

“I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?”: Trauma, Testimony, and the Possibility of Healing in Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif”

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Abstract

Trauma studies as a discipline came to prominence in the 1990’s. Though Sigmund Freud’s theories constitute its foundation, the eclectic nature of it provides scope for including post-structural, postcolonial, narrative, and sociocultural theories to analyze texts. It analyses the influence of trauma in culture and society and the ways through which trauma is represented. American author Toni Morrison has always been pivotal in representing the subjugation, torture and trauma inflicted upon her African-American community through her works. Apart from that, her works intend to retrieve the forgotten and discredited history of African-Americans in her writings. In “Recitatif,” she explores the institution of racism in an innovative way: her protagonists, Twyla and Roberta, belong to two different ethnicities but she keeps their racial identities concealed by not attaching any racial codes to anyone. While identifying the characters’ ethnicities, the readers come to face their own biases. Simultaneously, they also register the traumatic nature of the narrative. This paper intends to explore “Recitatif” in the light of trauma studies. By doing so, it will delineate Morrison’s view regarding the different modes of trauma that afflict the lives of African-American people.

Keywords: Nachträglichkeit, PTSD, witness, testimony, working through, vicarious trauma, dissociation

Toni Morrison’s oeuvre envisions a world where history and memory deeply involve in dialogues to recuperate, recreate and regenerate obliterated histories of African-American people. Morrison delves into the past to create vibrant, living black characters who have been systematically effaced in a racially changed country while she upholds various socio-economic-political maladies that afflict their lives. It is no wonder the issue of racism and its various unnerving effects predominate in all of her works. However, she has always been arduous about creating deeply moving arts rather than delivering lengthy harangues. One of the glaring examples of such endeavour is her short story “Recitatif” which was first published in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women* (1983). *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (Hornby et al., 2015) defines ‘recitative,’ which has its origin in French ‘récitatif,’ as “a passage in an opera or oratorio that is sung in the rhythm of ordinary speech with many words on the same note” (2015, p. 1286). Apart from its being a deeply moving literary piece, the work focuses on the dynamics between memory and trauma against the backdrop of the overarching phenomena, racism. Morrison, while in conversation with Bonnie Angelo, scathingly castigates it as she mentions the institutionalization of racism across the globe and the

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traumatic bearing it has on people: “Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That’s a trauma” (Angelo, 1994, p. 258). Consequently, this paper intends to explore various traumas represented in “Recitatif” in the light of trauma studies and to trace the aetiology of those in the practices of racism. This essay additionally explores the prospect of healing from the wound of trauma as evinced by Morrison.

In the preface of her 1992 book *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison reveals the thought pattern which motivated her to write “Recitatif.” She begins the discussion with Marie Cardinal’s *The Words To Say It* (1983), in which the writer charts the entire course of her madness, the therapy she took and the complicated process of recuperation. Cardinal finds the origin of her malady in the French-Algerian war since “as a French girl born in Algeria” (Morrison, 1993, p. ix), she felt her motherland, a place where she grew up, being violated. In her rendition, the black or people of colour are depicted in such ways that they become either dreadful or loving. They are also either benevolent or wicked and spiritual or voluptuous (Morrison, 1993, p. ix).

Morrison perceptively observes that she does not have access to ready-made construction of blackness like her white counterpart because as a black writer she is “struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “altering” of people and language” (Morrison, 1993, p. x). Moreover, she regards it her duty to learn ways of circumventing the sinister shackles of racial prejudice inherent in language. Such endeavour gave birth to “Recitatif” at first, and later *Paradise*, on a more ambitious level. She asserts: “The only short story I have ever written, “Recitatif”, was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial” (Morrison, 1993, p. ix).

Twyla and Roberta, about eight years of age and from different ethnic backgrounds (Morrison never reveals their ethnicities), come to live in a government shelter named St. Bonaventure in the late 1950’s. The story explores their eventful friendship and how it goes through ups and downs in the next thirty years amidst the racially charged environment of the USA, and this is what constitutes the core of “Recitatif”. They meet four times subsequent to their parting at St. Bonaventure, and three of their encounters revolve around the issue of Maggie, a staff person at St. Bonaventure and their alleged complicity in the physical abuse inflicted upon a deaf and mute person like her by the senior girls. As mature adults, both Twyla and Roberta fail to recollect the incident, now assuming increasing urgency not only for Maggie’s disability but also for the possibility that Maggie could be a person of colour. The probable culpability of theirs in the torture of a person with disability and belonging to racial minority is the issue that wrecks their friendship initially but brings them closer afterwards.

Prominent criticisms on the story

In recent years, a steady growth of criticism on the short story has been noticed. While a fairly good portion of critics underscore the apparent racial ambiguity of it, others tend to provide disability studies readings of it. Abel (1993), for example, employs “Recitatif” as

a springboard for discussion on feminism and race. She comes to realize that her subject position as a white feminist critic informs her identification of race in the story, since she initially identified Twyla as white and Roberta as black, whereas her colleague Lula Fragd, a proponent of black feminism, located Twyla's origin in the Black ethnic group. She concludes that by keeping race inconclusive throughout the text Morrison draws attention to the tendency of readers to identify characters' ethnicities basing on their subject positions. Harris (2006) draws similar conclusion while comparing it to James Baldwin's short story "Sonny Blues" (1957). However, Rayson (1996), citing textual cues, identifies Roberta as black and Twyla, white.

On the other end of the spectrum, there remain some voices who propose to analyze "Recitatif" in light of disability studies and narrative theories. Sklar (2011) shows how Maggie not only transcends her prosthetic functions in the text by allowing a deeper engagement of readers but also influences Twyla and Roberta to emerge as more rounded characters. Warhol and Shuman (2018) deploy feminist narratology to analyze Maggie's disability while Delazari (2016) employs insights from audionarratology to analyze Twyla as a split narrator.

Amidst such illuminating, wide-ranging discussions, the traumatic texture of the narrative remains largely unexplored. Greene Benjamin (2013) elaborates how the incident related to Maggie remains the central trauma in Roberta and Twyla's lives, which also becomes a common ground for them to reinscribe their conflicting life-narratives, albeit she does not employ insights from trauma theory to accomplish that. Likewise, Androne (2007) acknowledges how Maggie plays the role of "archetypal mother," embodying the trauma of Twyla and Roberta. Nonetheless, the discussion rather centres on Karla Holloway's Afrocentric interpretive paradigm which puts "a spiritual and a physical mother at its centre" (Holloway, 1992, as cited in Androne, 2007) to analyze motherhood without reverting to trauma theories. Matus (1998) provides a comprehensive analysis of the earlier novels of Morrison in light of memory and trauma studies. Likewise, Bouson (2000) explores Morrison's earlier works by using the theoretical tenets of shame and trauma theories, but none of them attempt to critique the shorter pieces of hers. My essay intends to bridge this gap by evaluating "Recitatif" in light of trauma theories.

Trauma studies

In 1980, with the official acknowledgement of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association, an outcome of intensive and fierce political campaigning by the veterans of Vietnam War who sought to raise consciousness about the debilitating and crippling effect of war, as contended by Herman and Whitehead, trauma studies came into being. That was a defining moment of our culture, argues Whitehead (2004), since the global acknowledgement firmly established that this milieu often trigger psychotic disorders which may lead to enduring psychological consequences (p. 2). In contemporary trauma studies, the prime concerns are psychological trauma and its various renditions in language and the roles memory play in defining identities, be it individual and/or cultural. Along with psychoanalytic theories, trauma studies apply

insights from other theoretical schools like post-structuralism, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies to interpret the manifestation of trauma in literature and society.

As there are multiple ways of addressing traumatic experiences, there is no single methodology or theoretical approach to accomplish that. Instead, such endeavour should be opposed as argued by Wolfreys citing Lacapra: a post-traumatic response becomes uncertain when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition (LaCapra, 2001, as cited in Wolfreys, 2002). Therefore, we should explore the various phases of trauma studies. Balaev (2018) notices two distinct waves or rather two models in trauma studies. The first model or classical model or the first wave originated in the 1990s and was influenced largely by Freudian theory which regards trauma “an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even raptures meaning altogether” (p. 360). This views suffering induced by trauma as unrepresentable. Often a connection between an individual and the community to which she/he belongs is forged by analyzing the effects of trauma on her/his psyche, and thus the personal is linked with the political world. The dominant ideas in this model are latency, pathology, dissociation, and infection. Felman and Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), and Van der Kolk’s *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society* (1996) are the founding texts of the first wave in particular and trauma studies in general.

The second model or the pluralistic model of trauma questions the concept of the “unspeakability” of trauma in order to explore both “the structural dimensions of trauma” (p. 366) which usually originate due to “trauma’s dissociative effects on consciousness and memory” and the “cultural dimensions of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression” (Balaev, 2018, p. 366). In other words, pluralistic approaches recognize neurobiological as well as social contexts of a given traumatic experience and provide scope for conveying the multiple meanings of trauma (Balaev, 2014). The process of remembering, rather than depending solely on the psyche of an individual, depends to a greater extent on external cultural factors which provide scope for representation of traumas. Consequently, the issue of “unspeakability” is assessed on the basis of both neurobiological and cultural factors. Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), Naomi Mandel’s *Against the Unspeakability: Complicity, the Holocaust and Slavery in America* (2006), Forter’s *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism* (2011), and Balaev’s *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014) are some of the works that elaborate the pluralistic models of trauma.

The fact that black intellectuals do not often wholeheartedly endorse psychoanalytic theories is not unbeknown to us. Claudia Tate, in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998), traces the provenance of such tendency in the inherent characteristic of psychoanalysis which focuses on an individual’s “primary nurturing environment” (p. 16) disregarding “the external circumstances that precondition the environment” (p. 16). To be specific, racism’s effects are studied on an individual “as a personality disorder caused by familial rather than social pathology” (p. 16). Hence, this essay intends to remedy the theoretical shortcoming. It largely follows the classical model as my analysis

is based on Freud's theories of *Nachträglichkeit*, screen memory, and the central tenet of classical model, the "unspeakability" of trauma. Yet, it tends to incorporate the social and cultural contexts that influence the disruption in recollection of trauma, following the pluralistic approach. Before delving into Morrison's "Recitatif", a discussion on Freud's ideas is imperative to identify the relevance of these to the context of traumatic recollection.

Freud's theories of *Nachträglichkeit*

Freud's theoretical perceptions play a significant role in the interpretation of trauma, albeit early theories of trauma remained undeveloped during his lifetime. His concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, formulated in his early studies of Hysteria, aids us in understanding the dual temporalities of trauma (Pedersen, 2019). Bidirectional in nature, *Nachträglichkeit*, in terms of structure "consists of a dialogic exchange between the past and the present, in which the past belatedly manifest itself in the present and the present retroactively reconstructs the past," (p. 29). Often translated as "deferred action", it is often wrongly interpreted as "a temporal trajectory that moves from either the past to the present or the present to the past" (p. 26) : either the incident that causes trauma remains the center of discussion, or the present traumatic symptoms are analyzed in terms of the past event. However, theorists like Cassie Pedersen, Haydée Faimberg, Anne Golomb Hoffman, and Donnel B Stern underscore the interconnectedness of the past and the present in the operation of *Nachträglichkeit*, providing re-reading of Freud's ideas which help us understand the various aspect of trauma.

Any discussion on *Nachträglichkeit* remains incomplete without mentioning the case study of Emma Eckstein, a Viennese woman, who started consulting Freud when she was twenty-seven and received treatment from 1892 to 1895. In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895) Freud mentions his diagnosis of Emma's phobia. Emma fears entering shops alone and she holds an incident responsible for her predicament. It happened when she was twelve years old. The incident involved two shop-assistants who were laughing while she was shopping. She felt panicky and left the shop: she thought they were laughing at her clothing. Despite this, she confessed to Freud that she had found one of them attractive. Freud labelled this incident of Emma as "Scene I". Upon further exploration, Emma recounts another incident which she has not narrated until now. The incident happened when, at the age of eight, she went to a shop to buy some sweets and the shop-keeper sexually assaulted her by grabbing her genitals through her clothing. Freud labels the earlier event as 'Scene II'. Emma divulges to Freud that she went to the shop for the second time, a fact which makes her repulse her childhood self. Freud, considering the relationship between the events, opines that the incident of 'Scene II' did not bear significance to her as she had not yet reached puberty and therefore unaware of the discourse of sexuality. 'Scene I' occurred, on the other hand, when she was mature enough to understand it. Freud opines that the memory of 'Scene II' remains latent until she becomes aware of it during 'Scene I' and the sexual excitation she directed towards the shop-assistant was the direct impact of earlier molestation, the realization of which made her panic-stricken. The past and present are in a dynamic relationship, each reformulating the other. This is how the temporality in *Nachträglichkeit* works.

Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), analyses Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to explicate Freud's ideas of historical and individual trauma, but she does not directly refer to *Nachträglichkeit*. However, her conceptualization of trauma functioning as a "double wound" and her emphasis on its intrinsic dormancy invokes Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*. Regarding Freud's example of a person who has narrowly escaped from a train collision mentioned in *Moses and Monotheism* as "the exemplary scene of trauma par excellence," she proclaims:

The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness.... (p. 17)

Forms of trauma depicted in "Recitatif"

In Morrison's story "Recitatif", Twyla and Roberta are witnesses to the humiliation that Maggie has been subjected to at the apple orchard during their stay in St. Bonny's. Apart from the "big girls" who are known for their unruly, abusive behaviour towards young girls and who play radios and dance with one another in the orchard, the place is rather uneventful. Only worth-remembering incident is Maggie's falling down there which evoked laughter in the 'big girls'. She fell down as she was taking a short-cut through the orchard in order to avoid waiting for another hour for the bus, a regular route on days when she had to do much cleaning along with cooking. Both of them were aware of her disability and thought they should have helped her but refrained from doing it in fear of the 'big girls'. The full enormity of the main incident dawns on her twenty years later when she meets Roberta for the third time after their second encounter at Howard Johnson's.

Now Twyla, married to a fireman named James Benson, and Roberta, married to a widower named Kenneth Norton, bump into each other at a new mall. The hostility and derisive attitude of theirs at the Howard Johnson's is replaced with a newly-found camaraderie: "Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long" (p. 246), Twyla fondly recollects. While reminiscing about the good old days, Twyla mentions the incident with Maggie only to be contradicted by Roberta: "Maggie didn't fall. No, Twyla. They knocked her down. Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes" (p. 247). The incident occurs in the orchard. The alternate version of this Maggie-incident deeply unsettles Twyla: "The Maggie thing was troubling me" (p. 247).

The obvious discomfort of Twyla – "My ears were itching and I wanted to go home suddenly" (p. 247) – upon receiving the alternate version bespeaks of its importance in respect to her identity. We usually tell stories which are intricately bound up with our identity and usually view those as seamless, but this particular incident creates a disruption in the narration of Twyla. She acknowledges, "Roberta has messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie" (p. 248). Van der Kolk and Hart's analysis on Pierre Janet's concepts in "The Intrusive Past" (1995) sheds light on Twyla's and later Roberta's uncertainty regarding the incident that happened to Maggie. They posit, "Lack of proper integration of intensely emotionally arousing experiences into the memory system results in dissociation and the formation of traumatic memories" (Van

der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1995, p. 163). The violence inflicted on Maggie was deeply traumatic for both of them which directly induced dissociation. Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), delineates the correlation between trauma and dissociation basing on the psychological research of Herman and Van der Kolk. Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) leans on neurobiological models to contend the direct casual connection existing between dissociation and trauma. She maintains:

Traumatic exposure can produce lasting alterations in the endocrine, autonomic, and central nervous systems.... Dissociation appears to be the mechanism by which intense sensory and emotional experiences are disconnected from the social domain of language and memory, the internal mechanism by which terrorized people are silenced. (pp. 238-239)

The recollection of the traumatic incident dismantles Maggie's idea of self as argued by Herman (1997) that events which are traumatic "shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others" (1997, p. 51); it is apparent that here she is relying largely upon Freud's view of trauma. Leys endorses Freud's postulation of a protective shield, or in his term stimulus barrier, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) which secures the organism from threatening the tide of huge number of stimuli emanating from the outside world. Trauma occurs due to the failure of the shield to process such stimuli. Along with it comes, as Freud mentions, "the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the physical sense, so that they can be disposed of" (Freud, 1920, as cited in Leys, 2000, p. 23). The failure in the process of 'mastering' and 'binding' results in "the general disorganization and other symptoms characteristic of psychic trauma" (Leys, 2000, p. 23).

Roberta's utterance – "Remember how scared we were?" – in the face of opposition from Twyla, "I don't- that's not what happened" (p. 247) is significant. Apparently, the two girls, eight-year-olds, were ill-equipped to witness and process the immensity of the situation as a disabled woman was being tortured by the equally imposing 'big girls.' Twyla unconsciously resorted to dissociation while Roberta's response becomes more complicated as she narrates newer versions of the story without any certainty as the story progresses. I will elaborate on that in the subsequent sections. Before that, the dream of Twyla needs to be analyzed as it will strengthen my argument further.

Another feature that predominates in any discussion on trauma, apart from the 'unspeakability' of it, is its repetitiveness. Freud (1920), in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, mentions the repetition of suffering in the lives of certain people. Like a pattern, the sufferings inflict the minds of people who feel powerless as if those are ordained by fate (Caruth, 1996). In Twyla's case, such repetition occurs, on a milder note, only through dreams: "I used to dream a lot and almost always the orchard was there" (Morrison, 2017, p. 240). Stanley (2011) discusses this by following the example laid down by Freud. His use of 'condensation' and 'displacement' to analyze dreams inspires Stanley to interpret how the orchard is "a repository of meanings that haunt" Twyla, "a site of original trauma" (p. 75). However, my reading of Sigmund Freud's idea of "screen memory" seems all the more relevant here as it tackles the issue head-on. In

“Screen Memories” (1899), Freud explores the reason why we forget the things of utmost importance but remember the most trivial of things. He believes it to be a negotiation of two forces- the inclination to remember and the concurrent resistance to it. He opines:

The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemonic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one. And since the elements of the experience which aroused objection were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence strike us as most trivial. (Freud, 1899, as cited in Reed and Levine, 2015)

He further argues that especially in our childhood memory, “the essential elements of an experience are represented in memory by the inessential element of the same experience” (Reed & Levine, 2015, p. 9). Twyla, often dreams of the orchard, but it is her screen memory which blocks the traumatic incident she witnessed along with Roberta. Her screen memory aids her in suppressing her primal scene.

Roberta and Twyla’s path cross again couple of months later amidst racial strife. It is the month of August and the community is divided among themselves regarding the issue of busing. The racial strife is the aftereffects of the Supreme Court’s verdict on racial segregation in educational institutions as unconstitutional in the Brown versus Board of Education, Topeka Kansas case on May 17, 1954, which also ended the *de jure* segregation and ‘Jim Crow’ era. This ruling in favour of racial integration made it compulsory to bus black and Latino students to the schools in the suburbs. Twyla does not give the issue any considerable importance until her views are pitted against Roberta’s. On the Hudson Street by the school, Twyla, who is steering the car, sees Roberta taking part in a demonstration that opposes the issue of busing. As they start exchanging their respective views regarding the issue, the tension brewing from their previous meeting resurfaces, and at one point during their altercation, Roberta calls Twyla a bigot who “kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground” (Morrison, p. 249). Twyla feels unnerved as she remembers Maggie as ‘sandy-coloured.’ However, she retaliates by joining the group who is in favour of busing. Nonetheless, she immediately realizes that the signage she puts vents her anger toward Roberta, but in itself, it is ridiculously meaningless as it relies heavily on Roberta’s notions. Her “AND SO DO CHILDREN” (Morrison, p. 249) only makes sense if it is read in opposition to Roberta’s ‘MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!’ (Morrison, p. 248). Morris (2013) regards this incident as another example of the two characters’ interdependence on each other to provide their life stories with missing pieces. The indication is apparent that both of their traumatic memories, if put together, may ease the process of healing.

However, if analyzed with respect to pluralistic model of trauma, the meaning becomes more precise as it takes into account the socio-political aspect of trauma. Also, the latency of trauma, as theorized by Freud through *Nachträglichkeit*, deserves critical attention here. As it has already been mentioned, Emma came to realize the physical abuse she endured during her childhood only when she came to terms with sexuality during puberty. She was not mentally prepared to understand her abuse when she was a child. Likewise, during the introduction of Maggie at the beginning of the story, her disability rather than her ethnicity predominates in Twyla’s narration. Her childhood self

could not fully fathom the implication of witnessing the abuse of a woman of colour. However, during their third meeting amidst the racial strife, Maggie's skin-colour takes center stage which makes them fully realize the gravity of the incident. As mature adults, they are now fully conscious of race discourses, of which they were unaware during childhood. The fact that they might be complicit in the violence meted out to Maggie afflicts them with shame and guilt. The racially charged environment compels them to remember, albeit partially, the central trauma of their life. Being consumed with their inner shame and guilt, they resort to being hostile towards each other during the sit-ins.

The incident compels Twyla and Roberta to do much soul-searching. Some years have elapsed and Joseph is now studying at SUNY New Paltz. During his graduation from high school, Twyla was looking for Roberta. However, her introspection makes her resolute enough to realize that she did not take part in the abuse. Roberta also corroborates her claim when she meets her on the eve of Christmas. Interestingly, both arrive at the similar conclusion regarding Maggie albeit they are still uncertain about her ethnicity. However, they come up with explanations for the way they responded to Maggie. "Maggie was my dancing mother," (p. 250) reveals Twyla. She clarifies the full implication of the statement. Maggie reminded her of the absent mother who failed to nourish and nurture her. So, she felt elated "when the gar girls pushed her down and started roughhousing," (p. 250). Likewise, to Roberta, Maggie had "been brought up in an institution like my [her] mother was," (p. 251) and she thought she would be too. Maggie's old age and physical limitations reminded Roberta of her mother. Both of them drew vicarious pleasure from the incident in the orchard although it was equally traumatic for both of them.

What they fail to realize and what Morrison perhaps wants us to ponder over is that both Twyla and Roberta might already be suffering from trauma when they were sent to St. Bonny's. The text drops some hints to explore that avenue. In addition, newer research on trauma might corroborate my argument. Researchers, such as Nancy Newton Verrier and Betty Jean Lifton regard adoption as a form of trauma. Verrier asserts that any sort of detachment from the birth mother—be it relinquishment or medical emergencies—triggers a "primal wound", which can be located in a range of symptoms ranging from "numbed affect, anxiety, depression" to "lifelong difficulty in trusting others" (Verrier, 1993, as cited in Homans, 2006). Most importantly, a person with such affliction goes through similar "intrusions" and "constrictions" as the "survivors of wars, the Holocaust, or childhood sexual abuse" (Verrier, 1993, as cited in Homans, 2006) do. The inherent pathos of separation from mothers gets reflected in Twyla's words: "People want to put their arms around you when you tell them you were in a shelter" (Morrison, 2017, p. 239). Apart from that they feel they are being "dumped" there. The craving of Twyla for the attachment with her mother is evident when she comes to visit her: she wants to "stay buried in her fur all day" (p. 242). However, her feelings are not reciprocated. The mother is not committed to undertake three core responsibilities toward children that Ruddick (1989) specifies for mother work—protecting/ preserving them, nurturing them and making them ready to face the world. Lack of attachment with their mothers makes them ill-equipped to react compassionately and appropriately during the incident with Maggie.

In addition to the absence of caregivers in their lives, they have to endure the trauma of being homeless and living in a shelter. Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey (1991) in their illuminating essay, explicate the trauma of homelessness. They observe that the loss of familiar surroundings, neighbours, and family members may induce trauma which is likely to last for a period ranging from days to months or sometimes even longer. Moreover, while living in a shelter, “attendant stressors” like “possible loss of safety, predictability and control” (p. 1219) may seriously harm coping capacity and trigger trauma. Twyla feels nauseous the morning she meets Roberta, since she has lost the familiarity with her previous place— “taken out of your own bed early in the morning” (p. 239)—and she has to cope with new surroundings— “to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from whole other race” (p. 239). Though she does not fully explore it, as it is beyond the scope of a short story, Morrison’s portrayal of ‘big girls’ as “put-out girls” and “scared runaways” who assume the role of mean and imposing girls further explores how homelessness might result in ‘interpersonal distrust’ and alienation.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in “Recitatif”

We may look at trauma from another perspective. Figley and Kleber (1995) conducted research on secondary traumatic stress, which falls within the purview of psychotraumatology, in order to enrich this area which purports to study those who are close to the survivor of a traumatic incident or witness to one such incident, a field which they believe has remained largely unexplored, despite being included in the description of posttraumatic stress disorder. The American Psychiatric Association’s (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edition; DSM-IV) elaborates the features of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as:

the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate. (p. 424)

The last section of it clearly shows why their research is timely and apt. Citing Kleber and Brom who regard feeling powerless and experiencing disruption in daily existence as the two effects of an extreme situation or trauma (Kleber & Brom, 1992, as cited in Figley & Kleber, 1995), they assert that being close to a victim of trauma generates similar reactions and hence define secondary traumatic stress as “the stress resulting from hearing about the event and/or from helping or attempting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (p. 78). They prefer secondary traumatic stress instead of other appellations, such as ‘peripheral victims’ and ‘secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD) because the former synthesizes all the features embodied in the latter concepts (p. 78). Their research includes not only families or relatives of war veterans but also crisis workers, and colleagues of people who work in high-risk professions.

Moreover, Ramirez (2016) employs secondary traumatic stress to analyze the nature of trauma in Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. Similarly, the helplessness and the shock both Twyla and Roberta encountered while the torture was inflicted on Maggie

prove the existence of secondary traumatic stress. Years later, when during the incident of demonstration, the women start encircling and rocking the car Twyla is in, and she sways “back and forth like a sideways yo-yo” (p. 249), the helplessness and the powerlessness she feels are redolent of her earlier traumatic feelings in the orchard.

The story instead of providing answer ends with a question: “What the hell happened to Maggie?” This begs the question whether it ends on a positive or a negative note. Trauma theorists may provide probable answers. LaCapra (2014) observes two models in trauma narratives: “acting out” which signifies the damaging effects of trauma and “working through,” which denotes the practice of articulation by dint of which a trauma inflicted person “recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (p. 22). Moreover, Toni Morrison follows the convention of introducing an empathic listener whose role in the alleviation of trauma has been recognized by trauma scholars. Herman believes that an empathic listener aids the victim of trauma in being reconciled to the past by reconstituting the victim’s identity. In Laub’s words: “[t]he listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony” (1992, p. 58). Both Twyla and Roberta function as empathic listeners to each other. Together they provide fragments of stories and conflicting versions of those which together form a unified narrative and bring them closer to each other.

The characters succeed in settling their differences to some extent but Maggie remains an enigma to them till the end. Morrison neither provides a closure to the issue of Maggie nor identifies her with any ethnicity. In my opinion, she does not end the story in an optimistic tone the way she does in *God Help the Child*. LaCapra (1994) opines that working through does not always mean complete healing from trauma. Rather it means to recognize that some “loss cannot be made good; scars that will not disappear and even wounds that will not heal” (p. 66). As long as racism persists, the hope of complete healing for Twyla and Roberta is far from reality.

Conclusion

The video clip of a man begging for his life as the oppressor was kneeling on his neck has rocked the entire world this year. The man was George Floyd, a black American, while the oppressor was Derek Chauvin, an officer from Minneapolis Police Department. As soon as the video of the incident that occurred on 25 May, 2020, went public, people started storming the streets, protesting the brutal killing in the name of detention. Peaceful protests became violent in the USA as well as around the world and tension escalated in the following days. Slogans like ‘I CAN’T BREATHE’ or ‘Black Lives Matter’ started resurfacing on print-, visual- and social media and previously concealed incident of police atrocities committed upon black Americans started doing the rounds. Consequently, a large portion of black Americans, especially the men, became afflicted with anxiety and depression. It became worse for those who encountered such atrocities in their lives. Such phenomenon has been termed as “vicarious trauma,” a nascent field of study gaining momentum for the occurrence of such incidents. Ramsden, after conducting extensive research, comes to the conclusion that among 18% of all the

participants who have watched such content suffers from PTSD and anxiety (Ramsden, 2017, as cited in Holder, 2020).

In ‘Recitatif’ Twyla and Roberta both become victim to vicarious trauma. Though it was published in 1983, Morrison was always aware of such trauma. In an interview with Gaby Wood in 2015, when asked about the series of atrocities committed upon black Americans—Eric Garner was strangled; Michael Brown and Walter Scott were shot in two separate incidents—by the white policemen, she responded: “People keep saying, ‘We need to have a conversation about race.’ This is the conversation. I want to see a cop shoot a white unarmed teenager in the back. And I want to see a white man convicted for raping a black woman. Then when you ask me, Is it over? I will say yes” (Wood, 2015).

Clearly, race remains Toni Morrison’s sole concern, as evident in all her novels but the larger picture of trauma should not be left unexplored at the expense of it. In my opinion, scholars of disability studies should attempt to study Maggie in the light of intersectional study of disability and trauma. Undoubtedly “Recitatif” is Morrison’s conversation with her readers, especially in the present socio-political context, to look beyond race and explore other treasures that she conceals between the lines of it. I hope my intervention in the Morrison scholarship will guide the readers to acknowledge and learn from Morrison’s wisdom.

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