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The Therapeutic Power of Memory Recollection in Toni Morrison and Caryl Phyllips' Neo-Slave Narratives

Derick J. Mbungang, PhD
University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the process which allows black slaves to get relieved from the trauma of slavery. While focusing on Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative, namely *Beloved*, *Paradise*, *Jazz* and *A Mercy*; and Caryl Phillips' *Higher Ground, Crossing the River, Cambridge* and *The Nature of Blood*, the paper aims to demonstrate how slave victims uncover and recover the their trauma and how this helps them heal. The analysis of the novels under study is based on the assumption that by recounting their experiences through memory the slaves are relieved. Memory recovery takes place through a constant shift from present to past both in the characters' psyche and in the narrative. Psychoanalysis is used as the theoretical framework. From the analysis of the texts, memory recovery which enables the characters to construct their history is also a process that has a positive effect on their fragmented psychology: it heals them from their neurosis. It is a form of therapy to their psychosis. In this sense, black slaves' process of storytelling becomes not only effective in relieving them from their traumatic past, but it also constitutes a prerequisite for their identity construction.

Key words: memory, trauma, recovery, black, healing

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the process which allows black slaves to get relieved from the trauma of slavery. While focusing on Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative, namely *Beloved*, *Paradise, Jazz* and *A Mercy*; and Caryl Phillips' *Higher Ground, Crossing the River*, *Cambridge* and *The Nature of Blood*, the paper aims to demonstrate how slave victims uncover and recover the their trauma and how this helps them heal. The analysis of the novels under study is based on the assumption that by recounting their experiences through memory the slaves are relieved. Memory recovery takes place through a constant shift from present to past both in the characters' psyche and in the narrative. Psychoanalysis is used as the theoretical framework. From the analysis of the texts, memory recovery which enables the characters to construct their history is also a process that has a positive effect on their fragmented psychology: it heals them from their neurosis. It is a form of therapy to their psychosis. In this sense, black slaves' process of storytelling becomes not only effective in relieving them from their traumatic past, but it also constitutes a prerequisite for their identity construction in the neo-slave narratives under study.

The slave narrative is a literary form which grew out of the written accounts of enslaved Africans in Britain and its colonies, including the later United States, Canada and Caribbean nations. Still known as the classic slave narrative, it recounts a fugitive slave's personal story condemning slavery and hence working towards abolition. However, narratives by fugitive slaves before the American Civil War and by former slaves in the postbellum era are essential to the study of eighteenth and nineteenth century American, British and Caribbean literature. As historical sources, slave narratives document slave life in captivity from the invaluable perspective of first-hand experience. The slave narratives can be broadly categorized into three distinct forms: tales of religious redemption, tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle, and tales of progress. The tales written to inspire the abolitionist struggle are the most famous because they tend to have a strong

autobiographical motif, such as in Frederick Douglass' autobiographies and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861).

The neo-slave narrative refers to contemporary, fictional stories and accounts of slavery. Unlike earlier works written by authors such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, neo-slave narratives are written by authors whose focus is not the abolition of slavery, but the amelioration of the wounds it has left behind; they seek reconciliation with a past that still haunts the present. The initial definition of the neo-slave narrative was provided by Bernard Bell. In *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*, he defines the neo-slave narratives as, "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). However, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy offers a slightly different definition for this term. In *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, he states that a neo-slave narrative refers to texts that "assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative" (3). While Bell's definition stresses on the subject matter of these narratives, Rushdy's definition goes further to include the structure of this narrative type. Yet, E. A. Beaulieu offers a broader definition in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopaedia*. He states that neo-slave narratives are "[c]ontemporary fictional works which take slavery as their subject matter and usually feature enslaved protagonists" (xiii). Although these critics' definition highlight different aspects of neo-slave narratives, what unites them however is the fact that they all agree that neo-slave narratives are contemporary fiction with as subject matter slavery and often feature black characters who recount their experiences in bondage. In other words, a neo-slave narrative is a modern fictional work set in the slavery era by contemporary authors or substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of enslavement in the New World. Whereas the traditional slave narrative recounted a fugitive slave's individual story condemning slavery and hence working towards abolition, the neo-slave narrative such as underlines the slave's historical legacy by unveiling the past through foregrounding African Atlantic experiences in an attempt to create a critical historiography of the black Atlantic.

Morrison and Phillips' healing strategy tap into Freudian Psychoanalytic healing process, Modernist narrative techniques, African American oral tradition and Judith Lewis Herman's stages of trauma recovery. According to Sigmund Freud in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis,* the repression of traumatic memories directs energy away from social and sexual satisfaction to the construction of symptoms. The healing process or psychoanalytic treatment involves unedited associational speech that is meant to escape the unconscious censors, transference of emotions onto the analyst, and finally an acting out or narration of the trauma in order to reintegrate to some extent, the ego and the libido. Narration or storytelling suggests the process of bringing the unconscious memories into the conscious mind, and thus negotiating and transcending their debilitating control. It is through this process that repressed fragments of black characters' traumatic past are retrieved and reconstructed.

Modernist narrative techniques which participate in the characters' healing process involve fragmentation of the plot and a shifting narrative voice. As far as the use of African American oral tradition in the portrayal of the psychological cure of black characters is concerned, it is Morrison who aptly utilises it (African American oral tradition) to depict in her works, the characters' process of coming to terms with their trauma. The use of African American oral tradition includes folk tales, songs, spirituals and call and response. Another way that characters in the texts under study struggle to heal from their traumatic experience in slavery is by going through Judith Lewis Herman's process of trauma recovery. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman indicates that there are three stages of trauma recovery, namely, the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life (155). To her, the process of trauma recovery "can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (133). In other words, rather than living in isolation, traumatised individuals who decide to live in a group or in a community

easily recover from their psychological pain. Herman's stages of trauma recovery begin by establishing a sense of safety within traumatized people. In the wake of suffering from traumatic experiences, those who have been traumatised might be afraid of facing reality and at the same time, they might also become suspicious of people around them. This explains why a group made up of traumatised individuals is indispensable to bringing the latter to a normal psychic state, as Herman further notes that:

> *Because traumatized people feel so alienated by their experience, survivor groups have a special place in the recovery process. Such groups afford a degree of support and understanding that is simply not available in the survivor's ordinary social environment. The encounter with others who have undergone similar trials dissolves feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma. (215)*

In other words, the group guarantees the safety of traumatised individuals in that the feeling of separation and alienation felt by trauma victims often disconnect them from the real world into a world of pain and anxiety. Therefore, reconstructing the traumatised people's sense of trust toward the world constitutes a priority in the process of trauma recovery. The second stage in Herman's classification includes remembrance and mourning the traumatic past. This involves talking and emotional release. During this stage, traumatised individuals talk and reveal their memories by letting out all their emotions. This process of catharsis enables victims of trauma to confront their painful experiences such as cruelties, horrors, suffering, and terrors, thus those past events that are responsible for their psychosis. And as Mei-Chuang Huang in "Trauma Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* " observes, these victims may not only use speech to release their emotions, but also "they might murmur, cry or even scream in narrating individual experience" (15). Finally, in the third stage, after traumatized individuals illustrate their traumatic stories, the significance of community support and company are especially enhanced. Herman points out that "traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others" (214). Herman further moves on to describe in this last stage the traumatised subject's rupture with past memory at the end of the healing process. She observes that:

> *[h]aving come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self. Her relationships have been tested and forever changed by the trauma; now she must develop new relationships. The old beliefs that gave meaning to her life have been challenged; now she must find a new sustaining faith. These are the tasks of the third stage of recovery. In accomplishing this work, the survivor reclaims her world. (196)*

In *Beloved*, two characters impel the healing process. Baby Suggs who acts as a ritual guide and Beloved who acts as a psychological catalyst for Sethe, Denver and Paul D. Baby Suggs conducts rituals outdoors in the Clearing, a place that signifies cleansing from the past, a place to encounter painful memories safely and rest from them. Her rituals manifest the Freudian psychoanalytical process of healing as well as a spiritual process of healing that combines African and Christian religious elements. However, after being set free, Suggs decides to "open her great heart to those who could use it" by becoming "an unchurched preacher" (92). In her ritual ceremony, she tells the former slaves: "Let your mothers hear you laugh…Let the grown men come…Let your wives and your children see you dance…cry" (92-93). The cleansing or healing rituals led by Suggs further becomes a grand communion of all blacks traumatised by their experience in slavery:

> *It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing*

damp and gasping for breath. (93)

This ritual ceremony is a form of healing for former slaves and enables them to seek reconciliation with their memories, whose scars survive long after the experience of slavery has ended. Beloved symbolises both pain and healing. She represents the repressed memories of slavery for the characters. As a cure, her presence enables Sethe, Denver and Paul D to confront their trauma by telling their experience in slavery. To this effect, each character's story then becomes a form of purification of the self. It is this catharsis that will lead them to construct their identity.

However, If Beloved is the embodiment of trauma in *Beloved*, in *Paradise* the Convent women's inscribing of body silhouettes and their paintings on the cellar cells are also ways of embodying trauma, which signifies the potential to heal because as Brooks Bouson puts it, "the women draw pictures of what haunts them—'Rose of Sharon petals, Lorna Doones. A bright orange couple making steady love under a childish sun' (265)—they talk to each other about what they have dreamed or drawn" (*Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison,* 210).

In the meantime, the healing process in *Paradise* follows Herman's stages of trauma recovery. The women of the Convent as a group are able to heal each other collectively by first articulating their traumas and then learning to recognise and love the connections between them. The healing process proceeds with the scene of healing ritual with loud dreaming, in which at first Connie instructs the rest of the Convent women to clean the cellar floor, ringing it with candles and then lie down naked in whichever way they feel comfortable. Then Connie draws the shapes of their bodies on the cellar floor. In "From Destructive to Constructive Haunting in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*", Tammy Clewell points out that the ritual that Connie guides them "enables them to begin mourning, an interminable process through which they embody their ghosts in a new way: as an absence within the self to which they bear witness" (139). While remaining in their silhouettes that Connie has painted and guiding with Connie's story of "a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word" (264), Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas start telling their traumatic pasts. In the process of sharing their stories, "it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because of their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale" (264). According to Carola Hilfrich the drawing of their own body silhouettes "allows the women to reinscribe their histories, while shifting attention from the historical reality of their moving bodies to the real life of their erotically embodied templates" ("Anti-Exodus: Counter memory, Gender, Race and Everyday Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*", 330-331). The women are able to heal each other collectively by first articulating their traumas and then learning to recognize and love the connections between them. They have learned to love one another because they recognize the similarities among them, and they no longer feel painful both on bodies and minds in that others share their pains. With the companies of others, each of the Convent women is encouraged to revisit the traumatic past; they are not afraid of confronting it again because this time, they are not alone when facing the traumatic moments. Therefore, community support, or group support, is helpful in reconstructing broken self-identity.

In *Paradise* language also constitutes a healing power for traumatised characters. Morrison employs here call and response to depict the healing process of characters suffering from the trauma of slavery. Vaiva Bernatonyte Azukiene in "Traumatic Experience in Toni Morrison's Novels, *A Mercy* and *Jazz*" asserts that "no other characters engage in such long, meaningful and intimate call and response conversations as Alice Manfred and Violet Trace or Florens and Lina, and Sorrow speaking to her imaginative Twin in *A Mercy*" (72). Therefore, Violet's conversations with Alice and Lina's stories passed to Florens become a healing process to all of them that include not only their past traumas but their common heritage, "their black language which certainly has

healing and reaffirming nature" (72). At the end of the novel, Florens wanders in her master's new mansion and writes her story on the walls. She wants to use a language to speak about the unspeakable condition and to say the unsayable sayings, and traumas that the African American women suffer in the racialised white patriarchal society. Since writing has a cathartic force, it is certainly going to enhance her recovery and therefore her healing.

In *Jazz*, music, dancing, language and telling stories of the past are healing moments for blacks who have encountered the terror of slavery, as the narrator asserts: "Like the voices of the women in houses nearby singing 'Go down, go down in Egypt land…' Answering each other from yard to yard with verse or its variation" (226)…. "City dancing all the way […]. City was speaking to them. They were dancing […] the City that danced with them, proving already how much, it loved them" (32). In other words, narrative and poetic language within the narrative becomes a therapy for black individuals and paves a way for the construction of their self-identity.

Phillips resorts to language and the use of narrative devices such as fragmentation of the plot and a shifting narrative voice to show the characters' process of healing. History making becomes a healing process for the characters. In *Crossing the River* and *The Nature of Blood*, the fragmented nature of narratives is a method that leads to the healing ritual of characters through the participation of the reader. In fact, the reader's process of reconstructing the fragmented stories of black characters parallels their psychological recovery. Through this process, repressed fragments of the characters' stories are retrieved and reconstructed. This is aptly illustrated in "The Pagan Coast" in *Crossing* the *River* where narratives are disrupted and include the intervention of several voices: the narrator's, Nash William's and Edward William's. In the second part of the novel titled "West", besides Martha's voicing of her slavery stories, her healing process also involves her migration to the West, far from memory site, in quest for freedom but also and more especially in quest for her daughter, Eliza Mae. When Martha finally encounters her daughter, "feeling old and tired, [she] sat down and wept openly, and in front of her grandchildren" (94). By crying, she purges her emotions, a purification which constitutes a cure for the trauma of slavery she is suffering from. However, she soon dies after the healing, suggesting that for several years she has been in search for the peace of mind which only her encounter with Eliza Mae could offer her.

In *The Nature of Blood*, in addition to the fragmentation of the narrative and polyphony, the healing process takes the form of dreams which traumatised characters realised. Dream in this perspective represents a form of escapism from the present holocaust drama in which Jewish characters are involved. This is in effect because these characters are still trapped by their trauma, that is their presence in concentration camps and anti-Semitism still very rampant in their society. In one of her dreams, the narrator explains that Eva,

> *ran on. Behind her, the soldiers' voices grew louder and more animated, but it was the barking of the dogs that frightened her, for she felt sure that at any moment they would be allowed off the leash. It was foolish of her to imagine that in her condition she might outrun grown, healthy men. Dogs would find her easy sport. (183)*

But Eva is aware of this deceit as she asserts: "I have tried to stop dreaming, but it is difficult to control my mind" (184). She still lingers between the walls of a concentration camp. If as Sigmund Freud argues that dreams are repressed desires that emerge to the mind of the individual when they are asleep, then Eva's dream is the expression of her firm desire to get out of her abrasive seclusion. Her dream is a healing process in that it helps her release the neurosis in which she is caught and that is caused by the segregationist system of her society.

In *Cambridge* and *Higher Ground*, the healing process that is associated with memory recovery, in addition to fragmentation, is seen through songs and black characters' language. Black language

like the one that intercepts Emily's narrative in *Cambridge* (28, 70, 71) functions not only as a means of communication and passing on black history, but it also helps blacks to feel relieved from their traumatic experiences. This healing process is also evident with songs in the novel. Prominent among these songs is the one sung by a black slave as he paddles the canoe transporting Emily to Baytown. Emily remarks that "the song was composed of the following words: Old rum kill de captain / O dear, He must die / New rum kill de sailor / O dear, He must die /Hard work kill de neger / O dear, He must die / La, la, la, la, etc" (20). In "The Cargo Rap" in *Higher Ground*, the letters Rudy writes to his lawyers and family members enable him to purge the trauma of his incarceration. Letter writing has the same power of healing as does oral expression or speech. Although still imprisoned, this form of communication will lead him to construct a new self.

In a nutshell, Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips' treatment of memory is a frequently disturbing revisiting of those aspects of history that have been obliterated. Intent as they are on remembering history, they explore old wounds that have since been healed. But memories are as hard and livid as scars. This explains why page after page of their works under study, they expose the inhumanities undergone by the black people, with the intention of allowing these reopened sutures to finally heal properly.

Morrison and Phillips place the history of slavery in a wider context. By revisiting the history of slavery through memory recollection, both writers revisit black history as a whole revealing not only the importance of strong ties between present and past, but also healing themselves from that traumatic past. They reconceptualise the history of slavery. However, most apparent in their texts under study is the historical perspective. They both construct history through reminiscence and consciousness of black people, rather through the perspective of whites. And as Vaiva Bernatonyte Azukiene suggests in "Traumatic Experience in Toni Morrison's Novels *A Mercy* and *Jazz*", what allows Morrison and Phillips' fiction "to be named as revision of black slaves' history is the way [they give] subjective voices to the enslaved ones who reveal their emotional and psychological depths" (72). And as demonstrated, historical methodology takes an important shift in that history-making becomes a healing process both for the characters and the authors. If the black characters' individual memories exist as fragments of historical memory, then, by extension, the individual process of recollection can be reproduced on a historical level and therefore constitutes a veritable therapy.

In sum, through memory, Morrison and Phillips create a vital historical link between present black generations and their ancestors who were slaves. By this means, they provide blacks with the possibility to have, as Azukiene puts it, "a connection to their history, which is theirs, understand and realize themselves better" (76) as Africans in the diaspora. However, slavery splits black characters into a fragmented figure. The identity, consisting of painful memories and an unspeakable past, denied and silenced, becomes a self that is no self. Because of the painful nature of the experiences, most slaves repressed their memories in an attempt to leave behind a horrific past. This repression and dissociation from the past caused a fragmentation of the self and a loss of true identity. But the fulfilment of the self could only be remedied by the acceptance of the past which eventually leads to self-reintegration. By telling their individual and collective stories, black characters in the novels under study set the pace for self-reintegration.

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