

Navigating the Past to Find Community and the Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* speaks of a ghost corporeal and immaterial at the same time, engaging with the idea of a past which is all-consuming, yet possessing weight enough to reflect and ponder upon, attempting to define the present with the lineaments of painful memories without undermining the importance of the same, nor giving into strong "rememories" to a point of no return or future, whilst simultaneously highlighting how the steadfast tether to a particular community may enhance the healing process of the self and how it may help the individual define the gravity of imbibing bitter truths and lessons of the times bygone. This paper explores the dangers of recklessly steeping oneself in the past and how a sense of community is integral to the self and personal growth in order to exist as an individual in society.

Keywords: Community, individual, past, rememories, self

Introduction

Noble laureate, Toni Morrison—an American novelist, essayist, book editor and college professor—penned the intricately vivid novel *Beloved* to express the African-American experience, basing the story on a true account, a "historical Margaret Garner", in order to navigate the cruel, amnesic terrain of slavery. *Beloved* is not simply a story, it is a history. One is made intimate with the slave experience by having "the sense of things be both under control and out of control", by having "the order and quietude of everyday life...violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead" and most importantly have "the herculean effort to forget ... threatened by memory desperate to stay alive".

In *Beloved*, moments are suspended in time instead of fading out and no longer existing with its passage; time clothes itself in the garbs of illusion, tainting the present with "pictures" of the past; these pictures floating in the "place where it happened", places where it all happened. We see Sethe grapple with the qualities of her "rememory"-

"I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. 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 rememory, but out there, in the world." (*Beloved*, 43)

These words possess truth in more than one way for Sethe and her family, one of them being that Beloved does not pass on; she is not one of the things that go, she is one of the things that just stay. Not only does the haunting past of the death of Beloved cling to Sethe's mind but Beloved does not ever cross the "bridge" and she comes back in corporeal form to remind Sethe of not just herself but the life of slavery that was led by her people. Beloved is the symbol giving material identity to the millions of slaves who were buried and struggled to be forgotten by the African-American people. The stream of consciousness narration makes one jump from one time period to another without intimation, the past merges with the present, with the thoughts of a possible future; the past bleeds into it all and this causes the concept of time and timelessness to become primary to the story. The past dominates everything.

"Anything dead coming back to life hurts." The pride of Sethe as well as the crime she committed of stealing her child's life causes her to become isolated and ostracized from the Black community, a bitter reality. With the arrival of Beloved into her home from the dead, she becomes isolated in a wonderful lie. In Philip Page's essay *Circularity in Toni Morrison's Beloved*, he states, "Sethe, Denver, and Paul D are possessed, in a different sense of the word, by the ghost of Beloved—an ordeal they must pass through but certainly not a healthy condition. In a larger sense, the novel demonstrates that no one can or should belong to anyone else and that, in fact, such possession uncomfortably resembles another form of human possession- slavery." The past possesses all the members of the house: Paul D has his tobacco tin blown open so that the "spilled contents that floated freely" made him their "play and prey", Denver is steeped in her own memories of the past and the most affected out of them, Sethe, precariously hangs on by a thread, the past threatening to engulf her and rob her of her sanity and life force.

Page also states that, "Beloved, symbolizing the power of both Sethe's and Paul D's unaccepted memories, holds the upper hand as long as these memories remain unacknowledged", which is interesting as the opposite of the same, the unmediated and limitless communication with the past, with Beloved, is a dangerous path, a path full of painful memories and thoughts. What Page, as well as Morrison is trying to say through the novel is, there is value in remembering past experiences, it is important to acknowledge the past in order to move on but one mustn't dwell in it inexhaustibly. In an interview in 1988, Morrison remarked: "the past is absent or it's romanticised. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past". To Sethe "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" but it isn't as black and white as she makes it out to be. The past cannot simply be killed, you must live with the truth in your present as well as future but you should not let it overwhelm you, overpower you or let it haunt you, as Ella said,

"The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out. Slave life; freed life – every day was a test and a trial." (*Beloved*, 302)

Now, as stated above, Sethe's isolation with Beloved was a dangerous game. Her hubris had removed her from the folds of the Black community and 124 was just a haunted house, inhabited by a wrongful, prideful woman and her family. This impression of Sethe, this divide between her and her community, let Beloved wreak havoc and eat Sethe inside out.

Over here we must understand that Beloved is not only a ghost but she is a representation of Sethe's past, she is the past of all the African-American people who were tortured under slavery. "I am Beloved and she is mine" - the possessive nature of Beloved is also threatening and unpredictable, she has eyes only for Sethe and in turn Sethe is consumed with guilt so she bends to the will of this uncontrollable entity, her daughter, it was as Denver thought, "It was as though her mother had lost her mind..."

"The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children, waving away flies in grape arbors, crawling on her knees to a lean-to. None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her?" (*Beloved*, 284)

It dawned on Denver that if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick a knife, Beloved might. The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved. Denver acted as the key which unlocked the doors that had been closed on Sethe's back for years. She instigated the act which broke Beloved's spell. Denver here acts as the descendants of the African-Americans who were brought to America via the Middle Passage, she stands for the youth who never faced slavery's harsh whip directly on themselves but instead drank the watered-down pain they faced as a result of it. Denver here acts as the 'uneducated young' finally taking a stand. Denver unlocks the spirit of deep-rooted brotherhood and sisterhood blocked by the Black community towards Sethe.

"The news that Janey got hold of she spread among the other coloredwomen. Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair. It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation... Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith - as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both." (*Beloved*, 300)

The Black community might have been bothered by pride but when push came to shove, the bottom line was that they were good people who would never shut out their own in need. As Sethe diminished and Beloved swelled, the women's community began to stir unrestfully amongst themselves; they started talking, started planning, started collecting their love, their sisterhood, their brotherhood, awakening themselves to stop the child from killing the mama, the past from killing Sethe: "Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present." The unbridled invasion of the past into Sethe's home needed have an end put to it. The women didn't know how, but they were determined to intervene between Sethe and her demonic child, between Sethe and her all-consuming past. In her essay "*Postmodern Blackness*": *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the End of History*, Kimberly Davis states that "One way to free oneself from the horrors of the past is to reenact and reconfigure the past in the present, as Sethe does with an ice pick at the end of the novel, attacking not her own

children this time but the white man Bodwin, whom she perceives as a reincarnation of her slave master Schoolteacher. Mae Henderson argues that this reconfiguration of the past delivers Sethe, who "demonstrates her possession of rather than by the past," and thus exorcises Beloved."

When the women assemble outside 124, the shape that Beloved has donned is one of a pregnant woman, beside her Sethe seems to be a little girl, their roles seem reversed. We can see the reflection of the black women in Beloved during her exorcism, a deviously clever image introduced by Morrison. Beloved embodies the pathetic plight of the women's community and this lends a sympathetic edge to Beloved; she is a mirror. We must also be cognizant of the fact that the plight of African-American women during slavery was worse than that of men, we see this highlighted throughout *Beloved* as well, through its questions on gender and narration. Women together as a whole understood the pain and suffering they had to go through on another plane altogether, therefore the sisterhood amongst women of colour was stronger and deeper than that of the community as a whole.

One notices, Beloved dies when an act of compassion and love is performed amongst Sethe and her community. We see this explicitly when the coupling and unification of Sethe and Paul D takes place; Beloved starts physically falling apart, she starts decomposing, she pulls out a back tooth. If Sethe is able to swallow the past and look towards a better future, without suppressing her memories, her past would no longer be a threat. Her past would be a part of her, not a separate entity trying to consume her. But in order for her to do so, she needs Paul D: She needs her community. Davis states, "Morrison suggests that dwelling on one's own past, or the collective past of the slaves, can strangle your present as Beloved nearly strangles Sethe in the Clearing."

"When the women assembled outside 124, Sethe was breaking a lump of ice into chunks... they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved's hand. Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words... It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash." (*Beloved*, 307)

Sethe relives the ordeal she had to go through, when she was young and twenty-eight days has passed her stay at 124 as a free, runaway slave—Schoolteacher, Bodwin, ice pick, handsaw and Beloved, but this time it was not her own daughter she was going to attempt to kill, it was the white man whom she believed took everything from her, the only bad luck in her world. It was a memory playing again, but this time she runs away from Beloved, leaving her behind, into the 'hill of black people' to destroy the 'man without skin', surrounded by women who chant and pray for her, accept her. Sethe finally leaves her past behind, she leaves Beloved behind, thus exorcising her with the help of her community. Davis comments, "I find Beloved's ending similar to Linda Hutcheon's description of the postmodern historiographic novel: "the past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled... the past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgment of limitation as well as power"."

According to Slavoj Zizek, “The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization. The dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt”. Sethe pays off her debt. In the end, she reintegrates with her community and leaves the terrible past behind, she frees herself of Beloved’s ghost and the ghosts of her past. Beloved is exorcised after the intervention of the women’s community, it would not have been possible without them. John Mbiti, the father of modern African theology stated in regards to the individual and the community in African culture, “the individual can only say, ‘I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’”.

The concept of brotherhood and community amongst the African-Americans is extremely crucial. Sethe was delivered of her ghost only after her rememory was retold, relived, remembered; only then was she healed. Beloved is forgotten. Page stated, “The novel ends with yet another paradox. The characters finally exorcise their frightening pasts and thus survive; since ‘remembering seemed unwise’, eventually ‘...all trace [of Beloved] is gone...’. The narrator, repeating that ‘it was not a story to pass on,’ seems to agree. But by telling the story, the narrator contradicts herself: She does pass the story on. She and of course Morrison force readers to relive the country's past horrors and make them participants in the recreation of those horrors. Would it have been better not to pass it on? It had to be passed on. Just as Sethe and Paul D could not pass on their memories but had to, just as Denver could not enter the world but had to, just as Sethe could not harm her children but had to, so the story could not be passed on, but had to be.”

“This was not a story to pass on.

Down by the stream in back of 124. her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there.

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. the rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but the wind in the eaves, or the spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.

Beloved.” (*Beloved*, 324)

Conclusion

The journey taken by Sethe from the beginning of the book to the end marks a woman who learned the true meaning of the past, the importance of it, the importance of community. One must always remember, *Beloved* is not just a story, it is a history and history ceases to exist if you forget it and it ceases to exist without people to remember it. One cannot live without the other.

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