



Haunting wounds: trauma and systemic violence in toni morrison's *beloved*

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Abstract

Trauma resulting from slavery remains a central concern in african american literary discourse, particularly in how memory, identity, and historical violence are represented. Toni morrison's *beloved* presents post-slavery trauma not simply as a past event, but as an enduring condition that continues to shape subjectivity and social life. Previous studies have largely approached trauma in the novel through psychological and memory-based frameworks, often focusing on individual experience while paying less attention to its systemic roots in institutional slavery and racialized power. In response to this gap, this study aims to examine how trauma in *beloved* is represented through characterization and narration, and how it operates as a systemic phenomenon. This study uses a qualitative textual analysis approach, drawing on selected passages from the novel through purposive sampling. The analysis focuses on key characters, including sethe, paul d, baby suggs, stamp paid, denver, and schoolteacher, and explores how their experiences reflect different dimensions of trauma. The data are analyzed through thematic clustering to identify recurring patterns such as repression, fragmentation, isolation, and inherited suffering. The findings suggest that trauma in *beloved* is not only psychological, but also embodied and socially transmitted, shaped by structures of institutional violence and dehumanization. Ultimately, the study shows that morrison portrays trauma as a lasting structural condition rather than solely an individual experience.

Keywords: Trauma theory; systemic trauma; slavery; characterization; Beloved.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Trauma remains a central concern in post-slavery discourse, particularly in African American literary narratives that examine memory, identity, and historical violence (Caruth, 1996; Luckhurst, 2008). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* portrays the legacy of slavery not merely as past suffering but as an enduring condition that shapes subjectivity, embodiment, and social belonging. Through fragmented memory, bodily inscription, and haunted domestic space, the novel represents trauma as both

historically rooted and persistently lived, positioning *Beloved* as a significant text in representations of post-slavery experience.

Previous studies have explored memory, haunting, and intergenerational transmission of trauma in *Beloved*, emphasizing Morrison's use of narrative fragmentation, repetition, and spectral presence to convey the difficulty of articulating enslaved experience (Caruth, 1996; Gordon, 2008; Hartman, 1997). Many of these studies tend to focus on the psychological and emotional impact of trauma, including its effects on memory, identity, gender, and forms of violence experienced by the characters. However, while these perspectives are important, they often frame trauma primarily as an individual experience. As a result, less attention has been given to how trauma in the novel is also shaped by the system of slavery itself particularly through institutional practices such as surveillance, control, and dehumanization. This suggests that there is still a need to examine trauma not only as personal suffering, but as a systemic phenomenon that actively constructs and transforms the characters' identities and sense of self.

Addressing this gap, this study examines trauma in *Beloved* as both representational and systemic. The objective of this study is to analyze how trauma is depicted through characterization and narration, and how it is simultaneously constructed as a systemic experience shaped by institutional structures of slavery and its aftermath. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the analysis focuses on key characters Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, Denver, and Schoolteacher to identify recurring patterns of repression, fragmentation, isolation, and inherited suffering.

This study contributes to trauma and post-slavery literary scholarship by demonstrating how Morrison represents trauma not merely as personal damage but as a structural condition that reshapes identity and memory. Accordingly, this research addresses the following questions: (1) how trauma is depicted in *Beloved* through characterization and narration, and (2) how trauma is represented as a systemic phenomenon shaped by institutional structures.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using textual analysis as its primary approach (Creswell, 2014). As a literary study, it does not involve human participants but instead focuses on close reading and interpretative analysis of a literary corpus. The primary data source of this research is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The analysis is conducted on the novel's narrative structure, characterization, and selected textual excerpts that reflect representations of trauma. The data consist of narrative passages, dialogues, and character descriptions that illustrate psychological, embodied, and systemic dimensions of trauma. These excerpts were selected through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this process, the researcher first

identified key characters who experience or are directly involved in acts of violence within the narrative, including Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, Denver, and Schoolteacher. These characters were chosen because they represent varied forms of trauma shaped by different conditions, such as gender, social position, forms of violence, and roles within the family and community. The selection also includes characters who experience trauma directly as well as those who contribute to or embody the system of violence itself.

After determining the characters, the researcher collected relevant textual evidence in the form of quotations and narrative descriptions that reflect each character's traumatic experience. These data were then examined to identify recurring patterns and variations in how trauma is experienced and expressed across different characters. The variations observed highlight how trauma operates differently depending on individual positions and experiences, making the analysis more nuanced and comprehensive.

The analytical framework is informed by trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's concepts of belatedness, repetition, and the persistence of unresolved memory (Caruth, 1996). In this study, Caruth's theory is used as an analytical lens to interpret the patterns identified in the data, particularly in understanding how trauma appears as delayed, recurring, and unresolved experiences within the characters. The analysis was conducted through thematic clustering, in which textual evidence was categorized into conceptual groups such as institutional power and dehumanization, embodied suffering, fractured masculinity, collective memory, and inherited trauma. These clusters were then interpreted to address the research questions concerning how trauma is represented and how it functions as a systemic phenomenon within the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the qualitative textual analysis of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The data are organized through thematic clustering to address the two research questions proposed in this study. The findings focus on how trauma is represented in the novel through characterization and narrative patterns, as well as how trauma emerges as a systemic phenomenon shaped by institutional structures such as slavery and racial oppression. Each cluster is supported by textual evidence drawn directly from the novel. At this stage, the presentation remains descriptive and data-driven, reserving interpretation and critical discussion for the subsequent section.

A. Cluster 1: Institutional Antagonism

This cluster presents textual data illustrating how trauma in *Beloved* is associated with institutional forces such as slavery, racial control, and legal authority, as reflected in the experiences of the characters.

Table 1. Institutional Antagonism

Character	Characteristic	Aspects	Textual Evidence
Schoolteacher	Rationalized dehumanization through institutional surveillance and emotional detachment.	Institutional Power and Dehumanization	“Schoolteacher listed her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right.”

B. Cluster 2: Embodied Trauma of Slavery

This cluster documents representations of trauma that are inscribed on the body, including physical pain, scars, and bodily memories that recur throughout the narrative.

Table 2. Embodied Trauma of Slavery

Character	Characteristic	Aspects	Textual Evidence
Sethe	Traumatized maternal survivor haunted by past memories, whose identity and isolation are shaped by slavery and loss.	Trauma, Memory, and Maternal Identity	“It was not a story to pass on.”
Paul D	Emotionally withdrawn and psychologically fragmented, reflecting damaged masculinity shaped by enslavement.	Slavery, Masculinity, and Psychological Trauma	“His tobacco tin, lodged in his chest, held his heart.”

Baby Suggs	A spiritual healer embodying collective trauma, whose silence reflects embodied exhaustion.	Collective Trauma, Spirituality, and Embodied Healing	“Love your hands! Love them.”
Stamp Paid	A figure of internalized guilt whose silence and withdrawal reflect collective post-slavery trauma.	Collective Memory, Guilt, and Post-Slavery Trauma	“He felt responsible for everybody.”

C. Cluster 3: Inherited Trauma

This cluster presents textual evidence of trauma transmitted across generations, showing how past experiences continue to shape the psychological and emotional states of later characters.

Table 3. Inherited Trauma

Character	Characteristic	Aspects	Textual Evidence
Denver	Shaped by inherited trauma, marked by emotional isolation and fear, yet gradually developing agency and openness to connection.	Inherited Trauma, Isolation, and Emerging Agency	“She was afraid of the outside.”

The findings presented in the previous section demonstrate distinct patterns of trauma representation across characters in *Beloved*. While each character embodies trauma differently, recurring thematic elements indicate broader structural and psychological dimensions underlying these portrayals. The following discussion interprets these patterns to address the first research question concerning how trauma is represented through characterization and narrative construction.

1. Trauma Representation through Characterization

The findings indicate that trauma in *Beloved* is represented through fragmented identity, emotional repression, and social isolation, reflecting the persistence and repetition of unresolved experience (Caruth, 1996). Morrison portrays trauma not as a singular past event but as a persistent psychological condition that reshapes subjectivity and relationships. Characters who directly experience slavery, namely Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Stamp Paid, embody trauma in distinct yet interconnected forms. Sethe's compulsive memory and extreme maternal action reflect intrusive repetition of the past, while Paul D's emotional repression and fractured masculinity illustrate destabilized identity. Baby Suggs represents embodied exhaustion, and Stamp Paid internalizes collective guilt. In contrast, Denver reflects inherited trauma, as her isolation and fear emerge from unresolved maternal memory rather than direct violence, reinforcing the notion of belatedness and intergenerational transmission of trauma (Caruth, 1996). While most characters function as traumatized subjects, Schoolteacher operates as the structural agent of institutional violence. His presence underscores that trauma in the novel is not merely personal but produced within systemic power structures. This also suggests that Morrison's portrayal of trauma extends beyond individual experience, reflecting how systems of domination shape both personal identity and collective memory in broader historical contexts.

2. Trauma as a Systemic Phenomenon

The findings indicate that trauma in *Beloved* is structurally produced rather than merely individually experienced. The recurring patterns of repression, fragmentation, guilt, and isolation emerge from an institutional system that dehumanizes and regulates Black bodies. Through Schoolteacher's rationalized surveillance and categorization of enslaved individuals, Morrison illustrates how trauma originates from normalized and intellectualized violence embedded within slavery as a structure. The systemic impact of this violence extends beyond direct physical suffering. Sethe's extreme maternal action, Paul D's fractured masculinity, Baby Suggs's embodied exhaustion, and Stamp Paid's internalized guilt demonstrate how institutional power reshapes identity and relational bonds. Even after emancipation, trauma persists in altered subjectivity and social withdrawal, revealing its continuity beyond the historical event (Caruth, 1996).

Denver's inherited isolation further confirms trauma as intergenerational. Although she does not directly experience enslavement, her fear and withdrawal emerge from unresolved maternal memory, indicating that trauma is transmitted through silence and domestic space. Collectively, these patterns suggest that

slavery in *Beloved* operates as an enduring structural condition that fragments identity and disrupts communal continuity.

In a broader sense, this representation can also be understood as reflecting wider historical and social realities, where systems of oppression continue to shape identity, memory, and fear even beyond the specific context of slavery. Although the historical institution of slavery has ended, similar patterns of structural inequality and systemic control may persist in different forms, suggesting that the impact of such trauma remains relevant in shaping collective experience.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that trauma in *Beloved* is represented as both an individual and systemic condition shaped by the enduring structures of slavery. Through characterization and narration, Morrison portrays trauma as embodied, repetitive, and identity-altering, reflected in patterns of repression, fragmentation, isolation, and inherited suffering across key characters. The analysis further shows that trauma in the novel is structurally produced through institutional power, surveillance, and dehumanization that persist beyond emancipation, positioning trauma not merely as personal damage but as a historical and systemic condition. In this way, this study contributes to literary trauma studies by foregrounding the systemic dimension of trauma, emphasizing how institutional structures actively shape and sustain its effects beyond individual experience.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single literary text and a qualitative interpretive approach, which does not aim for generalization beyond the narrative context of *Beloved*. The analysis also centers on selected characters and thematic clusters, which may not encompass the full range of trauma representations present in the novel. Future research may extend this inquiry by comparing systemic trauma representation across multiple African American literary works or by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives such as historical, sociological, or affect theory approaches to post-slavery trauma. Such directions may further illuminate how literary narratives construct trauma as both lived experience and structural inheritance.

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