

SHATTERED MEMORIES AND A SENSE OF IDENTITY IN BELOVED BY TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines and explores the complex relationship in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved' between the feeling of identity and the scattered memories. The novel employs the experiences of its characters—especially Sethe, whose recollections of her horrific past interfere with her ability to construct a cohesive identity—to illustrate the eerie legacy of slavery. Through a qualitative analysis of non-linear narrative structure of the novel, the paper investigates how Morrison represented memory fragmentation as a mirror of the psychological damage caused by slavery. The study argues that the characters' sense of self is damaged as a result of these fragmented memories, which are frequently brought on by upsetting memories and the spectral presence of Beloved. This is especially true in light of their struggles to reconcile the past with their present identities. By examining pivotal scenes and character dynamics, this study elucidates how Beloved employed memory as a literary device to investigate the enduring effects of slavery on African American identity. Last, the paper concludes that Morrison's depiction of segmented memories not only highlights the internal struggles of the characters but also offers a wider reflection on the lasting impact of slavery's collective trauma on the development of African American identities.

Keywords: Shattered Memories, Slavery, Sense Of Identity, Toni Morrison , Narrative Structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beloved, Published in 1987, is considered one of Toni Morrison's most significant and influential works. It is also highly recognized in the literary canon of African American literature. The story was set after the American Civil War. It tells the story of Sethe, a former slave who killed her infant daughter to free herself from the bonds of servitude. Her grief is so great that it takes the form of Beloved, a girl who would have been Sethe's dead daughter's age if she had lived (Abdullah, 2015). The novel explores the complex dynamics of memory, trauma, and identity as well as the long-lasting psychological scars left by slavery in the United States. With little social, cultural, or political power of any kind, African Americans are the disenfranchised perspective from which *Beloved* is conceived and written (Sickels, 2009). It traces the horrific reality of slavery, including the severe psychological and emotional anguish that enslaved individuals experience long after the physical bindings are severed, in addition to the physical horrors experienced by enslaved individuals. Morrison's depiction of slavery is brutally honest, delving into tragedies that more conventional slave narratives would have been compelled to downplay. *Beloved* is a foundational work in understanding the African American experience and the enduring effects of institutional oppression because of its unvarnished examination of the history of slavery (Selfridge, 2018).

Past memories and identity are central to its narrative structure, thus, Morrison employs fragmented storytelling, where memories and past traumas are interwoven with the present, to

reflect the disorienting and haunting nature of these experiences. This narrative technique not only emphasizes the characters' internal struggles but also invites readers to engage with the complexities of memory and history, particularly how they shape personal and collective identities (Müllerová, 2021).

Beloved is a potent examination of the psychological and emotional wounds inflicted by slavery on both the bodies and the minds of those who survived it. The main character of the novel, Sethe, struggles with a history that won't go away and represents the intricate relationship between memory and identity. Morrison purposefully breaks up her narrative in order to reflect the chaotic and painful recollections that interfere with the protagonists' attempts to piece together a cohesive identity. Memories in *Beloved* are more than simply nostalgic thoughts from the past; they are actual, eerie beings who occasionally mold and warp the identities of the characters. This paper will examine how Morrison uses the fragmentation of memory as a narrative strategy to reflect the fractured identities of her characters, particularly in the context of their traumatic experiences of slavery. Through a thorough analysis of key sequences and character interactions, his study aims to show how *Beloved* offers a significant commentary on the lasting influence of slavery on African American identity, showing the difficulties to reconcile a traumatic past with the present and future.

Beloved tells the story of slavery's horrors that are not documented in history books. It becomes a timeless tale throughout the book, but Sethe must let go of it in order to live a bearable existence. The author believes that Sethe's account of her personal experience serves as a metaphorⁱ for how African Americans have dealt with the trauma of being uprooted from their ancestral homes in Africa and their cultural heritage, as well as the terrifying experience of being split off from family members and sold into slavery (Rué, 2013, 142).

Despite the fact that American women writers may thematize language as layers of tainted, obscured, or deleted meanings, they are possibly yet, significant layers. Language can be used to both build and be built upon narratives during their telling. It is possible for stories to both reveal and obfuscate cultural meanings. Action results from this condition rather than intellectual detachment since historical recuperation and narrative production are intertwined actions. The American writers cast doubt on the basic essence of community, including its risks and aspirations, its mandated demands on people's lives, and its equally mandated tolerance for individual variations (Ferguson, 2017, 5).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of the novel's memory, trauma, and identity has attracted significant scholarly attention. The purpose of the literature review is to lay the groundwork for the analysis of this paper by looking at important studies that have examined these issues in *Beloved*. "*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*" (2016) by Cathy Caruth. This work is foundational in trauma studies. "*To Be Loved and Cry Shame: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's Beloved*" (2001) by Lynda Koolish. This article offers a psychological analysis of *Beloved*, concentrating on the characters' suffering and how it affects who they are. "*Her story Unwritten: Trauma, Memory, Identity and History in Toni Morrison's Beloved*" (2013) by Rué, E. D. This study focused on slave narrative and cultural identity. "*Memory and Mother Love in Morrison's 'Beloved'*" (1990) by Mathieson, in which she discussed the mother's memory of her child. "*Maternity and Rememory*" (1994) by Marianne Hirsch, in which Hirsch introduced his concept of "Rememory" and how it relates to the persistence of traumatic memories in the novel.

“*Language, Narrative and the Reconstruction of Fragmented Identity in Toni Morrison's Beloved*” (2024) by Favreau, K., in which he explored the idea that characters in the novel taking charge of their own narratives as well as the larger moral obligation that every person has to live in continual awareness of the stories they tell and the ideas they subsequently propagate.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on the intersection of narratology and trauma theoryⁱⁱ to examine how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* employed narrative structure to explore the psychological effects of slavery on identity and memory. The non-linear story structure of *Beloved* is examined using narrative theory to see how it represents the broken nature of memory. As the individuals attempt to piece together a cohesive sense of self from their shattered pasts, the novel's fractured chronology and shifting perspectives reflect their own identities. The intricacy of developing a stable identity in the wake of tragedy is highlighted by the employment of several narrative voices and the interaction between the past and present. The disarray and fragmentation of Morrison's characters' memories and identities are examined via the lens of Gérard Genette's conceptions of narrative temporality, focalization, and voice.

The characters in *Beloved* have fractured and disjointed memories, which can be examined through the lens of trauma theory. The study looks at how traumatic events break the continuity of memory and identity, drawing on the writings of academics like Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth. Trauma is experienced by the characters as a persistent intrusion into the present that warps their understanding of their past and of themselves. Memories of Sethe, especially those related to her choice to murder her daughter, are jumbled and reappear during trying times, signifying the unresolved trauma that still shapes her personality (de Almeida Pedrosa, 2019). Using this paradigm, it is possible to analyse Morrison's portrayal of trauma as a collective and personal experience that spans generations, impacting not only the descendants of those who were directly enslaved but also those who did not. Additionally, the framework analyses the relationship between narratology and trauma theory, examining how Morrison's use of narrative structure both enacts and reflects the pain that the characters go through. *Beloved*'s disjointed storyline compels readers to interact with the characters' disjointed identities and memories in a way that is reflective of their own psychological experiences (Spaulding, 2005). This intersectional perspective sheds light on how Morrison uses narrative to illustrate the profound psychological wounds caused by slavery.

4. ANALYSIS

In Toni Morrison's "*Beloved*" memory interacts with the viewer in an intriguing and somber way. The process of creating memories traumatizes Sethe and other characters in the novel. Sethe can't break free from the recollections of her time spent as a slave; she is stuck in the past. In a same spirit, her daughter *Beloved* represents the horrible past and is an embodiment of Sethe's recollections. As a result, it is clear how "*Beloved*" as a novel addresses the past topic, how memory and the past are related, and how the past becomes a dangerous web in which people live fragmented lives (Qayoom, 2022).

The written words of the oppressor and the spoken words of the oppressed are the two forms of storytelling found in *Beloved*. Language is crucial to the initial creation, necessary deconstruction, and final reconstruction of Sethe's identity and the identities of all other black actors in both of these scenarios. The dominating narrative that describes Sethe and the other

slaves' identities in the early section of the story's timeframe is controlled by the written word, which is employed by the tyrannical white slave masters. White slave owners hinder their slaves from contributing to their own identity and experience by keeping written language and storytelling out of reach, especially when it comes to the use of jargon and objectifying, animalistic descriptions. However, Sethe discovers the hollowness of the white narrative's assertions as she creates a new narrative for herself through her oral account of her experience and identity in her own words. The process via which Sethe and the other slaves regain control over their identities through spoken language demonstrates that true liberation arises from reclaiming the power of language in a new configuration for the self. Narratives that were once destructive and supported racial notions that were in power can be changed, and storytelling becomes a tool for self-redefining (Favreau, 2024).

“Sethe learned the satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. [...] because every mention of her past life hurt” and yet, “as she began telling [...] she found herself wanting to, liking it [...] it was an unexpected pleasure” (Morrison, 1988: 69). Sethe's enjoyment of reminiscing about her past suggests that her relationship with her memories has changed. Even while these memories hurt, talking about them helps her face and take back her story, turning her suffering into a way to connect with Beloved. The novel's examination of how facing and articulating painful events can result in healing and a reassertion of identity is further highlighted by this storytelling duality of pleasure and agony.

In addition to the anguish of losing her child and the physical abuse she endured, Sethe harbors negative memories of her mother.. She recalls a horrible memory she had forgotten, and is shocked to learn that her mother was hanged. “Sethe is haunted by the knowledge that her mother was hanged” (Koolish, 2001, p. 183). She is profoundly affected by her inherited trauma due to her haunting knowing that her mother was hanged. This knowledge acts as a sobering reminder of the cruel facts of slavery and the damage it causes to entire generations. The passing of Sethe's mother represents more than simply her personal grief; it also represents the widespread brutality that characterized the lives of those under slavery, especially women who were frequently deprived of their agency and dignity.

Morrison depicted the life of a slave in *Beloved* in a very distinctive way. In contrast to conventional slave narratives, which frequently tempered the rage and fury to appease white audiences, Morrison's novel seeks to reveal and illustrate the parts of slavery that these narratives may have left out or muted. Morrison challenges readers to face the hard realities that history frequently ignores by doing this in an effort to fully expose the brutality and inhumanity of slavery "She [Sethe] just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them." (Morrison, 163). Thinking back, Sethe regrets killing her daughter to spare her from the atrocities of slavery. It highlights the drastic steps a mother might take in the face of such an oppressive and dehumanizing institution, and it conveys the desperate and protective love that causes Sethe to commit such a sad deed. Morrison takes use of this opportunity to discuss the psychological and emotional fallout from slavery, topics that are frequently omitted from historical accounts. *Beloved* is able to effectively reimagine the psychological and emotional wounds caused by slavery in addition to serving as a historical account thanks to this technique. Morrison's work significantly advances our understanding of this dark period in history since it delves into the inner lives and lived experiences of individuals who survived slavery in addition to providing an accurate account of events.

The perception of the past is not limited to scattered recollections from different generations; it is also influenced by the varied memories that individuals hold when they transition from being consociates, who share the same time and place, to contemporaries, who share the same time exclusively. In the first example, history's passing influences the past's breakdown; in the second, spatial relocation causes it (Barber, 1994). Furthermore, the past continues to influence people whether they are conscious of it or not. Sethe's experience of her spirit collapsing under "the weight of things she remembered and those she did not" or her unexpected and startling memory of her mother's hanging body, "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross" (Morrison, 73).

The act of "remembering something she had forgotten she knew" pointed to the unintentional surfacing of a deeply buried memory, most likely one that is hurtful and/or shame-laden. It is clear from the description of this recollection as having "seeped into a slit in her mind" how trauma can enter the subconscious and get lodged, suddenly surfacing at vulnerable times. The reference to "something privately shameful" alludes to the character's internalized shame and lingering remorse, which are common outcomes of the dehumanization that befell people who endured slavery. The physical act of having the desire to "do something with her hands" when she remembers this event emphasizes the body's natural reaction to trauma: the desire to be grounded in the here and now when confronted with intense feelings from the past.

The characters' memories are intricately linked to their present psychological situations and go beyond simple recalls of past occurrences. Morrison deftly examines the ways in which her characters' previous memories and traumas influence them now, influencing their identities and behaviors long after the original events have passed.

Morrison also addresses the theme of identity, particularly the struggle of African Americans to reclaim and reconstruct their identities in the aftermath of slavery. The novel's characters grapple with their sense of self, which has been fractured by the dehumanizing experience of enslavement. Through Sethe's story and the presence of Beloved as a manifestation of the past, Morrison explores how individuals and communities can confront and heal from historical trauma, while also highlighting the difficulties of such a process. There are many different social, cultural, and historical elements that influence the dynamic process of identity formation. A sense of belonging in a society that tries to marginalize and exclude them is something that many of the characters in the novel struggle with. Readers are prompted by *Beloved* to reconsider their presumptions on identity and ethnicity (Badidja & Amar, 2023 : 31).

5. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Morrison views the characters' varied accounts of their personal histories as illustrative of the black community's cultural identity, which is composed of incomplete memories and experiences that were either unwritten or not told by the people who endured slavery. The novel uncovers a hidden facet of American cultural heritage by means of the spirit of Beloved, Sethe's deceased daughter, who will reappear to reunite her mother with the slave past. In this novel, the real and the paranormal coexist with collective and individual memory, history, and her story (Rué, 141).

The narrative of a runaway slave, centred on the killing of her helpless child, is how Toni Morrison addresses the darkest aspects of life. Slavery's fractured mental effects are exemplified by the warped mother-daughter connections in *Beloved*. Morrison creates a figure to take on the dual identities of the living in order to physically embody the psychological impacts of slavery,

presenting this phenomena in a radical way. She, through her novel, attempted to recreate American history by highlighting the depth of the anguish African people experienced as a result of the system of slavery in American history through fiction (Qayoom, 2022).

Morrison grants black people a sense of inclusion in the modern era by demonstrating how black identity is intrinsically linked to black history and culture. She utilizes her writing ability as a black woman to portray the entirety of the black experience, especially the ups and downs of women's life. She wants to use words to shatter the taboo that has kept black women out of the literary canon and the political sphere. She intends to retrieve "The New History"ⁱⁱⁱ that was previously hidden by the mainstream American white society by using her literary language. By doing this, she seeks to heal the psychological pain that Black people have experienced and inspire her people to rediscover their cultural roots and rebuild their ethnic awareness (Xu, 2014).

To provide readers with a profound perspective of African American history, Morrison draws attention to the traumatic past of African Americans in *Beloved* by revealing events that have been hidden. To remind the readers of the past, the horrors and tortures of slavery are given particular weight in the true story of *Beloved*, which takes place during an event in African American history. In her novel, Morrison reimagines the past in an effort to keep the reader from forgetting important events in African American history (Tanritanir & Akşak, n.d.).

Beloved has not only contributed to the discourse on slavery and its aftermath but has also influenced subsequent generations of writers and scholars in African American literature. The novel's exploration of trauma, memory, and identity has made it a crucial text for understanding the on-going impact of slavery on African American culture^{iv} and the ways in which literature can serve as a vehicle for historical reflection and healing. Through its innovative narrative structure and powerful thematic content, *Beloved* continues to resonate with readers and remains a pivotal work in the study of African American literature and history.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison skilfully combines the formation of identity development with the shattered memories, portraying the profound psychological wounds caused by slavery. Morrison examines through the character of Sethe how painful memories don't go away with time; instead, they linger and disturb the present, making it challenging for people to create cohesive identities. The non-linear narrative style of the novel emphasizes the difficulties the characters have in reconciling their past and current identities by reflecting the broken nature of their recollections through its disjointed chronology and shifting perspectives. The work has shown that *Beloved*'s fractured memories are active, haunting presences that constantly influence and reshape the characters' identities rather than just memories of the past.

This paper contributed to the body of knowledge already available on *Beloved* by emphasizing the critical role of memory in the identity formation, particularly within the context of African American literature. This study offers a deeper understanding of how Morrison uses narrative fragmentation to portray the fragmented identities of her characters by utilizing trauma theory and narratology.

In addition to enhancing our understanding of Morrison's literary devices, the investigation of the relationship between memory, identity, and narrative structure in *Beloved* contributes to a larger conversation about the history of slavery and its ongoing influence on African American identity. Comprehending the intricate ways in which individual and community histories mold

individual and communal identities in post-slavery cultures requires an understanding of this interaction.

NOTES

ⁱ This interpretation has been investigated by academics like Lynda Koolish and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, who have highlighted that Sethe's story captures the collective trauma of African Americans who were displaced from their ancestral homes and cultural heritage as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. For example, Rushdy (2001) emphasizes in *Remembering Generations* how Morrison's portrayal of Sethe's suffering functions as a metaphorical reflection of the hardships African Americans have encountered historically and currently.

ⁱⁱ Scholars such as Gérard Genette have described narrative theory as the study of the structure and operation of narratives. Trauma theory studies the ways in which trauma is portrayed and understood in literature, drawing on the research of Cathy Caruth among others. A more thorough examination of how *Beloved's* narrative devices represent the fractured and frequently nonlinear character of traumatic memory is made possible by the confluence of these theories. For further reading, consider Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ This embodies Toni Morrison's larger concept of "writing back" African American history that has been suppressed or hidden by prevailing narratives through recovery and rewriting. She exposes the horrific events and histories that have been hidden through her novels, most notably *Beloved*. She wants to offer individuals marginalized by popular historical narratives a voice through her art.

^{iv} African American culture is still being shaped by the lingering effects of slavery, which have an impact on social interactions, identity, and cultural expression. Scholars like Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) and bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman? The painful legacy of slavery has long-lasting effects on African American communities, influencing everything from family dynamics to cultural memory, as explored in Black Women and Feminism* (1981).

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