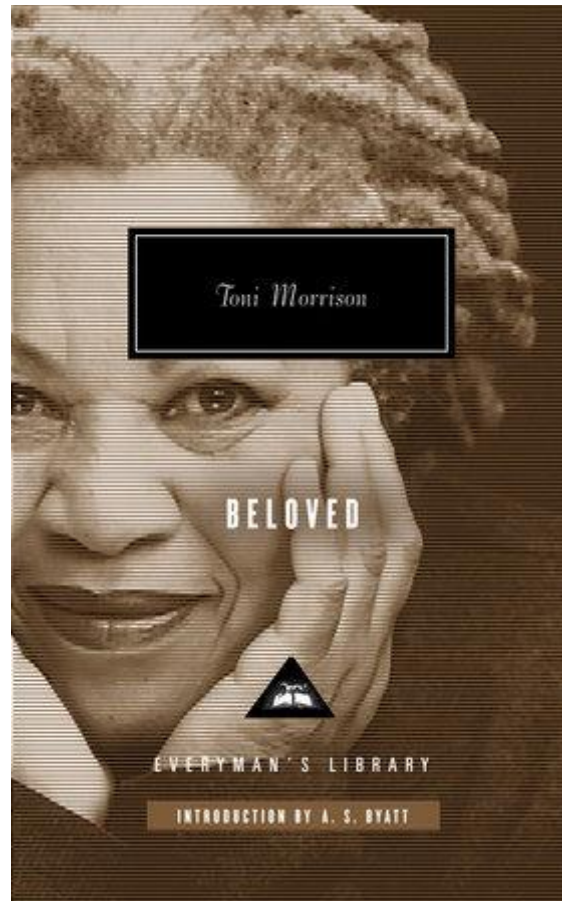


Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Experiencing trauma is an inevitable part of human life, we must go through extremely difficult situation though we like it or not. History is painted in blood. Literature provides an ample medium for venting out certain emotions. Human beings are exposed to worst situation in the course of history and most of the rational race has come out of it without unaltered mental and spiritual sanctity. But not all of them were lucky despite the human ability to adapt and survive some traumatic experience has shaken up the whole composition of physical mental and psychological wellbeing of these people. Post-traumatic stress disorder gives a theoretical framework on how people's conception of the world and themselves and how personal and shared experience are intertwined. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* we see the psychological effect of the personal and collective trauma of slavery. Each of the characters though out of slavery are still haunted by the ghosts of their past, their

bodies are emancipated their minds still carries the burden of memory. In this paper I would analyse post-traumatic stress disorder as experienced by the characters.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Slavery.

Introduction

Despite the human capacity to survive and evolve, traumatic experiences can jeopardise people's social, physical and psychological equilibrium to such an extent that the memory of one's past event comes to tamper all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. This trauma of the past interferes with the ability to pay attention to both new and familiar situations (The Black Hole of Trauma). The systematic study of trauma would help to formulate a theoretical framework which would explain the intricate and inextricable relationship between certain personal and shared experience and one's own perception of the world and oneself.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Theoretical Perspective

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD here after) is different from other psychological experiences. What distinguishes people who develop PTSD from people who are temporarily stressed is that they start organizing their lives around the trauma. Thus, it is the persistence of intrusive and distressing recollections, and not the direct experience of the traumatic event itself, that actually drives the biological and psychological dimensions of PTSD (McFarlane, 1992; Creamer, Burgess, and Pattison, 1992). After exposure to a trauma, most people become preoccupied with the event; having involuntary intrusive memories is a normal way of responding to dreadful experiences. This repeated replaying of upsetting memories serves the function of modifying the emotions associated with the trauma, and in most cases creates a tolerance for the content of the memories (Horowitz, 1978).

Subjective Assessment of the Victim

What makes a traumatic experience more tragic is the subjective assessment of the victim, the reality of the extraordinary event is crucial to PTSD but it is the interpretation and the meaning which the victim attributes to the event which makes the traumatic experience even more horrifying. The event itself may have ceased to exist in the past but the meaning which the victim attributes to the event constantly evolves in time. Though a tragic event may not seem stressful in the initial stage but the constant mental work which happens at the back of the head, where the event is constantly reinterpreted, would eventually add traumatic experience to the event.

According to Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, there are six different aspects through which people assess the information about the traumatic experience they have suffered. They are (1) They experience persistent intrusions of memories related to the trauma, which interfere with attending to other incoming information; (2) they sometimes compulsively expose themselves to situations reminiscent of the trauma; (3) they actively attempt to avoid specific triggers of trauma-related emotions, and experience a generalized numbing of responsiveness; (4) they lose the ability to modulate their physiological responses to stress in general, which leads to a decreased capacity to utilize bodily signals as guides for action; (5) they suffer from generalized problems with attention, distractibility, and stimulus discrimination; and (6) they have alterations in their psychological defence mechanisms and in personal identity (The Black Hole of Trauma).

The Ghosts of the Past in *Beloved*

Beloved is an award winning classic by Toni Morrison, set in the Reconstructionist era following the emancipation. The plot moves forth and back in time and employs different narrative technique to depict the traumatic experiences of slavery. The novel works in two temporo-spatial dimension. The events in the past have a direct connection to the events of the present. The central character, Sethe, is tormented by the memory of the past; she cannot come to terms with the events of the past. The beginning of the novel hints at the presence of shadow of the past, “124 was spiteful, full of baby venom” (*Beloved*). Sethe had to make the hardest choice in a mother’s life, to kill her daughter rather than to give into slavery. This traumatic event could not be erased from her memory; the guilt of infanticide follows her even after the physical emancipation.

When we disentangle the whole plot of the novel what we can see is the working of the after effect of the trauma, the tragic event of the infanticide and the trauma that follows it. The working of PTSD is evident in the novel. Sethe is unable to come out of the guilt, *Beloved* is the reincarnation of the guilt that suffocates her. The six stages of PTSD are explicit in her life, ordinary events in the life of Sethe becomes stimuli for the reappearance of the traumatic event. In the novel at a particular instance Sethe has an acute sensation for urinating, this ordinary event becomes a stimuli for her past traumatic event, this reminds of her water breakage while she was fully carrying with Denver. At the end of the novel when the village comes to exorcise Sethe sees Mr Baldwin on the horse and immediately she is reminded of Schoolmaster chasing her during their escapade from Sweet Home. “One of the serious complications that interferes with healing is that one particular event can activate other, long-forgotten memories of previous traumas” (*The Black Hole of Trauma*).

“One set of behaviours that is not mentioned in the diagnostic criteria for PTSD is the compulsive exposure of some traumatized individuals to situations reminiscent of the trauma. In this re-enactment of the trauma, an individual may play the role of either victimizer or victim” (*The Black Hole of Trauma*).

The reappearance of *Beloved* in the novel is the working of this principle, the entire family exposes themselves to the traumatic memory of the murdered child. This exposure torments every member of 124; the tobacco tin which contains the painful memories of Paul D is opened by *Beloved*, Sethe attends to *Beloved* spoiling her health. The characters willingly expose themselves to the traumatic situation.

Throughout history people have suffered and been through many traumatic incidents, Toni Morrison in the novel *Beloved* has attempted show us that even after the emancipation the after effects of the tragic events still continues to haunt them. The persistence of the trauma has made them social recluse and they continue to hurt them for the events of the past. Many victims continue to be re-victimised. While some people have adapted them to the new situations of life while some others have held onto the tragic memories, *Beloved* explores the effects of the traumatic events in life.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:4 April 2018

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