

**STATE OF MIND OF TONI MORRISON'S CHARACTERS IN *BELOVED*, *SULA*,  
*THE BLUEST EYE*, *JAZZ* AND *SONG OF SOLOMON*.**

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**Introduction**

Toni Morrison's novels are deeply rooted in the tragic history of African-Americans, from the time of their enslavement to the contemporary period. Her novels depict characters who convey uneasy feelings, and who are subject to existential unrest. As witnesses of painful events, they are put up with tribulations. They go through the bad times of their pernicious past in their lives.

Morrison's characters are generally characterized by morbid and amazing doings. Those doings are nothing but the perspiration on the surface of their inner lives that are tarnished by the pernicious character of some social facts such as anti-Black prejudices, oppression, segregation, incest, poverty, violence, etc., of which they are the victims. They look like mutilated and mentally handicapped beings. Enfeebled and unbalanced by painful experiences they are prone to eccentricism, as their state of mind is marked with corruption and depersonalization. Caught up in a traumatic past, they are led to existential uneasiness and to unwonted doings.

This study of the state of mind of Toni Morrison's characters follows a psychoanalytical approach. It is focused on characters' feelings, emotions, inner language and life, with the ultimate objective of grasping the significance of the message taught through Morrison's books. This work progressively displays people with corrupted character: moral corruption and depersonalization; their morbid psychoaffective state of mind, and the trauma in their memory.

**1-People with Corrupted Character: Moral Corruption and Depersonalization**

Toni Morrison's characters are tormented by a moral corruption that depersonalizes them, and deteriorates their judgements, tastes, languages and doings. It deprives them of their true selves, that is, of what constitutes their individuality or authenticity. Because characters' states of mind are tarnished by horrible experiences like indoctrination and violence, whose symptoms are visible in the form of moral corruption.

As triggering elements of slavery, and the major causes of the characters' trauma, the anti-Black prejudices continue to generate dehumanization and poverty in the life of black characters. For white racists, black people are not human beings but savages, and as such they are considered as beast of burden. Not only do Whites use Blacks as labor force, but their sentiment of superiority also makes them develop real hostility toward Blacks. The Prejudices these black people undergo are harmful to their psychology and their personality. They get Blacks into a state of confusion, and corrupt their identity and mentality. They are source of spiritual blindness, confusion and loss of culture. Sixo, in *Beloved*, is aware of this fact. For him, prejudices are likely to change his psychology by making him forget the things he should not forget, and to memorize the things he should not. Sixo is therefore a victim of confused sentiment.

Stamp Paid, still in *Beloved*, describes the symptom, that is, the process through which the prejudices, as pathogenic causes, act on the psychology of Blacks in order to determine a disease, that is to say, the trauma. In the following lines, Stamp Paid describes the pernicious character of anti-Black prejudices:

The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade Whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle Blacks brought with them to this place from the other [livable] place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. (*Beloved*, 244)

The prejudices allay the minds of Blacks by making them comply with their depreciating contents. Focused on indoctrination, that cyclopean white vision corrupts black characters' minds and depersonalizes them.

Anti-Black prejudices affect Blacks' mental clarity and balance. The mental uneasiness and disturbances they create, make their victims foreign to themselves and to their society. In their mental aberration, they develop an irresistible inferiority complex facing Whites. The doubt Paul D has about his humanity is nothing but the consequence of his alienation. In his wandering life, he has also seen corrupt-minded people:

[H]e had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. [...]. Once he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies. (*Beloved*, 81)

Those people are struck by a loss of memory and mental alienation. They are eccentric and live in an oneiric state. Their perception of reality is corrupt. It is the case of this woman who, in an hallucinogenic state of mind, assimilates or puts her children in the same category as ducks to

which she devotes her affection. The prejudices and bad experiences of which characters are victims are source of psychic degradation, aphasia and amnesia.

Because prejudices have tarnished Morrison's black characters' minds, the latter develop a pathogenic psychology directed against their race, and themselves, as individuals. In *Sula*, for example, because Helen finds that it is disadvantageous to be black, she cultivates negrophobia. She projects morbid fear and scorn for the black race on Nel, her daughter. She forbids Nel to approach Sula. She considers the mother of the latter as a swarthy woman. Facing white people, Helen is timorous and full of complexes. However, facing Blacks, basing her opinion on her clear halfcaste complexion, she is haughty. When the white controller reverted her to childhood, in the train, Helen got into a panic, and tried to obey as quickly as possible. In her voice, one could see her desire to please the controller mingle with the excuse of not being a white woman, that is a worthy woman deserving respect and consideration. Disconcerted, Helen behaved in an uncontrolled and senseless manner. She develops a morbid caution. She was on her guard during the whole trip.

Like Helen, Morrison's black characters have sleepy and stiff minds. They seem to have renounced their own selves to adopt the depreciating ideology of their white detractors. By rejecting and fleeing their race, and approving the mediocre, degrading and arbitrary image associated with them by Whites, these characters repudiate their true selves. By developing a sense of shame about their racial heritage condition, they are inclined to behave like their depreciators. They want to "whiten" themselves.

In *The Bluest Eye*, for example, Pecola feels herself a prisoner of her dark skin that she dislikes. She dreams of escaping her racial heritage. Helen, the halfcaste, endorses an inferiority feeling toward Whites, and a superiority complex facing people with dark complexion. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead II separates himself, body, spirit and soul from any African cultural model, as well as from the others. That self-denial is held by almost the whole black population that sees no other form of human dignity than that of Whites. That black community is passionately fond of that white self, and therefore unconsciously celebrates it every year during Christmas by offering white dolls to their black girls.

The idea that Claudia, in *The Bluest Eye*, has of her value makes her feel depressed. She develops an inferiority complex that makes her be jealous of every individual with white complexion, even white dolls. Her disarray makes her lose control, to the point of being violent and sadistic. Claudia feels herself insulted whenever she is reminded of her racial heritage. Like her, the majority of Blacks consider their skin color as an imperfection. Because they are unable to get rid of it, they are traumatized, and as if they are trapped in a poor life. The cause of this

misery is mental. They are disposed to absorb and appropriate the dehumanizing vision of Whites without showing a minimum of respect for themselves. Their true enemy is their cruel lack of mental keenness. That fact has favored their indoctrination, and given them a pathetic and lamentable personality.

Being unable to get rid of her racial heritage, and feeling trapped by it, Pecola cannot help crying. The people of her race, among whom Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, Buddy Wilson and Junie Bug, are used to plaguing her with insults. In their mind, blackness is synonymous with mediocrity, lack of culture and ugliness. Excluding themselves from the black race, they have improvised a song on the basis of racial insults. In doing so, they have developed an unconscious hatred of themselves and of their parents:

They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (*T.B.E*, 55)

These characters entertain negative feelings toward their black traits. Pecola is torn between a sentiment of hatred of her race and fascination for the white.

Prejudices are on an equal footing with complexes. White characters feel superior. Because halfcastes like Helen (*Sula*) and Geraldine (*T.B.E*) cannot rise up to their rank and status, they are torn between a sentiment of inferiority and superiority. They feel indeed inferior to Whites, and at the same time superior to their fellows of darker complexion. Helen and Geraldine refuse to mingle with those they pejoratively treat as Niggers. The racial stigmatization is so exacerbated in the black community that even the slightest difference of complexion is object of prejudice. One has to refer to the harassment that Pecola undergoes from the gang of black boys. Pauline Breedlove (*T.B.E*), her mother, is also shocked for being treated as good for nothing. The Blacks from the North are very haughty and as wicked as white characters. Compared to Blacks in the South, they develop a superiority complex motivated by slavery, an institution that denied any dignity to Blacks.

The poverty and dishonor to which Blacks are constrained, pathologically influence their psychology. Because the Breedloves (*T.B.E*) think of themselves as mediocre people, they live in a disgusting house. They live there because they are poor and black, and they remain there because they consider themselves ugly. They have adopted the white vision that succeeded in depriving them of their dignity and authentic “selves”. Being mentally impoverished, it is almost impossible for them to admit that they are worthy, and that they are not ugly people. Because they consider themselves as the embodiment of human lowness, they dream of

changing their human condition. Because Pauline (*T.B.E*) is subject to the racial mockery, she dreams of living the life of a white woman with the hope that she will be considered with kindness.

The mental corruption of T. Morrison's black characters is also due to some violent events. The cases of Plum and Shadrack, in *Sula*, can be an illustration. They took part in the 1917 war. Plum came back from that war with a ravaged mind and an incestuous inclination directed toward his mother. Plum's psychic unbalance made him immature. His puerilism, that is, the regression of his personality to the state of a child, is expressed through his reprehensible manners. Like nanny goats that are used to copulating the she goats which dropped them, Plum is not able to make the distinction between his mother and any other girl or woman. By trying to copulate with Eva, his mother, he has lost any moral sense. The corruption of his mind disconnects him with reality, and makes him ignore elementary rules. Being also inclined to suicide, Plum has decided to drain his blood off. Thus, in his dark bedroom, he was draining that liquid into a glass. That slow death was precipitated by his mother. Because of the grief caused to her by her son, Eva courageously burnt him alive.

*Sula* provides a good illustration of oneiric and insane states of mind of characters through the case of Shadrack. For having witnessed the cruelties of the war, he is a prey to mental degradation. When he was on the battlefield, he had heard explosions and people shouting. He had witnessed horrible scenes that have psychically unbalanced him:

[H]e saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. (*Sula*, 8)

Shadrack has witnessed horrors. Probably, he had killed one or several enemies on the battlefield. In his mind, that, experience has triggered off a huge amount of terror, more than his psychic system could support. Of him, that event has made a prey to a hallucinatory psychosis. He is then similar to the above-mentioned body of the soldier who had been decapitated by a shell. Because his mental faculties are suffering, Shadrack is not able to control himself. He cannot have a clear vision of reality.

Shadrack is actually a bit crazy. The atrocious scenes he had witnessed had made him fall down in a faint. He recovered consciousness in a hospital bed. His mind was worn by a pathological perception of facts and objects in his neighborhood. He is afraid of everything and of evrybody. He dreads his hands, his nurse, the trees, and even his meal. He is horrified at inoffensive things such as those described below:

In one triangle was rice, in another meat, and in the third stewed tomatoes. A small round depression held a cup of whitish liquid. Shadrack stared at the soft colors that filled these triangles: the lumpy whiteness of rice, the quivering blood tomatoes, the grayish-brown meat. All their repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the triangle ... (*Sula*, 8)

Shadrack's meal probably reminds him of the bloodshed, the human flesh and whitish brain of the decapitated soldier he had seen on the battlefield. Though starving, he needed first to make sure that the white color of the rice, the red of the tomato sauce, and the brown color of the meat would remain inoffensive and in place. His foolishness and childish manners irritated his neighbors.

Because Shadrack was schizophrenic, he was tied up by several men. He hardly knew who he was. Disconnected with reality, he assimilated his status of soldier to the word "secret", and he wondered why he was treated that way. He was suffering from the rupture of the principles of cohesion of his psychic system. Overwhelmed with fear and disarray, Shadrack has become a schizophrenic character. The fact that his psychosis is characterized by a psychic disintegration that is externally expressed by his paradoxical behavior is the proof that he is disconnected with reality.

Shadrack is also suffering from schizoparaphasia, that is, a language disturbance marked by the dissociation between words and their meanings. That is expressed by his desire to match his face with his status of soldier. He was traumatized because he thought he was horribly defaced. Having lost his psychic balance, Shadrack feels dizzy. His hysterical troubles deprived him of any integrity, and made him inoperative:

He fought a rising hysteria [...]. Suddenly without raising his eyelids, he began to cry. Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was [...] with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, [...] and nothing nothing nothing to do [...] he was sure of one thing only : the unchecked monstrosity of his hands. He cried soundlessly at the curbside of a small Midwestern town ... (*Sula*, 12)

Shadrack has lost his peace and memory. With the disorganization of his psychic system, he remembers neither his origins, his past, nor his identity. Unable to acknowledge himself, he is a prey of mental aberration.

Shadrack's oneiric state of mind is similar to that of the slave woman, in *Beloved*, who has a morbid vision that makes her assimilate her children with ducks to which she gives all her love. Shadrack's depersonalizing state of mind is also similar to Pecola's condition in *The Bluest Eye*. Feeling unhappy, she desperately wishes she could acquire the Whites' blue eyes in order to enlighten her life as white women's lives. Because Pecola perceives her racial

condition as a curse, she is full of complexes, and develops an irresistible feeling of shame that makes her hate herself and “run away” from her true self.

According to Pecola Breedlove, only Whites are in possession of the secret of felicity because of their blue eyes that she considers as their fetish. Worn down with the execrable image of ugliness she considers as hers, she wants to acquire the inborn attributes of white women. Pecola is then distressed by her blackness that she perceives as a grave defectiveness. Her black situation stifles her and shuts her up physically, socially and mentally. In her view, blue eyes would be the panacea. She would be beautiful, happy, loved and respected, and her family would be peaceful and comfortable if only she could get them. Following a number of actions, Pecola starts to fantasize, living in the illusion that she has the blue eyes that she looks for. With that morbid perception of reality, she thinks she has freed herself from her racial condition. Therefore, she sees nothing but a glorious state that arouses the jealousy of her neighbors. In that morbid obsession, Pecola ends her implausible quest in a phantasmagoric state.

Considering what has been mentioned earlier, the mental corruption tends to survive. Long after the abolition of slavery, contemporary black characters consider themselves as subhuman beings; ugly and unworthy people. The Breedloves give a perfect illustration of that fact. They associate themselves with an incurable mediocrity:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, ‘You are ugly people.’ They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. ‘Yes,’ they had said. ‘You are right.’ And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Dealing with it each according to his way. (*T.B.E.*, 34)

In addition to the indoctrination that has deprived the majority of black characters of their authentic personality, misery also puts them in deplorable states.

In *Jazz*, while Violet and Alice are ravaged by their respective lack of children, a woman suffering from mental inertness rejects hers. As a prey to an insane state of mind, Joe’s mother has fallen below human condition. Discovered pregnant in a bad way in a field, she was carried to a cabin by a young man. In that place, she gave birth to Joe. Surprisingly enough, she refused to look at him and to take him. She abandoned the baby and hid in the bush. The regression of her personality to a wild condition won her the name of “wild woman”. (*Jazz*, 171) She has lost the clear consciousness of herself. Wild is a scatterbrained character; a woman who is stupid and easy going. Her brain is so ravaged that she even ignores what animals are used for, that is feeding what they have given birth to. That humiliating dishonor affected Joe’s mind, making

him crave for death. Though he has married Violet, and despite his love for children, he has always refused to have any. His paradoxical refusal to get children might be due to fear. He might be afraid of rejecting them just as his parents had done toward him. The prejudices, mistreatments, and painful events have caused deep psychoaffective blows.

## 2- Morbid Psychoaffective State of Mind of Characters

Through the term affective state, we refer to any process that calls out affectivity. That implies feelings and painful moral states. The sensitivity of most of Toni Morrison's characters is negatively affected by their deleterious experiences of life. They are preys to profound existential uneasiness. As readers, our attention is drawn to bad consequences like indoctrination and depersonalization of slavery on Blacks. The mistreatment they experienced caused emotional shocks that tarnish the quality of their lives.

The cruel life of slaves put them in a poor psychoaffective state. They must serve Whites, ensure their happiness as well as the economic prosperity of the nation at their expense. Field and domestic attributions have despoiled and exhausted them. They suffer cruelties. Though they achieve their tasks, they are black and blue all over. Baby Suggs, in *Beloved*, is shocked and disgusted by that condition she tragically feels:

[I]n all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (*Beloved*, 29)

Baby Suggs is shaken by the erosion of her body, her forced separation from the people she loved, her rapes and dispossession of her eight children. All these cruel facts are likely to wear her out. As the property of her white master, Baby Suggs' offspring could not belong to her. Her progeny belonged to her master, just as the eggs of the laying hen belong to its owner. The grief caused by that mistreatment torments her, and makes her see her life as a malediction. The image of unworthiness and frivolity that people associate with her make her feel sick.

Because she had got children with six men, Baby Suggs was underestimated. She is broken-hearted. The pain she feels is unspeakable. Field works have broken her hips, and exhaustion has invaded her mind. Her condition as a slave troubles her. In her opinion, there are no other infamous people than Whites. The latter have deprived her of everything she had, and dreamed of. In her inner life, she harbours resentment and hatred against her traumatizers.

It is important to note that most of the slaves had a similar experience. For one reason or another, they had been separated from their beloved ones. Separation is source of a profound affliction that compromises their psychic balance, destabilizes and weakens them. Paul D (*Beloved*) is one of its victims. He had already seen his brother make his farwells at the back of a cart, with fried chicken in his pocket and tears in his eyes. He could not take advantage of neither his mother's affection, nor his father's. He has no recollection of them. During his deportation, his mind was invaded by an intense emotional shock that made him lose his self-control. Actually, Paul D tried to kill Brandywine, his purchaser.

The morbid character of the psychoaffective state of slaves tends to confer them an inclination for death. Sethe (*Beloved*), for example, planned to kill her children and commit suicide. As she reviewed her life, she saw nothing but ruin, terror, pain and desolation. Whites have milked her breasts, streaked her back with wounds and scars. They dragged her into the bush as she was pregnant. Everything about them is nothing but vileness. They have hanged Ma'am, her mother. Sethe feels each time of her life as a frustrating calvary.

The cruelty of slavery is not limited to what slaves experienced. It insidiously projects itself in time to the lives of their descendants. Denver (*Beloved*) and her brothers, Howard and Buglar, are suffering from it. Denver is consumed with it. She is tormented with the absence of Halle, her father, who is said to have lost his mind. She is also tormented with the nostalgia of her brothers who ran away not only because of the persecution deployed by the ghost of their sister that had her throat cut by Sethe, their mother, but also because of the fact that their mother has henceforth become a traumatizing agent for them.

Denver is affected and melancholic. Feeling alone, she keeps mostly to herself. Years of haunting memory torment her so that she has become a timid and appaled. The mystery about her mother's personality is so disconcerting that it puts her in a state of insecurity. She explains her state of confusion as follows:

I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. [...]. Maybe it was getting that close to dying made them want to fight the War. That's what they told me they were going to do [...] and there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own. All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too. (*Beloved*, 252-53)

Living in an atmosphere of anxiety, Denver develops a morbid hyper-vigilance. She is tormented by the thing that makes of her mother a threat. She is torn between the love and hatred she has for Sethe.

The terror that Whites have established has tarnished minds and hearts with hatred. Black characters have become vindictive, complaining and quick-tempered. The burning desire of vengeance that they develop make them immoral. The injustice established by the white community frustrated Blacks. The latter do not have any good share of the wealth of the nation. In *Sula*, Blacks are obliged to settle on the unproductive hills. They are constrained to poverty. The physical and mental sufferings that have invaded their bodies and minds fill their eyes with tears.

The tumultuous relations between people are also source of moral prejudices. They provoke affective and emotional troubles in characters. Though their mental integrity is not fully corrupt, they are tormented. Ruth Foster and her daughters, Lena and Corinthians (*S.O.S*), for example, feel themselves despised by Macon. The latter paralyzes them psychologically with terror. His hatred against Ruth, his wife, is contained in each speech he addresses to her. His disappointment about his daughters tarnished their lives, and deprived them of happiness. He deprives them of serenity and confidence. Because Macon annihilates and destabilizes his relatives, the latter, having lost their sense of serenity, safety and self-confidence are now living with trauma. Ruth and her daughters are distressed everyday. They suffer Macon's aggressive state of mind that is full of hatred. His tyrannical authority erodes his wife's and daughters' enthusiasm and potentiality. Of Corinthians, Macon has made an incapable and incompetent character despite her diplomas. Depressed by her condition, Corinthians could not find any better job than that of a maid of which she is ashamed. As by osmosis, Macon's neurosis and psychopathic disorder rubs off on his wife and neighbors.

As a mother, Ruth's pain grew when Hagar, armed with a pickax, tried to kill Milkman. She was so worried that she became violent and lost her self-control. We should not forget that Hagar, herself, is also brokenhearted. In addition to the fact of being shocked because of an unhappy love affair, she finds herself ugly because of her black traits. Because she wants to get rid of that ugliness, she thinks that new clothes and beauty products could be the panacea. Hagar is autistic. All her mental life is occupied with her morbid inner life. She is totally detached from the external reality. She acts desperately, and is scatterbrained.

That pathetic and disturbing state of mind gives her fever, and fills her eyes with tears that are, in fact, nothing but the perspiration on the surface of the morbid psychoaffective condition that she has incubated for a long time, and which torments her. That incubation period

has affected her moral sensitiveness and has left her in disarray. Despite all the attempts of people to make her rational, Hagar continues painfully to think that she is a prey to an unacceptable and irreversible defectiveness. In her distress, she does nothing but praise the traits of Whites. She has been so undermined that she died.

Like Hagar, Empire State is upset by an unhappy love affair. Empire State has been betrayed by his wife. He is so depressed by that betrayal that he has become aphasiac and a mental defective. Guitar, his friend, is exhausted by the oppressive social atmosphere and by some distressing events including the loss of people dear to him. His father died, sliced in two by a machine in a sawmill whose owner was a white man. The story of that death is so engraved on Guitar's mind that he cannot help hating white people.

In *Jazz*, moral afflictions are mainly due to violence and affective reasons. Joe's and Violet's experiences illustrate that fact. Joe is heartbroken because of his mother's mental imbalance. His mother has made an orphan of him. Just when she gave birth to him, she refused to take him, and fled to get shelter in the bush. In fact, Joe's parents disappeared without leaving any trace of them. The void created by these events in him has been mortifying him till he met Dorcas, the girl he will kill following a crisis of jealousy. With that crime, Joe is in a terrible psychoaffective state. He usually cries, because for him, the situation is terribly similar to that of prison.

Like Hagar, the autistic girl, Joe is so broken that he has become indifferent and apathetic. He is absent-minded. His life is exhausting. He does nothing but think of Dorcas, day and night. Because of her, he no longer works and no longer sleeps. Repeatedly and uncontrollably, the picture of Dorcas imposes itself upon him and tormented him. Besides, his impunity disturbs him. Feeling sorry for himself, Joe is so melancholic that the narrator has associated him with a nickname: "Blues man" (*Jazz*, 119).

Joe preferred Dorcas to Violet, his wife, who, being ravaged, sleeps with a doll. About Violet's condition, Joe endorses a sentiment of guilt. Actually, in their past, refusing to have children, they committed three abortions. Now that Violet is going through the menopause, she is in disarray, a painful emotional state that makes her lose her moral sense and the escape. Her desire to have children has reached the highest point, and has become unbearable. Succumbing to its yoke, she bought a doll that she hides under the bed, and gets it secretly whenever she is possessed by her lack of children.

Tortured by remorse, Violet is immersed in sadness and despondency. Her melancholy is fed with a state of obsessive regret of her abortions, at a time when her breasts have become flat. "[M]other-hunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out." (*Jazz*, 108)

Besides, her husband's unfaithfulness with Dorcas breaks her heart. Any idea about that girl haunts Violet's spirit, irritates her, and makes her lose her self-control. Having made of the defunct her enemy, she feels an inferiority complex facing the latter. Her hatred of the deceased girl exhausts her so much that her state worries her clients. Under the weight of bitterness, her weight declines.

Violet also develops a guilt complex for Joe. Exhausted, she has become a suicidal character. She desires death. Alice Manfred, her confidante, is also affected. The death of her husband and that of Dorcas, her niece, as well as her lack of children torment her. She does nothing but ruminate on warfare thoughts against Joe who killed her niece, and the woman who killed her husband. She feels guilty for her niece's death.

The lamentable state of mind of Toni Morrison's characters is due to physical and moral facts. These shocks are triggered by potentially traumatizing circumstances. If most of Morrison's characters undergo these circumstances punctually, that is, at the time when these events occur, some other characters suffer sporadically, that is to say, irregularly, through a traumatic memory. The shocks they have got during the horrifying events of which they have been the witnesses in their past, suddenly reappear in their present to torment their minds. So, in a delayed manner, characters undergo, not only the punctual effects of their painful experiences, but also in the middle and long-term.

### **3-Trauma in the Memory of Characters**

The past of a character refers to his former life, considered as a chain of events. It implies both agreeable events as well as painful ones that serve as testimonies. Through the term memory, we mean the recalling to mind of events associated with the past, and of which the states of characters are the results. Any moment of their present can be influenced by one or several events. In the same way, their present condition is the starting point of other moments that will constitute their future. It is impossible to part with one's past. Actually, any attempts to forget scornful situations do not always imply their definite fading. They remain in the minds, with their joys and pains. If some of those past events are tolerated, other ones are however dreaded. They are felt as traumatizing.

Morrison's characters who suffer from a traumatic memory of their past are numerous. Their deleterious experiences prevent them from having a harmonious family, community and social life in their present life. The sorrow they undergo are mainly due to a fact that is exterior to their present. It is about the pernicious and timeless character of slavery. It is the distant cause

of the misery of Morrison's characters in the post-slavery period. As by osmosis, slavery affects not only the minds of ex-slaves, but also the lives of their descendants. No generation is spared.

The past of black characters cannot part with slavery whose spiteful effects are timeless. Toni Morrison's novels explore its tragic nature. Neither the emancipation of slaves nor the abolition of slavery is synonymous with the cessation of its nuisance. That past practice continues to distill torments. Through prejudices, proslavers had depreciated, subjected and subordinated Blacks to Whites. They denied Blacks' human status: "Ain't no nigger men." (*Beloved*, 13) They considered them as sub-human beings that had to be tamed and then exploited. Such worldviews have been transmitted from generation to generation to both Whites and Blacks. Whites established themselves as masters, and lowered Blacks. Baby Suggs, in *Beloved*, considers that system as the most cruel system life has engendered.

If the ex-slaves have dreamed of the end of their calvary, they were disillusioned. They bear the stigmata of the past. The emotional shocks they inherited from that past continue to exist and to persecute them in their present. Sethe (*Beloved*) is still scandalized by the fact that Whites treated her like a cow by milking her breasts, and by the fact of having been violently whipped while she was pregnant. More than a decade after Sweet Home (Kentucky), the place where those traumatizing events occurred, Sethe continues to be shocked in her present life of an ex-slave in Ohio. With frustration, she relates her painful past to Paul D as follows: "[T]hose boys came in there and took my milk [...]. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em [...]. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It growes there still." (*Beloved*, 235) Sethe is unable to forget that bad experience. The fact that she tells that, eighteen years later, with emotion and insistence, is a proof that she is still traumatized. Though very far from the place where those events happened, she continues to be undermined with the traumatic view of the space of Sweet Home. She has become a reckless character.

Because Baby Suggs has been deprived of her children, she is not a stranger to Sethe's misery. Though an emancipated slave, she continues to feel her life as a calvary. Her present is as unbearable as her past. The "ghosts" of her past tarnish her present, and deprive her of peace. Feeling her condition as a malediction, she sets herself up against God, her creator. She has become indifferent and apathetic. In space and time, she has carried her trauma. Disgusted, vindictive, complaining and full of hatred, Baby told to Sethe and Denver, the lesson she has learnt from life. After all this suffering, she has come to the conclusion that there is nothing worse than Whites.

Paul D is not saved of the troubles. If by external appearance he seems to be healthy, as he told Sethe, by the interior, he feels a profound existential uneasiness: “Devil’s confusion. He lets me look good long as I feel bad.” (*Beloved*, 9) Like Baby Suggs, Paul D seems to see God as a sadistic one. His past terrors remain everlasting in his memory. He is tormented with an inferiority complex facing Whites, and even the other Blacks. His slave life has rooted any pride and self-confidence out. His misery is so sluggish that he wished he could commit suicide. Desperate and haunted with the mediocre image he has about himself, Paul D has become a heavy drinker. Sethe, his confidante, is also distraught.

Sethe is unable to censor, repress and get rid of the horrors in her past. Those horrors burst into her present and make it unbearable. She has a grudge against Whites and her own mind that has recorded, maintained, and refuses to get rid of the horrors of her past. She considers it to be stubborn and mischievous. Overwhelmed beyond her capacity, Sethe regrets for not having been mad. She could neither commit suicide because her children were alive.

As a slave of her memory, Sethe desperately feels the need for help so as to free herself psychologically: “Some advice about how to keep on with a brain greedy for news nobody could live with in a world happy to provide it.” (*Beloved*, 116-17) Weighed down by persecution, she has lost her self-control, and become arrogant and quick-tempered. She then started to transgress morals She turned her back to her community; trampling underfoot professional integrity. With the loss of her job, she keeps her family in destitution.

Though characters like Helen and Shadrack (*Sula*), Joe and Violet (*Jazz*), and Guitar (*Song of Solomon*) have not been slaves like Sethe and Baby Suggs (*Beloved*), they are each a prey to the traumatic memory associated with their respective experiences. Helen Wright is also suffering. She is a negrophobic and neuropath. She is unable to get rid of the sorrow and phobia she is suffering from. Her past in the South has made her know oppression. Though presently in the North, her fear of the South has not vanished. As soon as she read the letter from New Orleans asking her to come, she panicked. Her fear revived: “All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble” (*Sula*, 20). Her reminiscence of the South gave her the jitters. She was not sure she could come back to Ohio safe and sound. So, when she was back, she glorified God.

The trauma Shadrack got from his participation in the war in Europe continues to give him a rough time in Medallion, a small town in Ohio, in America. On the battlefield, in France, he had been exposed to death. He had heard explosions, seen atrocities, and been given fright. He might even have given death to people. Following those horrors, he had lost consciousness.

When he recovered it in hospital, he had been horrified by a meal on a tray that was not threatening in reality:

In one triangle was rice, in another meat, and in the third stewed tomatoes. A small round depression held a cup of whitish liquid. Shadrack stared at the soft colors that filled these triangles: the lumpy whiteness of rice, the quivering blood tomatoes, the grayish-brown meat. All their repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the triangle. (*Sula*, 8)

That meal tray reminded Shadrack of the horrors of the war. He remembered the bloodshed, the wounds displaying human flesh, and the whitish brain of the soldier whose head had been blown by a shell. It took him time to make sure that what was in the tray did not have anything with the battlefield.

Released after a year of hospitalization, Shadrack's mind is still haunted by the cruel scenes of his recent past on the battlefield. He is terrified by almost everything. He always refers things and events to the violence of the war. Shadrack is not very conscious of his present condition as an ex-soldier. Having lost consciousness about time, he is not aware that he is in a peaceful place. His long stay in hospital seems to have been useless.

Joe and Violet (*Jazz*) are also suffering from the malevolence of their past. When she was still in the South twenty years ago, Violet made three abortions. Now, in her present, in Harlem, in the North, she is developing a guilt complex that imposes her with an annoying and depressing mutism. Her suffering is so intense that she has lost weight and wears unstitched and torn clothes. She is so disturbed that she cannot help attacking the dead body of Dorcas in a church, with a view to "killing" her a second time. Alice Manfred, her confidante, is also a victim of the traumatic memory of her past. Due to the too rigorous education she had got in her childhood, she has become an agoraphobic. As such, she is afraid of everywhere in the country. She flees the streets, and keeps mostly to herself. Though far from Virginia, the state where her husband was murdered, and despite the years spent, Alice continues to suffer from fear and grief.

Joe's affective and traumatic memory has tarnished the quality of his life. Having been rejected by both his mother and father, he has not succeeded in putting up with their misconducts. As a consequence, he refused to have children though married with Violet. Both agreed to make abortions: "Joe didn't want babies either so all those miscarriages—two in the field, only one in her bed [...]. They liked children. Loved them even. Especially Joe [...]." (*Jazz*, 107) They committed those abortions probably because they wanted to spare these babies the bitterness they have experienced themselves. Without any objective reason, Joe does not feel able to fulfill the role associated with the father status. He probably does not want to abandon them just like his parents did toward him.

Joe's past has created a void that he has been carrying for decades in him, till he found a confidant: "somebody to tell it to. Somebody called Dorcas [...] who knew [...] what that inside nothing was like. And who filled it for him." (*Jazz*, 37-38) However, because of a morbid jealousy, he killed Dorcas. Joe also develops a guilt complex for Violet, his wife, who sleeps with a doll: "This wasn't Violet's fault. All of it's mine. All of it. I'll never get over what I did to that girl. Never." (*Jazz*, 129)

Violet's traumatic memory has made a suicidal character who acts irrationally in public. Her inner misery obliges her to entertain a depressing mutism. Their abandons by their respective parents are underlying their infanticides. Rose Dear, Violet's mother, committed suicide by throwing herself into a well. That traumatic event clung to Violet's mind, and gave her an inclination to abandon her own babies. With that morbid state of mind, she agreed with Joe to make abortions. Some decades later, Violet's desire for offspring reached the highest point, and became unbearable. Her mind is undermined by the obsessive regret of her criminal past: "[M]other-hunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out." (*Jazz*, 108-109) Exhausted, Violet deeply desires a disease that could put an end to her life.

Like Joe and Violet, Guitar (*S.O.S*) is an abandoned person. As he tells Hagar, his uneasiness is due to the loss of dear people, that is, his father and mother: "Everything I ever loved in my life left me. [...]. So it was hard for me to latch on to a woman. Because I thought if I loved anything it would die." (*S.O.S*, 307) Guitar and Joe suffer from similar pains. Somehow abandoned in their childhood, they are exhausted by the absence of their respective parents. Their past negatively influences their presents to such a point that they have decided not to have offspring, for they are afraid to abandon and make them suffer as their parents did toward them.

The experiences of Toni Morrison's characters corrupt their minds and tarnish their present; leaving their future under sad and gloomy auspices. They undermine and manipulate them, and tend to impose morbid doings to them.

## **Conclusion**

Toni Morrison's novels describe characters with fragmented selves, with lives and minds ravaged by horrible events. Being trapped in unbearable lives, those individuals have no other project than suicide, violence, tyranny, and many other reprehensible behaviors. Characters like Shadrack, Plum, Tar Baby, Lindberg, Robert Smith, Henry Porter, Rose Dear, Paul D, Violet, Sethe, etc. are on the brink of suicide.

With their exploration of characters' psychology and states of mind, Toni Morrison's novels describe the lives of unbalanced characters that are evocative of psychic drama. They abound in inoperative characters who are psychologically disturbed. In the latter's quest for welfare and well-being, they harvest nothing but almost endless torments.

Morrison's novels reveal the trauma caused by slavery through devastated lives. They describe its pernicious character through protagonists' ordeals and tribulations during and after slavery. Morrison evokes the material and psychological effects of slavery. *Beloved*, for example, deals with the reminiscence of the traumatic past in the present lives of characters. The novels also reflect the struggle for black consciousness and self-assertion. The flight that is one of the structuring themes of *Song of Solomon*, for example, is the expression of the will of characters to escape the misery that is inherent in their painful and daily experiences on the American continent.

Certainly, Toni Morrison's objective is not to describe a society that is almost nearly not worth living. She certainly wants, through her characters, to stimulate her readers, especially African-Americans, to transcend their existential uneasinesses so as to have a bearable life. A relative peace and salvation can be found through characters' reconciliation with the traumatic past they had wanted to bury. Her novels then serve as a therapy for the reconstruction of one's self.

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