



Echoes of Historical Trauma: An Analysis of *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things*

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*Abstract— This research delves into the profound impact of historical traumas arising from slavery and caste oppression on memory and identity in *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things*. Employing trauma theory as the analytical framework, the study explores the thematic intersections and narrative techniques used by Morrison and Roy to portray the effects of trauma on individual and collective identity. Through a comparative analysis, the research delves into how the temporal hybridity and non-linear structures in the novels serve to represent the complexities of traumatic experiences. The presence of repetition in both narratives will also be examined, illustrating how the characters grapple with their recurring trauma. Furthermore, the research explores how the respective traumas have fractured the identities of the protagonists, shaping their perceptions of self and others, and influencing their relationships with their families. This research provides an examination of the lasting effects of slavery and caste oppression, offering insights into the ways literature can act as a medium for exploring collective historical traumas and their resonance in contemporary societies. Moreover, the research underscores the significance of recognizing and addressing trauma in order to foster healing and resilience in individuals and communities.*



Keywords— Trauma, Memory, Identity, Slavery, Caste Oppression, Resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma is defined as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organisation and perception of the external world (Mambrol). Its study has, in recent decades, emerged aiming to unravel the intricate threads that bind traumatic events, their aftermath, and the human psyche. Within this broader discourse, literature has played a pivotal role in examining and representing trauma.

The study of trauma has had an evolving history that has shaped the understanding of its psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. The field "gained significant momentum" after World War I when the psychological scars inflicted on soldiers led to the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (Azmi). Since then, trauma studies have expanded to encompass diverse forms of trauma, including but not limited to war, genocide,

domestic violence, sexual assault, displacement, and systemic oppression.

Within the vast landscape of trauma literature, certain texts have emerged as landmarks, such as *An Untamed State* by Roxane Gay and *Mysterious Skin* by Scott Heim, offering insights into the psychological and emotional aftermath of traumatic events. One such seminal work is *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The novel confronts the harrowing experiences of slavery and their profound impact on individual lives. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Sethe, a former slave haunted by the memory of infanticide, Morrison unravels the complexities of intergenerational trauma. *Beloved* delves into the lasting ramifications of slavery on the identity of African-Americans. The novel unfolds during the post-Civil War and Reconstruction eras, painting a picture of the enduring trauma inflicted by slavery and its emotional scars.

Published in 1987, the book aligns with a resurgence of interest in African-American heritage, diverging from established historical narratives of the time.

Another notable contribution to the genre of trauma literature is *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Roy's novel explores the interplay of personal and collective trauma within the socio-political context of postcolonial India, while investigating the cultural and societal dynamics. Set against the backdrop of love, caste discrimination, and social conventions, Roy delves into the shattered innocence of the novel's protagonists, Rahel and Estha. Through their story, she explains the impact of societal structures on individual lives and the far-reaching consequences of trauma within familial and social realms. Published in 1997, the novel's characters navigate personal desires amidst societal norms. The narrative delves into power dynamics within families and challenges established narratives. Roy's storytelling captures the complexities of cultural identity and personal agency in a changing society.

By analysing these works within the broader realm of trauma literature, one can discern recurring themes and narrative techniques in navigating and processing trauma.

The intersection of trauma studies and literature provides a terrain for investigating aspects of human trauma, delving into the narratives crafted by the two authors would allow a deeper understanding of the human condition and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding trauma, resilience, and healing in literature.

II. RECURRENCE OF TRAUMA

Historically, trauma has been understood as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). By this definition most primary characters in both *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things* are victims of trauma, the trauma of slavery and caste oppression respectively. One way the trauma of the characters is realised is through repetition, which has been identified as a consequence of traumatic experiences. The “repetitive actions of the survivor” are evident in the plots created by Morrison and Roy (Caruth 4).

In *Beloved*, the actions of both Sethe and Paul D suggest the re-occurrence of traumatic experiences through its repetition in memory. Sethe, who endured the trauma of slavery and the horrific act of infanticide to prevent her children from being enslaved, exhibits repetitive mothering behaviours. Throughout the novel, she engages in acts such as breastfeeding and rocking, even after her children have grown. It suggests that she has unresolved trauma about motherhood and isn't ready to accept that her children will move on when she says “grown don't mean nothing to a

mother” (Morrison 38). She obsessively dotes on her remaining daughter, Denver, often smothering her with affection and protecting her from the outside world. Sethe's repetitive mothering can be seen as an attempt to compensate for the loss of her other children and to exert control over her past traumatic experiences. These actions reflect her unresolved guilt and desire to nurture and protect her children. These repetitive compulsions are also exhibited by Paul D, who suffered severe trauma during slavery, has a habit of touching and rubbing the iron bit that was used to restrain him during his time as a slave. This repetitive physical gesture reflects both a connection to his past and an attempt to regain a sense of control. The iron bit becomes a tangible reminder of his traumatic experiences, but also a symbol of his resilience and survival. By repeatedly touching the bit, Paul D asserts his agency and attempts to rationalise his relationship with the trauma he endured.

In *The God of Small Things*, Rahel, one of the central characters, is depicted as a chronic nail biter. This repetitive action represents her “anxiety and inner turmoil” resulting from the traumatic event of Sophie Mol's death that she has witnessed (Yasir 1317). Nail biting becomes a physical outlet for her pent-up emotions and serves as a coping mechanism in the face of trauma. Additionally, Estha, Rahel's twin brother, becomes increasingly withdrawn and silent following Sophie Mol's death and molestation in his childhood, after being coerced into lying to protect his mother. His withdrawal and selective mutism can be seen as a way to protect himself from further harm and as a response to the overwhelming nature of his trauma. The lie he tells condemns someone he cares for, which thus causes “Silence [to slide] in like a bolt” (Roy 303). Silence is said to “intensify the impact of trauma” and therefore his repetitive silence reflects Estha's struggle to process and communicate his traumatic experiences (Sidor).

The narrative technique of ‘delayed decoding’, where a character's experiences are not immediately revealed or understood by the reader or even the character themselves, has been used as a method to distance the characters from traumatic memories as a coping mechanism. Instead, the full understanding of the trauma is gradually unveiled over the course of the novel (Warodell 96). In both novels, through conversations and interactions, the protagonists start to remember and process traumatic experiences that they have been through. In *Beloved*, the presence and acknowledgement of a ghost being present is a clue to the readers that there is a somewhat tangible, overbearing traumatic memory that is affecting everyone in the household, however it is not until later that the ghost's presence is explained. In *The God of Small Things*, the instances when the readers are introduced to the twins Rahel

and Estha, their behaviour and actions do not indicate that there is something wrong, however as the plot progresses the readers find that there is a repression of traumatic memories. The overbearing presence of “something” in *Beloved* completely contrasts the silence and mystery in *The God of Small Things*. These revelations are gained through a slow and repetitive process, reflecting the characters’ journey towards a possible resolution to their trauma.

These repetitive actions highlight the characters’ attempts to navigate their traumatic pasts. They serve as outward manifestations of their inner struggles, providing insights into their psychological distress and the lasting impact of trauma on their lives. These actions, while offering temporary relief or a sense of control, also underscore the complexity of trauma and the characters’ ongoing struggle that is also visible in their disillusioned sense of time and space.

III. TEMPORAL HYBRIDITY: THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Trauma, in both the novels, is realised through, “an exile from chronological sequence” that does not fit into the traditional linear structure of a narration (Forter 71). These novels suggest that the trauma of slavery and caste oppression extend beyond time and space creating a non-linear narrative that intertwines the past and present. The approach emphasises the omnipresent nature of the trauma the characters’ have ensured in both *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things*. It also implies that the memories of traumatic experiences do not strictly follow chronological order, as they can resurface unpredictably, influencing the present and shaping the future.

In *Beloved*, the flow of time in the novel is not chronological, but rather “cyclical, sometimes allowing events to reoccur,” but from the point of view of different characters or are recounted with greater detail (Patchay 49). The structure of the novel can be understood as a way of working through trauma as events are forgotten and remembered at later points with missing details, which are then brought up later still. This approach of delayed decoding aligns with Cathy Caruth’s understanding of Freud’s work on the effects of trauma, which includes the “return of the event” to the survivor’s memories (Caruth 6). Sethe, and her stream of consciousness, shifts from one point in time to another, demonstrating the effects the traumatic memories had on her. For example, there is a notable shift of time as Sethe remembers the night she tried to kill her children (Morrison 127). The narrative abruptly moves from the present moment to the past, describing the events leading up to the infanticide. This abrupt shift illustrates the disruption in the temporal sequencing of

events, leading to a distorted or fragmented experience of past, present, and future.. The non-linear structure and therefore the trauma is also recognised in “memorial shards,” which are flashbacks and nightmares (Forter 71). Throughout the novel, there are flashbacks to Sethe’s escape from the plantation where Sethe was a slave, Sweet Home. A significant flashback of Sethe describes her traumatic experience of crossing the Ohio River while being pregnant. This flashback reveals the physical and emotional toll of her escape. The haunting memories depict her journey to freedom, the agonising hardships she went through, and the loss of her daughter. These flashbacks illustrate the scars left on Sethe’s psyche and body, emphasizing the trauma she faced, shaping her character and her subsequent actions.

The novel is punctuated with nightmares that are central to the narrative and play a significant role in shaping the characters’ experiences. Sethe experiences recurring nightmares that are rooted in her past. These nightmares often revolve around the death of her daughter, Beloved, whom she killed to spare her from a life of slavery. There are instances in the novel where Sethe is so shocked by her dreams that she cannot move on, “she woke up with the fragments of a dream lodged in the front of her forehead” (Morrison 68). This demonstrates the haunting nature of Sethe’s nightmares, which reflect her guilt and fear and serve as constant reminders of her past trauma.

Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, the story is presented through a mix of past and present experiences. The narrative displays a “disordering of time,” as the characters’ past seeps into their presents, reminding them of traumatic experiences over and over again (Outka 1). The plot is shown to be interwoven with elements of the past, present and future as the novel alternates between the time period of Sophie Mol’s drowning to Rahel and Estha’s first meeting after the incident. The novel moves between different time periods and shifts between the present, the past, and even the future, creating a web of interconnected events. In the novel’s opening chapter, the adult perspective of Estha and Rahel’s return to Ayemenem is mixed with fragmented memories of their childhood, highlighting the fluid transitions between past and present. Additionally, the use of flashbacks throughout the novel disrupts the conventional linear structure. For instance, Rahel’s recollection of Velutha’s death is interwoven with her adult life, creating a connection between past trauma and present recollection, as she is seen to be struggling with the aftermath of witnessing the death (Roy 247). The plot focuses on the childhood experiences of Rahel and Estha. One such incident occurs when the novel describes Rahel and Estha’s memories of a specific incident from their childhood: “She knew that he had been waiting for her to

remind him of the time when they were children...” (Roy 13). This reflects the nonlinear structure by alternating between the present and the characters’ childhood. Alongside the exploration of childhood memories, the novel also depicts the adult lives of Rahel and Estha. This provides insight into the consequences of their past actions and the lasting impact of their childhood traumas. The narratives are disrupted often with flashbacks, as past events return to the present (Outka 3). Roy’s authorial choice to not follow a linear narrative echoes the way her characters experience the present, always haunted by their traumatic past. For instance, there are flashbacks to the twins’ shared experiences with their cousin Sophie Mol. One such memory occurs when the children play by the river, and Sophie Mol’s drowning is foreshadowed. This flashback not only offers a glimpse into the children’s innocence but also foreshadows the tragic event that shapes their lives. As the characters in both novels revisit traumatic memories, the narratives subtly underscore the deeply ingrained unspeakability of trauma, where words often fall short in capturing the emotional scars left by their experiences.

IV. THE UN/SPEAKABILITY OF TRAUMA

The “unspeakability of trauma” is one among many responses to an extreme event” (Mambrol). This reaction to trauma is also seen in both *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things*. The character of *Beloved* embodies the unspeakability of trauma. *Beloved* is unable to express herself verbally and communicates through fragmented phrases and gestures. This is evident when *Beloved* states, “Me? Me? Me?” (Morrison 148). Her broken speech reflects the fragmented nature of the remembrance of the trauma of slavery and the challenges of articulating the horrors. The characters’ fragmented memories and the denial to speak about them also build the struggle to piece together their pasts and haunt the characters’ present lives. Likewise, in *The God of Small Things*, Roy delves into the unspeakability of trauma experienced by the characters within the confines of a deeply hierarchical and oppressive society. Ammu, the mother of Rahel and Estha, bears the weight of her traumatic experiences placed upon her. Her trauma stems from her ill-fated love affair with an untouchable caste worker. Ammu’s trauma is exemplified through her silenced voice and the inability to express her pain openly. “So she merely nodded” (Roy 57). Ammu’s nod represents the suppression of her emotions and resignation to silence. Estha’s inability to speak is also symbolic of the unspeakable trauma he has endured and the silence enforced upon him. Roy highlights Estha’s muteness as being an integral part of his personality, “Estha’s silence became his personality, his defining

characteristic” (103). The text emphasises the lasting impact of trauma and how it can render one unable to articulate their pain.

However in both the novels, the unspeakability of trauma is challenged through the characters’ ability to articulate their haunting experiences. In *Beloved*, the presence of *Beloved* embodies the unspoken horrors of slavery. Sethe’s ability to confront her past not only humanises her but also highlights the resilience of the human spirit. As the characters reveal their memories, they find healing dispelling the burden of silence. Additionally, Denver’s character embodies the interplay of trauma’s unspeakability. Isolated within her family’s past, Denver’s silence becomes a defence mechanism against the weight of their history. The horrors of slavery manifest as an unspoken presence in her life. Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, the characters grapple with the silence imposed by societal norms and personal fears. As the narrative unfolds, Estha and Rahel slowly unveil the tragic events of their childhood, trying to break the shackles of silence and repression. Their act of speaking out allows them to reclaim some agency. In both novels, the act of speaking about their traumas becomes an act of resistance against the oppressive forces that sought to keep their suffering unacknowledged, and the process of their identity development incomplete.

V. BROKEN IDENTITY

“Identity development begins when individuals identify with role models who provide them with options to explore for whom they can become” (Marcia 160). Through observed behaviours and interactions, family members exemplify various roles and identities, providing a vital framework for self-discovery and identity construction. Therefore, the broken idea of families in both *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things* is perpetuated within the protagonists’ broken identities (Heller 105).

In *Beloved*, Sethe’s family is fractured by the horrors of slavery, with her husband and two sons missing, and her daughter, *Beloved*, being murdered as an infant to avoid enslavement. Additionally, Sethe’s marriage to Halle is fraught with the oppressive realities of slavery, which shook the foundations of their relationship. The degradation she endured left her scarred, making it difficult for her to engage in a healthy partnership. The psychological scars of this broken family echo throughout the novel, as each character grapples with the weight of their past. Sethe’s identity can then be said to be profoundly affected by her experiences within a broken family. Being born into slavery, leaves her emotionally scarred and haunted by the trauma of her past. The murder of her infant daughter and

the loss of her husband and sons perpetuate a sense of disconnection and “spiritually and physically fragmented” selfhood (Powell 105). The absence of a stable marital environment hindered her ability to form strong, meaningful bonds with her children and others. Sethe’s actions and decisions are shaped by this fractured identity, resulting in a desperate need for love and connection. The other characters also have to deal with the consequences of having confused and broken identities. For Baby Suggs, despite the brief period of freedom she enjoys after being emancipated, the weight of her past weighs on her spirit. She seeks solace in the “Clearing,” a space where she attempts to find herself, however, the pervasive influence of slavery leaves her emotionally burdened till her end (Morrison 79). Even in the absence of direct influence of slavery, it indirectly still pervades the identity of the next generation. Denver, Sethe’s daughter, struggles with her identity due to the traumatic legacy of slavery passed down through her family. She grows up in isolation, haunted by the memories of *Beloved*’s presence. The intergenerational impact of slavery is distilled in Denver’s generation, reflected in the broken identities and relationships of the two sisters. Their complicated interactions mirror their struggle to make sense of self and an inability to forge meaningful relationships within and outside their generation.

In *The God of Small Things*, Estha, Rahel and Ammu are found within a scarred familial context. Contributing to the family’s fragmentation are societal constraints and rigid hierarchies. The forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha, a man from a lower caste, is central to the family’s unravelling. This transgression not only results in Ammu’s exile but also leads to Velutha’s death. Moreover, Ammu’s ill-fated marriage with an abusive and alcoholic husband left her trapped in an oppressive relationship. The twins are victims of domestic violence at their father’s house. Pappachi, their maternal grandfather, is described to be in a “black mood” often (Roy 49). The family is shown to be in perpetual dispute and argument. The emotional and physical abuse these characters endured erode their self-esteem and agency, leaving them emotionally scarred and isolated. For Ammu specifically, the constraints of societal norms and the stigma associated with her failed marriage further worsen her sense of entrapment. The weight of broken relationships follows the family, causing relationships to fracture, and a sense of displacement. The traumatic events of their childhood, including the loss of innocence and fractured familial relationships, contribute to Rahel and Estha’s shattered identities. As adults, the twins carry the burden of their past, struggling with a pervasive sense of dislocation, a longing for connection and a “fragmented” sense of self (Sibi 2527).

The contrasting ideas of motherhood in *Beloved* and *The God of Small Things* also help examine the impact of trauma on the identities of the mother and their children. Sethe, whose “best thing she was, was her children,” has a fierce maternal instinct (Morrison 308). She views her children as integral parts of herself, conforming to the image created by contemporary society of traditional mothers. Mothers are seen as nurturers in society, the moment they try to carve out an individual life for themselves, they are not celebrated mothers anymore. This is the case in *The God of Small Things*. Remembered as a loving mother by her children, Ammu’s identity is attached to her resistance to social norms by others. Her individuality receives double assaults, one for being a divorced woman, another for being an irresponsible mother. Her deviation from traditional mothering when she has an affair, makes her seem like a bad mother. Her romantic love and its ultimate downfall separates her from her children, thus it looks like Ammu placed more importance to her life instead of her children’s.

Both novels offer an interplay between personal traumas and larger collective traumas that contribute to the protagonists’ broken identities. These broken identities serve as symbols of the enduring consequences of historical trauma and the oppressive nature of societal norms on individuals’ lives.

VI. IS A RESOLUTION TO TRAUMA POSSIBLE?

A fundamental process in trauma resolution is “allowing the person to mourn and recall distressing events” (“Dealing With Trauma”). Sethe’s journey towards healing involves confronting the painful memories and traumatic events she had repressed. The appearance of *Beloved*, who embodies the spirit of her deceased daughter, acts as a catalyst for Sethe to recall and confront her past traumas. This process of recalling and confronting the past is essential for her trauma resolution, as it enables her to make sense of her feelings and memories, ultimately leading to a form of catharsis and acceptance. Furthermore, the community’s role in the process of trauma resolution is significant in the novel. The support offered by Sethe’s community of former slaves creates a safe space for her to share her painful memories and find comfort. This communal aspect of mourning, that ultimately banishes *Beloved*, plays a crucial role in Sethe trying to reconstruct her shattered identity and regain a semblance of wholeness. However in *The God of Small Things*, Rahel and Estha attempt to cope with their trauma, but the burden of societal expectations and familial pressures hinders their ability to fully mourn and recall distressing events, therefore obstructing their process of trauma resolution. The oppressive social hierarchy and

cultural norms prevent them from openly addressing their emotions and confronting the painful memories. Due to the traumatic distress, Estha becomes unnaturally “quiet” and Rahel “becomes emotionless” (Giri 1434). As a result, the twin’s unresolved trauma continues to haunt them in their adult lives. The inability to fully process their trauma perpetuates a cycle of emotional turmoil and hinders their ability to find closure and healing. Unlike in *Beloved*, there is not a definitive moment of trauma resolution and path to healing laid out in *The God of Small Things*.

In *Beloved*, Morrison illustrates that community can play a vital role in healing from trauma. Despite the horrific past experiences and failed attempts, the characters find a modicum of solace in shared narratives. Through interactions with her community, notably with Paul D and the women who come to exorcise *Beloved*, Sethe begins to confront her past. Even the ghost of *Beloved*, a metaphorical representation of shared traumatic memory, ultimately brings the community together in a collective act. Finally, Denver further embraces the communal support to suggest a potential future where the burden of her traumatic past is less dominant. Denver is also the only one who seems to fully utilise the power of the support of the community to suggest a future possibility where this trauma is less oppressive. The healing process is painful and not entirely complete, reflecting the lingering effects of trauma, but the communal attempts at resolution signify a step towards healing.

In contrast, *The God of Small Things* presents a socio-political environment that exacerbates trauma, making resolution seem unattainable. The oppressive caste system and rigid societal norms in postcolonial India add layers of complexity to personal traumas, making them seem as unresolvable. The family’s ‘history house,’ where the traumatic events occur, becomes a haunting reminder of their trauma. The house is abandoned, symbolizing the unresolved pain that the family cannot bear to face directly. In essence, the novel portrays trauma as a pervasive force that cannot be easily resolved or forgotten. It sheds light on the enduring effects of trauma on individuals and the challenges they face in breaking free from its grip.

The two novels illuminate contrasting approaches of the representation and resolution of trauma: one that emphasises the healing potential of community and shared experience, and another that underscores the aggravating role of oppressive societal structures. The novels illustrate the burden of historical trauma on individuals and communities, emphasising how both personal and shared traumatic experiences shape one’s sense of self. Both portrayals reflect the diverse ways in which trauma manifests within different socio-cultural contexts. The

confrontation with the unrepresentability and unspeakability of trauma creates an opportunity of generating healing and resilience through the two novels.

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