

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Study on History, Slavery and Love

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Abstract

This article makes an effort to describe Toni Morrison's novel, Beloved as a fusion of History, slavery and love. It also reveals that history of Afro-Americans, slave narrative; love and fantasy are the main assets of the novel. In the novel, she focuses on the horror of the past so that Afro-Americans and the Americans all those who involved with slavery would come face to face with grim reality of the past and rise above it. The novel articulates and embodies a history of slavery of African-Americans and their experiences, which has been apparently, accurately and carefully recovered but is actually uncooked. Beloved directly confronts racism which combines lyrical beauty with an assault on the readers' emotions and conscience. It emphasizes the legacy of slavery using forms resulting from traditional Back Folk aesthetic. It deals with the life and history of Black American women immediately after the emancipation of slaves in the North. Beloved also presents a tragedy involving mother's moment of choice, and a love story exploring what it means to be beloved. Thus the novel holds the key to the narrative's unity. The subject matter is stressful to read and it is also confrontational and painful. The form combines historical realism with magic, slavery and love.

Key Words: History, Slavery, Love, Fantasy, Black aesthetics

The novel *Beloved* is a historical novel which includes both slavery and love even fantasy. The novel confronts racism, and the most disturbing part of African American history of slavery. The story is based on the real account of escaped slave Margaret Garner's killing of her young child in the face of recapture. *Beloved* engages with history and myth combining social and historical in its confrontation of racism, sexism, and the supernatural. A dead baby ghost, Beloved returns as a young woman disrupting relationships and almost killing Sethe, her mother. In *Beloved*, Beloved the baby that slavery killed, is revived from the past, from the world of dead into the conscious memory of Sethe, Denver and all the people associated with 124, the white house on Bluestone Road:

124 is spiteful, full of baby's venom. The woman in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite with his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims... suspended between the nastiness of life and meanness of the dead, she could not get interested for leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of the two creeping off boys. Her past

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had been like her present – intolerable – and ... she knew death was anything but forgetfulness ... Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Running among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she live out her years in house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those then minutes she spent pressed up against down – colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating, than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. (4-5)

Sethe is not only to suffer. The agony of slavery holds the hidden reality of almost all the African Americans. They try to escape the history hanging about their minds. Most of them are caught in the extreme burden of history that they want to escape. Ghosts from the past creep into their life to make them unstable. To get rid of this instability, the black Americans need to face what they have willingly placed to remove. They need to open the suspension of memory. For Morrison, history of slavery and the pain close to it is what “characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. But *Beloved* is not about slavery as an institution, it is about those anonymous people called slaves” (Angelo 67).

In the novel, there is a sense of uncertainty and confusion. Toni Morrison herself is not sure about whether to remember or forget the painful historical memory of the past. The author projects the same sense of ambivalence in her attitude towards the story and its characters. Morrison wants to appeal to all those who were brutally killed by slavery. The novel is a conscious act toward healing a painful wound of slavery which was itself a great social wrong of the enslavement of Africans. Her words on behalf of thousands of black Americans, give voice to a deep lament that “the absence of a historical marker to remind us never let this atrocity happen again. For its absence has neither erased nor diminished its pain; rather, it reminds us only of itself of what is missing” (McKay 3). For several years, Sethe has been unwilling to recall the past. She has been systematically “keeping the past at bay” (41). She spends the time being involved in the “serious work of beating back the past” (74). The ghost of *Beloved* forces Sethe to challenge her personal past, a past that up till then had been “unspeakable” (*Beloved* 57). Coming back of *Beloved* to Sethe's life as a ghost compels Sethe to realize the fact that she has murdered her baby daughter. It shows that nothing ever dies and “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (36).

The novel has supernatural character as it is a ghost story about a much suffered woman's struggle with a real, but personal. The action of the novel takes places in the year 1873 at a house outside Cincinnati, Ohio that had been calling itself a state for only seventy years. The accuracy of the historical specifications, the reference to the passage of time, and the locus itself argue that this is a historical novel. It obeys the convention of literary historiography. The novel is very much located in its historical time frame. It concentrates on the experience of black Americans before, during, and after the Civil War. It enables

the readers to “experience American slavery as it was lived by those who were its objects of exchange” (Atwood 50). By focusing on the particular picture of historical experience, Morrison tends to make it come to life, to make it real, especially for those who removed in historical time.

Beloved contextualizes the arguments by discovering more about the history of slavery, torture, murder, and economic forces. The evidences of slaves provide inside knowledge of the slave experience. The novel presents the abusive treatment of the slave women by slave owners. The women denied family lives and abused by white owners were forced to be breeders of the future slaves. This dehumanizing experience reminds Sethe’s own abuse when men beat her and take her milk. The specific location in time is also important to know about the historical changes on which the period of the novel focuses. In 1855 the free Northern US states gave home to free slaves, but the slaves were unprotected by the slave catchers. They recaptured those who had escaped. Similarly, in the novel, Margaret Garner who had escaped with her family, saw the slave – catchers coming and tried to kill her four children because she didn’t want her children to become slaves again, rather wanted to kill them by herself. The baby girl died, but the boys lived. She was in history, in fact, convicted of escaping a property issue rather than murder. *Beloved* is essentially a story of memory, the memory of racial oppression under slavery. Memory or re- memory is acknowledged as present, “if a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it stays; and not just in my re-memory, but out there in the world... it is when you bump into the re-memory of someone else” (50).

A historical novel, *Beloved* can also be understood as a love story. In various places the novel offers a spectrum of possible relations between lover and beloved one, between self and other. What Ella tells Sethe is, “If anybody was to ask me, I’d say, “Don’t love nothing” (91). Paul D. says, “love small” (162). What he means to say is, the best thing is to love just a little so that people will have a little love left over for the next one. When Sethe asked Paul D. about her love to her children, Paul D. tells her that her kind of love is “too thick,” ... thin love aint love at all” (160). Thus, this novel deeply focuses on various forms of love which makes the main theme of the novel more challenging to understand. In this specific historical context, the crucial love relation is the maternal one. The novel constantly focuses on the relation of mother and child and delights of mother love. In “Toni Morrison, in Her New Novel, Defends Women” Mervyn Rothstein mentions that “One of the nice things that women do is nurture and love something other than themselves ... they do that rather nicely” (132). This has echoed in Sethe’s own saying: “If I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (199 – 200).

The main cause of Sethe’s action is certainly the institution of slavery, whose most dreadful legacy is an unpleasant logic of human relationship. According to Thurman, the novel “drives home the meaning of slavery by showing how within Sethe the roles of master and slave, mother and child, have been focused” (179). The argument of Paul D. reveals that sethe’s action was not only hopeless but also counterproductive. The novel

holds Sethe responsible for her killing her own baby to save her from slavery which is extremely awful. “There had to be some other way” (163). In one place, she says that she “wouldn’t draw breath without her children” (203). She tries to justify her action by saying that “The best thing she had, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing – the part of her that was clean” (251). Like other women, Sethe also talks about love, clothes, safety of the family and the like. Sethe’s love has been infected by the reason of slavery. This is a logic that converts the other into an object to be owned, into a possession. The loved one, the beloved, is converted into a love object, a thing that can be bought and sold. To love in that way is truly to be possessed, to be haunted by ghost. This kind of love is itself an abnormal excess, an unnatural essence. In one place in the novel *Baby Suggs* remarks, “everything depends on knowing how much, good is knowing when to stop” (86).

When Sethe slaughters her own daughter, Beloved, Paul D. condemns her by saying that “what you did was wrong” (164). He means to say that there could be some other ways to save her from the clutch of slavery. But Sethe denies other alternatives. For Sethe, it is only the suicide or attacking the slave owner or the master who denies the selfhood of other could be the other alternative. Actually the logic is that it is just this action, “Sethe’s turning on the enslaver in order to save her best thing that serves to exorcise her personal ghost and enables her to get on with her life” (Otten 93).

Paul D.’s “thick love” is a kind of love that Sethe expresses for Paul D., which respects the honesty and blessedness of the loved one. In the novel, Sixo clarifies his love with Thirty - Mile woman and says, “She is friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (271). This kind of love creates a strong bond of friendship with other and collects the disjointed pieces of other to restore it to self. It reminds Sethe about the limits of love and mutuality of it. Sethe believes that the mutuality of love can trace a journey ahead towards the future. They can look forward. Paul D. and Sethe have had too much bad yesterday not enough tomorrow. She can only have better tomorrow if she places to rest the final ghost, history of slavery and accepts that she is her own best thing.

In the mentioned novel, Morrison takes her reader back to the history. She focuses on the historical realism of African American people. The novel confronts racism and most disturbing part of African American history and slavery. Torture, murder, humiliation, suppression, and cruelty are the major issues of the novel. Not only history and slavery, Morrison is also careful to weave together a love story to ghost story by comparing mother’s love to magic. The novel embodies both the suffering and guilt of the past and the power and beauty as well. There is a need to realize the past fully in order to have a better future with all the possibilities. The novel, therefore, stands for the historical past as a living presence.

In a nutshell, the writer gives the past a different reading that represents African American historical experiences not simply as it has been measured by dominant norms

but as it has emerged in terms of a multi-leveled subjectivity from the time slavery. She does this by making use of the elements of fantastic genre and by rearticulating the concept of African American experience around the diversity of its historical forms. Morrison's narrative participates not only in a historical struggle among black communities but also in forging a new non-hegemonic realm of meaning and being. Thus, it becomes necessary for Morrison to make use of the fantastic mode in her novel to negotiate a complex environment of reality in which the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements becomes the very possibility of opening up a new space of cultural practice. The novel presents human struggle to progress from the margin to the center and highlights the problems of African American women in particular. She presents women character as being the victim of different kinds of inhuman oppression, suppression, humiliation, torture and brutality. They try to escape from the inhuman behavior of their white master into the isolation. Morrison picks up the stories of the historical reality during slavery, love and fantasy, in order to transform them into fictional reality that voice her actual concerns. Along with this, she does not forget to write the complexity of human nature where love concerns. Love, sex and relationship are also prime issues of the novel.

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