

The Generational Trauma of Being Black Women: Tracing Pain, Memory and Survival of Black Women's History

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Publication Date: 2025/08/21

Abstract: The generational trauma experienced by Black women in America reveals the scars of their painful history of slavery, systemic racism and patriarchal oppression. During the era of American enslavement Black women experienced the severe hardships of the most brutal aspects of slavery including forced labour, sexual abuse, segregation from families and the loss of identity and culture. Throughout American slavery, enslaved people especially women encountered the most merciless side of white supremacy. These physical and emotional wounds have been carried forward generationally shaping the lived experience of womanhood. The untold stories of many Black women disclose not only their experiences as victims but also their unseen courage, resilience, remembrance and ceaseless survival spirit. Through real-life narratives and literature, the exploration highlights how trauma constructs Black identity, motherhood and feminist consciousness in contemporary society.

Keywords: Slavery, Trauma, Womanhood, Black Feminism, Resilience, Resistance.

How to Cite: D. Durgalakshmi; Dr. B. R. Veeramani (2025) The Generational Trauma of Being Black Women: Tracing Pain, Memory and Survival of Black Women's History. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(8), 727-729. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25aug605>

I. INTRODUCTION

In history, the struggles of women are passed down quietly through many unspoken stories. For Black women, the pain often comes from the long brutal history of oppression by white people and of being mistreated. These traumas are not always clearly tangible but they remain alive in their memories. The pain carried by Black women is unnoticed they did not create but were shaped by a systemic world because of their race and gender. Literature has become one of the strongest mediums of expression to comprehend the experienced Black voices. Writers and storytellers shed light on these hidden struggles. Literary works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Alex Haley's *Roots* critically examine the enduring legacy of generational trauma experienced by Black women within historical and socio-cultural contexts. These novels not only reveal the pain and oppression faced by Black women but also their strength, resilience and will to survive. By exploring these novels, the study traces how generational trauma reshapes identity, motherhood and memory in the context of racial injustice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly research on Black women's experiences has revealed the impact of trauma, slavery and racism especially in African American literature. In 2023, the research article "On Sethe's Trauma and Recovery in *Beloved* from the perspective of Trauma Theory", Yuehua Lu and Ziyu Zhang show how slavery affects Black women deeply and how healing through their painful voice become the recovery tool of their community. In 2019, the research paper titled "Victimization of women in the select novels of Alex Haley" author Rajeshwari. A and S. Ayyappa Raj details the extreme physical violence of Black women endured during sexual exploitation which not only highlights the bodily violence but also their deep mental scars of a victim. In 2013, Indu B. C's "Voicing the Voiceless: A study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* focuses on supporting one another by voicing their experience Black Women can heal through silence and retrieve their identity. While these articles documents oppressions, trauma and sexual abuse of the individual character experiences. Yet it doesn't examine the psychological trauma passed from one generation to the next.

Examining the research gaps allows to trace the generational trauma shapes Black women's pain, memory and survival.

III. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF BLACK WOMEN'S TRAUMA

The trauma experienced by Black women cannot be detached from the systemic oppression in America. From the earliest time of slavery Black women were ruthlessly treated both as forced labour and as property. Enslaved women endured multiple forms of violence, including physical abuse which sometimes came from men in their racial group. They carried a double burden of conflict and were denied any form of dignity. The pain endured under systemic oppression created emotional disconnection among women across generations. Black women were expected to work under brutal conditions in the plantation while also being involved in raising the children of White slaveholders but were forcibly separated from their own children. This forced separation emotionally shattered Black motherhood. Even when slavery ended, the trauma did not disappear but it transformed into racism. Black women continued to suffer through segregation and discrimination in schools, hospitals and workplaces. Especially women were valued as less than others. This long history challenges Black women to reconstruct their identities and voices in an oppressive society that often silences them.

The American-based institution of chattel slavery was the context in which the members of this pan-African population struggled and changed themselves into a new, yet very old, American people known as African Americans. (Latha 24)

This demonstrates that identity alteration was not a passive process but rather a survival strategy that persisted across generations. Their sufferings and trauma are not just a past incident but an endless pain of social rejection and cultural struggles.

IV. LITERARY PORTRAYAL OF BLACK WOMEN'S INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Literary oeuvres about Black women have played a pivotal role in expressing the untreated wounds of generational trauma. Novels such as *Beloved*, *The Color Purple* and *Roots* offer readers insight into the lives of Black women. In *Beloved*, Sethe's traumatic memory of slavery haunted her entire life. She perceives death as the safeguarding shield of her children from the inhumane horrors of enslavement.

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them throughout the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison, 192)

Sethe strongly believes that her decision is the highest form of maternal love and shows how the trauma of slavery severely attacks the understanding of life and the struggles of facing brutality. Without verbal connection the pain between the mother and daughter passed through inherited fear, loss and secure love. Though Denver was unaware of her mother's past, she had grown up with silence, fear, and unanswerable questions. Through this novel, Morrison illustrates how psychological distress disrupts the maternal bonds and redefines their love through pain.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Walker explores Celie's journey from voicelessness to selfhood. She endures all the constant struggles and is raised to stay quiet and has a fear of men. Her transformation begins after the arrival of Sofia, who expresses a fearless attitude toward internalised patriarchy. Walker emphasises this resistance through Sofia's brave statement:

All my life I had to fight, I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. (Walker 39).

Sofia's experience is not strange. Her statement reflects the harsh reality of many Black women who have had to secure themselves even from their family men. Her voice gave strength to Celie who had remained silent for long days. Through Sofia's rebellious voice, Celie begins to raise her own voice and reclaim her sense of selfhood. This moment becomes a transformation point in Celie's life.

Walker uses Celie's journey to highlight how generational trauma can be broken through the vision of Sofia's fearless voice, not only to survive but to find inner peace across generations.

Alex Haley's *Roots* emphasises the importance of preserving one's tradition and culture even when they have been forcibly stripped away from enslaved people. Through Kizzy's character, Haley emphasises the significance of securing cultural memory and ancestral identity. Although Kizzy is separated from her family, she has preserved her roots and traditions through naming her children and sharing stories. As Wen and Zheng note in the study of *Roots*.

However, the trauma caused by their suffering under slavery and racial discrimination is continuous and comes down in one continuous line, that is, it is a kind of trauma inherited from generation to generation. The traumatic experience of the previous generation provides spiritual guidance for the next generation. (Wen and Zheng 14)

This highlights how trauma becomes a more painful compass and memory that helps future generations navigate oppressions. The novel *Roots* portrays the power of Black women's emotional care for their families and their strong memory to preserve their cultures and history.

V. TRACING PAIN, SURVIVAL AND RESISTENCE IN BLACK WOMANHOOD

The characters in the novels *Beloved*, *The Color Purple* and *Roots* represent not only the individual sufferings of women but also the generational wounds of their racial group. The journey of each woman experienced the emotional memory, identity, behaviour and relationship and their strength transformed into unbreakable resilience.

These women find healing through various aspects. Celie finds love in her friendship. Celie's emotional renewal serves expression in her defiant words:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And you dead body just the welcome mat I need. Say what? he ast. Shock. You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world. (Walker 180)

Kizzy passes strength to the children. Sethe grows up in Denver with courage. Each woman teaches us that pain doesn't break it can become the reason to grow. Black women transmit the strength, pride and power of healing that nourish the next generation and evolve into even more empowered figures, deeply rooted in survival. As Lakshmi points out the trauma is not just physical but deeply psychological and spiritual as well:

The scars of racial, sexual and class oppression are more horrible on the soul as well as those on the body. (Lakshmi 70).

These narratives remind us that survival is not just living but also fighting back in powerful ways. Though they endured hardships throughout their lives as enslaved, they refuse to be forgotten in history their voices still echo through literature.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explores how trauma moves through untold fears and stories and how they are treated to heal to preserve from the scars of the brutal oppression especially on the lives of Black women. From slavery to modern-day injustices Black women have carried the layers of suffering that have never healed. Inherited trauma leaves lasting scars and it also awakens the inner strength and stands as a testament to the erasure through survival. Despite the forced separation from families, Black women have preserved their culture and memory through motherhood and collective womanhood.

This ongoing legacy of survival and resistance reflects the powerful love passed through generations and teaches successive generations not to endure but how to rise. This study builds the ladder for further research to examine how trauma is expressed in Black literature across the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to my research supervisor Dr. B.R. Veeramani for his invaluable guidance, support and constant encouragement throughout the preparation of this study. I am indebted to Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science & Technology (Deemed to be University) for providing the necessary resources that made this research paper possible.

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