



## The Intersection of Trauma and Racial Memory in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

Kanika Chakraborty<sup>1</sup>

Email Correspondent: [chakrabortykanika11@gmail.com](mailto:chakrabortykanika11@gmail.com)

### Keywords:

Toni Morrison,  
Recitatif, Trauma,  
Racial Memory,  
Identity, Racial  
Ambiguity, Collective  
Trauma, Childhood  
Trauma, Race and  
Identity, Memory  
Studies.

### Abstract

Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" rigorously examines the relationship of trauma and racial memory, illustrating the influence of personal and collective trauma on identity formation. Morrison examines the formation and reinforcement of racial dynamics through memory by focusing on Twyla and Roberta, two girls from disparate ethnic backgrounds who share a traumatic childhood experience. The narrative's intentional racial ambiguity prompts readers to examine their own racial prejudices, while the characters' developing relationships underscore how racial memory—rooted in societal frameworks and individual histories—persistently shapes their existence. Morrison's tale illustrates the intersection of trauma and race, with the characters' collective and distinct experiences mirroring the wider racialised trauma present in American society. The narrative serves as a contemplation on the recollection, reconstruction, and interconnection of trauma with racial identity, illustrating the profound and enduring influence of racial history on personal experiences. Consequently, this paper intends to explore the relationship of trauma and racial memory 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.



This is an open access article under the CC BY License

### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's short story *Recitatif* skilfully combines trauma and racial memory, leading readers to examine their own beliefs regarding race and identity. Morrison deliberately renders the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta unclear prompting the audience to interrogate the racialisation of trauma and memory and the influence of these beliefs on both individual and collective experiences. The narrative explores the varied perceptions of the protagonists regarding their collective experiences at St. Bonny's orphanage and their disparate memories of Maggie, a silent, crippled woman who epitomises both their individual traumas and their ingrained racial biases.

Morrison's intentional removal of racial identifiers compels readers to examine their own racial prejudices, highlighting that race is both a social construct and a lens through which memory and trauma are perceived. The disjointed memories of Twyla and Roberta, stemming from both individual and collective trauma, demonstrate how racial memory can shape one's remembrance of events, underscoring the intricacies of racial identity development. Morrison illustrates that the

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, R. P. Shaha University Dhaka, Bangladesh, [chakrabortykanika11@gmail.com](mailto:chakrabortykanika11@gmail.com)

characters' recollections of Maggie evolve over time, symbolising the intersection of race and trauma in shaping both individual and cultural narratives. In *Recitatif*, Morrison provides a thorough analysis of the interconnection between race and trauma, seen in both the protagonists' experiences and the broader societal context.

Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" has received critical acclaim for its analysis of racism, trauma, and memory. The short narrative intentionally conceals the ethnic identity of its two main characters, Twyla and Roberta, prompting readers to confront their own racial biases. This intentional ambiguity functions as a means by which Morrison examines both the societal constructions of race and the impact of trauma and racial memory on individual and community identities. This literature study explores significant topics surrounding trauma theory, racial memory, and Morrison's challenge to racial categorisation, analysing scholarly engagement with these themes in relation to "Recitatif."

In her examination of "Recitatif," Robin Bernstein highlights Morrison's deliberate racial ambiguity, contending that it compels the reader to confront the notion that race is "socially constructed" and utilised as a lens for interpreting behaviour and identity (Bernstein 67). By leaving the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta ambiguous, Morrison transfers the responsibility of racial interpretation to the reader, a literary technique that reveals the embedded nature of racial biases in American consciousness. Bernstein contends that this ambiguity renders "Recitatif" a "experiment in racial reading" (69).

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy examines the importance of trauma in the narrative, particularly emphasising the painful incident at the orphanage that connects Twyla and Roberta. Rushdy observes that the collective trauma of seeing the mistreatment of Maggie, a mute and perhaps crippled lady, serves as a metaphor for the unrecognised violence perpetrated against marginalised people (Rushdy 13). This pain is racialised, despite its racial ambiguity, and mirrors broader societal processes wherein specific traumas are overlooked or trivialised according to the racial identities of the individuals involved. Rushdy claims that Maggie's silence and the ambiguity regarding her treatment signify "historical erasures of racial violence" (15).

Additionally, scholars have analysed how Morrison employs memory as a narrative mechanism to underscore the convergence of personal and racial tragedy. Memory is essential in Twyla and Roberta's interpretation of their common history, and it is through their adult relationships that the complexities of racial memory surface. Alys Weinbaum, in her analysis of memory in "Recitatif," contends that the narrative illustrates how racial memory—both individual and communal—constructs identity (Weinbaum 25).

The individuals' divergent memories about Maggie's race and their roles in her mistreatment illustrate the fallibility of memory and the influence of trauma through racial perspectives. Kevin Quashie further explores the issue of racial pain, highlighting how Morrison's narrative is profoundly anchored in the legacy of American race history. Quashie examines how Morrison contemplates the "generational trauma" transmitted to African Americans via systematic racism and institutional oppression (Quashie 34).

In "Recitatif," this generational trauma is manifested not just in the characters' individual experiences but also in their shared racial memory. Twyla and Roberta's contrasting memories of their infancy illustrate the fragmented essence of racial trauma and its enduring impact on identity. The intersection of trauma and racial memory in "Recitatif" is a complex topic, informed by trauma theory, memory studies, and race theory. Academics have analysed Morrison's storytelling techniques, emphasising how racial ambiguity, trauma, and memory complicate and contest conventional notions of race and identity. The collective pain experienced by Twyla and Roberta, together their contrasting racial recollections, illustrates the intricacies of racial dynamics in America and the enduring effects of racialised trauma on personal lives.

## METHOD

A qualitative research approach will be applied to examine the interplay of trauma and racial memory in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif." This approach integrates textual analysis, trauma theory, and critical race theory to examine how Morrison employs narrative ambiguity to investigate the impact of racial memory and trauma on identity development. The methodology entails a thorough examination of the text, supported by a review of secondary academic sources, to clarify the complex relationships of trauma, memory, and race within the narrative.

The principal methodology for this research is thorough textual analysis, focussing on significant excerpts in "Recitatif" where Morrison explores trauma and racial memory. Focus will be directed on the depiction of collective pain experienced by Twyla and Roberta, particularly their diverse memories of Maggie, the mute kitchen employee, and the evolution of their recollections over time. This research will examine how Morrison's intentional racial ambiguity of the characters influences the reader's understanding of their pain and memory, necessitating an exploration of racial preconceptions and biases.

This research will utilise trauma theory, specifically the contributions of Cathy Caruth, to elucidate how trauma operates within the story, highlighting its function as a narrative structure that interrupts linear memory and identity development. This analysis will explore Morrison's portrayal of trauma in "Recitatif," focussing on how the characters' collective childhood trauma—both individual and racial—shapes their adult identities. The study will examine the manifestation of trauma in the characters' interactions and memories, elucidating the enduring effects of both individual and collective trauma.

Critical race theory (CRT) will serve as the foundation for examining the construction and reconstruction of racial memory in "Recitatif." This project will examine the social construction and recollection of race through trauma, utilising the scholarship of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell. The racial ambiguity of Twyla and Roberta compels readers to confront their own racial prejudices. Critical Race Theory will be utilised to analyse how Morrison exploits these biases to uncover truths regarding racial memory and its relationship to trauma.

The research will employ an interdisciplinary methodology by integrating perspectives from trauma studies, memory studies, and African American literature. The research on memory, especially Maurice Halbwachs' contributions to collective memory, will be employed to examine how societal dynamics and racialised history shape the characters' recollections. This will entail studying how Morrison critiques the dependability of memory and the methods by which racialised trauma is either recalled or obliterated.

An thorough examination of current scholarship on "Recitatif" will enhance the basic analysis. Academic works by Robin Bernstein, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, and Kevin Quashie will offer significant insights into trauma and racial memory. These sources will provide essential insights into how Morrison's narrative strategies contest conventional interpretations of race and trauma, and they will assist in situating the conclusions of the textual analysis within wider literary and cultural discussions.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Toni Morrison's short tale "Recitatif" critically examines the intersection of trauma and racial memory that influence identity and relationships. Morrison's use of ambiguity, especially concerning the characters' racial identities and their collective trauma, generates a narrative abundant with narrative possibilities. This study examines the impact of trauma and racial memory on character development, emphasising the unreliability of memory, racial ambiguity, and the societal structures

around race and trauma. The analysis employs trauma theory, critical race theory, and a meticulous examination of the text to reveal Morrison's critique of race and trauma within the framework of personal and collective identity.

Morrison's omission of the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta, the two protagonists, invites readers to examine their own racial prejudices. This uncertainty is essential to the narrative's examination of racial memory. In "Recitatif," readers must infer each character's race based on stereotypical interpretations of their behaviour, language, and socioeconomic level. The narrator, Twyla, recounts that she and Roberta experienced disparate treatment at the orphanage because of their racial disparities; nevertheless, Morrison intentionally omits any racial identifiers, prompting readers to project their own racial assumptions onto the characters (Morrison 4).

This storytelling style underscores the socially created essence of race and illustrates the profound impact of racial memory on individuals' perceptions of reality. Readers are fundamentally complicit in perpetuating racial ideas, which Morrison critiques to illustrate how race is forced upon individuals and groups. The study revealed that this racial ambiguity hampers the reader's capacity to relate with either persona and compels an uneasy contemplation of how racial biases influence perception. Academics such as Robin Bernstein contend that the ambiguity in "Recitatif" functions as a "racial Rorschach test," compelling readers to project their own biases onto the racial elements (Bernstein 67).

The study analysed the role of trauma in the narrative, especially through the individuals' disjointed and contradictory recollections of Maggie, a mute woman employed at the orphanage. The early recollections of Maggie by Twyla and Roberta are crucial to their comprehension of their identities and their relationship with one another. Both women recall Maggie as a victim of violence, however their accounts diverge markedly: Twyla asserts that Maggie was assaulted by the other orphans, whilst Roberta remembers that she and Twyla were also involved in the maltreatment (Morrison 12). Furthermore, they are unable to reach a consensus on Maggie's racial identity, as Roberta initially asserts that Maggie was black, but Twyla can not remember any such detail.

This research, informed by Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, examines how Morrison employs Maggie as a representation of repressed and unacknowledged trauma. Caruth contends that trauma frequently creates voids in memory and comprehension, as the mind grapples with the enormity of an experience (Caruth 5). In "Recitatif," Maggie's silence represents the suppression of marginalised voices and narratives, especially concerning race. Twyla and Roberta's inadequate and inconsistent recollections of Maggie illustrate a broader social inability to adequately confront and recognise the suffering associated with racial violence.

Maggie's unclear racial identification symbolises the indistinct boundaries between individual pain and the shared anguish of racial history. The protagonists' ambiguity regarding Maggie's race reflects their failure to confront their own role in her mistreatment. Ashraf Rushdy observes that Maggie's silence and the characters' guilt serve as a comprehensive critique of the frequent neglect or distortion of trauma—particularly racial trauma—resulting in victims being voiceless (Rushdy 15).

This research explored the influence of racial memory and historical erasure in "Recitatif." Morrison employs the characters' divergent recollections of Maggie to examine the ways in which racism and trauma are remembered, recreated, or erased. Twyla and Roberta's divergent memories of their childhood, especially regarding Maggie's abuse, illustrate how racial memory is influenced by individual experiences and overarching cultural dynamics.

The ambiguity of Maggie's race and the characters' divergent recollections function as a metaphor for historical erasure, especially for the experiences of marginalised communities. Morrison posits that racial trauma, akin to Maggie's maltreatment, is frequently suppressed or

misrepresented by people in authority. This reflects the systematic erasure or alteration of African American history and its related pain within American culture. Academics like Alys Weinbaum contend that "Recitatif" functions as a critique of the ways in which racial trauma is either overlooked or misremembered, contingent upon the social environment and the viewpoints of the participants (Weinbaum 27).

The characters' disagreement on Maggie's colour symbolises a broader concern: the selective recollection and amnesia around racial violence. Morrison attacks the manipulation of communal racial memory to serve dominant narratives, frequently to the detriment of marginalised communities. Critical race theory was utilised to examine how Morrison attacks the societal fabrication of racial identity in "Recitatif." Morrison's omission of Twyla and Roberta's racial identities compels the reader to scrutinise the social and contextual construction of racial identity. The study revealed that this narrative decision compels both characters and viewers to confront the malleability of racial identity and its formation through external perceptions rather than inherent attributes.

Morrison's narrative method highlights the racialisation of suffering, even when it is not overtly related to race. The connection between Twyla and Roberta is hampered by unarticulated racial tensions that evidently influence their interactions. According to critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, identity is frequently shaped at the junction of several influences, such as race, gender, and class, which are intricately connected to the experience and recollection of trauma (Crenshaw 1267).

The study revealed that Morrison's "Recitatif" serves as a profound critique of the intersection between trauma and racial memory in shaping identity and relationships. The intentional racial ambiguity of the characters compels readers to examine their own racial assumptions, revealing the entrenched biases that shape race memory. The disjointed and contradictory recollections of trauma, especially with Maggie, illustrate the inconsistency of both individual and collective memory in relation to race. Maggie's silence and the ambiguity regarding her maltreatment symbolise the suppression and obliteration of marginalised narratives, especially those pertaining to racial violence.

The analysis of Twyla and Roberta's shared pain, as it intersects with their developing racial identities, demonstrates that Morrison used "Recitatif" to analyse the personal and societal ramifications of racial trauma. The narrative indicates that racial memory is shaped not just by personal experiences but also by overarching social dynamics that dictate which histories are preserved and which are overlooked.

Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" is an essential investigation of the interplay between trauma and racial memory, and its impact on human identity, relationships, and societal views. Morrison compels readers to examine their biases through the intentional racial ambiguity of Twyla and Roberta, demonstrating the profound influence of entrenched racial stereotypes on memory and identity. Morrison analyses the social construction of racial categories and the unreliable nature of memory, particularly in relation to trauma, by examining the fractured and conflicting memories associated with Maggie, a mute lady of unclear racial identification.

## CONCLUSION

The study has shown that "Recitatif" functions on various levels, prompting readers to contemplate the intricacies of race, trauma, and memory. Morrison demonstrates that racial memory is not a fixed, objective reality but is influenced by social situations, individual experiences, and the overarching dynamics of historical erasure. Maggie's silence and the ambiguity regarding her treatment symbolise the suppression of marginalised voices and the selective recollection of racial pain in American history.



In summary, Morrison's "Recitatif" highlights the interconnection between trauma, especially racial trauma, and memory, influencing both personal identities and shared narratives of race and history. Morrison's intricate and confusing narrative compels readers to examine their own involvement in the formation and continuation of racial memory. Ultimately, "Recitatif" serves as a testament to the lasting influence of literature in revealing and critiquing the profound social and psychological effects of racism and trauma on the human experience.

## REFERENCE

- Bernstein, R. (2007). Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* and the art of ambiguity. *American Literature*, 79(1), 65–71. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2006-064>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Morrison, T. (2004). *Recitatif* (1983). In H. L. Gates Jr. & V. Smith (Eds.), *The Norton anthology of African American literature* (2nd ed., pp. 2247–2261). W.W. Norton & Co.
- Rushdy, A. H. A. (2004). The politics of trauma in Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*. *Callaloo*, 27(1), 11–16. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2004.0030>
- Weinbaum, A. (2008). Racial memory and historical forgetting in *Recitatif*. *African American Review*, 41(3), 23–30.
- Eyerman, R. (2001). *Cultural trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Harvard University Press.
- Laub, D. (1995). Truth and testimony: The process and the struggle. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 61–75). Johns Hopkins University Press.