

# The Weight of Remembering: Guilt and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: March

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

J, Fousil Rifaya, and Parimala Devi. "The Weight of Remembering: Guilt and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S2, 2026, pp. 80–83.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-Mar.10241>

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## Abstract

*Toni Morrison's Beloved is a powerful novel that explores the deep emotional wounds left by slavery. The story focuses on how memory, guilt, and trauma shape the lives of formerly enslaved people even after freedom. This paper examines how Morrison presents psychological trauma through the character of Sethe and others, showing that remembering the past is both painful and necessary. The novel suggests that unhealed trauma can return in haunting ways, symbolized by the ghostly figure of Beloved. At the same time, Morrison emphasizes the importance of community, shared memory and storytelling in healing personal and collective pain. This study argues that Beloved portrays guilt and trauma not as weaknesses, but as human responses to extreme suffering. Through simple language, fragmented narration and symbolic characters, Morrison shows how the past continues to shape identity and survival.*

**Keywords: Guilt, Identity, Memory, Slavery, Toni Morrison, Trauma.**

Slavery was not only a system of physical control but also psychological domination. Enslaved people were denied family bonds, personal identity and emotional safety. Even after gaining freedom, many carried deep mental scars. Morrison shows that freedom does not erase trauma. Sethe and Paul D are legally free, but emotionally trapped. Their memories of Sweet Home plantation continue to control their lives. The novel reflects how slavery damages the mind and creates guilt, shame and silence that last for generations. The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is rooted in the historical reality of slavery in the United States, particularly the period before abolition. Morrison drew inspiration partly from the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who fled captivity and tragically killed her child to prevent her return to slavery. This historical background reflects the brutal conditions enslaved people faced — forced labor, family separation, violence, and the constant denial of freedom — all of which shaped the emotional and psychological landscape depicted in the novel.

The trauma in the story is not only physical but deeply psychological, showing how slavery's effects continue even after legal freedom. Characters experience haunting memories, guilt, fear,

and identity struggles, symbolized through the presence of *Beloved* herself. Morrison highlights how collective trauma passes across generations, affecting relationships, self-worth, and community healing. By blending history with personal memory, the novel emphasizes that the legacy of slavery is long-lasting, shaping both individual lives and cultural identity beyond the historical period itself. The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is rooted in the historical reality of slavery in the United States, particularly the period before abolition. Morrison drew inspiration partly from the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who fled captivity and tragically killed her child to prevent her return to slavery.

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Memory plays a central role in *Beloved*. Morrison describes memory as “rememory,” suggesting that the past is not gone but alive. Sethe tries to forget her painful experiences, but they return again and again. Sethe's memories are not peaceful recollections. They are violent, emotional, and overwhelming. She avoids thinking about Sweet Home because remembering brings unbearable pain. Morrison shows that memory can be a heavy weight that prevents healing when faced alone. Memory in *Beloved* is not a source of comfort but a constant reminder of suffering. Morrison presents memory as something that attacks the mind without warning. Sethe cannot control when or how her memories return. A simple word, sound or place can bring back painful images of violence and loss. This shows that traumatic memory does not follow logic or time; it forces itself into the present, making healing difficult

Morrison also suggests that memory becomes heavier when it is suppressed. Sethe believes that forgetting is the only way to survive, yet her refusal to remember openly gives memory more power over her life. The memories she avoids do not disappear but remain buried, growing stronger. This reflects how trauma works in real life, where unspoken pain often returns in harmful ways. The burden of memory is not limited to Sethe alone. Other characters, such as Paul D, also struggle with painful recollections of slavery. Paul D tries to lock his memories away in his “tobacco tin” heart, believing that feeling too much will destroy him. However, his emotional distance shows that avoiding memory leads to emptiness and isolation rather than peace. Morrison further presents memory as a shared burden passed across generations.

Denver, who did not experience slavery directly, still suffers because of her mother's memories. This shows how trauma can affect future generations, even those who did not witness the original suffering. Memory, therefore, becomes a collective weight carried by families and communities. Through the concept of “rememory,” Morrison challenges the idea that the past can ever be fully erased. She suggests that places and events remember themselves, even when people try to forget. This makes memory an unavoidable presence, shaping identity and behavior. In *Beloved*, memory is not just something characters recall; it is something they live with every day.

Sethe is the most deeply traumatized character in the novel. Her guilt comes mainly from killing her baby daughter. She believes she did the right thing, yet she cannot escape the pain of her action. Sethe's trauma is shown through her fragmented thoughts and emotional numbness. She has difficulty expressing love freely because love once led her to violence. Morrison presents Sethe's guilt as a result of slavery's cruelty, not personal failure. Her trauma shows how extreme conditions can force impossible choices.

Memory is a very important aspect of *\*Beloved\**. Morrison uses the term “rememory” to describe memory. This implies that memory is not something that is lost but is very much alive. Sethe tries to forget her traumatic experiences, but they keep flooding back into her mind. Sethe’s memories are not tranquil. They are violent, emotional, and overwhelming. She does not want to remember Sweet Home because remembering it gives her immense pain. Morrison portrays memory as a burden that makes healing impossible when it is experienced alone. Memory in *\*Beloved\** is not comforting but is a reminder of pain and suffering. Morrison portrays memory as something that invades the mind unexpectedly. Sethe cannot control when and how her memories come flooding back into her mind. A word, a sound, or a place is enough to recall painful images of violence and loss. This indicates that memory of a traumatic event does not follow logic or time; it imposes itself on the mind, making it impossible to heal

Morrison presents motherhood as both powerful and dangerous under slavery. Sethe’s love for her children is intense because slavery threatens to destroy family bonds. Her guilt is tied to this love. Morrison challenges traditional ideas of motherhood by showing how slavery forces mothers into tragic decisions. Sethe’s trauma comes from loving too much in a world designed to punish love. In *Beloved*, motherhood is shaped by constant fear. For enslaved women, loving their children means fearing their loss at any moment. Sethe’s love is intense because slavery threatens to separate families through sale, violence or death. Morrison shows that motherhood under slavery is not nurturing alone but filled with anxiety and helplessness. This fear deeply affects how Sethe understands love and protection.

Sethe’s motherhood is driven by the need to control her children’s future, even in extreme ways. Her decision to kill her daughter reflects a tragic belief that death is safer than slavery. Morrison does not justify the act but asks readers to understand the emotional pressure behind it. Sethe’s fear transforms love into something desperate and destructive, showing how slavery distorts natural maternal instincts.

Morrison also presents motherhood as an identity shaped by sacrifice. Sethe defines herself mainly as a mother rather than an individual. Her entire sense of purpose lies in protecting her children, which increases her guilt when she fails to do so. This self-sacrificing love leaves little space for Sethe’s own healing or self-care, intensifying her trauma. The novel contrasts Sethe’s motherhood with Denver’s growth, showing how love can change across generations. Denver initially depends entirely on her mother but later steps into the outside world to seek help. This shift suggests that while fear controls Sethe’s love, hope begins to shape Denver’s understanding of family. Morrison shows that healing motherhood is possible when fear no longer dominates love.

The theme of motherhood, Morrison highlights the emotional cost of slavery on women. Love becomes both a source of strength and suffering. Sethe’s story reveals how fear invades maternal bonds, turning love into a painful responsibility. Morrison ultimately suggests that true healing requires separating love from fear and allowing care to exist without violence or guilt.

*Beloved* is a deeply emotional novel that shows how guilt and trauma continue long after slavery ends. Toni Morrison presents memory as a heavy burden that must be faced rather than ignored. Through Sethe, Paul D, and *Beloved*, Morrison illustrates how unresolved trauma can return in destructive ways. At the same time, the novel offers hope. Through storytelling, community, and shared remembrance, healing becomes possible. Morrison reminds readers that remembering is painful, but forgetting is even more dangerous. *Beloved* stands as a powerful reminder of the emotional cost of history and the strength required to survive it.

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