

## The Psychology of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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**Abstract:** Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) stands as one of the most psychologically penetrating literary responses to the institution of slavery in American fiction. This paper investigates the psychology of trauma as it is constructed and mediated through Morrison's narrative, attending specifically to the ways in which the novel dramatises the enduring psychological consequences of enslavement on its principal characters. Drawing on established frameworks from trauma theory—including Judith Herman's (1992) model of complex post-traumatic stress, Bessel van der Kolk's (2014) neurobiological account of traumatic memory, and Cathy Caruth's (1996) theorisation of trauma's unclaimed temporality—the study examines how Morrison renders the interior lives of Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D as sites of psychological rupture, dissociation, and incomplete recovery. The analysis demonstrates that the novel operates simultaneously as literary testimony and as a sophisticated engagement with the clinical and theoretical literature on trauma, anticipating numerous insights that contemporary psychology has since formalised. The paper further argues that Morrison's representation of intergenerational trauma, embodied memory, and community-based healing offers a model of recovery that extends beyond the individual toward the collective—a dimension of traumatic experience that conventional clinical frameworks have historically underweighted. The findings carry implications for both literary studies and the psychology of historical and collective trauma.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, trauma theory, slavery, post-traumatic stress, intergenerational trauma, embodied memory, African American literature

### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a novel that refuses to let the past remain past. Set in the years immediately following the American Civil War, the narrative reconstructs the interior world of Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman living in Cincinnati, Ohio, whose house is haunted by the ghost of the infant daughter she killed rather than return to slavery. Around this shattering act of maternal violence, Morrison constructs a meditation on memory, loss, and the impossibility of escaping a history that has been inscribed not merely on the mind but on the body itself. The novel's psychological depth has long been recognised by literary scholars; what has received comparatively less sustained attention is the precision with which Morrison's narrative maps onto contemporary frameworks of trauma psychology, and the ways in which literary form itself becomes a vehicle for theorising what clinical language has struggled to articulate.

The study of trauma has undergone a significant transformation since the late twentieth century. Freud's (1920) early theorisations of the repetition compulsion established the foundational insight that traumatic experience is characterised by its resistance to integration into ordinary memory—a repetition that operates beyond the pleasure principle. This insight was subsequently developed by Herman (1992), whose landmark study *Trauma and Recovery* identified complex post-traumatic stress as a distinct clinical entity arising from sustained, inescapable abuse, and distinguished it from the single-incident PTSD that had dominated earlier diagnostic frameworks. Van der Kolk's (2014) neurobiological work extended this understanding further, demonstrating through neuroimaging research that traumatic memories are stored in qualitatively different ways from ordinary declarative memories—as somatic, sensory fragments that intrude involuntarily rather than being retrieved voluntarily. Caruth (1996), working at the intersection of literature and psychoanalysis, theorised trauma as fundamentally constituted by belatedness: the traumatic event arrives in consciousness only retrospectively, displaced from its original moment of occurrence, never fully owned by the survivor who nonetheless cannot escape it.

It is against this theoretical landscape that Morrison's *Beloved* demands to be read. The novel was published at a moment when trauma theory was itself emerging as a distinctive interdisciplinary field, and it anticipates, in literary form, many of the arguments that would subsequently be formalised in clinical and theoretical discourse. This paper analyses the psychological architecture of *Beloved* through the lens of trauma theory, examining how Morrison represents the interior consequences of slavery for three central characters—Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D—and how the novel's formal features, including its non-linear temporal structure, its use of the supernatural, and its representation of embodied memory, function as vehicles for traumatic meaning.

The paper is structured as follows. The following section reviews the relevant theoretical frameworks in trauma psychology and their applicability to the literary analysis of *Beloved*. Subsequent sections examine the trauma of each principal character in turn, followed by a discussion of the novel's engagement with intergenerational transmission of trauma and its portrayal of community as a vehicle for healing. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of Morrison's literary practice for the understanding of collective historical trauma.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND THE ENSLAVED BODY**

Trauma theory, as it has developed across psychology, psychoanalysis, and literary and cultural studies, provides the conceptual vocabulary most adequate to the experience Morrison represents. Herman's (1992) formulation of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) is particularly relevant. Herman distinguished between single-incident trauma, which produces the symptom cluster of classical PTSD-intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal-and the complex, cumulative trauma produced by sustained, inescapable abuse. The latter, she argued, generates not only these classical symptoms but a more profound reorganisation of identity, affect regulation, and relational capacity. Enslaved individuals, who were subjected to chronic, systematic physical and psychological violation with no prospect of escape or legal recourse, represent precisely the population for whom Herman's concept of complex PTSD was developed, even though she did not discuss slavery directly.

Van der Kolk's (2014) work on the body and traumatic memory extends this framework in ways that are directly relevant to Morrison's representational strategies. Van der Kolk demonstrated that traumatic memories are not stored in the narrative, declarative memory system-they cannot be retrieved, examined, and revised in the way that ordinary memories can. Instead, they are encoded in the body's procedural and sensory memory systems, emerging not as recollected narratives but as intrusive physical sensations, emotional states, and enacted behaviours that reproduce the original traumatic moment without the survivor's conscious awareness or consent. This understanding of traumatic memory as embodied and involuntary provides the theoretical basis for reading what Morrison calls "rememory"-the novel's distinctive term for the involuntary return of traumatic experience-not as metaphor but as psychologically precise description.

Caruth's (1996) theorisation of trauma's belatedness adds a further dimension. For Caruth, the traumatic event is never experienced fully at the time of its occurrence; it is experienced only in its aftermath, in the form of flashbacks, intrusions, and repetitive re-enactments that testify to the impossibility of full witnessing. The survivor is thus haunted not by a memory but by an event that was never fully experienced as it occurred. This structure of belatedness and haunting is, as numerous scholars have noted (Perez-Torres, 1993; Rody, 1995), central to the formal

organisation of *Beloved*, in which the past-embodied in the figure of the ghost-insists on its presence in ways that the living cannot simply choose to acknowledge or dismiss.

The concept of intergenerational or transgenerational trauma has also emerged as a significant area of research since the latter decades of the twentieth century. Kellermann (2001) and Yehuda et al. (2016) have documented, through both clinical and epigenetic research, that the effects of severe trauma can be transmitted to subsequent generations through a combination of altered parenting patterns, disrupted attachment, and-most controversially-epigenetic modification of stress-response systems. Morrison's novel, which dramatises the way in which Sethe's trauma shapes her relationship to her surviving children and ultimately manifests in the figure of *Beloved* herself, can be read as a sustained fictional engagement with precisely these dynamics of traumatic transmission.

### **SETHE'S TRAUMA: REPRESSION, EMBODIED MEMORY, AND THE ACT OF MATERNAL VIOLENCE**

The psychological complexity of Sethe's characterisation lies in the way Morrison distributes her trauma across the body, the memory, and the act-connecting the physical violence of slavery to its psychological aftermath through the novel's most controversial narrative event: Sethe's killing of her infant daughter to prevent her return to the plantation known as Sweet Home. To understand this act psychologically is to resist the impulse to judge it morally without first accounting for the conditions of radical coercion under which it occurs. As Herman (1992) observes, the characteristic response to conditions of captivity and sustained abuse is not resistance but a reorganised psychology oriented entirely toward survival-a reorganisation that can produce decisions incomprehensible to those who have not inhabited those conditions.

Sethe's trauma is rooted in experiences of physical and sexual violation perpetrated by the schoolteacher's nephews at Sweet Home-an episode in which she was held down and her breast milk taken while schoolteacher looked on and took notes. Morrison's (1987) representation of this scene is deliberately fragmented, distributed across multiple narrative moments and never rendered as a coherent sequence. This formal fragmentation mirrors the psychological structure of traumatic memory as van der Kolk (2014) describes it: not a story but a collection of sensory intrusions, each carrying the full affective charge of the original event without the narrative frame that would allow it to be integrated and set aside. The scene persists in Sethe's

consciousness not as something she remembers but as something that continues to happen to her-an enactment rather than a recollection.

The concept of rememory, which Morrison introduces through Sethe's explanation to her daughter Denver, encodes this distinction with psychological precision. Sethe tells Denver that a rememory is not simply a personal memory but a kind of external presence-something located not in the mind but in the world, capable of being encountered by anyone who passes through the place where it occurred: "Places, places are still there, and what's more, if you go there-you who never was there-if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again" (Morrison, 1987, p. 36). This account anticipates van der Kolk's (2014) insight that traumatic memory is not stored as narrative in the past tense but as sensory presence in a perpetual present. It also resonates with Caruth's (1996) formulation of traumatic haunting as a structure in which the past is not remembered but revisited.

Sethe's predominant coping mechanism throughout the novel is repression-the active, effortful avoidance of memories that cannot be safely held in consciousness. Herman (1992, p. 35) identifies repression as a central feature of traumatic adaptation, noting that survivors frequently develop elaborate strategies for avoiding any stimulus that might activate the traumatic memory network. For Sethe, this manifests as what she describes as "beating back the past"-a daily psychological labour that consumes energy required for ordinary living and relationship. The cost of this repression is evident in her emotional constriction, her difficulty sustaining intimacy with her surviving daughter Denver, and her impaired capacity to form a trusting relationship with Paul D when he arrives at 124. As van der Kolk (2014) notes, the body keeps the score of what the conscious mind endeavours to exclude; in Sethe's case, this keeping is literalised in the tree-like scar on her back-a map of her trauma that she herself cannot see but that others read upon her body.

The killing of the infant Beloved, and the manifestation of the grown ghost who subsequently arrives at 124, can be understood within this psychological framework as the return of what repression cannot indefinitely contain. Beloved embodies, in supernatural form, the psychological dynamic that Herman (1992) and van der Kolk (2014) describe in clinical terms: the traumatic event that could not be processed at the time of its occurrence returns, demanding acknowledgment, demanding to be witnessed. Sethe's gradual immersion in Beloved's demands-her progressive isolation, her physical deterioration, her surrender of agency-enacts

the clinical process of traumatic re-enactment: the survivor drawn back into the logic of the original trauma, unable to distinguish the present from the past (Caruth, 1996). It is only through Paul D's return and the collective intervention of the community that the cycle is broken.

### **BABY SUGGS: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND THE EXHAUSTION OF FAITH**

Baby Suggs's characterisation illuminates a dimension of traumatic experience that Herman (1992) identifies as among the most devastating long-term consequences of sustained captivity: the destruction of the capacity to connect with others, born not from a single wound but from the accumulation of losses that cannot be mourned because they were never permitted to register as losses in the first place. Baby Suggs has had eight children by six different men, all of them taken from her by the institution of slavery. The loss of her children is not experienced, initially, as grief in the ordinary sense; slavery systematically denies enslaved people the social and psychological conditions under which loss becomes mournable. The children are property; their removal is a transaction, not a bereavement. Yet the body and the psyche register what the social order refuses to name, and the cumulative effect of these un-grievable losses constitutes a profound traumatic burden.

What distinguishes Baby Suggs psychologically is less the content of her trauma than the trajectory of her response to it. Following her emancipation, she becomes a spiritual leader in the Cincinnati community, conducting the Clearing ceremonies that represent the novel's most sustained engagement with collective rather than individual healing. Herman (1992, p. 182) emphasises that recovery from complex trauma requires reconnection with community—a restoration of the social bonds that trauma systematically severs. Baby Suggs's ministry in the Clearing enacts precisely this form of communal healing, gathering the survivors of slavery in a space defined by the release of grief, laughter, and bodily expression. As Mbalia (1991) argues, Baby Suggs's spiritual practice constitutes a specifically African American form of therapeutic community, drawing on traditions of collective resistance that predate and exceed the frameworks of Western clinical psychology.

The psychological collapse of Baby Suggs following Sethe's act of infanticide is, however, one of the novel's most psychologically resonant moments. Her withdrawal from community, her retreat to her bed, and her final, diminished focus on the contemplation of colour represent not

simply despair but what might be understood, in clinical terms, as the final collapse of a traumatic coping structure that has reached its limit. Whitted (2007) notes that Baby Suggs's exhaustion is not merely personal but representative of a generation whose endurance has been stretched beyond sustainable limits. Herman (1992) observes that the helpers and community figures who sustain survivors of widespread trauma are themselves vulnerable to secondary traumatisation-the vicarious absorption of traumatic material that eventually overwhelms even the most resilient coping systems. Baby Suggs's decline enacts this dynamic with quiet devastating specificity.

### **PAUL D: DISSOCIATION, EMOTIONAL NUMBING, AND THE TOBACCO TIN**

Paul D's characterisation offers Morrison's most direct engagement with the dissociative dimensions of traumatic experience. His psychological response to the accumulated horrors of Sweet Home-the bit placed in his mouth, the chain gang in Georgia, the sexual exploitation of other enslaved men he was forced to witness-is organised around what he calls the "tobacco tin," the interior psychological container into which he places all affect that cannot be safely experienced: "By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" (Morrison, 1987, p. 113). This figure of the sealed container is a remarkably precise literary equivalent of what van der Kolk (2014) describes as the dissociative partitioning of traumatic material: the psyche's capacity to isolate overwhelming experience behind a functional barrier that permits continued survival at the cost of emotional availability.

The psychological literature on emotional numbing and dissociation is directly relevant to Paul D's portrayal. Spiegel et al. (2011) identify dissociation as a primary coping mechanism in response to inescapable threat-a neurobiological adaptation that allows the individual to continue functioning by separating overwhelming affect from conscious awareness. The cost of this adaptation is exactly what Morrison portrays in Paul D: an inability to sustain intimate relationships, a pervasive emotional flatness, and a tendency toward geographic movement (Paul D has wandered for eighteen years) that represents an externalised version of the internal flight that dissociation accomplishes psychologically. As Tate (1999) observes, Paul D's mobility is not freedom but a symptom-a continuous attempt to outrun an interior landscape from which travel offers no escape.

The significance of Beloved's effect on Paul D-her ability to move him physically and sexually in ways that appear to bypass his conscious will-can be understood in terms of van der Kolk's

(2014) account of how traumatic material stored in somatic and procedural memory systems can be activated by environmental triggers that bypass the rational, deliberate mind. Beloved functions, in this reading, not merely as a supernatural figure but as a representation of the traumatic past itself, with the capacity to break through the dissociative barriers that Paul D has constructed precisely because she does not engage with the narrative, conscious mind but with the body's deeper memory systems. It is only when Paul D acknowledges Sethe fully-when he commits to her with the words "me and you, us, we"-that the tobacco tin metaphorically opens and healing becomes possible.

### **INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND THE COMMUNITY OF RECOVERY**

One of the most significant contributions of *Beloved* to the literature on trauma is its insistence that the consequences of slavery are not confined to those who directly experienced it. Denver, who was born into freedom but raised within the haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road, carries the traumatic inheritance of her mother's history as a formative psychological presence. She has grown up in isolation, her relationships to the outside community severed by the stigma of her mother's act and the ghost's ongoing occupation of their home. Her psychological development has been shaped not by direct experience of slavery but by immersion in its aftermath-what Kellermann (2001) terms secondary or transmitted traumatisation.

The concept of intergenerational trauma has received increasing empirical support since Morrison published the novel. Yehuda et al. (2016) demonstrated, through research on Holocaust survivors and their adult children, that the children of severely traumatised individuals show altered cortisol and stress-response profiles consistent with epigenetic modification-biological evidence that trauma's consequences can be transmitted across generations through mechanisms that are not purely psychological. While the epigenetic dimension of intergenerational trauma remained unknown in 1987, Morrison's representation of Denver's psychological isolation and *Beloved's* embodied claim on Sethe anticipates the theoretical concern with how traumatic history shapes those who inherit it without having lived it directly.

The novel's resolution through community intervention-the gathering of the women of Cincinnati who come to 124 and, through their collective voice, drive *Beloved* away-reflects Herman's (1992) foundational argument that recovery from trauma is not a solitary achievement but a relational and social process. Herman identifies three stages of recovery:

safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Each of these stages requires the presence and support of others; none can be accomplished in isolation. The Clearing ceremonies led by Baby Suggs earlier in the novel represent the second stage-the communal container for grief and remembrance-while the exorcism of Beloved at the novel's end enacts the reconnection that constitutes Herman's third stage.

Floyd (2006) and Bryant (2000) both emphasise the specifically African American cultural dimensions of this communal healing practice, noting that Morrison draws on traditions of collective spiritual resistance-the ring shout, the mourning tradition, the communal witness-that are not reducible to the frameworks of Western clinical psychology. This is an important qualification. Herman's model, developed primarily in relation to Western clinical contexts, does not account for the culturally specific forms of collective resilience and communal healing that African American communities developed precisely in response to the trauma of enslavement. Morrison's novel implicitly critiques the individualism of mainstream trauma frameworks by locating the possibility of healing not in the therapeutic dyad but in the community.

Morrison's engagement with the question of healing is, however, deliberately qualified. The novel does not end with resolution but with silence and forgetting-the insistence, repeated three times, that "This is not a story to pass on." Gates (1987) has interpreted this ending as a formal acknowledgment of the limits of representation: some experiences exceed the capacity of narrative to contain them without doing further violence to what they represent. Reilly (1995) reads the ending as politically significant-a refusal to allow the traumatic history of slavery to be aestheticised into consolation. Both readings are consistent with the psychological understanding of trauma as an experience that cannot be fully processed or left behind, only more or less lived with. Morrison's formal conclusion honours this irreducibility while insisting, through the very act of writing, that the attempt to bear witness must nonetheless be made.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has examined Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a work that is simultaneously a literary masterpiece and a sophisticated psychological text, engaging with clinical and theoretical frameworks of trauma that its narrative form anticipates, extends, and in certain respects exceeds. Through the characterisations of Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D, Morrison maps with

precision the interior consequences of sustained, systemic traumatisation: the embodied memory that intrudes involuntarily upon the present; the dissociative partitioning of overwhelming affect; the intergenerational transmission of traumatic damage; and the communal dimensions of both traumatic suffering and possible recovery.

The analysis has demonstrated that the novel's engagement with trauma is not incidental to its literary qualities but constitutive of them. Morrison's narrative form-its non-linearity, its use of the supernatural, its fragmented rendering of memory-is not simply an aesthetic choice but a formal enactment of the psychological structure of traumatic experience. In this sense, *Beloved* does not merely represent trauma; it performs it, making demands on the reader that replicate, in attenuated form, the demands that traumatic material makes on consciousness.

The paper has also argued that Morrison's representation of community-based healing constitutes a significant contribution to trauma theory in its own right-one that challenges the individualism that has characterised much Western clinical thinking about recovery, and that insists on the social and cultural specificity of both traumatic experience and traumatic resilience. Future scholarship might profitably extend the analysis developed here to Morrison's other works-particularly *Jazz* (1992) and *Home* (2012)-in which the psychological legacies of racial violence in America continue to be explored through the resources of literary form.

The enduring relevance of Morrison's *Beloved* lies precisely in its refusal to let trauma become history in the comfortable sense-something completed, bounded, and available for dispassionate study. The novel insists that the traumatic legacy of slavery remains alive in the present, inscribed in bodies, families, and communities in ways that continue to demand acknowledgment and response. In this insistence, Morrison's literary practice and contemporary trauma psychology converge in their most fundamental commitment: to the necessity of bearing witness to what has been endured, however partial and provisional that witnessing must always be.

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