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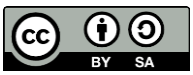

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Black Trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's Beloved offers a powerful literary response to the enduring wounds of slavery and racial violence. This study aims to analyze how the novel illustrates Black trauma as a shared, inherited, and historically grounded condition. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial trauma, the analysis focuses on psychological fragmentation, social alienation, and embodied memory to reveal the lingering effects of oppression across time and generations. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines Morrison's narrative methods and character portrayals. Ultimately, the novel frames healing as a nonlinear process rooted in reconnection, acknowledgment, and resistance.

Keywords: *Beloved, Black Trauma, Frantz Fanon, Historical Trauma, Intergenerational Trauma, Healing, Toni Morrison.*

Introduction

Black trauma has been the mark of historical oppression, leaving deep, enduring wounds for Black people. Black trauma is rooted in the historical oppression of African people through enslavement, cultural suppression, and racial violence, resulting in deep, enduring wounds that continue to impact Black individuals and communities across generations (Kirmayer et al., 2014; Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010; Henderson et al., 2021). Black trauma creates historical trauma embodied and expressed through physical symptoms and sensations that connect present bodies to historical violence (Williams, 2021 et. al.,). Addressing Black trauma requires a comprehensive understanding of its historical roots and ongoing manifestations, acknowledging the interconnectedness of past and present suffering.

Historical trauma refers to the psychological impact that a large-scale disaster has on a group of people (Abrutyn, 2023). Historical trauma refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations resulting from massive group-level atrocities or crimes against humanity (Henderson et al., 2021). Historical trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved is depicted as excessive trauma and identity loss experienced by black slaves as a result of the racism and slavery they endured

(Thohiriyah, 2019). The ongoing impact of historical trauma demands a sustained and multifaceted approach to address the enduring psychological and social burdens carried by Black communities.

Studies in examination of trauma in Morrison's Beloved have evolved significantly over the past decade, incorporating diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Psychoanalytic approaches have been employed to examine how characters in Beloved embody different responses to trauma, from Sethe's dissociation to Paul D's emotional suppression, revealing the varied psychological defense mechanisms against overwhelming historical violence (Al-Dmour, 2019). Morrison's depiction of trauma has been contextualized within the specific brutalities of American chattel slavery, arguing that the novel serves as a counter-narrative to sanitized historical accounts (Nugroho, 2021).

Morrison's fictional portrayal connects with archival research, suggesting that Beloved fills crucial emotional and psychological gaps in the historical record that conventional historiography cannot address (Taresh, 2025). Black female bodies become sites of both violation and resistance in Morrison's narrative, highlighting gendered dimensions of trauma in the novel (Sadati, 2020). Maternal trauma and its intersection with the institution of slavery reveals how Sethe's infanticide represents both the ultimate expression of and resistance to the dehumanization of enslaved mothers (Rout, 2024).

Morrison employs magical realism to express traumatic experiences that resist conventional representation, allowing the supernatural to articulate psychological states beyond ordinary language (Huber, 2010). Morrison's use of memory and forgetting functions as twin processes in trauma recovery, suggesting that the novel's complex temporality mirrors the non- linear nature of healing from historical wounds (Samir, 2020). Physical and psychological injuries in Beloved challenge normative conceptions of wholeness and recovery when viewed through the lens of disability studies (Selfridge, 2019).

Recent developments in epigenetic research provide scientific validation for the novelist's intuitive understanding of how trauma transmits across generations (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Community functions as both witness to and participant in trauma and healing processes, demonstrating collective responsibility in both perpetuating and addressing historical wounds (Schultz et al., 2016). These studies demonstrate the rich scholarly attention paid to trauma in Beloved, establishing a foundation for further investigation while revealing opportunities for new analytical approaches.

Despite the extensive studies on trauma in Morrison's Beloved, significant gaps remain in understanding the full complexity of how Black trauma is portrayed in the novel. Current research has not sufficiently explored the intersection between Morrison's narrative techniques and contemporary trauma theory as it relates specifically to Black People historical experience. While many studies have applied Western psychological frameworks to analyze trauma in the text, fewer have examined how Morrison's work might actually challenge and expand these

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frameworks by incorporating Black People cultural perspectives on suffering, memory, and healing.

The relationship between individual character trauma and collective historical experience remains underdeveloped in current studies. Additionally, there has been limited examination of how linguistic innovations in the novel—including Morrison's distinctive narrative voice, dialogue patterns, and symbolic language—function as vehicles for expressing traumatic experiences that conventional language cannot adequately capture. Although some studies have addressed the supernatural elements in the novel, few have fully theorized how these elements serve as metaphorical expressions of trauma's persistent presence across generations and its resistance to rational comprehension.

Current studies have not adequately positioned Beloved within the broader context of Morrison's literary corpus and her evolving portrayal of Black trauma across multiple novels. This paper addresses these gaps by providing a more nuanced analysis of how Toni Morrison's Beloved Portrays Black trauma by offering potential pathways toward reconciliation and healing that do not minimize historical suffering.

Studies examining Black trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved hold significant social relevance for broader cultural understanding. Literary representations of historical trauma continue to provide essential frameworks for understanding ongoing racial inequalities and their psychological impacts, making the continued analysis of texts like Beloved crucial for connecting historical wounds to present struggles (Wajiran & Apriyani, 2024).

This study contributes to a need to develop more nuanced critical approaches to trauma narratives that avoid both oversimplification and cultural appropriation of suffering. Studies align with the argument that literary analyses of racial trauma can provide valuable insights for mental health practitioners working with communities affected by historical and ongoing racial trauma (Bakare, 2024). The continuing relevance of Morrison's work lies partly in its ability to help readers recognize the persistence of historical patterns in contemporary racial dynamics, making scholarly examination of her trauma portrayal (Afroz, 2021). By examining Morrison's complex portrayal of Black Trauma in Beloved, this paper ultimately contributes to broader studies of conversations about literature's capacity to bear witness to historical violence while imagining possibilities for reconciliation that honor rather than erase painful pasts.

Method

In analyzing Toni Morrison's Beloved through the lens of Black trauma, this study employs a combination of textual analysis and theoretical application. Data is derived from a close reading of the novel itself, supplemented by the theoretical framework of Frantz Fanon's work on colonial and racial trauma. A qualitative approach is utilized to explore the complex emotional and psychological landscapes

depicted in the narrative. Specifically, this analysis focuses on the manifestation of trauma through character experiences, employing a contextual method that considers both the intrinsic elements of the novel and the extrinsic elements related to the historical context of slavery and its enduring impact.

Results & Discussion

The impact of slavery in Toni Morrison's Beloved extends beyond physical bondage, entering the psychological, emotional, and generational fabric of Black life. Through the lives of Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and Beloved, Morrison illustrates how trauma experienced by enslaved individuals does not end with their personal suffering but is transferred—physically, emotionally, and symbolically—across generations. To frame these effects, this analysis draws on Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial trauma, particularly his concept of the "psychoexistential complex," which explains how colonized individuals internalize violence and become alienated from their own identities (Fanon, 1952).

The novel not only confirms Fanon's claims about the psychological injuries of oppression but also deepens them by examining how Black trauma is carried through memory, body, and community. These findings are examined in three primary areas: Black trauma, the burden of Black identity, and the process of healing.

1. Black Trauma

Toni Morrison's Beloved unravels Black trauma as a psychic condition rooted in the historical institution of slavery and continued through intergenerational emotional inheritance. Intergenerational emotional inheritance refers to the transmission of emotional patterns, trauma responses, and psychological burdens from one generation to the next, often without conscious intent. For instance, Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) show that children of trauma survivors, like Holocaust victims, may exhibit altered stress responses due to their parents' trauma. Emotionally charged objects, stories, or silences within families also carry and transfer emotional weight across generations (Barclay et al., 2024).

Toni Morrison's Beloved powerfully illustrates this phenomenon through Sethe's trauma and her daughter Denver's inherited emotional burden; Denver, though not directly enslaved, internalizes the psychological aftermath of Sethe's experiences, showing how trauma can live on in descendants. As Janeen Selfridge (2018) argues, the character Beloved herself becomes the embodiment of the family's multigenerational trauma.

Morrison's narrative structure and her characterizations explore trauma as not only individual but communal, transcending personal experience to become a haunting historical presence. The theoretical foundation for this analysis is Frantz Fanon's concept of the "psycho existential complex", which refers to the psychological alienation experienced by the colonized subject—where one's sense of self is disrupted due to the internalization of racial oppression (Fanon, 1952).

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Morrison's characters live within this fractured reality, constantly negotiating between past violence and present survival. One of Morrison's most powerful literary devices for capturing trauma is the term "rememory." This concept, coined by the character Sethe, is distinct from ordinary memory. A rememory is a traumatic recollection that persists outside the individual mind and reemerges as an external phenomenon— "a picture floating around out there outside my head... even if I die, the picture of what I did... is still out there" (p. 71). Samir (2020) interprets rememorize as a form of collective traumatic memory, where personal recollections acquire communal significance and can be accessed by others, including later generations.

Thus, Black trauma in Beloved is both psychological and intersubjective—shared across space, time, and bodies. Black trauma in Beloved is shared across space, time, and bodies because Morrison constructs trauma as a communal and generational experience that transcends the boundaries of individual suffering. Black Trauma shared across space in Beloved at the house at 124 Bluestone Road is "full of a baby's venom" (p. 2), haunted by the unresolved pain of Sethe's murdered child, which drives away her sons and infects the entire household, demonstrating how trauma lingers in physical environments and shapes the lives of all who enter.

This aligns with Sharpe's (2016) concept of "the wake," which describes how the after effects of slavery haunt Black life through ongoing, ambient violence embedded in both space and social structures. Trauma in Beloved is not confined to one geographic or domestic site like 124 Bluestone Road—it permeates multiple locations, illustrating that the legacy of slavery migrates with the enslaved and formerly enslaved (Scheel, 2010). Sweet Home, initially presented as a "civilized" plantation, becomes a site of horror where Sethe is whipped so brutally her back scars into a "chokecherry tree" (p. 20), and where Paul D is stripped of autonomy and later sent to a Georgia prison camp, where his identity is reduced to mere utility (Al-Hassani, 2018).

These spatial zones—plantation, prison, and house—are all what Scheel (2010) calls "haunted geographies," where physical locations act as carriers of racial memory. Natural and liminal spaces such as the river, from which Beloved emerges, evoke the trauma of the Middle Passage, representing how the Atlantic itself functions as a graveyard and memory site for enslaved Africans (Sharpe, 2016). Beloved's watery return connects her to those whose bodies were discarded en route to the Americas, embodying what Sharpe (2016) terms "wake work"—the lingering aftermath of slavery that defines Black life.

The woodshed, where Sethe murders her child, becomes a deeply charged spatial marker of trauma and resistance, a moment Morrison (p. 175) renders with both horror and tragic necessity. These acts occur in what Fanon (1952) would describe as "zones of nonbeing," where the Black body is both absent from humanity and hyper visible under white control. Fanon's theory of the epidermalization of inferiority helps explain why such spatial transitions offer no real relief; even in "free"

territories, the Black subject is still inscribed with a colonial gaze (Fanon, 1952; Allan, 2022). Fanon (1952) argues that the colonized subject carries trauma within the skin, perceiving their body through the negative stereotypes imposed upon them.

Thus, spaces like Cincinnati are not neutral: they are saturated with the psychosocial residues of slavery, as Sethe's memories persistently haunt her despite geographical escape (Caruth, 1996). Morrison's representation of space shows that trauma cannot be contained or left behind—it travels, stains, and reinscribes identity wherever the survivor goes (Scheel, 2010; Sharpe, 2016).

Black Trauma in Beloved shared across time due to Morrison structures Beloved with a fragmented narrative to demonstrate that trauma distorts temporality and resists closure (Caruth, 1996). Events from decades earlier, such as Sethe's escape and infanticide, repeatedly resurface in her consciousness, disrupting her present and miring her in "rememory"—a term Morrison (p. 43) coins to describe the phenomenon of spatial memory recurrence. Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is not experienced fully in the moment but returns belatedly, as if to demand recognition.

Morrison reflects this through Sethe's inability to form a coherent chronology of her life, as well as through Paul D's disjointed recollections of imprisonment, sexual violation, and psychological collapse (p. 70–128). Beloved's return represents a temporal rupture, as she is both a resurrected child and a spectral presence of countless anonymous dead from the transatlantic slave trade (Sharpe, 2016). Younes (2016) emphasizes that Beloved's embodiment of "forgotten dead" positions her outside of linear history, creating a recursive temporality where the past is never past. Denver's psychological development is likewise shaped by this cyclical time: born during Sethe's escape, she matures in an environment saturated by grief, silence, and unspoken memories (p. 35–61).

Her isolation reflects what Caruth (1996) calls the "insistence of the trauma," wherein even those not directly affected inherit its effects. Fanon's (1952) insight that the Black subject is "sealed into their skin" by colonial history applies directly to this temporal entrapment. In Fanon's view, the colonized are defined by a past that continues to assert itself in the present, shaping behavior, perception, and emotional response. The concept of epidermalization of inferiority is temporal as well as spatial: the weight of history is carried forward in the skin, in the gaze, and in the psyche (Allan, 2022).

Morrison dramatizes this effect through Paul D's fragmented emotions and Sethe's regression into the past, both of which reveal how slavery disables linear healing and traps individuals in a loop of remembrance (Fanon, 1952; Caruth, 1996). Sharpe (2016) further argues that Black life is lived in the afterlife of slavery, where time is shaped by the persistence of systemic violence. Morrison thus presents trauma as a nonlinear, bodily experience that stretches through generations, marked by memory, loss, and inherited pain.

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In Beloved, Morrison portrays Black bodies as sites where trauma is not only experienced but encoded, remembered, and transmitted (Selfridge, 2019). Sethe's body is marked with the "chokecherry tree" of scars on her back, a physical manifestation of slavery's violence that becomes a lasting emblem of both suffering and survival (p. 20). Paul D's trauma is similarly embodied; his experience of being chained underground in Georgia, treated as less than human, and sexually violated results in his emotional detachment and repression, which he metaphorically seals inside a "tobacco tin" in his chest (p. 113).

This reflects the kind of psychosomatic suffering Fanon (1952) describes as the result of the epidermalization of inferiority, in which the colonized subject internalizes racial trauma into the very perception of their body. Denver's body, while not directly violated through slavery, still absorbs the trauma of her lineage. She is fed by her mother's milk in the same moment Sethe bleeds from the act of infanticide, symbolically ingesting both nourishment and violence (p. 152). As Sharpe (2016) argues, this form of inherited embodiment represents the "afterlives of slavery," where the biological and affective bonds between generations carry unresolved grief and oppression.

Beloved's body, too, is symbolically and physically unstable—her bloated form, voracious appetite, and emotional volatility suggest not just her own trauma but that of millions lost during the Middle Passage (p. 248–253). Bani Younes (2016) interprets Beloved as a ghostly embodiment of the "unclaimed dead," a repository of repressed historical pain that reemerges through physical presence. Fanon's (1952) theory that "the consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" under colonial domination applies directly to Morrison's depiction of how enslaved and formerly enslaved people view their own flesh.

As Allan (2022) elaborates, this process renders the body a corporeal malediction—a constant reminder of inferiority and violation. Morrison dramatizes this in the grotesque statue in the Bodwins' home, a kneeling Black boy labeled "At Yo Service," which functions as a relic of white supremacy, symbolizing the enduring objectification of Black bodies even in spaces of supposed emancipation (p. 255). Montero (2018) describes slavery's effect on the Black body as a reduction to "flesh," stripped of identity, kinship, and gender—a theoretical insight Morrison echoes by showing how enslaved people's bodies were used as reproductive tools, laboring machines, or instruments of punishment.

Sethe's act of infanticide, though horrific, represents an assertion of bodily sovereignty over a system that claimed ownership of her reproductive power (Morrison, 1987, p. 192). As Fanon (1952) observes, such acts of violence, both internal and external, arise from the psychic damage inflicted by a world that teaches the colonized subject to see their body as inherently othered and degraded. In Beloved, the trauma that character's experience is inscribed not just in their memories but in their flesh— passed through generations and reawakened through relationships, desire, and mourning (Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 1987; Allan, 2022).

1.1. Black Trauma Experienced by Black Individuals

Sethe's trauma is rooted in bodily violation and the severing of her maternal agency. Her recollection—"They held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby" (p. 19)—represents both physical and symbolic domination. The theft of breast milk is a literal and metaphorical act of dehumanization, wherein her ability to nurture her child is violently interrupted by white men. Such experiences inflicted deep emotional wounds, reducing enslaved people to property and denying them full humanity; they identify this trauma as central to the legacy of slavery and critical to understanding the psychological damage it caused (Mahameed, 2018; Thohiriyah, 2019; Oan et al., 2019). Sethe's trauma exemplifies Fanon's notion that under colonial systems, the Black body becomes a site of exploitation, stripped of subjectivity and used as a tool for economic and psychological control (Fanon, 1952). Her stolen breast milk, as depicted in Beloved, is not only a literal act of violation but a symbolic erasure of her identity as a mother and a woman. The emotional aftermath of this act reflects how slavery fractures not just bodies but also minds—leaving Sethe psychologically isolated, obsessively protective, and unable to heal from a past that refuses to remain buried (Oan et al., 2019). Sethe's later decision to kill her daughter is a traumatic action driven by what Fanon would classify as a "pathological consciousness"—a distortion of rationality caused by systemic violence (Fanon, 1952). Sethe explains, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (p. 193), inverting maternal logic under the oppressive logic of slavery. Sadati (2020) supports this reading, framing Sethe's action as the result of maternal trauma, a condition where Black women under slavery were systematically denied the right to parent, love, and protect their children. Rather than weakening her maternal role, Sethe's act becomes a radical—if tragic—assertion of agency.

Paul D experiences a different, yet equally devastating, form of trauma compared to Sethe. He is emotionally numbed, emasculated by slavery, and deeply alienated from himself. His metaphor of the "tobacco tin" in his chest—"By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" (p. 113)—serves as a symbolic container for his repressed pain. Samir (2020) describes the tin as Paul D's psychological defense mechanism, a way of coping with fragmentation by locking away memories too painful to confront. Al-Hassani (2018) further explains that Paul D embodies key symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, such as emotional detachment and the delayed return of traumatic memories, particularly evident in his recollections of being chained and treated like an animal in the prison camp. McBride (2021) interprets Paul D's coerced sexual encounter with Beloved as the moment that forces open the "tin box," symbolizing the involuntary surfacing of long-buried pain and triggering his breakdown. This emotional collapse illustrates how slavery has violently disrupted Paul D's sense of self and masculinity. His

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loss of identity and autonomy echoes Fanon's assertion that colonial violence deconstructs the Black man's subjectivity and turns him into an object for economic and psychological control (Fanon, 1952). Even Paul D's capacity to love is diminished: "The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit" (p. 45). His reluctance to fully love reflects Fanon's theory that the colonized subject often withdraws emotionally as a survival strategy. Paul D's trauma, therefore, is not merely an individual affliction but a powerful reflection of slavery's systemic erasure of Black male identity and emotional expression.

1.2. Historical Trauma Experienced by Black People

The novel's portrayal of historical trauma—the cumulative emotional and psychological injury across generations—becomes evident in the character of Denver, who suffers despite having no direct experience with slavery. Toni Morrison's Beloved powerfully illustrates how historical trauma transcends generations, shaping even those who did not directly experience slavery—most notably in the character of Denver. Although Denver was born after the end of slavery and has never been physically enslaved, her emotional and psychological development is deeply shaped by her mother's trauma and the legacy of violence encoded in their family history. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma often returns "belatedly," experienced not at the moment of the event but through its haunting, unconscious repetition in later generations. Denver exemplifies this concept of postmemory, as articulated by Marianne Hirsch: she inherits and emotionally embodies her mother's trauma through fragmented stories, silences, and psychic atmosphere within 124 Bluestone Road. From a young age, Denver is exposed to the ghost of her dead sister, the emotional volatility of her mother, and the oppressive isolation imposed by the community's fear. As she confesses, "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters… I'm scared of her because of it" (Morrison, p. 242). This fear is not rooted in personal memory, but in a psychic inheritance of unresolved violence, what trauma theorists call intergenerational haunting (Selfridge, 2018; Hirsch, 1997; Ali et al., 2024).

Denver's early deafness—when she learns the truth about Sethe's act—symbolizes her psychic defense mechanism against traumatic revelation. As Koolish notes, Denver "exists in a dreamwalking state of dissociation and denial" (Selfridge, 2018), a state that mirrors the symptoms of trauma despite her lack of firsthand experience. Her development has been arrested by her family's historical trauma, echoing what Frantz Fanon (1952) describes as the "transmitted effects of colonial violence"—where the children of the oppressed inherit psychic wounds alongside cultural legacies. Scholars such as Adnan Ali et al. (2024) point out that Denver's struggle for identity and independence is shaped by the "echoes of slavery" and her role as a "postmemory subject" who must navigate the traumatic residue of a history

she did not live through. Only when Beloved arrives and then disappears does Denver begin to step out of this shadow—leaving the house, seeking help, and ultimately reclaiming her agency. Her transformation underscores the possibility of healing through reconnection and communal re-engagement, reinforcing Caruth (1996) assertion that trauma requires witnessing and articulation—not silence—for resolution. Through Denver, Morrison reveals that historical trauma is not confined to direct victims; it seeps across generations, shaping identity, memory, and the very structure of the self.

Beloved herself functions as the embodiment of collective memory and historical trauma. Morrison transforms the ghostly character Beloved into a vessel of collective memory, not just Sethe's personal grief. Her spectral return is more than the haunting of one mother—it is the symbolic resurgence of an entire people's repressed past. Morrison's dedication of the novel to the "Sixty Million and more" makes clear that Beloved is not only Sethe's daughter but the embodiment of the millions of African lives lost during slavery's Middle Passage. As Kocabıyık (2016) explains, Morrison's concept of "re-memory" illustrates how personal memory expands into a collective dimension, becoming a shared historical inheritance that cannot be confined to one subject. When Beloved says, "I am Beloved and she is mine" (p. 248), her language of possession blurs boundaries between self and other, echoing Paul Ricoeur's claim that individual memory is shaped within collective frameworks, often bearing "the mark of the other" (Ricoeur, 2006). Morrison literalizes this dynamic: Beloved arrives from the water like a resurrected ancestor, her emergence mirroring the Middle Passage itself— "a hot thing" that she "was in" but does not fully remember (p. 248–249). This aligns with Kumari's (2021) observation that Beloved functions as a post-memory figure: a second-generation trauma vessel who "represents the collective trauma transmitted to those who did not witness slavery firsthand". Through Beloved, Morrison collapses time, space, and subjectivity—allowing historical memory to return as a bodily, emotional, and narrative force. In Fanonian terms, Beloved is the disruptive reminder of the colonial past that the Black community must confront: she refuses to be forgotten, insisting on the need for remembrance to reclaim agency and identity. Thus, Beloved stands as the narrative embodiment of collective memory—both ancestral and intergenerational—challenging the erasures imposed by systemic oppression.

More than a ghost or memory, Beloved operates in Beloved as the personification of historical trauma—the unresolved, intergenerational suffering caused by slavery. Her presence is marked by erratic emotional needs, disjointed language, and uncanny knowledge, mirroring the symptoms of trauma outlined by Cathy Caruth, who writes that trauma is "experienced too soon, too suddenly, to be fully known, and... returns belatedly in repeated flashbacks, hallucinations, and nightmares" (Caruth, 1996). Beloved's

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fragmented speech—"I am not separate from her... her face is mine"—reflects the intrusive and dissociative qualities of PTSD (p. 248). Kumari (2021) further explains that Beloved's behavior exemplifies trauma that is not fully integrated, functioning as a carrier of "ghosted memory" and post-slavery pain. Morrison gives this trauma a body—one with a scar, a past, and an emotional appetite.

As Fanon (1952) argues that colonial trauma is not confined to the individual but is embedded in the body and psyche of the oppressed subject, resulting in a fractured identity that distorts time and memory. This is illustrated when Beloved triggers the breakdown of Sethe's already-fragile psyche, creating an emotional vortex in which past and present collapse. Sethe begins neglecting Denver, overfeeding and worshipping Beloved in a pattern of obsessive repetition—re-enacting her trauma rather than healing from it. van der Kolk (2014) notes that unintegrated trauma can resurface as "body memory," overwhelming survivors with emotional intensity disconnected from linear thought. This explains why Beloved never simply speaks of her trauma—she embodies it, forces others to feel it, and destabilizes the household with it. Morrison does not allow the past to remain abstract or symbolic; she forces it into flesh. As Kumari notes, "Beloved's presence is Morrison's refusal to allow slavery to remain a distant historical event". By rendering historical trauma as a living, invasive force, Morrison not only dramatizes the persistence of slavery's psychic damage but asserts the political necessity of confronting it. Beloved, then, is history made present, pain made flesh—a visceral figure through which Morrison insists that trauma, unacknowledged, will always return.

2. Burden as Black People

The psychological and social consequences of slavery extend far beyond the immediate violence of the institution, persisting within the minds, relationships, and communities of Black individuals. Toni Morrison's Beloved powerfully illustrates how trauma is not a singular event but an enduring condition that manifests in multiple dimensions of human experience. To explore the complex burdens carried by formerly enslaved individuals, this section draws on the theoretical insights of Frantz Fanon (1952) that articulates the psychological and cultural fragmentation endured by colonized subjects. Fanon (1952) argues that under colonialism, the oppressed internalize the oppressor's image and expectations, creating a divided identity marked by self-alienation and emotional suppression. Within Beloved, these dynamics are illustrated through the characters of Sethe and Paul D, whose psychological burdens and social exclusions reflect the long-term impact of slavery on individual consciousness and collective structures.

2.1. Psychological Burden

The psychological burden of slavery in Beloved manifests through guilt, repression, and emotional fragmentation, as seen most vividly in Sethe's internal conflict over her role as a mother. The psychological burden of guilt reveals how slavery forces Black individuals into morally impossible choices that fracture the psyche. Sethe's guilt for killing her daughter is not merely emotional suffering—it reflects what Litz et al. (2009) define as moral injury, a trauma arising when one must violate core ethical values in conditions of extreme coercion. Sethe's explanation—"I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (p. 193)— exemplifies this moral paradox. Her guilt emerges from a decision made in a system that gave her no morally viable options. Frantz Fanon (2008) argues that under colonial and racial violence, the Black subject internalizes the gaze of the oppressor, turning shame and guilt inward as a result of systematic dehumanization. Sethe's trauma, then, is not the result of failed morality but of an oppressive structure that warps maternal care into violence. This is consistent with Tangney et al.'s (2007) findings that guilt, when fused with shame and powerlessness, leads to long-term psychological harm. Van Doorn, Hoek, and van Wingerden (2025) also highlight how emotionally charged guilt responses, particularly in morally grotesque situations, are intensified by traumatic context. Morrison uses Sethe's guilt not to pathologize her but to expose the moral devastation inflicted by slavery, showing how the institution criminalizes Black love and forces impossible ethical choices upon the enslaved.

Repression in Beloved is not merely a psychological defense mechanism but a survival strategy in a world where enslaved people are denied the right to narrate their pain (Austine, 2007). Sethe's refusal to remember or speak about the horrors of Sweet Home illustrates what Freud (1917) first defined as repression: the unconscious exclusion of traumatic events from conscious thought. However, in Sethe's case, repression is haunted—not healing. Her trauma returns in symbolic form through the ghost of her murdered daughter, Beloved, whose presence embodies the psychological return of the repressed. In Fanon's words, "the colonized is not only bound to silence; he is silenced"—rendered unable to process memory within a coherent, humanized framework (Fanon, 2004). Morrison literalizes this silencing. Sethe tries to forget Sweet Home, but instead recalls it in distorted fragments. For instance, as she washes chamomile sap from her legs, a mundane task triggers an involuntary memory of the plantation, which emerges not as horror but as seductive beauty: "although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty... the sycamores beat out the children every time, and she could not forgive her memory for that" (p. 6–7).

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This aligns with trauma research by Bedard-Gilligan et al. (2017), who argue that PTSD memories often return through fragmented and non-verbal forms, shaped more by sensory cues than narrative logic. Similarly, Brewin (2001) and van der Kolk (2014) explain that trauma is stored somatically, resurfacing through flashbacks, smells, and disjointed sensations. Morrison's rendering of memory—where trees are more vivid than lynched boys—exposes both the psychic cost of survival and the legacy of enforced historical silence. Through Fanon's lens, this repression is not pathology, but the inevitable psychic price of living in a world that demands forgetting in order to endure.

Morrison portrays Sethe's emotional fragmentation as a symptom of slavery's capacity to fracture Black subjectivity—a psychic rupture Fanon identifies as the "divided self" of the colonized. Sethe's identity is not whole; it is torn between the woman who longs to mother and the one who has killed, between love and violence, memory and denial. This is most clearly expressed in her relationship with Beloved, who becomes both her daughter and a projection of her guilt. As the novel unfolds, Sethe's emotional coherence unravels: she neglects Denver, becomes consumed by the needs of Beloved, and begins conflating care with punishment. According to Caruth (1996), trauma creates a temporal rupture, where the survivor becomes stuck in the moment of violence. Sethe is caught in just such a loop. Even her memories of Sweet Home demonstrate fragmentation; she selectively recalls beauty—the "wonderful soughing trees"—while repressing the reality of brutality: "It shamed her—remembering the sycamores rather than the boys" (p. 7).

This split between emotional perception and historical reality reflects Brewin's (2001) theory of dual representation, in which trauma divides memory into verbal and sensory systems that are difficult to reconcile. Furthermore, Morrison provides a harrowing image of Sethe's back, described as a "chokecherry tree" of scars, which symbolizes both physical violence and psychic damage. Even when Paul D tries to touch and soothe her, Sethe cannot feel the caress: "her back skin had been dead for years" (p. 35). This numbness is more than physical—it is emotional dissociation. Fanon (2008) would argue that this numbness is the result of ontological violence: under slavery, the Black self is denied not only freedom but coherence, fractured by systemic dehumanization. Morrison renders Sethe's emotional fragmentation as both personal and historical—a direct product of racial trauma that lingers in the body and psyche long after physical freedom is achieved.

2.2. Social Burden

Beloved presents the social burden carried by Black individuals in the form of communal judgment, isolation, and exclusion. Communal judgment emerges as a deeply embedded burden for Black individuals, reflecting the internalized moral surveillance born out of centuries of slavery and systematic dehumanization. Sethe, though a victim of unspeakable violence, becomes the subject of communal condemnation after the infanticide. Instead of understanding her trauma, the Black community of Cincinnati judges her for choosing death over re- enslavement. As Sethe recalls, "They were the whitepeople who came to take my baby, but it was the blackpeople who saved her" (Morrison, p. 149). This highlights a painful paradox: while the Black community physically intervenes to stop the schoolteacher, it emotionally distances itself from Sethe afterward. According to Frantz Fanon (2004), colonial violence doesn't just wound the individual—it disfigures communal relationships, causing communities to "police" their own, enforcing moral codes that mirror the dominant oppressor's values. As Janeen Selfridge (2018) notes, the trauma in Beloved is "generational and communal," shared yet also complicated by differing responses to survival and resistance. Sethe's radical maternal decision disrupts communal norms, and the resulting judgment reflects what trauma theorists describe as a secondary wounding—when survivors are re-traumatized by those around them (Caruth, 1996). Morrison uses this tension to question whether communal solidarity can truly exist when the past has produced such divergent responses to oppression. Communal judgment thus becomes not a path to healing but a continuation of the psychic damage slavery has inflicted on Black bodies and relationships.

Isolation in Beloved functions as both a personal refuge and a social wound, shaped by the community's response to trauma and the internal breakdown of the self. Sethe's physical and emotional seclusion in 124 is not simply an act of withdrawal but a survival strategy after her violent past and the community's moral judgment. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief," Morrison writes (p. 5), underscoring how isolation is not unique to Sethe—it is a widespread psychological consequence of slavery. Cathy Caruth (1996) notes that trauma often results in withdrawal and psychic numbing, where survivors retreat from social relationships in order to avoid re- experiencing loss and pain. For Sethe, isolation becomes a shield, but it also perpetuates the trauma. Denver, born into this environment, inherits this solitude, becoming emotionally stunted and socially withdrawn.

In The Body Keeps the Score, van der Kolk (2014) explains that trauma can alter one's capacity for social engagement, leading to hypervigilance and relational disconnection. Sethe's story affirms this: her trauma fragments her ability to connect meaningfully with Paul D, Denver, or the wider Black community. Fanon (1952) would describe this as ontological insecurity—a state in which the colonized subject cannot achieve wholeness or self-

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recognition due to structural violence. Morrison dramatizes this insecurity not only in Sethe's mind but in the social space of 124 itself, which becomes a haunted house of memory, fear, and exile. Through Sethe's isolation, Morrison shows how trauma severs individuals from collective healing, turning inward pain into perpetual loneliness.

Beloved also portrays the social burden of exclusion, where trauma marks individuals as "other" even within their own marginalized communities (El Mitry, 2024). In Beloved, Sethe is socially "othered" by her community—cast out and marked as different—reflecting what Fanon (1952) calls social alienation, and as El Mitry (2024) notes, this condition parallels the postcolonial marginalization of both African Americans and the natural world, framing Sethe's isolation as both a racial and environmental displacement. Sethe's past actions, while rooted in a logic of protection and resistance, render her unfit for communal reintegration. For eighteen years, she and Denver lived on the outskirts of Black society, both geographically and emotionally. As Morrison writes, "Sethe and Denver were left to live among the drabness of 124 by themselves" (p. 4).

This exile reflects what Fanon (1952) calls desubjectivization—the removal of the colonized subject from meaningful political or cultural participation. In this framework, exclusion is not just social—it is ontological. Denver, though innocent, is also ostracized; she is mocked by other children and kept from school, illustrating how the legacy of trauma infects the next generation with social alienation. Kumari (2021) notes that Beloved demonstrates how trauma "transfers beyond individuals to shape cultural relationships, often resulting in silence and disconnection". Even when Sethe attempts to re-enter the community with Paul D, the town's response is cold and judgmental. As Koolish (2001) and Selfridge (2018) emphasize, Beloved reflects not just psychological trauma but the failure of post-slavery Black communities to collectively heal and integrate their wounded members. Morrison thereby critiques not only the white structures of oppression but also the intra-community dynamics that perpetuate suffering. Exclusion in Beloved functions as a social scar, a reminder that trauma, if not recognized and processed, leads not to unity but to fragmentation and abandonment.

3. Healing From Trauma

Healing from trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved is depicted not as a linear return to normalcy, but as a complex and ongoing process rooted in reconnection, recognition, and resistance. Morrison portrays reconnection—with others, with self, and with community—as a critical first step in healing from historical and individual trauma. Sethe's trauma, rooted in her enslavement and the loss of her daughter, isolates her from everyone, including her surviving child. However, the gradual rebuilding of emotional ties—particularly with Denver and Paul D—initiates the possibility of recovery. When Paul D arrives at 124 and begins asking

about Sethe's past, she first resists but later shares her story, suggesting that relational openness becomes a conduit for processing trauma. Cathy Caruth (1996) contends that trauma is not resolved through repression, but through narrative witnessing—a re- experiencing mediated by empathy and trust. Sethe's return to speech, though fragmented, echoes this.

Denver's own growth—from dependence to self- assertion—also stems from her eventual reconnection with the larger Black community, which she initially fears. Her decision to leave 124 and ask for help marks a pivotal turning point. Schultz et al. (2016) emphasize the role of community connectedness in trauma recovery, noting that social reintegration restores belonging, accountability, and emotional resilience. Similarly, Fanon (1961) insists that liberation is social as well as personal; recovery demands solidarity rather than solitary suffering. Morrison's characters begin to heal only when they re-enter relationships—when they "step outside the yard," as Denver does, to rejoin the world of the living.

Healing in Beloved also requires recognition—not only of the traumatic past but of the humanity of the self and others who were dehumanized by slavery. Sethe's journey toward healing hinges on acknowledging that what happened to her was wrong—not simply a fact of life or survival. Morrison dramatizes this through the moment Sethe finally begins to confront what Beloved represents: "She was my best thing"—Sethe says in the novel's final chapter (p. 272)—a statement that begins the transformation of grief into love, and guilt into self-recognition. According to Herman (1992), trauma survivors must reconstruct a coherent narrative that restores agency and identity—something Sethe cannot achieve while stuck in silence and shame. Recognition also occurs in how characters confront their trauma through naming: the baby is never given a proper name, yet the act of engraving "Beloved" on the tombstone becomes an attempt to memorialize and reclaim lost dignity. Fanon (1952) speaks of ontological resistance—the assertion of one's being and interiority against a system that rendered Black subjects' mere property.

In this light, Sethe's gradual shift from self-erasure to self-recognition becomes a revolutionary act. Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) note that the intergenerational effects of trauma—whether behavioral or epigenetic—can begin to resolve when trauma is witnessed and validated by both self and others. Morrison suggests that healing begins not with forgetting, but with bearing witness to pain and affirming one's right to exist fully, despite it.

The final stage of healing in Beloved is not passive recovery, but active resistance—a refusal to let trauma, guilt, or systemic oppression define the self or the future. Sethe's ultimate act of healing comes when she chooses not to repeat the past: as Mr. Bodwin arrives at 124, Sethe mistakes him for Schoolteacher and lunges at him with an ice pick, but this time, her violence is redirected—not toward her children, but toward what she believes is the source of oppression. This symbolic reversal demonstrates what Fanon (2004) calls the "purging violence" of anti- colonial resistance—where trauma is transformed into historical agency.

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However, Morrison does not glorify violence; rather, she presents resistance as a multifaceted act. For Denver, resistance means stepping into the world, claiming her identity, and breaking the cycle of inherited silence. For Baby Suggs, it is found in preaching love and dignity in the Clearing, despite the world's devaluation of Black flesh. "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass," she proclaims (p. 88).

This is an act of spiritual defiance, a counter-discourse to centuries of commodification. According to Samir (2020), Beloved portrays healing not as forgetting but as a struggle to reclaim stolen narratives, names, and bodies. In this context, resistance is not just political, but deeply personal—it is the decision to live, to speak, and to remember without being consumed. Morrison leaves us with the hope that resistance, when paired with recognition and reconnection, can initiate true healing—even if it is never fully complete.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's Beloved reveals the profound psychological and historical consequences of slavery, illustrating how Black trauma is experienced individually and collectively, emotionally and socially, historically and intergenerationally. Through the characters of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, Morrison dramatizes the internal fragmentation and communal dislocation that follow centuries of racial oppression. Drawing on Fanon's theories (1952)—particularly the psychoexistential complex, emotional foreclosure, and psychic liberation—this analysis has shown that Black trauma in Beloved extends beyond the immediate experiences of violence. It becomes embedded in identity, passed down through generations, and sustained by both internal repression and social exclusion.

Sethe's psychological burden, marked by maternal guilt and emotional collapse, exemplifies the impact of what Sadati (2020) terms "Black maternal trauma," wherein enslaved women are denied safe motherhood. Paul D's repression, encapsulated by the "tobacco tin" metaphor, illustrates Fanon's (1952) insight into the emotional survival strategies developed under systemic dehumanization. Denver's transformation reflects a hopeful disruption of inherited trauma, aligning with Yehuda and Lehrner's (2018) concept of intergenerational resilience. Meanwhile, the community's dual role—as both an instrument of alienation and a vehicle for healing—reaffirms Schultz et al.'s (2016) argument that collective acknowledgment is essential for trauma recovery.

Healing, as Morrison presents it, does not entail the erasure of memory but its reintegration into a reconstituted self and community. Storytelling, ritual, and emotional engagement become the mechanisms through which characters begin to reclaim their lives. Fanon (1952) asserts that true decolonization must occur both externally and internally; Morrison echoes this by suggesting that healing requires both personal reckoning and social restoration. Thus, Beloved stands as a testament to the enduring struggle of Black individuals to reclaim agency, identity, and

community in the aftermath of historical trauma—and a powerful reminder that healing, though difficult, remains possible through love, memory, and collective solidarity.

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