex emotional landscape of a Sweetie. It also juxtaposes two contrasting states: "Heart full of wonder" representing curiosity, awe, and openness to experience whereas "Soul full of pain" symbolizes emotional suffering, trauma, and vulnerability. It captures the emotional depth of Sweetie Reed, despite the pain, she maintains a sense of wonder.

Sweetie is a "ninety-one-year-old woman" (4). She is referred to as "Great- Momma Sweetie". She "was born two years after the surrender and married to Jericho Witherspoon when she was fifteen and he was fifty-five..." (8). Witherspoon, her husband "taught her to read and write over sixty years before and ... coupled with fine speaking and pronunciation of her mother" (8). Education gives her access to knowledge, understanding, and self-discovery. It is her key to personal and social liberation.

Sweetie also confesses that "I had never had a proper growing up. so he educated me" (263). It helps her to understand culture, identity, and self-worth. Even though she faces numerous challenges, yet remains determined and strong because of it. She is also presented as " a woman of many faces, many voices, many lives" (32) the 'many faces' reflect her inner struggles, like fractured images in a mirror. Similarly, 'many voices' picture her inner world which is inhabited by multiple voices reflecting her complex emotions, thoughts, and experiences of the American woman, daughter, sister, lover, and individual. Her voices represent different aspects of herself, struggling to integrate and find cohesion. It also echoes the diverse cultural, historical, and social forces shaping her identity. It echoes her African diasporic heritage and family history. It voices self-doubt, shame, and internalized oppression. It shows expressions of joy, pain, love, and resilience. Expectations and pressures from her community, family, and society lead her to have a fragmented self. Sweetie's journey integrates her voice and finds a unified sense of self.

The novel also describes the protagonist's disjointed experiences and memories. The action takes place in 1958 when Nathaniel is twenty-one years old. His grandmother's horrific memories of slavery lead her to the disintegration of a cohesive sense of self. Nathaniel is confronted by the true history of his family in the times of slavery.

The first and foremost cause for the fragmentation of African Americans is the Great Migration. Great Migration is the migration of African Americans from the rural South to North America that happened between 1916 and 1970. The reasons for this mass movement are to escape racial violence, pursue economic and educational opportunities, and obtain freedom from the oppression of Jim Crow. In the name of making a fortune, they are forced to migrate to North America. It leads to cultural displacement since they are uprooted from Africa and displaced to several regions. From the below lines, it is clear that they search for community identity. "Sweetie and Jerico stayed with Lovelady Breedlove.....I (Sweetie) helped her in the kitchen she (Lovelady Breedlove) had set up for runaways during slavery and now it was

more active than ever because more negroes were coming north with nothing to make a living with. This was 1882 and I was fifteen" (262).

Another factor that leads to fragmented identity is the historical aftermath of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism. For instance, Sweetie was born as a slave. Being a slave, she is treated as a property, not as a human. She cries, "I was too little and unfit to do any really hard labor, not worth the money for feed"(253). The owners of the plantation needed only healthy slaves to do work. Moreover, they are not ready to feed unnecessarily. In addition to it, she further claims "at seven my period had not come down yet and they(men) didn't want you, Mother said, until the time your blood starts to flow" (253). She was forced to rely on her enslavers for her survival.

Slavery "consumed this earth; dominated it, to struggle and crawl with the breathless" (33) powerfully conveys the devastating impact of slavery on individuals, communities, and society. These lines also state the centuries of transatlantic slavery and its consequences on individuals, families, and communities. Oppression, dehumanization, and exploitation are the key terms of slavery. The slaves often attempted to escape using networks like underground railroad. They experience severe emotional trauma due to their dislocation from their culture and homeland. Here Sweetie longs to have an identity of her own as a loving daughter, as a loving wife. But both father and husband treated her indifferently.

Sweetie Reed tells the story of her family which is destroyed by slavery. Her mother Angelina is killed and her father I V Reed hates his child. He blames her for the death of her mother. The husband to whom her father sold was a hypocrite. So Sweetie did not attend the funeral of her husband Jerico Witherspoon, who cheated on her and had a child with a slave woman Lavinia. Sweetie separated herself from him and in a way to punish him adopted his child Arthur Witherspoon. She says, "Great Momma Sweetie's words as two veiled wings to hide from; especially when he got into hot water with her and she said she was going to pay him back for old and new; this was also a part of her backwater time" (5).

Sweetie expresses her unfulfilled desires to be loved in her relationship with her father I V Reed, Sweetie claims, "When I V Reed was on his deathbed, I went back down to the Rollins Reed plantation to say goodbye; fifty-two years ago to this very day; after all, this was the father, I said to myself. I had not seen him since I left that plantation, twenty-four years before. Maybe I wanted to hear him say just simply I tried to love you, Sweetie" (45). Sweetie wishes to hear a word of love from her father although she knows it is a 'foundling lie'. I V Reed, her father never showed any kind of love towards her when she was with him in her home. But she pretends to show the 'daughters gift of feeling' (45). She exclaims, "If I did apologize for returning to his sight. If I apologized for being born, that would not be enough for him. Nathaniel, I felt" (260).

A similar kind of disconnection from emotion is seen in her relationship with her husband, Jericho Witherspoon. Sweetie is "an escaped slave" (262) who reached the depot as part of a bargain and "married Jerico Witherspoon, for himself and not for her sake" (261). Sweetie exclaims "I didn't know how he fitted into the buying of my freedom" (261). This clearly shows the truth that slaves were often sold away from their families causing lifelong emotional scars. It also reveals Sweetie's longing for liberation.

Jerico is a full brown natural man with 6 feet 6 inches tall, higher up than Mr. Lincoln, huge flesh, and wears a high top hat. He always holds a long silver cane given to him by the father of the Governor. He had a powerful rugged face. He says "no injury was worst than injustice" (29). He was 55 years old at the time of marriage while Sweetie is 15 years old. He looks like a royal emperor of a kingdom who guarded the palace. Sweetie was the housemaid for the household. As a runaway slave, she thought it would be safe with Jerico. "My hands were icy cold. I felt my knees go weak" (262). Jerico started off with her education from scratch. He "had helped her to read and print and write before he sent her to night school" (14). It was the first time in her life that someone other than her mother touched her with kindness and sweetness. She was starved and thirsty for love. "I could not help but wonder how could this runaway slave be so secure within himself" (262). She kept on losing babies because they were weak and open to diseases. She appeared as a cursed woman. The social ladies made sex jokes out of them "Jerry's cedar-colored slave girl" (263). Sweetie appeared as a "cursed woman. Cursed in his eyes as well, after a time" (263). When she was thirty eight she stopped dreaming of becoming pregnant. Jerico's affair with another woman tore open the old healed over chamber of Sweetie's heart (268). Thus Sweetie felt disconnected from her family, social groups, and community. She also feels disconnected from her cultural heritage. This disconnection from her community resulted in an emotional fragmentation.

The other significant ancestor is her mother, Angelina Reed. Master Rollins Reed and Mistress Sylvia Reed are the owners of the Reed plantation. Angelina returns to I V Reed from the drowning waters of new slavery. Angelina is the slave girl in Reed plantation- her father is Rollins Reed. Sweetie says, "I made darkness shelter me in my secret hiding place. I heard every word deep as owls eyes in tree branches of moon light. I could see the shapes of Angelina and mistress Sylvia

in the faces of those oval mirrors" (59). Mistress Sylvia handed over fists of diamond to Angelina. "Take my diamonds and hide them upon your person lowdown Yankees aren't about to touch their sacred darkies" (61). Angelina learned to read the bible, to write, to sew, to set the table, and to cook from her mistress, Sylvia Reed. Mistress Sylvia called Angelina, her doll baby. She admits that Rollins Reed was Angelina's father. Rollins wants Angelina to call him, not as master, but as PAPPY Reed. She adds "I named you, Angelina, re-created you everything that you possess is fired from my being, culled from the rapture of my history. Refined you as silver. If you think you are solely a nigger slave, then you know how deeply I placed my brand within your very soul. I might, sir, your body and your soul" (63-64). From these lines it is evident that the slave owners totally controlled the slaves physically, emotionally, and mentally, they even stated that they had recreated them.

Sweetie's emotional wounds, trauma, and inner turmoil are visible when she explains to Nathaniel to look into the mirror for himself and know "the full of my hurts, my wrongs, my history, our history and what went wrong, from the beginning time"(21). Despite her hurts she finds strength in her relationships and spirituality. Sweetie's life reflects African American female experiences. Her hurts symbolize the collective pain of her community.

Sweetie is "tiny, cedar-colored, cotton-headed woman with a strawberry bonnet on her head"(12). Cedar colour describes Sweetie's hair or skin tone which is a distinctive feature in African American culture. This description may connect her to her roots. Cotton headed with strawberry bonnet evokes a strong visual image combining cotton and strawberry.

Oppression causes individuals to lose their sense of wholeness and integrity. Slave patrols or Slave catchers were organized group of white men authorized to monitor the movements of enslaved black people. They capture and punish escaped slaves. Their torturing methods include whipping, branding, mutilation, lynching, raping, physical and psychological abuse. They symbolize institutionalized violence and racism perpetuated by slavery. The death of Angelina preserves the collective memory of enslaved people's struggles. Angelina used to sing

Hurry Angels, hurry! Hurry down to the pool,

I want you to trouble the waters this morning

To bathe my weary soul.

Angel got two wings to hide me away

Two wings to fly me away

I would not be a hypocrite

I tell you the reason why

Cause death might overtake me

Angelina's song represents the resilience and determination of enslaved people. The song becomes a beacon of hope amidst oppression. Forrest uses music to convey emotions.

The slave patrollers discovered the whereabouts of Angelina and Sweetie. They shouted, "Nigger gal, I'm going to burn up your little black ass if you don't come unto me. Even the chickens cackling seemed slit to the screech of a pregnant woman caught up in a fire" (252). As they are working in Reed farm they know the ins and outs of the barn.

Angelina's death highlights institutional slavery and brutality. It also symbolizes the sacrifices made by enslaved people. Angelina's tragic death passes down through generations of women. Her death evokes strong emotions, underscoring the brutality of slavery. It affects Sweetie's inner self. Angelina's fate hints at Sweetie's own struggles. Sweetie understands that it is one of the seven men who captured, one of three who raped and killed her mother. Sweetie doesn't want to escape from the barn, instead, she fights back the patroller with a tiny butcher's knife. It is really hard for a girl of seven years old to have courage like this. Sweetie's defiance showcases her strength and determination at the very young age of seven. Suddenly there came a man who lifted her and put her into the wagon. She imagined a burning home waiting for her. She always thinks of "water and escape and swimming" (254). She thought the man would take her to the market and place her in the auction block naked. These are taught by her mother Angelina. Angelina also taught her the alphabets through plans of escape.. "A for Alert, B for Bravery,.... C for cunning.... Sometimes C for Courage, and sometimes C for Campground" (257).

Auction of slaves is a horrific inhuman practice that occurred during the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved people were gathered in auction houses, plantations, or public spaces. Buyers inspected and examined enslaved individuals often naked or semi-naked. Auctioneers announced the people's skills, strength, and fertility. When the bidding begins they are sold to the highest bidder. She thinks the man is taking her "chained to an auction block, erected upon the frozen slab that could not melt, two feet above the naked slave's feet, where body was forced to twist and dance and leap to avoid the flames, which it could not do, to the howls of laughter from bidders. With the auctioneer's voice alive in savage



rhythms and Christian-minted words of all accents: blood and rebirth, diamonds and seed, cotton and gold good as mustard seed, christ and anklebones and backbones, good white teeth, and blood ties, heavy-hipped and duty, honor, country, and nigger toes and salt-bathed lashes and ship called Sweet Jesus"...(255). These racist words and phrases demonstrate the dehumanizing and exploitative nature of the slave trade. These are derogatory terms that reduce individuals to property, and treat humans as a commodity. Frozen slab emphasizes the cold unforgiving nature of slavery. These conditions are passed on to her daughter by Angelina. She also gives three hundred plans about everything, "hope on one hand and constant terrorized warning, born out of despair of hopelessness and ruggedness, on the other" (256). These lines describe the complex emotions experienced by enslaved individuals.

Another character, Auntie Foisty's knowledge of auction reveals her wisdom and experience. She shares her understanding of the brutal process of slavery. She explains how enslaved families were torn apart by slavery. She "can't read or write, even asking her what each slave sold for, hour, day and year of the auction. Most of the time she ain't for sure about the money part of it; but knows where each and every one of 'em was sold off to..... Seasons, crops and slaves she remembers whole; when each slave was sold out this plantation; when they come into this world and how they went out" (112)

Mistress Sylvia always used to repeat "east is east and west is west", shows the perpetuating racial and ethnic stereotypes based on region.

Sweetie "touched upon the lock her chestnut, heavy, wavy hair that I had clipped from her head with the garden shears before I/ we reburied her- and that kept in a little wee bag"(257). Sweetie keeps the locks of hair of her mother as a memory. It connects her to her ancestral roots. After the patrollers rape Angelina, they shot her. They took her to the swamp, and applied old slave ointments. Angelina's voice lingers and echoes. Sweetie cries out for her mother. She "had never spoken much of her mother before; calling out for her now" (258). The mother handed over her hand to Mr and Mrs Bluestones after that she heaved a sigh of horror and fell. She digs her mother's grave " I had cut off part of myself from the labor and been cut off from myself by the task, the meaning of why we are digging the grave in the first place, amid my digging hands and cutting edge of the shears"(258). These lines show her sense of loss, separation, or disconnection from her identity.

Sweetie explains to the grandson Nathaniel, "You cannot escape from the yoke of history, ancestors, lovers, and demons and gifts of loving, only transcend and remake yourself through all of it as a man (5-6)". Through these lines, it is clear that African Americans cannot escape from the shackles of historical trauma. Forrest critiques cultural erasure, racial stereotyping, and economic exploitation through Sweetie. Sweetie exclaims "I could see the JW brand upon the shoulder in the mirror of my runaway slave husband. Didn't change an iota of spirit-thunder stirring up in my hard heart. Then I looked in the mirror at myself. I didn't exactly like Aunt Hagar, nor a withered chamber maid-hag with pail and soap and rag and a dust cloth ..... (268). Here Hagar represents a strong resilient African woman. Sweetie finds solace in Aunt Hagar's strength.

Nathaniel learns the lesson of insignificance of blood from Sweetie when she informs him that she is not his biological grandmother. He is devastated when he learns the truth from his grandmother. He says "I won't look. Grandmother. Old lady. Great Momma Sweetie Reed Witherspoon. I won't ... I won't look. As a lost soul, I don't want to look upon the fate that you want to show me, but not yourself" (292). Sweetie advises that destruction is part of redemption.

Through Sweetie's life, one can understand the diverse cultural, historical, and social forces that shape her identity. Her experiences clearly show her trauma and marginalization. Sweetie's identity fragmentation impacts her relationships with her father, husband, adopted son, and grandson. It is the education that empowers Sweetie. It empowers Sweetie to reclaim their identities and challenge oppression. This education fosters critical consciousness and self-reflection.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

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