

Black Identity, Community and Reconstruction of Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison (1931-), a Nobel laureate, has attained a central place in the American literary world. She won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977), her third novel after *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). *Tar Baby* (1981) was followed by what many readers see as the crowning achievement of her twenty-five-year career namely, *Beloved* (1987), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Then came *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008).

Black identity, community and reconstruction of past have always been the underlying theme of Morrison's novels. Through the account of her novels, she shows several ways in which slavery, one of the most oppressive period in the black history, has affected the identity of African American. Her novels chronicle the lives of Afro-Americans and explore the impact of socio-historic forces pitted against them. Using precise, richly textured prose and compelling characters, Morrison deftly examines the role of black aesthetics in her novels. Through her novels, she presents the non-linear African-American socio-historical reality, fragmented by a historical past of disconnection and raptures.

In Morrison's fiction one can clearly see that the commitment to ethnocentricity, collective experience of Black people and revolutionary change advocated by Black Aesthetic Theory. The present paper will analyse Toni Morrison's *Beloved* with regard to Black Identity, Community and Reconstruction of Past.

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Beloved (1987), is set in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. Through flashbacks to past tragedies and deeply symbolic delineations of continued emotional and psychological suffering, the novel explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman and her family during the Reconstruction era.

In some ways, Morrison quoted in Mervyn Rothstein's "Toni Morrison, in Her New Novel, Defends Women," said that *Beloved* is a ghost story – a young woman suddenly appears 18 years after the child's death, and the characters believe she is the slain infant returned to earth. "I wanted it to be our past," she said, "which is haunting, and her past, which is haunting – the way memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it head on." But "I wanted that haunting not to be really a suggestion of being bedeviled by the past, but to have it be incarnate, to have it actually happen that a person enters your world who is in fact – you believe, at any rate – the dead returned, and you get a second chance, a chance to do it right. Of course, you do it wrong again." (Rothstein C 1)

The narrative proceeds in a circular, nonlinear style that mimics the process of what Morrison calls “rememory”, one of its central theme. Part one begins in 1873 in the house at 124 Bluestone Road, where Sethe and her daughter, Denver, live alone with the ghost of Sethe’s dead baby daughter. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, has died nine years before, and Denver’s brothers, Howard and Buglar, have fled the troubled house, haunted by the ghost of the baby whose mother cut its throat. While Sethe tries hard to forget her painful past, the appearance of Paul D, “the last of the Sweet Home Men,” (Beloved 9) brings back memories of the ironically named Sweet Home plantation where they had both been slaves in Kentucky eighteen years before, together with Sethe’s husband, Halle; Paul A; Paul F; and Sixo. Fragmentary recollections of the events of 1855 – in particular the fateful day in which their joint escape attempt from Sweet Home ends in disarray and tragedy – are interspersed throughout the narrative. This includes Sethe’s painful memories of her physical and sexual violation at the hands of the slavemaster, schoolteacher and his young protégés.

Paul D moves in with Sethe and Denver, chasing the baby ghost from the house and taking them to a carnival, their first social outing in eighteen years. Briefly, it seems as if Paul D’s presence will result in a reconstituted family and a return to the normalcy that has eluded the residents of 124 ever since the murder of the baby girl eighteen years before, after which the community shunned Sethe for what they viewed as her outrageous and prideful act. Upon their return from the outing, however, they find a stranger, a young woman about nineteen or twenty, who has materialized out of nowhere. She gives her name as Beloved, recalling to Sethe the words she had carved upon her dead baby’s tombstone.

Sethe takes Denver and Beloved to the Clearing, where her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, used to hold prayer meetings. When she summons the spirit of Baby Suggs, longing for her healing touch, she instead feels someone strangling her throat vengefully. Gradually, Beloved’s greedy desire toward Sethe increases, and she begins to disrupt Paul D’s relationship with Sethe, first moving him bit by bit out of the house and then seducing him. Paul D feels unmanned by the ghost, much as the experience of slavery had unmanned him at Sweet Home making him feel like less of a man than even the barnyard rooster Mister, ironically called by the very title denied to male slaves.

Meanwhile, the events of eighteen years previously are delivered through a series of flashbacks from the point of view of various characters. Part one of the novel ends when Stamp Paid, the old family friend who helped ferry Sethe and the newborn Denver across the river to freedom and who witnessed Sethe’s act, shows Paul D a newspaper clipping about the murder. When Paul D confronts Sethe with his new knowledge, she explains her intention to “put her babies where they’d be safe” (B 164). Paul D judges her love “too-thick” (B 164) and reminds her that she had “two feet ... not

four,” (B 165) thus painfully reproducing the slaveowner’s treatment and characterization of her as an animal. The first section of the novel ends with Paul D’s abrupt departure from 124 Bluestone road.

In Part Two, Stamp Paid, filled with regret about chasing Paul D away, decides to pay a call at the house on Bluestone Road, when he approaches the house, he is repelled by the sounds of mumbling voices from within. With Paul D gone, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, whom Sethe now realizes is her dead baby restored to her, are left alone together, cut off from all contact with the community. The sounds Stamp Paid hears coming from the house are “the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (B 199).

In Part Three, Sethe and Beloved are locked in a pathological dependency fueled by a mixture of love, revenge, and guilt over the trauma of the past. Beloved, now pregnant with Paul D’s child, grows plumper and more demanding of Sethe by the day. Denver realizes that Beloved is slowly killing Sethe and that she will “have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world ... and go ask somebody for help” (B 239). Word spreads among the black women in the community that “Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her” (B 255). Finally forgiving Sethe both for her crime and for her pride, they gather together to help exorcise the ghost that is destroying her. As they approach the house, they witness a white man. Denver’s new employer, Edward Bodwin, approaching 124 in his cart to bring Denver to her new job for Sethe, the scene re-enacts the trauma of eighteen years ago: “He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing” (B 262). She tries to stab Bodwin with an ice pick, redirecting the violence toward the white man rather than towards her daughter and simultaneously exorcising the ghost of Beloved, who disappears as suddenly as she came. Paul D returns to nurse Sethe back to health. When Sethe mourns the loss of Beloved “She was my best thing” (B 272), Paul D replies: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are”(B 273). Her tentative reply – “Me? Me?” (B 272) – underscores both her new found sense of selfhood and its fragility.

The novel ends with a lyrical evocation of Beloved, “disremembered and unaccounted for,” (B 274) like the many anonymous and forgotten slaves of the novel’s dedication. In the novel’s final pages, the multiple meanings of the repeated injunction “This is not a story to pass on,” (B 275) engages the paradox of mediating between the need to remember and the need to forget the historical trauma of slavery.

Beloved explains black behaviour in terms of social conditioning, as if listing atrocities solves the mystery of human motive and behaviour. It is designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims

doesn't weaken. Yet perhaps it is best understood by its italicized inscription: "Sixty Million and More" Morrison recently told Newsweek that the reference was to all the captured Africans who died coming across the Atlantic.

So through her characters, Morrison portrays the dehumanisation of slavery and racism. Thus, the paper explores the multiple injustices and the harmful impact which the institution of slavery has had on the identity of African American.

Morrison is a phenomenon and extraordinary woman. She is regarded as one of the greatest living writer that has brought new life to American literature. She is the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993). She has written many novels, a play, a short story and a critical essay. She has created unforgettable characters and explored the psychological trauma of racism, injustice, oppression and slavery in her novels. In short, Morrison helps the world to stop and think about the history of the struggles through African American experience. She portrays the black community with reference to blackness and the inner struggles of the individual as well as the class differences and social structures within the collective that their past.

So, the ghost of Beloved is the horrible past of Sethe who keeps tormenting her present. This shows their past is repeatedly haunted by their past experiences as slaves and stand as an obstacle in making future. But Denver finds a new identity in the social structure and is able to escape alienation. When she leaves 124 to look for help and then she works to support her mother, her sister and herself. And above that, the whole women folks of community help Sethe by driving Beloved who represents the pain of slavery they all suffer in some way. The whole community share her story and pain, and they march to the house and perform a collective exorcism:

"The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the ends, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized its wash". (B 261)

Morrison here shows that Sethe will not be able to search her identity without the help of community. Here the word "baptised" show Sethe's rebirth into her new life. She now has an opportunity to redefine her identity on the basis of her cultural heritage and a new transformation from isolation into communal re-entry. Like the Sweet Home's tree and Paul D's sapling, the symbol of wholeness, Sethe finds herself an identity.

Morrison wants readers to participate in her novels, to be involved actively. She shows in her novel that to have a shared history, the individual who does not belong to a community is generally lost. The individual who leaves and has internalized the village or community is much more likely to

survive. The lack of roots and the disconnection from the community and the past cause individuals to become alienated; often her characters struggle unsuccessfully to identify, let alone fulfil an essential self. Morrison has given much reader a reason to reconceptualise their approaches to American literature. By using her imagination, historical element and tradition she produces a whole new reality of how pervasive “blackness” has been to the structuring of American texts. Hence she continues to awe and enhance the reader with her craft.

Works Cited:

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