

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: A Paragon of Trauma Fiction

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Abstract: Morrison's *Song of Solomon* could be viewed as a paragon of trauma fiction. Since no narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way, Morrison tries to depict the overwhelming power of trauma through a non-linear narrative, episodic delivery, and flashbacks. Accordingly, the readers are compelled to concoct the disjointed and fragmented memories in order to solve the riddle of the text, in which past, present, and future are intermingled. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is bound up with psychoanalytic formulation. The figuration of trauma in the ghost extremely resembles Freud's assertion about the return of the repressed traumatic past. Morrison's narrative clearly depicts the belated experience of trauma through resurrecting the ghosts of slavery. The analytical-qualitative scrutiny of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* not only corroborates the characters' traumatic experiences but also demonstrates the techniques Morrison employs in order to implicitly depict the trauma of slavery and its after-effects in its hypotext.

Keywords: Morrison, trauma, belatedness, return of the repressed, Sigmund Freud.

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to elaborate the reasons why Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is capable of being viewed as a paragon of trauma fiction. This article attempts to reveal the implicit potentiality and consequences of reading Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in the light of Sigmund Freud's trauma theories. Since trauma is the central premise of this essay, it is essential to look at the origin of this term in psychoanalysis.

Modern understanding of trauma began with the work of a British physician John Erichsen, who during the 1860s identified trauma syndrome in victims suffering from the fright of rail way accidents and attributed the distress to shock of the spine, which continued to be a topic of investigation for the next fifty years (Leys, 2000, p.3). The term trauma attained a more psychological meaning when it was employed by Joseph Breuer, Sigmund Freud and other prominent figures to describe the wounding of the mind as the result of a sudden, unexpected, emotional shock. Trauma was thus defined as "a widespread rupture or breach in the ego's protective shield, as a situation of dissociation or absence from the self, since it appeared to shatter the victim's cognitive capacities and made the traumatic experience unavailable for a certain kind of recollection" (Leys, 2000, p.23).

In 1893, Freud in "On the Psychical mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena", co-authored with Joseph Breuer, described a traumatic event as any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. Freud and Breuer argued that "any experience which calls up distressing effects- such as those of fright, anxiety, shame, or physical pain- may operate as a trauma of this kind" (SOH, 1974, p.54). Freud has exemplified the train collision in order to explain the distressing effects of a physical accident on the integrity of the survivor's mind. Since the same physical causation, specifically in accidents, might eventuate in other psychical hysterias, Freud has generalized the concept of train collision to any powerful excitation from outside, that breaks through the protective shield. Considering Freud's implication about the distressing effects of an external shock, it can be concluded that the brutal system of slavery in Afro-American societies has operated as a trauma of this kind, that has shattered the integrity of the slaves' identity, which has been depicted obviously in Morrison's novels, and to which the characters are absolutely subjected.

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", published in 1920, Freud elaborates [on] "repetition compulsion", by which he means psyche constantly returns to the traumatic scenes over and over again, in hope of finding ways of mastering the trauma belatedly (SE, 1920, p.51). Accordingly, no narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way, which is a blatant quality of Morrison's narrative, because traumatic experience was initially defined as "outside the range of normal human experience, something that might be grasped as a gap between impact and understanding" (SOH, 1974, p.79). Trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or absence from the self. It was understood as an experience that, because it appeared to shatter the victim's cognitive-perceptual capacities, made the traumatic experience unavailable for a certain kind of recollection, and accordingly at the time of the occurrence of the injury the sufferer is usually quite unconscious that any serious accident has happened to him. Not having truly known the threat of traumatic experiences in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. Thus the shock of the survivor's mind is not because of the direct experience of the traumatic event, but rather because of the missing of the direct experience, and it is this lack of direct experience which becomes the basis of the repetition.

In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud attempted to illustrate the idea of traumatic rupture along with "latency". In this work, a great study of Jewish history, Freud compared the history of the Jews with the structure of trauma, in which the borderline between fact and fiction is not obviously apparent. In this work, Freud mainly focused on the notion of return and departure in order to frame his text. Regardless of the biblical account, in which Moses was one of the captive Hebrews who finally became their leader and led them out of Egypt back to Canaan, Freud outrageously claimed that Moses was an Egyptian prince or priest who converted to Monotheism, who had been murdered by Israelites after leading the Exodus out of Egypt. Considering Freud's words, Moses was a follower of an Egyptian pharaoh and his sun-centered monotheism. He became a leader of the Hebrews, after the pharaoh's death, and brought them out of Egypt in order to preserve the waning monotheistic religion. Freud believed this return is not a matter of the preservation of Hebrew freedom, but of the monotheistic god. By which

he meant that Exodus was not so much the return to a freedom of the past, rather it was a departure into a new future of monotheism.

In this rethinking of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, the linear sequence of time seems to be broken, which means the future of monotheism is no longer continuous with the past, however, it is united with it through a radical break or discontinuity (MM, 1939, p.89). In other words, this radical break narrates the Jewish history through a non-linear narrative. Freud claimed that after the Egyptian Moses led the Hebrews from Egypt, they murdered him in a rebellion, and in the passing of two generations, repressed the memory of that murder. During the period, Hebrews resembled his god to a volcano god, named Yahweh, and resembled his act of liberation to the acts of another man, the priest of Yahweh (also named Moses). Freud believed the most significant moment in Jewish history is not the return to freedom, but the repression of a murder and its effects. For Freud the monotheism that Judaism developed belatedly, is based on a repressed and forgotten murder of a stranger at the hands of the Israelites. Through replacing historical facts with personal indications, Freud implicitly suggests the impossibility of direct access to historical reference as well as traumatic memory. Jewish historical memory in *Moses and Monotheism*, is depicted as a matter of distortion, through the fictions of traumatic repression, which makes the historical event available indirectly, due to latency.

Freud defines latency as the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent, just like the period of repression between the murder of Moses and the return in Jewish history. As Freud puts it; "since the murder is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (MM, 1939, p.109). Freud calls this belatedness, incubation period, during which the experience of trauma seems to occur, not in the forgetting of a reality that can never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience. The belated experience of trauma in Jewish monotheism generalized the Jewish history, as a history larger than a single individual or a generation. It could be construed in another way that the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical as long as they implicate others. Consequently, Jewish traumatic history did not only belong to Hebrews, but to the following generations, since the repressed

memory of the murder had remained buried in the unconscious of Jewish people and the future generation.

Discussion

Morrison is a prominent literary figure who has depicted the murderous legacies of slavery in America. The trauma of slavery appears as the central premise of her works, specifically in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. Although some critics have tried to look at Morrison's *Beloved* as paradigmatic of trauma fiction, but the idea could also be generalized to *Song of Solomon*. Roger Luckhurst, in his book titled *Trauma Question*, exemplifies Morrison's *Beloved* as paradigmatic trauma fiction due to three reasons, however, the idea, could be generalized to *Song of Solomon* as well. Luckhurst believes there are three aspects that make Morrison's novels paradigmatic; the disarticulation of linear narrative, figuration of trauma in the ghost, and reflections on the transgenerational transmission throughout the history (Luckhurst, 2008, p.91).

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison depicts the belated experience of trauma not only in the shape of brutal slavery but in the form of a traumatic loss. Milkman Dead is Morrison's first male hero, who is in search of the legacy of slavery. He needs to reclaim his legacy in order to solve the riddle of his life. Milkman is the youngest child and only son of Ruth and Macon Dead. Caught between his father's materialistic lifestyle and his aunt's (Pilate) traditional and unconventional values, Milkman is mentally enslaved and spiritually dead, and consequently headed for a quest, evoked by his father's greed who claimed Pilate's illusory gold. The novel is replete with various character's flashback to their pasts, each of which is a principal key to the puzzle Milkman must solve. Throughout the journey, Milkman discovers the poignant secrets of his parent's life. He learns that his father, Macon II, and his sister, Pilate, ran away from home after their father, Macon I, was murdered for protecting his prosperous farm, Lincoln's Heaven. They each went their own way and ended up in the same unnamed Michigan town. Macon refused to speak to her sister, whom he feels is an embarrassment to his social position in the town. Ruth, Milkman's mother, the dead doctor's daughter, is a fragile woman who copes with her empty life by escaping to a fantasy world in order to refrain from the memory of her father's loss. Alienated from himself and from his family,

the thirty year old Milkman leaves Michigan in search of Pilate's illusory gold, which Macon is sure his sister hid somewhere she lived before coming to Michigan.

Milkman's journey begins with his arrival in Danville, Pennsylvania, where his grandfather, Macon I, has built a prosperous farm, Lincoln's Heaven. Unable to find the gold in Danville, he makes his way to Shalimar, Virginia, where he meets his father's people and discovers the true spiritual meaning of his heritage. Milkman's journey is a search for love and identity, which can be construed as a love song to young black men, who like Milkman himself, are doomed to spiritual death and self-alienation unless they learn to read and understand their history.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* implicitly demonstrates how history is constructed and reproduced like other narratives; since Morrison has mingled fact and fiction in order to resurrect the past and give all those unburied people a burial, as if she intends to pay a historian's debt to those forgotten victims; that is why she both historicizes fiction and fictionalizes history. In this regard, Morrison is comparable to Freud, who has written *Moses and Monotheism* regardless of the biblical account, in which he has fictionalized the Jewish history as a matter of distortion and a murderous act at the hands of the Isrealites. Both Freud and Morrison have demonstrated how the reconstruction of the past provides the possibility of reconceptualization of the future, which is the power of history-making. Morrison's works as she claims; "bears witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded" (Andrews, 1999, p.38). However, she believes this process is not feasible if we don't keep in touch with the ancestors which results in getting lost. Circe, in *Song of Solomon*, is representative of the ancestor who seems to be immortal and clearly withstands the passage of time. She guides Milkman to find his proper place in the past.

In *Song of Solomon*, the genealogy of Macon's family is marked by the murder of Macon I, Jake, by whites for trying to protect his land. Jake's father, Solomon, Milkman's great-grandfather, flew back to Africa, left his wife, Ryna, and their twenty one children. Morrison depicts Milkman as the only member of his family who has the potential to fly, the act that symbolizes movement from the material world toward a more spiritual and free life. Pilate, Milkman's

aunt calls milkman, "a little bird", which implies that milkman will eventually proceed the imposed limits placed on black people, and when four-year-old Milkman finds out that "only birds and airplanes could fly" he lost all interest in himself. Being evoked by Pilate's treasure, Milkman decides to leave all his materialistic dependence behind in search of his true self:

I just know that I want to live my own life. I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more. And as long as I'm in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money, I have to get out of that house and I don't want to own anybody when I go. My family's driving me crazy. Daddy wants me to be like him and hate my mother. My mother want me to think like her and hate my father (Morrison, 2004, p.222).

Considering Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Milkman's Exodus is comparable to Moses Exodus from Egypt, since it is not a return to freedom, however it sounds to be, rather it is a return to the repression of a murder and its effects. Throughout his journey, the mundane target of Milkman, that is Pilate's gold, changes to a spiritual treasure, which is his true identity, genealogy, and history:

Really laughing and he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp (Morrison, 2004, p.281).

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is a story about traumatized people, victims of slavery, and the brutal history of the past, in which Morrison moves her readers throughout the non-linear memories of these traumatized characters. Since no narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way, Morrison tries to depict the overwhelming power of trauma through a non-linear narrative, episodic delivery and flashbacks. She has used modernist along with oral techniques to invoke the reader's power of imagination, which implicitly depicts history not as a series of significant public events, but as rememory. Consequently, readers are compelled to confront and concoct the disjointed and fragmented pieces of memories, shifting narrative voices, and repetition, in which past,

present, and future are intermingled. Reading *Song of Solomon* is more than an intellectual experience, it appears to be a physical process in which the reader must take a participatory role to fill the traumatic gaps and to connect several seemingly unrelated details in order to solve the riddle of the text.

In this book, Morrison has illustrated the belated experience of trauma not only through main characters but also through her narrative, specifically in the beginning of each chapter. In the initial part of each chapter, the readers might find themselves one step behind the narrator, which resembles Freud's definition of the incubation period in a traumatic experience. Morrison's narrative clearly depicts the belated experience of trauma by putting readers in an untimeliness, as if the readers get lost in the character's traumatic memories, and even the story's traumatic past. Morrison has implicitly conveyed the sense of belatedness in *Song of Solomon*, which begins by raising several questions in the reader's mind, who is Mr. Smith? Why is he about to fly from the Mercy Hospital's roof? And why does he ask for forgiveness? These are those gaps and black holes which are rooted in some traumatic and murky experiences in the past, into which Morrison submerges her readers in order to convey the sense of the traumatic experiences.

To Morrison, history is not a series of important public events because not everyone could survive a traumatic experience, and some losses are irretrievable and even malignant. In order to illustrate those irretrievable and unspoken historical losses, Morrison resurrects the ghosts of slavery to attest and reconfigure their traumatic past. The ghostly return of the past in Morrison's works embodies the idea of the persistence of traumatic memory and the intrusive invasion of the past into the present. The return of the ghost, in *Song of Solomon*, is not considered as a supernatural event, but it appears as a semi-natural event.

In this regard, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is bound up with psychoanalytic formulations. The figuration of trauma in the ghost extremely resembles Freud's idea about the return of the repressed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). The ghostly return of Macon I, in *Song of Solomon*, embodies the literal and exact return of the traumatic past for Pilate. Morrison has illustrated the idea of the return of the repressed through the ghostly appearance of Jake, Macon I, to his children, Macon II and Pilate, who ran away from home

after their father was murdered for protecting his land, "I saw papa shot. Blown of a fence five feet into the air. I saw him wigglin on the ground, but not only did I not see him die, I seen him since he was shot" (Morrison, 2004, p.140). The return of Macon's ghost, exactly as he was, suggests the literal return of the traumatic event in the form of hallucinations, nightmares, and flashbacks; "On the third day they woke to find a man that looked just like their father sitting on a stump not fifty yards away" (Morrison, 2004, p.168). Macon's ghost appears to guide his hapless children, and has got a destructive role throughout the novel. He led his children to the shelter of a cave, where they encountered an old white man, whom Macon II killed in order to protect his sister and himself. Then Macon and Pilate found the dead man's gold in the cave, about which they argued. Macon wanted to take the gold but Pilate refused, consequently they separated from each other and headed their own ways. Pilate started a wandering lifestyle in search of a stable home for her daughter, Reba, meanwhile she saw her father's ghost several times telling her something she could not clearly understand; "he kept coming to see me, off and on. Tell me things to do. 'Sing', he'd wisper" (Morrison, 2004, p.208), which Pilate construed as a request for singing songs, and tried to satisfy her father's desire. "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" was another assertion that Macon's ghost repeatedly mentioned to Pilate, which made her go back to the cave in order to find the white man's corpse. She reprimanded herself for her brother's murderous act since she misunderstood her father's assertion. Thus, she carried the bones, which she thought belonged to the white man, in a green sack for many years with her, until Milkman decoded the ghost's words, and freed his aunt from the repressed burden of her past. Eventually, Pilate found out that the bones she carried so long did not belong to the white man but it was her father's bones and his ghost persistently has requested her to bury his bones, "They're not that white man's bones. He probably didn't even die... That was your father you found. You've been carrying your father's bones-all this time" (Morrison, 2004, p.333).

Unlike Pilate and her spiritual lifestyle, Macon became a man of property, since he chose the complete opposite way after leaving the cave. Macon prizes his ring of keys, "Macon Dead dug in his pocket for his keys, and curled his fingers around them, letting their bunchy solidity calm him" (Morrison, 2004,

p.17), which distinguishes him from other black people, and tries to teach his son the most important lesson that he must learn; "own things" He looks at his son as his possession, to whom he imposes his materialistic views of the world. Not being satisfied with his wife's heritage, Macon pleads with his son to steal Pilate's green sack, which he believes contains the gold from the cave. Macon is doomed to be threatened by the invasion of the repressed past; "scraping the previous owner's name of was hardly worth the trouble since he couldn't scrape it from anybody's mind" (Morrison, 2004, p.17). Even if he tried to ignore his sordid past with his materialistic lifestyle, he was not able to obliterate the traumatic past.

Macon attempts to control his son, Milkman, while Pilate attempts to influence him. Milkman's materialistic mission, which was motivated by his father, took him back to his ancestral roots, and enabled him to reconnect with his tribe, as well as the black community. Immature Milkman begins his journey with reliance upon money and car but as he moves further he finds out that nothing can help him but his own powers and sensations; "there was nothing here to help him-not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him" (Morrison, 2004, p.277). Throughout his mission, Milkman learns how to listen to other people's stories, in order to contemplate the unwritten and omitted parts of the history. He learns that history is composed of collective experiences, including songs, poems, and stories which should be heard, this definition of history resembles Caruth's claim that, "the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another" (Caruth, 1996, p.18). Morrison tries to depict the traumatic gaps, unwritten traumas, and repressed memories of the past, by resurrecting the ghosts of slavery, in order to talk about the unspoken and missing parts of the history of black people.

Morrison has depicted the traumatic transmission of slavery through the ghostly return of the past. By mingling past, present, and future time, she gives the trauma, Macon's ghost, a ubiquitous quality, he is back to reclaim the forgotten black spiritual histories. Macon I held not only his own history, but those who failed to survive the Middle Passage, the victims of American slavery whose stories and names will never be known since they have left no written record. Morrison implicitly narrates a real story about the slave ship of the "sixty million

and more" which had been caught by a revenue boat, in *Song of Solomon*. To avoid paying taxes on their cargo of about fifty slaves, the slave runner tied rocks around the slaves' necks and threw them overboard. The weeping sounds reverberating in Ryna's Gulch, in *Song of Solomon*, is representative of the crises of the drowned slaves, "Ryna, Folks say a woman name Ryna is cryin in there. That's how it got the name" (Morrison, 2004, p.275).

In this work, it seems as if Morrison is telling African – American history through multiple voices. She has resurrected the traumatic past, Macon Dead, to live on and to haunt the following generation. The haunting nature of the ghost of slavery is incontrovertible and inevitable, since it persistently exists and waits for the survivors to repeatedly re-experience the traumatic moment.

Morrison depicts the traumatic legacy of the past through Pilate's green sack, which contains her father's bones. It is the most valuable property that Pilate has possessed from the past, even more valuable than her brother's wealth. When Pilate opens the bag in order to bury the bones, "a deep sigh escaped from the sack and the wind turned chill" (Morrison, 2004, p.335), which suggests that no one can "fly on off" and eschew the haunting nature of the traumatic past, like Milkman, who is a paragon of the following generation. Another example, through which Morrison depicts the transgenerational transmission, is the 'Song' which indicates the relationship between Afro-Americans and their African ancestors. The "Song", which is the riddle Milkman must solve, is about milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon, who flew back to Africa, leaving behind his wife, Ryna, and their children, the reflection of whose heroic act has been transmitted through the passage of time since children sing the song that narrates Solomon's rebellious act. The transmission of Solomon's flying act, as a rebellion to slavery, is completely flagrant in the beginning of the novel, when Robert Smith, a black insurance agent, prepares to fly, using homemade blue silk wings, which eventuates in his death. Mr. Smith's heroic act generalizes Solomon's fight as a history larger than an individual, to put it differently, it is not only Milkman's history, but all Afro-American slaves, it is an open wound, which cries out, and haunts the following generations.

Guitar's poignant past, his aversion to sugar, and the name 'sugarman' in Pilate's song in the novel do not appear accidentally, but refer to the vital connection between sugar and the slave trade according to which, in 1645, African slaves were forcibly brought to the West Indies in exchange for sugar, tobacco, and

wine. They also worked on sugar cane plantations in the south (Hornsby, 2008, p.17). These are other traumatic legacies which are inherited from the ancestors.

In giving the ghosts renewed voice and life, Morrison criticizes the institution responsible for Solomon's rebellious flight. She depicts slavery, the way it was, as a system of ownership of people. Since nothing can stop the transgenerational transmission of trauma, Morrison tries to concoct the unwritten and repressed parts of Afro-Americans history through delving into the personal memories and stories of many individuals in order to bring a measure of concordance to what violence has shattered.

Conclusion

By looking closely at the lines of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and its hypotexts, this paper demonstrates how this work has sufficient factors to bear the name of trauma fiction. Morrison's non-linear narrative in *Song of Solomon* implicitly depicts the overwhelming yet belated experience of trauma on the side of her traumatized characters, by which she demonstrates the characters' traumatic gaps in the form of episodic delivery and flashbacks.

Regarding Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Milkman's journey in pursuit of the repressed past appears as a return to the past while it can also be construed as a departure from the traumatic burden of the past simultaneously, which resembles Moses Exodus from Egypt to Canaan. Accordingly, Macon I's victimization could be viewed as the most salient landmark in Milkman's quest, which implicitly represents the repressed and forgotten memory of the Jewish murderous act of killing their leader, Moses, that Freud believed was the most significant moment in Jewish history.

Macon I's ghostly presence throughout the novel can indicate the flagrant yet literal return of the repressed traumatic past. His presence in the present time is not merely a return to the sordid past as an act of commemoration rather it can be contemplated as a departure, or exodus, to the future in order to reconstruct the forgotten and repressed part of black history. The ghostly return of the past could be contemplated as the contagious traumatic transmission of slavery in *Song of Solomon*, just like the "Song", which is the riddle Milkman must solve which has been transmitted among generations in the form of the children's song.

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