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FREED FROM SLAVERY, BOUND TO THE PAST: A PALIMPSEST STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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Abstract
This article examines Toni Morrison's Beloved through Sarah Dillon's theory of the palimpsest to explore the persistence of slavery's traumatic legacy in African American cultural memory. It argues that Morrison constructs the novel as a palimpsestuous narrative in which erased and suppressed histories remain visible beneath the surface of the present. Through its fragmented structure, disrupted chronology, and recurring acts of remembrance, Beloved reveals the simultaneous presence of past and present, illustrating how traumatic experiences continue to shape individual and collective identities. The analysis focuses on Sethe's memories, the phenomenon of hunting, and the spectral figure of Beloved as manifestations of historical traces that resist forgetting. By foregrounding the interplay of erasure and retention, Morrison challenges official historical narratives and recuperates voices silenced by slavery. The study concludes that Beloved functions as a literary palimpsest where memory, trauma, and history remain inseparable, affirming Morrison's commitment to preserving marginalized histories through narrative remembrance.

INTRODUCTION

This study undertakes the concept of palimpsest, a term derived from the Greek palimpséstos, meaning "scraped again," which originally refers to a manuscript or writing surface (usually a parchment) that has been inscribed multiple times, with traces of the previous text imperfectly erased (Alexander, 2005). Over time, it evolved from a material object into a metaphor for history, memory and layered narratives, where traces of the past coexist with the new inscriptions and remain visible beneath them rather than being completely erased. Thomas De Quincy's essay *The Palimpsest* (1845) first used the term as a metaphor to describe the layered function of memory. Later, twentieth century critics, such as Jacques Derrida (1994) and Gerard Genette (1997), extended the metaphor to literature.

Palimpsest analysis, therefore, emphasizes that past is never fully erased; rather, it continually returns in ways that cannot be separated from present reality, thereby shaping and affecting contemporary realities with continuity. Building on these ideas, Sarah Dillon (2007), in *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, develops a comprehensive framework for understanding the concept of palimpsest in literature and literary

studies. Dillon proposes that palimpsest is not only a metaphor but also a critical tool highlighting how a text can simultaneously preserve the traces of past while incorporating new inscriptions. Palimpsestuousness is a concept central to Dillon's theoretical framework, which describes the "simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation "(Dillon, 2007, p.3) within layered texts, allowing reinscriptions to remain visible beneath the surface and create new meanings. Her theory provides a comprehensive framework emphasizing temporal layering, erasure and persistence, intertextuality, palimpsestuous temporality, and Interdependence, making it a valuable lens for analyzing text layered with trauma, memory, identity, and the collective historical imprints of slavery.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) exemplifies a palimpsestic text. Set in the reconstruction era, the novel's fragmented narrative and shifting timelines intertwine past and present, memory, identity, and traumatic history, effecting and shaping characters' identities and experiences. The dehumanizing legacies of slavery permeate the present through interweaving memories, notably in Sethe's struggle to reconcile her traumatic past with reality while being haunted by the ghostly presence of her deceased daughter. By applying Dillon's palimpsest framework, this study aims to explore how Beloved functions as palimpsestic text, where past is never fully erased but continually reinscribes, resurfaces and layers through collective memory, recollections and harsh experiences.

Although, *Beloved* has been extensively studied through historical, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, trauma studies, and feminist perspectives, the palimpsestic dimension of the novel remains underexplored. Dillon's theoretical framework, which highlights layering of narrative, erasure and retention, persistence, intertextuality, and the coexistence of past and present, provides a suitable approach to address this research gap. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by analyzing *Beloved* through a palimpsest lens, exploring how the novel functions as both a textual and metaphorical palimpsest and how its rewrites historical trauma by giving voice to those unrecorded by history.

This gap is important because Morrison's *Beloved* functions through a noticeably palimpsestic logic. It revolves around traumatic pasts and memories, overlapping histories, and the simultaneity of past and present. This study, therefore, applies Sarah Dillon's (2007) theory of palimpsest to examine how *Beloved* functions as a palimpsestic text both structurally and thematically. Through close textual analysis, it aims to explore how Morrison inscribes the interplay of past and present, trauma, memory, and identity as overlapping layers that continually interact and shape her characters' identities and self-definition, particularly Sethe. Ultimately, this study not only deepens the understanding of *Beloved* but also highlights the importance of palimpsest theory as a critical and methodological tool for reading literary texts where history and memory coexist and interact in complex and enduring ways.

Literature Review

This literature review presents an analysis and overview of the related theories, concepts, and scholarly contributions that provide the intellectual basis for the present study. The discussion is divided into two sub-sections: Related Concepts and Theories and Related Studies. By synthesizing the conceptual and applied perspectives, the study identifies a significant gap: while the palimpsest has been widely discussed as a metaphor and applied to several texts, its application to the primary text, *Beloved*, *remains* underexplored. Thus, the present research aims to analyze this uncharted dimension, contributing both to the literary interpretation of the selected work and understanding palimpsest as critical metaphor used to represent trauma, memory, inscriptions of past and identity.

Review of Related Concepts

Origins of the Palimpsest

The word palimpsest is derived from Greek palimpsestos, meaning "scraped again," and was

used in manuscript writing to refer to a manuscript or parchment from which early writings had been erased to allow new inscriptions while retaining the old traces beneath. Since then, the metaphor has become a critical concept used to represent memories, overlapping histories, the coexistence of past and present, and texts that coexist rather than replace one another. Thomas De Quincey (1845) compares human mind to a palimpsest, where earlier memories persist beneath new experiences without erasure. De Groote (2014) offers a profound perspective regarding palimpsest for understanding memory and textuality. He addresses palimpsest as a rhetoric rather than merely a thematic tool, shaping the ways memory is written and interpreted.

Moreover, building on these perspectives, Sarah Dillon offers the most influential redefinitions of the palimpsest in *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007). Dillon moves beyond the paleographic origin and metaphorical use in psychology, philosophy and literary studies and argues that palimpsest must be understood as a critical analytical tool rather than simply a literary metaphor or symbol. According to her, palimpsest is not simply a text in which multiple layers overlap, but a structure of coexistence and simultaneity in which multiple inscriptions coexist and interact without complete erasure. Dillon conceptualizes and extends the term into a theoretical framework used in the analysis of narratives, historical discourse, cultural memory, and identities.

Furthermore, Dillon's study focuses on literature, criticism, and theory, and she argues that palimpsest is not only layered but involuted, as the layers are entangled, interwoven and inseparable. Dillon uses the term "palimpsestuousness" to describe a textual surface where multiple inscriptions remain distinct yet intimately connected. Palimpsest operates through erasure, retention and survival; thus, Dillon's framework offers a critical method for analyzing text layered with trauma, historical violence, cultural silencing, and fragmented identity.

Structuralist and Post-structuralist Theorizations

Gérard Genette's Palimpsests: *Literature in the Second Degree* (1997) represents an important contribution that links palimpsest to structuralist concepts, as he transforms the concept through hypertextuality. For Genette, palimpsest is just like hypertextuality: the relation between the hypertext and hypotext, where one text transforms another.

Even though Genette's work laid the foundation for textual relationship as palimpsestic, its orientation was formalist. Later, cultural and post-structuralist theorists further extended this concept by highlighting palimpsest as a site of negotiation between presence and absence, erasure, memory, and the coexistence of past and present. Additionally, Dillon (2007) integrates all these ideas and coins the term "Palimpsestuous "to describe how unrelated texts or discourses "are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other"(Dillon, The Palimpsest, 2007, p.4). In contrast to Genette, Dillon highlights that palimpsest is not only about textual relationships, in fact, it deals with layered histories, trauma and memory, co-existence of past and present, and cultural and psychic inscriptions, that remain active beneath the surface.

Palimpsest as Memory and Trauma

Palimpsest strongly resonates with trauma and memory because it preserves or stores past impressions. Adapting this psychoanalytic perspective, Sarah Dillon (2007) argues that memory itself works palimpsestuously: past experiences are never removed but they remain inactive beneath new inscriptions. Trauma studies have found palimpsest to be a fertile metaphor for understanding how past experiences affect present life and persist across time.

For instance, Caruth (1996) states that trauma always returns after sometimes in the form of nightmares, fear, repetitions because it is not fully experienced at the moment of the event. The return of painful memories through flashbacks

connects trauma to palimpsest logic, where traces of the past are never fully erased but remain reinscribed beneath the new layers of experiences. In this way, Caruth's model emphasizes the coexistence of past and present in haunting ways because trauma disturbs linear temporality.

Additionally, Hirsch (2008) presents the idea of "post memory" to explore the effects of traumatic memories experienced and inherit by descendants of trauma survivors who did not even experience the event themselves. Thus, the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory links post memory to palimpsest.

Hauntology and Spectrality

The concept trauma and memory are closely related to hauntology, as haunting is an important aspect of palimpsest theories. Derrida (1994) explains hauntology as haunting presence of the past within the present. According to Derrida, the present is never free from the past; in fact, past overshadows the present and continually recalls the things or events that have been forgotten or left behind.

Moreover, this concept is further strengthened by Saleh-Henna (2015), who elaborates on the concept of "rememory" presented by Toni Morrison's in Beloved as a form of Black feminist hauntology because the ghost of Sethe's deceased daughter, Beloved, represents the unwavering persistence of slavery's trauma.

Palimpsest as Methodology

Dillon proposes that palimpsest is not a model concerned only with erasure and retention; instead, it represents simultaneity, co-existence: how the past remains visible beneath new inscriptions, creating tension between past and present, as though the past overshadows the present like a double vision. Secondly, it is not just a descriptive figure; in fact, it also serves as a critical methodology, allowing researchers to analyze texts embedded with trauma, memory, history, and multiple narratives.

For this study, palimpsest as a methodology provides a strong basis for analysing texts such as Toni Morrison's Beloved. By reading the text palimpuestuously: one can interpret how traumatic experiences are reinscribed across generations, how devastating legacy of slavery is inscribed in bodies, and how the past is never erased but continually affects and reinscribes the present.

Review of Related Studies

Palimpsest in Literature and Literary Criticism

Rushdy (2001), in Remembering Generations, gives the idea of "American palimpsest". According to Rushdy, African American literature functions as an "American palimpsest" by layering new inscriptions of Black experiences over historical erasure and silence. Similarly, Byrd (2005) analyzes Charles Johnson's novels to represent the silenced histories of marginalized people. This approach goes parallel with Toni Morrison's Beloved as the novel reflects African American marginalized voices.

For instance, Muşat (2017) introduced the idea of "palimpsest effect". The concept suggests that texts should be read in relation to other narratives, with a focus on multilayered narratives within the text for meaning, where each layer carries traces of other stories.

Palimpsest and Trauma Narratives

The application of palimpsest to trauma studies is productive because trauma itself is non-linear and fragmented, and it resists linear narration. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma always returns in fragmented and repetitive ways. This idea mirrors Dillon's (2007) concept that palimpsest is not only about erasure or persistence but about their simultaneity.

In the same way, Horvitz (2000) explores the idea that Toni Morrison's fragmented narrative style reflects the disruption of traumatic memory through its non-linear structure, fragmented narrative and repetitive actions. According to Saleh-Henna (2015), Toni Morrison's use of "rememory" in Beloved functions as a form of Black feminist hauntology, where trauma persists in spectral forms and haunting becomes a mode of survival and resistance.

Palimpsest in African American Literature

African American literature is a rich field for palimpsest reading particularly in relation to slavery, trauma and memory. Byrd (2005) examines Charles Johnson's novels presenting the concept of American palimpsest, where African American history and identity is constantly reinscribed against the narratives of dominant culture. Similarly, Rushdy (1999) examines texts such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that reinscribe silence narratives and histories of traumatic slavery within contemporary forms, situating the neo-slave narratives within this framework.

Colwell (2022) adds to this discussion by analyzing objects as palimpsests themselves, an approach that resonates with and clarifies Morrison's use of material culture - house (the house at 124 Bluestone Road in Beloved), landscape, scars, Sethe's scarred body, and ghost of Beloved -as sites of memory and layered history. All these studies and perspectives acknowledge the palimpsestic operation of African American novels and fiction, representing histories, traumatic and erased pasts through rewriting and reinscription while carrying the traces of visible and invisible scars off trauma. The scholars, through these perspectives, also illuminate the need for a systematic theoretical framework and methodology, such as Sarah Dillon's framework, to analyze the complexity and fragmented structure of these textual layers.

Postcolonial and Diasporic Context

Postcolonial criticism and diasporic context frequently use the metaphor of palimpsest to represent the persistence of colonial histories within postcolonial literature and identities, showing erased history, the legacy of slavery, trauma, memory, and suppressed narratives. Bhabha's (1994) notion of "unhomely" represents the layered and unsettled conditions of colonial and postcolonial identities. Similarly, Boehmer (2005) puts emphasis on literature's role in representing suppressed histories. He examines both colonial and postcolonial texts as palimpsests, in which suppressed histories layer beneath forced colonial layers.

Together, these perspectives align with Toni Morrison's Beloved, which, although rooted in African American experience, has traces of diasporic histories of displacement and slavery.

Palimpsest in Cultural Memory Studies

Beyond literary and postcolonial studies, the metaphor of palimpsest has been applied in cultural memory to describe how societies remember and how past remain embedded in contemporary urban and cultural landscapes. Andreas Huyssen (2003) examines urban memory as palimpsest in which the past is not simply what has gone but acts as a palimpsest which carries different temporal layers simultaneously.

Critical Studies on Toni Morrison's Beloved

Many scholars have analyzed Beloved extensively for its themes of memory, identity, haunting legacies of slavery, and trauma using feministic, psychoanalytical and post-colonial perspectives, but its analysis using palimpsestic lens is missing.

Kreyling (2007) reflects on the concept of instability of memory and identity in Morrison's *Beloved* using Pierre Nora's concept of memory as vanishing entity. In addition, Kreyling (2007) argues that Beloved by resisting historical erasure, reconstructs a "real environment of memory" by rewriting the emotional and traumatic memories of slavery that are not included in the records of official history.

Moreover, Krumholz (1992) examines Beloved's portrayal of haunting as a metaphor for the enduring legacies of slavery. Krumholz argues that Morrison rewrites and reimagines American history from the perspectives of African American slaves rather than dominant white American society.

Dillon (2007) offers palimpsest analysis as a fresh perspective for studying texts where multiple inscriptions coexist without erasure. Palimpsest, as a critical tool, used to study texts representing collective memory, trauma, productive tension, coexistence of past and present through layered and fragmented narrative.

Building on this, Tsiokos (2022) examines "palimpsestuous manifestation" of psychological and physical trauma in *Beloved*, highlighting how Morrison infuses meaning onto the bodies and psyches of her characters.

Summary and Identified Research Gap

This literature review presents an analysis of palimpsest as a metaphor and method, from its origin in manuscript writing to its development as a critical metaphor in literary studies, situating it as a flexible concept studying text like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* embedded with trauma, legacy of slavery, collective memory, quest for identity and the simultaneity of past and present.

Yet despite this rich scholarship and studies on *Beloved*, a significant area remains underexplored. Although scholars have analyzed *Beloved* it terms of trauma, memory, histographic metafiction, haunting, psychoanalysis, postcolonial, and feminist perspectives, they have not systematically applied Sarah Dillon's (2007) theorization of palimpsest to the novel. Dillon's work is unique and distinct in the sense that she reconceptualizes the concept of palimpsest not only as a critical metaphor but as a methodology that provides a strong basis for analyzing simultaneity, co-existence of past and present, layered narratives, and survival of inscriptions overtime.

While critics such as Caruth (1996) and Hirsch (2008) emphasize the return of traumatic memory and its transmission across generations, their approaches primarily focus on the psychological recurrence and temporal disruption caused by trauma. Caruth emphasizes repetition and belatedness as key features of traumatic memory that disturb linear temporality while Hirsch's concept of post memory explores the transmission of trauma across generations but does not provide a detailed theoretical framework for understanding how these narrative layers and memories coexist simultaneously within textual structure. Similarly, Derrida's (1994) notion of hauntology introduces a philosophical and ontological dimension by foregrounding the spectral persistence of past within the present.

In contrast, Sarah Dillon's (2007) palimpsest theory provides a more comprehensive methodological framework by redirecting the focus from psychological repetition to textual simultaneity. Rather than merely describing how trauma returns and affects, Dillon explains how past and present coexist and interact, along with cultural, historical, and psychological inscriptions within the same textual moment. Her framework therefore provides a strong analytical bases for reading *Beloved* as a palimpsestuous text, in which trauma, memory, and history function not merely as thematic concerns but also as layered components of the narrative form.

This research study therefore highlights a significant gap by offering palimpsestic reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that uses Sarah Dillon's framework. By applying Sarah Dillon's theory, this study foregrounds how Morrison's novel represents the devastating legacy of slavery as an enduring presence- inscribed and reinscribed in bodies, memories, places and the present, never removed or erased but constantly and continually reinscribed.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and theory-driven literary approach grounded in Sarah Dillon's The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory (2007). It examines Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a palimpsestuous text in which multiple inscriptions coexist and the past continues to shape the present.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design appropriate for exploring complex layers of literary phenomena such as trauma, memory, identity, and persistence of past within a text. This research design focuses on examining Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a literary palimpsest, identifying how traces of the past experiences remain visible alongside new inscriptions in the text.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is grounded in Sarah Dillon's *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007). The key concepts used include palimpsestuousness, simultaneity, erasure and retention, reinscription, and temporal layering. These concepts enable the study to examine how personal and collective memories, historical experiences, and traces of the past coexist within *Beloved*.

Methodological Framework

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and theory-driven literary methodology. The analysis moves reciprocally between text and theory, using Dillon's concepts as interpretive tools rather than dominant explanatory structures.

The study analyzes *Beloved* as a multilayered text where past and present coexist and interact, focusing on memory, trauma, history, identity, and the layering of past and present.

Tools of Analysis

The primary tool of analysis is close reading, supported by textual analysis and thematic analysis. These tools examine Morrison's narrative techniques, fragmented chronology, repetition, shifting timelines, memory, trauma, identity, motherhood, and haunting.

Data Collection

The primary source is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Secondary sources include Sarah Dillon's *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007) and relevant scholarly books, journal articles, critical essays, and studies on palimpsest theory, Morrison, *Beloved*, trauma, and memory. Passages were selected based on narrative fragmentation, temporal disruption, repetition, visible erasure, simultaneity, and themes relevant to palimpsestuous concepts. Key scenes include Sethe's infanticide, Sweet Home memories, 124 Bluestone Road, and Beloved's fragmented monologues.

Delimitation of the Study

This study is limited to *Beloved* and Sarah Dillon's palimpsest theory, particularly concepts from Study One of *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007). It focuses primarily on Sethe, her experiences of slavery, and her relationships with Beloved, Denver, and Paul D. Other Morrison novels and quantitative or sociological approaches are excluded, and the findings are not generalized to other African American literature.

Discussion

This study presents a detailed palimpsestic reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through the theoretical framework provided by Sarah Dillon's *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007). Dillon's theory emphasizes the concept of palimpsest not simply as a physical manuscript but as a conceptual tool for analyzing and understanding how text, histories and identities are inscribed, erased and rewritten or reinscribed over time. Palimpsestuousness is the idea central to her argument, which she defines as "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation" (Dillon, 2007, p.6), a dynamic relationship between the old and new inscriptions, where the traces of past or overwritten text remain inscribed beneath the new inscriptions

In *Beloved*, this theoretical tool highlights the layered interplay between past and present, history, identity, memory and trauma. The novel's fragmented narrative, non-linear structure, and haunting embody what Dillon calls a "palimpsestuous text" -in which meaning is continually produced through the coexistence of multiple temporal inscriptions.

Ultimately, this discussion demonstrates that Beloved not only represents the persistence of slavery's memory, coexistence of past and present but also structurally enacts it. By applying Dillon's palimpsest theory, this study argues that *Beloved* is a multilayered text where history continues to shape identity, collective memory, and the present, thus representing it as a site and act of remembrance.

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Fragmented Chronology as Palimpsestic Structure

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is structured in a way that resists a linear narrative structure. The novel progresses through a fragmented and layered chronology, where the past and present coexist within the same textual instance, representing Sarah Dillon's conception of palimpsest, a form of simultaneity rather than succession. For Dillon (2007), the palimpsest represents "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation, one that preserves the distinctness of its texts, while allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence" (p.6).

Sethe's life at 124 Bluestone Road is in constant conflict with the traumatic experiences of her enslaved past, each moment is layered upon the other like traces of earlier writing beneath the new inscriptions or rewritten manuscript.

Sethe's memories are not flashbacks; they act as active inscriptions of the violent past upon th present. Sethe's present life intertwines with her past and remembered experiences, refusing erasure, thus suggesting that temporal or physical distance does not guarantee real separation or freedom. In fact, her life is continually overwritten or inscribed with overlapping moments of enslavement and freedom, of haunting and survival, and of violence and resistance.

Similarly, the novel's shifting timelines and narrative perspectives -from Sethe to Denver to Paul D and to the spectral presence of Beloved - further strengthen its palimpsestic structure and composition. Every story overlap and adds a new insight and emotional interpretation of the previous one, creating cumulative layering of meaning. Dillon's conception that "writing about palimpsest becomes an act of palimpsesting " (p.8) clearly resonates here: Morrison's storytelling process is itself palimpsestic, each narrative layer overlaps with another, and both obscure and reveals what came earlier.

Ultimately, *Beloved's* narrative structure and fragmented chronology serve as a formal reflection of historical marks, haunting, and coexistence of past and present. The novel refuses erasure and alignment with conventional temporality because, for Morrison's characters, the past is never past or erased, but it continuously writes itself onto the present.

Coexistence of Past and Present (Palimpsestuousness) in Beloved

Beloved, as a literary text, is layered with trauma, memory, slavery, history and its narrative is haunted by the devastating effects of slavery, where the past continuously permeates into the present, shaping and affecting characters' lives, experiences and
identities. The novel starts with the line "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom." (*Beloved*, 1987, p.3), reflecting Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone Road and her past. The house itself acts as a site and repository of layered experiences where traces of the past persist within the present.

Sethe's life at 124 Bluestone Road is constantly reinscribed by the memories of slavery, the past, and infanticide she attempts to forget. For example, Dillon (2007) argues that "to invoke a word is to recall a history. To use a word is to set history on its way again " (p.9) reflects Morrison's narrative technique: every attempt Sethe makes to speak about her past resurfaces her traumatic memories that she seeks to bury.

Moreover, Morrison's narrative structure mirrors this coexistence as the narration shifts between Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and Beloved, each voice overwriting the others while preserving distinct emotional experiences. This simultaneity echoes with Dillon's description of a palimpsestuous text where inscriptions coexist with each other, creating productive tension. Ultimately, in *Beloved* the past is not a part of history; it inhabits and influences the present. The novel's layered narrative and haunted temporality illuminate that historical imprints are not eradicated by new inscriptions but coexist with them in a palimpsestic logic.

Memory and Trauma as layered Inscriptions

In *Beloved*, memory functions not as a linear recollection of the past but as a site of

overlapping and repeated inscriptions- a psychological and textual layering that aligns with Dillon's notion of a palimpsest. Dillon proposes that palimpsest is process that embodies "inscriptions, erasures and re-inscriptions," where each new writing or layer "compares and struggles with the other" and together they form "the involuted palimpsest of the concept's own palimpsestuous history "(p,.8). This description clearly resonates with the structure of memory in Beloved, where the traces of past and recollection of trauma never fully erase or replace previous memories but constantly reactivates them.

For Sethe, memory is not a repository but a living force that breaths and acts upon her present life and shapes her identity and sense of self. She attempts to forget and repress her traumatic past, but it always returns in ways that cannot be separated, in both her consciousness and the spectral presence of absence like Beloved. Sethe's extreme pain and experiences are traces of her past as Morrison writes: " Something things go. Pass on. Other things you never do. (*Beloved*, 1987,pp.35-36). These lines represent the essence of palimpsestic memory by describing Sethe's memory that refuses to fade; fragments of the past coexist with the present, resisting erasure even when they seem forgotten.

Sethe's painful memories of slavery, her mother's hanging, the whipping scars on her back (a chokecherry tree), her infanticide, and her breastfeeding milk being stolen by the slave owners, all represent individual acts of remembrance that sustain clear visibility of the stressed past and connect personal experiences to historical record. The scars are not merely personal and physical; in fact, they are textual, historical imprints inscribed on her body as living marks of slavery and hieroglyphs of trauma. Morrison's narrative thus becomes a form of palimpsestic writing- a rewriting of the silenced historical voices, where memory functions both as subject and method.

Thus, *Beloved* transforms trauma into a multilayered inscriptional process that embodies multiple painful stories. Memory becomes a palimpsestic mode through which history is both preserved and rewritten like a manuscript, where the act of remembering is portrayed as a form of survival.

Beloved as an Embodied Palimpsest

In *Beloved*, the character of Beloved, Sethe's deceased daughter, herself functions as the most prominent and tangible embodiment of the palimpsestuous structure and principle. Morrison constructs Beloved as a living text, a text inscribed with overlapping histories, trauma, memory and silences of both personal and collective memory. She represents what Dillon (2007) calls "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation "(p.6). For Sethe, Beloved is at once Sethe's daughter, her past, her guilt, her love and her haunting. The recurrence of trauma represents palimpsestuous layering of Sethe's life in the present; each attempt for a new beginning is haunted by the underlying script of her enslaved past.

Beloved's fragmented speech also reflects the palimpsest's layered narrative and textuality, as her monologues are filled with disjoint memories of death and her mother, as she says" I am Beloved and she is mine."(Beloved, 1987, p.210). Additionally, Beloved's physical presence becomes a site of inscription for multiple histories beyond Sethe's individual experience and struggle. Her memories of slavery and her obscure recollection of the ocean voyage - "the men without skin" (Beloved, 1987, p.209), the face that is mine but nor mine, expand her identity into a collective dimension, representing the dark history of slavery. Beloved carries within herself, the memory of all those lost to the horrible condition of enslavement, transforming her into what Dillon (2007) describes as a palimpsestic text, open to multiple inscriptions of pain, loss, history, and identity.

Motherhood and Identity as Palimpsestic Layers

Motherhood in *Beloved* operates as a unique palimpsestic site where history, trauma, memory and love intersect in complex layers. Sethe's maternal identity is inscribed by the nurturing

impulse of care, the historical violence of slavery, emotional and psychological scars of enslavement, and the guilt of infanticide, representing her identity as layered with overlapping inscriptions. Sethe's most difficult decision, which serves as the defining act of her life - the killing of her infant daughter to save her from slavery-is both an act of protection, sacrifice, and irreversible trauma. Sethe explains her unforgettable decision by saying, " I took and put my babies where they'd be safe.(*Beloved*, 1987,p.164). This sentence represents the ambivalence of motherly affection under slavery, where love becomes equivalent to violence. Sethe's act of infanticide is both an expression of freedom and erasure of life. Through this moment, Morrison portrays motherhood as a palimpsest- a rewritten text where maternal impulse and care are transformed by historical oppression into resistance.

The moral distortion of slavery compels mothers to perform unthinkable actions to protect their children's dignity. Motherhood becomes a palimpsestic site, layering maternal affection, historical trauma, pain, and guilt over one another. Each act of protection is overwritten by pain and loss but the earlier meanings of maternal love are not demolished, rather, they persist beneath this violent re-inscription, haunting and shaping Sethe's consciousness.

For instance, Sethe's relationship with her surviving daughter, Denver, adds another inscription and layer to this maternal palimpsest. She unwillingly inherits her mother's trauma even she strives towards freedom. Thus, in *Beloved*, motherhood, the maternal body, and memory become sites of resistance, reflecting the possibility of palimpsestic structure that preserves the traces of past and suffering while allowing new meanings of strength and survival to emerge.

Morrison's Act of Rewriting History

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* functions as a profound literary act of palimpsesting by rewriting historical records to re- inscribe suppressed voices into cultural memory. Through its layered inscriptions of past and the erased histories -particularly those of enslaved Black women- the novel becomes a transformative act of rewriting history. Morrison reconstructs the past through its fragmented storytelling process- a past whose history has been ignored or silenced, layering fiction over historical truth without erasing it.

Through *Beloved*, Morrison rewrites the silenced histories of enslaved women whose suffering and pain never found a place in written history. She acknowledges this gap in her essay "The Site of Memory ", emphasizing that "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot." Morrison argues that facts alone are not enough to explain the story of slavery, as they are purely objective. However, truth is emotional, spiritual and experimental - it requires empathy and imagination to be unveiled. Therefore, Morrison puts her philosophy into practice by retrieving the emotional and psychological truths that were erased from history.

The novel's epigraph "Sixty Million and more" refers to the millions of African slaves who lost their lives due to the brutality of slave owners in transatlantic slave trade. Through this act of re-inscription, Morrison constructs the novel as a tribute to erased lives, restoring them to collective memory. This dedication transforms *Beloved* into what Dillon (2007) calls a "palimpsestuous text", wherein the new inscriptions does not erase the old ones but sets itself in relation to the traces of earlier text that remain. (p.4). Thus, the novel becomes a memorial, a rebellion, and an act of remembrance and resistance.

In a passage, Morrison conflates the boundary between personal memory and collective history: "This is not a story to pass on" (Beloved, 1987, p.275), the phrase, paradoxically repeated at the novel's conclusion, encapsulates the tension between remembrance and forgetting. It simultaneously resists erasure and demands remembrance, reflecting the paradox of palimpsestic writing.

Moreover, the language and shifting narrative perspectives of *Beloved* function as palimpsestuous text through their continual rewriting. The narrative voices shift smoothly between first - person confessions, third -person observation, and collective voice of the

community, producing a textual surface layered with multiple subjectivities and overlapping perspectives. Dillon's idea that writing about a palimpsest is itself an act of palimpsesting, strongly reflects Morrison's narrative style. Her prose not only describes the palimpsest but performs it.

Thus, *Beloved* is more than a historical novel; it acts as a living archive- a rewriting that makes the erased narratives visible once again. Morrison's narrative refuses closure, demonstrating that the effects of slavery continue to shape contemporary identity. Using Dillon's theoretical framework, the novel can be seen as a palimpsest of Black history and identity: every story, every retelling, every act of remembering, and every haunting inscription contributes to a collective rewriting of the past. Therefore, Morrison's act of rewriting history is both literary and ethical - a restoration of memory against erasure and renewal of voice against silence.

Conclusion

This study has examined Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) through Sarah Dillon's The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory (2007), demonstrating how the novel functions as a palimpsestuous text in which the traumatic memories and histories of slavery remain layered within the present. Using a qualitative, interpretive, and close-reading approach, the study identifies five major dimensions: fragmented chronology, memory and trauma, Beloved as an embodied palimpsestic presence, motherhood as layered inscription, and Morrison's rewriting of history.

The findings show that Morrison's non-linear narrative and recurring memories resist the erasure of slavery, while Sethe's experiences demonstrate the persistence of the past within present identity. Beloved embodies repressed history, and motherhood becomes a layered site of love, trauma, guilt, and survival. Morrison's narrative also rewrites silenced histories and restores marginalized voices. These findings support Dillon's concept of palimpsestuousness as "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation" (2007, p. 6), demonstrating that old and new inscriptions coexist rather than replacing one another.

The study further demonstrates that Dillon's theory can illuminate not only textual layering but also historical trauma, memory, identity, and the afterlife of slavery. Its limitations include its focus on a single text, reliance on one theoretical framework, qualitative methodology, and limited historical and thematic scope. Future research may extend palimpsest theory to other Morrison novels and African American, postcolonial, and diasporic texts through comparative and interdisciplinary approaches.

Overall, *Beloved* emerges as a living palimpsest in which memory, trauma, identity, history, and the past coexist with the present. Morrison transforms the traces of slavery into a narrative of survival, resistance, remembrance, and renewal.

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