

## Post- war Trauma and Healing in American Literature: A Comparative Study of Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughter House-Five and Toni Morison’s Beloved”

**Hazrat Bilal**

[bilalhazrat399@yahoo.com](mailto:bilalhazrat399@yahoo.com)

Lecturer, Department of English The University of Agriculture, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

**Zahid Ali**

[za28105@gmail.com](mailto:za28105@gmail.com)

Lecturer, Department of English The University of Agriculture Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

**Saba Ijaz**

[Ishalrajpoot786@gmail.com](mailto:Ishalrajpoot786@gmail.com)

M Phil English Linguistics, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

### Abstract

The under study investigates a comparative analysis of two different novels of Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughter house-Five (1969) and Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” (1987) investigating how two fictions depicted trauma and pathways to healing in the consequences of war. Throughout the close reading of the novels and essential writing and insight sources, the analysis recognizes the similarity and disparity within works of trauma representation techniques, component of recuperating and narrative ways. This research attempts to underscore the intricate tapestry trauma theory as its main conceptual theatrical framework to analyze the multifaceted manifestation of trauma and opportunities for recovery. However, key result indicates that both texts use cracked chronology and other ingenious approaches to represent trauma’s effect. Morrison eventually represents a more optimistic exploration of healing throughout communal acceptance. This investigation enhances and reinterpretation of the notion that how seminal American novels have investigated the resonations of mass aggression.

**Keywords:** *Pathway, Beloved, Post War, Trauma, Healing, American Literature, Slaughter House Five*

**Corresponding Author:** Hazrat Bilal (Lecturer, Department of English The University of Agriculture, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.). Email: [bilalhazrat399@yahoo.com](mailto:bilalhazrat399@yahoo.com)

## 1. Introduction

The deep-rooted history of armed conflict within the nation has led to a strong presence of war-related themes and the impact of combat in American literature. The deep impact of these themes on the nation becomes evident due to the nation's involvement with them (Books, 2011). The experience of war, which includes the American War of Independence that is considered to have led to the nation's birth, as well as more recent engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, has had a lasting impact on the literary landscape in the United States. The origins of this can be traced back to the Revolutionary War, which led to the founding of the nation. During the American Civil War, notable works is produced such as Walt Whitman's "Drum-Taps" emerged, offering authentic insights into the brutal truths and individual experiences of war through poetry. These poems were written during the era of the American Civil War (Boussaha, 2022). There are plenty of writers in the United States whose works devolve the evidence to confront the turmoil and aggression caused by war as here very good example the work of Walt Whiteman. For the first time Walt Whiteman works was released to public in 1855 is evidence of war. Likewise, the First World War had a significant on American literature, resulting in the development of notable works such as "A Farewell of Arms" by Ernest Hemmingway (Douakha, 2021)

Those masterpieces were the outcome of the tremendous influence that the First World War had on American writing. Ernest Hemingway's novel "The Sun Also Rises" addresses the feelings of disillusionment and existential anguish that were common among the "Lost Generation." This generation endured the horrors of trench warfare only to come back to a world that appeared to have lost all of its significance. The 1920s saw the majority of Hemingway's writing output. These works of American literature not only represent the nation's collective memory of the war, but they also delve into the psychological and emotional challenges that follow in the wake of the conflict. This is a significant contribution that the American literary community has made to the rest of the globe (Furman, 2010).

Two of the many works that were produced as a result of the Second World War were "Catch-22" by Joseph Heller, which criticized the absurdity and bureaucracy of war, and "Slaughterhouse-Five" by Kurt Vonnegut, which was a semi-autobiographical novel that used science fiction elements to explore the trauma of the Dresden bombing. Both of these works are examples of the many works that were produced.

Following the conclusion of World War II and, in particular, the Vietnam War, there was a shift in focus away from the physical impacts of war and towards its mental and social repercussions. During the whole of the postwar period, this change took place. Although it is set in America in the years after the Civil War, Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved" explores the haunting residue left behind by tragedy. Both "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien and "Beloved" by Toni Morrison investigate the emotional baggage that soldiers carry. Tim O'Brien "The Things They Carried," (1990) is considered one of the finest books about the Vietnam War, whereas Toni Morrison's published "Beloved." in (1988) examines the destructive legacy of black woman slavery. The two prominent writers develop the same ideas and themes of healing and coping through communal support, memory and individual action. However, the experience of war in the United States is significantly reflected in literature, but also offering insight into the broader human condition during times of hardship.

Toni Morrison and Kurt Vonnegut are the two notable figures in the American history of literature, who are contributing a diverse voice and perspective in attempting weighty themes such as war, trauma and human experience in the American society. However, both writers provide valuable insight into the investigation of these topics. "Slaughterhouse-Five" by Vonnegut is one of the most enduring antiwar novels of all time which develops the element of science fiction and horror of the Dresden and its permanent marks in the mind of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Furthermore, Vonnegut also served as a soldier in World War II, though he is young and clumsy, is portrayed in his famous work in "Slaughterhouse-Five". Time and again, Vonnegut proclaims that there is no such thing as free will. Humankind is the slave of predestination. So, both writers represented post-war trauma and healing in their works.

This piece of writing was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 1969. This book is a deep criticism of war, and it is also a study on the nature of time, memory, and the sorrow that is experienced by mankind. Both of these themes are explored throughout the book. On the other hand, Toni Morrison is renowned for her elaborately constructed tales that often revolve on the experience of African Americans. The Nobel Prize in Literature was bestowed to Morrison in the year 1993. Her seminal work, "Beloved," is set in the era after the American Civil War and tells the story of Sethe, a freed slave who is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter. It investigates the residual effects of slavery and trauma through the lens of this woman's experience (Jaber, 2022). In "Beloved" (1987) is a novel that tells a story of a dysfunctional family, the protagonist Sethe's formerly enslaved woman who is haunted by the spirit of her deceased daughter.

In the given research study texts both writers presented different wars in form of writing such as Vonnegut's center of attention World War II whereas Morrison's exploration of Civil War. These two novels are important explorations of warfare stories which challenge traditional storytelling and bring a permanent mark in the mind of the individual character group identity. However, both works are interesting to read,

but also subject of academic inquiry particularly in the field of post-war trauma and recovery studies. Both authors defy the stories conventions by employing innovative narrative techniques in their writing, making their works not only enjoyable to read but also subjects of scholarly examination (Klinkowitz, 2012).

## 2. Literature Review

In American literature, the two postmodern writers have deeply fascinated by the concept of post war trauma on individual and the process of healing. They used fiction as means to capture the essence of deep emotional wound caused by conflict and the intricate journey toward healing. Through their stories, these writers skillfully depict post war trauma and healing, emphasizing key themes, storytelling methods that prevailed during that time, especially towards those in position of lower class. The exploration of the long-lasting effects of trauma experienced after war on individuals and the journey towards healing is a major theme in American literary works especially in the writing of Kurt Vonnegut “Slaughterhouse-Five” and Morrison “Beloved”. They also explored and emphasized the impact of trauma and healing on society and questioned the essential motives of those in power creating a vivid picture in story form in broader way.

### Trauma in Slaughterhouse-Five

Billy Pilgrim is the most unlucky protagonist of anti-war in “Slaughterhouse-Five” by Kurt Vonnegut. The story significantly explored the impact of war trauma, the protagonist is clearly in trouble whose mental state is best described as broken in never completely investigated in the novel. his experience during the war, particularly the bombing of Dresden, which lead to his PTSD. Billy’s time travel experience is purely mental, as he revisits traumatic events as he always finds himself “unstuck in time” Billy Pilgrim would not be characterized as crazy or insane, and I would not assert that he is schizophrenic. He is a man who has endured significant mental trauma and is constantly struggling with the impact of PTSD while striving to navigate the real world (Monneix, 2017).

### Fragmentation of Time and Memory

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut delves into fragmented memories caused by trauma, which become disconnected from time, resulting in a divergent identity. It also explores struggles between free will and destiny which illustrates the idea of time in order to demonstrate that there is no free will in war; it is just destiny. As the repeated phrase “so it goes” In times of war, the reality has become destructive and fragmented as individual try to make sense of chaos around them as Billy mention the death of late daughter death is the constant reality of mortality in war with post-traumatic stress (PSTD). (Mannex, 2017).

### **Survivor's Guilt and Detachment**

Billy Pilgrim's experiences illustrate a profound feeling of detachment and a sense of culpability for his survival. His passive stance in the face of circumstances suggests a way of dealing with the ongoing presence of death. As Tally stated, (2011) in this expression, "the repeated phrase reflects a feeling of acceptance in the face of the horrors of war and the sureness of death".

### **Critique of War**

Vonnegut's novel is a strong declaration against war, employing satire and elements of science fiction to criticize the romanticization of divergence. The portrayal of the bombing of Dresden serves as a powerful memory of the indiscriminate devastation caused by war (Klinkowitz, 2012). The novel's depiction of the futility of war resonates with current conversations about the moral consequences of warfare and its lasting effects on both soldiers and civilians.

### **Trauma in Beloved**

Toni Morrison's "Beloved" novels portray various distressing experiences such as physical aggression, sexual exploitation, exciting desert, and the bereavement of loved ones. One of the central themes in Morrison's writing is the inheritance of trauma across generations, specifically addressing the enduring impact of slavery's trauma. The main character of the novel, Sethe, is haunted by the spirit of her late daughter, Beloved. This haunting symbolizes the inescapable past and the lasting effects of trauma. Morrison's inclusion of "a supernatural element serves to embody the pervasive presence of historical trauma", as noted by Ashraf H.A. Rushdy (1999).

### **Haunting and Memory**

Morrison delves into the psychological wounds of subjugation and the Civil War in Beloved by depicting the lingering spirit of Sethe's deceased daughter, Beloved. The specter symbolizes the unavoidable past and the enduring impact of trauma. According to Rushdy (1999), Morrison employs supernatural elements to embody the pervasive existence of historical trauma.

### **Psychological and Emotional Scars**

Sethe's encounters emphasize the emotional wounds of slavery, such as overwhelming culpability and the quest for self-definition. The act of killing her own child, carried out to prevent the child from enduring a life of servitude, symbolizes the extreme actions taken in response to intolerable oppression (Thompson, 2006). Sethe's anguish is

not just individual but also communal, mirroring the collective hardship of trauma in the African American community.

### **Healing Through Community**

Sethe's journey to recovery is closely linked to her community, unlike Billy Pilgrim's solitude. The joint endeavor to rid Beloved's ghost signifies the significance of communal assistance in conquering trauma. Morrison stresses that healing is not a personal pursuit but a community-driven progression (Furman, 2010).

## **3. Comparative Analysis**

### **Narrative Techniques**

The fragmented nature of traumatic memory is conveyed through innovative narrative techniques in both novels. Vonnegut employs non-linear storytelling, while Morrison utilizes shifting perspectives and supernatural elements to reflect the complexity of traumatic memory and the challenge of linear depiction (Harris, 2008).

### **Theme between Isolation and community**

The two novels significantly differ in their portrayal of isolation and community during the healing process. Billy Pilgrim's sense of detachment emphasizes the isolating impact of trauma, whereas Sethe's experience emphasizes the therapeutic value of society support. This contrast mirrors larger societal stories about the balance between individual and collective methods for addressing trauma (Brooks, 2011).

### **Historical and Cultural Contexts**

The depictions of trauma and recovery in the two novels are strongly influenced by their historical and cultural backgrounds. Slaughterhouse-Five conveys concerns and criticisms about military warfare in the aftermath of World War II, while Beloved confronts the enduring effects of slavery on African American identity and historical trauma (Peach, 2000). These contextual factors offer insight into the particular types of traumas depicted and the parallel methods of healing.

### **Conclusion**

These novels go beyond the author's own experiences, and it delves into the life of the protagonists, Billy Pilgrim and Sethe's both undergo similar traumatic experience and journey towards healing during the two different wars of independence. A "Slaughterhouse-Five" and "Beloved" autobiographical novel as Vonnegut and Morrison mirrors their own experience aftermath post war trauma time of war. While reading both

these texts we get the complete idea how literature depicted and expressed far reaching effects of traumatic feeling for individual and community that endeavors the post war trauma and the journey towards healing.

#### **4. Methodology**

##### **Research Design**

The present study is qualitative in nature and founded upon two different authors' works such as Vonnegut "Slaughterhouse-Five" and Morrison "Beloved" to devolve their comparative study of textual analysis. The overarching subject matter of the study is to evaluate the aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of themes of the post-war trauma and recovery presented in the selected literary texts.

##### **Data Collection**

It is pertinent to mention here that the primary source of the data collection is the two selected texts such as "Slaughterhouse-Five" and "Beloved". When the researcher refers to "secondary data," the researcher is talking about scholarly articles, critiques, and analytical essays that analyze the themes, characters, and narrative techniques found in both of the selected mentioned novels.

##### **Textual Analysis**

##### **Criteria for Comparison**

The criteria for comparison comprise:

1. Depiction of Trauma: The portrayal of the psychological and emotional elements of trauma in each novel.
2. Healing Methods: The approaches or procedures used by characters in the novels to seek healing or cope with their traumas.
3. Literary Devices in Narration: Employment of literary techniques such as flashbacks, numerous perceptions, and symbolism to convey themes.

##### **Coding and Themes**

Textual elements related to trauma and healing will be coded for easier categorization. Based on repetitive patterns or motifs in both novels, themes will be recognized.

### Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical lens for the study will be trauma theory, which provides a detailed understanding of the impact of trauma on individuals and communities, as well as the processes involved in healing.

### 4. Results

This comparative textual analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved" reveals several significant similarities and differences in how the two novels portray trauma and pathways to healing in the aftermath of war. However, both authors have extensively employed met fictional techniques to share his wartime experiences and the untold tales of World War II. Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine novels from a post-war trauma and healing perspective.

#### Portrayal of Trauma

Both novels depict trauma in a vivid, visceral manner. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut conveys the traumatic impact of the Dresden bombing through the protagonist Billy Pilgrim's fractured sense of time and unsteady grip on reality. Vonnegut has always contested the configuration of times-travel literary device to embody Billy's resist against war and his war experience. Toni Morrison depicted the destruction and hollowness of the Second World War in his novel Beloved. The protagonist Sethe is suffering from trauma because of a former slave tormented by the spirit of her dead daughter, Beloved.

Therefore, since postwar time she has been actively engaged in resisting against war. The trauma is indicated as evident through her haunting memories and profound feeling of guilt. After she gets trauma from slavery, she does the anti-reaction like the way she kills her baby and intensified supernatural elements to evaluate Sethe's deep distress. However, both writers have tremendously illustrated how can destroyed the sense and disturb the flow of time.

Novel	Techniques Used	Manifestations of Trauma
Slaughterhouse-Five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fractured chronology</li><li>• Time travel</li><li>• Semi-autobiographical protagonist</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hero Billy Pilgrim has fractured sense of time and unsteady grip on reality</li><li>• Inability to reconcile war memories</li></ul>
Beloved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Flashbacks</li><li>• Shifting perspectives</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Protagonist Sethe haunted by ghost of deceased daughter</li></ul>

Novel	Techniques Used	Manifestations of Trauma
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Magical realism/supernatural elements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tortured memories and overwhelming guilt</li> <li>Fractured identity</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Portrayal of Trauma in Slaughterhouse-Five and Beloved**

### Mechanisms of Healing

The two novels have significantly different healing mechanisms for trauma. Slaughterhouse-Five presents communal connection as a potential remedy. Although Billy finds solace in connecting with other science fiction enthusiasts and explicitly discussing his war experiences, he does not find complete healing from them. Similarly, Morrison's Beloved can be viewed as the symptom of trauma of the entire society in African American community as Sethe is reconnecting with her African society. Their sympathetic acceptance, symbolized by the sanitization power of song, enables Sethe to reconcile with her past. While Billy remains ensnared by trauma, Sethe attains a degree of freedom.

### Narrative Techniques

Vonnegut and Morrison both depart from traditional, chronological storytelling to reflect the disintegration caused by trauma. Morrison incorporates more mystical elements, such as the enigmatic ghost character Beloved, while Vonnegut's approach remains rooted in his semi-autobiographical hero. Although their narrative techniques are similar, Morrison's magical realism contrasts with Vonnegut's sci-fi elements, presenting a more somber first-person account. The different writing styles of the authors highlight how the texts present contrasting views on whether it is possible to recover from trauma.

Novel	Narrative Techniques	Effect on Portrayal of Trauma
Slaughterhouse-Five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nonlinear chronology</li> <li>Semi-autobiographical protagonist</li> <li>Science fiction elements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fractured narrative mirrors trauma's effects</li> <li>Grounding through first-person lens</li> </ul>
Beloved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nonlinear chronology</li> <li>Magical realism/supernatural elements</li> <li>Ambiguous ghost character</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fractured narrative mirrors trauma's effects</li> <li>Magical elements heighten trauma's disruption</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Narrative Techniques in Slaughterhouse-Five and Beloved**

## Textual Analysis

### Trauma in Slaughterhouse-Five

The post war trauma is one of the most important topics in form of exploration in American literature. This led to a focus on themes of personal, societal impact of conflict in literature as well as the exploration black women identity. Slaughterhouse-Five and Beloved text we come across these themes, which present different but harmonizing viewpoint of trauma and recovery. However, slaughterhouse-Five is autobiographical novel about Vonnegut experience about the World War II. He has an eventful war. He was captured in put in prison during the battle of Bulge. The novel also incorporates the elements of science fiction, which experience time differently than we do on earth. The text itself is used as evidence of its author undiagnosed PTSD, because throughout his life that his wartime experience left him traumatized. Billy's the hero of the novel remains "unstuck in time" because she clearly demonstrates his isolation and disconnect from reality. The story appears to be incredibly fictional and provides further evidence that such unreal elements could reflect the experiences of a traumatized mind, because of how greatly the war has disrupted Billy's existence. Billy's appears to be experiencing hallucinations about his encounters with the Tralfamadorians as a means of coping with a world ravaged by war, a world that is beyond his comprehension. In addition, the Tralfamadorians concept of the fourth dimension appears to be a convenient explanation that Billy uses to cope with the death he has witnessed firsthand.

### Trauma in Beloved

The novel beloved is considered to be one of the master pieces of Morrison. The character Beloved symbolizes the deep trauma of slavery, representing a violent event that is too horrific for the conscious mind to acknowledge. Toni Morrison employs her novel to captivate the reader and immerse them in the enduring impact of slavery and the Civil War in Beloved, because the importance of story in connecting the reader to the experience of trauma on a personal level is widely acknowledged. "Acknowledging one's own trauma either fulfills or shatters a commitment: the commitment of sharing the truth as a way of realizing it" (Laub 73). However, Toni Morrison's hero Sethe character reveals the consequences of dehumanization and trauma to the world through her storytelling. Trauma plays an important role in the protagonist Sethe's life. Sethe's decision to take her four children and flee to the shed to kill them is strongly influenced by trauma when she becomes aware that her master is coming for them. Sethe's battle was with world history and killing her own child was resistance against war, because she wants to escape her from slavery which illustrate overwhelming burden of guilt. It also shows intricate elements of maternal love and selflessness. Toni Morrison emphasizes that healing is not an individual endeavor but a society process.

## Comparative Analysis

### **Narrative Structure and Its Impact**

Although the two novels have different authors, their narrative technique and themes are very much same, because the frameworks which is mirror the fragmented quality of trauma memory. Vonnegut's depicted the timeline fracture in his novel "Slaughterhouse-Five" whereas Morrison's emphasizes long lasting effect of trauma to society and coming generation in history in his novel "Beloved". However, the portrayal of isolation and community in the two texts is entirely distinct when it comes to storytelling. Billy, therefore, is a man who has been traumatized and is unable to accept the destructive nature of war unless he relies on a far-fetched and impossible theory that allows him to interpret the world. Morrison guides the reader as Sethe goes through the process of reclaiming her identity while dealing with her trauma and eventually being able to acknowledge herself and her trauma as a complete survivor.

### **Psychological and Social Dimensions of Trauma**

In order to interpret psychological impact of trauma in form of stories in both novels are presented in various ways but they have same issue its social implication. Slaughterhouse-Five depicted that war is useless thing which destroyed society and human being as whole and put people mentally in trouble. Beloved is the accumulation of desire and pain to facilitate healing.

### **5. Conclusion**

The American literature reflects the psychological impact of slavery on the collective memory of war and delves into post-war trauma in novels long after the conflict. In both texts we can see the violence on people in the form of two different wars which bring long lasting psychological impact on human mind. While examining these novels the readers can get an idea out of it as complex nature of trauma effect in various ways. So, "Beloved", is novel by Toni Morrison, which represented the psychological journey of a woman who confronts her trauma. Morrison uses literary techniques to articulate the unspeakable voices. Therefore, he employs storytelling and literary techniques in "Beloved" to connect the narrative with the reader by emulating the mind that preserves the traumatic event in the unconscious and conveys it to the conscious state.

However, both authors employ the theme of entrapment in form of trauma towards healing and also highlight the urgency of liberating or reconciling the histories of confined female characters, delving into the entrapment of characters and events in the past for both authors. The selected texts above highlight the comparative study in analyzing the struggle of women in navigating the intersection between their external environment and their physical selves. Nevertheless, the distinct backgrounds of the writers and their counterparts from the 20th century result in differences in perspective. In conclusion, every author examines the concept of entrapment trauma from a unique perspective, which is

influenced by factors such as war, violence, situation and healing. These aspects then manifest in the characters they create, shaping their individual mindsets. Vonnegut's continues to enjoy innovative narrative techniques to present everlasting psychological impact of war trauma and ponders whether the past should stay in the past. Yet, both authors feel a strong obligation to speak out about the truth and have explored disintegration caused by trauma through non-linear storytelling and other literary creative methods. However, further study can be explored in the same comparative analysis in literarily texts the effect of trauma.

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