People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

8 MAY 1945 UNIVERSITY / GUELMA — **جامعة 8 ماي 1945/قالمة**

FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES — **كلية الآداب و اللغات**

DEPARTMENT OF LETTERS & ENGLISH LANGUAGE — **قسم الآداب و اللغة الإنجليزية**

Option: Literature

The role of Memory and Relationality in the Construction of Black identities in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Language and Culture

BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Chairman: Dr. Bouallegue Nadjiba (MCA)	University of 8 May 1945-Guelma
Examiner: Mrs. Boursace Houda (MAA)	University of 8 May 1945-Guelma
Supervisor: Dr. Bouallegue Leyla (MCB)	University of 8 May 1945-Guelma

Submitted by:

Ziaita Fedoua

Supervised by:

Dr. BOUALLEGUE Leyla

June 2025

Dedication

To the little Me.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Allah for granting me the strength and patience I needed along my way to accomplish this humble work.

Firstly, I would like to give my warmest thanks to my supervisor, **Dr. BOUALLEGUE Leyla**; her guidance, patience, and advice as well as her encouragement in hard times was extremely necessary and highly appreciated to finish this dissertation.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the committee members who devoted their precious time and effort to read my work and offer an insightful feedback.

Moreover, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents, for their love, care, and encouragements. Immense love and gratitude are extended to my one and only big brother Zahro for his endless support and love. A special thanks to my mother's prayers and my father's material and moral support which empowered me to complete this thesis.

I would like to thank specfically **Miss. MOUMENE Soumia**, **Dr. BOUALLEGUE Nadjiba**, **Dr. BOUREGAA Meriem**, and **Dr. BENDJEMIL Khawla** for their incredible teaching that made me love literature even more throughout my academic years. Thank you for your priceless advice, your patience, and your efforts. Most of all, thank you for your constructive feedback on my writings, and for believing in my creativity.

Abstract

This study aims at exploring the representation of the process of Black identity construction through memory and relationality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* In light of postcolonial trauma theory framework, this dissertation analyzes how legacies of slavery such as; violence, dehumanization, displacement, exploitation, and cultural erasure shape fragmented individual and communal identities, relationality, memories, and collective trauma. Moreover, the analysis focuses on the intersection between memory and relationality, and their role in shaping the former slaves' sense of self. This research investigates how Black characters, more specifically, former slaves, navigate the tension between remembering and forgetting to confront past traumatic experiences. Also, it examines the relational dynamics among characters to highlight that identity is not merely an individual construct. Ultimately, I argue that Morrison depicts trauma and healing in ways that align with postcolonial trauma theory, portraying how Black characters in *Beloved* work through suffering using traditional healing practices, storytelling, spirituality, and communal rituals. The novel thus is a narrative that depicts memory and relationality as vital mechanisms through which Black identities are built and understood in the aftermath of slavery. In the end, this study contends that Morrison illustrates identity not as a solitary endeavor but as one that is deeply rooted in communal and familial relationships, underscoring the necessity of relational healing in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Identity, memory, relationality, postcolonial trauma theory, *Beloved*.

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Introduction

The construction of identity has long been a central concern in postcolonial literature, particularly in contexts shaped by slavery, colonialism, and their enduring legacies. In the aftermath of transatlantic slavery, Black communities in the United States have faced ongoing challenges in reclaiming and reconstructing their personal, cultural, and communal identities. Although slavery was legally abolished in 1865 following the American Civil War, its violent legacy remains deeply embedded in the collective memory of African Americans. This study posits that slavery functioned as a colonial project—one that dehumanized, displaced, and erased Black subjectivity through physical, psychological, and cultural violence. Since the current study deals with the construction of Black identities in Toni Morisson's *Beloved*, a novel about the experience of slavery, it will be examined using postcolonial research because of the similarity in the effects of both slavery and colonialism on former slaves and postcolonial subjects' identities. The trauma inflicted by this system did not dissipate with emancipation; rather, it has continued to reverberate across generations, complicating the processes of healing, identity formation, and belonging.

This dissertation focuses on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a seminal work that confronts the psychological aftermath of slavery and interrogates the possibilities of healing through memory, storytelling, and relationships. In this novel, Morrison gives voice to the suppressed and fragmented experiences of formerly enslaved individuals, exploring how their attempts to recover from historical trauma are inextricably tied to remembering and reclaiming lost relationships. The research question at the heart of this dissertation is: How does Morrison portray the role of memory and relationality in constructing Black identity in *Beloved*, and what does this portrayal reveal about the broader legacy of post-slavery trauma?. Furthermore, the

central argument of this thesis is that Morrison uses memory—both personal and collective—as a mechanism for healing, and presents relationality as a crucial pathway toward rebuilding fractured identities.

The choice to focus on Morrison's *Beloved* stems from the novel's rich engagement with trauma, history, and Black identity. Morrison's work is widely regarded as a cornerstone of African American literature and postcolonial thought, particularly in its commitment to centering Black voices and experiences. As a writer, Morrison insists on confronting the brutal realities of slavery without romanticization or erasure. Her most acclaimed piece, *Beloved* (1987), was motivated by the real-life story of an escaped enslaved woman, Margaret Garner, and examined the lingering trauma of slavery. The book received the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and was subsequently turned into a movie featuring Oprah Winfrey. In 1993, Morrison was the first Black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, honored for her profoundly poetic stories and examination of African American experiences. She persisted in crafting impactful novels, such as *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), and *A Mercy* (2008), while concurrently serving as a professor at Princeton University. *Beloved* is not simply a story of the past; it is an active process of remembrance, one that challenges readers to witness the unspeakable and to consider how trauma continues to shape the lives of Black individuals and communities long after legal emancipation.

The analysis of the novel is based, specifically, upon the postcolonial trauma theory, as it reveals how the psychological scars of slavery shape Black identity across generations. The theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine *Beloved*, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how literature participates in both representing and working through historical violence. This dissertation builds on its insights to explore how Morrison's novel portrays

memory as both a burden and a means of reclaiming agency, highlighting how trauma is deeply embedded in personal and collective consciousness. Additionally, the theory emphasizes relationality, and community role in forming marginalized Black people's sense of self. By applying this framework, the analysis reveals that the novel's exploration of historical trauma, identity, and memory is more profound and nuanced.

This research investigates the representation of the theme of Black identities' construction in Morrison's *Beloved*. It reveals that memory and relationality are vital processes which contribute in constructing the Black identity, through examining the changes that identities of characters in *Beloved* undergo. This study specifically highlights the influence of slavery and its legacies on shaping fragmented individual and communal identities, relationality, and memories. More precisely, the research examines the tension felt by Black characters (former slaves), in remembering and forgetting past traumatic experiences. The novel under study portrays relational dynamics among characters as driving force to encourage memory, remembering, and working through trauma of slavery and to achieve what each character consider as healing eventually through storytelling and confrontation.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is theoretical, it tackles the theme of Black identity in relation to the concepts of relationality and memory. The first chapter is divided into three sections. The first section examines the concept of relationality, drawing on Joseph Suad's work, which emphasizes that identity is not individual nor collective in essence but is continuously constructed through relationships with others and with social structure. Joseph's work is particularly useful for examining how Black identity emerges in the context of historical displacement, marginalization, and the need for communal support and recognition. The second section engages with scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Irene Visser, Stef Craps, and

Michael Rothberg who have contributed significantly to the theoretical framework of trauma and memory. These scholars critique the Eurocentric framework of trauma and call for postcolonial reorientation, which makes them valuable for examining how personal and collective memories of historical trauma shape identities of postcolonial individuals. In addition, this section reveals how communication and storytelling, ultimately leads to remembering, healing and reclaiming oneself in postcolonial context. Last but not least, the third section offers representations of Black identities construction through memory and relationality in Black minority literature. *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* will be represented as illustrations for the notion of memory, relationality, and Black identity construction.

The analytical part of the research is represented in the second and third chapters. The second chapter deals with struggles of constructing Black identities in *Beloved*. It is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the novel. The second section illuminates the fragmented Black identities of the characters as a result of slavery and its legacies at individual level. As for the third section, it is devoted to highlight the shattered relationality and collective identity of the characters as a result of collective trauma. Drawing on concepts such as Dominick LaCapra's 'working through', the third chapter unveils the roadmap to working through traumas and reclaiming Black identities. It is divided into two sections. The first section highlights the role of relationality in forcing remembering and storytelling as pathways to individual confrontation with past decisions, and recognition of oneself for its own sake. The second section sheds light on collective reconciliation and healing of Black identities through the characters' collective memory, as well as their decision to embrace relationality and communal ties needed for working through collective trauma and healing.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that *Beloved* reveals how the afterlives of slavery continue to influence Black identity formation and that healing requires both a confrontation with historical trauma and the reestablishment of relational and communal ties. The novel *Beloved* offers a profound exploration of Black identities through the lens of memory and relationality, making it ideal fit for this study. The psychological and generational trauma of slavery profoundly shape Sethe's sense of self, while her complex relationships with Paul D, Beloved and her other daughter, Denver, illuminate the effects of trauma on identity. Morrison's portrayal of fragmented memories and the haunting presence of Beloved reveals the deep emotional and historical struggles that shape Black identity. Thus, *Beloved* serves as an invaluable narrative for examining the construction of Black identities through the lenses of memory and relationality of the postcolonial trauma framework, as it both illuminates and amplifies the multifaceted nature of the Black identity formation with the context of slavery and its aftermath.

Chapter I: Black Identities in Theory and Fiction

The following chapter is a theoretical exploration of relationality and memory as mechanisms through which Back identities are constructed. The first section delves into how slavery disrupted interpersonal bonds and communal connections within the Black community. It explores the concept of "Relationality" and its profound impact on the process of identity formation and an individual's sense of self. In the second section, drawing on postcolonial trauma theory, slavery is presented as a collective trauma that shapes collective memory and influences relationality throughout individuals' lives. Additionally, I highlight the interplay between trauma and memory, emphasizing orality and storytelling as means of healing and self-reclamation. The final section is devoted to a review of different portrayals and representations of memory and relationality in works of minority Black literature to get further insights on how they contribute to Black identities construction.

I.1. Black Identity and Relationality

Numerous scholars have engaged in discussions regarding the nature of Black identity and examined the factors that played a role in its erasure; such as slavery, and its construction; such as relationality and community. In an article entitled "The Pain of Being Black", Toni Morrison asserts that slavery represents a profound tragedy in American history, with its most egregious sin being the systemic discrimination and alienation of Black individuals (Angelo 1). Indeed, the identity of Black people was significantly undermined under the oppressive regime of white enslavers. They regarded them not as human beings but as properties—commodities that could be bought and sold, stripped of their names and instead labeled derogatorily as "niggers", while being systematically denied access to education. The narratives of Frederick Douglass, a former slave and a pivotal figure in early Black literature, further corroborate this

assertion, illustrating that it was both illegal and perilous to educate enslaved individuals. Douglass articulates this sentiment stating, "A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world … there would be no keeping him … he would at once become unmanageable" (29). Such dehumanizing rhetoric inflicted profound psychological damage on Black individuals, reverberating through their consciousness for generations. It is primarily through the literature they produced that we can comprehend the extent of their suffering.

For Black individuals, slavery not only shattered the self but also severed relational ties and fractured familial identity. Ramona Hoage Edelin argues:

> Slaves were torn from their motherland; separated from their kin; denied and forbidden their names, customs and religion; and stringently prohibited from securing formal education or marriage. To the extent that it was possible, they were forced to face enslavement in a new land singly, one by one, alone and without even the understanding and promise which their families had infused into their highly personal names. (qtd. in Allen 26)

This loss of land, names, and kinship lead to the loss of both individual and collective identities. In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers argues that during slavery the mother was stripped of her maternal role and reduced to a mere reproductive body (75-76). Moreover, Saidiya Hartman further asserts in *Lose Your Mother*, that slavery's violence was not only the theft of labor but the theft of kinship and social belonging (2-3). For slaveholders, slaves were deemed unworthy of love, attachment, and emotions, as these were reserved for individuals considered human, which slaves were not.

Harriet Jacobs further elaborates in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, that slaves had no rights to any family ties of their own (5). Thus, separating children from their mothers, wives from their husbands, and kin from extended families was a common practice. The latter practice was intended to prevent slaves from forming deep, meaningful relationships. Such violent disruption is also reflected in Frederick Douglass' narrative, where he recalls:

> I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant- before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (2)

The quote powerfully illustrates the cruel dehumanization inherent in slavery, particularly through the forced separation of enslaved children from their mothers. This practice not only severed individual identities but also fractured family identity.

In summary, history has been cruel to Black people. While many individuals attempt to forget it, avoid it as a sin of the past, Toni Morrison recalls it in her writings, weaving it into her consciousness with both casualness and constancy. She emphasizes the importance of collective unity for the Black community. Morrison asserts that only within the Black community can individuals truly understand, support, and love one another: "to be part of the community with other free black people, to love and be loved, to support and protect each other, to help each

other" (qtd. in Li 426). In such an environment, Black people can achieve happiness and spiritual freedom. Moreover, Morrison's novels predominantly explore the Black experience, values, traditions, and the intricacies of human relationships within the Black community. As Rigney specifically points out, in Morrison's fiction, "there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from community, no matter how tragic or futile the operations of that community might be" (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay 29). Additionally, Morrison has affirmed, "I'm interested in the relationships of Black men and women and the axes on which those relationships frequently turn, and how they complement each other, fulfill one another, or hurt one another and are made whole or prevented from wholeness by things that they have incorporated into their psyche" (qtd. in Kaushik 2795). This narrative reveals how relationships can serve both as sites of fulfillment and struggle, they are deeply intertwined with identity, and survival within the Black community.

Toni Morrison underscores the significance of interpersonal and communal bonds; whether between mother and child, father and son, individuals and the Black community, as essential to healing and self-definition, a concept that I argue can be encapsulated in the term 'Relationality'. Relationality was tackled by sociologists, psychoanalysts, and various other scholars, leading to vigorous debates regarding its precise meaning. On one hand, social anthropologist and political scientist, Vanessa Wijngaarden defines relationality as "a view of the world that underlines how no person or thing exists in isolation, because existence necessarily means being 'in relationship'" (412). While her definition may appear radical and extreme, as it overlooks individual agency. Conversely, psychoanalyst Jon Fredrickson explains that relationality involves two persons, "you and I, who as agents simultaneously constitute ourselves and are mutually constituted within relationships" (80). This definition clarifies the delicate

balance that relationality strikes between being a completely individual, separate person and being part of a collective. He further elaborates that as individuals, we simultaneously constitute ourselves and are constituted by relationality. In other words, "I am in, I am for, and I am from this relationship". The term "am" does not refer to my being as a static, isolated individual; rather, "I am. And I am with you" (82). This implies that identity and a sense of self do not arise solely from solitude, but rather from being in relation with others. Both individuality and relationality are essential dimensions of personhood.

Furthermore, Lebanese-American anthropologist Suad Joseph, in her work *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity*, explores how individual identities in Arab societies are deeply intertwined with familial and social relationships. She introduces the concept of "intimate selving" as " … a lifelong process" (2), through which personal identities are formed and understood via close connections with family members, such as mother-son, brother-sister, and father-daughter relationships. Joseph argues that intimate selving is a process of "relational selfhood that exist[s] side by side with individualist and other notions of self in the same society and even within the same person" (2). Her perspective challenges certain Western notions of an individualistic, separative, bounded, and autonomous self, highlighting instead a relational selfhood that is neither purely individualistic nor collectivist, yet retains agency. This healthy selfhood recognizes that personal and collective identities are interconnected and mutually shape one another. Although Joseph specifically discusses the role of relationality in intimate selving within the context of Arab families, the concept can be extended to describe a wide variety of subjects and societies where marginalized groups have had their identities suppressed, distorted, or erased, such as Black individuals, slaves, or those now known as African Americans. This is the aim of the thesis.

In the same vein, Pierpaolo Donati provides a balanced view on relationality, he argues that relationality "[does] not entail the same way of thinking ('we think') or a necessarily convergent thought ('joint commitment') … , or a 'group belief' or a 'shared point of view'… , but rather is expressed in a we-relation that unites the subjects, not the fact of having a mind that thinks the same things" (Donati 449). Essentially, Donati and Margaret Archer assert that even as individual, singular subjects, we are not entirely independent; we are ontologically relational. In the article "The Relational Subject", Douglas V. Porpora emphasizes that such relationalities are emergent realities with their own powers to influence those connected by them (423). This means that friendships, marriages, and social relations generate relational values such as trust, support, unity, and safety. Therefore, if these relationships are disrupted, not only are the subjects affected, but the relationship itself is also impacted.

In addition, Macaualy A. Kanu concludes in his article entitled "The Indispensability of Basic Social Values in African Tradition: A Philosophical Appraisal" that "the African emphasizes community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community identity. Its aim is to produce and present an individual as a community culture bearer" (154-155). Consequently, Africans place a strong emphasis on community life, family, and cultural practices as vital sites for gathering and unity. Ferdinand Kpohoué's perspective aligns with this idea, as he continues to assert:

> Solidarity is one of the most important aspects of the black community life. It is a system in which each individual vouches for the community and the community vouches for each individual. Individualism in such a system leads to alienation, destruction. It is the pillar that stabilizes the community in terms of its survival and prosperity. Nobody owns anything for himself alone, everyone depends on everybody. Consequently, it yields a

> social harmony and stability that cement the development of the individuals and the community itself. (5-6)

The quote above underscores the profound concept of solidarity (as a relational effect), which resulted from relationality and its significance within the Black community and their identities. This notion is further elucidated by Tommie Shelby in "Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?", where he argues that a collective Black identity is crucial for fostering effective solidarity aimed at liberation from racial oppression (233). Solidarity here is resulted from relationality, and not synonymous with it. In other words, relationality among the Blacks is an umbrella under which the senses of unity, belonging, solidarity, collectivity are generated.

Moreover, in the discourse of African Traditional healing, the book *Spirit and Healing in Africa* suggests that relationality is "the aim of healing, the source of healing, and the means to become healed" (49). In other words, the network of relationships with kin, community, and ancestors does not only entail the ultimate goal for Africans' healing. These relationships serve as sources of power and unity, and maintaining them is the key to achieve resilience, well-being, and spiritual freedom from the legacy of slavery. In conclusion to this section, I argue that Black individuals, their culture, traditions, and their connection to Africa are all prominently represented in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Most importantly, relationality is central to the construction of characters' identities in the narrative.

I.2. An Overview of Trauma, Postcolonial Trauma, and Memory

The novel under this study is often read as a post-colonial narrative. It explores the lingering psychological and communal wounds of slavery, which is considered by many as "cultural trauma" or "collective trauma" in scholarly discussions of the Black identity

construction. Thus, it is essential to examine the evolution of trauma theory and its recent intersections with postcolonial studies in order to get a deep understanding of how historical suffering shapes both fragmented individual and communal identities, and memories. Initially, trauma was understood solely as a physical injury; however, the work of Sigmund Freud expanded this definition to encompass psychological wounds. Subsequently, scholars such as Cathy Caruth, a prominent figure in trauma studies, further developed this discourse.

In her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth reconceptualizes trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and intrusive phenomena" (12). This perspective challenges traditional notions of trauma by positing that traumatic experiences possess such intensity that they can resurface involuntarily, disrupting the present of those affected and complicating their conscious recollection of the traumatic event itself.

The endeavor to decolonize trauma theory necessitates a departure from the foundational principles of Freudian psychoanalysis, which is characterized by its Eurocentric orientation and its emphasis on themes such as stasis and melancholia. Visser notes that:

> Critics and theorists working in non-Western studies have emphasized, trauma is not only to be understood as an individual, psychological, and/or physical response, but also as a collective, political, and cultural condition with far-reaching material and immaterial dimensions. (126)

Thus, it is essential to move beyond a melancholic fixation on trauma to emphasize the importance of relationality, storytelling, and community in the reconstruction of Black identity.

This is particularly exemplified in Morrison's *Beloved*, where collective memory serves as a site of both healing and resistance and will be further examined in the following chapters of this thesis.

Consequently, postcolonial trauma theory has emerged as a framework for analyzing the repercussions of colonialism and slavery on both individuals and communities, with particular attention to themes such as identity, memory, and collective trauma. In contrast to traditional trauma theories, which predominantly concentrate on individual psychological experiences (e.g., the frameworks of Freud or Caruth), postcolonial trauma theory is more attuned to systemic oppression and communal suffering, often exploring the intergenerational effects of colonization, slavery, and racial violence. Prominent critics and contributors to the decolonization of trauma theory include Stef Craps, Michael Rothberg, and Irene Visser.

In their article "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels", Stef Craps and Gert Buelens explore the intersection of trauma studies and postcolonial literature, positing that the Western conceptual framework of trauma is inadequate in capturing the complexities inherent in postcolonial contexts. They reference Rothberg's advocacy for contributions that facilitate "the creation of an alternative canon of trauma novels", while also noting that many of these works "question whether trauma provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world" (qtd. in Craps and Buelens 10). This quote underscores the commitment of these scholars to illuminate the Eurocentric limitations of trauma theory and their aspiration to foster cross-cultural ethical engagement with the concept.

Furthermore, Irene Visser's work, "Trauma in Non-Western Contexts", highlights the perspectives of critics who have engaged with non-Western literatures. These scholars assert that investigations of trauma within non-Western texts reveal fundamental, often implicit, and

figuratively articulated representations of familial and collective approaches to coping with trauma (130). In colonized communities, particularly among Black Africans, there exists a profound appreciation for communal ties and familial gatherings, which are regarded as both a refuge and a source of strength during periods of adversity and suffering.

Jeffrey Alexander posits that "Cultural trauma occurs 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). This definition is particularly applicable to Black slaves, who despite enduring significant suffering and the traumatic legacy of slavery, find a profound connection through their shared experiences and memories; despite being fragmented and shattered by it. This connection fosters a strong sense of belonging, uniting them under their collective memories and collective identity of "we the blacks/slaves" (qtd. in Ibnaras 3).

In the same vein, Gilad Hirschberger explains that the collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event affecting an entire society, persisting beyond the lives of direct survivors (1). It results in a system of meaning that affects group identity and future direction. For those affected, the recollection of trauma can serve as an adaptive mechanism for group survival, what Hirschberger refers to as "the collective memory of traumatic events". It is "a process that is primarily dedicated to the construction of meaning. The creation and maintenance of meaning comprises a sense of self-continuity, a connection between the self, others and the environment" (2). This passage highlights how collective trauma shapes identity by transforming painful experiences into shared memories and meanings, which becomes essential for survival and cultural continuity across generations.

Collective memory is defined by Maurice Halbwachs as memory one has in mind that other members of same society have as well, as a result to shared experiences, he adds that "it is individuals as group members who remember" (22). Furthermore, he argues that an individual does not remember directly, unless when stimulated in indirect ways through conversations and story-telling within social gatherings (24). He insists throughout this passage on the fact that memories are shared, highlighting that collective memories can be on the verge of fading if it is not reinterpreted and passed on to new generations via commemorative meetings. Thus, he emphasizes the role of orality in maintaining collective cultural identity within social groups. Similarly, Bouallegue Nadjiba elaborates on collective memory stating, "[It] is constructed and shared by members of a particular social group; they recall memories through conversations and social gatherings" (170).

Additionally, Dennis Walder emphasizes that memory is not just about recalling the past and creating a personal narrative. He explains that "recalling involves reconciling with the past in both an ethical and a heuristic way; it connects what we remember to the memories of others, including those with whom we share that past" (938). He further asserts that "it is crucial to view memory as something communal: shared memories can encompass remembrances, legacies, traditions, heritage, histories, monuments, and nostalgia" (939). In fact, in postcolonial contexts, memory tends to be more cultural and collective, often disrupted by the cultural and collective trauma resulting from violence, colonialism, displacement, or slavery.

In his work *Cultural Trauma,* Ron Eyerman emphasizes the significance of slavery as a cultural trauma for African Americans and their memories. He argues that it is not merely the lived experience of slavery that is impactful, but rather the collective memory of that experience and its reinterpretation by subsequent generations of African Americans that has profoundly

influenced their identity throughout history (1). I concur with Eyerman's perspective, as in postcolonial and African diasporic communities, shared historical memory is perceived as a locus of trauma, pain, and suffering, while simultaneously serving as a mechanism for resilience, unity, self-definition, and the reconstruction of collective identity. As Megill articulates, "when identity becomes uncertain, memory rises in value" (qtd. in Winstantley 41).

Memory serves a pivotal function in literature broadly, and specifically within the realm of Black literature. In her article titled "Reclaiming History: The Role of Memory in Afro-American Literature", Faiza Farhat Mohammed Mustafa posits that memory encompasses the collective experiences and narratives that inform cultural identities and collective histories. Furthermore, it acts as a mechanism for reclaiming and reaffirming historical narratives and identities within Afro-American contexts and other marginalized histories (2-3). This perspective highlights the significance of memory in postcolonial and African American literature, particularly in the endeavor to recover suppressed histories and counteract cultural erasure. Additionally, it reinforces the notion that memory is a shared and dynamic force in the construction of identity.

In a similar vein, Bill Ashcroft asserts in his work *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures*, that literature serves as a crucial mechanism for reimagining and reaffirming the historical narratives of colonized and marginalized populations (83). Within the realm of Black literature, the endeavor to reestablish the historical significance of Black individuals is intricately linked to the utilization of memory as a fundamental instrument for reconstructing identity, safeguarding history, and promoting resilience and resistance against cultural erasure. Black authors frequently draw upon both personal and collective memories to navigate the complexities of Black identity through their characters, who grapple with the challenge of recalling oral

ancestral histories, songs, and cultural practices. Laura Winstanley posits that in the contexts of post-apartheid and post-colonial societies, particularly in South Africa, collective memory is essential for the reconstruction of identity (39).

African Americans have historically encountered formidable obstacles in their efforts to preserve their history and cultural memory. Consequently, oral traditions assumed paramount importance as vehicles for transmitting stories, customs, songs, and values across generations, including the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Marianne Hirsch, in *The Generation of Postmemory*, conceptualizes "postmemory" as a structural framework for the inter- and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. Distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which stems from direct personal experience, postmemory operates at a generational remove (106). This temporal distance allows successive generations to cultivate a vicarious relationship with the past, framing it as a form of memory that is actively conveyed to those who did not directly live through the events in question.

Ayoub Ibnaras asserts that the processes of healing and surrendering disturbing memories come with the exceptional act of disclosing and retelling the unspeakable story collectively as well as individually (8). This highlights the importance of storytelling and orality in facing traumatic memories especially for colonized, repressed communities. In the same sense, the American psychiatrist and researcher Judith L. Herman asserts "Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told ... Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of social order and the healing of individual victims" (1). This quote emphasizes that unacknowledged trauma and suppressed histories; such of the slaves, continue to haunt individuals and societies until they are told and reclaimed. Also, it highlights that remembering is essential for personal healing and

restoring social order. This aligns with postcolonial and African American narratives, where reclaiming history through literature, oral stories, and remembering heritage and cultural practices, rituals, are the road map to healing and identity shaping.

In *African Oral Tradition: The Strength of Modern Literature,* Hadjioui Ghouti argues that oral form of literature, or the oral tradition is the most typical, genuine African art. Throughout history, oral literature was considered the most used, important medium in transmitting ideas, history, culture. It included variety of legends, spirituality, myths, ritual texts, curative chants, fables, genealogies, tales, folk tales, songs, poems, riddles, tongue twisters, recitations, historical narratives, and mainly proverbs (608). All of these are cherished and depicted in the African modern literary works, novels in order to preserve the African heritage through documented literature. He concludes to say that orality, for African people, is a source of becoming aware of their destiny that necessitates the knowledge of their past, present, and the possible future (609).

I.3. The Representation of Memory and Relationality in Minority Black Literature

Black literature plays a crucial role in reclaiming Black history and narratives, providing a counter-narrative to prevailing cultural depictions while affirming the humanity and dignity of Black individuals and communities. Through their artistic expressions, Black authors have shed light on the intricacies of black existence, confronted stereotypes and misconceptions, and encouraged readers to envision new possibilities for a more just and equitable society. As we continue to confront the legacies of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism, the voices of Black writers are indispensable as guides and witnesses, reminding us of the lasting power of storytelling to heal, transform, and inspire. Also, the entanglement of relationality, memory,

trauma and identity in postcolonial literature can be very apparent through many postcolonial works similar to *Beloved*.

Gloria Naylor was an influential African American writer known for her novels that explores Black women's experiences, challenges racial and gender norms, and blends history, memory, relationality and magical realism through folklores and spirituality. She contributed to the American Black literary scene with her works: *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Bailey's café* (1992) and others. *Mama Day*, is a novel that vividly demonstrates how relationships and memory influence Black identity by highlighting the significance of community connections, ancestral wisdom, and narrative traditions.

The story takes place on Willow Springs, a magical island rich in African American history and folklore, where traditions are maintained through oral narratives and spiritual rituals. Cocoa, the main character, faces challenges with her identity at first due to her separation from her origins; however, her bond with Mama Day, her grandmother and a community elder, is vital for her journey of self-discovery. Mama Day, in her role as a healer, symbolizes the strength of ancestral memory and community knowledge of what is best, "because if Mama day say no, everybody say no" (10). She assists Cocoa in overcoming obstacles and pushes her to rediscover her roots. The novel shows that Black identity is not a solitary endeavor but a relational journey, with memory—both individual and communal—acting as a basis for understanding oneself. For example, the island's legacy is maintained across generations of narratives about the story of Sapphira Wade. The latter is a legendary ancestral figure known as a mystical enslaved woman who gained her freedom by outwitting her slave owner, Bascombe Wade, and taking control of Willow Springs. Her story is shrouded in myth—some say she used magic or persuasion to make Bascombe sign over the land before his mysterious death. Gloria narrates in the beginning of the

novel, “The wild card in all this is the thousand days, and we guess if we put our heads together we’d come up with something—which ain’t possible since Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words. But ain’t a soul in Willow Springs don’t know that little dark girls, hair all braided up with colored twine” (7). Though little about Sapphira is certain, she symbolizes Blacks’ resilience, autonomy, and the power of ancestral memory in shaping the island’s identity emphasizing the notion that Black identity is closely linked to recollecting and respecting history.

In their article, “Exploring the Spirituality – Texts and contexts in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day”, Selvaraj and Manjula assert that “Naylor’s characters are associated with each other and through this connectivity they portray the picture of female unity … the novel is a mirror of black community and clearly reflects the women superiority and women bonding through their co– operation and lively participation in the society” (284). Ultimately, *Mama Day* indicates that Black identity is influenced by the connections individuals have with their ancestors, community, and cultural recollection, establishing it as an essential instance of relationality and memory in Black literature.

Moreover, the intersection of relationality and memory and the Black identity can also be found in the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s fiction, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe is a Nigerian author who has made significant contributions to the American literary sphere through works such as *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966) and more. He has also published influential essays, including “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”” (1975). Achebe frequently explores themes of colonial disruption, ancestral memory, and the role of communal ties in identity formation. In *Things Fall Apart*, he examines how Igbo traditions, oral storytelling, and intergenerational relationships

preserve cultural memory, shaping both individual and collective identity. He highlights the consequences of severing these ties under colonial rule, illustrating how memory functions as a means of resistance and continuity in Black identity construction.

The novel famously states, “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (7), highlighting how cultural memory is passed down through storytelling. Folktales also serve as a form of memory, as seen when Okonkwo’s wives tell their children stories that reinforce social values. In contrast, Okonkwo prefers war stories and tales of conquest (53), which reflects his rigid worldview and foreshadows his inability to adapt to change. Achebe also uses symbolism to illustrate the power of memory and relationality. The silk-cotton tree, under which ancestral spirits are believed to gather, represents the spiritual and historical connection between past and present generations. Additionally, Okonkwo’s gun, which accidentally kills a clansman, symbolizes his disconnection from communal traditions, as his downfall begins when he fails to respect Igbo customs regarding justice and exile.

Finally, the novel shows how colonialism disrupts communal memory, as the arrival of the British undermines traditional beliefs, erodes ancestral ties, and weakens relational bonds. The new colonial order disregards Igbo laws, and converts like Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, abandon their father’s traditions in favor of Christianity. The novel’s ending, where the District Commissioner reduces Okonkwo’s life to a mere footnote in a colonial history book (208), starkly contrasts with the rich oral traditions of the Igbo, emphasizing the devastating erasure of memory and the black individual’ identity. Ultimately, *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates that Black identity is sustained through relationships, oral traditions, and collective memory, and that the loss of these elements leads to cultural disintegration.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston demonstrates how relationality plays a crucial role in shaping Black identity through Janie's three marriages, each contributing to her journey of self-discovery. Her marriage to Logan Killicks represents societal expectations and suppression, as she is forced into a loveless union for security rather than love by her Nanny who believes that "she would love Logan after they were married" (53). Logan's treatment of her as a worker rather than a partner stifles her voice, and reinforces the idea that identity cannot flourish in a relationship devoid of emotional reciprocity. Her second marriage to Jody Starks offers a different but equally restrictive dynamic. Jody gives Janie material comfort and social status, yet he silences her and reduces her to an ornament of his power. His control over her speech and appearance, as seen when he forces her to tie up her hair (91), symbolizes how his dominance erases her individuality. Her final marriage to Tea Cake, however, introduces relational joy and mutuality, allowing Janie to experience love on her own terms. Unlike her previous husbands, Tea Cake treats her as a partner, encouraging her to engage with the world and express herself freely. Through these relationships, Janie evolves from a silenced, passive woman to a self-aware individual who understands that identity is not given by others but shaped through experience, love, and self-assertion. Additionally, relationality is represented in the novel when Pheoby hears about Janie's comeback, she hurries "with a covered bowl in her hands" (4) to the house of the new comer, and offers food to welcome her. This scene shows the love and care, friendships and relationality offers within the Black community.

Hurston emphasizes how memories are transmitted and transformed through shared stories within the community. When Pheoby hears about Janie's experiences, she says: "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie" (241). This statement emphasizes the

book's theme that Black identity is formed through common experiences and the insights gained from lived experiences of others within society.

Additionally, Janie's sense of self is influenced by her connections with others, which each reveal various facets of Black identity and a sense of community: Nanny (Her Grandmother), represents recollections of enslavement that influence her conviction that safety outweighs love. She informs Janie, "The black woman is the mule of the world" (47). This statement conveys the idea that Black women have been burdened with labor, suffering, and oppression, much like a mule that carries heavy loads without complaint. The mule is often seen as strong, patient, and submissive, enduring hardship without protest. This metaphor highlights the dehumanization of Black women, reducing them to mere tools for labor, and reflects how Black women, both during slavery and in its aftermath, have been expected to endure, sacrifice, and serve others, often without acknowledgment or compensation for their struggles.

Nanny's statement is rooted in her generational trauma, influenced by her own experiences of enslavement. Zora narrates "Part of the reason Janie's grandmother Nanny pushes her into a loveless marriage … is that Nanny was born in slavery and had little choice over her destiny" (20). Having lived through the brutal realities of slavery, Nanny has internalized the idea that survival—particularly for Black women—requires sacrificing love and personal happiness for safety and stability. In this context, the mule symbol is a direct critique of the historical forces that have shaped Black women's experiences, reflecting the broader struggles faced by Black women across generations. For Nanny, this perspective influences how she advises Janie to navigate the world, offering her wisdom that is shaped by the painful memories and legacies of slavery. However, as the novel progresses, Janie's eventual rejection of the notion of being a "mule" signifies her resistance against this oppressive identity, as she seeks to

forge her own path and reclaim her autonomy. In summary, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* illustrates that Black identity is dynamic, evolving through relationships and narratives. Also, it stresses that memory is not merely a recollection of the past; it serves as a dynamic energy that influences self-exploration, perseverance, and cultural identity.

The representation of memory and relationality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers us a deep understanding of the process of Black identities construction, and is going to be analyzed in the next chapter. Furthermore, drawing on postcolonial theory, the following chapter will examine how slavery affects Black characters' identities, relationality, and memories.

Chapter II: Struggles of Constructing Black Identities in *Beloved*

The second chapter is analytical, aiming to explore the intersection of memory, relationality, and Black identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The first section offers an overview of the novel, highlighting Morrison's focus on the construction of Black identity among former slaves and how they navigate their traumatic memories and relationships to forge a sense of self in the aftermath of slavery. The subsequent section investigates the impact of collective trauma on characters' memory, relationality and the formation of individual identity. Moreover, the last section analyzes the effects of collective trauma on the construction of collective identity within the novel. In other words, the chapter argues that slavery; as a collective trauma, not only fragmented Black identities of the characters in *Beloved*, but also severed their relationality and memory.

II.1. An Overview of *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a groundbreaking novel that explores the haunting legacy of slavery and the enduring psychological trauma it imposes on the lives of formerly enslaved individuals. Set after the American Civil War, the narrative follows Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, who lives with her daughter Denver in a house haunted by the ghost whom she believes to be her dead child. The novel is inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her own daughter rather than allowing her to be recaptured into slavery. However, William L. Andrews observes "She [Morrison] wanted to explore the nature of slavery, not from an intellectual or slave narrative perspective, but from within the day–to–day lived experiences of the slaves themselves" (qtd. in Edis 96). Thus, one can say the novel does not merely recount the horrors of slavery; as earlier slave narratives do, it delves deep into how these traumas continue to shape the personal and collective identities of those who

lived through them. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison expresses her hesitance about dwelling on the era of slavery while writing *Beloved*, because "it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, Black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember … it's a national amnesia" (1). Yet Morrison dedicates the book to sixty million and more Africans who died as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. The entry does not just honor the countless unnamed, unrecorded victims, but serves as a powerful invocation of a collective trauma.

The narrative structure of *Beloved* is nonlinear and fragmented, reflecting the disjointed nature of traumatic memory. Anne Whitehead points out that in testing the formal boundaries of conventional narrative techniques, Morrison "seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event" (qtd. in Harack and Ibarrola-Armendariz 301). I would add in similar vein that Morrison blends past and present, in a style that mimics the psychological experience of her characters, as she states "the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive" (8). Sethe's memories are not confined to the past; they interfere in and shape her present reality. The return of Beloved—the embodied ghost of her daughter—forces Sethe to confront what she has repressed. Beloved is not merely a supernatural element; she serves as a metaphor for the past that refuses to be buried, making visible the way trauma is relived, reenacted, and transmitted across generations. Toni Morrison says the following about the novel, "I was trying to make it a personal experience. The book was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another—that was incredible to me" (Angelo 1). This quote underscores the novel's central focus: the process of

identity construction among Black individuals and how they navigate their sense of self and relationships during slavery and its aftermath.

Paul D, another former slave and Sethe's love interest, offers a distinct perspective on the construction of Black identity. Unlike Sethe, who is consumed by her memories, Paul D attempts to suppress his past. He locks away his trauma, refusing to confront it directly. His struggle represents the psychological toll of slavery and the various coping mechanisms individuals employ to manage their pain. Morrison emphasizes how trauma disrupts not only personal identity but also the ability to form meaningful relationships. This is first illustrated through Sethe's guilt, which prevents her from being in any relationship beyond her role as a mother to her daughter. Secondly, Paul D struggles to fully trust or confide in others. In contrast, Denver, Sethe's surviving daughter, embodies a generational shift in Black identity. Although she does not experience slavery firsthand, she inherits the trauma of her mother's past. Her development in the novel illustrates the intergenerational effects of slavery and the potential for healing. Unlike Sethe and Paul D, who are trapped by their memories, Denver eventually moves beyond the weight of the past, seeking independence and self-discovery. Morrison presents Denver as a symbol of possibility—a younger generation that can reshape Black identity without being entirely defined by historical trauma.

Morrison's portrayal of identity construction in *Beloved* underscores the significance of memory in shaping the self. The impact of slavery is not merely a historical fact; it is a psychological and emotional reality that continues to influence the characters long after their physical bondage has ended. The novel suggests that Black identity of former slaves especially is formed in the tension between remembering and forgetting, between the pain of the traumatic past and the doubtful hope for the future. Furthermore, relationality plays a crucial role in the

process of Black identity construction. Sethe's interactions with Paul D, Denver, and Beloved demonstrate how relationships shape one's understanding of self. The presence of Beloved, in particular, forces Sethe to confront painful memories that she has long tried to repress and bury. Her relationship with her deceased daughter is both a source of anguish and a pathway toward self-recognition. Through these interactions, Morrison illustrates how Black identity is not constructed in isolation but rather through communal and familial connections.

By providing an overview of *Beloved* and its thematic concerns, this section establishes the foundation for a deeper analysis of memory and relationality and their role in Black identity construction. Morrison's novel reveals the complexities of self-definition in a post-slavery society, and emphasizes that the journey toward identity is fraught with both suffering and resilience. The following sections will explore how collective trauma affect memory and relationality, shaping the lives and identities of Morrison's characters at an individual level, and later on the second section at a collective level.

II.2. Struggles of Constructing Individual Black Identities

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison explores the psychological scars of slavery by depicting Sethe's fragmented identity as a product of both personal and collective historical trauma. After the death of Sweet Home plantation's owner, Mr. Garner, the new owner named Schoolteacher arrives to impose order. Paul D describes him as "hateful all right. Bloody too, and evil" (74). The white man represents the brutality and dehumanization of slavery at its worst. He treats the other slaves along with Sethe as objects with "animal characteristics" (186) rather than as a human beings. Sethe statement "like I was a cow, no, the goat" (192), exemplifies the colonial logic that reduces enslaved individuals to a property, robbing them of agency over their bodies. Morrison further emphasizes this through Sethe's sexual violation and the theft of her breast milk

by the schoolteacher and his nephews when she was fleeing with her husband while pregnant. In the beginning of the novel, Sethe recounts to Paul D how the white men used cowhide on her back, leaving it open until it resembled a chokecherry tree. Also, she reveals how this suffering was not as significant to her as the milk that was unjustly taken from her. This scene is a compelling evidence:

> "They used cowhide on you?"
>
> "And they took my milk."
>
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"
>
> "And they took my milk!". (23)

This act does not only violently strips Sethe of ownership and control over her body, but also represents a violation of her role and identity as a mother–a trauma that continues to hinder her ability to construct a coherent sense of self throughout the novel. The repetition of "they took my milk" shows how, for Sethe, motherhood is more sacred than her own physical suffering.

It is worth noting that Sethe has barely experienced a mother's love and affection during her own childhood. She informs Beloved and Denver about her mother, stating "I don't remember. I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light" (64). Sethe's words quietly expose how forced labor under slavery erased the possibility of maternal connection. More importantly, Sethe never had enough milk, as it was not provided by her mother. She recounts, "Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first, and I got what was left" (192). As a result of this trauma, she surrenders to her role as a mother to such an extent that her sense of

self-worth becomes entirely dependent on her children's ownership. The narrator describes that after arriving to safety, Sethe had love for her children. Unlike in Kentucky; at sweet home, they weren't hers to love (157). Moreover, Sethe's memories, rooted in this dehumanization, are non-linear and involuntary, aligning with Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which posits that traumatic memory is experienced 'belatedly' and 'disruptively' (12). For Sethe, these memories are not processed but relived in fragments, a phenomenon she refers to as "rememory," leaving her trapped in a temporal collapse where past and present blur, and her identity cannot be coherently formed. She informs Denver:

> I was talking about time. It's hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place–the picture of it–stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (41)

The passage above underscores the spatial and persistent nature of traumatic memory in *Beloved*. Sethe suggests that memory is not confined to the individual psyche but exists externally in places, shaping identity through a shared, lived environment. In this way, memory functions relationality–it connects individuals not only to each other but to the spaces marked by collective trauma. The quote thus reinforces the novel's portrayal of Black identity as rooted in both personal and communal remembrance and relationality.

For Sethe, even after she freed herself, she never fully embraced that freedom. As she reflects, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another"(96).

This quote foreshadows the enduring impact of dehumanization on Sethe's identity even after she crosses the river into Ohio; safe land for fugitives. As Bessel A. Van Kolk explains in *The Black Hole of Trauma*, "despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people's psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences … spoiling appreciation of the present" (qtd. in Udoette 209).

In the narratives of *Beloved*, Sethe is particularly imprisoned by her past and the memories of untold suffering. One can therefore agree with Cherie Gayle McNaulty that "the past lives in the present in traumatized people in general and more specifically with the inhabitants of 124" (qtd. in Udoette 210). The infanticide of her daughter represents a second, deeply complex trauma that further dislocates Sethe's sense of self. Many postcolonial critics acknowledge how the oppressed may enact violence as a response to structural violence (qtd. in Mohammed and Saeed 20); in this context, Sethe's act is interpreted as a form of resistance against the enslaver's claim over Black life. Furthermore, numerous scholars in feminist studies, such as Hine and Wittenstein, assert that African American women before the abolition of slavery resorted to infanticide as an act of resistance, demonstrating their refusal to participate in and contribute to a system that regarded their bodies and those of their children as mere property (qtd. in Lleses 2). As Sethe tells her daughter Denver, "there was no bad luck in the world but white people. They don't know when to stop" (105). However, this resistance comes at the cost of profound psychological fragmentation. As Hirsch states:

> In Morrison's novel, the economy of slavery circumscribes not only the process of individuation and subject-formation, but also heightens and intensifies the experience of

> motherhood- of connection and separation. It raises questions about what it means to have a self and give that self away. (qtd. in Caesar 113)

Sethe's identity is singularly defined by the moment of her maternal violence, as she attempts to assert ownership over her child's fate in a world where Black women are denied agency. The trauma compels her to inhabit solely the role of the sacrificial mother, foreclosing any possibility of an identity outside that. The scene in which she sells her body for the letters on the gravestone best illustrates her profound love for her daughter (10), highlighting her disregard for herself and her own body. Furthermore, in an interview with Alan Benson, Morrison comments on the act of killing the baby and states "For me, it was the ultimate gesture of a loving mother. It was also the outrageous claim of a slave. The last thing a slave woman owns is her children" (qtd. in Edis 96).

Morrison's emphasis on a damaged maternal identity shapes Sethe's unhealthy relationality with Denver and the ghost, Beloved, both of whom are drawn into the cycle of traumatic repetition later on throughout the novel. Numerous postcolonial and feminist theorists emphasize the relational, communal dimensions of identity. As Jessica Benjamin argues in *The Bonds of Love*, "In order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for an other" (qtd. in Schapiro 1). *Beloved* powerfully demonstrates the fact that in Benjamin's words, a free, autonomous self, is still an essentially relational self and is dependent on the recognizing response of a others. However, Sethe raises Denver in isolation, cultivating a co-dependent relationship that stems from her need to protect and validate her role as a mother. Also, Sethe's trauma disrupts healthy relational structures, replacing them with need, guilt, and subservience, and existence becomes only for the sake of the other which is not outside the house of 124. Additionally, when Beloved returns as a ghostly figure, Sethe submits entirely to her, seeking forgiveness and redemption through self-erasure. As Morrison narrates, "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes"

(59). This dynamic reflects Janoff-Bulman's assertion that the colonized subject often internalizes traumatic responses including shame, doubt, or guilt, which can destroy important beliefs in one's own safety or view of oneself as decent, strong, and autonomous (qtd. in Balaev 131). This is clearly reflected in Morrison's words, "it was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And beloved helped her out" (242). Sethe becomes a shadow of herself, unable to assert her individuality, as she tells beloved "when I tell you, you mine, I also mean I'm yours" (194). The author further asserts "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (240), Sethe was caught between maternal devotion and spectral memory, and the idea that "the best thing she was, was her children" (241). This statement shows how Sethe does not claim herself as a human being of a value, and her existence is meaningful only when the best part of it exists as well; which her children. Morrison thus portrays identity and sense of self as fractured by historical violence, disrupted by traumatic memories, and constrained within relational frameworks distorted by the trauma of slavery.

Sethe's youngest daughter, Denver, also struggle to construct her Black identity because of her inherited trauma and her entanglement in the painful legacy of her family's past. Born into a house haunted by memory and silence, Denver grows up in isolation, emotionally dependent on Sethe's fragmented storytelling as her only access to history. This reliance reflects Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, where the trauma of previous generations is passed down through narrative, creating identities rooted not in direct experience but in the emotional residue of inherited pain. She argues "children of those directly affected by collective trauma inherit a horrific, unknown, and unknowable past that their parents were not meant to survive" (112). Furthermore, Denver internalizes Sethe's trauma without fully understanding it, and this limited, mythologized version of the past leaves her with a fragile and incomplete sense of self, as Sethe

only told her about the woman; Amy, and how she helped her birth. This shows that Denver's identity is harmfully affected by the trauma that was experienced by her mother–Denver's identity is not individualized, it does not exist in isolation, it is relational. The following quote by Hirsch is in parallel with Morrison's representation of Denver's post-memorial identity shaped by inherited trauma:

> To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's conscious-ness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation. (107)

The trauma of Denver is transmitted not through direct memory but through her mother's fragmented storytelling, silences, and the haunting presence of Beloved. Denver internalizes her mother's suffering, which shapes her identity and fears, much like Hirsch's concept that postmemory is conveyed affectively rather than through direct experience.

Furthermore, Denver's identity is also defined later by her obsessive bond with Beloved. Denver's fear of abandonment, shaped by the fled of her brothers; Bulgar and Howard, the death of grandmother; Baby Suggs, and the emotional absence of her mother, leads her to cling to Beloved as a means of self-definition. The scene in which she plays hide-and-seek with Beloved and believes she has left her is the best example, as Denver cries helplessly. Toni Morrison asserts, "now she is crying because she has no self … because there was no world out there … and she won't put up with another thing leaving" (122-123). This dependency is suffocating; her

identity is consumed by Beloved's needs, just as Sethe's, and her fear of being left behind or unloved mirrors the psychological dislocation experienced by slaves and former slaves who lack communal ties and historical familial grounding. Morrison further illustrate this obsessive relationality that took hold of the women in 124, hindering any possibility of selfhood outside their relation with each other through a lyrical prose as follows:

> Beloved
>
> You are my sister
>
> You are my daughter
>
> You are my face; you are me
>
> … you are mine …
>
> I will never leave you again
>
> Don't ever leave me again
>
> You will never leave me again. (209-210)

These lines highlight how both collective and personal trauma can lead to an unhealthy, damaged relationality, where boundaries among traumatized characters become blurred. Sethe's words to Beloved–"you are my face, you are me"–reveal how she loses her sense of self and begins to see Beloved as part of her, rather than a separate person. This is due to Sethe's deep guilt and pain she carries from her past. Thus, Sethe's connection to Beloved becomes a way of holding onto the past, which traps her in continuous suffering. Also, Denver's desperate plea to Beloved "Don't ever leave me again", resembles a childlike begging. This reveals Denver's emotional dependance on Beloved and how her sense of self has been shaped by loneliness, trauma, and the

longing for connection. In the end, one can say that this moment shows how trauma effects both identity and relationships, making it hard for Sethe to see where she ends and where Beloved; as her daughter begins.

Paul D's identity, like Sethe's, is profoundly shaped by the collective trauma and the dehumanization of slavery, which Morrison presents as a force that stunts emotional development and reduces individuals to mere survival mechanisms. When Paul D arrives at 124, he struggles to open up to Sethe about the abuse he suffered at the hand of the schoolteacher. He states, "but wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me" (75). Morrison explores the psychological consequences of systemic violence, particularly the suppression of emotional expression as a coping strategy for trauma; however, this suppression hinders relational dynamics between the characters. In the scene where Paul D sits on the porch with Sethe, unable to tell her about his past experiences because "saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from" (75), illustrates the struggles of speaking through trauma and his inability to form a meaningful relationship with Sethe. Instead, silence becomes the property of all his actions, and keeping everything in his "tobacco tin" where his red heart used to be, locks away his painful memories. Morrison states, "It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, Schoolteacher, Halle, his brother, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, The smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time He got to 124 nothing in this world could pry to open" (113). This metaphor of the "tobacco tin lodged in his chest" symbolizes the internal compartmentalization of unbearable pain–a heart is replaced by a sealed container, emptied of feeling and locked against intrusion. The sensory fragments–taste, smell, names–are not stored as memories but as burdens, suggesting that for Paul D, survival requires a deliberate suppression of vulnerability.

By the time he reaches 124, the final closure signifies that he is no longer accessible even to himself; his identity is buried beneath the weight of unprocessed trauma of slavery.

At Sweet Home, Paul D experiences severe physical and psychological abuse, including being chained, locked in a bit, and treated as subhuman (72). These experiences shattered his sense of manhood. In addition, after Sweet Home, he's moved from one place to another, he tells Sethe "I'm a walking man, but I been heading this direction for seven years. Walking all around this place. Upstate, downstate, east, west; I been in territory ain't got no name, never staying long" (50). This lack of stability leaves him rootless and unsure of who he is or where he belongs. All of his painful experiences leave him with only a limited available portion of his brain, as Morrison narrates "After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing" (46), while the rest is effectively shut down. This reflects a state of psychological fragmentation in which trauma has rendered entire parts of his emotional self-inaccessible. Homi Bhabha suggests in his postcolonial theorization of identity, the trauma of colonial violence can leave the subject in a state of "unhomeliness," where belonging is always partial and unstable. Bhabha argues that "to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow" (qtd. in Joodaki and Vajdi 82-83). Paul D's guarded interactions and resistance to emotional vulnerability reflect this unhomeliness, as he hovers on the margins of relationality without fully entering it. In this way, Morrison illustrates that Paul D's trauma prevents him from forming meaningful connections and understanding himself beyond the constraints of imposed masculinity and survival. His inability to maintain a relationship with Sethe, thinking to himself he was having a house-fits (115), as well as his failure to acknowledge the depth of her maternal

trauma and his decision to leave her after learning about the infanticide, underscores how slavery has deprived him not only of physical freedom but also of the capacity to feel, trust, and envision a self beyond pain, doubt, and loneliness. Many other critics of the novel, envisioned the ghost Beloved as the collective trauma of slavery that prevented Sethe and Paul d from forming their relation. This is especially relatable to the scene where he was moved from his room to the cold house in the yard, because the author claims "he wasn't being nervous; he was being prevented" (115).

To conclude, I argue that the individual struggles of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver in *Beloved* reveal how trauma—both personal and inherited—disrupts the formation of a stable Black identities. Through fragmented memories, unhealthy relationality, relational dependency, and emotional repression, Morrison portrays identity as a site of ongoing negotiation shaped by the enduring legacy of slavery. These personal experiences underscore how systemic violence invades the interior self, shaping identity through loss, fear, silence, and alienation. However, these struggles do not occur in isolation. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the process of identity construction is also deeply collective—shaped by community, shared memory, and cultural continuity. The next section will discuss the role of collective experiences and communal responses in the formation of fractured collective identities of formerly enslaved individuals.

II.3. Struggles of Constructing Collective Black Identities

In *Beloved*, Morrison tests the limits of collective Black identity. Throughout the novel Morrison depicts how the collective Black identity is not always constructed because the Blacks share a racial identity; same color. In other words, collective Black identity requires Blacks to unite and stand in solidarity. As Tommie Shelby argues, "Collective identity is like the familiar

motivating force of kinship relations, it make Blacks more inclined to help each other in a movement to end their suffering" (233-234). Yet, the author exposes the fragility of relational bonds within the Black community on Bluestone Road. In *Beloved*, Collective identity, which is meant to be a site of resilience and solidarity, becomes fractured by jealousy, silence that stems from unresolved trauma. Before Sethe's act of infanticide, the community already harbored resentment toward Baby Suggs and her household, envying the abundance and spiritual gatherings that seemed to elevate 124 into a sacred space. This unspoken bitterness contributes directly to the novel's first tragic rupture. As Laurie Vickroy asserts:

> The environment of social relations and cultural values can be a source of trauma or a force that silences victims out of denial or guilt. It can create veils of illusion, attempts to mask or reinterpret behaviors that induce trauma. Societies, communities, or families may want to preserve stability or be willing to sacrifice victims for other goals. (131)

The passage above shows that trauma is not only individual but shaped and sustained by social and cultural forces. It highlights how communities can suppress victims' voices to protect collective stability which may hinder the process of collective healing. This is evident in *Beloved* When the schoolteacher and his men arrived, the community—aware of their presence—chose not to warn 124. The author narrates, "that explained why nobody ran on ahead; why nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut 'cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town … Nobody warned them" (153-154). Their silence was a passive betrayal, and this failure to act becomes an indirect cause of the horror that followed. Morrison suggests that the breakdown of relational responsibility within the community—triggered by envy and the trauma of slavery—ultimately renders the collective unable or unwilling to protect its own. Commenting on the community's

betrayal, Melissa Walker affirm that it is “the collaboration of the Black community with the conditions of slavery that led to the murder” (qtd. in Mahboobeh 273).

The aftermath of Sethe’s infanticide marks her first explicit alienation. Though she believed she was saving her child from a life of bondage, the community could not accept her act, regardless of the circumstances. From that moment, Sethe becomes an outsider. Her house, which once was a space for gathering and healing under Baby Suggs, transforms into a haunted threshold separating her from the rest of the Black collective. This isolation is not only emotional but spiritual, as Sethe is cut off from the communal rituals and relationships that give meaning and support to Black identity in the post-slavery era. The trauma she carries—and her refusal to seek forgiveness—deepens the rupture. Morrison reveals that the collective identity of formerly enslaved people is not in itself what guarantee healing or unity, but the collective efforts, accountability, mutual support, and relationality is what give collective identity meaning, and none of which take place after the killing. Ultimately 124 becomes a site of what Erikson, in his pioneering work on collective trauma, describes as “a gathering of the wounded” who have learned a “profoundly unsettling truth: that human institutions cannot be relied on” (qtd. in Visser 126).

The community, in fact, reinforces Sethe’s alienation a second time. When Paul D, who had rekindled her desire for human connection, learns about the infanticide, it is through the community’s intervention. Stamp Paid, in attempting to help, inadvertently drives a wedge between them by exposing Sethe’s past and telling Paul D about the murder which alienates him from Sethe. Morrison carefully frames this moment as another indirect failure of the collective, marked by covert judgment and the absence of open accountability. She narrates “He’d gone behind her back, like a sneak” (163), rather than approaching Sethe with compassion, the

community chooses to remind her of her trauma. One can say then that Paul D's departure is not just an individual decision—it is the result of how communal traumatic memory and judgment can isolate rather than restore. Thus, Sethe does not intentionally chooses to isolate herself, her alienation is rather a product of the community's unresolved relationship with trauma, morality, and forgiveness.

In addition to Sethe, Denver too, inherits this legacy of alienation. As a child, she suffers both from the spectral presence of Beloved and the social consequences of her mother's past. When a whiteboy reveals the truth about her mother's crime, Denver is emotionally shattered. The rejection she experiences becomes internalized, leading her to withdraw from society. She states crying when Paul D first arrives "Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either … It's not the house. It's us! And it's you!" (21). Morrison uses Denver's character, especially in this scene to show how collective trauma reverberates across generations, disrupting not only direct victims but also their descendants. The community's refusal to engage with the family of 124 leaves Denver in emotional isolation for "eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" (167), caught between inherited guilt and her own longing for belonging.

Additionally, Paul D's alienation after leaving Sethe reveals yet another layer of the community's fractured collective identity. After learning the truth, he retreats to a cold church, a space of refuge that ironically lacks human warmth. When Stamp Paid hears about the situation, he goes to meet Ella and John, who all used to help escaped slaves find safety for more than twenty years, and confront them about Paul D situation. Their conversation exposes the collective fear that now defines the community. Ella responds, "all he has to do is ask", but Stamp replies, "why? Why he have to ask? Can nobody offer? what's going on? since when a Blackman come to town have to sleep in a cellar like a dog?" (179). Ella replies that it was all

necessary, since they gave shelter to Sethe, and thought they knew her but she showed her true self and for her, as well as the community, “ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children” (179-180). Through Ella, Morrison showcase that the Black community in bluestone road no longer trust one another, and that the pain of past betrayals has made them suspicious of each other’s capacity for harm. Her refusal to offer Paul D shelter is not based on cruelty, but on fear—fear that if they take him in, he might do something that destabilizes them again, just as Sethe did. Morrison presents this moment as a critique of a community that has lost its moral compass, paralyzed by trauma and unable to extend grace. The fractured nature of communal bonds becomes a reflection of the larger post-slavery Black experience, where fear and distrust often undermine the possibility of collective identity. This is reminiscent of what Judith Herman M.D. in *Trauma and Recovery*, posits:

> Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living. (37)

This quote describe exactly what Sethe feels in the novel; that she belongs to her dead daughter more than whatever lies outside her house. She states “there is no world outside my door” (177).

In addition, 124 Bluestone Road, the central setting of the novel, functions as more than just a haunted house. It becomes a vessel of accumulated, unresolved personal and communal trauma. The haunting presence of Beloved represents not only Sethe’s personal guilt but also the pervasive, intergenerational trauma inflicted by slavery. The house is described as “spiteful,” echoing the emotional burden of the past that continues to shape the lives of its inhabitants. This

demonstrates that 124 is both a physical and symbolic space where the collective memory of suffering materializes. For the community, 124 becomes a reminder of a painful shared history, and collective memory they would rather not confront. Thus, they distance themselves from it, further isolating Sethe and her family. This spatial isolation mirrors the fragmentation of Black identity when communal trauma remains unspoken and unprocessed. Trauma scholar Kai Erikson further notes that the collective trauma is:

> a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality … a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared … "I" continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "you" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (460)

The quote above explains the fragmentation of collective Black identity in the aftermath of collective trauma; slavery. Also, Morrison uses the shifting dynamic between Sethe and the Black community to illustrate how trauma, when unshared or misinterpreted, can breed judgment, silence, and division within historically oppressed communities disrupting their collective identity.

In article intitled "Acting out and Working through: Trauma and (in)security", Kate Schick argues that "just as whole communities experience trauma, so too do whole communities fail to work through that trauma" (6). Thus, Dominick LaCapra's distinction between the two forms of remembering traumatic events "acting out" and "working through" is useful in this analysis. He explains that "Acting out involves compulsive and repetitive re-living of the trauma;

individuals who act out have difficulty distinguishing between the past and the present and struggle with notions of future. They are haunted by their experience and trapped in the past that wounded them" (qtd. in Schick 1842). In *Beloved*, the community refuses to process the memory of slavery and its consequences, and remains trapped in a cycle of repetition and judgment. Thus, Morrison manifests the form of "acting out" in the community's; particularly Paid Stamp's and Ella's inability to understand Sethe's action, highlighting the limitations of a community that has not collectively worked through its past. Unlike in "working through", LaCapra posits that:

> [Working through] requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them. Even when they are worked through, this does not mean that they may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again. In this sense, working through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out and that, even in the best of circumstances, is never achieved once and for all. (qtd. in Schick 1848)

I explain in simpler words that working through is a continuous, reflective process of re-engaging with past traumatic experiences. It does not guarantee permanent resolution, as issues may resurface and require renewed interpretation and engagement. Similarly, the collective Black identity in the novel emerges as a contested space shaped by the tension between acting out trauma of slavery, and working through it, remembrance and repression, belonging and exclusion.

In the second part of the book; 124 WAS LOUD, Sethe's alienation is further emphasized by her physical and emotional confinement within 124, a house that becomes a symbolic space of trauma and exclusion. When Beloved returns and the three women in the house were cold, suffering, lacking food, Morrison intends to repeat the sentence "nobody saw them falling"

(168). This illustrate how the community gave up on those inhabitants of 124, no longer considering them part of the community. Morrison highlights how Sethe's withdrawal from community life, and the community's withdrawal from hers, disrupt the relational networks essential for reconstructing a collective identity. Because "they stumbled and had to hold tight, but nobody saw them fall" (168).

In the subsequent chapter, I argue that The collective struggles portrayed in *Beloved* reflect the enduring scars left by slavery on communal structures, relational dynamics, and shared identity among African Americans. Through Sethe's alienation, Paul D's emotional detachment, and Denver's inherited fear, Morrison reveals how the trauma of slavery extends beyond the individual, fracturing collective memory and weakening the very bonds that sustain communal identity. These characters inhabit a world where trauma has disrupted traditional modes of belonging, yet they also gesture toward the possibility of reconnection. While the second chapter has traced the fragmentation of Black identity at both individual and communal levels. The next chapter will explore how Morrison envisions latent potential for relational repair and coming to terms with trauma through storytelling, memory-work, and the reconstitution of relationality and community; tools through which fractured identities begin to be reassembled and futures reimagined beyond the legacy of trauma.

Chapter III: Memory and the Reconciliation of Fractured Identities in *Beloved*

This chapter explores the themes of emotional healing and the construction of Black identities through memory and relationality in Morrison's *Beloved*. It is divided into two sections. The first section addresses the individual healing of specific characters, it shows how relationality positively affects individual character's process of working through trauma. Additionally, it highlights relationships among the characters in the novel as a driving force in storytelling, remembrance, and confrontation. The second section, on the other hand, examines the process of collective healing, emphasizing the importance of collective memory and community in the pursuit of survival and identity formation.

III.1. Individual reconciliation and healing through memory and relationality

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison intricately weaves the process of individual healing with the act of remembering and the power of relationality. In an article entitled "Toni Morrison's Beloved: Ironies of a "Sweet Home" Utopia in a Dystopian Slave Society", Jewell Parker Rhodes avers that, "Beloved is concerned with powers of memory and 'rememory' of individuals in the African American community and their ability to heal themselves and strengthen their identity through the reconstruction of the past" (1). Each character carries deep scars of slavery—psychological, emotional, and physical—that interrupt the formation of a stable Black identity. Yet, Morrison shows that healing is possible, though not without struggle, and it often begins with intimate relationships that challenge silence and repression. The characters of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver each undergo a form of reconciliation with their past selves, initiated not by external institutions or communal forces, but through personal bonds that awaken memory and emotional vulnerability. This section explores how relational encounters initiate personal healing

and identity construction, focusing on how memory—once a source of pain—becomes a path toward reintegration and selfhood.

Morrison begins the narrative with Sethe in a state of emotional isolation and psychological paralysis. Eighteen years after fleeing slavery, she lives in 124 Bluestone Road with her daughter Denver, haunted—both figuratively and literally—by the trauma of her past. Her days are defined by survival and silence; the future is unimaginable, and the past is buried under layers of repression. Morrison captures Sethe's internal stasis through her inability to envision anything beyond the present, a concept that La Capra refers to as 'Acting out'. As previously discussed in the second chapter, page 44-45, 'Acting out' disables the bridge between the present, past, and future. Traumatized individuals are haunted by their past, unable to escape ambiguities and horrific traumatic experiences that are carried, retained, and reflected in their present lifestyles. In this suspended emotional state, Sethe is neither fully present nor able to heal.

The arrival of Paul D, the last man from Sweet Home, marks a turning point in Sethe's emotional life. Toni Morrison describes him as "the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because in his presence, they could" (23). His presence compels Sethe to confront her pain as well. She decides to push her busyness into the corners of the house and take a moment in the kitchen to share her experience of rape with him, "and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men is there to catch her if she sank" (24). The morning after the first night with Paul D, Morrison illustrates the change in Sethe's feelings and thoughts. In fact, Sethe smiles and thinks " would it be alright? Would it be alright to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?" (43). He was responsible for those emotions.

Moreover, their outing to the carnival, seemingly trivial, is a pivotal moment. For the first time in years, Sethe experiences joy, companionship, and the potential for shared life, she thinks, “it was a good sign. A life. Could be” (52). This stirs in Sethe a sense of possibility and human connection that had long been dormant. Paul D’s desire to form a bond with her and her daughter reintroduces the concept of family and love; something Sethe had not allowed herself to hope for before. This shift becomes even more evident when Sethe begins to make plans. After sleeping beside Paul D for several nights, she wakes with a sense of forward motion, beginning to imagine a life beyond survival, and even windows suddenly had a view (45). This act of planning represents a radical change. Previously, the trauma of slavery and the burden of her past made the future inconceivable, “her brain was not interested in the future” (73). The fact that she can now entertain the idea of a future—however unsure—marks a significant step toward healing.

Morrison depiction of Sethe’s process of healing is far from linear. First, the arrival of Beloved—the reincarnation of Sethe’s dead daughter—disrupts the fragile balance she is beginning to build. Yet paradoxically, Beloved also becomes the catalyst for Sethe’s deeper healing. In an interview with Mavis Nicholson, Morrison expresses:

> The ghost in Beloved is not only because people believed in ghosts, it is not only because Sethe needs the ghost. It is also structurally a way to say; Memory can come in and sit now next to you at the table, and even you don’t want to remember, and you try your very hard not to remember, it is always there. It is always with you. And sometimes a situation arises in which you cannot put off any longer. (ThamesTv 21:01)

The quote suggests that ghost of Beloved symbolizes the individual and collective memory that needs to be confronted. It is also worth noticing Kathleen Borgan’s claim that “Beloved acts as a

crypt that is opened … as the stories that have 'been unconsciously buried are exhumed, they are heard, readdressed and given the burial they deserve'" (qtd. in Udoette 209). Beloved's constant questions and emotional neediness force Sethe to confront the memories she has worked so hard to suppress. Morrison expresses "Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost … unspeakable" (62). In the beginning she finds herself wanting it and liking it, since the questions were just about silly thoughts, her lost diamonds earrings, and her mother. However, The answers are tied to painful memories and other unbearable choices, especially when the questions becomes about infanticide she committed to save her daughter from slavery.

Additionally, Bessel Kolk posits that "traumatic memories are not often coherent stories … they tend to occur when exposed to the reminders" (qtd. in Udoette 210). This quote reminds one of the intrusive and incoherent pattern of Sethe's narratives in *Beloved*. Through Beloved's constant questioning, Sethe is drawn into storytelling—not as a deliberate act, but as a forced response to emotional demand and reminders. On one hand, Hilde Lindemann nelson argues that it is possible to remake the mind through storytelling (Lalonde 200). On the other hand, Visser similarly notes that "Storytelling reduces fragmentation, dissociation, and other trauma symptoms [such as forgetting, and suppression]" (128). This enforced remembrance drags repressed trauma into the open, destabilizing Sethe at first, but ultimately compelling her to acknowledge her past.

Toni Morrison illustrate Sethe's confrontation with all her past at Sweet home and the act to kill her daughter through a whole section in the second part of the book; BELOVED, she is my daughter. At first, when Sethe found out that Beloved the woman, is actually her daughter

who came back to her, she says “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (176). Yet, her relationship with Beloved makes her ready to remember, confront, explain, and admit or defend her actions. Sethe ultimately says, “I’ll tell Beloved about that; she’ll understand… seem like I do rememory that” (192-193). Thus, I argue that Sethe’s healing is not about forgetting but about remembering—honestly and painfully. The emotional turmoil she undergoes with Beloved is a form of confrontation that reclaims her agency over her own narrative and sort of ‘working through’ trauma. As I mention in page 43, chapter two, ‘working through’ implies that “For the victim, this means his ability to say to himself, ‘Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can’t entirely disengage myself from it, but I’m existing here and now, and this is different from back then’” (qtd. in Bond and Craps 3). Hence memory becomes a tool not of torment, but of self-understanding.

Morrison’s depiction of Sethe’s healing journey parallels Herman’s three-stage model of trauma recovery in *Trauma and Recovery*. She states, “The fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (2). This framework offers a valuable lens through which to examine Sethe’s psychological transformation throughout the novel. With the comeback of Beloved, Sethe feels happy and safe from the guilt, because now her child is back to her regardless and “By establishing a safe environment, the survivor creates a holding ground of investigation” (Lalonde 198). In the process of creating safety, the trauma survivor is encouraged to comprehend the trauma event from a different perspective, aligning with how Sethe tries to understand whether Beloved is angry at her or not. During the stage or remembering and mourning, Sethe tells her story and her perspective on the murder to Beloved, and that she did not want her to suffer in slavery. This resonates with Herman’s statement, “This work of

reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story", although first attempts to tell the trauma story might be difficult and unalterable, "After many repetitions, the moment comes when the telling of the trauma story no longer arouses quite such intense feeling … The story is a memory like other memories, and it begins to fade as other memories do" (qtd. in Lalonde 199-200). Similarly, narration acts as an antidote for Sethe in *Beloved*. This leads to Herman third stage of recovery; restoring connection. Now that the trauma begins to recede into the past, intimacy with others can be fostered because the survivor has "regained some capacity for appropriate trust" (qtd. in Lalonde 201). However, in *Beloved* this intimate relationship does not take long time to be broken, or fragmented till the very end of the novel, which Morrison decides to leave it open to the readers. By re-experiencing the trauma in the presence of a relational other; Paul D and Beloved, Sethe moves from silence to speech, from repression to recognition. Although this journey does not assure her complete healing, it enables the possibility of emotional release and confrontation with the painful past.

I conclude that Sethe's healing is highly complex and ambiguous, as it is never fully confirmed or resolved by the end of the novel. When Paul D returns eventually to 124 following Beloved's disappearance, he finds Sethe depleted, almost lifeless. Yet rather than abandon her once more, he chooses to stay. His presence is a radical act of love and restoration. By telling her, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are," Paul D affirms her value beyond the narrative of guilt that has defined her for years. This affirmation is profound. For the first time, Sethe is presented with the possibility of self-worth unlinked from pain, sacrifice, or maternal duty. When she echoes back, "Me? Me?" (262), it signals the beginning of a new identity—one grounded not in trauma, but in the acknowledgment of her own humanity. Her question is not one of disbelief, but of awakening; a moment of recognition that she is, indeed, her own best thing. One then can

truly say that thanks to the relationships with Beloved and Paul D, Sethe gets a new idea of what a self can be. This is idea suits Bouallegue's argument, the *family* serves as "a source of support, love, and cultural heritage for African Americans". In contrast to Western culture's idealization of individualism, she explains that in the African American community, "the family is not deemed a handicap to the individual's emancipation; rather, it is a force that nurtures and toughens the individual" ("*Spirituality in the Black Arts Movement*" 53). Sethe's healing, then, cannot be understood apart from the communal and familial bonds that surround her—especially the painful yet essential reconnection with her daughter, which becomes the space where both memory and identity are negotiated. Morrison rather than presenting a clear path to recovery, intertwines Sethe's healing with memory and her evolving relationships, which themselves are marked by fragmentation and disruption due to trauma of slavery throughout the novel, but still paves the way for a different understanding of how Black identities are constructed in postcolonial contexts.

Paul D, another character, enters the narrative as a man who is deeply fractured by the dehumanizing effects of slavery. His identity is marked by suppression—of memory, of a feeling, and of a self. Unlike Sethe, who is emotionally overwhelmed by her past, Paul D copes by compartmentalizing his pain. He stores his memories in what he metaphorically calls a "tobacco tin buried in his chest". This tin box, "rusted shut" (116), becomes a powerful symbol of emotional repression and psychological survival. Paul D's masculinity and humanity have been systematically denied through chains, beatings, sexual exploitation, and the trauma of witnessing others' suffering. In response, he numbs himself. He becomes emotionally fearful, hesitant to connect deeply to anyone or anything, he thinks "the best thing is to love just a little

bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back … maybe you'd have a little love left over" (49).

When Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, he seeks more than shelter—he is searching for some remnant of belonging, for a self he lost at Sweet Home. His relationship with Sethe offers the first glimpse of healing. Sethe represents familiarity, memory, and the possibility of tenderness. He informs Sethe, "I'm a walking man … never staying nowhere long. But when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn't the place I was heading toward; it was you, we can make a life, girl. A life" (50). Their rekindled connection challenges his emotional detachment. Through their shared memories, stories and intimacy, Paul D begins to re-experience feelings he has long buried, yet he remains guarded, reluctant to open the "rusted tin" that contains his most painful memories. He wants a future with Sethe but struggles with the present. This aligns with Erica Still argument that:

> [isolation caused by traumatic event] is overcome by language … Recovery from trauma involves, indeed necessitates, a return to language– more precisely, a return to *faith* in language as a means of creating communion. Efforts to recover that communion enact a commitment to the possibility of relationship even in the face of unavoidable disruption and incompletion. (314)

Similarly, Paul D's isolation and fear of attachment is overcome by talking and opening up to Sethe about all his past stories that he used to keep it in his tin box. His commitment to establish a relationship with Sethe, regardless of his inner struggles, is because of how they share memories and stories together.

The turning point in Paul D's journey occurs through his encounter with Beloved. His sexual interaction with her is not about desire or romance, as he refused her stating that their act is wrong towards Sethe who offered both of them her house and unconditional love. He says, "when good people take you in, and treat you good, you ought to try to be good back. You Don't … Sethe loves you" (116). Rather, their interaction is a moment of spiritual vulnerability that remains ambiguous because of the nature of what Beloved actually is. When Morrison describes the scene, she emphasizes on how the process unleashed the emotions that has long been suppressed in Paul D's heart. Beloved, who represents the return of the repressed, forces Paul D to confront the emotional pain he has long avoided. When he sleeps with her, it is not out of love, but because she demands recognition of a buried part of himself. This act tears open the "tin box" inside his chest, releasing the memories and emotions he had locked away. Morrison narrates his repetitive screams of "Red heart, Red heart, Red heart" (117), signifies his emotional reawakening, the tin box which used to be in his chest finally turned to a heart that can feel. The narrator says that when Paul D screams, his voice did not only wake the sleeping Denver from her bed, but also woke Paul D himself (117). This act is painful, even destabilizing, but it is also transformative. Following this rupture, Paul D acknowledges the role of Beloved, "she is doing it to me. Fixing me. Sethe, she's fixed me and I can't break it" (125), and yes somehow Beloved did fix him. He begins to access feelings he had not previously allowed himself to express—shame, regret, love, grief (125). He recalls the brutal experiences at Sweet Home, the animal-like treatment he endured, the people he lost. He informs Stamp Paid about Beloved, "she reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember" (227). Most importantly, he begins to see Sethe not as an object of sexual gratification, but as a partner whom he loves, respect, ashamed of cheating on her, and wishes to have another child with (127).

However, Paul D's emotional awakening is not sustained. He initially flees after learning of Sethe's act, unable to process it. He informs Sethe that her love is "too thick" (160), and what she committed is wrong as she "got two feet, not four" (160). His statement is not merely a rebuke, but a painful reminder of her humanity−an insistence that, unlike the dehumanizing slaveholders who treated them as animals, she must not internalize and reproduce the same logic of brutality. But by the end of the novel, he returns—not to escape the past, but to face it. When he sits by Sethe's bed and decides to put his story next to her, reflect a moment of emotional restoration. He says, "Sethe … me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow … You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (263. For the first time, Paul D recognizes both Sethe's value and his own capacity for care, love, and future. His healing is achieved not through forgetting but through emotional exposure. The memories he had buried in the tobacco tin is no longer something to be avoided; it becomes part of his selfhood that he accepts and ready to move on from. In reconnecting with Sethe and affirming her worth, Paul D also reclaims his own.

The way in which Morrison depicts Paul D's recovery is reminiscent of Herman's insights on the last stage that is necessary for recovery and healing from trauma. The third stage focusses on the concept of 'reconnecting' with people, meaningful activities, and other aspects of life. Reflecting on Herman's concept, only by confronting the past through relational vulnerability can fractured individuals begin to mend. Similarly in *Beloved*, Paul D does not become whole by returning to Sweet Home or denying his scars; he heals by remembering, by feeling, and by choosing to trust connection again. Herman also states "when healing relationships, the survivor re-establishes psychological faculties that were compromised by the traumatic experience, such as trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and intimacy"

(qtd. in Lalonde 197). This is relatable to Paul D's character, it is only through trusting Sethe, through taking the initiative to confront the past with her, through his intimacy with her that he becomes able to work through his trauma.

Among the characters in *Beloved*, Denver's journey of healing stands out as the most dynamic and transformative, which makes her identity development particularly significant within the broader scope of this chapter. Denver does not only exemplify the possibility of individual reconciliation through memory and social ties but also reinforce the argument that Black identity in postcolonial context, is not static essence but a process shaped by intergenerational memory and communal relations. Born during Sethe's escape from slavery, Denver has no direct memory of Sweet Home or the institution of slavery itself. However, she is deeply shaped by its lingering effects. Her life is confined within the haunted space of 124 Bluestone Road, where trauma circulates as a silent force. Denver grows up in emotional isolation, dependent entirely on her mother, and later, on Beloved. Her identity is stunted, her world is small. She exists in the shadows of her mother's trauma and the ghost of a sister she cannot remember but constantly senses. Denver's earliest steps toward individualism come from her hidden interior world; sweet secrets. She spends long hours in a "emerald room" in the woods—a secret space of fantasy and withdrawal. This houseplay place offers her safety but also signals her emotional fragility, as it is "quiet, private, and completely secret … closed off from the hurt of the world" (34). She does not share her feelings with Sethe and guards her thoughts from the haunted dynamics of 124. Her silence is both what Craps calls a "symptom of trauma" (qtd. in Pederson 107), and a strategy of self-protection just as Pederson argues, "silence may indicate not inability to describe, remember, or integrate but rather an intentional decision to gather one's strength and memorialize loss (107).

The arrival of Beloved marks a critical shift in Denver's emotional life. At first, Beloved provides her with the companionship and the attention she craves. Denver treats Beloved as a returned sibling and a source of purpose, she thinks "my sister come to help me wait for my daddy" (200). At this stage in *Beloved*, Denver's sense of self is no longer solely defined by her mother's presence. She finally has someone to care for, talk to, and wait for, in other words, Beloved becomes what satisfies her longing and imagination. But as the novel progresses, this relationship proves to be deeply unbalanced and even parasitic. Beloved's obsession with Sethe grows, and the emotional atmosphere in 124 becomes suffocating, as the mother and her returned daughter are either hungry or angry (230). Denver begins to sense that Beloved did not return for her, but for Sethe and Sethe only. After that, both her mother and sister start descending into an unhealthy, self-consuming relationship, and she begins to drift from the play (231). Denever's transformation starts from this realization and "the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved" (233). She recognizes that in order to survive—and to protect her mother—she must leave the confines of 124. The author says that "it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn't, they all would" (230). This quote implies that Denver's decision to leave, taking the responsibility of solving her family's hunger, becomes the catalyst for her transformation. This act, seemingly simple, is radical. Denver has never ventured beyond the property's boundaries in any meaningful way. Stepping outside is both a physical and psychological act of liberation. The act of leaving the confines of the house symbolizes the act of breaking the inherited cycle of isolation, silence, and passivity that defined her childhood. To summarize, Beloved plays a pivotal role in shaping Denver's character development. Through her experiences, Denver learns that happiness, companionship, and love arise from meaningful relationships with others.

However, the complete sacrifice of one's self for the sake of pleasing others can lead to the erosion of individual identity. I contend that Beloved's influence prompts Denver to recognize the significance of relational self—a balance between submission and individuality, avoiding both alienation and complete surrender.

In addition to Denver herself, the memory and soul of her grandmother; Baby Suggs help her to step off 124. Morrison describes that Denver hesitantly stood on the porch in the sun and could not leave. That is when the conversations and memories of Baby Suggs came running to her mind. So, Denver asked "then what do I do?", and Baby Suggs's soul answered her "know it, and go on out the yard. Go on". (235). This scene underscores that even when Denver as an individual possess agency and the ability to make choices, in critical moments and hardships, her relationship with her grandmother and her memories of her is what served and motivated her actions.

Morrison further illustrates that Denver's journey towards healing is not confined to her familial relationships, nor to her fantasies or emotional repression; rather, it extends to deliberate acts that involve risk, personal growth, and the forging of connections beyond the domestic sphere. She finds work at the Bodwins family, and begins to interact with people, and she becomes a bridge between the private suffering of 124 and the potential for public support. This emergence into the world marks her individual reconciliation. Denver does not forget the past, nor does she deny her mother's pain. Instead, she takes it upon herself to build a future that is not entirely shaped by it. Morrison emphasizes, "Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (242).The final scene where she meets with Paul D, discussing whether Beloved was her sister or not, she refuses his opinion, saying "I

don't, I have my own" (257). This response illustrate the independent identity, self-respect she developed throughout the novel.

The individual healing journeys of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver in *Beloved* reveal how memory and relationality serve as catalysts for self-repair and identity reconstruction. Each character's trauma is deeply personal and historically rooted, yet Morrison emphasizes that healing does not emerge from denial or escape, but from the difficult process of remembering, confronting, and reconnecting. Through these characters, Morrison explores how relational encounters—however painful or complex—are essential to the individual process of healing. Memory, once a source of torment, becomes a pathway toward reclamation. It is through remembering, storytelling, and emotional risk that these fractured selves begin to reassemble. In an article intitled "To be Loved and Cry Shame: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Lynda Koolish posits that "the struggle for psychic wholeness is a continuous one in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1). Morrison does not promise full resolution or simple closure. Instead, she offers a nuanced portrait of healing as ongoing, fragile, and deeply tied to the willingness to engage with the self and with others.

III.2. Collective Healing and the Role of Community in Reconstructing Black Identity

The role of community and collectivity in the construction of self and well-being is prominently depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Initially, when Baby Suggs is freed, Mr. Garner, her master, was kind enough to assist her in reaching the Bodwins. The family helped her secure a job and a house; of course, she had to work for it, but they were generous. Following this, Baby Suggs was regarded as holy, as she "devoted her freed life to harmony" (165). Before the infanticide, 124 Bluestone Road served as a kind of station—a resting place, as "124 shook with their voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well and laughed so much" (135).

Morrison describes Baby Suggs as someone who "always knows exactly what to do and when…giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding the fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone" (136). This aligns with Visser's assertion that collective trauma, even when causing disruption, can also foster social solidarity and cultural identity rather than inherently fracturing the self (qtd. in Balaev 9-10). However, this reckless generosity made her people angry, furious, because "she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (137). I argue that the Black community in the novel is traumatized and unaccustomed to such giving and welcoming behavior, had been so dehumanized that its members believed they did not deserve it. They questioned the source of her generosity—was she truly holy? And why her?.

One of the scenes that best illustrates the importance of relationality within the black community is the clearing scene. The clearing in *Beloved* is a space in the middle of the woods that Baby Suggs and other Blacks used to gather for some sort of preaching, singing, and praying. Du Bois reasoned that in these songs, black people find solace and unity and the memory of slavery could be carried and passed on in their collective memory (qtd. in Eyerman 69). Morrison narrates that Baby Suggs would situate herself on a huge flat-sided rock, and pray silently while others watched her from the trees. Then she would shout, "Let the children come!" and they would run from the trees toward her. Next, she would say, "Let your mothers hear you laugh", and the woods would resonate with their joy. After that, she called the men to dance and the women to cry, and it all became a beautiful mix. Morrison states, "Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart" (89).

In addition, Morrison portrays 'the Clearing' as a space for the wounded Black individuals working-through the trauma of slavery. Greg Forter argues that in the woods, Baby

Suggs calls the black community to engage in a ritual of polymorphous; self-love (86). Baby Suggs proclaims, “Here”; in this place:

> we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them … Touch others with them … stroke them on your face … You got to love it, you. And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth … You got to love it … The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. (90)

Baby Suggs’s urge her audience reclaims self-love through self-recognition and a ritual of reciprocal touching, affirming their bodies, organs and rejecting the degradation imposed by white racism that does not recognize or love the black slaves. This affirmation of the body and self-love cannot be learned in isolation; because “self-love needs relational foundation and a social context” (Schapiro 207). It is worth concluding that relationality and community in *Beloved*, especially within ‘the clearing’ is what helps black people recognizes themselves, love themselves, remember themselves with each other.

Stamp Paid, a former Underground Railroad conductor and a moral voice within the community, decides to approach Paul D at the church to offer him a place to sleep and to encourage him to reconsider Sethe’s past with empathy. He tells Paul D, “It ain’t what you think,” and “She ain’t crazy; she love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter” (227). This reflects Morrison’s portrayal of the necessity of communal understanding as a means to disrupt cycles of judgment and silence. Rather than ignoring or condemning Sethe, Stamp Paid

pleads with Paul D, insisting that Sethe's choices stem from a desperate need to protect her children. He reframes her act not as brutality, but as an act of tragic maternal resistance. This intervention compels Paul D to confront the complexity of Sethe's pain and her humanity. It also engages him in a dialogue about the communal ethics of survival and protection. Stamp Paid serves as a mediator between Sethe's isolated interior world and the moral consciousness of the Black community. Through his storytelling and advocacy, he repositions Sethe within a shared narrative of suffering, sacrifice, and endurance. This moment marks the beginning of Paul D's emotional reorientation; he starts to see Sethe not merely as a victim or a symbol of past horrors, but as someone who, like himself, is deeply wounded and in need of connection. He begins to understand her humanity as he finally confronts his own.

Morrison's portrayal of Stamp Paid's role is crucial in illustrating how shared memory can facilitate relational repair. As noted by Hirschberger, "history provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from, and where we should be going. It defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group's identity" (3). Stamp Paid's refusal to abandon Sethe, despite the community's earlier silence, reflects a deeper truth: healing requires not only individual confrontation with memory but also communal recognition and support. This aligns with Hirschberger's argument in his article, "Collective Trauma and Social Construction of Meaning", where he posits that the collective memory of traumatic events is a dynamic social-psychological process primarily dedicated to constructing meaning. This process of identity construction encompasses a sense of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, efficacy, and ultimately, a sense of meaning (2). By reopening the dialogue between Sethe and Paul D, Stamp Paid lays the foundation for the reconstitution of the family unit, collective identity, and the possibility of redemption.

Furthermore, In the African context, the idea of security and its value depends on personal identification with and within the community (Kpohoué 2). Denver's decision to step outside the haunted confines of 124 represents one of the most transformative acts in *Beloved*. Her choice to seek help from the community signals a critical turning point, not only in her personal development but also in Morrison's vision of collective healing and construction of collective identity. After years of isolation, silence, and dependence, Denver emerges as an agent of change—both for herself and her family. Her journey outward reflects a generational shift: unlike Sethe, who internalizes her trauma and distrusts communal ties, Denver places her faith in the possibility of solidarity and support. In simpler words, Denver rejoins the community and start to experience the traditional life, one that "is characterized by brotherhood, a sense of belonging to a larger family" (qtd. in Kpohoué 2). In *Beloved*, Morrison illustrates that when Denver leaves 124 and walks to the house of Lady Jones, a respected schoolteacher and community figure, despite knowing her mother's past and the stories surrounding 124, Lady Jones does not reject her. Instead, she offers the food and emotional support that Denver needs. Lady jones tells Denver that she established her church's committee members to ensure nobody goes hungry (239). The fact that Lady Jones tells Denver about the church means that Denver is now considered part of the community and that she will be supported and cared for by its members. Later, she informs and gathers other women to assist the family, and throughout the spring, names frequently appeared among the gifts of food left on the tree stump. Denver returned the pan, plate, or baskets and small conversations occurred among the women during this process (239). This gesture is emblematic of Morrison's representation of the restorative power of communal care. The support Denver receives—from meals to emotional reassurance to employment opportunities—reconnects her to a larger social fabric that had once excluded them.

In contrast to the beginning of the novel, thanks to the community of Bluestone Road, Denver has developed a relational black identity at this point. She is happy and appreciative to the love and help received from the community who consider her one of their own now, but also grown to know that their help does not mean a new wall to depend on. Her request for a job to get her own money symbolizes how far her character developed agency, sense of responsibility and independence but also with relational sense of self as she is part of the black 'we'; collectivity.

The character of Mrs. Bodwin further reinforces the process of collective identity construction. She remembers Baby Suggs, a symbol of collective memory, and helps Denver secure a job, which allows her to assume responsibility and gain autonomy. The community's willingness to respond to Denver's plea challenges the earlier narrative of neglect, emphasizing the role of collective memory. Hirschberger articulates a similar idea, stating, "Collective memory not only promotes the construction of identity but also the preservation of a positive collective identity and a sense of worth" (3). Morrison illustrates a collective willingness to move beyond past silence and reasserts the importance of mutual care and shared responsibility. She writes, "They remembered the party with twelve turkeys and tubs of strawberry smash" (239). Additionally, the narrator notes, "Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other just for so long, and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up" (240). Denver's transformation from a withdrawn and dependent girl into a proactive and socially engaged young woman reflects the empowering potential of communal relationships. Her outreach also initiates a broader healing process that reverberates back to her mother and ultimately sets the stage for the climactic intervention that follows. By making herself visible to the community, Denver not only ensures her own survival but also begins the

reintegration of 124 into the collective life of the neighborhood. Morrison uses Denver's story to assert that healing from historical trauma is possible, but only when individuals are willing to re-enter communal life and when the community is willing to extend compassion and solidarity in return.

The climactic moment of *Beloved* occurs when Janey Bodwin learns about Beloved and shares the news with the other Black women in the community. Thanks to Ella, a member of the community and ex-friend of Sethe, who believed that Sethe deserved to be judged by her own daughter, it is emphasized that "what's fair ain't necessarily right" and "the children can't just up and kill the mama" (246). Morrison asserts that it is Ella, more than anyone else, who helps convince the other women that the rescue of Sethe from the ghost is necessary (246). A group of Black women from the community—led by Ella—gathers at 124 to confront the increasingly dangerous presence of Beloved. This collective act of intervention represents the most direct form of communal healing in the novel. After years of passive silence and moral distancing, the women now take decisive spiritual action to protect one of their own. Their decision to act is rooted not only in empathy but also in the belief that no individual should be left to bear the weight of trauma and haunting alone.

In postcolonial trauma theory, religion and traditional rituals are considered cornerstones in the healing process of traumatized individuals; especially Black Africans. Also, "ancestors play important roles in the community. Rules, regulations, taboos, spiritual myth, symbolism, song and story, solidarity, etc., form the daily realities of the members of the black community (Kpohoué 2). Likewise in *Beloved*, certain rituals and prayers are represented as tools that the black community uses to link with ancestors to heal sickness or destroy evil spirits. When the women arrive at 124, they do not come with judgment or violence. Instead, they bring prayer,

song, and spiritual resistance. Sethe perceives as if the Clearing has come to her; their chanting is an ancestral, almost elemental force that builds in rhythm and power until it breaks through the spiritual stasis within the house. the narrator says that once their voices found “the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words,” their voices “broke over Sethe, and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (251). The women’s collective sound functions as a ritual of cleansing, a spiritual exorcism that disrupts the toxic hold Beloved has over Sethe. This moment is deeply symbolic. The women’s chanting is not merely a performance—it is an invocation of memory, solidarity, and ancestral power. Their spiritual intervention restores the moral and emotional balance that had been absent in 124. In contrast to the silence that followed Sethe’s act of infanticide eighteen years earlier, this moment signifies a communal reclaiming of responsibility and care. The women do not attempt to erase Sethe’s past; rather, they seek to lift her out of it, offering her a space to rejoin the living.

Sethe’s response to the women’s presence is equally transformative. Enveloped in their sound, she begins to envision a future beyond guilt and suffering. When Mr. Bodwin arrives at 124, she mistakes him for Schoolteacher and attempts to attack him—a moment that dramatizes her final confrontation with her trauma. Crucially, however, she steps away from Beloved in that instant, leaving her behind, as Toni describes:

> Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people. (252)

The passage above highlights the act of turning away from Beloved and toward a community witness, marking Sethe's first gesture of liberation from the psychological bondage that has defined her life. The last sentence in the quote "A hill of black people" is highly significant, it emphasizes black unity and solidarity and their role in facing and working through the trauma of slavery. Following the expulsion of Beloved and the spiritual cleansing of 124, Morrison guides us through a quiet yet powerful reassembly of fractured identities and relationships. What begins as a communal intervention ripples into individual transformation, culminating in the gradual reconstruction of a family and the emergence of renewed selfhood.

The role of the community in helping black characters work through the trauma of slavery and its role in healing fractured black identities is evident in Paul D's return to Sethe, which comes as a result of the assistance of Stamp Paid. Paul D's return to Sethe signifies the final step in healing the emotional rift created by trauma and judgment. After speaking with Stamp Paid and reflecting on Sethe's choices, Paul D no longer perceives her through the lens of moral absolutes. Instead, he recognizes her as a deeply wounded woman who, like himself, has survived the unimaginable. His return to 124 is neither triumphant nor romanticized; it is tentative and intimate. Paul D in the closing part of the novel, tells Sethe "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody, we need some kind of tomorrow" (262). He now recognizes Sethe's value as a human being whom he loves, shares history, and wish for a future with. His wish to put his story next to hers, acknowledging that both of their experiences are painful and require understanding, is directly linked to the role Stamp Paid plays in restoring her humanity. This act of solidarity highlights the novel's emphasis on the role relationality in reclaiming black identities; both at individual and collective levels.

Together, the reconfigured family—Sethe, Paul D, and Denver—does not return to a perfect or idealized state. Their healing is rather ongoing. Morrison shares in an interview with Mavis, that it's possible for an individual to forgive themselves; what she calls grace. However, grace requires going through the fire first; "you have to experience the full fall, the complete self-loathing in order to come around the forgiving of oneself". She adds, "it is when you skip responsibility, when you use a substitute emotions like guilt … feel the real thing which is shame, hatred, humiliation … that is the door, and if you get through that, then you can forgive yourself" (ThamesTv 15:12). Similarly in the novel, the idea of forgiveness is presented after Sethe's confrontation with Beloved. She is able to achieve grace, as she experienced all the substitute emotions Morrison mentions above. It is precisely this space, 124, that Morrison celebrates: the possibility of beginning again, of creating new identities through relationships, through coming in terms with memory, and most of all, through love. The final restoration of identity in *Beloved* does not depend on forgetting the past but on integrating it into a relational framework. Memory becomes bearable when shared. Pain becomes less isolating when acknowledged. And love becomes a radical tool of resistance when it dares to embrace the broken and the scarred. Through collective support and individual reconciliation, Morrison offers a vision of healing that is both deeply personal and profoundly communal. Forter's analysis of Beloved and claim similar to the previous idea. He argues that the psyche is positioned dialectically to historical factors that "insist the condition of traumatic healing is a social amelioration by which the causes of the past injuries cease to be operative in the present" (qtd. in Balaev 9).

In conclusion, the themes of healing and survival following trauma remains vague in *Beloved*. Morrison intentionally leaves the ending blurred, and ambiguous for the readers to

imagine; particularly the ex-slaves Sethe, and Paul D. Also, I argue that the open-ended nature of the end of Beloved can be read as a reflection of the nature of trauma which one cannot completely recover from or return to the people who they were before the trauma. In a conversation with Frank McCourt, Morrison response to a question about "how to survive whole in a world where we are all victims of something" by stating:

> Sometimes you don't survive whole, you just survive in part. But the grandeur of life is that attempt. It's not about that solution. It is about being as fearless as one can, and behaving as beautifully as one can, under completely impossible circumstances. It's that, that makes it elegant. Good is just more interesting, more complex, more demanding. Evil is silly, it may be horrible, but at the same time it's not a compelling idea. It's predictable. It needs a tuxedo, it needs a headline, it needs blood, it needs fingernails. It needs all that costume in order to get anybody's attention. But the opposite, which is survival, blossoming, endurance, those things are just more compelling intellectually if not spiritually, and they certainly are spiritually. This is a more fascinating job. We are already born, we are going to die. So, you have to do something interesting that you respect in between. (CTFORUM 0:16)

Beloved is a novel that portrays a sense of wholeness can only be attained by passing through traumas and experiencing it painfully, patiently, and by using memory and relationality along the way. Morrison emphasizes by the end of the book that "This is not a story to pass on" (265). In other words, the legacy of slavery and its effects on Black individuals are narratives that should neither be perpetuated nor forgotten. On one hand, it is a horrific event that disrupted, shattered and destroyed individual identities, and needs to acknowledged. On the other hand, there is no necessity for it to be transmitted to future generations; it is a trauma that should end here.

Conclusion

Scholars have repeatedly explored how historical traumas such as slavery, colonization, and racial violence disrupt identity formation and selfhood among Black communities. Within this framework, memory has often been examined as a key tool for reconstituting fragmented identities. However, this thesis sought to move beyond the existing critical paradigm by arguing that memory alone is insufficient to account for the full complexity of identity reconstruction. Instead, this study advanced the claim that both memory and relationality—the intricate network of relationships, whether familial, communal, or intimate—must be seen as interdependent mechanisms in the construction of Black identity. By drawing attention to how individual and collective relationships operate alongside memory, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how formerly enslaved individuals create meaning, recover agency, and reconstruct a coherent sense of self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Chapter One established the theoretical foundations of this argument by examining the key concepts of relationality, memory, drawing on postcolonial trauma theory. Additionally, the chapter examined how the legacy of slavery profoundly disrupted the capacity for relational connection among African Americans; black people. In this context, relationality is not limited to the idea of "community" as a homogenous or fixed unit, but rather encompasses a broader spectrum of interactions and affective ties that are integral to identity construction. The first section of the first chapter further defined relationality in African diasporic and postcolonial thought as a means of healing, resistance, and self-articulation in the wake of trauma of slavery. Through this theoretical lens, the thesis argued that Black identity formation occurs not in isolation but through the ongoing negotiation of relationships with others; whether maternal, romantic, communal, or even ghostly. The second section of this chapter focused on memory and

collective memory, exploring how the shared trauma of slavery has left an enduring impact on the Black collective identity. While collective memory often serves as a vessel of historical trauma, it also functions as a powerful source of resilience, cultural unity, and resistance. In postcolonial contexts, the act of remembering—through ancestral myths, oral histories, traditions, and communal rituals—becomes a tool of survival and solidarity, reinforcing a collective identity expressed through the inclusive pronoun "we" as Black people. Moreover, cultural practices such as storytelling, folklore, and song serve not only to preserve history but also to facilitate healing across generations. These cultural forms play a vital role in transforming collective trauma into shared strength and meaning. Finally, the third section of the chapter addressed how memory and relationality are represented in minority Black literature.

The second chapter of this dissertation provided an analytical exploration of the intersection between memory, relationality, and Black identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. At first, it showed that slavery had an enduring effect of former slaves' memories and relationships. The chapter further emphasized the profound struggles faced by formerly enslaved characters in their attempts to reconstruct identity in the aftermath of slavery's traumatic legacy. The first section offered a comprehensive overview of the novel's narrative framework, illustrating how Morrison deliberately situates her characters' memories and interpersonal relationships as complex landscapes of tension, pain, and negotiation. This section emphasized how the legacy of slavery continues to haunt specific characters, turning their everyday interactions into sites of unresolved trauma and identity conflict. The second section extended this analysis by investigating the specific ways in which collective trauma disrupted the characters' capacities for memory, relational connection, and self-construction on an individual level. Through a close reading of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, this section highlighted how each character's internal and

external conflicts stem from their fractured relationships and their attempts to survive traumatic memory. Finally, the third section addressed the broader implications of these experiences by examining how the collective trauma of slavery shaped the communal identity of Black individuals within *Beloved*. It demonstrated that the destruction of communal bonds and the fragmentation of collective memory hindered the formation of a stable group identity.

The final chapter of this dissertation shifted the analytical focus from the fragmentation of Black identities to the processes of repair, arguing that healing in *Beloved* is facilitated through memory, storytelling, and relational encounters. The first section examined the individual journey of reconciliation and the possibilities of healing when characters confront their traumatic pasts in the presence of others who bear witness to their pain. Through a close analysis of Sethe's evolving relationship with Paul D and her symbolic confrontation with Beloved, and Denver's relationship with Beloved, the section demonstrated how relational presence becomes a condition for emotional reckoning and self-restoration. Moreover, this section underscored how memory, rearticulated through dialogue, care, and storytelling, allows each character to confront suppressed trauma and move toward healing. The second section explored the theme of collective healing, emphasizing the central role of the Black community in reconstituting fractured black identities. It analyzed the women's ritual exorcism of Beloved as a communal act of solidarity that reclaimed both Sethe's agency and the community's collective memory. Additionally, the role of characters such as Stamp Paid and the supportive presence of the wider Black community illustrated how relational care and shared memory serve as powerful tools for reconstructing Black identity after trauma. This chapter ultimately argued that in Beloved, both individual and collective healing are made possible not in isolation, but through

relationality—through the act of remembering together, bearing witness, and offering care across personal and communal boundaries.

In conclusion, postcolonial Black subjects have long endured the intergenerational trauma of slavery in ways that reveal the persistent legacy of racial violence and dehumanization. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* stands as a powerful literary intervention that challenges dominant Eurocentric historical narratives—those that either marginalize the voices of the enslaved or sanitize the brutality of slavery—and instead puts the lived experiences of the formerly enslaved at the forefront. Through her profound depiction of memory and relationality, Morrison gives voice to the emotional and psychological scars that continue to shape Black identities in the aftermath of slavery. Her novel not only portrays the pain and fragmentation inscribed in individual and collective memory, but also emphasizes the role of storytelling, ancestral remembrance, and communal bonds as pathways toward healing and self-reclamation. In this way, *Beloved* affirms the existence of distinct and culturally rooted healing strategies within the post-slavery Black experience, offering a model of resilience and relational recovery that resists silence and erasure.

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تمثيل عملية بناء الهوية السوداء من خلال الذاكرة والعلاقات في بلوفد توني موريسون. في ضوء إطار نظرية الصدمة ما بعد الاستعمار، تحلل هذه الأطروحة كيف يشكل إرث العبودية مثل؛ العنف والتجريد من الإنسانية والنزوح والاستغلال والمحو الثقافي الهويات الفردية والمجتمعية المجزأة والعلاقات والذكريات والصدمات الجماعية. علاوة على ذلك، يركز التحليل على التقاطع بين الذاكرة والعلاقات، ودورها في تشكيل إحساس العبيد السابقين بالذات. يبحث هذا البحث في كيفية تنقل الشخصيات السوداء، وبشكل أكثر تحديدا، العبيد السابقين، في التوتر بين التذكر ونسيان مواجهة التجارب المؤلمة السابقة. كما أنه يدرس الديناميات العلائقية بين الشخصيات لتسليط الضوء على أن الهوية ليست مجرد بناء فردي. في نهاية المطاف، أزعم أن بلوفد هو سرد يصور الذاكرة والعلاقات كآليات حيوية يتم من خلالها بناء الهويات السوداء وفهمها في أعقاب العبودية.

Résumé

Cette étude vise à explorer la représentation du processus de construction de l'identité noire par la mémoire et le relationnel chez *Beloved de Toni Morrison.* À la lumière du cadre de la théorie du traumatisme postcolonial, cette thèse analyse comment les héritages de l'esclavage tels que la violence, la déshumanisation, le déplacement, l'exploitation et l'effacement culturel façonnent les identités individuelles et sociétales fragmentées, les relations, les mémoires et les traumatismes collectifs. De plus, l'analyse se concentre sur l'intersection entre la mémoire et la relation, et leur rôle dans la formation du sens de soi des anciens esclaves, dans la tension entre le souvenir et l'oubli d'affronter les expériences traumatisantes du passé. Il examine également la dynamique relationnelle entre les personnalités pour souligner que l'identité n'est pas seulement une construction individuelle. En fin de compte, je soutiens que *Beloved* est un récit qui dépeint la mémoire et le relationnalisme comme des mécanismes vitaux par lesquels les identités noires sont construites et comprises dans le sillage de l'esclavage.