

Trauma, Masculinity, and Marginalization: An Insidious Trauma Reading of Cholly Breedlove in *the Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of trauma, masculinity, and social marginalization through the character of Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, employing Maria Root's concept of insidious trauma as its primary theoretical framework. This study reevaluates Cholly's portrayal as the result of cumulative and systemic forms of trauma caused by racial discrimination, economic deprivation, social exclusion, and emotional neglect, despite the fact that previous research has primarily interpreted him as a violent and dysfunctional family member. Insidious trauma, unlike event-based trauma, emerges through persistent experiences of oppression and devaluation that gradually shape an individual's psychological and social identity. Drawing on trauma theory, masculinity studies, and critical race perspectives, the article conducts a close textual analysis of the novel to investigate how Cholly's life is marked by abandonment, humiliation, racialized violence, and the absence of nurturing social structures. The analysis demonstrates that these recurring traumatic experiences contribute to the fragmentation of Cholly's subjectivity and the distortion of his masculine identity, ultimately culminating in destructive behavioral patterns. Rather than excusing his acts of violence, the study contextualizes them within a broader sociohistorical framework of systemic oppression and intergenerational trauma. By foregrounding the intersection of race, gender, and class in the production of trauma, this article challenges reductive moral readings of Cholly and highlights the significance of structural forces in shaping individual autonomy. The study contributes to contemporary trauma studies by extending the application of insidious trauma to African American literary studies and by offering a more nuanced understanding of masculinity in marginalized communities. Ultimately, it argues that Morrison's narrative exposes the profound psychological consequences of social marginalization and reveals how cumulative forms of oppression become internalized and reproduced across generations.

Keywords: Insidious Trauma; Cholly Breedlove; Masculinity; Trauma Narrative; Marginalization; African American Literature; Race and Gender; Intergenerational Trauma; Maria Root; Toni Morrison.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma has become "a conceptual touchstone" in analyzing our culture and literary studies (Kurtz, 2008, p.1). Trauma studies have emerged as a significant interdisciplinary field for examining the complex relationship between individual suffering and sociocultural structures of oppression. Early trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not merely an isolated psychological event but an overwhelming experience that resists immediate comprehension and returns through repetitive symptoms (Caruth 4–5). Similarly, Judith Herman emphasizes that trauma is deeply embedded within social and political contexts, particularly when individuals are subjected to prolonged conditions of powerlessness and oppression (Herman 33). Although these foundational approaches have contributed substantially to trauma studies, they primarily focus on catastrophic or singular traumatic events. Consequently, they often fail to account for the persistent psychological injuries generated by everyday experiences of racism, social exclusion, and structural inequality. To address this limitation, feminist psychotherapist Maria Root introduced the concept of *insidious trauma*, and developed by Laura Brown which refers to the cumulative psychological harm caused by ongoing experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and social devaluation. Unlike other trauma theories, insidious trauma provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding the subtle, pervasive, and everyday forms of psychological harm experienced by individuals situated within marginalized social locations. . In her essay

"Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality" (1992), Root discusses insidious trauma as a form of indirect trauma that shapes the subjects' worldview and sense of self. Root (1992) states that: "Insidious trauma is usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power (p.240). According to Root, trauma may occur not only through direct violence but also through repeated exposure to systemic prejudice, exclusion, and social invalidation. These experiences accumulate over time and become embedded within an individual's psychological development.

Within African American literary studies, trauma has frequently been examined through the experiences of Black women and the enduring legacy of racial oppression. Morrison's fiction, in particular, has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its representation of historical and psychological trauma. Critics have explored themes such as racial self-hatred, memory, identity fragmentation, and communal suffering in *The Bluest Eye*. Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been given to the ways in which Black masculinity is shaped by cumulative and structural forms of trauma. Cholly Breedlove's experiences of abandonment, humiliation, racial degradation, economic deprivation, and emotional negligence suggest that his violence cannot be understood solely as an expression of dysfunctional individualism. Rather, his behavior emerges from a lifetime of systemic cyclical marginalization that gradually erodes his sense of self-autonomy.

The intersection of trauma and masculinity is particularly significant in understanding Cholly's characterization. Scholars of masculinity studies argue that dominant constructions of manhood often become inaccessible to racially and economically marginalized men, resulting in feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and frustration (Connell 80). For African American men, these pressures are intensified by racial discrimination and socioeconomic exclusion, which undermine traditional avenues of masculine self-definition. Cholly's inability to fulfill socially sanctioned masculine roles as provider, protector, and autonomous subject contributes to a fragmented identity marked by anger, self-destructive behavior and hyper masculinity. His traumatic encounters—from childhood abandonment to the degrading experience of racial humiliation during adolescence—illustrate how systemic oppression shapes his understanding of masculinity and interpersonal relationships.

Despite the growing body of studies on Morrison's representation of trauma, there remains a notable gap concerning the application of insidious trauma theory to the study of Cholly Breedlove. Existing analyses frequently emphasize the consequences of his actions while neglecting the structural and psychological processes that produce his traumatic subjectivity. By employing Maria Root's framework of insidious trauma, this study seeks to re-evaluate Cholly not merely as a perpetrator of violence but as a figure whose identity is profoundly shaped by cumulative experiences of racial, social, and emotional marginalization. Such an approach contributes to ongoing discussions in trauma studies, masculinity studies, and African American literary criticism by foregrounding the complex relationship between systemic oppression and individual behavior.

Ultimately, this research argues that Cholly Breedlove embodies the destructive consequences of insidious trauma within a racially stratified society. Through an examination of his life experiences, the study demonstrates how persistent social devaluation and psychological neglect contribute to the formation of a fractured masculine identity. In doing so, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of Morrison's critique of racial inequality and highlights the importance of recognizing structural trauma as a central force in shaping marginalized lives. Moreover, despite extensive studies on Pecola's trauma, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the traumatic formation of Cholly Breedlove, whose characterization often remains confined to his role as a perpetrator of violence. Such readings, while acknowledging the severity of his actions, risk overlooking the broader historical and social conditions that shape his psychological development. Morrison's narrative reveals that Cholly's life is marked by abandonment, racial humiliation, economic deprivation, and emotional neglect long before he becomes an abusive father. His experiences demonstrate how systemic racism and social marginalization can produce profound psychic wounds that accumulate over time. Through Morrison's representation of racialized masculinity and social marginalization, *The Bluest Eye* exposes the intricate relationship between personal suffering and structural inequality, revealing how trauma becomes both an individual experience and a collective historical condition

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of trauma in literature has evolved from a focus on singular catastrophic events to encompass more subtle, cumulative, and socially embedded forms of suffering. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison is a foundational text in African American literature that exemplifies how trauma operates both overtly and insidiously within marginalized communities. Recent scholarship increasingly situates the character of Cholly Breedlove within broader frameworks of trauma theory, particularly through the lens of insidious trauma.

The concept of insidious trauma, first theorized by Maria Root, challenges traditional definitions of trauma by foregrounding the cumulative psychological harm caused by systemic oppression. Root defines insidious trauma as a form of injury that arises from “the social status of an individual being devalued” due to identity markers such as race or class (Root qtd. in Karmakar and Janani 385). Unlike acute trauma, which is tied to discrete events, insidious trauma operates through repetitive, normalized experiences of marginalization that gradually erode an individual’s sense of self. This theoretical framework is particularly useful in analyzing Morrison’s depiction of African American life, where racialized oppression becomes internalized and perpetuated within the community.

Scholars have increasingly emphasized that trauma in *The Bluest Eye* is not confined to singular acts of violence but is embedded in everyday social structures. Jumi Kim argues that Morrison redefines trauma by illustrating its “structural, mundane aspects,” especially through racially coded language and symbolic systems that perpetuate Black marginalization (Kim 490). This perspective aligns closely with Root’s theory, as it highlights how systemic racism produces ongoing psychological harm that shapes identity formation. In this context, Cholly Breedlove’s behavior cannot be understood solely as individual moral failure; rather, it must be interpreted as the outcome of prolonged exposure to insidious trauma.

Critical studies of the novel further demonstrate that Cholly’s traumatic past is deeply intertwined with socio-historical forces such as chattel slavery racism, poverty, and familial abandonment. His early experiences—being rejected by both parents and humiliated by white men during a formative sexual encounter—constitute a pattern of dehumanization that disrupts his psychological development. As Kwang-Kuo Hwang states, trauma “destroys the basic organizing principles” of the self, leading to fragmentation and impaired relational capacity (Hwang 1065). This fragmentation is evident in Cholly’s inability to form healthy attachments, ultimately culminating in the violent act against his daughter Pecola.

Moreover, contemporary research underscores the intergenerational dimension of trauma in Morrison’s work. Trauma is not only experienced individually but is transmitted across generations, shaping the lives of characters such as Pecola and Pauline. Hanno observes that the novel portrays trauma as a cumulative phenomenon influenced by “racial discrimination, societal beauty standards, and transgenerational inheritance” (Hanno). This aligns with the framework of insidious trauma, which accounts for the persistence and normalization of suffering within marginalized communities. Cholly’s actions, therefore, can be read as both a product and a perpetuator of this cycle.

Importantly, Morrison complicates traditional victim-perpetrator binaries by presenting Cholly as both a victim of systemic oppression and an agent of violence. This duality reflects the broader implications of insidious trauma, wherein individuals who are themselves traumatized may reproduce harm within their immediate environments. As critics suggest, the Breedlove family’s internalization of racial inferiority results in “fragmented and dissociated narratives of self-loathing” (Hwang 1072). Cholly’s destructive behavior thus emerges not in isolation but as part of a larger socio-cultural matrix that conditions and constrains his agency.

In addition, Morrison’s narrative technique plays a crucial role in representing trauma. By employing multiple perspectives and non-linear storytelling, she reconstructs the fragmented consciousness characteristic of trauma survivors. This narrative strategy invites readers to engage with the psychological complexities of characters like Cholly, fostering a more empathetic understanding of their actions. As critics argue, Morrison’s work functions as a form of “narrative therapy,” challenging readers to reconsider conventional interpretations of trauma and responsibility (Kim 492).

In sum, existing scholarship demonstrates that reading Cholly Breedlove through the lens of insidious trauma offers a nuanced understanding of his character. Rather than viewing him solely as a perpetrator of violence, this approach situates his actions within a continuum of systemic oppression and accumulated psychological harm. By integrating Root's theoretical framework with contemporary trauma studies, critics illuminate the ways in which Morrison's novel exposes the pervasive and enduring impact of racialized trauma. This body of literature thus provides a strong foundation for further analysis of Cholly's portrayal as both a product and a conduit of insidious trauma.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in trauma theory. The research methodology includes:

1. **Close reading** of selected passages from *The Bluest Eye* that depict Cholly Breedlove's childhood, experiences of humiliation, and adult behavior.
2. **Theoretical application** of insidious trauma to interpret how systemic oppression shapes his psychological development.
3. **Contextual analysis** of racial and social structures represented in the novel.

The goal is not to excuse Cholly's actions but to analyze how Morrison constructs his character within a broader socio-historical context of trauma.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) offers a profound exploration of racialized trauma, psychological fragmentation, and the cyclical nature of violence within marginalized communities. Among its most controversial and complex figures is Cholly Breedlove, whose actions—particularly the rape of his daughter Pecola—have often been read as emblematic of moral failure or irredeemable brutality. However, a closer reading through Maria Root's concept of insidious trauma reframes Cholly not merely as a perpetrator but as a deeply traumatized subject shaped by cumulative psychosocial violence. This lens reveals how systemic oppression, racial humiliation, and emotional abandonment produce a fragmented identity that manifests in destructive behavior. Throughout *The Bluest Eye* Morrison demonstrated an interest in exposing different facets of fragmented psyche in Cholly brought on by his traumatic past as well generational trauma which as Clifton Spargo asserts, "has come to function for many critics as a trope of access to more difficult histories, providing us entry into a world inhabited by the victims of extraordinary social violence, those perspectives so often left out of rational, progressive narrative of history" (2002). Cholly's traumatic past had fractured his identity and spirit leaving him a dehumanized beast and making him a living example of colonized fragmented psyche.

Historical Concurrence and Layout of *The Bluest Eye*

Slavery is the most menacing factor that contributes historically in perpetuating the traumatic experience of marginalized African-American people. Slavery and patriarchy practiced by white people are the root cause in deforming the traditional gender norms and performances in the Culture of African society in America that has been pathetically reflected in literature. From generation to generation, the ego, spirit, and self-respect of slave males were destroyed, robbing them of their manly function and transforming them into subhuman positions. mainly set in The United States, Ohio, Lorain, which is in the North side of America in the 1940s after the Great Depression and before World War II. It is noteworthy to mention that officially chattel slavery was annihilated in 1863. So, it is reasonable to opine that Cholly Breedlove is very close to the generation that was the direct victim of the system of slavery. During slavery, castration was made into a law to subdue aggressive and rebellious male slaves. Male slaves could neither provide for nor defend their families. Efforts were made institutionally to emasculate male slaves literally and metaphorically to make the master more masculine in comparison to black males. Thus slave men had been snatched off their masculine function and had been turned into a sub-human position through the destruction of the male ego, spirit, and self-respect resulting in

becoming a pathetic traumatized creature. Barbara Christian comments, “the rape of the Black women by white men or the use of their bodies for pleasure could be rationalized as the natural cravings for sex rather than the licentiousness of the white men” (*Black Women Novelists* 13). Commonly, Black women bore their slave holder’s children due to rape. Ultimately, the Black men started to put the blame of the white master’s moves on the Black female. Black men began to look upon Black women as having no sexual modesty. “If a Black woman is known to have sex with men out of wedlock, she is considered loose” (Christian, 14). Moreover, being inspired by the life of whites, Black men maintain that women have to be responsible for looking after the home tasks. “In fact Black men did not regard taking care of the family as work” (Christian, 10). Wallace states that Black men came to view the lifestyle of the white men as achievement (*Black Macho and the Myth of the Superman*, 123-125). On the other hand, in the white hegemonic society, Black men were unable to create their place and identity as the provider of their family. Consequently, Black male lost their stature and dignity in the eyes of their women since they had failed to protect their females from their white masters. So, it can be stated that the gender roles of Black men and women in the United States during and post-slavery were constructed through their function in society. Many black men often felt a deep psychic need to affirm their masculinity in a society that refused to accept their masculine identities. Because they were unable to assert their masculine power in the social and political space, they assumed the role of a dominator in the domestic space. Black men constructed their masculinity and self-identity through beating, drinking, rape, domestic abuse, and pursuit of exclusively sexual relationships. Thus mostly conventional forms of femininity and masculinity were not visible in Black male and female due to the fact that violence and oppression induced a lack of conformity to conventional gender performance throughout slavery period and the non-traditional roles of the Blacks that continue within the African American community to secure their survival after slavery. Zimmerman comments, “Intergenerational trauma can stem from biology, learned behaviors and even the collective experiences of a group. Some research suggests that trauma can affect a person’s DNA and potentially influence the health of future generations far removed from the traumatic event”. Thus, the problematic untreated trauma during slavery is partially responsible for the fragmented psyche of Cholly Breedlove. So, long-term psychological issues such as post-traumatic disorders and the continuation of damages caused by untreated trauma during slavery are responsible for creating dysfunctional manhood in the Black community.

White Hegemonic American Society

The most horrific event in Cholly's early years following his parents' abandonment was when armed white people interrupted his first sexual experience. The demise of Aunt Jimmy peddled Cholly to initiate manhood, but he was made impotent at the moment whilst he just had started the adventure to manhood on the day of his Aunt’s funeral. Cholly’s first intercourse with Darlene had become an event of impotency and humiliation. The white hunters ordered him to continue his sex with Darlene and pointed a flashlight at their bodies as if he were a beast and did not need any privacy as a human being. Root (1992) cognizes insidious trauma are normalized by those power structures that marginalize and exploit certain groups of people. Thus the subjugation and traumatization of a Black man like Cholly is considered normative in white culture. They comment, “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good...the coon ain’t comed yet” (*The Bluest Eye*, 116-117). The incident not only dehumanized Cholly but also made him incapable of action, according to the situation. In Mendy’s language, “the experience being forced by the white hunters to continue relations with his partner constitutes a trauma not only in its humiliating intensity, but also in the impossibility of being able to react the situation” (Mendy 777). In the article “Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison,” the critic Bakerman persuasively describes Cholly as being “set adrift by the death of his guardian, taunted and humiliated by white men during his first sexual encounter, [...Because he] does not know about nurturing love, and feeling love, he is incapable of expressing it healthfully” (544). It is to be noted that, Cholly did not vent out his anger at the white hunters but at Darlene instead. Being a young Black lad, he instinctively recognized that white males had the authority and status to easily destroy him. Hating them would bring him destruction and being a Black, he did not dare to hate whites. The emotion of hatred for whites would smash him. Instead, his desire to develop hypermasculinity under the prospect of racial castration is demonstrated by the fact that he directed his rage on the defenseless Darlene. The politics of white society and its negative perception of Black people are symbolized by this incident, which also highlights how white hegemonic society contributes to the generational production of ill, traumatized Black males. According

to Root such trauma as a form of indirect trauma shapes the subjects' worldview and sense of self. Root (1992) states that: "Insidious trauma is usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power (p.240).

Cholly's Dysfunctional Family and Identity Fragmentation

In addition to the impact of white terrorism, Cholly's early traumatic experiences and dysfunctional family have a significant influence on his degraded personality. He grew up in a culture that marginalizes Black masculinity and promotes "hegemonic masculinity" through white middle-class heterosexual men.

Cholly's nonexistent relationship with his parents has an impact on him. He never tasted the sweetness of a family, much less the perfect one. He is raised by Aunt Jimmy, a kind woman who even failed to act as a motherly role for Cholly. Notably Cholly's surname "Breedlove" is not given from his father leaving him without any identity and dignity. Aunt Jimmy openly tells Cholly that "[his] mama didn't name [him] nothing. That nine days wasn't up before she throwed [him] on the junk heap" (Morrison 133). However, Samson Fuller, Cholly's father, was a completely horrible individual who showed no concern for either Cholly or his mother. Just after learning that he had gotten Cholly's mother pregnant, he left the town. In Aunt Jimmy's language, "He was hanging around then, but he taken off pretty quick before you was born" (Morrison 103). His father completely humiliated him and refused to accept him when he attempted to connect with him as an adult. Thus, Cholly's first example of parenting was to be left nameless in a "junk heap" and then later to be coldly reminded by his surrogate mother. As a result of his early trauma perpetuated by his own parents, Cholly had the misconception that a parent-child connection does not always need to be conducted with love and responsibility, which led him to commit the worst tragedy—the rape of his own daughter.

Given Cholly's tragic upbringing, it is not surprising that he was a shattered and dissatisfied person who had walked out into the world with little understanding of how to interact with others and, most importantly, with people. He had never known what it was like to be a parent, and even his first partner had not taught him the true meaning of love. Root theorizes that the experience of insidious trauma crushes the spirit of an individual. For her, this spirit includes interconnectedness among the individuals of a community, personal integrity, intuition, and "validation of intangible senses" (Root, 1992, p.238). Consequently, alcoholic Cholly's marital relationship was a great disaster. In a white hegemonic society, they always had to struggle with poverty and identity crisis. He utterly failed as a husband, man and father. He did not take any responsibility of his family, always beat his wife and children. His communication with his wife was only sex devoid of love. Through the portrayal of Cholly's inability to run the family. Morrison reveals the wretched state of Black men in a white-dominated society who were denied good jobs to support their families. Cholly's vulnerability to earn money reflects economic oppression as a consequence of racial oppression.

Cholly is found to be causing his wife and kids always in some sort of trauma throughout the book rather than providing them with any sort of relief. Cholly's crime of raping his own daughter is what makes him seem like a demonic character to the reader. Morrison illustrates how Cholly is already a menace to his children by showing the incest act; rather than providing for them, he took everything away from them. Cholly was incapable of acting in any capacity, neither as a father nor as a spouse, and when he did, it was a terrible deed.

In Morrison's language,

Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he is uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence (*The Bluest Eye* 127).

Cholly wondered why Pecola looked so dejected and helpless, He wanted to give her love and affection. And at the same time, he even felt a disgust of himself of being unable to provide Pecola with happiness.

Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—unburdened—why wasn't she happy?...Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her---ever? What say to her? What could a burned-out Black men say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? (127).

Such emotions can be attributed to his fatherly affection, but since Cholly was victim of untreated trauma instilled by both society and family and unaware of such feelings, he did not know how to react to the situation and to his feelings. Moreover, Pecola's bodily position at that time got merged with Pauline's memory. Thus the giddy moment of feeling and past memory had led Cholly to rape his own daughter. Feeling of tenderness and sexual sensation altogether gripped him. Morrison comments: "The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals,.....Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her – tenderly" (*The Bluest* 128). It is evident that sex is the only way known to Cholly whether it is an expression of love or hatred. Since Cholly did not know the concept of fatherly love, he let his emotion for his daughter to be expressed through sex. Such a contemptible act is nothing but an outcome of the misconstruction of love within the family, where the family members do not know the true implication of love and relationship. "For Toni Morrison people with no imagination like Cholly feed love with sex" (Mendy 780). Cholly truly could never become a father though he was a biological father of two children. However, Cholly's act cannot be forgiven but it is understandable because the background of Cholly is acknowledged. His past and upbringing softens the reader's feelings towards him and some blame can be placed on society. It is actually the black-hating and self-hatred culture that make Cholly the confused, angry and self-loathing rapist. Moreover, for the readers, it seems intriguing when in one hand Morrison criticizes Cholly as irresponsible and failed figure of a father as well as husband and on the other hand, she invited the readers' pity while talking about Cholly's parentless or in particular fatherless childhood. In an interview in 1978, Morrison presented this aspect of Cholly's personality as he "might love Pecola in the worst of all positive ways because he can't do this and he can't do that. He cant do it normally, healthily and so it might end up in the rape" (Jane Beckerman's interview 38).

To sum up, this incest is rather an outcome of the psychological, social, and personal damage executed by the white dominant society that has continuously traumatized Cholly since his childhood. The character of Cholly testimonies that an unhealthy society and upbringing can be proved fatal for an individual especially who belongs to a marginalized group. Through him, Morrison portrays a griming consequence of insidious trauma and Cholly's son Sammy may trap into this cyclical nature of insidious trauma. The novel therefore challenges readers to consider how social structures contribute to individual acts of violence.

Morrison makes an excellent observation on this when she writes that, "since the why is too difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (Morrison 6).

CONCLUSION

To encapsulate, this study demonstrates that Cholly Breedlove's character in *The Bluest Eye* can be more fully understood through the framework of insidious trauma. Insidious trauma highlights the cumulative and often invisible effects of oppression that gradually erode an individual's identity and sense of belonging. Rather than portraying him solely as a villain, Morrison reveals how systematic racism, dysfunctional familial trauma, abandonment and social marginalization shape up his menacing psychological predicament. Through Cholly's narrative, this literature illustrates how trauma can transform victims into perpetrators, perpetuating cycles of suffering within marginalized communities. Through lens of insidious trauma, this analysis criticizes systematic oppression and emphasizes the importance of addressing the social conditions that generate trauma.

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