
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:3 March 2014

ISSN 1930-2940

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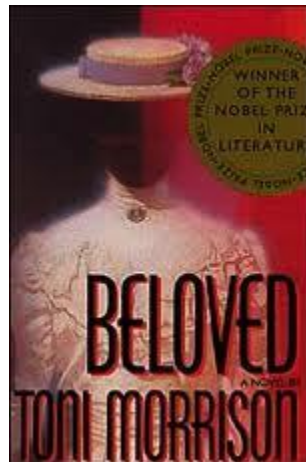
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Dealing with the Psyche of Slaves

Toni Morrison is one of the most gifted novelists in the history of African American literature. She delivers her voice to the black women, and makes them the protagonist of her novels. Her novel *Beloved* deals with the psyche of the slaves. Her writing is essentially humanistic and is a social document which deals with the past experiences of African Americans. It examines the old issues of the black. The traditional theory of naturalism is adequate to deal with their experiences. It is really heart-rending to know how blacks were victimized and oppressed in those days.

***Beloved* – Racial and Gender Discrimination**

In *Beloved*, Morrison explicates both racial and gender discrimination in the white dominated African American social life. Since the novel speaks about society which is disorderly, the narration of the novel is not in order. The broken narrative is the symbolical representation of the disordered status of society. The novel explores the trauma of the protagonist, Sethe. It revolves around the power of memory and history. The society of the black does not enjoy the recollection of the past; but tries to forget their position in the past. Sethe's past will showcase nothing but trauma. Sethe is the protagonist of the novel and she is the mouthpiece of Morrison. Her past is not sweet to think about so that she tries to forget it. But the past is embodied in memories of slavery and is inescapable. Her only hope is her daughter Denver. She tries to protect Denver from the white and male chauvinistic social framework. But she fails to do that. At one point she kills her own daughter in order to save her from the life of slavery. It seems to be cruel in the eyes of the society, but it is an act of mercy to her.

Sethe's Story

The novel *Beloved* begins with Sethe's story; it evolves into a story that Mirriam Horn states, "these people who don't know they are in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day . . . and they are trying desperately to be parents, husbands and a mother with children" (75). Morrison's conscious focus on the collective rather than Sethe's personal history is clarified when she says that the novel "has to be the interior life of some people, a small group of people and everything they do is impacted on by the horror of slavery,

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but they are also people”(33). The impact of slavery on a people involves the way internalization of oppressors’ values can misrepresent all intimate human relationship and even the self.

Deconstruction of History

The novel *Beloved* deals with not only ‘reconstructed memory’ but also deconstructed history. Set in post-civil war Ohio, it traces the life of a young woman, Sethe. The novel deals with Sethe’s former life as a slave on Sweet Home Farm and the tragic lives of the blacks. Although Sethe physically survives, her desire to give and receive love becomes a destructive force. Morrison addresses the difficulties faced by former slaves in keeping the horror of their past submerged within their subconscious.

In the words of Ann Snitow, Morrison “twists and tortures and fractures events until they are little slivers that cut. She moves the lurid material of melodrama into the minds of her people where it acquires the enlarging outlines of myth and trauma, dream and obsession” (25).

Ideological Basis

Morrison creates a past to undercut the ideological basis upon which it has largely been constructed by whites. However, she is employing not only available accounts in slave narratives, but also disengaging the materials from historical documents in order to revitalize them as lived experiences. Morrison expresses her views on an extremely painful and unattractive history of black women in the States, where black women have always been both mother and laborer, mother and worker, and have worked in the field along with men, Rosemarie K Lester states, “They were required to do physical labor in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship . . . Black women are both ship and safe harbor” (48-49). Morrison uses a beautiful metaphor to emphasize that black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the style, which feminists are recommending. Eric Williams states, “slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (7). The fact that African American people today are still oppressed, because of the color of their skin and their backwardness due to generations of slavery, proves that race is a later justification for the enslavement of the African people.

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Struggling to Build a Life

Toni Morrison with her heightened consciousness, depicts the way that Paul D. struggles to build a life with Sethe, as one based on a common history and a common struggle. Sethe is a typical African American woman who is satisfied with the real happiness, love brings, not with the artificial contentment brought by status and wealth:

Perhaps, it was the smile, or may be the ever-ready love she saw in his eyes-easy and upfront, the way colts, evangelists and children look at you; with love you don't have to deserve- that made her go ahead and tell him what she had not told Baby Suggs is the only person she felt obliged to explain anything to (161).

Paul D and Sethe struggle together to forge a positive life under the most oppressing conditions.

Between Fiction and History

Beloved stands exalted on the line between fiction and history from the experience of a single family. The novelist's powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery has to be appreciated. Morrison's story of Sethe represents the voices of people who have been historically denied the power of language. *Beloved* begins in 1973 in Cincinnati, Ohio where Sethe lives with her daughter Denver and mother-in-law. Sethe has two sons who run away just before the death of Sethe's mother-in-law, the old black woman. Sethe believes that they fled because of the malevolent presence of an abusive ghost that has haunted the house at 124, Bluestone Road for years. Denver however likes the ghost which everyone believes to be the spirit of her dead sister.

Resurrection of Memory

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The resurrection of Sethe's memory is caused by the presence of Paul D, with whom Sethe had been working on Mr. Garner's "Sweet Home Plantation" in Kentucky, approximately twenty years earlier. It stimulates the memories that have been buried in Sethe's mind for almost twenty years. From that point onwards the story unfolds memory in two temporal planes. The memory of the past events takes place in Kentucky, and the present in Cincinnati. The past is described through the flashbacks of major characters which are fragmentary. Each and every flashback from different perspective adds some more information to the previous ones. From that fragmented memory, the narration of the present emerges. Sethe, was born in the South to an African mother whom she never knew. When she is thirteen years old she is sold to the Garners, who own "The Sweet Home" and practice a comparatively benevolent kind of slavery, where the other slaves, who are all men, lust after her but never touch her. Their names are Sixo, Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, and Halle. Sethe chooses to marry Halle, partly because he is generous enough to buy his mother's freedom by hiring himself out on the weekends.

Beloved's Complex Identity

Beloved's elusive, complex identity is central to understand the novel. She may, as Sethe originally believes, be an ordinary woman who was locked up by a white man and never let out of doors. Her limited linguistic ability, neediness, baby-soft skin, and emotional instability could all be explained by a lifetime spent in captivity. But these traits could also support the theory that is held by most of the characters in the novel, as well as most readers, Beloved is the embodied spirit of Sethe's dead daughter. She first appears to Sethe soaking wet, as though newly born, and knew about a pair of earrings Sethe possessed long ago, she hums a song which Sethe used as lullaby for her children, she has a long scar of death under her chin and her breath smells like milk.

An Allegorical Figure

An interpretation believes that Beloved can be the representation of Sethe's mother who is dead. Beloved's memories make Sethe think about her mother. One can find some similarities between Beloved and Sethe's dead mother. Beloved's way of speaking and smiling correspond

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to those of her Mother. Beloved acts as the mother and Sethe as the daughter that maybe conscious in the writing of the novel. Beloved stands for all of the slaves who made the passage across the Atlantic. Her voice is the voice of the blacks who are suppressed by slavery's history and legacy.

Beloved can be seen as an allegorical figure. She may be the mother of Sethe, Sethe's daughter, or the embodiment of all black slavery victims. Beloved represents the past's return in the present. The major character confrontation with Beloved is complex. The relationship and interaction between Sethe and Beloved need special attention. Sethe devotes all her attention to make Beloved believe the reason why she had murdered her own child as the reaction to the Schoolteacher's arrival. To justify her infanticide, Sethe does not explain her sufferings at "Sweet Home" and her abandonment. Sethe learns the stern reality through the past. Beloved vanishes at the end of the novel. She creates a great impact on the society around her. She makes her community to be aware of the destructive and painful past, and she indicates the possibilities for the bright future. The name Beloved stimulates the entire community's suppressed memories. Confrontation as an Inevitable Strategy

The community can reclaim and learn from its forgotten and ignored memories through confrontation. Through *Beloved*, Morrison demonstrates the slaves' need of support from others to establish themselves and survive. Sethe's sense of fact is evident during the twenty eight days from whence she could taste the freedom. When Denver leaves 124, she is able to find her own 'self'. After leaving the place of slavery, she becomes socially active and it paves the way for identifying the 'self'. The black community fails to make Sethe to be kept away from the School Teacher. It leads to the death of Sethe's daughter. Baby Suggs cannot come out from the sense of grave betrayal.

When Sixo turns schoolteacher's reasoning around to justify having broken the rules, School Teacher whips him to demonstrate that "definitions belong to the definers not to the defined" (86). The slaves eventually come to realize the illegitimacy of much of the white definitions. Mr. Garner, for example, claims to have allowed his slaves to live as "real men," but Paul D questions just how manly they actually are. So too, does Paul D finally come to realize with bitter irony the fallacy of the name 'Sweet Home'; Although Sixo eventually reacts to the

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hypocrisy of the rhetoric of slavery by abandoning English altogether; other characters use English to redefine the world on their own terms. Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, for example, rename themselves. *Beloved* may read as Morrison's effort to transform those who have always been the defined, into the definers.

Cincinnati's black community plays a pivotal role in the events of 124. The community's failure to alert Sethe to the schoolteacher's approach implicates it in the death of Sethe's daughter. Baby Suggs feels the slight as a grave betrayal from which she never fully recovers. At the end of the novel, the black community makes up for its past misbehavior by gathering at 124 to collectively exorcise Beloved. By driving her away, the community secures Sethe's and its own, release from the past. While slaves, the characters manipulate language and transcend its standard limits. Their command of language allows them to adjust its meanings and to make themselves indecipherable to the white slave owners who watch them. For example, Paul D and the Georgia prison inmates sing together about their dreams and memories by garbling and tricking the words. Sethe, the mother kills the daughter, believes it as a mercy killing as well as the deepest hurt on another's heart. In her recollection;

She was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized Schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

From this remembrance, Sethe's mental state can be learnt by the readers when the infanticide is happening and what makes a mother cut the throat of her own baby; the helplessness of a mother, the thick mother love, the fear of losing her children, and her abhorrence of slavery.

Collective Class Struggle

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Beloved explains Morrison's most extraordinary and spell-binding womanish remembrances of things past. Morrison tells of Beloved's collective class struggle against capitalism and the only viable solution possible for the African American people in the white-dominated American society. The novel travels the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African American people. On a socio- psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe and Baby Suggs, who are searching for social freedom and psychological wholeness. Sethe struggles with her memory of her slave past and her retribution of Beloved. The ghost of the baby daughter whom Sethe has killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. The novel also deals with class, race, and sex, especially the black women, and their victimization under sexist and racist oppression. The feminist qualities that Morrison supports through Sethe's portrayal are strength, beauty, and resistance:5

There were required to do physical labor in competition with them, so that their relation with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance female subordination- Black women are both ship and safe harbor. It was the voice full of velvet and Boston and good things to eat that urged her along and made her think that maybe she wasn't, after all, just a crawling graveyard for six-month baby's last hours. (34)

Morrison justifies the infanticide because there seemed to be no other way for the black to save her daughter. Even though she kills her, she saves her daughter. Really, there is a paradox in it. This irony is the reality of the blacks. This novel *Beloved* expresses the black mother's urge to save the daughter from the dangerous disease of slavery; so she euthanizes her to give her eternal relief from it.

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