

**PHANTASM AND HAUNTING IN NEO-SLAVE
NARRATIVES: A STUDY OF NATASHIA
DEON'S *GRACE* AND LATANYA MCQUEEN'S
*WHEN THE RECKONING COMES***

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Reckoning Comes***

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ABSTRACT

Title: Phantasm and Haunting in Neo-Slave Narratives: A Study of Natasha Deon's *Grace* and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes*

From the late 20th to the early 21st century, neo-slave narratives have emerged as an African American literary genre that foregrounds Afrocentric heritage to narrate the stories of slavery, resistance, and emancipation. Two Afro-American neo-slave narratives, Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021), have been selected for this study. Guided by Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and Stella Setka's theorization of the phantasmic ethnic narratives, this research attempts to study the role and significance of vengeful ghosts and ancestral spirits of enslaved blacks represented in the selected narratives who, in the post-slavery period in American history, haunt their offenders and protect their descendants from racial oppression. This research seeks to decode the ancestral spirits as 'ndiichie'—revered spirits in Igbo cosmology—that can qualify as Igbo-specific phantasmic figures. Using Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method, it is examined how these ancestral spirits change their subject position as well as that of post-slavery black characters. The interrelationship of enslaved and post-slavery black characters is studied through communal memory embodied in these ancestral spirits. In addition, this research examines how reconnecting with the Igbo heritage enables the selected narratives to represent Igbo-specific phantasm as part of a legitimate worldview, thereby challenging Enlightenment skepticism towards the supernatural. This research also makes a theoretical intervention by adding the aspect of retributive justice to Stella Setka's theory that contributes to the ongoing discussions in Afro-American neo-slave narratives.

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DEDICATION

To my dear father for his invaluable support

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This research studies the role and significance of culturally specific phantasmic figures and supernatural elements in Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021). These two African American texts are studied to examine the significance and implication of phantasmic figures that are exclusive to the ethnic cosmologies and cultures of the black community represented in both literary texts, such as the veneration of the spirits of deceased ancestors. Stella Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives and Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology guide this research.

In the selected literary texts, the ghosts and ancestral spirits of enslaved blacks haunt their offenders and protect their descendants from racial oppression, respectively. These novels seem to depict the hauntings of enslaved ancestral spirits, known as 'ndiichie' in Igbo language, as a literary tool to keep the traumatic memory of slavery alive. The present research borrows the concept of ndiichie from Igbo cosmology, a worldview shared by one of the major ethnic groups of Nigeria (Nwoye 305). Moreover, this study interprets the representation of ancestral spirits in the selected African American texts as a literary technique to connect African American characters with the "spiritual worldview" of their "more distant African ancestors" as guided by the theoretical framework of this research (Setka 23). The ndiichie figures portrayed in the selected narratives are seen as protecting their post-slavery descendants who, being unaware of their history, have drifted away from their spiritual legacy.

Moreover, this research also engages with the skepticism of white characters towards the hauntings of ghosts and ndiichie spirits of the enslaved blacks in the selected narratives. This type of skepticism towards the African American characters' belief in phantasmic figures such as ghosts, spirits, supernatural visions, and time travel is an important subject of discussion in this research. The theoretical framework that guides this research identifies the white characters' skepticism towards the spiritual worldview of the black community as an attitude stemming from the predominance of rationality inherent in

the principles of American Enlightenment. The relevance of the legacy of Enlightenment movement to the present study is elucidated in section 1.2 of this chapter.

The selected texts for this study may be categorized as neo-slave narratives. And, to further our understanding of neo-slave narratives, the following section provides multiple scholarly definitions of neo-slave narratives as a literary genre.

1.1 Defining Neo-slave Narratives

The term ‘neo-slave narrative’ was coined by Bernard W. Bell in his book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987). In this book, Bell defines neo-slave narratives as Afro-American literature that adheres to the “residually oral” style of African folk tales and traditional storytelling (15). According to Bell, these narratives foreground Afrocentric culture in Afro-American literature (15). Employing the literary techniques of oral storytelling, these narratives tell the stories of slavery, escape, and emancipation in the antebellum (289); whereas the term ‘antebellum’ is a Latin word that denotes the period of American history after the War of 1812 and before the American Civil War which lasted from 1861 to 1865. Replete with elements that are often associated with religion and cultural folklore of the black community, these narratives engage with antebellum slavery and justify the resistance of black people against racial subjugation manifested through running away and revolting against the tyranny of slave owners (285). Bell identifies stories with these characteristics as neo-slave narratives.

It is important to note that Afro-American neo-slave narratives may also be identified as “magic realist” by some critics (Kennon n. p.). However, Stella Setka’s theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives, one of the theoretical lenses invoked in this research, challenges the categorization of phantasmic elements in ethnic narratives as magical realist. Setka’s theory and how she challenges the identification of Afro-American neo-slave narratives as a part of the canon of magical realism will be discussed in detail in the section of the theoretical framework.

Writing about neo-slave narratives, a Bangladeshi-British author named Ashraf Husein Ali Rushdie regards neo-slave narratives as a “strategic genre” in his book *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) (Rushdie 17). This

strategic genre enables ethnic authors to challenge and subvert the predominant American narratives (17). Rushdie compares neo-slave narratives with “palimpsest” (17). Palimpsest refers to a type of writing that builds on previous events and experiences; likewise, neo-slave narratives are based on the real or imaginary stories of enslaved blacks and the restoration of their freedom. Additionally, according to Ashraf H.A. Rushdie, these narratives draw on a “bi-temporal perspective” (qtd. in Anim-Addo and Lima 2). It indicates that neo-slave narratives may span across the antebellum and post-slavery period in American history. In the narratives set in the post-slavery period, “the past is erased but still legible” (2). This indicates that the stories told in these narratives may partially or wholly take place at a point in time when slavery is abolished but racism persists. This is how such narratives represent the suffering that the African American community is subjected to. Depicting racism as a consequence of the historical legacy of slavery, these narratives show that the tragedy of the historical past keeps on haunting the sites of violence and its impacts linger in the present time.

Toni Morrison defines neo-slave narratives as a work of “literary archeology” that imagines the stories of those enslaved subjects whose stories were lost under subjugation (qtd. in Anim-Addo and Lima 2). This involves the process of uncovering the stories of enslaved blacks that have been suppressed or ignored. This also includes the fictional accounts that reimagine slavery and the experiences of enslaved blacks on the American landscape. Clarisse Zimra also defines neo-slave narratives as stories that would otherwise be expunged if not ethically represented (qtd. in Anim-Addo and Lima 2). These narratives uncover and re-imagine the lived experiences of enslaved blacks to give expression to the trauma of slavery.

Furthermore, neo-slave narratives cover the writings of Afro-American authors that revisit the representations, forgotten stories, and resistant subjectivities of enslaved blacks (Anim-Addo and Lima 4-5). Originating from the late 20th and early 21st century, these narratives focus on personalized experiences of inheriting the legacy of slavery that engage different literary tools which may help in addressing the suffering of racial oppression (Kennon). A considerable part of many fictional accounts, including the selected narratives for this research, are set in the antebellum period. In this period, slavery was common in

the Southern United States, while the Northern United States offered the promise of freedom to the enslaved blacks following the American Civil War (1861-1865). The narratives selected for this research also portray the time period following the declaration of emancipation by the end of the Civil War.

According to the book *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (1999) by Christina Sharpe, this time period can be referred to as the post-slavery period, and individuals impacted by the discursive codes of slavery may be denoted as post-slavery subjects (Sharpe 3). Christina Sharpe's use of the term 'subject' indicates the way the "subjectivities" of African American individuals are shaped by the long-lasting impacts of slavery and the persistence of racism following the abolition of slavery (3). Racial mistreatment is a common thread that connects enslaved and post-slavery subjects; however, it can be observed that the challenges of the latter are sometimes overlooked (3). Nevertheless, the selected narratives for this research draw attention to the struggles of both of these generations of African American individuals whose fates are directly or indirectly overshadowed by the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination.

The present research consults the above definitions of neo-slave narratives to analyze the selected texts with respect to their genre so that neo-slave narratives can be distinguished from other types of narratives, and the phantasmic elements and figures embedded in the selected neo-slave narratives can be demystified.

Additionally, it is imperative for this research to differentiate neo-slave narratives from slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives are regarded as an evolved form of slave narratives but there are marked differences between the two. Locating the origin of slave narratives in the late 18th and early 19th century, William L. Andrews argues that the purpose of writing and publishing slave narratives was to promote abolitionist cause among white audiences by projecting that enslaved blacks were also "as human as American people" (qtd. in Olejniczak). This was assured by portraying that enslaved blacks could also be thoughtful, articulate, and susceptible to pain (Olejniczak). On the other hand, neo-slave narratives aim to highlight the importance of paying "penance" for the historical injustice inflicted upon African American community (Emmerich). Moreover, these narratives attempt to elicit empathy from readers for the historical suffering of African

Americans (Emmerich). Furthermore, slave narratives are written as autobiographies by former enslaved blacks, entailing first-hand experiences of slavery (Lentz). On the contrary, neo-slave narratives are fictional, and are informed by the historical knowledge of contemporary African American writers (Lentz). Moreover, another important difference between slave and neo-slave narratives is that the former is set in the antebellum period—the pre-Civil War period in American history (1812-1861)—while the latter can explore more than one temporality to offer a multifaceted understanding of the legacy of slavery.

1.2 Introduction to Enlightenment

Enlightenment refers to a philosophical movement that permeated the drastically changing Western world in the 17th and 18th century (Duignan). This period was marked by new discoveries in science and astronomy. The defining features of the American Enlightenment include skepticism, rationality, liberty, individualism, and progress (Ralston 1-2). The Enlightenment wave originating from Britain and France also revolutionized American society. Though the way the Enlightenment movement manifested itself in Europe and America differs slightly. While the European Enlightenment remained limited to abstract ideas and philosophies, in the American context, the movement displayed itself in practical form which shaped ideologies across diverse disciplines including religion, society, politics, and humanities (Meyer 167). Therefore, the Enlightenment movement is regarded as one of the primary forces that altered the course of American history. Moreover, the systems of knowledge that emerged in the Enlightenment period are designated under Enlightenment ontology. According to the American Enlightenment principles, knowledge about the world can only be derived from “secular reasoning, rationality, and scientific study” (Roediger). Making sense of the world in strict adherence to these principles constitutes the legacy of the Enlightenment period.

The reason that makes American Enlightenment ontology important to this research is that the movement inspired a rationalist approach to identify and explain the nature of things that exist in the world. To put it simply, American Enlightenment ontology questions and challenges the predominance of “first truths” i.e., religious discourses in the process of

making sense of the world (Meyer 15). It puts “science and reason” above faith and belief systems (Ralston 15). Moreover, American Enlightenment ontology adopts a skeptical approach toward “miraculous” and “supernatural” occurrences (3). The entities and phenomena that cannot be explained through science and reason are, therefore, reduced to superstition. While, at the same time, superstition is recognized as an enemy of Enlightenment (Meyer 169). The present research explores how such a skeptical approach towards the supernatural beliefs, specific to the black community, exoticizes the Igbo heritage in American society in the selected neo-slave narratives.

In other words, although it can be observed that the white characters in the selected narratives also get involved in circulating gossip about the hauntings of ghosts of the deceased enslaved, they treat it as only a form of idle pastime and amusement. They do not appear willing to heed the messages that these ghosts try to convey through their hauntings. It indicates that they are not only skeptical about the authenticity of this gossip but also contribute toward the exoticization of Igbo beliefs in the American context shaped by the legacy of Enlightenment. I return to this exoticizing element and its implications in the 4th chapter.

1.3 Afterlife in Igbo Cosmology: The Transformation into Ghosts or Ndiichie

The literary texts selected for this study portray the deceased enslaved characters in the form of ghosts and ndiichie spirits haunting the realm of living beings. To engage with this aspect of the selected neo-slave narratives, it is important to understand the Igbo vision of the afterlife. It is argued that in Igbo cosmology, the belief in ghosts and spirits is widely considered and affirmed as a supernatural reality (Aniago et al. 4). In addition to Igbo, other African ethnicities also profess a firm belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits (12). A Canadian author, Murray Leeder, proposes that the portrayal of ghosts in art and literature projects “memory and history” with their never-ending “traumatic” and “nostalgic” implications for the Igbo ethnicity (qtd. in Aniago 7). African American writers lay a claim on their ethnic heritage by conforming to the traditional worldviews upheld by Igbo people regarding supernatural entities.

Additionally, according to the studies published on Igbo cosmology, if people are “maltreated before death”, meet “untimely death”, are not served “normal burial rites”, and are “forgotten” by the living after their deaths, they remain stranded in the realm of the living as “ghosts” and “spirits” (Onukwube and Ngozi 2-5). The premature demise of a woman in childbirth and a lonely death also turn individuals into ghosts (7). According to Igbo traditions, these conditions are not suitable for a smooth journey to the afterlife. This is why these spirits seem to be “angry” and “restless”, and they vent their wrath in the form of “hatred” and “revenge” against people who wronged them in their lives and deprived them of their rights/rites (3-5). The unfair maltreatment that they receive in their lives and at the time of death turns into intense power (3). This power helps them to haunt and disrupt the lives of their perpetrators. It imbues them with the power to “hurt” the living (Aniago et al. 8). Therefore, the haunting of ghosts manifests the hostility of the dead towards the living who “ignored” them (8). These ghosts haunt the places they once inhabited as well as where they lost their lives.

It is observed that in the neo-slave narratives selected for this study, the ancestral spirits (i.e., *ndiichie*) of the deceased enslaved seem to be preoccupied with the well-being of their descendants. Their immense concern for their progeny depicted in these texts is indicative of their primary role as ancestors of the African American community. Therefore, it is important to study the role and significance of *ndiichie* in Igbo cosmology. In Igbo traditions, for an ancestor to be worshipped after death, it is important for him/her to lead a righteous life (Onukwube and Ngozi 10). Accordingly, sinful deeds, such as murder, sorcery, immorality, and lying blemish one’s virtue (10). Committing one of these deeds takes away one’s right to be revered and worshipped by their descendants after their death.

Moreover, according to Igbo people, among all beings and entities that are worshipped, the dead ancestors, “*ndiichie*”, care for the living the most (Onukwube and Ngozi 12). *Ndiichie* are the ancestors who have departed from the living realm to the celestial sphere (Anedo 7). The inevitable physical death and the eternal spiritual existence are the defining characteristics of *ndiichie* in Igbo cosmology (Ikechukwu 37). In E.G. Parrinder’s words, *ndiichie* are “guardians of morality” (qtd. in Onukwube and Ngozi 12).

They maintain moral and ethical principles for their progeny after their deaths. According to Onukwube, they are “liable to God alone” (4). They transcend the rest of the spiritual figures that are considered worthy of worship in the Igbo spirituality. This is why they can be regarded as an “intermediary” between their families and the supreme God (Mbiti 90). They take their families’ prayers and offerings to God and have them accepted (90). Due to this, ancestral spirits/ndiichie are identified as “bilingual” since they engage with living and divine beings (i.e., spirits and God) at the same time (90). Having experienced life in the physical realm, they are in a better position to understand the concerns of living beings. Accordingly, having become united with the divine beings, they can make pleas to the supreme God on behalf of their descendants (90). Therefore, worshipping ndiichie brings one closer to other divine beings.

However, it can be observed that contemporary Igbo people, influenced by Christianity, neglect the worship of their ancestors which symbolizes the act of forsaking one’s indigenous religion (Anedo 1). With the awareness of black authors and critics about the importance of indigenous African cultures, the genre of neo-slave narratives continues to foreground Afrocentric culture in African American literature. Therefore, the representation of ghosts and ndiichie in the selected neo-slave narratives can be deciphered as a return of African American literature to the traditional Igbo beliefs. The present research argues that the representation of these figures has multiple implications for the contemporary Afro-American community. Most importantly, it enables them to lay a claim on their Igbo heritage which, in turn, may help to regard phantasmic elements in Igbo beliefs as part of a legitimate worldview.

1.4 The Literary Texts Selected for the Study

The Afro-American neo-slave narratives selected for this study, *Grace* (2016) and *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021), contain many phantasmic elements that will be studied through the lens of Derridean hauntology and Stella Setka’s theorization of phantasmic representation in traumatic narratives.

One of the novels selected for this research is Natasha Deon’s *Grace* (2016). It narrates the story of an enslaved girl, Naomi, whose family is murdered by their white

master for defying his authority. To ensure her own survival, Naomi has to take her master's life. After successfully escaping, she is granted refuge by Cynthia, a Jewish prostitute. Naomi, as a headstrong teenager, is well-protected in her care until she becomes romantically involved with a white man who abandons her after she gets pregnant. Eventually, she is hunted down by a bunch of white men for murdering her white master in her childhood. They shoot her dead right after she gives birth to her daughter, Josey. Afterwards, Naomi's spirit is seen as haunting the living realm to protect Josey.

The second novel selected for this study, LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021), is about a young black woman, Mira, who is invited to her hometown, Kipsen, to attend the wedding of her white friend, Celine. Hoping to run into her childhood crush, Jesse, a young black man, she decides to attend the wedding. However, she is jolted to learn that the wedding is going to take place at an antebellum theme park, erected over a former tobacco plantation. Unable to change anything, Mira and Jesse begin to experience paranormal occurrences such as witnessing apparitions. While they undergo eerie encounters with these apparitions, some white townsfolk are mysteriously killed while others gossip about the ghosts of the enslaved blacks that might be taking revenge on the descendants of the owner of the tobacco plantation who mercilessly tortured them after their failed attempt to escape their white masters. It compels the characters of the novel to uncover the forgotten stories of racial oppression.

After this brief overview of the selected novels, the following section explains the employed theories with some of their key terms that will help us to understand the argument of this research.

1.5 An Overview of the Key Terms

One of the key terms in this research is phantasm. This word is borrowed from one of the theories invoked as a lens for this research. It is used by Stella Setka, a contemporary literary theorist, in the book *Empathy and the Phantasmic in Ethnic American Trauma Narratives* (2020). Setka refers to the supernatural elements and figures portrayed in ethnic fiction as phantasmic. To ensure clarity, Setka begins by providing a definition for the term phantasm. She defines phantasm as supernatural and fantastic elements that can take

multiple forms in literature, depending upon their suitability with the subject matter of the texts. Some notable examples of phantasm are “ghosts, reincarnation, time travel, or a bending of the time-space continuum...” (2). However, instead of being arbitrary and unexplainable, the phantasmic elements in traumatic narratives seem to be deeply rooted in the ethnic belief system of the people being represented. Setka observes that traumatic ethnic narratives seem to frequently incorporate culturally specific phantasmic elements and figures in literary texts to address the disturbing experiences of violence committed against marginalized groups (13). In other words, the phantasm represented in African American neo-slave narratives can potentially be based on the black community’s cultural and ethnic beliefs.

Another key term is historiography which denotes the political motivations that influence the way history is documented. A crucial feature of these neo-slave narratives is to challenge American “historiography” to revive the erased historical accounts of the atrocities committed against enslaved blacks by white slave owners (Setka 11). The selected literary texts expose how hegemonic versions of history fall short of representing the plight of subjugated and marginalized groups of society.

Enlightenment ontology is also a crucial term for this research. Broadening the scope of Enlightenment ontology is an important feature of the phantasmic representation of traumatic narratives (Setka 14). Enlightenment ontology understands and classifies things existing in the world from the perspective of Western realism and rationality (14). Therefore, it only documents monolithic versions of American worldview and history that privilege the position of white Americans. However, the proliferation of phantasmic elements to represent and revise the stories of subjugated enslaved blacks in the selected neo-slave narratives calls this tradition into question by constituting and developing historical accounts based on the ethnic beliefs, worldviews, lived experiences, and intergenerational trauma of African Americans who were enslaved and tormented in the antebellum period (the pre-Civil War period in American history, 1812-1861).

Another keyword in this research is haunting. Haunting, in Derrida’s book *Specters of Marx* (1993), is defined as “the return of the dead”, “reapparition of the departed” and “resurrection” of elements from social and historical past (5, 148). These specters

epitomize the legacy of the past that seems to haunt societies. However, they manifest themselves in a form that is not readily apparent or discernable.

Having introduced the selected neo-slave narratives, adopted theories, and key terms, it is time to compose a clear and comprehensive thesis statement.

1.6 Thesis Statement

Afro-American neo-slave narratives, *Grace* and *When the Reckoning Comes*, written with contemporary black subjectivity and infused with culturally informed phantasmic and supernatural elements, seem to make room for Igbo cosmology in American Enlightenment ontology, thereby differentiating between documented history and communal memory. At the same time, these narratives portray haunting ancestral spirits that, serving as sites of communal memory, help to reconfigure the subject position of enslaved blacks and reclaim black agency.

1.7 Research Questions

1. In what ways do phantasmic elements in the selected neo-slave narratives challenge and extend the parameters of American historiography and Enlightenment ontology that view Igbo cosmology as irrational and exotic?
2. How do the ghostly figures contest and renegotiate subject positions of enslaved and post-slavery subjects in the neo-slave narratives selected for this study?
3. How do the selected neo-slave narratives use phantasmic elements to reclaim the lost agency of black subjects?

1.8 Research Objectives

1. To understand the nature and function of haunting ghosts in neo-slave narratives
2. To explore how Afro-American authors call hegemonic accounts of American historiography into question
3. To observe how Enlightenment ontology is stretched to concur with Igbo cosmology in the selected neo-slave narratives
4. To study how neo-slave narratives reclaim Igbo heritage and black agency

1.9 Significance and Rationale

Although extensive research has been carried out on African American neo-slave narratives, there are a few newly emerging theoretical perspectives that have not been thoroughly applied to the analysis of the neo-slave genre. To engage with a newly introduced theory in relation to ethnic fiction, the present research invokes Stella Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives proposed in the year 2020. Setka has written a book and a few articles to present her ideas about the nature and implications of phantasmic elements in neo-slave narratives. Only a handful of literary texts have been analyzed in light of this recently theorized perspective. Moreover, the second lens of this research is Derrida's concept of hauntology, proposed in 1993. The concept of hauntology has been applied to multiple fictional texts. What remains to be done is its application on the selected neo-slave narratives to demonstrate how spectral hauntings in these narratives widen the scope of the Enlightenment ontology which dismisses the credibility of phantasmic elements embedded in cultures and cosmologies exclusive to African American heritage. The present research examines how phantasmic elements in the selected narratives as understood within the context of Igbo culture and beliefs. It also highlights the various implications of reclaiming Igbo heritage for the contemporary African American community.

This research also attempts to make a theoretical intervention in Stella Setka's work by adding the concept of 'retributive justice' to it. Another significant aspect of the present research is that it uses recently published literary texts that have not been exhaustively analyzed so far. It provides a thorough study of these novels for the scholars engaging with the phantasmic representation of ethnic traumatic narratives.

1.10 Delimitation

This research is delimited to two neo-slave narratives i.e., Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021). The study is limited to the representation of phantasmic elements and figures in the selected neo-slave narratives. This research will include ideas and concepts proposed by Stella Setka and Jacques Derrida that explore the role of culturally specific phantasmic elements and

spectral figures in the selected literary texts. The researcher knows that the concept of phantasm and hauntology is applicable to many other literary genres and texts, but these two neo-slave narratives are more suitable for the current study because they foreground ghostly hauntings explored in this research.

1.11 Chapter Breakdown/Organization of the Study

1.11.1 Chapter I: Introduction

The first chapter highlights what this research aims to explore and accomplish, with a comprehensive discussion on the primary texts as well as the genre of the selected literary texts. In addition, this chapter entails thesis statement, research questions and significance of the study.

1.11.2 Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of available studies on the literary texts and theories adopted for this study. The purpose of this review is to identify gaps in the previously published studies in the relevant research area so that the present study can contribute to the existing scholarship in this field.

1.11.3 Chapter III: Research Methodology

The first section introduces and explains the adopted theories so that this research can be pinned into the existing theoretical concepts and approaches in the field of the present research. The latter section of the chapter describes what research method is employed in this research, along with its rationale which explains how the selected method is suitable for the current study.

1.11.4 Chapter IV: Subversive Potential of Haunting Figures in Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) And LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021)

This chapter analyzes the selected neo-slave narratives to study how haunting figures help to challenge Enlightenment skepticism towards the ethnic supernatural. They also contribute to the expansion of the scope of historiography by narrating the tales of the slavery and racial oppression to their descendants.

1.11.5 Chapter V: Phantasmic Intervention to Reposition Black Subject in Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021)

This chapter studies the selected neo-slave narratives to analyze the ways in which ghosts and ancestral spirits of enslaved blacks reclaim black agency and reshape the subject position of their progeny in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery. This also enables their descendants to fight post-slavery racism.

1.11.6 Chapter VI: Conclusion

This chapter presents an overview of this research thesis. It provides a summary of this research with its key findings and contributions to the African American literature.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of available studies on the literary texts and theories adopted for this research. The purpose of this review is to identify gaps in the previously published studies in the relevant research area so that the present study can contribute to the existing scholarship on the implication of phantasmic elements in Afro-American neo-slave narratives. This chapter is divided into multiple sections that review the studies carried out on the selected theories and literary texts one by one. These sections review the literature in the following sections.

- I. Review of literature on Derrida's Hauntology
- II. Reviewing the literature on Stella Setka's theory of phantasmic ethnic narratives
- III. Reviewing studies on neo-slave narratives
- IV. Reviewing studies on the selected literary texts

A number of theses, research papers, and journal articles are consulted to review Jacques Derrida's theory of hauntology and Stella Setka's theory of phantasmic ethnic narratives. This literature review also accounts for the foundational works on which these concepts are formulated and developed by Derrida and Setka. Moreover, an attempt has been made to incorporate literature related to the selected literary texts that are used for textual analysis in this study. However, these texts have not been extensively studied and explored by research scholars and literary critics, therefore, the available literature on these literary texts mainly comprises multiple book reviews published in a number of websites and magazines.

The following section reviews studies published on Jacques Derrida's concept of Hauntology.

2.1 Reviewing Literature on Jacques Derrida's Hauntology

Colin Davis' research paper "Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms" locates the origin of the concept of hauntology. He defines a ghost as any figure that intrudes into our lives and cannot be described or understood within conventional ontology. His study finds

out that Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok were the first critics who critically engaged with the concept of a phantom, but their ideas did not receive acclaim and popularity. According to many scholars, their studies on this subject remain considerably ambiguous and obscure to readers. However, Derrida's subsequent publications on this subject do not address the difference between Derrida's "specters" and Abraham and Torok's "phantoms" (C. Davis 376). Davis distinguishes between them by claiming that Derrida's specter is deconstructive, and it remains stranded between presence and absence. Its deconstructive nature refers to the way hauntings can challenge or reinforce the existing power structures of society.

Derrida urges his readers to face these specters, not to dig up a hidden truth from the past but to simply deconstruct the element of secrecy that defines the limitations of human knowledge and language. On the contrary, Abraham and Torok's phantom is an ancestral figure represented in literature that usually exposes secrets from the past. It may also tell lies to cover its own "shameful" history (374). This point makes it clear that Abraham and Torok's phantoms are not as reliable as Derrida's specters. In short, Derrida's specters lead the future while Abraham and Torok's phantoms are trapped in the past. The inability of scholars to assign specters a position in Derridean binaries sustains the element of secrecy inherent in their existence (while, Derrida's binaries are alive/dead, visible/invisible, tangible/intangible, etc.). Moving forward, the current research only engages with Derridean specters that, in the form of ancestral spirits, turn the attention of the characters of the selected literary texts to the injustices done in the past so that their future can take a new direction.

Cihat Arıncı's thesis entitled *Postcolonial Ghosts in New Turkish Cinema: A Deconstructive Politics of Memory in Dervis Zaim's 'The Cyprus Trilogy'* (2015) is a study on hauntings of the ghosts subjected to violence in Cyprus under communal conflicts and colonization. He analyzes the film series entitled Cyprus Trilogy to address the politics of memory after the partition of Island (Arıncı 7). The communal memory of the colonial subjects in these films is deconstructed through Derrida's theorization of hauntology. Content analysis is used as a tool to analyze the selected movies. This study establishes that, according to the representation of Turkish Cypriots in films, colonized subjects are

reduced to ghostly figures that are othered, crippled, maimed, and silenced (18). This paper complicates the way Turkish Cypriots engage with postcolonial ghosts and formulate their identities accordingly. The research deals with the phenomenon of engaging with selective memory to counter the hegemony of master narratives that still lingers in history. Arıncı's thesis uses the word 'ghost' as a stylistic term to refer to the lingering, albeit concealed impacts of colonial legacy in the lives of Cypriots. Moving a step ahead of this thesis, the present research engages with the representation of supernatural ghosts as a literary device to explore how the authors of the selected neo-slave narratives resort to culturally specific phantasm to give expression to the traumatic history of slavery.

Nchamah Miller's journal article "Hauntology and History in Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx" (2003) engages with how the concept of temporality is complicated and disrupted in Derrida's hauntology. The article argues that Derrida's hauntology expounds on the insufficiency of present/contemporary time in the arena of temporalities. It shows that the present time carries indelible marks of the past and foreshadows the future. Furthermore, Miller explains the haunting of specters as a repetitive act carried out by the obsession of the past with the present. However, such disjunction of time (intermingling of past, present, and future) is accompanied by feelings of discomfort and fear. These irruptions of the past in the present time challenge the totality of theology, ontology, and dichotomy (Miller 3). According to this article, Derrida's analysis of Karl Marx's conception of history invalidates the usual ubiquitous understanding of history's contemporaneous reading only, and therefore, Marx seems to be leaning towards the possibility of a spectral outlook of the time.

This article also examines how memories of the past and the predictions of the future constitute specters that disregard the rigidity of a singular temporality. Miller finds out that, for both of these philosophers, texts, and legacies of preceding intellectuals, who influence their thoughts, are the ghosts who crack the notion of a contemporaneous reality (10). The key finding of the Miller's article is that Marx believes that the specters of a communist future haunt the ruling European class, an argument which is further problematized by Derrida to show the presences and absences of the elements of one social class in another (8). Marx's Manifesto was based on the history of exploitation of the labour

class and the perils of developing capitalist states, therefore, it draws on several events from the past and the imminent dangers that may perpetuate the exploitation of the underprivileged in future. Therefore, the specters from different temporalities (past, present, and future) hint toward disjointed events (13). As a result, the spirit of one revolution turns out to be the haunting specter of the next revolution which gives birth to “spectropolitics” (14-15). Therefore, Miller concludes that it is the spectropolitics that challenges the synchronic view of history and time. Miller’s article focuses on the relationship between temporality and social class, while the present research studies the nature and role of the ghosts of the enslaved blacks in the selected literary texts that tell the stories of their pain and bondage forgotten by the post-slavery generations.

Stephanie L. Tripp’s dissertation entitled *Hauntology and Humanities Studies* (2016) examines the emerging literary trends. The researcher analyzes contemporary gothic aesthetics and notes that the new writings in the genre of gothic literature are inspired by classical gothic texts such as *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Matrix* (1999), *Metropolis* (1927), and *Myst* (1993). This study uses exploratory analysis to identify the newly introduced trends in gothic literature. The theoretical framework combines hauntology and psychoanalysis to explore and visit the liminal spaces between the representation of presence/absence and life/death in the selected gothic fiction. The researcher identifies the term “hauntology” as a pun on conventional ontologies which fail to distinguish the self from the mysterious other (Tripp 42). In light of her study on temporality in gothic literature, Tripp argues that the recent popularity of ghostly figures in popular culture and academic discourse is inspired and informed by the classical texts selected for this dissertation.

This study also observes that gothic elements foregrounded by psychoanalytical approaches to literature are the intermingling of one’s unconscious mind with the conscious mind (43-44). Moreover, this process evolves with the changes taking place in human reality. This is the reason why the concept of haunting that originates from philosophy catches up to the contemporary discourse on virtual reality in the field of information technology. This also explains the return of Gothic trends to digital and popular literature as modern advancements are taking place in technology, resulting in a shift from print

literacy to digital culture. In a similar way, the role of hermeneutics in the age of print is considered similar to the role of dissemination of knowledge in the age of the internet (47). Additionally, the disruption of hauntings in the sequential continuity of time, as discussed by Derridean hauntology, forms a new connection between an individual and his/her social and cultural past (48). These connections are also created between individual and collective identity in the technological world. While Tripp's thesis deals with the new approaches to psychoanalytical and gothic literature in the era of technological advancement, the present study is based on the contemporary African American neo-slave narratives that portray multiple Igbo-specific phantasmic elements to revitalize the study of racial injustice carried out in the era of slavery in America.

Line Henriksen, in his dissertation *In the Company of Ghosts* (2016), tries to take a philosophical position on the study of ghosts in hauntology. He argues that hauntings hinder people from delineating past, present, and future in the process of studying history. The reason behind it is that the apprehensions of the past keep on visiting the present. Moreover, the emerging trend of virtual creatures featured in internet storytelling further complicates the demarcation among different temporalities. As a result, the notion of hauntology enters the new discipline of digital humanities (Henriksen 14). The supernatural creatures in this genre are considered as re-visitations of the past literary traditions i.e., hauntings of folklore ghosts. These re-visitations can even refer to the iterations of linguistic features from an old language that is no longer in use (20). Furthermore, Henriksen observes that the figure of the specter in literary traditions signifies the agency of the people who are no longer present and the ones who are yet to be born. This makes room for absent presences that create disruption in the understanding of time and space. Besides, the consideration for hauntological ethics in Derridean hauntology calls for attention to the specters of the past (14). While Henriksen's study of hauntology is placed into the discipline of philosophy, the present research studies selected Afro-American texts from the perspective of Derridean hauntology and Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives.

A research essay, "Hauntology and Cognition: Questions of Knowledge, Pasts and Futures" (2017) written by Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Katarzyna Więckowska studies the

development of spectrality studies, following the growing interest in ghosts and hauntings in literature. It observes that Derrida's exploration of specters calls for ethical responsibility towards historical figures, an approach that is indifferently reduced to mere superstition. The researchers observe that the figure of the specter evolved from a superstitious entity to a politically significant body. The researchers also examine the ways in which Derrida's hauntology is considered an unscholarly endeavor. The specters are the "silenced others" who prevent a future detached from the melancholy of past atrocities committed against certain ethnicities, races, and disabled individuals (Lorek-Jezińska and Więckowska 11-13). The researcher also takes into account Julian Wolfreys' proposition that all pieces of literature are ghostly. No text can be written and interpreted without involving the invocation of ghosts, therefore, it is maintained that texts give concrete forms to otherwise ambiguous spectral figures. The goal of spectrality studies is not only to identify the nature of ghosts but also what and who is haunted by them (19). It leads to a wholesome understanding of the subject.

This paper also reviews how many contemporary video games follow the trajectory of hauntology by not only allowing the players to witness others' sufferings from the past but also experiencing a chunk of somewhat identical to historical violence. This paper maintains that all literary and scholarly texts contain residues of the past in the form of ghosts, on the other hand, the present research digs deeper into the nature and role of these ghosts in the selected African American neo-slave narratives, particularly how these ghosts serve to revitalize ethnic cosmology and reconfigure black subjectivity.

Tyson Stewart, in his book *Cinema Derrida: The Law of Inspection in the Age of Global Spectral Film and Video* (2016) studies the concept of hauntology presented in the biographical documentary films made on Derrida's life and work. The filmmaker Safaa Fathy made *D'ailleurs, Derrida* (1999), and Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick co-directed *Derrida* (2002). The relevance of Stewart's book can be established by focusing on the portrayal of hauntology in these documentaries. The documentaries also help Stewart to study the representation of deconstructive criticism in visual arts. He identifies specters as symbols of political mourning that can be observed in historical texts, lived experiences, and memories of unprivileged groups of people (Stewart 2). According to Stewart, these

specters necessitate confrontation and negotiation with one's cultural, social, and historical past so that ethical lessons can be handed down to new generations. The author also examines these films to configure the ways in which such mourning can only be suitable for othered subjects, the ones that readers do not identify with (3-4). However, it needs to be ensured that the otherness of the other subjects and communities remains intact. Stewart's book predominantly focuses on the relationship between spectrality and film studies developed by adapting Derrida's deconstructive theory to visual arts. On the other hand, the present research extends the exploration of spectrality to the selected neo-slave narratives to foreground the importance of re-engaging with historical memory as a tool to cope with racial trauma.

Nermin Saybasili, in his thesis *Borders and Ghosts: Migratory Hauntings in Contemporary Visual Cultures* (2008) analyzes the experience of migration by using Derridean hauntology as a theoretical guide. A number of ethnographic case studies are selected as the main texts for analysis. The researcher uses the figure of specters as a metaphor to uncover the concealed harsh realities that immigrants encounter throughout the world. These issues range from unwelcoming states, power relations, and effects of globalization (Saybasili 17). Saybasili notes that the immigrants living in border zones experience dynamic temporality where no moment is isolated from past history and future prospects. The researcher equates illegal immigrants to ghosts as they hide from legal authorities in the host countries (314). Their experiences remain haunted and seek the hospitality that Derrida calls for. Saybasili's analysis is limited to the challenges faced by immigrants. However, the present study diverts the focus from immigrants to captured and uprooted blacks from African tribes in order to serve as plantation slaves in the Southern United States. The selected literary texts for the present research portray the ghosts of these enslaved blacks haunting their modern-day descendants in contemporary America to keep the memory of their traumatic past alive.

In a research paper "Specters and Spooks: Developing a Hauntology of the black Body" (2014), Kashif Jerome Powell engages with Derrida's concept of hauntology and Fanon's views on colonial violence. The paper observes that the study of blackness engages with the spectral representation of violence and torture that enslaved blacks were subjected

to. The institution of slavery made blackness/black skin a marker of bodies that falls short of the criteria to live. Therefore, racism perceives a black body as a form of “death/absence” (Powell 7). Moreover, black bodies are discriminated against in contemporary times because they are the hauntings of enslaved black bodies from the era of slavery. Powell argues that this is the reason why extremely racist views consider black bodies as collections of corpses (102). Powell concludes his paper by drawing a connection between death, black body, and blackness through the ontological understanding of hauntings. While Powell’s paper deals with the forms of violence that black bodies are subjected to on the basis of color and race, the present research focuses on the ghostly presence of deceased enslaved blacks who are stranded in the realm of the living to exact vengeance on their oppressors.

Having reviewed literature relevant to Jacques Derrida’s hauntology, now I will turn to reviewing studies published on Stella Setka’s theory of phantasmic ethnic narratives.

2.2 Reviewing Literature on Stella Setka’s Theory of Phantasmic Ethnic Narratives

Alexa Weik von Mossner’s book *Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology* (2022) examines how emerging American scholars engage narratology with critical race theory. The book notes that Setka’s work on phantasmic ethnic narratives is a reminder that trauma ensuing from the loss of memory is as painful as tragic communal memory (Mossner 4). The book explains that Setka draws on the midrashic storytelling style used in Jewish scriptures to identify how to fill gaps in holocaust narratives (4). The primary objective of this approach is to follow the modes of interpretation that originated and developed within the Jewish community, particularly by third-generation Jewish authors (8). The silenced voices in their narratives highlight the loss suffered by the entire Jewish community and estimate the role of available historical archives in carrying out intergenerational trauma. While Mossner’s work applies Setka’s theorization of holocaust narratives that engage the storytelling tools used in Jewish scriptures, the present research studies the significance of culturally informed phantasmic elements in Afro-American Neo-slave narratives.

Emily Ruth Rutter's article "Empathy and the Phantasmic in Ethnic American Trauma Narratives by Stella Setka" (2021) reviews Stella Setka's works and elaborates that stories portrayed in historical novels and films challenge the "culture of denial" and present unique and innovative ways to historically suppressed communities to enable them to connect with their ancestry (210). The article notes that Setka's book not only emphasizes the importance of understanding the trauma of different communities but also invites readers to accept their responsibility and involvement in others' suffering. The article also consults Setka's examination of tribalogy in LeAnne Howe's novels that use the literary tool of time travel which connects an international journalist with her ethnic roots. The journalist is able to connect herself with her Choctaw ethnicity by following a baseball team, as baseball sport is native to the Choctaw community. While Rutter's article only reviews Setka's works, the present research studies how revenge carried out by supernatural and ghostly figures can help Afro-American authors to address the trauma of slavery.

The research paper "Property and Possession in Gayl Jones's Novel *Corregidora*: A Study in African American Literature and Literary Theory" (2021) written by Raindrop Wright and Dhiffaf Ibrahim Al-Shwillay analyzes Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1975) by using Stella Sekta's theorization of trauma narratives and the Marxist concept of commodification. The paper applies these theories to study how the bodies of enslaved female blacks were commodified in the patriarchal setup of the Southern United States. One of Setka's research papers is also consulted to study black feminism in the character of *Corregidora*'s protagonist, Ursa, to deconstruct the role of "black female sexuality" in slave narratives (Wright and Al-Shwillay 5626). It is observed that Setka identifies that the communal memory of enslaved blacks helps Ursa to cope with the trauma of racialized violence. Moreover, the researchers engage with how Setka engages with Toni Morrison's concept of re-memory to develop a new term "traumatic re-memory" that functions as a coping strategy for historical trauma (5626). In short, to break free from the trauma of racial oppression suffered by enslaved blacks at the hands of their white masters, post-slavery subjects can engage in recognition and acceptance of their communal memory. This can possibly act as a healing agent for the black community (5626). Wright also attempts to find a gap in Setka's work, arguing that Setka's study of black feminism omits the

detrimental consequences of capitalism on the bodies of enslaved blacks. The present study will employ Setka's views on the study of the selected neo-slave narratives that portray the communal memory of enslaved blacks in the form of ghostly figures who attempt to reclaim their lost agency.

Eva Wühr, in her Ph. D dissertation entitled *Rethinking Past and Future: Identity and Trauma in Contemporary Afrodiasporic Women's Speculative Fiction* (2021) attempts to expand on Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives to develop a study for "Afro-speculative trauma narratives" (9). Wühr cites Setka's work to re-emphasize that diasporic African writers use phantasmic elements to foreground Afro-diasporic ways of knowing which previously have been rejected by Western rationalists. Therefore, it can be stated that realist fiction does not effectively create a link between history and trauma (9). Wühr relates Setka's theory with Afrofuturism which uses African culture to reconnect African Americans with their ancestry (2). On the other hand, the present study places Setka's theory in conversation with Derridean hauntology to analyze the nature and function of vengeful ghosts in the selected literary texts.

Having reviewed studies available on Stella Setka's phantasmic ethnic narratives, now I will review studies published on African American slave narratives.

2.3 Reviewing Studies on Neo-slave Narratives

T. Selvakkumar's research paper "black Identity, The Supernatural and the Spiritual Elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (2017) addresses the supernatural elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) from the lens of the black aesthetic theory. The paper elaborates on ethnocentrism in American society which undermines African cultures and practices in the lives of enslaved blacks (Selvakkumar 26). The use of supernatural and spiritual elements in the writings of Afro-American authors highlights their attempt to reclaim their ethnic heritage through literature. Although these elements can be interpreted through a psychological point of view instead of ethnic cosmologies, they still help to constitute black identity anchored in African ethnic beliefs. Having discussed that, it is important to highlight that the present research digs deeper into the implications of supernatural elements in neo-slave narratives. The literary strategy of portraying supernatural figures

specific to African ethnic beliefs not only enables Afro-American authors to reconnect with their African ethnicities but also serves numerous other purposes. Some of these purposes are enlisted by Stella Setka in her theory selected for this research, while one is suggested by the researcher in the last chapter of this research as a theoretical intervention.

To discuss the similarity between fantastic and African American literature, Sherryl Vint has written an article ““Only by Experience”: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-slave Narratives” (2007). It studies two quintessential works of neo-slave narratives i.e., *Beloved* (1987) and *Kindred* (1979). It explains how the so-called realist and objective portrayals of the experience of slavery in American historical fiction embody master narratives (Vint 241). Therefore, Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler use fantasy and supernatural figures to enmesh the past into the present, as a result of which, readers can learn history that seems to be neither distant nor exotic. Therefore, fantastic slave narratives stick to the postmodernist notion of pluralistic mini-narratives. Vint’s work is based on exhaustively analyzed texts categorized as slave narratives. On the contrary, the present research moves a step beyond this and selects newly published literary texts that may be labeled as neo-slave narratives. Unlike Vint’s article which focuses on fantastic elements as a way of integrating the history of slavery and post-slavery racism in America, the present research uncovers the implications of phantasmic elements incorporated in the selected neo-slave narratives.

Maja Milatovic’s article "Reclaimed Genealogies: Reconsidering the Ancestor Figure in African American Women Writers’ Neo-Slave Narratives" (2014) has conducted research on the role and importance of ancestral figures in neo-slave narratives. Drawing her study on literary texts such as *Corregidora* (1975), *Beloved* (1987), *Kindred* (1979), and *Jubilee* (1966), Milatovic explores the process through which African American female authors reconfigure the identity of black females by building their connection with their history and ancestors (5). This research also deals with the problem of post-slavery generations of black Americans who consider their history as a burden that undermines the growth of their subjectivities and personhood (5). Moreover, it is explicated that the selected novels serve to attribute affective value to African heritage that emerges as a site of identity construction. Unlike Milatovic’s work which delves deep into the identity

formation of black females, the current research focuses on the role and implication of ghostly figures in the selected neo-slave narratives to build a connection between enslaved and post-slavery subjects in America. The present research deals with the history of slavery as a forgotten as well as erased past, instead of a burden for the contemporary African Americans as proposed by Milatovic's work.

Viviane Saleh-Hanna's research essay "black Feminist Hauntology: Rememory the Ghosts of Abolition" (2015) is a study on feminist hauntology. The essay observes that the criminal justice system in America is erected on a deeply rooted racism dating back to the colonization of Africa. It is argued that anti-blackness has always been a problem and it can only be resolved through an abolitionist approach with which feminist female authors create literary works. In addition, anti-slavery movements need to be endorsed to exorcise the ghosts of violence and re-position hierarchical relationships between white and black Americans. The researcher uses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) as the selected literary text to develop a critique of fugitive slave laws. *Beloved* is based on the real-life story of Margaret, a black woman who murdered her own daughter to save her from the brutalities of slavery. As a result, many white abolitionists protested to make her stand trial in a court of law. The researcher observes that these so-called proponents of abolitionism remained unsuccessful in decolonizing the fugitive slave laws that could result in a just ruling. Although white abolitionists preserved their morality by condemning the institution of slavery, they pronounced a judgment against Margaret which perpetuated the victimization of enslaved black women. The essay concludes that the notions of anti-blackness and white supremacy define the lived experiences of enslaved blacks. On the other hand, the present research moves away from the discussion on the racism inherent in the postcolonial criminal justice system in America and specifically emphasizes the need for retributive justice achieved by the tormented enslaved subjects themselves.

Elisabeth M. Loevlie's dissertation entitled *Faith in the Ghosts of Literature: Poetic Hauntology in Derrida, Blanchot and Morrison's Beloved* (2013) identifies that Toni Morrison's fiction urges readers to have faith in literary ghosts. Loevlie argues that, like *Beloved*, every text is embedded with the hauntings of ghostly figures that seem to be unreadable. Drawing on Maurice Blanchot's views, the researcher puts forth the notion that

the presence of ghosts is embedded in every text. If the haunting of these ghosts is not recognized, readers may not be able to comprehend the essence of literature (Loevlie 348). Therefore, readers and critics need to identify hauntings in literary texts and how they broaden the scope of literature and language. Loevlie's work seems to be using the term haunting to refer to socio-political and historical consciousness reflected in literary texts. Moving ahead of this argument, the present research deals with the incorporation of supernatural elements in neo-slave narratives as a literary strategy adopted by the selected Afro-American authors who aim for the extension of the Western ontology to include supernatural figures from African belief systems.

Now that the literature review on slave narratives has been conducted, I will turn to review studies on the selected literary texts.

2.4 Review of Literature on Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021)

To provide readers with an insight into the plot, setting, characterization, and thematic significance of Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021), a review of available studies on these texts is given below.

Alicia Mosley has written a book review on Natasha Deon's *Grace* in 2017. She writes that Cynthia's character represents Deon's complex and multi-layered characterization which results in the formation of realistic and grey characters. According to her, Deon particularly engages herself with the subject position of enslaved female blacks who were physically exploited by their white masters. Moreover, their mother instinct was undermined, which shows that love and family are not sufficient to protect someone from the brutalities of racial subjugation (Mosley). Mosley remains perplexed over how the characters of the novel will be bestowed upon with grace as implied in the title of the novel. Moving forward, the current research is delimited to the study of ghosts of enslaved subjects who haunt contemporary American society in the selected narratives.

An editorial "The Haunted Past" published in The New York Times by Jennifer Wilson in 2022 addresses multiple slave narratives that feature ghosts. It discusses why slave narratives are sometimes written as horror fiction in which ghosts keep on haunting

the living. It proposes that these figures of haunting are roaming around in search of recompense and peace. These ghosts symbolize the unfinished business of the people who fell victim to the socio-political tragedies of their times. Therefore, their hauntings in contemporary American literature are a sign of their call for justice in the light of evolved subjectivities and modern moral standards. Moving beyond this article, the present research explores the torments of slavery that the ghosts of enslaved subjects need to avenge in order to constitute a just society for their emancipated descendants who still face multiple forms of racism in the selected narratives.

Nathan Adams, reviewing *Grace* in 2016, writes that the sexual politics depicted in the novel reverberate in the contemporary time with female sexualities being used to manipulate women. The threat of “sexual exploitation” still lingers in the society (Adams n. pag.). The wrongs done in the past during the times of slavery keep on repeating, waiting for societies to redeem themselves. However, such a redemption does not seem to be easy to achieve in contemporary times. Moving forward, the present research analyzes the role of the ghosts of female enslaved who have been subject to rape and other forms of sexual abuse just like Naomi’s mother in the novel *Grace*. However, Naomi as ndiichie puts an end to the sexual exploitation that her daughter suffers at the hands of a white man even after the proclamation of emancipation.

Taylor Simon writes a review in 2022 on LaTanya McQueen’s *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021). She considers the novel an account of “post-traumatic slave syndrome” which explains how Jesse, the innocent black guy, was suspected and arrested for murder on the basis of his race (Simon n. pag.). It also explains why Mira’s black family strives to live in the white community, considering it the only way to upgrade social status. Race becomes the primary source of self-worth in the society represented by McQueen. Having reviewed it, the present research moves on to examine how the haunting ghostly figures help to counter racism faced by their descendants in the selected narratives.

Brandon Stanwyck writes in a book review in 2021 that, in *When the Reckoning Comes*, Celine’s decision to hold her wedding at a former slave plantation that committed brutal atrocities against the unsuccessfully revolting slaves shows the historical blindness of present-day Americans. The clichéd image of “kindhearted belles and benevolent

masters” is what people expect from the slave-owning societies and times (Stanwyck n. pag.). Most people engage with history that is whitewashed and diluted by the metanarratives. To fill the gap in this article, the current research challenges Western historiography to foreground the lived experiences of enslaved blacks.

A website entitled Kate’s Review published an online article in 2021 on *When the Reckoning Comes* to emphasize the declining respect for historical sites in present-day America. The article observes that contemporary Americans do not seem to be engaging with the horrors of history, therefore, novelists like LaTanya McQueen use horror elements and vengeful ghostly spirits to avoid historical amnesia. Therefore, this novel makes readers face the horrors of past ages that flourished on the backs of enslaved blacks. It is proposed that the ghosts in the novel have “legitimate reasons” to be enraged and vengeful (Kate n. p.). These ghosts represent the trauma that haunts the descendants of enslaved subjects. In the novel, the use of a former plantation as the wedding venue is itself a recipe for disaster. Thus, the ghosts take this opportunity to subvert the constant invisibility that they have been subjected to even before their deaths. The present research takes the former tobacco plantation in the selected narratives as a site of ghostly hauntings that can only be exorcised through the recognition of the historical trauma and restoration of retributive justice at the hands of the specters of enslaved blacks.

2.5 Identifying the Gap in Existing Studies

The information given above highlights different perspectives of multiple researchers and critics on the role, function, and importance of ghostly figures in slave narratives. The literature review composed for this study reveals that a minimal amount of work has been done on the literary texts selected for this research. It brings to attention the requirement and scope of the research on Natasha Deon’s *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen’s *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021). Furthermore, it also throws light on a gap in the existing studies on supernatural elements in slave narratives.

Almost all the research papers and theses reviewed above give an idea that, despite extensive studies on the ghosts portrayed in ethnic fiction and slave narratives, little attempt has been made to identify the origin and rationale of depicting the culturally specific

phantasmic elements and supernatural figures in ethnic narratives. This research will examine supernatural figures and phantasmic elements in the selected Afro-American neo-slave narratives and relate them to Igbo cosmology. Moreover, this research will find out how Igbo-specific phantasmic elements help to challenge the Enlightenment approach to American literature which may discredit culturally specific supernatural as irrational or unrealistic. It will explore how the black community tries to exert power over their own narratives by portraying Igbo-specific phantasmic elements in neo-slave narratives. To add more depth to the existing studies on neo-slave narratives, this study will focus on the significance of incorporating the communal memory of the black community into American historical narratives using phantasm.

2.6 Conclusion

The above literature review helps the researcher to comprehend the theoretical concepts and literary texts used in this study. It also helps to explore how deeply this area of study has been examined. Alongside this, the limitations of the reviewed studies are also highlighted. A gap is also identified in the previously published studies in the relevant research area so that the present study can contribute to the existing scholarship on the significance of phantasmic elements in Afro-American neo-slave narratives.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter of the research has two main sections. The first section introduces and explains the theories applied to the present research so that it can have a strong theoretical foundation in the field of Humanities. Subsequently, the relevance of these two theories to the present study is demonstrated. The second section of this chapter discusses research methodology. It focuses on what research method is employed in this research, along with its rationale which describes how the selected method is suitable for the present research.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

In order to explore the role of phantasmic elements in the selected neo-slave narratives, this research uses Stella Setka's concept of phantasm in traumatic narratives and Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology as the main lenses of inquiry. Setka's concept mainly emerges from the growing need to reconfigure the ethnic and cultural elements in the traumatic narratives written by minority writers. She has written a number of research papers including "Partners in Catastrophe: The Phantasmic in African American, Jewish American, and Native American trauma narratives" (2013), "Phantasmic Reincarnation: Igbo Cosmology in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" (2016) along with a book entitled *Empathy and the Phantasmic in Ethnic American Trauma Narratives* (2020).¹

Stella Setka's work guides the present research which seeks to examine the proliferation of phantasmic elements in the selected neo-slave narratives. Additionally, Jacques Derrida's proposed concept of hauntology proposed in *Specters of Marx* (1993) serves as the second theoretical lens according to which the present seems to be haunted by the social and cultural past. Derrida also theorizes about oppressive social and political

¹ Since Setka has compiled all of the above research papers in her 2020 book, I will refer to the page numbers from the book.

dynamics whose remnants haunt human societies to preserve the memory and impact of past experiences which may, at times, be ignored in historical accounts. The following sections contain a discussion on the rationale for the theoretical framework as well as a detailed exploration of each theoretical perspective.

3.2.1 Relevance of the Invoked Theoretical Perspectives

It is imperative to establish the relevance and integration of the theoretical perspectives invoked for this research. Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology is suitable for studying the impacts of historical events on the present and future times. Since the present study analyzes neo-slave narratives that narrate the stories of enslaved families, the Derridean concept of hauntology helps to analyze how the legacy of slavery shapes and preordains the destiny of the black community in the post-slavery period. Moreover, as Derrida observes in his exploration of hauntology that each era in human history is haunted by the specters of the past, it is appropriate to say that racism permeating the post-slavery America in the selected literary texts can be identified as a specter of slavery, maintaining that Derrida's understanding of specters is not limited to supernatural ghosts.

Furthermore, hauntology also serves to deconstruct the politics of inherited legacy, history, and memory in the selected narratives to lay bare the dominant forces that shape the Southern society of the antebellum period (1812-1861) and lead up to contemporary challenges faced by African Americans. However, Derridean hauntology is an abstract theorization. While, on the other hand, Stella Setka's work, serving as the second lens of inquiry in this research, appears to have a concrete understanding of spectral figures and supernatural hauntings in literature.

Setka's propositions about the significance of culturally specific elements in phantasmic ethnic narratives will lead the present research to explain and reconfigure the role and nature of phantasmic elements in the selected neo-slave narratives. It will help to understand how the selected Afro-American writers challenge mainstream history, engage with the communal memory of black communities, and revitalize their African roots to deal with racial subjugation. To conclude, both of these theories will contribute to the analysis of the selected neo-slave narratives.

Moving forward, it is time to delve deeper into Derrida and Setka's theoretical perspectives.

3.2.2 Hauntology by Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida was an Algerian-born French philosopher. He is known for proposing the philosophy of deconstruction. In his book *Specters of Marx* (1993), Derrida formulates the concept of hauntology which refers to the persistent haunting of elements from one's social and cultural past in the present time. These haunting elements are termed as specters. Derrida defines specters as the hauntings of bygone times. These hauntings keep the memories of the past alive, particularly of any form of political violence perpetrated against a certain race, nation, or country (Derrida 18). Derrida argues that the mistreatment of marginalized groups persists in the form of lingering racist and sexist prejudices that maintain their status as "other", despite the attempts to subvert the oppressive dynamics of the societies (xviii). The unjust extermination of a group only throws the unacknowledged and the marginalized out of the dimensions of time. Derrida believes that these dynamics characterize history but seem to have been obliterated from the present world. However, in evolved societies, they take the form of specters that are liberated from the constraints of contemporaneity. They can neither be restricted to the past, nor dismissed from the present.

One of the most important considerations that need to be made in the study of hauntology is the difference between Derridean specters and supernatural ghosts. In *Specters of Marx* (1993), the term specter is neither synonymous nor interchangeable with a literal ghost. Derrida clearly "distinguishes the specter or the revenant from the spirit, including the spirit in the sense of the ghost in general" (6). This quote in the book deliberates on the underlying implications and significance of the term specter. It points out the complexities inherent in the concept of hauntology. Bearing deep abstract and philosophical dimensions, the term specter refers to the covert impacts of the past on the present. It shows how the past sneaks into the present and changes its course. This is how Derrida complicates the study of the present time and the understanding of contemporaneity. The present time and society seem to be dominated by fresh trends that apparently break free from the traditional ones. Derrida attempts to challenge this

worldview by reflecting on the way bygone times, albeit invisible, endure over time and continue haunting and shaping the present societies and eras. Therefore, to guide the mainstream understanding of the past, Derrida begins with treating the past as a specter. Similar to a supernatural ghost, the influence of the past remains invisible and undetectable.

However, an enhanced open-mindedness can lay bare the elements of the past that haunt the present time and thereby shape it. The present, in turn, takes the direction preordained by the past. Even if the present time seems to offer novelty, hauntology regards it as deceptive. Moreover, the use of the term specter highlights the skepticism that it faces. The way the lack of palpable evidence for the hauntings of supernatural ghosts keeps people from believing this phenomenon is similar to how the influence of the past on the present remains unrecognizable for many. Therefore, in hauntology, Derrida uses the term specter to imbue this concept with the tint of invisibility, persistence, and widely met skepticism. Though the entire work of Derrida on hauntology plays with the metaphor of specter, it remains crucial to recognize the metaphorical and philosophical implications of this term that surpass its superficial resemblance with the traditional image of a supernatural ghost.

Moving forward, Derrida insists on the idea of the occasional plurality of specters or, in simpler terms, multiple hauntings. The possibility of multiple specters arises from the idea that specters, in general, represent a “crowd”, “society” or a “community” that haunts the present “with or without a leader” (Derrida 2). It means that the specters of the seemingly vanished power dynamics of society resurrect as haunting figures that direct and guide the fate of different identity groups in that society. Besides that, Derrida identifies these specters as “apparition” as well as “re-apparition” of something that has “disappeared” or “departed” from the sphere of present time and conventional modes of knowledge (5). Here, the specters are regarded as entities stranded between the states of life and death. This is why it becomes hard to identify and classify them in accordance with conventional ontologies.

Furthermore, Derrida asserts that these specters are not constituted of flesh and blood, and their “tangible intangibility” can be felt (6). This paradox regarding their form suggests that specters can have a real presence and impact while maintaining an

imperceptible existence. One of the most defining features of these specters is that they evade the binary distinction between the living and the dead (78). Therefore, a specter becomes “an unnameable thing” that remains, for the most part, “invisible” (5). Its existence evades conventional systems of ontology, meaning and knowledge, therefore, it is hard to represent or show evidence of its existence. A specter has an enigmatic nature. It can only be recognized as something that is always around and concerns itself with the personal and social affairs of living beings in the present and contemporary times. However, Derrida emphasizes that hauntings are not the assertion of the presence of specters but simply the residues of certain palpable presences at one point in time. Moreover, their existence cannot be ignored, and they keep on haunting societies that they developed and maintained in the form of power dynamics and social attitudes.

This is why, in hauntology, it is important to remember that the concept of the future can only be conceived with the acknowledgment of the hauntings of such specters from the past. It is, Derrida suggests, ethical to welcome such specters with significant “hospitality” since a skeptic and exorcist approach towards the spectral elements only results in detachment from history (176). Nevertheless, Derrida maintains that spectral hauntings never cease, and the specters never die, rather they keep on coming back and influencing the present societies and communal memory.

Having discussed the nature of the specters, Derrida moves on to explore the denial of the “space of spectrality” on the part of traditional scholars (12). He assumes that it is possible that a belief in the hauntings of the past through the metaphor of specters may come to be recognized as an unscholarly approach. Derrida views it as “arrogant ignorance” (90). However, he argues that the denial of specters is synonymous with the rejection of “memory and the inheritance”, as these two elements are the basic constituents of the “future” (14). Therefore, according to Derrida, the “temptation” of understanding the dynamics and workings of a society or culture based on its inherited “memory” from the past is irresistible (14-15). Evidence for such a strong relationship between memory and the future is that every society bears “the mark of this inheritance” in a permanent, albeit invisible way (15). This indicates that the past exerts a considerable influence on the present and the future.

Nevertheless, it remains integral to notice that the spectral legacies of communities and nations do not appear as “transparent” (18). Derrida believes that this happens because they are inclined to “defy” reductionist “interpretations” that may oversimplify the stories of atrocities of the people who unjustly suffered from political violence (18). Therefore, he postulates that hauntology strives to relay “a secret” that invites the people inhabiting the sphere of the present time to “read...what [they] inherit” (18). This is a “critical choice” for future generations as they are called upon to grasp the essence of their legacies that are evasive, unnatural and ambiguous at a cursory glance (18). That is why Derrida chooses to label inheritance as a “birth wound” that bears the memory of “an irreparable tragedy” (24). Hence, coming to terms with the specters of one’s inheritance involves a process of “conjunction” of specters that overthrow the “hegemony” of the group that holds “some power” over other groups in society to develop a “political alliance” (58). It means that dealing with the specters of one's heritage requires calling for a will to challenge the power held by a particular group, ultimately leading to the formation of political affiliation. This affiliation helps to unify multiple individuals as well as combined forces with “common interests” to fight and exorcise a “political adversary” (59). It brings together a number of forces with common goals to confront and overcome a political opponent which is usually the privileged and oppressive group.

However, Derrida observes that the specters of the past times are often subjected to exorcist practices by new generations who hold a peculiar kind of “hostility” towards them (58). According to Derrida, the well-known communist, Karl Marx, exhibits a strong sense of hostility towards the specters of those groups and classes of Europe that upheld the traditional economic structures. Since Marx endeavored to challenge this system and call for a communist revolution, he needed to exorcise the specters of capitalism. Therefore, Derrida sees the exorcism of the ghosts of the past as a call for new revolutions that aim to overthrow the hegemonic structures of societies. This approach holds significant importance in societies progressing towards change since specters of the past often appear to be “more powerful” than the living beings who inhabit contemporary times (60). Therefore, it can be argued that specters are stronger than the forces of present time and the will of living beings.

Derrida then moves on to expound on the nature of the specter. A specter, in general, exhibits how often the unseen appears to be visible (Derrida 125). A specter makes its presence felt without being physically or empirically present. It interferes with the development of societies through an inexplicable influence. Moreover, Derridean specters constitute one's thoughts, imaginations, and actions that, in turn, can only be displayed on imaginary screens that are also invisible (125). Therefore, it can be assumed that specters are comprised of "a structure of disappearing apparition" (125). This is the reason that even the most vigilant eyes cannot "watch out" for spectral intervention (125). It shows how the influence of the past over the present is overlooked. However, Derrida argues that contrary to popular belief, the specters have the power to keep contemporary times and functioning societies "under surveillance" (125). Furthermore, Derrida believes that the frequency with which specters resurrect to pay visits appears to be a "strict inspection" of contemporary times and societies that foreshadow "consequent persecution" of oppressive groups and systems (126). Moreover, since a specter transcends the "flesh and blood" form, it becomes integral to take "its time and its history" into account in order to recognize it (126). The reason behind it is that a specter is not an individual figure that embodies personal interests, it is a constituent as well as a product of historical, political, and social circumstances that define and shape the direction of present and future times.

Derrida identifies specters as "the return of the dead" which cannot be withheld or obstructed in any way (126). According to him, in human societies, in general, the dead are put to deep slumber and stopped from returning to the realm of the living. This death is sealed with ritualistic "mourning" (9). However, ritualistic mourning is not capable of warding off the hauntings of the Derridean specters. Therefore, it can be assumed that the future is constituted of life as well as death or, in simpler terms, past and present. Derrida observes that living beings strive to create a world detached from the past, while the dead keep on returning, revisiting, and haunting the contemporary time. This creates a state of "anachrony" in the times and eras which contain both the present and the past and the living and the dead (141). Derrida calls it the "contamination" of contemporary temporality (141). However, Derrida observes that the widely known communist, Karl Marx, wanted to see a world purified from such contamination since he "detests all ghosts, the good and the bad" (141). Since Marx's vision of a communist future breaks away from traditional systems

and power dynamics, therefore, he hated the specters of capitalism that may haunt the future.

Nevertheless, Derrida firmly believes that the ghosts or specters of the past fuel all revolutions. Since, according to him, all revolutions are “anachronistic” in nature as they engage with the interplay of history, past experiences, and contemporary ethos and thereby merge all these elements into the contemporary and present conditions that strive for a future aligned with a vision for a better world (141). Since Marx wanted to see a different world marked with communist ideals, he wanted the 19th-century world to “cease to inherit”, since inheritance will maintain the already existing structures of the society (142). Therefore, his approach toward the obliteration of the specters of the capitalist past involves a call for the cessation of mourning. Since mourning will compel the living to “busy themselves with the dead” that is why there is a slight chance that they will be “played or tricked by the dead” (142). This shows that engaging with the past keeps it alive. Such mourning will only keep revitalizing the “revolution of the past” (142). Henceforth, Marx calls for the inheritors of the 19th century to “bury their dead” (143). This may enable people to break free from the legacy of the past.

Although “the recollections of past world history” were integral or rather indispensable to previous revolutions in the past, “the social revolution of the nineteenth century” cannot generate its spirit from former times (142). It means that while memories of former historical events played a crucial role in past revolutions, the new social revolution of the 19th century could not be fueled by the spirits of previous eras. Therefore, the living needs to engage in “active forgetting” as proposed by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (143). This calls for turning a blind eye to past revolutions that invoked “the great spirits (Jewish prophets, Rome, and so forth)” (143). This may, Derrida observes, help numb the pain of the violence they provoked. In addition, it will provide room for a different kind of activism.

Furthermore, Derrida traces the legacy of Karl Marx through his exorcist approaches to dealing with the “ideological phantasm” (131). However, the specters of the past that Marx, in his communist venture, abhors and conjures away keep on coming back into European society. These specters, as Derrida observes, keep on visiting their “prey”

and “hunter” which may be references to the working class and the ruling class respectively (175). The more they are warded off through exorcism, the quicker they return. Furthermore, the exorcism of these specters shows the obsession of the living with the haunting specters. One chases them away only to “remain in pursuit” and engages with them only to chase them away (175-176). In simple terms, the occupation with specters is limited to only exorcising them to avert their influence on present times.

Additionally, Derrida differentiates between different kinds of specters. In doing so, he mentions the work of Max Stirner, a German philosopher, in popularizing the term “unheimlich” which also refers to the ghosts of the past (Derrida 181). This term identifies the most obsessive kinds of specters. Such a specter, Derrida observes, appears to be the “most strange, distant, threatening” (181). It also has the most enduring influence. However, Derrida clarifies that the haunting of the past in the form of the metaphor of specter does not make it the only and the most dominant defining feature of the spirits or ethos of the present time. This specter occupies a liminal position between the present and the absent. Moreover, the unheimlich seems to be closer to one than oneself, as Derrida famously calls it an intimate stranger (217). It “invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it” (217). In other words, the spheres that are dominated by the spirit of the past are regarded as outdated by the living. However, the past cannot manifest itself as a standalone entity. Therefore, those spheres, just like specters, are pushed into a liminal position. Moreover, the character and influence of specters remain stranded between active and passive. Its passivity is reflected in its invisible nature, while its revisits/hauntings symbolize activity.

To conclude, Derrida proposes that it will be an ethical approach to recognize the specters as “a hospitable memory” (220). Since Derrida acknowledges the political violence that took place in the past, therefore, he argues that the pursuit of justice can only be exhibited through welcoming specters. The recognition of these specters will lead to a better understanding of history and highlight the need for the reversal of the oppressive dynamics of society. This can be carried out through exorcism which, instead of chasing them away, will give them a chance to come back as “arrivants” who will be offered hospitality and promise (220). According to Derrida, “the “scholar” of the future”, who has

a great concern for justice, needs to learn how to engage with the specters, and how to detect their influence on the present (220). In addition, he argues that “they are everywhere” even if it feels like they do not exist, no longer exist, or are yet to appear (220). Therefore, Derrida believes that giving the elements of the past some room to manifest themselves before they are exorcised is the approach of “the "intellectual" of tomorrow” (221). Here, he suggests looking for an approach to welcome the specters as remnants of history, making peace with them and acknowledging the suffering inflicted on underprivileged groups in bygone times.

3.2.3 Stella Setka’s Theory of Phantasmic Ethnic Narratives

Stella Setka is an Associate Professor of English at West Los Angeles College. In her book *Empathy and the Phantasmic in Ethnic American Trauma Narratives* (2020), Setka proposes a framework for studying the works of fiction written by ethnic American authors, be it Native Indians, Jewish or black, with the primary focus on the analysis of the culturally specific supernatural to engage readers with historical atrocities such as slavery and genocide.

In this book, Setka defines phantasm as “supernatural phenomena”, “a haunting presence”, a “fantastic occurrence” and “an absent presence” (2, 12). Some notable examples of phantasm in literature are “ghosts, reincarnation, time travel, or a bending of the time-space continuum...” (2). It brings to light the “exclusions and invisibilities” in history “which time would have us forget” (12). The ghostly figures that constitute the invisible presence in the haunted spaces are those subjects in history that have been rendered invisible by powerful groups in society. Setka emphasizes that phantasmic ethnic narratives not only familiarize readers with a chunk of the authentic history of an ethnic group but also highlight the lingering trauma that their posterity has to go through. Moreover, the addition of phantasmic elements in trauma narratives demonstrates the occurrences of violence perpetrated against minorities. This representation is guided by “a cultural perspective” of the concerned oppressed group, which thereby differentiates between history and memory (12). History can be hegemonic, characterized by a “monocultural bias” but memories are based on actual lived experiences (6). Communal memory assures that the stories of the past are more inclusive.

Stella Setka situates her theory at the intersection of postcolonial theory and ethnic studies. Moreover, she puts to question the universality of trauma studies. Through her study of a myriad of phantasmic ethnic narratives, Setka has found a commonly employed literary tool that connects them together through intricate threads of unique ethnic beliefs. The study pivots on the multifold meanings inherent in the use of phantasmic elements in phantasmic ethnic narratives. Though the challenge that Setka faces in this study is the reductionist approach of European academia towards these phantasmic and supernatural elements. Setka believes that the hegemonic take of European literary and critical studies unfairly regards these phantasmic elements as features of the canon of magical realism.

To counter it, Stella Setka proposes that magical realism is inadequate to account for the nature and function of phantasmic elements since it is based on a “modern, post-Enlightenment epistemology” that reduces the supernatural elements in traumatic narratives as merely an “unexplainable” occurrence (14). Magical realism is unable to contextualize them in “specific religious and spiritual practices” which are thereby “discredited” (13-14). However, these supernatural elements are esteemed as “legitimate worldviews” by the communities that practice them (14). To these communities, these supernatural elements are far from “psychological fantasies” (14). They consider the supernatural as one of the main constituents of reality which, however, is often interpreted by people holding disparate views as imaginary and artistic creations. That is why the “Western notions of rationality” discredit their “truth” and authenticity by stereotyping them as “magical” (14). However, phantasmic elements in these narratives foreground the forgotten minority voices in literary texts to produce a historically informed understanding of prejudice, discrimination, and trauma. Therefore, the principle focus of Setka’s study is to identify these phantasmic elements as something more and beyond the already existing lenses of critical studies.

Additionally, traumatic narratives, replete with fantastic elements, gesture towards the failure of Western ontology to represent the trauma of the groups that have been subjugated and suppressed for so long that the traces of their painful pasts and traumatic memories are expunged from “mainstream historiography” (Setka 11). Therefore, it is an ethical obligation of nations to wholly embrace all aspects of their histories. As a result,

these traumatic narratives may also pave the way for cross-cultural engagements and solidarity (12). They have the potential to uncover and explain how different groups of society are responsible for each other's trauma.

Setka begins by bringing the phantasmic elements in trauma narratives to light and locates their origin in the deeply rooted ethnic cosmologies of the communities being represented in contemporary literature. She especially highlights the significant importance of "cultural specificity" and "cross-cultural struggles" in the trauma narratives that are part and parcel of communal histories (Setka 3). Furthermore, the use of phantasmic images and figures in traumatic narratives highlights the "unspeakability" of trauma which calls for a distinct mode of expression (54). This kind of distinct expression can help with addressing and preserving the communal memory of the marginalized groups of a society (70). This highlights the significance of phantasmic elements in ethnic narratives.

One of the central concerns of Setka's study is the comparison of trauma and memory studies with neo-humanist ethics. Although, as Setka observes, both disciplines foreground the importance of response that trauma narratives elicit from readers, they differ in characterizing the nature of and risks involved in readers' responses. While trauma theorists maintain that the relationship between real-world incidents and texts "is far from straightforward", the neo-humanist scholars diverge from it by believing that reality and texts are comparable, and they have the potential to run parallel to a significant degree (Setka 5). Therefore, neo-humanist scholars regard the empathy arising in readers' sensibilities from reading trauma narratives as the common ground through which readers identify themselves with the ethnic group represented in them. However, such an "identification" is denounced by scholars of trauma and memory studies as "emotional colonization" (5). These terms explain the detrimental results of unfair appropriation of the history and trauma of a disparate ethnic group.

For further clarification of her point, Setka uses Emmanuel Levinas' imperative of "ontological imperialism" that results from identification or the "sameness between self and other" i.e., readers and fictional characters respectively (5). Setka argues that the dissolution of the "alterity" of the *other* portrayed in trauma narratives implies "a kind of violence" (5). Therefore, the empathetic response generated by readers needs to signify the

difference between self and other. Only such a form of response can be regarded as the “desirable forms of empathy” (5). Such a form of empathy involves “acknowledging and respecting” the alterity or the otherness of the characters portrayed in trauma narratives (5). This is particularly relevant in cross-cultural interactions between different ethnic groups through literature.

It is interesting to note that, according to Setka, the inculcation of phantasmic elements in ethnic narratives prove to be helpful in segregating phantasmic ethnic narratives from the mainstream literary canon which, in turn, helps in evading reductive comprehension of the historical trauma of marginalized groups in societies that have a racist past. In addition, Setka prefers ethical witnessing of the trauma of an ethnic group over “surrogate victimage” that the identification of self with others may bring about (6). Surrogate victimage occurs when readers of a traumatic narrative remain unsuccessful in recognizing the difference between their ethnic group and the ethnic group that is represented in fiction (6). It may appear as a form of violence that may result in shallow empathy with the trauma of the ethnic group being represented in literature (6). Therefore, to sustain, acknowledge, and celebrate the otherness of an ethnic group, it is important to accept and embrace the difference between self and other.

However, an area where trauma studies prove to be inadequate or rather ineffective in dealing with ethnic narratives is the Eurocentric approach that defines and construes trauma from a hegemonic perspective. Setka supports her stance with Laura Brown’s observation of the scholarship on trauma studies, including the works of Cathy Caruth, that pivot on “white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class men” (6). That is how, trauma theories neglect the experiences of “nonwhite, non-Christian groups” (6). Hence, the result of this approach is the failure of trauma studies to account for the ethnically specified literary tools employed by fictional authors. Therefore, according to Setka, the phantasmic elements that are deemed as an integral part of the authentic belief systems by the ethnic authors are merged with the canon of magical realism.

In light of the above discussion, Setka labels the definitions, dimensions, and implications of trauma theories as Western “politicized constructions” (6). Such a hegemonic and politicized approach towards trauma may “(re)colonize” the minority

groups of the societies, instead of addressing and healing their pain (6). The decolonizing approach towards trauma provides the authors of the phantasmic ethnic narratives, according to Setka, a spacious room for the expression of minority belief systems and a free interplay of contesting cultures existing in one society (15). Furthermore, Setka believes that culturally specific phantasmic elements spread out in disproportionate amounts throughout the trauma narratives seem to be “disrupting or disturbing” the reading process (8). Thereby, the “expectations and assumptions” that readers presuppose while reading trauma narratives are effectively challenged and put into question (8). Setka defines this phenomenon as an “ethical summon” as well as a “summons to responsibility” that are constantly posed to readers (8-9). This calls for a reading of the phantasmic ethnic narratives in the context of the belief systems and cultures of the ethnic groups represented in these narratives. In addition, it turns “passive readers into active witnesses” (10). Consequently, readers not only get to know about the history of the ethnic group represented in fiction but also feel the pain and trauma caused to them while, at the same time, identifying and respecting their uniqueness and otherness.

Moreover, Setka argues that phantasmic elements in traumatic narratives differentiate between specific communities and overall societies, especially in the way that violent histories are remembered and resulting trauma is addressed. It explores the ways through which “cross-cultural engagement” can help to deviate from the patterns of behaviors that may result in the subjugation of a vulnerable group of society (Setka 5). Nevertheless, it is essential for the authors of trauma narratives to privilege the “subaltern subject position” through the phantasmic elements embedded in their belief systems and folk tales (15). This approach makes room for the acceptance and coexistence of multiple worldviews in society.

Additionally, the members of the ethnic groups that have been subjected to brutal atrocities in their past often find their life stories overshadowed by the traumatic memories that they have inherited (Setka 16). In order to deal with this issue, the authors of traumatic narratives create a fictional world that engages with more than one time period. The characters from contemporary times may be represented as individuals who are haunted by the ghosts of the past. This literary tool, in ethnic traumatic narratives, can help authors to

create a bridge between the ancestors and the detached descendants who, at times, try to evade the burden of historical trauma that results from a connection with their traumatic legacies. It also enables readers and fictional characters to actively witness the suffering that previous generations of a given ethnic group endured.

3.3 Research Methodology

This is qualitative research. The primary source of data includes the novels *Grace* (2016) and *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021). The secondary sources of data include book reviews, journal articles, research papers, books, websites, etc. Primary sources of data will be used for textual analysis and the secondary sources of data will be helpful in developing educated and strong arguments to supplement the analysis.

A research method appropriate for analyzing literary works is chosen because this study focuses on fictional pieces. In this regard, Catherine Belsey's textual analysis appears considerably helpful. Moreover, this research method can ensure the significance of the historical context of African American characters portrayed in the selected narratives. Belsey's textual analysis is used for interpreting the text and literary devices used in both of the selected narratives. The findings are based on the researcher's interpretation of the literary texts in the light of their context. The texts of the novels will be analyzed through the lens of two theoretical concepts. The theoretical framework is instrumental in the process of exploring the texts and developing strong arguments to address the research questions posed in this research.

3.3.1 Textual Analysis by Catherine Belsey

Catherine Belsey contends that a text is more than just words inscribed on a piece of paper. To interpret it, it is important to take its context in mind which generally entails "cultural and political history" (Belsey 172). It is imperative to keep in mind the social, cultural, and political background when analyzing a text to gain a better understanding of it. Belsey draws her argument from the theory of textuality which maintains that a text is composed of "multiple writings" (176). The theory emphasizes the importance of considering the multiple layers and dimensions that compose a text because a text is not considered to be a singular entity. Therefore, it is important to understand that a text may

impose “constraints” by “iterat[ing] meanings”, however, researchers can still “refuse the position the text offers” (167-168). This highlights the idea that a text can influence its interpretation by repeating certain meanings and imposing limitations, but researchers and critics still have the ability to challenge these limitations by discrediting the perspective that the text offers.

Moreover, understanding the context and potential constraints of a text is crucial in being able to critically analyze and challenge its perspective. In addition, Belsey’s textual analysis method argues that it is the text itself that “poses the questions” that researchers attempt to address (171). The text is seen as having an active role in directing the research, rather than simply being an object to be studied. The research is guided by the prompts generated by the text. Any approach contrasting with this method may mislead researchers to misinterpretation.

Furthermore, Belsey emphasizes that “pure reading” is not practical (163). It always has to be supplemented with some sort of “extra-textual knowledge” (163). It is stressed that additional outside knowledge is necessary to fully understand a given text. That knowledge can vary in terms of its nature and origin which means its source could be personal, cultural, or biographical which helps readers, critics, and researchers out with comprehending a piece of literature. One of the important concerns in Belsey’s textual analysis is “resistance” in consulting secondary readings (164). Although secondary readings serve as a good guide for beginners to understand what a piece of literature signifies and what meanings can be inferred from it, yet it can overshadow the personal interpretation of the researcher. As a result, the research may feel that “whatever can be said has been said already” (164). However, consulting secondary resources at a later stage in the process of interpretation may guide researchers to a “new” and “distinctive” understanding of a given text (164). Here, Belsey suggests that excessively consulting secondary sources during the process of interpretation may lead researchers to new insights into a text.

Moreover, the textual analysis of a text is carried out in a “particular historical moment”, therefore, new interpretations can be made in a different time from the perspective of “modern eyes” (169). It is possible to attain a unique understanding of a text

at a different time and with a contemporary perspective. This is the reason that “past and future” readings can yield different meanings (169). The interpretation of a text can change over time, due to shifts taking place in cultural, political, and historical contexts. As these circumstances and contexts change, the interpretation of texts also changes.

3.4 Conclusion

The first part of this chapter provided a brief account of the selected theories that include Derrida’s hauntology and Stella Setka’s theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives. Both of these theories are explained above. A rationale for the selection of these theories was offered along with a demonstration of the relevance of these theories with the current research. The second section of this chapter discussed the research methodology. It focused on why and how Catherine Belsey’s textual analysis is used as a research method. The succeeding chapters will utilize this theoretical framework and research method to analyze Natasha Deon’s *Grace* and LaTanya McQueen’s *When the Reckoning Comes*.

CHAPTER 4

SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL OF HAUNTING FIGURES IN NATASHIA DEON'S *GRACE* (2016) AND LATANYA MCQUEEN'S *WHEN THE RECKONING COMES* (2021)

This chapter entails a detailed overview of the selected neo-slave narratives. It examines Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021) to investigate how Igbo-specific phantasmic elements help to challenge Enlightenment skepticism towards Igbo worldview upheld in these neo-slave narratives. An in-depth analysis of the portrayal of haunting ancestral spirits helps to foreground the significance of reconnecting with Igbo heritage and reimagining the stories from antebellum South for the African American black community represented in the selected narratives. The chapter also includes many textual references and examples from the selected narratives to support the arguments presented in the chapter. Additionally, this chapter is divided into multiple sub-sections, each focusing on a particular theme.

4.1 Natasha Deon's *Grace* (2016)

This section entails a brief introduction to the author, an overview of the novel and its classification as a neo-slave narrative.

4.1.1 Natasha Deon

Natasha Deon is a black female author, lawyer, professor, and social activist. She is a professor at UCLA and Antioch University. Her forte is creative writing. As a lawyer, she founded the Redeemed Agency which helps former convicts get back on their feet. In 2017, she was appointed by US Embassy to help settle the conflict between Armenia and Turkey ("Natasha Deon").

Deon published her first novel *Grace* in 2016. In 2017, she received an accolade for best debut novel by American Library Association. The New York Times listed *Grace* among the best sixteen novels published in the year 2016 ("Natasha Deon"). Her second

novel *The Perishing* was published in 2021. Both of her novels have received commercial and critical acclaim. The protagonists of both of her novels are black females. Her works mostly pivot on what it means to be black in different periods of American history. The staple themes of her works include slavery, racism, power dynamics, supernaturalism, and intersectionality of race and gender.

4.1.2 Overview of the Novel *Grace*

This novel follows the story of several generations of a black family, spanning many decades. The protagonist of the novel, Naomi, serves as the link among different generations and time periods, remaining present throughout the narrative. The story opens in Faunsdale, a town in the antebellum South (1812-1861) with Naomi, the first-person narrator, belonging to an enslaved black family. She is a 15-year-old girl, living with her mother and older sister, Hazel. Naomi's mother works on Massa's property. Massa is a white slave owner who is struggling financially. Therefore, he sells his male slaves, except for Boss. Boss is the male slave who is tasked by Massa to impregnate Momma, Naomi's mother, with a son. Massa often threatens Momma that if she fails to deliver a baby boy, he will sell both of her daughters to far-off plantations.

Hazel, Naomi's elder sister, has a lover, James who is a plantation slave in a nearby plantation. The three of them (i.e., Naomi, James, and Hazel) often hang out together and dream of escaping to the North where they could live as free folks. One evening, Massa comes to Hazel's cabin with Boss and tells Hazel to comply with him by conceiving Boss' baby. As Boss approaches Hazel on Massa's instructions, Hazel screams and tries to run out of the cabin. Momma rushes into the room and begs Massa to let her daughter go. Nevertheless, Massa pays no heed to her pleas. In the meantime, James enters the scene. James barges into the cabin to help Hazel. Massa, upon being infuriated by this disruption in his plan, brings out his pistol and shoots James and Momma. As he approaches forward to grab Naomi, she picks up a poker and attacks Massa. As Massa falls, Boss runs away in a state of fear and panic. Then Hazel urges Naomi to escape to the North while she herself insists on staying back because she fears that if they run away simultaneously, both of them will be implicated in the murder of Massa and get caught soon.

In the subsequent chapters, Naomi is seen running away with wounded feet and scraped knees in the jungle where she collapses. She stays conscious in the succeeding days. As she recovers gradually, she finds herself being taken care of by Cynthia, a Jewish woman who runs a brothel. Naomi refuses to share her name and story with Cynthia. As time passes, Naomi notices that Cynthia has a kind heart behind a tough façade. Out of pure goodwill, Cynthia had given a small portion of her property to a black man, Albert, who runs a blacksmith shop there. Naomi and Albert have mutual respect for each other.

Cynthia considers Naomi an epitome of female virtue and purity. Therefore, she protects her from the advances of men who frequent her brothel. However, as time passes, Naomi develops a romantic relationship with Jeremy, a white musician, which disappoints Cynthia. One day, Cynthia finds out that Naomi has been physically intimate with Jeremy and shouts at her for allowing an irresponsible man to tarnish her purity. They engage in a physical fight. In response, Cynthia kicks Naomi out of her property. However, Jeremy also refuses to take Naomi in and breaks up with her. In the following days, Naomi finds out that she is pregnant and requests Albert to let her live in his shop. Albert informs Cynthia about her pregnancy and seeks her permission to let Naomi stay. Cynthia forgives Naomi.

Time passes and Naomi is shown eight months pregnant. In the meantime, a white man in the neighborhood is killed. The murderer is rumored to be a black person. This leads townsfolk to speculate that Naomi is the murderer. In the following days, townsfolk get to know about the Faunsdale murder story through a newspaper that incriminates Naomi. One night, a bunch of men trespass on Cynthia's property to hunt Naomi. This incident takes place on Cynthia's wedding night. Cynthia brings out her pistol to stall time for Naomi. To distract those men, she shoots herself. On the other hand, Naomi, after running a few miles, begins feeling labor pains and delivers a white baby girl. Soon she is caught up and shot to death by those men. They take the baby and deliver it to a white barren slave owner, Annie, who names the baby Josey. At the same time, Naomi is shown to have turned into a deceased ancestral spirit i.e., *ndiichie*.

Throughout her childhood, Josey is taken care of by Charles, Annie's plantation slave. As she turns fifteen, she is raped by George, Annie's brother. Naomi's *ndiichie* spirit

witnesses it but remains unable to stop him. As a result of this sexual assault, she exhibits signs of trauma that nobody notices. It infuriates Naomi's ndiichie spirit who constantly seeks punishment for George to avenge Josey.

After a few years, Josey marries Jackson. She gives birth to twins, Squiggy and Rachel. All the while, Naomi's ndiichie spirit keeps practicing possessing human bodies to avenge her daughter's rapist. One day, a colonel issues an order to kill Jackson upon finding out that a black man was seen being intimate with a white woman, as it was considered outrageous for a black man to have a relationship with a white woman in the antebellum period. Upon learning of such orders, the family runs away. On second thoughts, Jackson returns to the town to grab a weapon. However, he loses his life at the hands of the colonel.

While, on the other hand, Josey is shown looking for Rachel whom she lost during the run. She ends up finding her with George, the pedophile, who raped Josey when she was little. George explains to her that he was just talking to the little girl; however, Josey refuses to consider any excuses. Josey tries to grab George but fails to do so out of exhaustion. Naomi's ndiichie spirit takes this chance to vent her wrath. She possesses Josey, picks up a stone and hurls it at George with full strength. George succumbs to his head injury. Naomi's ndiichie spirit attains peace and leaves the realm of the living to join Momma.

4.1.3 *Grace* as a Neo-slave Narrative

The novel *Grace* can be categorized as a neo-slave narrative on the basis of the themes it embodies, the characters it represents, and the setting where the story takes place. To explore it further, it is crucial to consult a scholarly definition of neo-slave narratives. Bernard W. Bell, a well-known scholar of African American literature, defines a neo-slave narrative as a piece of writing penned by a contemporary Afro-American author who employs the elements of Afrocentric folklore to tell tales of slavery and emancipation (15, 285, 289). Since *Grace* is a piece of fiction written by the African American author Natasha Deon in 2016, it qualifies as a contemporary piece of Afro-American literature. Moreover, the novel incorporates some Afrocentric elements in the narrative that make it a part of neo-slave narratives. These Afrocentric elements originate from Igbo heritage and

African folklore. The depiction of haunting ghosts and *ndiichie* is one such element that is deeply rooted in the Igbo cosmology. The use of elements from Igbo cosmology serves several functions in the narrative. A number of them are explored and analyzed ahead in this chapter.

In addition, the frequent changes in the setting of the novel where the story takes place are also symbolic. These changes highlight the altering course of American history that decides the fate of multiple generations of the black community. The story spanning over several generations of a black family allows the narrative to portray the transition of the lives of black Americans from slavery to emancipation in the latter half of the 19th century. Thus, the novel *Grace* is a narrative of slavery, identity, resistance, and freedom.

4.2 LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021)

This section is comprised of a short biography of the author, a brief summary of the novel and its classification as a neo-slave narrative.

4.2.1 LaTanya McQueen

LaTanya McQueen is a contemporary African American novelist, essayist, and professor. The novel *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021) is McQueen's first published fictional work, alongside *And It Begins Like This* (2017) which is the first collection of her essays (LaTanya McQueen). McQueen's short stories and essays have been published in multiple literary magazines and journals. She serves as a professor at Coe College, USA, with English and creative writing as her forte. McQueen receives grants for her writings from multiple literary organizations. Moreover, her novel *When the Reckoning Comes* has won nominations from multiple literary associations. (LaTanya McQueen). The present research examines this novel in light of Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and Stella Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives. The following section entails an overview of this novel.

4.2.2 Overview of the Novel *When the Reckoning Comes*

The novel *When the Reckoning Comes* opens with Mira, the black protagonist of the novel, being invited to the wedding ceremony of her white friend, Celine, in the post-

slavery period in America. Mira accepts the invitation in the hope of meeting Jesse (a black man and friend to both Mira and Celine) at this wedding. The subsequent chapter opens in a racially segregated town, Kipsen, where Mira, Celine, and Jesse are school-going kids. These three kids become close friends. Celine, though white, resides in a segregated black town because her family is poor. Despite being nice to them, her behavior and actions show no sympathy for her two black friends, Jesse and Mira, who are often subjected to bullying at school. For the most part of her childhood, Celine appears indifferent to racism and is ambitious to move to a better town.

Kipsen is permeated by spooky stories. Each resident has a story to tell about the haunting ghosts of enslaved blacks who, in the wake of slavery, were tormented and murdered by their white master, Roman Woodsman. The horror stories narrate the incident where the plantation slaves working on Woodsman Plantation plan a revolt against their master which fails, and they are caught. The reason behind this failed revolt, despite being widely speculated, remains unknown. One day, Jesse, Mira, and Celine happen to overhear rumors about ghosts haunting the abandoned plantation, and their curiosities compel Jesse and Mira to visit the abandoned and haunted plantation. As they enter, they see a ghost walking inside smeared in blood all over its body. Out of fear, they run back to their houses and a few hours later, Jesse is arrested for the murder of a white man whose dead body is washed up the river beside the plantation. Though Jesse and Mira try to lead the investigating officers to the ghost who might have murdered the man, but no one believes them. Jesse is eventually released from prison but the friendship bond among these friends is severed because Mira leaves the town, and Celine was never completely sympathetic towards her two black friends Jesse and Mira.

Back to the present, Mira returns to Kipsen and finds out that Celine's wedding is to take place at the same tobacco plantation which has now been turned into an antebellum theme park. The waiters and waitresses are all black and dressed like slaves to serve the wedding guests. However, the wedding turns into a horror story as people disappear and are murdered mysteriously. It prompts Jesse and Mira to team up to unearth what is happening. This search leads them to painful revelations about the deplorable living

conditions of enslaved blacks who were forced to work there. They not only learn more about the legacy of slavery but are also enabled to contend with the post-slavery racism.

4.2.3 *When the Reckoning Comes* as a Neo-slave Narrative

In *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), Ashraf H.A. Rushdie defines neo-slave narratives as “palimpsest”, a type of writing that builds on previous events and experiences (17). This indicates that neo-slave narratives are based on the real or imaginary stories of enslaved blacks and the restoration of their freedom (17). Since LaTanya McQueen’s *When the Reckoning Comes* is based on the antebellum and post-slavery conditions of black people in America, it can be regarded as a palimpsest of slavery and freedom. As Rushdie’s definition of neo-slave narratives covers the real as well as imaginary stories of slavery; therefore, owing to its narration of an imaginary story of the revolt of enslaved blacks against slavery and their struggles to attain freedom, the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* qualifies as a neo-slave narrative. Additionally, following the trajectory of Rushdie’s neo-slave genre, this novel draws on a “bi-temporal perspective” with its protagonist capable of visiting the antebellum period through time travel, along with witnessing the reenactments of the ghosts of enslaved blacks in the present time (Anim-Addo et al. 2). This aligns with Bernard W. Bell’s observation in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) that neo-slave narratives foreground Afrocentric oral culture in Afro-American literature (15). In light of Bell’s views, it can be argued that supernatural occurrences and figures in the novel are part of Igbo storytelling traditions.

4.3 Analysis of the Selected Neo-Slave Narratives: Characterizing Naomi and Marceline’s Spirits as Ndiichie

Before attempting to characterize Naomi and Marceline’s spirits as ndiichie, it is important to understand the figure of ndiichie from Igbo cosmology. According to the article “Ghosts in Chinese and Igbo Religions” (2019), Igbo people believe that among all the beings and entities that are worshipped, the dead ancestors “ndiichie” care for the living the most (Onukwube and Ngozi 12). The concern for their progeny is the reason why ndiichie spirits depicted in the selected neo-slave narratives, *Grace* and *When the*

Reckoning Comes, haunt the town. These narratives seem to make a distinction between ghosts and ndiichie spirits. The ghosts exact vengeance on their offenders, whereas ndiichie spirits fight to protect and defend their descendants. This distinction is made in the light of the motivations that drive the spirits and ghosts of enslaved blacks. It is now time to understand the figure of ndiichie.

Moving on to the characterization of Naomi's spirit as ndiichie in the novel *Grace*, a number of factors need to be brought into consideration. It is crucial to recall that, for a deceased person, Igbo cosmology suggests that there can be a possibility of either turning into a ghost or an ancestral spirit 'ndiichie' depending on the life choices and the conditions of death. Achieving high status as an ancestral spirit requires certain conditions such as a virtuous life, natural death and proper burial rites. However, in the novel *Grace*, Naomi's life, initially as a slave and afterward as a runaway, strips her of the free will that is required to lead a virtuous life. In her struggle to survive, she rarely gets any opportunities to perform high moral deeds. Moreover, at the age of seventeen, she dies in a jungle from a gunshot right after childbirth. She does not only die alone but is also deprived of burial rites. However, the point that needs to be considered here with significant attention is that, despite her limitations, the frequent challenges that Naomi contends with in her life project her as an embodiment of innocence. Predominantly, the act of killing her master always lies heavy on her conscience.

However, after Naomi's transformation into a ndiichie, her "awareness" about life expands (Deon 187). Therefore, she comes to consider her act of murdering her white master as "self-defense" (145). She remarks, "You ain't responsible for killing somebody if they trying to kill you first." (Deon 145). This is her attempt to justify her action as a natural response to the life-threatening situation that she found herself in as a young girl. Secondly, to avoid subsequent persecution, she does not escape of her own volition. It is rather her sister, Hazel, who forces her to run away. Thirdly, she takes refuge in a brothel but remains detached from the activities taking place there. This is emphasized in the narrative by the brothel owner, Cynthia, who repeatedly calls her "pure" in the narrative (198). Fourthly, although Naomi develops an intimate relationship with Jeremy out of wedlock, despite Cynthia's disapproval, the narrative explicitly redeems her of any grave

responsibility by unraveling how manipulative Jeremy is and the way Naomi suffers the consequences of this action till her death.

This suffering alleviates Naomi from the position of a sinner to an expiator. Moreover, it is made clear in the novel that the reason behind Naomi's stay in the realm of the living is to protect her daughter, instead of avenging her offenders. As her spirit clearly mentions, "I thought I'd leave Josey's side when I knew she was safe. Then I decided I'd leave after I saw her lift her head for the first time... Then, it got easy to stay" (Deon 55). Though the latter part of the plot portrays Naomi exacting vengeance against the white supremacist who harms her descendants, this revenge is clearly driven by her maternal instincts. Not even for once does Naomi's spirit show any grudge against the ones who harmed or wronged her in her life. Sparing her own offenders and watching out for her progeny are the reasons that do not allow the characterization of Naomi's character as a common vengeful ghost.

On the other hand, in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, Marceline's spirit can also be regarded as *ndiichie* based on the following considerations. Marceline's spirit serves as Mira's connection with her ancestral lineage from the time of slavery. Also, Marceline enlightens Mira with the history and stories of atrocities committed in Woodsman plantation in Southern America. By meeting Marceline, Mira learns about her family's history and the oppression meted out to her ancestors.

It is important to establish that Mira clearly distinguishes Marceline's spirit from other ghosts that haunt the town. Upon seeing Marceline's *ndiichie* spirit, Mira observes, "She appeared to be an angel, not a ghost, something descended from the sky, something holy, something true" (McQueen 158). Here, Mira asserts that Marceline's spirit is not a mere ghost. Mira's attribution of divine qualities to her such as a heavenly and holy being helps to define Marceline's spirit as a figure worthy of devotion and worship. Since Marceline is Mira's deceased ancestor and now that she has attained a divine status, she can easily be identified as a *ndiichie* spirit.

It is now time to separately analyze what role Naomi and Marceline's spirits play as *ndiichie* and what implications it has for the black community represented in the selected

narratives. This will enable a thorough exploration of their respective characteristics, motivations, and significance within each narrative.

4.3.1 The Role of Naomi's Spirit as Ndiichie

Naomi's journey from a human to a ndiichie figure marks an exponential shift in her subject position within the racial dynamics of the American society. Derrida's concept of hauntology offers some interesting insights into the implication of such types of spectral elements in fiction. In his study on hauntings, Jacques Derrida emphasizes, "One never inherits without... some specter" (24). This quote is specifically relevant here because of Derrida's emphasis that historical legacy leaves behind lingering specters. Though Derridean specters are not characterized as supernatural ghosts, the novel *Grace* represents literal ghosts to address the spectral legacy of slavery in the form of racism in the post-slavery period. Such ghosts in the novel reinforce the inevitability of specters as proposed by Derrida in hauntology.

Also, it is clear that Derrida's concept of hauntology does not necessitate a belief in the existence of ghosts. The term 'ghost' is a metaphor for the lingering presence of the past. In *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx* (2008), Fredric Jameson argues that Derridean hauntology does not necessarily imply a "conviction that ghosts exist" (39). It simply entails a belief that the past is "alive", and it plays out in the dynamics of the present and the future (39). The social, historical and political factors of the past shape societies in the present. Therefore, it can be argued that the present is not "as self-sufficient as it claims to be" (39). The present contains residues of whatever happened in the past. Accordingly, the present research argues that ghostly figures in the novels *Grace* and *When the Reckoning Comes* imply that slavery is a reality of the past, and its hauntings are manifest in the present time in the form of racism. This argument helps us to understand the implications of the image of ghosts and ndiichie in this analysis.

Derrida's study of specters can be supplemented with arguments presented in the book *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013), co-authored by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren. This book introduces readers to the emerging discipline of spectrality studies and argues that the figure of ghosts

in literature is a metaphor for things that lie outside of human “perception” (Peeren and Blanco 9). For that reason, the study of ghosts and specters exposes the limitations of human knowledge (9). Moreover, the figure of the ghost carries a significant “political potential”, thereby presenting critics with possibilities to broaden the scope of common perception, layman approach and the contours of knowledge (7). However, the interpretation of this figure requires “multiple, laborious, and creative processes of translation” (7). This indicates that the study of specters requires critics to approach the figure of ghosts with an open mind and willingness to embrace the unforeseen.

In Stella Setka’s view, the portrayal of such types of figures in African American literature reimagines “African cosmologies” with a creative touch and imaginative twist, adapting them to the context of slavery in America (26). In the light of this view, it can be argued that, in the novel *Grace*, Deon reconfigures the concept of *ndiichie* in Igbo cosmology and adapts it to the context of the antebellum South. The reconfiguration of the *ndiichie* figure in this novel helps with the understanding of the afterlife of enslaved black characters which is complicated by their excessive vulnerability in a racially segregated society in the living realm.

As a *ndiichie*, Naomi plays the role of the ancestor of the African slaves. She sees the black community as her children. By the end of the novel, she compares the space where she dies with her perspective on the American landscape.

Empty liquor bottles lay alongside a graveyard of half-buried toy... A doll’s head is cracked in the middle and buried, a broken rolling hoop, and a soldier figure... sun-dulled and dusted over. May have been a playground. One with no laughter. Maybe never. (Deon 397).

This passage draws an eerie and bleak image of pre-civil war Southern United States. The images of empty bottles and buried toys are used here to convey a sense of abandonment. It symbolizes how the figures of authority within American society and on a global level neglected and desolated the enslaved black community and turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed against them. The images of toys, the doll, and the rolling hoop not only centralize the minor victims of slavery such as Josey and Rachel but also

clarify the position of the specter of Naomi as an ancestral spirit who embodies the ancestral figure of the black community.

Similarly, the images of the graveyard and playground are juxtaposed to symbolize the hauntings of the deceased ancestors who try to protect their descendants from racial oppression in the novel. It helps to study the legacy of slavery from a personal as well as historical dimension. The personal loss in connection to the history of slavery is particularly relevant in a few other passages of the novel including the one where Naomi's ndiichie spirit remarks, "Who knows better than me the fear that comes with losing a child?" (Deon 396). This entails the personal experience of Naomi as a black mother in the antebellum period. As a child, she is estranged from her family and, as an adult, she is separated from her daughter. Therefore, she can speak from a position of personal understanding of broken families in the enslaved black community. Moreover, she speaks for and gives voice to the countless preceding generations of enslaved blacks as she confirms, "I'm in pieces. Not whole." (397). She does not see herself as an individual mother, rather she perceives herself as an ancestor of all enslaved communities and post-slavery subjects that need protection from racism and oppression.

According to Naomi's spirit, the specters of dead ancestors of the black community are "fighting to save their families, not a nation" (362). It highlights the importance of racial solidarity and community consciousness to Naomi's spirit. It further leads to the understanding of how contemporary Afro-American writers view the process of reconnecting with their African ancestry as well as Igbo heritage as a source of empowerment and agency. For them, revitalizing Igbo heritage and reconnecting with ancestral lineage leads to the reclamation of the agency for the Afro-American individuals.

4.3.2 The Portrayal of Marceline's Spirit as Ndiichie

The ndiichie in *When the Reckoning Comes* is the spirit of Marceline who is Mira's direct ancestor. Mira acknowledges Marceline's efforts to awaken her to an unfiltered understanding of the history of slavery. The narrator notes, "Without her, she would never have known her story" (McQueen 327). Her story symbolizes the story of the black community and the implications of a brutal past and gruesome history of slavery on the lives of contemporary black individuals in Kipsen.

In her childhood, when Mira asks questions about her bloodline, her mother tells her that their family history can be traced to Roman Woodsman and Marceline. Roman was a white slave-owner who fathered children with an enslaved black woman, Marceline. Marceline's name clings to Mira's memory. After growing up, in one of her time travel excursions, Mira witnesses the auction of black females as slaves. There she sees Roman Woodsman making unwanted sexual advances on her ancestor, Marceline. She cries, "God, I don't want my story to have come from rape" (McQueen 139). The word "rape" is also a representation of Mira's reinterpretation of history, since her mother's approach towards their bloodline differs from it. When she enlightened Mira about their bloodline in her childhood, she had begun by saying, "All our ancestors are buried out on that land, both white and black alike" (24). In her mother's choice of words, there is no resentment towards Roman Woodsman who owned Marceline, instead she refers to Woodsman as one of their ancestors. However, Mira's growing awareness and understanding of history leads her to believe that Marceline suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her white master, Roman Woodsman. Her tone and speech both carry sentiments of bitterness towards him.

Marceline plays a significant role as a *ndiichie* spirit when a white mob hunts down Jesse, suspecting him as the culprit of Celine's disappearance and murder. After Jesse and Mira escape the mob, they find themselves lost in the woods. This scene may remind readers of another scene in the novel from the antebellum period when enslaved blacks were running away to the North to escape their white master, Roman Woodsman, in a state of fear and panic. In the same way, Jesse and Mira run into the woods to save their lives from a white mob. However, this time, they are not meant to meet the same fate as their ancestors'. Both of them are approached by Mira's ancestor, Marceline. The narrator notes that Mira "knew this woman, felt a kinship with her, and believed she would help them get to safety" (McQueen 318). Mira's relationship with her is indeed that of an ancestor and descendant, but her confidence in Marceline's intention and capability to help them out is the first step towards her understanding of Marceline's spirit as *ndiichie*.

It is crucial to recall that, according to Igbo cosmology, among all the beings and entities that are worshipped, the dead ancestors (i.e., "*ndiichie*") care for the living the most (Onukwube and Ngozi 12). This concern is manifested in the way Marceline's spirit comes

to their rescue. Since Igbo cosmology holds that *ndiichie* spirits are “liable to God alone”, Mira fearlessly follows Marceline’s lead (4). Addressing the spirit, Mira says, “I know you are. I see my eyes in yours. Can you help us? There are men after us. We’re trapped” (McQueen 318). Since Marceline’s spirit approaches Mira in the time of crisis, it becomes clear to her that she is just trying to protect them. The narrator notes, “She was leading her away from the fields and through the grounds. Mira... began to follow” (274). Given that Mira and Jesse were lost in the woods on suspicion of Celine’s murder, Marceline leads them to where Celine was murdered. At the murder site, Mira is shocked to see Phillip standing over her dead body. This is where Mira learns that it is Phillip who murdered Celine for her refusal to marry him. Marceline’s help ensures that *ndiichie* spirits are “guardians of morality” (Onukwube and Ngozi 12). Accordingly, Marceline’s spirit brings truth to the surface to uphold morality.

Marceline further plays her part as a *ndiichie* spirit in the novel by escorting Mira to safety, leading her to watch the reenactments of the ghosts of enslaved blacks, enlightening her with the accurate knowledge of history and helping her out by exposing Phillip as Celine’s murderer. Mira’s acknowledges that, “without her [Marceline’s spirit], she might never have known what Phillip had done to Celine” (McQueen 328). Since, in the antebellum period, the revolt of enslaved blacks against their white master, Roman Woodsman, failed miserably, their return as ghosts and *ndiichie* signals their resolve to complete the task that they were unable to accomplish in the past. This time, they avenge their offenders and protect their post-slavery descendants.

4.4 Additional Supernatural Elements in *When the Reckoning Comes*

There are multiple phantasmic elements in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*. These phantasmic elements draw supernatural images, figures, and phenomena from the Igbo cosmology. The purpose of such unique phantasmic elements in the novel is to differentiate phantasmic ethnic narratives from literary texts that fall into the category of magical realism. A few of these phantasmic experiences offered to the characters of the novel include historically accurate nightmares, communication with ghosts, mysterious visual performances and auditory messages.

In addition to phantasmic elements from Igbo cosmology, there are a few other supernatural elements in the novel, the origin of which can be traced to Igbo folk culture. Interestingly, according to some African American critics such as Toni Morrison, communal memory gradually takes on the form of folktales. This is the reason that the stories about the history of African Americans, when shared across generations, often transform into imaginative narratives. In the book *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (2020), Morrison notes, “Memory is insistent yet becomes the mutation of fact into fiction then folklore and then into nothing” (335). This indicates the memory endures for a long time and it is gradually infused with creativity. However, with the constant inculcation of imaginative details into it, it goes down as a made-up story which is easy to dismiss. Nevertheless, the imaginative reconstruction of the stories of the enslaved blacks forges a meaningful connection between the Igbo folklore and post-slavery African American characters represented in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*.

According to Setka, phantasmic ethnic narratives tend to break away from traditional and realistic literary styles inspired by Western Enlightenment (Setka 28). Therefore, Setka suggests readers and literary critics to keep in mind the ethnic beliefs of the group or community whose literary work is being studied. This approach towards the interpretation and investigation of literary texts leads to new findings and exclusive messages that ethnic fiction conveys. Therefore, it can be argued that the neo-slave narrative *When the Reckoning Comes* gives readers exposure to the metaphysical and cultural implications of multiple phantasmic elements represented in the novel.

The following sub-sections examine how the novel engages with different types of Igbo-specific phantasmic elements and figures to create a link between the Igbo heritage and post-slavery subjects.

4.4.1 Vengeful Ghosts

An article entitled “Ghosts in Chinese and Igbo Religions” (2019) notes that, in Igbo cosmology, it is commonly believed that people who are treated unfairly, meet premature deaths, are refused burial rites, and are forgotten by the living turn into angry ghosts (Onukwube and Ngozi 2-5). These Igbo-specific beliefs are important to the analysis

of the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* which narrates the story of a group of two friends, Mira and Jesse, who dig the stories of their ancestors and learn about plantation slaves who were made to perform laborious tasks at the Woodsman Plantation in Kipsen. As Mira and Jesse navigate post-slavery racism, they are faced with the legacy of slavery that haunts Kipsen in the form of ghosts. These ghosts enlighten them with the unfiltered history of their forefathers and enable them to reconfigure their black identity in a racially segregated town. These haunting ghosts of enslaved blacks become a crucial part of the characters' lives in the novel. The narrator notes, "Any descendants of those who harmed them or their kindred, they're seeking them out, killing them" (McQueen 144). The term 'kindred' is very important to unpack here. It covers a wide range of individuals including their direct descendants, the members of their extended family and other members of the black community who share the same lineage.

The native African religions' belief in the existence of ghosts is also emphasized in a research project entitled "Anti-Mimetic Narratives: A Study of Alain Mabanckou's *Memoirs of a Porcupine* and Yoko Tawada's *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*" (2021). This research examines the novel *Memoirs of a Porcupine* (2012) which opens in an unnamed "African village" (Alam 43). The researcher notes that the villagers portrayed in the novel commonly believe that "ghosts come back to haunt the living" (55). Accordingly, the ghosts in the village can be seen engaging in activities "which can only be done by humans" (55). It indicates that, among the villagers, the existence of ghosts is a common belief, and their hauntings are viewed as routine matters. It helps us to understand that the African ethnic groups' belief in ghosts has been widely represented in other fictional narratives as well. The present research also examines the representation of ghosts in the selected narratives.

In the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, the encounter of the black man, Jesse, with ghosts begins when he starts to see supernatural visions in which he perceives a "movement in the shadows" (McQueen 243). While he keeps seeing these visions, Mira returns to Kipsen and learns that "the spirit of the slaves that died come out at night... searching for who put their bodies in the ground" (50). This perplexes Mira. As time passes and Mira herself begins to hear mysterious whispers, she reaches the conclusion that these

“were the whispers of the dead. Of the lost. Of the forgotten” (315). It marks the beginning of her awakening to the horrors of slavery and the hauntings of angry ghosts of enslaved blacks. She understands that “the ghosts are retaliating” (245). This retaliation has multiple dimensions and implications for the black and white communities of Kipsen. These ghosts not only retaliate against the abuse they suffered in their lives but also fight to put an end to newly emerging forms of racism that their progeny contends with.

The concern of these ghosts for their progeny and the resentment towards the progeny of their perpetrators is clearly highlighted when the narrator notes that “ghosts roamed the land now in search of their families” (McQueen 49). Townsfolk begin to witness “a pattern of people dying”, “freak accidents” and “families with unexplainable deaths” (245). These events show how ghosts hunt for their culprits and exact vengeance on them. Following these events, townsfolk speculate the possibility of “ghosts”, “spirits” and “demons” haunting Kipsen and its residents (5). According to these speculations, these ghosts enact their anger and execute their revenge by attacking the descendants of their offenders and other white residents of the town who are responsible for post-slavery racial discrimination. The reason why these ghosts attack the posterity of slave owners is that they remain “complicit” in racism persisting in contemporary America in the novel (97). Therefore, the anger of these ghosts seems justifiable to many black characters in the novel.

One of the forms of racism that the black community continues dealing with in the post-slavery period in the novel is the growing trend of fetishizing the legacy of slavery. This fetishism is explicit in the construction of the antebellum theme park. The construction of a theme park on the site where enslaved blacks were tortured enrages the ghosts. In this regard, Celine, the white friend of Jesse and Mira who decides to hold her wedding at this park, disappears and is afterward found murdered. It is speculated that “ghosts must have lured her into the woods... Come and see. Their heads on pikes, eyes gouged out, tongue cut, teeth stolen” (McQueen 263). However, as Celine ends up dead in the woods, the characters of the novel suppose that Celine might have “refused to see what they’d tried to show her, and they killed her for it” (264). Since, as a white woman, she has been refusing to acknowledge the harsh truths about the cruelties faced by the black community in the

past and present, the characters of the novel assume that she is considered by ghosts as complicit in racial oppression.

However, Jesse and Mira always regard Celine as a good friend. It is important to note that Mira and Jesse only acknowledge the racial distinction between them and Celine after she is mysteriously murdered. Following this incident, they exhibit emotional detachment from Celine. They discuss with each other the complaints they had about her indifferent attitude towards racial discrimination and bullying that Mira and Jesse were subjected to as black kids at school.

4.4.2 Time Travel

The literary trope of time travel has an instrumental role to play in the novel. Before delving into it, it is important to note that, according to Stella Setka, the inculcation of phantasmic elements in ethnic traumatic narratives confirms that the expression of ethnic trauma is not bound to be regulated by “mortal” spatial and temporal rules (29). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the representation of phantasmic elements, particularly the literary trope of time travel, is used in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* to help the protagonist, Mira, witness and experience the excruciating realities of the era of slavery. Setka’s theory decodes the literary trope of “time travel” as a bridge between past and present, and a juncture where the past influences and shapes the present (Setka 34). Moreover, Setka believes that phantasmic elements in ethnic narratives assist in creating a more personal link to historical events (Setka 47). Therefore, it can be argued that the literary trope of time travel enables a strong sense of familiarity with the past which, in turn, fosters a deeper understanding of history.

Through time travel, Mira is enabled to feel the pangs of slavery as a first-hand victim and witness. In one section of the novel, Mira goes to bed and then suddenly she is transported to the antebellum South at an auction of enslaved females. She learns that this auction was arranged by a white man named Roman as Mira observes, “He had orchestrated those women, gathered them together to profit off their bodies” (McQueen 299). This episode of the novel gestures towards the excessive vulnerability of enslaved females who were deprived of autonomy over their bodies in the wake of slavery. As a female black teacher in the post-slavery America, Mira’s understanding of racism expands

and her determination to fight racial prejudice and discrimination is renewed after this experience.

After some time, Mira again finds herself transported to the antebellum period where she sees an enslaved man, Jeffrey, being tortured by his white master, Roman Woodsman, for attempting to lead a revolt of enslaved blacks to attain freedom. She witnesses Roman as he “slid the blade around Jeffrey’s face” and it ends up in “blood on his pants. Blood on his shirt. Hands dripping with blood” (McQueen 304). These details symbolize Mira’s anguish as she is faced with a gruesome episode of torture that one of the enslaved men is subjected to. The torture and subsequent murder of Jeffrey mark the defeat of the revolt that Roman’s Woodsman Plantation slaves planned out. After witnessing this scene, Mira is again pulled back to the present-day America where she realizes that “Roman and his torture devices were gone” (310). The disappearance of slave owners and their brutal methods of punishment indicates that, though slavery has been officially banned, its legacy still haunts the black community in the form of racism.

Besides time travel, this novel introduces a nuanced exploration of temporality, challenging conventional understandings of time. The narrative exhibits an “anachronistic” space of spectrality which, according to Derridean hauntology, allows specters to break free from the orbit of contemporaneity (141). In simple words, though these specters can maintain a haunting existence in the present time, they remain invisible and intangible. The hauntings of the spirits of the deceased slaves in the post-slavery period align with Jacques Derrida’s argument that hauntings challenge the conventional understanding of time by enabling specters to defy of the dominion of contemporaneity (Derrida 29). Time, as a result, neither belongs to the past nor to the present and future. In short, the spirit’s existence occupies an anachronistic space that is not bound by the constraints of time, particularly of present time.

4.4.3 Historically Accurate Nightmares

To begin with, it is important for this research to show that the concept of dreams and nightmares holds immense significance in Igbo culture. In the article “Ominous in Igbo Ontology: A Socio-Metaphysical Consideration” (2021), Gregory Emeka Chinweuba argues that throughout Igbo societies, it is widely believed that “Igbo-Africans view

nightmares as revelations from the metaphysical world” (Chinweuba 47). Therefore, it can be established that, in the Igbo cosmology, dreams and nightmares help the living commune with spiritual beings. These suggestive dreams carry messages from the divine realm to the human realm.

The novel *When the Reckoning Comes* depicts multiple scenes that are based on the dreams and nightmares of the protagonist, Mira, who is a post-slavery American citizen. Though these nightmares are emblematic of the historical trauma of slavery that deplorably impacts Mira’s mental health, psyche and identity, the present research particularly pivots on how the tenets of Igbo faith are at work in the interpretation and implications of these nightmares. Another crucial fact to be shed light on is how dreams and nightmares are distinguished in this research. To do so, it is important to clarify that the dreams that Mira has about the history of America and the workings of slavery scare the core of her and make her feel immense discomfort in day-to-day life. Though these dreams are historically accurate and help to expand Mira’s historical consciousness, the unsettling impact of these dreams on her mind characterizes them as nightmares. Therefore, the present research characterizes her dreams as nightmares.

Moreover, Gregory Emeka Chinweuba’s aforementioned article also argues that Igbo cosmology interprets nightmares as messages from the spiritual world. As the nightmares begin, Mira experiences strange occurrences. In her nightmares, she often witnesses the torment that enslaved blacks were subjected to. When she wakes up the next morning, she experiences “a searing pain in her forehead” with “her hand. . . wet with blood” (McQueen 297). The image of blood signals the process of Mira getting enlightened with the vivid details of the atrocities committed against enslaved blacks in the antebellum South; whereas, pain symbolizes the historical trauma that passes from generation to generation in the black community. Moreover, the nightmares leaving marks on Mira’s body dispel her doubts about the authenticity of the contents of her nightmares. To Mira’s surprise, Jesse once shares with her that he also “had nightmares so upsetting he was afraid to even sleep” (243). This fear not only mirrors the horrors of slavery in the antebellum South but also the post-slavery racism that plagues the lives of black individuals in Kipsen town, where Mira and Jesse are presently living.

4.4.4 Messages from the Dead

Discussing the struggles of the contemporary residents of Kipsen, Mira remarks, “[A]t night they heard whispers... the whispers told them strange things, unconscionable things” (McQueen 22). These mysterious whispers are often heard by townsfolk at nighttime, but they fall on deaf ears. Resistant to dwell on the underlying purpose of these whispers, townsfolk gossip about the mysterious whispers as a time-pass hobby. However, this time-pass activity is not meant to last long. Overtime, this mysterious and supernatural phenomenon takes a visual form. Mira observes that townsfolk eventually begin to see “visions they couldn’t explain” (22). It is astonishing for her that the residents of Kipsen, with a history of slavery, are unable to identify the visions and callings of the deceased blacks who once inhabited that town. It shows how the passage of time has desensitized white and black townsfolks alike to the historical injustices committed against the black community that still inhabits a racially segregated area in the town.

However, things begin to change when Mira and Jesse experience these mysterious occurrences. For both of them, these phantasmic occurrences mean something more than rumors and hallucinations. They learn that the mysterious auditory messages that they hear are freedom songs sung by a chorus of *ndiichie*. This shows the importance of unity and the force of the black community. It also brings them closer to each other to stand united and firm in the face of the challenges that these songs acknowledge and foreshadow. As the text notes, “Jesse gripped her hand, and their fingers interlocked as the rhythm and hum filled her ears” (McQueen 218). This scene foreshadows how Mira and Jesse will reunite with each other to escape the racial persecution that awaits them in future.

Moreover, these songs and hymns sung by a chorus of *ndiichie* foreground the significance of folktales and music in Igbo folk culture. The hymns that Mira hears can be interpreted as reenactments of the pleas of enslaved blacks to God for freedom. One of those pleas that still keep the ghosts of enslaved blacks (i.e., *ndiichie*) restless is, “Lord, send my people into Egypt land. Lord, strike down Pharaoh and set them free” (McQueen 218). Here, the image of Pharaoh is conjured by an enslaved black to paint the picture of their oppressive white masters, while the aspiration to migrate to Egypt symbolizes the

desire to run away to the antebellum North that offered the promise of freedom to the enslaved blacks.

In short, multiple supernatural occurrences discussed above forge a bridge between the enslaved ancestors and the post-slavery subjects within the African American community. The literary approach of portraying such supernatural occurrences in neo-slave narratives also link African American community with their distant past, particularly Igbo heritage.

4.5 Igbo Cosmology and American Enlightenment: A Comparison of Two Different Worldviews

The novel *Grace* contrasts Igbo cosmology with the rationalist ideology of American Enlightenment to draw attention to the distinct heritage of the black community in America. By portraying this comparison, the novel seeks to emphasize the suitability of Igbo cosmology for enslaved blacks in America. It also seems to indicate that it is not necessary for a state to assimilate diverse ethnicities and communities to promote a unified national identity. Relevant arguments have been presented in a book entitled *Environmental Ethics: Life Narratives from Kashmir and Palestine* (2023). In this work, Aamir argues that it is not appropriate for national authorities to confine people with similar races and religions in “geographical blocks” (395). Since “humanity is not a flock of sheep”, it cannot be easily restricted to fixed regions based on their racial and religious identities (395). Accordingly, correlating national identity with religious identity may lead to the emergence of “parochial nationalism” which is a conservative form of nationalism that rejects diverse identities in shared geographical regions. Aamir notes that parochial nationalism is “worse than any colonialism” (395). The selected narratives *When the Reckoning Comes* and *Grace* show that, in addition to the Enlightenment skepticism, it can also be the prevalence of parochial nationalism which results in the dismissal of Igbo cosmology in the Southern United States.

It is exemplified in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*. Mira conveys the helplessness and vulnerability of enslaved Black people by stating, “They prayed to a god now told was theirs” (187). This suggests that Christianity was not originally their faith, but rather something forced upon them by their white enslavers as a tool of control. Mira

further emphasizes the inadequacy of Christianity for the enslaved by mentioning that their prayers were “denied” (187). This implies that the religion failed to meet the spiritual needs of those with an Igbo background.

Moreover, in the theory of hauntology, Derrida notes that “ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (69). This indicates that the dominant beliefs of each period reflect the views of those in power. This is how the perspectives of the ruling class shape the prevalent ideas and opinions in a society. This idea is also explored by Laura Brown in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). Brown believes that “human experience” is often mistaken for the experiences of the dominant groups/classes of a society (101). This is the reason why the scholarship on trauma studies mostly examines the traumatic incidents that are “usual” to white men (101). Brown further argues that such an approach towards trauma leads to dangerous conclusions which may see white men as “innocent victims” but women of color as partially responsible victims (102). Using these ideas to analyze the Afro-American novel *Grace* may require readers to revisit section 1.2 in the 1st chapter of the present research to understand what Enlightenment stands for and how it contributes to the marginalization and suppression of minority voices in the intellectual landscape of America. In simplest terms, Enlightenment is a philosophical approach that regards rationality and science as the only sources of acquiring knowledge and making sense of the world.

In the novel *Grace*, Natasha Deon attempts to differentiate between well-founded beliefs and made-up fantasies as this distinction is important to establish before demonstrating how the ethnic and cultural beliefs of African Americans in the novel serve as a tool for black authors and readers to revisit and reconnect with their cultural heritage that is somewhat lost in the American society. The novel projects the Igbo view of the afterlife as a sensible and well-founded belief, anchored in Igbo cosmology. It helps to promote, popularize and mainstream the representation of Igbo ontology in American literature.

In *Grace*, a number of references are made to mind-made stories and fantasies that are popular in American society. The “monster” of Frankenstein, “witch”, and “black magic” are the things that the characters in the novel casually mention (Deón 89, 119, 388).

The purpose of these elements in the narrative is to show the difference between myths/stories and spiritual worldview. Although monsters, witches, and magic also have unknown origins and mysterious natures, believing in these things is not frowned upon at any moment in the novel. However, the Igbo view of the afterlife remains inaccessible to the white characters portrayed in the novel. This is the reason that Bessie, the female house slave, is the only person in the novel *Grace* who can see and talk to the ndiichie spirit of Naomi. On the other hand, Annie, the white slave owner, does not even notice that Naomi's spirit haunts her and possesses her body.

It is crucial to explain why Bessie is the only woman who can interact with ghosts. Brian McCuskey's article entitled "Not at Home: Servants, Scholars, and the Uncanny" (2006) examines the role of servants in literature in upholding beliefs in the supernatural and the uncanny. In this article, McCuskey argues that in fictional narratives, belief in the existence of ghosts is identified as a "superstitious fear" of uneducated characters such as "servants" (429). However, the "so-called educated" characters are often seen as being skeptical about such "primitive" fears (428-429). This article helps to explain why ghosts in the novel *Grace* find it safe to approach and interact with Bessie. The ghosts understand that Bessie's lack of education is the reason why no one will believe her even if she reveals the paranormal occurrences taking place in the town.

When Naomi's spirit asks Bessie multiple times about how she sees her, Bessie replies, "Feel you more'n see you. Feel you angry" (Deon 185). It signifies the deeply rooted resentment in the minds of the black individuals prompted by their marginalization. Bessie also makes an important remark here as she mentions, "You'll be back here like the others" (185). It shows that prior to Naomi's spirit, there have been multiple spirits and specters that haunted the residences and plantations of slave owners. The restlessness of their spirits after a lifetime of torment and subjugation agonizes Bessie. It scars her in so many ways. Not only does she keep "crying" over her helplessness to assist them in their revenge plan, but she also begs them to leave as she says, "you got to forgive" to escape "hellfire" because she believes that haunting will eventually harm these spirits (184-185). However, she makes it clear to them that though "nobody deserve forgiveness", and it will be "a gift for [spirits like Naomi]" if they are saved from hellfire eventually (186). Despite

being a kind character in the narrative, Bessie remains unable to understand the motivation of Naomi's spirit and relate with her maternal instinct.

The novel also seems to propose that there can be a few elements in different folktales, cultures and ethnic beliefs that lack reasonable and logical evidence which is a requisite of Enlightenment ontology. Monsters, magic, and witches are hardly believed to be unreasonable entities by the white characters in the novel based on how commonly they are mentioned in everyday conversations. While at the same time, the cries of the ndiichie spirit of Naomi, if heard, are disregarded as the sound of "wind" (Deón 376). It shows that logical explanation is only offered by white American characters when they deal with the elements or entities from Igbo culture. On the other hand, the explanation for native myths is neither offered nor sought after. This is also a manifestation of racism in the novel and the Enlightenment rationality is its driving factor. It shows how the elements of Igbo cosmology are judged on the parameter of Enlightenment ontology in the novel. Consulting the way Igbo cosmology views spirits and the afterlife will help to understand how the concept of ndiichie and ghosts in the novel *Grace* is anchored in Igbo cosmology.

Similarly, Enlightenment skepticism towards Igbo cosmology is also highlighted in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*. In the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021), there are various instances of characters being skeptical about the authenticity and credibility of Igbo-specific phantasmic elements. Such a skeptical attitude towards the ethnic supernatural is discussed by Stella Setka in her theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives. She argues that the worldviews offered by non-Western cultures are simply dismissed in the light of experiences deemed plausible by Western rationalists (Setka 32). The rationalists discredit the approach to engage with the "supernatural" as a means to make sense of the world (28). Setka argues that this is the reason why American academia and literary traditions are unable to differentiate between mind-made fantasy and culturally specific supernatural. As a result, the characters portrayed in ethnic narratives approach their "traumatic past from a position of alterity" (26). This means that these characters also struggle with identifying with their ethnic cosmologies and native cultures. They also appear to be distant from the cultural heritage and historical legacy of their ancestors. Therefore, Setka's theory attempts to expose the limitation inherent in the existing critical

frameworks in Western literary criticism by connecting the phantasmic elements in the ethnic American narratives with their respective indigenous cultures.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that, despite the Enlightenment skepticism towards the supernatural, Igbo-specific phantasmic elements in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* are part of the Igbo worldview. In a book entitled *African Religions and Philosophy* (1970), John Mbiti argues that in all African religions, physical and spiritual worlds “intermingle” in such a way that it becomes a challenge to draw a distinction between them (97). African religions hold the belief that even death cannot disrupt the “continuation of life” (211). Mbiti further adds, “A person dies and yet continues to live; he is a living-dead” (211). This indicates that life after death is an important reality of Igbo cosmology. However, in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, black characters, such as Mira and Jesse, have a hard time believing in the hauntings of ghosts and the supernatural occurrences taking place in the town. They take time to adjust to their changing reality and evolving worldview.

In this novel, Mira initially appears reluctant to believe in the authenticity of her supernatural encounters. The narrator notes, “she thought maybe she’d been imagining what she saw” (McQueen 195). This shows that, after having been offered supernatural experiences by the ghosts haunting the town, Mira initially chooses to adopt a skeptical attitude. Since she fears that her mysterious and supernatural experiences will make no sense to others, she appears to be uncertain and doubtful. She tells Jesse that she initially thought, “I was wrong” (195). She feared that she might be mistaken about the mysterious occurrences. However, Jesse assures her that he believes whatever she says. Subsequently, she takes him to the place where she witnesses the ghosts of enslaved blacks reenacting their laborious services and episodes of torture from the antebellum period. However, “when they reached it she saw no men, no digging, and no hole” (194). It not only dwindles Mira’s confidence, but she also fears appearing non-sensical. This incident also shows the agency of ghosts in deciding when, where and to whom they want to show their reenactments. Moreover, Mira first needs to navigate her history and black identity to make sense of the supernatural visions that she sees. Therefore, ghosts do not answer her calls.

It is crucial to recognize that her confusion regarding the authenticity of her visions is catalyzed by a childhood incident. In their school years, Jesse was arrested for a murder that had been committed by the ghost of an enslaved man. She knew it and mustered the courage to share this with the police officers. However, she was discouraged by police officials whose response upheld the rational spirit of American Enlightenment. Police officials were infuriated by her “stories” (McQueen 76). A policeman scolded her by saying that she was “wasting [his] time with her stories” (76). The narrator further notes, “The way he’d raised his arm at her, close to hitting her, when all she’d wanted was to tell the truth” (266). This incident instills a fear of punishment in her. As a result, she decides to not share her supernatural experiences with others. She laments, “I just couldn’t prove it” (203). This incident is so traumatizing for her that she leaves the town to elude phantasmic experiences, thereby avoiding judgment and punishment at the hands of skeptical white townsfolk.

Additionally, Mr. Loomis, the son of the white overseer, remembers his deceased father’s advice that “sons bear the sins of the fathers, you know, and they’re coming to take their due” (McQueen 101). Despite being warned of the haunting ghosts, Mr. Loomis doesn’t believe it. His decision to discredit the phantasmic possibilities leads him to his death. Mira reckons, “The ghosts had been after him for what his family had done, and he stayed out of defiance, refusing to believe in their existence until they finally killed him” (245). His decision to stay in the town and keep occupying the land his father received from Roman Woodsman shows his indifference towards the horrors carried out on that piece of land. Therefore, he is considered to be complicit in the injustices committed against the black community. He dismisses his father’s advice to leave the town and give up on the cursed land. As a result, ghosts decide that he also has to serve a penalty for racial crimes committed in Kipsen. Similarly, when Mira decides to warn the townsfolk of an impending verdict of ghosts for them, Jesse tells her, “They won’t believe you” (259). The townsfolk’s disbelief in their stories is an embodiment of the distinction between the belief systems of white and black communities in Kipsen, with the former instilled with the spirit of Enlightenment rationality, while the latter associated with Igbo heritage.

4.6 The Divide between Documented History and Communal Memory

This section delves into the distinction between national history and communal memory, initially in the novel *Grace* and subsequently in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, with the sequence arranged to enhance clarity and readability.

Natashia Deon's *Grace* deals with the history of antebellum slavery and American Civil War, covering the time period of multiple decades. Each chapter of the novel is set in a different year of American history. This is why *Grace* appears to be a macrocosm that first builds a historical context, and then portrays how individuals and their stories are impacted and shaped by it. Such an approach to writing not only adds depth to the story but also allows the author of the novel, Natashia Deon, to take a clear position and thereby make a commentary on different historical events and their direct and indirect imprints on the lives of black individuals. Moreover, the plot and characterization of the novel classify it as a family saga of three generations of the black community. In doing so, it brings together multiple historical occurrences from the documented history of America and the communal memory of the black community. In a research article entitled "Collective Memory and Social Movements" (2022), Kansteiner and Aguilar define communal memory as the past shared by a specific community (qtd. in Zamponi 1). So, the communal memory of the black community in this research refers to the legacy of slavery shared by African Americans. The selected narratives embody communal memory in the shared sense of belonging of African American characters with Igbo heritage, slavery and dehumanization of black race across American history. The selected narratives also function as a repository of communal memory for narrating tales of slavery and experiences of racial subjugation with the Igbo lens.

As a family saga, this novel addresses the communal memory of the black community. It is crucial because, according to Jacques Derrida, history can be "selective" (69). Here, Derrida calls out the non-inclusive policies in the process of documenting history. There can possibly be some forces that "filter the inheritance" (69). It points out the role of a privileged class of a given society in shaping historical narratives. Furthermore, it is important to mention that such a skeptical attitude toward official history is shared by Stella Setka too. She addresses the practice of celebrating white American

historical narratives at the expense of the histories of “ethnic minorities” (Setka 15). This leads us to an alternative approach to engage with history and the past.

One of the pathways to the past is through the communal memory of the black community. This type of memory is epitomized in Naomi’s character in *Grace*. Naomi’s ndiichie spirit is an embodiment of the stories of enslaved blacks. She thinks that these stories need to be passed on to the progeny of the American black community so that they can develop a mature sense of their history and identity. She believes, “I could’ve saved a whole lot of trouble by tellin ’em the things that I know” (Deon 1). The preservation of communal memory of the black community is immensely significant in the novel because of its magnitude as it covers the time period transitioning from the days of slavery to emancipation and engages with the stories of enslaved and post-slavery subjects.

The narrative opens with the narrator, Naomi, introducing herself as a spirit of a deceased woman. She says, “I died a long time ago. Before you born, before your mother was born, ’fore your grandmother. I was a mother, too.” (Deon 401). This sentence introduces the readers to the story of different generations of people connected with each other through communal bonds. It also highlights the importance of the bloodline as the basic unit of a community. Moreover, the narrator’s racial identity is reflected through the literary device of imagery. She claims, “I’m coal... turning to ash” and “cinder” (399). These images of three black and gray combustion products not only characterize the narrator as a black woman but also reflect her emotional state. The image of coal shows her capacity to endure, the intensity of her resilience and fighting spirit. In one way, turning into ash and cinder may suggest that Naomi is consumed by the atrocities and pain inflicted on her throughout her life. Alternatively, it can also reflect that her enduring existence which persists even after death in an alternate form i.e., ndiichie. The way the specter of Naomi haunts the realm of the living throughout the narrative clearly shows her fortitude in the face of death and danger.

As Naomi unravels the story of her life, the readers learn that the constant fear of estrangement and a broken family hovers over her childhood. Born to an enslaved mother, she opens her eyes to a world that preordains the fate of the people in the light of their preassigned racial identities. She sees her mother constantly being threatened with the sale

of her two daughters in case she fails to give birth to a baby boy to help amass the slave owner's wealth. The peril of a broken family is always considered to be imminent by enslaved families as the narrator clearly remarks, "It's not strange for a negro to lose parents and for folks to move on in silence" (Deon 228). To her dismay, Naomi is eventually subjected to a lifelong feeling of isolation. As a nine-year-old girl, she unwittingly ends up killing her white master in a conflict that begins with Massa bringing along a male slave to make the older daughter, Hazel, breed with him. Naomi is forced to escape to the North to avoid facing the aftermath of the bloody discord that takes the life of three individuals. At a later stage in her life, when Naomi decides to start her own family with her romantic partner, Jeremy, he severs ties with her and refuses the paternity of their unborn child. Moreover, she is killed right after giving birth to her daughter, Josey. In a nutshell, it can be assumed that Naomi's story is the story of a broken family for which separation is preordained, and there remains no chance of reunion.

Back to hauntology, Jacques Derrida notes that the purpose of specters is "to redress history, the wrong [tort] of history" (24).² Specters can carry it out by elevating the awareness of present-day generations. It will not be wrong to say that, in *Grace*, one of the reasons why Naomi's spirit haunts the living realm is the preservation of her story in a way that can help her exercise power over her story as well as the narrative of the black community. She claims to have "a pocketful of memories" that need to be unraveled and conveyed to her descendants (Deon 16). This is reflected in her statement that says, "There are some stories..., secret stories." (1). On another point, she says, "There were things I still needed to tell [my daughter]" (54). Naomi's spirit considers it important to tell the story of her life as an enslaved woman to her daughter because these stories are only passed on from mothers to daughters as life lessons.

Since she dies early, she is stuck with so many words left unsaid. Therefore, the spirit of Naomi is scared of Josey losing a sense of identity and connection with her ancestors and their stories. However, despite efforts, she remains unable to communicate with her so she simply accompanies her everywhere. At one point, she expresses, "I hear

² The word "tort" is a legal term which refers to a wrongful act committed by a person that causes harm, injury or loss to another person or their property.

Josey's thoughts sometimes. They're like her prayers spoken that I cain't answer." (Deon 230). This statement identifies the disconnection between the dead and the living, the past and the present, free people and enslaved people. She realizes that a ghost cannot play the role of a mother, similar to how an enslaved woman's maternal instinct is undermined and infringed upon by her master/s. These realizations inform Naomi's posthumous motivations as *ndiichie*. This is the reason she tries to reclaim her agency and takes things into her hands.

Naomi has learnt a lot from the experiences of the oppression of her family and sister, Hazel, who saved Naomi by making her run away but chose for herself to stay behind. This was a lesson long remembered by Naomi even as *ndiichie*. It made her realize that she cannot remain passive in realizing her goals. It is because Hazel had seen the consequences of not being able to do anything for her mother upon witnessing her being sexually exploited. At one point, Hazel comments that she often feels "guilty"; however, she cannot be blamed "for... fix[ing] nothing" because, as a child, Hazel couldn't do much to save her mother (Deon 16). Therefore, after turning into *ndiichie*, Naomi is adamantly resolved to take matters into her own hands to assure her daughter's safety. This also explains why Naomi's *ndiichie* spirit refuses to give up her revenge plan despite Bessie's repeated insistence. She turns Bessie down by thinking, "She should understand the pain of no justice 'cause she black, too." (201). It shows the strength of her resolve to protect her daughter.

Apart from a family saga, the novel engages with real historical events. It is crucial to note that the historical events that Deon engages with are the ones that involve an underprivileged group in American history, be it invasions of Native tribes or the plight of enslaved blacks. One of the interesting things in the novel *Grace* is how different characters view Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of America, who signs the proclamation of emancipation in the narrative. Besides being a depiction of authentic history, it remains an event conflating the consciousness of the masses. The novel's characters paint a grey image of Lincoln, with blacks celebrating their freedom and whites lamenting the widespread destruction that accompanied the Civil War. Neither revered as a hero nor labelled as a traitor, his leadership capability divides opinions among both communities. A white

character, Richard, says, “[Lincoln] has taken it upon himself to take away our rights, our livelihood, kill our brothers” (Deon 168). Another character, the Doctor, goes as far as to call Lincoln “a war criminal” (221). These phrases reflect the frustration caused to the white Southerners by the abolition of slavery.

Additionally, a formerly enslaved black character, the preacher, says, “God has touched President Lincoln and softened his heart so that he be like Pharaoh and set us free” (Deon 160). Furthermore, Naomi’s spirit announces in one of the following chapters of the novel that “Lincoln was murdered like it was done in trade” (247). It refers to how he was killed like other people who had lost their lives in the Civil War. The war started by him claimed the lives of many and, in return, he was also murdered following the declaration of emancipation. Naomi’s comment as a black woman on Lincoln’s murder is questionable because her utterances lack sympathy or admiration for Lincoln who was their savior in a way. However, to begin with, these comments are due to the conflicted race relations that were aggravated by the legacy of slavery in an interracial American society.

Another real historical event portrayed in the novel is the ‘Indian Wars’ fought in the 18th century. One of the characters of the novel, Jackson, fights in this war. The narrator takes a critical approach to this war. At one point, when Jackson finds his everyday life dull and boring after returning from war, the narrator remarks, “he missed war. [As] most of the able-bodied men did, black or white” (Deon 278). Here, the author debunks the tradition of associating war with masculinity and adventure. This quote means that war can only be glorified and romanticized by individuals who do not sustain disabling injuries. At this point, readers not only learn about a real war that was fought on the American landscape, but their perceptions of war are also informed by Natasha Deon’s personal stance on this subject.

Moreover, in relation to the war between Native Indians and the United States, there are intriguing passages in the novel pertaining to the Creek landscape. The narrator begins praising the beauty of this land and proceeds to the way it is maimed in the war. She says, “This land got a memory” about how the United States “cut her up” to “own her. . . . It’s always how white men came to own things: If you can define it, you can own it . . . it can be fought for, killed for.” (Deon 41-42). These lines present Naomi’s critique on the

supremacist approach of white Americans towards the tribes of Native Indians and weak ethnic groups. The narrator is able to understand this pain by relating it in the same passage with the practice of owning “a woman, a slave” (55). These invasions and human rights abuses, according to her, weave a chronicle of American history. Here, Naomi’s spirit, the first-person narrator, takes the position of a bystander or an observer who can break free from the dominion of time and witness these historical occurrences. This is quite similar to how a historian takes account of the history of a particular nation and takes a subjective position to make comments in light of evolved human values. In these passages, Naomi’s spirit takes the history of America into consideration and passes personal comments informed by complex and constantly evolving black subjectivity.

On the other hand, in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, multiple characters from the white and black communities deal with the legacy of slavery differently and it interplays in intricate ways in their day-to-day lives. To navigate these diverse approaches to history, it is effective to categorize them into following sub-sections.

4.6.1 Traumatic Rememory

In a research essay entitled “Haunted by the Past: Traumatic Rememory and black Feminism in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*” (2014), Stella Setka defines “traumatic rememory” as disruptive recollections of the past not only serving as a source of pain but also as a site of healing and empowerment by dissolving the cycle of oppression (129-131). This indicates that the act of recalling memories of the traumatic past is painful as well as cathartic. Coming to terms with one’s traumatic past leads to healing.

In the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, Mira is gradually exposed to such recollections by ghosts which become a source of agony, anguish, and trauma for her. Largely unfamiliar with the injustices committed in the era of slavery, Mira’s traumatic memory is sparked by the phantasmic visions of the ghosts’ reenactments of the past. Explaining the reason for the hauntings of ghosts in Kipsen, Mira says, “They remember the sight of their husbands and sons hanged from the trees... and the cold metal on their ankles... and in their mouths” (McQueen 3). The word remember also implies Mira’s expanding awareness of history as she gradually learns the painful realities of the past. Mira witnesses the sight of “men digging this large hole, like some sort of mass grave”

(192). Upon observing this, she is troubled about who these men are and why they dig a grave.

Watching these reenactments is one of the initial steps that lead Mira, a post-slavery subject, to acquire authentic and unfiltered knowledge about the pre-Civil War history of Kipsen. As these reenactments continue, she learns that, in this scene, enslaved blacks are ordered to dig their own graves “for the white men’s fun” (McQueen 311). Moreover, she sees and learns that, after the failure of the revolt of enslaved against slavery, Roman “decapitated the leaders and put their heads on pikes along a five-mile stretch of road. Negro Head Road, people called it after, as a warning to other slaves” (240). This shows the indifference of white people in the antebellum South toward racial abuse. Instead of getting horrified, they take pride in it and threaten their own slaves by using this example. This is the reason the entire white community is considered by the ghosts complicit in the inhuman treatment meted out to enslaved blacks. Mira laments, “Many never made it to the freedom they sought” (79). This shows that their revolt met failure and their purpose remained unfulfilled.

The pain that the exposure to past recollections brings to Mira serves as a history lesson. Her growing pain is juxtaposed with the pain inflicted on enslaved blacks. She learns, “Over and over they suffered the pain of fractured bones, of mutilated flesh” (McQueen 186). It becomes clear that the preservation of memories brings about the preservation of pain for the black community. Mira describes the helplessness and vulnerability of enslaved blacks by saying, “They prayed to a god now told was theirs” (187). This quote seems to make room for Igbo cosmology by affirming that Christianity was not the religion of the enslaved, rather the white slave-owners turned it into a tool to dominate their slaves. The unsuitability and inadequacy of the imposed Christianity religion for enslaved blacks are further highlighted by Mira when she says that their prayers were “denied” (187). This indicates that Christianity could not suffice to the needs of people with Igbo background.

Since the selected narrative seems to show Christianity as a belief system that does not align with the needs and worldviews of black people with Igbo heritage, it may remind readers of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Regarded as a seminal work,

Achebe's novel foregrounds the doom-laden encounter between Christianity and Igbo religion, resulting in the collapse of the native Igbo society. Likewise, McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* also touches briefly upon Christianity, dismissing it as an unsuitable belief system for enslaved blacks. The narrative shows that, since Christianity is the religion of white slave owners, it cannot offer any promise of respite or relief for enslaved blacks with Igbo heritage.

To have a more insightful understanding of the significance of this subject, a brief discussion on Achebe's novel will play an instrumental role in this analysis. A research paper "God (s) Fall (s) Apart: Christianity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (2005) by Enrique Galván Álvarez, and Fernando Galván Reula discusses the inadequacies in Christianity for native Igbo populace as shown in Achebe's novel. This paper argues that *Things Fall Apart* critiques the evangelization of Christianity to the Igbo world. The researchers note that Achebe's novel foregrounds the "political significance" of introducing Christianity to colonies (Álvarez and Reula 106). It is meant to serve the colonial purpose of "disempowering of a people" (115). As a result, Christianity "as a foreign perspective" marks the "end of the clan's main socio-spiritual institution" (106,115). However, "the old worldview [Igbo] is still there" which is why the message of Christianity somehow "remains mysterious" for the local Igbo populace (108, 112). Overall, the paper observes the inadequacies of a foreign belief system to Igbo society. This paper supplements the argument presented by the present research about how the prayers of enslaved blacks for freedom in *When the Reckoning Comes* remain unanswered. As the religion of the slave owners, Christianity makes no promises of freedom to these enslaved characters.

The experiences Mira has in the antebellum South in her time travel excursions also help her engage with the communal memory of enslaved blacks. Mira witnesses multiple forms of racial oppression in her time travel excursions in the antebellum South. One of them is the way a black girl, Lucy, is treated in Woodsman family. As Roman Woodsman's wife loses her mind after her biological child dies, the family adopts Lucy as their daughter. However, this adoption is very ironic. Lucy is "a sort of de facto daughter" and "a pet" for the mentally hinged Annabelle, Roman's wife (McQueen 237). Mira provides readers with

the graphic details of the tortures Lucy is subjected to in the family. Upon Annabelle's orders, Lucy has to spin in loops while "Mrs. Woodsman didn't let her stop" (290). Narrating Lucy's condition after spinning, Mira observes, "Her face was scrunched up in pain" as she fell down in a state of dizziness and disorientation (291). However, Annabelle scolds Lucy for putting an end to the show that she orders her to perform every now and then. Afterward, Annabelle orders Lucy to crawl to her cage, and "Lucy got on her hands and knees... and crawled toward what looked like a wire cage" which injured her back (292). Then she is told to sleep inside the cage as Annabelle also goes to bed.

All these incidents that Mira is exposed to through phantasmic means constitute her engagement with traumatic re-memory or 'rememory' as coined by Morrison and theorized by Setka. The process of recalling and re-engaging with the past serves as a source of pain and trauma for her. Her trauma is also manifest in her nightmares, the initial state of denial, and the decision to leave the town. These traumatic recollections eventually become a site of healing for the racial trauma that Mira faces.

4.6.2 Fetishization of the Legacy of Slavery

In her theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives, Stella Setka makes a case against how a dominant group of a society fetishizes the "subaltern as an exotic object" (Setka 86). The legacy and monuments of an underprivileged group may fascinate the powerful groups who remain physically and emotionally distant from their adversities and trauma. The legacy of a disadvantaged group can potentially fuel a sense of superiority in other groups. The viewpoints of Setka are quite relevant to the present research because, in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, the white family that inherits the Woodsman Plantation decides to erect an antebellum theme park over it. This shows how lack of empathy and acknowledgement for the misery of enslaved blacks characterize the understanding and representation of history in the post-slavery world painted in the novel. This indifference undermines the legitimacy of American historiography for post-slavery African American characters. To add insult to injury, black members of the town are employed as waiters and workers at the park, while white guests are invited to relish the spectacle.

When Mira returns to Kipsen after a long time, she is told by Celine that the theme park has “become a pretty popular touristy place” (McQueen 16). This greatly disturbs Mira’s peace of mind. The narrator notes, “Mira wanted to know how they were able to do it—to enjoy a moment like this, drinking in contented peace, while admiring the view” (96). She is perplexed as to why people endorse the mockery of the legacy of the black community like this. Mira wonders, “I don’t know who would want to see something like that” (88). She cannot believe how the performances of black individuals as antebellum slaves can entertain people. It appears to her that the theme park and the employment of black people as waiters and caretakers are a tribute to the slave owners of the antebellum period who controlled and exploited blacks.

Mira is also shocked to see the response of white guests as they “look out and say—oh, how lovely, and not think any more beyond the perceived beauty before them” (McQueen 96). The admiration that the white guests exhibit for this sight is an embodiment of romanticizing violence against the weak. Mira wonders, “Who could look at this and not see it for what it was?” (90) She does not understand why these guests fail to grasp the complexities of history behind the fascinating façade of the theme park. In addition, the insensitivity of these people to the excruciating realities of slavery is further exposed when an employee approaches the guests, offers them slave costumes, and says, “You can dress up too if you like. A few of the visitors do, wanting to feel part of the show” (88). This shows how the white townsfolk turned the legacy of slavery into a plaything. It is one of the reasons that ghosts also begin to perform reenactments of the past in the town to disrupt the fantasies of the townsfolk.

Furthermore, Jesse and Mira discuss with each other how apathetic it is to hold and attend a wedding ceremony at an antebellum theme park, Jesse says, “you know as well as I do roots mean something to these people, even if the core is rotted” (McQueen 130). This implies that Jesse clearly understands how the white community at Kipsen asserts supremacy by revisiting the power dynamics of the antebellum period. So instead of acknowledging the injustices committed in history, they seem to be celebrating the legacy of slavery by arranging a joyous wedding ceremony at the controversial theme park.

4.6.3 Historical Amnesia

Stella Setka believes that it is not possible for societies and communities to forget traumatic history. Instead, societies and groups engaged in collective efforts to cause “historical amnesia” (Setka 56). However, ethnic authors can play a notable role in “repairing historical amnesia” (127). The term historical amnesia refers to a partial or complete purgation of uncomfortable truths about the exploitation of a certain group of people from history. In phantasmic ethnic narratives, the characters are faced with little chunks of memories from the communal memory of their communal group which signals the beginning of the healing of historical amnesia (62). In these texts, the characters oblivious to history are exposed to graphic details of the sufferings that their respective communities were subjected to in the past (29). Such an intimate exposure to past restores voice to “historical silences” (31). This leads the literary characters and readers to enhanced understanding of their past and history.

In his discussion on hauntology, Jacques Derrida uses the term “amnesiac order” to refer to the phenomenon of overlooking and deliberately forgetting the injustices committed in the past (139). To clarify this point, Derrida also uses the term “impure history” (221). To understand these ideas, it is crucial to note that, according to Derrida, history is maneuvered by the powerful and privileged groups of societies that shape and dictate historical narratives. Therefore, the study of specters may lead people to understand how important it is to challenge the dominant narratives of history. This approach not only leads to a better understanding of history but also clarifies how the past shapes the present.

The novel *When the Reckoning Comes* sheds light on historical amnesia by highlighting how the post-slavery period is marked with collective forgetting of antebellum history. The hegemonic structure of post-slavery American society, shaped by white supremacy, leads to erasure of black history and contributions. On one occasion, Jesse takes Mira to a graveyard and asks, “Our ancestors were buried out here, so where are their graves?” (McQueen 137) They attempt to find their enslaved ancestors’ graves to pay respect to them and to honor their resilience. However, they realize that their ancestors could neither find a home in Kipsen, nor could they secure a place in its graveyard. Jesse complains, “Our ancestors were the ones who built this place. They lived and died to make

it, and what did we get in return?" (137) This shows that Jesse is traumatized by the fact that enslaved blacks who worked to foster the agricultural economy in Southern plantations went down in the history of Kipsen as mere commodities and properties of white slave-owners. The services and sufferings of enslaved blacks, even after the abolition of slavery, remain unacknowledged.

Overtime, Jesse is faced with a paradox. The construction of the theme park at Woodsman Plantation where his ancestors served as slaves is the sole opportunity for him to find employment. He takes the job but faces immense discomfort for taking part in a project that disregards the sentiments of the black community and fetishizes their historical legacy. He admits, "It's hard to live with certain truths of this world, so we ignore what we can. Choose not to look. We have to do it because otherwise we have to deal with the burden of knowing" (McQueen 250). In this scene, Jesse reveals to Mira that he also sees the reenactments of ghosts at the construction site but chooses to not respond because it will make him feel guilty for getting involved in the construction of the theme park. He finds it hard to ignore the brutal afflictions faced by his ancestors, but he is compelled to witness his history and legacy.

Moreover, Jesse's hobby of photography is also emphasized in the novel. His passion for photography reveals his recognition of the need to preserve the communal memory of the black community. In his leisure time, he maintains a diary in which he juxtaposes slave narratives with the current photographs of black residents of Kipsen which he complements with "quotes from the once-lost stories" (McQueen 231). This shows his growing concern for the continuation of racism and exploitative policies that harm black community.

In contrast to him, Mira, for the most part, appears intimidated upon witnessing the reenactments of ghosts. She struggles with figuring out what she can do to handle the stories of the past depicted by the ghosts of deceased enslaved. However, these reenactments are the first step in her way to learn the history of her ancestors. The narrator notes, "Mira saw the history of her people, of this country, of all the violence forgotten and ignored" (McQueen 313). However, she initially lacks the courage to face the unfiltered details of historical violence her ancestors were subjected to. The narrator says, "Fear told

her to do what she'd always done—run, and she did" (184). She chooses not to look and witness the uncomfortable truths. However, as she is constantly faced by these reenactments, she begins to understand the need to acknowledge history.

The narrative also shows a white character, Mr. Loomis, the son of the white overseer from the antebellum South, remembering his deceased father's advice: "Sons bear the sins of the fathers, you know, and they're coming to take their due" (McQueen 101). However, his mind is hardly prepared to believe that the marginalized black community that still faces racism in the town could attain power. When a ghost murders him, Mira reckons that he might have also been exposed to these reenactments. She assumes, "Maybe he died because he denied them their history" (244). She believes that the anger of the haunting ghosts stems from the fact that their perpetrators as well as their descendants stick to racism. The refusal of the descendants of slave-owners to empathize with black history and honor their legacy invites the wrath of ghosts. Since the history was "always there, hidden but never lost", the ghosts in the novel offer the opportunity of witnessing the past to the entire community of Kipsen (26). The reason why ghosts make efforts to expose the townsfolk to the legacy of slavery is that "the history [was] rewritten, erased" (16). The documented history of Kipsen was merely a "corrupted version of the past" (97). This is the reason why ghosts of the deceased slaves duplicate and perform reenactments of the brutalities they were subjected to.

Moreover, when a white man who inherited the Woodsman Plantation decides to build an antebellum theme park at this site, Mira laments, "Shame for the realization that even after all these years of progress, this was where we'd come" (97). She realizes that this theme park is only a mockery of their legacy, but an insensitive parody of the atrocities committed against the enslaved black who served at Woodsman Plantation.

The above discussion helps us understand that the role of ghosts in this novel is to fill the gaps in the historical knowledge of the characters, particularly Mira and Jesse. In the book *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (2004), Jeffrey Weinstock argues that ghosts embody facts that are excluded from history (5). The hauntings expose "an untold story" that is missing from the "received history" (5). Weinstock further notes that one's preoccupation with ghosts reveals their understanding

of the politicized and maneuvered documentation of history that hides uncomfortable truths (5). These arguments help us to explain the implications of ghosts in the novel. These ghosts continue to perform reenactments of the events that took place in the antebellum South so that the post-slavery subjects, including Mira and Jesse, can expand their understanding of how race determines their fate and influences their lives.

4.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has analyzed Natasha Deon's *Grace* and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* to address how the portrayal of Igbo-specific phantasmic elements in the selected neo-slave narratives challenged Enlightenment skepticism of the supernatural found in ethnic belief systems. It has further analyzed how these texts reconfigured history and engaged with the communal memory of the black community to narrate the stories of enslaved blacks. Also, it has been examined how communal memory has been presented in the selected narratives using the lens of Igbo worldview that predominantly considers the existence of phantasmic figures, such as ghosts and *ndiichie*, as an integral part of the physical world.

CHAPTER 5

**PHANTASMIC INTERVENTION TO REPOSITION BLACK
SUBJECT IN NATASHIA DEON'S *GRACE* (2016) AND
LATANYA MCQUEEN'S *WHEN THE RECKONING COMES*
(2021)**

This chapter studies Natasha Deon's *Grace* and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021) to examine how the selected narratives manifest an evolved understanding of black subjectivity. It further analyzes how ancestral spirits disrupt the subject positions of black individuals in the aftermath of slavery. Moreover, the chapter attempts to investigate how ghosts and spirits of enslaved blacks enable their post-slavery descendants to reclaim black agency that was lost in the wake of slavery. The chapter is broken down into multiple sections to make the analysis clear, structured, and easy to follow.

Before delving into analysis, it is pertinent to define the three key concepts—agency, subjectivity, and subject position—this chapter examines. Subject position refers to the way social, cultural and political forces shape a group's identity, experiences and status. It depends on various factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, nationality and caste etc. On the other hand, agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups to take control of their lives, write their own narratives, challenge oppressive structures, and assert their culture and experiences. Additionally, black subjectivity refers to how black individuals perceive themselves, navigate their racial identity and view their community in the broader society.

All three concepts including agency, subjectivity, and subject position deal with how individuals navigate and experience the world, shaped by internal and external forces. Agency is about one's capacity to act, subjectivity is about personal perception and experience, while subject position is about the roles assigned by society.

5.1 Manifestation of an Evolving Black Subjectivity in the Selected Narratives

The selected neo-slave narratives seem to problematize black subjectivity and reconfigure what it means to be black. The narratives engage with black subjectivity in multiple ways. Before explaining it, it is imperative to define what black subjectivity means for contemporary black critics. In *black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks explains what black subjectivity means. According to her, the attempts made by black individuals to explore blackness and break away from “a fixed essential identity” imposed on them by the “forces of domination” constitute black subjectivity (hooks 20, 46). This indicates that black subjectivity is not only the way blacks perceive their identity, but it also refers to the process of the constant struggle on the part of black Americans to subdue how “media” or other forces represent them, alongside expecting them to conduct themselves (5). The struggle of maintaining a distinct identity and protecting it from the attacks of the privileged group of society is what constitutes black subjectivity. Moreover, in a research paper entitled “Ghost [s] in the House: black Subjectivity and Cultural Memory in Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope*” (2012), black subjectivity is defined as “an interior space of meaning” (74). It indicates that experiences unique to black individuals keep on shaping and influencing the way blacks perceive themselves and the world around them.

In relation to black subjectivity, Stella Setka explores the idea of “fluid subjectivity” and moving “beyond [one’s] own subjectivity (34, 40). She emphasizes that the changes taking place in one’s historical and political circumstances can deeply impact an individual’s subjectivity.

Setka further observes that phantasmic ethnic narratives may use the trope of time travel to help characters approach history with “postintegrationist, postfeminist sensibilities” (Setka 38). This leads them to a better acknowledgement of their legacy and history. Time travel is a useful trope to strip characters of their “historical foreknowledge” which might have been whitewashed by the powerful groups of the society (Setka 43). It also helps them to “fully immerse” in the historical experience that they are offered (43). Since Setka argues that a major portion of history full of uncomfortable truths “has not been duplicated in texts”, phantasmic narratives take characters to the past to show them

the horrors and disturbing details that historiography may sugarcoat and whitewash (Setka 44). Time travel exposes characters to the pains inflicted on their ethnic groups in the past. However, this pain is witnessed and “experienced by twentieth-century minds” (Setka 27). This shows that, through time travel, characters take part in their history and engage with it with an evolved subjectivity.

The following sub-sections examine how black characters in the selected neo-slave narratives depict an evolved understanding of black subjectivity.

5.1.1 Mira and Jesse’s Subjectivity

It is now time to identify the ways in which LaTanya McQueen’s novel *When the reckoning Comes* engages with evolving black subjectivities of post-slavery subjects such as Mira and Jesse. It will help to analyze how different factors shape their black subjectivity and influence their response to racial dynamics of their town.

Mira’s journey towards the exploration of her subjectivity begins with her growing awareness of the history of slavery. In the novel, Mira is the only character who time travels. While, at the same time, both Mira and Jesse are exposed to continuous reenactments of the past by ghosts. This is how these two post-slavery subjects learn about the history of the black community in Kipsen. As their awareness about their history grows, Mira says about herself and Jesse, “He was different and so was she, the past having haunted the arc of their lives, shaping who they had become” (McQueen 348). It shows that their phantasmic experiences and growing knowledge about their history, ancestors and legacy leave indelible impressions on their lives and alter their outlook towards the subject of race.

In the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, not only do Jesse and Mira deliberate over the present condition of the black community and white community’ role in racial discrimination but they also make significant interventions in the dynamics of their relationship with white community and the retribution plan of the ghosts. This shapes their subjectivity i.e., their perception of their identity, race and blackness. It also shapes their response to racial inequality. Therefore, it can be argued that the subjectivity of Jesse and Mira as post-slavery subjects allows them to rewrite their story. Their final survival in the

woods at the end of the novel, assisted by the ghosts of their ancestors, is portrayed in the novel in opposition to their enslaved ancestors' unsuccessful revolt. This seems to show that history can repeat itself, but it can yield different results.

In the novel, when Jesse and Mira watch black waiters in slave costumes who are specifically hired to reanimate the dynamics between blacks and whites from the antebellum period in the theme park, they feel unsettled. As Mira watches one of these enactments, her initial response is the feeling of guilt and self-criticism. She fears that watching them and not doing anything to stop it will make her one of the other white guests who fetishizes it. She muses, "Watching was participating, wasn't it? Allowing it to continue" (McQueen 182). This shows her post-slavery subjectivity which compels her to discourage such disregard for the history of slavery and racism. She thinks, "It was easier to wipe her hands, to shrug in the admission that this is how it is and how it'll always be" (181). This is the reason she stays unsettled and starts looking for Jesse to share this with. Her evolved subjectivity disrupts the way different dimensions of race unfold and operate in the town. She is overwhelmed to see how the white community views the American history. It compels her to attempt to subvert the existing oppressive structure of the society.

One of the most important understandings Mira and Jesse reach is that, even after the abolition of slavery, racism and the indifference of the white community towards racial discrimination remains a pervasive issue. "They think they're absolved from the past, but it's their past too. All our lives have been shaped by it, but they're the ones who've ignored how" (McQueen 254). Both of them become critical of the way the white community of Kipsen assumes innocence regarding racial abuse. They begin to discuss that, in the antebellum period, the white individuals who did not own slaves were also responsible for the racial oppression since they assumed silence and accepted the workings of their society. Their criticism of the white community as a unified force to direct and maintain racial oppression is fueled by their contemporary subjectivity which calls for taking serious actions against the racial injustice prevailing in the society. Their personalities, enlightened by the ideas governing liberal democracy in contemporary America, drive them to a realization that one can either be a perpetrator or an accomplice. Jesse and Mira consider the entire white community responsible for racial oppression on the basis of "what [white

townsfolk] continue to let happen right in front of them” (253). Both of them believe that silence in the face of oppression is also a crime.

Moreover, Mira and Jesse’s friendship with Celine is also emblematic of these views. In their childhood, both face bullying in school, while Celine remains neutral. Even when they learn that Celine will hold her wedding at the antebellum theme park, they try to dissuade her from doing this, but she is not moved by their arguments. Regarding the history of the plantation on which the theme park is erected, Mira says to Celine, “The suffering that built it. That’s never forgotten. It’s always there” (McQueen 153). However, Celine pays no heed. Mira informs Jesse that “she said she hadn’t owned slaves. She’d had nothing to do with the place’s past” (228). Jesse replies, “It’s like the difference between drowning someone and not caring if someone drowns nearby” (228). Jesse draws this analogy to prove that their friend, Celine, is insensitive towards their racial trauma. He remembers that she remained inactive and passive when he was arrested. His arrest was a manifestation of racial persecution, but it failed to bother Celine. Jesse remarks, “It’s easier with the others, you expect their hate, their disregard for your existence, but Celine?” (229). This remark shows Jesse’s disappointment with Celine which he never expressed before her.

The freshly shaped black subjectivity impacts Jesse’s endurance and resilience. As a result, he decides to leave the white townsfolk at the mercy of ghosts. However, Mira does not let him follow this trajectory because she fears that if they do not warn the townsfolk about the impending retribution, “he’d have to carry the weight of any deaths on his conscience” (McQueen 255). Having seen the repercussions of the white community’s silence and indifference towards racial oppression, she convinces Jesse to take an alternative approach. However, Celine’s disappearance at the wedding backfires their sympathy as Jesse is implicated in her disappearance.

As an angry mob chases Jesse and Mira, considering them the prime suspects for Celine’s murder, both run into the woods to save their lives. This scene is a reminder of the time when Roman Woodsman’s slaves try to run away to the North, but they are chased and hunted down. The narrator notes, “The mob of men, ones she’d mistakenly thought were after Jesse, had been hunting the slaves who escaped” (McQueen 345). This scene

represents a temporal paradox. This creates a strong link between the black community of the past and the present. This realization raises questions about the interconnectedness of events across time, inviting reflection on the consequences of the actions of both communities in Kipsen for themselves and for those who come after them. It also shows that time travel and expansion of knowledge about history enables Mira to approach the stories of her ancestors through her contemporary subjectivity. Though she has not lived in the wake of slavery, the past shapes her response and the will to endure and fight.

Through their experiences, Mira and Jesse exemplify everyday resistance. Their critiques of the antebellum theme park and recognition of silence as complicity underscore their commitment to challenging dominant narratives and historical misrepresentations. Their eventual escape from the white mob showcases their resourcefulness and determination to survive. Also, by seeking the help of Marceline's spirit, they tap into spiritual resistance, honoring their heritage and the lingering impact of slavery. Their warning to the townsfolk about the spirits' revenge foregrounds their empathy, thereby fostering a sense of shared humanity. This can be interpreted as their resistance to dehumanization and indifference. Ultimately, through pursuing education, personal ambitions and acknowledgement for historical wrongs, Mira and Jesse challenge systemic racism. This is how they resist racial inequality.

5.1.2 Josey's Subjectivity

In Natasha Deon's novel *Grace*, Josey's characterization seems to represent black identity in flux. The fluidity of black identity is prompted by the fact that Josey, as an interracial child, has a white skin, but she is identified as a black woman because her mother was a runaway black slave. Her mixed-race identity influences how she is perceived and treated by the dominant forces in her social and historical context that assign essentialist identities based on racial background. People around Josey constantly feel a need to clarify, "Josephine is no white. She's fair but she has black blood in her." (Deon 391). In short, Josey's character serves to dismantle a monolithic black subjectivity which, in turn, subverts the dominant narratives of race in her day and age.

Throughout her life, people around Josey treat her in accordance with their perception of her racial identity. Therefore, it can be argued that Josey's life epitomizes the

struggles of post-slavery subjects. Her mother, Naomi, is shot dead after giving birth to her. Josey is adopted by a white family which mistakes her for a white child. Eventually, as her adoptive white father learns that Josey was born to a black mother, he gives her away to his slave, Charles. The narrator notes, he “told everybody else his precious child [Josey] died” (Deon 192). He not only fakes her death but also arranges a funeral to assure people that she died. He complains to his wife, “You was bringing niggers in the house like family” (190). This shows the rejection faced by the members of the black community even after the abolition of slavery.

However, Josey is not deterred by this rejection and lives her life fully, and therefore, it can be argued that the novel *Grace* shows black subjectivity as a dynamic process. Josey’s ability to transcend racial categorization and reconfigure her identity lead to self-definition which is an integral part of an evolving black subjectivity. Self-definition becomes crucial as the novel exposes the dehumanization of black characters at the hands of white characters such as George who calls Josey an “animal” that is “not worthy of human decency” (Deon 145). This shows his perception of blackness as an inferior state of being. Such labels represent the denial of humanity to black characters who therefore feel a need to redefine their identity and reshape black subjectivity. Self-definition, as a result, becomes an impetus in reshaping black subjectivity.

Josey’s life is full of instances of initial acceptance and eventual rejection on the basis of whether people perceive her as a white or black woman. Therefore, her journey to self-definition starts in her childhood. With no adult noticing her symptoms of trauma after the child abuse episode, Josey decides to get over this trauma herself. Her ability to heal stems from her inherent strength and resilience. She later turns into a woman who is not bound by any racial or societal restrictions. Despite having white skin, she goes against the accepted norm by getting married to a black man, Jackson. Authorities consider it as a disrespect to her skin color. However, this does not deter her from making a choice independent of others’ approval. Her defiant spirit is also reflected in the scene where she picks up a stone to hurl at George after she sees him trying to abuse her daughter. Her response is a testament to the strength and fighting spirit she has developed over years. Although she was abused by the same man in her childhood, she can now be seen as a

woman who can protect her daughter from what she could not be protected. This shows that a former victim is now ready to fight the oppressor. All these examples symbolize her evolving subjectivity. So, her journey to define and embrace her identity signifies black subjectivity as a dynamic process.

In short, Josey's life embodies a powerful narrative of resistance, as she continually defies the racial and societal forces that attempt to dictate her identity and choices. Her journey from victim to protector highlights her unwavering determination to reclaim her agency, demonstrating that her strength lies in her ability to resist, challenge, and ultimately transcend the limitations imposed upon her. Through each act of defiance, Josey not only asserts control over her own life but also redefines what it means to resist oppression on her terms.

Besides Josey, Bessie's character also exhibits the internalization of evolving black subjectivity. Bessie's spiritual beliefs about the existence of ghosts and *ndiichie* reflect an attempt to foreground unique black experiences and worldview. Whereas, white characters' tendency to dismiss Bessie's experiences of talking to the enslaved blacks' ghosts as fabricated stories is an example of the Enlightenment skepticism of supernatural beliefs in Igbo culture. Nevertheless, the black characters still manage to seek support and strength in their own community and belief systems. Bessie's enduring spiritual beliefs and the unspoken understanding between Josey and Naomi's spirit show how black individuals forge their own sense of belonging.

The weight of the past, the memory of slavery, and Igbo heritage constitute black subjectivity. Also, resilience and resistance are shown as defining features of black subjectivity. Naomi's spirit's resolve to fight against George out of unwavering love for her daughter, Josey, is one such example. Jackson's acts of joining the war and discussing the abolition of slavery also serve to foreground the inherent strength, resilience, and freedom fighting embedded in black subjectivity.

Having discussed black subjectivity and its role in enabling different characters to evolve, it is crucial to move forward with the analysis and explore subject positions of black characters.

5.2 Analysis of the Subject Position of Post-Slavery Subjects

The subject position of black characters in the selected narratives refers to their status and the position they occupy in the social hierarchy throughout the history of America. It is clear in the opening of both selected narratives that black characters navigate through a disadvantageous subject position in the post-slavery period. In this context, a disadvantaged subject position implies a marginalized status of African American characters.

Commenting on the disadvantaged subject position of black individuals in the post-slavery period, Stella Setka argues that the “racist” ideologies and practices in the contemporary time have been inherited from the legacy of slavery and everyone is responsible for its continuance (Setka 37). The arena of politics, culture, and society are equally complicit in maintaining racism as a leftover fragment of slavery (37). Therefore, the narratives written by Afro-American authors help readers to critically engage with the forgotten, “concealed”, and overlooked aspects of history that, if not given voice and representation, will continue shaping the societies, power dynamics, and interethnic relations in the present and future (Setka 46-47). This will lay bare the fragments of history that have been brushed under the rug and whitewashed by privileged groups.

The arguments presented by Stella Setka show that it is the need of the hour for contemporary African American authors to write their stories, thereby asserting power over their narratives that represent their ethnic group. This will not only result in the documentation of inclusive chronicles of the past but also restore African American authors’ agency over their narratives. In short, they need to challenge the position of passive victims in literature by finding their own voice and gaining the power to subvert stereotypical representations of black individuals. However, the subject of the agency goes beyond this in the selected neo-slave narratives. To understand it, it is important to recognize the changing power dynamics between white and black communities in these narratives.

Having established that, we can now investigate the disadvantaged subject position of black characters in LaTanya McQueen’s *When the Reckoning Comes*. To delve deeper,

we need to examine how “cultural and political institutions” preserve racist ideas and practices in post-slavery period (Setka 37). The novel shows that racism leads to economic disparities and job discrimination. Mira observes, “A new system had been created, one where the poor people... took jobs at the Woodsman..., and most of the people who’d taken them were black. And the visitors were mostly white; it was all haunting in its history” (McQueen 199). Mira further says that “many of those working for them were the descendants of slave owners” (96). In the wake of slavery, black individuals served as slaves at the plantation; whereas, in the post-slavery period, they are hired as employees at the antebellum theme park built over the abandoned plantation. The reasons why their economic and social standing remains stagnant in post-slavery time include bullying at school, social exclusion, criminalization, and rejection. These aspects are discussed below.

In *When the Reckoning Comes*, Jesse and Mira observe the society viewing black citizens’ behavior as deviant, deserving of criminal penalty. One day, Jesse and Mira break into an abandoned Woodsman Plantation to satisfy their curiosities regarding the haunting of ghosts. This is their first practical and self-learned lesson on racism in Kipsen. After this incident, the school echoes rumors such as, “You know that’s what they all do, destroy other people’s property” (McQueen 67). Although they just visit the building, they are rebuked for attempting to cause damage to the white owner’s property. In the aftermath of this incident, Mira argues with Jesse saying, “You always want to do what those white kids are doing. You heard one of them broke in and you thought you could do it too” (64). Though she accompanied him to the abandoned plantation, she later blames him for encouraging her to join him in this misadventure. It also results in Jesse’s arrest on suspicion of a murder that is actually committed by a ghost.

Moreover, when Celine disappears from the wedding, people begin to ask Phillip questions about her. Since Phillip himself is Celine’s murderer, he blames Jesse for being the suspect to avoid potential suspicion on himself. The narrator remarks, “Phillip understood the power his whiteness held, and Jesse had been the easy target. Blame Jesse and everyone would believe it” (McQueen 328). This shows that it was easy for the townsfolk to believe that a young black man could be behind the disappearance of a beautiful white girl. Even though Jesse was Celine’s friend, he was still considered to be

unsafe to hang around with. Phillip exploited this racist stereotype to take the suspicion off his shoulders.

On the other hand, in Natasha Deon's *Grace*, the confusion arising from Josey's interracial identity leads to the criminalization of her black husband, Jackson. After becoming a free woman, she marries a black man, Jackson. One day, a romantic moment between the couple in an outdoor setting is witnessed by a stranger who mistakes Josey for a white woman. The local authorities, upon being informed, issue a death warrant for Jackson for having been seen intimate with a falsely perceived white woman. The colonel tasked with finding Jackson says to Annie before searching her house out of suspicion. "Don't you want to know what he's accused of? Rape. Raping a white woman." (Deon 391). This is one of the most paradoxical points in the narrative, considering the fact that when Josey was actually raped in her childhood, it went unnoticed by people around her.

It is also important to note that the officers working on this case are aware of the fact that Josey is not being forced by Jackson. For authority figures, it is a disgrace for a supposedly white woman to let a black man be intimate with her. Here, legal authorities are shown as the forces of domination that control the lives of post-slavery black subjects. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that Josey's story epitomizes the way African Americans continue to fall prey to racial discrimination even after the abolition of slavery.

Additionally, there are also examples of black students being bullied in school. In the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, Jesse is a victim of bullying at the hands of white students at school. There are a few incidents in the novel where Jesse is subjected to unprovoked violence. However, no teacher takes notice of it. The narrator observes, "A group of students ganged up on him, beat him bloody, and left him in a crumpled heap on the bathroom floor" (McQueen 102). Jesse eventually learns to endure such violent behavior from his white school fellows in silence. Part of the reason is that the school administration is encouraged by the local police department to be attentive to any violent acts committed by black students, albeit in self-defense. The narrator notes, "Administration recommended that at the first sign of trouble in the classroom teachers call the police and let them handle it" (28). Therefore, black students do not dare to respond to any discriminatory attitudes exhibited by the school staff.

The hegemonic outlay of post-slavery America is reflected in the racial segregation. Mira and Jesse live in a racially segregated town. Celine, their white friend, also lives in that neighborhood because her family is poor. Stuck in a black neighborhood, Celine's childhood dream is to become wealthy and move to a high-income town. Moreover, racial discrimination is frequently witnessed on the school bus where the black students are asked to take back seats. Mira notices, "A cluster of black students sat in the rear of the bus" (11). Even after Mira grows up and becomes a teacher at a high school, she continues noticing how black students are marginalized in classrooms.

One such marginalized student is Javion who always takes the last seat in the class and never utters a word. The narrator observes, "He was the kind of kid who forced himself to be invisible" (McQueen 28). Mira often urges him to approach her to have a discussion on what personal issues he contends with. However, he chooses to remain discreet. One day, she is shocked to learn that Javion is in trouble for "talking back in class" (28). This scene is ironic since Mira has been troubled by his silence for a long time. On one hand, Mira complains about his silence; on the other hand, he is punished for talking back. The narrator notes, "She'd watched in horror as two policemen took hold of the student, yanked him from his desk, and drop-kicked him to the ground, pulling both his arms behind his back and cuffing him" (28). Her horror emerges from her understanding of the underlying meaning behind this incident. Javion is treated like a heinous criminal and a terrorist who needs to be dealt with at once. In this regard, the prison commissioner says, "If a man is humiliated enough maybe he'll think a little harder about what he's done and choose not to do it again" (27). This shows that the police department is not motivated by a commitment to uphold justice but to subjugate and humiliate black teenagers and plant a sense of fear in the black community of the town.

Marginalization is an everyday reality for black characters in the selected narratives. The black characters in the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* are constantly marginalized and excluded from the mainstream society by having been denied the right to participate in the society. When Mira enters a police station as a teenager, she is made to wait for a long time to meet the official in charge. The narrator remarks, "He made her wait a long time. Long enough that her back ached from her posture" (McQueen 73). The act of

making Mira wait is an intentional choice on part of the officer. Similarly, the novel represents multiple other incidents of racial discrimination in Kipsen. Talking about Jesse, the narrator observes, “Every day the world reminded him, both directly and subtly, that because he was black his life held different rules” (52). This shows the prevalence of discriminatory practices that negatively impact the socioeconomic status of the black community.

At one point in the novel, Celine criticizes Mira for not having accounts on social networking sites. Celine says, “What kind of person isn’t on social media? You’ve done a good job of disappearing” (McQueen 6-7). Mira’s choice to not be active on social media is understandable, considering how black youngsters are constantly subjected to bullying. Therefore, black characters prefer to isolate themselves and limit their interaction with the white community.

It is also important to note that Celine’s sudden disappearance on her wedding day raises hue and cry, while the regularly occurring disappearance/abduction of black girls from Kipsen is overlooked by the town as well as the security services. Talking about the abduction of black girls, the narrator remarks that “their cases were ignored by police” (McQueen 71). This shows that the security forces of the town are also complicit in racism.

Moreover, the hegemonic design of post-slavery period asserts white-centric beauty standards. The distinction between a white and a black female is drawn by the level of confidence Mira and Celine exhibit in their skin. The narrator remarks, “Whereas Celine showed off, baring more of her body for the camera, Mira engaged in a futile attempt at covering what skin showed” (44). This shows that Celine takes pride in her white skin, while Mira remains inhibited regarding her physical appearance which hardly aligns with the beauty standards prevailing in the society.

Similarly, Mira is looked down upon by Celine regarding her financial situation. Though the narrative constantly represents Celine’s inferiority complex arising from her financial instability, she still asserts her superiority by offering Mira financial help. Inviting Mira to her wedding, Celine says, “I’ll pay for your room. I can send you money for your travel too. Anything you need, Mira. Just let me know. All you have to do is come” (McQueen 15). It offends Mira that Celine sees her as a woman who is unable to support

her lifestyle. In response, Mira wonders, “Was this another insult hiding underneath” (15). This shows Mira's sensitivity to racist remarks.

All of these incidents point out to Mira and Jesse that they need to reclaim their agency and fight for their rights. Mira realizes, “More pain would come unless she fought” (314). Therefore, she decides to stand by Jesse's side. Furthermore, at one point, when Mira sees Jesse's diary and his family tree connecting him to his enslaved ancestors, she thinks, “Maybe this was his attempt at finding a sense of agency over his story” (247). Jesse's diary which creates a bridge between him and his ancestors preserves stories of his ancestors for future generations. The act of writing these stories in his diary puts him in an empowered position.

Moving forward, it is time to turn our attention to examples of marginalization in Natasha Deon's *Grace*. In this narrative, Josey's bruised body in the aftermath of the rape incident goes unnoticed, exposing the societal indifference and neglect towards individuals who exist on the margins. Although the bruises on her arms are seen by other characters who, instead of seriously addressing the cause behind these bruises, simply call her “clumsy” (Deon 151). It is a dismissive message, exposing a denial of importance to her experiences. For having been denied voice, she is left to feel as unheard, silenced, and ignored. The characters around her fail to realize that, by overlooking her experience, they are subjecting her to a perpetual cycle of violence and marginalization. Although her adoptive father, Charles, eventually suspects that something happened to her, he also fails to learn the truth. The other characters' inability to see her bruises symbolizes her marginalized status as an enslaved girl. Her suffering is not taken into account as long as she is known to be a black girl. However, as a grown-up woman, the moment she is mistaken for a white woman, her black husband, Jackson, is sentenced to death without a trial for having been intimate with her. As Jackson says, “Men are coming to kill me and I've committed no crime.” (389). It also shows racial persecution and disregard for the lives of post-slavery black subjects. As a black man, his life is considered of little value which leads to his eventual murder at the hands of the colonel.

The above discussion has served to highlight the disadvantaged subject position of post-slavery subjects. However, things do not end here as the selected narratives navigate

these issues and reconfigure a way to address the subject position of African American characters.

5.3 Reconfiguration of the Subject Position of Enslaved Blacks

One of the most interesting aspects of the selected neo-slave narratives is the authors' attempt to explore the possibility for a renegotiation of the subject position of enslaved subjects. They do so by reimagining the stories of the antebellum slavery with a twist. In this way, the narratives enable the deceased enslaved subjects to rise in their status and subject position after their physical deaths. After death, they are shown transcending the human-made hierarchies and occupying the utmost pinnacle achievable for humans. Guided by Igbo cosmology, they are shown turning into *ndiichie* which marks a significant shift in their subject position as they are believed to be a bridge between the mortal and the divine realm.

Having attained the status of *ndiichie*, the spirits of enslaved subjects are regarded as holy spirits by the characters of the selected narratives. This is clearly reflected in Mira's description of Marceline's spirit as "an angel... descended from the sky, something holy" (McQueen 158). It is clear that the subject position of enslaved blacks shifts from the victims of slavery to powerful protectors and vigilantes of their descendants. Moreover, the status of *ndiichie* puts the spirits of enslaved subjects into a more powerful position than the one that white Americans enjoy in these narratives. Making use of their protective powers, *ndiichie* decide to contest the subject position of post-slavery African Americans, thereby altering the outlook of power dynamics in the post-slavery America to help their descendants. For this purpose, they take up the task of reclaiming black agency once and for all.

While the transformation of enslaved characters into *ndiichie* is a narrow subject, the reclamation of black agency carries broader and more impersonal implications. Reclaiming black agency has wider applicability across different generations of African American individuals. It goes beyond the narrative's immediate context, prompting a reflection on wider repercussions of historical injustices, illustrating their enduring effects.

The following section is an attempt to analyze how *ndiichie* and ghosts reclaim black agency.

5.4 Reclamation of Black Agency

Reclaiming black agency involves the act of fighting racial oppression, confronting historical injustice and amplifying black voices and experiences. This carries long-term implications for the African American community represented in the selected narratives. Reclaiming black agency can significantly improve the condition of the post-slavery black characters.

In the novel *When the Reckoning Comes*, the silenced victims of slavery resurge as haunting specters who have the power to protect their descendants from racial oppression and enlighten them with authentic accounts of the history of slavery in the American South. As the enslaved blacks were denied a voice in their lives, their resurgence as ghosts disrupts the historical narrative. The haunting of ghosts can be interpreted as a form of protest against the commercialized and fetishized narrative of antebellum slavery in the form of the Woodsman plantation theme park. With the intensified menace of hauntings, Jesse and Mira find themselves being “called out” by ghosts to confront the story of brutalities meted out to enslaved blacks (McQueen 158). Furthermore, in one of Mira’s time travel excursions, she is mistaken for Marceline, her enslaved ancestor. This incident serves to intensify Mira’s connection with her enslaved ancestors.

The resurgence of deceased enslaved subjects serves to disrupt the racial hierarchy of the town. White characters, such as Philip, experience intense dread and apprehension as ghosts of the enslaved subjects haunt not only the town but also the conscience of the beneficiaries of slavery and racism. It shifts the subject position of the deceased enslaved subjects, positioning them as ghosts that establish themselves as figures of power. By wielding their power, they trouble the minds of people who fail to discard the racist ideologies in the post-slavery period. This is evident in the scene where “Phillip [white supremacist] scratched and clawed at his skin... He shouted again, but this time the words came out in a garbled gasp” (McQueen 326). This shows how ghosts disrupt power dynamics and challenge black subjugation.

The resurgence of ghosts shows a yearning for the acknowledgment of the suffering of enslaved blacks. Their haunting serves as a call for justice for wrongs committed against them in the wake of antebellum slavery. Frequent references to the “anniversary of the slave revolt” highlight the need to address the relevance and the imprints of antebellum slavery to the post-slavery period. It is a call for the townsfolk to grant recognition to past uprising of enslaved blacks and seek accountability for individuals responsible for persisting racist prejudices and whitewashing the legacy of slavery. The reenactments of ghosts carrying “branding irons shaped with the initials of the men who seared their flesh” serve as constant reminders of racial oppression (McQueen 1). By haunting the beneficiaries of slavery, the ghosts force a reevaluation of history, reconfiguration of power structures and alteration of subject positions of white and black individuals.

The hauntings also force a reckoning with the misrepresentation of antebellum history through the theme park that whitewashes slavery and presents it as a subject of entertainment for visitors. Since the theme park fails to reveal uncomfortable truths about slavery, ghosts haunt the park and perform reenactments to challenge and rewrite the historical narrative on their own terms. This is how Mira finds out about the “slaves’ blood”, “rape”, “torture room” and other stories of oppression that are absent from the theme park’s portrayal of antebellum history (McQueen 202). Mira is also shown by ghosts an antebellum scene where a white slaveowner tells one of his slaves, “Many will pay good money for a piece of you... Even after your death you'll still be of use to me” (302). This shows her the commodification of black bodies at the hands of white slaveowners in the antebellum South.

On the other hand, in the novel *Grace*, Naomi’s spirit reclaims her agency which she lost in the wake of slavery. She manifests her agency by protecting her descendants and avenging them against the white characters who perpetuate racial oppression with impunity. After turning into *ndiichie*, Naomi’s spirit reclaims her agency in two ways examined below.

5.4.1 As a Protector

Naomi’s spirit watches over her daughter, Josey, like a guardian angel throughout her life. Unable to perform the role of a mother, Naomi occupies the position of *ndiichie*

in Josey's life. Despite being invisible, Naomi's spirit tries her best to protect her. She does not only accompany Josey wherever she goes but also deliberates over her choices in life. Her haunting spirit remains complacent with her ability to see Josey being raised by Charles. To put it simply, her spirit acts on her maternal instinct by passively beholding Josey in her sight all the time and being by her side when she is happy, sorrowful, or afflicted with slight ailments.

In one of the chapters of the novel, Naomi's spirit deliberates on what pulls her to the realm of the living. She expresses that she longed to reunite with Momma the night she died, however, Josey's cries hold her back. She stayed to let Josey know that she is "beautiful" and "loved", thereby deferring her departure until "it got easy to stay" (Deon 54-55). The purpose of her stay is to ensure that Josey is safe, happy, and healthy. These passages in the novel symbolize the yearnings of enslaved mothers in the Southern United States whose babies were robbed from their laps to be sold off to far-off plantations. The way Naomi's spirit refuses to join Momma in the afterlife, despite being unable to hold Josey, exhibits the defenselessness of enslaved black mothers in the face of institutionalized slavery.

Over the years, Naomi's spirit watches Josey growing up. When she turns seven years old, the spirit sees her imitating the way boys relieve themselves i.e., in a standing position; however, it does not go well for Josey as she ends up messing up her thighs and clothes. Deon takes this instance in the novel to emphasize the intersection of race and gender which may inspire a girl to mimic the privileged gender. It was also reflected in Naomi's childhood account where Boss, Massa's plantation slave, continuously raped Momma and molested Hazel on Massa's instructions. His masculinity drove the enslaved women at Massa's property to defiance which, in turn, ended in a bloodbath. Since Josey is extremely wary of oppressive men since her childhood, her pissing scene in a standing position seems to be her way of showing her defiance towards men.

When Josey utters her first word "yes", Naomi's spirit is elated with joy (Deon 53). She names it as "the worst kind of wanting" which is hard to put into words (53). The next few days, she keeps on waiting for Josey to say her second word. The day Josey turns one and a half years old, she falls down. Josey's cries make Naomi's spirit feel utterly

miserable. She yearns to “hold her, kiss her where it hurt”; however, she cannot (53). As she stands helplessly, she observes Josey crying and mumbling the “m-word”, denoting mother (53). Naomi’s spirit is heartbroken seeing that Josey serves this word to Annie.

Apart from this, Naomi’s spirit shows a keen interest in the matters of Josey’s heart. Following her fifteenth birthday as Josey falls head over heels for Jackson, Naomi’s spirit comments that “you cain’t reason with a fifteen-year-old girl who’s convinced she’s in love” (Deon 131). As Naomi herself went through cycles of romantic relationships in her teenage years, she can understand Josey’s intense feelings for Jackson, her first love interest. Moreover, when Josey gives birth to twins, Squiggy and Rachel, after marrying Jackson, Naomi’s spirit watches over them as well. One day, George encounters Rachel who is a post-slavery subject. Naomi’s spirit dreads that George will harm Rachel so she accelerates her attempts to kill George.

5.4.2 As a Vigilante

A vigilante is an individual who decides to take things in their own hands and serve justice, without resorting to legal authorities or any other form of support or help. In the novel *Grace*, the ndiichie spirit of Naomi also acts as a vigilante to seek justice for her progeny. To grasp how Naomi’s ndiichie spirit becomes a vigilante, it is crucial to understand her circumstances. In the novel, the first time Naomi’s ndiichie spirit feels extremely helpless is the day when she witnesses the sexual assault that George subjects Josey to. George, Annie’s brother, has a history of pedophilia. Although Annie is familiar with her brother’s perverted activities, she brushes it under the rug to save her reputation in the town.

Before the rape took place, Naomi had not imagined that she would ever need to interfere with the affairs of the living. On the day George takes advantage of Charles’ absence and forcefully takes away Josey from Annie’s house, Naomi’s ndiichie spirit attempts to intervene in the situation to rescue Josey. In a moment of desperation and powerlessness, she tries her best to shield Josey from George’s blows which he hurls on her to enforce silence and conformity. However, she realizes that she can neither push George away nor alleviate Josey’s suffering. She hears George calling Josey “an animal”

who is “not worthy of human decency”, but Naomi’s spirit remains unable to save Josey (Deon 145). She just lies beside Josey with tears rolling down her cheeks.

In the aftermath of this incident when Naomi’s ndiichie spirit realizes that no one cares about Josey’s subsequent sickness and panic attacks, she is enraged. Even Charles overlooks “strange bruises” on Josey’s body (Deon 151). It shows how powerful communities and groups in the Western world turned a blind eye to the practice of slavery and racial violence in the antebellum South. Naomi’s ndiichie spirit cannot stand this tragic sight so she decides to take the matter into her own hands to seek retribution and “satisfaction” (165). In the subsequent years, the spirit is shown trying to possess human bodies and control people’s thoughts and actions.

The day Josey is on the run with her family, she is seen injured and exhausted with her son, Squiggy, in her arms, while looking for her daughter, Rachel, whom she lost on the way. Josey finally finds Rachel in a jungle with George. Josey, familiar with George's pedophilia, sees that her daughter is unsafe around him but she is not strong enough to fight him. At this moment, Naomi’s spirit takes possession of Josey’s body and strikes a deadly blow to George’s head which results in his death. This serves justice and liberates Naomi from the realm of the living. It fulfills her purpose because she believes, “The death penalty, folks say, is the right punishment.” (Deon 361). This incident concludes Naomi’s role as a ndiichie spirit.

Afterwards, Naomi’s ndiichie spirit is seen approaching Momma in the realm of the dead. This scene holds special significance in the novel. It shows that her trauma caused by racial violence can only be addressed through reparations that enslaved and post-slavery subjects are owed. However, Naomi’s ndiichie spirit understands that it is not possible for her to restore to her daughter, grandchildren and the rest of the black community what they lost in the wake of slavery. Therefore, the retribution she sought contributes to the psychological healing and catharsis of the Afro-American community.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the selected neo-slave narratives and shown that ghosts and spirits of enslaved blacks haunt the mortal realm to guide and protect their post-slavery

descendants. It has been examined that, with the resurgence of enslaved blacks, the understanding of black subjectivity underwent evolution. Through thorough analysis of the selected narratives, it has been established that ghosts reclaimed black agency and shifted power dynamics between white and black communities. It not only helped them to elicit acknowledgment for their suffering in the wake of slavery but also enabled their progeny to fight post-slavery racism.

CONCLUSION: THE HAUNTINGS OF THE ENSLAVED

This section presents an overview of the present research. It summarizes the key findings, significance, and contributions of the research. It restates the research questions and provides comprehensive answers to them in light of the main findings. Recommendations for further research in this area of study are also given.

The present research has used Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method to examine Natashia Deon's *Grace* (2016) and LaTanya McQueen's *When the Reckoning Comes* (2021) through the application of Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and Stella Setka's theorization of the phantasmic ethnic narratives. The analysis of the selected narratives has shown that the *ndiichie* of enslaved blacks haunt the living realm to protect their post-slavery descendants from racial discrimination in the post-slavery period. This helps to change the subject position of the spirits of enslaved blacks from the victims of slavery to powerful protectors and vigilantes of their descendants in the selected narratives. These descendants, referred to as post-slavery subjects in this research, become empowered, while the subject position of the deceased enslaved blacks shifts from enslaved subjects to *ndiichie*—Igbo term for ancestral spirits considered worthy of worship. This indicates how the selected narratives make room for the supernatural inherent in Igbo cosmology in contemporary Afro-American writings which is sometimes downplayed by Enlightenment rationality.

The representation of other Igbo-specific supernatural elements and vengeful ghosts also serves to enlighten post-slavery subjects with the history of slavery, alongside helping them reclaim their lost agency. Additionally, it is concluded that Igbo-specific phantasmic elements do not appear exotic in the selected narratives because they are adapted to the context of African American community. The *ndiichie* in these narratives have no other mission but to navigate racism and save their descendants from racial oppression. These *ndiichie* do not appear as unrecognizable figures; instead, the authors of the selected novels have attempted to make the figure of *ndiichie* more approachable for a wider audience who might not be cognizant of the Igbo cosmology. To make this Igbo figure of deceased ancestors more approachable, the deceased black mothers are shown as haunting the realm of the living to protect their offspring. This helps readers to understand

the motivation driving these spirits. In simpler terms, it indicates the significance of ndiichie in the lives of their descendants as per the Igbo cosmology in a more accessible manner.

In addition, it is important to recognize how the portrayal of ndiichie and ghosts counters the risk of being perceived as irrational and exotic. The analysis shows that ndiichie and ghosts do not appear irrational, not only because they are consistent with the world crafted in the stories of both novels but also due to the selected texts' deliberate attempt to address skepticism towards the ethnic worldviews.

The first question in this research addresses the ways in which phantasmic elements in the selected narratives challenge and extend the parameters of American historiography and Enlightenment ontology. To answer this question, this research first analyzed how phantasmic elements in both novels challenge the outlook of Enlightenment ontology. Enlightenment ontology, as explained earlier, is a flagbearer of rationality. The rational framework challenges the predominance of the supernatural inherent in the Igbo cosmology in making sense of the world in the selected narratives. Nevertheless, invoking Stella Setka's theory helped to present a critique of the traditions of oversimplifying culturally specific phantasmic elements as part of magical realism.

Setka's theory suggests that one of the effective ways to explain the phantasmic and supernatural elements in the ethnic narratives is to engage with the ethnic cosmology and culture of that community. Accordingly, this research has interpreted the ancestral spirits of enslaved blacks as ndiichie from Igbo cosmology. Moreover, other phantasmic elements, such as historically accurate nightmares, supernatural visions, and time travel have also been explained as part of Igbo cosmology and cultural folktales.

Additionally, it has also been analyzed that the novel *Grace* not only engaged with the history of the antebellum South and the American Civil War that bore implications for black Americans but it also addressed the story of Native Indians and how they were robbed of their territory by the United States. Similarly, the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* has been studied to examine how the black characters, Mira and Jesse, have been offered supernatural visions from the antebellum period about the day-to-day life of enslaved blacks at Woodsman Plantation that enhanced their historical knowledge. It has been

argued that the exposure to supernatural visions, voices, nightmares, and time travel has served to enlighten black characters, including Jesse and Mira, with the unfiltered history of their ancestors.

The second research question posed in this research asks how the ghostly figures contest and renegotiate the subject positions of the enslaved and post-slavery subjects in the selected narratives. To address this question, it is important to note that the representation of ghosts is a common literary device used in both selected narratives to give a fresh perspective to the conversations surrounding the enslaved blacks in the post-slavery setting. In these texts, there are multiple ghosts of enslaved blacks, seeking the descendants of their offenders who perpetuate racism against black Americans.

In addition to these ghosts, there are *ndiichie* that are embodied in the spirits of Naomi and Marceline in *Grace* and *When the Reckoning Comes*, respectively. Both figures are seen as protectors of their descendants. To identify how ghostly figures alter the subject position of enslaved blacks, it is important to recall what is meant by subject position. The subject position of blacks in the selected narratives refers to their status and the position they occupy in the social hierarchy across American history. In the antebellum period in both texts, black individuals are shown as slaves of white plantation owners who exploit their labor and violate their fundamental human rights. This paints the picture of black individuals as defenseless victims of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse at the hands of their white masters. However, in the post-slavery setting in both texts, the ghosts of these enslaved black people resurrect as powerful, albeit invisible figures who overpower, hurt or even kill the post-slavery white individuals who display racial prejudice against their descendants. Lack of empathy and acknowledgment for enslaved blacks following the legacy of slavery also drive the vengeful ghosts. This shows a shift in the subject position of black people.

Moreover, the way the descendants of the white slave owners who attempt to maintain racist practices against black individuals turn up mysteriously dead shows that the ghosts of enslaved blacks have been transformed into powerful retaliators. They not only retaliate against post-slavery racism but also enlighten their progeny, detached from their enslaved ancestors' stories, with accurate historical knowledge.

Also, it is crucial to note that, in the post-slavery period, ndiichie spirits of Naomi and Marceline occupy a high status in their descendants' lives. As traditional ndiichie figures, they enjoy a revered status in the lives of their descendants as per Igbo cosmology. From being the victims of rape and objects of auction in the wake of slavery, the spirits of these women eventually occupy an esteemed position and elevated status. This shows how the ghostly figures renegotiate the subject position of black Americans.

However, it is also observed in both narratives that it is not only the ghosts of enslaved blacks whose subject position is changed. This power shift bears several implications for their post-slavery descendants as well. These ghosts exact vengeance on white racist characters, such as Mr. Loomis and Celine from *When the Reckoning Comes* and George from *Grace*, for exhibiting a racist attitude towards their descendants. This leads to post-slavery subjects attaining true freedom. Black characters from *When the Reckoning Comes*, such as Jesse and Mira, successfully evade the armed white mob. Likewise, black characters represented in the novel *Grace*, including Josey and her twins, are saved from sexual abuse. The endings of both texts show the true freedom attained by post-slavery subjects. Moreover, these narratives increase respect for the enslaved blacks who died before the declaration of emancipation by elevating their spiritual position in the black community.

The third question asks how the selected narratives use phantasmic elements to reclaim the agency of black subjects. The analysis of the novel *Grace* has shown that one of the major phantasmic elements i.e., the transformation of Naomi into a ndiichie spirit helped her reclaim the agency that she lost to the heyday of slavery. In simpler words, during her lifetime, she remains unable to protect her family. However, after her death, she protects her descendants as a ndiichie spirit. Similarly, in *When the Reckoning Comes*, when ghosts begin to exact vengeance on the white racists of the town, things begin to change for the black community, particularly for Jesse, Mira, and Javion who are victims of racial discrimination in the post-slavery period. Moreover, the antebellum theme park, an instance of the fetishization of the legacy of slavery by the white community, is taken over by the ndiichie and ghosts of enslaved blacks. This changes the power dynamics

between the white and black communities, enabling black individuals to reclaim black agency.

Though *Grace*'s Naomi and *When the Reckoning Comes*' Marceline are portrayed as ndiichie, a significant difference in their levels of agency can be observed in the selected narratives. Though both characters exercise agency to protect their post-slavery descendants from racism, Marceline's ndiichie spirit appears to be a fully developed form of an ancestral spirit as represented in Igbo cosmology. She is even acknowledged as a divine spirit by her descendants. On the other hand, Naomi's spirit initially finds herself powerless. Over time, she works tirelessly to attain agency. She even seeks Bessie's help. It takes her some time and effort to be able to gain agency and help her offspring. Despite this, her presence remains unperceived by her offspring. However, she continues to protect her descendants. Another notable difference is that the novel *Grace* focusses more on ndiichie than ghosts, whereas *When the Reckoning Comes* portrays a more dominant role of ghosts than ndiichie. In addition to this, the latter portrays a more extensive range of supernatural elements such as time travel and supernatural visions.

The present research has carried out an extensive analysis to study how the novel *When the Reckoning Comes* opened with "rationalist" characters. Their skepticism is gradually suspended as the stories that ghosts try to pass on to black characters in Kipsen turn out to be historically accurate upon the characters' further digging into the history of the town. Similarly, in *Grace*, the character Bessie confesses that many ghosts haunt Annie's plantation. Moreover, these ghosts only interact with black characters which signals their deep connection and relevance to the black community as an ethnic group. Considering these factors, the present research views the spirits of Naomi and Marceline as ndiichie spirits i.e., the ancestral spirits considered highly venerable in Igbo cosmology. Moreover, these ndiichie do not appear exotic because they are adapted to the context of slavery in the antebellum South which complicated the conditions of afterlife ascension as determined by Igbo cosmology.

In a nutshell, the portrayal of ancestral spirits of the enslaved blacks ultimately paves the way for the reclamation of black agency as deceased enslaved blacks turn into

revered ndiichie spirits and the post-slavery black characters transcend the indignities of racism under the protection of their ancestors' spirits.

A Possible Theoretical Intervention

I endeavor to make a possible theoretical intervention in Stella Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives in light of the current research topic. Setka enlists multiple reasons to explain why authors writing traumatic ethnic narratives make use of phantasmic elements. First, she believes that the trauma of minority groups of society in the West cannot be represented within Western ontology; therefore, the scope of Western ontology is broadened to include the culturally specific phantasmic elements from the cosmologies of marginalized groups. Secondly, Setka proposes that trauma cannot be addressed through simple language that is too realistic to give expression to the experiences of extreme violence. Therefore, the traumatic narratives may make use of the phantasmic elements of the represented community's ethnic worldview. Thirdly, Setka observes that the inculcation of phantasmic elements helps ethnic authors to lay a claim on their ethnic heritage.

The current research attempts to give another reason to explain why phantasmic elements have been used in the selected narratives. It is observed that the selected black authors write neo-slave narratives to emphasize the importance of 'retributive justice' in dealing with the ongoing suffering of African Americans caused by the legacy of slavery. Therefore, my intervention is about the element of retributive justice which is not discussed by Setka. As the contemporary time witnesses a growing number of critics of slavery calling for reparations for the victimized black race, the aspect of retributive justice serves to highlight the urgency to acknowledge and address historical wrongs.

Additionally, the two writers, Natashia Deon and LaTanya McQueen, seem to endorse that only the oppressed enslaved characters of the novel have the right to take revenge. In other words, the representation of ghosts of enslaved blacks taking revenge on their offenders indicates that retribution is only the right of the oppressed enslaved blacks, not their descendants, such as Mira and Josey. Therefore, the novels show only the ghosts of the enslaved blacks taking revenge on white individuals who have been complicit in

racial oppression against blacks. This literary strategy mitigates the resentment that black readers may feel as they uncover the injustices done in the past.

It is also important to understand that, although the selected narratives only portray ghosts of enslaved blacks taking revenge on white supremacists, this argument does not deny the living enslaved characters a right to fight against white slaveowners. It may be noted that the selected narratives have clearly assigned the role of seeking revenge solely to ghostly figures rather than to living enslaved characters.

The spirits' attempt to seek retributive justice seems to suggest that, unless the individuals perpetuating racism are punished, the cycle of black subjugation will continue. However, it is important to understand that the response of second-generation black characters in the selected narratives is different from their ancestors' spirits. The response of living black characters, including Mira, Jesse and Josey, shows that resistance has gradually evolved into different forms. Instead of seeking revenge and retribution, they strive for acknowledgement of historical wrongs and systemic change. Through education, empowerment, resistance, defiance and communal solidarity, they fight against structural racism, instead of racist individuals. Through this, they serve to foster collective responsibility and transformative justice. Their attempts to seek transformative justice and systemic change differentiate between the divergent paths and destinies of enslaved and post-slavery black characters. Those who died in slavery and bondage choose to seek revenge; on the contrary, the ones who witness and experience emancipation choose to seek change and equality.

Moreover, this research also has some practical implications. It highlights the need to broaden the scope of the literary analysis of African American writings. Following Setka's theorization of phantasmic ethnic narratives, this study connects the phantasmic elements in the selected neo-slave narratives with Igbo cosmology, an ethnic belief system in Africa. Therefore, it helps to promote intercultural engagement between readers from different communities and Igbo culture. However, there is a limitation in promoting intercultural understanding through neo-slave narratives. This limitation lies in the fact that the readers, unaware of the cosmologies and cultures of ethnic groups in Africa, may fail

to identify the references made to Igbo figures and may oversimplify them as supernatural figures.

Therefore, research works like this can highlight the need for studying the origin and background of unique and unexplainable figures and phenomena in ethnic literature. Though some cultural references and allusions may appear deceptively simple, such as ghosts in the selected narratives, they call for further study in the context of African American community's ethnic heritage. Employed to the present research, this approach has led to the understanding of the Igbo figure 'ndiichie' and its adaptation to African American context in the selected narratives.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although a wide range of theoretical perspectives can be used to examine the selected literary texts, it is recommended to use a feminist lens to study how *Grace* and *When the Reckoning Comes* represent the transformation of only enslaved females into ndiichie. Since the portrayal of female ancestral spirits has multiple implications for female spirituality and the status of women in the family lineage, the feminist analysis of these texts will yield new insights. In addition, psychoanalytic theory can be applied to the selected narratives to study how the repression of historical trauma can manifest in the form of nightmares. Similarly, black characters' supernatural experiences (such as seeing visions and hearing voices of deceased enslaved) in the selected narratives can be studied as symptoms of post-traumatic slave syndrome, as theorized by Joy DeGruy in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005). All these theoretical perspectives are suggested for a thorough examination of the selected or similar neo-slave narratives.

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