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# The trauma and fragmentation narrative in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Trauma theory, which emerged in the early 1990s, unveiled the deep-rooted violence characterising modern civilisation. As an essential subset of trauma studies, trauma literature acts as a testament to victims' experiences. A narrative technique pivotal to this literature is the fragmented narrative, mirroring both the inherent nature of trauma and its external portrayal. This technique aptly captures the often-ineffable nature of traumatic experiences. This research scrutinises the application of fragmented narrative in two seminal works: Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* published in 1991 and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* published in 1987. Through a lens focused on mother-daughter dynamics and trauma representation, the study illuminates the novels' shared themes of motherhood and the agonising internal battles of trauma-afflicted mothers. Tan and Morrison, using fragmented narrative, vividly depict their protagonists' harrowing traumas, and offer invaluable insights into the experiences of marginalised communities. The emphasis on trauma literature is pivotal, both for a comprehensive understanding of traumatic events and the advancement of trauma research. This underscores the paramountcy of acknowledging personal and communal traumas and championing a humane approach to trauma victims.

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## Introduction

The twentieth century was a period of unparalleled upheaval, with events such as armed conflicts, nuclear bombings, the Holocaust, racial trauma, and religious conflicts in the context of apartheid, leaving a lasting impact on global consciousness. Shoshana Felman aptly describes it as “a century of trauma and (at the same time) a century of trauma theory” (2002).

Trauma criticism, emerging in the 1990s in the United States, has deep roots in psychoanalytic theory, with Freud’s contributions serving as a foundational bedrock. Early theories, including those from Jean-Martin Charcot and Freud, examined trauma’s psychological dimensions.

By the 1980s, trauma theory research underwent a renaissance, spurred by the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the wake of the Vietnam War. Scholars expanded the scope to include the study of concentration camp survivors and responses to feminist movements. With luminaries like Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman exploring trauma’s intersection with history and everyday life, the field began recognising the profound societal implications of traumatic experiences. Jeffrey Alexander’s introduction of “cultural trauma” (2012) further broadened the scope of research.

In literature, trauma’s portrayal has found resonance, particularly within American minority writings. Novels like Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* embody the trauma experienced by marginalised communities, with themes touching upon racism, war, poverty, and cultural restrictions. These narratives serve as powerful reminders that, as Toni Morrison noted, understanding one’s history is crucial to understanding oneself (Page, 1995). Additionally, Anne Whitehead’s *Trauma Fiction*, published in 2004, bridged the gap between trauma theory and literary depictions, creating a novel lens through which contemporary fiction could be analysed.

This paper sets out to analyse *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *Beloved*, primarily focusing on mother-daughter relationships and trauma representation techniques. These novels, representative of Asian and African American experiences, shed light on individual and cultural traumas rooted in war, racial discrimination, and systemic prejudices. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* tells the hardships a Chinese immigrant woman faced in her feudal patriarchal homeland and her struggle to communicate with her American-born daughter. *Beloved* tells the harrowing story of an enslaved black mother who murdered her baby to save her from a similar fate.

The paper adopts a comparative research methodology, contrasting the trauma narrative strategies in the two novels. Beginning with a foundation in trauma criticism, it delves into trauma literature, underscoring the fragmented nature of traumatic narratives. The ensuing sections offer a detailed analysis of narrative fragmentation, both structural and psychological, within the selected novels. This paper ultimately aims to highlight the shared narrative techniques employed by Amy Tan and Toni Morrison to portray their protagonists’ traumas. The effective portrayal of trauma in literature holds profound implications for trauma studies, extending beyond academic insights to fostering understanding and empathy toward trauma victims.

## Trauma literature and fragmented narrative

Freud characterised trauma as an overwhelming surge of stimuli that exceeds our capacity to control, marked by its thorough unpredictability (1984). The notion of trauma syndrome is embodied by victims becoming entrenched in a past moment, with the traumatic experience recurring in various forms. Post-1980s trauma theory was brought into the study of trauma

literature, which delves into human psychology and the psychological distress of characters in literary works. Trauma literature, providing literal testimony of victims, has thus furthered trauma studies. Cathy Caruth first defined trauma in literature as an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (1995). In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth posited literature as a mirror where readers can engage with traumatic events in unconventional ways. The severity of traumatic events often renders the memories too distressing to be acknowledged as truth. These experiences highlight why traumatised individuals struggle to leverage their conscious understanding and memory. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that trauma results from a person’s inability to bear the mental aftermath of traumatic events. In the face of sudden violent, traumatic events, victims usually undergo a series of psychological reactions, manifesting as fear, denial, intrusion, and constant correction before the trauma finally resides. Following a similar trajectory, the narrative structure of trauma literature follows the process of experiencing, recalling, and recovering from trauma. When the distressing, traumatic memory cannot be reconciled with normal memory, the traumatised individual fragments into a dual self in a bifurcated world, making articulating the traumatic experience exceedingly difficult. In their struggle with trauma, victims “want to deny those terrorist incidents and at the same time want to speak up” (Herman, 1997). Therefore, trauma literature’s significance lies in its ability to faithfully represent the indescribable traumatic experiences of victims, uncover the physical and mental harm inflicted by violent historical events, and inspire silenced and vulnerable groups in marginalised communities to engage with mainstream society.

Contemporary literary criticism is a broad area with diverse perspectives. Rocio Davis exclaimed that: “Identity politics, nationalism, racial differences and similarities have been overly paid attention to... Literary form and genre issues tend to be ignored or subordinated” (Cheng and Shao, 2006). Therefore, this paper focuses mainly on analysing the literary structure and narrative methods. Novels like *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *Beloved* eschew traditional narrative structures. Instead of using a chronological narrative, the theme of trauma is expressed through fragmented narrations over time, space, and characters.

Many scholars regard the fragmented narrative as a staple of the postmodern narrative. Postmodernist novels often lack a central thread, and their story structures are convoluted, rendering the narratives elusive. Na Li defined “fragmentation” as presenting a state of diversity, inexpressibility, playfulness, difference, decentralisation, fragmentation, uncertainty, non-circulation, and fluidity in creative endeavours. “Fragmentation” writing perceives the world as diverse and uncertain (2017). This narrative perspective causes thoughts and concepts to evolve into scattered fragments within the non-linear flow of time, embodying elements of contingency, subversion, and randomness.

Fragmented narratives serve as “witnesses to the unspeakable” (Lyotard, 1996). Fredric Jameson viewed “discontinuity and fragmentation as ‘the true state of history’” (Chen et al., 2010). Fragmentation disrupts the unity of the world. It dissolves the integrity of the text, affording authors the freedom to collage structure and plot. Fragments dissolve the latent meaning in the text and gradually expose the concealed, unspeakable elements to the reader. The fragmented narrative is a deliberate defamiliarising literary device implemented by authors to contrast with the typically cohesive content of a novel.

The intersection of fragmentation and trauma introduces a fresh perspective to literary research. Trauma is inherently resistant to the chronological narrative structure. It often occurs in fragmented flashbacks, which are imitated by the fragmented narrative. In *Introduction: Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth said, "Traumatic structure is marked by an interruption in history or time" (1995). She also suggested that "traumatic events, happening without being fully experienced and absorbed, are only revisited in their constant and intrusive return, meaning that traumatic events cannot be remembered or recounted in conventional ways" (1996). Herman noted that "long after the danger has passed, traumatised individuals continue to relive the event as if it is persistently occurring in the present" (1997). Flashbacks, delays, and repetition constitute the three critical phenomena of psychological trauma. Therefore, this paper begins with exploring trauma narrative strategy and the fragmented narrative, cantering on the traumatic works of two minority female writers of Chinese and African heritage. This approach not only lays the groundwork for elevating the status of American minority literature by documenting historical trauma events but also adds new research perspectives on trauma novels.

### **Fragmentation of narrative structure: flashback, delay, repetition**

The mentally traumatised inner world is chaotic and disorderly. Cathy Caruth characterised trauma as an unspeakable wound, an "unclaimed experience". Victims of traumatic events constantly face the dilemma of telling the truth but being unable to do so. The traditional narrative strategy has limitations in showing a pathological storyline through an orderly and unified world. Fragmentation better fits the expression of trauma and can better restore traumatic experiences and the psychological mechanism of depression and recovery of traumatic memories. The studied novels have a complex structure. The author deliberately deconstructs the complete story structure into fragmented forms. The fracture of the planar structure presents a three-dimensional shape. Multiple narrative lines go hand in hand, kidnapping the reader's mind and forcing the reader to think about the traumatic experience.

The fragmented narrative structure presents a tree-like configuration. No focal point can be found in the multitude of characters, environment, and plot fragments, yet individual fragments' independent focus sprouts multiple branches, constantly shifting between "decentralisation" and "re-centralisation". The novels *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *Beloved* present their stories in a fragmented manner, utilising multiple character perspectives. *The Kitchen God's Wife* adopts the first-person narrative, changing the narrative perspective between the daughter Pearl and the mother, Winnie. *Beloved* mostly uses the third-person narrative, supplemented by the first-person narrative. This multi-perspective narrative better tells the bloody and violent life of people under slavery.

The story of *The Kitchen God's Wife* is told through the alternating narratives of Winnie, the mother, and Pearl, her daughter. The story is presented via flashbacks, interpolations, and supplementary narratives that highlight the tumultuousness of war and the serenity of American life. It also portrays Wenfu's abusive behaviour, Jimmy's affection, Winnie's unflinching love for her mother, and the profound misunderstandings between Winnie and her daughter, Pearl. The novel begins with Pearl recounting the distant and complicated bond she shared with her mother. Rather than being close, their relationship was uncomfortable and perplexing. Pearl expressed, "Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument" (Tan, 1991), and, "I think of the

enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life" (Tan, 1991). Winnie hid her painful past in China from Pearl, while Pearl never told Winnie about her multiple sclerosis. The story then shifted to Winnie's perspective. The climax is reached when Winnie faces her trauma and courageously shares her past experiences, specifically during the Japanese invasion of China in World War II. This helped Pearl gain a deeper understanding of her mother and led to a reconciliation between them. The story of the mother and daughter turned from rupture to reconciliation, and the narrative structure is reassembled into a complete circle from the fractured grooves.

The novel's timeline shifts from the present to the past, then from the past to the present. While sharing her story, Winnie intermittently returned from her memories to converse with Pearl. Though there are some gaps in the narrative, the connections are handled properly. The vivid descriptions in the novel exude warmth, and the form of storytelling helps the author follow the story's development. It can disassemble the complete story into independent fragments or paste scattered story plots to mimic the flashback, repetition, and delay of traumatic memories. Every aspect of American life connected closely with what happened in old China. The novel consists of twenty-six chapters, each containing independent stories. Some of these stories are continuous in time, while others are not. Small gaps occasionally enrich the story with fragments of reality, forming a contrast between "past" and "present". The story is told from two perspectives - one of life in the United States, and the other of the harsh realities of China during the Japanese invasion in World War II.

Pearl and Winnie's estrangement was primarily caused by Winnie's traumatic past and the cultural differences between America and China. Whenever Winnie spoke about her suffering, she would pause and briefly explain it to Pearl. Her unspeakable trauma would repeatedly resurface, transcending her self-cognition model from the behavioural model. Winnie had a strong desire to share her story with someone, and Pearl was the most appropriate listener. Memories were not linear, and at the right moment, Winnie would pause slightly, allowing the memories to resurface and return to the present. As a result, the past and present in Winnie's narrative became one, forming a narrative causality in linearity and establishing a narrative order.

*Beloved* has a more complex structure than *The Kitchen God's Wife*, with fragmented storytelling that effectively conveys the trauma theme. The novel is set in the context of slavery and is divided into three parts, each containing unnamed chapters narrated in the third person. This format can make the book challenging to comprehend.

In the second part of the story, the author incorporates narratives from the first-person perspectives of Seth, Denver, and Beloved. By viewing and piecing together fragments from different character perspectives, the multi-faceted aspects of the story are revealed. *Beloved* has two threads of narrative, one about the present-day life at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati and the other about the past life as slaves at "Sweet Home" in Kentucky 18 years earlier. At the beginning of the story, the focus is on the real house at 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved, who is full of anger, connects Sethe, Denver, and Paul D. The author uses a third-person omniscient narrative to control the story's development. The story has the potential to shift its focus towards Paul D's recollections of the past. This could include Siksor and the "Thirty-mile Woman" or the days of slavery. The third-person point of view allows for a seamless transition between different perspectives. Take Denver telling her story to Beloved for example, Denver's story about her birth could easily switch to Sethe's viewpoint, telling the story of Sethe's birth of Denver

crossing the Ohio River with the help of the white girl Aimi 18 years ago.

The fragmented narrative structure resembles the branches of a tree. It's impossible for readers to predict how the current scene will connect to the overall plot or if new branches will emerge to establish a new narrative context. Unnamed chapters are difficult for readers to judge the logical relationship between the chapters, or there is no time and logical connection in some chapters. "This idea may have always existed deeply in Baby Suggs's thoughts..." (Morrison, 2014). A new chapter cuts off the actual narrative context of the previous part from this sentence and abruptly shifts to Baby's son, Hale, and then moves on to the story's climax, which is the plot to kill the baby. The story shifts back and forth between the present and the past, which can be confusing for readers. The use of narrative time in this text breaks away from traditional historical conventions and instead adopts a fragment collage method. This is not just a mere word play by Morrison, but rather a way to accurately portray the psychological mechanism of traumatic memory reproduction and the process of depression and recovery experienced by the victim. Trauma experience is deeply rooted in a specific point in the past and cannot be accurately conveyed in a typical narrative context like normal memory. The alternating use of "past" and "present" in the story reflects how the protagonist is interpreting his damaged memory. The "past" sections depict flashbacks and the repetition of mental trauma, while the "present" narrative shows the effects of delayed mental trauma. Additionally, the protagonist uses this narrative technique to express his desire for recovery from his traumatic experiences. Morrison's fragmented storytelling technique effectively portrays the unspeakable trauma of depression and the journey towards healing.

### **Character fragmentation: the prototype of the "Inner Child"**

In literature, the fragmentation and deconstruction of characters can disrupt the reader's perceived image of a character and create a powerful and subtle energy through the random collage of character fragments. This fragmentation can occur through a single fragment of a character's image or through the re-aggregation of multiple fragments to form a new dominant character image. The character image is essential to the narrative of a novel. While the fragmentation of characters can disrupt the writing's integrity, it also creates a unique and unfamiliar reading experience. Additionally, the deconstruction of identity in literature often serves as an attempt to construct self-identity. Trauma victims, who have experienced traumatic events in their childhood, may feel isolated and depressed. These experiences can lead to personality imperfections and a tendency to view things in extremes. Authors such as Amy Tan and Toni Morrison use character fragmentation to expose the source of the alienation between the victims and their surroundings, highlighting the theme of trauma in their narratives.

The novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, portrays Winnie's fragmented image of her mother, with scattered fragments throughout the text. Her childhood lacked maternal love, which caused deep trauma in Winnie. Her mother's image was an illusory figure yet acted as a spiritual guide for her. Despite being absent in her upbringing, her mother had a lasting impact on her life. Wright (1998) suggested that a mother was a reflection of a child, and the child expressed themselves through the mother's reactions. Winnie's mother served as a link to her traumatic past, which she could not leave behind, and the confusing present. Her mother was also the spiritual support for healing from her trauma. The fifth chapter, "Ten Thousand Things", focuses on the fragments of Winnie's narrative of her mother which served as the source of Winnie's broken life.

Winnie's memory of her mother was partially accurate. Her mother used to carry her, even at the age of six and spoiled her. They played checkers together, creating a genuine bond. Her mother took pride in her appearance, and Winnie admired her jade-green dress with short sleeves and a long skirt of smooth pleats. Her mother's black, shiny hair left a lasting impression on Winnie's heart. Her mother also instilled the philosophy of self-reliance in Winnie, teaching her to find her own way in life. "I thought my mother was teaching me a secret-that my happiness depended on finding an immediate answer to every wish" (Tan, 1991).

In Winnie's imagination, her mother was pretty, modern, and well-educated. She dressed in Western clothing and had a range of favourite items from different countries, including English biscuits, Italian cars, French gloves and shoes. She attended a missionary school in Shanghai and fell in love with Lu, a Marxist. Unfortunately, she was compelled to enter an arranged marriage with a man who had multiple wives. She was given the position of second wife, taking the place of her husband's former second wife, who had committed suicide. They called her "Double Second" (Tan, 1991), a label that shamed her. Winnie imagined different scenarios for her mother's disappearance: she ran away with her lover Lu. She found out Lu had died, and she became a revolutionary in hiding herself. She became a nun. She suddenly got sick, then died that same night. Winnie tried to "make up a complete story" with the fragments she heard and knew (Tan, 1991). "And it must be that she has changed ten thousand different ways each time I recalled her. So maybe my memory of her is not right anymore" (Tan, 1991). Repetitive memory refers to the process of a traumatised person reviewing their chaotic experiences. Uncertain memory causes each recollection to alter the story subjectively. Reality and imagination become intertwined, leading to distorted traumatic memories. On the contrary, the combination of the imagination and reality of the mother's fragments made the image of Winnie's mother gradually clear and clear: her mother was a woman with an outstanding appearance, tough character, and not succumbing to fate. Through the restoration and reproduction of traumatic memories, and restoring the protagonist's traumatic memories, readers will experience the pain of Winnie's loss of her mother first-hand in her childhood, as well as the restlessness of Winnie's American life in her middle age.

Throughout the story, the image of Winnie's mother is portrayed as dynamic. This is especially evident in the sixth chapter, where Winnie unexpectedly comes across her mother's portrait in the greenhouse. This moment allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of Winnie's mother and further develop their own image of her. "I saw a painting of a pretty woman, wearing a plain blue dress, her hair pulled back, looking straight ahead, so somber I almost did not recognise her... And I realised that was the kind of place my mother and I belonged to, only that kind of place, where things are thrown away" (Tan, 1991). This was the source of the insecurities deep in Winnie's heart. She had understood the feeling of alienation since she was a child. In the twelfth chapter, "Taonan Money", Winnie suddenly shouted "Ma! Ma!" (Tan, 1991) during the bombing of Japanese planes. She did not even know why. As if her mother could have saved her, the mother who had abandoned her so long ago.

Constructing the image of a mother is necessary, which helps to understand Winnie's forbearance in her married life and her courage to embrace the new American life. From the perspective of trauma theory, there is a prototype of the "inner child" in Winnie's heart, which acts on her to become a concrete trauma experience and representation. It begins with childhood experience and is a psychological rather than an objectively physical existence, and it is the result of differences in the individual's

growth environment and external factors. From the perspective of trauma, “inner child” refers to internal self-expression fixed at the traumatic point due to traumatic experience. On one side of the image is the traumatic, naive, dependent, and masochistic immature self, and on the other side is the sadistic, controlling, and demanding parents...” (Shi, 2013). The concept of “inner child” was initially proposed by Jung. He regarded the “inner child” as a prototype that represented both positive and negative sides: part of the positive child prototype is vitality, creativity, and freedom. The negative child prototype is the selfish, impetuous, internally injured child who refuses to grow. The emotional manifestations of the “inner child” are fear, shock, shame, a sense of being abandoned, and a sense of emptiness and loss. The mother archetype plays a crucial role in changing the “inner child” in the direction of good or bad: the positive is the kind, protective and life-giving mother. The negative is the mother of sin, abandonment, and destruction of the child (Shi, 2013). For traumatised children, a mother’s abandonment is tantamount to death, an extremely negative emotional experience. The unfortunate marriage had caused Winnie to tolerate her husband’s abuse for many years. The alienation of her family had chilled her fragile heart, and the loss of her three children had deprived her of the qualifications to be a mother. These sufferings were evidence of Winnie’s wounded heart. Although abandoned by her mother, she had never forgotten her.

Instead, she recalled her mother in ten thousand different ways. The positive image of a mother ultimately triumphed over negative thoughts. In times of crisis, the power of motherhood guided her to confront reality, decisively leave unhappy marriages, and finally embark on a life of freedom.

The novel *Beloved* tells the story of a mother, Sethe, who killed her own daughter, Beloved. However, Beloved was resurrected and sought love from her mother. Beloved’s intense desire for Sethe causes her to become weaker and weaker, losing her sense of self and becoming controlled by the ghost. Despite being fragmented in form, Beloved remained the main character and soul of the story. Traumatic novels often focus on alienation, with fragmented character identities separating the close connections between characters, weakening their vividness, and revealing the conflicts and contradictions within the text.

The fragmented character image of *Beloved* can be divided into three parts: the emergence of the soul, the resurrection of the flesh, and the disappearance of the soul. Sethe’s two sons were scared by the ghost and ran away from home. Then the chickpeas were piled on the floor, and the biscuits were twisted and placed at the door. The atmosphere of resentment and the absurd opening created a horrifying violent trauma effect. Who was playing spoof? Morrison was not eager to reveal the answer but turned to another scene. Sethe had sexual intercourse with the engraver for ten minutes in the middle of the tombstone only for the daughter’s name to be engraved on the tombstone and in this way finding a dwelling place for the dead baby daughter. This was the first time the name of Beloved had appeared. The scene changed and was fixed in Sethe’s house of 124. When Paul D came to Sethe’s house for the first time, the baby started to make trouble again, shaking the table non-stopping, Paul D shouted, “Good God...what kind of evil you got in here (Morrison, 2014)?” This was their first confrontation, and he roared and grabbed the table thrown at him, screaming, and destroying everything to fight the baby’s wanton actions. Without a real body, Beloved, who had nowhere to escape, was just an illusion of fragments, yet extremely aggressive. What appeared in front of readers was a resentful and violent baby image.

The organisation of the text of *Beloved* did not follow a linear timeline. However, it was constantly interspersed with related memories of the “Sweet Home” in the past so that the content of

the entire novel was scattered and difficult to grasp. “When Denver looked in, she saw her mother on her knees in prayer, which was not unusual. What was unusual was that a white dress knelt next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother’s waist” (Morrison, 2014). Sethe did not notice the strangeness, but the sensitive Denver realised that the white dress was painful, and the little ghost had a plan for the next step. From Denver’s point of view, the imaginary Beloved was suffering from injury. Killed for no reason was outrageous. The hatred-filled heart could not be calmed down, and the whole body was broken into fragments due to the huge impact of the trauma. The weird details connected the past and the future, paving the way for the resurrection of Beloved. For Sethe, the past eighteen years had been aphasia, a kind of hysteria of the mentally traumatised. She deliberately concealed the past, unable to merge the past pain experience with reality, and the misunderstanding and contradiction of Beloved towards Sethe gradually escalated.

At the moment of joy, Beloved appeared. She walked out from the water neatly dressed, with smooth skin, but dragged her head to rest with her palms, as if her neck was too heavy. This behaviour was obviously inconsistent with her age. Sethe’s first reaction when she saw Beloved was as if the amniotic fluid had broken, and she could not help letting it out in her backyard. After entering 124, Beloved followed Sethe all day, asking her to tell stories such as “Crystal Earrings” and “Wedding Dresses”. These were the past events that Sethe deliberately avoided mentioning. These pieces were put together to restore the image of a baby whose throat had been cut. She used her hands to hold her head because she had her throat cut and her neck could not bear the weight of her head. The “Crystal Earrings” were related to memories of Beloved being with her mother. The image of Beloved’s “inner child” was negative. She had been hurt, full of hatred, and refused to grow up. This was related to the negative archetype of the mother. Although Sethe killed the baby out of love, Sethe was the mother who strangled and destroyed the child, so Beloved had strong aggressive behaviour. This kind of infringement was manifested as Beloved swallowing and possessing everything about Sethe, and Beloved used “psychological empathy” to transfer the grudge and hatred to Sethe, the “substitute”, and established an “offensive abusive relationship” through Sethe, or “self-masochistic destructive relationship” (Tao, 2011). Beloved empathised with Sethe, and then rushed the anger toward Paul D. She would rather dispel herself than allow anyone to share Sethe with her. Like the protagonist Winnie of *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Sethe also had the traumatic experience of being abandoned by her mother. The gap between mother and daughter was also related to childhood traumatic memories, and her mother also existed as a negative prototype. Morrison used small fragments to repair the prototype of Beloved, unearthed the source of Sethe’s infanticide tragedy, and used the fractured experience to express the existence of trauma.

The self-declaration part of Beloved dissolved itself with fragmented words, the chaotic words had no time order, and no punctuation in the first half of the self-declaration greatly increased dyslexia. “She is mine” symbolised Beloved’s extreme greed for Sethe, “curled up” symbolised an early death, a young body that could not stand, “earrings” and “round basket” strongly implied Sethe’s past, “he” and “she” was confused and misplaced, expressing the two-sidedness of Sethe’s cruelty and doting, “Skinless Man” symbolised the ruthless slave owner of “Sweet Home”. The innocent language told the story of the infanticide, “I am going to become fragments, and he ruined my sleeping place. He put fingers there and I threw away the food” (Morrison, 2014). Beloved told her painful experience of being cutthroat in an innocent voice. The painful experience symbolised the black people who had lost their voices and denounced the inhuman

torture suffered by the ethnic group with weak vocalisation. The image of Beloved gradually became clearer and clearer, restoring the truth under the grievances, the helplessness in pain, the image of a black woman who was crazy for revenge but eager to find her roots.

### **Mental fragmentation: superstition and soul**

In trauma literature, the protagonist who is deeply traumatised has a split dual personality and is in a fragmented and broken world. His speech and behaviour are incompatible with the normal world. Broken memories can damage people's normal lives. Traumatic memories are painful and subconscious, and people cannot control the repetition of memories timely. Freud called this behaviour "repetitive oppression" (Caruth, 1996). "It is a kind of anxiety and restlessness. It is a negative experience that recurs after primitive human emotions and desires are suppressed. This negative experience becomes a lingering nightmare for humans, which is retained in memory and forms a mentality that can be passed on. In this psychological space, the self is divided, one is realistic and forward, and the other is historical and lagging" (Caruth, 1996). Psychological self-splitting leads to spiritual fragmentation, manifested in the repetition of dreams, ghosts, superstition, and death in the narrative content. The characters in the two novels *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *Beloved* are both deeply affected by schizophrenic personality disorder. They both desire to merge with reality and are trapped in memories and self-elimination.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Amy Tan tells readers about Winnie's unspeakable traumatic experience and mental division with superstition. In the novel, the statue of the Kitchen God that Winnie gave to Pearl entrusted Winnie's deep and strong love for her daughter. It contained all the hardships she had gone through, which were condensed into beautiful blessings. Winnie was superstitious. She attributed the death of her American husband, Jimmy to environmental causes. The electrician had been sick at the time he rewired her kitchen and later died of cancer. "He built that sickness right into our house" (Tan, 1991). Pearl had stared at the flickering eyes of a carved pumpkin, waiting for goblins to fly out when she was five years old. Her mother had come rushing into the room when she screamed. Instead of comforting her or pooh-poohing that it was just her imagination, Winnie had said, "Where?" and then she searched the room (Tan, 1991). During her time with the army, the story of the pilot Gan and the ghost "Nine Bad Fates" (Tan, 1991) made Winnie anxious and uneasy. Kunming's scissors incident initiated the unlucky incidents: the scissors fell, and the baby became very still (Tan, 1991). As a result, Winnie lost her first child, and even the ghost of Winnie's mother could not stop Wenfu from sexually abusing Winnie late at night. Trauma is a lasting disturbance to the victim, "For so many years I thought he was going to fly out of a closet, or jump out from underneath my bed. Her hands flew, her legs jumped, the instincts still there" (Tan, 1991).

The traumatic state will not disappear with the passage of time. Those subjective consciousness, behaviour patterns, and cognitive models that cannot be digested by themselves will stick to the traumatic experience and become more and more profound. The mental trauma caused Winnie to bear aphasia for many years. The deep-rooted thought of karma also affected Winnie's consciousness, words, and deeds. "Everything has a reason. Everything could have been prevented" (Tan, 1991). Winnie believed in unlucky things and was always troubled by them. The repetition of superstition events sets the fantasy effect of the novel on the one hand and, on the other hand, helps to shape the platform to represent the subtle traumatic experience. The Chinese American

community needs to speak out, and the marginal area needs to move closer to the centre.

Ghosts are not objective material existence but subjective spiritual creation. The differences between Chinese and Western ghost beliefs and ghost worship are also slightly different due to national assumptions. Chinese ghosts tend to focus on weirdness, and they are an ideology that remains in the world after the death of human souls. The West promotes the "animism of all things". Ghosts tend to be more enmity, and souls can survive the death of the body. In African-American literature, ghosts are often used as physical projections of traumatic and extremely negative emotions, and they are related to historical traumatic events. Under the dualism of African ghosts, ghosts, and normal people belong to two different worlds, looking at each other from a distance, using their physical hosts to avenge the world or to fulfill their unsuccessful wishes. Morrison is famous for telling ghost stories. *Beloved* revolves around the revenge of a baby's soul, which is a spiritual confrontation between characters, reflecting the black people's painful complaints about their encounters and the desire to return home. As a spiritual guide, Beloved travelled freely through the subconsciousness of the characters, disintegrating the inner worlds of Sethe, Denver, and Paul. The spiritual trauma suffered by people under the slavery system is like an open river pouring out. As a victim of traumatic schizophrenia, Sethe and Beloved were both interdependent and contradictory. Sethe was lonely, silent, and hardly participated in social activities. Beloved was sensitive and irritable with resentment. On the one hand, the desolate Beloved was an innocent victim of slavery, and crazy revenge was the purpose of her resurrection. At the same time, she loved her mother Sethe deeply and did not want her mother to cede her love to others, nor even to her biological sister. Beloved moved forward in love, disappeared in love, and her abnormal greed for her mother almost killed her mother. Sethe's gratuitous giving was not so much a compensation for maternal love, but more of a kind of spiritual salvation. In the face of Beloved, the forced repetition of spirit made Sethe lose herself and gradually lose her original master status and subject spirit, willing to give her life in exchange for Beloved's crazy demand for love. The abnormal mother-daughter relationship was the evil result of mental trauma under slavery. Denver was a lonely child with a strong desire for attention and love in her heart, hoping to create a warm home. Before Beloved appeared, she had no playmates and never got her mother's attention. As a result, she loved to accommodate Beloved who related to her by blood and even became a "conspirator" to please Beloved. Under slavery, the communication between people and their hearts is gradually impoverished, and the heavy chains of life drag down people's sustenance for a better life.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman put forward, "By the third phase, traumatised people are ready to participate more actively in the world. From their new safe base, they can boldly march into the future to set their own goals and plans, recover some of their pre-traumatic ambitions, or even discover their ambitions for the first time" (Herman, 1997). For traumatised people, establishing an essential re-connection with others and developing a new self is an effective method to recover from trauma. Denver sensibly faced the wanton tricks of Beloved's soul, bravely stepped out of 124, asked the real black community for help, and finally saved Sethe's life. Paul D and Beloved were vying for the possession of Sethe with their respective love. He strove to forget Beloved completely, forget the past, forget the history, and obtain spiritual ambivalence. After blaspheming Beloved's resurrection body, he could not calm his heart. Only by facing the problem directly could he calmly face the torture of history and escape the haze of trauma.

## Conclusion

Trauma literature provides understandable narratives that give voice to the experiences of trauma victims. Through deconstruction and reconstruction, these narratives present the fragmented inner world of the traumatised individual, reflecting their shattered psyche and conflicting dual personalities. The novels *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *Beloved*, from the perspectives of Chinese and African American women in the United States, respectively, use motherhood as a universal theme to explore the complex and paradoxical mother-daughter relationships of two mothers perpetually tormented by trauma. Both Tan and Morrison use the fragmented narrative strategy to reveal the excruciating pain and trauma experienced by their protagonists to the reader. Understanding trauma writing is crucial for analysing traumatic events and deepening the scope of trauma literature research. It empowers marginalised and silenced groups to express their experiences and advocates for empathy and moral care to be extended towards trauma victims.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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## Competing interests

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## Additional information

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