Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi

(KMÜ EFAD)

Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University Journal of Literature Faculty

E-ISSN: 2667 – 4424

https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/efad

TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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Abstract

This study delves into Toni Morrison's acclaimed novel, *Beloved,* exploring the intricate ways through which trauma is portrayed and confronted via differing literary methods. Focused on the character Sethe, a former slave haunted by the psychological aftermath of her enslavement, the narrative unfolds through the haunting presence of her deceased daughter, Beloved. The study analyzes Morrison's use of storytelling as a powerful tool to convey individual and cultural experiences, emphasizing its role in shaping human identity and self-awareness. The study examines Morrison's strategic use of repetition, imagery, language, and testimony as narrative devices that guide readers through the progression of trauma, from the unconscious to the waking state. Trauma has become a focus of attention in contemporary fiction and its representability in literature has been questioned by many scholars and critics so far. This study sheds light on this ongoing debate since Morrison's Beloved is a working example of how trauma can be represented through storytelling in fiction. This study explores the impact of trauma on identity, emphasizing the challenges individuals face in expressing themselves and integrating their experiences into their personal narratives. Additionally, the study discusses the collective trauma of African American slavery as a central theme in *Beloved,* illustrating how the characters' shared history becomes a unifying force despite the painful memories associated with it. Ultimately, the article argues that Morrison's literary methods serve not only to tell a compelling story but also to actively engage readers in the profound process of comprehending and confronting trauma.

Keywords: Trauma Fiction, Trauma Narrative, Storytelling, Toni Morrison, Beloved.

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TONİ MORRİSON'UN *SEVİLEN* ADLI ROMANINDA TRAVMA VE ANLATI

Öz

Bu çalışma, Toni Morrison'un ödüllü romanı *Sevilen*'i inceleyerek, travmanın edebi yöntemler aracılığıyla nasıl tasvir edildiğini ve karşılandığını inceliyor. Eski bir köle olan Sethe'nin karakterine odaklanan bu çalışma, köleliğin psikolojik sonuçlarıyla, hayaletimsi bir formda, geçmişiyle yüzleşen bir karakteri konu alır. Hikâye, ölen kızı Sevilen'in hayaleti aracılığıyla gelişir. Çalışma, Morrison'un bireysel ve kültürel deneyimleri iletmek için hikâye anlatımını güçlü bir araç olarak kullanma şeklini analiz eder ve bu, insan kimliğini ve öz farkındalığı şekillendirmedeki rolünü vurgular. Çalışma, Morrison'un tekrar, imgeleme, dil ve tanıklık gibi anlatı araçlarını, okuyucuları travmanın bilinçaltından uyanıklık haline doğru rehberlik eden anlatı araçları olarak incelemektedir. Travma, çağdaş kurguda giderek daha fazla ilgi odağı olmuş ve edebiyattaki temsil edilebilirliği birçok bilim adamı ve eleştirmen tarafından sorgulanmıştır. Bu çalışma, Morrison'un *Sevilen*'i, travmanın kurguda hikâye anlatımı aracılığıyla nasıl temsil edilebileceğine dair devam eden bir tartışmaya ışık tutmaktadır. Çalışma, travmanın kimlik üzerindeki etkilerini keşfederken, bireylerin kendilerini ifade etme ve deneyimlerini kişisel hikayelerine entegre etme konusundaki zorlukları vurgular. Ayrıca, çalışma, Afrikalı Amerikalı köleliğinin kolektif travmasını *Sevilen*'de merkezi bir tema olarak ele alır ve karakterlerin bu acı dolu anılarla ilişkilendirilmiş olsa bile ortak birleştirici bir güç haline gelmesini açıklar. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Morrison'un edebi yöntemlerinin sadece etkileyici bir hikaye anlatma amacı taşımadığını, aynı zamanda okuyucuları travmayı anlama ve yüzleşme sürecine aktif olarak dahil etme işlevini gördüğünü savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Travma Kurgusu, Travma Anlatısı, Hikâye Anlatımı, Toni Morrison, Sevilen.

Introduction

Michelle Balaev claims that "The history of the concept of trauma is filled with contradictory theories and contentious debates, leaving both psychologists and literary scholars the ability to work with varying definitions of trauma and its effects" (2014, 2). The concept of trauma has a long and complex history, with numerous and often conflicting theories about its causes and effects. As the field of psychology and trauma studies has developed, the definition of trauma has expanded to encompass a wider range of experiences, including sexual assault, natural disasters, and systemic violence. Conflicting theories and debates characterize the history of the concept of trauma, leaving both psychologists and literary scholars to work with varying definitions and understandings of trauma and its effects. Despite these debates, the ongoing exploration of the concept of trauma has resulted in a deeper understanding of its complexities and how it impacts the individual and society.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores the intricate interplay between trauma, identity, and resilience. Rooted in the historical context of slavery, the narrative of the novel skillfully navigates the psychological landscape of its characters, particularly Sethe, a woman who grapples with the haunting legacy of enslavement. This article delves into the theoretical background of trauma, offering insights from scholars such as Judith Herman, Janoff-Bulman, and Michelle Balaev, to provide a foundation for understanding the psychological dimensions of Morrison's work. The theoretical framework laid out here serves as a lens through which Morrison's *Beloved* can be analyzed.

Beloved is a novel that encapsulates the enduring impact of trauma within the context of slavery. The study of trauma blurs the lines between past and present and Morrison's narrative brilliantly unfolds this temporal entanglement. *Beloved* is not merely a historical account; it is a rich tapestry of storytelling that exposes the wounds of the past and the complexity of individual and collective responses to trauma. The characters in Morrison's novel, particularly Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, become conduits through which readers confront the profound and enduring effects of enslavement. The oppressive figures of the Schoolteacher and Bodwin further contribute to the intricate narrative within the community Sethe eventually finds solace in after she escapes from bondage.

This study underscores the significance of representation in trauma theory in *Beloved*. Trauma is a crisis of narrative and representation. Trauma has become a focus of attention in contemporary fiction and its representability in literature has been questioned by many scholars and critics so far. This study sheds light on this ongoing debate since Morrison's *Beloved* is a working example of how trauma can be represented through storytelling in fiction. In other words, Morrison, through her literary prowess, uses storytelling not only to convey the traumatic experiences of her characters but also as a powerful tool to bridge the gap between the unknown and the known.

Through an analysis of Morrison's narrative strategies, such as repetition, imagery, and language, the layers of trauma embedded in Sethe's psyche unravel. In essence, this study aims to unravel the intricate narrative web woven by Toni Morrison in *Beloved,* examining how trauma, identity, and resilience intersect in the characters' psychological landscapes. By drawing on theoretical perspectives and delving into the literary techniques employed by Morrison, the novel presents the profound impacts of trauma on individuals and society, transcending the boundaries of historical fiction and inviting readers to engage actively with the complexities of the human experience.

1. Theoretical Background

Trauma is, fundamentally, an individual, intense response to the events that might result in psychological disruption. This could be a one-time event, such as a car accident, or it could be a repeated exposure to a traumatic situation, such as abuse. Judith Herman suggests that after PTSD, victims might live with a fragmented memory or a diminished sense of self, or might feel alienated. To clarify, Janoff-Bulman explains that traumatic responses might include shame, doubt, or guilt, or might destroy important beliefs in one's safety or view of himself/herself as decent, strong, and autonomous. Balaev defines trauma as follows:

Trauma is located within a dynamic process of feeling, remembering, assimilating, or recovering from that experience. Trauma has a range of causes and effects, which moves away from a focus on internalized isolated psychic elements found in the traditional trauma mode and toward an alternative trauma model that considers the interaction of social and behavioral constructs associated with trauma. Learning theorists explain that trait-driven conceptions of personality are less accurate measures of behavioral causes than the individual's personal history of conditioning, personal constructs, and their psychological circumstances (2014, 131).

Trauma is a wound "inflicted by an emotional shock so powerful that it breaches the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Eyerman, 2013, 42). The most common psychological reaction to the trauma of the culture is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition that develops after an individual experiences a traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, depression, and avoidance of people, places, and activities that remind the person of the trauma. The symptoms of PTSD could last for years and lead to social and emotional problems.

The concept of trauma was coined in Ancient Greece, and it could be defined as "a psychological wound" in simple terms. Trauma is related to a multitude of wounds. In this sense, trauma is supposed to occur several times. Cathy Caruth claims in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, that trauma has an "endless impact on a life" (16). She maintains that trauma is an "unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (2). Trauma is typically caused by disastrous events such as war, sexual violence, child abuse, or betrayal. However, individuals might react differently to the same events. Therefore, not all traumatic events traumatize individuals. Traumatization could be defined as the process of the formation of a mental wound.

The study of trauma has a background of "understanding how people's biology, conceptions of the world, and personalities are inextricably intertwined and shaped by experience" (Van Der Kolk and McFarlane 488). Waterman suggests that "traumatic experience often impedes, indeed contests, a distinct separation of past from present" (119). Traumatic experiences and their representations are disparate. They do not all correspond to the popular conception of "shell shock". Even C. S. Meyers, who refers to this term

in an article wherein he describes the condition and treatability of World War I soldiers, implies that it is not accurate. Trauma studies suggest that the word might have two dimensions: the first face of the term addresses physiological scars and injuries, and the second face of the term addresses psychological helplessness and despair. Greg Forter develops a two-phase model of traumatization according to which the original occurrence is not experienced as unpleasant until its redetermination, in a second moment, as a distinctly traumatic event:

A word, an observation, a sensory perception, a feeling-something in a person's present life sets off a chain of associations that lead to the first scene's unconscious "understanding", giving rise to intense anxiety precisely by making that scene significant and rendering it traumatic for the first time (264).

The victim belatedly recalls certain notions that lead to his/her trauma; however, both the event, due to its occurrence in the past, and its present recollection affect the victim. In other words, since it is almost impossible to recollect the traumatic event in its full form, the recalled version of it will inevitably be distorted and fragmented; even so, it affects the present state of the victim. Dominick Lacapra states: "No genre or discipline owns trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it" (96). However, for Caruth, trauma is a crisis of narrative and representation. Trauma theory is also an attempt to present several forms of individual suffering and individuals' responses to them. There are some cases where individuals might experience trauma because of mental stress, anxiety, and other psychological problems.

Trauma theory has evolved greatly over time, reflecting the changing understanding of trauma as a psychological phenomenon and its impact on individuals and society. Early trauma theory in literary criticism focused primarily on the psychological effects of trauma, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, as the field of trauma studies has developed, it has expanded to include broader semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns, such as the cultural representation of trauma and how trauma is represented in literary texts. The study of trauma in literature and society has become increasingly interdisciplinary, incorporating perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and political science, among others. This interdisciplinary approach has allowed for a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between trauma, power, and representation, and how trauma impacts the individual and collective psyche. The evolution of trauma theory has also shed light on the cultural and historical contexts that shape our understanding of trauma, and how representations of trauma are influenced by societal attitudes and power structures.

The evolution of trauma theory in literary criticism reflects the changing understanding of trauma as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing psychological, semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns. The interdisciplinary approach to the study of trauma has provided a deeper understanding of the impact of trauma on the individual and society and how representations of trauma are shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Representation is a major problem in trauma theory. Trauma results in "a shattering break caesura in experience which has belated effects" (La Capra 186). Concerning PTSD, van der Kolk claims that "In contrast to the actual trauma, which had a beginning, a middle, and an end, the symptoms of PTSD take on a timeless character" (172). Therefore, literary texts and other cultural productions are significant mediums to make the unknown known. Caruth suggests that traumatic events cannot be fully known at the point of occurrence. They make sense when the experiences are "told to others and heard by them" (2013, 11). In this sense, trauma involves the repetition of some painful experiences of the past voiced and reconstructed in the present.

2. The Reflections of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Beloved narrates the story of Sethe, a slave woman who bravely escapes her oppressive master, seeking refuge in a new home devoid of the shackles of slavery. Despite physically breaking free from the chains that bind her, Sethe grapples with the haunting psychological trauma inflicted by a life of enslavement. This deep-seated anguish drives her to commit a heartbreaking act—killing her own infant daughter, who later returns as a haunting presence. As the haunting unfolds, the roots of Sethe's trauma become evident, tracing back to the gruesome loss of her mother, who was denied a meaningful relationship and faced a tragic demise by hanging.

Sethe's quest throughout the novel revolves around reclaiming the severed mother-daughter bond and reconciling with the agonizing pain stemming from this severed connection. The spectral figure of Beloved personifies Sethe's trauma, and their interactions unveil the profound suffering and the void left by the absence of motherhood, affecting both the mother and the denied daughter. Additionally, other characters like Denver, Sethe's living daughter, and Paul D, a fellow former slave, contribute to the intricate tapestry of their shared experiences. Schoolteacher, the oppressive master from whom Sethe and Paul D fled, and Bodwin, a benevolent white man aiding former slaves in their quest for freedom, also play significant roles in the narrative within the community Sethe eventually settles into after she escapes from slavery.

In the novel, storytelling is a powerful narrative strategy through which human beings convey value, both on an individual and cultural level. Morrison adeptly uses narrative to transfer individual or culturally specific events into the awareness of others, facilitating a connection between individuals and cultures. The stories not only draw readers into unfamiliar experiences but also contribute to their understanding of their own identities and cultural backgrounds. Morrison's literary methods shed light on how storytelling shapes human identity and self-awareness. Her narrative is driven by the intention to humanize, inviting readers to reflect on the nature of narrative, culture, and even humanity itself. The novel strategically uses storytelling attributes to immerse readers in the experience of trauma during slavery, turning them into what is referred to as experiencers of this historical pain. Morrison's novel emphasizes the significance of storytelling and self-reflexivity. Through the narrative of the novel, readers are actively involved in the progression of traumatic events from the unconscious to the waking state. Sethe's severe trauma as a slave, initially suppressed in her unconscious, is explored through literary tactics like imagery and language structure. Repetition compulsion becomes a key element in engaging the reader on a personal level with Sethe, uncovering her traumatic story through recurring words, figures, and the nuances of what is expressed and left unspoken.

Repetition serves as the narrative backbone of the novel. The opening lines of each book - "124 was spiteful" (Morrison 13), "124 was loud" (Morrison 134), "124 was quiet" (Morrison 186) - construct the basic framework of the story's progression, revealing the evolution of trauma. The repetition of the phrase "124 was..." establishes a familiar rhythm, inviting the reader into the narrative. This repetition, normalizing the ordinary, allows emotions and a sensation to permeate the reader's waking state. Morrison skillfully engages the reader's consciousness, mirroring the psychoanalytic process where the unconscious gradually reveals itself through the primary process, veiled by displacement and condensation.

Repetition becomes a potent tool in Morrison's narrative, guiding the reader through the effects and processes of trauma. The traumatic event of separating a child from its mother, evident in Sethe's history, recurs throughout the novel. Denver's fear of her mother further reflects the destructive force of violence on the human psyche. Morrison intricately weaves a tapestry of repeated traumas within Sethe's bloodline. Morrison's literary imagery functions as dream images, conveying a pleasurable facade that disguises violent acts. The image of Sethe urinating upon encountering Beloved exemplifies the displacement of trauma through ordinary events. This separation of mother and child recurs through the literary image, mirroring the repression of Sethe's traumatic experience.

Beloved herself becomes a complex amalgamation of desire and pain, functioning as a condensed dream-literal image embodying numerous fragments from the unconscious. The reader, akin to a dream interpreter, must continuously trace backward through Sethe's stories to unravel the symbolism within this literary image. "A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity" (Balaev, 2008, 149). This speechless fright created by trauma can leave individuals feeling disconnected from themselves and their memories, leading to a fragmented sense of identity. Beloved's own fear of becoming fragments suggests an intimate connection to the condensed pain and desire that brought her into existence.

Beloved's literary imagery functions as a referential return to trauma, engaging the reader not only in Sethe's personal violent event but also in the preceding violent events that shaped her. The novel makes it clear that Sethe's trauma is entwined with the trauma of her mother. Morrison uses literary imagery to

weave a narrative that explores the denial of love in mother-child relationships, evident in Sethe's experiences and mirrored in Beloved's acts. However, trauma has "to do with a loss of identity" (Bennett and Royle, 107). For the traumatized, the meaning of the past experience undergoes a form of displacement. The self has been victimized, damaged, and traumatized. It needs to be repaired. The repair is often through compensation. Such compensation is usually in the form of acquiring a new status or role. It might be the formation of a new identity, a new profession, or a new social status. It might also be a new way of being in the world. The new identity or status is often in the form of a survivor. As the novel concludes, Morrison employs literary imagery to signify Sethe's emerging identity as a daughter. Beloved, the dream-like image, insists on the denial of love, echoing Sethe's past.

In the final literary images, Beloved assumes the characteristics of an apparition or dream image, mirroring her paradoxical nature and the recurring desire for the mother-child bond. In *Beloved*, the reader and Sethe are intricately entwined through the enigmatic nature of their shared lack of understanding. The traumatic event, incompletely grasped by Sethe, is presented to the reader with deliberate ambiguity. As the narrative unfolds, both Sethe and the reader oscillate between realms of knowing and not knowing. Sethe's exposure to violent events before the infanticide suggests that trauma predated the killing, perpetuating the separation of mother and daughter. Morrison strategically employs language, such as the imagery of birds, to hint at pre-existing trauma, engaging the reader's waking state. The reader must decipher fragments of knowledge and ignorance embedded in Morrison's narrative.

In Book II, the narrative unfolds through fragments and varying perspectives, illustrating the conscious processing of the painful event. Quotes like "Beloved. She my daughter. She mine" (Morrison, 157), "Beloved is my sister" (Morrison, 161), and "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison, 165) depict varying stages of consciousness grappling with the traumatic event. The intentional omission of a verb in the first quote engages the reader in Sethe's psyche, bringing trauma to the waking state. The possessive pronouns and absence of a verb signify a desire for the lost object without fully acknowledging the violent event. This fragmented language evolves in the second quote, where a complete simple sentence with a subject, verb, and object order emerges: "Beloved is my sister."

The traumatic experience can become so overwhelming that it creates a chasm within the individual's sense of self, hindering their ability to fully process and integrate the experience into their personal narratives. As a result, victims of trauma might struggle with expressing themselves, both verbally and emotionally, further exacerbating the feeling of disconnection and damaging their sense of identity. The traumatic experience can also leave deep-seated emotional scars that influence the victim's future experiences and relationships, further complicating their sense of self. Ultimately, the impact of trauma on identity is significant and long-lasting, challenging the individual's ability to make meaning of their experiences and understand who they are.

In *Beloved,* the inclusion of a verb brings meaning to Beloved, clarifying her identity. Despite the shift towards completeness, the use of possessive pronouns continues to engage the reader in the complex emotions surrounding Beloved's belonging. The contradiction of belonging to both Denver and the reader adds to the intricate layers of emotional involvement. Morrison's meticulous use of language in *Beloved* not only serves the narrative but also actively involves the reader in the intricate process of trauma unfolding from the unconscious to the waking state. Language becomes the conduit through which the trauma is expressed, demanding the reader's active participation in deciphering the complexities of Sethe's experience.

All in all, in *Beloved*, Morrison illuminates the harrowing legacy of African American slavery through her portrayal of characters once enslaved. Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, and Baby Suggs grapple with their inhumane experiences during slavery, inevitably revisiting their painful pasts. The introduction of Beloved, a young ghost embodying the collective history of the characters and serving as the reincarnation of Sethe's deceased baby girl, further transforms their lives. Throughout the narrative, Beloved becomes a symbol of the characters' shared history and a catalyst for confronting and remembering their undeniable past. The process of reconciliation becomes pivotal for their survival, with Beloved acting as a force

compelling them to face the trauma they seek to forget. The sense of community among these characters is significant, as their shared collective memories create a bond that becomes essential for mutual support. In the novel, the retelling of the stories by former slaves serves as a means for the following generations to comprehend the profound impact of their ancestors' experiences.

Morrison strategically emphasizes the non-linear history of African American slavery in *Beloved,* portraying it as the central theme. Despite the trauma associated with this history, it becomes the unifying factor that brings people together. The painful outcomes of slavery, while undeniable, are woven into the very fabric of their characters. Mingo (2019) claims,

After a traumatic event, it is normal to think about what has happened, and the person can either accommodate the event or assimilate it. In any of these ways the brain either stores the information as something belonging to the past or as the emotional trigger that relieves the past event and it becomes a living memory (59).

Accommodation implies a mental process where the traumatic event is acknowledged and compartmentalized as part of the past. In this scenario, the individual actively works to distance themselves from the immediate emotional impact of the event, allowing the memory to become a more detached aspect of their personal history. This coping mechanism may involve rationalization, acceptance, or finding a way to live with the knowledge of the traumatic event without being overwhelmed by its emotional weight. Morrison, in *Beloved,* tackles the issue of national forgetfulness regarding slavery and the avoidance of its painful memories as a vehicle to make her characters confront and remember their shared past. Through these painful memories, the characters find a way to heal themselves from their past traumatic pains related to their agonizing slavery.

Conclusion

A traumatic experience cannot be easily interpreted since this experience is distorted in the victim's mind. A victim who is suffering from trauma is indeed in psychological paralysis. Krystal defines this traumatic case as follows:

In the traumatic state, there is a psychological paralysis which starts with a virtually complete blocking of the ability to feel emotions and pain as well as other physical sensations and progresses to inhibition of other mental functions. The subjects themselves are able to observe and describe the blocking of affective response (101).

Trauma can be caused by a variety of events, including witnessing or experiencing violence, being a victim of violence, a witness to death, experiencing a natural disaster, being a victim of a terrorist attack, and experiencing or witnessing a traumatic birth. The concept of trauma has been extended to include non-physical injuries, such as psychological trauma or emotional shock. Adult psychic trauma is "initiated by the recognition of inevitable danger, and the surrendering to it" (Krystal, 80). It is the inability to be protected from harm and to feel safe. In this way, trauma is defined by the helplessness of the individual. Helplessness is often characterized by the inability to respond and defend oneself against a threat. A threat could be physical, sexual, or psychological. Psychic trauma could have a significant impact on an individual's mental and physical health. It could lead to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and physical health problems.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* delves into the psychological journey of a woman as she grapples with her trauma. Morrison employs literary methods to articulate the unspeakable, inviting readers to engage and listen actively. Through these methods, healing begins by granting individuals the right to testify to their stories and fostering an understanding of those narratives. The essence of storytelling lies in conveying the true experience of events, operating distinctively from merely reporting an incident. Morrison strategically uses storytelling and literary techniques in *Beloved* to parallel Freud's psychoanalytical theories, exploring the psychological structures and processes within the unconscious. These methods, including repetition, imagery, language, and testimony, work together to guide readers

through the learning process about the traumatic effects of a violent act. The narrative aims to lead readers toward resolution and comprehension of the initial violent act— the separation of mother and child— marking the first step in the dehumanization of the character Sethe.

These psychological methods, translated into literary tactics, establish an intimate connection between the reader and the violent act, as well as with Sethe. Readers actively participate in learning alongside Sethe's conscious mind, unraveling material stemming from the unconscious. By engaging readers as experiencers, Morrison exposes them to the pain and symptoms of trauma, fostering an understanding of the conditions that lead to and perpetuate the originating violent act. This comprehension extends to recognizing how such acts disrupt an individual's ability to self-identify and understand the truth of their history, hindering the authorization of one's sense of self.

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