

## The Decolonising and ‘De-traumatising’ Role of the Genre of *Magic Realism* in Toni Morrison’s Acclaimed Novel *Beloved*

**Yukti Bhardwaj**

MA student, Faculty

Dept. of English Language and Literature

**Ms. S. Lakshmi Menon**

Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning

Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, India

### Abstract

Magical realism which originated as a Latin-American and Caribbean narrative strategy focusses on the handling of trauma generated by the politics and power dynamics of colonised societies and the resulting divisions. It works as a bridge between various binaries like the dominant and the depressed and the center and the margins. It is a tool used by writers like Toni Morrison to highlight the loss of voice and identity when faced with terrible trauma, in the context of the horrific experiences of slavery faced by many African-Americans. In her novel *Beloved*, magic realism acts as a counter to the dominant and destructive Euro-centric narratives of a society, which silences the voices of the oppressed. The ghost-figure *Beloved* works as an intensification of ‘magic’ and a representation of the ‘past’ and ‘trauma’ in the novel. The present study delves into how magic realism highlights and then resolves trauma, otherwise repressed in the mind of the protagonist, Sethe.

**Keywords:** magic realism, trauma, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, decolonising, decoding trauma

**Introduction:**

From the very beginning of literature ghost stories are used as the revenge-plot stories. These spooky and gothic writings are not confined to the new-age narratives but form the traditional writings of the world, including America and Europe. Magical realism as an off-shoot of the genre was introduced for the first time by German critic Franz Roh in the year 1925. It is “a way to uncover the mystery hidden in everyday realities”, which is used in abundance by the Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison in her novels, indifferently. According to the writer, “my own use of enchantment simply comes because that’s the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew...there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting, and so it seemed impossible for me to write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was “unbelievable”. So, I have become indifferent, I suppose, to the phrase magic realism” (Guthrie, 1986). So the main aim of this research is to find out the role of magical realism as a genre to highlight the decolonising and de-traumatising angles in Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. Trauma is the most evident theme in the novel and its intensity is realized with the following words of Morrison,

In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of

everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the Herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. (Morrison 2005, xiii)

Bringing the theme of ‘trauma’ to the forefront, Morrison throws light on the necessity of ‘forgetting the horrific past and the dead’. It is from the lens of the readers that we can designate the novel as belonging to any thematic genre, whether magical realism or political narrative. It is through various incidents and images that we will go into the deep understanding of the role of ‘magic’ in the novel. This paper is an attempt to bring to light the traumas of the victims of slavery through the focus on magical realism’s role as a decolonising and de-traumatising agent.

### **The Decolonising Role of Magical Realism in *Beloved***

Magical realism is an important tool for the writers, predominantly the Black writers, for attacking the systems like colonialism and totalitarianism. From the accounts of history it is very clearly evident that the Africans were robbed off their culture and sent to America to further weaken them, economically and socially. It had bereft them of any kind of mass living or community living which could help flourish or at least sustain their culture.

*Beloved* as a ghost represents all the unheard and pleading voices that suffered colonialism and mass enslavement. It refutes the false reduced claims of the Whites regarding the Black grief. Magical realism has also influenced writers to speak about myths and legends of the folk in order to detach themselves from the mixed lit-culture of their colonizers. Morrison in an interview spoke thus, “I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is

about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean it's national amnesia". Thus, there is a need to write such works which are never explored truthfully, owing to several dominating powers still prevalent in the world. Magical realism works as a very powerful tool in overturning the existing frameworks of power. It tries its hands at revisiting the past and rewriting the history with a changed viewpoint. It is aimed at being written from the point of view of the depressed and the marginalized. Though we cannot totally negate the still dominant hand of the Western forces on the readers, it does shake their literary expectations.

### **The De-traumatising Role of Magical Realism in *Beloved***

*Beloved* is a real-life story of Margaret Garner, an African-American lady who too like Sethe murdered her own child to save her from the clutches of slavery. Both her life and the novel talks about the horrors of slavery and the need to forget the dark-engulfing past. The novel makes use of interesting narrative style, going back and forth in time. There is an impressive usage of flashback technique whenever Sethe addresses her memories. Sethe says:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just say. I used to think it was my memory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the world.

Past and future work on the same plane in the *Beloved*, illuminating or bringing forth the trauma faced by the African-Americans, not over a decade or century but from generations. It is thus not just an ‘intensely personal trauma’ but also a trauma faced by an entire nation. The exploitation faced by the Blacks is so terrorizing and deep-rooted that words cannot do justice to its portrayal. Therefore, Morrison makes use of the figure of Beloved. Shoshana Felman and Dori Lob define trauma as “an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after”. It just works on two different levels. On the first level trauma is embedded with the narrative. Trauma in these cases is not just concerned with an individual but shared among all. Therefore writers should maintain integrity or respect for the sufferers or the victims of oppression or slavery. Incidents that tend to surface the internal suffering and trauma of the victims are generally not expressed explicitly using literature’s fictionality. On the second level it works as a healing process. After decades of the horrific experiences of slavery and exploitation, trauma generally loses its impact and ‘haunting power’. Here a contrary aspect comes into the picture: the opposition of the necessity of truth by the need for an ‘acknowledgement of the intensity of the event’.

In the novel the incarnated Beloved embodies two contradictory aspects for Sethe. On one hand it is Sethe’s reminder of the great urge of forgetting the past and on the other hand it is also the constant reminder of that painful time. Trauma also helps in the healing process of the protagonist in a three step way. It involves repressing the painful memories, reconciling with whatever was there in your past and finally an intellectual and personal ‘rebirth’ of the victims of slavery. But at the same time trauma also activates the defensive mechanism of the human mind by taking a toll on the memory.

Beloved flourishes and Sethe is famished. It is Sethe's own thoughts that eventually engulf her completely. It is the audience which actually knows that all this while Beloved was impacting the other characters, even though she had her own selfish motives. She not only reminds Sethe of her painful past but also the other characters like Paul D and Denver are forced to come face to face with their past and relations.

The novel portrays the real difficulties faced by the survivors of the cruel incidents like slavery. Sethe in the novel says that, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another". Freedom is not something that is attained with ease and thus one cannot even get accustomed to it with ease. For someone who has stayed in chains and shackles for almost all of her life, accepting the new fact that they are free to live 'their' life according to themselves is very hard. Even after attaining freedom there is a question of self-identity. For claiming one's identity one needs a common thread tying them from one generation to another. This common thread in the novel is the mother-child relationship, which is strangely enough missing in the story. Neither does Sethe receives this knowledge of identity from her mother (a slave) nor does she provides it to her daughter (Beloved).

Women, according to Morrison, are the worst sufferers of slavery. They are Blacks and on top of that women. They are not exploited just politically or socially but also sexually. The patriarch cum colonial forces always has a history of objectifying and dominating women.

It is in fact a very tedious task to narrate stories of trauma without affecting their intensity and without reducing them into normal everyday stories or clichés. Forgetting the past comes with another hideous negative aspect of concealing all the bad that has been done to the Blacks. If we

want the history to live on there is a need of bringing ‘trauma’ to the forefront instead of back grounding the miseries.

### **Abundance of magical realism- elements**

The ghost-figure in the novel *Beloved* is a not-so supernatural object and is in fact a human being in flesh and blood who is thought of as an incarnation of Sethe’s baby girl. The character also bearing the same name as the novel’s title is in no way ghostly and does not instill a fearsome atmosphere. While the mood of the novel becomes both mystical and mysterious after her arrival, it is not the character that has a supernatural air about her. Everything else in the story contributes to the supernatural and gloomy atmosphere. Be it the name (or in fact the number) of the house, or its treatment by Sethe through her dialogues, everything makes the surrounding more dense and dark. The house 124 is treated more like an active participant in the novel rather than just a setting. Phrases and dialogues like ‘when 124 was alive...’, ‘124 was quiet’, ‘I just hope you’ll pardon my house’ makes 124 come to life. It is more likely to be a counterpart to the ghost-figure, evident through various incidents and appearances like “white staircase climbed toward the blue-and-white wallpaper of the second floor”. (Morrison, 1987)

Sethe’s association with the chokecherry tree further heightens her lingering trauma of her past. As the name of the tree suggests, her past is not letting her go and she’s choked in those painful-haunting memories. There is also a vivid description and unfathomable fascination with ‘colors’ throughout the novel. Baby Suggs, towards the end of her life is all about colors. ‘Colored people’ and ‘colored ladies’ keep coming back to back in the novel. One can even think of it as

Morrison's subtle yet forceful way of hinting at the prejudice against the 'blacks' based on the color of their skin.

Morrison has used all these elements with a very normal or not-so-mystical ease as a 'narrative of the Black experience in colonial America'. She speaks of the effect of colonization on the culture and minds of the Africans. It does not just affect them on an individual level but on the cultural platform. The colonizers did not just drain the wealth from these countries but enslaved them ideologically too. The novel, thus, juggles between significance of 'community' and 'personality'.

## **Conclusion**

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* acts as a voice for the unheard and the silenced. The novel is replete with instances, both positive and negative, thus throwing light on the dual aspect of 'being chained by the trauma of the past' and the 'urge to overcome it'. The character Beloved not only acts as a reminder for the characters of the novel but also as a mouthpiece for the whole history of slavery and the blacks. Authors like Morrison bring together the real and the imagined in a bizarre combination of the duo-real world. Though considered as a masterpiece in the realm of magical realism, it still seeks to question its utility in the process of healing. But all the shortcomings of the technique are nullified as this great work puts back the most important jewel in the crown of American literature, which is generally neglected. The work not only talks about the past struggles and violence but also paves way for a better, united and equal world in which every single voice holds the same thrust and respect.



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