

## Psychotraumatology in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony*

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**Abstract:** Psychotraumatology is the study of psychological trauma, of its mental and physical consequences and of the proper treatment. Trauma can be defined as an emotional reaction to a distressful event such as a calamity, taking part to an armed combat, or being the victim of violence from an offender. Whatever its cause, trauma is commonly associated with a psychological suffering which can be expressed by flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, relational problems as well as physical problems such as headache and palpitations. In literary works, the representation of traumatic experiences and the resulting mental disturbances has often been the interest of many writers. In American literature, two novels are worth to be discussed for their representations of human suffering in relation to traumatic experiences: *Beloved* by T. Morrison and *Ceremony* by L. M. Silko. The former is focused on the psychological consequences of slavery for a black woman, Sethe, and her memories of past traumas while the latter depicts an American Indian veteran of World War II, Tayo, who struggles to cope with his mental distress.

**Keywords:** Mind, Trauma, American literature, *Beloved*, *Ceremony*

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### I. Introduction

The representation of traumatic experiences has often been the main interest of many novelists, poets, and dramatists in literature, worldwide and across the centuries. The English poets of World War I, such as Sassoon and Owen and their representation of shell shock, are a classical example of writers who were concerned with the description of the devastating effects of the conflict on the mental conditions of soldiers. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma can be defined as an emotional reaction to a distressful event such as a calamity, taking part to an armed combat, or being the victim of violence from an offender. Whatever its cause, trauma is commonly associated with a psychological suffering which can be expressed by flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, relational problems as well as physical problems such as headache and palpitations. The shell shock syndrome mentioned above is comparable to the post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, a modern clinical diagnosis which may commonly occur in a person who experiences a traumatic event since life is in danger and there is no, or a limited control, of the situation (Olf, 2019). In American literature, two novels are worth to be discussed for their representations of human suffering in relation to traumatic experiences: *Beloved* by T. Morrison and *Ceremony* by L. M. Silko. The former is focused on the psychological consequences of slavery for a black woman, Sethe, and her memories of past traumas while the latter depicts an American Indian, Tayo, and the possibility to overcome the mental distress caused by World War II, with the help of Native American spirituality. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between the clinical manifestations of psychological trauma and the description that these two American novelists made of the mental effects on their characters of such painful and dramatic experiences.

### II. Psychological Trauma In *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, traumatic experiences are represented either on an individual level, such as Sethe and Denver's psychological distress, or in relation to a community, that is the issue of slavery of black people. Sethe represents both these aspects since she is the victim of violence and sexual abuse by the hegemonic white people during her slavery and, most importantly, she is the perpetrator of a crime, the killing of her child, Beloved (Selfridge, 2018). These two experiences leave a deep mark on Sethe's personality because she is unable to speak her own suffering and is apparently anchored to the past either as a victim or as a criminal, as shown in the following extracts from the novel. In chapter one, a first idea of the influence of past events in the lives of the characters is given to the reader: '... Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so' (Morrison, 4). Afterwards, there is the description of another event in Sethe's memory:

'Counting on the stillness of her own soul .... Who could have thought that a little old baby could harbour so much rage?' (5). Two words from these passages can already give some insight into the psychological suffering of Sethe, that is 'persecution', which likely refers to the trauma of slavery, and 'rage', a negative emotion that is expressed also by Denver and Beloved, the ghost who haunts and torments the life of the dyad mother-daughter. It is this relationship between Sethe and Denver that will cause much trouble to the surviving child as she suffers the consequences of her parent's past as shown in this passage: 'But Denver was shaking now and sobbing because she could not speak [...] but I can't live here, Nobody speaks to us ... Boys don't like me. Girls don't either' (17). From these lines, it is evident that the daughter suffers from isolation, fear, and depression. It is interesting at this point to reflect on Sethe's past that has a major impact on the life of her offspring. A recent study on the psychological wellness of African American people (Halloran, 2019) shows that there is an intergenerational transmission of anxiety, depression, health problems and stress in general which is commonly called cultural trauma and, more specifically, Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome, PTSS. It is likely that this legacy is what Morrison refers to when she writes: 'to end the persecution'. Along with her inability to speak, another mental faculty is impaired in Denver, that is hearing. As a matter of fact, the girl becomes deaf at a certain point of the novel, an aspect which can be explained as a physical reaction to knowing or being told of her sister's death by the mother (Neveen, 2020). The speech and hearing impairment of Denver, represented here as a physical problem, is clearly related to the intensity of the traumatic experience: it is better not to listen or to talk to preserve one's mental integrity. Therefore, the memories of the past are unbearable for both characters, a situation which is reinforced in the novel by the appearance of the dead child or ghost. Indeed, Beloved symbolizes the trauma of black people who as slaves were tortured and abused but she is also the reminder of Sethe's mistakes as shown in the following excerpt: 'Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her' (284). It seems here that the supernatural is intervening in the life of a human being to suggest a way to recover from painful experiences, that of talking about the traumatic event and discharging the emotions related to it.

### **III. Psychological Trauma In Ceremony**

In *Ceremony*, the problem of trauma is reported mainly with the description of the mental conditions of the main character. Tayo is a veteran of WWII who manifests signs and symptoms of a deep psychological trauma which are portrayed in the opening chapter of the novel. He suffers from sleeping difficulties and this is shown in the first lines: 'Tayo didn't sleep well that night' (Silko, 1). He has nightmares which are described with a particular emphasis of colors and weather like in: '... humid dreams of black night ...' (2). An altered state of mind is frequently depicted with the occurrence of flashbacks like in the following passages: '... the Japanese voices came first, angry and loud..' (1), '... he could hear Uncle Josiah bringing him the fever medicine ..' (2), and again '... He could not get to rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present..' (6). All these descriptions provided by Silko give a clear idea of how intense the impact of war has been on the psyche of his character thus explaining the trauma it caused. The mental condition of Tayo clearly resembles the clinical manifestations of PTSD because it is possible to detect the following aspects: the re-experience of the traumatic event, the disturbances of perception, the intrusive thoughts, the restlessness and finally the insomnia (Mosel, 2022). And to be more specific, Tayo is affected by a psychological trauma which causes an inability to distinguish between past and present experiences which, consequently, determines a severe instability of his identity and integrity (Kazi-Nance, 2012). One might argue that Tayo's sense of identity was already compromised by the fact that he is of mixed blood ('I'm half-breed', p. 38), an aspect that is often highlighted in the novel thus representing another important element of suffering. As a matter of fact, Tayo is forced to deal not only with his painful experiences as a soldier but also with his belonging to an ethnic group along with the necessity of restoring his connections with this peculiar society in order to find a way to cope with trauma (Satheesh, 2021). The Laguna with its nature and the culture of the Indian world will be favourable to Tayo in this process of recovering from his mental disturbance. At the beginning of the novel, the differences between the Indian reserve and the white world are described in several passages. It is worth to compare: 'the smothering dampness of the green jungle leaves..' (7) and 'Jungle rain had no beginning or end;...' (10) with '... this was not the green foliage they sought out in sandy canyons ..' (10) and '... a cloudless blue sky, pale with a summer sun...' (11) to get an idea of how natural elements can influence a state of mind, being the Indian environment more soothing for the soul. Likewise, it is interesting to contrast the gracefulness of Ku'oosh, a Laguna medical expert who heals Tayo's physical symptoms ('He laid the bundle of Indian tea in Tayos' lap, p. 34), with the indelicacy of modern doctors ('They forced the medicine into Tayo's mouth', p. 2) to understand the discrepancy between these two different cultures and how impressive is the healing power of the reserve.

#### IV. Conclusion

To conclude, in *Beloved* the representation of traumatic experiences commences with the depiction of a family of black people, their connections with an unhappy past and the consequences of previous events in the present time. Differently, in *Ceremony* the first description is about the psychological suffering of the main character, a person of mixed blood and a veteran who fought for a nation toward which his sense of belonging is controversial. In Morrison's novel, belonging to the Afro-American group is central to the plot since the story of the characters is the narrative of a large ethnicity. By contrast, Tayo's ethnic affinity is put into question by the author because his biological origins do not create an immediate sense of identity, an aspect that will be stable only in a second time thanks to his acceptance of the healing abilities of the mother's social group. In the end, both authors make use of imagery and language to illustrate the impact of traumas on the mental integrity of their characters. Morrison makes use of a strong expression, 'They took my milk', to represent the impact of sexual abuse on Sethe's emotional life and future relationships. This utterance likely refers to the deprivation of body functions and nurturing which are very important for a woman and a mother. Silko uses the metaphor 'white smoke' to symbolise the mental condition of Tayo. 'White' as a color can be commonly associated with nothingness and oblivion, while 'smoke' may refer to confusion and chaos.

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