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RECOVERING SUBMERGED HISTORIES: THE TREE CARVING IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*.

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ABSTRACT

For the blacks in America, slavery has had the impact of a holocaust and like holocaust victims, the African-Americans suffered temporary amnesia. It is a bold step to reopen submerged history and debate it. *Beloved* retells history. Morrison reshapes the phase in history which was shaped by those in power. At the centre of the novel is a fatal act. It is an act that solidifies Sethe's sense of motherhood, but it is a bloody act. What compelled Sethe to undertake such a horrendous act? Is it justified? Can it be termed as her



excessive love or a crime? These are some of the questions that this study seeks to explore along with the devastating effects of slavery on the main characters of the novel. The paper also discusses why it becomes necessary to trace one's footsteps back to one's ancestors and ground black history into slave reality. To acknowledge the past is to remember all its ugliness, grief, nastiness and pain. The tin box must be opened and the choke cherry tree must be exposed with all its legacies of pain, the past has to be recycled. By divulging encased emotions and letting them spill over in laughter and tears, Morrison wants her people to break down the walls they have built to survive against separation, grief, meaninglessness and hopelessness - the only things that life had offered them. Unleashing the past becomes

indispensable, not for anything else, but to come to terms with the present which only can lead to the formation of a positive self. American history has trivialized human dignity but Morrison doesn't set out to expose; nor does she want sympathy. She merely retells, fills in and gives it a different version, The version of the victim who becomes the subject of the telling.

KEYWORDS: Black consciousness, Black solidarity, slavery, history, community healing, identity.

Nothing would be more hateful to me than a monolithic prescription of what Black literature is or ought to be.

Morrison: 1984

INTRODUCTION:

These are the words by an assertive Black woman writer writing from a black center, with her own set of rules, unrestricted by any theory or method of writing. This Nobel laureate finds inspiration "at the margin". In her works blackness emerges as a social, political and historical construct. Since its publication in 1987, no novel has been so well received and debated by the critics as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Beloved* bears the unique Morrisonian signature. It is an attempt to reopen the past and shake history out of its complacency; bringing to memory a chapter in human history which neither the whites nor the blacks wish to remember. The blacks because they wish to forget the pain associated with it and whites because they do not wish to acknowledge or confront it.

Set in the free state of Ohio and the slave state of Kentucky, *Beloved* delves back into the past and shapes a real life documented story of Kentucky slave Margaret Garner, who ran away with her husband and children to escape slavery. When caught, she tried to kill her children as she did not want them to go through the unbearable experience of slavery. The Margaret Garner case could be used as an example of the effects of slavery. It could also be used to establish the legal claim of a mother on her child. This story could not merely languish in historical documents. It had to be appropriated and woven into a tale and expanded enough to delve into the past and lay claim to those who could be claimed as ancestors. "In *Beloved* Sethe is the slave who dares to claim agency over her children, claiming her identity as a mother, asserting that her children belong to her and not the slave holder" (Grewal 97). The novel revolves around Sethe Suggs, who, through flashbacks and a non-linear narrative pattern recounts her story. The narrative takes the readers repeatedly backward and forward from freedom to slavery and vice versa. As the epigraph states, *Beloved* is dedicated to "the Sixty Million and more" who died in the middle passage and lay in the past unaccounted for, unclaimed, unnamed. By claiming kinship with them, Morrison has accepted responsibility towards her people, to ceremoniously bury through art all those unceremoniously buried or not buried at all. Morrison performs a sacred ritual of laying out the dead through art.

To write about discredited marginalized people, to reopen a chapter in history best forgotten, to use the language of the oppressor and give it a meaning different from that of the dominant culture's, requires among other things a political and moral conviction. As Morrison says in her interview with Danille Taylor Guthrie, "If they can live it, I can write about it. I refuse to believe that that period or that thing is beyond art" (Guthrie: 1994, 244). It goes to Morrison's credit that despite the fact that she is positioned at a specific point of time in history, not having firsthand experience of slavery, she is able to bridge the gap and bring immediacy to the anguish of slave reality. She draws upon the collective black consciousness and gives it a throbbing heartbeat; so that the text does not become a discourse on slavery but an intensely felt experience of pain.

THE DISCOURSE OF SLAVERY:

Beloved can claim kinship with earlier slave narratives. Two things make it different, one is the entry of the ghost in the form of *Beloved*; and the other is that Morrison is concerned with inner psyche of the slaves. The dialectic is not patronizing, paternalistic or condemning. The earlier slave narratives did not allow the tale to become too horrible, what the slaves went through was not decent enough, but the tale had to be trimmed, veiled and dressed so as not to offend the white audiences. But

Morrison is a new black woman writer, confident in her blackness and not to be silenced no matter what she says; not afraid, or ashamed to claim her ancestry or her past.

Beloved is a complex character. She has been brought in because she is the only one who can question and judge Sethe. She speaks the language of the survivor gone through a terrible trauma. In this sense she functions as a survivor of the middle passage. Consequently, critics have read the novel in various ways. Some take it as a realistic writing while other feel it has elements of 'magic realism'. Critics who have psychoanalytical approach include Jennifer Fitzgerald, May Henderson and Brooks Bouson; whereas the critics who label the novel as post colonial, feminist or historical are Gurleen Grewal and Satya Mohanty. However, Morrison is able to incorporate fantasy and beautifully make it walk alongside reality. Beloved blurs the boundaries between magic and realism, between living and the dead, between past and present.

The black experience has to be taken in historical perspective. This experience includes the African beginnings, the Middle Passage, the experience of slavery, the violation of human dignity, oppression, racism, segregation, humiliation, resistance, outrage, survival against all odds in a racist situation, in conditions totally degrading and dehumanizing. In her discussion of Beloved Fitzgerald states, "The discourse of slavery privileges humanity, autonomy and participation in a family - by denying these values to slaves" (670). The slaves brought to America had to pass the Middle Passage wherein they underwent inhuman conditions and many did not survive. Those who survived were regarded not as human but a commodity by white masters. As Toni Morrison says, "Black people have to bear the brunt of everybody else's contempt" (1989). The slaves were treated like animals:

Three hundred years [...] Now that's not a war, that's generation after generation. And they were expendable [...] they had the status of good horses, and nobody wanted to kill their stock, and of course they had the advantage of reproducing without cost" (Morrison: 1989).

This dehumanizing institution of slavery went on for generations leading to devastating physical, emotional and psychological damage. This Afro-American experience is like a holocaust experience. Not easy to understand, it encompasses all blacks on white American soil.

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY:

Morrison deconstructs history. Viewing history from a different perspective brings out ridiculousness of white man's claim that slavery was an uplifting institution for Africans. Some kind souls saw the inhumanity of slavery but agreed that it was necessary for the progress of history. Beloved exposes the hypocrisy, the dishonesty and the hollowness of the claim and brings out the inhumanness of the institution of slavery. To exemplify that Sethe was treated as an object by her white masters is when she overhears them writing down her animal characteristics: "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left, her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (Beloved 193). Being collared like a beast, that bit in his mouth, watching the rape of his wife, what did the negro do? Smear butter on his face like Halle; or lock "tin box" like Paul D. Wherein lay manhood? Raped, whipped, used, abused, lynched, where was womanhood? Was it being whipped with the belly resting in a hole so that the commercial commodity in the stomach was not harmed? Sethe had been outrageously violated by the boys with "mossy teeth", her protest earned her a whipping to silence her. Rape and violence are used as weapons to terrorize, to victimize and subjugate. The result: the tin box and the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back, a scar she herself had never seen.

James Baldwin in his preface to Notes of Native Son (1984), says, "I think that the past is all that

makes the present coherent and the past will remain horrible for as long as we refuse to acknowledge it honestly" (Baldwin 87). *Beloved* is a struggle for memory against forgetting; memory may not always be passive or nostalgic longing for the past. In this sense, memory serves as a catalyst for self recovery. Re memory is empowering. The characters in *Beloved* wish to forget the past. "Saying more might push them both to a place where they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (*Beloved* 67). Both Sethe and Paul D have developed their own mechanisms to keep their past at bay. Sethe by erasing her memory and Paul D by locking his memories in a tin box. The rustiness of the box is suggestive of the inaccessibility and corrosiveness of Paul D's memories.

THE TREE CARVING:

Beloved tells a tale of strikingly pretty slave girl Sethe who tries to escape from slavery at Sweet Home and pays a heavy price for it. The others who escape as well are all doomed, they are roasted alive or shot. Paul D ends up with a bit in his mouth. Halle, Sethe's husband never shows up. Sethe had reached her destination but her freedom is short lived. The slave owners pursue her and driven by desperation, Sethe decides to end it all. She tries to kill her children so they do not have to suffer as slaves. She is stopped but succeeds in killing her "crawling already" by slitting her throat. She has done what she thought was right. Her action is bizarre in one context, immoral in another, criminal in third and perfectly logical and tragic in the fourth. There can be no final judgement, because the action changes with shifting contexts. Sethe's action surprisingly brings condemnation even from people like Stamp Paid and Ella. She becomes a woman that her own children are afraid of. Her sons Howard and Buglar elope, her mother in law Baby Suggs is dead and she is left alone at 124 Bluestone Road with Denver, her daughter, who is scared of her. But Sethe strongly faces the circumstances: "No more running from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket but let me tell u something Paul D Garner: it cost me too much! Do you hear me? It cost me too much (*Beloved* 15). However, the child returns as a ghost - a spectre of her love and guilt. Her house is haunted and people stop coming. Sethe and her survived daughter Denver live in isolation.

Sethe is portrayed by Morrison as a very strong woman with her back a little too straight and her head a little too high. She is seen as proud and arrogant by her community: "The one with iron eyes and backbone to match[...] A face too still for comfort; [...] a mask with mercifully punched out eyes. [...] her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light" (*Beloved* 9). Her appearance tells the tale of her past that she tries best not to remember, "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. [...] The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard" (*Beloved* 6). The mark on her back had been from her past, when the school teacher's two nephews had assaulted her before her escape from Sweet Home. They take milk from her breasts which is supposed to be for her baby. When Sethe tells this to Mrs. Garner, the men punish her by whipping her with a cowhide on her back. The result is the scar like a chokecherry tree leaving her completely numb on her back: "the sculpture her back had become, [...] like a decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (*Beloved* 17) It is the mark of slavery that Sethe carries with her. In Bouson's words, "Sethe's scarred back is a visible reminder of her traumatic abuse, both her physical violation and her psychic wounds, and it also concretizes her marked identity as the racially and stigmatized Other" (Bouson 142).

Slavery's devastation of family life can be evidently seen in the destruction of this family. Slavery denied basic humanness to slaves. Sethe, the mother, a symbol of nurturance and regeneration is compelled to do something that no mother would ever think of. In Sethe we have a radical departure

from the common definitions of motherhood. Motherhood has been the metaphor for regeneration, life giving nurturance, the source where life renews itself. Sethe dares to claim her right as a mother, she wants to claim her children. This impossibly fascinating slave girl is one of Morrison's most complex and intriguing characters. The treatment given to the slaves by the white masters is also evident in Baby Suggs last words, "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed, [...] and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (Beloved 89).

Sethe runs away from her past and her act of infanticide, "Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; [...] the hurt was always there - like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (Beloved 58). Sethe's own mother had been brought from Africa through the Middle passage. The mark that Sethe carries on her face portrays her value as a property: "Mark on me too [...] She slapped my face [...] I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own" (Beloved 61). Sethe was the only child to survive in her family because her mother willed it so. Her mother too had thrown all her children except Sethe as she was born out of the only black man that Sethe's mother ever lay her arms around.

For eighteen years Sethe turns her back on the community and its disapproval and leads a solitary life. Having no support system, no group to depend on, one is in a dangerous position of self sufficiency. Proud in her isolation, she does not demand sympathy. It is only with the arrival of Paul D, the man from her past, that she contemplates the possibility of unlocking the painful past and opens herself to the possibility of reflecting and re memory. Paul D too leaves her being stunned with her act of taking life of her baby. "This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. [...] This here new Sethe dint know where the world stopped and she began [...] more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed" (Beloved 164).

Sethe's love is too thick for Paul D to compromise, "You got two feet Sethe, not four, [...] a forest sprang up between them trackless and quiet" (Beloved 165). Sethe's love was beyond his understanding. The institution of slavery did not allow the slaves to express deeper emotions. Slaves did not love too deeply or rather they were scared to love. Slavery hardly provided the soil for strong relationships or emotions. They had to guard their emotions to keep away from hurt: "So you protected yourself and loved small. [...] A woman, a child, a brother - a big love like that would split you wide open" (Beloved 162). Paul D protected himself and loved small. But for Sethe love is or isn't. Morrison has been heavily criticized for the eccentricities of her characters. A black father committing incest and here a black mother killing her daughter.

RETURN OF BELOVED - CONNECTING THE PAST AND PRESENT:

Exorcised by Paul D, Beloved returns as much more malevolent and manipulative presence. She brings in the self centeredness of a possessive two year old. Sethe's intense love brings her back to her. Beloved comes as a means of self discovery and re memory for Sethe and Paul D compelling them to come to terms with their horrid past. The return of Beloved and her character in the novel has been interpreted by critics in numerous ways. According to Grewal, "Beloved is the unresolved past that comes between them. For both Sethe and Paul D she is the return of the repressed" (Grewal 109). Another view is, "Beloved connects us with the dead and unremembered of the Middle Passage" (Mohanty 63). Beloved is the past, a survivor from slave ship representing the "black, angry and the dead". Otten aptly summarizes her role as,

"Beloved is both, Sethe's doomed and one of the "sixty million and more", a victim of both, Sethe's

"rough love" and the manifest cruelty of slavers. What is more, she becomes a demonic force returned to punish and redeem Sethe, a remarkably ambiguous force able to free Sethe at last from her past, but only by exacting an enormous price. She is on one hand "an evil thing" on the other a Christ figure come to save" (Otten: 1989, 84).

With the arrival of Beloved Sethe is convinced that her dead baby she killed is alive and she can let her hold free on the mind and soul that she carried for years. She has a new light in her life and is now unafraid to remember the past.

The community figures in an extraordinary way in Morrison's books. In *Sula* it becomes a character and in *Beloved* a chorus. Capable of meddling and punishing, it also nurtures and sustains. Sethe's isolation is unnatural but so is her act. The community understands her rage but they do not understand the action that stems from it. Her pride bothers them. It is this community that the positive practical Denver approaches for help. They help leaving the dignity and the pride of those they help intact. The community awakens after years and realizes that Sethe is after all one among them.

RECONSTRUCTION OF AN AFFIRMATIVE IDENTITY:

Beloved is thus a reconstruction of slavery. It emerges as a powerful re-construction where the blacks are the participants in their own discourse and writers of their own history. The past had to be remembered in order to overcome it and re-form a more positive self. Thus *Beloved* rises above an ordinary slave narrative. It makes no attempt to sublimate or alleviate the anguish, the pain, the terror and the trauma of the powerless. It brings it all out, rises above it and transcends it. Slave reality has been relocated and with this must come a new attitude which claims responsibility of a self which has released painful memories. "Freeing your self was one thing, claiming ownership for that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 95). This is the message. For this, the blacks have to empower themselves with a new sense of pride in their blackness. Morrison, through Baby Suggs tries to help mould and re shape freed slaves, restore their self worth and self esteem by believing that they are worth loving:

Here in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes, they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands. Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you [...] More than eyes or feet, more than your life holding womb and your life giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize (*Beloved* 88).

Beloved sings about black solidarity, black community and black sisterhood. Despite its bleakness, its density and its lack of colour, its intensity, agony and grief, *Beloved* ends on a positive note. Sethe gets a second chance, there is a gush of new life in the impudent youngster Denver. We also see a change in Paul D, something has clicked into place so that he doesn't confront Sethe with moral accusations but, with love that will perhaps help the fast shrinking Sethe regain the will to live. The past is not just a collection of yesterdays, it also creates tomorrows.

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