

RIGEO 

ISSN: 2146 - 0353

**Review of International
GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION**



www.rigeo.org

Negotiating Individual Identity in Postcolonial Spaces: A New Historicist Reading of Aminatta Forna's Fiction

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Abstract

Aminatta Forna's novels explore the complex formation of individual identity within postcolonial societies shaped by war, displacement, and historical trauma. This article employs a New Historicist framework to examine how personal identities in Forna's fiction are constructed through continuous interaction with historical forces, political violence, and cultural memory. Drawing on selected novels such as *Ancestor Stones*, *The Memory of Love*, and *The Hired Man*, the study argues that Forna presents identity not as a fixed or autonomous entity but as a fluid process negotiated within specific socio-historical contexts. By situating individual experiences alongside suppressed histories and dominant narratives, the article reveals how Forna challenges linear historiography and foregrounds marginalized voices. This analysis contributes to postcolonial literary studies by demonstrating how New Historicism offers a productive lens for understanding identity formation in contemporary African literature.

Keywords

Aminatta Forna; Individual Identity; New Historicism; Postcolonial Literature; History and Memory; Space and Trauma

1. Introduction

Postcolonial literature has persistently interrogated the question of identity, particularly the ways in which individual subjectivity is shaped by historical upheavals, colonial legacies, and sociopolitical transformations. Within this literary tradition, Aminatta Forna emerges as a significant contemporary voice whose fiction foregrounds the lived experiences of individuals

navigating fractured histories and contested spaces. Her novels depict characters whose personal identities are inseparable from the historical realities of colonialism, civil war, and post-conflict reconstruction.

This article examines the negotiation of individual identity in Aminatta Forna's fiction through the lens of New Historicism. Unlike traditional historicist approaches that treat history as a stable background to literary texts, New Historicism emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between literature and historical discourse. It views literary texts as cultural artifacts embedded within networks of power, ideology, and social practices. Applying this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how Forna's characters internalize, resist, and reinterpret historical narratives in their quest for self-definition.

Forna's novels frequently situate individual lives within broader historical moments, such as the Sierra Leonean civil war and its aftermath. Characters are often portrayed as witnesses, survivors, or inheritors of trauma, whose identities are shaped by both personal memory and collective history. Through fragmented narratives and shifting perspectives, Forna destabilizes authoritative historical accounts and highlights the multiplicity of lived experiences. This narrative strategy aligns closely with New Historicist concerns regarding the instability of historical truth and the power relations embedded in historiography.

By focusing on individual identity, this study seeks to demonstrate how Forna's fiction reveals the intimate impact of historical forces on personal subjectivity. The article argues that Forna presents identity as a process of negotiation—one that unfolds across postcolonial spaces marked by violence, silence, and recovery. In doing so, her work challenges essentialist notions of identity and underscores the interconnectedness of history, space, and the self.

2. Theoretical Framework: New Historicism and Identity Formation

New Historicism, as articulated by critics such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, challenges the traditional separation between literary texts and historical context. It emphasizes that literature and history are mutually constitutive, each shaping and reshaping the other through discourse, power relations, and cultural practices. Rather than viewing history as an objective and unified narrative, New Historicism treats it as a series of competing representations influenced by ideology and authority.

Within this framework, identity is understood as a historically situated construct rather than an innate or autonomous essence. Individual subjectivity is produced through interaction with social institutions, political forces, and cultural narratives. New Historicism thus provides a valuable lens for analyzing postcolonial texts, where personal lives are deeply entangled with colonial histories, national conflicts, and collective trauma.

In Aminatta Forna's fiction, identity formation occurs at the intersection of private experience and public history. Her narratives foreground characters whose sense of self is continually reshaped by memories of violence, displacement, and inherited trauma. By embedding personal stories within specific historical moments, Forna illustrates how identity is negotiated within systems of power and historical representation. A New Historicist reading allows for an exploration of how these characters both absorb and contest dominant historical narratives.

3. Historical Trauma and Individual Identity in *The Memory of Love*

The Memory of Love presents a profound exploration of how historical trauma shapes individual identity in post-war Sierra Leone. The novel is set against the backdrop of the country's civil war and its lingering psychological effects. Characters such as Adrian Lockheart, Kai Mansaray, and Elias Cole embody different responses to historical violence, illustrating how identity is fragmented by trauma and memory.

Elias Cole's confessions reveal the moral ambiguities of survival during times of political chaos. His identity is marked by guilt, complicity, and self-justification, reflecting how individuals internalize violent histories in order to survive. Through Cole's narrative, Forna exposes the blurred boundaries between victimhood and culpability, challenging simplistic historical categorizations.

Kai Mansaray represents a contrasting model of identity shaped by humanitarian engagement and emotional restraint. As a surgeon working amid devastation, Kai's identity is defined by professional duty and emotional suppression. His reluctance to confront personal loss mirrors the broader social silences surrounding trauma in post-conflict societies. From a New Historicist perspective, Kai's character illustrates how dominant discourses of resilience and reconstruction often marginalize emotional truth.

By juxtaposing these personal narratives, Forna reveals the psychological consequences of historical violence on individual identity. The novel resists a singular historical account and instead foregrounds multiple, often conflicting, perspectives. This narrative multiplicity aligns with New Historicist concerns about the instability of historical truth and the power structures that shape remembrance.

4. Personal Memory and Ancestral History in *Ancestor Stones*

In *Ancestor Stones*, Forna explores identity through the intergenerational transmission of memory and history. The novel traces the lives of four women whose personal stories collectively reconstruct a fragmented national past. The protagonist Abie's search for ancestral history becomes a quest for self-understanding, illustrating how individual identity is rooted in inherited narratives.

The novel challenges colonial historiography by privileging oral histories and female perspectives that have traditionally been excluded from official records. Through these voices, Forna reconstructs history as lived experience rather than institutional documentation. A New Historicist reading highlights how these marginalized narratives function as counter-histories that disrupt dominant colonial and patriarchal discourses.

Abie's identity evolves as she engages with these ancestral stories, revealing how personal memory and collective history are inseparable. Her selfhood is shaped not only by her present circumstances but also by the suppressed experiences of previous generations. This negotiation between past and present underscores Forna's portrayal of identity as fluid and historically contingent.

By embedding personal narratives within broader historical transformations, *Ancestor Stones* demonstrates how individual identity emerges through dialogue with the past. The novel exemplifies New Historicism's emphasis on the circulation of power and meaning across time, space, and discourse.

5. Power, Silence, and Selfhood in *The Hired Man*

The Hired Man shifts the focus to post-conflict Europe, exploring identity within a landscape shaped by unspoken histories and political repression. The novel examines how silence functions

as a tool of power in shaping individual subjectivity. Characters such as Duro Kolak construct their identities around suppressed truths, reflecting the psychological consequences of living within authoritarian systems.

Duro's narration reveals how fear and surveillance influence self-perception. His identity is formed through careful self-censorship, illustrating how political power penetrates personal consciousness. From a New Historicist standpoint, this internalization of authority demonstrates how ideology operates beyond formal institutions, shaping individual behavior and selfhood.

The novel also exposes the fragility of historical memory in post-totalitarian societies. Through fragmented storytelling and unreliable narration, Forna destabilizes official historical narratives and foregrounds the emotional costs of enforced silence. Identity, in this context, becomes a survival strategy rather than an expression of authenticity.

By situating individual lives within broader political structures, *The Hired Man* reinforces Forna's recurring theme that identity is negotiated under historical pressure. The novel exemplifies New Historicism's focus on the subtle operations of power within everyday life.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the negotiation of individual identity in Aminatta Forna's fiction through a New Historicist lens. By situating personal narratives within specific historical contexts, Forna demonstrates that identity is shaped by memory, trauma, and power relations rather than fixed personal essence. Her novels challenge authoritative histories by foregrounding marginalized voices and lived experiences.

Through texts such as *The Memory of Love*, *Ancestor Stones*, and *The Hired Man*, Forna reveals how individual subjectivity is continually reconstructed in response to historical forces. A New Historicist reading underscores the interdependence of literature and history in shaping identity, highlighting the relevance of Forna's work to contemporary postcolonial discourse.

Ultimately, Forna's fiction affirms that understanding identity requires an engagement with the complexities of history, silence, and remembrance. Her narratives offer a powerful critique of linear historiography and contribute significantly to discussions of identity formation in postcolonial literature.

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