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# Symbolism in Toni Morrison's "Beloved": Embodiments of Trauma, Memory, and Healing

***Ribhi Dakhlallah Gteifan Aldalain***

PhD research Scholar
Department of English, Faculty of Arts
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh
Uttar Pradesh, India
Email address: **dalainco@gmail.com**
Mobile number: +918445421158

**ABSTRACT :**

This research article traces the complex symbolic structure employed by Toni Morrison in her landmark novel Beloved to communicate what is fundamentally the uncommunicable trauma of slavery and its aftermath on psychology. With a focused analysis of reoccurring symbols-the character Beloved herself, the colour red, trees, the tin tobacco box, and the concept of "rememory"-this study demonstrates how Morrison utilizes those symbols to extend across time frames, melding the past into the present to illustrate the ever-present psychological ravages of slavery. Morrison's symbols serve a tripartite purpose: they function literally as elements in the narrative, they are psychological manifestations of trauma, and they are cultural signifiers of common African American experience. Through this complex symbolic landscape, this essay argues that Morrison shapes a narrative that not only reconstructs-the-historical trauma of slavery but also projects the possibilities for psychological liberation and communal healing through an engagement with a painful past.

**Key Words:** Trauma , Beloved , Morrison , slavery , embodiment , memory , healing

## Introduction: Morrison's Symbolic Landscape

Toni Morrison's Beloved, which was published in 1987 after it had been written, has gone a long way to prove itself as one of the most effective pieces of literature that confront the psychological trauma of slavery in American literature. Set in post-Civil War Ohio, it focuses on Sethe, an escaped slave who kills her infant daughter rather than letting her be returned to slavery-an act that haunts Sethe literally and figuratively throughout her life. Thus, the power of the novel lies, among many other things, in its theme of an unsparing illustration of the horrors wrought by slavery, buttressed by innovative narrative techniques, particularly Morrison's masterful use of symbolism in articulating experiences that resist direct representation.

In "*Beloved*," symbolism is much more than a literary ornament; it becomes in fact a necessary narrative device for Morrison to transcend the limits of linear and direct exposition. Via a complicated web of recurrent symbols, Morrison instigates a text that functions on different levels: it is a ghost story, an introspective and psychologic study of trauma, and a historic reclamation of silenced voices. "*Beloved*," through symbols, links the presence and past; the two lives are incommunicado, between the singular experience and collective nostalgia. Between the voices and the unuttered.

Thus Morrison's central problem in "*Beloved*" is how to articulate that which is unrepresentable-how to put into words experiences which, by their very nature, resist expression in language. As Jessica Benjamin proposes in "The Bonds of Love," the development of free, autonomous selves depends, in part, on "the recognizing response of an other," yet for African Americans in a slave society, "there is no reliable other to recognize and affirm their existence." In this context of compromised selfhood, Morrison's symbols might incant powerful means of expression for psychological states that the direct language cannot adequately articulate.

This analysis of major symbols in "*Beloved*" looks into their role in expressing the main themes of the novel-the psychological effects of trauma, the tenacity of memory, fragmentation of identity under slavery, and the possible means of healing through confrontation with the past. Through an examination of these symbols-from the embodied ghost *Beloved* to the endless repetition of red-as well as from the examples of Morrison's other symbols, this study will show how she writes a story that recounts the lives of specific characters but also reconstructs a shared history systematically suppressed and forgotten.

## The Character of Beloved: Embodiment of Trauma and Memory

One of the most intricate and multivalent symbols in the novel is undoubtedly the character of *Beloved* herself. With all the essential triumphs and downfalls occurring within the narrative, the woman *Beloved* has enchanted through its features into a powerfully real character and symbolically a

harbour of manifestations whose meaning is developed as it goes along with the text. At the first level, *Beloved* signifies Sethe's murdered daughter who came back as a real person form-an expression of maternal guilt and unsolvable grief. Yet, even as the novel develops, *Beloved's* symbolism increases dangerously far above this primary literal interpretation.

A basic sense just made of *Beloved* understood her as, "the existence of Sethe's guilt for killing her daughter." This is guilt through a dimension of parasitism-where *Beloved* physically consumes Sethe-"*Beloved* ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it." Here again, her physical consumption, though rich in allegory, expresses vividly how unresolved guilt and trauma can consume the present existence. What emerges from past trauma swelling up to occupy the present if not addressed is given palpable expression in the ever-growing, swelling body of *Beloved*.

While an individual personification of guilt, *Beloved* represents the social body that bore the weight of a historical trauma. The article on the symbolism of the female ghost in the story states that "Morrison uses a female ghost to link the past and the present, so that the characters can face their trauma and ultimately conquer it." *Beloved* here becomes a link between past and present incarnating how historical trauma transcends generations, refusing its safe rest in the past. The idea of "rememory" proposed by Morrison finds embodiment in *Beloved*-'the material presence of the past events in the present moment.

The ghostly associations surrounding *Beloved's* character connect her to numerous folklore traditions. The analysis proposes parallels between *Beloved* and such supernatural beings as "Poltergeist, Domovoy, Haltia, La Llorona, [and] Succubus". Those connections grant *Beloved* symbolism that transcends local considerations of American slavery, reaching out to universal archetypes of haunting and possession. Particularly significant for the drama is *Beloved's* appropriation of the succubus with Paul D: "she rapes him while he sleeps" and "drains her victims, Sethe and Paul D, of their energy, vitality, but also of their memories". In that supernatural dimension, we rather see how trauma works as a force that can operate beyond the natural realm, possessing and consuming its victims with an almost supernatural power.

Moreover, *Beloved* acts as a catalyst for confrontation regarding blocked memories. By her presence, she forces other characters like Sethe, Denver, and Paul to face portions of their pasts they might wish to have forgotten. It is noted in research on the novel that, "*Beloved*'s appearance re-opens old wounds, and makes them face their traumas and past acts". Such a catalytic function denotes that healing involves confrontation with painful memories instead of their repression.

Ultimately, *Beloved* stands for a forgotten history-the history of slavery itself-what Morrison refers to as "the 60 million- and more-victims" of the Middle Passage and American slavery alluded to by the dedication of this novel. Through *Beloved*, Morrison gives physical presence to historical absences and silences, creating a character who begs for acknowledgment of what has been systematically forgotten or erased from the official historical narratives.

## The Colour Red: Vitality and Mortality

Another of the really a lot very beautiful and ongoing visual symbols in "*Beloved*" is colour red in its various forms and manifestations through the story. The symbolic significance of red within the course of the novel is many-fold and contradictory-it is life and death, it is presence and absence, hope and horror. As mentioned in the SparkNotes analysis, "Colours from the red part of the spectrum (including orange and pink) recur throughout *Beloved*", with each different meaning attached to red objects sometimes.

On the one hand, red is a symbol of vivacity, vitality of life. It stands for feeling and emotion-the capacity to link with other humans which, in spite of the dehumanizing effects of slavery, still remain. "Red roses lining the road to the carnival" allude to a moment of jubilant possibility for Sethe, Denver, and Paul D while they're coming together to make a new sort of family unit. Here, red indicates that there is still some residue of human vitality after quite serious trauma.

Yet, Morrison deftly loosens death-and-dying meanings on the blink of red light on that life-affirming symbolism. According to the SparkNotes analysis, "In *Beloved*, vitality often goes hand in hand with mortality, and red imagery [is] referring simultaneously to life and death and to presence and absence." For the sake of example, there are, indeed, the red roses that herald the carnival, whose "stink of death" mingles with images of the "red rooster," which for Paul D evokes the manhood that, under slavery, "Paul D himself was denied." This simultaneous double coding of red objects provides a broad symbolic ambivalence that addresses the more general concern of the combined presence of life and death and their complicated coexistence in the minds of those who survived slavery.

Perhaps the most potent red image in the novel is Sethe's daughter's blood. SparkNotes comments, "Sethe's memory is awash with the red of her daughter's blood and the pink mineral of her gravestone, both of which have been bought at a dear price." This streak of red blood represents both the horror of the infanticide and, paradoxically, Sethe's fierce maternal love-her determination that her daughter would die rather than experience the dehumanization of slavery that Sethe herself had endured. The pink of the gravestone, purchased with Sethe's degradation, similarly carries this dual coding of love and horror.

She can just as easily call it an old tale. Amy Denver really did pursue "crimson velvet," adding yet another red symbol. The most striking feature of this crimson velvet is its linking of hope and future possibilities-it is Amy's dream of a better life. Still, as the SparkNotes analysis sees it, "the story of Amy's search for carmine velvet seems all the more poignant because we get a sense of the futility of her dream". Like the other red objects in the

novel, this particular velvet of Amy's presents aspiration against restraint and hope contrasted with futility.

Through such ambiguous and ambivalent red images, Morrison creates the symbolic vocabulary that should hold over the complexity of characters' well-lived experiences, which cannot be simply reduced to good and bad, joy and suffering, life and death. This is where red takes on a visual manifestation of the book's main concern regarding how opposites penetrate and coexist in the lived experience of trauma and its aftermath.

## Trees: Symbols of Healing and Horror

For healing and horror, comfort and violence, freedom and death, trees serve powerful, paradoxical symbols in "*Beloved*." This duality reflects Morrison's greater concern with how symbols, like experiences, defy easy categorization and instead carry multiple contradictory meanings.

On the positive side, trees in "*Beloved*" "become the sources of healing, comfort, and life". Denver's "emerald closet" of boxwoods creates for her "a place of solitude and repose-a refuge from the haunted atmosphere of 124 Bluestone Road". It gives her private arboreal space and helps her develop an identity that can detach itself from the traumatic history that is weighted over her home. Similarly, Paul D finds the way to freedom by "following flowering trees to the North," while Sethe runs away from Sweet Home "through a forest." These trees mark, in fact, the paths to freedom and selfhood.

Perhaps the most striking tree image in the novel is the reimagining by Amy Denver of the brutal scars on Sethe's back as "chokecherry trees." By imagining the scars on Sethe's back as a "chokecherry tree," Amy "sublimates a site of trauma and brutality into one of beauty and growth." This act of imaginative transformation transforms a symbol of dehumanizing violence into natural beauty and vitality, hinting at the possibility of reclaiming and reframing even one's most traumatic experiences.

But Morrison constantly undermines these positive associations with the darker meaning. "The beautiful trees of Sweet Home mask the true horror of the plantation in Sethe's memory," seeming to cover over the brutality of slavery. Trees are furthermore "the sites of lynchings and of Sixo's death by burning," thus ingathering the associations of racist violence wrought during slavery and even in its aftermath. This double coding creates a deeply ambivalent symbolic experience, reflecting how the same natural world that offers beauty and comfort serves as the theatre for human cruelty and violence.

In this sort of paradoxical tree imagery, Morrison demonstrates how trauma has broken even that unexplained relationship with the simple natural world. For these characters, there is nothing-even the simple beauty of trees-that can be experienced with the shadow of slavery's brutality. Positive tree imagery still endures with such negative connotations, implying, however, that through imagination and reframing, those traumatic associations could be reclaimed and reinvented.

## The Tin Tobacco Box: Emotional Suppression and Psychological Protection

Among the most powerful instruments of psychological symbolism in "*Beloved*" is Paul D's presentation of his heart as a "tin tobacco box". This metaphorical reference effectively perceives the psychological defence mechanisms developed in response to trauma-particularly masculine trauma during slavery. The tin box embodies protection against further psychological injury as well as damage towards emotional connection and true self-hood.

According to SparkNotes analysis, Paul's heart is enclosed in such metaphoric container after "his traumatizing experiences at Sweet Home and especially in the prison camp in Alfred, Georgia". The box has, "by the time Paul D arrives at 124, 'rusted' over completely", implying the calcification of emotional defences with the passage of time. By "alienating himself from his emotions", Paul D tries to "preserve himself from further psychological damage," but then again," sacrifices much of his humanity by foregoing feeling and gives up much of his selfhood by repressing his memories."

The symbol powerfully illustrates how trauma spurs emotional compartmentalization as a survival tactic. Being adamant that "nothing can pry the lid of his box open", Paul D speaks of the unyielding psychological defences formed in the wake of extreme trauma. But the narrative also contends that, while seemingly well-suited for survival during the moment of trauma, those defences actually impede healing and authentic connection. It is through Paul D's "strange, dreamlike sexual encounter with *Beloved*"-"perhaps a symbol of an encounter with his past"-that "the box [bursts] and his heart once again [glows] red".

On one side, the tin tobacco box comes to denote the physical enduring of an abstract process of dissociation and repression. By embodying the psychological processes through the image of the tobacco box, Morrison brings to light the self-protecting internal mechanisms trauma survivors develop in order to ward off feelings of being flooded with intolerable pain. Yet the novel also suggests that for healing to occur, this box must first be opened: to reintegrate in painfully conscious awareness the dissociated experiences and emotions.

## Memory and Rememory: Symbolizing Temporal Experience

In "*Beloved*," one of the most significant innovations of Morrison is the idea of "Rememory," which serves simultaneously as a thematic concern and as a structure in the novel. In other words, it implies that there is a material presence of past events which has a continuous present existence-that

memories exist in the world rather than only in the mind. So this concept could become a strong metaphor for how trauma collapses conventional distinctions of past and present.

Reading from the analysis of search result 4, "While the word memory refers to thinking of the earlier experiences, 'Rememory' means reminding oneself of the earlier memories". In Morrison's term, the term rememory equates to "the act of remembering a memory," where "a memory is returned to, whether physically or mentally". "Rememories are places or better photos of specific spots setting off re-introductions striking portrayals or records" .

For Sethe, the protagonist of "*Beloved*," rememory serves as a means of rebuilding the past. The past does not exist for past time-all things must be possible again and come again in the present. This symbolically shows the nature of traumatic experience as being resistant to temporal boundaries; they seem to exist long after their particular time. In the analysis, it is //8751202145/said that "Through the Memory and Rememory Toni Morrison explains the 9/83.29*former dolor 741201245/+experience of the slaves in the hands of their masters who treats them like an animal".

Another way to relate rememory back to the structure of the novel is in considering how it describes disorderly time. The story operates by continually moving back and forth between past and present, whenever characters encounter rememories that take them back to past moments. The very structure of the rememory embodies how trauma interrupts linear temporality, creating a perpetual present for past horrors that still exist and exert influence.

This idea of rememory takes on the element of intergenerational transfer of trauma; it is larger than life. In the novel, memories do not belong only to those who lived through the original events; they are often met by others-vis-a-vis the next generation. Denver, although born long after the end of slavery, must face memory aspects of events she never experienced. This rememory aspect symbolizes how the trauma finds its way from one generation to another, affecting even those with no direct memory of the original events.

Through rememory, Morrison has given new symbolic meaning to temporal experience in blatant contradiction to Western notions of linear time and memory. Rememory, therefore, is a concept that opens up time in a more circular and accumulative way, where the past coexists with the present and can be encountered and relived. Such a conceptual innovation allows Morrison to capture far more accurately the temporal experience of trauma survivors for whom the past refuses to remain past.

## Ghosts and Haunting: Symbols of Unresolved Trauma

The ghost that haunts 124 Bluestone Road, the central supernatural force of the novel, /ymbolizes unresolved traumas that go beyond time. Prior to taking on physical form as the yog woman called *Beloved*, the ghost makes itself known as a poltergeist presence in the house, signifying the very essence in which trauma will continue to disturb the present even when it is not directly confronted or acknowledged. Analysis in result 3 states that Morrison's novel is both a neo-slave narrative and a ghost story owing to the supernatural intermixing with the mundane daily life of former slaves as Morrison narrates the experience of African Americans who faced the traumas of slave life even after gaining freedom." It is this combination of historical realism and supernatural elements in which Morrison finds a way to illustrate both-the historical reality of slavery and its psychological remanences-"haunting" the survivors.

The apparition in "*Beloved*" shares certain similarities with various supernatural creatures known in folklores around the globe, namely the Poltergeist, Domovoy, Haltia, Llorona, [and] Succubus". These connections expand the symbolic resonance of the ghosts beyond the very specific historical context of American slavery into more universal archetypal notions of haunting and unresolved grief. The poltergeist element of the ghost-its ability to wreak havoc upon the house through "ghostly" means-represents how trauma can carve itself into physical existence, and manifest in embodied experience that would seem to defy rational explanation.

As the manifestation grows to become *Beloved*, her dealings with the other characters tell different stories of haunting. With Sethe, *Beloved* acts as a poltergeist that "mercilessly forces Sethe to gradually face her actions, and their consequences". With Denver, she takes "a form of a more benevolent spirit" while continuing to exert control. She possesses Paul D "like a succubus", sexually engaging him while he is unaware or asleep. These different manifestations symbolize how trauma affects different people in different ways, depending on their relationship to the original traumatic event.

In the novel's conclusion, the exorcism of *Beloved* indicates potential freedom from haunting and absolutely communal action. As observes, "for the community, *Beloved* breaks the years-old barrier between the residents of 124 and the rest of the community," which will finally lead up to the moment when "all the women within the community gather together in order to embrace Denver and Sethe within their circle of protection, thus banishing *Beloved* from their home and lives". This communal exorcism symbolizes how healing from historical trauma requires not just individual psychological work but collective acknowledgment and action.

Morrison, through these supernatural elements, builds up into a vocabulary symbolic of all that trauma stands for-being beyond rational comprehension or the boundaries of time. The ghost would now represent not merely Sethe's own guilt but indeed the grand-scale trauma of slavery itself-guilt that will not remain buried as past but will confront the collective of that community in order for healing to occur.

## Psychoanalytic Symbolism: Self and Other in "Beloved"

Understood primarily within psychoanalytic frameworks, Morrison's symbolism in "*Beloved*" has been thoroughly studied and allows for an exploration of how the symbols in the novel speak to issues in the psychology of identity-building under the dehumanizing conditions of slavery. These psychoanalytic readings focus particularly on Morrison's symbols that illuminate the interplay between self and other-a relationship that the institution of slavery has fundamentally distorted.

This psychoanalytic criticism from the source mentioned in search result 5 states that "*'Beloved'* powerfully dramatizes the fact that, in [Jessica] Benjamin's words, 'In order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for an other' (53); in so doing, it enacts the complex interrelationship of social and intrapsychic reality." This allows us to hypothesize how the many symbols that Morrison engages, especially *Beloved*, might symbolize the psychological results when a social condition impedes healthy reciprocal relations between the self and the other.

"It is a terrible thing to be a person of Morrison's characters, who generally live in 'a racist, slave society, where there is no reliable other to recognize and affirm' their existence-to not have an other in a community of humans who would apparently claim such affiliation. Under slavery, 'the mother, the child's first vital other, is made unreliable or unavailable by a slave system that either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition.' Such loss leads to emotional hunger and possible manifestations like "obsessive and terrifying narcissistic fantasies"-psychological states that Morrison represents through symbols such as the never-satisfied yearning for Sethe by *Beloved* and the confusion of the identities of mother and daughter.

Using psychoanalytic tools, Helene Moglen writes: "..In *'Beloved'*, Toni Morrison greatly reconceptualizes the psychological dynamic of differentiation and the social consequences of othering by radically interrogating the fantastic tradition within which she also writes". With this reading, it is suggested that Morrison's symbols-for example, her ghost character-move away from classical notions of self/other as they "show that the other is an instrument in the construction of the self".

The psychoanalytic frame gives further explanation for the novel's obsession with borders-physical, temporal, and psychological-and their violation. What's at work in all Morrison's symbols is the kind of hanging of boundaries: between life and death (*Beloved*), the past and the present (rememory), inside and outside (trees), and protection and imprisonment (the tin tobacco box). This recurring violation of boundaries symbolizes precisely how trauma itself breaches normative boundaries to create psychological states resistant to conventional categorization.

In that psychoanalytic imagery, Morrison would articulate how slavery did damage not just to bodies but also to minds-going as far as compromise of the most fundamental psych processes of identity formation and self-other differentiation, but the novel also indicates possibilities of healing from this psychological state brought about by the recognition of an other. The community recognizes Sethe through its gathering at 124, giving recognition from another then making possible true selfhood.

## Communal Symbolism: Collective Healing and Restoration

Individual trauma has been a major theme in "*Beloved*," and the novel features a symbol of collective experience accompanied by the possibility of collective healing. Together, these symbols signify Morrison's view that healing from historical trauma requires not only individual psychotherapeutic work but also collective acknowledgment and action.

One of the most critical communal symbols in "*Beloved*" is the house at 124 Bluestone Road, an isolation from community and the possibility of reintegration. In the first instance, 124 isolates itself from the wider Black community for judging Sethe's infanticide. The analysis in search result 3 states that the "years-old barrier erected between the residents of 124 and the rest of the community" began "when Sethe came back from jail without showing remorse for what she did." It is a representation of how unresolved trauma can alienate from the communal resources required for healing.

The climactic episode of the exorcising of *Beloved* at 124 by the women of the community opens the possibility of communal healing. As the analysis states, "All the women within the community gather together in order to embrace Denver and Sethe within their circle of protection, thus banishing *Beloved* from their home and lives." The gathering itself symbolizes how recognizing trauma at the level of the community is the only way to healing, and not by judgment or avoidance. The circle of protection created by the women powerfully emphasizes how community can hold trauma and transform it, often in ways an individual alone cannot.

Another layer of collective healing is represented in Denver's transition from isolation to community linkages. Initially locked in by fear within 124, Denver emerges "for the first time in years in order to find help to get rid of *Beloved* and save her mother" outside the yard. This act signifies individual courage and acknowledgment that healing demands community resources. Denver's re-entry symbolizes how the younger generation can break cycles of isolation sustained by historical trauma.

For Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, the carnival affords the characters an opportunity very rarely enjoyed-a moment of communal joy and contact-among those otherwise isolated with trauma. The "red roses that line the road to the carnival" announce not only the coming of the carnival but "the beginning of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D's new life together." This brief experience of communal celebration seems to speak of the healing power of shared happiness-just the opposite of what the novel emphasizes: that of shared sufferings.

Through the symbolism of community, Morrison suggests that healing from historical trauma requires both individual psychological work and acknowledgment and action on the part of the collective. While the isolation of traumatized persons from community may perpetuate suffering, reintegration into community holds the promise of protection, acknowledgment, and eventual healing.

## Conclusion: Symbolic Redemption and the Healing of Historical Wounds

The intricate symbolism of Toni Morrison in *'Beloved'* creates a narrative that does much that is impossible for the usual history: it brings the psychological aftermath of slavery into the physical reality and hints at paths toward healing from historical trauma. The multi-faceted symbols in Morrison's work, which include the embodied ghost *Beloved*, the paradoxical red imagery, the dual-natured trees, the protective but limiting tin tobacco box, and the concept of rememory, articulate experiences that elude direct representation and craft a text working as historical reclamation, psychological exploration, and spiritual journey.

As an analysis of *'Beloved'* as a ghost story, it is stated that "the symbol of the female ghost embodied in *Beloved* not only serves as a connection between the past and the present, but also promises a healing of that past in order to live in the present and possibly to construct a future." This encapsulates the main reason behind Morrison's intent in constructing her symbolic landscape-not merely an act of showing trauma but also an act of enabling transcendence from it. Coming into confrontation with the embodied past that *Beloved* signified, these characters begin the painful but necessary process of integrating traumatic experience into a coherent narrative of self.

All of Morrison's symbols work on many levels, as literal narrative elements, psychological states, and cultural signifiers. The effect of this multilayered symbolism is a text that refers equally to personal and collective experience-to show how individual trauma cannot be separated from the historical context. The psychoanalytic reading discussed in search result 5 remarks that the novel "enacts the complex interrelationship of social and intrapsychic reality," and the symbols of Morrison are the primary means of this enactment.

Interestingly, Morrison's symbols also help to collapse the organized time boundaries of properly past, present, and future in a narrative narrative. Through such ideas as rememory, Morrison alleges that past has material presence in present, that historical trauma shapes modern experience in a way regular historical accounts refuse to reckon with. Paradoxically, the novel also asserts that working through this ever-present past, painful as it is, creates the very possibility of a different present.

It's not conclusion, rather it's the perception of symbols in a "*Beloved*" such that they are just part of a literary craft but rather universal tools for manifesting experience that cannot or resist direct representation. Through her symbolic system, Morrison has configured a narrative that respects the complexity of historical trauma while nurturing the possibilities for healing through acknowledgment, confrontation, and shared community. This novel will truly be remembered as the undeniable testament of how literary symbols can serve other than the decorative-comfort ethical purposes; that is, how they can keep history aside and even open space for psychocultural healing in communities.

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