

## From Repression to Redemption: Reading the Metaphors in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

As a conjunction of black slavery in a colonial milieu, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* delineates all the historical and political paradigms of slavery where *Beloved*, the dead daughter can be read as a metaphor for slavery. As an important element of deconstruction, the ghost stages resistance to any specific time-frame in what Derrida regarded as the persistence of past or "out-of-jointness" of time in *Specters of Marx*. Thus breaking the temporal confine, the "spirit" of the spirit of slavery, manifest into *Beloved* which espouses the forms of Freudian Uncanny, where the detailing of Black psychopathology by Frantz Fanon substantiates the theme of return of the repressed. Thus slavery as an intrinsic inclination than an imposed vice, comes in the face of cognizance when *Beloved*, along with the collage of memories connote the grip of the slave past, the acknowledgement of which causes a denouement in redemption. In recounting Margaret Garner's life through Sethe's character essentially deconstructs slavery as a force of habit outgrown through a cathartic process by the individual than merely an oppression of the racialised community by the colonial masters. Thus the text in many ways signifies the symbolic culmination of immutability of slavery in the contemporary milieu.

**Key words:** Slave narrative, metaphor of haunting, return of the repressed,

### Introduction

"What does a man want? What does a black man want?"(Fanon 10)- Questions that revamped the black identity in a historical, political and psychological magnitude while firmly rooting itself in a post-imperial landscape, delineates the persistence of occidental sway over the rest of the world. The historical junction can be viewed as a world polarized as the white western elites and the black emulating lot, where the latter is irrevocably subdued to the Anglicized ways of life as an obsession over the occidental sophistications through reserved attitude and 'rolling

the Rs' as defined in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*. Apparently, the dichotomy of Black-White is projected through the stark contrast it offers perhaps by the inherent polarity in the concept or the many metaphoric extremities it projects through savage rituals and a superior justice through violence and guns, sealed respectively in their "blackness" and "whiteness". As Fanon explains it further, Black is not a man because, "Black is a black man; that is as result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of universe from which he must be extricated." (Fanon 10) Though it no longer answer to the white master in a colonial milieu, slavery as behaviour internalized through years of rehearsal, comes in many forms and is not essential to any individual race. However, as a confluence of black slavery and its many dimensions in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Fanon's delineation of the psychopathology of the Black as inferior to White with an unavoidable strain of cynicism, reasserts the purpose and purview of this paper.

Any serious discussion on slavery can be traced back to pre-colonial and colonial era as it is in the case of serfdom in the medieval era, the transatlantic slave trade during the imperial expansion, abduction of African slave to American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth century etc. As much as the history provides a saga of slave legacies, it cannot be overlooked that the specters of it still haunts the contemporary landscape in what is regarded as the modern slavery. As a haunting of the spirit of slavery, the spirit of the 'spirit' of slavery would "no longer frighten, it will no longer hide itself, driven back behind the bereaved rhetoric of antique models and the grimace of death masks. It will exceed it's the form, it will break out of the clothes, it will overtake signs, models..." (Derrida 144) Thus the specter, owing to the "out-of-jointness" of time, and the inadequateness contributed by its own "excesses", would garner a novel and evasive form to the 'spirit' of slavery which transpires in this milieu as modern slavery and its manifestations like human trafficking, forced migrant labor etc. A scientific enquiry into the subsets of modern slavery victims include, sexually and domestically exploited women; sexually exploited girls; men exploited in licit and illicit markets; and criminally exploited boys. (Lightowers, et al.1393) While the spirit remains, the fossils of it can be observed in Toni Morrison's fictionalized account of Margaret Garner who sought refugee in Ohio after having escaped from a Kentucky plantation in 1856 with Robert, her husband, and their children. Here, *Beloved* as a confluence of these various subtypes of slavery while exploring it historically and psychologically, reasserts its stand as a slave narrative where the quintessential thing of 'psyche' offers reflection in its progression from the aspects of repression to a denouement in redemption.

The intend of this paper is to explore the themes of slavery in *Beloved* while studying the depiction of its plot and character through historical and psychological dimensions to ultimately place it literally and metaphorically as a haunting slave narrative where, Sethe as a character outgrows the boundaries of the text to reign as a prevailing symbol of slavery and redemption. Through a collage of rememories implying the trials of her slave past, the collective and communicating unconscious of the black community and in the symbolic exorcism of the slave past by the disappearance of *Beloved*, the text connotes a loop of slavery that could be placed in any time frame which would invariably suggest its possibility in this moment and milieu. Yet what makes *Beloved* stand unique as a slave narrative is in its confluence of many dimensions (historical, political, and individual) of slavery and the exploration of its psychological

implications. Through the narrative, Morrison provides intimations on the original events of Margaret Garner's life thereby providing a historical vantage to the story. In its exploration of racial politics amidst slavery, the plot hints, though with incredulity, the notion of White-man's burden. The text goes on to observe the repercussion of slavery on an individual degree to ultimately infer its psychological concerns through the sense of regret, conscience, redemption of the sin to eventually outgrow the slave past.

The characters in *Beloved* can be prioritized into two based on their centrality in the text. Consequently, Sethe and Beloved would make the primary characters as their thoughts and memories become axial to the narrative; the rest of the characters including Paul D would make the secondary characters that revolve around the primary characters while the role of Denver would form a bridge between the primary and secondary characters. The narrative progresses in two phases, first at the Sweet Home then at the House 124. While the Sweet Home symbolizes a perpetual state of slavery, the murder of Beloved (Sethe's third child) proves to be an instance of an outcry and rebellion against White men and their sway over the racialised community. However, the haunting of Beloved in House 124 reinstates the intransience of slavery or rather, the haunting of slavery. Beloved as haunting confirms the haunting of the dead daughter in a literal quality while it connotes the haunting of slavery in a metaphorical plane reasserting the return of Beloved (the specter in blood and flesh) as the return of slavery and the return of the repressed.

Evoking ghosts in literature is the resurrection of a past that never was. Thus the identity of Beloved is an identity detached from its past self. On the other hand, it connotes the timelessness of its signification which Derrida defines in term of "the apparition of the specter that does not belong to that time" or the spectral moment where "a moment that no longer belongs to the time, if one understands by this word, the linking of the modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present)." (*Specters of Marx* xix) this observation invariably evokes rhetorical questions which within itself seek its psychological and hauntological references- Where does slavery begin if it is detached from its literal and political overtones? Where does slavery end if it is detached from the temporal realm?

### Content

Ghost in literature almost always holds a mirror to the past which as Tabitha King remarks as a "metaphor" for the burden of past or in terms of Salman Rushdie in the *Satanic Verses*; the specter is "unfinished business". The ghost is usually in a quest of moral, of justice, even of a weird kind through revenge and retribution, which proves true for the ghost in Hamlet which reiterates the out of jointness of time in its purpose to seek retribution in the rotten state of Denmark where the 'time' apparently 'is out-of-joint'; the ghosts in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* connotes the moral laxity in a Victorian sense (excessive cursing, homosexuality, polyamory) in a Civil War backdrop reasserting the distortion of time frame; the ghost of Don Andrea seeks to set the balance straight as it sets out with the spirit of Revenge. Similarly, Morrison's *Beloved* is one such powerful ghost that leads not only to the post structuralist theory of deconstruction but also the post colonial theory through methods of hauntology. As an instance of post colonial gothic literature, the text exposes communication between the colonized

and the colonizer on the aspects of slavery and White Man's burden. The present absence of ghost as a metaphor for the timelessness of past as confirmed in the *Specters of Marx* is substantiated in *Beloved* as "The text teaches us how to live with our ghosts, those people who are not presently living though still persisting with us or within us in the present." (Barish 19) Here, as a reiteration of history the story of Margaret Garner in *Beloved*, becomes a universal text on slavery, confirming the persistence of past while not denying the plausibility of the events as a recurring loop anywhere.

"Derrida finds that the ghost becomes an important concept for his project of deconstructing Western metaphysics – which is predicated on presence – because it problematizes the relationship between presence and absence, being and non-being". (Barish 19) This proves true for *Beloved* the ghost, who exists in gray area that falls between dead and being alive though it strongly asserts its presence as an axial element of the story; further, *Beloved* treads the faint line between presence and absence as a metaphor for slavery as it begins to haunt Sethe, to remind her of her slave past and to wrench her away from the false sense of security that her current abode (House 124) seemingly offers. As a reiteration of Margaret Garner's story, *Beloved* gives a patient and graphic detailing of the eventful life of Sethe (Margaret Garner), the slave from racialised community. Here the distance between the sin of infanticide and the same as an act of revolt against slavery, scales the moral of her life. The fact that that scale is tipping not in her favor would justify the apparition of the spirit of her dead daughter, who returns to haunt her of the sin as well as the slavery.

The instances of slavery are abundant in *Beloved* and it can be traced through the lives of the Sweet Home men who were born into slavery, to Baby Suggs, their slave mother. Sethe was also born to a slave mother who she barely remembers except for the vivid images of her haunting death. Sethe has been in the Sweet Home as long as she remembers and eventually gets married to Halle, one of Sugg's sons. Though he buys freedom to his mother at the cost of boundless overtime, the most haunting "spirit" of slavery comes evident in the fact that they think high of their owners at the Sweet Home, generous for letting them slack off in the forced labour. This is where Morrison hints at the fact that the slavery has become a force of habit for the racialised people. Their new owners at the Sweet Home is the tyrannous school teacher, a flat character, reduced to caricature of evil and his disciples who treats the slave community as less than human while becoming almost beastly in the process. He objectifies Sethe, and with his disciples, makes a classification of her characters as human and animalistic.

The violence continues to a point where they violate Sethe and "steals" her milk, a symbolic connotation of denial of the archetypal Great Mother, and her role of giving life and nurturing. This denial perhaps gave way to what Adrienne Rich observed in *Of Mother Born* as invoking the Dark Mother archetype that is associated "with bloodshed and killing." (Rich 117) Despite having run away from the Sweet Home, the school teacher trails her back to House 124 which turns quite bloody by Sethe's violent attack on the whole institution of slavery. Sethe couldn't get through the murder of her younger daughter, Denver; due to the intervention of Stamp Paid as Sethe unleashes a chaotic spur of resistance to hand herself over her slave master. Thus the murder of her third child, (Beloved) can be justified in terms of what Rich observes in "The Domestication of Motherhood" or more plainly as a desperate attempt to protect her

children from a legacy of chattel slavery. The murder of Beloved is one of the climactic moments in the text which can be read as impulsive act of righteousness, a violent fight for dignity and individuality, the sin of infanticide, failure as a mother, breaking the archetypal image of nurturing mother. The gist of the moment is the conflict between motherhood and the individual. If the balance is tipping, inferring if it is in Sethe's favor would answer all of the questions broached in this analysis.

When it comes through the eyes of the white man, who creates the text, "In the magazines, the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by the Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary, "who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes"" (Fanon 146) Here it would suffice to say that the entire episode is misinterpreted by the schoolteacher as he observes that the "slave" can only handle so much freedom and the excesses of it would drive them savage and beastly. He fails to see the revolt against violence and slavery, instead, he reads into it, the apparent image of gruesome murder as plain brutality. Though the murder of her daughter as a resistance towards slavery, eventually wins her freedom, the pertinent question remains- Has she truly outfought slavery? If the sacrifice of her daughter was the answer, wouldn't the return of Beloved defeat its purpose? The answers to these questions demand clarity in the metaphor of *Beloved* as a ghost and Beloved as the repressed.

*Beloved* as a haunting of slavery includes the memories of slave past and the murder of Beloved as the ultimate act of resistance to chattel slavery. While the plot begins 'in medias res', the events leading up to the moment are recollected as memories of the past. These moments of regressions are largely graphic detailing on images of slavery, be it the death of Sethe's mother, Baby Suggs' contemplations on her husband, Paul D's escapade with Sixo from Sweet Home, his humiliation in a chain gang in prison, with an iron bit in his mouth etc. these memories are juxtaposed to Paul D's observation of the rooster named Mister who enjoys more freedom than the slaves. The Sweet Home men are victims of Chattel slavery so is Sethe who becomes aware of the endless legacy of abuse and enslavement under the White owners as the callousness of the schoolteacher snaps her into sense. Running away from the teacher garnered her some sense of liberty yet she is a slave to the idea and paradigms of the racialised community that still looks up to the gentle white owners. In its delineation of the 'list' by the school teacher, objectifying Sethe as a commodity and her sexual exploitation implies the various subtypes of slavery as in sexual exploitation of women, exploitation of men in licit and illicit market etc. Here one could infer that, while it reminisces about the detritus of slavery from the past, it also takes turn in anticipating its modern form of slavery and racism.

In terms of Derrida and Mark Fisher, history as a repetition and disruption of the past events as it irrupts into presence, functions here on dual levels as events of Margaret Garner's life retold through Sethe's eyes takes more detail and reflection into the personal (Sethe's psyche) and the skeptic delineation of the abolitionists (with the negro figurines at the Bodwins's place). Fisher's classification of the haunting as the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' broaches on the haunting of the present from past and future. The prevalence of the condition (forms of modern slavery, racism and xenophobia) in the contemporary milieu would invariably place the text as a

‘future haunting’ of history. The plot of the text is in reference to life of Margaret Garner which holds a mirror to the authenticity of a historic past and it comes to haunt the readers through the text. “For Derrida, the return and repetition of the past in the present is manifested through the figure of the revenant, that which returns each time as if it were the first, unchanging and insistent, demanding a reckoning for a message that went unheard or was ignored.” (Coverley 10) Within the textual significations, the haunting of ‘Beloved’ implies the haunting of her slave past for despite her violent attack and reaction against slavery, she is still enslaved to its specters. She never outfought slavery though she lost her daughter in the fight. And that brings more questions- Did the murder of her daughter transpire as a sin of infanticide than a sacrifice for liberty? Does the failure as a mother outweigh the impulsive act of righteousness? This opens an alley into the psychological bearings of the character.

The psychological observations on ‘Beloved’ begins with the Freudian explanation of the “Uncanny”, a term common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic and fantastic literature. “Freud introduces the uncanny as a special shade of anxiety, which can be experienced in real life or in literature, caused by the return of the repressed.” (Masschelein 54). Beloved as the return of the repressed impulses invokes restlessness in House 124 which edges to a borderline behavior in Sethe to please the revenant by yielding to all of its whims and fancies in what appears to be a distended form of justice or payback for the wrong done unto it. Freudian definition of “Uncanny” as the concealed or the hidden, maintains an element of secrecy with reference to its German etymology, “Unheimlich” (not from home). The ghost as it is intrinsic to it, is neither alive nor dead for it exists in a gray area that compromises its presence in a definitive temporal realm. The subject of “Uncanny” “belongs to all that is terrible- to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread. Yet we may expect that it implies some intrinsic quality which justifies the use of a special name.” (Freud 1) The “Uncanny” in *Beloved* excites the gothic atmosphere with its enigmatic actions that often connotes horror in its erratic attitude. ‘Beloved as a daughter’ comes evident in its evolution from a thin brooding girl to a plump woman agrees to its murderous tendencies in choking Sethe to indulging in sweet goodies reveals a metaphoric evolution from its need for vengeance to reconciliation in the excesses of motherly affection and love.

Between the two deaths- murder of Beloved, the baby and the exorcism of Beloved, the haunting- is the space of pure death drive (with the tendency towards self-destruction in Sethe), without desire, between symbolic and actual death. While the infanticide connotes a symbolic death of slavery, with Sethe’s impulsive and fierce attack against the white men, the exorcism of Beloved from House 124 by the women of the racialised community, acknowledges the detritus of slavery and ultimately expels the hauntings of servitude which previously functioned through Beloved. The repetition of the repressed trauma which overrides any instinctual inclination would then connote the Freudian death drive. Here, the space between the two deaths- symbolic and actual in Lacanian observation, acknowledges the “unconditional and insistent demand- like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, insisting that he be avenged. In the popular culture, this position is often taken up by the living dead-ghosts, vampires etc. ‘Beloved as a metaphor’ for slavery has its predilections in hauntology, *différance* and dissemination, the subject of which signifies the

return of the repressed that haunts the pretense to the conceptual discourse and exposes the ideological closure of definition and concepts.” It conveys a sense of horror over deference to the “it” that is invisible to the public. Uncanny is often a reflection of the “id” or the repressed impulses. The ‘repressed’ impulses in turn assumes the identity of the “Uncanny” phantasm which in this case would be “Beloved” with references to slavery, sin, guilt, exploitation etc.

The return of Beloved in the prime of her youth connotes the reprisal of servitude in a more intense and private manner and also as a fundamental dynamism of the gothic-slave narrative. Here, Beloved as a dream comes in the face of cognizance when the essential strain of realism offers its resistance to the magical and fantastic delineation of Beloved. The existence/return of Beloved jeopardizes the natural order where the only logical deduction would be “Beloved as a dream” or “Beloved as a projection”. As Freud holds, dreams, or any of its manifestations are the consequence of multiple impressions from past. The projection of “Beloved” comes from the impressions of slavery and the murder. Freud regards it ‘scapegoating’ where the policing of super ego is suspended following which it is projected elsewhere (in the ghost of Beloved), where it can be blamed, punished and condemned. For Sethe, the murder of Beloved was the deplorable error, thus the error of infanticide didn’t achieve the intended end of striking back at slavery. Undoing the death of Beloved would then mean the persisting inclination to slavery. Here the return was necessary to condone the sin and overcome slavery which is done collectively by the slave women as a mass exorcism. Thus the return of the repressed is the climactic moment and also the one inducing the catharsis in the protagonist and it becomes safe to say that, return of “Beloved” causes an evolution from repression (of traumatic impulses) to redemption (from guilt and slavery).

## CONCLUSION

The traumas and injustice of past are often delineated in fiction by employing ghosts as a metaphor for the same- instances of the same can be traced through the ghost of the dead king in Hamlet who represents the ‘rotten state of Denmark. Of recent, *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders shows its hauntological predilections in its delineation of a Bardo in a graveyard where the ghosts connote the various socio-psychological issues from sexuality to American Civil War. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the metaphor of Beloved holds a mirror to the sense of guilt and enslavement from infanticide and chattel slavery, endured by the protagonist. While the murder of the child haunts the protagonist in an individual level, Sethe becomes an everyman figure for the liberation of the entire slave community. Sethe’s agony over the dead daughter implies her frustration over slavery; and as a metaphor for slavery, Beloved still haunts her despite the two decades of her freedom. But the notion of freedom is questionable as she still works in a place run by a white man who is less than tolerant towards her. The quintessential question that the author tries to ask is that- “Has the centuries of oppression and slavery burned it into their blood as a force of habit?” This observation is further substantiated by the return of Beloved as a haunting of slavery, apartheid, sin and regret.

The narrative is lined with themes of trauma, resistance, redemption and enslavement. The instances of trauma as in the abuses endured by the slave community under the white masters gets projected through Paul D undergoing punishment as a chained slave and the school teacher's cruelty towards Sethe. The theme of 'resistance' is largely inclined towards the resistance towards 'slavery'. Sethe's resistance towards slavery is one of the highest moments in the narrative as she murders her daughter. While she hopes to have fought slavery with her symbolic message, of 'not surrendering another generation to the slavery', the next eighteen years are spent, 'resisting' the 'sin' of infanticide which eventually gets blown up in her face as the ghost of Beloved which serves as a metaphor for her murdered child as well as slavery. 'Redemption' is a theme that reflects the other side of resistance. While the moment of murder causes the 'resistance to slavery' and 'resistance to sin', the culmination of the events in a mass exorcism, provides the redemption, Sethe had been searching all her life- from both 'slavery' and 'sin'. The theme of 'redemption' in turn implies the theme of 'enslavement' which functions in two levels. Despite having stood up to slavery, in her own ways, the enslavement to 'white' is a force of habit inherent to the slave community. Furthermore, the theme of slavery can be delineated in Sethe's enslavement to the guilt of murdering her daughter which later manifests into the return of Beloved.

Beloved as a metaphor, comes evident in various dimensions of slavery can be delineated through its historical aspect as a reiteration of the life of Margaret Garner. With its political inclinations, it connotes the aspects of racial identity, apartheid and slavery. In an individual level, it points to the psychological convictions of the protagonist and the condensation of Beloved as a manifestation of her subconscious. In all these aspects, Beloved embodies the trials and tribulations confronted by the protagonist and Beloved as a dream, thus stems from Sethe's past imbued with slavery and trauma. Thus, from its incidence to the exorcism at the denouement of the narrative, the function of ghost is to expose the psyche of the protagonist, Sethe and the evolution from aspects of repression to a cathartic redemption.

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