

The Etiology of Infantile Trauma as a Cultural Affect in Toni Morrison: An Exegesis

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Abstract

The identity of an individual is developed through his or her ego which is subjected to the constant inflation of the cultural consciousness that is passed onto generations through the cultural unconsciousness rooted deep in the system of our societal existence. The essential existence of a person is thus shaped not by fulfilling or ensuring the private desire of the self, but by the supposed desires granted by the hegemonic society that determines who the individual should become. This codified existence of the self, beginning from the stage of infancy, troubles and traumatizes the development of the ego and disrupts the functioning of the adulthood. The effect of a tabooed existence in the mirage of culture sometimes betrays the healthy mind and forces it to commit heinous crimes/sins in order to 'save' itself or the other from the evil clutches of the pseudo ideologies practiced by the society. The works of Toni Morrison mirror such incidents, and though fictional in nature, they carry the soul of the realistic sufferings in the 'disordered' society; thereby affecting the evolution of the younger generations from the inception onwards. The hauntings and the traumatic experiences of a child born in a system that practices cultural paranoia, consumer industry and a world of binaries can be explicitly traced through the present study on the select works of Toni Morrison.

Keywords: Affect; Consciousness; Culture; Infancy; Trauma.

Trauma and Culture

Trauma and culture have contributed greatly into the discipline of literature and other extended areas. Unfortunately, the contributions made by the discourses of culture and trauma are rarely problematized in order to bring in a solution; it always appears to remain aporiacal. It is often confusing to think about culture and trauma in a single breath and they

are different in their ontology too, but are closely knitted to the human consciousness. The firstone is a construct and the other is the result of this constructed entity. Culture is always looked at as a symbolic means of communication. It is a dogmatic construct which is based on the false ideology of shared belief system, values, tastes, rituals, and customs forced upon the social animal. The construct is the primary seed to the discourse of civilization. The inherent wilderness of man seems to be imprisoned in the name of culture and society. This imprisonment becomes the root cause of the traumatic haunting that the constructed entity of the culture has offered to the whole of mankind- cultural trauma.Cultural trauma occurs, in the opinion of Jeffrey C. Alexander,“when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1).

Toni Morrison, in most of her works,writes about various traits of cultural trauma and their aftermaths, because they are deeply rooted in the shared traumatic experiences of the author herself who has been a victim of cultural codes. Racial discrimination and slavery were the unpardonable encryptions brought into mainstream doctrines in the society where the color of the skin defined the identity of an individual. The society often tends to lament upon the shifting nature of identity; but for a “black” the identity was constant. This shared feeling tormented the existence of the black skinned. The agony and plight the individual or the collective community experienced is clearly narrated in all the works of Toni Morrison and beautifully conceptualized in her novel*Beloved*:

“Definitions belong to the Definers, not the Defined” (Morrison, “Beloved”190)

The elitist and hegemonicwhite communities defined the definition of who a black is. He/she is othered by the Other. They are monitored and led from the infancy to adulthood, to the very last breath of their being by the supremacy of the whites. Slavery became the quintessential identity. Without being given an opportunity to choose, they were forced to work because they lacked essence. Thus, two varied sets of ideological consciousness were shared in the same regional realm; the consciousness of the definer and the defined. The value system is a construct to dehumanize the other which often results in cultural trauma. This agony made Sethe in *Beloved* to kill her own infantbecause she believed that death would be far better an option than becoming a slave. It is the same binary

that operated in the rationality of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, to desire the 'blue eye' which was epitomized as the symbol of beauty. They are not to be blamed for their actions or thoughts. On the other hand, in Lacanian terms, all the three registers (imaginary, symbolic, and the real) of these individuals (Rabate 23) have been colonized and conquered by the pseudo philosophies of the masters. These suffering individuals collectively form a traumatized society. In his explanation of the theory of traumatized societies, Todd Madigan quotes Jeffrey C. Alexander as:

Collective identity [becomes] significantly revised. The identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life. (49)

The method of reconstructing the collective identity's past life is constantly revisited in the work *Beloved*. The most powerful portrayal of this memory haunting is where Paul D and Sethe ponders upon traumatic experiences they had in the plantation. The very name of Paul D is a baggage from the past. There were other Pauls initialed either A, B or C. So, him being Paul was not really a concern at all; name was never an identity to the members of the black community and their identity was strictly grounded on racism. The ghostly presence of the murdered third child that Sethe experiences in the house 124 is also the analeptic representation of the memory, constantly traumatizing not only the grown up, but the infant as well. All these sufferings are the results of the cultural constraints chained on to the shoulders of the community in the name of collective identity suppressing the independent ego, id, and the super ego. The cultural affect in disrupting the psyche of the society could be concretely defined from the narrative techniques of analepsis, paralepsis, and prolepsis which would be triggering up the menace effect by creating voids and connectivity of the shared lives in the fiction. These techniques are not just narrative measures; on the contrary, they devise the same function in real life experiences too. Memory from the past often traumatizes the present and ruins the probably beautiful future yet to come. Hence it could be said that trauma is that experience of an individual or community on the grounds of the socio-political culture temporally anchored to the existence of the imago.

Trauma Comes back as a Reaction not as a Memory: Talking out the Wound

Trauma became more of a literary term than its medical reference by talking it out through the narrations. Writers have made use of the theoretical framework of trauma in understanding the behavioral changes of the person, community and the society. Surprisingly, it should be acknowledged that every individual does share some traits of grey experiences that restructure the world of experiences in and around them. Literature, being the best medium to explore and discuss life, became successful in talking out the wound louder through the fictional world. This could be a shared expression like apartheid, gender inequality, linguistic differences, sexual violence and so on. The most important point to be analyzed with due regard is the shared unconsciousness of the unique individual victimization. The shared past of the victims, instead of creating fossilized memories, gets renewed as reactions and resistance. As Benita Parry argues, "It is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language... we must never cease renewing those images, because once we do, we fossilize" (172).

Often it is misunderstood that traumatic hauntings are the results of the unerazed memories of the things or events that happened in the past. But, it would be better to define trauma in the words of Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist, author, and a researcher from the US, who said, "trauma comes back as a reaction not a memory" (Brown 5). This reaction could be a shared conscience that performs in the collective unconsciousness of the individual and the community; thus defining his or her existence. The very manner of Sethe killing her infant in *Beloved* can be seen as the reaction of the trauma that she carries within her and in the community fixated probably from her childhood. The sexual abuse of Pecola's father in *The Bluest Eye* is read as a method to make Pecola believe that she is not ugly, but desirable as any other 'beautiful' woman out in the society. The way Maya decided not to speak, when she was abused by her stepfather in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a reaction to the mental and physical wounds of the infant. The lesbian relationship shared by Celie and Shugg Avery in *The Color Purple* is a counter act to the degree of suffocation that the women folk had to live under male dominance.

Therefore, as these examples clearly signify, whatever be the genre, and to whichever community one belongs to, the wounds talk in a universal language, the language of trauma; not recollected and subjected to the self and collective victimization, but erupts in the form of dangerous reactions that affect the person and the society. The idea can be explained explicitly in the following words of the renowned poet Aime Césaire:

We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are- that is the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we are black and we have a history ... [that] there have been beautiful and important black civilizations ... that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world. (Nkosi 268)

Toni Morrison narrates the reactions resulting from the wound with a very interesting terminology which she has termed as 'rememory', representing the collective memory paving way to all the counteractions in the para-epitaphic and proleptic narration. This tale, though fictional, appears to be realistic and includes not just the harsh truths of victimization but is flavored with all kinds of emotions. Critics such as Caroline Rody have also highlighted this concept of 'rememory' by Toni Morrison. For Rody, 'rememory' is a "heightened imaginative power ... [able to] represent the past" (102). In her opinion, Morrison uses the past memories of herself and her fictional characters in the narration and exploration of trauma suffered by African-American people. This technique enables Morrison to illustrate the working of 'collective memory' in her novels. While examining Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Mae G. Handerson argues that the novel explores personal as well as collective memories "to move from image to text" (84) and also as a device to link the past and the present. Additionally, many trauma theorists and critics have written about the curative function of past memories where they can assist in the healing of the self. For example, Eliana Cristina Ionoia asserts that *Beloved* "is organized by fragments of memories retold and it deals with a healing of the self" (68). Hence, for Morrison and many other writers belonging to the Afro-American tradition, remembering the past enables some of their characters and even themselves to achieve self-discovery as well as recovery from the traumatic wounds.

Racial Victimization as a Cultural Affect in Toni Morrison

Racism is considered to be a byproduct of colonialism. The European colonizers divided the colonies on the basis of color and ethnicity; thereby creating a primary difference to the collective feeling. The European elites trained the local elites to mimic them resulting in the discrimination of the non-white skinned in the native land. This marked the first step of racial victimization resulting in the revolutionary reactions of the othered non-

whites in the native land, fighting against both the foreign colonizer and the native colonizer as well. In this, the local elites joined hands with the European masters to remain as the dignified white-collared slaves of the master. Thus, the division resulted in the creation of a suppressed habitat of the alienated natives sprouting a different collectivity from that of the mainstream dogma. The situation could be understood in detail in the words of Frantz Fanon as the following:

The world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. (30-31)

Literature started to decode the collective conscience of both the master and the slave through its narrations. Writers started to address the issue in favor of the subjugated class. People became writers in order to express their sufferings, thus transforming the aesthetics of writing or literature as a tool to react against the age old traumatization. Toni Morrison is one among such writers who believed that narrating the wound is one of the best methods to achieve healing. Toni Morrison, who rightfully understood the problems of the colored people because she herself was a victim, became the spokesperson to address the atrocities against the African-American communities through her works. Her very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* tackles the etiology of racism as the cultural affectation in a remarkable manner. Once in an interview with Salman Rushdie she said that:

I am not sure what the word “Negro” means, which is why I write books. What is black child/woman/friend/mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions. (Russel 46)

Morrison believed in claiming back the lost individuality of the black community to save the younger generations. She knew how the children and women are becoming the subjects of racial traumatization more than

the men. In spite of concentrating more on the gender aspect of racial colonization her ambition was to save the infants from the early childhood traumatic experiences which gets fixated and affects their healthy adulthood. This was the collective fear of all the adult black community which forced the characters of her novels to choose painful options to save their children from the cultural affectation that could ruin the infants' life in the long run.

Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* painfully describes the ardent prayer of its protagonist Pecola for attaining the culturally constructed notions of beauty. "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time" (46). This is the desire of Pecola, instilled into her system not by her personal choice, but by the American racial system which polluted the young mind of the child and made her believe that a pair of 'blue eyes' and white skin are the qualities that the society demands from a beautiful woman, something that makes her desirable. If the girl did not match the prescribed expectations of the elite society she would be stamped as "ugly". This identification of black Pecola as "ugly" and non-desirable is the traumatic haunting that she has to encounter for the rest of her life, until and unless her hope wins over her. But as readers we know what fate unfolds to the child in the future, and we remain to be helpless in saving her from the abuses and the resulting bruises she is supposed to carry just because she was born black and "ugly" in the eyes of the society.

The situation was almost the same for every black person. He or she was never recognized on the grounds of their efficiency, talents, ability, and hard work. They were criticized and treated more like animals. Almost all the works of Toni Morrison addresses the issues of racism as a cultural affectation ruining the generations. The following passages from two of Morrison's novels illustrate this point:

What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false face, a laughless grin, a talking posture. I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am. ("*Jazz*" 160)

And

Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? ("TarBaby" 299)

Both the passages strongly present the pain and sufferings of the African-American community in America. The question "[c]ulture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" remains a puzzle. Does she belong to the black culture or the culture of the whites? Or is she following the cultural codes shared by the women community? Is she a silent victim of the white patriarchy, or the black, or both? Whose culture are you bearing? This rhetoric proves the angst of a woman in the world of trauma in positioning herself and her children as part of a culture bearer without knowing where she really belongs to.

Infantile Trauma and its Cultural Affiliation

The works of Toni Morrison have been appreciated worldwide for its representation of the racial struggle, double colonization of womanhood, and its related counter cultural expressions. The unit of family played a great role in telling the voids of life in all the stories of Morrison. Along with that, Morrison always assured that the units of black family to be more connected and grounded in comparison to the whites, though sexual violence was a common factor that disturbed the serenity of the family atmosphere. She also explored the phenomenon of infantile trauma as transferred through culture in her child trauma narratives and stressed that children of the black community should be liberated from the apartheid struggle and given opportunities to thrive towards individuality and independence.

The author spoke of many social issues through her characters such as Pecola, Sethe, Sula and many others. However, the less noticed element associated with the portrayal of these realistic fictional characters is the evil effects of culture in their childhood. The question of how the world of innocence disappeared soon from the lives of these characters is rarely answered. The readers know them as either teenagers or in the role of matured adults. But how did they happen to experience so much of bitterness in their lives? Why did they start to react against the past images and attempt to come out of the shadows of the haunting analeptic memories? The answer lies in the thinking of Freud and its later refinement by Lacan. According to Lacan, the child starts to develop his/her identity in

its mirror stage (Bocock 39); the phase when the child for the very first time misrecognizes the image in the mirror to be other, and competing with its own image, where the child unknowingly starts to develop its ego or identity. The child during this phase also experiences unknown threats including the fear of castration (Jacobs 51) and in its growing phase the clean slated mind of the child starts to incorporate its culture unconsciously. The infant belonging to the black community might start to develop the fear of losing one's identity, the fear of looking ugly, not fitting into the desires of the society and many more.

At the same time, the child also becomes a witness to all the domestic atrocities inside the family too. From *The Bluest Eye* to *Song of Solomon*, in most of the early novels of Morrison, she has portrayed totally disrupted family dynamics and structures. In his analysis of Morrison's novels, Oumar Ndongo describes the nature of disintegrated families as "the Mac Teers are impoverished, the Wrights are sterile, the Streets are decadent, the Deads are just as their name suggests, therefore dead. Even though Morrison does not see men who abandon their families as villainous, she, however, strives to show how their absence causes chaos and confusion to women and children" (31). Therefore, the amalgamation of family imbalance and the cultural insecurity in many ways steals the world of innocence and traumatizes them by forcefully throwing their childhood into the premature world of experiences.

An analysis of the portrayal of children and infants in the works of Toni Morrison reveals that most of her child characters encounter different kinds of traumata. There is an undefined sorrow in their black retina fused with the uninvited silence. Some are silenced by their own mother-figures (sometimes permanently, by killing) without allowing them to survive in the polluted cultural discourse. Death stands out to be the greatest apocryphal truth in the life of every individual. It sounds absurd to desire the thanatos, for in every passing moment one becomes closer to the uninvited dead-end; the abstract reality of life. In the case of Toni Morrison and the collective unconsciousness of her fictional characters representing the real world the acts of killing are justified in the manual of their conscience, for desiring death over slavery. The mothers of Morrison liberated their infants from the world of infantile trauma by helping them reach their final goal, death, as Eagleton defined:

The final goal of life is death, a return to that blissful inanimate state where the ego cannot be injured. Eros, or sexual energy, is the force which builds up history, but it is locked in the tragic con-

tradition with Thanatos or the death drive. We strive onwards only to be constantly driven backwards, struggling to return to a state before we were even conscious. The ego is pitiable, precarious entity, battered by the external world, scourged by the cruel upbraiding of the superego, plagued by the greedy, insatiable demands of the id. Freud's compassion for the ego is a compassion for the human race, labeling under the almost intolerable demands placed upon civilization built upon the repression of desire and the deferment of gratification. (139-140)

The above passage very clearly justifies the infanticides portrayed by Morrison in her works of fiction. Because she, through her characters, was trying to free the future black community from the harsh realities of the brutal world; like Sethe killing her new born as a means to liberate Beloved and herself. But the spectral presence of Beloved marks the intelligence of Morrison in highlighting the truth of the past never leaving the present; one must say the umbilical cord is not really cut. Another incident of child trauma which is different from the usual pattern is described in *Song of Solomon*, where the protagonist Milkman is always ill-treated by the black community for having born in a "white institution". The racial element of ironical whiteness is attributed to him as an unresolvable burden by nicknaming him as Milkman. Thus, one can say that Toni Morrison implicitly narrated in depth about the not dominantly addressed concern of childhood trauma and its aftermath in almost all her works, especially in her last novel *God Help the Child* (2015), in which she made two very remarkable opinions. The first being "I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it" (53) and the other about the lasting impact of childhood trauma- "what you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (44).

The study becomes incomplete without mentioning Cathy Caruth, who contributed greatly into the discourse of Trauma studies. Caruth claims that the wounds inflicted on the mind can affect "time, self and the world," so it is a "collective, unbearable and unhealed wound, not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (4). Here, Caruth concreted the idea of recognizing trauma more as a psychological wound, which cannot be easily cured with the passage of time, but that gets resisted and manifested as traumatic reactions. She is also of the opinion that "the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (7). The traumatic experiences analyzed in this study explain how any culture can detrimentally affect

the psyche of an infant, and how its impact is made visible in their adulthood. This etiological study done in the select works of Toni Morrison is an attempt to foreground the fact that it is the cultural affectation and the collective unconsciousness imbibed by the child in its early stage of developing ego, the real cause for the traumatic hauntings and experiences that would unfold in its later life.

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