
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sing, Unburied, Sing: The Dual Lack and Pursuit of Love and Identity among Black People

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ABSTRACT

Jesmyn Ward's third novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, however, is Ward's second work to have won the National Book Award for fiction. It was *Sing* that laid a solid foundation for Ward's reception from the American literary circle as a powerful new voice. *Sing* focuses on a black family in the American south, which was nearly torn apart by poverty, drugs, and racial discrimination; Apart from the estranged kinship in the black family, represented by ghost Richie, the black group in the novel also shows a seemingly strong desire for identity. Based on Erich Fromm's alienation theory and his theories of love, this paper gives an analysis of the alienation of the protagonist at the level of love and racial identity and focuses on the struggle of the black group to survive in the white mainstream society, which resulted in their dual lack and dual pursuit of love and identity. This paper aims to reveal Ward's fierce criticism of racist ideology that has caused the double dilemma of survival and spirit of black people in the American South and demonstrate her deep understanding as well as support for the ideals and actions of African Americans in terms of their eagerness to integrate into the mainstream society.

KEYWORDS

Sing, Unburied, Sing; Jesmyn Ward; alienation; love; identity

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1. Introduction

Jesmyn Ward (1977-), the African-American female writer, became famous in the American literary circle for her novel *Salvage the Bones*, which was published in 2011, and won the National Book Award in one fell swoop. Since then, Ward has continued to write and has published many novels. In 2017, Ward won the National Book Award for Fiction again with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which further confirmed the high praise she received from the academia as "the new voice of American Southern literature". *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (hereinafter referred to as *Sing*) inherits the anti-racism motif that Ward has injected into most of her works. The novel is set in Bois Sauvage, a bay town in the southern United States, and focuses on a black family that is almost torn apart due to racial discrimination, poverty, drugs, and other reasons. One of the two storylines of the novel is that the black mother, Leonie, with her mixed-race children Jojo and Kayla, and Leonie's white friend Misty, travel from a small town in Mississippi in the south to Parchman in the north. In essence, it's a road trip to meet Leonie's white boyfriend, who is about to be released from prison. Along the way, the group experienced pain, anxiety, racism, and violence. Another storyline is the memory and trauma of the black community that was constantly exposed as the plot progressed.

Domestic and foreign academic research on *Sing* is still relatively weak, mainly focusing on, for example, ghost research, racial trauma, and memory, together with a small amount of cultural and narrative research. So far, no scholars have studied the alienation of characters in the novel in terms of their cognition of love and racial identity. Based on the content and plot of the novel, this thesis draws on Erich Fromm's theory of alienation and love to explore the alienation phenomenon of love and identity cognition that is ubiquitous in the novel in order to clarify what Jesmyn Ward has in mind - a critique of racist ideas and thus reveal Ward's feasible solutions for black compatriots to solve the dual dilemma of survival and spirituality, and then to provide some ideas for understanding the novel and for contemporary African-Americans to break free from shackles and achieve equality.

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The German-American Jewish humanistic philosopher and psychoanalyst - Erich Fromm put forward a definition of alienation based on the examination of the capitalist system in his book *The Sane Society*: "Alienation is a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his acts-but; his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys or even worships." (Fromm 2002: 117). Fromm goes on to suggest that one of the main characteristics of the alienated person is "out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person... with the senses and with common sense, but without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively." (ibid). Fromm believes that alienation is ubiquitous in modern society, and it has a certain negative impact on people's mental health, relationships with others, and the maintenance of people's social emotions. Based on that, he has continued to think and explore a way that can alleviate, or even eliminate, alienation and its derived negative effects, and finally found love, a mediating medium that is "the answer to (all) problem of human existence." (Fromm 2013:15) As we can see in one of his representative works named *The Sane Society*, Fromm proposed that the alienation of human beings from themselves and others as well as the adverse consequences of alienation, but basically, he was just expounding the existence of alienation and its urgency to be dealt. Yet in *The Art of Loving*, Fromm put forward a solution to the problem of alienation in the true sense, that is, to alleviate and eliminate alienation by seeking and obtaining love.

Looking back at the main characters created by Jesmyn Ward in *Sing*, it cannot be clearer that they have all experienced alienation and then eased the alienation state through love and finally regained a sense of identity. Undoubtedly, this is Ward's endeavor to show her approval and affirmation of Fromm's point of view: Love can solve all the problems related to human existence. Therefore, this thesis is mainly devoted to a new interpretation of the novel, primarily by analyzing the experiences of the main characters in *Sing* in terms of their alienation in love and their recognition of racial identity, together with the healing love that helps black groups to moderate alienation and reconstruct identity.

2. The Alienation of Love - The Estranged Parent-Child Relationship

Alienation means that people feel alienated from themselves and others in the process of experiencing the world, and they cannot treat themselves as the subject of actions and their consequences but put themselves in a subordinate and negative position, which is, in essence, a kind of psychological illness. In this case, the individual will inwardly feel a deep sense of anxiety and guilt and outwardly unable to coexist peacefully with the people and things around him with a peaceful mind, which in turn leads to a deeper sense of alienation and strangeness. Alienation exists in all aspects of social life. According to Fromm's classification, alienation exists in the production field (production process and products), the consumption field (the way of obtaining money and the purpose of consumption), the political field (political system and bureaucratic mechanism), and in social relations, which is the main focus of this article.

Fromm argued that with the continuous development of capitalism, the relationship between modern man and his fellow man has become alienated into a relationship "between two abstractions, two living machines, who use each other." (Fromm 2002: 135). To put it differently, the development of a capitalist society must have certain drawbacks, such as extreme wealth gap and social status disparity. As far as social relations are concerned, one of the manifestations of alienation is the alienation and indifference of interpersonal relationships, of which family relationship is a key element. As is known to us all, family relationship plays a vital role in establishing correct values among family members. There are mainly four families presented in *Sing*, namely the black-and-white mixed family centered on Michael and Leonie and their mixed-race children, the pure black family with River and Philomena as the core, the pure white family with Michael's fathers, Big Joseph and Maggie as the core, and the family of Misty, the one appears less frequently but still attracts the attention of readers. Yet the four racially and economically diverse families were surprisingly consistent in their unusually alienated parent-child relationship.

Alienation manifested itself in interpersonal relationships in modern society as "a superficial friendliness, and a more than superficial fairness, but behind that surface is distance and indifference. There is also a good deal of subtle distrust." (Fromm 2002:135) As an important part of interpersonal relationships, family relationships play an important role in the development of an individual's personality. An unbalanced parent-child relationship will inevitably lead to alienated emotional connections. The novel begins with a mulatto boy about to turn 13, Jojo, who accompanies his elderly but undiminished black grandfather to slaughter a sheep. This is followed by Jojo's recollections of the past, and it is through the memories that readers know why Jojo and his younger sister lived with their grandparents: Jojo's father (white) was jailed for illegal drug trafficking, and his mother (black) did not have a serious job, so she had to rely on her elderly parents to share the burden of raising a pair of children. Due to the long absence of their parents, Jojo and his younger sister Kayla gradually grew up in the company of their grandparents. Again, because of the care and love they received more from their grandparents rather than their biological parents, Jojo and Kayla were once very estranged and even resisted their parents - Leonie and Michael.

In the first place, Jojo hasn't called Leonie 'mother' for several years; however, he would affectionately refer to his grandparents as Pop and Mam. Compared to calling his mother Leonie by her name, Jojo's closeness to his maternal grandparents is self-evident. Besides, Jojo's grandparents followed the fine tradition of tenacity, bravery, industriousness, and simplicity of the black nation, and

Jojo, who was taken care of by his grandparents, naturally regarded his grandparents as his role model. For instance, Pop is old but industrious and relies on his hard work to support a large family with a heavy burden. Jojo admires Pop so much; for this reason, he imitates Pop in many things in daily life, like imitating Pop's way of eating and walking with his head and chest up in order to make Pop feel that he is mature and strong enough. The 13-year-old little adult, Jojo, was unable to establish a close and stable relationship with his mother because he lacked too much company and care from his mother during growth.

Going back to the beginning of the novel, Jojo endures physical and psychological discomfort and tries his best to help the grandpa kill the sheep. At the same time, he also hoped that the sound of the sheep slaughter would not disturb the sleeping mum and sister in the house. Such a thoughtful, filial and considerate child seemed unusually numb and indifferent when getting along with his mother. Jojo would talk to Leonie in a cold and polite tone and ridicule Leonie as a 'killer of everything'. When Leonie swallowed drugs in her stomach, then became severely unwell and vomited, there happened to be a police officer who came forward with a gun and threatened them to cooperate with the inspection. Jojo still sang nursery rhymes to Kayla to make her happy while completely disregarding Leonie's safety. When Michael asked him to go to the store to buy something to relieve Leonie's vomiting, Jojo was more worried about Kayla's safety in the car rather than the illness of his mother, one can imagine how estranged the parent-child relationship between Jojo and mother Leonie is! Jojo transferred the source of love to his maternal grandparents and gave a response of love in his understanding. However, he always responded rigidly and mechanically to his biological mother, Leonie, with an unfamiliar and self-estranged standard. This type of love ran counter to the productive love that Fromm recognized. And this type of love is degenerate and alienated to a certain extent.

Additionally, Fromm made it clear in *The Art of Loving* that the fundamental reason why people go to a state of alienation lies in their own loneliness and isolation because "The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love- is the source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety." (Fromm 2013: 17) Apart from the children's irresponsible mother, their white father Michael is also absent most of the time, so Jojo and his sister are also full of strangeness and distance in the process of getting along with their father. When Jojo was young, Michael left them after an argument with Leonie, leaving Jojo with a dispensable hug. After that, for Jojo, the word 'father' only remained at the stage of remnant memories of Michael's appearance. Years passed, and Jojo saw his father again at the door of Parchman prison, or because Leonie insisted on bringing him and Kayla to welcome their father out of prison. The father and son/daughter reunion after a long absence did not see a joyous atmosphere. Michael, who had just walked out of the prison gate, shouted 'baby', but Jojo knew very well that he was not calling him or his sister. During the meal together, Michael's concern for the children made them extremely uncomfortable, Jojo chose to remain silent, and Kayla even said that her father should not be near her. In this way, the children expressed their incompatibility and a little resistance to the sudden concern. It can be seen that the long-term absence and inaction of the parents have created an insurmountable gap between the parents and their children.

What deserves attention here is that the estranged parent-child relationship between the Jojo siblings and their parents is not without a trace. In the first place, the mother Leonie's way and attitude towards the children are very negative, which means Leonie is not only indifferent but even mindless to her children. To cite an example, she is such an unconcerned mother who bought a baby birth cake for her 13-year-old son to celebrate his birthday. Leonie, in a way, even regarded the children as a tool she could use to vent her anger, which can be found in the irritated Leonie's tyrannical attitude towards her two children. (Sun and Wang 2022: 053) Perhaps because of the loneliness after losing her brother, Leonie's various behaviors all pointed to her inner jealousy of Kayla, who has been spoiled and cared for by Jojo very much. Therefore, when Kayla was sick and noisy, Leonie took care of her impatiently and found that Jojo had been watching her like a supervisor for fear that she would abuse Kayla. Considering that the baby was too young to hit, then Leonie chose to say something mean to irritate the son to "let that anger touch another." (Ward 2018: 147) Especially, When she saw the scene of a pair of children hugging each other and sleeping together, Leonie couldn't help but wonder if her brother had hugged her like this before. There was a force in her mind that made her think about "to shake them awake, to lean down and yell so they startle and sit up, so I (Leonie) don't have to see the way they turn to each other like plants following the sun." (ibid: 151) A mother's love should be selfless and sincere, but Leonie's balance is always in favor of her own feelings over that of others, including her own babies. She just tried to transfer what she lacked to her children and let them suffer the pain of separation. The sort of love of Leonie is domineering and overbearing, and she does not regard the child as an independent individual equal to her. This possessive love will inevitably lead to an "opposite, even alienated relationship" (Xu 2016: 24) between her and her child.

3. Pursuing Love in the Absence of it - The Misplaced Thirst for Love

Fromm divided the "survival needs" that arise in the process of human existence into the need to remain related, the need to transcend, the need to have stable roots, and the need for a sense of identity. In explaining the need for associativity (being related), Fromm further stated that "the necessity to unite with other living beings, to be related to them, is an imperative need on the fulfillment of which man's sanity depends. This need is behind all phenomenon which constitutes the whole gamut of intimate human relations, of all passions which are called love." (Fromm 2002: 29) That is, When an individual lacks a relationship with others

or has fission in the relationship with others, the individual who does not feel love will involuntarily develop negative emotions such as loneliness, anxiety, and even despair, which in turn affects the individual's mental health. The author Ward also seems to be aware of the drawbacks of the individual being in a state of emotional depression and lack for a long time. Therefore, she carefully sets the main character to make up for the unmet need for love by seeking alternatives. Nevertheless, it is clear that this approach to finding an alternative is not what Fromm was referring to as "union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality", which allows the others to maintain integrity too. (Fromm 2013: 26)

Because Leonie and Michael failed to fulfill their responsibilities as parents, Jojo regarded Pop/Mum as his 'father'/'mother' as a substitute or compensation for the lost parental love. As a matter of fact, Jojo also transformed the lack of fatherly and motherly love into a sort of over-protection of his younger sister-Kayla. Fromm, in *The Art of Loving*, stated that the essence of love is giving, not receiving. The love he emphasized is a kind of active and creative love, not based on the dependence and acquisition of one party on the other, let alone the possession of one party to the other. It is true that Jojo's love for Kayla satisfies Kayla's emotional needs, but his love is possessive and deformed to a certain degree. For instance, Jojo would feel a deep sense of fear and crisis every time he saw Leonie getting a little closer to Kayla and Kayla responding to Leonie. The latter part of the novel does not explain why Jojo is afraid, but after a comprehensive analysis of his attitudes and ways of getting along with Kayla, the answer is obvious. What scares Jojo is that Kayla will begin to identify and accept Leonie as a mother and thus take his place and make him less important to Kayla. The insecurity and sense of lack of subconsciousness made him think of Kayla as an extremely important person—both the object of his love and the source of the fulfillment he was able to enjoy being asked for.

Another fact from which we can have a glimpse of Jojo's unusual possessiveness towards Kayla is that, on their way to Parchman Prison, Kayla became severely unwell and vomited, and Leonie did everything she could to reassure Kayla, including resorting to herbal remedies that she has been most reluctant to touch. She took a lot of effort to find some plants and boil them into herbs for Kayla to drink; however, Jojo "sticks his finger down her throat and makes her throw up (the potion made by Leonie)" (Ward 2018:118) Jojo, who has never made Kayla unhappy, but this time, in Kayla's cry, he just pulled Leonie's 'love' out of Kayla's body, regardless of what Kayla feels. To trace its root cause, it is Jojo who fears that his primary position in Kayla's heart will be replaced by Leonie, which later turns out as Jojo's love has a strong possessive color. Fromm mentioned in his categorization of love that "Love in the mode of having implied confining, imprisoning, or controlling the object one 'loves'." (Fromm 2015: 39). Love in this mode virtually deviates from the creative and productive nature of love. From this perspective, Jojo's love for Kayla and for Pop and Mum are also imperfect and need to be adjusted.

In light of Fromm, "Mother is food; she is love; she is warmth; she is earth. To be loved by her means to be alive, to be rooted, to be at home." (Fromm 2002: 37). If the children cannot get the emotional response necessary for survival from the parents, they cannot establish a deep and stable emotional connection with their parents. For the time being, out of the need for survival, the children will find another replacement, which would potentially lead to some dislocated and even deformed emotional demands. In short, since neither Jojo nor Kayla has grown up with the love and care from their parents that their peers enjoy, there is a lack of emotion, so both of them invariably transfer their inner lack to each other, and this transfer is, in essence, misplaced even abnormal. The two relatively important characters created by Ward in *Sing*, Jojo, and Kayla both showed different degrees of emotional alienation, which was in line with the family theme contained in most of Ward's novels. In the meantime, it conveyed to readers that the family environment and parents play a sort of key role in terms of education for children. Through the difficult lives of the two children, Ward managed to show the public the plight of contemporary African-American survival.

4. The Alienated Perception of Racial Identity

As one of the more abrupt characters in *Sing*, Leonie's understanding and pursuit of love were also alienated. Being distinguished from Jojo's alienation in emotional aspects, Leonie's alienation has more to do with her sense of self and racial identity. That is to say, Leonie's deformed perception of racial identity is a result of "the social forces which determine our society and the life of everybody living in it." (Fromm 2002:133) Namely, racial differentiation and the 'one drop of blood principle' acquiesced by mainstream American society are the root causes of Leonie's alienated perception of racial identity.

As a descendant of black people, Leonie deeply recognized the vulnerable position of her family and even her ethnic group through the innocent and tragic death of her brother. To borrow Fromm's words, she realized her sense of isolation and powerlessness in the realities of family relations, life, and death, fairness, and injustice, all of which made her suffer "suppression of life then produce the passion for destruction that forms the reservoir from which the particular hostile tendencies- either against others or against oneself - are nourished." (Fromm 2013:125) To be more exact, Leonie's alienation is mainly reflected in her distorted self-identity and racial identity. This paranoid and radical cognition prevents her from enjoying the warmth of family, love, and friendship like ordinary people, let alone making use of the power of these loves to inspire her courage in facing reality. Her brother, Given, who had loved her so much, was accidentally shot by a white man, but the case was simply characterized as a 'hunting accident'. The murderer only needed to serve three years in Parchman Prison, including two years of bail. The law, as always, favors white people.

When Given's death leaves Leonie without her hero, there's nothing she can do about her parents' grief. Losing all sources of security for a while made Leonie aware of the desperate situation her family and community were in, and the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and isolation prompted her to start taking drugs because cocaine's hallucination allows her to see the dead Given. Steele-Nicholson, in a paper, stated that "Leonie's trauma of losing her brother was the result of a larger, collective trauma that was generally faced in the American South, namely slavery." (Nicholson 2020:34). I agree that Leonie's loss of her brother must be a negative consequence of slavery, but slavery has brought Leonie much more than that, such as the alienation of her recognition of racial identity, is also a product of slavery, which later manifested itself in Leonie's over-obsession with her white boyfriend.

After Given's death, Leonie's family lacked much warmth, and she longed for someone to accept her more and more. As we can find in her soliloquy in Chapter 2: "He (Michael) saw me. Saw past skin the color of unskimmed coffee, eyes black, lips the color of plums, and saw me. Saw the walking wound I was, and came to be my balm." (Ward 2018: 54) In *The Sane Society*, Fromm explained that one of the characteristics of alienated people is "craving for acceptance (from others)." (Fromm 2002: 150) For a year after Given's death, Leonie spent her days in a muddle, and Michael's presence made her feel like a light, and she tried her best, almost paranoically, to grasp the light. It seems that in Leonie's world, Michael has always been at her core. She disobeyed his parents' advice for him, dropped out of school prematurely because of early pregnancy, painted nails with the color of Michael's preferences, and took drugs during pregnancy just for "burning up all the sorrow and despair she felt at Michael being gone." (Ward 2018: 51) Maybe for Leonie, her son's birthday and studies, her parents' opinions, etc. are not as important as Michael. Leonie's extreme dependence and attachment to Michael seems to be a common phenomenon among lovers, but in fact, such kind of obsession with her white boyfriend meaningfully alludes to the racial self-hatred and self-deprecation of black people under the influence of racist ideas.

Born into a white middle-class family, Michael's intention to approach Leonie was out of inner guilt for Leonie's family because his father used his position to shield the murderer who killed Given. On their first date, Michael confessed that his father was old and stubborn, and Leonie thought to herself that "I (would) swallow the fact of his father's bile and let it pass through me." (ibid: 53). It can be seen that Leonie knows in her heart that Michael's father is a dangerous racist, and Michael is more or less affected, but she still chooses to give her all to express her gratitude for Michael's presence in her life. Likewise, out of a long-standing racist thought that Leonie silently endures Michael's punches and kicks during the argument and ensures that even if she and Michael have walked hand in hand for several years, they are still not legally married. She even endured her inferior status as a daughter-in-law who bore a pair of children for Michael but was still not recognized by the white father/mother-in-law. For all these, Leonie, who has a hot temper in life, accepts them all in silence. Fromm has pointed out that alienation has a huge impact on people's mental health, in part by depriving people of a sense of dignity and subjectivity. The misfortunes experienced by Leonie's father and brother in the white-dominant world, together with the family's difficult situation, constantly drove her to the edge of a breakdown and reminded Leonie that she is a black woman and there is a huge difference between her and the white man, who was naturally 'more noble' than her. In other words, Leonie's racial identity is alienated because she loses her most basic but crucial sense of dignity and subjectivity as an individual and as a black. This is why did Leonie stay calm and polite even though she was humiliated when getting along with Michael's parents.

Particularly, when Big Joseph treated Leonie and her children with great unkindness, calling her a 'nigger bitch' instead of being as angry as she did with her children, Leonie began to feel remorse and disgust for her black identity. She even couldn't help wondering that she could "throw up everything including organs, bones, and muscle until all that left was skin...not this skin, not this body." (Ward 2018: 207) It is not difficult to find that, on the one hand, Leonie held some one-sided and negative perception of her own identity, which was essentially the result of self-hatred under the influences of ubiquitous racism. She pins the value of her existence on the affirmation of the superior in her eyes and replaces it with self-hatred of her racial identity and the desire to get rid of the trouble this identity brings her. Fundamentally, when alienated people realize the fact that they are not accepted and affirmed, they will associate themselves with their failures in all aspects, which in turn will produce deep frustration and self-deprecation. Leonie is like this; the whites think she is inferior, and her evaluation and positioning of herself are then humble as dust. In order to gain a sense of identity, Leonie discarded her self-esteem and pride as a black.

Furthermore, Leonie's alienated perception of racial identity can also be seen in her relationship with Misty, who is a white woman. Leonie maintains a friendly relationship with Misty on the surface but is actually jealous of Misty's iconic white appearance. For example, Leonie thinks Misty's hair is nasty because it "caught all the light. The self-satisfied beauty of it. I hated her hair." (ibid: 37). A similar state of mind occurs in a conversation between the two where Misty lightly told Leonie about something, and Leonie privately believed that Misty always simplified everything, and the root cause was her blond hair, the stubborn milkiness of her skin; how easy had it been for her, her whole life, to make the world a friend to her." (91) It is well known that blonde hair and white skin are the standards for white people, and Leonie's attitude towards Misty's blonde hair is contradictory because she dislikes Misty's blonde hair while dyeing her black and fluffy curls to the same blonde straight hair as Misty. The only thing that makes

sense is that Leonie hates the superiority and privilege that Misty's white identity brings her, and Leonie, eager to break this inequality, is powerless to change her skin color, so she can only start with her own hair. Correspondingly, Misty uses her white identity to constantly put pressure on Leonie in her life to force her to submit.

The environment shrouded in racist ideas has put many constraints on the blacks represented by Leonie, and the deeply repressed blacks can only find another way to find solace. In *Sing*, Leonie lowers herself to suit the whites' behavior, which coincides with Fromm's definition of an alienated person who "tries to solve the problem by conforming." (Fromm 2002:191) It is not easy for blacks to seek identity and security in a society dominated by whites. Therefore, many writers describe blacks with strange and confusing behaviors, or alienation, to varying degrees. As Professor Xu pointed out in her thesis, "Most of the human social actions have performativity, but human social actions are not the embodiment of individual's free will, but a unity of opposites between social norms and free performance, which is the product of the operation of individual and social power." (Xu 2011: 1) Leonie obeyed white people, imitated white people's behavior, and resigned herself to the malicious discrimination from the whites, which is precisely a product of the operation of white power represented by Misty and Big Joseph. The disguise props that Leonie explored for survival are not entirely the result of her personal will. Indeed, the fact that Leonie is alienated from the black group she belongs to but leans toward the white group points to her distorted racial identity.

Nevertheless, the author Jesmyn Ward used her ingenious brushwork to have created such a black woman who is alienated, addicted to drugs, and obsessed with white people and their culture. Her real intention is to subvert the cowardly, fearful, and sentimental victim image of black women presented in most of the previous works. Through the image of an atypical victim like Leonie, who was extreme and stubborn and sought spiritual relief in a new way, Ward managed to reveal how deeply racist ideas are poisoning the black community.

5. The Pursuit of Identity - An Journey Across Life

As Ward's second novel to have won the National Book Award, *Sing* has attracted a lot of attention in academic circles at home and abroad in recent years. Among them, the research on this novel mainly focuses on the analysis of the images and functions of ghosts in the novel. In fact, the repeated appearance and haunting of ghosts is what distinguishes *Sing* from other race-related novels. Kathleen Brogan has pointed out that " Ghosts figure in the folkloric past of virtually every culture. They are also extraordinarily useful literary metaphors in the larger process of ethnic invention and revision." (Brogan 1995:163) It is fair to say that haunting of ghosts can be used by individuals to pursue unrealized ideals and by the black group as a weapon to subvert the dominant white discourse. In *Sing*, Ward used this weapon to the point of perfection. Specifically, Ward portrayed the ghost individuals Richie and Given, as well as the ghost community consisting of other black compatriots, and used these black souls to compose a 'song of the wronged souls' in terms of their pursuit of racial identity.

The entire narrative of *Sing* is mainly undertaken by three protagonists: Jojo, Leonie, and Richie; of which Richie can be described as an impressive one, partly because of his special identity as a ghost and partly because of his tragic life that gradually unfolds as the plot progresses. Richie's first appearance in the novel is when Pop tells Jojo about his past memories and calls Richie the youngest inmate in Parchman Prison. As Pop's memories continue, Richie's tragic experience gradually emerges: he was forced to steal a piece of salted meat for his starving brothers and sisters, so he was captured in Parchman to serve his sentence. Richie attracted River (Pop)'s attention for his " big onion-like head on top of his skinny body" (Ward, 2018: 23), a typical developmental feature of the body due to malnutrition. Having seen this, River did everything he could to help Richie. Life in Parchman was difficult enough, and the heavy labor made adult prisoners miserable, not to mention that Richie was only a twelve-year-old child. The hard work combined with the random whipping of the jailer exhausted Richie physically and mentally and made him eager to escape. Later, he did escape, but at the cost of his life.

After his death, Richie wandered the world, feeling the smell of Jojo and determining that he was the grandson of River, who had taken good care of him, so he began to follow Jojo. From the time Jojo and his mother leave Parchman to return home, Richie urges Jojo to ask River about the cause of his death so that he can give himself an answer. In pursuing the answer, Richie also gave the answer to the tragic history of the black community being hidden. Richie's monologue is like a realistic painting, reviving the inhuman ordeal that black people were forced to endure in the past. The painting shows his impoverished home and hungry family, and blacks, including him, who were treated inhumanly and abused to death after being unjustifiably charged by whites; there are blacks who long to leave the South for the North, which symbolizes freedom, and whites who enjoy privileges at all times and places, and there are lynchings, oppression, injustice, and pain. The ghost Richie constantly intervenes in Jojo's life, hoping to learn the cause of his death from River. Because Richie's death was too tragic - he was bitten and eaten by a pack of dogs, and his bones were gone so that "Even God can't bear to watch, so half of his spirit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace..." (Ward 2018: 236) Left with only a soul, he floated in the sky, and once again, he was trapped by Parchman Prison and not allowed to be free. Parchman was once a nightmare for his all life, and it still haunted him after he died, so he must figure out why he died in order to set his floating self on the road home.

Additionally, Richie, who was not properly buried, was forgotten by his family, and his only brother-like friend (River) 'turned a blind eye' to him, let alone acknowledged by anyone other than Jojo and Kayla, and he desperately needed a fixed and clear identity to "have a sense of his position among his fellow members." (Patterson 2018: 79) In her paper, Madeline Raine Cole illustrated that "there was a social death in Richie, and that began when he entered Parchman Prison." (Cole 2020: 13) According to Cole, Richie's entry into Parchman meant losing contact with the outside world, especially after being whipped by prison guards, Richie lost his mobility to connect with the community due to his injury and limited mobility, which has deepened the extent to which of Richie's social death. In this regard, I'm for the point that Richie's social death does exist, while it does not begin with entering Parchman's prison but with his physical destruction. Social death, according to Patterson's definition, occurs when an individual's identity is irreversibly severed from the connection to the collective to which he belongs. Here Patterson's emphasis on the irreversible nature of social death means that the bond between the individual and the group to which he belongs is completely broken and irreparable and that the individual in this situation is absolutely isolated, both physically and mentally.

The forgotten and neglected Richie is treated as an 'other' and has no fixed community as a source of stability, and in that respect, he is isolated. Since his ghost identity cannot be seen, let alone integrated into the collective there and maintained a stable association with the rest of the group. Moreover, his family has long forgotten him, and River, whom he considered his only best friend and even brother, is reluctant to bring up his story again. In the novel, Richie repeatedly mentions that he wants to "be a song" (Ward 2018: 281). The fundamental reason why he wants to be a song and not something else is that being a song means being sung and remembered and regaining a sense of existence in the community and a previously lost sense of identity.

Moreover, Richie also told Jojo many times that he needed a 'key' to help him get into "the song that fully recorded the stars and the sky."(ibid) The song here should not be understood only in its original sense; in fact, the song is equivalent to mainstream American society, and black members, including Richie, tried to squeeze in, only to find that it is not what they think as "to be some need, some lack, like a keyhole. Makes it so I (Richie) can come in."(ibid) Richie's several attempts to get into 'the song' repeatedly allude to the fact that African Americans have been trying so hard to integrate into mainstream society but have been excluded. Richie cannot become a part of mainstream society, so he cannot obtain recognition of his identity in mainstream society. The premise of the existence of a sense of identity, that is, the establishment of good and stable ties with the group and society, is even more out of the question. That's why he kept getting involved in the Jojo family's life. In the end, Richie learns that it was River who killed him out of a desire to protect himself from white lynching. The truth has eased the hatred in his heart, but he still desperately wants to take away the dying Mum, hoping to gain a true identity by becoming Mum's child. In the final analysis, Richie tries to find out the cause of his death; on the one hand, he is to find liberation for the only remaining soul and embark on the road home. On the other hand, he is to recover his lost identity in order to re-establish a stable connection with the ethnic group to which he belongs.

Ward once confessed in an interview that what she wrote, and what she wanted to write, was the story of the poor, the black, and the rural South because that was where she grew up, and there were people she knew. In reality, Ward has also put into practice her original intention with six of her existing works—most of her works focus on the lives of blacks, the poor, and Southerners and spread outward to portray society and even the fate of mankind. The haunting and narration of ghosts added a layer of mystery to *Sing* and also implied the transcendence of established rules and boundaries. Ghost Richie's obsession with regaining identity runs through almost the entire novel, and the hordes of black ghosts who slowly appear at the end of the novel also cannot be ignored in their search for identity.

Through Jojo's perspective, these ghosts include "men and women and boys and girls, some of them near to babies."(Ward 2018: 282) They were ragged, their bodies slumped, curled up on tree branches, whimpering in the wind like singing, and reluctant to leave. Until Kayla came to the tree where they lived, like a goddess who ruled the world, persuaded the ghosts to "go home", and the ghosts shivered but still refused to leave. Having seen this, Kayla began to sing ballads that Jojo couldn't understand and the song mingled with the ghosts'. As Kayla's voice grew louder and she sang with the usual gestures Jojo used to soothe her, the ghosts finally moved and decided to relieve and go. The novel also ends after the ghosts cry "home". Although the black ghost group does not appear until the end of the novel, the number of its members, the breadth of its coverage, and their tragic death of them are really sobering. It is worth noting that Ward arranged the ghosts of the black community at the end of the novel, seemingly dedicated to highlighting the suffering of the black community, but in fact, turns her attention to the pursuit of identity that is more meaningful to the black community.

Orlando Patterson demonstrated in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*: "in almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person."(Patterson 2018: 38) De-socialization means stripping slaves from any social relationship other than their owners, thereby placing slaves on the margins of society, i.e., As for social death we have explained in the previous section (represented by Richie), while de-personalization is tantamount to equating slaves with animals. It has been mentioned several times in the novel that blacks are treated like animals, such as River's great-grandmother who was kidnapped

into a ship during the slave trade period and forced into an iron yoke so that "her mouth shaped to the muzzle, she was made into an animal under the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far away in another world." (Ward 2018:69) This narrative scene vividly recreates the dark history of the black community being enslaved and sold like cattle. As the descendants of black slaves, contemporary blacks have involuntarily "inherited" the misfortunes experienced by their ancestors, and the tragedies and evil deeds that occurred in the past continue to be staged in modern times.

Sing focuses on the time scene of the early twenty-first century, but there are still white people who commit atrocities against blacks, resulting in a group of ghosts "perch like birds, speak with their eyes: He raped me and suffocated me until I died... he shot me eight times... she locked me in the shed and starved me to death... they came in my cell in the middle of the night, and they hung me... they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes... and he put me under the water, and I couldn't breathe." (Ward 2018: 282-283) The ghosts are chaotic, intermittent, and without exception, nameless, but they have a strong desire to tell their stories. When it comes to the reason, it was the fact that black people died tragically and were not properly buried, leaving their souls wandering all day, unable to find liberation, and could only imitate the free birds curled up in the branches and singing in search of their identity and sense of belonging. Their purpose is to let future generations know their stories, understand their pain, and remember the history of their community. On the one hand, Ward used this to suggest the depersonalization and desocialization of the black group by white people, and on the other hand, to highlight the strong desire and pursuit of identity of the black group under the atrocities of white people and to warn black descendants not to forget the suffering of their ancestors and remember the ethnic mission.

As mentioned earlier, when ghosts haunting is involved in literary works (especially American literature), it is often the author's intention to "recreate ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present." (Brogan 1995:151) In *Sing*, Ward artfully portrays ghost Richie, ghost Given, and a group of anonymous but important ghosts, and one of the common characteristics of these ghosts is that their "identity is ignored, trampled on, or deprived in a certain social context, and the ensuing existential crisis." (Pang 2019: 85) And that existential crisis, identity crisis, further motivates them to respond, that is, to restlessly let the world know their experiences, see their existence, hear their voices, and finally gain an identity that was recognized. By arranging ghosts' accounts of their tragic fates and their eagerness to be identified, Ward lashed out at the atrocities imposed on the black community by whites and further called on the public to rethink race relations in contemporary American society.

6. Conclusion

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, it is hard to trace a single word of Ward that directly criticizes racist ideas, yet we can see the evil and peril of racist ideas throughout the novel. Black people living under racist oppression were unable to experience the feeling of love and being loved normally, but the emotional needs necessary to survive to force them to find alternative ways to obtain some alternative love, such as Jojo empathizing with the missing father/mother love to his maternal grandparents and sister Kayla. Leonie transferred her unmet emotional needs from her parents/brothers to her boyfriend, Michael, and used drugs to relieve her inner sense of lack after Michael left. Nevertheless, this sort of alternative love is not a complete and healthy one but a deformed and dislocated emotional consolation derived from the alienation of love. Furthermore, the sense of restraint and powerlessness of living on the fringes and bottom of society for a long time has led to the general feeling of a weak sense of existence among black people. In other words, black people's inability to integrate into mainstream society and establish a good relationship with society further exacerbates their identity anxiety. The black community was tortured during their lifetime and still could not rest in peace after death, and their souls searched for the identities they were forced to lose before, which made a contribution to Ward's literary world in which ghosts were entitled to the power to transcend life and death, talk to the mainstream, and revise history.

To conclude, Ward's writing intention to speak for marginalized black people incisively and vividly manifested itself in the word 'sing' in the title of the novel. By accurately depicting the mixed-race boy Jojo, the alienated parent-child relationship between the black mother Leonie and her family, as well as the dislocated emotional needs and their alienated perception of racial identity, Ward intended to insinuate the uninterrupted racial discrimination in contemporary American society and strongly condemns the racially differentiation thoughts and behaviors that have caused the dual dilemma of the survival and spirituality of black people. Meanwhile, Ward also used the eager and persevering pursuit of love and identity by Jojo, Leonie, and Richie to reveal the hard work of African-Americans to integrate into mainstream society. She also put forward the way for contemporary African-Americans to find a feasible way to break the shackles and achieve equality: remember the history, return to the ethnic group, build on the tradition, and work together.

Due to my junior qualifications and relative lack of research experience, there are still certain deficiencies in the interpretation and analysis of this novel. With regard to this thesis, it is only an interpretation of the protagonists' alienation in emotion and recognition of identity. The pursuit of identity can be described as a classic motif, which this thesis solely interpreted as the tip of the iceberg, and there are still many meaningful details to be analyzed. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, is a bold and profound novel that

scholars can continue to study in the future, including perspectives related to cultural studies, trauma studies, narrative studies, etc.

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