

Psychological trauma of slavery in Toni Morrisons beloved

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is an Afro-American novelist, essayist, editor, short fiction writer and lecturer who have received many awards including Pulitzer and Nobel Prize. *Beloved* is the novel remains one of Morrison's most unforgettable novel and a significant work of American fiction. The emotional hunger of the child constitutes the essential psychological drama of the Novel. An injured, enraged baby is the central figure of the book. Literally it is present in the title Character of *Beloved* and symbolically it is in the unconscious of all the characters of the novel. The viciousness of the baby's unsatisfied needs colours the mother daughter relationship in *Beloved*. Mother plays an active role to instill in the child the cultural and social values that guarantee the formation of the identity of the whole community. The prospect of the survival of the Black community depends on the motherhood in *Beloved*. A baby's unsatisfied needs not only refer to physical needs but also psychic and emotional ones.

In *Beloved*, the worst atrocity of slavery and the grimmest dilemma the novel presents is not the physical death only but the psychic death also. The children have been denied to their basic need and their birth right, which is the lap of the mother that is essential for the psychic growth of the child. This unfulfilled desire leaves such holes in the sub-conscious as are not filled throughout the life. In *Beloved* trauma is pervasive. As a novel of slavery *Beloved* depicts the atrocities in slavery which traumatizes most of the characters. The impact of psychological of women by focusing specifically on the issues of social oppression on minority groups and power dynamics is portrayed in Morrison's *Beloved*. Trauma narratives are often concerned with human made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the social and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma. Trauma can be a power indicator of oppressive cultural institutions and practices.

Keywords: Slavery, Psychology, gender issues

Introduction

Toni Morrison (February 18, 1931) is an American novelist, editor, and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed characters. Among her best known novels are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987). She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison serves as Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. *Beloved* is a 1987 novel by the American writer Toni Morrison. Set after the American Civil War (1861–1865), it is inspired by the story of an African-American slave, Margaret Garner who escaped slavery in Kentucky late January 1856 by fleeing to Ohio, a free state. In the novel, the protagonist Sethe is also a slave who escapes slavery, running to Cincinnati, Ohio. After twenty-eight days of freedom, a posse arrives to retrieve her and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave owners the right to pursue slaves across state borders. Sethe kills her two-year-old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured and taken back to Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from which Sethe recently fled. A woman presumed to be her daughter, called *Beloved*, returns years later to haunt Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio.

A traumatic memory is essentially an absent memory. It doubly functions as having a painful impact on the psyche, while at the same time being erased from the psyche in order for the psyche to cope. Trauma narratives, in this study, attempt to work through and fill these gaps by putting the bodies of the victims at the very center of the coping process. Thus their bodies and their presence also serve as loci of

recovery. As each narrative proposes to implement therapeutic steps, its characters work through or a community copes with trauma that, in turn, triggers a more comprehensive process of resolution.

Toni Morrison's novels is the exploration of trauma, specifically the forms of trauma that have afflicted the African American community. Although Morrison's novels predominantly feature African American characters and communities, the traumatic events she explores, including active combat, domestic abuse, and deadly accidents, transcend racial boundaries. Trauma can be universal, and thus the arguments about trauma that emerge from Morrison's novels, while certainly having significance in a racial discussion, should be thought about in universal terms as well. Morrison's novels are thus tools with which to reflect on the implications of trauma in a global sense, and to investigate how descriptions of trauma are informed by—and even respond to—the historical moment in which they were written.

While there are many ways of expressing and relating trauma, I will focus on Morrison's literary portrayal of mental illness, specifically post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I will evaluate this issue in three of Morrison's novels: *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Home*. Morrison's novels feature an abundance of mentally ill characters, which can be explained by the fact that mental illness is both a common physiological byproduct of trauma and a means of psychological detachment from unbearable traumatic realities. Morrison does not depict trauma merely to show its insidious presence in the African American psyche, and does not explore mental illness merely to demonize the systems

and prejudices that instilled it. Instead, her novels offer complex meditations on the network of factors that give rise to mental illness over time, the treatment options available to victims of mental illness at the narrative present, and the impact of mental illness on both the individual and the community.

The emotional hunger of the child constitutes the essential psychological drama of the novel. An injured, enraged baby is the central figure of the book. Literally it is present in the title character of *Beloved* and symbolically it is in the unconscious of all the characters of the novel. The viciousness of the baby's unsatisfied needs colors the mother daughter relationship in *Beloved*. A baby's unsatisfied needs not only refer to physical needs but also psychic and emotional ones. In *Beloved*, the worst atrocity of slavery and the grimmest dilemma the novel presents is not the physical death only but the psychic death also. The children have been denied to their basic need and their birth right, which is the lap of the mother that is essential for the psychic growth of the child. This unfulfilled desire leaves such holes in the subconscious as are not filled throughout the life. Seth unable to have the love and care of her mother develops into an overprotective mother whose selfish love takes away the life of her own daughter. The predicament, of the novel is Sethe's murder of her baby daughter *Beloved*. But a deep study exposes the paradoxical nature of the murder. Seth, having passed the life of slavery and then able to run away from the cruel master is on the threshold of being captured again. Her experience of slavery is so worse that she prefers to kill her daughter instead of leaving her to the cruel institution of slavery.

The narrative structure of the novel is correlated with the character's continues struggle to delineate a path of self-discovery. The complex narrative of the novel is emblem of the intricate lives of the characters. Afro American's overall fragmented state sets a constant dialogue between past scraps and present bits of their texts and selves in an array to sustain a loose textual and cultural continuity, a weak sense of belonging and self-identity. Afro American's overall fragmented state stipulated an invariable. Morrison's story telling characterizes shifting and mutability in perspectives, in time and space, character, procedure, and composition. Her writing is characterized by the "constantly though unexpectedly shifting point of views, an unpredictable choir of narrative voices, and juxtaposed fragments of events and images that are in dialogue with one another but could hardly form, a straightforward linear cause-and-effect plot that is a monologue". The monologues of *Beloved*, *Seth*, and *Denver* present something more serious than the mere flexibility between the boundaries the complete breakdown of borders, between the self and the other.

Trauma caused by slavery plays an essential role in Morrison's *Beloved*; it is the Haunting memories of horrors experienced while enslaved what leads Sethe's hand when cutting the throat of her baby daughter. Paul Valent, one of the pioneers in the treatment of trauma, has described trauma as "the nemesis of our lives. Sometimes it swamps us; at other times it haunts us. It is the fracture that stops us from running as we would wish. The word trauma comes from the Greek word meaning wound, or penetration as in stabbing. Technically, the penetration can range from minor to lethal, but it always leaves a scar and a vulnerability". As described

by Judith Herman, a psychiatrist who specializes in traumatic stress, a trauma can be either "acute", caused by a single event, or "chronicle", developed in a response to a prolonged or repeated immense suffering. Among the common responses to the event which is too distressing to bear is the state of the so-called "double consciousness" when the distressing event has been banished from memory. Herman further observes that "traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own. Traumatic symptoms are divided into three categories by Herman: "hyper arousal", "intrusion", and "constriction": "Hyper arousal category reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint. When the traumatized event concerns the whole community, as is the case of war, the holocaust or slavery, the reaction to a traumatic injury differs. According to Alexander, the collective tends to "construct symbolic constructions and framing" around it and move along from there, while creating stories and characters. However, the scars, engraved by pain. And suffering of individuals, sustain, "marking their [collective] memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 3). Thus socio-historical trauma of African Americans, origins of which stems from the five-hundred year old history of slave trade and the resulting consequences, has created a racial divide between Blacks and Whites and remains unsettled until now. As Toni Morrison observes in her essay "The Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", the racial issues "continue to haunt African Americans in the race divided society where race still matters" (Morrison, "The Rootedness").

While trauma and its consequent impact on individuals as well as collective has been widely recognized by professionals in the field of psychology, psychiatry or psychotherapy, as well as by literary scholars, it has been observed by Adamson and Clarke that the significance of shame was somewhat neglected. While on one hand they refer to shame as to a "central human emotion" they are also aware that the tendency to deny the emotions any real significance in our understanding of the world is, to a certain extent, still deeply rooted in our culture: "[T]his ideology of science has for the most part tended to disregard and undervalue both the affective and the imaginative dimensions of human experience. The serious study of the imaginative realm is often dismissed as anti-objective and anti-realistic" (2). Nevertheless, Adamson and Clark claim that the situation is changing and this powerful emotion is beginning to receive the attention it deserves. The imaginative world of literature, with its metaphors and symbolic language, offers an "acute insight into inner reality" (Adamson and Clarke 1), thus providing the perfect evidence for understanding psychological reality; an evidence which would be hard to gather by other means. And it works in both directions; scientific and psychoanalytic understanding of the affective reality enhances our understanding of literature.

Reference

1. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, Print, 1997
2. Dequina Michael. *Beloved* African American Literature Book Club. March. 2006. Print, 1998.