

Glimpses of self-alienation in Tony Morris novel ‘Beloved’

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Abstract

Tony Morrison’s novel ‘Beloved’ may be counted as a revolutionary novel- as a unique addition to the genre – fictional and the typical slave narrative structure. It is a fair document of the dehumanizing effects of slavery that leave the protagonist Sethe stuck in the past and unable to escape the “continuing apocalypse of racism”. ‘Beloved’ is one of a very few examples of literature that is written in a maternal voice. This novel speaks to the unspeakable, and somewhat incommunicable, rawness of trauma. ‘Beloved’ speaks to the pervasiveness of psychological trauma. Here Toni Morrison tackles life’s darkest elements through the story of an escaped slave based around the murder of her innocent infant. The twisted mother-daughter relationships of ‘Beloved’ showcase the fracturing effect of slavery upon the human mind. Morrison radically presents this phenomenon by granting the psychological effects of slavery a physical embodiment, resurrecting a figure to adopt the secondary selves of the living. This paper explores the crisis of slave life of American in particular and all over the world.

Keywords- *Unique, turmoil, maternal, psychological, fictional*

Tony Morrison’s novel ‘Beloved’ may be counted as a revolutionary novel- as a unique addition to the genre – fictional and the typical slave narrative structure. It is a fair document of the dehumanizing effects of slavery that leave the protagonist Sethe

stuck in the past and unable to escape the “continuing apocalypse of racism”. ‘Beloved’ is one of a very few examples of literature that is written in a maternal voice. This novel speaks to the unspeakable, and somewhat incommunicable, rawness of trauma.

'Beloved' speaks to the pervasiveness of psychological trauma. Here Toni Morrison tackles life's darkest elements through the story of an escaped slave, based around the murder of her innocent infant. The twisted mother-daughter relationships of 'Beloved' showcase the fracturing effect of slavery upon the human mind. Morrison radically presents this phenomenon by granting the psychological effects of slavery a physical embodiment, resurrecting a figure to adopt the secondary selves of the living. Beloved enters at an illusory high point in the protagonists' lives as a physical manifestation of the split identities of Sethe and Denver. Sethe reminisces on days where she and the other slaves were treated like animals, locked in boxes, bits put in their mouths, chained, beaten, killed, and even sexually harassed and raped. These disturbing experiences never leave Sethe's mind, and it is safe to say they have a similar effect on the other slaves.

Slavery and racism's message is that white people are superior to black people. This is one of racism and slavery's worst affects because it has lasting. Sethe continues to believe she is inferior to the white man because that is all she has ever been told.

Sethe and the rest of the freed or escaped slaves are "still haunted by slavery, confront an over howling legacy of psychological scars". While Sethe is now physically free, mentally she is still enslaved. The physiological effects of slavery are so harsh, even those who never experienced slavery is affected by them. Denver, Sethe's daughter, is affected by Sethe's past. She hears so much from Sethe about her past that she almost wishes she experienced the same things in order to connect with her mother. At the start of the story, Denver is rather immature and only wants to hear stories about her. However, her innocence is lost when she learns that her mother killed Beloved and planned to kill her and her brothers. She says,

"I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (Morrison 243.)

Beloved is based on fact, which makes it all that much more horrifying. Morrison's inspiration for the story was Margaret Garner, who killed her two-year-old daughter in 1856, to keep her from being returned to slavery. Before she could kill the rest of her children and herself, slave catchers pried the knife from her fingers. On the backbone of this gruesome

story, Morrison builds 'Beloved', a novel of a baby who haunts the mother who killed her. The traumatization of the family is generational.

Sethe's own story, growing up under a mother who essentially disposes of all of her other newborns without concern, suggests that her own infanticide is prefigured by that of her own mother. Sethe recognizes her mother's actions with feelings of displacement. Sethe clearly loved her mother, but remembers little about her, and her memories are tainted by a great legacy of fear and resentment.

Morrison centers her story on the unique relational conflict of mothers and daughters documenting "the tragic human cost of being 'other,' and the dim regions of desubjectivization and undifferentiation. Reduced to less than human by the confines of slavery, these women have no identities outside of mother and daughters or slaves.

Overlapping between slavery and motherhood is part of what pushes Sethe into insanity, continuing her trauma on after slavery. Furthermore, this effect is intensified by Sethe's undeniably intense dedication to her children. Sethe approaches her maternal responsibilities with a passion

almost too fierce. While Sethe's low self-esteem is not projected onto her daughters, her low self-worth, in combination with a lack of a bond with her own mother, perverts Sethe's understanding of maternal affection. A pattern of female aggression as a version of love accompanies the cycle of violence which underlies Sethe's traumatization.

Emotionally stunted by trauma and the social isolation of slavery, Sethe interacts with those she loves in the only way she knows how—through impassioned violence. Despite her frequent use of violence, Sethe's maternal instinct is the only force that keeps her, bloody and emotionally distraught, moving forward. Nevertheless, the dichotomy of her fear of slavery and her love for her children burdens Sethe throughout the entire novel. Emerging from the horrors of slavery, Sethe inhabits a kind of trauma-based hysteria "that allows the self to survive, but not to prosper, mirrors the cultural psychosis which is its cause.

While Beloved's death is the final tipping point for Sethe's sanity, it is one of the first and most destructive memories for Denver. The graphic murder of Beloved is the common traumatic tie between Sethe and Denver. In fact, the book opens with the line, "124 was spiteful, full of baby's venom" placing

Beloved and her female compatriots squarely at the center of the novel. Beloved's untimely death cleaves her from what grounds one as human; she dies nameless and therefore, without a tie to her identity. The term "Beloved" in and of itself signifies the impermanence of her identity she only receives this name after death, paid for with Sethe's body. Both women are trapped in the same complex position—that of Sethe's daughter. Denver expresses her traumatization.

"I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (Morrison 242).

While Beloved is deprived of a sense of self from her very beginning, her murder also causes Sethe's identity to split apart. No longer capable of maintaining a linear time line, Sethe collapses in on herself, pulling Denver down with her. Her repeated cycling between present and past reopens the wounds of her traumatization, allowing Beloved to create an identity from the remaining fragments of her mother and sister. Morrison uses psychological time rather than real time, and memory rather

than lived experience, to emphasize the importance of perception.

She enhances this quality through her choice of narrative perspective; "having to make do with only a description of bits and pieces of Beloved's 'body.' During Beloved's presence, and through her role as the physical embodiment of their psychological trauma, Sethe and Denver drastically change. Beloved forces them to both re-experience their past trauma and see the consequences as they present in themselves and are reflected in Beloved. Once this cycle of repetition is complete, Beloved vanishes.

This supports the notion that Beloved personifies the trauma Sethe and Denver have experienced in order to preserve their core identities. The identification of Beloved as an amalgamation of Sethe and Denver's split selves also requires one to delve into the nature of individual identities in Beloved. Perpetually trapped in an infantile mother-daughter relationship, the two daughters allow their identities to bleed into one another. In much the same way that she uses Beloved's need for her breast milk to temporarily rise above the trauma of slavery, Sethe also uses Beloved's physical form to overcome her overall traumatization.

In fact, ‘Beloved’ is an amalgamation of the traumatized selves of Sethe and Denver, brought into the physical realm to be defeated. However, when Beloved introduces a new kind of non-verbal communication, she acts as the companion of which Denver has long been deprived. Here, the tie between language and oral fixation resurfaces in a relational context. When Denver loses the capacity to use language, going temporarily deaf, the sound of Beloved’s ghost on the steps returns her hearing. In this, Beloved grants Denver importance, giving her the responsive attention, she desires. Beloved later sympathizes with Denver’s social hunger, characterized by overtly oral statements such as “licked, tasted, eaten, by Beloved’s eyes” (Morrison 68), tying social acknowledgement to oral fixation. Beloved, away from her family for years, has experienced social isolation even more severe than Denver’s. This experience produces a need for attention similar to Denver’s, but more guttural. On a foundational level, Beloved mirrors the traumatization of Denver and Sethe. She is a product of slavery, deprived of basic human rights, by and like her mother,

and forever trapped in a state of immaturity like her sister. Even in life, Beloved existed as a symbolic part of Sethe. In murdering her young daughter, Beloved, “Sethe extends her right over her own body—the right to use any means, including death, to protect.... the ‘parts of her’ that are her children”. Beloved makes an ambiguous appearance midway through the novel, mirroring and building upon this trauma. As the novel progresses, she increasingly resembles Sethe. In this, Beloved necessitates Denver’s transition into the role of caretaker, allowing Sethe to escape the struggles and trauma she associates with motherhood. Beloved’s embodiment of Sethe and Denver’s traumatization allows them to move beyond the moratorium forced upon them by slavery and murder. While Beloved never fully establishes herself as an individual, her role as the physical embodiment of Sethe and Denver’s broken selves provides a figure to carry the burdens of Morrison’s main characters so they can truly begin their adult lives.

In fact, ‘Beloved’ is meant to be more than a story—it is a history, and it is a life. Beloved explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who

are former slaves even in freedom. The most dangerous of slavery's effects is its negative impact on the former slaves' senses of self, and the novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation.

Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's. Slaves were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul D is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real "man," and he frequently wonders about his value as a person.

Sethe, also, was treated as a subhuman. She once walked in on schoolteacher giving his pupils a lesson on her "animal characteristics." She, too, seems to be alienated from her and filled with self-loathing. Thus, she sees the best part of herself as her children. Yet her children also have volatile, unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with Beloved's, and Beloved feels herself actually beginning to physically disintegrate. Slavery has also limited Baby Suggs's self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the

opportunity to be a true wife, sister, daughter, or loving mother.

As a result of their inability to believe in their own existences, both Baby Suggs and Paul D become depressed and tired. Baby Suggs's fatigue is spiritual, while Paul D's is emotional. While a slave, Paul D developed self-defeating coping strategies to protect him from the emotional pain he was forced to endure. Any feelings he had were locked away in the rusted "tobacco tin" of his heart, and he concluded that one should love nothing too intensely.

Other slaves—Jackson Till, Aunt Phyllis, and Halle—went insane and thus suffered a complete loss of self. Sethe fears that she, too, will end her days in madness. Indeed, she does prove to be mad when she kills her own daughter. Yet Sethe's act of infanticide illuminates the perverse forces of the institution of slavery—under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them and thus protecting them from the more gradual destruction wrought by slavery. This shows that slavery's negative consequences are not limited to the slaves: he notes that slavery causes whites to become "changed and altered . . . made . . . bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be."

The insidious effects of the institution affect not only the identities of its black victims but those of the whites who perpetrate it and the collective identity of Americans. Where slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity and compassion.

To sum up 'Beloved' was named "the single best work of American fiction published in the last twenty-five years," It is not a linear tale, told from beginning to end. It is a story encompassing levels of past, from the slave ship to sweet home, as well as the present. Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present. The novel is, in essence, written in fragments, pieces shattered and left for the reader to place together. The juxtaposition of past with present serves to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the present, and by giving us fragments to work with Morrison melds the entire story into one inseparable piece to be gazed at. In forcing the reader to put back the pieces, Morrison forces him also to think about them and consider the worth of each. From a stylistic perspective, Morrison's artistry in this regard is nothing short of breath taking. Morrison's use of both verse and stream of

consciousness writing where necessary is unsurpassed and not often matched in literature. Strict narrative, she realizes, is not enough to capture the feelings of a people, and she manages to capture them in some of the most well-known passages of modern literature.

For this reason, Morrison suggests that our nation's identity, like the novel's characters, must be healed. America's future depends on its understanding of the past: just as Sethe must come to terms with her past before she can secure a future with Denver and Paul D, before we can address slavery's legacy in the contemporary problems of racial discrimination and discord, we must confront the dark and hidden corners of our history. Crucially, in *Beloved*, we learn about the history and legacy of slavery not from schoolteacher's or even from the Bodwins' point of view but rather from Sethe's, Paul D's, Stamp Paid's, and Baby Suggs's. Morrison writes history with the voices of a people historically denied the power of language, and *Beloved* recuperates a history that had been lost—either due to willed forgetfulness or to forced silence.

She says "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass

on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my re-memory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. 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. What

I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there right in the place where it happened.”

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