



Ritual and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

This article interprets ritual as a healing process of trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It shows how slavery harms African Americans mentally, culturally and across generations. It focuses on how Morrison employs communal ritual to heal such wounds. The study examines Sethe's painful memory, *Beloved*'s haunting presence, and the community's role in helping the healing process. It uses a qualitative textual approach to analyze storytelling, memory, bodily expression, spiritual gathering, and exorcism as ritual practices through which suppressed pain is recognized and transformed. The article argues that Morrison presents healing as a shared cultural and spiritual process shaped by African American memory and community support. In this way, *Beloved* presents ritual as a restorative practice through which trauma is voiced, communal bonds are renewed, and historical memory becomes a source of survival.

Keywords: African American, collective memory, identity, ritual healing, spiritual resistance, trauma

Introduction

This study focuses on how the painful memory of slavery can be understood and healed when words, personal memory, and Western therapy are not enough to address it. In the novel, author asserts that the slavery damages not only the body but also memory, identity, motherhood, family, and community life. She claims that trauma cannot be resolved if it is repressed. Her idea finds its authenticity Sethe's silence, *Beloved*'s return, Denver's isolation, and the community's eventual intervention. Therefore, this article focuses on how ritual functions as a healing process of trauma. This study examines how Morrison uses ritual practices such as storytelling, remembrance, communal gathering, spiritual sound, bodily expression, and exorcism to transform traumatic memory into collective healing. The study answers how Morrison represents slavery as psychological and intergenerational trauma. It also explores how rituals help the characters confront traumatic memory. It further unveils in what ways communal participation becomes necessary for healing in the novel. The study is limited to interpreting ritual as a healing process for trauma and does not attempt to examine the novel's political, historical, and

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feminist dimensions in detail. This article argues that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* presents ritual as a process of healing from trauma. Through storytelling, remembering, singing, praying, communal gathering, bodily presence, and the exorcism of *Beloved*, Morrison shows that the wounds of slavery cannot be healed through silence or individual effort alone. Healing becomes possible only when traumatic memory is recognized, shared, and transformed through collective ritual action.

Review of Literature

The novel has received more interpretations with a focus on traumatic events experienced by the characters. The contribution by Cathy Caruth in her trauma theory is valuable in understanding the fragmented, repetitive and resistant representation of memory made by Morrison. Caruth believes that traumatic experiences return belatedly as haunting and repetitive but not through remembering (4). According to Judith Herman, recovery involves testifying and remembering. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman asserts that for one to recover from trauma, he or she needs to be provided with safe environment and social support (155). The idea explains the importance of the communal engagement portrayed by Morrison where the collective approach replaces the individual one. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy claims that *Beloved* is a re-telling of the history of African Americans through collective narrative and the resistance of erasure of history (37). In the same way, Marianne Hirsch's work revolves around the generational transmission of the trauma experienced. She discusses how the people know about their history despite not having experienced it. They even go ahead and inherit the emotions from it (22). Barbara Christian, on the other hand, has stressed on the African-American tradition used

by Morrison. She reveals the importance of Black oral tradition, spirituality, and ritual for Morrison's work. According to her, this is an alternative epistemology to Western rationality (11). The women's ritual gathering represents a communal cure to restore the balance between the living and the dead. Consequently, the ritual is symbolic without looking into its therapeutic value. Such a gap necessitates a closer examination of ritual as a means of healing trauma. The current research will contribute to existing knowledge of Morrison's perspective on healing through community, spirituality, and culture. The research questions include the following: How is the issue of slavery in Morrison's novel represented as psychological and intergenerational trauma? In what way can rituals assist in facing traumatic memory? When does communal involvement become essential in the healing process?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual method. Morrison's *Beloved* is used as the primary text, while trauma theory and critical writings on African American memory, spirituality, and community are used as secondary sources. The study applies thematic and interpretive analysis to examine selected textual moments related to traumatic memory, storytelling, spiritual gathering, bodily expression, and communal exorcism. The analysis first identifies scenes of trauma and repression, then interprets how ritual practices help characters articulate, share, and transform their suffering. In this sense, the methodology is organized around the relationship between trauma and ritual healing rather than around a general historical reading of slavery.

Ritual as a Healing Process of Trauma

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reconceptualizes American history, and reconstructs it through the acts and consciousness of African-American slaves.

The novel constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical process. Sethe, the central character, describes the relationship between the individual and the historical unconscious: "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, saw is still out there. Right in the place here it happened" (36). This passage shows that trauma is not only private but also tied to place and history. Sethe's re-memory becomes a ritual problem because the past must be faced, witnessed, and transformed through shared recognition.

Sethe's memories exist as fragments of a historical memory. Likewise, the individual process of recollection or re-memory can be reproduced on a historical level. Sethe's process of learning to live her past is a model for all the African-Americans who must confront Sethe's past as part of their own past, a collective past that lives right there where they live. Arnold Rampersad, in his discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Soul of Black Folk*, describes the recovery of history as both a national personal necessity:

[Du Bois's] point of view is clear. Admitting and exploring the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for a black American, but only by doing so can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and American and Afro-American culture in general. The normal price evasion of the fact of slavery is intellectual and spiritual death. Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing the temporality of the institution, finally begin to transcend it. (123)

The repression of the historical past is as

psychologically damaging as the repression of personal trauma. Morrison negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well.

Ron Eyerman's concept of cultural trauma helps explain how slavery becomes not only an individual wound but also a collective memory that shapes African American identity across generations. In this sense, Sethe's suffering in *Beloved* represents both personal trauma and the larger historical trauma of a community (Eyerman). The novel challenges the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism. Morrison delves into the stories and souls of black folk to tap resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing.

For Morrison ritual is a model for the healing process. African religious traditions often understand healing as a communal and spiritual process rather than as an individual act alone. John Mbiti explains that African life is deeply connected with community, ancestors, and spiritual continuity; this idea helps clarify why Morrison presents healing through collective ritual and communal participation rather than through isolated self-recovery (Mbiti). Rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations such as dance, song, story, and other activities are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world. The process of reconstructing the fragmented story parallels Sethe's psychological recovery: repressed fragments of the personal and historical past are retrieved and reconstructed. Morrison uses history to create a distinctly African-American voice and vision which invoke the spiritual and imaginative power to teach to heal.

The ritual of healing Sethe's re-memory and confrontation with her past corresponds to the three sections of the novel. In part one, the arrival of Paul D, then of Beloved,

forces Sethe to confront her past in her incompatible roles as a slave and as a mother. Moving from the fall of 1873 to the winter, the second part describes Sethe's period of atonement, during which she is enveloped by the past, isolated in her house with Beloved, who forces her to suffer, over and over again, all the pain and shame of the past. Finally, part three is Sethe's rituals "clearing" in which the women of the community aid her in casting out the voracious Beloved, and Sethe experiences a repetition of her scene of trauma with a difference- this time she aims her murderous hand at the white man who threatens her child. These three phases clearly show the history of slavery. In part one, stories of slavery are accumulated through fragmented recollections, culminating in the revelation of Sethe's murder of her child in the last chapter of the section. In part two, Morrison presents the internal voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in a ritual chant of possession, while Paul D and Stamp Paid are also overwhelmed by the legacy of slavery. The last part of the novel is the reader's "clearing," achieved through the conversation of Paul D and Stamp Paid and hopeful reunion of Sethe and Paul D. The novel concludes, with Denver's emergence as the new teacher providing a model for a pedagogy and the opportunity for the reconstruction of slave history from a black woman's perspective.

The three phases are supported by several textual moments that connect trauma to ritual healing. At the beginning of the novel, the house itself is marked by haunting: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison 3). This opening shows that Sethe's trauma is not only psychological but also attached to domestic space, memory, and the ghost of the dead child. Later, Sethe's description of rememory explains why the past cannot simply disappear; it remains present and returns repeatedly through place, image, and feeling. In the second part, Beloved's

presence forces Sethe to repeat and confess her painful past, turning the house into a closed ritual space of possession, suffering, and atonement. In the final part, the women of the community gather outside 124 and use prayer, song, sound, and bodily presence to confront Beloved. Their collective action becomes a ritual of exorcism because Sethe's private trauma is finally taken up by the community. Thus, Morrison links the structure of the novel with the healing process: traumatic memory first returns, then possesses the sufferer, and finally becomes bearable through communal ritual intervention.

Ritual activities that bring about healing for trauma in *Beloved* include storytelling, remembering, singing, praying, coming together in community, being physically present, naming the dead who were forgotten, and casting out the ghost from 124. This is because ritual healing takes the pain of trauma from being kept silent and personal to becoming public and spoken about through healing practices. Sethe's trauma is destructive while it is still kept inside 124 and within her own memory. When stories are told, when the past is named, and when the community takes part, the memory becomes less powerful as a private pain. Therefore, ritual healing does not mean forgetting the past; it means accepting the past and including it in communal memory.

According to Morrison, African-Americans can, through storytelling, retrieve their ancestors from the ash heap of American history. Marilyn Sanders Mobley argues that Morrison's fiction uses folk memory, myth, and narrative traditions to recover suppressed histories. This view supports the idea that storytelling in *Beloved* functions as a ritual act through which the characters give shape to traumatic memory and reconnect themselves with communal history (Mobley). This is the process she calls "giving blood to the scraps," or what Karla F.C. Holloway, reviewing *Beloved* for *Black American*

Literature Forum, calls “remembering history – the life-saving antidote to an historical and historiographical disremembering”(179-82). Morrison suggests that, looking for a lost generation, we do not get a polite, manageable ghost; we get “Sixty million and more” (v) of the “disremembered and uncounted for” (274). These about ghosts, ancestors, history, and narrative are affirmed in a straightforward way by the novel’s epigraph:

I will call them my people,
Which were not my people;
And her beloved, Which was not
beloved. (vii)

The epigraph connects to ritual healing by turning the forgotten and rejected into beloved people. Morrison’s biblical echo becomes an act of naming and reclaiming, restoring the disremembered dead to community and memory. It prepares the novel’s larger healing movement: slavery’s lost and silenced victims must be remembered before healing can begin.

Reclaiming an individual also means reclaiming an entire race, or cultural group. The communal reclaiming is exactly what happens when *Beloved* returns to 124 Bluestone Road: “Looking for their “beloved, Sethe and Denver get their people, too. All sixty million of them” (150). Morrison articulates her effort expressly rooted in American culture, to contest Western culture’s veneration of individuality:

The cotemporary autobiography tends to be how I got over – look at me alone – let show you how I did it. It is inimical, I think, to some of the characteristics of Black artistic expression and influence ... I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice thing don’t always happen to the totally self – reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. To say, see – this is what will happen.

(Morrison, “Rootedness” 339-44)

For the benefit of anyone who might need convincing that the history of African – Americans qualifies as suppressed,

destroyed, or denied, Morrison lays down her evidence before her book even begins, with her dedication of the novels to sixty million or more.

In her 1987 interview with Walter Clemons, Morrison explains this figure as “the best educated guess at number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ship” (75). It is an illuminating fact that those, including Morrison, who want to and teach the history of African – American atrocity are often forced to guess: “Sixty Million and more.” Even though the slave traders were more murderous than the Nazis, they were less bureaucratically meticulous, and their records have only recently come to light in historical studies of slave trades. Morrison describes the absence from the American cultural record of slavery’s full story: “I went to the slave museums, but they weren’t much help: little handcraft things slaves had made. No chains or restraining devices. In Brazil, though, they’ve kept everything. I got a lot of help down there” (qtd. in Clemons 75). The list of gaps and forgetting might go on. Even media, schools, or the history books cannot record all this things. People seem to suffer from partial or total loss of memory about what may well be the ugliest part of the past; *Beloved*, the novel reminds this. What is true for the novel as whole, and particularly for *Beloved*’s interior monologue, turns out to be true. In a spectacular way, it bears re-reading.

Having traced some of the relationships in the novel among ghosts, history, literature, and politics, we can return to those brief lines from Romans, which has been mentioned in the novel’s epigraph, and wring from them some surprising and disturbing meanings. Morrison might mean to relate it to a central issue of the novel and of contemporary African-American cultural work: the struggle to reclaim one’s history even while others distort, suppress, and deny it. In puzzling out the

poly-generational identities of the character Beloved and tracking down the full story of the novel's epigraph, historical, spiritual, and political work of Morrison's book can be emulated and participated in: dragging the history of "Not- my-people" from the mire of the past. Although the novel deals with history, its main concern is not history alone. Morrison presents historical memory as a wound that requires ritual healing. The ghost, the house, the repeated memories, and the community's final gathering all show that slavery survives as trauma in the lives of the characters. Therefore, the historical discussion becomes meaningful only when it is connected to the ritual process through which the characters confront and transform this trauma.

Both a historical novel and a ghost story, *Beloved* addresses the historical period known as "Reconstruction." Privileging "history as life lived" over "history as imagined," Morrison becomes the truest of historians, because the novels of the ways in which "the master discourse" has repressed the history of the oppressed, those "left voiceless by the history books and by accounts, such as slave narratives, that obeyed the fixed rules of a genre and erased the other's point of view" (Morrison, 88). It seems that the whole process of making history with the tools of master reading/writing is reflected in the character of Schoolteacher who represents scientific racism. The white slave master who stands for the normative white male system, the creation of knowledge from a racist hypothesis and its link to power. Schoolteacher writes books in which this knowledge becomes truth, then that is passed down to later generations. Milking Sethe like a cow, taking her baby's milk, is both an application of the lesson and an abrupt lateralization of the fact that slaves used to nurse the white children. It shows the horrors of slavery and the rape of Sethe's milk is a story of the historical position of the slave women in a racist economy.

Jean Wyatt's discussion of the maternal body in *Beloved* is useful for understanding how Sethe's trauma is linked to motherhood, bodily violation, and symbolic loss. Sethe's stolen milk and her relationship with Beloved show that slavery attacks not only physical freedom but also maternal identity and emotional wholeness (Wyatt). The statement, "the nephew, the one who had nursed her" (150) underscores how power deprives the slaves of any agency. This scene is related to trauma and ritual healing because Sethe's violated motherhood becomes one of the central wounds that ritual must later confront. The stealing of her milk reduces her maternal body to an object of slavery, and this humiliation returns repeatedly in her memory. Morrison shows that such trauma cannot be healed by private silence. It requires communal recognition, storytelling, and spiritual intervention so that the wound of slavery can be named and shared.

Official history is pushed to the margins while seeing through slaves' eyes. The Civil War does not seem to make sense: "The War had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it" (52). Slaves were used as a manual labor. History is also redefined as the history of consciousness of those who took part in everyday tasks. Morrison has used documents to ground the narrative in historical reality. The bit, the shackles, the collar, the whip, the chain gang – all these elements derive from identifiable historical sources. Their fictionalization is an attempt to imagine the context, both material and psychological, in which these traces can be relocated. Morrison asserts that "memory" is a form of willed creation. The bit, for instance, is worn by Paul D when Halle witnesses the rape of Sethe, a detail withheld from Sethe until Paul D owns up to it: "I had a bit in my mouth" (69). It is one of the reasons why he does not intervene. The bit is also brought into the metaphoric exploration of the face. Sethe's

mother had worn it to such an extent that she wore a permanent smile: “when she was not smiling, she smiled” (203). In the same way, the evocation of the forbidden slave marriage yields the image of the making and unmaking of the wedding dress as a metaphor for the resourcefulness of the slaves and self-reflexively explains the aesthetics of the novel.

In this way, the history of slavery, which Morrison chronicles, is thus real, although the master discourse could carry on without ever acknowledging it. At the end of the book it is known how invisibility is borne when the text stresses how loss can only be the expression of subjectivity: “She [Beloved] can be lost because no one is looking for her” (274). This statement shows that forgetting itself becomes a form of violence. Beloved is “lost” because the dead and traumatized have not been properly remembered by the living. Ritual healing begins when the community starts looking for the lost through memory, naming, song, and collective presence. Thus, Morrison connects healing with the ethical responsibility to remember those erased by slavery.

Morrison makes the master-slave relationship on the plantation very complex by portraying Garner as a benevolent slave master who wants his slaves to be “men” (10). The inherent contradiction between his assertion and the impossibility of its accomplishment is clear in Paul D’s realization that “definitions belonged to the definers”(190). Baby Suggs’s freedom is bought by her son Halle, who is used as “labor” to pay for her, when she is too old for it to mean anything. The white mistress Lillian Garner is also soft-hearted like her husband, who gives Sethe earrings for her wedding that the latter cannot wear but steals away, sewn in the seam of her dress. Her muteness and growth on her neck at the end of her life translate the inner corruption of the system and echo Paul D’s forced voicelessness through wearing a bit.

The unvoiced and dismembered historical-cultural memory of the Middle Passage is cultivated in *Beloved* along genealogical lines. It goes back three generations from Beloved to Sethe and to Sethe’s mother, who is the link to African reality. While the history of the Middle Passage is handed down by Nan, Beloved as African daughter is recreated in the middle section where she is the girl-child on slave ship. After Sethe’s and Denver’s monologues, the text graphically reproduces the gradual coming to language of the slave girl in the hull in increasingly more grammatical sentences. She moves from timelessness of an eternal present “All of it is now” (210), to the loss of the mother “she goes in the water” (212), and to her final desire for fusion “I am looking for the join” (213). Now the novel points out toward the construction of history from primary sources, such as newspapers and affects a critique of historicism.

On the individual level, *Beloved* illustrates the contradictions inherent in remembering a traumatic experience. The characters move from refusal to acknowledge the past to confrontation and to reconciliation with the pain made bearable through retelling. Sethe and Paul D illustrate that position. Remembering and making peace takes love. Denver is temporarily spared the trauma of the past although she will eventually have to face it. It finally catches up with her in shape of Beloved. The first memory of Sweet Home--“the picture of the men coming to nurse her” (6)--arises even when Sethe is not directly connected by an oil factory stimulus, such as “scent of ink”: “She worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious” (6). The splash of water and the size of her shoes and stockings are enough to reactive the past. The surge of memory cannot be blocked since it works through the unconscious.

Storytelling also functions as a ritual

of healing in the novel. Sethe's traumatic memories return in fragments, and she often tries to avoid them because they are unbearable. However, the process of narrating the past allows hidden suffering to become visible. When memory is spoken, shared, and heard, it begins to move from private torment into collective recognition. Morrison's idea of "rememory" shows that the past is not dead; it remains present in places, bodies, and relationships. Ritual storytelling therefore becomes necessary because it allows the characters to revisit the painful past without being completely destroyed by it. Through storytelling, the characters begin to reconnect broken personal memory with communal history. Storytelling is therapeutic because it organizes experiences that were earlier disjointed, suppressed, or unspeakable. Memories of Sethe come back to her in fragmented form through images, physical feelings, and unexpected bursts of emotion. By telling the story, these disjointed pieces of information are given shape and order in the narrative structure. This enables Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and everyone else to view the experience of trauma as something imposed on people by slavery, rather than as personal failure. For this reason, storytelling is considered a ritual performance, since it turns private agony into a collective historical awareness.

The exorcism of Beloved should not be understood only as the removal of a ghost. It is also a symbolic ritual through which the community confronts the unhealed trauma of slavery. Beloved represents the dead child, the Middle Passage, forgotten ancestors, and the historical wounds that have not been properly mourned. Her presence forces Sethe, Denver, and the community to face what has been silenced. When the women gather outside 124, their ritual action transforms haunting into healing. The ritual of women outside 124 takes the lead among all the rituals presented in the novel. Instead of healing

Sethe just through discussion, the women perform healing through sound, prayers, singing, motion, and bodily presence. It is the power of their voices that makes a spiritual break in the circle of Sethe's pain. The singing and praying of the community have an exorcising effect since they treat Beloved not as a problem of the individual family but as the trauma of history. The ritual presence of the women shows Sethe that she does not have to keep in herself the burden of slavery, motherhood, murder, and guilt. Their collective sound breaks the isolation of Sethe's house and restores the broken relationship between the individual and the community. Morrison thus presents ritual as a cultural process through which buried pain is acknowledged, shared, and released.

In this way, Morrison depicts the healing process through ritual to be a gradual one as opposed to one big magical moment. To begin with, the trauma resurfaces in the form of haunting and re-memory. Secondly, the trauma is relived and reinforced in the possession of 124 by Beloved. Lastly, the trauma is faced up to through ritual. The remembering, telling stories, singing, praying, gathering, and the exorcism of Beloved serve the characters well because it brings back together the broken individual and the community as a whole.

Conclusion

The novel is an expression of the harsh experiences of African Americans whose voices were silenced and excluded from history. Morrison demonstrates that the legacy of slavery still has an effect on memory, identity, family, and community life by relating individual pain to the historical pain of people whose voices were never heard. In the novel *Beloved*, memory is painful but important because suppression results in loneliness, fragmentation, and a loss of spirituality. Healing does not come from individual realization but from communal consciousness and responsibility.

Ritual in the novel is the practice of healing trauma and not just a magical or historical component of the story. Rituals that heal trauma in the novel include storytelling, remembering, collective listening, naming the dead, gathering at 124, praying, singing, physical presence, and exorcising Beloved. These rituals work by converting trauma from a private experience into a communal responsibility. Sethe's healing begins only after the community steps in to help her confront what she cannot face alone.

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