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Supernatural as an Instrument of Effective Retelling of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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The concept of the marginalized has found expression in ways more than one in the work of various authors in various ways, most of them being autobiographical. The conflict that lies at the base today regarding such expression is often considered liable to debate regarding the truthfulness of expression, a debate that is more rampant among Indian authors such as Om Prakash Valmiki, who advocate the autobiographical mode of writing saying that the oppressed undoubtedly relates to his own life when it comes to delineating suffering, as his becomes the epitome of such suppression. However, in case that the writing is not completely fictionalised does the allegation of unfeeling upper class writing stand its ground? This is a question worth exploration in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The novel attempts utterance of the unspeakable atrocities that have been inflicted on the blacks at a time when autobiographies could hardly contain all the demeaning stances one had been reduced to, simply due to their skin colour. In a case such as this the experimental mode adopted by Morrison does indeed create a landmark in the expression of repression of probably the worst kind. The part fictionalised concept that finds its way in the work of Morrison is indeed a boon when it comes to apt expression. The horrors associated with the concept of slavery where the condition of humans was worse than animals couldn't find better representation than through the use of memory in the most skilful manner. The presence of the supernatural serves multiple functions; one of them is the attributing of the unimaginable nature of the incidents that come to light owing to the occurrence of the ghost child. The willing suspicion of disbelief that the author hints at is but a liberty she asks her readers to permit, to conduct her experimentation with the technique and see whether fiction associated with reality can actually intensify and convey the sensations that would remain otherwise unfelt in the plain rendition of a biography.

Morrison's *Beloved* is well known as a narrative of slavery that portrays a very vivid picture of that which had escaped apt representation because of the inexplicability of the incidents that had occurred, simply speaking about which brings forth the recognition of the burden of their existence in the mindscape of the individual. Agony such as this whose expression in words might have made confrontation with them an unbearable morbid experience in other times might have found their expression in terms of art forms such as painting that arouse emotions such as fear, pity, awe etc. This is particularly because art forms barely tell a story, its expertise lies in the manner of freezing of emotions or scenes. They preserve but hardly delineate. However, a novel on the topic delineates the entire story; the tit-bits of horror, escapism, cruelty and denial faced in the course of entire lives of people. The people who have faced them for most of their lives before escaping from them have the worst possible imprint in their minds. These people who had once faced similar suffering and survived them form the instrument of supernatural— that brings about the apt delineation of marginalization. The entire series of incidents that fringe the minds of the African American slaves in *Beloved* have the impact of the collective memory of a race. The difference being that the memories in question are of such inhuman nature that the intolerability of these, results in confusion between the memories of the living beings and those of the past:

The novel hinges upon rememory, the basic concept of which is that memories have physical existence beyond the minds of the individuals in whom they originate: it is possible to bump into and inhabit another person's memory.(101 Peach)

Sethe's mother is said to have had the mark of slavery on her wrist that is clear in Sethe's mind ; but what is to be thought is that Sethe herself has the mark of slavery of the past in the memory of her Beloved; whose death is caused by the same threats of slavery. Thus we see that the boundaries of memories dissolve and the past and the present times are so confused that time loses its signification in the novel. Thus the novel is constructed as if over the tombstone of time which hurls it in the zone of no time, making repression a timeless phenomenon.

The concept of the supernatural that takes place in the novel is a signifier of this dissolution. Beloved who comes to denote the dead daughter of Sethe, brings back the past in the present in palpable form. This impossibility of event is possible only in the realm of fiction, thus we see the mode of supernatural presenting the unrepresentable when suppression is intolerable. The presence of the supernatural element in the novel has more than one function to play. The probable improbable undoubtedly provides the defining status of such utilization. The readers are at once given the means of suspicion as well as the basis for belief. As the human mind is always in search of an alternate paradigm other than the real one, Morrison makes use of this need of people who inspite of knowing the impossibility of the situation focuses on the unravelling of incidents with more curiosity than usual. Morrison suitably makes use of them to present the realm of the real only to keep a parallel speculation of the unreal throughout the novel, utilising the wilful suspension of disbelief in her readers.

The movement of the text has in itself a somewhat retracing of history. In the story of Sethe and Denver as well as the entire community the similarity in aim binds the entire community. The aim is the forgetting of a horrifying past but the problem lies in the fact that they want to forget a horrifying past as a means of avoidance of the distorted; whereas forgetting of the past by means of acceptance are different. Sethe's apparent blissful life in the present is at the expense of forgetting a past because of its distortion that has marked her life. The arrival of Beloved at this point in time is as if the trespassing of her apparent peace with the threat of the return of the past. It should be remembered though that the past which threatens to come back is not the bodily coming back of that which is gone. It is metaphorical of the remembrance that had never found acceptance and comes back to claim its place in the life of the individual:

When the main male character Paul D, expels the ghost, it returns in human form as the character Beloved. The past cannot be exorcised it demands recognition in the present. The recognition involved in the rememory requires more than the work of individuals, it is a continual communal process.(115 Kubitschek)

Thus at this point the supernatural seems to be the mouthpiece of the eternally repressed that claims the acceptance of the past and the changes that it has caused in the present. And the function of Beloved is to drive the same point home.

Sethe whose life with Denver in 124 is devoid of male presence is merely because of the quarantined nature of life that these two live, reminiscent of the past that has in it the death of Denver's sister at the hands of her own mother. Thus Sethe is someone who: "is traumatized by both the past and the present task of surviving it."(Barnett 419) Denver's deafness can be considered as the case of shutting herself out of the world that reminds her of

a past full of insecurities that her school mates would hurl at her. The deliberate cutting out of the self from the others is but a retreat to her own self. In the part of the novel that deals with the coming of Paul D, both the mother and daughter seem to have successfully bottled up the memories that would make life difficult for them otherwise. Not for once does the presence of Paul D bring out of Sethe the memories in a way as if they were gushing out of her subconscious. The careful restricted language of expressing her rape and Paul D's telling her the reason of Halle's absence all take place peaceably but in a way as if the memories were ordinary, 'of childhood plays and adolescent frolics' whereas speaking of Paul D:

Not even trying, he had become someone who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep – to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too. Strong women and wise saw him and told him things they told only each other.(103 Peach)

However, the presence of Beloved and the slow but steady attachment of Sethe with Beloved before her realization of Beloved to be her daughter mark the gushing out of emotions as she tries to reason out with Beloved the act of her killing. As Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "Patients in traumatic neurosis are not much occupied in their waking lives with memories . . . perhaps they are more occupied with thinking of it [the traumatic experience]" (419 Barnett) Paul D who comes as an apparent relief to Sethe bringing back love in her life and trying to give her that which has been denied her in the form of a complete family seems to succeed at first before descending into a failure. The expelling of the ghost from 124 by Paul D at first seemed to be a success but this was not to be termed so as Paul D before the completion of his noble endeavour had to come to terms with issues about himself:

It was sometime before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brother, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory notebook, paper, one by one into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open. (113 Morrison)

Here, once again the un-open able lid has to be opened and memories, good or bad have to be experienced. It should be kept in mind that the coming of Paul D to alleviate the pains of the past of Sethe and Denver does not leave any one to make him come to terms with his past except for Beloved. Thus the supernatural once again serves the purpose of exorcising the painful past in people unable to come to terms with it: "Ironically the lid is prised open by something supernatural, the ghost of Beloved in the form of a young woman. As she seduces him he does not hear the flakes of rust fall from the seams and the lid eventually gives." (96 Peach) The novel thus unravels its plot only with the arrival of Beloved. The long closed lids are reopened. The denouement is seen when Denver suffering from the loneliness that she had at one imposed upon herself finds companionship in her resurrected sister. However at one point in time parts of Beloved's body seem to be falling off:

Beloved has mental and physical peculiarities parts of her body threaten to fall out. She has a scar on her throat, her infrequent speech is childish. Though apparently a stranger she knows intimate things about Sethe, including the lullaby that Sethe sang for her babies.(118 Kubitschek)

Denver is the close companion of Beloved and being so is able to notice all these peculiarities. However, arising out of a long time loneliness she refuses to let Beloved go, in spite of knowing that it is Sethe that Beloved loves the most and Denver's help to retain

herself in the household is the only thing she desires of her, Denver keeps her company. Her only fear is her losing Beloved. This is metaphorical of the fact that Denver's redeeming of herself from the loneliness that she had imposed just to keep a barrier between herself and her past is slowly coming to terms with her. Her introduction to her past is relative, her past is defined by the deeds of her family, chiefly her mother; thus her escape from the past as well as her coming to terms with it are relatively easier. The comradeship she seeks from Beloved is but the initiation that would ultimately lead to her acceptance of the past and thus she is the one endowed by the plot to break away from Beloved's fix and get help for her mother, whom she realizes she will soon lose:

Denver identifies the woman as the returned ghost and welcomes her as a sister. Soon however she is frightened to discover that the spirit is covertly attacking Sethe. For example, while pretending to massage Sethe's back, Beloved tries to choke her.(118 Kubitschek)

The end, of the novel when the realization of Denver had already taken place and she had sought help from Lady Jones in terms of sustenance we find Sethe in pitiable state, there seems to be a competition between Beloved and Sethe in terms of deriving nutrition. The jobless Sethe is berated constantly by Beloved for having left her. The guilt that seemed to have always been a major component of Sethe's mind at once comes to picture when at the hands of this prehistoric guilt she abandons all modes of nutrition at the hands of Beloved and is ready to die of malnutrition whereas Beloved grows. The symbolism in it is apparent. The guilt that survives in the heart of Sethe is long present, it was temporarily suppressed or its suppression was aimed at as Beloved was never erased from her memory neither the act that she had performed to save herself in her child from the hands of the tyrannous schoolteacher:

Simple, 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 and dragged them through the veil, out, away over there where no one could hurt them. Over there, outside this place, where they would be safe. And the Hummingbird wings beat on.(163 Morrison)

It is but a fact that though she had never accepted in the eyes of law that she had committed a crime for which she was released after a short sentence; the guilt of losing a child by her own hands, by inflicting upon it a painful death might not be restricted to her impulse to spare her own part the horror it had so long witnessed in life; there might as well be a sado-masochist tendency that had resulted in her a stimulus to out-hurt the abuser. Whatever might be the case the aspect of guilt in her is something that is yet to be dealt with and in this comes the supernatural in Beloved.

The duality of meaning; the play between the real and the unreal that Morrison engages in comes to show the intended impact at this point of the novel when the previous portrayal where the "narrator describes first meeting with Beloved in terms that suggest birth: Sethe's body gushes water, a parallel to the breaking of water just before labour."(118 Kubitschek)The coming out of Beloved with water dripping from her garments seemed to be the representation of the dead who as according to the biblical doctrine is thought to wear new clothes especially new shoes much like beloved. It is here that Morrison seems to have stretched her fantastical creation too far. Her intention to incorporate the supernatural as the metaphorical seems to be crossing the boundaries of the subtle to an emphatic portrayal almost over the mark, at the hands of the author. The reference to new clothes and new shoes seem to be the evidence of this very fact which in turn is aggravated when at the end of the novel when she leaves, "a boy reports to have seen a woman with fish in her hair walking

toward the creek from which Beloved had emerged months before”(120 Kubitschek). However, it is to be noted that the importance of the image is the presence of water; if mind is the canvass for reflection and the nature of water is to reflect as well, then Beloved’s coming out of water is symbolic of the memory coming to existence. Similarly the nature of Beloved presented by Morrison is almost childlike. Her speeches, her necessity of the kind of caress from Sethe all fall in a very juvenile pattern. However, in this case Morrison has utilised this realistic unreal in a sensible way:

Because she personifies the past, and no one can change past events, Beloved cannot change or develop. Beloved always remains a two-year old, with a two year old understanding. Amoral, she has no consciousness of doing wrong in trying to fulfil her own needs. She remains unaware of others needs.”(125 Kubitschek)

This falls in place as the childlike intensity gives to the readers a belief of the fact that the dead child in its resurrection has come with the unadulterated innocence; Passages are left unpunctuated and Beloved herself uses words out of order while omitting words important to the sense all together: for example, ‘where your diamonds?’; “tell me your earrings”:The coherence and chaos of the sections involving Beloved which at one point become poetry, are manifestations of the divinity and isolation which she represents. (109 Peach)

The divinity, as mentioned is truly because of the fact that this will be an experience to be turned to by the witnesses a moment of realization of the intensity of the past scars. But on the other hand this apparent innocence makes Sethe correspond this image of Beloved with the one retained in her mind that acts as a catalyst in intensifying her guilt.

The pregnancy of Beloved is yet another question to be answered. Considering the fact that the supernatural in Beloved is metaphorical in usage yet the pregnancy metaphor lies unanswered. If Beloved is the materialization of the past, then the possibility of the past coming to the present and attempting to create the future, is but a dangerous possibility. Beloved’s pregnancy can be interpreted at multiple levels. In consideration of Beloved as a supernatural being the myth of the succubus and incubus comes to play: Beloved who plays the succubus and incubus, collects the sperm from Paul D to impregnate herself, then uses the life force of her mother’s body to sustain her spawn.(422 Barnett)

Thus Morrison once again uses the dyad of the unreal reality to cast the myth of the demonic possession to fit the dimension of her novel. Yet the practical implication of the incident might be considered as the motif in which coming to terms with the guilt ridden memory of Sethe being the most difficult, her failure to accept the past would have the possibility of her creating a renewed painful past for her successors, including Denver:

Beloved is – the past creates the present, but it cannot give birth in the present. Birth would change Beloved (the past) and the present. The past is past: it has created the present but cannot change the future. (125 Kubitschek)

This fear it might be said, of having a future indented with the past causes Sethe to come to terms with her own past as she relives it. In viewing Denver’s employer Mr. Bodwin riding up , Sethe replaces his figure with that of the schoolteacher’s who had one day rode up in similar fashion to disrupt the newly introduced peaceful life that Sethe was living. She goes on to attack Mr. Bodwin and in the process rids herself of the past itself:

Physically frozen in time since she killed Beloved, Sethe cannot distinguish between Mr. Bodwin in the present and schoolteacher in the past. She sees only that a man is riding into her yard. Determined to do now what she could not do before, she protects

her children by attacking the man with an ice pick. Fortunately, the women pull her away before she damages him. Misunderstanding, Beloved thinks that her mother has once again abandoned her. (120 Peach)

This is the climactic moment when the truth of Sethe confronts her once again. Her life that had been a bundle of contradictions before this moment has its knots cleared at once. The repetition of the same action as what she had performed ages before clearly refers to the fact that her protective instincts overpower her at the moment of crisis. The guilt that had been arising in her silently and which had dwelled in her for so long; owing to which she had begged forgiveness and tried to reason out herself with beloved, stands cleared. The determining fact is that the sado-masochistic impulses that had lied in close correspondence to her elemental urge of saving her children from the hands of abominable slavery is done away with. Now though not portrayed explicitly, the urge to attack Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick is not the result of any sado-masochist impulse but the purest drive to save her children and keep them away from harm's way. The previous action that she had performed had given her the hardest time of her life and the present action might be considered as the proper channelization of the same impulses that in the past had given her the chance to doubt her own intentions in killing her child. If in case it was due to pure sado-masochist impulses because of which she had harmed her child then it would but be a selfish act and the dignity of the deed would be forever denied putting on her the slander of being a selfish mother. However, that possibility is done away with as Morrison metaphorically makes Beloved move away. Even though here once again Morrison's extraneousness is seen in the action of Beloved's leave is portrayed as caused by dejection of her mother which seems to her to be the repetition of the same action that had drove Beloved from Sethe previously. The metaphor, signifies that with the clearance of the guilt that Sethe had been living in, the domain of the past that had emerged from its suppression have found its acceptance both with Sethe and with the entire Black community that witnesses the occurrence of the events which in turn clears their speculations about Sethe.

Morrison's skill lies in the fact that she makes brilliant use of one element to encompass all possible shades of meaning. The use of supernatural in her work is one element, while in the novel the individual characters are stressed upon, there lies hidden the implication of the failed grand narratives. Not only is the failure brought to the front but the deconstructive usage of these grand narratives is also implied:

The Bible read from a particular historicised, cultural, perspective, was one of the means by which colonial authorities tried to inculcate Western values and introduce European or Anglo-European notions of culture to Africa. Indeed its apparent dualism – 'Black Satan' and 'The snow white Lamb of God' – appeared not only to justify slavery as a particular text, as it were.(110 Peach)

This implies the presence of Bible as a multilayered narrative. The deconstructive mechanisms once used by the whites may be counter used by The African American's as well:

Through its delineation of the history of the Jewish nation, the Bible expounded the trials and miseries of slavery. It offered slaves a source of communal strength through notions of faith, grace and the holy spirit, even a means of achieving healing.(100 Peach)

Beloved in its own way carves the path to trot this deconstructive journey. It won't be an overtly outrageous statement to say that Morrison's series of novels contain in them religious themes that are of similar pattern as In Dante's The Divine Comedy:

The title of the third novel *Paradise*, suggests the scope of Morrison's project by recalling the work of the fourteenth century Italian poet, Dante. In three volumes of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante recounts his spiritual journey through hell, purgatory and paradise. The *Divine Comedy* contains many details about the politics of Dante's own time and place, the fourteenth century city-state of Florence."(117 Kubitschek)

Beloved presents in itself similar themes. The function of the supernatural in *Beloved* with respect to this deconstructive notion of the Bible is apparent in the possessiveness of *Beloved* towards her mother as she says: "I am *Beloved* and she is mine"(110 Morrison) as also the possessiveness of Sethe towards her resurrected daughter, " *Beloved*, she mine"(110 Morrison) These have their source in *The Song of Solomon*, which had inspired the title and in part the concern with ancestral wisdom, found in Morrison's earlier novel. Furthermore the subversion of the Biblical in the form of the *Beloved* which is a spirit and has come for what seems to be apparently the worst fortune for Sethe and Denver thus using the apparently holy signification in an unholy fashion. However the principle of reversal is once again at its play in considering the duality in the presence of *beloved*: the spirit that seems to be wrecking havocs with the life of people in 124 has a purgatory role to play as well. Thus the unholy becomes the holy. This seems to be the repetition of the holy Bible in a way that corresponds with it and yet goes against its white interpretation and follows the Biblical story in which Hosea calls one of her three children 'not beloved', a representative of the Israelites who had been temporarily rejected as punishment for their own betrayal. After a period of retribution God reclaims the lost people:

I will claim them my people
Which were not my people
And her *beloved*,
Which was not *beloved*. (100 Peach)

The subversion that Morrison had represented thus makes use of the supernatural to achieve its purpose. *Beloved* being the supernatural in the novel also resurrects along with itself the African supernatural fables that had seemingly gotten suppressed and lost under the foreign domination thus:

As a character then, *Beloved* is commensurate with the fantastical in African literature which is traceable back to concrete, social historical events. But *Beloved* moves from one plane of reference to another, literally destabilising the novel which also moves from the plane of reference to another. This destabilising is central to the novel because just as Morrison's creative use of the Bible in the epigraph exemplifies how African American writers find an 'African' text in the white man's religious book, *Beloved* reminds us of other texts inside the narrative of slavery which have come down to us by white male chroniclers.(102-102 Peach)

Thus the supernatural not only serves to present the sensibility of the suppressed in the best possible manner but at the same time shows all sides of the individual characters in their dealing with their tragic past, imparting a three dimensional reality to the novel. While at the same time the fact of suppression is resurrected in the modes more than one and in this case through the memory presented as a supernatural stalker, that demands purification.

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