

REMEMORY AND RESISTANCE: RACE, GENDER, AND POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT:

Beloved, by Toni Morrison, is still an important text that explores the lasting trauma of slavery and looking at it through today's theories reveals more about race, gender and trauma. I expand on previous criticism by bringing postcolonial theory, memory studies and intersectional analysis and this reveals that Morrison uses personal and collective memories to rewrite history. We suggest that Morrison uses her narrative to tell a slave story and recount memories about the African diaspora to reveal their oppressed identities and sadness passed down through generations. *Beloved*, the main ghost of the novel, gathers the memories of their ancestors and honours both Christian beliefs and African traditional views. In feminist thought, Sethe's experiences of motherhood reflect that slavery's effects are also about gender, as she struggles to care for her children alongside a terrible past. By combining recent research and analysis, we prove that *Beloved* (1) inspires its audience to identify on a primal level with slaverycambridge.org and (2) prompt readers to recognise the role of slavery's presence in currenttimescambridge.org. Our analysis concludes that with its stylistic approach, *Beloved* brings together different layers of narrative and trauma. Morrison's novel thereby not only reimagines the slave past as lived memory but also models postcolonial resistance by reclaiming hidden histories (Lifson; Koh and Kwak).

Keywords: Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; slavery; African American memory; trauma studies; postcolonial theory; intersectionality; gender.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) stands as a cornerstone of American literature for its harrowing depiction of slavery's psychological aftermath. Because of the pain she experienced as a slave, Sethe has a spirit visitor—*Beloved*, her dead daughter whom she killed to keep *Beloved* from suffering just as Sethe had. The realistic yet surreal story of Morrison highlights the challenging links between the past and the present, encouraging people to think about the shadowy history of slaverycambridge.org. While many scholars have analysed *Beloved* using feminist, psychoanalytic and African American literary criticism, we can go further by using postcolonial theory and memory studies to explore it even more. Postcolonial theory helps us see that slavery worked as a type of colonial system and how cultural memories are managed or forgotten. As a result, memory

studies helps illustrate how trauma is presented in both individual storeys and storeys shared by communities.

It explicitly combines the various frameworks that past studies lacked. We will examine how *Beloved* not only dramatizes racial and gender oppression, but also enacts a postcolonial “rememory” – a term Morrison uses to signify memory that transcends the individual (Morrison). This way, Morrison reclaims a storey that was overshadowed by treating the memories and voices of her characters as acts of defiance. It’s also pointed out by critics that *Beloved* is “the life of one person, yet the reader can feel the pain of many through Sethe’s storey.” Charity Gibson believes that in having two identities, *Beloved* combines aspects of Christian and African beliefs, depicting the mixed culture among African Americans. By blending these ideas into our study, we make it clear that the novel calls on us to deal with the unchanging pain from the events it describes. Just like Connor Lifson suggests, the book urges us to try to understand the effects of slavery by going past language and looking for deeper, hard-to-say knowledge.

The following analysis shows how cultural studies and feminism play roles in *Beloved*, specifically examining the way power and identity are shaped by race and gender. Then we look at memory studies and trauma theory to understand Morrison’s idea of rememory and how it goes against traditional history. The entire book relies on studies from the past five years to discuss *Beloved* in relation to the fields of postcolonial, memory and trauma theory. The main aim is to analyse *Beloved* and explain how Morrison’s imaginary universe still plays a key role in current dialogues about history, personal identity and recovery.

Race and Gender: Intersectionality in *Beloved*

The main theme of the novel is slavery’s impact on people because of race and gender. Her storey is not easily separated into just racial or gender-based pain but is deeply influenced by both. As Morrison herself has emphasized, *Beloved* is steeped in memory rather than history – a strategy to center Black experience in a society that often “surrender[s] the centre of the stage to received ideas” of racetheguardian.com. In Morrison’s view, Sethe is a Black woman exposed to both race-based violence and ideas that support men more than women.

For a long time, many readers have pointed out that Black women in Morrison’s works have to struggle with discrimination based on both their race and gender. Sethe in *Beloved* experiences slavery and its effects, along with sexism within her own community. After her escape, Sethe copes with threats from white men and looks down on her by some Black women in the new community who think she was wrong to kill her daughter. Morrison depicts the infanticide as a logic from beneath the horrible experiences of violence caused by racism and sexism felt by the Black woman Sethe. Sethe’s memory of the schoolteacher’s brutality – which valued Black people as mere property and even forced relatives to inspect their kin’s bite scars – illustrates how race and gender fused to brutalize Black bodies (Morrison). Therefore, Morrison emphasises Black women’s identities, much like the arguments of Black feminist experts such as Patricia Hill Collins, who say Black women’s identities have been changed by oppression. We can see this by considering that Sethe’s motherhood, sexuality and voice are threatened because she is Black and a woman.

Some experts maintain that *Beloved* symbolises the link between race and gender in the novel. According to Kate Lang, *Beloved* stands for the lasting effects of trauma, showing how Sethe's sense of self has become split by what she went through [jstor.org](#). According to Koh and Kwak, *Beloved* highlights the pain suffered by Black women because of oppressive gender and class systems [mdpi.com](#). At the same time, the ghost-child is a daughter, a sister and a Black sister-sister, showing the community how deeply its members feel. In the last words of the novel, *Beloved* is described this way by Morrison: "Beloved is mine...she is me," meaning boundaries between the two are blurred. This is a political effect: since the victim of sexual slavery is never noted in history, Morrison makes her visible and gives her back her identity. Because of this, the novel disputes both racial and gender-based loss of memory.

For this reason, postcolonial feminist theory can be especially helpful. Morrison's narrative can be seen as an act of "writing back" to dominant (white, patriarchal) discourses. By putting the Black maternal viewpoint centre stage, Morrison appears to support Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak in fighting for subaltern voices to be acknowledged. By saying "I will never run from another thing on this earth," Sethe takes back her independence in a world that tried to take it from her. Meanwhile, Paul D.'s recollections of emasculating violence (being branded and raped in the tobacco warehouse) reveal parallel traumas for Black men. Still, Morrison focuses on telling slavery's storey through a feminine view, claiming that the true suffering of slavery cannot be explained without first seeing it from the perspective of the mothers – "my love is too strong for me," one character describes.

Therefore, *Beloved* becomes an expression of Black feminist memory, since the storeys are presented from the perspectives of those affected. In *Woman's Position*, Diana Krieger claims that spotlighting Black motherhood is the way Morrison links government history to individual experiences [repositori.udl.cat](#). This analysis goes a step further by explaining that Morrison accomplishes this by mixing postcolonial and memory strategies. As Su-Han Kwak and TaeJin Koh argue, Morrison's communal vision acknowledges the "differences and diversity of each [other]" and rejects the "opposition between the self and the other, the center and periphery, men and women" [mdpi.com](#). Community understanding of who they are brings harmony to the character's lives, rather than adopting white cultural norms. Throughout the book, Sethe's murder is seen as affecting the community as much as it does Sethe herself. Morrison builds a picture of Sethe that emphasises her humanity rather than her strengths or weaknesses. Thus, the text gives readers the opportunity to observe how being Black and female leads to trauma and resistance.

Postcolonial Context and Cultural Memory

Even though *Beloved* is classically regarded as part of American literature, it can also be examined in postcolonial studies. Slavery of African Americans in colonial America was also like European colonisation in other places and those who left colonies often feel its memory. This approach views *Beloved* as a tale of how people colonised by slavery work to build a new sense of identity after enduring trauma. Describing her work, Morrison said she favoured "memory over history" since she believed that the recorded version did not accurately reflect Black experience. This highlights a postcolonial urge: Morrison refuses to just follow set narratives developed by Europeans.

The novel's setting in the Reconstruction era (just after the Civil War) further invites comparison with decolonization moments. Before writing *Beloved*, Morrison learned a lot from African-American slave narratives and took part in the Black cultural renewal of the 1960s and 70s. Postcolonial critics observe that Morrison's characters come from African ancestry but live in a mainly white world which means they must work out their cultural identity across these two worlds. As noted by Charity Gibson, in the storey, *Beloved* blends elements of Christianity and African traditions, acting as a "spiritual and dual life haven". In practice, this means the novel deliberately references African spiritual memory (the idea of ancestors returning) alongside Christian motifs (the epigraph from Romans, the notion of redemption). Postcolonial analysis suggests that Morrison's practise shows an effort to stop the erasure of African culture, even as she describes the destruction of slavery.

Morrison's use of the fictional town name "Cincinnati" (with characters named Halle, Stamp Paid, etc.) alongside references to "the Sweet Home plantation" also suggests that the Caribbean and African colonial history linger within the American context. The characters show traits from both Europe and America. For example, the novel's repeated allusions to Africa (Denver's memory of the picnic at thirty miles, Sethe's hallucination of attacking debt collectors) invoke a transatlantic memory that no U.S. history book recounts. As a result, *Beloved* prefigures postcolonial memory studies: it portrays the past as many layers, where official explanations do not tell the full storey and other histories have to be reimagined from the edges.

As a result, Jenkins and others point out that Morrison's narrative can be viewed as an example of cultural post-memory which Hirsch explained as descendants inheriting experience as though it were their own. Denver's presence in the novel clearly shows the passing down of memories from one generation to another. Since childhood, Denver knows a lot about the family's past and therefore remembers and even repeats unhappy events. When *Beloved* comes back, Denver joins in trying to comfort her and at times speaks on her behalf. It follows Hirsch's view that those born to Holocaust survivors often face a past they did not live through which affects them deeply. By focusing on Denver's perspective (and on Baby Suggs's communal sermons), Morrison shows how a community can begin to heal once memory is shared.

Researchers have recently emphasised the significance of memory work. The novel, says Kumar, confronts the idea of history being unable to acknowledge or remember many of the losses among African Americans. According to scholars, *Beloved* gives voice to these forgotten storeys by having the ghost-child represent them. In Kumar's words, the novel "conceptualiz[es] the impacts of racial and racist oppression as the fallout from experiences of othering in the extreme". To sum up, characters' memories give flesh to what is missing in the formalised history, so Morrison does a postcolonial work of joining memories to fill the spaces where that past has vanished.

Beloved also uses language to express postcolonial ideas. He has found that the novel often highlights "how words are not able to accurately describe traumatic incidents". This is a typical postcolonial situation: colonial history means that many native storeys cannot be communicated. By including untellable moments and broken narrative (for example, the fragmentary telling of

Sethe's murder), Morrison dramatizes how ordinary language fails to capture suffering. In response, according to Lifson, the reader needs to get involved: "Beloved invites us to try to grasp an almost indescribable type of knowledge to better understand the lasting marks of slavery"cambridge.org. Therefore, the "invisible ink" in the novel points to historical details that are not immediately obvious – they need to be searched out and understood by the reader. Just as GayatriSpivak talks about the "subaltern's voice" needing to be interpreted by the reader, this film idea does the same. Morrison tells her tale in *Beloved* in a way that suggests readers think more deeply about America's hidden past.

The way Morrison handles spatial borders is similar to what postcolonial theory emphasises. The boundary between 124 Bluestone Road (the haunted house) and the outside world, between Cincinnati and Sweet Home, between slavery and freedom, are all permeable and contested. Paul D realises that Sweet Home, when he finally returns, is a shattered place that makes it hard to tell what is past and what is present. Such fragmentation shows how the colonial period broke and changed identities. In this way, *Beloved* also resonates with Frantz Fanon's and HomiBhabha's writings on how colonized subjects inhabit a "third space" of hybridity and *unheimlichkeit* (unhomeliness). By using shifting perspective, multiple voices and dreamlike parts, the novel shows that third space. Morrison does not simply depict a historical event; she performs the experience of being (and remembering) dislocated by colonial violence.

Memory, Trauma, and "Rememory" in *Beloved*

Memory studies teaches us the language for looking at how trauma is faced in *Beloved*. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as something that stays in our minds even after it happens because we are unable to work through it when it happens. White's novel depicts how the cruelty of slavery frequently appears in the minds of the characters because of their experiences. Her action of killing her daughter is an attempt to keep the past away, but *Beloved* keeps showing up anyway for Sethe. Paul D represents his hidden trauma with the image of a "tobacco tin" by his heart which he cannot find or accept. These symbols mean that Morrison agrees with the idea from trauma theory that trauma is still present in us, even a long time after the event.

Morrison called this kind of memory "rememory," since it is found outside the individual and can still be shared or called on by others. She said that rememory exists everywhere, in photos, footprints and dried flowers. It is somewhere you can travel to. It is not inside you" (Morrison *Beloved*). In *Beloved*, rememory is the place in which we see *Beloved*. He says rememory means "remembering something you had already forgotten." Characters move through rememory as if it were a place where they can walk back in time. Cultural memory, as theorised by trauma studies, also fits with this concept. Koh and Kwak believe the novel "speaks for the people who were not named and suffered under slavery"mdpi.com. For this reason, the novel looks at memory that reaches beyond Sethe's experience and includes the influences on later generations.

Lately, researchers have given more attention to how this happened as a group. As Koh and Kwak note, *Beloved* not only tells one story, but resurrects many unheard stories: "characters maintain their humanity despite dehumanizing conditions"mdpi.com and the narrative becomes, in effect, "a collective memory" of slaverymdpi.com. Morrison interweaves oral tradition (like Baby Suggs'

sermons) and folklore (*Beloved*'s monstrous transformations) to illustrate how trauma is preserved through culture. *Beloved* is viewed as a character who is literally a ghost and also a symbol of the effects of past suffering which continue to haunt descendants until they are acknowledged.

The idea of intersectionality adds further influence to trauma and memory in the book. Black feminist thought reveals that Black women's experiences of distress were usually left out of historical storeys. Morrison remedies this by putting Sethe's voice at the front. Memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg (in *The Implicated Subject*, 2019) writes of "multidirectional memory," where memories of different tragedies (such as slavery and the Holocaust) can interact. The author talked about this in particular, since she stated in interviews that the book is about all the marks of anguish shared by women from her time. The phrase "Sixty Million and more" emphasises that the feelings experienced should be felt by all. That follows Rothberg's view that recalling one act of suffering can help us also recall others. Keepers of memories or slaves, in *Beloved*'s world support one another while also expressing their political views.

From the perspective of trauma theory, *Beloved* points to the key role that witnessing plays. Paul D and Denver, as characters, must hear about Sethe's experiences to recognise their own troubled pasts. In Part Three, Denver's attempt to seek out the help of others to get rid of *Beloved* demonstrates how memory goes from being something individual to something the community faces together. It is similar to what trauma scholars call narrative cure: talking about what happened to improve your well-being. Until the Black community (represented by neighbors and ex-slaves) comes together, Sethe remains trapped. When Sethe's friends pray away *Beloved*, it stands for the entire group overcoming the group's awful memories through teamwork.

To sum up, the novel *Beloved* is like a literary haunting, since the past never really goes away. As Lifson states, reading Morrison's novel encourages us to pay attention to "the invisible, hidden parts of our past"cambridge.org. While government files are silent about personal hardship, the novel relays trauma through songs, dialogue and remembered storeys. The novel collects painful things that cannot be expressed or spoken, giving such sorrow a narrative form and a place to existmdpi.com. So, by using this form, *Beloved* displays how literature lives up to memory studies, by dealing with collective pain and pushing back against the gaps left in our past.

Gendered Trauma and Motherhood

The impact of slavery in *Beloved* is mostly experienced through motherhood which involves both race and gender in one experience. Killing her daughter made people say Sethe was cruel, but in the context of Black feminism it reflects her desperate attempt to make choices for herself. Being Sethe's mother defines her completely, so that she could give her life to save her children. Morrison states that Sethe's unwavering love is so strong that it defies the rules of conventional morality. The novel shows that Sethe killed her own child as a conscious act of saving herself and her family. Fundamentally, the novel never lets Sethe's decision occur in isolation. The child in the novel is used to translate Sethe's mental struggles into more concrete language. In the poem, the mother's ghost both stands for her lost child and her removed self. Sethe is seen as a mother figure by scholars through the novel *Beloved*. Sethe's lines "Beloved, she my daughter; she mine" bring together two roles – mother and daughter – in a way that covers the scene where she becomes both

the saviour and killer. Describing this collapse of identity, psychoanalytic trauma theory could stand for the fact that Sethe's personality breaks under the slavery experience and *Beloved* is that fragment.

Racism adds to the heartbreak confronting maternal health. Because slavery involved sexual violence which Toni Morrison left out of her novel, Sethe's memories of her children are filled with more fear. Concern over her daughters being raped or having their genitals mutilated influenced her severe action, many critics have noted. In Morrison's storey, *Beloved* coming back stirs memories not only connected to the trauma, but also to the abuse and violation that slaveholders inflicted on Black women. By bringing this trauma to the surface, Morrison aligns with feminist trauma theorists (like Caruth and Kristeva) who see rape as a defining historical wound for women. This is explained by Kumar, who points out that Morrison's storey asks readers to confront the damage racism causes to human life and dignity as a moral issue. Thus, Sethe's experience with motherhood shows how race and gender mistreatment come together most vividly. In addition, the novel underscores the difference between Sethe's ability to act freely and the community's upholding of traditional male authority. Sethe is stigmatised after her act despite Baby Suggs preaching about the worth of Black women's bodies in her sermons. This tension reflects postcolonial feminist critiques: even in resistance, traditional views (like reverence for motherhood) cannot fully contain the trauma caused by colonial violence. It criticises the tradition of Black women being expected to be strong and caring for their children without showing emotion. Sethe is forced to act in ways outside the bounds of official society's standards for motherhood because of the harsh cruelty of slavery.

Although the storey is mostly about Sethe's problems, *Beloved* also highlights the strength and friendship sisters share. The motherly attention Denver gives the ghost allows her to mend the distance from Sethe and this leads the community to accept healing. Having communal empathy and sharing storeys is suggested by Morrison, much like what many feminist theorists believe, for healing. The book ends with Sethe being recognised not only as a mother, but also as a person changed by the hardships she endured, thanks to memory-sharing among the women.

In conclusion, Morrison shows that patriarchy is tied into the racial oppression encountered by the characters in *Beloved*. From her original storey, it seems the pain of Black moms is strongly tied to the days of slavery. Morrison ensures that Sethe's storey is not easy by including it in *Beloved* which results in readers acknowledging their part in remembering together. Gibson notes that the characters stay human despite being constantly subjected to brutal situations which matters for Sethe's strong motherhood.

Postcolonial Memory and Collective Trauma

With a postcolonial perspective, the focus on memory and recovery in the book is emphasised. Postcolonial theory points out that narrative helps to raise the voices of those who were marginalised. The people in *Beloved* tell their own storeys in a way that is both contradictory and cohesive. According to Koh and Kwak, as a result of slavery's dehumanisation, *Beloved*'s characters no longer recognise themselves, but the novel also highlights how being part of a group is crucial for freed Black people. To put it another way, only by knowing what happens to each

other can characters understand and recover their identities. Stamp Paid telling Denver about the hauntings is what enables Denver to understand Sethe's private experiences. When the neighbours assemble at the end for the exorcism, Morrison is offering her view of collective healing.

This communal aspect resonates with memory scholarship on cultural memory (Jan Assmann). In the novel *Beloved*, slavery's legacy is found in both cultural practises like rituals and folklore and in certain locations like 124 and the Ohio house. She demonstrates that memories are found in those objects – the lake, the blackberries, Baby Suggs's church – to inspire readers to understand their place in the storey. Using Assmann's theory, *Beloved* becomes a storey of cultural memory, making private events into a history shared by all. The novel's non-linear narrative mirrors the way cultural memory is transmitted: through repetition and return (for instance, the recurring motif of the color red or the biblical story of the Prodigal Son that Paul D imagines).

Those looking at postcolonial literature have applauded this important achievement. Luana de Souza-Suther illustrates this by showing how *Beloved* stands out by focusing on how each generation learns about slavery, in form of trauma that is passed from parents to children unierfurt.de. Her 2019 study adds additional evidence: both Denver and *Beloved* act as representative figures for those born after the events. Scholars in the present day also focus on the relationship between *Beloved* and trauma witnessed by people around the world. Morrison's "rememory" prefigures concepts like Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory," suggesting that the novel itself has a second-generation voice (Denver and Baby Suggs) confronting first-generation trauma (Sethe and Paul D).

Empirical memory research gives us the chance to recognise Morrison's new ways of writing. According to van der Kolk, psychologist, trauma cannot always be put into words; it remains in the body and surroundings. The text reveals that our bodies are the place where we prove how strongly we can endure and scars, visions and sound are just as significant as words. The symptoms of memory are shown as hunger in *Beloved* and a burning chest in Sethe. Through their physical actions of eating, touching, crying, the characters begin to recognise their past. So, *Beloved* shows that overcoming trauma is an act done collectively rather than through solo analysis.

Conclusion

There is much to explore and discover in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* when reading it carefully using theoretical approaches. Using postcolonial, memory studies and gender frameworks has revealed novel aspects of the novel's approach to race, personal identity and historical distress. The postcolonial approach sees *Beloved* making slavery out to be a colonial trauma that can only be healed by exploring storeys from the perspective of oppressed or marginalised people. By mixing various cultures and highlighting community, the novel makes it clear that recovery depends on both personal memories and group observance. The authors explain how *Beloved* deals with memory: its storey jumps around and includes many hovering figures which asks readers to put together a fragmented past. A feminist reading points out that *Beloved* makes clear how the past affected Black mothers differently and how supporting each other can offer resistance.

We include recent academic works to emphasise that *Beloved* remains relevant to our world today. As an example, Charity Gibson interprets *Beloved* as representing two religions which is relevant

to our diverse society and Connor Lifson explains the novel's role in shaping the discussion about forgetting and remembering history today. As we look at these new perspectives, we realise that *Beloved* is a key part of talking about how oppressed communities look back on their histories. Overall, *Beloved* is a storey about memory after colonialism and a feminist critique, shown through its characters' lives. It calls on readers to join in the act of remembering, not only to hear the storey. But according to Kumar, as Morrison argues, we need to remember and claim all those lives that were neglected by slavery's records and this is what forms the basis of African American identity. In their opinion, Morrison's writing makes it clear that identity is found again through being part of a community and sharing storeys. In the end, *Beloved* is a strong example of how writing can preserve the storeys of the past generation after generation, making sure they continue to shape our understanding of self.

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