



# REVISITATION, IMAGERY AND AGENCYLESSNESS OF TRAUMA: A STUDY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED THROUGH THE LENS OF CARUTH'S TRAUMA THEORY

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**ABSTRACT:** The second half of the late 20th century brought forth 'trauma' as a critical theme in worldwide literature. Wars, colonization, slavery, segregation, atomic bombing, genocide and their aftermath led to assault, which was as much psychological in nature as was physical and/or emotional. More so for females, for the sheer lack of voice. This paper studies the black female characters of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Winning novel *Beloved* (1987) who are the victims of slavery having a "repetition compulsion" (Freud) of the traumatic instances. The paper employs Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory illustrated in *Unclaimed Experience* to study trauma's 'uncontrolled re-experience' through the use of imagery. The imagery of tree, milk, water and gravestone will be explored as driving factors which lead to agencylessness in the revisitation of trauma suffered due to slavery by the female characters of Sethe, Denver and *Beloved*.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Revisitation, Imagery, Agencylessness, Slavery, Female, Black.

## INTRODUCTION

*"Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women"*

-Harriet Jacobs (*Incidentents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 119)

Upon deeply penetrating into black history, one can unequivocally confirm that slavery hit women harder than men. When import of slaves was banned in 1808, the scarce supply of black labour prompted the slave owners to turn the female slaves into brooding machines. "From adolescence, black female slaves were subjected to their master's desire for them to reproduce because increasing the number of slaves resulted in an increase in profits." (Wilson, 2021) The exuberant objectification of black women, who had already experienced inhuman conduct at the hands of their masters, added sexual submission to the list of their ordeals, as is also confirmed, "...apart from issues, such as racism, inequality, and discrimination, that both male and female slaves had to endure, female slaves also experienced sexual oppression, abuse, and the struggle of motherhood." (Bos, 2016)

The devastation caused had psychological, emotional as well as physical impact. Although the first wave of feminism coincided with the Abolitionist Movement, it was the second wave of feminism that gave way to many female authors to robustly correlate feminism and slavery, discussing resultant female trauma and its consequences. In the book *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses*, the co-author Charlotte Krollokke states "The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s to 1970s in postwar Western welfare societies, when other "oppressed" groups such as Blacks... Second-wave feminism is closely linked to the radical voices of women's empowerment and differential rights and, during the 1980s to 1990s, also to a crucial differentiation of second-wave feminism itself, initiated by women of color and third-world women." Before that, the mainstream literature had majorly failed to capture the pathos of female slaves. "The focus has mostly been on the narratives of male slaves." (Bos, 216)

Toni Morrison, one of the most celebrated American novelists, explores racial and sexist upheavals through her work. "Morrison places the experiences of black women at the center of her novels." She has played one of the key roles in foregrounding black feminist fiction and has recorded "the histories of those countless 'Subaltern' subjects whose voices and stories have been missing in history." (Khamisa Qasim, 2012) She interrogates the assault, both physical and mental in nature, on the formerly enslaved women in her novel *Beloved*. The attack so despicable that it leads the plot to a point where the ladies - Sethe, her daughter - Denver, and her back from the dead daughter - *Beloved*; enter into a haze blurring the lines between natural and supernatural, giving the novel

a visceral aesthesis. This makes *Beloved* an ideal literary work to interrogate female slave trauma as is corroborated by Roger Lockhurst in *The Trauma Question*, calling *Beloved* “a formative text in literary trauma studies.”

Morrison has interwoven *Beloved*'s plot between two planes- one is the novel's present which is the reconstruction era after emancipation; and the second entails the flashbacks of the bygone days of slavery. In doing so, Morrison has used certain images which drive the plot to and fro from one plane to the other, highlighting the trauma borne by the most hushed of them all - black females as is quoted by Khamsa Qasim (2012) - “*Beloved* can be viewed as a neo-slave narrative, it explores the lives of those countless slave women whose stories are absent from dominant literature.”

### TRAUMA THEORY BY CATHY CARUTH – CONCEPT OF REVISITATION, IMAGERY AND AGENCYLESSNESS

In *Unclaimed Experience* by Cathy Caruth - a highly acclaimed book on trauma, its implications and intersections with Literature; the author departs from Freud's example of the ‘Double Wound’ in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. “*Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight... He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.*” (Caruth, 1996, 2)

The second confrontation with the wound, is the ‘repetition’ of the traumatic episode with little to no role played by Tancred – as is pointed out by Caruth in her book. Through the deconstruction of Freud's ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Caruth points at the **revisitation** of trauma, that is the uncontrolled re-experience through the wound which had a sense of belatedness accompanying it. This implies that the visual of the wound makes one re-witness the traumatic truth with its delayed appearance sans any voluntary attempt or agency of the person. For the purpose of the study, the same will be denoted by the word ‘**agencylessness**’.

The theorist also brings to light certain attributes one could associate with trauma like it being visceral, uncanny, evasive, unhealable, voiceless, catastrophic, and numbing. She adds that the moment of trauma evades immediate comprehension - its understanding is delayed and is upon retrospection. She also hints at the physical manifestation of mental trauma by stating the example of deferred publication of Freud's work due to war. Through the above mentioned trauma model, this paper strives to analyze the role of imagery in showcasing agencylessness in recapitulation of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

### IMAGERY AND AGENCYLESSNESS IN BELOVED

The protagonist of the novel- Sethe, lives freely post emancipation in the novel's present in Ohio, although she has been shown to be shackled by the atrocious memories of the time spent as a slave at a house in Kentucky called Sweet Home. “The protagonist is no longer a slave towards the end of the narrative; however, that designating label will hover around her to haunt her existence in different ways.” (Cicero, 2011) The novel's plot extends from the year 1835, that is the year of Sethe's birth, to 1875, the conclusion of the novel. Morrison intermittently employs imagery to recount the events from the past, largely pertaining to trauma borne out of slavery and sexual abuse. The images of the tree, the gravestone, milk and water are used as a medium to narrate the tale of female slave trauma.

The narrative highlights the conscious and desperate efforts of the silenced to disremember the horrendous past, however the images in the narrative's present don't let them. This paper argues that the aforementioned elements of imagery rush the select characters back to the days of mental, emotional and physical assault borne due to slavery, without their conscious effort. Thus, pointing at their unresolved trauma and repetitively resituating them into the traumatic past. This brings to light the ‘unhealable’ and ‘catastrophic’ nature of trauma (Caruth, 1996)

### TREE

Out of all the imagery used by Morrison in *Beloved*, the one that stands out the most is that of a tree. Besides the generic symbolism of a tree denoting nature's nurturing force, Morrison, also, uses it as a source of horror to the main characters, literally as well as metaphorically. Dr Jasna Poljak Rehlicki has quoted, “The tree was a scar from physical abuse she experienced in Sweet Home.” The image of the tree has been used as a potent tool to drive the plot back and forth to the time when Sethe faced the ordeals, mostly because she was a female slave. The same has been corroborated by Moa Tjerngren - “...one function for trees in the novel is to accompany the characters' struggles, here the struggle for life.”

In the beginning of the novel, when Paul D visits Sethe at 124 in Cincinnati, they walk down the nostalgic road of the time spent as slaves at Sweet Home. Right about then, Paul D finds the ‘tree’ like scars of torture inflicted upon Sethe's back by the school teacher's nephews, when Sethe tells him, “I got a tree on my back...” (Morrison 18). This mentally relocates her into the very moment when she was raped, whipped and her breast milk was defiled leading to its ‘uncontrolled re-experience’ (Caruth, 1996). Not only that, the tree imagery also plays a key role in highlighting the black female narrative of slavery. Sandy Alexandre adds that the “tree imagery—as a way to demonstrate continuity between violence committed against black men and violence committed against black women and as a way to interpolate black women's sexually violated bodies into the publicity...” (Sandy Alexandre)

Sethe claims that the tree-like scars inflicted upon her when she was pregnant are still growing - a ‘chokecherry tree’ with its trunk, branches and leaves. The bitter taste of the chokecherry can be related to the female slave experience she carries with and on herself in the form of that tree. This highlights the ‘uncanny’ nature of the traumatic instance which also shows ‘physical manifestation’ of trauma. (Caruth, 1996)

In one of the pathways to the past set by the image of a tree, the image of the two slave boys' corpses hung on the tree come alive as mentioned in the sentence - “boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (Morrison 7). The traumatizing memories of slavery, how-so-ever attempted to be repressed, make her recall fellow slaves dying beside or tied to the trees.

The 'tree' imagery convincingly draws a parallel between a felled tree and Sethe's daughter 'Beloved'. Michele Bonnet, in her paper *'To Take the Sin out of Slicing Trees...: The Law of the Tree in Beloved'* suggests that the slicing of the trees is associated with slicing of Beloved's throat, thus the 'felled trees' should be considered as a metaphor for Beloved. Thus, tree imagery helps the plot unveil her horrendous murder.

## MILK

Milk, worldwide, is considered one of the primary sources of nourishment, especially for children. However, the shackles of slavery had deprived many of it. In *Beloved*, Morrison has represented milk as a symbol of motherhood, nourishment and healing. When Sethe delivered her first daughter (Beloved), her fierce dedication to nurse the infant became quite evident. This milk represents a strong maternal instinct arising in Sethe - "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me (Morrison 10)".

Although free after emancipation, the milk imagery takes Sethe back to the sexual assault she faced at the hands of schoolteacher and his nephews. "Among many tortures Sethe receives from her white owners, the stealing of her milk pains her the most." (Mohammed, 2023) Almost in a state of trance, she repetitively stated, 'They took my milk' (Morrison 20) in front of Paul D in the novel's present, revisiting the very instance when one of the nephews held her down and the other sucked the milk. As a black female slave, she wasn't only raped, but also snatched of the joy and pride of breastfeeding, marring her motherhood. "The robbing of Sethe's milk is the materialization of the fundamental perversity of the institution which kills the slaves' selves by severing the bonds between mother and child" (Bonnet, 1997)

## WATER

The stream of water running behind Sethe's house in the novels' present has quite a relevance in the novel. Sethe, having noticed the arrival of the school teacher and a probable u-turn to slavery, felt compelled to kill her children in a fit-like state. However, she succeeded in killing only her two year old daughter. As mentioned in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* that trauma manifests itself physically, the stream of water gives way to the resurrection of Sethe's daughter - Beloved, whom she killed with her bare hands to spare the life of a slave. The 'visceral' and 'uncanny' attributes of the trauma mentioned by Caruth are also affirmed by this.

Morrison has efficiently used the imagery of water to depict the egression of the remorseful past into the present, wherein the protagonist is struggling to reconcile with her trauma. As is also quoted by Kikuko Morita, "The all-encompassing water imagery both literally and illuminatingly accentuates the moments when the past intrudes into the present and validates the healing process of a slave woman, Sethe."

## GRAVESTONE

The 'unchiseled headstones', engraved with the word 'Beloved', is a striking highlight of the novel, as Morrison goes on to name her novel the same. While talking to Denver about the baby ghost haunting the house, Sethe is transported back to the time when she buried the corpse of that baby girl. The flashback uses the gateway of the imagery of the headstone/gravestone against which Sethe leaned while giving her body away as a part of the barter with the engraver as his son looked on. "...those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-coloured stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil." (Morrison 6)

All for one word - 'Beloved', and missing out on its intended precedent 'Dearly'. "Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free." (Morrison, 5) Placed in the beginning of the novel, the traumatic episode of getting 'Beloved' engraved on her daughter's gravestone is refreshed in her mind as she recollects her desperate and impoverished state, being unable to pay the engraver. "...she could not afford to pay for the engraving of her daughter's grave. She was forced to use her body as an object of commerce." (Sebuah Kajian Pustaka, 141)

The episode was a consequence of a final sacrifice by Sethe which can be seen as an effort to redeem herself from the traumatic memory of murdering her own child in the quest of saving her from a life of slavery. The dehumanization, powerlessness and the sexual abuse, here, can be deemed as a part of the ripple effect of slavery. The torturous naming of her daughter's headstone lives in her heart years later through no conscious effort by Sethe.

## CONCLUSION

Imagery serves as a potent tool in the hands of an author to drive a non-linear plot back and forth by using the images from one timeline as a gateway to another. Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, has firstly delineated the traumatic lives of anguished blacks living under the system of slavery in Kentucky, then the emancipation era showing the immediate aftereffects of slavery on the mental, emotional and physical being of the slaves, here Sethe, by introducing certain images in the novels present which is the third backdrop in the sporadic plot of the novel. This paper has discussed the role of the images of tree, milk, water and gravestone driving the characters of Sethe, Denver and Beloved back to their traumatic pasts without any agency. This is in consensus with Cathy Caruth's trauma model discussed in *Unclaimed Experience*, as the "uncontrolled re-experience" of trauma by the aforementioned characters is owed to the images depicting trauma as visceral, unhealable, catastrophic, numbing and having physical manifestation.

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