

Communal Trauma: Healing and Reconciliation in Toni Morrison`s *Beloved* through the Lens of Trauma Criticism

Roja Ghorbani Rostam, MA

**Department of English, Tabriz Branch,
Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran.**

Email@ Roja.ghorbani70@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper aims to explore how the communal trauma in Tony Morrison's famous novel *Beloved* conditions the subjective healing and the reconciliation in the communities within the work of trauma theory. The collective trauma inflicted by systems affects the group of people of any size and stir up collective sentiment, often resulting in a shift in that society's culture and mass actions for generations to come. Trans-generational trauma of large scales such as the trail of tears, and the slavery can be potent fuel for the eruption of violence and frustration in present communities. Focusing on historical collective trauma Toni Morrison attempts to re-conceptualize the traumatic events through reliance on narrative elements such as characters, actions, places, and time to redefine the history and the collective memory in a reconstructive process. Toni Morrison's works constitute texts in which through the characters' interaction with the color, and memory the trauma is brought out to societal level which is crucial for personal and communal healing for preventing traumatic identities to transfer into future generations. Collective trauma can be alleviated through cohesive and collective efforts such as

recognition, remembrance, solidarity, communal therapy and massive cooperation and this is what Morrison does in *Beloved*.

Key Words: Collective trauma, collective memory, communal trauma, healing, recovery.

Introduction

Communal or collective trauma is usually designated to devastating psychological effect experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity and affiliation. This term has been applied to numerous colonized indigenous groups, as well as African Americans in recent years. New theories of collective trauma increasingly appear in the literature in relation to minority populations and groups that experience trans-generational communal pain, institutional neglect, guilt, self-blame, and shame. Contemporary American literature by African American writers voices the conceptualizing historical trauma as a communal and public narrative with personal and public representations.

The narratives by the American novelist, Tony Morrison, string together traumatic events of the black community to construct

meaning and establish a new discourse to express both individual and collective identities situated in new social contexts. In most of her works the communal and personal trauma of slavery are inflicted in the bodies and minds of its victims living on through successive generations. In fact, Morrison creates characters who strive with the insurmountable task of recovering from trauma to gain subjectivity. Handling collective trauma through narratives such as *Beloved*, Morrison brings out the capacity in communities of color facing violence and social injustice to develop trauma-informed, restorative practices in overcoming communal pain which is very important for communal accountability, responsibility, transformative healing and social peace.

In her narratives, Morrison attempts to restore the bruised identities which have for generations shied away from the righteous positions. “Communal identity is an integral part necessary not only for the transcendence of society or for a single private self, but also to reverse the shame and stigma which the system of slavery has inflicted on the African Americans” (Shilaja). As Eyerman and Seidman in their famous work, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, put forward the issue of cultural trauma and formation of African-American identity, they state that: “Whether or not they directly experienced slavery or even had ancestors who did, blacks in the United States were identified with and came to identify themselves through the memory and representation of slavery; this came about not as an isolated or internally controlled process, but in relation and response to the dominant culture” (14). Accordingly, “resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual stories meld through forms and processes of collective representation. Collective identity refers to a process of “we” formation, a process both historically rooted and rooted in history” (14).

Trauma and traumatic experience are major challenges among black community, since it constantly forces its presence to their life and situation and therefore, imprints its heavy burden in their mind and body. Cathy Caruth discusses in his major work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*:

...the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind...is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor... so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature...returns to haunt the survivor later on. (4)

Discussion

Beloved (1987) is an outstanding novel in American literature and is read ages throughout the world. This novel has gained Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 which by itself brought highlighted fame approval for Morrison. This novel better than the others represents Morrison's outpour of fragmented feelings towards Black community, especially women who have been the bearers of their history and suffering. This novel is mainly concerned with a child murder which is the outcome of slavery, and later the return of the silenced traumatic past which never ceases to exist, so it never lets the next generations in peace. As Tally in his edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* maintains, “*Beloved* deals with the recollections; what people remember and the memory of slavery; the act of remembering; It probes its effects on the individual psyche of black and white people, but also the repressed memory of

slavery in the make-up of the American nation” (43).

Beloved is a masterpiece in portraying and bringing into words the memory of slavery. Morrison writes about silenced feelings and the unmarked lives of those slaves who have been incarcerated in past, so she is in part helpful in filling the gap of history that has dropped out of notion and narration. Morrison could succeed in ripping the veil that has been drawn to the heart-rending and agonizing cultural history. She gives life to these sealed presences and brings them to life in her textual language so that she could mourn to the black community's grief and sympathize with the burden that they have carried for ages. This narrative is followed by a non-linear narrative method which represents the traumatic psyche. The novel opens with a ghost's spectral appearance in the house and follows with its physical appearance (50). It goes on as this ghost takes charge of the house and starts to torment Sethe; this appearance is exchanged by Paul D and Denver's appearance and it is finally exorcised (262).

The novel first goes into Sethe's fragmented memory of her childhood, her enduring suffering, and her time in plantation, then Baby Suggs and her suffering, then *Beloved* rises to narrate her unfinished story and wants to possess what has been her right to possess. This text narrates not a woman's history, but also a linear history of those entrapped in time which is resurfaced by *Beloved*'s spectral and later physical appearance. The beginning sentence of three chapters in this novel open with: “124 was spiteful” (3), “loud” (169) and “quiet” (239) which represent the change from trauma to dealing with trauma that is symbolically portrayed by presence and exorcism of the spectral ghost that hovers around the house. The novel ends with Sethe's questioning about her own self: “Me? Me?” (273). It remains open with telling: “It was / this is not a story to pass on” (274–275). This sentence is repeated three times. This story tells the past story which will never end and

which will always remains open but it is not intended to be passed on.

As Ulrich Baer puts it, “trauma remains open and un-decidable because there is no possible immediate recourse to an external frame of reference” (9). The author by putting, “was, and is” intends to show the burden of the past in the present. It could be argued that, Sethe's traumatic suffering and agonizing past refers to collective trauma of the black slaves. Her trauma is not a personal trauma rather it represents all black community that has suffered as slaves. This narrative exposes how blacks have undergone suffering under white dominated society, and later burdened with an unbearable and agonizing situation consequently. In large, all these suffering stems from racism had destructive and heavy-burdened effects on the black psyche. Baby Suggs as a victim of slavery and trauma once exclaims: “There is no bad luck in the world but white folks” (89). This refers to white dominance and superiority as well as black inferiority.

In fact, Sethe and Baby Suggs are helpless victims of slavery; they project their humiliation and suffering to their offspring like Denver, and two sons that escaped the house. Denver as the next generation is isolated and is expelled out of social space since she is affected by a cultural trauma though she has not directly experienced it directly. That is, Denver is haunted by her mother's and grandma's life. As far as she intends to involve in social contact, she is rejected. Morrison exposes a black community that through racism, oppression and suppression are excluded and therefore alienated.

In addition, these black people are rubbed their subjectivity and freedom and are instead burdened with pain and suffering which is carved in their psyche and body. Thus, Sethe's carved back represents her wounded psyche which she is gifted as a slave. When she was a child, she was grown up motherless, since her mother was a slave.

Once her mother showed her the mark that was a mark of slavery, once Sethe asked her mother to be marked like her, but she was punished by her:

All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn't think of anything so I just said what I thought. 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me?...How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.'" Sethe chuckled...She slapped my face...What for?... I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own. (*Beloved* 61)

Just the time Sethe was marked by her master, did she understand the amount of pain it had inflicted on her. This mark of slavery could refer to the carved mind of the slaves as well. In fact, it represents the degree of the pain that they have to bear and remember; they are repetitively reminded of their past with the pain that is carved in their body as well as psyche. Sethe's mark is like a tree, when she shows it to Paul D, for whom it seems like a piece of artwork "too passionate for display" (17). She has been told by a white girl Amy that her back looks like a "chokecherry tree" (79). This scar highlights Sethe's wounded psyche and the depth of it as Morrison refers to it as deeply marked tree with many branches. It seems that it will never heal, so she has to bear it in her back to the grave. As Tally maintains: "It celebrates the beauty of these marked bodies and also constructs a history of the body as the site of historically inflicted oppression and violence" (52).

Moreover, the collective trauma is depicted as a haunting ghost that resides in Sethe's house after many years. This ghost has penetrated Sethe and Denver's house, furthermore, it constantly reminds Sethe of her past, her suffering and agony. Additionally, this ghost reminds Denver of the unlived experiences; she can understand her mother's suffering and her birth through Beloved's presence. Beloved's ghost

contains the memory that reminds Denver of her birth and past: "It was the tender embrace of the dress sleeve that made Denver remember the details of her birth – that and the thin, whipping snow she was standing in, like the fruit of common flowers. The dress and her mother looked like two friendly grown-up women – one the dress helping out the other" (29).

Beloved in this part first appears as Amy's ghost and then in her own presence. This spectral presence tells Denver of her the story of her birth which urges Denver to know more of it. Furthermore, Beloved by its presence brings out anything that has been untold and was absent in Denver and Sethe's life. This spectral presence endows lacks and absences. Besides, Beloved is the main role to highlight Sethe's traumatized psyche. She forces Sethe entrapped in past where she could recall her messed up and disturbed memory.

Looking more deep and digging in further, it is of primary importance to look at Sethe's body, which plays major role in representing the pain that blacks have suffered and which ultimately reflects their psychic wound visually. Sethe and the other black people's body were the tool for whites, it provided them with their desires, and also it was a target of their violence and dominance. For instance, Baby Suggs as inferior black was the target of her masters as Sethe for Schoolteacher; she is "the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collar the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left" (149). When Baby Suggs preaches in her sermons afterwards, she remarks that loving one's body is what the slaves should do (88). In later scenes, when Paul D stays with Sethe, in order to diminish her pain and suffering, he touches her and holds her breasts (17), makes love to her, bathes her (272). Accordingly, he issues his love towards Sethe's body, so that he can diminish her suffering.

After Sethe and Baby Suggs's survival, they are still kept haunted by past trauma; the

place that Sethe and her daughter live is “Full of a baby’s venom” (3). This venom reflects the ghost’s spectral presence and its bothering status. The novel’s beginning is filled with feelings of “spite”, “fury” and “outrage,” and attributions of agency to the house: “the house committed . . . the one insult” (3); “the lively spite the house felt for them” (3); “the outrageous behavior of that place” (4); “what the house permitted” (4). These feelings are the heap of persistent and intolerable venom that are caused by their traumatic past. As social analyst Avery Gordon mentions *Beloved* in her book *Ghostly Matters*, it could be argued that past has control over present situations and actions. According to Gordon, “a phase of history that is too horrifying, too debilitating or too brutal to be registered in direct historical narrative impinges on the present as phenomena of haunting” (14).

In *Beloved*, “Morrison shows the torment of slavery and its memories which affect everything Sethe does and most certainly affects how she raises her children. Moreover, we are shown the importance of history and why it is a vital part of black people’s lives. Slavery has left its scars, in particular in the mentality of black mothers” (Wising 16). Thus, Sethe represents all black slave women who are crashed under the heavy burden of slavery. As a black slave she has to sacrifice her children because she feels agonized and unsafe, so she doesn’t have heart to let her children experience and feel the sufferings they have endured for ages. As Boyce Davies suggests, “*Beloved* . . . simultaneously critiques exclusive mother-love as it asserts the necessity for Black women to claim something as theirs” (136). Similarly, Christopher Peterson’s analysis indicates that Sethe must “kill her own daughter . . . to claim that daughter as her own over and above the master’s claim” (554).

Generally, *Beloved* engages her readers with real feelings of the pain, suffering, and tormenting pressures that blacks have suffered throughout history. Sethe, Paul D

and Baby Suggs represent ex-slaves that are haunted by their history even after their survival. Sethe lives in past, Baby Suggs lives with her past memories, her lost children and the lessons her suffering and bitter experiences have taught her. The characters are confronted with the unspeakable in the aftermath of their trauma. The concluding part of the novel represents how Beloved was forgotten, who then threatens a reappearance of the ghost if the “footprints” fit (275).

Sethe, Baby Suggs and their family are the slaves of the Garners. These slaves are properties that are treated as objects. The slaves don’t have the possession of their bodies and selves which is remarked by Sethe when she says: “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing . . . Sethe had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). Sethe and other slaves alike not only have to struggle to free themselves from master control, but also they have to regain back their subjectivity, and therefore get hold of their self which will cost them all their life to built it on. In this novel, subjectivity can only be spelt in the negative: “The sadness was at Baby Suggs’s center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home” (140). Baby Suggs who was a property of her masters has to be paid to gain her freedom but this freedom didn’t bring her subjective freedom. Only after regaining her authority and escaping slavery did she realize that she was the owner of her hands. She laughs out loud (141) and questions in disbelief that she can be paid: “Money? Money?” (144).

It is highly remarkable that these black slaves struggle to possess their body and mind as well as their children. Sethe, as a mother, feels possessive of her children. She has the ownership of her two-year-old child and therefore decides for her future and life. Because she says that they are hers. Moreover, Beloved in another scene struggles to have her mother, because she

thinks that she belongs to her: "I saw her face coming to me and it was my face too. I wanted to join" (214). Beloved craves for her mother. She intends to be one with her mother. Here Sethe, Denver and Beloved want to feel possessive. All three of them say "You are mine" (216).

Denver as the last child could be remarked the child of trauma. In other words, she is born out of traumatic memory though she struggles to overcome this heavy burden. Sethe's first memory of Sweet Home is "the picture of the men coming to nurse her" (6). This memory is doesn't belong to Sethe and her past: "She worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious" (6). What she confronts, remind her of past memories, such as the splash of water, her shoes and stockings. Sethe is haunted by her past and they keep up coming to present since they reside in her unconscious. Beloved's presence likewise activates Paul D's memory: "She reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember" (234). All these cumulative memories that are stuffed in Sethe, Paul D and the characters alike dates back to the time of slavery. Sethe is inflicted terrible (6) memories that she bears in her back; they come to surface her horrors and sufferings.

According to Eyerman in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American*: "Slavery is traumatic for those who share a common fate, not necessarily a common experience" (14). Thus, it could be noted that, all black characters' life in this narration is traumatic, because they share the same experiences when they were slaves. Sethe is haunted by her past and her spectral daughter, Baby Suggs suffers her children's loss, Paul D is affected by his past which makes him stuck in his traumatic past, Halle, Sethe's husband, who has been witness to his wife's trauma while bearing his own, has undergone too much torture and suffering that leaves all his family.

All the ex-slaves here, Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs etc. are presented with traumatic memory which is fragmented as a result of bitter memories; these memories are kept alive which haunts them and which urges them to tell their story so that they can somehow deal with it. The character, especially Sethe is forced to break her silence and tell her untold story. More she talks about her past, more she gets involved in it as far as she is faced by her trauma physically. Beloved is given voice and body so that she can narrate her repressed memory. The novel also fuses the characters' memories; Sethe and Paul D's memories are put together, when they start their first physical connection. While together, these characters remember all their past memories. When Sethe makes love with Paul D, she remembers the first time she made love with Halle in the cornfield. Looking at Paul D's back, she recalls corn stalks breaking over Halle's back. The text moves from her consciousness to Paul D's through the mediation of Paul D's thinking of Halle making love to Sethe: "Now Paul D couldn't remember how finally they'd cooked those ears too young to eat. What he did remember was parting the hair to get to the tip, the edge of his fingernail just under, so as not to craze a single kernel" (27). Paul D and Beloved appear at the same time and they resurface Sethe's past; they make her confronted by forgotten memories and somehow let her cope with it.

As far as Sethe struggles to escape her past, it lingers on and keeps up haunting her; this memory is always present and there: "She worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious . . . Nothing else would be in her mind . . . Nothing . . . Then something . . . and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes" (6). Past is streaming in Sethe's rebellious and disordered mind, this is represented in a part that Paul D tells her of Halle. Sethe this time experiences uncontrollable mainstream of strong feelings:

But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day . . . Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new. (70)

Sethe is filled by spectral presence of her absences and lacks that she has been instilled in past. When the subject of Halle is brought up, it is told that his absence is palpable: "he has to not be there" (70). Beloved in this story is portrayed as the figure of absence, she has brought with herself what is absent, as Erickson argues she is "a composite figure of the black and angry dead whose voices Stamp hears outside the house while she haunts within" (38). So, this novel introduces to all its readers with Beloved and its spectral presence: "I will call them my people, which were not my people, and her beloved, which was not beloved" (9). Therefore it could be argued that Beloved highlights the absence of those who have never been loved and who have been repressed and lost in past. These unloved and lost people are the African American community who are the next generations of slaves.

In Denver's case, it is manifested that she feels something absent and lacking in her life. She feels loss by thinking that "her own father's absence was not hers" (13). Though her father does not belong to her past but she keeps up feeling its absence somehow. She envies her mother, grandmother, and Paul D for their apparent "ownership" of Halle's absence while regrets her lack of owning her father's absence: "They were a twosome, saying 'Your daddy' and 'Sweet Home' in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers. Once the absence had belonged to Grandma Baby, a son deeply mourned . . . Then it was her mother's absent husband. Now it was this hazelnut stranger's absent friend" (13).

In sum, the memory of slavery is always present and it will haunt the next generation as far as it goes. It seems that the black community is doomed to suffer traumatic memory. If Sethe ends up escaping spectral presence of Beloved and can come out of her haunted space and mind, she couldn't escape its whole clutch, whatsoever. Sethe feels sagged and crushed finally and feels fatigued which means that she is eaten up by her past and is breathed out by her agonizing and heavy burden. It is Denver who has to stand against all that is surmounting her shoulders as well as her mother. Sethe is too much tired to deal with her traumatic memory. Healing means something unreachable or at least temporary to a pain that has been rooted deep inside.

Conclusion

To recap, Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver as the victims of trauma struggled to overcome their trauma and experience healing and reconciliation. Baby Suggs after her cultural and personal trauma, strived hard to heal her distorted self and body by narrating her story and creating a moral lesson of her bitter experiences so that she could deal with her losses and escape her traumatic memory. After she ran away from slavery, she could find safety in 124 and get empowerment though she was haunted with the baby ghost that reminded her of past experiences. However, she could come to terms with such a spectral presence. Furthermore, Baby Suggs gave sermons and gathered with surrounding people so that she could reconcile with her inner self as well as with the others.

Sethe likewise, tried to deal with her past trauma that hovers around in the shape of a spectral baby ghost. After visiting Paul D, she could somehow understand her trauma. Meanwhile Sethe was caressed and loved by Paul D which gave her safety and a temporary healing remedy that could relieve her of heavy burden for a while. Afterwards, Sethe mourned over the child that she had lost forcibly. Finally, She confronted the

horror of her trauma by interacting with Beloved's ghost and ended up breathless and exhausted under the heavy weight of past memories. Last but not least, Denver, as a victim of cultural trauma, could reconcile with her traumatic self and with the others more easily than Sethe. She could come to terms and understand her story and birth after Beloved entered their house. Hence, she interacted with Beloved which provided an opportunity and chance to interact with outer world which therefore provided her a chance of healing by her reconciliation with outside and escaping her alienation and isolation.

Morrison's Novels *Sula* and *Beloved*, 2008: 34.

References

- [1] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- [2] Erickson, Daniel, 2009. *Ghosts, Metaphor, and History in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [3] Eyerman, Ron and Steven Seidman, 2001. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Gordon, Avery F, 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minnesota: Minnesota UP.
- [5] Herman, Judith, 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- [6] Morrison, Toni, 1987. *Beloved*. New York: Plume.
- [7] Tally, Justine, 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Wising, Johanna. *Motherhood and the Heritage of Slavery in Toni*