IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Narrating Survival: A Comparative Study Of Trauma In Toni Morrison's Beloved And Ling Ma's Severance

Ms. P. Vishranthi,

Assistant Professor

Dr. R. Vanitha,

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education,

Pollachi Main Road, Eachanari, Coimbatore- 21

Abstract:

In the aftermath of large-scale crises—whether historical or contemporary—literature becomes a powerful space to record, remember, and reimagine trauma. This paper explores trauma as a literary theme through a comparative analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ling Ma's *Severance*. Both novels, although written in different cultural and temporal contexts, examine how individuals and communities attempt to survive the invisible wounds inflicted by slavery and pandemics. Drawing from trauma theory, particularly the ideas of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, and this study explores how memory, silence, and disassociation are key indicators of unresolved trauma. In *Beloved*, Morrison focuses on the haunting legacy of slavery, where Sethe's personal history becomes a site of collective racial memory. In contrast, *Severance* engages with the trauma of a global pandemic, where the protagonist Candace drifts through an eerily empty world, representing emotional numbness in modern capitalist society. The paper argues that while Morrison's novel engages with generational trauma rooted in historical injustice, Ma's work addresses contemporary anxieties shaped by disconnection, routine, and crisis fatigue. Despite their differences, both narratives foreground the psychological scars that outlive the event itself, stressing the urgent need for healing, community, and remembrance. Through this comparative lens, the paper demonstrates that literature remains a critical medium for articulating unspeakable pain, thus affirming the resilience of the human spirit amidst social and existential disruptions.

Keywords: Trauma, Space, Global pandemic, Existential disruptions.

Introduction

Literature has long served as a refuge for voices silenced by historical violence, psychological suffering, and sociopolitical upheaval. In the wake of mass traumas such as slavery, war, or pandemics, fiction often becomes a space through which unspeakable pain is voiced, processed, and remembered. In the contemporary era—particularly in the post-COVID-19 context—there has been a renewed academic and cultural interest in understanding how trauma operates within literature, especially through lenses of race, identity, memory, and survival. This paper seeks to explore these issues through a comparative study of Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) and Ling Ma's Severance (2018). Though separated by time and context, both novels deal with the lingering effects of trauma, and the unique ways in which it distorts memory, identity, and one's relationship to time and routine.

Toni Morrison's Beloved is a canonical text in African American literature, addressing the aftereffects of slavery through a deeply personal and spiritual narrative centered on a formerly enslaved woman, Sethe. The story confronts generational trauma, mother-daughter relationships, and the psychological implications of having lived through unspeakable horrors. Ling Ma's Severance, on the other hand, is a speculative pandemic novel that follows a Chinese-American woman named Candace as she wanders through a post-apocalyptic world following the outbreak of Shen Fever, a mysterious illness that erases one's ability to function emotionally while preserving bodily routines. Though vastly different in their narrative structure and cultural origins, both novels center characters whose trauma isolates them and reshapes their connection with reality.

By employing trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, this paper argues that Morrison and Ma, in their respective novels, depict trauma not merely as a psychological wound, but as an invisible force that transforms space, memory, and selfhood. A comparative analysis reveals that while Beloved focuses on historical trauma rooted in slavery, Severance illuminates contemporary trauma caused by societal disconnection and capitalist inertia. Both authors, however, converge in portraying survival as a narrative and emotional process, one deeply tied to remembrance, rupture, and healing.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma and Narrative

Trauma theory has emerged as a central approach in literary studies since the 1990s, particularly after the publication of Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience (1996), which asserts that trauma is not a direct experience but a belated one—something that "happens too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). This delayed return of trauma often disrupts traditional narrative structures, producing fragmented, nonlinear, or repetitive storytelling.

Dominick LaCapra expands on this by differentiating between "acting out" and "working through" trauma. According to LaCapra, a traumatized person who is stuck in the past remains in the "acting out" phase, reliving the trauma endlessly, while "working through" involves narrativizing the event, integrating it into one's identity, and eventually allowing healing or at least a critical understanding. Literature plays a vital role in both phases by giving shape to otherwise unspeakable pain.

In the context of Morrison's Beloved, trauma is generational and collective; it is rooted in the systemic horror of slavery and manifests through haunting and fragmented memory. In Ma's Severance, trauma is contemporary, abstract, and tied to capitalism and global crisis; it takes the form of emotional paralysis and routine. Both texts use trauma theory to explore how people attempt to live after the end of the world as they knew it—whether the world of slavery or the world of late capitalism interrupted by a viral outbreak.

Toni Morrison's Beloved: Memory, Guilt, and the Ghosts of Historical Trauma

Toni Morrison's Beloved is a groundbreaking novel that examines the deeply psychological and generational trauma of slavery in post-Civil War America. Through her protagonist Sethe, Morrison explores how enslaved people carried not only physical scars but also deeply embedded emotional wounds that shaped their identity, memory, and sense of belonging. The trauma in Beloved is not limited to a single event but is collective and cumulative, affecting an entire community. This makes the novel a perfect site for

applying trauma theory, especially in understanding how personal suffering intertwines with cultural and historical trauma.

The narrative structure of Beloved itself is fragmented, nonlinear, and filled with gaps—mirroring the effects of trauma on memory. Sethe, who escaped slavery but was forced to kill her infant daughter to prevent her recapture, becomes the embodiment of "acted-out" trauma. She constantly relives her past, unable to reconcile her memories with her present life. The house at 124 Bluestone Road, haunted by the ghost of her dead child, becomes a physical metaphor for unresolved trauma that "refuses to be forgotten." The haunting in Beloved is not just supernatural but psychological—it represents the legacy of slavery itself, one that cannot be buried or erased through mere escape or denial.

Sethe's relationship with memory is deeply conflicted. She tries to suppress certain memories ("It was not a story to pass on," Morrison 274) yet cannot avoid their resurgence. Trauma operates as a return of the repressed, as Cathy Caruth describes: "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located" (Caruth 8). Morrison presents trauma as an experience that lacks linearity. Sethe's memories are presented in fragments, often shifting from past to present without warning, creating a disorienting but emotionally intense reading experience. This narrative fragmentation is one of the ways Morrison simulates the effects of trauma on both the character and the reader.

The character of Beloved—the ghost made flesh—symbolizes the unresolved pain of the past. Her physical reappearance forces Sethe to confront her actions and grief, but also reveals the destructive power of guilt. Beloved's presence destabilizes Sethe's already fragile identity and emotional state. She becomes consumed by the need to care for Beloved, as if trying to atone for her past through complete submission. As LaCapra notes, "unresolved trauma tends to produce repetition compulsions and cycles of guilt" (LaCapra 70). Sethe's journey in the novel is one of entrapment, both physically (in the house) and psychologically (in her guilt).

Yet Beloved is not entirely a novel of despair. By the end, the narrative suggests a form of working through trauma. With the help of Denver (Sethe's surviving daughter) and the community women, Sethe begins to reclaim a sense of self. This transition from isolation to collective support indicates the possibility of healing—not by erasing trauma, but by acknowledging and narrating it. As Michelle Balaev argues, "Trauma narratives often locate healing within the creation of meaning and the integration of the traumatic past into the individual's life story" (Balaev 152). Sethe's healing begins when she is no longer alone in carrying her trauma; through memory, narrative, and community, she begins to let go of the ghost.

In this way, Morrison's Beloved offers not just a portrayal of trauma, but a roadmap for recovery—one rooted in storytelling, cultural memory, and human connection. The novel shows how literature can act as both a witness and a remedy, making Beloved an essential text in the literary trauma canon.

Ling Ma's Severance: Pandemic, Routine, and Capitalist Disconnection

Ling Ma's Severance, though written well before the COVID-19 outbreak, eerily anticipates the emotional and psychological disruptions of a global pandemic. The novel centers on Candace Chen, a millennial Chinese-American woman navigating the collapse of society during a fictional plague known as Shen Fever. In contrast to Beloved's historical trauma of slavery, Severance explores trauma within a modern, globalized, capitalist framework—highlighting emotional numbness, alienation, and the dehumanizing repetition of routine as symptoms of a deeper existential disconnection.

Severance uses the tropes of apocalyptic fiction—emptied cities, plagues, survivalist groups—but strips away sensationalism in favor of emotional introspection. The trauma depicted here is less about dramatic loss and more about the quiet dissolution of meaning. Candace, even before the pandemic, lives a ghostlike existence in New York. She works in a corporate publishing office, managing the production of luxury Bible editions in China. Her life is governed by repetition and disengagement. When the world begins to fall apart, Candace continues going to work, documenting the empty streets of Manhattan on her blog.

This compulsive adherence to routine, even in the face of catastrophe, is a subtle yet potent representation of trauma. Ma aligns it with capitalist conditioning—how modern workers are trained to dissociate from their surroundings and perform roles regardless of context. The infected in Severance exhibit this in extreme form: they repeat daily habits—setting the table, brushing teeth, folding laundry—until they collapse. This behavior, though grotesque, mirrors the emotional automation many people experience in high-stress, performance-driven societies.

Trauma in Severance is not defined by one major event but by chronic disconnection. Candace's emotional detachment from her parents' deaths, her failed relationship, and even the apocalypse itself marks her as a figure of quiet despair. She rarely displays overt grief or panic. Instead, her trauma is internalized, masked by functionality. This aligns with modern trauma theory, which acknowledges that trauma can manifest not only in flashbacks and breakdowns but also in flattened affect, dissociation, and a numbed self (Luckhurst 90).

Severance also critiques how modern society responds to crisis—not with reflection, but with denial, productivity, and branding. Even after the fever spreads, Candace's company offers her incentives to keep working. She becomes a "creature of habit," willingly walking into the same office every day, not because she feels safe, but because it's what she knows. This presents a new form of trauma: one not from visible violence, but from the invisible erosion of selfhood under the pressures of modern life.

The nonlinear narrative structure, alternating between Candace's post-apocalyptic wandering and flashbacks to her life before the fever, mirrors her fragmented identity. The shifts in timeline reflect the disjointed way trauma is remembered—not sequentially, but in fragments and emotional spikes. Like Morrison, Ma uses this fractured structure to embody the disorientation of her character.

Ultimately, Severance presents survival not as heroism but as inertia. Candace survives because she keeps moving, following rules, and detaching herself from emotional entanglement. But survival in this sense is also a form of haunting—Candace becomes an observer of life rather than a participant. Ma's novel poses a critical question: is survival without meaning a form of trauma itself?

Through its subtle prose and emotional quietness, Severance offers a chilling portrait of how trauma operates in contemporary capitalist societies—not through visible collapse, but through the slow, silent decay of emotional life.

Comparative Analysis: Slavery and Pandemic as Sites of Silent Suffering

While *Beloved* and *Severance* differ in genre, time period, and cultural context, both novels use trauma to foreground the **invisible emotional toll** of large-scale societal collapse. Morrison's historical fiction is rooted in the **legacy of slavery**, where characters carry inherited pain passed down through generations. In contrast, Ma's speculative fiction deals with **pandemic trauma**, often individualized and shaped by the mechanization of daily life in a hyper-capitalist system.

Both Sethe and Candace are **isolated women**, navigating landscapes of loss and emotional numbness. Sethe's isolation stems from her guilt and society's silence about slavery, while Candace is surrounded by the physical emptiness of a post-pandemic world and the emotional vacuum of modern life. Both characters exhibit **"acting out"** behavior as defined by LaCapra: Sethe clings to the ghost of her daughter, while Candace clings to her routines. Neither can fully escape the trauma that shapes their identity.

Furthermore, both authors use **nonlinear narrative structures** to reflect the disorienting effects of trauma. Sethe's flashbacks come unbidden and uncontrollable, while Candace's memories surface passively in the middle of a broken timeline. The very form of both novels reflects a psychological truth: trauma does not follow logical progression but arrives in fragments.

Both novels also resist the idea of total recovery. Healing is slow, partial, and uncertain. *Beloved* ends with a community effort to exorcise the ghost, hinting at the power of collective memory. *Severance* offers no such closure, emphasizing instead the **ambiguity of survival**—Candace continues on, but her future is

unclear. This contrast reveals how different cultural traumas are processed: one through communal reckoning with history, the other through lonely endurance in a fractured modern world.

Conclusion: Literature as Witness and Healer

This comparative study reveals that trauma—whether historical or contemporary—transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Morrison and Ma depict trauma as a deeply embodied and disruptive force that reshapes memory, identity, and narrative form. Their protagonists, Sethe and Candace, struggle with guilt, loss, and disconnection, yet remain testaments to human endurance.

While *Beloved* addresses collective racial trauma stemming from slavery, *Severance* critiques the silent emotional decay in late capitalist societies. Both novels challenge readers to rethink the definition of survival—not as mere physical persistence, but as the ability to narrate, remember, and make meaning of suffering.

Through the lens of trauma theory, the paper demonstrates that literature remains a crucial space where the **unspeakable is given shape**, and where healing—though never guaranteed—can begin. In bridging the personal and the collective, the past and the present, *Beloved* and *Severance* prove that fiction continues to be one of the most powerful tools for witnessing and working through trauma.

Bibliography

- Balaev, Michelle. *The Nature of Trauma in the American Novel*. Northwestern University Press, 2012.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2004.
- Ma, Ling. *Severance*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.
- Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books, 1992.