



## A FOUCAULDIAN READING OF TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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### ABSTRACT

Foucault is one of the most prominent historian-philosophers whose ideas have largely influenced the literary circle of twentieth century. His studies cover a vast area of knowledge such as philosophy, history and sociology. Many of his ideas have “strongly influenced the development of new historicism”. Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, has incited many critical approaches. As she is a very politically inclined and race-conscious writer, it would be rewarding to analyze the novel from a new historic standpoint. This paper would offer a new historic reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* focusing on Michel Foucault’s perspective. Borrowing from Foucault’s ideas about the subjective nature of truth and history which encompasses the notions of discursive discourses in relation to power, this paper would analyze the dominant discourses which are countered in search of regaining power for the silenced nation of black people. Morrison offers the perspective of a marginalized people who need to retell their lost history to assert themselves as a part of that history, and also subvert the hegemony popularized by the white supremacy ideology.

Although the gain of total freedom is denied by Foucault, the sense of survival and struggle permeates the novel. In other words, having the basic principles of new historicism in mind, certain relevant major and minor ideas of Michel Foucault has been chosen and applied step by step to the novel. The central aim is to build around the three notions of dominance, resistance and survival in the accounts of the novel and the history behind it.

Keywords: Dominant discourse, hegemony, subversion, power mechanism, history, racism.

### INTRODUCTION

Inadequacy of traditional historiography which claims objectivity and truthfulness is the basic idea of new Historicism. “For Foucault, history is the complex interrelationship of a variety of discourses” (Brassier . In fact, by focusing on the notions of subjectivity, individuality and diverse sinterpretations, he strongly objects to hegemonic narratives: To undertake the history of what has been said is . . . to go back from statements

preserved through time . . . toward that interior secret that preceded them, left its mark in them, and . . . is betrayed by them. Thus the nucleus of the initiating a *subjectivity* is freed.

A subjectivity that always lags behind manifest history; . . . This *other history*, which runs beneath history, constantly anticipating it and endlessly recollecting the past, can be described . . . as the evolution of mentalities. Therefore, “subjectivity” becomes the key word in dealing with

the accounts of history: history can be told from different perspectives. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has chosen to give voice to the version of a marginalized group. The story is told from the female African-American perspective. she gives centrality to the voice of a group of people who have been oppressed, suppressed, dominated, marginalized and neglected for a considerable amount of time. If Anglo-Americans' domination of discourse trapped African-Americans, such retelling of history gives some sort of control back to the subjugated. Although Foucault has a distrustful outlook on the subject of total freedom, he explains that his "position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism." And this is exactly what Morrison has done by writing the novel. These accounts of slavery are needed for remembering the horror as Morrison, in an interview with World Magazine, speaks of the absence of any historical markers that help remember the lives of African slaves. She explains why she wrote *Beloved*: There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not to think about, to summon the presence of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower.

There's no small bench by the road . . . And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. In line with such point of view is the concept that history is something which is constructed by the dominant discourse, so it can be re-constructed. The main purpose of this reconstruction is to form a counter- discourse or memory: the "other history". The African-American history was excluded either by the Anglo-Americans from the historical accounts by force, or by the negligence of African-Americans due to willful forgetfulness as they have encountered unspeakable cruelties. Two broad categories of relating to the issue would be the focus on the traumatizing experiences of slavery whether collective or individual, and the means of African- American resistance. The novel is filled with the personal accounts of inhumane ways of slavery to show that the legacy of such practices is nothing but

destruction. The physical torture and labor plus the humiliation that each slave endures leave them with nothing but a ruined body like baby Suggs' or a damaged psyche like Sethe's which is epitomized in her act of infanticide and manner of rationalization. Besides these physical and emotional tortures that each individual goes through personally, there are some key moments in African-American history as a community which are important to be brought to the surface. In *Beloved*, two historical periods have been emphasized. One is the Middle Passage: The forced voyage of Africans across the Atlantic is usually called the transatlantic slave trade or Middle Passage. It has been given other names that more adequately reflect the pain and hardship enslaved Africans endured. These terms include the Black Holocaust, the African Holocaust, and, in some African countries, *le mort*, from the French term for "death". Some African-Americans may describe the experience of their ancestors with a word borrowed from the African language Swahili: *maafa*, meaning "disaster" or "great suffering". (Sharp vi). Sethe mentions that her mother was on one of these slave ships as she was told by Nan: "She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew".

In another place, *Beloved*, describing the place where she had come from, talks about a dark place where bodies are piled up which clearly paints a dismal picture of slave ship: I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it it is hard to make yourself die forever. The other historical stage, which refers to the systematic resistance of the slaves, is the Underground Railroad: The informal network of secret routes and safe houses used by American slaves to escape to freedom in the northern United States and Canada with the aid of abolitionists who were sympathetic

to their cause. Stamp Paid and Ella are members of the Underground Railroad who come to find Sethe by the river and help her and her new-born baby to cross the river and get to her mother-in-law's house (Morrison 92). Furthermore, Mr. and Miss Bodwins are two abolitionists who help the escapees. The

Bodwins are described as such: "the white brother and sister who gave Stamp Paid, Ella and John clothes, goods and gear for runaways because they hated slavery worse than they hated slaves"(Morrison 137). Moreover, the issue of power and its mechanisms play a major role in defining and approaching the dominant discourse and means of resisting it. Foucault believes, Power must be analyzed as something that circulates . . . It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization . . . They (individuals) are not only its inert or consenting target; . . . In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.

The marginalized people can also assert themselves by subverting the discourses that the dominant group has constructed. People are not only passive receptors of what they are fed to. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them.

Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (Morrison 198-199).

The concern that comes after resistance is the issue of survival. As mentioned before, Foucault has a pessimistic view on the possibility of

achievement of total freedom. Nevertheless, the novel offers hope for a chance for healing and a brighter future. By focusing on the concept of memory and re-memory, Morrison tries to put forth the idea that one should relive the past memory to free him/herself and reach a stage of exorcism. To clarify the point, a few issues of psychology should be considered: Freud in his lecture XVIII titled "Fixation to Traumas - The Unconscious" suggests that some of his patients made the impression that they were fixated to a "particular portion of their past" (273). He continues explaining that their "traumatic illness" came about due to an "inability to deal with an experience whose affective coloring was excessively powerful" (275). In the case of the ex-slaves, they are all trapped in their traumatic experiences of the past. Beloved represent this traumatic past that has come to haunt them. They have to regress to their haunting past memories and confront them in an attempt at exorcism. Ex-slaves have to purge themselves from the image and the psychological hold of their past in order to find peace in their lives again. Baby Suggs' sermons in the Clearing also put forward guidelines for such purgation. Baby Suggs as an unofficial preacher to the black community offers emotional purgation: "Love your hands! . . . Flesh that needs to be loved.

Murrey believes that *Beloved* is a literary example of paresis focusing on the "self's relation to itself, and how that self struggles normatively to define the terms in and by which it will be spoken." In different instances in the novel, this concept has been explored: for Sethe as a former slave, it is claiming herself: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison, 95). Baby Suggs calls for self-possession: "Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them" (Morrison 88). Describing Denver who represents the hope for new generation, towards the end of the novel, Morrison writes: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve".

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, Morrison, by writing *Beloved*, makes African-American traumatic history a part of American history as Foucault believes in the subjective nature of history. The African-Americans were denied the power of the language

symbolized by the iron bit put in the mouth of Paul D (Morrison 68). Writers such as Morrison try to find a voice and place for Blacks by their pen. In *Beloved*,

Morrison tries to give an alternative picture of what has happened. She offers the reader the marginalized perspective to win some power and control for her people, and subvert the dominate discourses which only operate to secure the needs and interests of the white people.

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