# BABES BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA FACULTY OF LETTERS THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

# A PSYCHO-MEDICAL APPROACH TO TRAUMA IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### SUMMARY

**DOCTORAL SUPERVISOR,** 

Prof. univ. dr. Michaela Mudure

DOCTORAL CANDIDATE, Liana Beian

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**KEY WORDS:** anorexia, racial autism, bipolar disorder, bulimia, racial codependency, crimes of passion, discrimination, infanticide, medicine, necrophilia, psychoanalysis, psychology, race, racism, ectopic pregnancy, slavery, trauma, body dysmorphic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder.

#### SUMMARY

A Psycho-Medical Approach to Trauma in Toni Morrison's Novels focuses on different aspects of psychology and medicine in the traumatic context of Toni Morrison's work. The thesis is meant to be an original experiment in which literature can transcend its boundaries and merge into the scientific solidity of the psychological and medical phenomena. The touch of the pathological is what sets the psychological and medical interpretations in motion, in the context of a deeply disturbing and traumatizing literary fiber. The contradictions and tensions exhibited by Toni Morrison's characters are the inevitable generators of different pathologies, transforming the individuals into the ideal subjects for psycho-medical profiles.

Psychology and medicine are of great value for my doctoral enterprise because they explain the intricacy and the paradox of the human psyche, which is the constant and fundamental concern not only of the present paper, but of Toni Morrison's literary universe. The human psyche is dissected and analyzed within the psychological and medical framework of racism which transforms Toni Morrison's characters into captives of their own lives and of their own choices. Even though most of them are free individuals who are no longer oppressed slaves, they carry with them the invisible burden of another type of slavery, one that is exacerbated by the poisonous influence of racism. This renders them as puppets in the hands of a master puppeteer, the main attractions in the grand show of racism.

Toni Morrison's literary creations prove that the human psyche is subjected to pressure and trauma in every instance of the characters' evolution. They are individuals experiencing disfiguring moments, demonstrating the challenge which the understanding of the human psychological mechanisms poses. They face abominable situations that are almost impossible to tolerate. Slavery and racism are those instances that demonstrate, in Toni Morrison's works, the bestiality of a certain type of aggression whose consequences do not limit and do not end with the occurrence of a traumatic event, but extend into the realm of the pathological.

From the point of view of its literal meaning, slavery implies, in Toni Morrison's novels, a psychologically complex phenomenon as regards the brutality of hundreds of years of slave domination in the United States of America. From a social perspective, it is also the epitome of man's thirst for power and domination. Slavery, in America, was born out of the White man's need for cheap labor force; it emerged from the economic demands of a fast-growing America. A thriving economy demanded the colonization of new territories and the enslavement of the poorly developed Black population.

Slavery can be broadly defined as the constrictive limits imposed by an individual on another individual, in certain historical and psychological situations which encourage the development of such an abusive act. Toni Morrison's novels do not formulate moral sentences on slavery. They simply seek to transmit the aesthetic emotion with the aid of complicated and psychologically complex characters. A sophisticated writer such as Toni Morrison did not and could not limit herself to delivering a literary product confined within the narrow walls of a strictly historical phenomenon. Her intention was to use slavery and, consequently, racism as the perfect argument for the broad psychological spectrum of emotions experienced by the modern Black selves and by former slaves. She invites the reader into her literary world where preconceived ideas are stripped bare, verdicts are forbidden, and the characters are invested with a unique manner of transmitting the artistic message.

Slavery and racism are perpetually recomposed and redefined in Toni Morrison's universe. Every scene, every life and death situation in which characters perform a fragment of their implacable destiny as African Americans demonstrates the author's creative version of how slavery and racism can be approached in literary terms.

Slavery, whether portrayed from a literal or a figurative point of view, occupies the core of her novels, which display two psychological facets of the notion. Some of Toni Morrison's novels such as *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, envision the quintessence of slavery in its brutal form while her other novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz* and *Home* represent a more sophisticated and cynical version of slavery, concentrated in the form of racism. Therefore, Toni Morrison uses *racism* as the implacable continuation of a historical phenomenon. Racism is, in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz* and *Home*, the unwanted, crippled offspring of the illicit, sordid and unfortunate historical and psychological relationship envisioned by slavery. Racism is the insidious and beautifully adorned type of slavery which successfully captures the development of a psychologically efficient type of war which thrives on both visible and invisible means of action. Racism, like the artisanal bomb, has a huge potential when it comes to versatility. Racism is that type of weapon which can be easily masked and can pass undetected, but has huge consequences when detonated.

As Slavery and Racism embody the supreme type of evil in Toni Morrison's works, my doctoral thesis is to discover new ways in which the two terms can be envisioned and portrayed in a distinctive and original manner.

Race and Racism as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and The Trauma of Slavery and The Pathology of Rape are personal, psychological and medical outlooks on the notions of race, racism and slavery. OCD and the clinical picture of rape represent scientific paths in which race, racism and slavery are decomposed and interpreted.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) in The Bluest Eye and The Failure of Society's Fanatic Search for Beauty are new, psychological approaches to understanding the main character Pecola and the society in which she evolves. In other words, Pecola' story is the same, never-ending trauma of the black teenager, analyzed and interpreted, within the framework of BDD pathology representative for the failure symbolized by the social and psychological context in which Pecola inevitably disintegrates.

*The Disfunctionality of Ectopic Friendship in Sula* centers on the friendship between two African American females, Sula and Nel, whose complicated, dramatic, and complex relationship represents the perfect argument for the literary unfolding of the medical phenomenon portrayed by ectopic pregnancy. The pathological evolution of the embryo, in the case of an ectopic pregnancy, is the perfect parallel for the racially determined, pathological evolution of the heroine Sula, the literary symbol of the dead fetus.

*Traumas in Song of Solomon* focuses on the subchapters *Bipolar Disorder* and *Necrophilia*. The first subchapter aims at finding relevant correspondences between bipolar disorder and the complexity of *Song of Solomon*. Using bipolar disorder as a solid medical argument, one can draw a parallel between states of extreme happiness and extreme depression and the contradictory nature of events in the novel. *Bipolar Disorder* captures the drama of several generations of African Americans, severely marked by the ruthless

consequences of slavery and racism. All in all, bipolar disorder serves as a medical argument for understanding deeply disturbed individuals whose pathological universe is a vibrant testimony to the drama characterizing the African American identity. *Necrophilia* characterizes the shocking sexual relationship between a daughter and his father. *Necrophilia* stems from the emotional insecurities of the daughter Ruth Foster Dead, fueled by the racial and identity-related insecurities of her father, Dr. Foster.

*Tar Baby* is a novel that explores the multifaceted aspects of the African American Jadine, who is a Black soul trapped in a White existence. This contradiction creates tensions and drama for the cosmopolitan Jadine, who apparently lives a White successful existence. Her way of living constantly tries to reshape her into a racial mutant, pressuring her to become someone she is not, in order for her to make it into the White world. *Dreaming the Forbidden Dream in Tar Baby* and *Race, Bulimia and Anorexia in Tar Baby*, use different psychological instruments to capture the drama of the Black woman, constantly shifting between full racial awareness and intoxication with the chimera of the White model of success.

The novel *Beloved* tells the story of the slave Sethe, severely traumatized by the loss of her little child, whom she kills with a chain saw. In *Beloved and Freud's Psychoanalysis* and *The Pathology of Infanticide in Beloved*, the emphasis is laid on the issue of infanticide, a psychologically disfiguring moment for both the mother and the child. In the former, the act of murder is analyzed from the viewpoint of hysteria, a highly debated phenomenon in Freudian psychoanalysis. The latter focuses on the ambivalent status of Sethe, who can be seen either as a martyr or as a ruthless murderer. The psychoanalytical and controversial nature of these two chapters is my personal effort to understand *Beloved*'s psychological depth.

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*Crimes of Passion in Jazz* focuses on the idea of the African American couple who strive to have a successful life in New York City. From a psychological perspective, Joe and Violet are dysfunctional individuals, because they both try to overcome their frustrations and compensate for their racially generated shortcomings. The chapter captures the essence of the crimes that Joe and Violet commit, proving that violence is the direct result of a reckless psychological, social, and racial background, which invades the characters' tranquility. Joe and Violet's evolution in the novel revolves around the Black individuals' dramatic and hopeless search for a solid realm of emotional stability.

Toni Morrison's novella *Home* tells the story of Frank Money, whose extreme drama shapes the pathological universe of *Traumas in Home*. The chapter is divided into *Racial Codependency* and *Racial Autism*. The incredibly suggestive and almost naturalistic type of emotional pain which Frank Money endures in the fifth decade of racist America paves the way for the psychological phenomena of codependency and autism. Racism is the culprit and the enabler of Frank's codependency and autism. Both phenomena describe the main character's emotional handicap. He is unable to make healthy and mature choices.

Although they are very interesting from the standpoint of the racial, social, and gender dynamic, Toni Morrison's other novels *Paradise*, *Love* and *A Mercy* do not present a solid argument for a psycho-medical approach. Therefore, I have not used them for my research.

Slavery and racism are the supreme type of evil in Toni Morrison's novels and they take unprecedented artistic forms under the skillful pen of Toni Morrison, who grew up listening to stories about slaves. They had a dramatic impact on the psyche and the imagination of little Chloe, who later succeeded, as Toni Morrison, the adult, in metamorphosing the disfiguring memories of the slaves into life-changing works of art.

This thesis is an innovative undertaking in the field of African American literature because it searches for ways in which literature can be reinterpreted from a medical and pathological perspective. The notions of race and racism are closely interrelated with various ways of emotional development and understanding of a complex human being. Furthermore, as displayed in Toni Morrison's novels, the "collision" between the Black and the White race offers a solid foundation and the appropriate context for discovering and interpreting various interracial, psychological phenomena and the brutal, cynical way in which people can treat their fellow human beings.

My study is a literary, psychological and social experiment which seeks to explore the multifaceted kaleidoscope of Black experiences generated by the inevitable interracial clash. It is an attempt to understand, from a medical, psychological, and racial point of view, destinies, dramas, and happiness. All the characters in Toni Morrison's novels have, in one way or another, a certain 'feud' with themselves and, consequently, with the society and the race. The characters develop in intricate and difficult situations, acquiring a certain skill at becoming iconic and strong literary figures. Their realism allows them to emerge into living and breathing entities that have the potential to change the lives of the readers.

At first glance, Toni Morrison's novels appear to be unrelated to the medical domain, but at a more profound look, they are a reflexive mirror which shows the vast intricacy of the human psyche, with its complex, twisted and unexpected recesses of thought and perception. Psychiatrists and psychologists have tried to demystify the mechanisms of the human psyche but unfortunately this has proved to be one of the biggest failures of the scientific community. This premise makes the work of a doctoral student even more difficult in her attempt to capture and analyze something that is apparently impossible to evaluate. Nevertheless, the beauty and special character of such an approach to Toni Morrison's work has enabled the doctoral student to overcome the inevitable difficulties posed by her attempt at understanding the human psychological system.

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Toni Morrison's novels show the negative, brutal psychological part of the human personality. They stir a full range of emotions and are capable of transporting the reader into the imaginary world of mind-troubling, shocking stories. The emotionally liberating function of Toni Morrison's novels helps the reader to develop an empathic relationship with the characters who are capable of recreating for the reader the impression of an original psychotherapy and literary session conducted by Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison's characters are unique individuals with a unique evolution, verbalizing the silent cry of generations of Black slaves through the literary artisanship of the African American writer. These characters are placed in different social, psychological and racial contexts which, combined, shape the pathology of a disfunctional Black universe affected by the negative influence of the Whites on the Blacks.

Toni Morrison introduces the reader into a different world from that of the wellestablished White writers. She succeeds through the plots and characters in rendering the credibility of the African American experience. The violent realism of her novels is permanently coupled with the drama of being and feeling Black, which is the constant motivation behind Morrison's artistic drive. Evil is seen as a physical and psychological danger in Toni Morrison's work, the hot iron which leaves deep scars on numerous generations of former and modern slaves. These marks remain with the victims throughout their existence forbidding them to find their true identity and the reason behind their existence. Spiritually crippled, they vainly try to find their way in the racially imposed darkness.

Evil announces its presence through fear, which becomes the subconscious symbol of the African American existence. The Black victim stands in the vicious circle of prejudice, which creates the racially determined terror, the shadow that constantly accompanies the Black existence. Fear, pain, dehumanization and the feeling of worthlessness are omnipresent in the author's novels, as monsters influencing the Black past and present. In Toni Morrison's novels, there are modern and former slaves who do not know who their true selves are and what their future looks like in a racially fragile and complicated existence.

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