

WRITING THE WOUND: TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, AND ETHICAL REPRESENTATION IN TONI MORRISON AND ARUNDHATI ROY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines trauma, testimony, and ethical representation in selected works of Toni Morrison and Arundhati Roy, with particular attention to how literary form records wounds produced by slavery, caste, gendered violence, communal conflict, and state power. Morrison's *Beloved* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are read as narratives in which private suffering is inseparable from larger histories of domination. The study argues that both writers refuse a simple realist reproduction of pain; instead, they use fractured temporality, polyphonic narration, silence, memory, and bodily imagery to represent trauma without reducing the victim to spectacle. Their fiction transforms testimony into an ethical act: it asks readers not merely to observe suffering but to confront the structures that produce it. The study concludes that Morrison and Roy expand the moral possibilities of literature by writing wounds as historical evidence, affective memory, and political critique.

Keywords: Trauma, testimony, ethical representation, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, slavery, caste, gender, memory, violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma literature often begins where ordinary historical narration fails. The wound is not only an event but also a delayed, recurring, and socially mediated experience. In Toni Morrison and Arundhati Roy, trauma appears as an intimate injury and as the residue of collective violence. Morrison's fiction returns repeatedly to the afterlife of slavery, racial capitalism, maternal violation, and the psychic burden of inherited memory [1]. Roy's fiction, in another geopolitical context, examines caste, patriarchy, communal violence, militarization, and the fragile survival of those excluded from dominant national narratives [2], [3]. Both writers are concerned with the ethical difficulty of representing suffering: how can literature testify to historical wounds without consuming them as aesthetic objects?

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on trauma studies, testimony studies, and postcolonial ethics. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is marked by belatedness and recurrence, because the traumatic event is not fully grasped when it first occurs [4]. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through," a distinction useful for reading Morrison's and Roy's narrative structures [5]. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub understand testimony as an address to another, an act that requires a listener capable of receiving fractured truth [6]. These perspectives help clarify why Morrison and Roy write in disrupted, non-linear, and polyphonic forms. Their narratives do not merely describe suffering; they stage the difficulty of speaking it.

The study argues that Morrison and Roy convert literary narration into ethical testimony. Their works ask readers to recognize pain as historically produced. In this sense, trauma is not detached from economics. Slavery in Morrison is a system of racialized ownership, reproduction, labour extraction, and human commodification. Caste and class in Roy are tied

to property, land, labour, domestic service, and uneven citizenship. The wound, therefore, is not only psychological; it is embedded in political economy.

II. MORRISON: SLAVERY, MEMORY, AND THE HAUNTED BODY

In *Beloved*, Morrison writes the wound of slavery through a narrative in which the past refuses burial. Sethe's body carries scars, memory, milk, labour, and violation. Her back, marked by the "tree," becomes a text of racial violence [1]. Morrison does not treat slavery as a closed historical period. Instead, slavery persists as haunting, repetition, and embodied memory. The ghost in the house at 124 is not only supernatural; it is the return of an unresolved historical crime. The dead child becomes a figure for all those whose lives were violently interrupted by the slave system.

Morrison's ethical method lies in refusing to make Sethe's act of killing her child a simple moral scandal. The novel compels readers to confront the impossible conditions under which maternal love is forced to act. Under slavery, motherhood itself is controlled by property relations. Sethe's children are not secure as children; they are vulnerable as future labouring bodies. Hortense Spillers has shown how slavery violently reorganized kinship, gender, and flesh, making the Black female body available to regimes of ownership and reproduction [7]. Morrison's narrative gives literary force to this historical reality.

The novel's fragmented chronology is central to its ethics. Morrison does not allow the reader to consume the story as a smooth sequence of events. Memory emerges in fragments, repetitions, and sudden returns. This narrative method corresponds to traumatic temporality. LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through is especially useful here: Sethe initially remains trapped in a repeated return of the past, while the communal intervention near the end suggests the possibility, though not completion, of working through [5]. Healing does not come through forgetting; it comes through witnessing, communal recognition, and the partial reorganization of memory.

Morrison's broader critical work also clarifies her literary practice. In *Playing in the Dark*, she argues that American literature has often constructed whiteness through the suppressed presence of Blackness [8]. *Beloved* reverses that silence. It places enslaved and formerly enslaved people at the centre of historical consciousness. Yet Morrison does not write trauma as documentary realism alone. She uses lyricism, ghostliness, repetition, and oral resonance to honour experiences that official records frequently distort or erase. Barbara Christian's account of Black feminist criticism helps situate this method as both aesthetic and political, because Black women's writing contests dominant forms of knowledge [9].

III. ROY: CASTE, GENDER, STATE VIOLENCE, AND THE BROKEN TESTIMONY

Roy's fiction writes trauma through the smallness of injured lives. *The God of Small Things* examines how caste, family, sexuality, and political hypocrisy converge in the destruction of Velutha, Ammu, Estha, and Rahel [2]. The novel's famous "Love Laws" name the social codes that determine who may love whom and how much [2]. These laws are not abstract customs; they are disciplinary structures that regulate caste purity, gender respectability, property, and social hierarchy. Velutha's death is not an isolated tragedy. It is the violent enforcement of caste order.

Roy's narrative style is deeply connected to trauma. The novel moves backward and forward, circling around the event that cannot be narrated directly at first. Estha's silence is especially significant. His withdrawal from speech is not emptiness; it is a form of wounded testimony. Felman and Laub's idea that testimony may emerge through broken speech helps explain

Roy's representation of silence as a trace of violence [6]. The child's inability to speak becomes evidence of what the social world refuses to hear.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy expands the field of trauma from family and caste to the nation-state. The novel includes lives marked by gender marginality, communal violence, Kashmir, displacement, and the politics of mourning [3]. Anjum's residence in a graveyard is a striking ethical image: the excluded build shelter among the dead because the living city refuses them full belonging. Judith Butler's work on grievability is relevant here. Butler argues that political power determines whose lives are publicly mourned and whose deaths remain socially unrecognized [10]. Roy's fiction resists this hierarchy by creating narrative space for the unmourned.

Roy's ethical representation is also postcolonial. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can speak remains important, not because subaltern subjects are mute, but because dominant institutions often cannot hear them without translating them into their own terms [11]. Roy's fiction responds by multiplying voices rather than presenting a single authoritative narrator. This polyphony prevents the wound from becoming a stable object possessed by the writer. It also challenges the reader to inhabit discomfort rather than mastery.

IV. TESTIMONY AND ETHICAL REPRESENTATION

Morrison and Roy both understand testimony as more than confession. Testimony is a relational act. It requires speaker, listener, memory, and an ethical space in which pain is neither denied nor exploited. Saidiya Hartman's critique of representing scenes of subjection is important here: the repetition of violence can risk reproducing the spectacle of domination [12]. Morrison and Roy are alert to this danger. They do not avoid violence, but they resist making violated bodies merely visible for narrative consumption.

In Morrison, this resistance appears through interiority. The reader is brought close to *Sethe*, *Denver*, *Paul D*, and *Beloved*, but never granted complete interpretive control. The traumatic past is given through multiple partial memories. In Roy, the same resistance appears through linguistic play, structural fragmentation, and irony. The broken form of the narrative prevents the reader from approaching trauma as a neatly solved case. Both writers therefore create what may be called an ethics of difficulty.

This ethics is also evident in their treatment of the body. In *Beloved*, the body is marked by slavery's economy: whipping, sexual violation, reproductive control, hunger, and forced labour [1]. In *The God of Small Things*, the body bears caste punishment, police violence, desire, shame, and childhood fear [2]. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, bodies are exposed to gendered exclusion, communal violence, and military authority [3]. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is useful for reading these worlds because power operates not only by governing life but also by deciding exposure to death [13]. Morrison and Roy show that wounded bodies are archives of political order.

V. TRAUMA, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

Although the title of this study belongs to literary studies, its argument has a strong economic dimension. Morrison's slavery narrative is inseparable from the commodification of Black life. The enslaved person is transformed into labour, property, reproductive capacity, and exchange value. The trauma of *Sethe's* motherhood cannot be understood apart from this economic structure. Orlando Patterson's account of slavery as social death helps explain the condition under which kinship, honour, and autonomy are systematically denied [14]. Morrison writes against social death by restoring interiority, memory, and voice.

Roy's fiction also links trauma to political economy. In *The God of Small Things*, caste is connected to labour, land, domestic hierarchy, and party politics [2]. Velutha is skilled, intelligent, and indispensable, yet caste society refuses him equality. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the city, the graveyard, the protest site, and Kashmir become spaces where citizenship is unevenly distributed [3]. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's work on postcolonial ecocriticism and unequal power helps illuminate Roy's concern with how bodies, land, animals, and marginalized communities are placed under extractive and violent regimes [15].

Thus, trauma in both writers is not merely individual pathology. It is the human cost of systems that organize labour, sexuality, caste, race, territory, and citizenship. This is why testimony matters. It counters official forgetting. It gives narrative form to those whom law, archive, market, and nation have rendered disposable.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Morrison and Roy differ in historical location, language politics, and narrative tradition, yet their ethical concerns converge. Morrison writes from the African American memory of slavery and its afterlives. Roy writes from postcolonial India's layered histories of caste, gender, religious violence, and state power. Morrison's prose often moves through oral memory, ancestral presence, and haunted domestic space. Roy's prose frequently works through satire, linguistic disruption, political commentary, and childlike defamiliarization.

The major similarity is their refusal of linear historical closure. In both writers, trauma returns because society has not repaired the conditions that produced it. *Beloved* insists that the past is not past [1]. *The God of Small Things* shows that childhood trauma remains lodged in adult consciousness [2]. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents the nation as an unfinished archive of wounds [3]. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory is useful here because later generations inherit traumatic histories not as direct experience but as powerful imaginative and affective transmission [16].

Another similarity is their commitment to marginal voices. Morrison centres enslaved women, formerly enslaved families, and Black communal memory. Roy centres children, Dalits, women, hijras, Kashmiris, and other vulnerable figures. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of universalizing women's oppression helps explain why both writers insist on historical specificity [17]. They do not write "woman" or "victim" as abstract categories. They locate suffering within race, caste, class, sexuality, nation, and history.

VII. CONCLUSION

Morrison and Roy write the wound as memory, testimony, and ethical demand. Their fiction does not offer easy consolation. Instead, it asks readers to remain answerable to histories that remain active in the present. Morrison's *Beloved* transforms the suppressed history of slavery into a haunting narrative of maternal love, racial terror, and communal witnessing. Roy's novels transform caste violence, gendered exclusion, and state brutality into fractured testimonies that resist silence. Both writers show that trauma is never only private. It is produced through institutions, economies, and inherited structures of domination.

Their achievement lies in representing pain without reducing it to spectacle. Through fragmentation, polyphony, silence, haunting, and embodied memory, they create literary forms adequate to wounded histories. In doing so, Morrison and Roy demonstrate that ethical representation is not simply the act of speaking for the injured. It is the more difficult act of making space where injury can be heard without being appropriated, simplified, or forgotten.

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