

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: The voice of Black Trauma

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Toni Morrison is one of the leading writers of African American literature. Her novels deal with the oppression of Black people in America. By her works she tries to give new identity to the Black people. She chooses to remember the past of slavery, racism, violence against Blacks, their exploitation and their struggle to achieve their civil rights in America. Racism and slavery is not used by Morrison as narrowly exclusive; they are committed to survival and wholeness of entire Black people and marginal people at large. In her works, she shows the condition of Black people and convincing her readers about the deprivation and injustice of the Black people.

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio in a working class family. She won the Nobel Prize and the Pulitzer Prize for her novels. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogues and richly detailed black characters. As an editor she played a vital role in bringing black literature into the mainstream. She edited books by many black authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis and Gayl Jones.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* focuses on a forgotten chapter in American history. According to Morrison, the question of slavery has been part of a collective amnesia in American society. She has made an attempt to open up the past of slavery which neither the Whites nor the Blacks wish to remember. Blacks, because they wish to forget the pain associated with it and Whites, because they do not wish to acknowledge or confront it. Morrison says in the article "The Pain of Being Black" the reason why she wrote *Beloved*:

This has got to be the least read of all books I'd written because it is about something that the 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. I mean its national amnesia. (Morrison: 1989, 34)

By writing *Beloved*, Morrison has accepted her responsibility towards her people and she consciously resurrects memories of slavery by writing this work. Those people, who were unceremoniously buried or not buried at all in the days of slavery and their days of struggle, are brought back to life and given a peaceful burial, so that their souls rest in peace. *Beloved* is about those extra-ordinary and ordinary slaves who never entered into the pages of American history. They never lived peaceful independent life because they were never considered as human beings in their lives. They were treated as subhuman and the world never asked them what they really wished or wanted to be in their lives. It is the past which always makes the present coherent. For centuries slaves didn't raise their voice against the injustice but in those years they survived and it was a remarkable achievement. In the days of slavery, they were beaten, lynched, and raped. Their stomach was never full and their works in the fields stretched endlessly.

As a writer, Morrison feels that it is her moral responsibility to remember the painful past of slavery, even if Black society wants to forget it. History always plays a crucial role in shaping the present and future, especially for the blacks in America, because the experience of slavery is central to the shaping of their identity in America. For Morrison, black history gives identity to the black people. As Susan Blake has pointed out: "It is not a case of 'foreging (sic) new myths' but of 'rediscovering the old ones'. In this process lies in the clue not only to 'the way we really were' but to 'the way we really are'" (Blake: 1984, 98)

Many slaves have laid down their lives during and before the Civil War. This book is dedicated to "sixty million and more", who died in the middle passage. The middle passage is a term which refers to the flight of slaves from Africa to the American shores before the Civil War and after it. Their deaths were unnamed and unclaimed. When Morrison undertook the editing of *The Black Book*, a collection of "original raw material documenting our [black] life", she

discovered many painful incidents of slave history. And out of them, she uncovered the true and shocking story of a runaway slave from Kentucky named Margaret Garner. She cites an article, titled “A Visit to the Slave Mother who killed her Child,” published in the *American Baptist* in eighteen fifty five. Garner, at the time of her recapture, murdered her infant child so that the baby would not be doomed to a lifetime of slavery. This incident stayed in Morrison’s mind for years, and afterwards it became the theme of her novel called *Beloved*. *Beloved* is a fascinating slave narrative that goes back into the past and shapes a real life story of a Kentucky slave.

Morrison felt that the story of Margaret Garner could be cited as an example of the effects of slavery. Though, here, mother kills her child, it is an effort to establish a legal claim of a mother on her child. During the time of slavery, the master had absolute control over the lives of his slaves. They were his property. It was the master who decided the fate of black child. If he wishes, he would sell the child and for this he never has to ask the child’s mother or other family members. The slave parents did not even have control over the lives of them, in this circumstances it is next to impossible to raise voice for their children. Margaret Garner was separated from her family, not because she killed her child. Her masters were least concerned about that, they punished her for her crime of fleeing from slavery.

In *Unruly Women: the Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (1992), Victoria E. Bynum writes about the case in the court of Granville country in which Hannah, a slave of Col. John G. Hart, was charged with murdering her own son. She cuts the throat of her child and afterwards she also tries to slit her own throat but was unsuccessful. She faced the trial for murdering and attempting suicide. Another example is described in the “fugitive slave” account, G.W.Offley describes his mother’s confrontation with her dead master’s family over their refusal to allow her to purchase her children. They say to her that they will buy her children and kill her husband on the auction ground. She bluntly replies:

Buy them and welcome, but you had better throw your money in the fire, for if you buy one of my children, I will cut all three of their throats while they are asleep, and your money will do you no good. (Offley: 1971, 131)

Beloved describes the situation of slaves. Paul D ends up with a bit of iron in his mouth, Halle never shows up and Sixo dies. Sethe reaches her destination but her freedom is very short lived. She takes her children along with her and tries to kill all of them so that they don't have to suffer as slaves. Two children Heward and Buglar run away but she succeeds in killing the crawling baby. Sethe is without any support system and she does what she thinks is right. However, the little murdered child returns and her house is haunted by the ghost. People stop coming at her home because of the ghost. She is isolated from her society and leads her life in loneliness with Denver. It is only after Paul D, the last person from Sweet Home, arrives and gives a new life to Sethe again. Living in isolation is not easy, but she accepts it so that she can live with her baby ghost. Maybe, it was not possible for her mother and mother-in-law, she is somehow upgrade herself and move little ahead as a mother.

Morrison did not make Sethe a passive victim. Even though Paul D leaves her, her sons run away from her, the community turns it back on her, she does not seek pity. She has crossed all boundaries around her, and makes herself self-sufficient to cope up with any situation. She protested, sometimes even violently. She rejects every one and lives an isolated life but she does not bow to anyone. There have been critics who are struck by her immediate action of killing a child. But as Heinze has pointed out, this is a very superficial reading of text. Having never been in a similar situation, many may not agree with what Sethe does but the novel goes deeper than the act. Sethe is one of the most puzzling characters by Toni Morrison. Morrison has been criticized for the eccentricities of her characters. Sometimes black fathers have sexual relationship with their daughters while here a black mother kills her daughter. But Morrison successfully establishes intimacy with her readers. And readers, characters and she herself can involve together in the tragic world of the narrative. Here, if someone criticizes her for portraying such eccentric behavior of Sethe, one must be convinced that she did the right thing. The murder is an act of love not of hatred. In this sense *Beloved* is about loving things which are very important to them.

In *Beloved*, every character has a story to tell, all have different stories but the root cause of their tragedy is the same. The cause is slavery, and they have very few chances of winning.

They all are victims of slavery. Baby Shuggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, known as a lady with large heart considers the white man as bad luck. Sethe's mother, the survivor from the slave ship, is finally lynched. Paul D survives and sees all but is left homeless and sad. He arrives at Bluestone road, and wishes to build his life again with Sethe. He chooses Sethe because he feels that she is the woman of his mind. She has left him in his days of manhood.

Beloved exposes the inhumanness of the institution of slavery. It exposes the hypocrisy, dishonesty and hollowness of the whites. White people ridiculously claim that slavery is for the salvation of souls of the black people. Some sensitive white souls see that there is inhumanness in slavery but at the same time argues that it is necessary for the progress of history. The Black are unable to assert themselves as they are denied identity by the institution of slavery. They are reduced to objects. The tin box of Paul D and chokecherry tree on Sethe's back are emblems of the repression they are subjected to.

Conclusion:

By reading Morrison's *Beloved*, one can understand the African American family life in the years before the Civil War. One can understand that, there is no choice left for the slave but to confine himself or herself in the system of slavery. The protest against injustice, the trauma he or she feels cannot find expression. In writing the novel, *Beloved* Morrison gives expression to the burden of anguish and grief the Black slave carried within him or her.

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