

Troubled and Traumatized Self: A Psychoanalytical Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. Anju Mehra

Assistant Professor., Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,
M.D.University, Rohtak.: anjum780@gmail.com

Article History: Received: 10 November 2020; Revised 12 January 2021 Accepted: 27 January 2021; Published online: 5 April 2021

Abstract: An attempt has been made in the present paper to study and analyse the troubled and traumatized self of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. A psychoanalytic thinker says "trauma places the relation between external reality and psychic reality in focus. A person's personal experiences are represented in one's own psyche and gets personalised. The internal world of wishes, conflicts and deficits, resulting from trauma, is negotiated in human interaction". Here, Sethe felt affected both by physical and emotional trauma caused by the institution of slavery. The institution of slavery not only repressed the maternal bond between Sethe and her children but also her own individualization and the development of her consciousness as a normal human being. Here, an attempt has also been made to explore how much she was affected by the repression of the memories of the trauma she had endured in her life and how much she was victimized and traumatized that she felt unable to nurture her own child *Beloved*. Under the oppressive conditions of slavery she found herself unable to form a maternal bond between herself and her beloved daughter. Morrison also tried to restore the historical record of the atrocities on the blacks during the period of slavery and give voice to the collective memory of Afro-Americans by depicting the trauma faced by Sethe

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Trauma, Conflict, Memory, Slavery, Racism, Slave Narratives

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is the novel that demonstrates the troubled and traumatized self of Sethe under the 'peculiar institution' named American Slavery. This institution was intended to build up a value system in which total subjugation and surrender of the victims' individuality i.e. self would be possible. In this process, particularly in an oppressive society, deliberate efforts are made to mould human personality and create conditions both physical and psychological so that the enslaved person is rendered totally depersonalized. The manifest ramifications of this peculiar institution of slavery are: brutalization, animalization, demolition of the victim's family unit, a forced sexual assault, molestation, manslaughter, lynching, flogging, and assignment of low and degrading jobs and traumatization of every type. It keeps the victim in a psychological bondage and trains his mind in numerous ways and attacks him with countless derogatory images, myths and stereotypes. It weaves an intricate web of misconception around the enslaved person with a view to inserting oppressor's ideological weapon into the victim's thought system. It finally compels the victim to give up his own consciousness and accept that of his master.

Morrison took the idea of writing *Beloved* from Camille Billops' *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. She was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner as it represents the troubled and traumatized psyche of a mother. After reading the narrative of Garner, she had thought, "A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied" (Naylor, Morrison, *Conversation*, 584). Here, Sethe's life can be compared with that of Garner as Morrison says, "Garner chose death for both herself and her most beloved rather than accept being forced to return to slavery and have her children suffer an institutionalized dehumanization" (*Conversation*, 585).

In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison talks about racism as it is taught, institutionalized and culturally reproduced. "Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That's a trauma. It's as though I told you that your left hand is not part of your body" (258). Her characterization of racism as a trauma suggests a way to consider the project of her novel *Beloved*. Many Critics have raised the question of trauma in relation to Morrison's representations of slavery and its effects in *Beloved*. The scope of the term 'trauma' is further widened through the notions of trans-generational traumatic effects. Though usually thought to relate to an individual's direct experience, trauma can, according to some theorists, be experienced from one generation to the next, Maria Root observes:

The effects of insidious trauma can be passed down trans-generationally through stories of atrocities about what has been done to those who have come before.... Over time, the nature of this type of trauma manifests itself in one's reactivity to certain environmental stimuli, as one carries not only one's own direct experiences, but also the unresolved traumatic experiences of those who went before. Given that the dynamics of domination by gender and race are similar, one's own experiences may easily make come alive the stories of those who went before.

In *Surviving Trauma*, David Aberbach notes that "trauma can destroy a survivor's power to fantasise and thus greatly diminish spontaneity and individuality." The defence against feelings that threaten to overwhelm is "the cessation of feelings; survivors often deny all sectors of emotion which are sealed off in response to Trauma" (Aberbach, 9) It is as if, bearing a freight of history, the traumatized patient is thoroughly overburdened. Sethe feels overburdened with history and manifests symptoms of disturbance, loss of memory or the psychic effects caused by racism and slavery.

Morrison's focus on *Beloved* as a need to witness and remember the past and as a way also of making the past available to memory recalls Freud's focus on the puzzling nature of dream work among the traumatized. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud comments that anxiety, fear and fright need to be distinguished. While anxiety denotes a state of expectation that something unpleasant may happen, and fear suggests a definite object of which to be afraid, fright alone conveys the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it (Freud, 11). Angelo is of the opinion, "There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course, there is a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive". (247-248). While Sethe remembers too much and too well but a scattered narrative of *Beloved* performs a repression of memory. Here, memory reflects her experiences as the reminiscences of the traumatic past haunt her extremely throughout life. They appear in modes that are insistent and that feel real, eg., 'flashback' and as bodily memories in the form of feelings and sensations, pains and reaction in the automatic nerve system. They may be reflected in the behavioural patterns. These experiences are difficult to reach by verbal reorganization, often felt as a 'hole in the mind' separated from the integrating function of the mind. The memories exist in a mental format that may not be repressed, and thus not forgotten in the way we normally forget shameful and unpleasant experiences. As Freud states, "Repression... as a reaction to trauma, that is, all neurosis could be seen as elementary traumatic neurosis".(Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, 85).

Under the oppressive condition, the victim's self undergoes pathetic diminution and devaluation to such an extent that it remains almost on the verge of extinction. The ideological apparatus inserted into the fabric of enslaved person's consciousness operates in such a way that it ultimately leads him to question the authenticity of his own self. The neurosis of self-doubt ends in self-denial and finally, in withdrawal or suspension of the true self. Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard describe repression as "that process in which people are encouraged to deny their feelings, sexuality and desires". Under the increasing pressure of hostile circumstances, the person secures acquiescence and docility because the repressive mode imprisons the natural in the unnatural. Repression leads to willful withdrawal of natural and honest feelings and sources of life energy. It is essentially imposed by men on women, by whites on blacks i.e. by the powerful on the powerless.

Sethe found herself a subject to the tyranny of history of slavery. She fell victim to the imperatives of a nascent capitalistic economic order. Her own body was used as others' property as well as with impurity. Gloria Anzaldúa describes the trauma of a black woman:

Torn from limb to limb, knifed and mugged, beaten, my tongue ripped from my mouth left voiceless. My name stolen from me. My bowels fucked with surgeon's knife, uterus and ovaries pitched into the trash, castrated, set apart from own kind, isolated. My lifehood sucked out me by my role as a woman....

The mother-child relationship considered pious in American society and culture was totally demolished by the economics of the institution of slavery. Sethe's children, her family, even her own self belonged to the white slave master. Her situation can be compared by the trauma a black mother has to face in the auction block. Henson Josiah provides a pathetic account of that trauma:

My brother and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother paralyzed with grief held me by the hand. Her turn came and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery country. Then I was offered.... My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting for ever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother could only command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least one of her little ones.... This man disengaged himself from her with violent blows and kicks.... I must have been between five and six years old.

Such an inhuman treatment often led black mothers like Sethe to infanticide. She becomes one such mother who cuts the throat of her baby girl by a butcher's knife and hits her two sons with a spade. "If they had given

[me] time [I] would have killed them all” (*Beloved*, 53). Sethe shows destructive motherly passion and love that result in murdering her own daughter Beloved. Her surviving daughter Denver becomes alienated and indifferent to her own black community. In fact, both outcomes result from Sethe’s trying to save her children from a life of slavery as it robbed her not only of her motherhood but of every right to exist humanly. She was abused, raped and beaten publically in order to frighten the total black community and bring them under control. Sethe had to confront the crossfire of oppression. As Harriet Jacob says, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.”

Further, Morrison depicts Sethe’s sense of mystification as she wishes to forget and remember the traumas of the past at the same time. The trauma faced by her as a mother is not shown through her failure to remember the past; in fact, she seems to suffer from insatiable memories of the past. She goes mad; she never shuts down the door; she refuses to share and accept any information related to her life. When Paul D tells her about Halle watching the boys steal her milk and then smearing his face with clabber, she takes it all in:

She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing if refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can’t hold another bite? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast, the other holding me down, their book-reaching teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that. God damn it, I can’t go back and add more.... But my greedy brain says, oh thanks, I’d love more – so I add more (*Beloved*, 70).

To sum up, it can be said that although Sethe works hard at repressing the traumatic memories but her brain remains meandering and devious. She completely stops to reproduce memories of the trauma and horror she witnessed during slavery. It is not repression of memory that creates the problem here but it is Sethe’s awareness of the forgetfulness of her memories. The loss of consciousness that Sethe suffered is incalculable as she could never liberate herself from the ideological and psychological bondage, could never accept the inner qualities of both being black and female, could never attempt to state her individuality from her own perspective, could not define purpose of her life and finally, could not liberate herself in true sense. Alice Walker’s comment is poignant when she says, “there is so much that is ours that we’ve lost, and we don’t even know we’re missing it” (Tate, 183) She further adds: “When we really respect ourselves, our own minds, our own thoughts, our own words, when we really love ourselves, we won’t have any problems whatsoever....”(Tate, 183). Thus, at the end of *Beloved*, Morrison allows Sethe and Paul D to move forward into a shared future, to put their stories next to one another, but while *Beloved* appears to have exorcised, the novel does not allow us to banish her or consign her unproblematically to the past. But there are accounts and reckonings that never balance that are simply irreparable. These are the aspects of the past that must be remembered even as they continue to trouble and give pain; they are never comfortably possessed and they can never be redeemed.

Works Cited

- Aberbach, David. *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989. Print. 2-9.
- Angelo, Bonnie. “The Pain of Being Black” (An Interview with Toni Morrison) (1989), *Conversations*, Print. 258.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. “La Prieta” In *Morga*. Print. 206-211.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Vol. XX. London: Hogarth Press, 1926. Print. 85.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York : Norton, 1961. Print. 11.
- Jacob, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Cambridge: Harvard Uni. Press, 1987. Print.
- Josiah, Henson. *Father Henson’s Story of His Own Life*. New York: Corinth Cross Books, 1962. Print. 53.
- Morrison, Toni. Foreword, *Camille Billops, The Harlem book of the Dead*, New York, 1978.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
- Naylor, Gloria and Toni Morrison. ‘A Conversation’, *Southern Review*, 21, 1985. Print. 567.
- Root, Maria. “Women of Colour and Traumatic Stress in ‘Domestic Captivity’ : Gender, Race as Disempowering Statures” in Marsella, et al., *Ethnocultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*. Print. 374.
- Tate, Claudia. ed. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum Books, 1984. Print. 183