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Trauma, Memory And Healing In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* And Nicholas Spark's *Safe Haven*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of trauma, memory, and recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Nicholas Spark's *Safe Haven* (2010) through the combined frameworks of trauma theory and psychoanalysis. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma's belated temporality, the analysis highlights how Morrison's nonlinear narrative structure and fragmented voices replicate the disorienting experience of traumatic memory, while Sparks employs suspense-driven flashbacks to dramatize the persistent threat of abuse within a linear, romance-thriller framework. The study borrows from Freud's psychoanalytic concepts, particularly the "return of the repressed," and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" to illuminate how Sethe and Katie navigate the intrusion of past trauma into their present lives. As Judith Herman emphasizes, recovery is a relational process that depends on safety, remembrance, and reconnection, a framework that resonates with both Sethe's communal healing and Katie's reliance on supportive relationships to confront abuse. Furthermore, Caruth's insistence that trauma resists full narrative integration underscores why both Morrison and Sparks stage memory as fractured, intrusive, and yet ethically necessary to articulate. In this way, both texts demonstrate the centrality of memory, repression, and relational support in negotiating trauma, highlighting literature's capacity to mediate between the ethical imperatives of witnessing suffering and the human desire for emotional closure.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, memory, repression, recovery psychoanalysis and belated temporality.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Nicholas Spark's *Safe Haven* offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on trauma, memory, and recovery, demonstrating how literature can both reflect and shape cultural understandings of suffering. At first glance, the two texts occupy vastly different literary and generic territories. *Beloved* is a postmodern historical novel that interrogates the enduring impact of slavery on individual and collective psyches, while *Safe Haven* is a contemporary romance-thriller focused on domestic abuse and personal survival. Despite these differences, both novels provide nuanced explorations of how traumatic experiences resurface, how memory mediates the past, and how healing can be sought through relationships and narrative. In examining these texts, trauma theory and psychoanalysis provide essential analytical tools. Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma is belatedly experienced, "not locatable in the simple violent or original event... but in the way that its very unassimilated nature returns" (Caruth 4–5), is central to understanding Morrison's fragmented narrative and the ghostly return of Sethe's past. Similarly, Judith Herman's model of trauma recovery—encompassing safety, remembrance, and reconnection (Herman 181)—illuminates Spark's depiction of Katie's gradual confrontation with her abusive past. Psychoanalytic concepts, particularly Freud's notion of the "return of the repressed" and LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through," allow for a comparative understanding of how characters navigate memory, repression, and the intrusion of trauma into present consciousness. This study aims to analyse the similarities and divergences in these novels, arguing that Morrison foregrounds trauma's historical and communal dimensions, resisting closure and emphasizing ethical witnessing, whereas Sparks prioritizes individual resolution and relational healing within a popular narrative framework. By engaging with both trauma theory and psychoanalysis, this paper demonstrates how genre, narrative form, and interpersonal relationships shape the literary representation of trauma, offering insights into both the ethical responsibilities and narrative possibilities of depicting suffering and recovery in contemporary literature.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a comparative study method, analysing two primary texts in parallel to highlight convergences and divergences in their representation of trauma. The comparative lens allows for an in-depth evaluation of how authors construct narrative and character under conditions of psychological rupture.

The analysis is grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which emphasizes the belated and fragmented nature of traumatic experience, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework of "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," which explores memory, repression, and recovery. These theories collectively provide the basis for interpreting the psychological and narrative dimensions of trauma.

ANALYSIS

Trauma, memory, and recovery are central concerns in both Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Nicholas Spark's *Safe Haven*, though each author engages these themes differently in accordance with genre, narrative strategy, and ethical considerations. Morrison's novel foregrounds the enduring psychological and historical effects of slavery, portraying trauma as collective, fragmentary, and resistant to closure. Spark's work, while addressing domestic abuse and personal trauma, situates the experience within a linear, suspense-driven narrative that emphasizes individual recovery and relational healing. Analysing both texts through trauma theory and psychoanalytic frameworks illuminates how narrative structure, character development, and genre shape the representation of traumatic experience, offering insights into both the ethical and emotional dimensions of literature.

Cathy Caruth's work on trauma provides a foundation for understanding Morrison's fragmented approach. In *Beloved*, Sethe's traumatic experience of slavery and infanticide is never fully narrated in a single, linear scene. Instead, the horror emerges in fragments, piecemeal, mirroring the belated arrival of traumatic memory. Sethe's telling of Paul D that she “put her babies where they would be safe” (Morrison 193) obliquely references her act of infanticide, leaving the reader to reconstruct the event across narrative discontinuities. Similarly, Paul D's tobacco tin, where he locks away painful memories from Sweet Home symbolizes repression and deferred trauma. When *Beloved* metaphorically “cracks” the tin, the repressed horrors are forced into conscious recognition. Morrison's non-linear movement between 124 Bluestone Road, Sweet Home, and the Clearing destabilizes chronological reading, compelling the audience to experience the disorientation and temporal distortion characteristic of traumatic memory. Judith Herman notes that trauma involves memories that are “timeless and wordless, not bound by ordinary perception” (Herman 38), a description that resonates with Morrison's narrative strategy. The novel's polyphonic voices, shifting perspectives, and temporal leaps enact the very dislocation that trauma theory describes, demonstrating that certain horrors cannot be contained within conventional narrative forms.

Spark's *Safe Haven* also engages in belated memory, but within the conventions of suspense-driven storytelling. Katie, escaping an abusive partner, experiences flashbacks of Kevin's violence that intrude unpredictably into her present consciousness. Sparks writes, “She remembered the look in his eyes, wild and dangerous, when he told her she would never escape him” (112), highlighting the intrusion of past trauma on her sense of safety. Unlike Morrison, Sparks maintains a generally linear narrative, using fragmented recollections to heighten suspense rather than to destabilize temporal experience. Trauma in this context is narratively interruptive but ultimately contained within a plot trajectory that allows resolution. The contrast underscores the role of the genre: Morrison destabilizes chronology to mimic trauma's disruptive temporality, while Sparks preserves narrative order to create emotional engagement and suspense.

Freud's psychoanalytic framework, particularly the concept of the “return of the repressed,” offers another layer of interpretation. In *Beloved*, repression is both psychological and spectral. The ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter first manifests as poltergeist activity, later embodied in the living figure of Beloved. Sethe's realization, “Beloved, she is my daughter. She mine” (Morrison 236), collapses the boundary between memory, loss, and haunting, rendering trauma materially and emotionally present. *Beloved*'s water-logged monologues echo the collective trauma of slavery, linking personal grief with historical atrocity. In contrast, repression in *Safe Haven* is psychological and immediate. Katie suppresses her identity as Erin and adopts a new life in Southport, but Kevin's reappearance violently disrupts this attempted stability: “He was here. He had found her. And he was never going to let her go” (Sparks 186). In both cases, trauma refuses containment, but Morrison dramatizes the historical and communal dimensions, whereas Sparks foregrounds immediate physical danger and individual survival.

LaCapra's distinction between “acting out” and “working through” further illuminates character responses to trauma. Sethe repeatedly enacts the traumatic memory of infanticide through obsessive justification, reflecting acting out. Only when the women of the community gather to exorcise beloved; They sang. They prayed. They shouted” (Morrison 273)—does the novel gesture toward working through. Even then, the resolution is tentative; beloved leaves, but the scars of slavery and maternal grief endure. Morrison resists neat closure, highlighting the ethical imperative of witnessing and remembrance. Spark's Katie similarly acts out through silence and avoidance, concealing her past from Alex and repeatedly engaging in defensive behaviours. Her transition to working through begins when she narrates her experiences to Alex: “For the first time, she told someone the whole truth” (Sparks 201). The supportive relational environment, reinforced by Jo's letters, allows Katie to integrate her past into her present. Here, working through aligns closely with Herman's model of recovery—establishing safety, recounting trauma, and reconnecting with others (Herman 181). The juxtaposition shows that Morrison emphasizes collective intervention and historical responsibility, while Sparks emphasizes relational repair and individual psychological recovery.

The role of the “other” is crucial in both texts. In *Beloved*, Denver's recognition of the need for external support underscores trauma's social dimension: “She lifted her head and tried to think where she would go” (Morrison 289). The women's communal singing and chanting act as both ritual and witness, situating Sethe's healing within a network of communal acknowledgment. Paul D's affirmation, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (Morrison 322), gestures toward repair but underscores the complexity and incompleteness of recovery. In *Safe Haven*, Alex functions as the reparative “good object” in psychoanalytic terms, offering trust, protection, and relational safety: “With Alex, she felt safe, as though the past could no longer reach her” (Sparks 203). Sparks presents healing as relationally mediated, relying on intimacy and emotional support rather than communal ritual or historical witness.

Finally, the ethics of trauma representation differentiate the two works. Morrison's fractured narration, refusal of closure, and polyphonic voices enact Caruth's claim that trauma “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (Caruth 25). Readers become ethical witnesses, forced to grapple with the historical and moral weight of slavery. Sparks resolves trauma through genre conventions: Kevin is defeated, Katie finds love, and narrative closure reassures the audience. While this may risk simplification, Stark argues that popular fiction “broadens the discourse of trauma by reaching audiences beyond literary or academic circles” (Stark 222). Morrison challenges readers to confront the persistence of trauma, whereas Sparks provides accessibility and emotional reassurance, demonstrating the ethical and narrative stakes of genre in representing trauma.

In fact, *Beloved* and *Safe Haven* both portray the return of traumatic memory, the struggle with repression, and the tentative pathways to recovery, yet they do so in fundamentally different ways. Morrison emphasizes historical, collective, and unresolved trauma, insisting on communal witnessing and ethical responsibility. Sparks emphasizes individual, relational, and narratively contained trauma, showing that love and relational safety can mediate past suffering. Through trauma theory and psychoanalysis, these novels illustrate that literature negotiates between the ethical imperatives of acknowledging suffering and the human desire for resolution, demonstrating the power of narrative to mediate memory, trauma, and healing.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Nicholas Sparks' *Safe Haven* reveals the multifaceted ways in which trauma, memory, and recovery can be represented in literature, reflecting both theoretical and ethical considerations. Morrison's novel foregrounds the enduring and unresolved nature of historical trauma, particularly the psychological scars of slavery, through a fractured narrative that disrupts linear temporality. Sethe's experiences, compounded by communal and generational pressures, demonstrate how trauma persists beyond individual experience, resisting closure and requiring ethical witnessing. The ghostly manifestation of *Beloved* embodies Freud's concept of the return of the repressed, illustrating that past horrors cannot simply be buried but must be confronted, negotiated, and integrated within a social and historical framework. Psychoanalytic models, such as LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through, underscore the ways in which Sethe oscillates between repetition and potential resolution, with communal intervention marking tentative progress. In contrast, Sparks situates trauma within an individual and relational paradigm. Katie's journey emphasizes Herman's stages of recovery, establishing safety, recounting and confronting past abuse, and reintegrating into a supportive network of relationships. Romance functions as a conduit for psychic repair, with Alex embodying the reparative “good object,” and narrative closure reassures the reader of trauma's successful resolution. The juxtaposition of these two novels demonstrates how genre profoundly shapes literary representation: Morrison's postmodern, polyphonic approach conveys trauma's historical and ethical complexity, whereas Sparks' linear, suspense-driven style makes trauma accessible to popular audiences while emphasizing hope and emotional repair. Together, these works illustrate that trauma cannot be eradicated, but literature provides spaces, through narrative structure, memory, and interpersonal bonds for understanding, confronting, and mediating its effects. They reinforce that whether trauma is historical or personal,

collective or individual, literature remains an essential medium through which the past is remembered, ethical responsibility is acknowledged, and tentative pathways to recovery are imagined.

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