

Historical Traumas and the Cure: Psychoanalysis of Traumatic Fixation in *Beloved*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison, one of the representative among all outstanding African American writers, portrayed before the readers the brutal life the black people had gone through and their efforts in regaining. Unlike most works that depicted the sufferings and fighting against slavery, her novels especially her masterpiece *Beloved* described the ex-slaves physical and psychological traumas rooted in the bitter past. This paper will follow the healing process that includes defining, confronting and curing the traumas until they finally recover with unity, love and self recognition.

Key words: slavery; physical and psychological traumas; fixation; emancipation

中图分类号: I106 文献标识码: A 文章编号: 1009-5039(2013)08-0217-02

The 1970s saw a Black feminist literatures flourish that produced many outstanding African American writers. Toni Morrison, as one of their representatives, portrayed before the readers the brutal life that the slaves went through as well as their efforts in regaining physical and psychological freedom. Her novels, particularly her masterpiece *Beloved*, focus on the ex-slaves' psychological problems that are rooted in the historical traumas after their emancipation. This paper explores the ex-slaves' recovery from "traumatic fixation" (Freud p.236), and the healing process will be divided into three stages: defining the physical and psychological traumas, confronting the traumas in which *Beloved* plays the crucial role, and curing them by unity, love and recognition of self and cultural identity.

According to Freud, "being fixed upon some very definite part of their past", some people "are unable to free themselves therefrom and have therefore come to be completely estranged both from the present and the future" (p. 236). As Morrison claimed, "black people don't want to remember, white people won't want to remember—it is national amnesia" (Angelo p.257). The past is like a ghost, which always haunts in the ex-slaves' minds and disrupts their present life. In order to expel the ghost and recover from the traumas, the first and necessary step is that "all pathogenic unconscious experience must be transferred into consciousness" (Freud p.244) and "to discover how persons become sick" (p.244).

The amnesia prevailing among the black people in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, typical in Sethe's family, is mainly caused by "physical abuses and trample on human dignity (Matus p.104). Physical traumas such as rape, hanging, lynching and mutilation are revealed in *Beloved*. "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore.

Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (Morrison p.251). There are also psychological torments by dehumanized means. Schoolteacher is one of the fervent carriers of enslavement. When analyzing slaves' nature, he lectured the two nephews "I told you to put her (Sethe's) human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (p.193). That directly aggravates her shame and horror at slavery and later forced her to commit infanticide to protect *Beloved* from living the life as a degraded animal.

The agonizing traumas had left the misconception that "slaves were subhuman creatures" so deep that the "neuroses" could not eradicate it. "The traumatic neuroses show clear indications that they are grounded in a fixation upon the moment of traumatic disaster" (Freud p.237). As long as the memories that cause traumas remained, the "neuroses" are unable to be cured. Trapped by the misconnection, they lacked the self-awareness even after the emancipation. Sethe's sense of self is so weak that she is constantly under *Beloved*'s manipulation and it diminishes as *Beloved* grows. After the Black Community enjoyed the feast provided by Baby Suggs, "the scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air". In their minds, "loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave who had never been lashed by a ten-year-old white boy as God knows they had" (Morrison p.137). The Emancipation Proclamation entitled the slaves to personal freedom. However, haunted by physical and psychological traumas, they were unable to live a free life. Therefore, a second emancipation that heals the traumas is needed. The key to cure traumatic fixation is to make them experience again the past that caused the traumas (Laurance 1997). *Beloved* provoked the painful past and made every member in the family confront it. Her resurrection as a living person enabled Sethe to regain her motherhood. She touched Paul D's "in-

收稿日期: 2013-02-17 修回日期: 2013-03-18

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本栏目责任编辑: 杨菲菲

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side part”, which helped him to set free the memories. Her return as a companion eases Denver’s loneliness, while her strong desire to possess Sethe forces Denver to step out and asks help from the community, which at last broke the isolation and restored the family’s connection with the outside world. *Beloved* is the incarnation of the baby ghost as well as the “60 million and more” who were sailed to America as slaves. She bore their hatred towards slave owners and slavery and accused them of their inhumane abuses by speaking out her experience in the Middle Passages. These ghosts were filled with hostility, but desperately wanted to love and being loved. Their consciousness was transmitted to *Beloved*, the ghost baby coming back to life and to gather energy from the historical traumas by recalling the painful history to regain the sense of self and to unite the people as a whole.

“History, like trauma, is never simply one’s own—History is precisely the way we are implicated in each others’ traumas” (Caruth p.187). Consequently, the traumas can be healed by uniting them together. There is a *Beloved* in every black’s mind, linking to their most miserable but unforgettable memories. If all of them are brave enough to confront its existence and aware of the fact that anything done to fight back slavery including the extreme ones is forgivable, they will be able to expel it from their mind and get back to the original state of a united community. Their cooperation forms a forceful power that surpasses the definition relating to their animal nature defined by slave owners like Schoolteacher, joins their forces and leads them to get rid of slavery and retrieve senses of self and community.

Beloved tells the grievous history of the black people who used to be slaves and reveals their process to recover from the “national amnesia”: reviewing the historical traumas that had imposed physical and psychological injuries, recollecting the agonizing traumatic experiences that stimulated by *Beloved*’s resurrection and restoring the sense of self and community by being united, caring and dignified. A bright tomorrow is made possible by taking lessons from the past, and cherishing the sacrifices and achievements

gained by the ancestors with honor and respect. By doing so can the ex-slaves conquer their fixation with historical traumas rooted in slavery and reached their goal: “the story of oppression becomes a story of liberation; a story of inhumanity has been overwritten as a story of higher humanity” (Henderson p.79).

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