



UNCOVERING THE BURIED PAST: REPRESSION AND RECOVERY OF MEMORY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a profound exploration of the impact of slavery on the human psyche, particularly through the lenses of repression and recovery of traumatic memory. Set in the aftermath of the American Civil War, *Beloved* delves into the haunting legacy of slavery through the experiences of Sethe, an enslaved woman, and her community. The book shows how the characters try to forget their traumatic pasts to survive and how hard it is to face and accept these suppressed memories. Through its complex characters, *Beloved* highlights the importance of recognizing and reclaiming one's past as a vital step toward healing and recovery. The paper examines how Morrison depicts the characters' struggles – especially Sethe's – with buried memories and the process of dealing with and accepting a painful past.

Keywords: Memory, past, recovery, *Beloved*, Sethe

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the themes of repression and recovery of memory play crucial roles in the narrative structure and the psychological development of the characters. The characters in *Beloved*, particularly Sethe, use repression as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from the intense pain of their past experiences. Sethe's memories of being a slave, killing her daughter, and the abuse she endured are too painful to confront directly. So she pushes these memories deep down inside her mind. She constantly strives to suppress these memories in her daily life. She tries hard to avoid thinking about her past and focuses on the

present to keep the pain away. This repression of memories helps her survive mentally, allowing her to function in her day-to-day life despite the lingering trauma.

Sethe's initial repression of her past is a defense mechanism. She tries to bury her traumatic experiences in an attempt to shield herself from the intense pain they create. But these memories do not remain dormant. They reappear in various ways, like the ghost of *Beloved* and the fragmented thoughts that invade her mind. Sethe's encounter with *Beloved* compels her to face her buried past. This confrontation is painful but necessary. For

Sethe, one of the most important steps towards healing is remembering and verbalizing her past. Though painful at first, remembering turns into a therapeutic process for Sethe. Morrison contends that healing from trauma requires confronting painful memories. Sethe's story shows that accepting the past is more important for healing than trying to forget it. In the words of Monica Udoette: "Beloved's appearance reawakens memories of slavery among the other characters and they are forced to deal with the traumatic past instead of trying to repress their memories." (Udoette, 215)

In *Beloved*, memory is depicted in a way that makes it capable of both inflicting wounds and offering solace. For characters like Sethe and Paul D, memories of their traumatic pasts remind them of the atrocities they endured during slavery. Sethe especially battles with the memory of killing her own daughter to save her from a life of enslavement. This traumatic memory haunts Sethe, which manifests as the ghostly presence of Beloved. Beloved, the ghostly figure who returns to 124 Bluestone Road, serves as a personification of repressed memory. Her presence forces the characters, particularly Sethe, to confront their buried past. Beloved's ghost symbolizes how unresolved memories inevitably resurface, demanding acknowledgment and reconciliation. "With the appearance of Beloved, there were no memories that could be kept hidden. She forced both Sethe and Paul D to open up and to remember and give in to the power of the past and to face their deep emotions and desires." (Orkun KOCABIYIK, 347)

When Beloved asks Sethe about her "diamonds," it triggers old memories. Sethe recalls a pair of crystal earrings given to her by Mrs. Garner, the wife of the owner of the Sweet Home plantation. Beloved's inquiry about the earrings is important for a few reasons. It shows how curious Beloved is about Sethe's past, especially the parts that Sethe has kept hidden or has tried to forget. By asking about the earrings, Beloved makes Sethe remember a part

of her past she may have preferred to leave buried. This is not just remembering; it is reliving the emotions tied to that memory.

It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries...

But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it--in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (Morrison, 69)

Sethe is torn between wanting to move on from her tragic past and the knowledge that her mind continually brings back painful memories. This conflict is central to understanding Sethe's character and her psychological condition. Sethe's questions and wishes for her brain to reject specific memories express a deep frustration with her inability to escape the past.

She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it reused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite?...I don't want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow...But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day. (Morrison, 82–83)

The term “rebellious brain” personifies Sethe’s mind which defies her control. This personification emphasizes the nature of painful memories and how they persist despite Sethe’s desire to forget. The larger conflict between Sethe’s desire for tranquility and the unescapable past is symbolized by her brain’s rebellion against her will. The comparison of Sethe’s mind to a “greedy child” is a striking image. It conveys the indiscriminate nature of her memory, which, like a child with an insatiable appetite, takes in everything without choosing. Memory is portrayed as a weight from which Sethe is unable to free herself as her mind “snatched up everything.” Her plea for her brain to say “no thank you” to certain memories shows how much she wants relief from her painful past.

Even after Sethe has gained physical freedom, her traumatic experiences of slavery never really go away. Her memories of Sweet Home and the brutal punishment inflicted on her remain not just as memories. Rather, they are experienced as present realities that keep Sethe in constant emotional pain. Slavery has deeply affected her sense of self. Her identity is connected to being a mother and protector, but killing her own child complicates this self-image. The guilt and shame she feels keep her stuck in the past, making it hard for her to envision a future where she can see herself beyond her traumatic experiences.

Sethe’s inability to envision a future shows the deep and lasting impact of slavery. Her present life is a struggle where the past keeps coming back, making the future seem unreachable. Morrison’s portrayal of Sethe’s struggle emphasizes the need to face and deal with the past to break free from its shackles and move toward a hopeful future. In the words of Orkun KOCABIYIK:

Sethe is struggling in a process of self-negation by neglecting and denying her past by suppressing her own identity. Her struggle with her memory is almost

eating up her feeling of “self”. But re-memory, confrontation with the past, dealing with it and giving her memories a legitimate place in her existence, help her to move on. (KOCABIYIK, 348)

Denver, Sethe’s daughter, is another complex character whose development and experiences are integral to the novel’s exploration of themes such as trauma, identity and the search for self. Denver’s life is deeply affected by the history of slavery and her mother’s painful past. Her journey from isolation to self-awareness and independence reflects the larger theme of overcoming the past’s grip to create a future.

At the beginning, Denver is a deeply isolated character, both physically and emotionally. Denver’s relationship with Sethe is one of deep attachment mixed with tension. She wants her mother’s love and attention, yet she is also deeply affected by the emotional and psychological scars that Sethe carries. The arrival of Beloved marks a turning point in Denver’s life. At first, Beloved’s presence fills Denver’s loneliness. Denver sees in her a companion and a source of emotional connection that she has longed for. However, as Beloved’s influence over Sethe grows, Denver begins to realize the harmful impact Beloved has on her mother and herself. This understanding pushes Denver towards independence. Through her interactions with Beloved and her mother, she learns more about the terrible experiences her mother went through and the reasons behind their current plight. In the words of Janeen Selfridge:

Both Sethe and Denver experience a psychological split, simultaneously embodying their able and traumatized selves. While Sethe inhabits a state of total dissociation, Denver is trapped in a terrifying childhood.... As these psychological effects progress, Beloved appears as the living reflection of these two women. (Selfridge, 69)

Paul D, another central character, also employs repression to cope with his traumatic experiences. The "tobacco tin" he imagines inside his chest symbolizes his effort to lock away painful memories. Paul D says he keeps his most painful memories locked away in the imaginary tin. This tin has replaced his "red heart," symbolizing how his emotional capacity has been altered by his traumatic experiences. The "lid rusted shut" suggests that these memories are deeply buried and difficult to access, showing the long-lasting impact of his suffering. By keeping his trauma locked away, Paul D emotionally isolated himself from others. This isolation is a common response to trauma but also a barrier to healing and forming meaningful relationships. However, the arrival of Beloved profoundly affects Paul D, forcing him to confront buried memories.

In addition to individual acts of remembering, the novel also underscores the importance of communal memory and collective healing. The characters of 124 Bluestone Road, who share experiences of trauma and oppression, find solace and strength in each other's presence. Through their collective efforts to confront and acknowledge their shared history, they form connections and a sense of belonging that help them move beyond their past traumas. The climactic exorcism scene symbolizes the process of dealing with and releasing repressed memories. It suggests that healing requires confronting and purging painful memories rather than suppressing them. The women of the community come together to perform the exorcism, highlighting the importance of collective action and solidarity in the healing process. From a psychological perspective, the exorcism serves as a cleansing ritual for Sethe and the community, allowing them to start moving forward from their collective and individual traumas.

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that

day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said...

It was not a story to pass on.

So, they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep...

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go... By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather... Just weather. (Morrison, 323 – 324)

Thus, through the characters' journeys, Morrison shows the significance of confronting and integrating repressed memories as a pathway to healing. The novel reveals that while remembering painful memories is hard, it is necessary to liberate oneself from shackles of the past and regain one's sense of self and agency. Sethe's story especially shows the resilience of the human spirit and the power of memory to heal even the deepest wounds from the past. Through the story of Sethe, Morrison demonstrates that true recovery lies in the courageous act of remembering and reclaiming one's history.

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