

Revelation of Past and Present in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to trace how the blacks need united effort to succeed in a white dominated society. A few blacks with their education and wealth changed their lifestyle like that of the whites and believed that they could gain entry into the white society. Morrison's *Beloved* is analysed in the light of her class consciousness both thematically and structurally. Any how the blacks could rise up in America culturally and socially only if they could build up solidarity among themselves. In *Beloved*, Morrison tells the story of runaway slave Sethe and reveals her conflicting attitudes towards nature as a result of the violence she experiences while enslaved on the Southern plantation Sweet Home. Sethe's past and the history of slavery in America illuminate African-American women's complicated views of nature and how that has translated into modern day environmental perceptions. Morrison's unique stream-of-consciousness writing style is especially effective in blurring the boundary between past and present. Invariably shifting between past and present incidents admits Morrison to depict the instability and fluidity of categories and how confronting definition admits for resistance and healing. It is a novel based on memory, history, revisiting past and coming to terms with the present reality.

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Toni Morrison is the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American Literature. In her literary works she daringly portrays not only the sorry state of affairs in which blacks found themselves in but also reveals the beauty and hope beneath the surface of blacks' sufferings in America. Morrison, a champion of a new expressive and innovative force, in her fiction, discovers history of her race and projects it as a phenomenon for opening new vistas of hope for the suffering humanity for success through solidarity. Hers is an authorial voice associated with the quest for freedom. She wants to struggle not only to survive but also to become powerful. She believes that the continuity between past and present is crucial because it creates bonds, mutual-understanding, and a shared communal feeling for solidarity.

The great success of Morrison's *Beloved* shows that she has succeeded in plumbing the depth and breadth of the black experience. She herself calls the novel "a genuine Black Book." *Beloved* is

the tale of Margaret Garner, a fugitive from Kentucky who tried to kill her children rather than have them enslaved when they are all captured in Ohio in 1850. Morrison's motive in this Pulitzer Prize winning novel is not only to unveil the phase of slavery but also to portray the inequities that black women continue to face in the white society. *Beloved* is set in post-civil war Ohio, has a haunting narrative of slavery and its aftermaths trace the life of a young woman, Sethe, who has kept a 'terrible memory' at bay only by shutting down part of her mind. The novel narrates Sethe's past life as a slave in Sweet Home Farm, her getaway with her children to what look a safe asylum, and the tragic events that pursue. She survives in outskirts of town with Denver, her daughter and Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law. The novel is based on the demise of Sethe's infant child Beloved, who magically comes back as a voluptuous young woman. Beloved's vitality resumes claiming Sethe's love. Sethe does not want to give full of possession of her present.

Morrison wants to focus the historical reality of the time during 1860s and 1870s and few

African-American heritages were maintained during the time of drastic social shifts before and after civil war. Morrison brings out temporal and historical markers. *Beloved* portrays the period of 1870s when men and women use head under constant check. Their life choices were very much limited and they had to function within the set frame by the whites. The concept of freedom for both male and female was an elusive dream. Morrison develops psychological and social facets which typify the prevalent experience of historical changeover. Paul D., a street home man, recalls that during and after the civil war blacks were homeless and a wondering race. The blacks were hungry and tired. They had to go without food for many days until they found a master to give them work and food. Sethe was not an exception. Hungry and drained, she took flight from the white school teacher. Amy, a white teen aged woman, meets Sethe and restores her to life by massaging her swollen feet and she sheds tears at the white woman for her kindness and affection. It is Amy's role as midwife who delivers Sethe's daughter, Denver that bonds the women together. Sethe's womanhood is nurtured by Amy's strength. Sethe's story in the novel is a personal experience which Morrison reveals in an interview:

The book was not about an institution - slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves ... What they are willing to risk, however long it lasts, in ends to relate to one another - that was incredible to me. ("The Pain of Being Black," 48)

Morrison wants to demolish the stereotype characters and incidents and she wants rather to tell the real-life and actual experiences of run-away slave woman. *Beloved* touches a perplexing and different observation because it intentionally ignores chronological progress of the narrative. Sethe, *Beloved*'s mother, is caught in the uncertainties of a quest that presents itself as a transparent narrative - structure with the revelation of her past and present with a series of flashbacks. Her memory is loaded with unspeakable and painful past.

Sethe in *Beloved* is a victim of both racist and sexist oppression. She is a run-away slave mother who is savagely treated by White men - the school-teacher and his kinsman. Morrison explores a black woman's self-conscious protest to her dual oppression. "It is not only the sexual exploitation that Sethe feels most oppressed but by the humiliation of nurturing abilities as a mother - the

stealing of her milk" (121). She prefers to murder her daughter *Beloved* rather than see her in bondage. Infanticide represents a vehement type of resistance by black women against slavery. The context in which she annihilates her baby makes Sethe stand above the rest of her tribe. It is an agony but at the same it involves a supreme sacrifice in the cause of a principle against which she finds only one avenue open that is to kill her baby which does and thereby becomes a symbol of absolute freedom for the suppressed black race. Whites believed that Sethe's action is purely a personal crankiness and also in general black's inhuman way to solve their problems. No one viewed the gruesome incident as pathetic and a consequence of whites' people's apathy towards the blacks.

The community of blacks watches the episode in silence and the craziness of the black world is matched by the white world's devices. Morrison's portrayal of *Beloved* as a sensual woman with otherworldly aura provides an insight into the author's vision. Had Sethe been given freedom to lead life as she wished, the dastardly act of her world not has taken place. Still worse is that her own race brands her a criminal rather than understanding the absolute vibrant of love of a mother who wants that her daughter should never suffer as a slave. Because for Sethe, being a slave is a living tyranny of death and she considers it better to cease to live once for ever then to encounter living tyranny of death.

Morrison defends through Sethe's depiction of traditional qualities of black people like strength, resistance, and integrity. Her deliberate concentration on collective rather than individual encounter is cleared-up through her perennial insinuations that *Beloved* is the tale of people struggling to live despite all odds. To crystallize the need for collective action for survival of African people, Morrison juxtaposes isolated struggle with collective struggle and selfish individualism with individualism conditioned by social responsibility. Since it is usually best for all that individual needs and desires be conditioned by those of the collective, Baby Sugg's self oriented behaviour is tantamount to heresy.

The very name "Beloved" functions as a site where a number of oppositions are interrogated. Simultaneously adjective and noun, the word problematizes the distinction between the characteristics of a thing and the thing itself. The reader confronts the instability, indeed the inadequacy, of language perhaps most powerfully in the passages of interior monologue told from Sethe's, Denver's, and *Beloved*'s points of view.

After telling Paul D about Sethe's murder of her daughter, Stamp Paid, the man who conveyed the family to freedom, is turned away from Sethe's house, 124 Bluestone Road, by the "undecipherable language ... of the black and angry dead." The narrator tells us that mixed in with those voices were thoughts of the women of 124 - "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (19). In the four sections that follow, we read the unspeakable and unspoken thoughts of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, first separately, then interwoven. Here from Sethe's perspective are her memories of killing her daughter, of being beaten, of being abandoned by her mother. Largely addressed to Beloved, Sethe's words convey recollections she could never utter to another. Likewise, in her section, Denver expresses her fear of her mother and her yearning to be rescued by her father, anxieties that, for the most part, had been hidden previously in the novel.

Beloved is the most riveting and most obscure of the monologues. For here is represented the preconscious subjectivity of a victim of infanticide. The words that convey the recollections and desires of someone who is at once in time and out of time, alive and dead, are richly allusive and defy interpretation. It is a novel of such extraordinary plenitude that new meanings and ways of reading emerge whenever one repositions oneself as critic. One might say of the text what the narrator says of the photograph of a close friend or relative: look at too long, it shifts, and something else moves there. The novel sustains a wide range of interpretations. By representing the inaccessibility of the suffering of former slaves, Morrison reveals the limits of hegemonic, authoritarian systems of knowledge. The novel challenges us to use our interpretive skills, but finally turns them back upon themselves. By representing the inexpressibility of its subject, the novel asserts and reasserts the subjectivity of the former slaves and the depth of their suffering. The novel reminds us that our critical acumen and narrative capacities notwithstanding, we can never know what they endured. We can never enjoy a complacent understanding of lives lived under slavery. To the extent that *Beloved* returns the slaves to themselves, the novel humbles contemporary readers before the unknown and finally unknowable horrors the slaves endured.

In "Rediscovering Black History," Morrison speaks of the "complicated psychic power one had to exercise to resist devastation" (24). She was speaking, of course, not just of slavery, but of the black existence in America after slavery as well. *Beloved* and all of her novels, to a certain extent,

bear witness to this psychic power. The intertextual reading of this novel as a revision of the slave narrative should not be construed as an attempt to diminish the form and content of the slave narratives themselves in any way. It is, instead, recognition of the truth that Gates offers in the introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*:

Once slavery was abolished, no need existed for the slave to write himself (or herself) into the human community through the action of first-person narration. As Frederick Douglass in 1855 succinctly put the matter, the free human being 'cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not and cannot look from the same point from which the slave does.' ... The nature of the narratives, and their rhetorical strategies and import, changed once slavery no longer existed. (xiii)

Beloved is a complex, contemporary manifestation of this shift. In a larger sense, however, it is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a "reaccentuation" (*Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 222) of the past - in this case, the past of slavery - to discover newer aspects of meaning embedded in the classic slave narrative. Morrison's purpose is not to convince white readers of the slave's humanity, but to address black readers by advising them to return to the very part of our past that several have oppressed, forgotten, or ignored. In the end, after the community has helped Denver rescue her mother from *Beloved*'s ferocious spell by driving her out of town, Paul D returns to Sethe "to put his story next to hers" (87). Despite the psychic healing that Sethe undergoes, however, the community's response to her healing is encoded in the chorus-like declaration on the last two pages of the text, that this was "not a story to pass on" (99). Yet, as readers, if we understand Morrison's ironic and subversive vision at all, we know that our response to the text's apparent final call for silence and forgetting is not that at all. Instead, it is a sarcastic gesture that the process of deliberately remembering not only empowers us to narrate the challenging tales that should be passed-on, but it also empowers us to make meaning of our individual and collective lives as well.

Fragmented Africans encounter uninterrupted oppression continuously because the white masters know pretty well that by isolated black groups cannot come together and as long as they are separated, the white masters believed that

they could have absolute hold over them which are their ultimate objective. Clearly, Morrison wants African people to see themselves as one people undivided by their class status. The novel reiterates the theme of solidarity and collective struggle to alleviate to oppression of African people which they have been facing in America. The mind makes it clear that the plight of Africans in America stems from their nation - class oppression, that their first enemy is capitalism in all its disguises. To overcome the systematic oppression, all blacks must unite and they have to launch collective struggle against capitalism. Morrison harmoniously fuses her social concern and the demands of mind as an art form.

The ultimate solution of collective struggle to the problem of economic exploitation of the blacks in white America is offered through her all novels. *Beloved* is also a story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and to keep their history alive. Morrison also celebrates the strength of black women, their values, and beliefs. *Beloved* is artistically, socially and politically gratifying art. Morrison projects in *Beloved* the positive principles of traditional African society - humanism, collectivism and egalitarianism. Eradication of the plight of African people acquires collective class struggle against capitalism and oppression. In other words, absolute solidarity alone will fetch them success. This novel voices for solidarity for the success of blacks against the oppression in the white society.

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