

Reconciliation with the Past for a New Self-Identification in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract— In this paper, slavery and its atrocities are discussed in Toni Morrison's "Beloved". Through this novel black's emotions, lives, and experiences are highlighted to make them visible; as they were invisible, silenced, and forgotten in the past. It reveals and explains the tension between forgetting and remembering past experiences through unspoken memory and how it acts on their lives: physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

In order to heal from these abominable agonizing experiences, the disturbed ex-slaves must oppose and challenge the repressed memories

Keywords— Trauma of slavery, repressed memories, reconcile with the past, black community, black identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, editor, and professor. Her fifth novel, *Beloved*, a Pulitzer Prize winner book is a story about slavery and its repercussions. It deals with the traumatic experiences of slavery, a harmful institution, which dehumanizes African Americans and affects them physically and psychologically. *Beloved* is based on a true story of Margaret Garner, where Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, tries to kill all her children and then herself, but she only succeeds in killing her two year daughter before Stamp Paid stops her. She prefers to kill them rather than letting them experience the horror of slavery that she has been through. Through *Beloved*, Morrison gives voices to her characters and tries to shed light on the black's emotions, lives, and experiences to make them visible; as they were invisible, silenced and forgotten in the past. Camelia Sadehi says that *Beloved* "displays the tension between forgetting and remembering past experiences through unspoken memory; Morrison demonstrates the multiple feelings suppressed by dominant discourse of American slavery's history" (136). *Beloved* reveals the unrecorded tortured slaves' experiences, and how they cope with their past after many years of the abolishment of slavery. To heal and humanize fragmented, lost identity consisting of unspeakable past painful memories 'kept at bay', the traumatized ex-slaves have to confront and reconcile with these repressed memories.

II. THE TRAUMA OF SLAVERY

All of the suffering experienced under the institution of slavery affects African Americans even after its abolishment. They are denied under times of slavery to

have a sense of self, a sense of individuality or self-worth. Peterson confirms this idea pointing that they are physically and nationally free but not psychologically free. "They have just managed to escape from the fact of slavery but have not been released from its effects" (25). Atrocities of slavery are depicted in *Beloved*, where trauma is pervasive. Most of the characters are traumatized; subjected to brutality and violence and treated like animals.

But what is trauma? Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, interpret trauma as "an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effect that it brings" (465). They characterize trauma as a violent shock, a wound and the consequences affecting the whole organization (466). Paul D has an iron bit in his mouth, chained together with forty five slaves and almost drowned in muddy water (*Beloved* 10). He tells Sethe that he would never "be Paul D again living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else" (*Beloved* 39).

After witnessing his wife's abuse, Halle goes insane. Stamp Paid is forced to share his wife with the slave owner. Baby Suggs, who was freed by her son, gives up and surrenders after witnessing the infanticide committed by Sethe, "Her faith, her love, her imagination and her big heart began to collapse" (*Beloved* 56). Sethe, the protagonist, suffers the most inhumane treatment at the plantation by the schoolteacher and his two nephews. She has been mistreated, tortured, raped, whipped and milked while pregnant with Denver. What affected her most is not the physical pain and dehumanization that were inflicted

on her. The mention of the stolen milk is a recurrent issue in the narrative. According to Bonnet, taking Sethe's milk is the violation of the mother/child bond. So it is no wonder when schoolteacher goes to 124 to get them back, Sethe "driven by her traumatic experiences, gathers her children to the woodshed and tries to kill them all" (21).

2.1 INSIDIOUS TRAUMA

According to Fuston-White, committing infanticide is not madness, but the reality of slavery that forces Sethe to kill her child not wanting her children to experience the same difficulties and brutality that she has endured (46). In addition, Denver is also traumatized through the unpleasant experiences in her life, and how the past has affected her. Her traumatic experiences correspond to a concept known as insidious trauma. Maria Roots suggests that "the effects of insidious trauma can be passed down transgenerationally through stories about what has been done to those who have come before" (374). To Denver, her trauma is all connected to her mother's infanticide; being asked about her sister's death traumatizes Denver because it stimulates the insidious trauma, passing transgenerationally from Sethe to Denver and as a result she loses her hearing for two years. So it is of significance for the ex-slave characters to resist and repress the traumatic memory for the day-today survival and their sanity (Vickroy 181); "the future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (*Beloved* 135).

2.2 REPRESSION OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* suggests that traumatic memory is "intentionally repressed from [the patient's] conscious thought" (10). While Laplanche and Pontalis state that repression is when people try to "bar thoughts, images and memories from awareness" (390-391); thus the traumatized subject avoids talking about the traumatic experiences. These theories of repression are applicable in *Beloved* where the reader encounters Sethe repressing her memory and resisting to dwell in the past to the point where Denver complains to Sethe about it, "You never told me all what happened. Just that they whipped you and you ran off, pregnant with me" (*Beloved* 20). Also Sethe's will to avoid the past is obvious when Paul D is trying to convince her to share the past and her inner feeling, but she only say, "I don't go inside" (*Beloved* 25). She also evades the event of infanticide altogether until Paul D confronts her. She has simply lived by keeping the past at bay (*Beloved* 23) and begun each day with the serious work of beating back the past (*Beloved* 39). To Sethe the past is painful and she could not tolerate its burden. She wills herself to forget the past and bury it in her mind.

Paul D, too, is not able to talk about his past and cannot find suitable words to express it, "I just ain't sure I can say it. Say it right" (*Beloved* 39). "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* 39). According to Dauterich, Paul D's reluctance in telling Sethe what has happened to Halle is an attempt to forget the past (*Beloved* 37). In addition, to protect themselves the inflicted individuals perform a repression of memory through fragmented and discontinuous narrative and repetitive and monotonous utterances (Matus 112). One of the examples is when Sethe asked about her lost earrings, and because she does not want to talk about it, she says, "'gone. Long gone' and she wouldn't say another word" (*Beloved* 32).

III. REMEMORY: INTRUSION OF THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT

No matter how an individual represses his memory, it will haunt him/her back if not confronted by it. According to Roger, *Beloved's* presence is the illustration of Sethe's repressed memories (187). Because Sethe cannot express her traumatic past, *Beloved* represents all the unspoken memories. To Morrison, *Beloved* is the embodiment of the past; she "is a child girl. But she is also the men and the women... all of those people... of the sixty million and more" (Carabi 106).

Beloved is one of the most important memory that links the past to the present. Sethe also confides to Paul that "Schoolteacher made me open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (*Beloved* 9). 'It grows there still' implies that Sethe is still psychologically suffering from the brutality she has endured. Dr Jason Campbell stresses on the idea of the interference of the past into the present by suggesting in his article *Scarification and Collective Sympathy: An Analysis of Rememory in Toni Morrison's Beloved* that the tree scar is not only a continual reminder of her abuse at Sweet Home, but it is also an intrusion of the past into the present (4). In some instances, Sethe deliberately represses or silences her memories; in other cases, she would like to forget but cannot, and in other moments, she would like to remember but cannot (Rogers 184). This is clear at the beginning of the novel, where Sethe tries to remember her son Buglar but could not, then her memory shifts to her hurrying across the field, and finally there is Sweet Home's 'rolling out' that indicates the return of the repressed memory. No one knows what triggers Sethe's memory.

3.1 INVOLUNTARY MEMORY

Many critics have explained this as the work of involuntary memory. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud argues that in the unconscious, "the repressed retains its upward urge, its effort to force its way to consciousness" (95). That is under certain conditions, the repressed memories will be triggered and brought back to consciousness suddenly. In *Beloved*, after Sethe's

involuntary memory of Sweet Home rolling out, Paul D comes, “the last of Sweet Home men” (*Beloved* 3). The unexpected appearance of Paul D is like the return of the repressed memory in which the involuntary memory brings back the intangible painful past and tangible Paul D; both connected to Sweet Home, the origin of Sethe’s traumatic memory. According to Hawks, Paul D’s coming to ‘124’ helps release memories for Sethe. She allows herself to remember and ‘rememory’ certain occurrences in her life (4), where “her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for – well it would come in time” (*Beloved* 53).

To define what rememory is, Elliot states that rememory in the novel explains the notion that no trauma is ever one’s own, but “shared among groups of people. Rememory works as a collective way for a community to decolonize themselves” (183). In *Beloved*, Sethe explains rememory by saying,

If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world...Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on...And you think it’s you thinking it up...But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (20)

While the arrival of Paul D has brought back the reminiscences of the past spent at Sweet Home, the arrival of the embodiment of the murdered daughter serves as a catalyst, offering Sethe an opportunity to be forgiven and redeemed. Once Sethe has reached the conclusion that the daughter that she killed is now alive and grown, her thoughts flow freely, letting go of the hold she has on her soul and mind because she understands Beloved’s return as forgiveness and reconciliation; “And my girl come home. Now I can look at things again because she’s here to see them too. After the shed, I stopped. Now, in the morning, when I light the fire I mean to look out the window to see what the sun is doing to the day” (107). Seeing the world in a different light, Sethe can face her repressed thoughts and fears allowing herself to remember.

3.2 MEMORY THROUGH STORYTELLING

Maurice Halbwachs states that memory operates through stories and storytelling (38). In the novel, it is clear that Beloved is insatiable for the stories of the past, and Sethe feels unexpected pleasure in telling the stories to her which she has never told to Denver or Paul D.

Beloved is the element that triggers the process of remembering not only for Sethe but also for Paul D, where she activates the release of the locked emotions and

memories he thinks he has locked away in his heart, “She (Beloved) moved closer with a footfall he didn’t hear and he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin” (*Beloved* 63). According to Fitzgerald, Paul D moves from “the position of object in the discourse of slavery to the position of subject in the discourse of masculinity”, wanting and requiring affirmation of his own manhood through his interactions with Sethe and Beloved (670). So, Beloved forces Sethe and Paul D to remember and to come to terms with the atrocities of the past. And as Bell Hooks argues that when the person confronts the past without shame, he/she is free of its hold on him/her (119). This idea asserts the importance of a well-functioning memory system that is essential to the individual’s psychic life (Janet 426).

As discussed above, *Beloved* is thirsty for stories of the past being told by Sethe as well as thirsty for her mother’s love which the latter gives unconditionally; yet as time passes, with Sethe explaining the reasons why she has committed the murder, Beloved’s behavior becomes progressively demonic and leads to the continuous deterioration of Sethe’s physical and mental health. Beloved is presented like an incubus who is consuming her mother out of both love and hate, where Sethe sits “in a chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (*Beloved* 131). Instead of soothing her mother, Beloved tortures her for whatever she has done. Denver, who has been trapped by her mother’s repressed past of killing Beloved, swears to protect her resurrected sister from the mother she fears. Denver is transformed from a childish, lazy person into a mature and active one hunger for sisterhood. But after recognizing her mother’s gradual collapse under Beloved’s possession, she decides to protect her mother from danger, overcoming her fears to step outside the yard encouraged by her grandmother’s spirit, “Know it, and go on out the yard, go on” (*Beloved* 128).

IV. BLACK IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY RECONSTRUCTION

Going out to the community and asking it to save her mother’s life, Denver acknowledges the importance of communal unity to confront the past and reclaim the present. By doing this, Denver has crossed into adulthood, forming a new identity which is a blend of “self-interest, personal responsibility toward Sethe and a relationship with the black community” (Kubitschek 171-172).

Knowing what is happening to Sethe, one of the women, Ella, “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (*Beloved* 135). Here, Denver serves as a

bridge, allowing her mother and all the community to confront the past, embodied by Beloved, and return to the present which is a part of their self-definition. Here the characters undergo a process of what Derrida labels “Difference” which is “delaying or in diverting the fulfillment of a need or desire” (562). That is taking their time to recognize the basic way to their self-affirmation; in this sense healing of memories is the first step needed to self-identification which enables a new life in the future. To accomplish this, thirty women have gathered in the yard singing:

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (*Beloved* 138)

Here, Morrison shows that Sethe will not be able to form her identity without the help of her community. The word ‘baptized’ shows Sethe’s rebirth and her chance to redefine her identity, based on her cultural heritage and her re-entry into the community (Channingkhombee 10). But while Sethe is looking at the women and remembering the clearing, feels threatened by the presence of a white man and wants to protect her daughter from the traumatic experience of slavery. But instead of killing her daughter, she runs toward the source of danger to attack him.

This scene is the reenactment of the infanticide but reversed. According to Katrin Amian:

The destructive impulse that lay at the heart of Sethe’s infanticide is overcome in the act of reliving the traumatic experience. Rather than attempting to murder her own kin once again, Sethe directs her rage against the white oppressor and finds an alternative outlet through which the wounds of slavery and oppression can be healed. (114-115)

Thus, attacking the white rather than killing Beloved serves as a therapeutic reenactment which purifies Sethe’s haunted memory, released from the grip that the past has on her. Beloved vanishes after serving her function as a rememory; “the sound of fury is over, and spiteful, loud 124 is finally quiet” (Grewal 116), and “in the place where long grass opens, Beloved erupts into her separate parts” (*Beloved* 145). Beloved disappears leaving behind her a promise of an optimistic future where love is a real possibility between Sethe and Paul D who “wants to put his story next to hers” (*Beloved* 144), saying “Me and you,

we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (*Beloved* 144). Moreover, Denver’s intention to go to college opens a new path of hope to future Black generations.

V. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, Morrison in *Beloved* has given to the 60 million and more an identity and to her characters voices to break the state of national amnesia and tell the African American’s story which has never been told. Through her narrative, the author reveals the atrocities and brutality of slavery and its aftermath on the psyche of the ex-slaves. The reader can trace out three stages in the novel. The first stage is the repressing of the traumatic memory by the characters, the second stage is learning how to reconcile with their memory and finally being cleared from all the painful experiences and having a rebirth or a new identity separate from the formal one. That is, “only when memories are remembered can they lose, gradually but never entirely, their traumatic effects” (Berger 415) and can plan for a better future.

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