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## The Aesthetics of Suffering and the Representation of Trauma in Toni Morrison's Major Fictions

<sup>1</sup>V. Chandra Chowdry, <sup>2</sup>Dr. T. Jayakumar, <sup>3</sup>Dr. A. Noble Jebakumar

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar – Ph.D English (PT ), PG & Research Department of English

Reg.No: BDU2120612778876

Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College (Autonomous)

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Trichy-23

E-Mail: chowdrymirnu@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Research Supervisor, Principal (Associate Professor of English)

Government Arts and Science College

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

Kumulur, Lalgudi - Trichy - 621 712

<sup>3</sup> Co-Guide, Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English

Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science College (Autonomous)

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Trichy-23

### Abstract

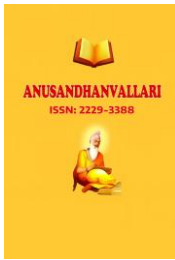
This research paper explores the pervasive theme of psychological and physical trauma within the literary works of Toni Morrison, focusing specifically on the devastation caused by systemic racism, poverty, and domestic violence. Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory and trauma studies, the analysis investigates how Morrison aesthetically reconstructs the shattered lives of her characters. Through detailed examinations of three foundational texts, this paper highlights specific traumatic incidents that serve as catalysts for psychological fragmentation. The first section examines the destructive impact of internalized racism and incestuous abuse on a vulnerable child. The second section analyzes the lasting effects of military combat alongside the horrifying manifestations of maternal violence within an impoverished community. The final section delves into the historical catastrophe of slavery, exploring how traumatic memory literally haunts the survivors. Ultimately, this paper argues that Morrison utilizes complex narrative structures to articulate previously unspoken horrors, transforming the debilitating experiences of shame and violence into a generative space for historical recovery and communal healing.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Trauma Theory, Psychoanalysis, Systemic Racism, African American Literature, Psychological Fragmentation, Historical Memory.

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### Introduction

Through the in-depth literary studies of African American experience, Toni Morrison has repeatedly reflected on the long lasting psychological and physical trauma allotted by the society designed along the racial



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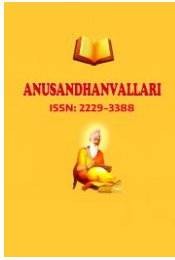
hierarchy lines. Her creative imagery needs to deal with the highly distressing and frequently concealed truths of racial suppression, domestic violence, and community violence. According to mental scientists, trauma refers to a terrifying encounter that destroys the feeling of safety in an individual resulting in a state of severe emotional numbness and failure to describe the gruesome incidences. Some breaches of the social contract are so horrible to mention, which makes them unspeakable. By putting her characters in the most dire of circumstances, Morrison is exploring their survival limits and also recording how they will be ruined. Writing gives her a secure space to contemplate these inconceivable happenings and to reveal the buried and embarrassing past of racial oppression.

According to trauma theory, one catastrophic attack may cause psychological damage, and chronic abuse and threat may cause the same. The trauma could be caused by one devastating shock (shocks) or a row of smaller but repetitive and tend to be cumulative injuries (strains) (Caruth 1). Morrison demonstrates each of these types of trauma, the historical disaster of slavery, and the daily, mundane violence of poverty, racism, domestic abuse. Characters in her stories often experience intrusive memories and great emotional narrowing, alternating between the reexperience of the horrific events and complete numbness. Moreover, African Americans have traditionally served as vessels of the projected shame of the dominant white community that leaves them with an overload of internalized racism and self-depreciation. Through the advanced aesthetic skills, including the non-linear time lines and split-scenic perspectives, Morrison recreates the dizzying feeling of the trauma to the reader. She, at the same time, offers an artistic vessel, which is structured in a way that allows to deal with these atrocities and, in other words, turns roughery into the art of literary form. In the presented paper, I will show how Morrison dramatizes the paralyzing impact of the trauma, identity fragmentation, and intergenerational transfer of the shame based on certain traumatic events in three of her most significant novels.

Fragmentation of Identity as a result of Internalizing Racism and Abuse in the *Bluest Eye* In her first novel, Morrison explores the devastating effects of trauma caused to a very fragile black female child by her dysfunctional family and the society that detests her beauty. This is guided by the urge to explain the real reasons behind the unidentified form of misery that the poor Breedlove family is going through. Pecola Breedlove, the main character, shares the scornful gaze of the white dominant culture and believes that she is basically ugly and flawed. This persistent shame is a perpetual trauma with her since she would wish to obliterate her racial identity and adopt her idealized white standard of beauty. She is in a desperate need of a miracle to touch her, or maybe change her physical appearance and hope that she could have blue eyes so that she could be finally loved and her parents would cease to perpetrate violent acts in front of her.

The catastrophic or extraordinary notion of the conceptualization of trauma, fails to understand the insidious nature of trauma of racism and the daily, long-term psychic assaults on the marginalized subject. To Pecola the trauma is not an isolated incident but a structural situation, as the internalisation of the white gaze becomes turned into a position of natural flaw and disgrace, creating a situation where a complete psychic break is required to survive (Bouson 104).

The worst trauma she suffers, however, is committed by her own father, Cholly Breedlove who rapes her. To give some background to this atrocity, Morrison describes the case of Cholly himself of psychological trauma and victimhood. Cholly had a highly humiliating sexual introduction during his teenage years where two white gunmen found him having his first sexual session in the forest. The men compelled him to go on with his activities as they observed and put the light on in a flashlight. Awakened with fear and his helplessness, Cholly turned his frenetic anger downward and instead of the armed white men, too big to attack, redirected the anger on the young girl who was



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witness to his humiliation. This trauma backdrop in addition to years of racial marginalization leaves Cholly in a constant state of humiliated rage that causes him to take out his anger on menial objects and feeble individuals.

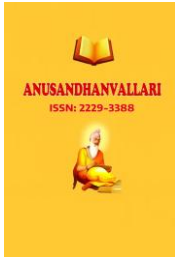
He only sees his own daughter cleaning the household later and he perceives how miserable she is and has a mixture of disgust and protectiveness. The result of this emotional confusion is his violent attack on her, which Morrison calls a transfer of his own shame and trauma that was catastrophic. He imposes on her his feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and narcissistic trauma. The mental harm that this violation causes Pecola is unconditional. She fails to incorporate the trauma or find comfort in her own community who then scapegoats her in turn to feel better about themselves and she dissociates herself entirely out of the reality. She turns into an enduring psychotic condition, acquiring a different name and, in her days, wanders the fringes of the town and believes that her desire has come true and that she has blue eyes in the whole world. Morrison shows that a combination of cultural negation and harsh family trauma is fatal through the total psychological destruction of Pecola.

### **Dissociation and the Traumatic Landscape of the Community in Sula**

Giving a broader range of theme, Morrison also discusses the most pernicious psychological trauma caused by warfare and uncontrollable domestic violence in her next novel. It begins with the stories of Shadrack who is a young black soldier whose sanity is destroyed in the first world war. On his way across one of the battlefields in France, Shadrack sees a nearby soldier face blown away by the artillery fire, observing the decapitated body still running forward all energetic and graceful. Such awful visual trauma creates the condition of extreme shock and post-traumatic amnesia. When he returns to his hometown, he is haunted by the most terrifying disintegration anxiety, terrified by the suddenness and abruptness of death and hallucinating that his own hands were turning monstrously out of control. To put his debilitating fear into check, he creates a ritualistic holiday that is devoted to suicide and functions within the traumatized rational that one particular day of the year to accept the reality of death will ensure safety the rest of the year. This effort to arrange and manage his traumatic memories is a clear indication of the long-term disturbance that his battlefield experiences had on him.

Community trauma in the novel is another theme that is demonstrated through a character of Eva Peace who is a fierce but heavily wounded matriarch. Eva is in a situation where she is left to suffer extreme deprivation after her husband leaves her as she tries to find means of ensuring that she keeps her 3 young children alive. When her infant sons are badly ill one night in a freezing winter, she goes to extreme physical and desperate lengths in an outhouse, pointing to the harsh truths of their living. There are local rumors that she intentionally cuts off one of her legs under a train in order to be insured to support her family, which is a form of self-mutilation she engages in to highlight the desperate economic conditions of her existence.

The most horrifying event in the life of domestic trauma is several years later when her son Plum comes back to the family after military service, having a serious substance addiction. Eva sees his backward, drug-caused actions as literal crawling back into her womb, into which he has crossed a boundary, which she finds psychologically unacceptable. In one of the scenes where there is a mix of maternal sensitivity with shocking brutality, Eva lovingly hugs her grown-up son and immerses him in kerosene flames to burn him. Morrison uses an extremely aloof and aestheticized narrative voice in which he narrates this event bringing the experience through Plums sedated consciousness where the deadly flames seem to him a kind of soothing baptism of light. This destructive gesture is an elaborate expression of trauma in that those who are exposed to sustained environmental forces can do rather drastic and apparently contradictory things of destroying in order to retain what they see as dignity. In the novel, these sudden



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outbursts of violence are used to recreate the unpredictable disruptive quality of traumatic memory on the reader and successfully achieve the dissociation of affect and event.

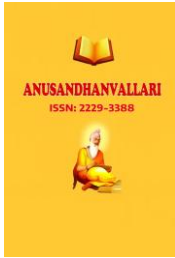
The saddest and most far-reaching study of historical trauma in *The Historical Catastrophe of Slavery and the Haunting of Memory in Beloved* by Morrison focuses on the crushing impact of the institutionalized slavery. She wants to tear the cover that has conventionally been seated around processes that are too awful to describe and reveal the ugly truth about the slave system. The story revolves around Sethe who is a once-enslaved woman who has been able to achieve her physical freedom yet totally bound by the torturous memories of her past. During her detention at a plantation ironically called Sweet Home, Sethe is subjected to extreme psychological and physical dehumanization which is being staged by a vicious overseer who is referred to as schoolteacher. Schoolteacher also uses pseudoscientific practices to identify the enslaved men and women as animals, trying to deprive them of their humanity and make them feel inferior racially. The greatest breach Sethe experiences comes when nephews of schoolteachers rape her and suckle out her breast milk, an act of animalism humiliation, which ruthlessly disgraces and traumatizes her. She is told upon a cruel whipping with cowhide when she calls this mistreatment, a reminder which she will always have on her back, a tree-like network of scar tissue imprinted on her back, as a permanent reminder of how she was made subject to any form of treatment she wished.

When Sethe manages to escape to a free state and this succeeds, her former captors finally track her down, which results in an absolute psychological panic. With a desperate desire to save her children the slandering and dehumanizing effects of slavery, Sethe goes back into a shed in the forest and gets a handsaw to kill her baby daughter. Morrison introduces this infanticide as the ultimate contradiction of the maternal love within the regime of complete repression, between extreme protection and extreme violence. Sethe is of the view that the white who can contaminate a person to an extent of forgetting their own identity and she tries to hold on to the only clean section of herself which she perceives to be her children.

This devastating experience leaves Sethe with the torturous form of intrusive memories which she refers to as rememories in which traumatic experiences of the past interfere with her current reality spontaneously and vividly. Trauma theorists admit that it is one of the typical symptoms, as the experiences that cannot be assimilated come back as intrusive flashbacks of sensations. This psychological haunting will ultimately translate into a physical one in the role of *Beloved*, a mysterious young woman who symbolizes the soul of the murdered child and also the suffering of people who died during the transatlantic slave trade. *Beloved* is a hungry and insatiable being which compels Sethe to face the ugly past that she has tried so hard to forget. The story tells the unspeakable history of the slave ships through the broken and poetic monologues of *Beloveds*, who compels the reader to participate in the challenging task of rebuilding the fragmented past. The ghost systematically removes the life energy of Sethe until a group of local women come to do a community exorcism, using wordless voice to force the spirit out and proving the absolute need of communal backing in healing the after-effects of such devastating trauma.

## Conclusion

Through her sophisticated manipulation of narrative structure and her unflinching thematic focus, Toni Morrison creates a vital repository for the traumatic memories of African Americans. By forcing her audience to confront the devastating realities of systemic racism, incestuous abuse, and the horrors of slavery, she actively dismantles the cultural amnesia that often surrounds these historical and personal catastrophes. However, Morrison does not merely subject her readers to gratuitous horror. By employing profound aesthetic mastery, such as



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transforming a brutal network of whipping scars into the image of a blossoming tree, or by utilizing fragmented timelines that require active cognitive participation, she provides a necessary artistic distance. This aesthetic framing allows the audience to process unimaginable pain without being completely shattered by its emotional weight. Ultimately, Morrison succeeds in transforming the destructive and silencing legacy of trauma into a generative space for artistic creation, utilizing the very mechanisms of shame and suffering to initiate a powerful process of historical recovery and communal healing.

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