
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Can Home Be Reconstructed after Trauma?

Family Failure and the Reconstruction of Belonging in Toni Morrison's Home and Tijan Sila's The Day My Mother Went Mad

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| ABSTRACT

Although Toni Morrison's *Home* and Tijan Sila's *The Day My Mother Went Mad* emerge from different linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts, both address a central question: how does historical trauma enter the subject through the family and subsequently reshape the experience of belonging? Rather than treating "home" as a static spatial image, this article understands it as a mediating site where structural violence, intimate relationships, and subject formation intersect. Through a comparative reading of the two works, the article examines how historical trauma enters the family, why the family's protective function breaks down, and how belonging may remain possible after trauma. The analysis shows that both works challenge the conventional idea of home as a place of inherent safety, yet they differ significantly in their ethics of repair. Morrison places greater emphasis on reconstructing belonging through relational support, the naming of history, and communal care, whereas Sila focuses more strongly on maintaining a minimal form of psychological presence when external structures of support have become unavailable. In trauma narratives, therefore, home is no longer a natural endpoint but a complex site where historical violence penetrates private life and belonging is reshaped through processes of rupture and reconstruction.

| KEYWORDS

Toni Morrison; Tijan Sila; trauma; family failure; reconstruction of belonging

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

"Home" is not a naturally stable, self-evident, or transparent category in literature. It is associated with kinship, shelter, belonging, and ethical order, but it may also harbor repression, discipline, accumulated trauma, and the disintegration of the subject. Trauma theory repeatedly points out that experiences of extreme violence do not automatically disappear when the event itself ends; instead, they continue to affect the subject through latency, intrusion, and repetition, shaping memory, narrative, and identity formation (Tao, 2011; Wang, 2016). For this reason, the family in trauma narratives is no longer merely a container for private life. It often becomes a crucial mediating site through which historical violence is internalized, relationalized, and incorporated into everyday experience.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Morrison's and Sila's texts. *Home* intertwines the Korean War, racial violence, bodily injury, and memories of the homeland, making the return "home" at once a difficult return to the site of trauma and an attempt to reconstruct the subject's position. *The Day My Mother Went Mad*, by contrast, presents a Bosnian immigrant family in Germany suddenly overwhelmed by a mental-health crisis, showing how the aftershocks of war, the experience of displacement, social devaluation, and family failure accumulate and ultimately force the subject into a minimal form of psychological self-preservation. At the beginning of the story, Sila describes his parents as "failed scholars": only after fleeing to Germany do they discover that the doctoral degrees they earned under the communist system have little value there; the mother then links the German present to the Bosnian war as part of the same structure of persecution (Sila, 2024). This demonstrates that macro-level historical violence does not remain confined to the public sphere but continues to enter the subject through family relationships.

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Existing scholarship on *Home* has already developed a number of substantial interpretive approaches. Li Meiqin and Jiang Zhiqiang approach Morrison's oeuvre as a whole and identify the relationship between trauma and identity formation as an important key to understanding her fictional world (Li, 2019). Ramírez reads *Home* alongside *Sula*, emphasizing the connection between Frank's postwar disorientation as a "shell-shocked veteran" and the racial realities of the United States (Ramírez, 2016). Allen, Gan, and Tsai respectively reveal, from the perspectives of medical violence, eugenics, and medical ethics, that Cee's bodily trauma is not simply a private misfortune but a manifestation of American medical racism (Allen, 2021; Gan&Tsai, 2020). Kovács, focusing on bodily marks and sensory memory, argues that trauma in *Home* remains both in wounds and bodies and in mechanisms of memory that cannot easily be erased (Kovács, 2021). Visser, Tabone, Wen, Yazdani, Namgung, and Dao Hanying further expand interpretations of *Home* through fairy-tale intertextuality, utopian ethics, social mind, psychoanalysis, Orientalism, and power relations (Visser, 2016; Tabone, 2018; Wen, 2021; Yazdani, 2022; Namgung, 2019; Dao, 2019).

By comparison, scholarship on Sila remains relatively limited. Bachmann's master's thesis on the novels of Saša Stanišić and Tijan Sila mainly examines subject formation through the perspectives of transcultural experience, war trauma, cultural adaptation, and hybrid identity (Bachmann, 2024). Schlüter's study of *The Flag of Wishes* points out that violent memories in Sila's writing are often reorganized and witnessed through retrospective narrative structures, so oppressive histories return to the text through acts of "retrospective narration" (Schlüter, 2018). Yet with regard to *The Day My Mother Went Mad*, insufficient attention has been paid to why the family loses its protective function and how the subject maintains a minimal sense of self-continuity after family support has failed. This article therefore takes as its starting point the question of how trauma reshapes the experience of belonging through the family and offers a comparative examination of the two works.

2. How Historical Trauma Enters the Subject through the Family

In trauma narratives, the family does not naturally constitute an external zone protected from historical violence. On the contrary, it is often the key medium through which large-scale historical experience becomes internalized, relationalized, and sedimented as everyday trauma. Although *Home* and *The Day My Mother Went Mad* belong to different linguistic and cultural contexts, both disrupt the conventional imagination of home as a "safe haven" and reveal the same fact: war, racism, displacement, and psychological disintegration do not remain at the level of public history. They enter the subject through the most intimate and ordinary relational structure—the family—and thereby alter how individuals understand themselves, others, and belonging.

Home first presents this process as an early imprint of childhood memory. The novel does not begin directly with the postwar setting. Instead, it first depicts the two siblings wandering onto a farm, watching a herd of horses fight, and then witnessing "them drag a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a waiting grave"; one foot remains outside, trembling, before being pushed into the earth with a shovel (Toni, 2014). More importantly, Frank later insists in his own account that he has "forgotten" the burial: "All I remember is the horses" (Toni, 2014). Such "forgetting" does not mean that the trauma has disappeared. Rather, it indicates that the experience has been repressed and continues to return later. Kovács observes that traumatic experience in *Home* repeatedly enters the present through wounds, the body, and sensory triggers; the transformation of the buried person from an "unmarked grave" into an object that must be named and properly laid to rest demonstrates that traumatic memory has never truly disappeared (Kovács, 2021).

This childhood trauma does not remain in the past but develops into the structure of Frank's postwar subjectivity. Ramírez emphasizes that Frank, as a Black veteran returning home, suffers psychological disorientation not only because of the war but also because of the continuing harm inflicted on Black people by racial segregation; in Morrison's work, the battlefield is never simply "elsewhere" but continually flows back into racial realities in the United States (Ramírez, 2016). Yazdani further understands Frank as a "split subject" who constantly oscillates between past and present; his defensive mechanisms and hostility toward the outside world are psychological consequences of prolonged trauma (Yazdani, 2022). Trauma in *Home* is therefore not a single event but the cumulative result of childhood racial terror, wartime experience, and postwar social oppression.

Cee's experience pushes the process by which historical trauma enters the subject through the family into the realm of bodily politics. Wen argues that Cee grows up without stable attachment figures, lacking sufficient emotional affirmation and a fully developed "theory of mind"; she consequently tends to misread others' intentions and trust external goodwill, ultimately becoming vulnerable to manipulation and deception (Wen, 2021). Her vulnerability is therefore not accidental but directly related to neglect and emotional deprivation within her childhood family structure. The subsequent experiments and injuries inflicted on her body by a white physician transform this familial vulnerability into a direct encounter with institutional violence. Gan and Tsai explicitly argue that Cee's injured uterus is not simply the result of a medical accident but is closely connected to eugenics, medical racism, and the instrumentalization of Black women's bodies (Gan&Tsai, 2020). Allen likewise emphasizes that Cee's near-loss of reproductive capacity shares a structural lineage with the forced sterilization, experimental medicine, and "industrialized" medical logic historically imposed on Black women in the United States (Allen, 2021). In other words, emotional deprivation within the family, wartime trauma, and external institutional violence are not three separate strands in *Home* but a continuous chain shaping the subject's traumatized condition.

Sila's text likewise demonstrates that historical trauma enters the subject first through the family. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator recognizes that his parents' social position in Germany has been radically devalued: in Bosnia they were well-educated intellectuals, whereas in Germany they are merely unemployed and "failed scholars" (Sila, 2024). The mother then presses her son: "When did they get you?" and declares, "It's all of them, here and the people in those institutions in Bosnia" (Sila, 2024). These utterances show that the war did not end in Sarajevo in the 1990s; it re-enters the present of the immigrant family through paranoia, suspicion, and persistent fear. Bachmann emphasizes that war trauma, migration, cultural adaptation, and multilingual experience together shape the protagonist's complex and unstable hybrid identity in Sila's works (Bachmann, 2024). In *The Day My Mother Went Mad*, this instability becomes concrete through the structure of family dialogue.

The father's silence reveals another way in which trauma enters the family. As the mother expands her paranoid structure, the father stands silently in the hallway; the narrator even juxtaposes his shock with the expression of a wartime schoolmate staring at his own body after his leg was blown off (Sila, 2024). The father is therefore not outside the traumatic experience but endures it through paralysis, withdrawal, and speechlessness. Schlüter observes in his discussion of another work by Sila that oppressive history is often reorganized through a retrospective mode of narration, with characters functioning less as heroic resisters than as narrators and witnesses to processes of collapse (Schlüter, 2018). Although this observation does not specifically concern *The Day My Mother Went Mad*, it helps clarify the narrator's position here: he does not control the trauma but retrospectively witnesses how the family becomes a site in which trauma resurfaces.

3. The Failure of the Family's Protective Function: From Relational Support to a Cycle of Trauma

If the preceding section has examined how historical trauma enters the subject through the family, the next question is *why*, once trauma has entered the family, the family fails to absorb or buffer the pressure and instead gradually loses its protective function, becoming a site where anxiety, hostility, and disorder are reproduced. The key question is no longer simply "who is wounded?" but "why does the family, which should provide support and containment, instead become a mechanism through which trauma continues to operate?"

In *Home*, Lotus is not a homeland that can be straightforwardly idealized. Visser notes that Morrison deliberately draws on the intertext of *Hansel and Gretel*, presenting Frank and Cee as siblings who cling to one another amid poverty, neglect, and punishment; for them, family does not initially signify protection but rather a form of mutual dependence maintained after abandonment (Visser, 2016). Cee's repeated internalization of the humiliating label "ditch child" is likewise rooted in her long-term experience of degradation, scolding, and neglect within her early family relationships (Kovács, 2021; Visser, 2016). From the perspective of power and space, Dao Hanying points out that Black families in *Home* are always surrounded by larger structures of racial domination: forced relocation, dependence on others, impoverished labor, and emotional deprivation together produce a sense of having "no home," while the family itself loses its capacity for emotional support because the parents are exhausted and unable to provide adequate care (Dao, 2019).

More importantly, *Home* does not present family failure as a closed "domestic problem." After leaving Lotus, Cee's movement into the outside world does not repair the gap within the family; instead, it reproduces the same logic in a more modern and institutionalized form. Allen argues that the white doctor Scott's house and medical space appear to offer protection but in fact conceal the experimental control exercised over Black women's bodies; once medicine is organized as an "industry," care gives way to efficiency, power, and utility (Allen, 2021). Gan and Tsai likewise emphasize that Cee's illness and injury cannot be reduced to an individual tragedy. They expose how modern medicine uses eugenic fantasies and an "objectifying gaze" to treat the Black female body as an object available for penetration and experimentation (Gan&Tsai, 2020). Namgung further reminds us that Frank's brief sense of power derived from his identity as an American soldier on the Korean battlefield is ultimately dismantled by his parallel gazes upon a Korean girl and Cee: gendered and racial violence in overseas war and the experience of Black victimization in domestic society belong essentially to the same structure of power (Namgung, 2019). Thus, the failure of the family's protective function in *Home* is not an accidental failure of an individual household but the result of the interconnection between the private and the public, intimate relationships and state violence.

Sila's *The Day My Mother Went Mad* presents the failure of the family's protective function in a more concentrated, claustrophobic, and immediately oppressive form. At the beginning of the story, the mother's "Setz dich, wir müssen reden" initially appears to be an ordinary summons within the family, but it quickly becomes a coercive interrogation: she demands that her son name "those people," disclose the truth, and bring the conspiracy to an immediate end (Sila, 2024). The most basic order of family communication has already collapsed. The mother-son relationship is no longer sustained by trust but has been taken over by paranoia and interrogation. The father's response is similarly non-supportive. He either remains silent, screams, or retreats to the bedroom and refuses communication; when the narrator attempts to seek help, he encounters a father who is himself incapable of providing support (Sila, 2024).

The most symbolic scene occurs when the narrator retreats to his old room. This room should be the most private, familiar, and protective space within the family, but after switching on the light, he finds that he can "hardly recognize it": the old bookshelves and wardrobe have disappeared, replaced by a storage room filled with old radios, record players, speakers, and wires (Sila, 2024). The father's statement, "Man kann alles reparieren," ostensibly defends the old appliances but in fact reveals an equally powerless fixation: he does not truly repair any relationship or aspect of life but merely prolongs the process of collapse amid

accumulating objects (Sila, 2024). The family thus not only fails to protect the narrator but also loses the recognizability of the last private space to which he might retreat.

In this sense, *The Day My Mother Went Mad* depicts family failure as a mechanism of traumatic repetition itself: the mother conflates wartime memories with present reality, the father responds through hoarding and silence, and the son is repeatedly forced to assume the task of understanding and maintaining the family. Bachmann's discussion of hybrid identity and cultural adaptation in Sila's work helps explain this dynamic: once neither the culture of origin nor the host society provides stable coordinates, the family becomes the border zone where trauma first erupts and is most difficult to repair (Bachmann, 2024). Unlike the long-term sedimentation of historical injury in *Home*, Sila depicts a crisis that erupts suddenly within an enclosed domestic space but has been incubated by war over a much longer period.

4. How Can Belonging Remain Possible after Trauma? Communal Support and Self-Preservation

Once "home" is no longer a naturally safe ethical space, can the subject still regain a sense of belonging? If so, in what form can such belonging emerge? Morrison and Sila offer two distinctly different answers. The former retains the possibility of reconstruction through community, relationships, and the naming of history; the latter compresses belonging into a minimal form of psychological presence and self-maintenance.

In *Home*, the reconstruction of belonging does not initially appear as a romantic return to the homeland but as a return compelled by crisis. Frank returns to the South because he receives a brief and urgent letter: "Come fast. Don't delay, or she'll die" (Toni, 2014). "Going home" is therefore initially not a destination but an ethical response: he must return to save his sister. As the return unfolds, what gives "home" its meaning is not spatial movement itself but a series of acts of support, care, and re-naming that take place after the return.

For Cee, the most important force of repair comes not from institutional medicine but from the female community in *Lotus*. Allen argues that *Home* both exposes the long history of medical violations against Black bodies in the United States and returns healing to an ethics of care among Black women; the "medical industry" cannot provide genuine care precisely because it treats the body as an object rather than the injured person as a whole subject (Allen, 2021). Gan and Tsai likewise argue that Morrison uses folk remedies and communal practices among generations of women to move "healing" beyond physical recovery toward the restoration of personhood, dignity, and subjectivity (Gan&Tsai, 2020). Wen further points out that these women do more than treat Cee's body. They incorporate her into an "intermental unit" of shared experience and judgment, helping her redevelop the ability to recognize others, understand relationships, and affirm herself, thereby forming a "social mind" (Wen, 2021). In this process, Cee gradually ceases to be merely a victim and becomes capable of self-judgment and self-respect.

Visser summarizes this process as a transition from trauma to communal care: in *Home*, sibling love and the female community together constitute the central forces through which trauma can be traversed; the homeland consequently ceases to be merely a place of poverty and shame and becomes a space capable of accommodating recovery, growth, and maturity (Visser, 2016). Kovács similarly notes that the reburial of the unnamed Black remains at the end of the novel creates a visible marker for past violence; this not only supplements the historical record but also provides survivors with a way of processing trauma (Kovács, 2021). Dao Hanying emphasizes that Frank and Cee gradually move beyond their passive positions after returning home because they regain agency, the capacity to name, and the ability to begin a new life (Dao, 2019). Tabone's interpretation of *Home* is particularly illuminating here: Morrison's "home" is not an enclosed space of comfort but something closer to an everyday ethical practice. It is not a return to an original point of departure but, in a Blochian sense of *Heimat*, an "arrival" rather than an "origin" (Tabone, 2018).

Sila's text presents a different and more austere picture. In *The Day My Mother Went Mad*, once the family loses its protective function, the subject can hardly find re-anchoring through external relational structures. The mother has fully entered a paranoid structure, while the father responds either with silence or by retreating into hoarding and helplessness; the old family space no longer provides recognition or support. Ultimately, the narrator can rely not on communal care of the kind found in *Home* but only on a quiet command to himself: "Bleib da, Tijan. Bleib da." He explains that over the years this sentence has helped him avoid the humiliation of emotional collapse; more importantly, the sentence was originally in Bosnian. He had already begun using it during the war to resist the fear produced by bombardment and later translated it into German, carrying it, together with his self-defense, into the new linguistic environment (Sila, 2024).

Thus, "Bleib da" in Sila's text is less a language of healing than an ethics of minimal existence. Its function is not to "return to normal" but to "not collapse"; not to achieve complete belonging but to retain, however precariously, a foothold that prevents the self from disintegrating. Bachmann's analysis of the intersection of multilingualism, cultural adaptation, and war trauma in Sila's work helps explain the importance of this self-command: under hybrid and destabilized conditions of life, language itself becomes one of the final resources for maintaining continuity of the subject (Bachmann, 2024). Schlüter's discussion of Sila's dystopian narratives likewise suggests that Sila's subjects often do not regain stability through an external community but instead preserve their connection with the past through retrospective narration (Schlüter, 2024). *The Day My Mother Went Mad* therefore does not truly offer a picture of "going home"; it offers only the maintenance of the self at the edge of collapse.

5. Conclusion

A comparison of *Home* and *The Day My Mother Went Mad* demonstrates that “home” in trauma narratives is not the natural opposite of trauma but an important medium through which historical violence enters the subject and reshapes experiences of belonging. *Home* shows that although the family may lose its original protective function because of war, racism, poverty, and bodily injury, damaged belonging can still be reproduced through sibling relationships, female communal care, the naming of history, and the subject’s recovery of agency. *The Day My Mother Went Mad*, by contrast, shows that when the family becomes a site where paranoia, silence, and a ruined everyday life converge, the subject may be unable to find effective support in the outside world and can only retreat into a minimal form of psychological presence.

What the two works ultimately share, therefore, is not a sentimental narrative of “going home” but a more complex and distinctly modern insight: home can be both a channel through which trauma is transmitted and a crucial site where belonging is reconstructed. The issue is not whether the family possesses an inherent protective function, but whether, once macro-level historical violence has penetrated intimate relationships, the family can contain trauma and where the subject can still find support. Morrison places her answer primarily in relational and communal ethics, whereas Sila reduces the answer to the subject’s minimal resistance to psychological collapse. For this reason, “home” in trauma narratives is no longer a static spatial noun but a complex site that continually exposes historical wounds, tests the resilience of relationships, and reshapes the subject’s sense of belonging.

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