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Identity Crisis in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Dedication

We dedicate this study to our beloved parents for their understanding and overwhelming support financially and emotionally, and for being a constant source of love and inspiration. To our siblings for baring with our emotional mood swings due to the study pressure. To our closest friends for encouraging us to thrive through this amazing college experience by making it the most fulfilling experience. To those who we can rely on without getting disappointed.

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Abstract

This study examines the theme of identity crisis in Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved* examining how the characters relationships with one another and their self-perception are shaped by the trauma of slavery. By analyzing the fractured identities of Sethe, Paul D., Denver and Beloved. Also, this study examines how the historical trauma of enslavement transcends physical bondage into psychological captivity drawing on Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, Post-Colonial Theory, and CRT. Morrison emphasizes the fight for self-definition in a society that consistently marginalizes African Americans by portraying the lasting effects of slavery on African American identity through non-linear storytelling, lyrical prose, symbolic elements, and in-depth psychological exploration. Although characters autonomy was taken away by slavery the study contends that memory and individual agency are essential resources for identity reconstruction. In post-slavery African American literature this study adds to larger conversations about trauma memory and identity formation by examining the novel's themes and narrative structure.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize-winning author renowned for her exploration of African American history and identity, centers her novel *Beloved* (1987) on the psychological aftermath of slavery. Drawing from the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her child to prevent her return to bondage, *Beloved* examines how trauma fractures identity and haunts survivors long after emancipation. The story is set after the civil war during the Reconstruction Era. Morrison presents together historical trauma with individual and societal identity crisis in her narrative by using lyrical prose, non-linear storytelling, and in-depth psychological exploration. *Beloved* significance stems from its ability to draw attention to the lingering effects of slavery on community motherhood and identity. (Seligman, 1993)

To illustrate the unavoidable nature of historical trauma the book combines realism symbolism and supernatural elements. Morrison uses a blend of realism, symbolism and supernatural elements to showcase the inescapable nature of historical trauma. Through applying unconventional literary structures, she shows a great commentary on identity formation against historical oppression by emphasizing the African American experience especially that of African American women. As Hinson, D. S. (2001) argues, the novel's narrative structure and themes highlight the communal and individual struggles with memory, trauma, and identity formation. The theme of identity crisis in the novel is a strong reflection of the emotional, psychological and cultural dislocation that the African Americans faced in the aftermath of slavery.

Trauma of slavery did not only strip away the personal identity of enslaved people but also left them in a state of confusion and fragmentation as their constant trials to rebuild their sense of self in a society that continuously marginalized them. In order to analyze the themes of the novel the application of three theoretical frameworks will be used: Erikson's Psychosocial Development

Theory Erikson (1968): A psychological model proposing that identity formation hinges on resolving conflicts across life stages. Failure leads to role confusion and fractured selfhood. Post-Colonial Theory Fanon (1961): Explores how systemic oppression internalizes self-hatred and alienation in colonized subjects, perpetuating psychological subjugation.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) Delgado & Stefancic (2017): Examines how race and power structures shape identity, emphasizing systemic racism's role in marginalizing communities.

In this study the struggle of the characters in *Beloved* to establish stable identities after slavery is examined. It looks at how their relationships and self-perception are impacted by trauma memory and social marginalization. According to the novel the lingering effects of slavery make psychological freedom elusive even though physical freedom may be attained.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1- How does slavery contribute to the identity crisis experienced by the characters?
- 2- How does trauma shape the characters' self-perception and interpersonal relationships?
- 3- How do the characters attempt to reconstruct their identities despite societal oppression?

1.3 Research Objectives

The study intends to investigate how Morrison depicts the challenges of identity formation in *Beloved* study the effects of trauma and slavery on the characters self-perception, investigate the role that memory plays in forming identity, and ultimately add to the body of knowledge on identity reformation in African American literature written after slavery.

1.4 Research Organization

This research is organized into six main chapters, each one is made to explore the relationship between trauma, identity, and literature in *Beloved*. Starting with the introduction we will overview historical context the research questions and the aim of the research. In the literary review we will focus on existing scholarly articles, research papers, and theories that are relative to identity crisis. The methodology outlines the qualitative approach and theoretical frameworks usage.

The discussion chapter delves into the analysis of the characters Sethe, Paul D, Denver and Beloved. The results chapter summarizes the findings of the research. Lastly in the conclusion, finalizing the research we consider how *Beloved* adds to broader discussions about the psychological effects of slavery.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The topic of identity crisis in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* has been widely explored in academic literature, many scholars have delved and analyzed this topic based on their points of view. Despite the variety of the many studies on this topic, most of them came to one conclusion, which is that the characters have been traumatized severely by their past through enslavement, that they found it extremely difficult to adapt to their reality even after gaining freedom. Mohammed (2018). Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the post-colonial theory, and the critical race theory are few of the theories that deal with how impactful those elements can be on the identity of the characters of the novel *Beloved*.

Erikson, Erik H. (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development explains how individuals form their identity by resolving conflicts at various stages of life. In *Beloved* we witness characters as Sethe and Denver who must reconcile their past with their present to move forward. The characters are pressured by society in shaping their identity, the dehumanization they went through was an enough reason to create a collective trauma that prevents them from a healthy identity.

Fanon, Frantz (2004) Post-Colonial Theory examines how the effects of colonialism and oppression continuous even after the end of slavery. In *Beloved*, characters like Sethe and Paul D. are haunted by the trauma of slavery, *Beloved* haunting Sethe symbolizes how the past continuous to be present that reflects the ongoing psychological and cultural effects of systematic violence.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant culture modes of expression. Through this theory Scholars attempt to understand how victims of systematic racism are affected by cultural perception of race and how they are able to represent themselves to counter prejudice, meaning that how race can affect history, power dynamics, and identity shape the lives of African Americans, and this is shown through Sethe trying to take control over her own life and her family's legacy, which is a form of resistance against the systematic forces that continuously dehumanized African-Americans.

As provided above, we can see these theories have a specific idea on identity crisis in *Beloved*, thus, it can help us answer the key research questions with the provided from the text from the novel as a supporting data. Since the novel delves into a plethora of issues that revolves around identity crisis, such as psychological, psychosocial, racial, and post-colonial matters. That has a direct and severe impact on the development of the identities of the characters, and the trauma that have been carried from the aftermath of slavery.

There are scholars like Krumholz (1999) argue that Morrison's use of memory and supernatural elements such as ghosts symbolizes how inescapable historical trauma is. The novel demonstrates how the past keeps haunting the characters like Sethe and Paul D., reinforcing their broken sense. As for Schapiro (1991) adds by analyzing the psychological fragmentation in *Beloved*, employing that Morrison's characters struggle with defining their identities due to the social and emotional bonds shattered by slavery. The trauma they experience stops them from building stable identities, aligning with Erikson's theory that unresolved conflicts lead to role confusion.

Further, Bouson (1999) delves into the themes of racial shame and trauma, focusing on how Morrison portrays the internal suffering of African Americans post-slavery. The shame linked with their past dehumanization continues to affect their relationships and self-worth. This aligns with Fanon's argument that systemic oppression fosters self-hatred and alienation, which persists even after physical emancipation.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Using a qualitative research method this study is focused on textual analysis to investigate how identity struggles and the lingering effects of trauma and slavery are portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Since it enables a thorough examination of the novel's themes, characters development and narrative devices a qualitative approach is suitable, in addition, this research utilizes a theoretical framework that draws from post-colonial theory, critical race theory, and Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory in order to analyze the characters fragmented identities.

The main source for the study is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Secondary sources are scholarly articles, books and critical essays that talk about trauma, African American literature, and identity issues. The data is collected through thematic analysis and detailed reading of the novel, with emphasis on significant passages that provide examples of identity crisis, memory, and the haunting presence of the past. In addition, the theoretical framework is used as support to help answer the key research questions and contextualize the findings.

Post-Colonial theory examines how the aftermath of colonialism and systemic oppression persists even after abolishing slavery. Erik Erikson's psychosocial Development Theory stages are applied to the characters to explore how their traumatic experiences with slavery rattle their capability to form stable identities. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to analyze how identity formation is impacted by race and racism.

Textual analysis is used in the study with an emphasis on important narrative components like shifting timelines, symbolism, and fragmented storytelling. In the analysis the following steps are used:

As for the identifying key themes, the novel is scanned for recurring themes that relate to identity, trauma, memory, and race. Character Analysis: using the theoretical frameworks as a guide the psychological and emotional challenges of Sethe, Denver Paul D., and Beloved are examined.

Narrative structure and style: Morrison's way of depicting identity crisis through non-linear storytelling shifting perspectives and supernatural elements are analyzed.

As for contextual interpretation, the findings are placed in the framework of African American literary traditions and historical facts which connects the novel's themes to more general, social, and cultural concerns.

Chapter Four

Discussion

In this chapter we will delve into discussing our research question and analyzing the textual evidence and linking it to the used theoretical framework stated previously. Since Morrison showcases identity as a shattered and evolving concept, deeply affected by the trauma of slavery. Sethe, Paul D., Denver, and Beloved each one of them struggles with self-definition, haunted by previous horrors and societal rejection. This helps answer the first question.

Slavery contributes to the identity crisis experienced by the characters as it robbed the characters of their self-perception, distorted their relationships with their families, and their autonomy. The quote stated by Sethe “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison, 2004, p. 187) signifies how her identity is shaped by the paradox of love and violence and another character who had similar issues Paul D. who struggled to find his masculinity again after many years of dehumanization. Furthermore, As Krumholz (1999) explains, Sethe’s identity is linked to her past trauma, making it extremely difficult for her to move on. Her past comes back to haunt her in the form of a ghost of her daughter Beloved, which symbolizes the weight of historical memory.

Additional take on the matter from Schapiro (1991), the characters are emotionally disconnected because of their past experiences with slavery. Paul D’s metaphorical statement “tobacco tin heart” (Morrison, 2004, p. 85), the word heart embodies how he suppresses his pain, a mental coping mechanism that stops his emotional growth. Similarly, Sethe’s obsessive motherly love stems from her guilt and loss, reinforcing her internal war between survival and self-destruction. How does trauma shape the characters’ self-perception and interpersonal relationships? Morrison explores how trauma rattle’s identity and human connections. Beloved resembles this lingering pain, coming back to remind Sethe of her past. Morrison writes, “She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands” (Morrison, 2004, p. 60), reinforcing Beloved’s unnatural life as both a memory and a ghost.

Denver, who grows up inside the shadow of this haunting presence, firstly she isolates herself however she later regains her agency. Morrison's representation of Denver's transformation which displays that identity formation needs facing and overcoming trauma. Also, Paul D. had difficulties with intimacy and vulnerability because of his traumatic past. Morrison shows his pain: "He wants to put his story next to hers" (Morrison, 2004, p. 325), showing his craving for connection in spite of his instincts to restrain his emotions.

The characters attempt to reconstruct their identities despite their societal oppression. The characters kept struggling with defining themselves even after gaining their freedom outside the topic of slavery. Sethe cannot separate her identity from her past, while Paul D's is searching for his stability it leads him to restrain his emotions. Denver, on the other hand, comes out as a symbol of hope, overcoming her family's trauma to set her own future. Morrison illustrates her resilience: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother" (Morrison, 2004, p. 90), reflecting her growth and new understanding of identity. According to Bouson (2000) states that *Beloved* not only does it explore trauma but also the shame paired with racial dehumanization. Paul D's trying to reclaim his masculinity, Sethe's is desperate to protect her children, and Denver's parting away from her family's trauma all reflect attempts to find self-identity in a world that keeps denying them autonomy. Morrison presents Denver's growth as a type of resistance, to prove that even though the scars of slavery remain, healing is possible and self-definition can still be achieved.

The theme of memory works as both a source of pain and a tool for identity reformation. Morrison uses "rememory" to illustrate how in the present past trauma still lingers. As Sethe explains, "Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place the picture of it stays" (Morrison, 2004, p. 44). This reflects the novel's central argument: slavery's psychological wounds linger long after its abolition. Paul D's repression of memory contrasts with Sethe's obsessive recollection, highlighting the struggle between forgetting and remembering as means of self-preservation. Morrison's statement, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (Morrison, 2004, p. 325), suggests that self-acceptance and healing are possible, even in the face of overwhelming trauma.

Beloved's presence amplifies memory's power, as she forces Sethe and Denver to confront buried emotions. As Morrison writes, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard." (Morrison, 2004, p. 105), reinforcing Beloved's role as a living memory of both personal and collective suffering. Morrison's use of non-linear storytelling and shifting perspectives immerses readers in the psychological fragmentation experienced by the characters. Her blend of realism and supernatural elements reinforces the idea that trauma defies conventional logic and chronology. The fluidity of time in *Beloved* reflects how enslaved individuals were denied personal histories and stable identities.

Beloved's perspective blurs the boundaries between past and present, as seen in her disorienting monologues: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (Morrison, 2004, p. 236). This reinforces the novel's exploration of identity as fluid, shaped by both personal and historical trauma, a key concept in Post-Colonial Theory, where the past continuously shapes the present.

Furthermore, Critical Race Theory helps to contextualize the systemic oppression that persists beyond the characters' immediate experiences. Morrison underscores this through Baby Suggs' realization: "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison, 2004, p. 5). This highlights how trauma is not just personal, but a collective burden carried by the African American community. The denial of history, the continued marginalization, and the forced erasure of identity reinforce the argument that societal oppression extends beyond physical enslavement into psychological captivity.

This ongoing captivity is further explored through the psychological chains that continue to bind the characters even after physical enslavement has ended. Morrison's depiction of Paul D's struggle to assert his autonomy his inability to believe in his self-worth beyond what white oppressors dictated aligns with Fanon's concept of the 'colonized mind.' The remnants of systemic oppression force characters into cycles of self-doubt and fragmentation, reinforcing Erikson's notion that unresolved identity crises can extend across generations. Denver's eventual break from this cycle signals the possibility of reconstructing identity outside of historical trauma, suggesting that while oppression endures, agency and self-definition remain attainable.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory also emphasizes the importance of generativity versus stagnation, a stage that is evident in Sethe's journey. Her struggle with motherhood, particularly her act of infanticide, reveals her attempt to protect future generations from the trauma she endured. Morrison captures this complexity in Sethe's realization: "She was trying to outhurt the hurter" (Morrison, 2004, p. 278). This moment embodies Erikson's belief that identity formation is deeply connected to one's contributions to future generations. By reclaiming her agency and seeking healing, Sethe challenges the cycle of inherited trauma, illustrating the potential for personal growth despite deep psychological scars.

Chapter Five

Results

This study has examined the theme of identity crisis in *Beloved*, demonstrating how Toni Morrison intricately weaves trauma, memory, and oppression into the characters' struggles for self-definition. Through an in-depth analysis of Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and *Beloved*, it has been revealed that identity formation in the aftermath of slavery is an arduous process, shaped by historical and psychological wounds.

5.1 The Lingering Psychological Effects of Slavery

The findings indicate that slavery inflicted lasting psychological scars on African Americans, disrupting their sense of self and their ability to form stable identities. Sethe, as a mother and survivor, embodies this struggle, as her past trauma continually haunts her present. Her identity is inextricably linked to the suffering she endured, and her actions—such as the tragic infanticide—stem from an internalized sense of fear, love, and guilt. Paul D, on the other hand, represents the masculine side of this crisis, where systemic dehumanization leads to emotional suppression and self-doubt. His struggle to reclaim his manhood is indicative of how slavery eroded the self-worth of enslaved individuals.

5.2 Memory as Both a Curse and a Tool for Healing

A major theme that emerged from this study is the dual nature of memory—while it serves as a source of pain, it is also a necessary tool for identity reconstruction. Morrison's concept of "rememory" illustrates how trauma is never truly erased but continues to shape individuals and communities. Sethe's inability to forget the past keeps her bound to her suffering, while Denver's eventual confrontation with her history allows her to break free and redefine herself. *Beloved*, as a manifestation of the past, reinforces the idea that unresolved trauma remains a haunting force in identity formation.

5.3 The Role of Societal Oppression in Shaping Identity

The analysis shows that the societal oppression of African Americans extends beyond physical enslavement, continuing in the form of racial marginalization and psychological captivity. The application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in this study highlights how systemic racism dictated

the characters' sense of self, limiting their ability to forge new identities outside the constructs of oppression. Paul D's internalized self-doubt, Sethe's feelings of worthlessness, and Denver's isolation all stem from a history of racial subjugation that persists even after emancipation.

5.4 The Possibility of Identity Reconstruction

Despite the overwhelming trauma depicted in *Beloved*, the novel also presents a path toward healing and self-definition. Denver's transformation from an isolated, fearful girl into an independent, self-assured woman symbolizes the potential for identity reconstruction. While Sethe and Paul D continue to struggle, their journeys highlight the slow, painful process of reclaiming one's sense of self. Morrison suggests that identity is not fixed but rather an evolving process, influenced by memory, trauma, and the ability to confront one's past.

5.5 Morrison's Narrative Techniques as a Reflection of Identity Crisis

The fragmented storytelling, shifting perspectives, and use of supernatural elements in *Beloved* serve as literary reflections of the characters' fractured identities. Morrison's narrative style mirrors the chaos and instability experienced by those who have endured historical trauma. The non-linear structure emphasizes how the past continuously intrudes on the present, reinforcing the theme that identity crises cannot be resolved without acknowledging and processing historical pain.

The results of this study reinforce the idea that identity crises in *Beloved* stem from both personal and collective trauma. Slavery's psychological wounds persist long after physical liberation, manifesting in fractured self-perception, emotional suppression, and generational pain. However, Morrison also offers hope through the character of Denver, demonstrating that while history leaves scars, healing and self-definition are possible.

Ultimately, *Beloved* serves as a powerful exploration of identity reconstruction, urging readers to recognize the deep-seated impact of oppression while also acknowledging the resilience of the human spirit. The findings contribute to broader discussions on trauma, memory, and self-identity in African American literature, emphasizing the importance of confronting historical pain as a step toward personal and communal healing.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This study has looked at how *Beloved* depicts the difficulties of forming an identity in the years following slavery. Morrisons characters illustrate the deep psychological scars caused by slavery and show how past trauma affects one's sense of self and relationships with others. Sethe's identity crisis is a result of her ambivalent roles as a mother survivor and guilt-bearer. Paul Ds emotional suppression serves as an example of how dehumanization undermined masculinity and self-worth. Despite generational trauma Denver's development shows that self-definition and healing are achievable. While *Beloved* on the other hand highlights the impossibility of completely escaping the past by symbolizing the still-present ghost of slavery.

Morrison skillfully illustrates the brittleness of identity under oppression with his inventive narrative techniques which include fragmented storytelling shifting perspectives and supernatural symbolism. In addition to reflecting history her book offers a deep psychological analysis of the long-lasting impacts of trauma. Finally, *Beloved* highlights how African Americans have persevered through both personal and historical hardship. It forces readers to recognize the difficulties in rebuilding one's identity and the need to face up to painful pasts. The study's conclusions reinforce Morrisons work as a foundation for examining trauma memory and identity in African American literature and add to larger conversations on these subjects.

6.1 Limitations of the Research:

The reliance on the theoretical frameworks (Erikson, CRT, Post-Colonial Theory), might have narrowed down the analysis, by overlooking other theories with relevance to our topic. The qualitative approach limited our options generally. The similarity among most articles, research, and journals made it difficult to obtain a wider range of viewpoints on the issue of identity crisis. The study's focus was limited to *Beloved* not comparing it with other works made it difficult to get more insights on identity crisis within a similar context.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research:

Future authors could incorporate additional theoretical lenses. Comparative studies with other Morrison novels or works by other authors could provide a broader insight.

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