



# Unveiling The Hidden Scars: An Analysis Of Acute Trauma In Toni Morrison's The Beloved Novel

**Shanmathi M C**

Student -3<sup>RD</sup> Year BA English Literature

Department of English

PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

Erode

**Monika C**

Student- 3<sup>RD</sup> Year BA English Literature

Department of English

PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

Coimbatore

India

## Abstract

Trauma is defined as a contagious disease which occurs because of various drastic incidents in one's life. In a recent survey it was found that, approximately six million deaths are occurring because of trauma. It has the capability to break and destroy a person's inner strength and push them into a darker and gloomy world, where survival become more scary and tough. In the novel "Beloved" by Toni Morrison the character Sethe experiences trauma due to infanticide. This paper aims to explore the suffering of a mother and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing trauma, both individually and collectively.

**Keywords** – Slavery, Motherhood, Infanticide, Identity, Redemption.

## 1. Introduction

Toni Morrison was an American novelist who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. She is best known for her novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987), *Song of Solomon* (1977). This paper aims to explore the acute trauma experienced by a former slave for committing infanticide in order to protect her child from the dark world of slavery by applying concepts from Freud's psychoanalytical theory.

## 2. Beloved- Summary

The novel "Beloved" by Toni Morrison is written in 1987. This novel is inspired from a real incident of Margaret Garner. In this novel the protagonist, Sethe was a slave in a plantation where they practised benevolent kind of a slavery. Sethe married Halle and bore him four children. When the owner of the estate, Mr. Garner died, his wife immediately seek help from her highly racist brother-in-law to manage the plantation. Thus, the plantation was taken over by him who is often referred as the school teacher. He was a cruel man and abused the pregnant Sethe physically and mentally. One day things got worse, her husband Halle sacrificed himself and let Sethe and his children escape the farm. The school teacher found where Sethe is hiding and tried to capture her along with her children.

Sethe has endured enough of these hardships and felt that her children should not encounter this tribulation in their life. She kept aside her motherly love and decided to kill all her children. But her two elder sons escaped; she has killed her infant daughter who is later addressed as the beloved as written in her headstone. Later everyone believed that their house was haunted by the spirit of the beloved whom Sethe killed.

Later a strange lady appeared in front of Sethe's house, no one knows where she came from and who she is, she addressed herself as 'Beloved'. Beloved was the name of Sethe's daughter whom she killed in order to protect her from slavery. So, Sethe believed this stranger to be her dead daughter's reincarnation and develop a strong affection towards her. Sethe's obsession over beloved increased but the stranger disappeared soon and this led to the imbalance of Sethe's sanity. Denver, Sethe's fourth daughter as a matured child look after her mother. Denver tried every possible way to recover her mother from the traumatized state.

## 3. Psychoanalytical Theory of Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud is an Australian Neurologist. He formulated the psychoanalytic theory which was proven to be the base to describe human behaviour. It is used to identify and justify the human behaviour. It explains how the human thoughts, feelings and desire structure the human behaviour. According to psychoanalytic theory human mind is divided into three parts conscious mind, preconscious mind and unconscious mind. Through this Freud developed three personality which can be seen common in human behaviour. They are as follows:

- Id: It is the product of natural impulse which happens when our mind is unconscious state. Example: when you are hungry the Id provokes you to eat.

- Super Ego: It arise from once own moral principles or the social norm that he/she followed and happens in conscious state. Example: Feeling guilty after doing wrong.
- Ego: It is controlled by reality principle. It can happen when your mind is conscious as well as unconscious. Example: If you're craving for ice-cream and your friend is having already his you can ask a bite from him but your ego will stop you make you wait until you get your own.

#### 4. Psychoanalytical Theory in the novel Beloved

As per Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory, human behaviour is deeply affected by three factors Id, Super ego, and ego.

##### 4.1 Freud's Concept of Super Ego in the novel

Super ego is the feeling that is influenced by the moral codes imposed by society, which create a clash with their own personal traumas. Sethe in the novel kills her own child as an act of protecting her from slavery. This internal conflict is magnified by the Super ego's insistence on adhering to societal norms and expectations. Sethe's guilt and shame become internalized, which prompts her to repress the memory of the infanticide as a coping mechanism. We can observe the influence of the super ego in Sethe's character. Sethe's experiences as a slave had a profound effect on her psyche. She endured physical abuse, mental stress and the denial of her basic human rights. These traumatic events left a lasting imprint on her super ego, shaping her thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.

The super ego functions as a moral compass, incorporating societal expectations and cultural values. For Sethe, the deep-rooted trauma of her enslavement distorted her super ego, and convinced her actions to be utmost essential to protect her child from life of bondage. "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison, Beloved part1 Chapter 9). This statement uttered by Sethe in the novel pictures the harsh realities of slavery were the slaves even freed from slavery could not realize their freedom due to long term oppression.

In Sethe's mind, killing her daughter was an act of love, sparing her from the horrors of slavery. Sethe's decision to take her daughter's life reflects the heartbreaking struggle she faced between her innate motherly instincts and the immense psychological burden she endured during enslavement. The extreme nature of her action demonstrates the profound influence that trauma can have on a person's super ego, causing them to make choices that deviate from societal norms. Sethe's acceptance of the stranger named Beloved in the novel can indeed be attributed to the guilt she feels for killing her own daughter. This guilt creates a profound impact on Sethe's psyche, influencing her to form a strong emotional connect to the stranger who shares her daughter's name. However, deep down, Sethe cannot escape the haunting guilt and remorse that remain. She carries the weight of her decision, constantly questioning whether she had the right to take her own child's life.

## 4.2 Freud's Concept of Repressed memories in the novel

Freud's theory of repressed memories suggests that individuals can unconsciously bury painful memories or experiences deep in their mind to protect themselves from emotional pain. When the stranger named Beloved arrives, claiming to be Sethe's dead daughter, Sethe's guilt resurfaces with an overwhelming force. Seeing Beloved, or at least believing she is her daughter returned from the dead, triggers a flood of buried emotions and repressed memories.

The stranger assumes the Identity of Beloved, and Sethe desperately desired for forgiveness and reconciliation. Sethe, in her twisted sense of remorse, believes that by embracing Beloved, she can make up for killing her own child. She sees this as an opportunity to right her wrongs and perhaps find solace within herself. The manifestation of Beloved as a ghost can be interpreted as Sethe's subconscious attempt to confront and process her traumatic past. Sethe becomes captivated by the stranger's presence, desperately seeking redemption and a chance to atone for her past actions.

### a. Acute Trauma

Acute Trauma is a singular traumatic event which is brief in duration but lasts a profound impact on a person's mental health. In the novel "Beloved" by Toni Morrison, acute trauma is depicted through the character of Sethe who have endured severe and distressing experiences. This trauma is also connected to elements of Super ego and repressed memories.

The Super-ego which refers to the part of a person's mind that acts as a self-critical conscience, reflecting social standards learned from parents and others inflicts guilt, anxiety, and other painful emotions due to their past actions. Sethe's traumatic experiences include enduring physical abuse and the act of infanticide she committed to prevent her children from being returned to slavery. These incidents have left a lasting psychological impact on Sethe, leading to the manifestation of a ghost named Beloved, which represents the repressed memories and unresolved trauma from the past.

Repressed memories are another important element in the novel. The character Sethe in Beloved have endured unspeakable trauma as a slave. To survive, they are forced to bury these traumatic experiences deep within themselves, suppressing the memories to protect their sanity. This repression allows them to function in their day-to-day lives, but it also leads to psychological distress and unresolved trauma. In this way, the Super ego and repressed memories in the novel intersect. The Super ego represents the internalized societal standards that contribute to the characters' guilt and shame, while repressed memories serve as a defence mechanism against reliving traumatic experiences.

Both of these aspects contribute to the acute trauma. To address and heal from this type of trauma, one potential solution is through the process of remembering and acknowledging the past. Throughout the story, the

characters gradually uncover the truth about Sethe's traumatic history, and they begin to move towards healing and resolution. In the novel, the character Denver plays a crucial role in Sethe's healing process. Her love and support help Sethe confront her past trauma.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, this paper explored on acute trauma and its connection to Freud's psychoanalytical theories. Through acknowledging the past and building supportive connections, the characters in the novel are able to work towards healing and finding redemption. It also explores the complex interaction between the Super ego and repressed memories, shedding light on the psychological toll of trauma and the struggle to reconcile personal experiences with societal expectations.

## References

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