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Memory, Slavery and the Representation of Trauma in Beloved

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Abstract

One of the most important literary activities relying on the traumatic heritage of American chattel slavery is Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison. This paper explores the ways Morrison depicts trauma through memory, collective sufferings, and narrative structure. This exploration of seven dimensions of representation of trauma, through the trauma theory and the qualitative analysis of text, is based on the understanding of seven interrelated dimensions of representing a trauma: the infanticide and maternal trauma of Sethe, the neologism of rememory developed by Morrison, the ghost of Beloved as the epitome of communal trauma, the masculine vulnerability and psychic numbing of Paul D, the domestic space of 124 Bluestone Road, the communal healing facilitated by Baby Suggs, and the play of narrative fragmentation as an expression of the traumatic experience in its formal forms. Analysis shows that the novel by Morrison is not only a reconstruction of historical facts of slavery but an interior psychic space of the enslaved so as to make visible how traumatic memory is transported across generations, disrupting identity, and making it inaccessible to the traditional representation. The analysis shows that Beloved simultaneously serves as a literary testimony, a community grieving ceremony and an intervention in the politics of historical memory. The paper will add to the current academic discourse at the intersection of African American literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and trauma studies by shedding light on how Morrison makes aesthetic decisions to chronicle the eradication of Black suffering and ethnocentrism conditions at once.

Keywords: the theory of trauma, collective memory, Toni Morrison, Beloved, rememory, slavery, fragmentation of narratives, intergenerational trauma, African American literature.

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1. Introduction

American chattel slavery is one of the most enduring episodes of group violence of the modern history. Its impacts have spread over centuries to curb not just the socioeconomical aspects of African American life, but, also, the psychic construction of memories, identity and belonging. But throughout much of American literary and historiographic tradition has been an organized oppression or falsification of the inner experiences of the enslaved: their sorrow, their horror, their affection, their struggle. It is in this context of historical erasure that the 1987 novel Beloved by Toni Morrison takes its tremendous meaning. Freely inspired by the historic case of an enslaved woman, Margaret Garner, who killed her own child instead of letting her be sold again into slavery, Beloved is an archaeological effort of unearthing the emotional and psychological truths that lie outside the documentary narrative of slavery.

The setting of the novel is Cincinnati, Ohio, 1873 after the Civil War but in essence the inability of not forgetting the past. Sethe is a former slave, who resides with her daughter Denver in a haunted house, numbered 124 Bluestone Road, where the ghost of her killed baby lives. The arrival of a mysterious young woman, Beloved, on the scene throws the novel into an excruciating place in examining the world of traumatic memory, maternal love, guilt, and the price of survival. What is innovative about Morrison, however, is neither her subject matter, nor her use of formal strategies to depict the trauma: non-linear temporality, changing focalization, stream-of-conscience monologues and the calculated use of gaps and silences, which reflect the fragmentation of traumatic memory.

Scholars have been growing to consider that Beloved is a watershed text in historical trauma literature. The study has shown that the novel uncovers the complication of interrelationships between historical injustices and personal misery, examining the long-lasting effects of slavery on the identity of individual characters, like Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, as well as group identity (Ali et al., 2024). Established frameworks of trauma have been applied in analyzing the novel to explore the concept of psychological rupture, dissociation, and incomplete healing, and the inner worlds of the main characters can be seen as places of settling psychological effects of slavery

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(Chishti, 2026). In addition, a postcolonial lens has been used to analyze the novel as a text where re-memory serves as one of its tools, both a burden and system of resistance leading to psychological fragmentation, emotional discontinuity, and unresolved guilt and at the same time, as a means of recovering fragmented subaltern identities (Khalid, 2026).

This paper is based on the argument that Beloved by Morrison is a multi-layered literary expression of trauma that occurs at the individual, familial, communal and national levels, that its formal innovations, specifically its narrative fragmentation, its concept of rememory, and its spectral figuration, are not the aesthetic decisions, but epistemological ones, challenging the dominant Western forms of knowing and remembering the past. This paper uses qualitative textual analysis based on the theory of trauma to analyze seven dimensions deeply connected to the representation of trauma in the novel to illustrate how Beloved serves as an image of bearing witness to the unspeakable trauma prevalent in slavery, as well as a template of societal memory, grieving and healing that must be common to identity reconstruction following the experience of collective disaster.

2. Literature Review

Beloved has an abundant and interdisciplinary scholarly literature, cutting across many disciplines such as literary criticism, trauma studies, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and African American studies. This review brings together areas of inquiry of interest; the use of a theory of trauma on a narrative of slavery, the importance of the collective memory and historical suffering within the African American literature, and the definite theoretical interactions with the concepts of rememory, embodiment, and narrative form as introduced by Morrison.

2.1 Trauma Theory and Its Application to Narratives of Slavery

As it emerged during the seminal work of Sigmund Freud and the case studies of Judith Herman and the deconstructive interpretation of Cathy Caruth, trauma theory offers a critical vocabulary in which overwhelming experiences are unable to become integrated into everyday consciousness, but reappear in the form of intrusive repetitions, flashbacks, and somatic symptoms. Trauma theory, in its application to literary works, has cast light on the ways in which the formal features applied in

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some forms of narrative, such as fragmentation, repetition, temporal disruption, the employment of gaps and silences, can be seen as formal analogs to managing the form of traumatic memory itself. One or another of several scholars has had an analytical payoff in applying these insights to Beloved by Morrison.

It has been defined as a research on the effects of trauma on personality, identity, and presentation of an individual narrative, wherein the influence of the enslavement on Sethe as a mental and personal consequence is also studied due to the haunting of Beloved which, together with the repetitions, imagery, use of language, and testifying, help the author of the novel to guide readers through the phenomenology of being in a traumatic experience (Tokssoz, 2024). Likewise, specialists in a Freudian and Jungian paradigm have studied the psychological consequences of slavery in the novel, her unresolved issues and repressed memories of Sethe and the intricacies of the memory, identity, and healing processes through the character of Beloved (Pon & Saritha, 2024). Lacanian psychoanalysis has also been applied to the novel as the character of Beloved is seen as a reflection of the repressed unconscious, guilt and unspeakable trauma of slavery that spreads throughout the main characters of the novel and the Black community as a whole (Shen, 2016).

One of the areas of scholarship that has attracted considerable attention in the novel is the intergenerational aspects of trauma. Scientific evidence has shown that historical trauma is also transmitted both physically and psychically, tracing permanent traces both physically and mentally, and that traumatic experiences are belatedly brought back through flashbacks, nightmares and obsessive repetitions (Latif, 2026). This idea of transgenerational ghosting i.e. that the unresolved traumas of one gen has a way of haunting the psychic and somatic life of the next generation has also been especially fruitful in understanding Beloved in which the ghost acts as a figurative manifestation of how the unprocessed pain of the enslaved haunts the psychic and cellular life of the post-emancipation present (Lynett, 2008). Researchers have also suggested that the main characters in fiction of Morrison construct psychic tombs to hold the unintegrated traumatic memories, resulting in

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symptoms like flashbacks, hallucinations and linguistic aporia, that repressed guilt and silence lead to transgenerational and cultural trauma (Pedrosa, 2019).

2.2 Collective Memory and Historical Suffering in African American Literature

The Africa American literature has examined the idea of collective memory, the collective body of knowledge, tales, and attitudes through which a community would gain knowledge about its past. In the context of the communities in whose pasts a thorough process of oppression, manipulation, and denial has historically taken place, the process of collective remembering acquires a special urgency. This work has been conducted primarily through literature that has also been termed by researchers as what thinkers have referred to as a literary archaeology of loss where narrative action, testimony, and textual mourning are some of the mechanisms that must be employed as a way of restoring identity, as well as as a method of redeeming historical pain (Henry, 2006).

Beloved stands alone in such a tradition. It has also been interpreted as depicting the physical and mental tortures of the slaves as well as the annihilation of Black history, culture, and identity and as illustrating the fact that catharsis can be achieved through collective unity, recovery of oppressed pasts, and linked memory to catharsis as a central form of resistance to colonial forgetting (Panwar, 2026). It has been established by scholars that this novel by Morrison represents resistance as an individual and communal recovery, acting as what one of the critics refers to as a moral story of liberation and recollection where identity is never absolute but in a continued negotiation with the aspects of memory and survivability (Zahraa, 2026). Its role in the process has been further discussed in the collective memory paradigm of postmemory - the passing on of traumatic memory to subsequent generations who were not directly involved in the events that caused the trauma - with theorists asserting that postmemory and the reparative writing allows African American women writers to de-silence traumatic pasts and to make identities (Ribeiro, 2023).

Collective memory and space have also been a subject of long term scholarly interest. The explorations of the post-traumatic slave syndrome and cultural trauma in the literature of the African American ethnicity have brought attention to the psychological distress of the Black psyche under the influence of inherited slave-era

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traumas, disjointed identities, and systematic oppression; and how the characters of the neo-slave texts are in a state of mental and psychological distress, express it through their memory breaches and the haunting of the spaces filled with past events (Campbell, 2020). In these narratives, identity is constructed and healed through historical recognition, self-determination and repossession of secure spaces of both physical and emotional security. The haunted house on Bluestone Road 124 in Beloved has been interpreted as a paradigmatic exemplar of this space dimension of collective trauma, a site where the past is not just being remembered, but exists in reality.

A number of scholars have placed the project of Morrison in more general context of African American literature and how it has dealt with the Middle Passage and its consequences. Neo-slave narrative studies have investigated the manner in which escape, haunting, and traumatic memory figure into a renewed historical memory, by studying the inevitability of traumatic memory and the spectral influence of the past on construction of identity and social memory through generations (Mondal, 2026). The novel has also been discussed in conjunction with Caribbean and African diasporic literature as a part of a transnational engagement with the legacies of slavery, with scholars contending that collective memory and painful memories of trauma are reflected across generations, and that African and African American cultures are connected across the Middle Passage (Dockery, 2020). This transnational view has been strengthened with research on spectral figures found in music of Morrison explaining it as concrete expressions of historical trauma and fundamental agents of personal and collective strength (Tia, 2025).

2.3 Rememory, Embodiment, and the Politics of Narrative Form

Morrison has coined a neologism called rememory that has produced a large and growing critical commentary. In contrast to the traditional conception of memory as a subjective, inner experience of recalling, rememory in the conceptualization proposed by Morrison is quasi-material: it is a part of the world, that can be experienced by other individuals and that cannot be lost to consciousness that brought it into existence. Rememory has been discussed by scholars as a discursive structure, and four major discursive operations have been identified in the novel,

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namely: the exteriorization of the memory, the imbodimentation of the past, the ghost discourse, and the non-linear temporality (Shuhratovna, 2026). This discussion places rememory as a thematic motif but as a structuring principle, which controls the overall narrative structure of the novel.

The body aspect or question of embodiment has been specifically critical in the academic literature. Studies have shown that feminine body in Beloved is a corporeal archive imprinted with racial and colonial trauma, and scars as physical evidence and truth-telling of oppression as well as personal suffering converging with collective memory via the wounded possibility of the female body (AFILAL, 2025). Scholars have furthered this reading by claiming that Morrison rematerializes the body as an archive to signify Black feminist epistemology, a state of destabilized evidence and historical truth of the West (Iqbal & Naseem*, 2026). Embodied trauma has been addressed in the novel as well as discussed via comparative method and analysis with other Slavery literatures, where scholars have analyzed the concept of rememory and the comparative concept of rememory in Brazilian literature (Sutter, 2019).

The politics of Beloved narrative has received tremendous critical discussion. The fragmented, non-linear narration that Morrison uses has been viewed as formal performance of traumatic experience per se, and the structure of the novel reflects how trauma defies the linear narrative, instead coming as moments of intrusion, repetition, and novelty. Researchers have asserted that the novel addresses trauma, memory, and identity by fragmented narration and techniques like intimacy, dissociation, and dialogical witnessing (Abdulateef, 2020). It has been said that Morrison presents the trauma of slavery instateless and obsessive, impossible to narrate directly or to approach through an access point, and the novel is never given a sense of closure or redemption, which provides the reader with an experience of cognitive discomfort can be felt in the long term (Saigal, 2026). It is this formal aspect of the novel that has prompted researchers to examine how language, in turn, is not sufficient to signify traumatic experience, prompting readers to find embodied knowledge in order to experience the legacy of slavery (Lifson, 2023).

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3. Method

This paper will use a qualitative textual analysis approach, which is based on the theory of trauma, to discuss how memory, slavery and trauma are represented in Beloved by Toni Morrison. The qualitative analysis of texts is better applicable to the topic under investigation as the intricacy of the literary text is subject to closer consideration: the interaction of thematic and formal elements and rhetorical strategy, and the theoretical framework of the investigation kindly offers the conceptualization of understanding the psychological, historical, and aesthetical aspects of the interaction between Morrison and the slavery legacy.

Morrison's Beloved (1987) has been chosen as the key text to be analyzed due to its rightful fame as one of the most renowned novels that significantly influence the literary history to portray the image of historical trauma and define the way in which one could develop the themes of memory, collective suffering, and identity reconstruction within the context of the post-slavery period. The theoretical orientations adopted in the analytical framework are based on some of the main theoretical orientations in trauma studies. In clinical trauma theory, the study utilizes ideas of post-traumatic stress, dissociation, repetition compulsion as well as the difference between acting out and working through trauma. The research is based on insights about collective memory, intergenerational transmission, and social construction of traumatic events as part of cultural trauma theory. Based on the literary trauma theory, the analysis is responsive to the formal means by which trauma is played out in narrative - fragmentation, non-linear temporality, gaps and silences, repetition, and the use of spectral or uncanny characters.

The analysis is performed in close reading through the text of the novel, with special emphasis on seven dimensions of trauma representation in the novel, including the infanticide and maternal trauma of Sethe, the idea of rememory, the idea of a ghost of Beloved, collectively as a representation of the collective trauma, the masculine vulnerability and the psychic numbing of Paul D, the haunted space of 124 Bluestone Road, the role of Baby Suggs in communal recovery, and the narrative fragmentation of the novel as the formal presentation of the traumatic experience. In each dimension, the analysis will determine the textual evidence that is germane, analyze

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it in light of the trauma theory, as well as within the general academic discourse on the novel. The contextualization and support of the interpretative claims presented in the analysis is achieved through secondary sources such as published peer-reviewed scholarship on Beloved and on trauma theory, in general.

The paper recognizes some shortcomings of the study. Qualitative textual analysis is by definition interpretive, and cannot provide the type of generalizable, reproducible results that the quantitative research design can. This choice in favor of the trauma theory serving as the main theory of analysis, although highly prolific, inevitably prefigures some aspects of the text, and may not investigate others - including the role of the novel in addressing economics, legal history, or African cosmological systems - as thoroughly as possible. However, the research questions proposed by the study are quite well suited to its methodology: they aim to explore how the literary art of Morrison reflects, enacts, and challenges the traumatic remembrance of slavery.

4. Findings

4.1 Sethe's Infanticide and the Architecture of Maternal Trauma

The focal point of the traumatic documentary scene in Beloved is the murder of her two-year-old daughter by Sethe to keep her out of slavery, with Sethe depicting the event as the moral and psychological epicenter upon which the whole architecture of the remembrance, guilt, and identity in the novel is built. Morrison is founded on the historical case of Margaret Garner but the success of the novel is its refusal to subdue the incident to a mere moral verdict, but rather making the complete nature of a maternal conscience in which murdering the child is felt as the ultimate act of love and protection. The fact that Sethe says that her children will not experience the same life that the animals led bears witness to the realization that slavery was so inhuman that death was better than to be reborn.

Scholars have explored the treatment in the infanticide of Sethe, that exposes the psychological and cultural wounds of slavery and how trauma and the repression of that trauma cause personal and cultural fragmentation with characters experiencing deep fragmentation because of traumatic experiences caused by the haunting of brutalities of slavery (Malazi & Turgut, 2025). The infanticide serves as what the

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trauma theory calls a limit event - a so overwhelming experience that it cannot be broken down and absorbed into normal consciousness. Sethe is unable to interpret the event in a logical manner but the event comes back in bits, as visual experiences, sensations and physical manifestations. The chokecherry tree of scars on her back, which was created by the nephews of the slavemaster at Sweet Home not only makes the literal text of violence but also has become a kind of icon representing how trauma literally imprints the body as a place where trauma is preserved. It has been shown through research on the feminine body as a corporeal archive marked with racial and colonizing trauma that the scars in the novel both serve as bodily signatures of oppression and the location of individual suffering across mass memory (AFILAL, 2025).

The fact that Sethe is unable to grieve in the slavery conditions adds to her maternal trauma. With slavery, the mother child relationship was methodically broken: slaves would be sold, parted and commodified any time. The only mother Sethe had was hanged, the closest thing that the child of mother, her milk, was seized by the schoolteacher nephews. Her milk theft is a crime against maternal identity that echoes throughout the rest of the novel, as it figured how slavery assaulted the enslaved not just physically, but through a systemic act of annihilating family ties and parenthood. This aspect of the novel has been examined by scholars within the context of the mother-daughter relationship by showing how Morrison represents the crushing effect of slavery on the maternal identity and the relationship between mother and daughter (Tandon, 2019). The traumatic experiences and physical entrapment defining female identity, which occurs under slavery have also been broken down to contribute to circumstances where characters enlist self-sacrifice, ritual reenactment, and spiritual practices to reclaim agency and protest oppression (Dockery, 2020).

What renders Sethe infanticide both heart-wrenchingly, yet simultaneously thriftily, in the economy of trauma of the novel is the fact that it is both an act of both love and violence, an act of matriarchal agency, and an extreme act of maternal powerlessness. Sethe finds no solution to this contradiction. Her guilt is not some kind of discrete mental state that could be worked through and overcome but it is an

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organizational state of her being, which is integrated into all facets of her daily existence. The incompleteness of this guilt is reflected by scholars on how Morrison paints the life afterward slavery as incomplete and unresolved yet identity throughout post-slavery life is incomplete as it is constantly reformulated and renegotiated with traumatic memory and historical violence (Khalid, 2026). The burden of remembering - the guilt that comes with the process of remembering what one has done, what one has done to him/her, is both a psychological burden and, ironically, a moral testifier (Rifaya & Devi, 2026).

4.2 Rememory: Memory as Living Entity

Morrison rememory is one of the most original and theoretically generative contributions to the project of trauma writings. In one of the biggest quotes, Sethe tells Denver that a rememory is not just a recollection in the mind of the person who had gone through the event but it is instead a phenomenon that exists in the world and can be experienced by anybody who goes through that place. "If a house burns down," Sethe tells Denver, "it's gone, but the place — the picture of it — stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world." This theory subverts Western epistemological foundations of privacy and interiority of memory, proposing that traumatic experience in the world does result in a material effect that continues without reference to any individual consciousness.

Rememory has been recognized by scholarship as a discursive form that has four overlapping mechanisms: the externalization of memory, the embodiment of history, ghost discourse, and non-linear temporality (Shuhratovna, 2026). All these mechanisms co-exist to create a narrative where the past is not safely enclosed in the category of the past that happened before but rather bursts unexpectedly into the present destabilizing the lines between self and other, living and dead, present and past. The idea has further discussed itself as being both a weight mechanism and a resistance mechanism, which involved psychological fragmentation and emotional discontinuity, and allowed the process of creating fragmented subaltern identities by continuing to negotiate with traumatic memory (Khalid, 2026).

The theoretical meaning of rememory go beyond the novel itself. It has been studied by scholars together with comparable concepts in diasporic literatures, including the

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Brazilian concept of pensamentos-lembrancas (memory-thoughts), with the aim that such concepts collectively sheds light on how descendants engage in the revision of family narratives and address inherited trauma (Sutter, 2019). It has also been interpreted through the prism of postmemory, as theorists have shown that the traumatic slavery and violence memory burdens must be shared across generations so that these burdens are relieved and persons can gain self-definition (Ribeiro, 2023). Rememory, in Morrison novel, is the issue but, maybe, the first step toward a solution: the system of how the past cannot be forgotten and, at the same time, the system of how the community will be finally able to come to the terms with what it has lost.

It matters that rememory is vital in Beloved because it will help us to explore more the relationship between personal and collective trauma. Since the rememories are a part of the world, not just internal to a single mind, they create a collective sphere of traumatic experience, which holds the community in one piece--not united, but united in anguish. The novel indicates that this common ground needs to be recognized and worked upon together in order that healing should take place. Morrison presents the mechanisms of memory, rememory, and storytelling to make characters face the collective and individual trauma and shows that recalling and addressing the past can help characters reconstruct the fractured identities, grant them psychological healing, and redeem themselves (Nefnouf, 2023). The idea therefore serves in the boundary between the individual and the political, the psychological and the historical, in between the symptoms of a person and the grief of a group.

4.3 The Ghost of Beloved as Embodied Collective Trauma

The traumatic embodiment of Beloved, who initially comes as disruptive poltergeist haunting 124 Bluestone Road and subsequently as an inexplicable young woman, materializing in the doorstep of Sethe, is Morrison most radical formal strategy of making the trauma seen and felt. Beloved serves as both at once on the different levels of signification: she is the dead daughter of Sethe brought back to life; she is a representation of the sixty million Africans and more that were killed during the Middle Passage; a representation of the collective memory of slavery that has been

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repressed but not wholly overcome; and the representation of the unresolved guilt and sorrow that haunts the African American community post-emancipation.

The characters of Beloved have been examined by scholars via Lacanian psychoanalysis, claiming that she reflects the repressed unconscious, guilt, and unspeakable trauma of slavery permeate the main characters of the novel and the Black community at large, and how she is weak in forming a coherent Cartesian self reflects an appalling historical heritage of the Middle Passage (Shen, 2016). The ghostly figure has also been interpreted as a material manifestation of past trauma and a necessary driving force of personal and societal resilience, and a mechanism by which the characters are obliged to face the raw pain of the past (Tia, 2025). This interpretation is supported by the body of scholarship that locates the ghost in Beloved as the haunting of slavery and national amnesia where the symbolism of the ghost through the repressed trauma and guilt in Sethe is manifested through the ghost (Abdoluteef, 2020).

The aspect of Beloved is also essential as a means of representation in Morrison. Beloved is, unlike an ordinary ghost that can be construed as only a ghostly or supernatural event, unambiguously corporeal: she bodies, she feeds, she sleeps, she demands. Her corporeality makes the rest of the characters, and even the reader, address the materiality of the past in a way that cannot be abstracted or metaphorically treated. Scholars have stated that the concept of non-linear, somatic and intergenerational trauma that Morrison uses to characterize trauma in characters such as Sethe and Paul D is self-disenfranchising, and that the literal expression of Beloved reflects the way in which historical trauma is repressed but reappears to demand attention (Mati, 2025).

The three lyrical monologues in the heart of the novel, the ones written by Sethe, by Denver and by Beloved, constitute the most protracted formal exploration of the psychic effects of shared trauma by Morrison. In the example of Beloved, especially the monologue, the barrier between the personal and the communal is cracked, with the horror of the Middle Passage caused by the disjointed novel writing style, where sentences lack context-formed endings. It has shown that Morrison introduces the trauma of slavery in fragmented, compulsive forms, not allowing to be captured by a

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single narrative, but only through openings and recreations, with collective memory and post-memory merging the voices of the characters through which inherited trauma is practiced and one is compelled to be significantly involved in the process of reading (Saigal, 2026). This is what the reader finds in the monologue of the main character of Beloved: that this speaker is not a clear subject recounting a lost past but rather a voice that has atrophied and become hardened in the trauma of the millions of who died to a common, shared past.

The disposition of the ghost in the novel eventually points to the idea that the ghost can not be cast out forever-that the slavery trauma is a problem that does not have a final solution. The collective exorcism which leads Beloved out of 124 does not remove the past: it refocuses the community relationship with the past. The scholars have remarked that the novel never allows closure or redemption and thus, the reader engagement will be accompanied by never-ending cognitive disturbance (Saigal, 2026). What some have interpreted as a ban on telling the story has been interpreted by some to suggest the need to do so, the traumatic memory paradox right in the closing, mysterious refrain, which suggests both the impossibility and necessity of bearing witness, at the same time.

memory: the impossibility and necessity of testifying at the same time.

4.4 Paul D and the Terrain of Masculine Vulnerability

Although much of the critical demand of Beloved has centered on Sethe and the female experience of slavery, how Morrison approaches Paul D has created a no less devastating and psychologically complex depiction of male trauma. Paul D experiences at Sweet Home and, more terrifyingly, in the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, a methodical attack on his selfhood, agency and ability to feel. Morrison makes his psychic injury possible using one of the strongest metaphors of the novel: the "tobacco tin" which substituted his red heart, a hermetically closed box where he has buried all the emotions following the survival strategy against intolerable pain. Paul D psychic numbing has been identified by scholarly sources as an exemplar moment of the formal performance of interiority pioneered by Morrison; that the tobacco tin metaphor accomplishes the damage of the psyche with figuration instead of description, thus preserving the secrecy and honor of the traumatizing

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experience (Saigal, 2026). This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that analyses of the masculine vulnerability that the novel treats, more generally, show that Morrison imagines trauma as resulting in self-fragmentation and dissociative episodes among characters like Paul D and that repressive vehicles like the tobacco tin are not long-term strategies, which leads to people having to work together to recover their memories (Mati, 2025). Trauma psychology in Beloved has been discussed within the existing theoretical framework that explains how the interior world of Paul D can be viewed as a residence of unchanging or unresolved psychological effects of the state of slavery, where dissociation and distamped recoveries define his post-slavery life (Chishti, 2026).

The experience of earlier days on the chain gang, in which the men are confined underground in wooden boxes, and where they are forced to fellate the guards every morning, and are chained together workers in a configuration that causes them to act as a single body, is a supreme case of the dehumanization that slavery and its consequences caused to the Black men. The fact that the chain gang is described as eradicating the individuality is highlighted by Morrison: the men are not able to move their own way; the collective survival of every man is determined by the movements of the rest. This coercive unity is a twisted reflection of the social ties which the novel ultimately proves crucial to a restoration of health, and it shows how slavery deformed even the most fundamental human desire, the need to connect.

The passage of Paul D through the novel is a passage of gradual unwrapping of the tobacco tin. His intrusion at 124 breaks the stasis of Sethe and Denver in their isolated world, and his sexual climax with Beloved that he feels to be an obsessions of which he is powerless signifies the forcible violation of his hidden emotional heart. The ending of the novel when Paul D reconnects with Sethe after an extended absence and says to her You your best thing is hinting at the potential of emotional re-connectivity, though it is a limited and feeble hint, not an resounding close. Historians have contended that narratives and shared practices and language restoration helps characters like Paul D to start engaging race with the past and recovery of identity, yet that this effort is unfinished (Pedrosa, 2019). Masculine vulnerability as practiced in the novel thereby adds to and deepens the paradigm of

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trauma by showing that it was not only women who paid the psychic price of slavery and that masculine survival tactics such as emotional lockdown, itinerancy and psychic numbing had destructive effects of their own.

4.5 124 Bluestone Road as a Haunted Space

124--vile.--full of the venom of a babe. Morrison provides the house at 124 Bluestone Road not just as a house, but as an independent entity of its own: a living breathing entity, hostile, and filled with the emotional residue of traumatic experience. The haunted house is an established device of Gothic literature but is converted by Morrison into something much more precise and grounded in historical events, namely, the figure of how the traumatic history of slavery comes to occupy domestic space and thus to turn the house, which is supposed to be the location of the private sphere, into a location of continued psychic violence.

Space, trauma and healing in the color of postcolonial narrative scholarship has revealed that characters in neo-slave stories are haunted by the past traumas of historical space, and that mending of identity is possible through historical recognition and physical-emotional habitats of safety and security (Campbell, 2020). The 124 house serves as what the scholars have referred to as a "memorial topography" - a place where history is not just remembered but there physically, pressing like a force that cannot be disregarded by the occupants (Tia, 2025). The development of the novel through the sequence of words, i.e. the transitions between the terms: spiteful and loud as well as quiet signify the alterations in the nature of the haunting that accompany the changes in the life of the family and the surrounding community with regards to their attitude to the traumatic past.

The meaning of 124 as a cursed zone goes beyond the traumatic experience of Sethe and her family. Prior to the infanticide, Baby Suggs had transformed 124 into a communal meeting and spiritual renewal, a place where former slaves were able to gather celebrating the embodied presence and starting the psychic reconstruction. The infanticide changes 124 into a place of communal redemption into a place of communal evasion: the neighbors, appalled by the act of infanticide by Sethe and perhaps equally appalled by their own inability to warn Sethe of the arrival of schoolteacher stand back of the house and its occupants. Researchers have

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suggested that the novel illustrates that the haunting, fragmented subjectivity, and cultural memory are lingering consequences of the colonialism, which is present in the spaces that oblige people not to forget the past (Panwar, 2026). Isolation of 124 is, therefore not simply a side effect of the haunting but a side effect of the community inability to digest its collective trauma, an issue only addressed by the collective exorcism that forms the climax of the novel.

The spatial logic of Beloved also includes the additional sites that are being used in the discontinuous chronology of the novel: Sweet Home, the Middle Passage (implicated via the monologue of Beloved) the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, the clearing where Baby Suggs preaches. Both of these spaces have their own modality of trauma and relation to memory. The clearing, especially, serves as the antithesis to the haunted house, it is something open and natural in which the community can meet, where the body can be worshiped and not tortured and where the therapeutic process may commence. It is observed by scholars that these spatial topographies highlight the argument of the novel that physical and emotional safe spaces must be returned to in order to overcome the collective trauma of a process involved in recovering (Campbell, 2020).

4.6 Baby Suggs and the Practice of Communal Healing

The reason is that Baby Suggs, holy is the mother-in-law of Sethe that was bought out of slavery by her son Halle, and that is the most enduring exploration of Morrison into the potential of communal recovery in the aftermath of slavery. One of the strongest passages in the novel is her sermons in the Clearing which provide an idea of embodied spiritual practice explicitly dealing with the psychic harm done by the institution of slavery. Here, Baby Suggs tells her congregation, in this here place we flesh, weep, laugh, dance on bare feet in grass: love it: love it hard. The love oneself command is radical in the frame of a system that has systemically depolarized, commodified and brutalized black bodies and it demonstrates the insight of Baby Suggs that recovery after slavery comes only through radical redefinition of the relationship of the self to itself.

The work of Baby Suggs has been analyzed in the context of community-based healing, with scholars suggesting that her activities can provide community-based

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models of recovery that go beyond the victim, and that her inner world is one of both permanent psychological effects of enslavement, which she channels into a source of collective healing (Chishti, 2026). The spiritual aspect of the practice that baby Suggs followed has also been evaluated within the context of African spirituality as the scholars have shown that such characters as Sethe and Baby Suggs employ African spiritual customs, reenactment of the rituals, and community gathering in order to reclaim their agency, protest against the pain, and gain a certain redemption (Dockery, 2020). The sermons in the Clearing by Baby Suggs are a direct counter-discourse to the ideology of slavery, which was trying to persuade the enslaved that their bodies were not their own; her order to love the flesh an assertion of ownership, selfhood, of the irreducible value of black embodied experience.

However, Morrison does not report the project of Baby Suggs as a complete success. Following the infanticide at 124, Baby Suggs moves to her bed and fantasizes about colors until her death, since she is devastated by the world where maternal love can result in the act of murder and where envy of a community can aid in the destruction. Her submission exemplifies the fact that the novels recognizes the extensiveness of the trauma of slavery to such a degree that even the most spiritually gifted person might not have the power to handle or recover. It has been believed by scholars that the repressive guilt and silence reinforce intergenerational and cultural traumas, and that storytelling, communal rituals, and reintegration of language are required, but not always adequate, to allow characters to address the past and have redemption (Pedrosa, 2019). The despondencies of Baby Suggs indicate the boundaries of group healing amid the persistence of structural violence and hints that the process of recovery after group disaster is a generation-long journey instead of a year-long one.

Notably, the legacy of the Baby Suggs lives on even after her demise. The exorcism of at least one community by another that celebrates at the climax of the novel, as thirty neighborhood women come before 124 and force Beloved out of the house with their joint voices, is a direct continuation of the community act Baby Suggs had begun in the Clearing. Researchers have observed that addressing the memories of the past and the community exorcism allow the characters to gain subjectivity,

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maturity, and redeem themselves (Shen, 2016). The action of all the women proves that the means of healing are contained even within the community itself, that the ties of experience of otherness and that these ties are broken by the traumatic experience of slavery and its outcomes, but can be restored by the conscious efforts of collective recall and collective action.

The theme of communal healing through storytelling coupled with communal remembrance, which Morrison employs, has been recognized as a key thematic and structural principle of the novel. Studies have revealed that narration acts as both witnessing to trauma and as a way to heal, allowing characters to progress through the traumatic acting out to working through of the trauma (Ali et al., 2024), (Malazi and Turgut, 2025). According to the novel, the process of healing ought to not be an individual and personal but a communal process that involves the active involvement of the community collectively as a whole- similar to the process that Morrison embodies in her writing of the novel at the literary culture level.

4.7 Narrative Fragmentation as Formal Representation of Trauma

However, the most prominent accomplishment of Beloved probably by Morrison is the creation of the narrative form that does not detail the trauma but officially acts it. The form of the novel is radically unlinear, flipping back and forth between 1873 and the years on Sweet Home by a sequence of fragmentary, associative jumps that recall the mechanism of traumatic memory within the psyche. Sometimes the narration of events appears to proceed in no chronological order but comes to light, bit by bit, through the complexity and conflict of viewpoints of several characters. The reader will, as the characters, be forced to piece the story together by bits, and will have something close to the lostness and disorientation which in traumatic recollection.

According to the scholars, this formal strategy is the core of the representational project developed by Morrison; they argue that the novel is dedicated to the trauma, memory, and identity expressed through fragmentation of narration and such strategies like intimacy, dissociation, and dialogical witnessing (Abdulateef, 2020). Narrative fragmentation has also been examined as a formal decision that reflects a trauma of slavery being impossible to approach directly, and could only be

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approached indirectly via gaps, repetition, and indirectness (Saigal, 2026). The studies of discursive practices of the novel have shown that four functions combined in a symbiotic relationship of externalization of memory and embodiment of the past, a ghost discourse and non-linear temporality transform the reader into a member of a community of witness (Shuhratovna, 2026).

Of great importance in this aspect is the repetition used by Morrison. Some of the lines and pictures are re-used all through the novel the tree on the back of Sethe, the tobacco tin, this is not a story to pass on, and every time, adding new meaning and feeling. This procedure resembles the repetition compulsion that Freud describes as a characteristic of traumatic experience: the habit of the traumatized subject returning to the site of the trauma with obsessive repetition, not because the traumatized subject is trying to be able to cope with it but because the trauma has not been fully assimilated into consciousness. The repetitions of the novel, therefore, serve both as thematic motifs, and as formal analogues to the organization of traumatic memory per se.

The three lyrical monologues in the middle of the novel, represented as described by Sethe, Denver and Beloved, is the most radical form of formal experimentation by Morrison. These monologues gradually disintegrate the standard rules of prose in English: there is no punctuation, sentences are broken, voices interchange and overlap, the boundaries between speakers become even more blurred. The monologue of Beloved, especially, has been interpreted as bringing out the experience of the Middle Passage as a whole because it is the voice of the voices of the millions of slaves who were killed and rendered as precious cargo in the hold of the slave ship. Researchers have stated that Beloved has been found to be lacking in language to convey the traumatic experience and that readers should find embodied knowledge beyond the restrictions of standard linguistic expression (Lifson, 2023). This formal strategy transforms the process of reading into a disorientation reminiscent of the psychic disorientation of trauma, and the reader, rather than a consumer of a narration about trauma, is one of the subjects of its affective dynamics.

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The phenomenology of trauma is also practiced by the time structure of the novel. There is no temporal flow in Beloved, as the past comes to the present in a circular motion, eclipsed, folded into itself, and collapsing creating a sense of immediacy of events that blends the present and the past in such a way that it becomes impossible to distinguish between something that has happened and something that has not. Such disruption of time is directly linked to the theory of trauma of what is described as the disproportion of time of exposure to the traumatic experience: how it is not experienced in its entirety during the encounter with the traumatic experience but reenters, unwilled, and with all the impact of the initial experience. Scholars have proved that traumatic events in the novel reappear late when they are reliving in flashbacks, nightmares, and compulsive repetition, destabilizing the sense of identity of characters, their ability to develop consistent personal narratives (Latif, 2026). The form of the narrative thus of Morrison does not simply indicate this temporal disturbance; it recreates it in the experience of the reader, so that the textual space in which past is never safely past and present is constantly haunted.

The unclear refrain of the novel titled This is not a story to pass on and the footprints of Beloved as she comes and goes by the stream with her illustration of the novel's climax, summarize the contradiction of traumatic memory that all the other parts of the story examined. Slavery as a myth, as proposed by Morrison, is a story that cannot be told and at the same time, a story that should be told, a story that the community hopes that people will forget and a story that they can no longer afford to forget. The novel itself represents a resolution of this paradox: it is the novel that must not be relayed, relayed; the unsayable, said; the unrepresentable, put into expression. It has been suggested by scholars that the narrative acts made by Morrison are necessary procedures to recreate identity and free historical loss and the formal innovations in the novel are a mode of literary witnessing, which alters the reader into an ethical agent in the process of collective memory (Henry, 2006).

5. Discussion

The results of this work indicate that Beloved by Morrison is a multi-layered literary narration of trauma where the thematic, psychological and the formal levels of this text are intrinsically intertwined. The seven dimensions explored in the findings

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section, maternal trauma, rememory, the ghost as collective trauma, masculine vulnerability, haunted space, narrative fragmentation are not individual issues, but rather rely on each other and taken as a whole collective approach to the question of how the legacy of slavery remains and how, if there is an answer, it could be given, tentatively and incompletely.

There are a number of important patterns derived as a result of the analysis. On the one hand, the novel, through its consistent presentation, clearly shows that trauma is not just a psychological phenomenon of individuals in slavery but of an intergenerational and structural nature as well. Infanticide cannot be interpreted within the context of a society that is fertile to it, and psychic anesthesia cannot be interpreted as a failure on the part of Paul D but as a survival tactic developed in an atmosphere that dehumanizes; despair not as a failure itself but by the sheer weight of the violence that is systemic. This reading has been confirmed by scholars, who have shown that the concept of collective trauma and common experience of slavery practice as a slave inhabitant is one of the interconnections, in which the characters perceive their consciousness and their collective existence in the novel (Tokssoz, 2024). As various theorists have suggested, identity is never absolute in the world of Morrison but is in a constant bargaining with the memory, survival as well as the necessities of the community (Zahraa, 2026).

Second, the analysis indicates that formal innovations Morrison employs are not merely ornamental and arbitrary but rather key elements of her representational strategy. The narrative disintegration, temporal discontinuity, and lyrical fragmentation to which Beloved is subjected, are not hindrances to interpretation but are summons to a disposition of reading that would approach the phenomenology of the traumatic experience. Managing to introduce the organization of trauma as its fragmentation, its imprecision, the lack of linear narration, Morrison makes a reader not an indifferent spectator of the art piece but one who engages in the process of witnessing and remembering. The scholarly literature has already dealt with this formal component of the novel in detail, and scholars have accentuated how Morrison transforms the reader into a member of a community of witness by the discursive structure of the novel (Shuhratovna, 2026).

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Third, the tension in the novel between the impossibility and the necessity of remembering is as well marked in the analysis. Rememory is curse and resource; the ghost of Beloved is both a destroyer and a change agent; the communal exorcism is both a liberation and loss. Morrison does not resolve such tensions, and the omission of a resolution of these tensions in the novel is one of the key moral and aesthetic undertakings made by the novel. This dynamic has been discussed broadly by scholars who insist that the constant rejection of redemptive closure in the novel secures its enduring cognitive instability and makes the novel a perspect—instead of a completed mode of mourning—and an ethical challenge to be taken up over time (Saigal, 2026).

The reasons of these results are not limited to the analysis of one novel. Formal and thematic devices employed by Morrison within Beloved have impacted a generation of authors and academics interested in literary expressions of historical trauma, and the conceptual inventiveness of the novel, especially the idea of rememory have contributed to the theoretical discourse of trauma studies overall. The critique also implies that literary texts have the capacity to engage forms of cultural work witnessing, mourning, healing that cannot be achieved through historiography, social science alone, and that the aesthetic aspect of writing is not a superfluous addition to its moral and political importance.

One must take into account some limitations of the current analysis. Because trauma theory is the main analytical paradigm, which is so fruitful to use, other significant aspects of the novel remain unexplored. The allusions of African and African American spirituals made by Morrison, her analysis of the patriarchal mode, her approaches to the issues of economic exploitation, her ambiguous attitude to the traditions of the slave narrative and the Gothic novel all warrant the cumulative consideration that is beyond the boundaries of this paper. Future studies may fruitfully combine work with trauma-theoretical with such other important angles in order to come up with a more elaborate explanation of the multidimensional accomplishment of the novel.

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6. Conclusion

This paper has explored how the theme of trauma is portrayed in Beloved by Toni Morrison in seven interrelated dimensions of analysis that prove Beloved is a full literary exploration of the psychological, societal and technical issues of representing the traumatic history of American chattel slavery. It is through its treatment of the Sethe infanticide and maternal strain, its conceptual creativity of rememory, its figuration of Beloved as a living collective trauma, its subtle depiction of the masculine vulnerability of Paul D, its conversion of 124 Bluestone Road into a haunted shrine, its focus on the community-healing activities of Baby Suggs, and its use of narrative fragmentation as performative realization of traumatic experience, that the novel exhibits that the history of slavery is not a closed book of the past but an active presence in the present that continues to shape the psychic topography of the currently present landscape.

The success of Beloved is not only that Morrison is able to salvage the voices of the enslaved but also that she is able to create new literary forms that are sufficiently equal to the task of representing the experiences as they are expressed, not in a standard form of narration. This lapsed temporality with which the novel is shot through, this spectral figuration, this rememory are formal interventions, which present a challenge to the pre-eminence of historical representation, and open up new vistas to witnessing the collective pain. Storytelling, communal memory and supportive relationships are key healing processes, as evidenced by the academic literature, which allow characters and communities to transition the traumatic acting out stage to the working through and identity formation stage (Malazi & Turgut, 2025). However, it is also the novel that, with its denial of closure, its indefinite final refrain, holds to the idea that the labour of remembering and healing is never complete, that the ghosts of the past can be dealt with and interacted with but never be successfully buried.

Living in the modern day, when the concerns of historical memory, racial justice, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma are still a part of the focus of public discourse, the Beloved by Morrison may be considered an invaluable literary and moral resource. The novel shows us that the past is not the lost but the present and

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the past happening in us, between us, and around us-and that the task of facing up to that past, how painful and unfinished it may be, is the only condition to the possibility of a more just and humane future. With much of scholarship still dealing with the novel and its multifaceted interactions with trauma, memory and representation, the depiction of literature by Morrison as an encounter with witness and healing is as urgent and needed as ever.

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