

Narrativizing the Margins: Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) depicts a world in which a slave woman who is told that she can not be a mother, indeed, can not legally own her own body, assumes rights of motherhood, in spite of such legalities. Sethe kills her baby daughter Beloved from being remanded to slavery. Set during the Reconstruction era in 1873, *Beloved* centers on the powers of memory and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willfully try to forget. Morrison (original name Chloe Anthony Wofford) borrows the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, escaped from slavery in Kentucky and murdered her child when slave-catchers caught up with her in Ohio. *Beloved* straddles the line between fiction and history; from the experiences of a single family, Morrison creates a powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery. But she is not only re-creating anguish of Margaret Garner, she touches on issues that lie at the heart of the contemporary society. Does a woman, who has borne a child, have the right to claim it to the extent that she can kill rather than allow it to be killed? Under what conditions death is preferable to a lack of freedom? And who is empowered to make that decision? The author comments that though Sethe's killing of her baby girl Beloved is the right thing to do, but that she does not have any right to do it which drops us into the moral quagmire of the novel's thematic design.

When the baby Beloved returns as a twenty-year-old ghost, intent upon avenging her death, questions of guilt, innocence and history become prominent. Without knowing who she is, Sethe lets the girl in. But once she realizes it is Beloved, she sees it a divine and golden opportunity to seek forgiveness from her daughter and understanding for her deed. Past has the effect on the present and it might as well cause repercussion on the future. Sethe's memories and re-memories illustrate that the past is almost a tangible part of the present that there can be no future without the past, no matter how ugly and bloody. Had she not murdered Beloved, she and all the children would have been chained into slavery. Yet, when she commits the murder, she infuriates an entire community and is placed at the mercy of a vengeful spirit. For Sethe, to allow School teacher to take her children would be to allow him to destroy everything that is good in her, to destroy all the "life" she had made. According to this understanding, Sethe's murder of her daughter seems a less legally and morally reprehensible crime because it becomes an act of self-defense. Sethe suffers a jail term for her crime. Killing of her baby by a black slave mother is not abnormal. We find reference to it in E. B. Browning's poem "The runaway slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1850) in which a black slave is flogged to death for murdering the child she bore after being raped by her white owner. Here in this poem, sexism, slavery and racism co-mingle. Morrison condemns slavery as an institution so perverse that it could mutate a mother's love into murder.

A white woman Anne Denver helps the pregnant Sethe give birth to a child and Sethe escapes from the Sweet Home Plantations a few hours later. The narration of the incident is so traumatic. How much macabre circumstances can lead a woman with a newly-born child to escape into unknown destination? We find in this novel a significant role of silence—things not expressed. Even the silence is made to articulate. It is a kind of non-verbal communication or gesture.

Another reason for the black folk's lack of expression is that they were for centuries kept under stony silence—they did not learn to express things. Slavery was the instrument of the whites to assert power over the blacks. Example of a master's crude behaviour and a slave's submissiveness is revealed in this section:

“Want some breakfast, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hungry, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.” (p.127)

Though Beloved is the manifestation of a murdered two-year old in a 20-year old body, her mind and actions speak as a child not an adult. She may give voice to and embody the collective unconscious of all those oppressed by slavery's history and legacy. She represents the power of the past to intrude into the present. She loves her mother and wants her all to herself like a typical two-year old child. She even loves Denver though she is jealous of her and the relationship Denver has had with her mother. She claims Sethe "I am Beloved and she is mine". Beloved "...made demands. Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire". Sethe literally meets her past in her daughter's incarnation. She must tell her own story over and over to herself and Beloved to explain just what she did and why she did it, to come at last to terms with the meaning of her action for Denver as well as for herself. As a ghost-made-flesh Beloved is literally the story of embodiment of the past.

Edward Bodwin and Miss Bodwin--brother and sister, are former white abolitionists and try to be helpful to the black community. They own 124, which they allow Baby Suggs and her family to use. Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men, twice gives Sethe restoring love. When he arrives at 124, Paul is broken by his experiences; he sees in Sethe's scars (from the beating by Schoolteacher's nephews) a pain he must address; by touching them, he shares her pain, "learning that way her sorrow," and briefly liberates Sethe from the prison of her guilt. They make a family attending a carnival, and Paul D successfully exorcises the "spiteful ghost," but he too is overwhelmed by the ghost-made-flesh, who eventually demands that he introduce her to sexuality she was denied in death. After he leaves 124 and learns the full extent of Sethe's suffering and his own concern for her, he returns to offer support as she faces a life without either Beloved or her ghost. Paul offers a limited but compelling vision of hope: "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

In Chapter 7, Paul D begins sharing his painful memories with Sethe, but he fears that revealing too much will wrench the two former slaves back into a past from which they might never escape. Both Sethe and Paul D avoid the pain of their past as best they can, and both have developed elaborate and ultimately destructive coping mechanisms to keep the past at bay. Sethe has effectively erased much of her memory, and Paul D functions by locking his unpleasant memories and emotions away in his imagined "tobacco tin." The rustiness of the tin contributes to the reader's sense of the inaccessibility and corrosiveness of Paul D's memories. His separation from his emotions means he is alienated from himself, but Paul D is willing to pay the price to keep himself from his painful and turbulent past. When Paul D is forced to confront the past during his erotic encounter with Beloved, the rusted lid of his heart begins to break open. At the end of the novel, Paul D reveals that he is willing finally to risk emotional safety and open himself to another person, to love Sethe.

Paul D's arrival at 124 is marked by an exchange of stories about the Sweet Home men, but Sethe tells him an abridged version of her life-defining event: "I wasn't going back there . . . Any life but not that one. I went to jail instead." What she tells Paul is not a lie, and her motive for

killing Beloved is clear from it; but she leaves out the narration of her eighteen years of isolation since killing her child.

Throughout the novel Sethe uses a portmanteau word, "rememory," as both a verb (to remember) and as a noun (memory). This is Morrison's linguistic device to suggest the importance of coming to terms with our individual and collective past, for she is clearly not representing an unschooled character's malapropism. At times Sethe correctly uses both roots, but she and Beloved must "rememory" the past, or come to terms fully with the experiences not as stories but as lived events. The repression and alienation from the past causes a fragmentation of the self and an erasure of true identity. Sethe, Paul D. and Denver all experience this loss of self, which could only be recuperated by the brave acceptance of the past and the memory of their original identities. *Beloved* serves to unveil these characters up to their repressed memories, eventually causing the reintegration of their true selves.

The unrequited love of Beloved is fathomless. Beloved once knew that her mother had a pair of ear-rings. The ghost of Beloved's soft new hand touches Sethe's shoulders. She searches Sethe's face and asks her about diamonds:

"Where your diamonds?"

"Diamonds? What would I be doing with diamonds?"

"On your ears."

"Wish I did. I had some crystal once. A present from a lady I worked for."

"Tell me", said Beloved, smiling a wide happy smile. "Tell me your diamonds."(p. 69)

Beloved wants to get back the past life. Beloved also wants to make her mother conscious of the past. Sethe has other things to do--worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness, not to speak of love. Morrison says, "Her brain is not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let her alone plan for, the next day. Exactly like that afternoon in the wild onions—when one more step was the most she could see of the future." When Sethe works in a restaurant, she opines her philosophy of work: "Working dough. Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past." (Ch. 7)

Slavery is not just an institution; it is a philosophy and way of thinking which has umpteen and deep consequences. The Garners treated their slaves well, and as a result were respected by people like Sethe and Paul D. However, as Paul D later comes to realize, "Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces." Though treated nicely, the Negroes on Sweet Home were little more than toys to be toyed by the Garners. The black men and women forever remain cheap labour and slaves. Race is fundamental to the formation of the working classes in general, and to the experiences of the black labour in particular. The theme also comes up in the description of the Bodwin's household, which includes the statue of a black boy and the words "At Yo Service." With such images, Morrison demonstrates the extent of slavery and what must be done to abolish it completely. Freedom, Morrison points out, is more than a matter of not belonging to a single master. The authoress says, "If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up."(Ch. 1)

At the beginning of Book Two, a slave named Stamp Paid considers the ways in which slavery corrupts and dehumanizes everyone who comes in touch with it, including the white slave-owners. It makes them dreadful, sadistic, and raving. For example, one could say that schoolteacher's perverse lessons and violent racism exist because they are his means of justifying the institution of slavery. In his thoughts, Stamp Paid depicts the jungle from a white person's point of view—as awesome, exotic, and thrilling. He perceives anxiety on the part of

the whites about the unknown, unintelligible, “unnavigable” psyche of the slaves they steal. The sense of anxiety is emphasized by the images of wild consumption in the passage—jungles growing and spreading, red gums ready for blood. The conclusion of this passage asserts that what the whites recognize and run from is in fact their own savagery. They project this savagery onto those whom they perceive to be their opposites—“the Other.” If the Whites are supposed to be ‘the Self’, then the Blacks are sure to be ‘the Other’. By the end, the whites are the ones who hide a jungle under their skin.

In Cincinnati, Baby Suggs serves as an unofficial preacher to the black community. Despite her intuition that something is amiss, Baby cannot protect Sethe from Schoolteacher's unexpected presence. Thus the community is indirectly responsible for Beloved's murder, a responsibility they fail to accept by making Sethe an outcast. The community's failure is further emphasized when, after her jail term, the isolated Sethe must pay for a gravestone by selling her body to the stonecutter, who clearly takes advantage of her suffering. Morrison says "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." (Ch.9)

Each of *Beloved's* three parts begins with an observation about 124. The three Books of the novel begin with 124 WAS SPITEFUL, 124 WAS LOUD and 124 WAS QUIET respectively. The names of the slave-houses also bear tremendous irony. Sweet Home is not at all a sweet home for the slaves. The name of the slave-house Glory is also ironical. Sethe once says "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks." (Ch. 9)

The characters are so desperate to get themselves and their loved ones away from that awful life known as slavery. Sethe shows this desperation when she sends her children away from Sweet Home, when she travels, alone and pregnant, from Sweet Home to Ohio, and when she attempts to kill her children to keep them from school teacher. Although she hardly can get on without them, Sethe, in desperation, sends her children to live with their grandmother, Baby Suggs, to keep them from becoming slaves themselves. Baby Suggs's childhood also belonged to slavery. Like Baby Suggs, Sethe learned the exhilaration of freedom and therefore could not tolerate the notion of returning to the shackles of slavery. Morrison says about Beloved, "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed." (Ch. 28)

Toni Morrison and other Negro women writers have been trying to develop a new type of novel, one which represents the hopes, aspirations, and historical memories of colored women. African American women struggle under a double burden: that of racial prejudice and that of a male-centred society. While black men may have created a literature about the former, it has been left to black women to analyze the whole of the androcentric society. The active entry of black women served to expose polarities within U.S. "mainstream" feminist politics. Black feminist politics, rooted in the black liberation and civil rights movements (1960s–1970s), had convinced many African-American women of the need for a politics that was both anti-racist and anti-sexist. Reacting to a narrowly defined feminism, the African-American writer Alice Walker coined the term ‘*womanist*’ to describe a woman "committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female." Walker comments in her first collection of non-fiction, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender”.

Thus, responding to the reality of women's multiple identifications, feminism broadened out along these issues. Black Feminism posits that sexism and racism are inextricably linked, and that sexism will never be overcome while the system is still so fundamentally racist. This movement grew out of the discontent of African American women during the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s, who felt their particular needs as minority women were not being addressed. The term "Black feminism" is often used to encompass the needs of all women of color. Morrison tries to penetrate into the vagaries of the 'coloured' slaves. Walker comments, in the folklore black women are called, that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the mule of the world", because they have been handed the burdens that everyone else refused to carry. The black women have also been called "Matriarchs", "Superwomen", "Mean and Evil Bitches", "Castrates" and "Sapphire's Mama". When they have pleaded for understanding, their characters have been distorted. When they have asked for love, they have been given countless children. Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own* (1928), "...genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working class." We can apply black slaves in this context. The black African-American slaves must have some literary sensibilities as well. In the Post-Reconstruction South, black American writer Jean Toomer considered the black slave women as exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling their lives simply as 'the mules of the world'. They dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls. They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise. The history of black-white relations is also the history of slavery. This analogy with slavery is present in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the rights of woman* (1792).

Part of Morrison's project in *Beloved* is to recuperate a history that had been lost to the ravages of enforced silences and willed oblivion. Morrison paints Sethe's story with the voices of people who historically have been denied the power of language and eloquence. *Beloved* also contains a didactic element. From Sethe's experience, we learn that before a stable future can be attained, we must confront and decipher the "ghosts" of the past. Morrison suggests that, like Sethe, contemporary American readers must confront the history of slavery in order to address its legacy, which manifests itself in ongoing racial discrimination and discord. It is undoubtedly one of the glaring novels to project the black women slaves' consciousness onto readers' mind and to retrace the murmurings, kept under giant rocks for centuries.

Works Cited:

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