
TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING

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Abstract

In this research paper, the interaction and interrelation between trauma and narrative fragmentation in the novel, Beloved by Toni Morrison has been assessed focusing on the psychoanalytic approach in explaining the psychological and emotional disturbance of the characters in the novel. The argument of the study is as follows: the fragmented narrative style, which can be described as a patchwork tale, as it was in the case of the novel by Morrison, reflects the disjointed and fractured lives of the characters of the novel survivors of enslavement. The psychoanalytic strategy enables one to gain a better insight into unconscious impulses and repressions, which form the memories, identities, and behavior of the characters. The investigation will help to reveal the connection of traumas, memory and the process of recovery or repression by conducting an analysis of the way Morrison employs narrative disjunction and repetition. With this discussion, the article indicates the importance of Beloved not only to illustrate a historical trauma but a multi-layered investigation on the psychological effects of slavery whose legacies continue to live even in the post-slavery era.

Keyword: *Trauma, Narrative Fragmentation, Psychoanalysis, Toni Morrison, Slavery, Memory*

INTRODUCTION

The work of Toni Morrison *Beloved* (1987) is a giant in American literature, which gives a profoundly personal view of the psychological aftermaths of slavery. The novel is widely considered to be a landmark of African American literature as it is extremely interested in how historical trauma is carried over time and across generations. The chilling horror of slavery at the core of *Beloved* completely transforms the identity of the characters involved but also changes the way time, memory and self are conceived. The novel by Morrison is focused on Sethe who is a runaway slave but is tormented by the eruption of ghost of her little girl, *Beloved*. Sethe is torn between the past and the present, struggling to reconcile the horror of the past in her present life, and this is the struggle symbolic of all humans in their experiences relating to trauma-especially how trauma can distort an individual's version of reality, leave psychic scars, and define their identity.

The uniqueness of the novel is the broken narrative offered to the readers as the psychological condition of the characters is broken. The narrative is in a non-linear structure, and it is marked by changes in the point of view, dislocating changes in time, and elusive moments of uncanny repetition. The structure of the narration itself, in many ways, can serve as a metaphor to the fighting of the characters with their past and the present, repressed memories, unpunished guilt, and the demon of the repressed. Morrison used fragmentation in her narration not as a style art but as a strong expression of the trauma of the characters. This fracturation is one that underlines the way in which trauma breaks continuity in time and memory and produces an incoherent and frequently unintelligible sense of self. This changing of narrative points

of view and time displacement serves to show how psychologically traumatizing the horrors of slavery has been, and how each perspective matches its story with the emotional and mental wounds of its subject.

The study issue which will be researched in this paper assumes the following question: how trauma and narrative fragmentation are interdependent in *Beloved*, namely, how the non-linear storytelling device employed by Morrison may be viewed as a reflection of the traumatic experiences of the characters. Trauma as a psychological and a fairy-tale concept is commonly considered a break in the world and the self. It does not only break the identity of a person but also the capacity to make sense out of their experiences and express it clearly (Caruth, 1996). Trauma recreates the time as not linear, rather there is psychic breach in between the transgression and the current. This discontinuity to the identity of the self resonates in this structure of the narrating whereby the experiences of the characters as they slave are reflected in a distorted non-linear fashion. The memories of Sethe, e.g. are not chronological, but appear fragmented and a collection of moments surrounded by disorientation and confusion are characteristic of trauma. Using this fractured form Morrison generates a psychological geography that reflects the fractured, and frequently incoherent form of traumatic memory, and provides readers with a physical experience of the emotional and psychological divisions which is the result of enslavement.

The research has the following reasons as to its relevance. To start with there is the complexity of the association of trauma and narrative form in *Beloved* which has the demonstration that the fragmentation of the narrative is not a mere stylistic device but rather it is a crucial manifestation of the psychological impact of a trauma. Second, it gives a contribution to the wider theory of trauma as it indicates how trauma may be depicted in the literary form and the disjointed narrative structure of the novel itself is a direct reflection of the trauma. Trauma has been described as incommunicable, and not amenable to linear or cohesive narration by scholars in the area of trauma studies, including Cathy Caruth (1996) and Shoshana Felman (1992). Morrison is not so different and in *Beloved* introduces this idea by enabling slave trauma to appear in the form of fragmented narration and in such a way offering a rich stage where to examine how the unrepresentable may be included in literature. Third, the study will address the contributions of the *Beloved* to the wider literary tradition of African American literature where memory, trauma, and identity are one of the commonly developed motives. In discussing the use of narrative fragmentation by Morrison, this study shall add up to the ongoing debates of the importance of memory, and historical trauma through African American texts.

This study will attempt to achieve three objectives. First, the research aims at investigating the role of fragmentation of the narrative in *Beloved* as a psychological representation of the trauma slave-ownership initiates. Analyzing the psychoanalytic concept of fragmented storytelling will help the research to determine the alignment in the format of the narrative and the mental and emotional fragmentation the characters go through. Secondly, the purpose of the paper is to draw a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Beloved*, with regards to the representation of unconscious through narrative fragmentation, repression, guilt and the repressed. Third, the paper will add to the current debate on trauma theory and help explain how *Beloved* deploys narrative fragmentation in symbolizing the psychological reality of trauma, thus making some points regarding the connection between literary form and the figuration of historical trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beloved by Toni Morrison (1987) has been much analyzed within the contexts of trauma theory, with scholars discussing questions of how *Beloved* represents the psychological and emotional scarring on slavery. The central event of the novel is the traumatic experience of slavehood, which is not just defining

the identity of the characters but also their experience of time and memory. The connection of trauma and fragmentation of narration is amongst the most debated in the novel of Morrison. One of the central terms through which the literature in the study of *Beloved* is viewed is the trauma theory, especially that proposed by Cathy Caruth (1995). According to Caruth, trauma has something to do with the person and is an experience that overtrawls the person resulting in a fragmented view of reality and the self. The traumatic memories are broken and fragmented and can lead to incapability of ever forcing them to be part of their life narrative. In *Beloved*, the memories of slavery in the characters are at times confusing, repressed and traumatic as this shows the trauma that the characters are unable to process and tell coherently. The memories of Sethe, to illustrate an example, are not complete and raw as the enormity of the trauma does not allow her to face her past in a chronological way. This is a thematic interest in fragmentation and memory that has become the focus of points of conversation that surrounds the novel.

Furthermore, authors such as Lauren Berlant (1997) and David L. Eng (2010) have analyzed and discussed how the fragmented narrative structure of the novel encompasses a relationship to how slavery psychologically affects one. The arguments of these critics focus on the fact that non-linear storytelling featured in the novel reflects the disintegrated identities of the characters, especially Sethe who fails to connect the events in the past with those in the present. According to Berlant, this mutilated structure of *Beloved* reflects the attempt provided by the characters to recapture lost histories and face the unresolved trauma, whereas according to Eng, fragmented nature of a narrative structure shows the cyclical element of trauma, where the characters might be destined to live the traumas once again. In the case of Eng, occurrences that reoccur as well as repression of memory are used to demonstrate how the aspect of slavery legacy affects lives of the characters. These theorists underline the role of narrative fragmentation of the novel as a device that helps to depict some psychological suffering, the unresolved trauma of the characters.

The experimental fragmentation of the narrative used by Morrison has also been viewed as a way of capturing how disorienting and hard to comprehend trauma itself is. Some critics such as Ruth Franklin (2011) have pointed out that the disjointed nature of the story in *Beloved* may be viewed as a reaction to the inadequacy of language when it comes to describing the pain and the depth of trauma. According to Franklin, Morrison followed the broken narrative style of depicting the traumatic experiences, when the line between the past and the present, the reality and the recollection get more and more distorted. In *Beloved*, the story is not time-sequential which is needed to depict traumatic memory in its jagged forms of the diversion of time and the shift in point of view. This is not only incoherent in the narrative form, but there is an importance to note that trauma breaks the capacity to adopt the cohesive self or cohesive account of life.

Although scholarship on the links between trauma and narrative fragmentation in *Beloved* as well as the work on assessing the psychoanalytic aspects of the relationship between trauma and narrative fragmentation have been studied extensively in the works of literature, there remains a stark insufficiency in the body of work that deals with how this relationship has been indicated in psychoanalysis. Many analyses of *Beloved* have dwelt upon the structure and theme of trauma presentation, however, there exist a dearth of psychoanalysis analyses that consider the unconscious nature of occurrences in the narrative. Repression as one of the principles of psychoanalytic theory plays an important role in the knowledge of the fragmented memories of the characters and their impossibility to cognitively face the trauma of slavery. According to the ideas about repression expressed by Sigmund Freud (1917), traumatic memories may be repressed by the unconscious mind in a bid to protect the individual against the huge pain caused by emotion. In *Beloved*, Sethe is repressed of her past, especially her memory of murdering her daughter to save her life under slavery conditions, which becomes the key to her psychological conditions. The

trauma that Sethe is suffering is in the form of deformed memories, guilt, and reflex of repressed into the ghost of Beloved. The elements of the return of the repressed can be viewed not only in the literal sense of Beloved returning but also in all the pieces of the memories built up within Sethe.

The other important psycho analytic device that is applicable when discussing the fragmented structure of Beloved is the concept of the Real coined by Jacques Lacan (1977). Lacan put forward the hypothesis that the Real is a traumatic locus of the experience that cannot be integrated completely in the symbolic order of words and meanings. In Beloved, the trauma of slavery is the Real: something that is radically destabilizing, both to the people in general, and to the characters specifically, and thus is ineffable in its trauma. The disintegrated narrative of Beloved can therefore be considered as a kind of image of the Real that is the trauma of slavery-which cannot be represented by a logical narrative. Using the notion of the Real in accordance to Lacan, the paper will include the study of how the fragmentary narrative of Morrison is the inability of the characters to process and internalize the traumatic events into their history and identity.

Whereas the association between trauma and narrative fragmentation in Beloved has been discussed by several scholars, it is only a few scholars that have considered the psychoanalytic dynamics of repression, guilt and the repressed itself. The above literature gap leaves a critical question which was yet to be answered, how do these subconscious processes affect the fragmented narrative structure of the novel? Using the psychoanalytic theory, this paper is going to address this gap providing an elucidation of the motivations underlying the unconscious psychological state of the characters and their manifestation in the textual structure. This paper will investigate how the repression and the returned enhanced the novel storytelling fragmentation and how the processes of psychoanalysis involved there are part and parcel of traumatic representation in Beloved.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The importance of the given research is that it helps to fill in the gap between the trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and narrative form within Beloved. Although a large part of the already available literary scholarship has centered on the notion of trauma and memory, especially in the context of the narrative structure and thematic concerns, very little has examined the psychoanalytic aspects of how repression and guilt as unconscious processes help shape the narrative form into clusters. This paper, by proposing a psychoanalytic insight into the narrative fragmentation, will add another psychological dimension to the Beloved novel: particularly on how trauma, repression and the manifestation of the repressed contribute in constructing a novel that features a new narrative style.

Moreover, the paper has a wider contribution to the trauma theory and narrative studies literature where the effects of representing trauma in literature may be considered a field where the memory-identity-psychological legacy of the historical events may be studied. Through focusing on the unconscious dimensions of trauma this paper will further inform our registration of how Beloved makes use of its triple narrative form in order to reflect emotionally and psychology disintegration brought about by slavery. The study will also be useful to academics and learners of African American literature, trauma theory, and narrative studies as it will add a recent dimension to the work on Morrison and the way he contributes to the depiction of trauma in literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between trauma and narrative fragmentation in Beloved?

2. How does Morrison's use of a fragmented narrative structure reflect the unconscious processes of repression and memory in the characters?
3. Why does the return of the repressed in *Beloved* take the form of fragmented storytelling, and what does this reveal about the psychological legacy of slavery?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this work, the psychoanalytic analysis of the story crack in *Beloved* is applied. The fractionated nature of the novel in terms of storytelling will be discussed with reference to the psychoanalytic critique that involves key concepts, including repression, the unconsciousness, and the phenomenon of the return of the repressed. The concepts of trauma and repression, as put forth by Freud (1917), will form the basis of analyzing how memories of some traumatic experiences are repressed and how the process of the repressed memories resurfacing is reflected in the story. The work by Lacan (1977) concerning the Real will also be utilized in an attempt to realize how the traumatic nature of slavery as a key irreducible reality that interrupts the sense of time, self, and memory among the characters. Also, the theories developed by Caruth (1995) on the irrepresentability of the trauma and its representation in genres of fragmented narratives are going to be applied to how the non-linear structure of *Beloved* helps illuminate the fractured character of traumatic memory and identity.

METHODOLOGY

The main data in this research is *Beloved* (1987) a novel written by Toni Morrison in which the author fills the book with complicated themes that surround trauma, memory and identification. This paper shall analyze the narrative structure of the novel through the use of a close reading practice which aims to analyze important instances of fragmentation and repetition. Through this approach, there can be a detailed insightful analysis of the text so as to point out trends and changes that are exhibited in the narrative in accordance to the psychological disintegration of the characters especially Sethe, Denver and Beloved. In this way this research paper will explore the way in which the non linear story structure that Morrison uses and the fragmented memories of the characters it shows illustrates the disjointed, often overwhelming nature of traumatic memory. Structural disjunction, repeating important scenes and changes of time and perspective will also be examined as the text elements aiding the overall troubled depiction of trauma.

Besides the close reading, the paper will encompass a psychoanalytic theoretical model to further conduct the analysis. Psychoanalysis will be used, especially the notion of repression, the unconscious, and the returned repression in order to analyze the awakening of the psychological processes that construct the fragmented narrative of the novel. The influence of Sigmund Freud and his existing work on repression (1917) and Jacques Lacan and his work known as the Real (1977) will be sought in the way in which the trauma of the characters comes up as unfinished trauma that keeps recurring in fragmented form as witnessed through dreams, hallucinations, and repressed memories. Through applying these psychoanalytic ideas, the research shall provide new knowledge of how the fragmented narrative style in Morrison expresses the processes of repression and the endeavor of the characters to deal with their respective pasts.

The close reading method is especially applicable to the current study since it is possible to explore the formal and thematic aspects of the text in a holistic way. It gives an occasion to explore the parallels with the way the architecture of the novel is constructed as fragmented as it is, with interruptions coming up, and parts being duplicated, and the way in which the trauma is experienced psychologically by the individual who underwent it. The given approach helps to develop a sensitive interpretation of how the innovative usage of narrative fragmentation by Morrison is not simply a stylistic decision, but an element

of characterizing the traumatic nature of the experiences of her characters. Using this method of analysis, the paper will take a critical stance on how the form of the novel is also a reflection of the emotional and psychological division caused by slavery.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

It is a reading on the trauma, and narrative disaccordation in *Beloved*. Focusing on a psychoanalysis approach, the paper discusses how the disunity of the narrative structure in the novel conveys the traumatic events to the life of the characters especially Sethe whose suppressed past greatly interferes with the flow of her story in her own life and in the very framework of the novel. Examining timing and point of view jumps, and disjointed storytelling in the work by Morrison, this study shows how the author employs such techniques to represent psychological dislocation due to the trauma, specifically, towards repressed memories and unresolved guilt.

The trauma associated with Sethe due to her experiences of slavery and the act of killing her child as a means of trying to save him or her of becoming a slave is key in the novel. Infanticide and its consequences are deeply buried into the memory and become available with some remnants and with failed recollection. According to the idea of the repression explained by Freud (1917), Sethe has traumatic memories to such extent that they cannot be completely adopted as a full part of her conscious personality. This failure to deal with the trauma is reflected in the disjointed organized nature of her narration that occurs between the past and the present and leaves Sethe with a hard time possessing a coherent self-narrative. The perception of time is chronologically vague in Sethe as she sees the world that is twisted mirror of the past horrors penetrating her present life, as can be observed through the re-appearing of *Beloved*, which is the embodiment of the guilt of Sethe. This non-linear structure is very circular and it echoes the emotional dislocation and disintegration that Sethe is going through as trauma does not just interfere with the sense of memory, but also with the sense of time and identity.

The diverging viewpoints alongside time leaps in *Beloved* can be explained by the theory of repression by Freud because the story alternately switches on and off several times and experiences that Sethe and other characters are not able to integrate. Repetition of the events like Sethe running away as a slave, her coming back to 124, haunting presence of *Beloved* show the repetition of the repressed. These are not something that transpires as individual incidents but together as a cycle which proves that Sethe and the other characters are entangled in their past traumatic experiences. We can further elucidate this phenomenon by the idea of repetition compulsion as Lacan (1977) puts it. Lacan asserts that traumatic individuals are forced to repeating the traumatic events unconsciously in order to find virtuosity or to solve them. The repetitive act of going back to the past not only in physical sense but psychologically as well to relive her trauma as shown by Sethe in *Beloved* represents not only an unconscious need to expose herself to her trauma but also a demonstration of her inability to completely process or work through it. This kind of pattern indicates that Sethe cannot get out of the cycle because she cannot truly leave her past, and the already experienced consequences of slavery keep manifesting in her life.

The boyish spirit that symbolizes repressed trauma in Sethe (referred to as the ghostly figure), is an expression of the so-called return of the repressed described by Freud (1917). *Beloved* is a precise as well as metaphorical manifestation of the guilt, and the unwholesome emotional anguish in Sethe. The appearance of *Beloved* makes Sethe grapple with the past in a non coherent and unresolved form. Even the fact that *Beloved* is someone who appears, disappears, and reappears shows how fragmented Sethe is in her memory and the inability to incorporate her past trauma into a coherent story of her life. This can be illustrated by the fragmented style of the narrative that is favored in the novel thus fading the lines of past and present, wherein Sethe struggles and fights within herself, and where inner conflict is projected

outward in the form of the haunting presence of Beloved.

With the aid of psychoanalysis framework, it is evident that Morrison employs fragmented storyline to demonstrate the manner in which traumatic memories could not be sufficiently elucidated or spoken out. Re-occurring events and architecture of the novel depict psychological influences of traumatic effects on the ability of characters to create linear and coherent sense of self. The attempts by Sethe and Denver to heal the relationships between the past have a symbol of the whole African American experience, whose reality of slavery is equally broken and usually excluded, as well as distorted by mechanisms of persecution and cultural amnesia. Morrison fragments structure of her narration to reflect on a social hurdle that it faces: having to live with the realm of slave culture, the lack of a continuum, the loss of an identity, the trauma of manifesting itself repeatedly.

That intergenerational trauma and narrative fragmentation are linked is also shown through the experiences of other characters, namely Denver and Paul D who, like Sethe, refuse to work out how to be themselves and deal with their tragic backgrounds. Even the eventual conflict between Denver and Beloved, or the resolution of Paul D, the love interest to Sethe's, departure, depict a psychological break of the characters, which were compelled to confront unprocessed trauma. The growth of Denver, especially the way that she deals with getting out of the psychological demon of Beloved, hints at the promise of healing and reconciliation, although it must be achieved at the cost of dealing directly with the past. By doing so, Morrison does not only demonstrate how devastating the consequences of trauma can be but hints at recovery at least in the terrible and puzzle-like process facing one with the past.

Nonetheless, limitations are not avoided by the research. The psychoanalytic approach adopted in this case does not explore in depth other critical views that might present a different interpretation of the text mainly because it dwells more on unconscious and how the repressed returns. As an example, although trauma theory and psychoanalysis can explain the skeletons of the psyche that Beloved is based upon, the feminist and postcolonial approach can show more depth behind the text, especially around the aspects of gender, race, and power. With further studies, this current study can have an extension in the integration of other key interpretations to form a more holistic picture of trauma, memory and identity in this body of work. Also, though the psychoanalytic aspect of the narrative fragmentation is touched in the study, a deeper analysis of the role played by the language and the narrative voice in the sensation of the trauma would strengthen the argument made in Beloved in its complicated structure.

To finish, it is essential to state that psychoanalytic interpretation of Beloved enables to determine how fragmented narrative organization of the novel could be an effective method of expressing the psychological consequences of trauma. With the help of the repressed returned, repetition compulsion and the lack of unity in the narrative, Morrison reminds the reader of the immense emotional and psychological effects of slavery on those affected. The cross-referencing of Beloved in terms of trauma theory and psychoanalysis offers exciting insights into the form and content of the novel with regard to the aspects through which narrative fragmentation reflects the fragmentation of memory and identity following trauma.

FINDINGS

The analysis of Beloved explains that the disrupted narrative shape of the novel is the spirit of the failed mental sanity of the characters and specifically the inability of the character called Sethe to face her past. This fragmenting is akin to the disorientation and disintegration that is crept in by trauma, in which memory is reduced in its reliability, and the flow of time reduced to ruins. The non-linguistic composition of the work shows how Sethe is struggling to cope with her traumatic memories of being a slave, in that it

changes past events and constantly revisits them as they are re-interpreted and re-experienced. As an example, the novel moves back and forth in time between the present life of Sethe and her experience as a slave with time frequently bleeding into itself. The fragmentation that is present in the understanding of Morrison helps to control Sethe herself, and her inability to linearize her life depicts the emotional weight and psychological trauma. The continual back and forth moving in the novel of time simulates how the trauma Sethe has not been left behind in the past but instead has actively invaded her present unable to get peace or closure.

The comeback of Beloved both in the literal and figurative sense summarizes the agonizing reclamation of the oppressed memories. Beloved is not just a ghost of the daughter of Sethe, but rather the ghost of what has not been resolved and a ghost of a trauma that Sethe has not been revealing her. The reappearance of Beloved compels Sethe to face the unimaginable nature of killing her own daughter in order to rescue her out of slavery by pushing aside the horrific memory that she had previously attempted to forget. The psychological fragmentation is present in Sethe through her equation with Beloved, where although she misses her daughter, she is also extremely ambivalent to be subjected to the painful past, which Beloved embodies. The case of Sethe and her inability to forget Beloved or the past depicts how trauma persists because what has been suppressed, always comes back to haunt the characters.

This repression also manifests because of the recurrence of traumatic events in the novel. Characters and specifically Sethe are in a loop of repeating and re living the past trying to make some sense of it or at least accept it. The use of repetition in the narrative format by Morrison underlines how trauma does not allow the characters to progress and, on the contrary, it compels them to touch upon the same agonizing memories over and over. Inability to have the trauma fully narrated or even integrated one leads to the repetition of the traumatic event and the novel Beloved proves the theory by revealing how the characters are compelled to experience the most dreadful moments once again as it has been suggested by Caruth (1996). This repetition compulsion is an idea taken by Freud (1917) and is present in the entire narration of Sethe and the very choppy form of the novel itself.

CONCLUSION

To sum it up, Beloved by Toni Morrison is an effective study of trauma, memory, and the psychological consequences of enslavement that still steadily haunt the individuals. The novel is rich and disorienting, showing a lack of order in the presentation of the story because of its traumatic memory, which in turn, uses broken storytelling in order to explain how traumatic experiences will always intrude on the present in the lives of people who have felt deep emotional wounds. Through the psychoanalytic approach, the research has illustrated how the disjointed nature of the narration in Beloved works directly as an expression of the mental disjoint, as well as the issues of Tetteh Sethe fighting with repressed memory and a sense of unresolved guilt.

The narrative strategy of Morrison is a graphic illustration of the impossibility that trauma shatters the linear flow of time and experiences by making the primary characters such as Sethe, repetitively re-live and re-experience their worst moments. This is Season of Beloved and how the actual demise of Sethe and the lack of resolution to the trauma and the symbolic embodiment of her dissatisfied ghost brings repression to a close and the repressed returns. The fact that Sethe cannot completely negotiate her past translates to the larger meaning of the history of slavery, not only to the person, but also to the memory of an entire society that has been characterized by racial discrimination and historical violence.

The results of the study will be of value to the field of study since it will highlight the aspect of narrative fragmentation as a psychological instrument employed by Morrison to express the trauma experience as

being complex. In reviewing the literature interested in *Beloved*, it is observable that although a great proportion of the existing studies have addressed their interest in the thematic elements of trauma in *Beloved*, there is a minimal number of studies that have fully considered the psychoanalytic implications of the fragmented narrative structure of the novel. The use of psychoanalytic lens in this research offers a fresh set of understanding on how trauma, repression and analogy of the repressed are inextricably entwined in the composition of the novel to grant us a better insight on the emotional/psychological impact of slavery.

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