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**K. Jayasree**

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Srimad Andavan Arts and Science College, Thiruvanaikovil, Trichy -62005.



## **An Analysis of the Traumatic Anxieties of the Protagonists in the Select Novels of Toni Morrison**

**K. Jayasree**

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Srimad Andavan Arts and Science College, Thiruvanaikovil, Trichy -62005.

Email: jayasreearuna@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Toni Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for her books *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1993). Human existence includes the experience of psychological distress. Both books are heartbreaking in their examinations of the suffering black people experienced during slavery when whites treated them as property and compared them to animals. In this work, Morrison examined how psychological damage brought on by tragedy may lead to isolation and social immobility. Her writing mostly focuses on the experiences of women victims of sexual and racial persecution. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison shows many aspects of trauma, such as disintegration, continuity between the past and the present, and restoration. Individuals, families, and even communities may all show signs of trauma. Morrison's account contains other painful elements, but the overpowering intensity of these occurrences is the most prominent. This dissertation delves into the struggles, fears, and mental pain the black characters in Toni Morrison's works face.

**Keywords:** Anxieties, Alienation, Discrimination, Dilemmas, Disintegration, Slavery, Trauma

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the United States, African Americans are the people who trace their ancestry back to slaves. In their own countries, people were coerced into working. Because of racial supremacy and the denial of basic rights, they lived in horrific and dismal conditions. Nevertheless, African Americans have left an indelible mark on the nation's past and present. Formerly, African Americans tended to cluster together in self-contained communities known as villages, compounds, and enclaves. The black cast of characters has been enhanced by centuries of literature and culture, and their language has developed verbal forms and written abilities. Morrison includes what might be considered black music as an intentional accompaniment to her stories. Black Christians in the North who were free from slavery also used writing to protest racism and injustice. The slave stories lacked unity, with neither clear images nor a consistent tone.

However, authors like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks brought fresh perspectives to the genre while exploring topics like racism and Black nationalism. Inspired by Sartre, Richard Wright created *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945), and *The Outsider* (1951). The pain of African Americans who experienced racism and brutality is what he mostly focuses on. James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Le Roi Jones, and Alex Haley are just a few of the many groundbreaking black authors. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), written by W. B. DuBois, portrays black people's shattered identities and the harsh attitude of white people. The articles in this anthology captured the feelings and thoughts of black people and their passionate perspectives. Du Bois wrote that "the challenge of the colour line is the defining issue of the 20th century." (Bois 10).

Contrary to Du Bois's views, Washington adopted a combative posture in his efforts to eradicate slavery and racism from the United States. Washington said that freed slaves should organize a violent uprising to overthrow slavery. Black beauty became a rallying cry of the Harlem Renaissance, whose authors also addressed slavery, racism, and other social ills.

Sethe, a slave on the estate owned by Mr. Garner and his wife, drives the action of *Beloved*. She has a happy marriage to Halle and three healthy children. After Mr. Garner's passing, however, the farm is entrusted to a teacher who is cruel, nasty, and hideous. Paul D., Paul A., and Six O. are only a few of the slaves that flee from the schoolteacher's dread. Schoolteacher utilizes all abilities to persecute the blacks. His nephews rape Sethe in the barn as Halle and Paul D watch in terror. *Beloved* (1987), written by Toni Morrison, is widely regarded as one of the finest instances of traumatic literature, and it has received much attention from modern critics and reviewers. Cathy Caruth writes that traumatic stories often include acts of violence, brutality, and the loss of one's sense of self. *Beloved* is rife with traumatic elements, like Sethe and the School teacher's nervous behaviour and the idea of dissolution. The storyline is inconsistent and has several holes in the text. Sethe's mental disorder of forgetfulness causes her to be perplexed and disoriented. Morrison has included several songs

with important cultural and historical contexts. The way black Americans experience trauma is defined by the mutual disdain the white culture views the black experience. Morrison uses trauma theory and practice to organize the story in the book. Morrison has utilized her lyrical abilities to include songs throughout the work, enhancing its themes and re-imagining aspects of black history and culture.

Several black writers, including Toni Morrison, have said that works of black aesthetics “should, by definition, transmit a sense of what it is like to encounter life’s multiplicity of complications as a person affected by ethnic values.”

Henry Louis Gates Jr. argued that the concept of race itself is culturally constructed rather than having any basis in biology. Morrison warns that one of the most harmful cultural constructions of physical standards is the aesthetic of idealized beauty. Morrison has portrayed her heroes as mentally and physically deformed to emphasize the plight of black people in a white-dominated society. Sethe, a slave woman, is compelled to kill her daughter to protect her from the sexual abuse of whites in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The ghost’s mysterious reappearance enhances the novel’s metaphysical quality. Morrison investigates the historical context of black people’s experience of expulsion and slavery. The narrative of *Beloved* has been dissected by reviewers using Freud’s concept of trauma as a lens. It is as if the past is haunting them, making them feel apart from the rest of society. The narrative highlights the disintegration of families and the continued anguish caused by slavery’s legacy. In the book’s opening line, Morrison refers to the emptiness and helplessness of black people who cannot speak their stories. Incoherent sequences, which Vickroy claims illustrate Morrison’s depiction of the repressed emotions that result from trauma, support Vickroy’s argument that Morrison demonstrates silence. As the heroine of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Sethe represents all black women who struggle to gain acceptance in a white-dominated world. Their only purpose is the abolition of slavery. Sethe envisions a bright future for black children, but her hopes and ambitions are dashed when she is repeatedly raped and hunted through the woods by what seem to be pack animals. Toni Morrison’s works include confined, dejected, and afraid characters due to the degrading actions of whites. The pleasure of Sethe’s body is restored when she begins dating Paul D, “the type of guy who could stroll into a home and make the ladies weep” (*Beloved* 17). When Sethe murders her daughter, she does it to prevent “from [soiling] her daughter’s thighs and [invading] her daughter’s privates with a gang of whites.” (B 251).

*The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison’s debut novel, was published in 1970. Toni Morrison’s character Pecola has several mental illnesses. As she examines her reflection, she cannot help but think about how she stacks up against the other females who have been similarly gifted with blue eyes. Rape is the result of emotional and mental stress for Pecola. Cholly’s father is miserable and odd due to drink, poverty, and unfairness. Morrison reveals the destructive power of family as the primary force in stifling creativity and originality. As described by Karen Horney in her book *Our Internal Conflict and Neurosis and Human Evolution*, psychic anxiety may lead to excessive agitation and a loss of one’s capacity for rational thought. Every single person has both a waking and a sleeping existence. Cholly is another neurotic main character, this time in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison’s “too horrific to recount” description of slavery’s atrocities provides a clue to the study’s central thesis. Many writers, like Cathy Caruth, Brooks Bouson, and Allan Young, have examined how traumatic events affect a novel’s development. In her book *Unowned Expertise: Trauma Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth makes the case that there is no causal relationship between the historical record and traumatic events. The separation of Sethe and Paul D. is the novel’s most traumatic event. Abject poverty, the unfairness of whites, and his re-humanization in the Black community break his mind and sensibilities. Slavery and constant degrading by whites have made him ill and deformed. Since he is now no better than an animal, he no longer has any concept of good and wrong. Morrison describes Cholly’s pre-rape neurosis:

Impotence and guilt surged in a bilious duet. What could he possibly do for her? What is with her? Say what to her? What could a black guy who was worn out say to his daughter, eleven, who had a bent back? He would be able to appreciate her and accept her love if he looked into her face and saw what those troubled, loving eyes had accomplished. (*The Bluest Eye* 161-62)

Cholly has serious mental health problems and is morally bankrupt. Freud developed his hysterical theory based on his observations of Dora. He popularized the idea and said that hysterical symptoms are rooted in psychological shock or sexual dysfunction. He spirals into a deep melancholy when he comes home to find his eleven-year-old daughter Pecola doing dishes alone. In his inebriated state, he notices his daughter’s deformed foot. Now that her foot has become a fetish object, his existential angst is being replaced by sexual desire. According to Morrison’s argument in *The Feminist Reader*, “fetishization is a strategy usually utilized to underline the binary authoritarianism of civilization and barbarism.” (*The Feminist Reader* 39) Morrison demonstrates how a bad family can significantly stifle a person’s originality.

Morrison depicts the sexual, racial, and gender oppression that women experience. A person may lose their ability to think properly while experiencing anxiety or mental agitation, as Karen Horney highlighted in her book *Our Inner Struggle and Neurosis and Human Growth*. Everyone, without exception, lives both a conscious and unconscious existence. A man’s unconscious governs him without his awareness or permission, in contrast to his conscious existence, over which he has complete and total knowledge and, to some extent, control. What

is under the surface of our awareness, the unconscious, is a powerful force in shaping our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours—dreams and periods of inactivity, such as sleep, maybe windows into the workings of the unconscious. As the characters in your story fight to conquer the challenges they face and endure the ups and downs of life, you may notice a sense of disorientation creeping into the narrative. Male and female characters both have a sense of being “out of kind” in their communities. Humans become illogical and destructive when they lose interest in living. According to Freud, a well-balanced individual has a well-coordinated ego, a healthy superego, and a vibrant id. In his article, Freud describes hysteria as follows: “Psychosis happens when the ego-external world connection is broken while suppressing unconscious impulses, and the unconscious starts to construct another deluded reality.” (Freud, 123) Psychosis arises when the ego’s link to the outer world is broken while repressing unconscious drives. This causes the unconscious to construct a fictitious, delusional world. (Freud 123).

Ultimately, Morrison’s portrayal of the screams of black women subjected to all types of injustice and enslavement earned her the Nobel Prize in Literature. *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, two of Toni Morrison’s novels, are among the greatest works of American literature because of the bold stylistic risks they take in retelling black history and culture for a modern audience. The remarkable Black feminism in her writing propelled her to worldwide fame.

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