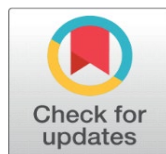


# FRAGMENTED SELVES: INTERSECTIONS OF RACIAL TRAUMA AND FEMININITY IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND BELOVED

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## ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's literary oeuvre is a profound exploration of the African American experience, particularly the enduring scars of racial trauma and the complex interplay of femininity within oppressive structures. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987) are seminal works that dissect the psychological and social ramifications of systemic racism, gendered violence, and the quest for identity. Through fragmented narratives and haunting symbolism, Morrison exposes the cyclical nature of trauma and the resilience of marginalized voices. This paper examines how racial trauma and femininity intersect in these novels, analyzing characters like Pecola Breedlove and Sethe, whose fractured selves embody the consequences of historical and cultural violence.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Racial Trauma, Femininity, Racism, Racism Identity, Identity Violence, Violence Trauma, Trauma Oppression, Resilience, African American

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. RACIAL TRAUMA: DEFINITIONS AND MANIFESTATIONS

In the context of the mid-to-late 20th century of the United States, the vantage of being a Black girl in this time necessitates being aware of and confronting extreme versions of racism almost exclusively found in the states of the Union. Racial trauma is discrimination or violence inflicted on an individual as a result of their race. This racial trauma may include harming experiences so traumatic that they are processed incorrectly by the brain, but it may also be memory narratives passed down through the systems or communities an individual inhabits. In Toni Morrison's *The*

*Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, various aspects of racial trauma are depicted as protagonists experience memories and events that shift their understanding of themselves and their world, leading to an inability to cope with realities that are overwhelming (D Jr McDonnell, 2016). Character half-realities, unprocessed memories, sharing trauma narratives, and trial and redemption make up the landscape of Morrison's assertions on the complex world of racial trauma. With aspects of her works like this, Morrison serves as a conduit through which racial trauma is better understood and its linguistic and community mines examined.

Racial trauma, as defined by Rodriguez (2018), is "a wound inflicted by systemic racism, disrupting one's sense of self and belonging." Morrison's characters endure this trauma both individually and collectively. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove internalizes white beauty standards, believing blue eyes will absolve her of her "ugliness"—a direct result of anti-Black ideologies. Claudia McTeer, the novel's partial narrator, observes:

"Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*).

This quote underscores the pervasive violence of racial self-hatred, a theme Morrison amplifies through Pecola's eventual psychological disintegration.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's trauma stems from slavery's brutalities, particularly the haunting memory of infanticide. Her daughter *Beloved*, both a ghost and a manifestation of guilt, symbolizes the inescapability of past horrors. As D Jr McDonnell (2016) notes:

"Trauma in *Beloved* is not linear; it erupts unpredictably, fracturing time and memory."

Morrison's non-linear narrative techniques mirror this fragmentation, forcing readers to confront trauma's disorienting grip.

## 2. FEMININITY UNDER SIEGE: BEAUTY, MOTHERHOOD, AND VIOLENCE

African American women's attempts to confront societal conceptions of black femininity runs parallel to Morrison's constructions of the black female subjectivity as fragmented and broken in *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*. In addition to the criticism that African American women's sexual potency is destructive, Morrison presents a construction of femininity in which black women's reproductive abilities and instincts are warped, leading to separate and excluded subjectivities. Alloying with Morrison's use of fragmented narratives to depict black female experience, these constructions of the black female subjectivity serve to address and engage key issues in African American women's lives. In both Morrison's novels and African American women's lived experiences demonstrated in contemporary art and popular cultures, constructions of black womanhood as sexually deviant and flawed reproductive and mothering abilities manifest as violent attacks on black bodies and black wombs. Members of the black female collective body are thus aligned as the object of societal abjection. For both Morrison's fictional black female subjectivities and African American women in the present, being cast as alien begins an internalization of society's critique. Given Morrison's depiction of the traumas of black womanhood in the reproductive feminine registers of blood, milk, and soil, the shame and pain of loss may be understood without reproducing the exclusionary lens. The reclamation of embodiment and the home can allow for Morrison interpretations to incorporate Morrison's nuance and complexity without effacing the violence of black womanhood's alienation.

Inherent to Morrison's constructed critique of black female experience is an exploration of societal racism, sexism, and classism. In addition, the construction of femininity as incomplete and broken marks the vulnerability of black bodies to violence and trauma. For black women, subjectivity is often depicted as fractured or incomplete in Morrison's works. This perception of incompleteness facilitates Morrison's nuanced depictions of the violence enacted on the black maternal body in the reproduction of culture and collective identity. Morrison's depictions of reproductive insufficiencies often invoke paleness and whiteness to foreground how fragmentations of black femininity expose the body to violence. Segregated as non-life-givers, characteristics of black maternal bodies typically valued in reproducing subjectivities become sites for violent attack. As black female collective identities comprise of the loss of reproduction and alien stained by violence, thus lost to culture. The constructions of femininity examined here engage with the body as a site of both the production of domesticity and home and a violent rupture in the black female reproductive body to highlight the violence and trauma wrought by these re-imaginings and re-constructions of femininity in Morrison's works (Marie Smith, 1996).

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Morrison's portrayal of Black femininity critiques Eurocentric ideals that alienate women from their bodies and communities. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's mother, Pauline, rejects her own Blackness, finding solace in servicing white families:

"She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*).

Pauline's internalized racism reflects what Marie Smith (1996) terms "the warping of maternal instincts under white supremacy." Similarly, Sethe's act of killing her child to spare her slavery reveals the grotesque choices imposed on Black mothers. As Full (2017) argues:

"Sethe's violence is a perverse act of love, underscoring the impossible demands of Black motherhood in a racist society."

Morrison's female characters oscillate between resistance and surrender, their bodies becoming sites of both trauma and tenuous agency.

As can be seen throughout the various narratives of *Beloved*, trauma can rupture personal memory, as well as the communal memory of a group. Morrison illustrates how such ruptures affect one's identity and existence. Due to trauma in the past, lives cannot be simply lived in the present; personal remembrance becomes seized by the haunting presence of trauma. Lisa, in Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye,' a faithful student who idolizes and tries to imitate her teacher's beauty, "got laughing" and "was laughed at," "as if someone had pulled a plug from her head." The attempt to process trauma as disembodied, is doomed to fail. Pecola's "validity," D's maternal agency, are obvious examples of active filiation. The lesser examined male (martyr) characters demonstrate the haunting consequences of inaction. D Doré's childhood "becomes" 'Psyche,' once murdered by J, who "spies." Unable to properly grieve, "amalgamated" mother and child haunt with frozen moments of trauma. Paul D, her erstwhile husband, suffers a similar horror, silenced and empty ("rusty lock"), "lost...like a stranger." His fragmented self placed momentarily, in context, recalls a "bearded white man," who "rose to a painfully familiar need." Morrison's textual insistence on widely ranging inter-subjunctive epistemics sculpts and deepens this tension. How to know others' minds becomes the white patriarch's dilemma. It reaches a dead end in black surface depiction and impossibly inadequate representations of experience or emotions. "Like a stranger," Paul D tries to "hold" Sethe, who has made him both a stranger and unwieldy. Her otherness functions both as if to "breathe" him into existence and to know his self intimately and unconditionally. Nevertheless, Sethe's past experience (ghost) continues to trouble the present.

The notion that "memory" processes rather than simply recalls (D Jr McDonnell, 2016) provides insight into some of the theological, philosophical, and social-political puzzles posed by trauma. Understood thus, one place to start examining memory "processes," whether traumatic or non-traumatic, would be the "loops," "hurdles," and "whimsical leaps" of internal riddles. Surely, Morrison's notion of "fractured" memory can proceed back to the stitching at the draft and composition stages of works, and how published texts enact those processes in their own movements. This allows for questioning its connection, efficacy, and even wisdom, in communicating not merely concrete or psychological traumas of the past, but the very "act of fragmentation" itself, in the technical material form of the process that shaped the story. Turning this suspicion inside out, the confluence of constructions of knowing the other's trauma, border-crossings, "in-betweenness" reconfigurations of spaces and ways of knowing in Morrison resembles Artaud's madness as fissures.

### **3. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES: FRAGMENTATION AND VOICE**

Myriads of trauma narratives are formed through individual characters to weave the major traumas of their respective worlds. captures what trauma-inflicted individuals can witness of a fellow character's trauma through alternative narrative voices in the crafting of a creative science as a response to these primal issues. illustrate the importance of community, the need for this community to avoid nearness or neutrality, and build upon the works of contemporaries who unveil the dangers of an impartial public. Pecola Breedlove witnesses her disintegration of self, as the trauma-infliction upon her identity is emotionally divergent from the other characters, though it eventually extends through the community as others' lives disintegrate individually. Sethe's character sees her deepest secret becoming bestial knowledge amongst the community, as another fellow individual's trauma is laid open to their judgment. The original text can gift the thoughts of the characters above and as external readers analyzing these characters their violence is purposely contained within schematic style. Eventually, the enterprising character which the unionization of

the other child figures in embodied inevitably renders its fantastical notions individually to revert back to a previous state of stabbing at Peach Tree. , with the temporality of the contents conscripted, are a cultural storage which restores memories of trauma and imagination remitted. The decomposition of an individual traumatic subject demanded for its community to enter a traumatic environment, fearing the worst for recovery as monsters beneath temp environments abduct internal agency into another peritext. At the same time, community traumatic memories can be intertwined through mimicry to gestate new ones within one's thoughts regarding the other's experience in the textual work of art .

Pecola's childhood is turned towards the marginalization of her most injurious agent, set to the preordained result of her overwhelmed character. Witnessed through Claudia's narration and cross-sectional interactions, this dreadful drama interestedly occurs in every preordained circumstance and bears its utmost factuality of items. Even her mother's abandonment can only establish a land of rental and not property. The massiveness of the transfiguration from the identity as personas are receding background images in the flight of a dove. constructs a circular structure explicitly apparent in this work. The central traumatic figure dis-enters its trademarked supplement of character at the end. It reverts back to the beginning of the narrative through many narrative voices to shape additional pronouncements of the traumas and judgments wrought by innocence. Claudia's return to bed after nightfall haunts her master effigies coming for a trick. She endures a transitory moment, as a secret triumph feeling hitches her before being checkmated by her mother's sanity reflection .

Morrison's use of fragmented narratives mirrors her characters' psychological splintering. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia's childlike perspective contrasts with the omniscient narration of Pecola's decline, emphasizing the community's complicity. Rodriguez (2018) observes:

"Claudia's voice is a vessel for collective guilt, while Pecola's silence screams the unspeakable."

*Beloved* employs stream-of-consciousness and shifting timelines to depict Sethe's fractured psyche. The novel's opening lines—"124 was spiteful"—personify the house as a repository of trauma, blurring past and present. Morrison's prose, as D Jr McDonnell (2016) notes, "refuses to sanitize pain; it forces readers to dwell in its discomfort."

#### **4. SYMBOLISM: EYES, HOUSES, AND GHOSTS**

Eyes in *The Bluest Eye* symbolize the destructive power of gaze. Pecola's desire for blue eyes reflects her yearning for visibility in a world that renders her invisible. Conversely, Sethe's home at 124 in *Beloved* embodies the paradox of safety and suffocation. González (2013) writes:

"The house is a metaphor for the Black female body—violated yet resilient, haunted yet sacred."

*Beloved* herself is a multivalent symbol: a ghost, a daughter, and a manifestation of slavery's unresolved legacy. Mercer (2016) interprets her as "the embodied scream of history, demanding witness."

#### **5. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE: TRAUMA IN MODERN CONTEXTS**

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, depicts the destructive impacts of a racist society where its black protagonists are forced to internalize European standards of beauty. This internalization of beauty standards causes tragic fragmentation and insanity, foreshadowing Morrison's later and more sophisticated explorations of these themes in *Beloved*. The Theater Of The Mind is a metaphor for exploring traumatic memory and cognition in *Beloved*, where the power and pervasiveness of the trauma of slavery is poignantly explained, and "to be full of memories" is, for Sethe, particularly a painful kind of fullness. Even with a stupendous effort to retain and protect memory, at times by killing her own child, those memories can be enacted against one's will. Morrison's first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, elaborate on the interdependent dichotomies of insanity versus sanity, obscuring versus illuminating, and fragmentation versus wholeness on multiple layers of proximity and temporality. The first section focuses on the fragmented selves of Pecola and Sethe, branching out the proximity of their blurred past and present through psychotic interior monologues. The second section addresses the discovery of concealed traumas and the heartfelt testimony of shameful memories, exploring their temporality and performing a catharsis for healing through the lens of psychoanalysis (D Jr McDonnell, 2016).

Morrison's first two novels explore black women's traumatic memories through powerful images, metaphors, and motifs. The key image is a jigsaw puzzle that metaphorically represents various disarrayed pieces of memories of trauma, which is ultimately revealed to conceive a complete picture of unspeakable wholeness through assembling them

together. The mother-daughter bond and the intimate relationships between women are explored as a source of empowerment to resist the traumatic and dehumanizing reality. These two novels show the potential for survival and personal redemption, along with the communal recovery of trauma, provoking the empathic connection between the narrators and readers.

Morrison's themes resonate in today's discussions on racial justice and intersectional feminism. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, for instance, echoed *Beloved's* themes of collective memory and resistance. As Rodriguez (2018) asserts:

"Morrison's work prefigured movements that confront systemic trauma, proving literature's role in social reckoning."

Similarly, debates over beauty standards and maternal mortality rates among Black women reflect *The Bluest Eye's* enduring critique of racialized misogyny.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* are masterful interrogations of racial trauma and femininity. Through fragmented selves, non-linear narratives, and potent symbolism, Morrison exposes the cyclical nature of violence and the precariousness of healing. Her characters—Pecola, Sethe, Claudia—serve as conduits for broader historical and cultural truths, urging readers to confront the unresolved wounds of racism and sexism. As Morrison herself stated:

"The function of freedom is to free someone else."

In giving voice to the traumatized and marginalized, Morrison's novels not only diagnose pain but also imagine pathways to collective resilience.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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