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The Exploration Of Trauma And Healing In Toni Morrison's Novels

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ABSTRACT: This research paper examines the exploration of trauma and healing in Toni Morrison's novels. Morrison, a Nobel laureate in literature, is renowned for her poignant portrayal of African American experiences, particularly in relation to trauma and its aftermath. Through her rich storytelling and deeply nuanced characters, Morrison addresses the enduring effects of trauma on individuals and communities, while also exploring various modes of healing and resilience. This research paper will analyze how Morrison's novels shed light on the complexities of trauma, highlight the importance of acknowledging, understanding, and confronting it, and offer insights into the transformative power of healing. Toni Morrison's novels are deeply invested in the exploration of trauma and healing, particularly as they relate to the Black American experience. Morrison's characters often grapple with the legacy of slavery, racism, and other forms of oppression, and her novels offer insights into the complex ways in which trauma can manifest and be overcome. The paper will dissect significant scenes, themes, and characters to unravel Morrison's intricate portrayal of trauma and healing. The analysis will take into account the narrative techniques employed by Morrison, including her use of magical realism, nonlinear storytelling, and rich symbolism, to convey the complexities of trauma and the potential for healing.

KEYWORDS: trauma, healing, Toni Morrison, slavery, racism, resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (2007), Justine Tally comments on how Toni Morrison—who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993—is one of the most widely studied contemporary American writers (2). Her works—in particular *Beloved* (1987)—have been extensively discussed by scholars all over the world. Many anthologies on her oeuvre have been published, including the aforementioned *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* and others, such as *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (2008), *Toni Morrison: A Literary Life* (2015), and *Contested Boundaries: New Critical Details on the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (2013). Regarding *The Bluest Eye* (1970), one of the most important anthologies published is Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye* (2007), in which different scholars, [1,2,3] such as Deborah T. Werrlein, discuss aspects such as text and countertext, and notions of childhood and nation in the novel. Especially relevant to my studies are Carl D. Malmgren's and Cat Moses's works. In Malmgren's —Text, Voices and Primers in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the scholar analyzes the different forms of textuality and the polyphony that compose the book. In a brilliant observation, Malmgren argues that a single narrator, Claudia MacTeer, has created the different voices, composed the texts, and organized the entire narrative of the novel (Malmgren 147—148). He also calls attention to the fact that Pecola is never given voice throughout the narrative—she never has the chance to tell her story, which is years later revisited by an adult Claudia (Malmgren 148). Meanwhile, in —The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Moses focuses on the musicality of the novel as he analyzes the book within a blues aesthetic, considering it Claudia's 8 —singing| of the community's blues. The scholar links Claudia's physical and psychological survival to the values and knowledge transmitted to her through the blues sung by her mother, and argues that later, when she narrates the novel, she performs the poetic catharsis typical of the blues singer (Moses 133). Meanwhile, *Home* was published in 2012. As it is a considerably recent novel, it has not been as extensively studied as *The Bluest Eye* yet. However, some articles written by scholar and Professor Irene Visser are very important to my research. The first is called —Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospect|, in which the scholar argues that postcolonial trauma narratives frequently convey that resilience and growth can be possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding, which is a very interesting perspective from which to analyze *Home*. In [4,5,6] —Entanglements of Trauma: Relationality and Toni Morrison's *Home*, Visser expresses a belief in allowing multiple perspectives, multiple discourses, and multiple disciplines to inform readings of trauma fiction, which I also believe can be very productive for studying *Home*. Indeed, since the early 1990s, the area of trauma theory has expanded fast, and become really diversified. Scholars from disciplines such as psychology, cultural and literary studies, sociology, cognitive science and history, among others, have all contributed to discussions regarding traumatic experiences. In a scenario like this, I have decided to consider perspectives from multiple fields in my analysis of *The Bluest Eye* and *Home*. As my theoretical background, I discuss Cathy Caruth's formulations. To her, the pathology of trauma consists

in the structure of the experience or reception of the traumatic event, in which the event is not assimilated or experienced as it occurs, but belatedly, by the repeated possession of the survivor (Trauma: Explorations in Memory 4-5). I also rely on some studies by Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, which present some differences between 9 traumatic memories and narrative memories, and the therapeutic potential of transforming traumatic experiences into words that can be related to others. As some scholars—especially from postcolonial studies—have drawn attention to, it has also become important to expand trauma theory in order to accommodate suffering which had been previously unheard. Stef Craps states that the event-based model of trauma may not be adequate to describe and portray the experiences of certain particular groups, such as the traumatic impact of racism and other manners of ongoing oppression. Therefore, I also consider in my theoretical background formulations on insidious trauma and on the specific experience of African Americans. For the latter, I use Joy Degruy's concept of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. With these distinct considerations on trauma in mind, I present the objectives of my article. The first is related to understanding and analyzing how trauma is portrayed in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Home*. Through close readings of the novels, I examine the different traumatic situations that the characters experience, and the ways in [7,8,9] which these experiences impact them. I also observe the healing processes that happen (or that do not) in the books. From this observation that not all of the characters are able to heal from trauma, comes my second objective: comprehending why healing is possible for some characters, but not for others, and the reasons why *Home* seems to have a —happier ending when compared to *The Bluest Eye*. The structure of this article comprehends three details and a conclusion. The first detail presents some theoretical speculations on trauma and trauma theory, consulting scholars from different fields, such as literary criticism, psychology, and sociology. Concepts related to literature, trauma and to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are presented, but many of the considerations regarding symptoms, behaviors, and healing processes are actually spread throughout details two and three. I have decided on structuring the article in this manner because relating aspects of trauma and of PTSD to the experiences which the 10 characters go through in the novels seemed to make the analysis more fluid and interesting to read. The second detail presents a close reading of *The Bluest Eye*, formulating an analysis that takes into consideration the context in which the novel was written, its formal structure, and the experiences that its characters undergo. In this section, I discuss insidious trauma and the set of behavior patterns that Degruy associates with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. The third and final detail brings a close reading of *Home*, reflecting on the therapeutic engagement with trauma that the novel presents, and on the importance of community in healing processes. In my conclusion, I further establish and discuss the parallels that I was able to trace between the two novels, comparing and speculating on their presentations and resolutions of traumatic experiences.

II. DISCUSSION

+RPHas a historical trauma narrative, deals with the fragmented identities and collective hauntings of African Americans [10,11,12], which have to do with slavery and its legacy, but also with the Korean War. The siblings Frank and Cee Money are plagued by the ghosts of the past, which refuse to be forgotten. They have undergone appalling childhood violations, racial prejudice and humiliation, family dysfunction, etc. Moreover, Morrison exposes the Frank, terribly traumatized and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, returns home from the Korean War to cope with the harsh life of other ordinary black people. In +RPH, harrowing experiences are paralleled by those healing modes that African American individuals and their community bring into play in their endeavors to ensure their survival. Morrison actively engages in the narrative analysis of the many forms of healing: psychological, social, historical, etc. She unveils the strong and complex link between the psychological and social recovery of the black individuals and the healing of collective traumas. Morrison also discloses the amelioration of war veterans' emotional and mental disorders, their struggle for manhood and need to come to terms with their role as victim deals with the siblings' redeeming journey back home, to a nurturing community that can provide these uprooted "orphans" with support and care. Furthermore, Morrison delves into the restorative powers of love and nature for African Americans. This detail puts the spotlight on the healing elements and mechanisms that the author uses so as to illustrate Frank and Cee's recovery process, as well as the regenerative potentiality that both black individuals and their community possess. In coming to terms with traumatic experiences is represented by two interconnected modes that Dominick LaCapra calls "acting out," which stands for the crippling and weakening effects of trauma (Freudian approach that Caruth emphasizes), and "working through," "an articulatory practice" that makes it possible for the traumatized subject "to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living [13,14,15] here and now with openings to the future" (2001: 22). Morrison is not interested in depicting characters who are suspended in "the timeless space of trauma," as Colleen Lye says, but "in the resumption but that are also, in the context of Morrison's oeuvre, perverse and bold" (2013). In her novels, Morrison connects healing from personal and communal psychological wounds with remembering the traumatic past. If the past episodes of your life are not embraced, "redemption becomes impossible" (Nutting 1997). That is why Morrison wants her generations. For that, Morrison resorts to the storytelling tradition, "the pathway to health" (Visser 2014: 8) of the black community, thus incorporating the lived happenings of the dead into the present. As a storyteller, she is able to create the dialectical

images that bring those smashed voices into the present and re-memembers the dead, thus opening up the possibility of redemption for the oppressed [...] the creator of images, dialectical images, that can break the continuity of white history which threatens to bury slave history, leaving the survivors with a choice between forgetting and madness (Nutting 1997). Traumatized victims need to tell their story so as to face the feelings attached to their ghastly memories, which are creating havoc in their daily life: “suffering can heal and humanize, provided that one can reorganize the painful events of the past and retell them culture had ignored it. Michiko Kakutani postulates that, in +RPH, Morrison “has found a new, angular voice and straight-ahead story telling style” (2012). Even though most of the story comes to us from “a transparent narrator” (Charles 2012), she deploys a special narrative technique, the ‘ and the listener/scribe, who becomes “a second person’s empathic and literary consciousness” (Visser 2014: 8).² Through this dialogue, Morrison seems to question the capacity to tell torturing adversities using an external narrator. The damaged soldier criticizes the listener’s inability to put his tribulations into language. When Frank, “a bearer of collective memory of racial violence and persecution” (Visser 2014: 7), recalls his family expulsion from their home in Texas, he rebukes the scribe: “You can’t come up with words that can catch it [...]. Describe that if you know how” (41, italics in original). This assertive listener helps the Korean veteran control and put together his remembrances: The presence of somebody willing to bear witness and to assist in the recovery[16,17,18] of those memories is crucial for the victim’s reconstruction of a sense of self. But the witness/scribe must show the kind of empathy necessary to become a ‘true sharer’ of the traumatic memories (Ibarrola 2014: 117).

III. RESULTS

The Margaret Garner incident is an account of a slave mother who killed her two-yearold daughter. The Garner incident was acted out and completed on a Monday in January eighteen-fifty-six. From then on, it exists as only an account or report of the event. The act, having been done, moved into the realm of story, sound-images, and concepts, only able to communicate through the interpretation of signs, and hence, as a fabrication of the event. The Margaret Garner incident was written into an article in eighteen-fifty-six and reproduced into *The Black Book*, a compilation of slave life, edited by Toni Morrison, in nineteen-seventy-four. In nineteen-eighty-seven, Morrison published her novel *Beloved*, in which Sethe, a runaway slave, kills her young daughter. The conditions in which Sethe kills her infant closely shadow the events that led to the infanticide in the Margaret Garner case. Both women had escaped slavery, and both women killed their young daughters upon hearing of their master’s return to take them and their children back into slavery. The threat of returning to the dehumanizing and abusive conditions that uphold slavery prompted both women to stop such a fate by using the drastic means of killing. The infanticides were not an act of violence, but rather a reaction, triggered by unresolved trauma and carried out by these women to avoid further violence from being imputed upon their offspring. Trauma was present for both Margaret Garner and the fictitious Sethe. It is Toni Morrison’s Sethe who presents to the world in story form the results of dehumanization and trauma. Trauma plays a strong role in Sethe’s decision to grab her four children and run to the shed to kill them after she [18,19,20]realizes her master has come for them. It is there that she kills the baby, who comes to be known as *Beloved*. The other three are spared only because of Sethe’s lack of time. Moments before the killing of *Beloved*, Sethe and her family had been outside, working and at peace. Her decision was sudden and responsive. It was the return of her master that triggered the return of trauma, followed by the desperate act to end further violent events. Toni Morrison had purpose when taking the Margaret Garner incident into the realm of story through her novel *Beloved*. It is through the novel, specifically through the characters Sethe and *Beloved*, that Morrison engages the reader to recognize trauma as an experiencer and not just as a 6 third party. She does this by involving them in the processes and results of trauma using varying literary methods. What methods does Toni Morrison use in her novel to hook the reader into being subjected to the resulting trauma of slavery? A psychoanalytical approach will demonstrate how the writing techniques in Morrison’s *Beloved* reveals to and engages the reader in the psychological structure of trauma and its progress from the unconscious to the waking state, or the conscious self. Using this approach, this article will observe and highlight the repetitions produced by the violent event, the language used by the unconscious to communicate the event, and the need for witness and testimony to begin the resolution of the event and the acceptance of the event by the conscious into memory, resulting in a united self. A psychoanalytical approach will also reveal the separation of mother from daughter as the originating trauma and is the secondary argument of the work proceeding. This article argues that Morrison uses storytelling, as opposed to giving a report on the factual events of slavery, to engage the reader on a personal level and to humanize the people subjected to being slaves and thus becoming the possessions and-or objects belonging to a master. Morrison accomplishes this task through the methods of repetition in imagery and language and through testimony. This strategy turns the reader into an experiencer of the trauma. *Beloved* tells the story of a slave woman who chose her freedom. She escaped her master and found a new home that did not possess the structures and conditions of slavery. Yet, even though she got away from those conditions which sustain slavery she continued to carry the trauma within her psyche that a life of slavery produced. This trauma caused her to kill her infant daughter, and it is this infant daughter that she believes comes back to haunt her. As the haunting progresses, the history of Sethe’s trauma emerges. She had lost her own mother, a woman she was denied a relationship with, to hanging, and witnessed the body in the tree. Her own mother lost her mother

during the middle passage from what appears to be a suicide into the sea. Through out the novel Sethe tries to regain the lost mother-daughter relationship and come to terms with the horrific pain this caused her. Sethe's trauma is represented by the figure of the ghost Beloved. It is how Sethe and 7 Beloved behave together that reveals the suffering and loss of being denied motherhood and consequently, the daughter being denied a mother. Further characters in the novel relevant to this work are Denver, Sethe's living daughter. Paul. D, one of the men who was a slave with Sethe and who lived under the same masters. Schoolteacher, the master Sethe and Paul. D ran from and finally Bodwin, a white man living in the community Sethe settled into after running from slavery. Bodwin participated in helping former slaves establish themselves after they gained freedom. This article will begin its work on examining the literary methods Morrison uses to engage the reader in Sethe's trauma by first providing previous research on its core topics and then discussing its working theories in the theoretical framework. From there a brief chapter on story and its importance in creating empathy and engagement with a listener and-or reader will be discussed. This will lead into a chapter on how Morrison uses repetition in imagery to engage her reader, and a subsequent chapter on how Morrison uses repetition in language to achieve the same effect[19,20]. The last chapter in this article will discuss testimony and its value in resolving trauma. This final chapter leads to a conclusion which ends the article.

Toni Morrison uses storytelling to engage her readers. This is supported through the work of Eusebio L. Rodrigues in the article "The Telling of Beloved". In this article, Rodrigues establishes that Morrison's narrator uses the strategies of a melodious orator to bring her audience around her and lure them into the listening, wherein history is not treated as a mere documentary (Rodrigues 154). As the article continues, the musical methods within the narrative is discussed such as repetition, and fragments of story given here and there in tempo throughout the novel. The reader is enchanted by the tactics of Morrison's narrative and obliged to piece it together. "Both reader and listener have to understand why Beloved and Sethe behave in this unnatural manner" (Rodrigues 163). Whereas Rodrigues argues a melodic tendency through repetition, and an adjustment of speed to maintain the involvement of the listener, this article states that this is done through literary 8 tactics that mimic the primary and secondary psychological processes found within the dream image. In "Literary Criticism as Dream Analysis", Jeanne A. Roberts argues that literature may be used to further experience and investigate the self. Roberts uses Shakespeare's Falstaff as an example of how, even though the character has changed in the eyes of the critics from early criticism to the Romantics and to the then modern 1970's, the variety of Falstaff's interpretation displays how he bids to be interpreted by the reader. It is the application of such critical thinking that leaves the reader wiser (Roberts 16). Literature is a means by which we are able to explore ourselves (Roberts 14). With Morrison's choice of literary method, she connects to this ability for the human psyche to explore itself, confident that if the reader is able to see the truth within themselves, they will also see the truth of Sethe. The secondary argument of this article is that trauma was already present at the time of the infanticide and that the originating trauma was the separation of daughter from mother. Terry Paul Caeser's article, "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved" states that "when Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing" (Caeser 112). Here further work is shown supporting the idea that unresolved emotions existed prior to the act of killing the infant. Caeser states that "Toni Morrison's novel is discussed not as a presentation of slavery, but rather of motherhood" (Caeser 111). The dehumanizing event of disallowing the mother-child relationship disrupted the development of not only the child but also of motherhood itself. This shows that Morrison's novel Beloved engages the reader deeper than a chronicle of slavery would, instead taking the reader into the deep details of the dehumanization and resulting trauma that slavery possesses.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examines the cultural trauma of characters with a cultural embodiment of race in the sophisticated but claustrophobic contemporary American society. Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) projects pain and trauma that live under the colored skin as a part of the author's and her character Bride's immense suppression of desire as a triggering force to past memories. Further, this research explores how traces of slavery in the past reconstitute trauma and how the interplay between dominant and residual cultures shapes the trauma of the African Americans. Morrison reveals the inter-racial and intra-racial conflicts in new generations of Americans by presenting the traumatic mind of her protagonist Bride who reconfigures traumatic history through critical acting out and working through trauma. Eventually, she succeeds in recovering and turning her grief into strength. The way through which such trauma is coped with is a researchable issue. It unfolds an individual's consciousness of racism and its influence on the individual psyche as a part of cultural trauma. Further, it unveils the inter-racial and intra-racial consciousness among the African Americans as they develop some guilt complexes within themselves due to their double consciousness and ambiguity contrary to social values. This is an internal conflict experienced by them in an oppressive society.[20]

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