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***THE QUANDARY OF MNEME AND ANAMNESIS  
IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED:  
THE REPOSSESSION OF THE PRESENT BY THE PAST***

**Keywords:** *Mneme, Anamnesis, social death, trauma, rememory, natal alienation, infanticide.*

**Abstract:** *Beloved underscores the several interchangeable identities of Sethe in the context of slavery, in a continuous play of Mneme (μνήμη) and Anamnesis (ἀνάμνησις). Beloved constitutes itself in a convoluted and gendered narrative of enslavement based on traumatic events which shape Sethe's identity and her family's life. In Sethe's case, her memories create a framework for her existence after the destruction of her identity caused by slavery. The novel creates a theory regarding the indestructible and inescapable nature of the past, since Sethe considers that the traumas of the past are forever reenacted by the present. Mneme is an attempt of Sethe's to re-live the past happy moments and to remember her old self – who she was before becoming psychologically and physically scarred and maimed – whereas Anamnesis is a reappropriation – the recalling to mind of traumatic events – representing an essay to overcome her tribulations and create Sethe anew. While she tries to be faithful to the past, she feels compelled to dis-member and re-member herself, by re-living past events in her present, as well as to deliver a sense of the past to future generations.*

As a condition leading to a separation of human beings from their past, slavery was a traumatic experience which had terrible effects on the afflicted populations. As is the case with trauma, in the case of this novel the terrible experiences of the past are kept locked away without being dealt with – the self-provoked amnesia of former slaves is a refusal to remember painful episodes from the past, until that past returns. In effect, in the case of trauma, the victims oscillate between remembering and forgetting. Sethe too oscillates between a voluntary amnesia, transforming slavery and the infanticide into some sort of taboo, and remembering, either nostalgically or with awe, the times at Sweet Home. *Beloved* was published a time of great debate regarding Recovered memory; and as such, Morrison included in the novel various theories of memory and she questioned the validity or “truthfulness” of memories. The novel is organized by fragments of memories retold and it deals with a healing of the self through representations in speech of traumatic events of the past. This retelling of trauma gives the novel a fragmentary and oral character and the actual memories are told by bits, each time going a little further. Thus the narrative is circular and oral, and it repeats episodes until the whole can be reached as there is no straight line to be followed, but spirals in which the story takes shape before the reader. In effect Sethe observes that her own narration of the infanticide to Paul D was

spinning. . . Circling, circling, now she was gnawing something else instead of getting to the point. . . Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the . . . subject, would remain one. (Morrison 161-63)

This is the story of an infanticide, the story of slavery and of rememory, all in one. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* does not take slavery as its main topic, the focus is on the effects slavery had on the enslaved population. Morrison's novel is about memory and about remembering or 'rememory'. Tally posits that the subject matter of the novel is the nature of forgetting, memory, and survival. (Tally 32) Walter Benjamin's 'cancellation of memory' as well as Alison Landsberg's slavery as “a chapter [of

history] to forget” (Landsberg 82) result in the provoked amnesia in this novel. Orlando Patterson’s theories of social death and natal alienation are also reflected in the characters of *Beloved* and *Denver*. The views of the past held by various characters are also illustrative of the effects slavery had on human beings.

The novel analyzes how the delegitimization of the slave family, as a condition of slavery, disrupted traditional means of passing on memories by tearing families apart and separating children from their mothers. (Landsberg 82) In slave narratives, the nuclear family is never present, in fact children of slave women are generally fathered by multiple men and this leads to an orphaning of the children of slaves whose past becomes annihilated due to a severing of family bonds: “Many historians have explored the way that slavery as an institution forced a radical, violent separation between slaves and their past.” (Landsberg 85) Sethe’s mother had had several children all by white slave drivers and the crew on the ship that brought her from her homeland to a land of slavery, but she had only kept the child fathered by a black man. However, Sethe’s scant memories of her mother show that there was no nuclear family involved. Baby Suggs too had suffered the indignities of sexual exploitation since she had borne eight children by six different men, and in this case too there can be no discussion of a nuclear family. Ella was kept as an object of sexual pleasure for two white men, one of whom had fathered the child she left to die. Among these slave women, Sethe is the lucky one since she was able to stay for six years with the same black man of her choosing who had fathered all her four children. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson asserts that slavery led to “natal alienation,” described as an instance of alienation from all rights and claims of birth since no slave could belong to him/her self. Slaves were mere commodities that could be sold away from their families at any moment, thus removed from family and cultural traditions that could have been transmitted otherwise in the nuclear family:

Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. (Patterson 5)

Since Patterson claims that slaves were socially dead, any relationships they might enter into were illegitimate and they even bore their master’s patronym. The greatest tragedy, however, stemmed from the mother-child bond which was prematurely severed; thus the children of slaves were legally born orphans and were an object of exchange. (Landsberg 85) This situation is illustrated by Morrison’s novel through the various examples of slave women and their children.

Memories of slavery are presented mostly through Sethe’s character, since she remembers what Nan had told her about the Middle Passage and the sexual exploitation of black women during that passage:

She was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. . . . What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. . . . [S]he was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (...) ‘Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe,’ and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. (Morrison 62)

*Beloved*’s character also remembers the Middle Passage although this should have been impossible – in her character Morrison expounds a theory of generational memory since she recollects that “the ritual mass rape aboard ship was labeled *la pariade*”, when the crew was allowed to enjoy sexual merriment with the black women to be sold as slaves. (Reyes 72)

*Beloved* tells a ‘free story’ (Grewal 97) by exploring the traumatic memories left behind by slavery and infanticide. Most slave narratives are objective rather than subjective, whereas Sethe dares to

claim her children as her own property instead of the slaveholder's. Orlando Patterson theorizes 'social death' in relation to slavery – without any rights to themselves or their families or to property, since they were perceived as property themselves, slaves were considered socially dead. Social death is illustrated in the novel through the depiction of slaves as commodities and animals and through discussion about the price they would fetch on the market. To the slaveholders, the slaves were "expedable," had the "status of good horses" and the "advantage of reproducing without cost" (Bousoon 131). The schoolteacher attempts to pseudo-scientifically analyze the Sweet Home slaves by listing their human and animal features on two columns, and seems to deem them animal rather than human since when he mentions Sethe's unborn child he calls it a foal. Thus, Sethe tries to save her children from being deemed animals, a fate she considers worse than death, by killing her daughter and attempting to kill her other children as well. (Grewal 97)

Sethe's decision to save her children by sending them into the next, better world, was borrowed by Morrison from a slave narrative about Margaret Garner, who had escaped slavery, arrived in Cincinnati but on being found had killed one of her daughters and injured her two sons. Morrison cites an article, titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child," published in the *American Baptist* in 1856 in which Margaret Garner recounts feeling extremely calm and cool when she had committed the murder since she was convinced that a quick death was preferable to the death her children would have endured if taken back to slavery. (Grewal 98) Sethe's and Garner's possible motivation for such an act is voiced through Margaret Garner, the historical character. Sethe's 'thick' love and Margaret Garner's love are one and the same since the latter called her daughter Mary, her beloved "bird"; and she also believed that "the murder would save her daughter from a life that would be far worse: enslavement." (Reyes 72-73) Under the circumstances of slavery and repeated rape, many coloured women committed infanticide. Morrison's former slave women disrupt the mechanisms of slavery and miscegenation using infanticide as a resistance tactics. (Bousoon 138-139) The novel presents two other cases of slave mothers' resistance to the oppression of the white male apart from Sethe: Ella, one of the workers of the Underground Railroad,

had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet,' a white father and son who had held her in captivity and raped her; the child dies after five days of neglect. (Morrison 259-260)

The other instance of infanticide was with Sethe's mother who abandoned the children of the white slave drivers or sailors who had raped her and the only child she kept was Sethe, who was born of an African father, whom she had chosen herself:

The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. (Morrison 62)

In *Infanticide: Psychosocial and Legal Perspectives on Mothers Who Kill*, Margaret G. Spinelli argues that infanticide is neither random, nor unpredictable since it is

deeply embedded in and responsive to the societies in which it occurs. The crime of infanticide, or child murder in the first year of life, is committed by mothers who cannot parent their child under the circumstances dictated by their unique position in place and time. (Spinelli 4)

The spontaneous character of infanticide is further discussed as "reflecting a loss of control rather than a cool-headed calculation" (Spinelli 14); however, in Morrison's depiction of Sethe and Margaret

Garner's own words their crimes were characterized by cool-headedness rather than by a loss of control. This type of control in Garner was what struck Morrison and determined her to use this slave narrative in a novel as well as Garner's appropriation of her children which was seen as noble. (Bouson 133) Thus, in Morrison's own words the "clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head. I had to deal with this nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder" (Clemons 75). Margaret Garner became Sethe and Mary, her daughter, became Beloved. (Reyes 69) This maternal act of love which became embodied in murder was meant as an act of preservation, of keeping her children as far away as possible from the dehumanization of slavery (Hirsch, "Maternity" 104 qtd. in Bouson 147). Sethe in fact re-defines herself from slave woman to mother, and claims her children as her own. (Bouson 148)

Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory functions through stories and storytelling, through ritual, celebrations and commemoration (1992, 38). Paul D's arrival at 124 leads to reminiscences of the life spent at Sweet Home where they were all together, reconstructing the past as a golden age. (Tally 39) But actual storytelling only begins with the arrival of the embodiment of the murdered daughter which offers Sethe the opportunity she had been waiting for – to be forgiven and redeemed, to do penance. By having Beloved with her in the present, the past seems to be erased and Sethe tries to:

undo her 'crime' by devoting her life to the nurturing of the ghostly presence. By neglecting the present in the form of Paul D and the future in the form of Denver, she can purify herself. But of course the past is insatiable (...). Nothing can make up for death; to try to "fix" the past is to be consumed by it. (Byerman 34)

The past takes up all of Sethe's energy since she is living for the dead daughter after a respite of eighteen years. Now, as Byerman posits "Sethe surrenders herself to the ghost, while she neglects Denver". (35) In fact Denver is ignored even before the arrival of the ghost.

The infanticide is what remains hidden in the recesses of Sethe's mind until the arrival of Beloved. At that point forgetting is no longer possible and remembering becomes a mechanism of negotiating everyday life with the ghost of the dead daughter. This remembering, however, makes Sethe lose her job. Now she is no longer anchored in the present. The past overwhelms her and even her instinct for survival disappears as she gives everything to Beloved, who like a succubus absorbs all of Sethe's life force. Thus Sethe becomes thinner and thinner, nearly transparent, while Beloved grows. At his point, Sethe recalls the past and retells it to Beloved as she wishes to be forgiven by the latter for her monstrous act:

Sethe wants to believe Beloved is her daughter come back to her from the dead because it gives her a chance to explain her actions and demonstrate her love. It means that forgiveness, her redemption, is at hand. (Grewal 111)

Beloved asks for everything Sethe has to give and she seems insatiable – apart from a sweet tooth and expecting Sethe to serve on her hand and foot – she also requires stories. The first of these stories is the one about Sethe's diamonds – some earrings Sethe had received from Mrs. Garner of which Beloved was not supposed to know anything:

'Wish I did. I had some crystal once. A present from a lady I worked for.' 'Tell me,' said Beloved, smiling a wide happy smile. 'Tell me your diamonds.' It became a way to feed her. (...) Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk

with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there-like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left. But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it--in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (Morrison 57)

The text sets Beloved in a privileged position since she is a possessor of memory, not only at the level of her family, but at the level of slavery in general, thus enabling the expression of the abominations of slavery. Beloved has an unquenchable thirst of hearing more about the past so as to investigate her mother's past as well as her own. Beloved attempts to

become a mobile archive, a storehouse for Sethe's unmanageable memories. But even though she holds the kernel of each memory, she needs Sethe to put it into narrative for her. (Landsberg 94)

Displaced from the family she would have known had she not been murdered, Beloved's ravenous need for knowing more catalyzes Sethe's previously painful 'rememory' which in the past she had refused to share with either Denver or Paul D. However, when interrogated by Beloved, Sethe feels unexpected pleasure in telling those stories.

The quandary of mneme and anamnesis in *Beloved* is closely related with theories of trauma and with memories so terrifying that the subject is unwilling to remember them. In the case of Sethe, the ex-slave woman of this story, the traumas she has experienced are multiple – she has been abandoned by her mother who had been hung, she was taken away from the plantation where she was born, she was abused by the schoolteacher and his nephews by milking her like a cow and whipping her. One might argue that thus far her lot was not worse than that of other slave women, who had also endured repeated sexual abuse, their prostitution by bedding with whichever slave the white master wanted to father other slaves, or had their children sold away. The actual traumatic event that had led her to run away was constituted by her milking by the schoolteacher's nephews. The cowhide was an affront to her body, whereas taking her milk was an affront to her children – her best thing. The milk she wanted to take to her daughter near Cincinnati was taken by someone else, in effect Sethe's daughter was symbolically killed at that very moment. While the actual infanticide took place only a month after Sethe's arrival at Cincinnati when she had been tracked down by the school teacher who was unwilling to give up on a good piece of property which 'reproduced itself without cost' (Morrison 23, 228), and whose price was probably higher than Paul D's since she still had 'ten more good breeding years in her'.

The past is illustrated in the novel in various ways embodied in Paul D., Sethe, Denver and Beloved. Paul D's character depicts the belief that the past serves the present for those who were able to survive and he refuses to live with the past. His own memories are locked away in a tin box where his heart used to be and he chases the ghost away immediately after his arrival at 124. For him the past is separated from the present (Byerman 31) and only has whatever relevance one bestows on it. Sethe conceives the past as something that has to be kept at bay, locked away and not dealt with. Alongside Sethe, Baby Suggs also refuses to accept the past into the present by beating it back and preferring to forget since an acceptance of the past would also mean a remembrance of one's fellow victims who did not make it through. The past does not serve Sethe in any way, since the present is all she needs. On the other hand, with Beloved's arrival she tries to recover a past she has so far rejected but the effects are anything but beneficial, although in the end she is redeemed through the intervention of the community. Beloved's return is a recovery of the past, but for Sethe this also means a recovery of slavery. (Byerman 32) Denver fears the past and she seems to lack any link to it since when the traumatic events occurred eighteen years before she was but a month old. Denver needs to make the past about the present so as to achieve a sense of belonging which she lacks in the isolation of 124. Denver has to accept that "the

present is what came into being as a result of the destruction of the past.” (Byerman 32) She has to assimilate the fact that the past has to stay in the past in order to save her mother from Beloved’s ghost. Beloved is opposed to the other characters in her view on the past since she wants Sethe to accept it and demands Sethe’s undivided attention in recounting it: “She demands not only witness but also guilt. The present and the future must be sacrificed for the past because the suffering must be atoned for in some way.” (Byerman 32) For Beloved, the past is all-encompassing and needs to destroy the present in order to survive.

Trauma theory focuses on the individual casting aside his memories of a terrible event and then reclaiming them and speaking about them since the moment of disclosure is also a moment of healing through a representation in speech. The moment those traumatic memories are reclaimed and re-enacted through story-telling, healing begins:

The relation between silence and speech is figured as one of liberation (...): to heal the self by the very act of speaking and being heard, on the other. The injunction to remember, and the corresponding language of forgetting and denial, are directed equally at individuals and at groups. (Hodgkin and Radstone, 99)

Hodgkin and Radstone seem to discuss the very situation in *Beloved*: for a long time Sethe beats back her memories, but once Sethe recalls and retells the scene of her daughter’s infanticide, and then the same scene is re-enacted not only through speech but also through action. Thus both individuals and the group – the coloured women of the neighbourhood, Sethe, Beloved and Denver – perceive the situation as it was eighteen years before. Through speech and re-enactment, Sethe is healed from those traumatic memories that had made her live only for the present moment, unwilling to think of and remember the past or consider planning for the future.

Sethe’s constant beating back of the past in favour of living in the present, day by day, without any plans for the future, can be seen in terms of remembering and forgetting. She desires forgetfulness and rejects remembering since memories are far too painful to be dealt with. In effect, she refuses to remember and declines her ‘rememory’ as well as Denver’s desire to know and understand the past. Paul D’s arrival enables Sethe to remember some of the traumas of the past – the whipping and milking – and Beloved’s arrival at 124 allows her to tell the stories of the past without the pain she had experienced so far even when recounting them to Paul D. In effect, the novel deals with memory and oblivion which Marc Augé compares to gardening:

Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work, selecting, pruning. Memories are like plants: there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help the others burgeon, transform, flower. (Augé 17)

Sethe prunes away at her traumatic memories trying to survive. In fact, it may be argued that in the eighteen years that pass from the moment she commits infanticide, Sethe is not truly alive – she does not live, but merely survives. There is no burgeoning and flowering in her life, even though she eliminates the memories that would not allow her to live. The reason for this lack of living stems from the fact that Sethe has not dealt with her memories, she has simply locked them away in as far a recess of her mind as she was able to, without resolving those conflicts. Augé posits the idea that those who have suffered traumatic events have a duty to forget:

those who were subjected to it, if they want to live again and not just survive, must be able to do their share of forgetting, (...) in order to find faith in the everyday again and mastery over their time. (Augé 88)

Augé goes on to discuss certain mechanism of oblivion such as nostalgia for the past, the ritual suspension of contact with past and future and the pursuit of ‘rebeginnings’. Thus, Sethe feels nostalgic for the good times at Sweet Home, and she longs for a re-beginning with Paul D.’s arrival at 124. The intrusive and devious qualities of memory in *Beloved* are best represented by Sethe’s constant attempts to not remember:

As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. (...) Suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes. (Morrison 6)

Paul D’s arrival encourages more reminiscing: voluntary and involuntary remembering are both represented in Sethe’s character, but at the very beginning she seems to have been crippled by the traumas in the past and thus rejects even the remembrances of happy times. She also blames her memory for remembering the good times at Sweet Home:

Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (Morrison 6)

Sethe – just like Themistocles – would rather be offered the wondrous lethotechnics than mnemotechnics, since she wants to learn and practice forgetting. However, as Margalit posits, “Forgetting cannot be voluntary.” (Margalit 201) In effect in *Beloved* “memory (...) is interpersonal, it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers.” (Rushdy 322) Sethe and Paul D, Sethe and *Beloved* build a relationship through storytelling and remembering, whereas Denver is left out since everything she knows of the past are stories told by others not her own experience. For Denver, the traumatic events of her past – witnessing her sister’s murder by her mother – are not truly remembered. These events are only experienced through storytelling: she can reconstruct the circumstances of her own birth from the scraps and bits her mother narrated and through her grandmother’s stories of a past she could not have remembered alone. In these stories Denver finds a sense of belonging. (Tally 39-40) As Alison Landsberg states,

prosthetic memories are those not strictly derived from a person’s lived experience. Prosthetic memories circulate publicly (...). Prosthetic memories thus become part of one’s personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity as well as one’s relationship to the present and future tenses. (Landsberg 25-26)

Denver’s identity is formed by the memories of others, not through organic memory since she did not have the opportunity to experience much in her eighteen years of life due to the isolation to which the inhabitants of 124 were subjected. Landsberg also expounds that “Memories are central to a person’s identity—to one’s sense of who one is and who one might become.” (42) For a very long time no such identity was available for Denver to claim as her own. Paul D’s arrival leads to the creation of a few personal memories – such as the carnival – but Denver only assimilates organic memories once the embodiment of her dead sister appears on the scene. Although at the back of her mind there always was some knowledge of her mother’s crime from her infancy, Denver suffers from the trauma of having witnessed her sister’s death at her mother’s hand only later on. First, in Lady Jones’s classes Nelson Lord asks Denver about the time spent in jail by Sethe for murder, and Denver questions her mother about it,

but is unable to hear the answer – her temporary deafness of two years is a sign of trauma as Freud would have it:

Even when she did muster the courage to ask Nelson Lord's question, she could not hear Sethe's answer, nor Baby Suggs' words, nor anything at all thereafter. For two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration. (Morrison 103)

Another sign of trauma are Denver's constant nightmares regarding her mother. Denver fears that her mother might kill her as well since she is a killer of daughters:

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. They told me die-witch! stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to. (...) 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. (Morrison 205)

Since no explanation was ever offered by Sethe as to her committing the infanticide and since no discussion ever existed between the two regarding slavery and the traumatic experiences undergone by Sethe, Denver has no way of knowing that Sethe would have no other occasion to commit such abhorrent crimes. Thus, Denver's nightmares continue and when *Beloved* arrives, she feels that she should protect her sister: "Don't love her too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I have to tell her. I have to protect her." (Morrison 206)

*Beloved* on the one hand, as we have already seen, possesses the cores of memories and needs them to be put into context. On the other hand, she seems to be a memory herself. Paul Ricoeur mentions the two valences of memory for the Greeks: *mnēmē* and *anamnēsis* designating memory as appearing passively and the memory as an object of a search (recollection). (Ricoeur 4) The Greek's conception of memory comprises "reminiscence" which entails an active search for past experience (via story-telling and reconstruction of the past), and "phantasma," which is totally involuntary. (Ricoeur 17) In *Beloved*, both are present – she is a ghost as well as an *eidōlon* of all those lost in the Middle Passage and a living, breathing human being. *Beloved* embodies the traumatic experiences Sethe has undergone as a slave, haunting her present. Thus, *mneme* designates memory as *phantasma* which seems to be an imprint of the past, more reliable since it is spontaneous, involuntary and it has to be taken as such since it is prompted by a trigger of some sort, while *anamnesis* is the memory as an object of an active search for past experience bearing the name of recall or recollection. *Beloved* acts as a *phantasma* – spontaneously appearing at 124 and reminiscing about things she should have no business knowing anything about, as well as a recollection since she provides the impetus for recalling in Sethe's case. This view of *Beloved* is in tune with the West African belief that the dead are kept alive as long as one remembers them, through stories and retelling the past. (Grewal 107)

In Caruth's depiction of trauma, its power consists

in an inherent latency, (...) [in that] trauma is repeated after its forgetting, (...) the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. (Caruth 202-203)

Thus, for eighteen years, Sethe has repressed the memories of the infanticide, but, with *Beloved*'s arrival she is forced to relive that experience in another place and at another time. Towards the end of the

novel when finally the community decides to take action and save Sethe from the ghost of her dead daughter by exorcism, the scene of the infanticide is re-enacted. At this point, the group of women of colour and Mr. Boldwin are the main actors: Sethe, feeling threatened by the presence of the white male – a representative of the class of oppressors – attacks him in an attempt to save Beloved, the daughter that had returned to her from the dead. In fact, the initial infanticide scene is reversed since Sethe chooses to protect Beloved instead of killing her in order to save her from the traumatic experience of slavery. Thus, in Katrin Amian's words:

the destructive impulse that lay at the heart of Sethe's infanticide is overcome in the act of reliving the traumatic experience. Rather than attempting to murder her own kin once again, Sethe directs her rage against the white oppressor and finds an alternative outlet through which the wounds of slavery and oppression can be healed. (Amian 114-115)

The infanticide scene of eighteen years earlier, although intricate and hard to understand for those who have not undergone tremendous trauma, as Sethe had, was straightforward for her. The traumatic events of her past – being milked like a cow, being whipped with cowhide, being made to feel less than human – all came back to her when the schoolteacher and his nephews found her near Cincinnati. All she had known in her previous life, before her flight, was all she had hoped to keep her children from when she had left the Sweet Home plantation pregnant and with terrible wounds on her back. All those traumatic memories were instantly recalled to mind and her decision was made momentarily: her children were not to suffer the same indignities, humiliations, shame she had to endure at the hands of the white oppressors. Therefore, she simply gathered her children and decided to put an end to their lives before they could be taken back to a life of suffering and pain. The ordeals endured by her and by her mother before her were not to touch her beautiful children whom she loved dearly – thus she first killed one of the girls, then struck down her two sons, and by the time the schoolteacher had reached the shed where she had taken refuge, only one of her children was still in her arms – the youngest, Denver. If for most people Sethe's decision and actions are incomprehensible, under the circumstances presented to her after a life of slavery she did not believe she had a choice: "I stopped him . . . I took and put my babies where they'd be safe." (164)

Sethe's decision to attack schoolteacher/Bodwin rather than kill Beloved serves as a therapeutic reenactment that purges Sethe's haunted memory and signals Beloved's departure. (Duvall 129) Morrison thus imagines a way that the past could be rewritten and Sethe is given the chance to choose again. (Duvall 134) In the two scenes – eighteen years apart – the only thing that seems to be on Sethe's mind is the protection of her children; since as Paul D puts it her "love is too thick." Sethe, as a coloured ex-slave, dares claim her own children as her own instead of accepting that her children are simply a commodity for her white master. She admits having felt a "kind of selfishness" (Morrison 162) never felt previously when she managed to get her children out of slavery by sending them over to Cincinnati, while on arriving their herself, her love for her children seemed to have grown:

Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love 'em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon--there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. (Morrison 162)

Paul D understands perfectly that Sethe was not allowed to keep her children as a slave and he realizes that the freedom she had to love her children is what had made her so fierce in protecting them. Once the traumatic memories of the past have been confronted, Beloved disappears having served her function as rememory – Sethe has confronted the past and is now released from its shackles. (Grewal 116)

As many critics have argued, *Beloved* represents the ‘return of the repressed’ which in Freud’s terms is characterized by the “distinctive character [and] the extensive distortion the returning elements have undergone, compared with their original form”. (Freud 200) The scene of the infanticide is one element illustrating the return of the repressed, and the changes apparent in it are the well-disposed mob and Mr. Bodwin as the white oppressor, as well as Sethe’s choice to attack ‘the man without skin’ rather than her own flesh and blood. *Beloved* herself – the ghost of the two-year old killed eighteen years before the actual events of the novel – comes back as an epitome of the return of the repressed. She has had no opportunity to live her life since it had been suppressed. When she returns, she puts into motion an entire mechanism which leads to Sethe’s healing. Sethe is finally able to make a different choice which will assist her in overcoming the trauma constituted by her decisions and actions of almost two decades before. A legitimate question would be – why this delay? Freud states that “the experiences in question are as a rule entirely forgotten and remain inaccessible to memory.” (Freud 120) He relegates trauma and period of latency to infantile amnesia, however in this case we do not deal with a child, but with a grown woman. Cathy Caruth’s writings may shed some light on the subject. She theorizes that post-traumatic stress disorder is

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event. (Caruth in Rossington and Whitehead, 200).

She goes on to posit that “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly. (...) To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.” (Caruth 200) Sethe, Denver and *Beloved* are all possessed by an image-event – the infanticide committed by the first on the latter, which was witnessed by Denver as a baby. In Denver’s case this traumatic event re-enacts itself in her dreams caused by her brother’s telling of die-witch stories. Denver re-lives the infanticide in her nightmares, but in this case she is the victim – she dreams of her mother cutting her head off only to take it downstairs and braid her hair. Denver cannot understand her mother’s decision to kill her children, nor can the two older boys who run away from home. The reason for Denver’s lack of understanding lies mainly in the fact that Sethe represses any memories regarding the infanticide and she never discusses it with her daughter. She never gives any explanations; therefore Denver lives in constant fear. With the arrival of Paul D at 124, memories start coming back, but mainly about Sweet Home, whereas with the appearance of *Beloved* and departure of Paul D, the traumatic memories regarding the infanticide finally surface and Denver comprehends her mother’s reasoning for killing her own flesh and blood as a love so great as to prefer her children dead rather than in the hands of white slave-owners such as the schoolteacher.

In conclusion, it is the natal alienation and social death inherent in the condition of slavery that lead to trauma and voluntary amnesia. The events of the past and the voluntary recollections (anamnesis) and involuntary remembrances (mneme) related to them have to be re-enacted in a present moment in order to be overcome. The nature of forgetting and of rememory is central to this novel, since we are presented with the cancellation of traumatic memory in Sethe’s case. The past is annihilated for the children of slaves such as Sethe who has no connection with her mother since the past as well as memory function through storytelling. In *Beloved*’s case, generational memory is illustrated since she functions as a representative of the slaves brought to the New World through the Middle Passage. The various views of the past – as something to be locked away or something that has to be relived – are epitomized by Paul D and Sethe and *Beloved*, respectively. In fact, *Beloved*’s return of the repressed is a recovery of the past. The interpersonal and interactional character of memory in this novel is used in building the relationship between Sethe, the mother, and *Beloved*, the phantasma of the dead daughter, through re-telling the past.

Story-telling about the past and the repossession of the present by the past lead to the healing of the self. The recovery of the past as a method of overcoming traumatic events is achieved in *Beloved* through mneme and anamnesis as mechanisms of the reappropriation of the slave identity.

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