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RE-INVENTING THE PAST AS "RE-MEMORY": TRAUMA, MOTHERHOOD AND HISTORY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrative thrust of Toni Morrison's Beloved as a response to previous slave narratives. It discusses and identifies the writer's handling of issues of slavery, identity, motherhood, class and history in the novel using the backdrop of Trauma and Psychoanalysis as theoretical models. A close reading of the text reveals that although the novel follows the pattern of slave narratives; it raises more vivid issues by filling in the gaps of silences in traumatic experiences of motherhood, sexual abuse and violence as the haunting echoes of slavery resonating in the memory of black American lives. Between the extremes of forgetting to memory, lies another understanding of an unconscious effort to erase the dehumanizing relics of the past. The textis therefore Morrison's attempt at contextualizing the 're-memory' model in merging the past and present selves together, moment by moment, in a process of both group and individual reconstruction.

Keywords: Re-memory, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Dehumanizing, Reconstruction, Toni Morrison.

Introduction

The uniqueness of the African American experience in the United States has always required a unique kind of approach; one that adequately depicts black history and struggles in the works of African American writers. One often finds marking the pages of African/ African Diasporic writers' recreations of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, also referred to as "The Middle Passage" and the dehumanizing plantation experiences in America. The blacks taken from Africa were regarded as beasts of burden forced to settle in a society that tends to breed deeper invisibility, rootlessness and identity crises. As a result, the early slaves found expression in oral art forms like the spirituals, work songs and the blues. These songs (especially the spirituals) were escapists mechanism because the temporarily transformed the future into the present and cushioned at least for a moment the negative impact of slavery on the consciousness and sensibility of the Negro as Ralph Ellison puts it. The suppression of book learning by slaves coincided with the earliest musical and lyrical expression.

Later, the slave narratives emerged, most of the early writers wrote factual accounts of their experiences for abolitionist publications. Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) adjudged the most famous slave narrative, discusses his personal experiences in relation to the slave community, the meaning of slavery and black/white relationship. Ultimately, long after the abolition of slavery, black and white relationship has been what Bell

Hooks (1984) describes as "margin/center relationship" in her preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, thus:

> To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily remainder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town (i).

It is these concerns that account for the distinctive traits of African American literature. According to Robert Hayden (1971) by failing to denounce racial injustice and plead the cause of Negro freedom they have produced, in J. Saunders Redding's phrase, a "literature of necessity", a literature preoccupied with the urgent realities of racial situation, a kind of situation which echoes what David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan in a related context describes as a "gloomy imagery" (344). However, Nicole Coonradt asserts that "Morrison expands the boundaries of traditional slave narrative to explore the far-reaching damage of the institution of slavery and the promise of acceptance and healing" (168-169).And in highlighting the realities of racism and bridging the gulf of pain that exist, Black female writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, among others join their male counterparts in contributing to corpus of African American literature.

The Past as "Re-Memory" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Basically, Toni Morrison's writings - one of which is *Beloved*- are notable for richly detailed African American characters, epic themes, mythic elements of black experience and vivid dialogue celebrating black community. In contrast, Joy Nwiyi and Monica Udoette attest that" in Leila Aboulela's narratives, religion is employed by her characters as a potent means of navigating, overcoming cultural hierarchies and existing as global citizen while minimizing the damage to personal identity" (8). This could be seen as part of the author's quest, in the words of David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan "… to proffer roadmaps for negotiating society through the complex urban architecture of postmodern socio-cultural landscape onto a landscape of control and safety" (186).However, the sustained desire for the dignity of survival of the individual and family against all odds appears to be the merging path in the narratives of both authors. As *Beloved* loops around events that dramatize the effect of pain on memory, it suggests in a way, an insistence to force the past out of characters whose memories are representative of a group identity (Caroline Rody, 100). While Lynda Koolish posits that "the struggle for psychic wholeness is a continuous one in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (Koolish, 169), Jewell Parker Rhodes avers that the novel, *Beloved* is concerned with powers of memory and "rememory" of individuals in the African American community and their ability to heal themselves and strengthen their identity through the reconstruction of the past (Rhodes,77).

Beyond this, Cherie Gayle McNaulty adds that the novel is a "historical and sociological memory tool that encourages the reader to become part of the collective remembering that is necessary to acknowledge and examine more closely the atrocities connected to slavery"(McNaulty, 9).Rhodes and McNaulty seem to agree that the novel is a remarkable slavery memory and remembrance tool. However, McNaulty goes further to classify the novel by what Bernard W. Bell and Ashraf A. H. Rushdy describe as a "new or neo-slave narrative" (McNaulty, 9). This term implies that the narrative's focus is not on the abolition of slavery but on the amelioration of the wounds left behind. The protagonist of the novel, Sethe appears kidnapped by her own actions and remains trapped inside a melancholy state 'a frozen place' that evokes Sigmund Freud's definition of memories of those who suffer from trauma that freeze in place and remain in this time frame. Koolish argues in support that the characters in the novel "exist almost as dream walkers in a state of dissociation and denial" (Koolish, 169). It is therefore worth noting Kathleen Brogan's claim that "*Beloved* acts as a crypt that is opened … as the stories that have 'been unceremoniously buried are exhumed, they are heard, readdressed and given the burial they deserve'" (Brogan, 141). Clearly, characters memories are suffused with terror, humiliation, physical, sexual and emotional violation that it is not surprising that their response to something associated with the past is problematic.

The novel subverts time structures in telling the story of the characters' slave past. Throughout the narrative, the background of the characters and the wrenching poignancy of their slavery story show the importance of remembering. Storytelling becomes the text's self-conscious task and foremost process of healing. Beloved is killed by her mother, who will not allow her daughter to be returned to slavery. As the ghost of a young lady of twenty years, the age the baby would have been if it had survived, Beloved haunts the Ohio house and appears in person to live with Sethe and her youngest daughter, Denver. Beloved is the past brought to life in the present and seen as a 'baby ghost' who haunts her family. The presence of Paul D resurrects memories that have been buried in Sethe's mind for almost two decades. From this point, the story unfolds on two temporal planes. The present in Cincinnati constitutes one plane, while a series of events that took place around twenty years earlier, mostly in Kentucky, constitutes the other. This latter plane is accessed and described through the fragmented flash backs of major characters. Each flashback reveals the varying perspectives and successive narration of event. Morrison rejects a chronological structure and a single narrator in favour of a splintered and multifaceted approach.

In the book titled *The Black Hole of Trauma*, Bessel A. Van Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane postulate on the degree of damage on the psyche by traumatic experiences. As Kolk explains "despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people's psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences… spoiling appreciation of the present" (Kolk, 488). This seems to be true in relation with the traumatic results of slavery as experienced by the characters of *Beloved*. Cathy Caruth's position equally is that "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 36).Kufre Akpan also identifies

some of the other negative consequences of trauma as: "sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, inability to cope with life, a general fear of the unknown, suicidal tendencies among others" (36). In this narrative, Sethe especially is still held prisoner by the past and the memory of untold suffering. One can therefore agree with McNaulty that "the past lives in the present in traumatized people in general and more specifically with the inhabitants of 124" (McNaulty, 13).

Interestingly, Rebecca Usoro and Monica Udoette rationalize "the literary artist as one who interrogates socio-cultural, religious, political and historical experiences with the sole purpose of reconstructing and revitalizing the narrative. In the process, the writer mirrors the inter-relationship between human nature and the society" (138). The above position is indicative of what Morrison professes in *Beloved*as her characters not only take on ancestral pain, but their struggle for individual wholeness becomes a struggle for ancestral healing. At moments where characters bump up against each other's painful rememories and experience each other's suffering, Morrison evokes not only shared sorrow, but the possibility of tribal and ancestral healing through transformational healing of individual characters. The shattering and reclaiming of memory proceed in similar ways for most of the central characters. The memory of what has happened to them is pushed aside, externalized, repressed, placed in a box and given over to someone else (Koolish, 173).

Morrison repeatedly writes in the final chapter of *Beloved* that "it was not a story to pass on", "it was not a story to pass on … this is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved*, 336-338). Also, the repetition of "rememory" in the text underscores the text's preoccupation with the problems of the mind. Thus, "'Rememory' functions in Morrison's 'history' as a trope for the problem of reimagining one's heritage" (Rody, 101-102). Kristin Boudreau argues contrastively that, the repetition of terms like "disremembered" and "unaccounted for" plays on the ideal of what should be remembered and how it will be remembered.This idea of selective remembrance is not out of place but can be reviewed as a testament to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PSTD). Kolk on the other hand, posits that "traumatic memories are not often coherent stories …they tend to occur when exposed to the reminders"(Kolk, 492). This definition of the pattern of traumatic memories tends to suit the intrusive and incoherent pattern of Sethe's narrative in *Beloved*. The symptoms include: fixation on trauma, hypersensitivity, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and a desire to revisit the trauma (McNaulty, 16). Also, Monica Udoette and Joy Nwiyi avow that "Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions where the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible"(202). These contradictions are visible in how Morrison gives the story a space to be heard and even felt as she suspends life and purposefully interrupts the passage of time. The sense of time standing still re-echoes the human response to traumatic events also known as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Trauma, Motherhood and History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* treats the theme of the mother as a nurturer and protector through the characters of Sethe and Baby Suggs. Morrison's women are linked by a three-generation chain of scars, marking both bond and breach. Sethe's mother urges her daughter

to recognize her body in death by the scar under her breast, and Sethe's ghost daughter bears on her neck the mark of Sethe's handsaw. Between them, Sethe has "a chokecherry tree" on her back, the scar of a brutal whipping by slave masters. These scars are poignant and vivid pictures of the horrors of slavery and representative of the women's charred past and the 'prize' of motherhood.

According to Terry Paul Caesar, the novel poses questions about "a world where the family is destroyed and traditional family identities are in ruins" (114). Within these ruins, conventions and morality is still largely determined by societal conventions. As such, Joy Nwiyi and Monica Udoette equally state that: "This cultural configuration dictates, to a large extent, what is conventional, moral, disdainful or otherwise among members of the community" (8). In the novel, the author recreates the character of Sethe and her children constantly confronting the memories of slavery. Motherhood is typified as an overarching and overwhelming love that can conquer all. Morrison's text therefore shows the extent of the feminine capacity for love as maximal and in Sethe's expression; "It hurt her when mosquitoes bit her baby". Furthermore, Sethe's escape from the slave plantation stems from her desire to keep the "mother of her children alive" and not from any personal survival instinct. The narrative chronicles what could be termed as one of the cruelest slavery experience a mother could face when Sethe was overpowered and sexually assaulted by white boys: "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em … they took my milk!" (*Beloved,* 16-17).This crime underscores the rape of motherhood.

Sethe is embodied as a woman with tremendous inner strength, seemingly damaged, who has survived the brutality which comes with slavery and torn even further apart by a common denominator of an unbalanced and racist American society. While the society that creates Sethe in *Beloved* is similar to the one that creates Celie in *The Color Purple*, Monica Udoette avers that "what Walker is doing in The Color Purple is to draw attention to the second class treatment of women in America. By doing this, she joins other women of the Civil Rights Movement in criticizing the manner in which the society has been structured and run, and the alleged dominant roles of malesin all spheres and strata of the society." (76). This corroborates the position of Monica Udoette and Kufre Akpan in their study of the experiences of African women in African literature. According to them, the way society is structured and run "has been the bane of societal development, particularly in Africa where the aspirations, expectations, and desires of the sexes are conditioned on the dictates of the socio-cultural and religious structures in the society" (56). Kufre Akpan and Isonguyo Akpan reveal that the condition of women above "expectedly shatters their psychic identity and damages their sense of perception and representation" (31).

On the other hand, Morrison projects Sethe sandwiched at the peak of slavery and ensnared in a perpetual cycle of fear for her children, untold hardship and cruelty. This apprehensive tensionand psychological unrest culminates in her decision to kill her daughter Beloved, rather than allow her go through similar agonies of slavery. In line with this, some critics argue that killing her baby is her refusal to be a mother under slavery. Clearly, Sethe understands the responsibilities of motherhood yet she is equally aware of the violations that

such responsibilities would generate for her and her child in the slave quarters. Sadly for Sethe the act of killing becomes the greatest show of love. This seems to agree with Caesar's view that "the novel becomes an exploration of what it means for Sethe to 'own' herself as a function of disowning a daughter" (Caesar, 114).

Sethe is described by people around her as a woman of remarkable stillness, suggesting that she was calm even in the face of difficult situations, and she had cultivated a kind of rationality that would help her survive. Her daughter, Denver describes her as a "quiet queenly woman", the kind of woman who would look danger in the face and not flinch, the kind of woman who when the ghost in her house in Cincinnati had thrown the dog into the wall so hard that it bites two of its legs and dislocated his eyes, Sethe took a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious and set his bones (*Beloved,* 12). It is worth noting that this show of strength and resilience may not be unconnected to psychological traumas of slavery taking its toiling on weaknesses and leaving in its wake, a woman devoid of all emotions.

The intense love she has for her children is what informs the suggestion of Paul D that it was dangerous for a woman to love her children as much as Sethe did. Her maternal instincts almost lead to her own destruction, as the strength of her love leads her to allow Beloved (ghost) to take her revenge. Interestingly, the opening lines of the novel is suggestive of the intensity of Sethe's love for Beloved with reference to the Biblical expression "I will call them my people, which are not my people, and her beloved, which was not beloved" (*Beloved,*i). This allusion to the degradation experienced by the Hebrews and an affirmation by God to love and redeem them from unjust treatment, carries the message of penance which Sethe undertakes to implement to make up for killing her daughter, Beloved. Paul D calls this kind of love risky detailing the danger in a mother's love for her child within the harrowing slave era:

> Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (*Beloved,* 45).

One major issue that is of central concern in the novel is the impact of slavery. The novel is an attempt to understand the forces, historical and personal, that would cause Sethe to murder her daughter rather than allow her to experience the horrors of slavery. The horror of the slave past is shown as haunting, evidenced by the appearance of the baby ghost and the manifestation of the fully grown Beloved. Beloved is also the ghost of the pain, destruction, and aftermath wrought by slavery. 124's occupant's refusal to acknowledge the ghost of the baby Beloved causes it to be spiteful at first. Through a dramatic twist, Morrison uses Paul D's appearance to tell the story of slavery as experienced by Baby Suggs and Sethe in the slave house ironically called "Sweet Home".

> … in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't

> run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. (*Beloved,* 23).

In fact, Betty Taylor-Thompson argues that "Morrison unceasingly places before the reader the environment that created Sethe – economic slavery" (48). This is the source and the context of Sethe's madness and the impetus for her behaviour. Paul D is able to understand and verbalize Sethe's dilemma by concluding that it was dangerous for a slave woman to love anything, especially her children. Paul D thus points out the tension created by the system of slavery and the instinct of the slave woman to protect and nurture her children. Slavery claimed ownership of all its property and ignored the slave mother's right to determine the future of, to mould the character of, and to physically nurture her own children. Sethe instinctively sought to hold on and to love her own children, thus creating the central conflict in the novel.

At the end of the novel, Sethe tries to justify her action for killing Beloved and wants Beloved to understand. Marianne Hirsch clarifies that " when Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing" (196). Thus, Sethe verbalizes:

> that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad that you couldn't like yourself anymore, dirty you so bad that you forgot who you were and couldn't think it in: and though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her alright, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing, the part of her that was clean … (*Beloved*, 251).

Sethe's justification above is countered by some critics like Terry Caesar who maintain that "the action is horribly exacerbated with despair, fatigue, and confusion over whether the mother in fact kills her child in order to save herself rather than her child"(113). Notwithstanding the divergent critical propositions, it is important to note that the novel experiments on the different responses (both psychological and otherwise) to pain and trauma; and that such responses depend to a great extent on the degree of damage done to the individual psyche.

Moreover, the novel replicates the concern slave mothers had for the welfare of their children. Sethe determines to kill all her children rather than allow them to be returned to a life of slavery. As she struggles to reach Ohio, and her children, she repeats often that she has to get her milk to her "crawling already" baby girl, Beloved. Basically, the text is saturated by a mother's guilt for not having enough milk for her children. Caesar offers that "Sethe's lack converges with Beloved's need, and in the convergence the two become as inseparable as murder from revenge"(115). The novel also probes the bond between the nursing mother and her infant. Beloved's personality and character in the novel, may possibly have

originated from a lack of bonding with her mother and from a sense of spite, as well as from a need for retribution for her brutal murder at her mother's hand. Therefore, motherhood in *Beloved* is contextualized as a site for both victim and oppressor.

Morrison's novel is sketched on a foundation of historical events. The most significant event within the novel, Sethe's murder of Beloved- is based on an actual historical event. In the forward to *Beloved*, Morrison states that she came up with the idea for the novel when she came across the true story of a woman, Margaret Garner, "who escaped from Kentucky with sixteen other slaves in January of 1856. She fought back and cut her youngest daughter's throat and tried to kill her other children, then herself"(*Beloved*, viii). Morrison uses the last name, Garner as the name of the slave owners at Sweet Home and this is the last name of some of the slaves like Paul D. According to Kufre Akpan and Monica Udoette, "It is through the expert handling of these themes, and with the kind of narrative resilience and courage hardly seen …" (66) that *Beloved* can be appreciated as the reworking of fact and history into something with a very emotional central message. Rody avers that the text is "strategic recentering of American history in the lives of the historically disposed" (Rody, 94).

Rebecca Usoro and Monica Udoette add that creative imaginations "articulate dimensions of social experience in terms of what actually is, was, or could be" (61). This position highlights Morrison's expertise in creatively weaving historical events like the middle Passage and the Underground Railway in many parts of the novel. The 'sixty million and more' to whom Morrison dedicates the novel may refer to many who died during the Middle Passage. The entire concept of the slavery described in the novel are all based on history and this invokes the anguish, suffering and deadness of the soul-taking sentence of slavery, thereby giving the novel a powerful impact. Interestingly, Caroline Rody adjudges *Beloved* to be a successful attempt at a psychological cleansing of not just an individual past but an ethnic one too. Thus:

> Reconceiving the historical novel as memorial, Morrison illuminates the psychological structure of ethnic historical fiction. Like all memorials, *Beloved* is not a "place" of the dead but a place where survivors can go to "summon" and "recollect", to look upon the sculpted shape of their own sorrow. *Beloved* cannot recover the "interior life" of slaves, but by dramatizing the psychological legacy of slavery, it portrays that "interior" place in the African-American psyche where a slave's face still haunts (Rody, 98).

One interesting fact though, is Morrison's derivation of the house number where her characters live – number 124 Bluestone road, Cincinnati. Some critics are of the opinion that it is technically derived from the subtraction of the 1863 year that the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln from the 1987 year of publication of the novel *Beloved*. Also, from the text, Sethe has four children, if the children are numbered in order of year of birth one to number four (1-4), number three (3) would represent Beloved who was murdered and is absent from the house number 124. These deductions among other issues discussed earlier, reveal in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's unique personality as the first African American female Nobel Laureate.

Conclusion

It has been noted that in reconstructing history, *Beloved* is more explicit than most early slave narratives which could not fully reveal the horrors of the slave experience either because the authors dared not offend their white abolitionist audience or could not bear to dwell on the horrors of slavery. Although the novel follows in the tradition of slave narratives; the selective memory of ex-slaves; it confronts the more painful and taboo aspects of slavery, such as sexual abuse and violence and advocates for healing in the tradition of neo slave narratives. However, it has been observed that the purpose of turning to the folk culture for inspiration and new formal ideas by artists is the revitalization of memory. In fact, Morrison follows this trend by making historical understanding a significant representation of history in *Beloved*. Beloved represents the troubled past (slavery) that haunts the lives of all African Americans. This troubling past is represented by the word "rememory", which is used throughout the novel. Beloved's appearance reawakens memories of slavery among the other characters and they are forced to deal with the traumatic past instead of trying to repress their memories. Beloved's reappearance coincides with the concept of re-memory, a revisit of the past, conjured up to project a better understanding of the future. Therefore, "Rememory" is a valid attempt by the author to transform memory into a property of consciousness with the heightened imaginative power to represent the past.

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