



ISSN: 2957-3874 (Print)

Journal of Al-Farabi for Humanity Sciences (JFHS)

<https://iasj.rdd.edu.iq/journals/journal/view/95>

مجلة الفارابي للعلوم الإنسانية تصدرها جامعة الفارابي



Beyond the Silence: Embodied Trauma and Historical Memory in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Lect. Najlaa Hayyawi Abbar

Ministry of Education \ General Education Directorate of Babylon \ Iraq

najlaahayawi@gmail.com

ما وراء الصمت: الصدمة المتجسدة والذاكرة التاريخية في رواية "محبوبة" لتوني موريسون

م. نجلاء حياوي عبار

وزارة التربية المديرية العامة للتربية في بابل

Abstract

This research shows the complete influence of the trauma conducting from the systemic experience of slavery on the Blacks in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved (1987). It elaborates on the historical experience of enslavement that has left severe psychological scars on the Blacks and transformed them into fragmented selves struggling with continual trauma. In this research, the concept of trauma is viewed as an obstacle that prevents the characters from having a usual life since the past continually ruins their present. Furthermore, the research sheds light on the maternal trauma endured by the Black women whose humanity and maternity rights were ignored systematically. Eventually, the findings uncover that Beloved functions as a narrative of survival and recovering, proposing that facing and admitting past trauma is the crucial, although painful, path toward retrieving individual's identity and moving toward the future. **Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Beloved, trauma, slavery, memory

المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث الأثر الشامل للصدمة الناجمة عن التجربة الممنهجة للعبودية على السود في رواية توني موريسون "محبوبة" (Beloved) (١٩٨٧). ويوضح البحث التجربة التاريخية للاستعباد التي خلّفت ندوباً نفسية عميقة لدى السود، وحولتهم إلى ذوات متشظية تكافح تحت وطأة الصدمة المستمرة. يُنظر في هذا البحث إلى مفهوم الصدمة بوصفه عائقاً يحول دون ممارسة الشخصيات لحياة سوية، إذ إن الماضي يقوّض حاضريهم باستمرار. علاوة على ذلك، يسلط البحث الضوء على صدمة الأمومة التي عانت منها النساء السود اللواتي جُردن من إنسانيتهن وحقوق أمومتهم بشكل ممنهج. وتخلص النتائج إلى أن رواية "محبوبة" تعمل كسرديّة للنجاة والتعافي، مقترحة أن مواجهة الصدمات الماضية والاعتراف بها هي المسار الجوهري - وإن كان مؤلماً - نحو استعادة الهوية الفردية والمضي قدماً نحو المستقبل. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** توني موريسون، محبوبة (Beloved)، الصدمة، العبودية، الذاكرة.

1. Introduction

One of the most important matters in the dramatics literary works of black writers is the issue of slavery which has consistently been a difficult obstacle for any African-American individual who was enslaved. Historically, the term 'African American' implies discrimination as the consequence of the racism, oppression and degrading of other nations. As Miniotaité (2017) states: Racism was not merely a skin color difference, but a politically motivated cultural and ideological approach targeted at transfiguring the other into a subhuman to guarantee full control over him (p.5). Moreover, African-American literature was created to oppose the stereotypes concerning the separation of racial groups in the USA from the time of colonisation till today. The literature works can be considered as the counter discourse against the intellectual hegemony according to the concept of Bader (2004), who defines it as the one which maintains that slave labour system existed not only due to the physical domination, but also because of the intellectual one based on the 'Eurocentric' ideology. The interpretation of the African society through the western standards of culture and intellect (literature and fine arts) led to the exclusion of its oral culture. This deliberate ignorance permitted them to label those of African descent as "intellectual inferiority"

fabricating a spurious justification that framed slavery as a form of civilizing control rather than a brutal violation of human rights. In so doing, African-American literature functions as a strong challenging narrative that reveal how dehumanization was a spurious lie used to justify systemic repression, eventually retrieving the humanity that was systematically deprived (p. viii). In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison reveals the disastrous impacts of slavery and its concomitant wickedness as these consequences appear through diverse generations of one family. The enduring trauma of slavery is leading to that no individual touched by it can be free of the past, even long after gaining physical freedom. This is obvious in the protagonist, Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman rebuilding her life following the Civil War. Therefore, in her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison not only aims to make the readers realize what occurred to the African Americans in the enslavement era depicted by slavery but also how they got their freedom with a vivid treatment that reveals the end of racial brutality. As Austine (2007) states, *Beloved* is a narrative about self-determination. It assumes after the systemic attempt to transform a person into a thing, the most radical act one can perform is to re-claim oneself as a human being with a subjectivity and to struggle the painful, rugged path of recovering the damage that the past has imposed on the mind and heart. (p.2). Morrison tackles in her novel *Beloved* the struggles between the need to remember and forget the painful past. Hence, Rushdy (1992) proposes that Morrison believes a society cannot recovery from a traumatic past if it chooses silence. It must 'reincarnate' that history, make it public, make it real, and speak it aloud, so that it can finally be buried and the characters can start to live a real life not determined by their history (p.571). So, through the novel and its themes, Toni Morrison effectively delves into the significant matter in the history of African Americans, that is, enslavement and its traumatic impact on individuals and the whole society.

2. Problem Statement

Many critics have examined and evaluated *Beloved*; however, there is a gap in its study; hence, to tackle the existing gap, the current paper will focus on the most noticeable way black people in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* were dehumanized.

3. Reviews of Related Literature

This part is primarily divided into two sections. The first section means to review some of the researches done regarding to the play and playwright and then, the second section intends to review on theory.

3.1 On Play and Playwright

Matus (1998) in her book *Toni Morrison*, gives an exciting and fascinating introduction to Toni Morrison's novels, concentrating on their interaction with African-American history. Matus provides new light on Morrison as a contemporary writer working at a time when the potential of literature is being memorialize and testify. O'Reilly (2004) examines in her book *Toni Morrison and motherhood: A politics of the heart* Morrison's novels, essays, speeches, and interviews to show how Morrison draws on black women's personal perspectives on motherhood to develop a view of black motherhood that is radically different from motherhood as worked on and set in the dominant culture in terms of both maternal identity and role. Goulimari (2012) in *Toni Morrison* which is like as a guide to Toni Morrison's life and achievements. It has organized numerous of Morrison's works, themes, and an outline of critical texts and opinions on each of Morrison's novels. As a result, this book may be useful for readers who are searching for a comprehensive study of this amazing author's writings. McKay and Andrews (1999), in their book *Toni Morrison's Beloved: a casebook*. The book is valuable and informative book because it has comprehensive information on Morrison's *Beloved* as well as her literary works. In their book McKay and Andrews, the authors of this book, aim to go deeper into the novel as a way to discover the certain aspects of American ethnic, racial, or cultural experience that they so ably portray. Middleton (2016), in his book, *Toni Morrison's fiction: Contemporary criticism* which includes six essays offering the readers a contemporary criticism of Morrison's passion for racial and sexual orientation issues. These essays provide a comprehensive overview of Morrison's complete body of works during the previous ten years.

3.2 On Trauma Theory

Trauma theory is a narrative approach has materialized in the shape of fictional works that is aimed with the depiction of the traumatic experiences and events. This approach includes exploring the psychological impact of racism and colonization from a postcolonial view, moreover examining themes that related to the Holocaust, Vietnam War, and incest in the other (Vickroy, 2002, p.2). Caruth (2016) proposes in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, that trauma narratives capture a multiplex relationship between survival and storytelling. These narratives demand the double act of narrating, analyzing the constant transferring between the edge of death and the constant struggle for life. Trauma narratives represent "the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the

story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (p.7-8). on the one hand, Caruth examines the ways in which the fields of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory are interweaved in their debating of traumatic experiences. on the other hand, she explains that these disciplines not only illustrate traumatic experiences but also utilize narrating as a way to convey the deep effect of such events or experiences. Azmi (2018) contends in his article A New Beginning of Trauma Theory in Literature, that traditional literary criticism often may not adequately recognize the difficulties of trauma, whereas Trauma Theory gives a systematic approach to realize the nuances of traumatic events and experiences in literature. Azmi (2018) emphasizes the role of repetition in literary fictions as a familiar response to trauma, focusing on how survivors may revisit traumatic events and experiences in their storytelling. Furthermore, He asserts that connection between Trauma Theory and Critical Thinking can "developing learners' intellectuality and maturity in analyzing and appreciating literary texts" (p.57).

4. Trauma Theory

Early research, such as that of Caruth (2016), confirms trauma as a "missed encounter," where the psyche's capacity for assimilation is shattered by a trigger so intense that it cannot be blended into the individual's conscious understanding at the moment of event (p.129). Trauma is not only a memory of a past experience; but also it is a deep psychological and physical fracture that gives the individual's experience unassimilable within the parameters of conventional narrative. Therefore, the traumatic experience is dissociated, manifesting not as a cohesive retrieval, but as a haunting return of the past. Transcending beyond the psychological, modern theorists have progressively underscored the bodily dimension of trauma and how the body underlies experiences that the mind cannot articulate. LaCapra (2001) differentiates between "acting out" and "working through," presenting a framework to be aware of how traumatic traces continue in the body, captivating the individual to repeat the trauma through involuntary psychosomatic symptoms. Acting-out is defined as "a process but a repetitive one," whereby individuals' bodily residues are contained within an endless present, and manifesting the unabsorbed trauma through involuntary psychosomatic symptoms that evade conscious articulation (p.148). On the other hand, "working through" refers to the inevitable psychological process of making a "constitute a distinction," whereby the individual separates between the traumatic past and the present, and moving on from the realm of repetition to narrative action, and ultimately enabling the transformation of the trauma into historical memory, rather than an ongoing physiological intrusion (LaCapra, 2001, p.150). In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the body is the central arena wherein trauma, particularly the violence of slavery. Through the reenactment of trauma, Sethe copes with her trauma physically through the coming back of *Beloved*, and consequently regresses to an instinctual state of repetitive compulsive attachment. Conversely, the toward 'working through' happens when the community gathers at 124 for the exorcism, effectively externalizing the trauma and transforming Sethe's internalized, bodily humiliation into a shared, historical narrative. Through this communal act and Denver's ultimate departure from the house to claim her own agency, the characters begin to establish the "constitute a distinction" that LaCapra considers pivotal, permitting them to move from being bodily haunted by the past to narratively handling it as a memory rather than a cyclic physiological disorganization. However, as Kocabiyyık (2016) underscores, the psychological resolution of such trauma is basically impossible in isolation. Therefore, the only way of being able to move forward with the future is actually confronted with and accept the past experiences (p.348). Thus, the transfer from individual silence to collective testimony is not only a plot conclusion but also a psychological requirement. According to Kocabiyyık (2016) this transition permits the characters to move beyond the disjointed, fragmented reality and will shape their future. In this regard, the collective testimony represents as a bridge; it "spans between the region between personal memory and collective memory making past and present mingle which intensifies memory through making it more dynamic" (p.345). In other words, it transforms the body's stored, unspoken history into a shared narrative, thus enabling the moving from the isolated trauma of the past to a cohesive presence. This state is vividly illustrated in *Beloved*, where the neighborhood women's collective singing represents as the core idea described by Kocabiyyık (2016). By gathering before 124 Bluestone Road, the community transforms Sethe's compulsive reenactment of her traumatic past, which formerly trapped her in a fragmented reality into a shared narrative, effectively permitting her to transforming from the silent, individual trauma of the past to a coherent presence now. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison, 1987, p.497). Furthermore, Luckhurst (2008) expressively describes that trauma works as a destruction of the border

between the past and the present. He defines trauma as a disruptive force that basically undermines the psychological boundary between the subject's interiority and external reality. By describing trauma as a "piercing or breach of a border", Luckhurst (2008) proposes that the self's protective apparatuses are overwhelmed by an experience of such intensity that the distinction between the subject's interiority and the exteriority of the event becomes permeable (p.3). This strange communication underscores the indistinct boundaries between the mental and the physical; such bodily expressions produce a barrier to conventional storytelling, as the survivor is obligated to exist in a state of suspended history. In *Beloved*, Sethe's physical trauma gives a clear example of this strange communication. For instance, the theft of her milk signifies a violation that links private and public violence, creating a thorough bodily trauma, as she describes: "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it" (Morrison, 1987, p.32). Luckhurst (2008) additional notes, trauma "leaks between mental and physical symptoms" (p. 3). This suspended state is clearly revealed in the fragmented, non-linear experiences of the characters, whose bodies perform as living archives of historical trauma. This clearly appeared through Sethe's relationship with her body, when Paul D describes the scars on her back as like a 'chokecherry tree': "It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See ,here's the trunk.... and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches...Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it" (Morrison, 1987, p.153). Therefore, the work of black writers such as Toni Morrison work as a shape of reparative justice. They use their novel as a vital medium to bridge the divide between a sanitized historical record and the lived, often painful, reality of the Black experience. They do not only write stories but also they actively encourage the reader to look at the gaps in their own understanding of history and to recognize that, until those gaps are filled, the picture of humanity remains incomplete. For Toni Morrison, the accountability serves as a moral requirement to reclaim the marginalized subjectivities excluded from history. Her novels functions as an alternative archive, telling the human truths that history books have neglected (Erll & Nünning, 2008, p.106). When readers are faced with these missing facts of the past, the writer Morrison empowers them to reconstruct a more holistic historical narrative. So, Morrison's *Beloved* serves as a vivid example; rather than merely replacing lost history, she focuses on the existence of these gaps (Erll & Nünning, 2008, p. 106), that authorizing readers to critique and recognize the prejudices established in conventional historical documentation. Morrison's *Beloved*, trauma is not just a site of stagnation but also it works as a motivate for a deep psychological transformation. As Duran (1994) argues, Morrison exposes the depth of suffering and emotional strength inherent in her characters, observing that the act of engagement "frees the characters from the burden of their past and let them feel what they should let themselves feel: love" (p.14). By engaging with this physical dimension of the past, the characters' transformation from fragmented state t a process of self- awareness, eventually suggesting that the path to reclaiming one's humanity, no matter how painful it may be, is intrinsically combined to the deep recognition of traumatic memory. "No more powerful than the way I loved her," Sethe answered ...The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips (Morrison, 1987, p.5). Moreover, in Morrison's *Beloved*, the characters of Sethe and Paul D represent the deep psychological disintegration attributed by the trauma of enslavement. Their different coping strategies, Sethe's endeavor to remember as close to nothing and to escape from the memories. This reality is clearly represented in Sethe's case: " As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (Morrison, 1987, p.7), and Paul D adopts an identical case of emotions in a 'tobacco tin', disclose a mutual, compulsive strategy of domination: "He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be"(Morrison, 1987, p.142). Therefore, instead of processing their past both characters treat memory as an invasive presence that fractures their attempts to reconstruct a life. This systemic avoidance reveals the cruelty of the slave experience was not merely physical, but also was profoundly psychological. It made individuals give up memories and pieces of themselves just for sustaining a fragile life that could be taken away at any time. *Beloved* by Morrison provides an insightful way for examining this fragmentation of psyche. The rupture of the mother-child dyad in *Beloved* becomes an important intersection between socioeconomic oppression and physical memory. As Walker rightly points out, the burden of motherhood becomes an unendurable dilemma between the mother's instinct to protect her children and a racist society that considers her children mere commodity (as cited in Hefny, 2017, p. 25). However, this imposed burden is not merely a social or psychological one, but primarily a physiological phenomenon. Drawing on Whitehead's (2004) theories on the traumatic text, one must understand that Sethe's maternal experience is determined by the physical inscription of historical violence upon her flesh, a 'chokecherry tree' of scar tissue that gives the body a repository for unresolved past. Moreover, applying

LaCapra's (2001) distinction between the 'acting out' of trauma and the process of 'working through,' it becomes obvious that Sethe's fight is not restricted to psychological retrieval. Rather, she is tasked with the impossible endeavor of shifting the physical fragments of enslavement into a viable subjectivity. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it... Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me (Morrison, 1987, p. 32). Though, in Morrison's *Beloved*, the trauma and suffering underwent by mothers under slavery system can affect their ability to reveal affection and exact feelings towards their children. The extreme act of mothers killing their daughters can be seen as a desperate defiance against the oppression of slavery system. The overprotective behavior obvious appeared by the mother-daughter relationships in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison can be attributed to Sethe's own experiences of trauma and abandonment. Sethe's mother, Ma'am, was absent from her life due to the harsh realities of slavery, leading to a sense of disconnection and longing for maternal love in Sethe's upbringing. This absence of a nurturing figure during Sethe's formative years likely contributed to her intense need to shield her own children from the horrors she endured.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the trauma as depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is not merely a psychological phenomenon, but it is also an existential force that inhabits and transforms the body. As has been illustrated above, the characters are not victims of mere memories of the past but are victims of re-living the past through physical and psychological signs that render the experience of slavery an actual, instinctive experience in the present. The use of the survival strategies of the characters, for instance, Paul D's locking of his emotions within a rusty tobacco tin, and Sethe's separation physically from the rest of the world, become desperate efforts at holding on to an experience that will not confine itself to the realm of history. Eventually, these examples make clear that embodied memory functions not merely as a narrative device but also as evidence that the human body is a living record of history, transforming the collective trauma of slavery into the individual biological trauma. Therefore, breaking the silence in *Beloved* is not an act of overlooking, but a process of testimony. *Beloved* underscores that the individual cannot be reconstructed following such deep fragmentation without aware engagement with physical and psychological agony. By transforming from the circumscribed life toward the painful process of acknowledgment, the characters transform toward a recovery of the self. So, Morrison's work represents as a continuous demand that we recognize the physical dimensions of historical memory, explaining that the path to regaining individual's existence does not reside in silencing the past, but in confronting the trauma that the body persists in enduring.

References

- Austine, H. (2007). The persistence of memory: Slavery and trauma in Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (Master Thesis), Florida International University
- Azmi, M. N. L. (2018). A New Beginning of Trauma Theory in Literature. *KnE Social Sciences*, 3(4), 57-65.
- Bader, P. (2004). *African-American Writers*. New York: Facts On File, Inc.
- Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Duran, M. D. M. G. (1994). Community and love: Understanding the Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, (3), 11-17.
- Erll, A., & Nunning, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Cultural memory studies: An international and interdisciplinary handbook*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co
- Goulmari, P. (2012). *Toni Morrison*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Hefny, D. M. (2017). Tracing The Mother-Daughter Relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *Temple of My Familiar* and Dorothy West's *The Wedding*. *Bulletin of The Faculty of Arts*, 45(2), 17-36
- Kocabiyik, O. (2016). The concepts of memory, forgetting and the past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Mediterranean Journal of Humanities*, 6(2), 343-350. DOI:10.13114/MJH.2016.302
- LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Luckhurst, R. (2008). *The trauma question*. London: Routledge.
- Matus, J. L. (1998). *Toni Morrison*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- McKay, N. Y., & Andrews, W. L. (Eds.). (1999). *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A casebook*. Oxford University Press: USA.
- Middleton, D. L. (Ed.). (2016). *Toni Morrison's fiction: Contemporary criticism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Miniotaitė, D. (2017). *The African-American literary tradition*. Vilnius: Lietuvos edukologijos universiteto.

- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books.
- O'Reilly, A. (2004). *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A politics of the heart*. New York: New York Press
- Rushdy, A. H. (1992). Daughters signifyin(g) history: The example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *American Literature*, 64(3), 567-597.
- Vickroy, L. (2002). *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. US: University of Virginia Press.
- Whitehead, A. (2004). *Trauma fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press