

Reclaiming the Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Beloved by Toni Morrison is a rigorous exegesis of past. While oscillating between hard facts and indelible memory we learn about the psychological turmoil, through Sethe, Paul D, Sixo, Halle and others that the slaves had to undergo. Fully aware that as future cannot be sealed, the past can also not be undone, Morrison uncovers the deep recesses and communicates the importance of forgetting through the mouth of the doubly suppressed population of world, i.e., female characters. Sethe undergoes terrible experiences during the days of slavery that she spent at Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky. Eighteen years after gaining freedom from the cursed life of a slave Sethe is confronted by the unspoken facts about past with the arrival of Paul D. Morrison holds the view that it is important to revisit the past in order to fully annihilate its effects. Sethe revisits her past through Beloved, believed to be the ghost of her own daughter who she herself killed for the fear of her leading the same life as she led. The narrator does not indulge in uselessly beating back the past but makes it a point for the story to be heard and felt. Interestingly, deviating from the norm of blaming all whites to be cruel, the novel presents their positive and humane aspects as well through Amy Denver and others, and asserts that racism as concept cannot be eliminated from the minds of the people until the dark memories of transatlantic slavery are made peace with. It provides lessons about not getting stunted by the past but to learn and absorb from it.

Key Words: Slavery, Memory, African American, Plantation, Reconciliation.

With the common interest increasingly getting engaged in the writings of diaspora, the harrowing African-American situation has received an unusual attention. Simon Manuel, the first ever black woman swimmer to secure an individual Olympic title for the United States in the Rio Olympics 2016, voices the void in which the African- American community

finds itself suspended and says, “Just coming into this race, I kind of tried to take the weight of the black community off my shoulders, which is something I carry with me just being in this position... I do hope that it kind of goes away” (Teariffic). Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* (1987) is a post- modern rewriting of the American slave history. It brings to life the historical mentality that exists in present day only as an ache caused due to injustice in the minds of generations of those who went through the traumatic situation. While focusing on the people who once lived as slaves and are now free, the spotlight follows the process of recovery and that of getting accustomed to freedom. The slow and gradual process is presented dramatically through painful dialects of loss, repression and memory. The fractured pieces of untold history are gathered in the form of fragments of memory seamed together by the author in collective form. Set in Cincinnati of 1873 *Beloved* revokes the black past with a new perspective. Finding the basis in Margaret Garner’s story that was summarized in a newspaper clipping in *The Black Book*, Toni Morrison develops her as a symbol of willingness, of determination to risk every possible thing for freedom. “Too little imaginative space” demanded the writer “to invent her (Garner’s) thoughts, plumb them” and to bring to life a woman who represents “the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; (who) assume(s) the consequences of choosing infanticide; (and) claim her own freedom” (*Morrison XI*).

Dedicated to “sixty million and more” whose names and stories we are never going to know, the novel is a series of shocks, and deals with the guilt of being a survivor. Through stream of consciousness technique the writer explores the intricate human relationships and complex inner experiences rather than just giving words to the testimony. Through the incidents in the ex-slaves’ minds, the novel records the cruelty, violence, and atrocities—physical floggings and psychological fragmentation. Barbara Schapiro remarks that slavery,

... penetrates, perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery. The novel reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one’s status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual’s internal world. These internal resonances are so profound that even if one is eventually filled from external bondage, the elf

will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom. (194)

Beloved discloses the gory aspects of history through various characters but it is the feminine point of view that dominates. Repeated rapes, exploitation, separation from her male counterpart, being treated as an animal form the central conflict in the novel. As Deborah Horvitz opines that the novel explores “the insidious degradation imposed on all slaves” (157). It also deals with the “matrilineal ancestry and the relationship among enslaved, free, alive and dead mothers and daughters” (157). *Beloved* thus provides the opportunity for a resurrected female slave narrator’s voice. Not only Sethe but her mother; Pasty ‘the 30 mile woman’; Sethe’s daughters, Denver and Beloved also come up with their experiences. Above all it is Baby Suggs, with broken hip as the physical legacy of 60 years of bondage, whose escape into colours brings peace to the readers.

At Sweet Home plantation the Garners galvanize reality, with an illusion of security for slaves that gets shattered when Schoolteacher takes over the charge after Garner’s death. Sethe realizes the brutal truth that Sweet Home was a slave house veiled as “a wonderful lie” (190). Above and beyond thrashing the male slaves, Schoolteacher unflinchingly told them that “definition belonged to the definers not the defined” (Morrison 190). He, a physiognomist and a phrenologist, immediately commodifies his brother’s ‘human property’ by treating them as creatures, as “gelded workhorses whose weigh and whinny could be translated into a language responsible human spoke” (125). In order to keep them away from the life they crave for, he systematically documents their behaviour as a measure of his scientific representation of them. According to Sethe,

Schoolteacher was teaching us things we couldn’t learn. I didn’t care nothing about the measuring string. We all laughed about that-- except Sixo. He didn’t laugh at nothing. But I didn’t care. Schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool. (191)

Her growing responsiveness about her personal standing forces her to reject slavery, circumscribe her motherhood and escape barefoot. Bleeding, hungry, exhausted, disoriented Sethe struggles to reach Ohio and save “the life of her children’s mother,” (Morrison 30). Amidst the deterioration of black life at Sweet Home, Sethe successfully gets her children on

the board on the North bound caravan. However, in the midway she becomes the sport of Schoolteacher's assistants who breach her honour by stealing the milk she bears because of her pregnancy with her fourth child. She knows "what it is to be without milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler it, and to have so little left" (Morrison 200). After being brutally beaten for reporting this heinous act to Mrs. Garner, pregnant and mutilated, the woman escapes to Ohio, to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs and her children. Sethe does not arrive in Cincinnati with her husband Halle, but with her fourth child, Denver, who's born on route. Wendy Harding & Jacky Martin remark:

Sethe's escape should not be characterized less as simple evasion but as a progressive commitment to a destiny in which her fellow slaves' suffering is going to be redeemed. She is the bearer of a message, entrusted with a nurturing function, and by giving birth to Denver on the river that divided the zones of freedom and slavery, she initiates a new generation of men and women. (194)

In Ohio, under the care of Baby Suggs, Sethe begins reclaiming herself and her children. But when Schoolteacher arrives to take her and her children back into slavery, as was facilitated by the Fugitive Slaves Law, she instantly recollects the brutal beatings that she had endured before her escape. Collecting "every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful" (163) she rushes with her children to the woodshed where she hopes to find a safe harbor. This event brings to light the choices that Morrison offers to and through characters, especially when they are without autonomy. The most crucial of these is the juxtaposition between Sethe's choice of death for herself and her children, above slavery, with Paul D's preference for life when he faces the similar circumstances that leave him with the same choice. Both Paul D and Sethe 'got to choose' and in their following lives, they are preyed upon by the choices they make. And we place them at the pedestal of dignity when, in their suffering, they accept the responsibility of their opposing choices. Towards the end of the novel Sethe revisits her past and takes upon herself the responsibility of Schoolteacher's racism and says to an uncomprehending Paul D "I made the ink.... He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (Morrison 271).

Sethe's contemplation in wake of rearranging and coming to terms with "time, memory and the past" echoes Morrison's suggestion that to establish a stable future, the 'ghosts' of the past must be confronted and understood. Her "nothing ever dies" (Morrison

36) attitude gets concretized with the arrival of a fully dressed woman whose limited linguistic ability, baby-soft skin, neediness and emotional instability point towards a lifetime spent in captivity. But Sethe's sensation of water-breaking at seeing the young lady who smells like milk and calls herself Beloved, her awareness about a pair of earrings that Sethe possessed long ago, her humming the song that Sethe made up for her children which could be known only to them and her having a long scar under her chin which would have been there under Sethe's daughter's chin had she survived relate, in one way or the other, to Sethe's past, and builds a gothic image in the reader's mind. The bond created by memory, love and pain is evident from Sethe's belief that "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine"; "Beloved is my sister"; "I am Beloved and she is mine" (200). It is through this complex relationship that Sethe begins to realize the importance of her conscience and her people's past.

Sethe finds in Beloved an agent to bid adieu to her past. Beloved who sometimes is also seen as an embodiment of her dead mother, communicates some memories that bear a resemblance to those that her mother might have had of the journeying through the Atlantic. Her strange speaking style and the perpetual smile, symbolically, emulate Sethe's yearning for her own mother. Sethe's desire to be compensated and explained the absence of a nurturing mother results in their switching places with Beloved taking the role of the mother and Sethe of the child. In the course of the novel we realize that Beloved brings familiarity to the experiences of all those slaves who made journey from Africa to America, and voices the collective unconsciousness of those who feel oppressed by the slave past and its legacy. She becomes the allegorical figure that represents the victims, the past and the present. It has been observed that the ghost is a "symbolic representation of the memory of more than sixty million men and women and children who lost their lives to slavery. The ghost who comes to life in the novel provides a way for Morrison to use the supernatural to give voice to those who died at the hand of slavery" (Modern 332). Toni Morrison herself establishes the importance and need of the ghost when she says, "I just imagined the life of a dead girl which was the girl that Margaret Garner killed... And I call her Beloved so that I can filter all these confrontations and questions that she has..." (qtd. in Contemporary 267). Paralyzing and enabling at the same time Beloved's violent presence establishes a destructive and parasitic relationship with Sethe who then gets stimulated to come up with stories that had laid hidden

in her memory—about her being abandoned by her mother, about the indignities suffered at Sweet Home, about the motivations for slitting the throat of an infant girl. Engagement with past allows Sethe learn about herself and bring a consciousness about her ability to live in the present.

At a point that demands her pondering over the possibility of explaining to Beloved, Sethe contemplates over the origin of the impulse to kill her. She gathers wrecks of life and discovers that the eccentric decision was neither a consequence of the threat of physical atrocities, nor the dread of being sold and separated. She comes to recognize that it was her own struggle with the demeaning and dehumanizing eyes of the masters that her children were bound to get affected by. She was haunted that they might cultivate a similar way of looking at themselves. She recalls the horrifying sentences that she overheard years back:

I heard him say, “No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up.” I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back.
(Morrison 193)

Interestingly, Morrison does not censure every white character for abusing blacks, and portrays their compassionate and sensitive side through characters like Amy Denver, the daughter of a farmer indentured servant who helps Sethe reach Baby Suggs' house. There is almost immediate bonding between the two perfect strangers: “They did not look directly at each other, not straight into the eyes anyway. Yet they slipped effortlessly into yard chat about nothing in particular” (33). While at one point Amy's socialization dominates her thought and depicts Sethe as nothing more than a pregnant animal, at the very next moment she is taken by Sethe's determination. Alone in the lap of mother-nature and free from the artificial constraints of race, Sethe and Amy form a family having its roots in love and compassion which ultimately is able to sustain itself and its new member. When Sethe names her daughter after Amy, she acknowledges her kin as responsible for Denver's birth.

In fact, many critics have noted that names are extremely significant in the black legacy which signifies their identity. From every name the readers can deduce something or the other. Sethe's name is masculine in origin as she was named for a black man. Her mother remains unnamed and is addressed only as 'Ma'am.' Her identity is marked by a brand of a

circle with a cross beneath her breast, as all others were branded by the slave masters physically as well as psychologically as their property.

Halle, Stamp Paid, Sixo and all the Pauls, represent those who were robbed of their identity. Paul D and other Pauls are denied their identity and are seen as a group of slaves who are differentiated by mere alphabets. It deprives them of individuality and also robs them of their right to claim identity. Stamp introduces himself as “Name’s Stamp, Stamp Paid” (91). Christened Joshua at birth, he renames himself after being bought and later freed from slavery. He had to give his wife to his master’s son that deprived him of his dignity. He paid and paid continually for his freedom. The freedom to name leads to a sense of value and formation of a new identity. Through the process of naming, Morrison emphasizes on reclaiming identity.

The novel comes across as a community’s efforts to pose its claim over the place that it deserves in history. The paper analyses the struggle of intellect that fights against its own self to reshape the ‘insignificant’ identity that slaves have always been allotted because of the distorted and erased history presented by the whites. It also studies the fact that to heal oneself of the pain of past one must not keep the facts hidden behind a veil but must bring it out to the world’s notice. Reconciliation demands unburdening oneself from the thoughts of past, not by suppressing them but by repeating and retelling them till the saturation point is achieved that provides the individual ability to rise and look at life from a fresh perspective. For those who are unable to recover from the memories of the traumatic experiences of slavery, Morrison rewrites the past and through it tries to offer them revival that would help them move forward in life.

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