



Transhistorical Trauma: Depiction of Casual Racism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Trauma literature talks about the experience that goes beyond a person's mental framework that continues to haunt them. The novel uniquely presents the psychological impact of trauma through the effects of transhistorical trauma. The present paper sheds light on the transhistorical trauma through various traumatic events such as 'casual racism' that happens in the life of Sethe, the protagonist. It depicts the trauma that all the characters face, taking up the scenario of a victim-turned perpetrator showing how trauma can affect people in extreme circumstances proving them to be neither innocent nor guilty.

Keywords: trauma, transhistorical, racism, perpetrator

Introduction

Early trauma theory posits an event-based theory of trauma. Cathy Caruth initiated the contemporary field of trauma studies in literature, and argues for "event [that] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth 4) stemming from the "structure of the experience" of an event returning to haunt the victim. She has advocated theories based on punctual trauma that stems from a singular event. Theorists like Laura Brown and Maria Root developed the concept of "insidious trauma" (Brown 107) challenging this limited definition of trauma. This theory is acclaimed as a feminist model that stems from the need to describe the trauma of women who suffer from "abusive situations that, while part of their everyday life, were nevertheless traumatic" (Gibbs 16). Stef Craps and Gert Buelens explain that "the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and

other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for” (3-4) in view with bridging the gap between the insidious model of trauma and (post)colonialism, But, this appears to be crucial, as it describes trauma and every singular event. In other words, the trauma of slavery is both insidious and punctual. There are incessant encounters with oppression, abuse, and dehumanization, as well as singular events that return to haunt the victim proving it to highly traumatic. This has also led to the controversial theory that an entire culture or race could be affected by the trauma of past generations, even years after which highlights the concept of transgenerational transmission with respect to the theories of collective and cultural memory and trauma. Nancy Van Styvendale describes trans/historical trauma as “cumulative, collective, intergenerational” trauma that is not fixed in one single event “even as it demands our attention to historically specific atrocities” (203). Her idea of trans/historical trauma relating to those who still suffer from traumatic incidents that she describes as “ongoing domestic colonization” or “neocolonial oppression” (208) differs from theories of collective or cultural trauma theories that focus on how people in the present are affected by the past trauma of their ancestors.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is about a woman named Sethe who manages to escape slavery with her children in 1856. Arriving at her new home after twenty-eight days where she is finally supposed to be free, the slave owner abuses and dehumanizes her by reclaiming her and her children. Being in trauma, she murders one child and attempts to murder others and herself without a second thought. The protagonist here serves as a perpetrator of murder herself which has made the book controversial under debate whether this act is one of resistance, madness or protection. a protagonist who is a victim of colonial or neocolonial oppression and racism, who suffers trauma, and who becomes a perpetrator of murder or violence. The novel demonstrates, the effects of trans/historical trauma, which is evident in *Beloved*. A wider gap is seen between the original collective trauma of Native people and their present-day traumatic experiences that cover both the period of slavery and the aftermath of post-Civil War emancipation.

The Aftermath of Slavery

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is termed as a “formative text in literary trauma studies,” (Luckhurst 90) that takes place during and directly after the period of slavery and the Civil War in the United States. The novel is based on the true story of Margaret Garner. Toni Morrison writes in the foreword of the novel that, after reading about the story of

Margaret Garner, she wanted to write this novel to “invent [Margaret’s] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues” (xi). By bringing in the historical news into the novel, Morrison has thrown the reader “ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the Alan Gibbs discusses how *Beloved* and a few other books helped to formulate the conventions of trauma literature, which include temporal disruptions such as fragmentation, non-linear chronology, shifts in narrating voice, etc. for the purpose of “represent[ing] or attempt[ing] to transmit trauma.”(Morrison, 27). The protagonist, Sethe, is a former slave who escapes with her children and is found twenty-eight days later by her slave owner and abuser. She murders her infant daughter and attempts to kill the other children and herself to save herself and her children from the tortures of her slave owner called the ‘school teacher’. At the outset, the novel relates the traumatic experiences of slavery that include physical and mental abuse.

Neoslave Narrative

The novel presents Sethe’s act of perpetration more than her culpability. It highlights indirectly the responsibility of perpetrators in the projection of racism, oppression, or trauma. In this way, the novel stands as a neoslave narrative. Yogita Goyal suggests that one of the functions of neoslave narratives is to “generat[e] a fuller consciousness of the past as with the transmission of memory in the present” (Goyal, 148). She argues that while historical accounts can provide factual information about slavery, “imaginative literature” in the form of neoslave narratives can capture what the slaves thought and felt (150). However, most neoslave narratives, like *Beloved*, also reveal the difficulty to attempt to relate the experience of trauma and the truth of slavery. *Beloved* comes under the trauma of slavery which can be characterized as insidious trauma, that describes traumatic situations that are a part of everyday life (Brown 107). In the novel, there are various singular events with traumatic impact on the victim in addition to the insidious trauma of living within and being a victim of slavery. Schoolteacher and his nephews, the so called “conventional” perpetrators who control the slaves, subject Sethe, Paul D, and other slaves to dehumanization. A slave is considered property just like the plantation they run rather than a person. Sethe relates an experience that is especially traumatic for her in the first-person perspective. She expresses that she is sharing this experience for the first time only to explain to *Beloved* what has made her kill her. She explains how she discovers the schoolteacher and his nephews who have

been measuring her physical features and comparing them with animals. She has overheard schoolteacher saying, "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (Morrison 228). This horrifying dehumanization as an experience could not be shared by her with anyone for years. In the beginning of the novel, Sethe seems to be speaking to Denver about how schoolteacher has a book that he would write in every night after asking them questions and observing them. She hints that she still believes "it was them questions that tore Sixo up. Tore him up for all time" (Morrison 44).

Paul D has experienced the dehumanization both from schoolteacher and from his time in the chain gang after abolition. He relates this experience one night in a conversation with Sethe, and says that schoolteacher has put an iron bit typically used for animals in his mouth. He felt inferior to the roosters that are walking freely near him. This excerpt reveals how the dehumanization he has experienced has stripped him of his sense of self. Paul D is dehumanized when he is forced to sleep inside a box underground when he is in the chain gang shortly after the emancipation of slaves. A rope is connected to his neck and iron is clamped around his ankles and wrists as if he is some kind of wild animal. The box is like a cage underground, in which "anything that crawled or scurried" could share it. He also feels so dehumanized that he has lost control of his own hands (Morrison 126). The white men watching over the chain gang ridicule, mistreat, and beat the black men (126-128). Paul D's time in the chain gang reflects the trans/historical aspect. The narrator reveals Paul D's thoughts that what he has shared is only a small segment of what he has experienced, and "[h]e would keep the rest...in that tobacco tin buried in his chest" where he kept traumatic memories he could not bear to face (Morrison 86). Sethe's also has difficulties facing her past trauma (86). Paul D is unable to share his full experience with Sethe, as he has trouble facing it himself. The second experience from the chain gang is revealed through Paul D's focalization.

Mother-Child separation

The text presents the trauma of mother-child separation through the love between Sethe and Beloved. At Sweet Home, schoolteacher and his nephews assault her and steal her breast milk. She states, "They held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby" (Morrison 236). An atrocious level of mother-child separation is depicted by the mean action of not taking away her baby, but stealing milk, the crucial part of her motherhood, to feed and

care for her child. Even though it is her own breast milk, she states that it belonged to her baby. Sethe considers more of the milk than her being assaulted. For Sethe, her own mother was not able to breastfeed or take care of her. A woman named “Nan had to nurse whitebabies and [her] too...The little whitebabies got it first and [she] got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call [her] own” (Morrison 236).

There are several similarities between Sethe and her mother, and Sethe and Beloved. One is that Sethe's mother also has committed infanticide. She has been impregnated on a boat to America many times by the white crew. She throws all the white babies off the boat, except Sethe, whose father is a black man. Sethe's mother shows her a mark that the slaveowners have branded onto her skin. When Sethe asks her mother one too to show her love and oneness with her mother, her mother slaps her (72). The implication of this scene is that Sethe's mother knows what it meant to have that mark, and does not want her daughter to be branded property, as well. Similarly, Sethe does not want Beloved to be the property of the slaveowners, and therefore kills her to “protect” her. Sethe also states that she has told Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law who lives in freedom with Sethe and her children for a short while before she dies that she would not live without her children. Baby Suggs has feels the traumatic loss of separation from each one of her eight children, and therefore knows more than anyone that it is dangerous to love but she could not actually prevent herself from loving her children. She and many other characters in the novel must feel the trauma of losing the ones they love. Some scholars argue that people who die cannot be considered traumatized, because being traumatized implies a mode of “living on” (Rothberg 138).

Beloved longs to be with Sethe, yet also accuses Sethe. She states, “I cannot lose her again...I follow her... I reach for her...Her smiling face is the place for me” (Morrison 250-252). Yet, she blames Sethe as “the face that left me” (Ibid 252). This suggests that Sethe has had the choice, and she chooses to leave her. Beloved's perspective reveals the varying emotions she feels as a result of being forcibly separated from her mother. She longs for a connection to her mother, but blames Sethe for “leaving” her. The chapters from Sethe's and Beloved's perspectives work together to show the individual perspectives of the characters on Sethe's act of perpetration. Sethe shares her emotions about the trauma that schoolteacher and his nephews have put her through, that leads her to kill her daughter to protect her from them. She does not want her daughter to be measured of her parts comparing them with animals as she has been inflicted with. Beloved and Sethe plunge into madness as Beloved continuously

blames Sethe for taking her life. Sethe feels that murdering her daughter is better than allowing her to suffer through the assaults and dehumanization that she has suffered.

Perpetration of racism

There are characters who present themselves as good people, but are actually complicit in the perpetration of racism. Mr. Garner, the former slaveholder of Sweet Home serves as a stark contrast to schoolteacher though does not outwardly abuse the slaves the way schoolteacher does, but forces them to work against their will. Sethe's husband Halle who works extra hours to earn money to free his elderly mother, Baby Suggs. But, Garner believes that he is being a good person by agreeing to give Baby Suggs her freedom, but he only makes this possible if Halle works grueling hours to free an elderly woman who "walk[ed] like a three-legged dog" and was barely useful to Garner anymore. Therefore, he is still participating in the oppressive system of slavery. Other less conventional perpetrators in the text are the Bodwins, abolitionists who help runaway slaves escape and reach freedom but have a racist, caricatured figurine in their home depicting a black boy on his knees with bulging eyes, hair that was "a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads," and a red gaping mouth. At the bottom of the figurine were the words "At Yo Service" (Morrison 301). The fact that they own and display such a figurine that mocks black people (in a room that many black people in the community visit), shows that they are implicated in the perpetration of racism in a more indirect way even though they do not perpetrate violence and actively oppose slavery. The Black community that Sethe is a part of after slavery also consists of implicated subjects, and the text suggests that they may be held partially responsible for the fate of Sethe and Beloved., Baby Suggs holds a feast for the whole community shortly after Sethe arrives at Baby Suggs' house after escaping the plantation. The members of the community become angry that the feast is abundant as the display of Baby Suggs' "reckless generosity" and "uncalled-for pride" (Ibid 162). As a result of these spiteful feelings, the members of the community do not warn Sethe that schoolteacher is approaching her house to take her and her children back to slavery. If they had warned her, she could have escaped and avoid killing her daughter. The novel reveals the community's neglectful actions through Stamp Paid's focalization. Like a flag hoisted, this righteousness telegraphed and announced the faggot, the whip, the fist, the lie, long before it went public. Nobody warned them... (Ibid 185). It is implied that the members of the community fail to warn Sethe due to their jealousy and ill-will.

Conclusion

Through *Beloved*, Morrison highlights the effects of the psychological trauma through Beloved who makes an ambiguous appearance midway through the novel, mirroring and building upon this trauma. As the novel progresses, she terribly resembles Sethe. Beloved necessitates Denver's transition into the role of caretaker, allows Sethe to escape the struggles and trauma she associates with motherhood. Beloved's embodiment of Sethe and Denver's traumatization help them move beyond the moratorium inflicted upon them by slavery and murder. Morrison has tried to put the burden of all her characters upon the shoulders of Beloved though she never fully establishes herself as an individual but has taken up the role as the physical embodiment of Sethe and Denver's broken selves. Thus, Toni Morrison has explicitly exhibited the psychological trauma making it universal though it revolves around the individual.

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