

## Remembering Colonial Histories: A Postcolonial Reading of Trauma and Cultural Memory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

*Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) has elicited many interpretations as a novel about the experience of slavery and its aftermath in the United States, but it is also a novel about colonialism—a saga to which slave systems are related. In this paper, these points will be examined to see how Morrison's novel Beloved can be analysed with reference to postcolonial theory, and as her novel entices to illuminate her wider colonial ploy that involved physical and psychological torture of slaves, as well as the destruction of black history, black culture, and black identity. The study understands haunting, fragmented subjectivity, and cultural memory as representations of the lingering effects of colonialism, as described by Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said. Alongside being a ghost of personal tragedy, the ghost of the novel Beloved is also the ghostly presence that refuses to be silenced by colonial histories. The violence of the colonies was not only physical, but it also took the form of Sethe's killing of the baby and a lack of communication within the community. But Morrison also speaks of the possibility of catharsis through people sharing together and the retrieval of oppressed histories. In making memory resistance a key feature of the novel, Beloved elicits contestation to colonial forgetting and makes room for cultural revival. This research argues that Morrison's novel is a portrait of the 'silenced' voice and an interaction with the legacy of colonial oppression in postcolonial literature.*

**Keywords:** *Beloved, colonialism, postcolonial theory, cultural memory, slavery, trauma.*

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* continues to be one of the most impactful novels of slavery's psychological and cultural consequences, both in the African American and world contexts. Although the novel is about the historical memory of American slavery, it can be understood only by recognizing the global path of its perpetuating structures of colonization. The transatlantic slave trade was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a key pillar of European colonialism to shore up slow-growing economies, supply cheap labour, and prove racial differences. With Sethe as her focal point, her family and her community, Morrison dramatizes how “slavery, as a colonial enterprise, inflicted wounds that extended far beyond physical bondage into the realms of memory, identity, and cultural belonging” (Morrison 3–25). A postcolonial reading of *Beloved* puts its claim in relation to the other discourses on the impact of colonialism on the subjectivity and cultural memory of the colonized. As illustrated by the theories of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, colonialism is manifested not only in material dominance or physical control but also in control over

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representation, memory and identity and the undermining of the culture, traditions and way of life of the colonized. Consequently, as Fanon has demonstrated in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “how colonial violence fractures the psyche of the colonized” (Fanon 45), while Spivak’s notion of the “subaltern” highlights the silencing of marginalized voices within colonial discourse” (Spivak 70). Morrison’s status as a novelist is evident in her approach to these issues, including characters who are haunted by histories that only official archives deny, yet that surface in ghostly and injured ways. It’s this ghostly legacy of colonialism that is embodied in *Beloved*, the novel’s central character. *Beloved* represents the trauma of not only Sethe, but the entire people ravaged by slavery. Her presence also sheds light on unresolved violence, on colonial legacies, and on the presentation of realities of the present. “In a style of magic realism and a disjointed narrative, Morrison challenges a linear history and asserts alternative methods of recalling and remembering, thus forcing the colonial archive to come to terms with the invisibility of African American experiences” (Rushdy p. 7). Along with the reconstruction of the horrors of slavery, *Beloved* also looks at the workings of memory as a burden and as a necessity. Morrison will not have slaves confined to one-sided historical characterizations as passive victims; she instead emphasizes the emotional experiences, cultural practices, and resistance of slaves. The significance in her story is that the past is not truly past, that it lives in the present, trailing through trauma, identities, and history. This knowledge fits perfectly into the perspective of current theories of cultural memory, such as those of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the German historian Jan Assmann, who recognized a collective memory, one that is socially constructed and passed down from one generation to the next, and that creates or strengthens a collective identity in the aftermath of the events. Morrison’s novel likewise depicts memory not as a passive phenomenon of knowing but as an active community enterprise in which communities remember (or forget) and try to remember or retrieve histories when they are suppressed or erased, and work to keep alive the knowledge of their ancestors. In *Beloved*, using a historical familiarity alongside the fantastic nature of the stories, Toni Morrison breaks through the traditional Western idea of historiography working through a documentation-based approach and argues for alternative methods of knowledge, such as the story, oral history, and embodied memory. Through the use of this tool of narrative, Morrison questions the positions adopted by the colonizers. In doing so, *Beloved* is not only a novel about the haunting legacy of slavery, but a brilliant response to cultural aurality, historical reckonings, and political acts of remembering in the context of postcolonial studies at large.

This paper presents the view that *Beloved* should be understood as a postcolonial novel unmasking the profound wounds inflicted by colonialism on the black community and black identity. Through her analysis of the colonial nature of slavery, Morrison shows how slavery

has afflicted kinship, split selves, and muffled cultural histories. She also provides opportunities to heal through memory, story, and togetherness. This research positions *Beloved* in the context of postcolonial theory as a valuable effort in the process of reclaiming previously nonrepresented voices, dismantling colonialism's legacy, and envisioning cultural renewal. From that day, *Beloved* has continued to produce a wealth of commentary on slavery, trauma, and memory. "Early critics often emphasized its role in reconstructing the brutality of slavery and documenting African American cultural memory" (Henderson 62–63). Other, more recent works place *Beloved* in the context of postcolonialism, an environment in which the colonialism out of which slavery developed and was sustained is inseparable from slavery itself. Thus, *Beloved* explores how colonialism is continuing to impact identity, subjectivity, and cultural survival. The theme of greatest importance to critics of Morrison is the psychological effects of slavery, which makes the discussion relevant to Fanon's focus on colonial violence. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* emphasise the dehumanisation of the colonised and fragmentation of their self and the scar on their identity caused by the colonial domination. It can be considered that Fanon's ideas parallels some of the characters in *Beloved*, especially Sethe and Paul D, who both struggle with "divided identities, resulting from the systemic violence they have faced" (Ochoa 114). The fact that this aligns with Morrison's admittance of a certain colonial trauma is not only physical, but also a psychological one. There is another strand of scholarship that locates *Beloved* in memory studies in the postcolonial. Homi Bhabha might be especially pertinent with his concept of the "unhomely," which is the setting of Morrison's protagonists in which the private and traumatic are intertwined with the public and historical. "*Beloved* herself represents this collapse, functioning both as the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter and as the spectral presence of countless enslaved Africans who died during the Middle Passage" (Rushdy 35). The use of haunting by Morrison reflects Bhabha's concept of the "third space", one that gives form to repressed histories in disruptive ways. The framework of interpretation for *Beloved*'s silences can be analysed within the framework established by Spivak's influential essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Voices are heard that, historically, have been erased: Sethe's disjointed memories, the unspeakable horrors of the Middle Passage. Other critics, such as Krumholz, argue that "Morrison uses storytelling to restore subjectivity to those rendered voiceless by colonial discourse" (Krumholz 397). In this way, *Beloved* may be seen as a piece of literary resistance to the colonial archive. The emphasis in the recent scholarship has been on the global and colonial aspects of *Beloved*. It is these additional associations to the wider diasporic and transatlantic backdrop that critics draw attention to: "Morrison disrupts national histories of slavery by linking African American experiences to broader diasporic and transatlantic contexts" (Mullen 283). The scene of *Beloved*'s ghost is ghostly and the recurring water and ship images all lead to the "Middle Passage" as a basic trauma of

colonialism. These readings recognize Morrison's work as existing within the field of postcolonial studies, it can be viewed as contributing to a critique of imperial narratives, practices and discourses, and to a newly told history of the "other" voices.

Undeniably, slavery in the United States was connected with the slave trade in Africa, and it was about the use of African bodies for the service of European and American economies. Slave labour in Africa was an important factor in the economic development of Europe and the Americas. The Kentucky plantation, Sweet Home, is a miniature version of the system. It was relatively innocuous with Mr Garner, but it turns into systemic violence under the Schoolteacher. Paul D says, "There was no getting away from it; Sweet Home was never sweet" (Morrison 125). The plantation symbolizes the commodification and dehumanization of Black bodies into a labouring machine for colonialism. Sethe's back is scarred with the "chokecherry tree," which is a projection of the colonial violence, both literally and figuratively: "It had been a tree, it was a tree, and it would always be" (Morrison 20). According to Mae Henderson (72), Morrison's work "brings the violence of slavery to the archive as the body of the African American." In the memory of the chain gang – "chains on ankles, iron bit in mouths, the smell of iron, the taste of iron" (Morrison 127), Paul D's humanity is reduced to that of an object, just as Fanon argues that "colonialism dehumanizes the colonized" (Black Skin 89). Sethe's infanticide also constitutes a rejection of the colonial logic. The schoolteacher comes to take her children, but she chooses between her daughter's life and slavery and kills her instead of letting her be taken away: "I stopped him... I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison 236). Ochoa notices that this act "reflects the trauma-induced logic of a mother resisting the commodification of her child" (Ochoa 118). Sethe claims to take action in a system aimed at depriving her of choice. Among the most important features of the presence of colonialism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the split or divided identity of the individuals. But Morrison does not depict this slavery as just a historic fact, but as a "colonial system of violence" that continues to affect the psychological and emotional lives of African Americans long after emancipation.

The novel reveals the fragmentation of subjectivities, the disintegration of ancestry, and the indelible imprints of slavery on individual and collective memories through the characters of Sethe, Paul D, and *Beloved*. As the reader of this book discovers these effects, she exposes the eternal consequences of colonialism on the lives of Africans descendants of slavery. Frantz Fanon's study on the colonized subject furnishes the psychological aspects of colonial violence. Fanon believes that colonialism goes beyond economic exploitation and political domination, usurping the minds of the oppressed and leaving them feeling alienated, afraid, and with multiple identities. Morrison's characters represent this condition; they are trying to find balance in their lives between past and present traumas. In their experiences, the abolition of

legal slavery did not diminish or remove the emotional and psychological hurt caused by colonial legal systems of oppression. Paul D is a striking model of a fractured self, which came out of slavery. He is one of the characters in the novel whose painful recollections of being enslaved, imprisoned, and displaced are not pushed out of his mind throughout the novel. As Paul D thinks about how he is feeling about the incident, he compares it to a 'tobacco tin buried in his chest' (Morrison 125). This is the metaphor of the psychological defense mechanisms of the colonized ones, from overwhelming sufferings. In order to safeguard himself against feelings he cannot bear to recall, Paul D suppresses his emotions but consequently can't create a unified sense of himself. Colonial violence is so much alive within his interior that he is incapable of emotional entanglements. In all forms, slavery deprived slaves of the chance of stable identities or meaningful relationships. The story of Paul D's experiences mirrors what often happens in a system which is aimed at turning human beings into property or object. His physical squeeze has been broken, but he still clings to his embarrassing past, his losses, and his being mentally enslaved. Not being able to think about a safe future suggests that colonial oppression continues to haunt, impacting on how one thinks about self and possibilities for personal liberty. Sethe's experience as a mother is also a second major theme with the novel that highlights the negative aspects of colonialism. Her family life was insecure under slavery, as her family could be split apart, sold off, beaten, and brutalized at all times. As an enslaved woman, she had little control over her children, who lived in the world of slave owners' will. Sethe's will for her children not to suffer what she suffered is an expression of this reality, embodied in Morrison's novel. The circumstances surrounding her making the choice to kill her daughter before she could be returned to slavery are a result of past brutal acts of a colonial structure, which reduces human beings to goods, and a mother who would rather see her daughter dead than be sent back into slavery. How slavery disrupted and warped the nature of love and forced unsound moral decisions from enslaved mothers are on full display in these actions. But Morrison goes beyond this one case to set Sethe's actions in the context of larger acts of colonialism and the repercussions that follow. Sethe's experiences of being dehumanized have shaped her perception of what being a mother is about, as has her insecurity and fear. To her, slavery means losing your identity, losing your dignity, and losing your very personhood. So, her actions are a last resort to save her child from being a slave – at the cost of life. Morrison shows the tremendous psychological price paid within the framework of colonialism that had prevented black people from having command over their lives or families. They did not have human status under them; they were only their handy tool; their power was over them in the colonial structure. Memory also plays a crucial role in the novel and can certainly be seen as an expression of colonial wounds. For these colonized, Morrison blurs distinctions often taken for granted between the past and the present – how these differences impact daily life as it stands now,

due to past traumas. “rememory” suggests that “the past is not gone but hanging around your present; it remains active, present, and it suddenly emerges when it shapes you, your present,”. It is a thought that speaks to the enduring impacts of trauma, and the difficulty of escaping harmful previous experiences. In the works of Morrison, memory isn't a passive phenomenon but a continuing powerful force that shapes a person's identity and actions. *Beloved* is about the lives of the blacks' and about their history that was put aside in the antebellum South. A supernatural character as well as one of the symbolic aspects of slavery, *Beloved* brings to light characters' experiences they have tried to forget in their lives. She is a testament to the devastation trauma can cause an individual and a family, and over time, shows how the boundaries of reality and memory can't be erased and how it refuses to be left behind. As the novel repeatedly tells us, *Beloved* is a one-two-step bridge between the past and the present writing, and anything about history isn't suitable to be let go into the past when the wounds of colonial brutality are never going to heal.

The novel *Beloved* is also a consideration of issues of historical representation and cultural memory. The “system of colonies” does tend to erase the experience of the colonized and represents what the colonizer has to say. They create the image of the colonized and their historical constructions from the standpoint of dominant power. We can employ the theory of “subaltern” which is proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to understand this kind of narration in Morrison's texts. Marginalized groups: Spivak suggests that “marginalized groups are often excluded from dominant forms of historical and cultural representation, making it difficult for their voices to be heard within official discourse” (70–71). At the heart of this issue is the need to give voice and human agency to the formerly enslaved, and Morrison does this in her work as she brings to the fore the experiences of people who have traditionally been marginalized by history. A main part of this process is the multiple and fragmented voices of the structuralism of *Beloved*. Instead of the single voice of authority, Morrison writes in a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. This approach addresses the experience of traumatic memory, at the same time as it confronts a history that has ignored black lives and the black experience. Moreover, Morrison is able to use the novel's representation of various character storylines to provide a much-needed place within contemporary literature for the voices of the marginal to tell their stories without restraint and build a community solution to the colonial trauma, rather than individual solutions. In the end, Sethe is accepted by the community, and their participation is essential to the process of healing the wounds of colonization and to the process of healing their hurts.

Without edging on the issue, or crawling under the bed, there can be no recovery, Morrison says. Rather, individuals and collectives have to demand the inclusion and preservation of memory of their painful pasts and that the cultural memory continues in order to combat this

erasure. From this perspective of empowerment and survival, it is crucial to point out that *Beloved* demonstrates the colonial violence that undermines subjectivity, its impact on family formation, and how it continues to wound psychologically. Both as memory and identity, the story highlights the history of representation and enables the novel to expose the long shadow of slavery on African American life.

Morrison's multiple point-of-view/non-linear narration creates an alternative historical discourse which alters and disrupts the dominant version and brings voices marginalized by colonial discourse to the forefront. As he does so, *Beloved* shows how grappling with injuries of the past is key to recognizing one's identity and collective cultural memory. The novel is therefore a strong indictment of colonial oppression and the indomitable spirit of the people who have survived it. Memory is really significant in *Beloved* and is used as resistance. Sethe's memories of Sweet Home and the Middle Passage are layered on top of and in opposition to the erasure of colonial systems. *Beloved* never forgets, requires being identified, contests oblivion: "*Beloved* bending over the baby" (Morrison 58). The ghost reveals trauma – colonial trauma – as she interferes with the linear temporality. Bhabha talks of the "unhomely" as the intersection of "personal history and collective history, of family history and collective colonial history," and *Beloved*, as a character, represents both family history and collective colonial history (Bhabha 139). The nonlinearity of Morrison's discourse performs a counter-archival politics of redressing cultural memory under the threat of colonial amnesia. Colonialism broke families apart; community is the healing word, says Morrison. Yet, despite the atrocity of dehumanization, the gatherings at the Clearing with Baby Suggs are about embracing the body, embracing one another: "Come to me, my children. Come" (Morrison 78). When the community decides as a whole to exorcise *Beloved*, this is an example of resistance: "They joined hands, and it was over" (Morrison 324). The healing is through community in line with Fanon's focus on collective liberation (Fanon, *Wretched* 65). Trauma of colonialism still survives after emancipation. By coming to life, *Beloved* represents Sethe's personal trauma and collective trauma. Morrison's magical realism allows us to see the continued impact of historical violence, as the woman's face became "Her face was the face of the one who had been there" (Morrison 252). Said's concept of "contrapuntal reading" seeks to give consideration to the two sides of the colonizer and the colonized (Said 55). That is accomplished in Morrison's works through the emphasis on silenced black voices and the questioning of the imperial narratives.

## Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an example of the effects of slavery as an extension of colonialism on the colonized through its physical, psychological and cultural damage. Morrison brings

themes of haunting, fragmentation, and collective resistance to show how the violence of colonialism leaves an imprint — and traces of migration and oppression — on identity and community long after formal emancipation has come and gone. Strategies of healing and cultural survival become memory, storytelling, and communal solidarity. Placing *Beloved* in the frameworks of postcolonialism helps to make sense of its international significance. Morrison's use of the storyline, which is aligned with that of Fanon, Bhabha, Spivak, and Said—and is linked to the African-American literary tradition of memory and survival. Ultimately, *Beloved* suggests that literature can give voice to the voiceless and can raise the issues of colonial amnesia, and perhaps imagine cultural dreaming. The book also discusses the continuation and aftermath of colonial violence in today's social systems, racial inequalities, and cultural identity. Morrison is giving voice to those histories that have been untold or even silenced by emphasizing the lives of the former slaves. Remember, *Beloved* is not only a ghost, but also a representation of an unsolved, historical suffering and trauma, which must be ethically and factually addressed. As Morrison narrates, she suggests that working with the past is a necessary precondition toward individual and collective liberation. The novel also emphasizes the importance of community as a space in which fractured identities can be repaired through collective memory, empathy, and cultural connections. Overall, *Beloved* is a novel not just of African American literature, but iconic of displacement, resistance, and human dignity. Morrison's postcolonial approach informs readers that the struggle against oppression is not only political, but also about the revival of history, voice, and identity. In so doing, Morrison issues a strong literary "challenge" to the indelible legacy of colonial domination and celebrates remembrance as a strategy of resistance and narrative as a means of regaining some control over the pasts of colonial domination.

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