



NARRATING THE PAST: RECONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is a prominent voice in African American literature. Her focus is historic and her goal is the rediscovery of the African past lost through slavery in America. Morrison re-interprets past and re-centers it with black experience. The history of America has been written from the perspective of the dominant whites that has degraded and distorted the presence of blacks in America. The history of America will remain incomplete if the voices of the margins are not heard. The objective of this study is to observe how Morrison's novels transform what had been a significant absence in the narrative of American history--the exploitation and denial of black cultural identity--into a powerful presence. It observes how Morrison presents American history from a black perspective creating a voice and identity out of a confrontation with the dominant white American discourse. So it is apt to use New Historicism as theoretical tools to analyze Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), as it considers works of literature as historical texts, and refigures the relationship between texts and the cultural system in which they are produced.

Key Words: History, Culture, Exploitation, Slavery

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, the famous and leading contemporary African-American writer, awarded highest honour for letter when she was named the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature. Her constant focus on the life of the black and revival of their past make her literary discourse to reproduce a true history of the black people that was overlooked by the mainstream society as Morrison argues that "There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming

presence of black people in the United State" (Morrison, 5). Through her work, she tries to heal the suffering of her people and argue them to look at their cultural roots and recreate their cultural consciousness.

Morrison's novels have a complex relationship with history. All her novels are historical novels in which characters, as Barbara Rigney states, "are both subjects of and subject to history, events in real time, that succession of antagonistic movements that includes slavery, reconstruction, depression, and war" (61). Her works may appear to be "quasi documentaries that bear historical witness" (Barbara, 62), but it states history in

narrative form which is sometimes deliberately distorted or half-remembered, as fantasy or even as brutal nightmare.

Morrison challenged the political, social, and racial aspects of American literature created by the dominant white society. In legitimizing the disgraced past and presence of marginalized African Americans, she prefers a historical approach to rewrite the African American culture and history through the powerful vivid language of black and their vernacular tradition of narration to preserve the values and history of their culture. Thus, the paper seeks to discuss and analyze how Morrison has recreated the historical realities which were omitted by mainstream history of America.

To recreate the historical realities of the period, Morrison focuses on period before and after the civil war of the 1860s and 70s. *Beloved* (1987) is a historical novel based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave from Kentucky who attempted to kill her children rather than have them enslaved when they were all captured in 1850. Morrison carefully pinpointed temporal and historical marker by mentioning the places such as Cincinnati and Ohio, and the year of 1873, sets *Beloved* within the political and geographical realities of history as mentioned in the first chapter. The description of Baby Suggs' family's story takes us to the pre-civil war period as

124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old . . . leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next . . . crept away. (Morrison, 3)

Beloved (1987) covers the period of the 1870s by looking back to the mid-nineteenth century when "men and women were moved around like checkers" (Morrison, 23). They hanged, rented out, bought up and stolen or seized. Their life choices were limited and freedom was unimaginable.

Morrison develops the social and psychological aspects of slavery which characterize the lived experience of historical transition. Paul D, a Sweet Home man, recalls that during and after the war blacks were homeless and without people, moving, walking, running, hiding, stealing and moving on:

During, before and after the war he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who like him, stole from pigs; who like him, slept in trees in the days and walked by night. . . . He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own children (Morrison, 66).

Like other blacks, Sethe too ran away from Slavery and Sweet Home, her white owner's house, exhausted and hungry when "her husband disappeared; that after her milk had been stolen, her back pulped, her children orphaned, she was not to have an easeful death. No" (Morrison, 31).

Morrison reveals her intention to make Sethe's story a personal experience 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 order to relate to one another--- that was incredible to me" (Morrison, 48). By choosing to narrate the real life and actual experiences of a runaway slave woman, Morrison proves the power of art to demolish stereotype. Sethe's experience is treated with many ironic overtones that point to certain paradoxes and many fundamental complexities of her quest to freedom. Other novels also examine the intricate legacy of the past.

The story of *Beloved* is a series of flashbacks. Morrison is concerned with the omitted

and unspeakable past of the black slave women. Recollecting her past, Sethe remembers that once upon a time her house 124 had been “a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (Morrison, 86).

The main concern of Morrison in *Beloved* is to re-establish the connectivity between women to face the physical as well as psychological survival in the era of slavery. Discussing about the relationship between two women, Morrison says:

We read about Ajax and Achillies willing to die for each other, but very little about the friendship of women, and them having respect for each other, like it's something new. But black women had always had that, they have always been emotional life support for each other.”(Morrison, xvi)

When Sethe arrived with her daughter, Baby Suggs “kissed her on the mouth and refused to let her see the children. They were asleep she said and Sethe was too ugly looking to wake them up in the night . . . bathed her in sections, starting with her face and cleaned the eyes of newborn with its mother's urine” (Morrison, 92). Sethe learnt female rites from Baby Suggs which brought her close to her ancestor. Baby Suggs is a powerful cultural mentor for Sethe who has awakens her desire to know her past and to love herself as a person.

Alienation and oppression were the most destructive factors of historical transition for a slave mother. Alienation of Sethe is not only result of her separation from her family or her culture but also the result of her murdering her own daughter to protect her from curse of slavery. To assert her sense of self, Sethe does not care for community as:

She lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons, Mother-in-law, she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do (Morrison, 164).

Sethe's alienation has its effect on her daughter Denver. She feels neglected and socially cut off because nobody speaks to them; nobody comes to their house anymore. And Denver is dying to be related to her grandma, Baby Suggs who taught her to listen to and love her own body. Although “Slaves

were not supposed to have pleasurable feelings of her own” (Morrison, 209), she taught Denver wants to be loved by her mother. She wants to be related to her sister Beloved whom her mother had killed. She is willing to risk anything to be related to her daddy, Halle, who had disappeared. She dreams about him as ‘My daddy was an angel man. . . . I always knew he was coming. Something was holding him up. The river flooded; the boat sank. . . . My daddy was coming for me’ (Morrison, 207). She moves around as a sensual young woman amongst the living members of the family to claim her mother's love.

Morrison seeks to expose a truth about the interior life of people who did not write. She is trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left. And what makes her approach authentic is her ‘recollection that moves from the image to the text.” (Morrison, 113) When Sethe reminisces, her present collides with her past and her family's migration to 124. Eighteen years of her ‘unlivable life’ was interrupted by the arrival of Paul D, who brought her ‘Short-lived glory’ (Morrison, 173). Their past is represented through stories and flashbacks. Paul D. Garner, Halle, Suggs and Sixo, the wild men all worked at Mr. Garner's farm Sweet Home along with Sethe. As Sethe and Paul D exchange their past and want to catch up on eighteen years in a day, Sethe tells Paul D that she had a chokecherry tree on her back. This is the way Sethe remembers her past. The chokecherry tree was the result of cowhide beatings on Sethe's back and it is an image that recreates her painful history.

What distinguishes Morrison's fiction from autobiographical strategies is her “reliance on the image” (Morrison, 112). In addition to recollection, she relies on picture and the feelings that accompany the picture. In her fiction, sensuality is embedded in the past and sensual descriptions explode the effects of alienation and repression. Sethe's remembrance of girlhood sensuality at Sweet Home coincides with her Womanhood in Cincinnati. Both are metaphorically condensed with the alienation she experiences as a black emigrant and social outlaw in Ohio. Morrison's metaphorical language “he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith

too passionate for display," (Morrison, 17) produces the effect of pain, cruelty and alienation. Indeed, the image of chokecherry tree evokes the poetics of surrealism while the language reveals the historical process through which the image is produced. Paul D's desire to learn Sethe's sorrow, to share it with her, produces a liberating effect: "He rubbed his cheek on her back and teared that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (Morrison, 17). And Sethe's back skin which had been dead for years, feels the hurt it ought to. She remembers things with the hope that the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank. As Paul D dropped twenty-five years from his recent memory to share bed life with Sethe, she remembers her first experience with her husband, Halle, in the tiny cornfield of Mr. Garner. Sethe spends a few month of "the sunsplashed life" (Morrison, 173) with Paul D who resented the children she had, the code they used among themselves that he could not break. Paul D knew that "They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it" (Morrison, 132). Finally when Paul D learns about Sethe's past, he sneaks away without saying a "goodbye."

Morrison readily conceded that she is "trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narrative left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that [she] heard" (Morrison, 112). She draws upon the memories within and uses the significant act of "rememory" to make her story acquire the structure of an oral narration. Each story in *Beloved* (1987) recreate a particular patch of the past and reveals a new mystery and then calls for another story. In different places, by different characters the same story of Sweet Home is picked up, retold, expanded into further complexity and mystery. The accumulation of stories of Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Baby Suggs, Paul D, Halle of Sweet Home men, Amy Ella, the call and response pattern, their gradual merging into a single story, Sethe's story, create an interesting structure. Sometimes it is the omniscient narrator, at other times the voice of different characters replace that of the narrator, each offering its own fragmented perception of truth while the author bridges the gap between the telling and what is

being told. Thus Morrison uses a combination of the point of view of various characters but still retains the power to slide in and out.

By using this kind of narrative pattern in which "each character becomes part of his or her own history and must be put together in quilt fashion, Morrison reminds us that the oral tradition is so strong in black culture that it is still alive" (Ayesha, 279). The stories of different characters bear witness to the past, to the struggle of black slaves to survive and escape to freedom; the reality and fantasy of their life create history. Thus form and content of *Beloved* (1987) is "about gaps which must be fulfilled and interpreted by the reader" (Tate, 125).

Conclusion

Thus, Morrison's purpose is to argue black community to return to the very part of their past that "many have repressed, forgotten or ignored" (Moblely, 197). The declaration in last two pages of the text that this was "not a story to pass on" (274) has a ironic and subversive vision that 'the process of consciously remembering not only empowers us to tell the difficult stories that must be passed on, but it also empowers us to make meaning of our individual and collective lives as well' (Moblely, 197).

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