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# The Impact of Systemic Racism and Trauma on Individuals, Families, and Communities in Toni Morrison's Novels "Beloved" and "The Bluest Eye"

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**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

## Abstract

This abstract provides an overview of a research paper that delves into the themes of systemic racism and trauma as depicted in Toni Morrison's novels 'Beloved' and 'The Bluest Eye'. The paper aims to explore how these societal issues impact individuals, families, and communities within the narratives. It outlines the analysis of characters' experiences to understand the influence of historical injustices and societal pressures on their identities, relationships, and overall lives. Moreover, it highlights the themes of race, identity, memory, and community as central to understanding the enduring effects of trauma and the resilience displayed by the characters.

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**Keywords:** Identity, memory, community, systemic racism and trauma.

## Introduction

The introduction sets the stage for an exploration of Toni Morrison's novels 'Beloved' and 'The Bluest Eye', emphasizing their focus on race, trauma, and identity within the context of American society. It highlights how these novels provide a profound portrayal of the enduring impact of systemic racism and oppression on various levels, including individuals, families, and communities.

Beloved contains many cultural materialist concerns such as race, gender, slavery, and rape. Encapsulating the problems and pressures of African Americans, Beloved is a kind of reminiscence of slavery in the twentieth-century American literature. Written in 1970 when the new movement of 'Black is Beautiful' was at its peak, The Bluest Eye stimulated new critical discussions about racism and sexism, as well as social, ethical and psychological issue about race, the female body, and black femininity (Zebialowicz and palasinski 221). Although all of Morrison's novels can be good representatives of marginalized people, this study will investigate only Beloved and The Bluest Eye.

Morrison's narratives delve into the complexities of how historical injustices, particularly slavery and racism, continue to reverberate through the lives of African Americans. By delving into the stories of her characters, Morrison illustrates how the legacy of these injustices shapes their experiences and identities.

The aim of the research paper, which is to analyze the themes of systemic racism and trauma within these novels. It specifies a focus on examining how these themes affect individual characters, their families, and the broader communities depicted in the narratives.

## Historical Context

'Beloved' is set in the aftermath of slavery, in a period known as Reconstruction, when African Americans were grappling with the legacy of slavery and trying to rebuild their lives in a society that was still deeply divided along racial lines. 'The Bluest Eye', on the other hand, is set in the 1940s, during a time of racial segregation and discrimination, when African Americans were fighting for their rights amidst widespread prejudice and inequality.

'Beloved' by Toni Morrison is set in the post-Civil War era in America, specifically during the period known as Reconstruction. After the abolition of slavery, Reconstruction aimed to rebuild the South and integrate newly freed African Americans into society as citizens with rights. African Americans faced widespread discrimination, economic hardship, and political disenfranchisement despite the legal end of slavery. The novel explores the psychological and emotional trauma endured by formerly enslaved individuals and their descendants, as well as the ongoing struggle for freedom and identity in a society still deeply entrenched in racism.

'The Bluest Eye' by Toni Morrison is set in the 1940s, during a time of racial segregation and discrimination in America. This era, often referred to as the Jim Crow era, was characterized by laws and social norms that enforced racial segregation and upheld white supremacy. African Americans were subjected to systemic racism in all aspects of life, including education, housing, employment, and public accommodations. They faced daily indignities, violence, and dehumanization, perpetuated by both individuals and institutions. Against this backdrop, the novel examines the damaging effects of internalized racism and societal beauty standards on a young African American girl named Pecola Breedlove, who longs for blue eyes as a symbol of acceptance and belonging in a society that devalues blackness.

## Impact on Individuals

One of the central themes of both novels is the impact of systemic racism and trauma on individual characters. In 'Beloved', Sethe is haunted by the trauma of slavery and the loss of her daughter, Beloved, whose spirit returns to torment her. Sethe's experience reflects the psychological toll of slavery and the dehumanization of black bodies. Similarly, in 'The Bluest Eye', Pecola Breedlove internalizes the racism and colorism she faces, leading to a deep sense of self-loathing and a desire for blue eyes, which she believes will make her beautiful and loved. Both characters illustrate how systemic racism can erode one's sense of self and lead to profound psychological scars.

In 'Beloved', Sethe is a former slave who escapes from Sweet Home plantation to Ohio, but she carries the trauma of her past with her. The central trauma she faces is the killing of her own child, Beloved, whom she murders to prevent her from returning to a life of slavery. Sethe's actions are driven by her desire to protect her children from the horrors of slavery, but they also haunt her. The return of Beloved's spirit forces Sethe to confront her past and the devastating choices she made. Throughout the novel, Sethe struggles with guilt, shame, and the psychological weight of her experiences as a slave.

Beloved returns as a ghost or embodiment of the trauma of slavery. Her presence disrupts Sethe's life and the lives of those around her, symbolizing the unresolved trauma and loss experienced by enslaved individuals and their descendants. Beloved's longing for connection and love mirrors the yearning for identity and belonging among those affected by slavery. Her character embodies the collective memory and suffering of African Americans who endured slavery and its aftermath.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is a young African American girl growing up in a racially segregated community in Ohio. She faces constant ridicule and discrimination because of her dark skin and perceived ugliness. Pecola internalizes society's racist beauty standards, particularly the belief that whiteness is synonymous with beauty and worth. She becomes obsessed with the idea of having blue eyes, which she believes will make her beautiful and desirable. However, this desire for acceptance and validation only deepens her sense of inferiority and self-hatred. Pecola's tragic story illustrates how systemic racism and colorism can warp an individual's sense of self-worth and perpetuate cycles of trauma and oppression.

Thus, Morrison focuses on the experiences of these marginalized young girls "who are disregarded and suffer from many forms of abuse, including physical, psychological, and sexual assault (qtd. in Roye 212). Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* depict the psychological turmoil experienced by black girls as they confront persecution and neglect in a racist society, and this hindrance impedes their development from adolescence to womanhood.

Both novels depict the profound impact of systemic racism and trauma on individual characters, highlighting the enduring legacy of slavery and racism in America. Through Sethe and Beloved in 'Beloved' and Pecola in 'The Bluest Eye', Toni Morrison explores the complex interplay between personal experience and broader historical and social forces, shedding light on the psychological toll of racism and the quest for identity and belonging in a society marked by inequality and injustice.

## Impact on Families

The novels also explore the impact of systemic racism and trauma on families. In 'Beloved', the ghost of Beloved represents the unresolved trauma of slavery that haunts the entire family, disrupting their lives and relationships. Similarly, in 'The Bluest Eye', the Breedlove family is torn apart by the effects of racism, with Pecola's father perpetuating violence and abuse, while her mother is consumed by her own insecurities and internalized racism. These examples highlight how systemic racism can fracture families and create cycles of trauma that are passed down through generations.

In *Beloved*, the Garner family not directly depicted in the novel, the Garner family represents a semblance of familial stability within the context of slavery. Sethe, the protagonist, was a slave on the Garner plantation, where she formed a familial bond with other slaves, including her husband, Halle, and her fellow slaves. However, this sense of family is shattered when Sethe decides to flee to Ohio with her children, leaving behind her husband and the community they had built. The trauma of slavery and separation continues to affect Sethe and her children, haunting them even after their escape.

Sethe's family in Ohio is profoundly affected by the trauma of slavery and the return of Beloved's ghost. Sethe's relationship with her surviving children, particularly Denver, is strained by the presence of Beloved's ghost, which disrupts their daily lives and exacerbates Sethe's guilt and trauma. The family is isolated from the community as they grapple with their painful past, struggling to find healing and reconciliation amidst the lingering effects of slavery.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedlove family is depicted as deeply fractured and dysfunctional, with systemic racism and internalized oppression taking a heavy toll on its members. Pecola Breedlove, the central character, longs for love and acceptance in a world that devalues her because of her race and appearance. Her parents, Cholly and Pauline, are unable to provide the stability and support she needs, as they are both consumed by their own struggles with racism and self-hatred. Cholly's abusive behavior and Pauline's neglect further contribute to the family's disintegration, leaving Pecola vulnerable and isolated.

In the MacTeer Family, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer are Pecola's childhood friends, come from a loving and supportive family. However, even they are not immune to the effects of racism and poverty. They witness Pecola's suffering and struggle to understand why she is treated so differently because of her appearance. The MacTeer family serves as a contrast to the Breedlove family, highlighting the importance of love, resilience, and community support in the face of adversity.

Both novels illustrate how systemic racism and trauma can fracture families and undermine their ability to nurture and protect their members. Through the Garner and Sethe family in 'Beloved' and the Breedlove and MacTeer family in 'The Bluest Eye', Toni Morrison explores the profound impact of historical and social forces on the dynamics of family life, shedding light on the complexities of love, survival, and resilience in the face of oppression.

## Impact on Communities

Furthermore, both novels depict the broader impact of systemic racism and trauma on communities. In 'Beloved', the community of former slaves in Cincinnati is portrayed as fragmented and haunted by the memories of slavery, with each member grappling with their own traumas and losses. In 'The Bluest Eye', the community of Lorain, Ohio, is depicted as complicit in perpetuating racist and colorist ideals, which further marginalizes characters like Pecola. These examples underscore how systemic racism can pervade entire communities, shaping their values, beliefs, and interactions.

In "Beloved", the community of former slaves in Cincinnati represents a microcosm of post-Civil War America grappling with the legacy of slavery. This community is deeply scarred by their experiences as slaves, and their shared trauma binds them together while also causing division. The memories of slavery haunt the characters, manifesting in various ways, such as Sethe's haunting by the ghost of her dead daughter, Beloved. The community's inability to fully reckon with their past perpetuates their collective trauma, leading to a fragmented and disjointed existence.

Individuals within the community, like Sethe and Paul D, are burdened by their personal traumas, but they are also influenced by the broader communal trauma. For example, Sethe's decision to kill her own child rather than let her return to slavery is shaped by the community's shared history of slavery and the fear of its repercussions. Similarly, Paul D's struggle with his own identity and sense of belonging is influenced by the community's expectations and norms.

In "The Bluest Eye," the community of Lorain, Ohio, is depicted as complicit in perpetuating racist and colorist ideals, which further marginalize characters like Pecola Breedlove. The community's obsession with white beauty standards and its disdain for blackness contribute to Pecola's internalized self-hatred and longing for acceptance. The characters in the novel, including Pecola's own family members, are influenced by the community's attitudes towards race and beauty, leading to their mistreatment of her.

The black community has internalized a sense of marginalization perpetuated by the white community. This theme is evident in the character of Pecola Breedlove, who is ostracized within her own black community. Shubhanku Khochar observes that "*The Bluest Eye* offers a candid exploration of the systemic oppression and dominance of black individuals by white society. The novel also addresses the exploitation of African Americans by some members of their own race within the dynamics of racial dominance". (Khochar 563)

Moreover, the community's silence and indifference towards Pecola's suffering highlight the systemic nature of racism and its impact on collective values and beliefs. The community's failure to challenge or question prevailing norms perpetuates the cycle of oppression and reinforces the marginalization of individuals like Pecola.

Overall, both novels illustrate how communities can serve as both sources of support and sources of oppression for their members. The collective trauma and systemic racism depicted in "Beloved" and "The Bluest Eye" shape the values, beliefs, and interactions of their respective communities, highlighting the pervasive influence of systemic issues on collective identities and individual experiences.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's novels 'Beloved' and 'The Bluest Eye' offer a powerful exploration of the impact of systemic racism and trauma on individuals, families, and communities. Through her poignant storytelling and rich characterization, Morrison illuminates the enduring legacy of slavery and racism in American society and the profound toll it takes on the human spirit. By shedding light on these issues, Morrison challenges readers to confront the past and strive for a more just and equitable future.

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