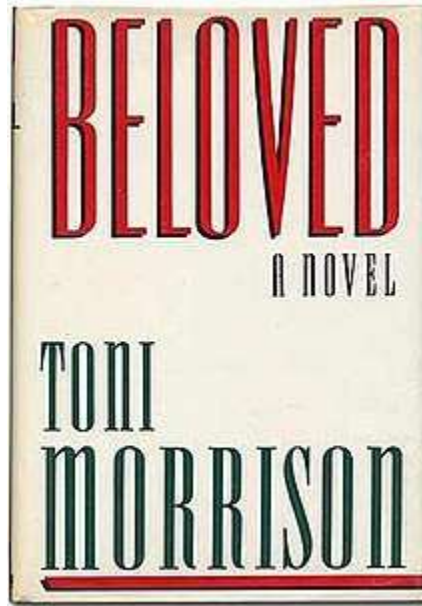


Representation of Memory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. Anjali Verma



Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beloved_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beloved_(novel))

Beloved

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* remembers the horror and pathos of the Black Slaves prior to their emancipation and their emotional status after their legally won freedom. The novel brilliantly displays the emotional response of each character to unimaginable loss and suffering. The narratives by the main characters are actually documented thus making *Beloved* a historical novel woven within a fictional plot. *Beloved* has been categorized as a gothic romance, a ghost story, a holocaust novel, a feminist tract. The writer has used history, language and imagery to create a gripping novel which shakes the readers out of complacency and forces them to live and relive the trauma of slavery.

Role and Function of Memories

Our character and actions are to a large extent decisively determined by our memories and our memories are no idle vestiges of the past but active agents of our conduct in the present. *Beloved* portrays the continuous searing emotional conflict in the psyche of its protagonist. Through flashback to past tragedies, *Beloved* explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman and her family during Reconstruction Era. Sethe, a representative of the holocaust of black slavery. Not only has her body been violated, but her emotions have been treated as saleable

commodities by the power –to-be. The central incident in *Beloved* is the murder by a fugitive slave of her infant daughter to spare her from a life of ignominy and slavery.

The writer has amply used ‘**repetitive frequency**’, i.e., narration of the ‘same’ event several times, but with difference of ‘duration’ (the narrative length of representation of the event) and ‘focalization’ (the angle or perspective from which the event is represented). Nearly every important event of the past in *Beloved* is remembered or narrated more than once. *Beloved* is marked by repetitive narrative memory. It entails the narrative aesthetics of a quaint interaction of order, duration and frequency.

Memory in African American Narratives

Rebecca Ferguson in her essay, *History, Memory and Language in Morrison’s ‘Beloved* states that for many Afro-African novelists ‘memory’ become a crucial concern in their writing because they realize that their history has been ‘disremembered and unaccounted’² for. Ferguson observes, “theirs (the Afro-Americans) is a history of oppression, but one that must be remembered, accounted for, and while the language of the dominant culture and the written work itself have all too often been potent instruments in that oppression, not to have made of them, is to be rendered impotent in ways that matter greatly” (109). So his memory and language become a crucial part of the writings of novelists like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

In order to give an authentic portrayal of history, memories are essential and in order to construct this repressed history through memories, we necessarily need language. So, language becomes framework within which they inscribed history and its corresponding memories. Ferguson argues that Morrison’s language in *Beloved* is in some ways modernist because most of her novels are located, ‘in a time of radical transition,(110) a time when the west was registering the impact of industrialization and ‘great transformation from the old world to the new’, while Africa was being subjected to a parallel and extreme experience of dislocation and it is in such time that Morrison locates the inception of modernism. History and memory are of central concern in *Beloved* and survival of women within and beyond structures of slavery.

Civil War and *Beloved*

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is set in Cincinnati in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War. The passage of time has neither healed or anesthetized the pain and effects of slavery. Instead the characters in *Beloved* are formed and deformed by their experiences in slavery. Sethe, an ex-slave has escaped from slavery and captivity in Kentucky to Cincinnati eighteen years earlier in 1855.³ "her three children she had already packed into a wagonload of others in a caravan of Negroes crossing the river"(9). Sethe's children consist of two boys, Howard Buglar and her daughter, the crawling already? Baby (99) she gives birth to her fourth and last child, Denver, named after Amy Denver, a white girl who helps Sethe on her flight to freedom.

Humiliation and Dissection of Slavery – Memory and the Novel *Beloved*

Paul D., Sethe, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, Ella have been mortally humiliated in countless ways about which the reader comes to know from different angles. So, we travel back and forth across the scene of slavery such that the narrated circumstances begin to crystallize into a tight verbal net from which no feeling or emotion can slip through unfelt. *Beloved* can be labeled as

multi-narrative because numerous voices retell the same events, each from a different perspective, without one perspective getting privileged over the other narratives of the same event.

Beloved dissects the consequences of slavery's tragedy through a three generational tale of mothers and daughters. Not only is *Beloved* a haunting tale of mothers and daughters, it is also a touching dirge for anonymous victims--sixty million and more--survivors and victims of slavery. Cynthia Wolff observes, "Toni Morrison's retrospective account can do two things that were not possible in Stowe's era: it can present an entirely unsentimental account of slavery's brutality, and it can deal with the tragic inheritance that slavery has bequeathed to African-American women:"⁴

Morrison states, 'yet no slave society in the history of the World wrote more-or more thoughtfully-about its own enslavement. The milieu, however, dictated the purpose and style. The narratives were instructive, moral and obviously representative... Popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience.'⁵

Morrison further observes that 'the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate."⁶ in shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they (slave writers) were silent about many things, and they 'forgot many other things'⁷ and Morrison asserts that 'the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I am willing to take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil drawn (aside).'⁸

Morrison says that, 'Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections of others. Thus, memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant.'⁹ The subaltern history of the Blacks which is also the cultural heritage of the whites is a 'revisionist' version of a public past. A major historical past is 'rememored' in addition to the private accounts of slavery as borne by the former slaves. Sethe voices Morrison in *Beloved* when she tells her daughter, Denver: "Some you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it is you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else... The picture is still there and what's more. If you go there -you who never was there -if you go there and stand in the place where it was. It will happen again: it will be there for you. waiting for you." (36)

Hence the profile of memory is integral to the novel. The narrative structure becomes the representation of memory of the characters. The narrative manipulations become the framework within which the memories are flashed on against the background of American history. So, memories become integral to the identity of the novel.

Two Periods of History

The two principal periods between which *Beloved* oscillates are 1850-55 and 1873-74. These two stretches of time also culturally characterize slavery in the antebellum South and the period termed as Reconstruction. This 'span' of time also accommodates Sweet Home, the Kentucky Farm managed by Mr. and Mrs. Garner with the help of five male slaves, i.e. three Pauls, Otalle and Sixo and one female slave Sethe, who replaced Baby Suggs, and 124 Bluestone Road

on the outskirts of Cincinnati. Finney observes: ‘The past is the confederate South, the present is the union North, and the meeting point between the two is the Ohio river that symbolizes a geographical, historical, cultural and ethical divide which the major protagonists of the novel have to cross-not once but many times in the unfolding of the syuzhet.’¹⁰

The novel’s present time extends from the summer of 1873 with Paul D’s arrival at 124 to the spring of 1874 when he returns there in the penultimate chapter after the neighborhood women exorcise the ghost of Beloved. Beloved narrates the events in the past during the crucial year 1855 and in the present, 1873-74, in a disjointed manner. Often some aspect of the present triggers of memories piecemeal. The past in *Beloved* is specially confined to the period 1850-55 though Baby Suggs’ memories extend back to before 1850. 1850 is the year in which Mr. Garner buys the 13-year-old Sethe to replace Baby Suggs in the kitchen. The following year Sethe chooses Halle (son of Baby Suggs) as her husband and they subsequently have four children. In 1855, Mr. Garner dies and Mrs. Garner invites Schoolteacher to take over the farm because, ‘she didn’t want to be the only white person on the farm and a woman too.’ (36)

Schoolteacher comes with his two nephews and assumes the controls of Sweet Home. Schoolteacher’s harsh treatment of the slaves is so bad that, “for years Paul D. believed Schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men. And it was that that made them run off” (220) and this makes them hatch a plan to escape that August. Sethe, fully pregnant with her fourth child, manages to escape but not before she is sexually assaulted by the nephews and flogged by schoolteacher for informing Mrs. Garner about the outrage. Halle goes insane after helplessly watching nephews abuse Sethe. Sixo is burnt alive by schoolteacher Paul D. is sold to Brandywine. Sethe delivers her fourth child, a daughter on her flight to freedom to rejoin her children at 124. Twenty-eight days later, schoolteacher, his nephew and Sheriff arrive at 124 to reclaim Sethe and her children and succeed in murdering Beloved: “I couldn’t let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn’t let her nor any of them live under schoolteacher. That was out.” (163)

We learn about these events of the past in a fragmented manner in the present, in 1873-74. Some aspects of the present triggers off the memories and we get a splintered, discontinuous revelation of the past. Paul D.’s arrival at 124 in 1873 the first chapter of *Beloved* triggers off the memories of the past, i.e., arrival of Sethe at Sweet Home, the Kentucky farm. He remembers Sethe as, “Halle’s girl-the one with iron eye and backbone to match... Halle’s woman. Pregnant every ear including year she sat by the fire telling him she was going to run”(9) memories of Sethe from 1850 to 1855 in 1873 present Sethe as an iron willed and “iron-eyed”(10)woman, who choose Halle, Baby Suggs’ “eighth and last child ,who rented himself out all over the country to buy her away from there”(23). Sethe decides to go the clearing (the place where Baby Suggs used to hold prayers and give sermons) “to pay tribute to Halle” (89). Sethe remembers Baby Suggs and blames “herself for Baby Suggs’ collapse” (90), because she feels that “grief at 124 started when she jumped down off the wagon, her newborn tied to her chest in the underwear of a whitegirl looking for Boston” (90).

Sethe remembers Amy Denver, the whitegirl who helped her in delivering Denver. Memory of Amy Denver, Stamp Paid and Ella is triggered off by Sethe’s visit to the clearing. She

also remembers how Baby Suggs nursed her back to health, even when she was “convinced her son was dead” (94). In the clearing, sitting on her mother-in-law’s preaching rock, she remembers that she had twenty eight days of unslaved life and she got to know the other Negroes and “that’s how she got through waiting for Halle. Bit by bit, at 124 in the clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself.” (95)

Another instance of the present triggering off a past event occurs four weeks after Beloved enters 124. Sethe, Denver and Beloved collect the rain-soaked clothes and come inside their home. Sethe starts toweling Denver’s hair and Beloved asks Sethe “Your woman she never fix up your hair?” (60)

To Conclude

The ‘fabula’ can be reconstructed from discontinued flashbacks:1855- Beloved’s murder, Sethe and Denver’s imprisonment for 3 months, while Baby Suggs becomes bed-ridden due to despair;1862-63-Denver attends Lady Jones’s ‘School’, 1863-65: Denver becomes dumb after learning of her mother’s act of infanticide;1864-65 Howard and Buglar leave home;1865-Baby Suggs dies. Simultaneously we also learn about Paul D’s history since being sold to Brandywine in 1855. *Beloved* employs redundancy or the repetition of the events of the ‘fabula’. Almost every significant event of the past is remembered on more than one occasion. Repetition of the past reflects the difficulty the major characters have in talking about their experience of slavery. In every person, there is a concentrated set of specially charged memories that is inseparable from his/her self-identity.

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References

¹ Rebecca Ferguson. History, Memory and Language in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* “, in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Susan Selsers. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1991, pp. 109-27.

² Ferguson borrows this phrase from the closing passages of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, pg. 9.

⁴ Cynthia Griffin Wolff. “Margret Garner”: A Cincinnati Story” *The Massachusetts Review* (Fall 1991), pp. 434.

⁵ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory” in *Inventing the Truth* ed. William Zinsecr (Boston: Houghton. Mifflin Company, 1987), 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory” in *Inventing the Truth* ed. William Zinsecr (Boston: Houghton. Mifflin Company, 1987), 109-110.

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⁸, "The Site of Memory", pp.110.

⁹, "The Site of Memory", pp.111.

¹⁰ Brian Finney, "Temporal Defamiliarization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Obsidian*, 2(Spring 1990):22.

Dr. Anjali Verma
Asst. Professor
Smt. MMK College of Commerce & Economics
Mumbai
India
drarver@yahoo.com