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Article

Moral Injury and the Scars of War: A Reading of Toni Morrison's *Home*

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Abstract: This article examines Jonathan Shay's theory of moral injury to illuminate the psychological and emotional distress experienced by veterans of war, with particular reference to Toni Morrison's novel *Home* (2012). In *Home*, Morrison narrates the story of Frank Money, a black Korean War veteran who returns to the racially segregated American South and struggles to recover. Because of his acts during the Korean War and the pervasive systemic racism he encountered upon his return home, Frank suffered from severe post-war moral injury that goes beyond the conventional description of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to include the complex elements of moral harm. The article explores how Frank's experience, including the Korean girl's death, survivor's guilt, violence from the authority, and his sister Cee's medical exploitation, creates distinct but related moral scars. The article also highlights how healing and the development of a renewed sense of identity and belonging can be facilitated by storytelling, communal support, and facing one's own and society's moral failings.

Keywords: Moral Injury; Post-War Trauma; Toni Morrison; African American Literature; Storytelling and Healing

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Introduction

The study of psychological trauma has changed dramatically, encompassing people's fundamental moral and existential disruptions rather than a singular focus on fear-based reactions. At the heart of this enlarged comprehension is Jonathan Shay's notion of moral injury. Clinical psychiatrist Shay developed this concept to explain the profound psychological, social, and spiritual harm that occurs when a war veteran's core moral ideals and behavioural expectations of self or others are violated in high-stakes scenarios. Moral injury stresses feelings of guilt or shame, moral disorientation, and societal alienation, in contrast to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which primarily deals with symptoms connected to fear. This concept of moral injury is essential in this context for a nuanced analysis of complex traumatic events, especially those involving moral compromise or betrayal.

Toni Morrison's novel, *Home*, offers a compelling examination of race, identity, and post-war trauma. The protagonist of the novel, Frank Money, a young African American Korean War soldier, struggles with the atrocities of combat and the systematised racism of 1950s America. The fundamental essence of moral injury is brought to light by Frank's attempts to find purpose and acceptance in a society that rejects his humanity as a Black American yet accepts his sacrifice as a combat veteran. In the novel, Frank's quest to save his younger sister, Cee, is a crucial one as it forces him to confront his suppressed memories and grapple with the moral transgressions that have damaged his sense of self. Frank Money's experiences in *Home* include both the systematic betrayals he receives and the personal moral transgressions he commits. His arduous journey with Cee, ending with their return home, serves as an example of a multifaceted process of healing and reconciliation. Morrison's portrayal of this recovery is firmly anchored in storytelling, the healing power of community, and a courageous confrontation with both individual and social moral shortcomings. By using this theoretical framework, the novel reveals deep insights into the nature of trauma, the intricacies of the African American veteran experience, and the pathways to moral recovery.

Moral Injury- A Theoretical Framework

Jonathan Shay, through his groundbreaking works *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994) and *Odysseus in America* (2002), compared the psychological damage suffered by contemporary combat veterans and that of historical heroes, laying the foundation for the concept of moral injury. In his seminal essay "Moral Injury", Shay defines moral injury as "a betrayal of what's right; either by a person in legitimate authority or by oneself in a high-stakes situation" (182). "Betrayal of what's right" indicates the contradiction between one's ethical framework and actual combat behaviour. Moral harm arises not only from witnessing atrocities but also from authorities that order or approve such immoral behaviour, and it is implied by the "legitimate authority". "High-stakes situation" refers to life-or-death circumstances like battle, which tend to intensify the traumatic resonance. Scholars like Litz et al. (2009) broaden the concept by defining moral injury as the "inability to contextualise or justify personal actions or the actions of others and the unsuccessful accommodation of these potentially morally challenging

experiences into pre-existing moral schemas, resulting in concomitant emotional responses and dysfunctional behaviours"(705). This enlarged view recognises that moral injury can arise not only from misleading authority but also from one's own actions, from witnessing or learning about the gross inhumanity of others. This all-encompassing perspective acknowledges the general human ability for moral suffering when deeply held ideals are violated, enabling a more flexible application of the theory to a variety of contexts outside the battlefield.

Jonathan Shay distinguishes Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from moral injury. Though they both result from traumatic events and share symptoms such as depression and anxiety, their fundamental emotional landscapes are very different. Emotional numbness, avoidance behaviours, intrusive memories, and fear-related symptoms characterise PTSD. In contrast, symptoms of guilt, shame, anger, and disgust are the main emphasis of moral injury. It can be defined as a betrayal of conscience. When someone is prevented from acting in a way that an individual feels morally right, it can create moral discomfort in the individual. This may cause "disruption in an individual's confidence and expectation about one's own or others' motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner" (Drescher et al. 9). Moral injury has the potential to literally and figuratively take the life of its victims. Individuals who suffer moral injury become incapacitated and unable to lead fulfilling lives. It damages identity, creating a profound internal conflict with his own perceived moral failures as well as the moral failings of others. Moral injury has repercussions that extend beyond the individual and can undermine one's ability to trust others, affecting the family unit and the broader community. It can break social ties, which results in feelings of social exclusion.

Understanding the difference between PTSD and moral injury is especially helpful when examining Frank Money's personality. Even while Frank displays typical PTSD symptoms, including flashbacks, nightmares, and a general disinterest in life, the deepest source of his suffering, especially in relation to the Korean girl incident, is intense guilt and shame. His guilt-driven inability to interact with the families of his deceased friends suggests a moral burden that transcends PTSD's fear responses. A more accurate psychological perspective is obtained by using the moral injury framework, which highlights the particular moral aspects of his suffering that might be overlooked if only PTSD is considered. As a result, the nature of his deep soul wound can be better understood.

Although Jonathan Shay first developed the concept of moral injury in military settings, it has since proven incredibly flexible and applicable to various high-stakes situations where moral values are questioned or transgressed. It can even apply to healthcare and education, where people may encounter situations in which systematic factors compel them to act in ways that conflict with the demands of justice, care, and honesty. Here, the legitimate authority that betrays what is right is the institutional or societal structures themselves. This broad definition of moral injury is crucial for understanding the complex pain that characters like Frank Money have endured. Frank fights not only in Korea but also on the streets, in hospitals, and in his memories of the

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divided South. Black bodies and spirits are continuously betrayed by racism, poverty, disenfranchisement, and gender violence, as the novel *Home* urges readers to confront. Frank's experiences with institutional violence, including medical malpractice and police brutality, violate his moral expectations and values. Therefore, his moral injury is exacerbated by both his own deeds and the ongoing, widespread moral failings of the society he is part of. This intersectional view of trauma emphasizes how Home utilizes the framework of moral injury to analyze the profound moral failings in American culture, demonstrating that the very institutions designed to preserve and defend justice can cause moral injury.

Frank Money's Moral Injury in *Home*

The character of Frank Money in *Home* is a compelling example of the intricacies of moral injury, representing several levels of moral wound that connect his individual wound with broader societal injustices. His unresolved childhood traumas, his experience in the Korean War, and his encounters with institutional racism after returning home all contributed to his shattered sense of self and underlying moral discomfort.

For Frank, his involvement in the wartime killing of a little Korean girl is the most profoundly damaging incident. At first, Frank claims the girl's murder was committed by another fellow soldier who shot her. "As soon as I look away from her hand to her face, see the two missing teeth, the fall of black hair above eager eyes, he blows her away. Only the hand remains in the trash, clutching its treasure, a spotted, rotting orange" (95). This narrative distortion can be interpreted in light of Cathy Caruth's concept of belatedness, where the rapid witnessing of a violent incident can lead to a delayed or fragmented perception of the event. Frank's initial distortion of the incident illustrates his self-loathing and shame that arise from the moral injury. His inability to face reality until much later in the story demonstrates how, in contrast to other types of trauma, moral injury frequently entails the willful repression or distortion of memory due to the grave moral transgression. The examples suggest that hiding behaviours are frequently motivated by shame, a fundamental emotion of morality. Frank's initial lie is consequently an intentional psychological defence strategy intended to preserve a shattered self-image rather than just a memory lapse. Morrison's narrative structure, which progressively exposes the incident's truth, therefore reflects the process of confronting a moral injury, wherein the person must ultimately reclaim the memory in order to start the healing process.

The shocking reality, as Frank eventually admitted, is that he killed the girl after he got aroused from her touching his crotch. "I shot the Korean girl in her face. I am the one she touched. I am the one who saw her smile… I am the one she aroused" (133). The intense emotions of guilt or shame that are at the heart of moral injury are triggered by this act of perpetration, which is closely related to the perpetrating element of morally harmful incidents. "Back was the free-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else's fault" (15).

In addition to this transgression, Frank struggles with severe survivor's guilt. His inability to visit his friends' families after enlisting in the military is a manifestation of his guilt as the only survivor of his group. His failure to spare his combat colleague's life represents another aspect of his moral injury. "If he heard a joke Mike would love, he would turn his head to tell it to him- then a nanosecond of embarrassment before realising he wasn't there" (99). Frank is emotionally damaged, afflicted with nightmares and flashbacks, and unable to achieve stability as a result of both the act of commission and the seeming failure of omission.

Frank's moral injury extends beyond the battlefield to the systematic racism he experiences after returning to the United States. The fact that Frank's trauma is classified explicitly as racial oppression trauma, as the high-stakes situations and betrayal by legitimate authority pervade his civilian life. The statement made by Reverend John Locke, "You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better." (19), highlights a widespread betrayal in society. Frank witnesses racial segregation on his train journey, the loss of Thomas's arm to police violence, his own experiences with police brutality, and general disdain for black veterans in society indicate the gravity of systematic racism in America. In this context, the legitimate authority includes the government machinery and social norms that support racial injustice, resulting in a moral trap where people are unable to follow their moral convictions because of repressive structural circumstances. Social organisations designed to maintain justice in society often behave as legitimate authorities, yet they violate core moral values and cause serious moral harm to their citizens.

Dr. Beau's medical experiments on Cee are the most heinous example of institutional cruelty and moral transgression. Cee is sterilised as a result of non-consensual treatments performed by Dr. Beau, a doctor who has a history of using Black people in research. A respected medical expert commits an egregious betrayal in this high-stakes situation, embodying medical racism on Black bodies in the name of science. This violence against the Black body intensifies Frank's moral injury and has a profound effect on him. His desperate attempt to save his sister from Dr. Beau's experiments is closely related to his failure to save friends in the war. "The letter said, "She be dead." I dragged Mike to shelter and fought off the birds, but he died anyway… No more people I didn't save. No more watching people close to me die. No more" (103).

The source of Frank and Cee's moral weakness can be traced back to Lotus, Georgia. Abuse by their step-grandmother and abandonment by their parents resulted in childhood trauma but also brought a strong bond between the siblings, with Frank serving as Cee's primary guardian. These early events undoubtedly influenced their core moral values and heightened their vulnerability to subsequent moral violations and betrayals. The historical background of racial violence in the South, which includes the burial of unidentified Black bodies that the young siblings witnessed, further taints their years and makes them more susceptible to the moral injury they would experience in the future. Frank's efforts to rescue Cee reflect his desire to atone for past transgressions and reclaim his autonomy and moral integrity.

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Ways to Recovery: Reconciliation and Social Support

Toni Morrison's *Home* does more than identify trauma; it painstakingly lays out Frank Money's journey toward recovery, resolution, and resilience, showing how overcoming moral injury is a complex process requiring personal will, social support, and narrative confrontation. The novel offers a nuanced, hopeful closure to trauma that is not often found in literary works. The pivotal act of will that starts Frank's recovery is his quest to save Cee. The urgent letter, "Come fast. She be dead if you Tarry" (8), gives him a new sense of direction and lifts him out of his aimless, drunken life. He was able to discover his authentic self when he consciously chose to act on behalf of someone else, especially his younger sister, for whom he has had a strong protective duty since childhood. This journey is not only a physical rescue but a metaphorical quest into his consciousness and the horrific past of his people, replete with challenges and relived traumas.

An important turning point in Frank's psychological healing occurred when he acknowledged his involvement in the murder of the Korean girl. The truth of the incident is initially hidden as this painful memory is suppressed and only manifests as a delayed memory. Frank's internal conflict with "free-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else's fault" (15) is clearly depicted in the novel, and it validates Frank's existence as both victim and perpetrator. The most significant part of healing comes from re-memorising and confronting trauma and feeling the anguish again. By recalling and integrating the painful memories, Frank was able to come to peace with himself. "Sitting on the train to Atlanta, Frank suddenly realised that those memories, powerful as they were, did not crush him anymore or throw him into paralysing despair. He could recall every detail, every sorrow, without needing alcohol to steady him" (101). As the novel progresses, Frank is able to face his internalised villainy through the therapeutic process of narrating his story, especially to the anonymous scribe. "I have to say something to you right now. I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you, and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me" (133). The damaging cycle of guilt and shame is broken by this open confession and is incorporated into his self-awareness. This aligns with Shay's assertion that healing requires confrontation and an admission of moral injury.

Frank and Cee's return to their childhood hiding place at the end of the novel, to unearth the bones of an unidentified Black man they saw being buried as children, marks another potent act of reconciliation and identity reclaiming. Digging up the past to rebury it properly can be metaphorically interpreted as an act of moral repair. They can create an alternative future in which individual dignity is an unalienable right by making amends for a collective historical fault and recognising the vitality of a recovered past. Frank and Cee reject the repression of their terrible experiences and toward integrating them by facing the truth of the past, both individually and collectively. Frank's journey exemplifies what a combat veteran must go through to return to and thrive in civilian life, much like Odysseus's account in Homer's *Odyssey*. Valerie Smith, in his book Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination, notes, "Through their

willingness to confront their past, they find their true home within them in the memories they share" (135).

Frank's recovery reflects a shared healing process rooted in community support. The help and mental support he receives from people like Billy Watson, Reverend John Locke, Lily, and other African American allies provide him with crucial direction and emotional support during his journey towards Lotus. It would have been tough for Frank to return to Lotus without the help and encouragement of these characters. In addition to meeting his basic needs, such as clothing, food, and financial stability, they also provided him with the empathy that is essential for initiating the healing process. In Lotus, Ethel Fordham and a community of women pave the way to healing for Celie and, through her, Frank. The women in the neighbourhood nurse her back to health after Frank saves Cee from Dr. Beau's traumatic experiments. She undergoes a profound transformation in their homeland. "Cee was different. Two months surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her" (121). Despite being initially shut out of this close-knit group, Frank eventually finds his way into a nurturing environment through his involvement in Lotus and active participation in Cee's care. "Waving occasionally at passing neighbours or those doing chores on their porches, he could not believe how much he had once hated this place. Now it seemed both fresh and ancient, safe and demanding" (132).

Conclusion

Morrison's *Home* considerably broadens the discourse on Jonathan Shay's theory of moral injury by showing how societal structures themselves can behave as legitimate authorities that violate moral values, leaving the marginalised with severe moral scars. A complex tapestry of moral wounds is embodied by Frank Money's character, including his self-inflicted guilt and shame over the Korean girl incident, his survivor's guilt for his fallen comrades, and his enduring anger and alienation over the institutional and widespread racism he encounters in Post-war America. The novel painstakingly explains how these various moral transgressions combine to harm Frank's identity and cut off his ties to society, resulting in a fractured life characterised by psychological anguish and a quest for acceptance.

Frank's road to healing is a multi-layered process rather than a single incident. His deliberate act of saving Cee compelled him to confront his suppressed traumas. The confession to the scribe demonstrates how expressing one's moral failures in a supportive environment facilitates the integration of shame and guilt, making it more authentic. In addition, the novel emphasises the value of community, as demonstrated by the Women of Lotus, in providing the group support necessary for moral restoration. Reconciliation with a painful past and the creation of a new sense of identity and belonging are possible outcomes of this collective healing, which culminates in the symbolic reburial ceremony.

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