

TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*: CONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

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“History is [...] an ongoing tension between stories that have been told and stories that might be told.”(Hunt 103.) A post modern view of history therefore necessitates the recognition that history is a text composed of “competing and conflicting representations and meanings,” (Peterson 294), an acknowledgement that makes an ‘authentic’ historical representation impossible. The novel *Beloved* begins with its dedication to the “sixty million and more”, and ends with one word--beloved. Who is this beloved? On the personal level, it signifies the figure of Sethe’s daughter ‘returned’ from the dead, while in the larger context of the novel, it refers to all those that died in the Middle Passage, revisited and given a voice through her presence. Beloved, a term of endearment becomes subversive when used for those who have been willingly forgotten. Morrison metaphorically portrays the inability to move beyond the ‘ghosts’ of the past and seek a future outside the dark history of slavery. Beloved “could open locks the rain rained on” (Morrison 275) and through her presence initiate a movement out of the circularity of inherited suffering into a hopeful future which necessarily involves the acknowledging of the ‘stories that had not been told.’ The healing of a traumatic past is shown to be dependent upon a conscious meaning making of what is inherently incomprehensible.

The slave narratives that define the inaugural moment of Afro-American literary tradition and document /seem to document the atrocities of slavery were subject to several western hegemonic impositions. The narratives encapsulated a slave’s journey from bondage to freedom, related in a stable and fixed first person narrative mode, the sequence of events following the experiential order in which they occur. The slave narrative functioned as a political text as well, adding fuel to the Abolitionist cause gathering force in the period preceding the American Civil War. The narratives aimed at mounting moral pressure on the white middle-class northern readership that had the power to effect political change and help in putting an end to slavery. Ironically however, too vivid descriptions of the extremities of suffering made their true accounts seem more **fictional** (which necessitated a preface by some White sympathizer to authenticate the account); or, it alienated the sympathy of readers by violating their ‘finer sensibilities’. Therefore they remained silent about or “forgot” what would be “indecorum” to state.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* attempts a “literary archaeology”, redefining and subverting the tropes of the slave narrative genre. *Beloved* ‘haunts’ the ‘gaps’ and ‘silences’ enforced on the collective memory, and encounters the growing Romanticizing of history and erasure of the past that could not be assimilated into hegemonic rhetorical discourse by a detailed account of ‘Black life as lived’¹. It voices the trauma of rape and physical violence and focusing on the ways in which slavery violates structures,

and its influence on the psychic life of the black subject. *Beloved* addresses a Black readership, the text foregrounds the dialogic characteristics of memory along with its imaginative capacity to construct and reconstruct the past. Morrison disrupts the western epistemological notion of linear progression of time and history not only through the structure of the novel but through the psychic process of her characters and their conception of history. Drawing on African oral narrative tradition where what is “superstition and magic” according to Western Epistemological schema is “just another way of knowing things,” she fosters an alternate epistemology which is sometimes ‘discredited’ only because those who subscribe to it have been similarly negated historically. “The folk tales” Morrison says “are told in such a way that whoever is in it can shape it and figure it out².” The multivocality of such a narrative exposes not only the contradictory and conflicting perspectives of violence wreaked on the “self”, but also how fraught the black sense of identity is in the western ideological expression. When Paul D points out to Sethe that her love is “too thick” and that she had got “two feet, not four”, it recalls his own experience of being dragged in a ‘bit’ a beast of burden, tied to others like him performing an absurd ‘chain-dance’-- a subversive performance of African tribal dance, where participants impersonate elements of nature or animals to draw from their sources of strength. What in one culture is a process of integrating with nature in another becomes brutal dehumanization.

The dialogic element of the novel is clear in its contradicting structuration- the central theme being the mother’s murdering her child out of “fierce love”. The ambivalence inherent in the concept of “fierce love” encompasses the various levels of ambivalence in the entire narrative. It is a story about storytelling itself-- a storytelling that reclaims the past of not only the protagonists, but through them the history and culture of the tribe. And interestingly, these very cultural binders also have the potential to destroy the community as well. But the danger involved in mutual sharing of history is reflected in Paul D’s response to Sethe’s story, threatening a return to the brutality they had escaped which had made them the animals in the eyes of the Schoolteacher.³

The recurrent analogy between feeding and storytelling throughout the text suggests the myth and history created out of the culture. *Beloved*’s appearance initiating a voicing of the repressed, forgotten memories of Sethe and Paul D corresponds to Morrison’s project of intervention in the tradition of slave narratives. This recounting of the past to sustain *Beloved* on the level of the narration is at once personal and communal as is the burden of slavery and shared suffering. Therefore, the exorcizing of the past is also a communal effort. The individual’s encountering and negotiating the past, and thereby purging themselves of its violent ruptures in the present by implication, is extended to the community’s acceptance of the past which is a part of their shared history. A conscious remembering of the past equips us in making meaning out of our individual and collective lives as well.

The character of *Beloved* is subject to a wide variety of speculations. Horvitz’s ‘supernaturalist’ reading establishes *Beloved*’s status as a ‘powerful corporeal ghost.’ This is sharply contradicted by Elizabeth B. House who shows through textual evidence that *Beloved* is a ‘young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery’. In a family where reality is shaped by desire⁴ and fantasy, each figure responds to the loss the other has sustained, and Sethe becomes the face that was ‘going to smile’ at *Beloved*. But the ‘magic’ of the oral narrative is retained in the fact that it accommodates both these extremes, and by thwarting the ‘privileged, white, male reader’s’ explanatory efforts, it foregrounds the fact the horrors of slavery are incomprehensible from the western standards of reasoning. The incomprehensibility of Afro American readerships hints at the ‘collective amnesia’ that has created a

gaping hole between the slaves and their motherland Africa which can be bridged only by taking responsibility for all those undocumented lives lost in the Middle Passage. Morrison herself states in an interview that there is evidence in the text so that both things could be approached because the language⁵ of both experiences--death and Middle Passage-- is the same.

The oral narrative structure allows the reader to interpret through his imagination and sense of history the fragmented narratives taken up in each part by some other character. Sethe's narrative is modified. Amplified by the versions provided by the other characters, the narrative follows the call and response pattern of African-American oral tradition (blues)⁶, where voices speak to and comment on each other. Denver's attempt to 'give blood' and 'a heartbeat' to the bits and scraps of the story of her birth to make 'a net to hold Beloved' in becomes like a 'duet', and they both 'did the best they could to create what really happened'. It is something that belonged to Sethe's memory but was the story that is the centre of Denver's identity and the one she uses to bond with her 'sister', returned from the dead, and hungry for the past. The fact that Sethe links Denver's birth with the 'antelope dance' performed by her mother, linking their souls, is strengthened when shared by Beloved whose own fragmented speech is that of the middle passage and loss of history.

By inviting the reader to participate in the reconstruction of the actual story of Margaret Garner⁷, Morrison involves us in the way Denver involves Beloved in the voicing and sharing of their own past. Through Garner's story, the entire Black readership for whom the book is intended can negotiate their own private demons of the past in a collective effort, just as the community at the end of the story encounters their own potentially destructive possibilities in Sethe's catastrophe. By exorcizing her 'ghost from the past', they in effect *catharize* their own destructive self.⁸ The mythologizing that Black women as mother have been subjected to is a crucial part of the mythologizing of African American history. By concentrating the narrative of slavery on motherhood, Morrison delineates the particular inter-relation between maternity and the history of African Americans undoing the stereo typical mythologizing of black women identities. The way in which the characters negotiate their narration and confrontation of the horrors of their past⁹ metaphorically suggests the historical dilemma of finding a means to write their own history outside the disabling mythology of hegemonic culture. The imposed amnesia, "day's serious work of beating back the past" the narrative told and retold but always cut off at a point "beyond which (Sethe) would not go", Paul D's tobacco tin box rusted shut with all consciously forgotten memories, are pried open and forced into language, contesting the ways the past has been subsumed within the historical discourse. Morrison describes her novel "among other things, the tension being yourself, one's own Beloved, and being a mother." (Marsha 32) Slavery denied the rights of motherhood, the woman slaves' body was imagined in separate portions, each having no connection with the other: her physical strength to be used in labour, her hands to nurture the white family, her vagina for the master's sexual pleasure and her womb a place for capital investment. While whipping Sethe, the Schoolteacher was careful to place her stomach in a pit for the safety of the foetus. Morrison's narrative articulates the slave woman's claiming of her body; Grandma Baby tells Denver that she should always 'listen' to her body and 'love' it. Morrison establishes a metonymic relation between the bodies of mothers and daughters where the image of Sethe's mother dancing Juba (the antelope) is the form in which she imagines her six month old foetus "paw(ing) the ground of her womb with impatient hooves."¹⁰ (Morrison, 30) Sethe nurses Denver soaked with the blood of the child she killed, so that

Denver takes in her sister's blood with her mother's milk, establishing elemental ties between the bodies of mother's and daughter's that the institution of slavery would deny.

The image of the Antelope sparks in Sethe's memory something she had "forgotten she knew, something privately shameful, that had seeped into a slit in her mind." (Morrison 61) The fact that she was the only child her mother did not "throw away" was unimpressive to young Sethe, and when she was a grown-up woman it made her angry, though she was uncertain of the cause. Even this sudden 'rememory' (Morrison 36) is accompanied by the pain of having to face the fact that her mother may have run away without her. That would mean she left Sethe behind. This cycle of mother-daughter loss, perceived abandonment, betrayal and recovery is inherent in each mother-daughter relationship. It is a reaction to the anger that is inherited through generations denied of mother love, and child's affection for mother that Sethe and Beloved react to each other in such extreme measures. They present the two choices (life and death) available to a slave mother to "claim" her right over her children under the institution of slavery. The most important thing for Sethe, worse than flogging, is that "they took (her) milk" (Morrison 18), the milk that belonged to her 'crawling already' girl. Sethe was determined that no one could nurse her daughter like her; her daughter would not have to wait for what was left after the white folks babies had had their fill, like she did. Later in the novel after Sethe had seen Beloved's scar like a 'curved shadow of a smile' she wears herself out in her efforts to make it up to Beloved (an exteriorization of Sethe's guilt) who 'feeds' on her mother, physically, draining her of her health and vitality and metaphorically on her history: "Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her...not even look(ing) her way when she ran away... Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting listing again and again her reasons" (Morrison 242)

The Scar on that Beloved bears is an symbol of her mother's love and fierce desire to "protect" her, contradictory as it may seem, and it also traces its itself to the "choke cherry tree" etched on Sethe's back, her own private shame, the physical marker of the psychological ravages of the institution of slavery. Ironically in the only conversation with her mother that Sethe remembers, her mother shows her the 'circle and cross' under her breast. "This is your ma'am. This," is what she says and it becomes the only way Sethe can *trace* her mother, psychologically and physically. But she herself suffers from a sense of insecurity, "but how will you know me?" she demands. The only way to establish a physical marker of the bond she wants with her mother is, "Mark the mark on me too." Beloved's eruption into the lives of Sethe, Denver, Paul D and the narrative occurs at a significant junction. It is on their way to the carnival in town that Sethe agrees that there is the possibility of "A life" (Morrison 47) with Paul D when she sees their 'hand -holding shadows' gliding over the dust beside them to the fair and leading them on their way home, the "shadows of three people still (holding) hands." (Morrison 49) This image is challenged and changed by the appearance of Beloved. Even Sethe realizes this that her family is complete with Beloved, she asks herself: "the shadows holding hands at the side of the road, had'nt the picture altered?" (Morrison 132) The dissolution of the future promised in Paul D is complete with the picture of the women of 124 skating, holding hands depending on each other for support and succour. There is no prospective of a future without acknowledging the past.

The thematic concern with the problematic of tracing the historical lapses in the mother-daughter relation is brought about through the imagery of water. Water that symbolizes the feminine principle is also the water which forms the "bread coloured sea" that Beloved remembers from her life before 124 into which she had seen the woman with her face go. She describes what can be imaged as the lower hold

of some abysmally crowded slave ship, people crouching, crammed in a deep dark hollow; she describes 'piles' of dead people who are shoved into the sea; she describes the woman who picked flowers in Africa, with diamonds in her ears, the diamonds are gone and she has an iron collar round her neck; Beloved waits for the woman to smile at her, but she goes into the sea without smiling at her, leaving her behind. The image of the sea and the dark hold of the ship echo the death of "sixty million and more" in the Middle Passage; also on a psychic and symbolic level, it functions as a trope for the sense of loss and betrayal that both Beloved and Sethe suffer from-- a sense of separation from their ancestors¹¹ which gets concentrated on their loss and separation from their own mothers. The diamond earrings are at once the diamonds of the tribal women back in Africa who gathered flowers from the leaves and Sethe's crystal earrings given to her by Mrs. Garner as a wedding present. Beloved identifies Sethe with the woman on the ship who gathered 'yellow flowers in the place before the crouching' (214); she images those same flowers on the Quilt in Baby Suggs room, the only bit of colour on the brown quilt in the old woman's room who spent the last days of her life yearning for colours, that she never had the opportunity to look at in a life of gruelling slavery. Water recurs as a Biblical motif when Sethe is 'washed in sections' by Baby Suggs. It metaphorically cleanses her of the indignity of slavery and the sexual violence she suffered as well as marks her birth into a new life.

Denver and Beloved are connected to their mother through the imagery of water as well. Beloved's entry into the narrative is from water, "a fully dressed woman walked out of the water." She also associates water with the sea (into which her mother/the woman who did not smile at her went) and therefore to her parent.¹² It is in the water that she imagines her mother figure below the bridge, and it leads her to '124' and Sethe. Even the last image that the narrator provides us of the mysterious disappearance of Beloved is of a "naked woman with fish for hair... cutting through the woods", her final transformation into what can be imagined as an African tribal Goddess which is also linked with the element she had emerged from. Denver's birth takes place on a boat astride the Ohio river, "as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke to join it", the river is also the divider between slavery and freedom, the promise of future that Morrison forges through her writing to "repossess, re-name, re-own"(Rushdy 575). It is actualized in the character of Denver, the "seed(s) in which a whole generation sleeps confident of a future."(Morrison 84)

The issue of sexual violence is inherent in the 'unspoken, disremembered' experience of the slave mother. The schoolteacher and his nephews' violence is an outrage of Sethe's claim to motherhood, the milk being symbolic of mother-love: Sethe kills her child so that no White man can ever 'dirty' her daughter. This image of sexual violence is recurrent in Beloved's own references to "chewing and swallowing laughter." Sethe tells Beloved that in killing her she had prevented her own "undreamable dreams", that whites "dirty you so bad you (can't) like yourself anymore". This disgust for one's own mutilated body, treated as a product "that breeds itself" makes the women disassociate themselves from their own bodies. It is only after being freed that Baby Suggs recognizes her body to be her own. Beloved's role is not limited to a "receptacle of remembered stories"(Barnett,74), she enacts the sexual violence integral to the 'remembered stories' thus figures as the persistent nightmares of the victims of such trauma. In her 'self' she comprises the role of the "succubus", a shape shifting witch of Afro American folklore as well as the prototype of the white master, entrenching his role as the 'possessor' on the body of the racial other. Beloved's draining of Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality¹³ gestures back to the institutionalized effects of slavery, as the black male

subject is emasculated and the black female commodified into a source for the reproduction of labour. The fact that Morrison depicts the sexual exploiter as a woman foregrounds race rather than gender as the category determining subjection to rape.

Beloved's womb becomes the visual symbol of the clashing and interweaving of the residue of the past, the reality of the present and the possibility of the future. She is pregnant with the 'forgotten' histories of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D and by implication of the entire community, an exteriorization of what Morrison calls "national amnesia". And the communal act of exorcizing this "devil child" is an expulsion and at the same time recognition of all she represents. This recognition is necessary to help Paul D place "his story" beside "her (Sethe's) story" and make her realize her own individual identity and space in the problematic mother lines through which she shapes her sense of self.

"You are your best thing Sethe. You are. His holding fingers are holding hers.

"Me? Me?" (Morrison 273)

In keeping with the strong subversive undercurrents in the novel, Morrison emphasizes repeatedly, "this is not a story to pass on", while the entire narrative stresses on the retelling of stories in order to escape the recurring after effects of trauma. Beloved searches out and lays bare the profoundest human consequence of racial segregation. The story gathers meaning and is revitalized wherever it encounters a people robbed of their sense of indigenous history: be it the "stolen generation" of Australian indigenous tribes or the victims of Hitler's Holocaust or even the national amnesia engineered on the people of the Indian subcontinent by the Partitionists to make them 'forget' their shared cultural history and agree to the absurdity of dividing a common identity. The novel itself functions like "her (Beloved's) footprints that come and go" and are so familiar that "should a child or an adult place his feet in them, they will fit." (Morrison 275)

Endnotes

1. Toni Morrison 'Behind the making of the *The Black Book*', *Black World*, 1974. Morrison states 'I was scared that the world would fall away before somebody put together a thing that got close to the way we really were'
2. "The folk tales are told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It is not over just because it stops. It lingers and it's passed on. It's passed on. It's passed on and somebody else can alter it later." Taken from the interview between Morrison and Marsha Darling, 'In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison', *Women's Review of Books*, March 1998.p.6.
3. "What you did was wrong ,Sethe... you got two feet, Sethe not four," he said and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet..."(Morrison 165)
4. Denver's 'original hunger' and Sethe's conviction that her little girl has come "right on back like a good girl.' The narrator says that Sethe's neighbours are eager to see the carnival, a show that advertises performances by people who head or weigh a ton. That Sethe and Denver attend this carnival immediately before meeting Beloved foreshadows their willingness/need to believe that the mysterious girl is extraordinary. Neither the carnival nor Beloved's status as a child returned from death is based on truth, but both provide much desired escapes from the pain of everyday life.

5. Language becomes another medium of tracing matrilineage. Sethe does not remember the language her mother spoke, the language she had brought from Africa, but her subconscious is still capable of 'picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood.' Her memories and feelings do respond to the language "which would never come back".
6. In the novel, the statements of individual characters shape the 'call' to which other characters offer a 'response' by sharing their versions of the past. This pattern of call and response then shapes the collective story of slavery that binds the members of the community together. This pattern resonates with similar patterns found in blues and other forms of African-American oral expression.
7. The story of Margaret Garner's escape and murder of her child when captured forms the primary source of inspiration for Morrison.
8. A self reflexive enterprise, like all other communal rituals, e.g. the origins of tragedy in Greek society, is from a religious festival exorcizing the potential for human slaughter through the ritual of sacrifice, a celebration of 'innocence' that takes into account the 'willingness' of the sacrificial beast and the respect for life among the sacrificers. It is in effect purging them of their inherent potential to kill, the fear of giving over to their animal side, that they guard themselves against through this ritual. Sethe does give over to her animal side and is incapable of moving on beyond the 'tedious job of beating back the past'. Her guilt invokes Beloved, (from the grave or in a person escaped from a slave ship) that needs recognition. A communal exorcizing ritual is required to free Sethe of the physical and metaphoric presence of the ghost.
9. "The powerful imaginative way the characters reconstructed and deconstructed reality in order to get through Whether it is colour for Baby Suggs, the changing of his name for Stamp Paid, each character has a set of things their imagination works rather constantly at, and it's very individualistic, although they share something in common." Taken from the interview between Morrison and Marsha Darling, 'In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison', *Women's Review of Books*, March 1998, p.6.
10. "an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young." p.30
11. Through those that died in the Middle Passage (their undocumented lives swallowed up by the sea), Morrison suggests that unless the Afro Americans participate in the 'literary archeology', reconstructing the past from their own collective racial unconscious, they can never be free of the burden of the past, and their future will always be fraught by the shadows of the past.
12. Water is associated with the amniotic fluid in the mother's womb as well as the sea which in the novel gives birth to a enslaved generation in the 'womb' of the ship. It is also the element that swallows the dead bodies of all those that died in the Middle Passage along with their undocumented histories.
13. Paul D and his fellow prisoners must choose between saying "yes, sir" and death, a choice that emasculates them (they are forced to fellate the guards at Alfred Georgia). Beloved's power to 'move him' around the house and his inability to resist her is a reenactment of this emasculation which at once demeans his manhood and reminds him of his dehumanization when he was forced to wear a horse's bit in his mouth.

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