

## Narratives of the Repressed Memories in Toni Morrison's Oeuvre

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### Abstract

Storytelling is an inherent aspect of mankind as most of the learning is imparted through it since ages. Stories that are recalled and narrated to others have a greater impact in transferring the knowledge. Native American and Afro-American societies have had the practice of oral tradition in which tales and experiences are passed on from generations to generations based on the memories of the people. Prominent African American author, Toni Morrison has revolutionized the history of Afro-America with her storytelling weapon. With her narrative techniques, she mirrors the repressed realities of her culture. Most of the literature has already existed on Toni Morrison's works in different themes and concepts. A research gap has identified in Toni Morrison's two novels particularly *God Help the Child* (2015) and *Home* (2012) the concept of radical tool as storytelling is little. Hence, the present research paper digs out on Toni Morrison's radical tool of storytelling, slave narratives, narrative techniques, repressed memories, trauma, memory & rememory, storytelling as a tool for identity and redemption, memory as a pathway to healing and trauma in the select novels. Through storytelling medium, Morrison has brought the black community into the mainstream of the community with identity and normalize their societal beliefs from African American's repressed memories. Besides, her narratives also preserve the culture and history of African Americans.

**Keywords:** *African Americans, slave narratives, repressed memories, Toni Morrison, Storytelling, Identity, Redemption, Memory, Trauma and Healing*

### Introduction

Toni Morrison, the most celebrated author in the world has reached the pinnacle in her literary career in the U.S history. She received the most prestigious awards: Pulitzer prize, Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama and Nobel prize in literature. She dedicated her life in exploring the experiences of the black and left her indelible mark in the world of literature.

Through her Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize-winning literature, Toni Morrison gave voice to the African American experience, both past and present, reminding us that storytelling is still the most essential and prevalent way of sharing our histories that captures the essence of community living of a

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given period. We are grateful that her work will stand testimony as a lasting legacy—the one that will live on as future generations of Americans discover her talent and label her as genius.

Storytelling is an inherent aspect of mankind as most of the learning is often imparted through it since ages. The stories that are recalled for narration have a profound impact in transfer of knowledge. Native American and Afro-American societies have had the practice and the tradition of orally communicating in which the tales and experiences are passed on from one generation to another. In fact, the tradition of oral communication narrates stories based on the memories of the people.

Mc Adams (1993) mentions a few basic aspects of storytelling: the oral or written sharing of our stories with others. A culture's stories create a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audience. ( McAdams,1993; Mohammad, 2025).

African American's oral stories bring forward the glorious history and rich culture of those people. Such history, if portrayed well, makes one believe and accept those facts of the bygone days. Most of the African-American's repressed stories speak volumes of their displacement, humiliation, suffering, violence, alienation and slavery. Their experiences of exploitation is one of untold misery, of affecting psychological damage that, in essence, render one speechless.

“Tony Morrison was a national treasure, as good a storyteller, as captivating, in person as she was on her page. Her writing was a beautiful, meaningful challenge to our conscience and moral imagination. What a gift to breathe the same air as her, if only for a while.” Obama honored her on Twitter

As a matter of fact, slave narratives, through the tradition of narrating stories orally, are quite significant in African American fiction. Collective memories not only interconnect people from the past to present situations but also trigger the emotional sentiments within. Each narrative has its own set of tropes and conventions emanated from its specific cultural scenarios. Narrating a story is a significant source that acts as a connecting platform for the survivors to know about the historical facts, cultural values and social conditions thereby linking up with their relatively unworthy and indignified past.

## **Themes in African-American**

### **Repressed Oral Stories**

Narrating a story holds significant power to influence and transform collective thinking. With the narrative art, individuals and societies share realities, identities and build values. Story narration has the art to break through boundaries, unite diverse groups, and narrates complex ideas so that one can relate to oneself easily. It brings out empathy, inspire action and create a sense of belongingness. It weaves the fabric of cultural, social and political arenas.

Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. TED Global (2009) The danger of a single story.

The most famous women writers are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler who have revitalized the tradition of slaves in their attempt to unveil its dark side and the ongoing repercussions of African Americans. Slave narratives provide insight into the historical context of slavery in the United States. They reveal the irrational, unjust, and unequal relationships between enslaved black individuals and their white enslavers.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review factors in what has already been explored the works of Toni Morrison. The most latest research work of Wajiran Wajirana 2025 and Trisanti Apriyanib 2025 on Toni Morrison's novels are on *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. Toni Morrison's novels act as powerful tools for challenging contemporary social systems, especially those involving race and gender. It examines how her works address systematic racism, sexism, and the trauma passed down through generations among

Black women. It highlights Morrison’s strong critique of societal norms that restrict and marginalize Black women, while also portraying the deep emotional and social effects of such oppression. It concludes that Morrison’s literature remains vital not only for understanding the present day struggles of black women but also as a key element in academic discussions and ongoing social justice movements.

The recent 2023 article explored on Toni Morrison’s concept of postmodernist in *God Help the Child* (2015) on dialogical polyphonic consonance of the heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrative voices of the characters. Moreover, the paper is based on the presumption of narrative schema in psychoanalytic theory. Also the psychological recovery of the traumatized victims of child abuse is

History & and Culture	Rich Cultural Heritage and Glorious Past
Displacement	Forced movement and loss of home
Humiliation & Suffering	Emotional and physical pain
Violence and Slavery	Brutal experiences of the past
Exploitation	Untold misery and injustice
Psychological Damage	Trauma makes people speechless

shown.

In 2021 research work, Slave narratives were more popular in African American books until the Great Depression. The stories of slaves have had a big impact on some of the best-known works of American Literature Article, like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “ Harriet Beecher Stowe”.

In 2017, Shilaja C.L et al explored the significance of storytelling and the role of memory in the selected works of Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The study focused on historical experience and the effects of slavery. It explored especially in storytelling & slave narratives in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

In 2016, Shilaja C.L et al illuminates on the attempts to focus on Morrison use of language as a powerful tool in Toni Morrison’s novel, *A Mercy*. It focused on the common language uncommonly used it as a double edged sword. She subverts language in a rather complex play of words employing it as a powerful tool for the survival and continuance of existence for the voiceless. It becomes a means of identity construction as much as a tool of empowerment for the marginalized to overcome their traumatic experiences.

**Gap in the Research**

All the above mentioned are the previous research on Toni Morrison’s works on different themes. But most of the research is not yet explored on her recent novels *God Help the Child* (2015) and *Home* (2012) especially on the themes of storytelling, slave narration, memory, rememory is little. Hence, the study intends to explore the radical tools of Toni Morrison’s storytelling, slave narratives and narrative techniques in her two latest novels *God Help the Child* and *Home*. Storytelling and memory studies have become more popular in the present days and remain crucial in modern society because it fosters

connections and understands ourselves and the world around us. The paper also examines how black people's repressed memories are projected in and how they have overcome with their situations eventually giving a message to the world.

**Toni Morrison's Narrative Techniques**

Toni Morrison has a host of strategies to narrate stories. She has narrated African stories in oral tradition technique to get an immediate response from the people. To create a rich tapestry in stories, she uses many narrative techniques: narrative-within -a-narrative, oral tradition, slave narrative (which is a dark genre addresses racism, slavery and struggle for freedom and chronological events incorporating flashback to the present).The narrative style of the novel is stereoscopic, shifting from the main character to minor characters. She even uses metaphor to bring life to her stories. Repressed memory, memory and trauma, rememory, memory, identity, and healing are the themes related to this paper.

The portrayal of Black women in literature has played a significant role in Black feminist discourse, providing a space to examine the multifaceted nature of their experiences more deeply. In this context, Bell Hooks emphasizes that no Black woman writer can ever write " too much" in this society. In fact, she argues that no woman writer has ever written enough. (Hooks, 1991; Mohammad et al, 2024; Mohammad et al., 2025a)

**Toni Morrison's Narrative Techniques**

Toni Morrison Strategies to Narrative Stories		
African stories in oral tradition technique		
Narrative-within-a-narrative	Oral Tradition (addresses racism, slavery, and struggle for freedom)	Chronological Events incorporating flashback to the present
Morrison uses many narrative techniques to create a rich tapestry in stories		

**Repressed Memories and Trauma in *God Help the Child* and *Home***

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison unveils how the culture is filled with horror stories of child abuse. The characters are abused and molested which are the primary themes. The paper brings to limelight the repressed stories of children in *God Help the Child* and in *Home*. Child abuse is a global phenomena all over the world. According to James Garbarino what is truly harmful is the chronic pattern that "erodes and corrodes a child" (qtd. In Palusci & Fischer, 2010:144). When children face all the traumatic experiences like physical, sexual, psychological, emotional abuses, their behaviour may damage in their latter life and face psychological, behavioral, social and emotional problems.

Child trauma is interlinked with the whole nations' trauma rather than individual trauma which eventually becomes the whole nation's collective memory. Morrison is disturbed by the childhood trauma, asking help for the abused children. The problem has been growing day by day in the modern world which has lost ancient values and culture. She urges for attention on social evil and to fight against on social evils. Child abuse rings an alarming bell to the humanity to strive and take a responsibility to protect vulnerable children. " Apparently the children were kept bound while molested, tortured and there were amputations."(*God Help the Child* 119; Mohammad et al., 2025b; Mohammad et al., 2025c)

Memory and trauma are interlinked in Toni Morrison's two novels: *God Help the Child* and *Home*. She retells the history of African American through stories and tales of the past traumatic experiences. They are still living in the trauma of racism that impacts their immediate existing victims. The dark spots of the Afro-American's past still haunts them every moment. Morrison masterfully uses memory to depict

the personal and collective histories and explores the complex themes of interplay among personal trauma, cultural identity, historical memory, and in broader context of collective history which reverberates many generations.

The novel *Home* shows the experiences of slavery, racism, and violence and displacement in mid-20th century America. The main protagonist of the novel Frankmoney's memories is not just personal but is intertwined with the collective trauma experienced by African Americans' oppression. "You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better" (*Home* 18). In other novel, *God Help the Child*, revolves on the central character Bride, whose dark skin exemplifies the repression of traumatic childhood experiences. As a child her mother Sweetness rejects her due to her dark skin, internalizing the racism of society and treats Bride with coldness and emotional neglect. Sweetness is not able to accept her daughter's dark color due to internalized racism and societal fear. "She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black". (*God Help the Child* 4) Bride struggles with a lot emotional trauma that lingers in her memory. She is not loved by her own mother. The internal struggle forces her to get an identity. However, as much as Bride tries to push the trauma of her childhood into the background, it continues to affect her. She experiences a physical regression, symbolizing the surfacing of the deep psychological wounds she carries. This regression—manifested as her body beginning to revert to a childlike state—reflects the way repressed trauma forces itself back into consciousness with her unresolved pain.

The other main character, Booker struggles with painful memories. He is haunted by the memory of his brother's murder. He struggles with the repressed trauma of his brother's violent death. His grief and anger over his loss shapes his life, but instead of confronting these feelings, he distances himself emotionally from others. His inability to address the pain of his brother's death affects his relationship with Bride, as his own wounds lead to emotional withdrawal and isolation. His trauma isolates him emotionally from Bride. Memory centralizes Booker as the African repressed voice of the abuse of African culture.

The novel *Home* shows the repressed racial black experiences that have been wounded physically as well as psychologically. Frank Money and Cee revisit the place where they witnessed a murder closure and in doing so they revisit and rememory their own wounds, their own buried mental wounds and their own past hurt life. Frank's journey to home is in many ways, a confrontation with his repressed memories. One of the key examples is his repressed guilt over a violent incident involving a young girl during the war. He initially represses memory, but as the novel progresses, it becomes clearer that his inability to confront the traumatic event is a significant part of his emotional turmoil.

The stories of Toni Morrison in *God Help the Child* and *Home* retain memory to the contemporary generation. She even adopts a post-modern narrative technique of voicing the unspeakable atrocities of child abuse practised against the children of Afro-American community. Morrison narrates about the past slavery and which has its impact on the present as childhood trauma.

In *God Help the Child* and *Home*, the writer weaves a web of childhood stories. All the children in the novel suffer a lot. Her purpose is to make the present generation aware of the historical conditions of racialized black people's trauma, painful memories in a way that their feelings will make them awake and arise. The small girl named, Rain is one of the victims, she said, "she didn't need reminding because once when some really old guy hurt her so bad she bled, her mother slapped him and screamed, "Get out!" (*God Help the Child* 103; Mohammad et al., 2025d)

"Today, the world lost a storyteller of unmatched empathy, elegance and power. Toni Morrison's belief that language is the 'measure of our lives' leaves an extraordinary, inspiring inheritance, and her beautiful writing will continue to be a blessing for generations to come." — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, via Twitter.

### **The Concept of Memory and Rememory**

Furthermore, to define the concept of memory and rememory; memory means to recall the experiences of the past, where as rememory means involuntary involvement of traumatic recollections of the past events like horror and slavery that are deeply rooted in the present and those memories haunt individuals and communities.

In *God help the Child* "rememory" surfaces as the character's pasts are not truly forgotten but linger in the background, waiting only to reemerge. Bride, the protagonist childhood experiences of racial rejection and her false accusation of a teacher named Sofia Huxley resurfaces after she decides to visit Sofia to seek forgiveness. The journey into her past serves as an act of "rememory," where she

confronts the pain she caused and the trauma she endured as a child. Through this encounter, Bride begins to grapple with the lasting effects of her actions due to her neglected childhood. The repressed trauma shapes Bride's identity as a successful woman. The character Booker, too, experiences "rememory" as he revisits the pain of his brother's murder. His relationship with Bride initially provides him with a sense of escape, but as their relationship unravels, he is forced to confront the loss which he has buried in his mind for a long time. The memory of his brother's death returns with renewed intensity of healing after facing the trauma.

Morrison explores the idea of memory in her novel *Home* i.e., the act of reliving and re-experiencing past events as if they are happening again. The character, FrankMoney is haunted by traumatic memories of the Korean War and his childhood memories of violence and death. "Just after dawn on the twenty-fourth hour he was beaten to death with pipes and rifles butts and tried to the oldest mangolia tree in the country - the one that grew in his own yard and buried there" (*Home* 10). Those affect him deeply which influence on his mental and emotional state throughout the novel. Morrison suggests that trauma doesn't fade with time—it can resurface (rememory), and shapes a person's personality. His eventual acknowledgment of the memory is crucial to his healing. By reciting their trauma, the protagonists begin to re-examine their own psychological nature and the strengths that ensured their survival. Besides, they are aware of the losses they would have to face in order to mend their fragmented sense of self. Morrison gives voice to the character Ethel, so that she finds herself the newfound persona of the American woman, who has got self-sufficiency and identity. She changes Cee's attitude and her way of life. She is a wise woman and holds a good position in society. Through this character, Morrison is educating African American women with her radical tool of story narration (Mohammad et al., 2025e; Mohammad et al., 2025f).

The protagonist, Frank Money, is a Korean War veteran who returns home carrying the weight of his traumatic experiences, both from the war and his childhood. His memories of his sister Cee's abuse, family's hardships, and experiences of racism are painful. Morrison explores how memory is often involuntary and unreliable, with Frank's recollections coming in flashes, often triggered during his journey.

In the Frank's struggle with memory of trauma, he tries to suppress painful memories, yet they resurface, forcing him to confront them. "There was no goal other than breathing, nothing to win and, save for somebody else's quiet death, nothing to survive or worth surviving for" (*Home* 83). Morrison suggests that this confrontation with memory, no matter how painful it is, is necessary for healing. As Frank reclaims his memories of the war, he begins to understand his actions and their impact leads him to emotional recovery.

To sum up, the characters' acts of rememory restores back their sense of self which reconnects them to their psychological and historical past. This enables them also to reclaim the strengths which they exhibit as a way of moving on towards the future. The author explores the traumatic experiences of the past and the present conditions of Africans with mixed emotions of repression and healing.

Toni Morrison delves deeply into the concepts of memory and "rememory," particularly how repressed trauma influences and haunts the lives of the characters. She often explores how individuals bury their traumatic memories and try to resurface in unexpected ways, disrupting their sense of identity and stability. The novel's exploration of repressed trauma highlights the cyclical nature of memory, where the past continues to intrude the present despite attempts to forget.

### **Memory as a Pathway to Healing and Trauma**

Memory plays a dual role in this novel i.e., to remember and not to remember. It serves as both a source of pain and a tool for healing. In *God Help the Child* storytelling and memory are intertwined as powerful forces that shape the characters' present and future. It reveals, memory is both painful and redemptive step for healing.

Bride, at first believes that memory is the worst thing to heal herself. Then she realizes with the memory only she attains wisdom, spirituality and becomes the central figure of the black community. Memory succeeds Bride's life in healing the trauma. She successfully heals her traumatic wounds and becomes the mother figure for future generation.

Throughout the novel, Morrison emphasizes that memory is not static; it evolves the characters by reflecting their past. The process of storytelling, whether it's internal narratives or shared stories among characters, becomes a path to self-discovery. Lula Ann (Bride's childhood name) reclaims that her painful memories integrate to get an identity. Her journey towards healing involves memory of suffering

in her childhood especially for the love and kindness from her mother which she has encountered and transformed herself. "A child. New life, Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness, Minus wrath." (*God Help the Child* 175; Mohammad et al., 2025e)

Toni Morrison shaped two characters by their memories. Bride, in turn, represses these painful memories by creating a successful life for herself. She changes her name, develops a glamorous persona, and focuses on her career, distancing herself from her painful childhood. Her storytelling provides a means of survival, resistance, and communal connection. These themes create a rich tapestry in enduring its impact on the present, particularly with the African American experiences.

### **Storytelling as a tool for Identity and Redemption**

The paper delineates how exactly the two novels are apt for the storytelling and memory as it is structured on the same paradox. Storytelling serves in two ways for the characters to process their trauma and to reshape their identities. The main characters Bride, Booker, FrankMoney and Cee undergo painful traumatic childhood.

Bride, the main protagonist of the novel tells stories of her beauty and success in her adult age to compensate her childhood pain. Her transformation into a confident and successful woman is a narrative part which she prepares a shield for herself with the past experiences. However, as the novel progresses, she learns that these stories are fragile, superficial and the real healing requires than escaping them. On the other hand, memory entraps another character Booker into reckless and aimless life with his painful past without any achievement. He too uses storytelling in a different way. His academic pursuit of historical injustices, slavery and violence externalize his pain by connecting it to larger narratives of suffering. Stories of injustice also has affected his personal life.

In *Home*, Frank's journey to his home is not just a physical return but also a return to his roots, where the stories of the community and family help him to reclaim a sense of belonging. Cee, too, is healed through the wisdom and stories shared by the women who take care of her after her medical abuse. These women's knowledge, passed down through generations, embodies an alternative form of storytelling that values ancestral memory and communal care. The community also plays a role in the act of storytelling. Storytelling allows characters like Frank and Cee to situate their personal stories within a larger cultural and historical context, giving meaning to their experiences.

Morrison refers to it as "recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past" (Morrison 2019; Raynaud 69). Morrison's fictional explorations into the African American past showcase the interrelations of personal memory and communal history, and thereby contest established narratives of the past.

### **Conclusion**

The study summarizes and illuminates the importance of storytelling and preserves the identity and history of African Americans who have historically been marginalized and whose narratives have often been suppressed. Toni Morrison's novels *God Help the Child* and *Home* serve as a powerful testaments to the enduring legacy of trauma and the necessity of storytelling as a means of healing, reclaiming identity, and confronting historical violence. Her works show psychological and cultural residue of slavery, racism. Morrison has the profound ability to shape narrative not just a tool for recounting events but as an intimate space where memory, emotion and identity intertwine.

Storytelling becomes a therapeutic process for Morrison's characters, as they seek to reconstruct their identities through confronting the past. The notion of rememory resurfaces as characters struggles with memories that they did not choose to remember but cannot escape. In *Home* Frank suppressed memory of honorific act he committed during the war reemerges slowly. Forcing him to reckon with his own capacity of violence.

The author describes the characters' restoration journey towards redemption. Whereas the memory of racial discrimination and abuse is projected. Like the tree, Frank finds to bury the shrouded bones and their painful wounds, they still want to live on, continue with hope in spite of their hurts.

The two novels end with a powerful message that the characters realize their mistakes and they heal psychologically which is reconstructing memory and restoring connecting between their communities and the survivors. The stories have a positive role that resists and restores i.e., transformation and healing. Morrison's novels ask the readers not only to remember the enslavement and colonization of the black nation, but also to remember those victims around the world who have

lost their identities and their sense of worth because of their social environment. Like the protagonists in the novels, ignoring these wounds which cause delay in healing and on the other hand, the traumatic events would help the victim, to regain his lost identity.

### **Acknowledgment**

This research was funded by INTI International University & colleges.

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