

MEMORY, RACE, AND HEALING IN TONI MORRISON’S *BELOVED*

Umirziyayev Umidjon Maxamadjonovich

Fergana State University, Teacher.

Durdona Omonova Jahongir qizi

Fergana State University, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of Philology and Language Teaching (English), Group 24.107

Abstract: *This article examines the interconnection between memory, race, and healing through the example of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. The study analyzes how the legacy of slavery is manifested through personal and collective memory, explores the bodily and psychological forms of trauma, and highlights healing as a communal rather than an individual process. Through Morrison’s narrative strategies, the article reveals issues of historical justice, ethical responsibility, and survival.*

Keywords: *memory, race, trauma, healing, collective memory, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*.*

Introduction. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* stands as one of the most profound literary explorations of memory and racial trauma in African American literature. Set in the aftermath of American slavery, the novel examines how the past persists within individual and collective consciousness, shaping identity, relationships, and the possibility of healing. Morrison does not treat memory as a linear recollection of events; instead, she presents it as a fragmented, intrusive, and often painful force that refuses to remain buried. Through this narrative strategy, *Beloved* reveals how the legacy of slavery continues to inhabit the present, long after its formal abolition.

Scholars frequently note that Morrison’s approach to memory challenges traditional historical narratives by privileging emotional truth over chronological accuracy. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues, *Beloved* reconstructs history not through official records but through lived experience, especially the silenced voices of enslaved women [1, p. 41]. Building on this idea, Morrison’s novel can be read as an act of narrative reclamation, where remembering becomes both a moral obligation and a psychological burden. This duality frames memory as a central site where race, trauma, and healing intersect.

Memory as a Racialized Experience. In *Beloved*, memory is inseparable from race. The memories that haunt Sethe and other characters are not merely personal recollections but manifestations of a historically racialized system of violence. Slavery, as depicted in the novel, is not an abstract institution but a lived reality inscribed onto Black bodies and minds. Morrison repeatedly shows that memory operates collectively, shared among those who endured similar forms of oppression.

According to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations, shaping the identities of those who did not directly witness the original events [2, p. 22]. Although Hirsch developed this theory primarily in relation to Holocaust studies, it resonates strongly with Morrison’s portrayal of African American

historical memory. In *Beloved*, the trauma of slavery is inherited, not only by Sethe’s children but by the broader Black community. Morrison extends this idea by suggesting that racial trauma does not fade with time; instead, it mutates, embedding itself within cultural memory.

Expanding on Hirsch’s framework, Morrison illustrates how racialized memory resists closure. The character of Beloved herself embodies this resistance. She functions less as a conventional ghost and more as a materialization of unresolved history. As Barbara Schapiro notes, Beloved represents “the return of the repressed” collective memory of slavery that demands acknowledgment [3, p. 195]. This interpretation underscores that forgetting is neither possible nor desirable within Morrison’s moral universe. Memory, though painful, is necessary for confronting historical truth.

Trauma, Silence, and the Limits of Language. One of Morrison’s most striking narrative choices is her emphasis on silence and fragmentation. Characters often struggle to articulate their memories, suggesting that trauma exceeds the limits of language. Sethe’s recollections surface in disjointed images rather than coherent narratives, reflecting the psychological impact of extreme violence. This narrative style aligns with trauma theory, which argues that traumatic memory is often stored somatically and emotionally rather than verbally.

Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is characterized by its belatedness; it is experienced fully only after the event has passed [4, p. 7]. Morrison’s portrayal of Sethe exemplifies this concept. Although slavery is legally over, its effects emerge more forcefully in freedom, when suppressed memories resurface. Morrison thus challenges the assumption that emancipation equates to psychological liberation. Instead, freedom creates the conditions in which trauma becomes unavoidable.

At the same time, Morrison resists portraying her characters solely as victims. While trauma constrains them, it also propels the narrative toward confrontation and, potentially, healing. By giving voice to previously silenced experiences, *Beloved* transforms personal suffering into collective testimony. This process suggests that storytelling itself can function as a form of resistance against historical erasure.

From Memory to the Possibility of Healing (Transition). Although memory in *Beloved* is deeply painful, Morrison does not present it as purely destructive. The novel gradually shifts from an emphasis on haunting toward a cautious exploration of healing. Importantly, healing does not mean forgetting. Instead, it involves integrating memory into a shared communal framework. As the narrative progresses, individual suffering begins to find resonance within the community, signaling a movement away from isolation.

Scholars such as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu argue that Morrison envisions healing as a collective process rooted in recognition and empathy rather than individual therapy [5, p. 88]. This idea prepares the ground for examining how communal rituals, storytelling, and mutual care enable characters to survive the weight of memory. In the next section, the analysis will focus specifically on healing as a social and ethical practice in *Beloved*, with particular attention to the role of community and embodied remembrance.

Healing as a Communal and Ethical Process. In *Beloved*, healing is neither immediate nor individual. Morrison carefully dismantles the idea that personal willpower alone

can overcome historical trauma. Instead, healing emerges as a communal and ethical process that requires recognition, shared responsibility, and collective memory. Sethe’s suffering intensifies precisely because she attempts to bear her memories alone. Her isolation turns memory into obsession, allowing the past to consume the present.

As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu observes, Morrison frames healing as an act that must occur within community, particularly among Black women who share embodied knowledge of loss and survival [5, p. 90]. Building on this insight, the novel suggests that trauma becomes survivable only when it is witnessed. The presence of others does not erase pain, but it transforms private anguish into shared understanding. This shift marks a crucial ethical movement in the novel: memory must be carried together, or it will destroy the individual.

Morrison reinforces this idea through narrative structure. As the novel progresses, voices multiply. The story no longer belongs solely to Sethe; it becomes polyphonic. This stylistic choice mirrors the thematic movement from isolation toward connection. Healing, therefore, is not presented as closure but as an ongoing negotiation between remembering and living.

The Body as a Site of Memory and Survival. One of Morrison’s most radical contributions in *Beloved* is her portrayal of the body as a primary archive of memory. Trauma is not confined to the mind; it is etched into flesh. Sethe’s scarred back, described as a “chokecherry tree,” functions as both a literal wound and a symbolic map of historical violence. The body remembers what language cannot fully express.

Hortense J. Spillers argues that slavery produced a condition in which Black bodies were reduced to property, permanently altering the relationship between flesh and identity [6, p. 67]. Morrison extends this argument by showing how bodily memory persists even after legal freedom. Sethe’s physical pain and exhaustion are not remnants of the past but active elements of her present existence. By foregrounding the body, Morrison insists that racial trauma is material, not metaphorical.

At the same time, the body also becomes a site of resistance. Acts of care, touch, and nourishment counterbalance violence. Baby Suggs’s sermons in the Clearing emphasize loving the flesh precisely because it has been brutalized. This insistence reframes the body not only as a site of suffering but as a foundation for healing. Morrison thus proposes a radical ethic of embodiment: reclaiming the body is a necessary step toward reclaiming the self.

Beloved as Embodied Memory and Historical Return. The character of Beloved occupies a central symbolic role in the novel. She is not simply a ghost or a supernatural presence; she is the embodiment of unresolved historical memory. Her arrival disrupts the fragile equilibrium of Sethe’s household, forcing suppressed memories to surface. Beloved demands attention, devotion, and acknowledgment, mirroring the demands of a past that refuses to remain silent.

As Barbara Schapiro suggests, Beloved functions as the material return of collective trauma, insisting that history be faced rather than denied [3, p. 198]. Expanding on this reading, Beloved can be understood as memory made flesh. She collapses the boundary between past and present, individual and collective. Her insatiable hunger reflects the

unfulfilled need for recognition experienced by generations of enslaved people whose suffering went unacknowledged.

However, Morrison also demonstrates that unmediated immersion in memory is destructive. As Sethe becomes consumed by Beloved, memory turns parasitic. This dynamic illustrates a crucial distinction in the novel: remembering is necessary, but dwelling without limits is lethal. Healing requires boundaries, structure, and communal mediation. The eventual dispersal of Beloved by the community symbolizes not the erasure of memory but its reintegration into a shared social space.

Toward an Integrated Understanding of Memory and Healing. By the novel’s conclusion, Morrison offers no simplistic resolution. Trauma is not cured; memory is not erased. Instead, *Beloved* gestures toward an ethics of survival grounded in balance. Remembering must coexist with living. The community’s intervention does not deny the past but prevents it from monopolizing the future.

Scholars often note that Morrison resists Western therapeutic models of healing, favoring instead culturally rooted practices of storytelling, ritual, and collective care [1, p. 54]. This perspective aligns with the novel’s broader critique of dominant historical narratives. Healing, in Morrison’s vision, is inseparable from justice. To heal is to remember truthfully, collectively, and responsibly.

Critical Synthesis: Memory, Ethics, and Survival. At its deepest level, *Beloved* is not only a novel about remembering slavery but about negotiating how to live with its memory. Morrison refuses to offer redemption through forgetting. Instead, she constructs a moral framework in which memory becomes an ethical responsibility. The past must be acknowledged, but it must not be allowed to annihilate the present. This delicate balance lies at the heart of Morrison’s vision of survival.

What distinguishes Morrison’s treatment of memory from many historical narratives is her insistence on emotional truth over archival completeness. Official history records dates, laws, and events; *Beloved* records pain, fear, love, and guilt. In doing so, Morrison exposes the inadequacy of traditional historiography when dealing with racial trauma. The novel argues, implicitly, that a history which excludes suffering is itself a form of violence.

From a personal analytical standpoint, *Beloved* can be read as a warning against two extremes: total repression and total immersion in memory. Sethe’s tragedy lies not in remembering but in remembering alone. Conversely, the community’s role demonstrates that memory, when shared and contextualized, can become a source of endurance rather than destruction. Morrison thus proposes a model of healing grounded not in erasure but in relational ethics.

Conclusion. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison redefines the relationship between memory, race, and healing. Memory is portrayed as intrusive, embodied, and collective, shaped by the historical realities of slavery and racial oppression. Healing, in turn, is neither linear nor individual. It emerges through communal recognition, embodied care, and ethical remembrance. Morrison’s narrative insists that the wounds of slavery do not disappear with time; they demand engagement.

Ultimately, *Beloved* affirms that survival depends on the capacity to remember without being consumed. By transforming memory into shared testimony, Morrison offers a literary space where historical trauma can be acknowledged and held collectively. In this sense, *Beloved* is not only a novel of mourning but also a text of moral endurance, reminding readers that confronting the past is a prerequisite for imagining a livable future.

REFERENCES:

1. Rushdy A. H. A. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 240 p.
2. Hirsch M. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. 320 p.
3. Schapiro B. *Literature and the Relational Self*. New York: New York University Press, 2004. 260 p.
4. Caruth C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 168 p.
5. Beaulieu E. A. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. 200 p.
6. Spillers H. J. Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book // *Diacritics*. 1987. Vol. 17, No. 2. P. 65–81.