



WOMEN'S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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ABSTRACT

*This thesis explores the traumatic experiences of women in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It employs a qualitative narrative research approach as proposed by Creswell, with data collected through a compilation of stories. The theoretical framework is feminism, which is understood as both a social movement and a field of study aimed at elevating women's status within patriarchal societies or environments. The analysis focuses on loss and violence as key factors in the trauma experienced by women subjected to slavery. This study identifies two primary causes of women's trauma: loss, as exemplified by Sethe, who endures severe trauma under slavery, and violence, which she faces at the hands of slave owners and through systemic oppression. The novel reveals how trauma, loss, and violence not only devastate individual lives but also shape collective experiences of suffering and the ongoing struggle for identity and freedom. The study concludes that Toni Morrison illustrates that women's traumatic experiences encompass various dimensions, primarily loss and violence.*

Keywords: *trauma, loss, and violence.*

I. Introduction

Women's traumatic experiences remain a critical issue to discuss, reflecting real situations and conditions faced by women worldwide, including in Indonesia. The phenomenon of violence—both physical and sexual—as well as the loss of children, leaves deep emotional scars that are often difficult to heal. Research indicates that women who undergo such trauma face not only psychological consequences, such as depression and anxiety disorders, but also significant social repercussions, including stigma and discrimination.

The author whose work is discussed in this study is Toni Morrison. She was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, as the second of four children, with her birth name being Chloe Anthony Wofford. Although she grew up in a semi-integrated neighborhood, racial discrimination was a constant threat. When she was two years old, her family's

landlord set fire to their apartment building while they were still inside, as a consequence of failing to pay rent. Despite such challenges, Morrison turned her focus to her studies and became an avid reader. Her intelligence allowed her to excel as a member of the debate team, a contributor to her school yearbook staff, and eventually as the secretary to the head librarian at the Lorain Public Library. At the age of twelve, she converted to Catholicism and was baptized as Anthony after Saint Anthony of Padua, which later inspired her nickname "Toni" (nobelprize.org).

After graduating from Lorain High School in 1949, Toni Morrison pursued a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Howard University, Washington D.C., one of America's most distinguished Black colleges. She later earned her Master of Arts degree at Cornell University in 1955. In 1958, she married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican



architect. The couple had two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. They lived together contentedly for six years before divorcing in 1964, primarily due to cultural differences that they were unable to reconcile (Coser 1).

Morrison began writing novels that explored the experiences of Black people, particularly women, within the context of an unjust American society. In 1965, she joined Random House as an editor and, in 1967, became the first Black female senior editor in the fiction department. While working there, she started submitting the manuscripts for her novels, including *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), *God Help the Child* (2015), and *Beloved* (1987), the latter of which won the Pulitzer Prize (Ferdinal and Zahra 113, 117).

Ii. Research Methodology

2.1 Women's traumatic experiences

Women's traumatic experiences arise from social conditions deeply embedded in gender inequality, violence, and oppression. These experiences often stem from the vulnerable position women occupy in capitalist societies, where their labor—such as domestic work—is frequently undervalued and dismissed compared to men's income-generating activities. The concept of women's trauma recognizes that it is not limited to physical injuries but also encompasses emotional distress caused by events that threaten one's life or well-being.

Trauma can manifest through various forms of loss, including the loss of a loved one, loss of identity, or loss of freedom. Women also experience trauma through physical or sexual violence, systemic oppression, and other daily adversities. Recognizing and understanding women's traumatic experiences are crucial steps toward addressing gender inequality and promoting equality. This includes acknowledging the

uniqueness and complexity of women's lived experiences and providing spaces for them to narrate their realities—particularly in societies dominated by male perspectives and narratives.

According to Djajanegara, there are two primary sources of women's traumatic experiences: loss and violence (Djajanegara 3.14).

2.2 Theory and Method

This study adopts a narrative qualitative research approach as proposed by Creswell, who defines narrative research as a qualitative method in which the investigator explores the lives of characters, gathers and recounts stories about individuals' experiences, and composes narratives to illustrate those experiences (54). Data for this study are collected from books, online journals, online dictionaries, and other online sources.

The research employs feminist literary criticism as its analytical framework. According to Abrams, criticism involves defining, classifying, analyzing, and evaluating literary works (36-37). Feminist literary criticism specifically focuses on the intersection of literature and feminism. It examines literary works from the perspective of gender equality, exploring how women are represented, constructed, and experienced within literature.

III. Result and Discussion

Beloved tells the story of Sethe, a woman who kills her infant daughter out of love to save her from the horrors of slavery. Having escaped from slavery, Sethe is haunted by memories and deep regrets surrounding the death of her daughter, Beloved. Her decision to take Beloved's life is an act of desperation to shield her from a life of bondage, but this act leaves Sethe with an overwhelming sense of guilt and trauma. The loss she experiences extends beyond Beloved's death; it also encompasses the loss



of her humanity, identity, and familial connections—irreparable damages caused by the institution of slavery.

The return of *Beloved* as a ghost to haunt Sethe symbolizes the emotional and psychological weight of loss that continues to plague survivors of slavery. It underscores the enduring scars of oppression and injustice. Sethe's own experiences as a former slave reveal the multifaceted nature of the trauma inflicted by slavery. One of the most visible forms of violence endured by slaves was physical abuse, including beatings and torture. Sethe, after enduring unimaginable cruelty, ultimately fled from slavery.

In addition to physical violence, psychological violence played a significant role in shaping Sethe's trauma. This is particularly evident in her agonizing decision to kill her child to spare him from a life of enslavement. The psychological wounds left by slavery persist in Sethe's struggles with guilt and her search for healing and self-recovery. Furthermore, Sethe endured sexual violence during her time as a slave on the Sweet Home plantation. She was raped by the plantation guards, an act of dehumanization and suffering that exemplifies the brutality of slavery. This harrowing experience left deep emotional scars that continued to haunt her, influencing the drastic measures she took to protect her children from the same fate.

Sethe's story reflects the profound and enduring impact of slavery, particularly its physical, psychological, and sexual violence, on its victims. Her experiences highlight the devastating toll of systemic oppression and the resilience required to confront and heal from such atrocities.

The main characters in *Beloved* include Sethe, Beloved, Denver, and Paul D. Minor characters in the novel include Halle, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, Mr. and Mrs. Garner, Mr. and Miss Bodwin, Lady Jones, Amy Denver, Paul A, Paul F, Sixo, and the Schoolteacher. Sethe is portrayed as a central, round

character in the novel. She is a woman who embodies persistence, bravery, and a deep devotion to her children. As a mother, Sethe is determined to protect her children from physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual trauma. The horrors of her past continue to haunt her, especially the traumatic loss of her daughter, Beloved, during her time as a slave.

Sethe feels trapped in the past, with memories of the cruelty she endured during slavery and the death of her child constantly resurfacing. This trauma profoundly affects her ability to connect with others, including her surviving children, and disrupts her daily life. The loss of Beloved becomes a symbol of the suffering and losses Sethe experienced, further complicating the deep emotional wounds inflicted by her past as a slave.

The novel is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, with flashbacks to Kentucky and a prison in Alfred, Georgia. During this time, Cincinnati was a key stop on the Underground Railroad before the Civil War, situated near the slave state of Kentucky. Many escaped slaves sought refuge in Cincinnati, a city filled with stories of abolitionists, runaways, slave traders, and free people.

3.1 Loss

Morrison vividly represents the theme of loss within a family context, focusing on the characters Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and Baby Suggs. Sethe is portrayed as a complex, round character—persistent, brave, and devoted to her children. As a mother, she is determined to protect her children from physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual trauma. However, the horrific actions and events of her past continue to haunt her. Sethe endures the painful trauma of loss, particularly the death of her daughter, Beloved, during her time as a slave. She feels trapped in the past, where memories of slavery's cruelty and the loss of her child persist, haunting her every day. This trauma not only makes it difficult for her to form



connections with others, including her surviving children, but also disrupts her daily life. The loss of Beloved becomes a symbol of all the suffering Sethe experienced, amplifying the deep emotional wounds left by her past as a slave.

Morrison depicts Sethe's loss through a richly developed character, particularly in Beloved. The loss of Beloved represents more than just the physical loss of a child; it symbolizes Sethe's loss of identity and freedom as both a woman and a former slave. Morrison uses the presence of Beloved's spirit to explore the profound impact of such trauma. Through this, Morrison critiques the patriarchal structures and the system of slavery that oppress Black women. This aligns with Djajanegara's feminist theory, which highlights how Sethe's trauma and loss reflect the double oppression Black women endure. Morrison emphasizes that women must struggle not only against the systems that oppress them but also carry the heavy emotional scars of that oppression (13).

As a result of the trauma from losing her daughter, Sethe experiences a range of profound emotional and psychological disturbances. This trauma leads to social isolation, as she is haunted by guilt and painful memories of the past, and she struggles to form healthy relationships with others, including her surviving children. The atrocities of slavery and the intense sense of loss continue to erode her well-being, forcing her to live in the shadow of the past. Trauma is an emotional and psychological reaction triggered by an event or experience that is extraordinarily stressful and beyond one's ability to cope. It can alter how a person perceives themselves, others, and the world around them, often resulting in long-term emotional, cognitive, and physical impairments. Feminism emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing trauma within the broader context of social

injustice, highlighting the necessity of a collective struggle for change (112–115).

Djajanegara argues that loss is an emotional experience that occurs when someone loses something valuable or precious in their life, whether it be objects, people, or specific situations. This feeling of loss is often accompanied by various negative emotions, such as sadness, grief, and a profound sense of emptiness. Loss impacts not only one's emotional state but also an individual's mental health and overall well-being. In coping with loss, individuals typically go through a complex grieving process, requiring time to recover and adjust to the changes that occur (51–54). In *Beloved*, Morrison creates Sethe as a representation of a parent who becomes the agent of her child's loss. Sethe, a mother who deeply loves her children, goes to the extreme of killing her own daughter, Beloved, to protect her from the horrors of slavery. This act reflects a profound moral dilemma where the love and protection of the child conflict with the brutal reality of slavery. Sethe is not only a perpetrator of loss in the physical sense but also symbolizes the emotional and psychological loss caused by the system of slavery. Her actions highlight how inhumane conditions can lead a person to make tragic decisions and how the guilt, remorse, and trauma from such actions continue to haunt her. This is evident in the following passage:

“You forgetting how little it is,” said her mother. “She wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even.”

“Maybe she don’t want to understand,” said Denver.

“Maybe. But if she’d only come, I could make it clear to her.” Sethe released her daughter’s hand and together they pushed the sideboard back against the wall. Outside, a driver whipped



his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124.

"For a baby, she throws a powerful spell," said Denver.

"No more powerful than the way I loved her," Sethe answered (2).

The author directly shows Sethe's passion through her explanation, depicting the trauma and loss she experiences. The deep trauma and sense of loss Sethe feels as a mother who has lost her child are vividly conveyed. Phrases such as "Too small to understand" and "No more powerful than the way I loved her" emphasize the strength of Sethe's love and the heavy emotional burden she carries.

Sethe is the embodiment of a traumatic and devouring past, a character in whom the reader perceives the painful loss of true maternal love. "No more powerful than the way I loved her" (2). This excerpt shows how Sethe's traumatic past and deep sense of loss reflect a mother's true suffering and love.

The negative impacts of slavery are presented in various ways in the novel. The ex-slaves seem to endure the heavy burdens of the horrors from the time of slavery, which continue to haunt their present lives. Loss was a common experience for women and slaves in general. During slavery, Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, a daughter of Halle, moved to Cincinnati and became an emotional and spiritual inspiration for the community. After Sethe's death, Baby Suggs moved to Philadelphia. As the community's itinerant spiritual leader, she could only experience deep sadness when recalling the memory of her eight children—four who died and four who survived but were lost.

You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Everyone of them gone away from me. Four

taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." Baby Suggs rubbed her eye- brows. "My firstborn. All I can remember is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember" (5).

The author directly conveys Baby Suggs' emotional state. Once someone passes, and no one alive remembers them, it's as if they never existed—their existence becomes nothingness. In her teachings, Baby Suggs calls for respect for the memory of the lost. Unlike her daughter-in-law, however, she is not obsessed with holding onto the past. She accepts the memories of those gone and forgotten but reminds those in the present to cherish what they can still feel.

Sethe, too, has encountered numerous losses in her life, mostly involving family members: Baby Suggs, who was very ill and eventually died; Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, who ran away from home; Sethe's husband, Halle; her own mother; and her baby girl, Beloved. However, she allows the memories, particularly of her children and the guilt she carries over her dead baby girl, to resurface. She tries "as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that" (6).

For Sethe, her past and present are in conflict, a tension that only intensifies with the arrival of Paul D., "the last of the Sweet Home men" (6). Paul D.'s appearance not only sheds light on her sorrowful life but also brings to the surface painful memories from her past. Gradually, her painful history is revealed through her conversations with Paul D. Paul D., once Sethe's fellow slave, moved from Sweet Home to a new house. He had lived as a slave, understanding that in order to live a healthy life, one must not be bound to a single place.



"It made sense for a woman who didn't know where the world stopped, that it was nothing to see her world clearly. She could walk through it, around it, see it from above, even give it another world to be in if she wanted to" (19-20).

In a conversation between Sethe and Paul D., Sethe shares a story that reveals the suffering they endured as slaves and how they tried to move on after gaining their freedom. This passage reflects how Sethe attempts to cope with the pain and trauma of her past by creating her own reality, where she can begin to confront her past, even though it also triggers more painful memories.

All the traumatic events on the plantation, presented through flashbacks, amplify Sethe's maternal instincts and love when the master finally finds her and attempts to reclaim her and her four children. However, this reaction is also a manifestation of her trauma. It becomes clear that her decision to kill her children rather than allow them to be enslaved was deeply influenced by the trauma she endured at Sweet Home. In such a desperate situation, Sethe had to make a swift decision, and her maternal instinct led her to believe that death was preferable to slavery. She takes her children to the woodshed and attempts to kill them all but only succeeds in killing her nearly two-year-old daughter. The author discusses this trauma in real life, in interviews and essays like "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," where she explores how the trauma of slavery shapes and limits black women's choices. Morrison outlines how profound traumatic experiences, such as Sethe's, influence extreme decisions made by female characters in stressful historical and social contexts. Through this, Morrison shows that Sethe's drastic decision to protect her children reflects the trauma that shapes boundaries and choices in the lives of black women, highlighting the long-term impact of

slavery on personal identity and decision-making (Jakubowicz et al., 1992).

Even though Sethe killed her daughter a long time ago, she is still troubled by her spirit. Living in isolation with her youngest daughter in a haunted house, and burdened by her guilt, she cannot free herself from the remorse she feels. She constantly wrestles with the desire to explain to Beloved why she killed her and to express her regret. Sethe knows that she paid an incredibly high price to protect her child. She declares:

"I got a tree on my back and a haunt in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D. Garner. It cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much..." (15).

The memories of her past, particularly her decision to commit infanticide, have become haunting regrets. The infanticide seems like an unbearable burden. Although Paul D. can see how much Sethe loves her children, he perceives such love as dangerous. He says that for a former slave woman, "to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (45).

"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it. The children felt it. The house itself had taken on a life of its own, a presence that was constantly alert, haunting its inhabitants with whispers, shadows, and echoes of the past" (3-15).

Morrison creates the character of Sethe to illustrate her state of regret. This state of



regret is symbolized through the setting of Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio, after the American Civil War. These memories primarily arise after Sethe escapes from slavery and tries to build a new life with her children in the house. The house symbolizes the burden of Sethe's past, and the memories of her tragic act of killing her daughter haunt every corner of the home. This haunting is often depicted through apparitions, voices, and shadows, which disturb the peace of Sethe and her family.

Sethe decided to kill her children because "unlike a snake or bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin" (148). She demonstrates her love for her children through her maternal instinct, choosing to prevent them from experiencing the horrors of slavery. Her decision to commit infanticide stems solely from a mother's love, as an act to protect them from being reclaimed. Hazel Carby explains that Sethe's action in *Beloved*, the killing of her child, is an extreme manifestation of her maternal instinct. Carby argues that Sethe's decision to end her son's life is a form of deep protection, taken to shield him from the greater suffering slavery would inflict. According to Carby, this act exemplifies how maternal love can drive a woman into tragic circumstances as she seeks to protect her children (1987).

Although the act of infanticide has left Sethe with deep regrets throughout her life, she considers it the best solution because she knows that as soon as *Beloved* entered the world, she would be considered a slave simply because her mother was a slave. Once captured, Sethe would lose control over her innocent baby. She sees the act as a form of protection, sending "the babies where they'd be safe" (164). Through the infanticide, she demonstrates a kind of love that Paul D. describes as "too thick love." Sethe responds:

"Your love is too thick," he said.

"Too thick?" she said, thinking of the clearing where Baby Suggs' commands knocked the pods off horse chestnuts.

"Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (164).

Paul D. sees the love Sethe has for her children as excessive, believing it to be dangerous for them. However, Sethe maintains her belief that she did what was right, as she says, "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). She recalls her traumatic experiences on the plantation and concludes that the infanticide was the best she could do to shield her children from that horror.

The author creates the character of Denver, who experiences a loss of freedom. Denver is Sethe's youngest daughter. A shy, dynamic, intelligent, sensitive, and introspective girl, her emotional growth was hindered by years of isolation. She spends most of her time alone, cut off from the outside world. Though she loves her mother, she is also fearful because of her mother's act of killing her sister. In this way, the author portrays Denver's loss of freedom in both social and emotional forms. This is narrated:

"Denver was not afraid of the dark. She was afraid of the world outside. The house at 124 was her refuge, but it was also her prison. The boundaries of the house held her close, but they also kept her from the freedom to explore beyond its walls" (30).

This quotation shows that Denver lost her freedom. Although she did not directly experience slavery, living under the weight of family trauma and isolation from the outside world significantly restricted Denver's freedom. This isolation impacted her development and her ability to form social connections outside the home. This aligns with Gordon's statement, which discusses



how trauma and collective memory affect both individuals and communities. She argues that, even though they did not experience slavery firsthand, people remain affected by generational trauma and social isolation, which severely limit their freedom and personal development (1997).

The author demonstrates how Denver experienced the loss of a normal childhood and freedom due to trauma and isolation in the house at 124 Bluestone Road. The house at 124 Bluestone Road can be imagined as a large, old structure, surrounded by fields and forests, with a gloomy and shadowy atmosphere. The walls are full of memories of the past, and every corner of the house feels cold and eerie, reflecting the trauma and regret experienced by the residents. This is narrated:

“Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But before Beloved came, Denver’s only company was the solitude, and the fright that powered her into adventures that she learned to handle and outmaneuver by herself” (123).

The author directly shows that Denver’s only companion was solitude and fear, which pushed her into various challenges she had to face and overcome on her own. Hooks discusses how women, particularly those who have experienced oppression and trauma, often lose their freedom and the chance to experience a normal childhood. She explains that systemic oppression can restrict women’s personal space and development, leading to a significant loss of freedom and identity (48–70).

The author also shows that Denver not only experienced a loss of freedom, childhood, and identity but also the loss of Halle, the father figure in her life. Halle,

Sethe’s husband, suffered terrible hardships as a slave and disappeared, never to return. His absence leaves an emotional void and a deep sense of loss for Denver (140). This quotation describes the atmosphere in the house at 124 Bluestone Road, where Halle’s absence is one of the many emotional wounds that Denver must cope with. Denver learns of Halle’s fate through information from another person in the house, but the loss is ignored and remains emotionally unexpressed by those around her. This condition is supported by Miller’s statement, which discusses how the loss of a father figure can affect a woman’s mental health and development. She explains that the absence of a father figure often creates feelings of loss and trauma that influence the way women form their identity and relationships (1986).

3.2 Violence

Morrison presents violence as the central element that weaves the tragic story of the lives of slaves in post-Civil War America. Through characters trapped in a cycle of suffering, the author explores various forms of physical, sexual, psychological, and structural violence that not only tear the body but also wound the soul. With a poetic yet stirring language style, the author also unveils the horrors of slavery (Moglen 17-40). Djajanegara explains that violence against women is often the result of patriarchal social and cultural structures that place women in a subordinate position. She highlights how literary works often reflect these forms of violence, both physical and psychological, experienced by women. As Djajanegara states, the prevailing system considers women as lacking independent rights to speak or act (1-2). This is reflected in Sethe’s experience, where she was not seen as human, not regarded as a mother, her child was taken from her, and she was reduced to nothing. The patriarchal system dehumanizes women, viewing them solely as slaves meant to



manage the household, bear children, and care for their husbands (28).

Sethe experiences deep violence and suffering at the hands of the schoolmaster at Sweet Home. The Schoolteacher, Mr. Garner's cruel and sadistic brother, takes over Sweet Home, breaking the will of the slaves, conducting research, confining Sethe, stealing her milk, and ordering his nephew to whip her. Sethe endures physical violence, including beatings and the theft of her milk, even while pregnant. The research conducted on Sethe on the plantation treats the slaves as subjects for scientific experimentation and observation. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

"Schoolteacher'd wrap that string all over my head, 'cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool. And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all" (193).

This scene takes place at Sweet Home, the plantation where Sethe was enslaved before escaping. Sweet Home serves as the main backdrop for many of Sethe's traumatic memories, including the abuse inflicted by the Schoolteacher, who measures Sethe with a rope while taking notes. He holds a notebook and pencil, recording his observations with a detached expression. Morrison reflects on this reality in an interview with Brown, et al., where she discusses the impact of slavery's history on her work and the use of historical research to add authenticity to her stories. She notes that research into the treatment and experimentation on slaves played a crucial role in depicting the reality of their experiences (Brown, et al., 455-473).

Morrison also highlights how the Schoolteacher restrains Sethe: "Sethe and the other slaves were subjected to cruel and dehumanizing treatment, and their lives became filled with fear and suffering" (150). The cruelty committed by the Schoolteacher instills fear in Sethe and subjects the slaves at

Sweet Home to a life of cruelty and dehumanization. This is supported by Degruy, who emphasizes that the captivity of slaves had profound long-term effects on enslaved individuals and communities. He explains that the trauma of slavery not only directly affected the slaves but was also passed on to subsequent generations (123).

M Morrison illustrates that Sethe was brutally whipped while at Sweet Home, the plantation in Kentucky where she was enslaved. This whipping occurred after she sent her children away in an attempt to escape. Sethe endured brutal torture that left permanent scars on her back, which are described as resembling trees. Her back is referred to as an "open back" (17), and the schoolteacher whipped her so severely that her skin tore, and the wounds healed to form scars resembling the shape of a tree. These scars are referred to as the "chokecherry tree" (13) and serve as a symbol of the trauma and suffering she experienced. This is narrated:

"And they took my milk. And held me down while my baby girl sucked from my breast. After I told, Schoolteacher made one of his boys open up my back, and when it closed, it made a tree. It grows there still" (20).

Morrison shows that the schoolteacher not only deprived Sethe of her right to be a mother but also stripped her of her dignity as a human being. She uses this tragic experience to illustrate the far-reaching effects of brutal violence, showing how it damages both the identity and psyche of its victims. The schoolteacher's violence against Sethe represents more than just physical cruelty; it is an attempt to maintain patriarchal dominance. By whipping Sethe and stealing her milk, the schoolteacher aims to demean and control her as both a woman and a mother. This act exemplifies how patriarchy uses violence to enforce power and force compliance (Morrison 20).



Morrison introduces the character of the Nephews (Schoolteacher's nephews), who are direct perpetrators of the violence against Sethe. The Nephews are a group of white men working under the Schoolteacher's control at Sweet Home, and they engage in physical violence against Sethe and other slaves, including whipping her and stealing her milk. By depicting how the nephews, as the direct perpetrators, brutally beat Sethe and deprived her of her rights, Morrison paints a grim picture of the setting: Sethe was whipped and placed in a dark, dirty, and abandoned barn. As a space for storage and agricultural activities, barns are often filled with the smell of animal waste and dust. This is narrated:

"When I was in the barn, they (schoolteacher's nephews) had me held down and they beat me. They took everything I had" (86).

These conditions contribute to the atmosphere of cruelty, further hindering Sethe's ability to move or escape.

Morrison creates the character of the Schoolteacher's nephews to highlight the cruelty of the slavery system and its devastating impact on individuals, particularly slave women like Sethe. Through the nephews' brutal treatment of Sethe, Morrison reveals the profound dehumanization suffered by slaves. The passage reflects how systematic physical violence was used to control and degrade individuals, and how slave women were stripped of their identity and humanity.

The author also creates the character of Denver to emphasize Sethe's traumatic experiences and the violence that, while not directly experienced by Denver, affects her deeply. Denver is often depressed and isolates herself due to the circumstances of her family. This is illustrated with the following quote:

"Denver is alone, with no one to help him. His father is a ghost, his

mother is a crazy woman, and he has to face everything alone" (54).

This quotation highlights the emotional isolation and hardship that Denver faces as a result of the family conditions and the trauma experienced by Sethe. This is supported by Briere and Scott (2015), who state that violence that is not directly experienced can still significantly affect a person's emotional and psychological well-being, in much the same way as direct violence.

The author portrays Beloved, who was killed when she was two years old. Beloved is the manifestation of Sethe's daughter's spirit, and she embodies the violence experienced by Sethe and the other slaves. The incident that led to Beloved's death occurred at night, and the dark night and its ominous atmosphere emphasize the tension and gloom of the event. Sethe, overwhelmed by depression and hopelessness, believes that in order to save her children from a life of suffering, she must take extreme measures. Under circumstances filled with tension and trauma, Sethe tragically decides to kill her children to protect them from what she believes would be a fate worse than death. This is narrated:

"Beloved was the baby who had been killed, and she was the embodiment of the violence and suffering experienced by Sethe and others in slavery. Her presence was a constant reminder of the horrors that had been inflicted. She was the one who came back from the dead, not just as a memory but as a living embodiment of the violence and brutality that had been done to Sethe and the others. Beloved represented the inescapable past that haunted them all" (64).

Morrison illustrates that infanticide, in this context, is a tragic yet perceived act of protection—an attempt to shield her children from the horrors of their past.



The author also highlights the violence that Baby Suggs endured. She was forced to toil under extremely harsh and inhumane conditions. Slaves often performed heavy physical labor without adequate rest or medical care. This is narrated:

"She worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Lest she be overcome by the anger she felt at all that had been taken from her and all that had been given her" (164).

The author illustrates how a woman, burdened by the anger and bitterness of her emotions, is constantly threatened by those feelings beneath the surface. The author conveys that if Baby Suggs allows herself to remember and feel the magnitude of all that was lost and the suffering she endured, she risks being consumed by deep anger and sorrow (164).

IV. Conclusion

The traumatic experiences of women in this novel are effectively portrayed by the author through various literary elements such as character, setting, and imagery. These traumatic events significantly impact different aspects of their lives—physically, emotionally, and socially—evidenced through themes of loss and violence. Physically, trauma manifests in the form of wounds, injuries, or chronic health issues due to violence, often leaving permanent scars that affect long-term well-being. Emotionally, traumatized women experience fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disrupting their mental health and influencing their relationships with others. Such experiences often hinder their ability to trust and form healthy connections. Socially, trauma can lead to isolation and difficulty functioning within society, as women who have suffered violence may withdraw from their social environments.

The novel highlights two main causes of women's traumatic experiences: loss and violence. Loss is reflected in the grief and suffering of women who lose loved ones, children, and their sense of self and identity. The second cause is violence, which includes physical harm such as beatings, verbal abuse, and sexual violence. The author underscores how the violent past experienced by women can have lifelong effects, affecting their mental, emotional, and social well-being.

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