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From enslavement to selfhood: Negotiating identity across borders in Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name*

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Abstract: *This study explores the negotiation of identity performed by the main character in the novel Someone Knows My Name. It portrays the journey from enslavement to selfhood, illustrating profoundly impacts black people's views on identity and belonging. This study focused on a cross-border narrative by tracing Aminata's journey from Mali (Africa) to America and England. Her journey shapes her identities and marks her transition from being enslaved to becoming herself. Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and Paul Gilroy's The Black Atlantic are used as the theory of this study. The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative, with the primary data taken from Someone Knows My Name and secondary data gathered from historical records and previous research findings. This study indicates that identity in the novel is not fixed but reconstructed through movement, memory, and resistance. Three main findings are revealed: first, Aminata experienced identity erasure under enslavement; second, the border is a space of exclusion and negotiation; and third, self-representation, resistance, and self-rearticulation. This study concluded that identity is a flexible, changing concept shaped by movement and the human desire for freedom and belonging.*

Keywords: *Negotiation, Identity, Enslavement, Selfhood, Transnational*

INTRODUCTION

Someone Knows My Name is one of the novels that rewrite the history of the transatlantic slave trade through the personal experience of Aminata Diallo. It is written by Lawrence Hill, a Canadian author, who first published it under the title *The Book of Negroes (2007).* The novel foregrounds topics not only in history, but also in identity (Rasiah et al. 2023). It exposes the struggle of the life of Aminata Diallo, a Muslim girl captured in Bayo-Mali, West Africa, and forced into the transatlantic slave trade at the age of eleven. Her life unfolds across several geographical and political locations, including West Africa, America, Canada, Sierra Leone—Freetown, and London. Through these experiences, the novel presents identity as neither fixed nor exclusively determined by national origin. Along with Aminata's identity is continuously negotiated through displacement, enslavement, memory, race, religion, and encounters with different communities and systems of power. Her journey across borders is both a history of forced migration and a process through which she reconstructs a sense of self.

Hill's novel is set in the historical experience of the Black Loyalists and draws upon the eighteenth-century *Book of Negroes*. Book of Negroes is a historical document

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that recorded Black people who departed New York for Canada after the American Revolutionary War for a promised land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone in 1783 (Walker, 1999). Many scholars then focused their analysis on the mix of history and fiction in the novel. Some scholars researching the novel include: Oduwobi, Sewlall, & Abodunrin (2016) investigated the historiographical metafiction as it self-reflectively lays claim to historical events and personages in the novel; Emode (2009) pays special attention to the history of violence. Duff (2011) examined the strategies of historical discourse of Canada's Past. Yorke (2010) analyzed the slave narrative tradition adopted by Hill. Nehl (2016) demonstrates a dynamic perspective on the meaning of 'home' for the African diaspora. Gasztold (2020) examines Hill's narrative as rhetoric that formed the triad author-text-reader. Jeslin (2019) focused on the struggles of the black woman for freedom and self-confidence. Last but not least, Rasiah et al. (2023) investigated historical metafiction and the quest for black authority.

The task of this paper is to scrutinize the process of negotiating identity done by the main character, Aminata, across borders. Aminata, as one of the enslaved Africans, was forcibly removed from her community in Bayo Village, separated from her family, renamed, and commodified. The history of the transatlantic slave trade is frequently described using the language of displacement, commodification, and loss (Rawley & Behrendt, 2005). So, the central question of this paper is: how does the African individual represented through Aminata negotiate identity while moving across different geographical, cultural, and racial boundaries? The purpose of this study is to examine how Aminata Diallo negotiates and reconstructs her cultural identity across geographical, cultural, and racial borders in Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name*. This study not only contributes to enriching literary studies but also to historical and cultural studies. This perspective can help demonstrate how literary narratives represent the psychological, cultural, and personal consequences of forced migration and enslavement. This study could also connect literary representation with broader questions concerning the historical experience of displaced and enslaved African peoples in particular and the related people in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stuart Hall's Concept of Cultural Identity

Fundamentally, identity is used to articulate one's sense of self through the most basic question: 'Who am I?' (Erikson, 1966; Woodward, 2003). Weeks (in Rasiah, 2020) defines identity by stating that identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic, it gives a sense of personal location, the stable core to individuality. But it is also about social relationships. Thus, identity encompasses not only the aspects that align us with others and define us as part of a specific community but also those that distinguish us from others. Furthermore, identity not only signifies individuality but also shapes relationships with others.

Hall (1990) identified cultural identity as both a matter of shared historical experience and an ongoing process of formation. Identity may provide a sense of continuity with a common past, but it is also continually transformed by historical circumstances. Cultural identity is therefore simultaneously connected to origins and open to change. Therefore, cultural identity should not be understood as a fixed essence

shared equally by all members of a group. Identity is produced within history and culture. It is shaped by the ways individuals and communities remember the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future. Hall developed two related ways of understanding identity: identity as a shared cultural "being" and identity as a continuing cultural "becoming."

The first dimension of identity concerns shared history, ancestry, culture, language, memory, and tradition. This dimension helps explain Aminata's connection to her African origin. Her identity is initially grounded in her family, village, religious practices, language, naming traditions, and knowledge of birth and midwifery. However, based on Hall's theory (1990), it does not require the researcher to treat African identity as pure or unchanging. Aminata's African identity is important, but it is not a simple essence untouched by historical change. It becomes meaningful through the experience of displacement and through her later encounters with African, Black Atlantic, European, Caribbean, and North American cultures. It is then connected to the second dimension that views identity as a process of becoming. New experiences, historical changes, social relations, and acts of interpretation continually shape identity. It is not simply inherited; it is negotiated.

Paul Gilroy's Double Consciousness

Double-consciousness is a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward "twoness" putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression and dis-valuation in a white-dominated society. The concept is associated with WEB Du Bois, who introduced the term into social thought in his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois was engaged throughout his long career in the attempt to understand both the socio-historic conditions facing "Black folk" in the American twentieth century, and the impacts of those conditions on the consciousness and "inner world" of the human beings subject to them. In *Souls of Black Folk* that second concern was with capturing in words "the strange meaning of being black", with describing the "spiritual world" and the "spiritual strivings" of "the American Negro".

Gilroy (1993) discussed that the "Black Atlantic" refines the concept of hybridity within Black identity by linking it to "double consciousness," which is an awareness of a dual identity stemming from slavery. Gilroy's Black Atlantic emphasizes routes as well as roots. A roots-based approach focuses on origin, ancestry, homeland, and cultural continuity. Gilroy's theory challenges the idea that Black identity must be contained within a single nation. The histories of Black peoples are transnational because slavery and colonialism crossed national boundaries. Black political and cultural identities therefore develop through connections among communities across the Atlantic. The Black Atlantic is therefore not a single homogeneous community. It is a network of related but unequal experiences. Aminata's identity emerges through this network of connections, separations, negotiations, and cultural translations. The Black Atlantic produces cultural forms through contact, conflict, adaptation, and exchange. Gilroy's approach helps explain how language, religion, music, food, memory, storytelling, and political ideas are transformed through diasporic movement. Gilroy helps explain the larger historical network in which these changes occur. Together, the theories make it

possible to analyze both the personal and transnational dimensions of Aminata's selfhood.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, using close reading—an in-depth textual analysis—to examine the narrative of Lawrence Hill's novel *Someone Knows My Name* (2007). This approach is integrated with Diaspora Studies and draws specifically upon Paul Gilroy's theory of "The Black Atlantic" to explore the shifting identity of the protagonist resulting from the crossing of geographical boundaries. Primary data consist of textual units such as dialogue, narrative, and internal monologue—were collected selectively through thematic coding, focusing on the phases of enslavement and the reconstruction of selfhood in the novel. Historical documents regarding the *Book of Negroes* and theoretical texts on transatlantic slavery literature were secondary sources. The data were then analyzed through a process of reduction, historical contextualization, and theoretical synthesis to uncover how agency and the reclamation of identity are negotiated amidst the backdrop of transatlantic colonial hegemony

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

There are three main findings of this study: first, identity erasure under enslavement; second, borders as instruments of exclusion and spaces of negotiation; third, self-representation, resistance, and the rearticulation of identity. The findings are displayed in the following table.

Table 1. Process of negotiating identity across geographical, cultural, and racial borders in Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name*

No.	Stages	Elaboration
1.	Identity erasure under enslavement	Changing original name into a Western customized name; Aminata Diallo vs. Meena Dee
		Forbidden to practice Muslim prayer vs. joining a sermon in Church and ending up as an atheist in London
		Food, chicken vs pork
		Body and sexualities owned by the master
2.	Borders as instruments of exclusion and spaces of negotiation	The protagonist tried to adapt and integrate into a new environment
		Memory of homeland
		Skill of catching babies as the local African women's skill
		Learning English, learning to write, accounting and literacy skills
3.	Self-representation, resistance, and the Self-Rearticulation	The use of the first-person narrative 'I'
		Writing testimony based on the protagonist's point of view
		Resisting the Abolitionist domination and stereotype Became famous and a public speaker in London
		Meeting the king as the plot twist of countering the white domination

Discussion

Identity Erasure under Enslavement

In Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name*, enslavement is represented not only as a system of forced labor but also as a systematic attempt to erase the identity of African people. The slave system attempts not only to replace personal, familial, and cultural identities with the imposed identity of property. Aminata's experiences reveal how slavery has been taken apart in her identity erasure. It can be seen through the separation from family and community; suppression or replacement of names; racial classification; commodification of the Black body; disruption of language and cultural knowledge; and exclusion from historical representation.

Table 1 shows that the protagonist's identity negotiation progresses from erasure under enslavement, through adaptation at the borders of exclusion, to self-rearticulation through her own testimony and public voice. Aminata's identity is initially formed through her relationships with her parents, village, language, religion, and cultural traditions. In the novel, Aminata explains herself as: Aminata, actually a holy name in Islam attached to the Prophet Muhammad's mother's name, Sitti Aminah. Aminata acknowledged herself as a Muslim, free, and of mixed tribes, Fula and Bamana in Mali, West Africa. She can speak Fulfulde and Bamanankan, and knows a little bit of Arabic as well as English (after settling in America). Her father is a jewellery smith, and her mom is catching babies.

"I am a freeborn Muslim. Let me go!" I said it in Fulfulde, and I said it in Bamanankan, but my words had no effect, so I started screaming. If any villager happened to be out at night, perhaps he would hear... I was still alive. *Allaahu Akbar*, I said. I hoped that someone would hear the words in Arabic and realize the mistake. But nobody heard me or cared. (Hill, 2007: 32).

When she is captured and separated from her family and homeland, the slave system destroys the social environment that enables her to understand who she is. In the novel, Aminata talks about herself as a Muslim, free-born, and mixed tribes Fula and Bamana. She also articulates words associate to Muslim attributes: Allahu Akbar, a holy word to greet the great power of God. She also talks about her capture in her village and being brought to America. She was kidnapped by black men from another village murdered her Fa (mama) and Ba (papa) (Hill, 2007: 31-36). Aminata stated that:

"I lived in terror that the captors would beat us, boil us and eat us, but they began with humiliation: they tore the clothes off our backs…As I began my long march from home, I discovered that there were people in the world who didn't know me, didn't love me, and didn't care whether I lived or died" (Hill, 2007: 36).

The separation of Aminata from her parents and village (community) is not only emotional. It also prevents the transmission of family history; genealogy; language; religious beliefs; cultural customs; and communal protection. In another scene, it is explained by Aminata that, in America (and London), her name was changed to Meena Dee, a Western customized name.

I acknowledged that I was Meena Dee, but that she could call me Aminata Diallo if she wanted, which was my childhood name. Aminata. Four syllables. It's really not that hard: Ah-ME-naw-tah, I told her" (Hill, 2007: 10).

A name carries more than personal identification. It can express family, ancestry, culture, religion, and belonging. Aminata Diallo's name connects her to her African

origin and family history, and her religion. Aminata repeatedly explains herself and her cultural background: "As I told her, I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali, ... I am a Bamana. And a Fula (Hill, 2007: 11).

Aminata was also forced to study English when she arrived in America and lost chances to learn all the Qur'anic prayers. When I tried to mumble the prayers in my head —*Allaahu Akbar. Subhaana ala huuma wa bihamdika. A'uudhu billaahi minash shaitaan ar-Rajeem*—it wasn't the same. I could not praise Allah properly, without prayer (Hill, 2007: 40). She also pushed to eat pork. She has no choice. "I sniffed the meat and turned away. Pork. Not that. Not pork (Hill, 2007: 130).

The slave system reduces Aminata's individual identity to the generalized category of "Black." Her name, language, community, and personal history become less important than the racial category imposed upon her. Blackness is not treated simply as a physical identity. It is placed within a racial hierarchy in which whiteness is associated with authority, ownership, citizenship, and humanity, while Blackness is associated with servitude and exclusion.

Using Hall's concept of difference, this process can be understood as the construction of a racial "Other" (1997). A dominant group defines itself as superior by representing another group as inferior. Racial identity is therefore produced through discourse, law, economic practice, and institutional power.

Enslavement also transforms the human body into property. Aminata's body is treated as something that can be purchased, transported, examined, disciplined, and exploited. She was illustrated being pushed down by her master: "He slapped me…. Who owns you?" he said (Hill, 2007: 165). Aminata's body is placed under the control of others, while her physical movement, labor, sexuality, health, and reproductive capacity are regulated by the slave system. Her body no longer belongs to her but to her master. Aminata's identity is slowly but surely erased and transformed into a new cultural background. She was Meena Dee, sometimes joined in Church sermons, and ended up as an atheist in London.

Borders as Instruments of Exclusion and Spaces of Negotiation

The second finding is that the borders in *Someone Knows My Name* are both material and symbolic. Aminata crosses geographical borders between Africa and the Americas, Canada and England, but she also encounters legal, racial, cultural, political, and psychological boundaries.

The most significant border is the Atlantic. The Atlantic separates Aminata from her birthplace and family, but it also places her within the wider Black diasporic world created by the slave trade. Other borders include the distinction between enslaved and free, Black and white, African and colonial, citizen and non-citizen, and remembered self and imposed identity. These borders regulate movement and belonging. They determine who may own property, who may be owned, who may travel freely, who may be legally recognized, and who may speak with authority. Aminata's movement across borders therefore does not automatically signify freedom. Physical mobility and social freedom are not identical.

Aminata's arrival at Robinson Appleby's indigo plantation powerfully presents the physical: the air was cold, and around my waist I had nothing but a bit of rough osnaburg cloth (Hill, 2007: 127). It bit into my hip, leaving it red and raw, and the toes

of my left foot were bleeding"; psychological: The air was cold is not only about the physical condition but also about feeling that the environment and people are not always friendly, and the cultural consequences of enslavement. It also illustrates Aminata's gradual movement from being treated as an enslaved body toward developing a sense of identity and belonging. She dreamed of having what white have.
"Inside my own head, I tried to hear the sound of my father's low and steady voice while his fingers lit gently on my arm. This is what they want, Aminata, and this is how to survive. …I am watching over you, Daughter. I use the stars for eyes, and I see you in this new land. You crossed the big river, and you must keep on living (Hill, 2007: 136).

The quote reveals Aminata's internal conversation with her deceased father as a crucial moment of memory, cultural survival, and identity negotiation. The passage shows that enslavement cannot destroy Aminata's cultural identity since her memories and familial teachings remain active within her consciousness. Memory, then, becomes one of Aminata's most important forms of resistance. The slave system separates her from her family and homeland, but it cannot entirely control her internal memories. Her father's voice (Hill, 2007, p. 136) is a private space in which the slave system has limited authority. Her father's voice teaches her how to survive. To survive means to negotiate in a new environment.

However, survival does not mean that she accepts the identity imposed upon her. It means that she learns to negotiate oppressive conditions without surrendering her entire sense of self. Memory preserves cultural continuity and a form of cultural adaptation as well as preservation. Through Gilroy's Black Atlantic, the father's voice can be understood as cultural knowledge carried across the Atlantic. Aminata's African memory travels with her into the diaspora and becomes part of her new identity.

The passage demonstrates that resistance does not always require complete refusal of the surrounding culture. Aminata's survival depends partly on learning new practices. However, adaptation is not identical to assimilation. She changes her practices while retaining the memory and significance of the culture from which those practices originated. This supports Hall's concept of identity as "becoming" and Gilroy's understanding of Black Atlantic identity as formed through cultural translation.

Self-Representation, Resistance, and Self-Rearticulation

Self-representation refers to the ability of a person or community to describe, interpret, and give meaning to their own experience (Hall, 1997). In a system of slavery, self-representation becomes politically important because others usually represent enslaved people: slave owners, traders, colonial authorities, legal institutions, and dominant historical narratives (Rasiah, 2020, ibid., 2021). Aminata's self-representation challenges these categories because she appears as a speaking, remembering, thinking, and interpreting subject. She does not simply become the object of the story; she becomes the person who tells and understands the story.

One of the most important forms of evidence is the novel's use of Aminata's first-person voice. The use of "I" is significant. Aminata is not described from an external perspective as an anonymous enslaved girl. She speaks as the person who experienced the event. The first-person voice gives her control over the selection and interpretation of memory. The title of the novel, "Someone Knows My Name," signifies the central code of black self who not only controls the story but also the narration. Randall, in her novel

The Wind Done Gone (2001), also claimed the voice and subject of black people (Rasiah et al., 2024). The main character, Cynara, a black woman, writes a book based on her own voice and experience. She compares Uncle Tom with Frederick Douglass. Uncle Tom is seen as a Christ figure who sacrifices himself for others. Marked as Old Negro: submissive, ignorant, obedient, and compliant to whites in the literary representation of nineteenth-century slavery. So that's why Cynara wants to represent something like Frederick Dounglas did, a new negro who claimed his voice (Dennis in Rasiah, 2020).

The phrase "I would have been about twelve" also indicates retrospective narration in the *Someone Knows My Name* novel. The older Aminata looks back at her younger self and reconstructs the past. Her uncertainty about the exact age suggests that memory is not a perfect record. Nevertheless, the act of remembering gives her authority over the meaning of the event. She does not merely state that she was brought to a plantation. She remembers the cold air, the rough cloth, the injury to her hip, the bleeding toes, the white house, the bodies of the enslaved people, their hair, and the yellow scarf. These details demonstrate that she is an observer and interpreter, not merely an object being transported.

The other day, they took me into a London school. One girl asked if it was true that I was the famous Meena Dee, the one mentioned in all the newspapers. Her parents, she said, did not believe that I could have lived in so many places. I acknowledged that I was Meena Dee, but that she could call me Aminata Diallo if she wanted, which was my childhood name. … She said she wished I could meet her parents. "My grandfather says he bets you eat raw elephant". .. Honey, I said, my life is a ghost story. Then tell it to me, she said (Hill, 2007: 11).

Language becomes a tool of resistance when Aminata uses it to communicate, interpret experience, assist others, and narrate her own history, a ghost story. The quote also reveals the way Aminata challenges the stereotype about African people issued by the little girl's grandfather: "African eat elephant". Instead, black people eat what white people eat. Aminata compared the endless grey of London with her colors and tastes of food in her homeland. She found bread and meat uninteresting and unpalatable in London, and she wondered how it was that people who sailed the oceans and ruled the world cared nothing for food and how to prepare it. Londoners ate hardly any fruit at all. She missed the bananas, limes, oranges and pineapples of Sierra Leone (Africa). I especially missed the malagueta peppers, and found myself writing to Debra, pleading with her to send me a shipment of spices for cooking (Hill, 2007: 447). Aminata tried to show her perspective about the world that was not voiced in the colonial world.

Aminata in the novel is also presented as a black woman whose existence and voice are important. Hill depicted how pleased they were that John Clarkson (Abolitionist): "had finally prevailed in his attempts to bring Aminata" (Hill, 2007: 445). Stanley Hastings (Abolitionist) recognizes the political value of Aminata's life story, but he immediately assumes that he and his associates should organize and write it for her. The passage therefore reveals that self-representation remains contested even within an abolitionist context. The phrase "we will interview you and write" is significant. Aminata responds: "You will write an account of my life?" (Hill, 2007, p. 447).

Her question interrupts Hastings's assumption that the project has already been decided. She makes the problem of narrative ownership visible. Aminata's question functions as a subtle act of resistance because it challenges the assumption that other

people may automatically speak for her. Aminata's resistance is not expressed through open rebellion. Instead, it appears through language. This can be called discursive resistance. Aminata challenges the dominant speaker through speech and questioning. Her resistance defines her from the outside. Aminata's question signals that she must resist not only the representations produced by slaveholders but also any representation that removes her authority over her own experience.

Aminata Diallo's then reclaims her self-rearticulation. She recognizes Africa as her homeland, but she also claims London as the place where she wants her life to end. Her identity is therefore neither exclusively African nor completely assimilated into England. Instead, she constructs a complex diasporic identity shaped by homeland, displacement, memory, and personal choice.

The reference to "the King" places Aminata in relation to imperial authority. The King represents the political and institutional power responsible for laws, colonial structures, and national decisions. Aminata's intention to meet him creates a reversal of the usual power relationship. Under slavery, Black people are denied the authority to speak to political leaders as equal human subjects. Aminata imagines herself entering the royal sphere as a witness and narrator. Her testimony challenges the distance between imperial power and the lived experience of enslaved people. She carries the history of slavery into the political center of Britain. The scene can therefore be read as a form of discursive resistance (Ghulam Hifsa & Tabassum Saba, 2025). Aminata cannot erase the political power of the King, but she can enter the space of that power with her own account. Her voice becomes a challenge to official historical narratives that exclude or silence enslaved people. The verb "told" is significant. Aminata does not say that someone else will tell her story. She wants to tell it herself (Hill, 2007: 456).

By talking about slavery, forced migration, and Black suffering, Aminata transforms personal memory into public testimony. She moves from being an object of imperial and slave systems to becoming a speaking subject who addresses authority. Aminata gradually becomes able to represent herself, resist the identities (stereotypes) imposed by slavery, and rearticulate her identity across different geographical, cultural, and political borders. Hall (1997) stated that representation is not a neutral reflection of reality. It helps produce social meanings and determine how people are understood.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Hill's *Someone Knows My Name* demonstrates that enslavement is not merely a system of forced labor. It is also a system that attempts to erase identity by separating individuals from their families, communities, languages, names, cultural practices, bodily autonomy, and historical voices. However, the novel also shows that identity erasure is never complete. Aminata preserves and reconstructs her selfhood through memory, naming, language, and cultural knowledge. Her memories of her family and Africa provide cultural continuity, while her experiences in the Atlantic world transform the meaning of that identity. She does not simply return to an unchanged pre-enslavement self. Instead, she develops a layered identity shaped by both African origins and diasporic experience. Aminata's identity is therefore shaped by both roots and routes: her roots connect her to Africa, while her routes across the Atlantic create new experiences, affiliations, and forms of belonging.

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