

# Revisiting and Reconciliation with the Past with reference to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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## Abstract

The past of an individual is inseparable with time, no matter how much the individual tries to escape from it. The past tries to haunt the memories that with time when recalled becomes a traumatizing experience for an individual. It creates a turbulence in the life of an individual to an extent that it forces one to confront it and accept it and reconcile with it in a way that would usher in some newness at the end. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* also witnesses such horrors of slavery and the characters in the novel are traumatized by the events to an extent, that no matter how much they try to rid themselves of the clutches of the gory past, they are made acquainted by it through recalling the past events and also by making its presence felt. In this paper, the aim is to explore those situations that causes the characters of the novels to recall their past and how it becomes the living truth for them. The novel is the representation of the memories that are recorded in the tales of the characters of the ex-slaves. They become the unspeakable voices as they get revisited in the form of fragmented collection of memories that one voices out and through the presence of ghost of *Beloved* the past of the ex-slaves is revisited and recalled. It bridges the gap between the past and the present. The paper also explores the psyche of the characters when their past revisits them and how they reconcile with it by gracefully accept it in order to release them from the past.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Memories, Past, Haunting, Trauma, Reconcile

## I. Introduction-

In African- American literature, Toni Morrison is an award winner novelist who won Noble Prize for Literature in the year 1993. She also won National Book Critics Circle award and Pulitzer prize award. She also wrote eight novels of which *Beloved*, published in 1987 won her the Pulitzer Prize. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is inspired from the true account of the Margaret Garner, who was also African American slave who escaped temporarily slavery in 1856 from Kentucky to Ohio, which was a free state. When she was about to be captivated by the Whites, she was forced to kill her own children. In the same manner, Sethe also murders her daughter and tried to take life of her rest of her children as. As Sethe fears her possessor arrived at Ohio to take them to back to Sweet Home, the plantation in Kentucky from which Seth had managed to escape. Generally *Beloved* is a novel narrates the true story of a black woman and a mother that has been ill-treated and racially discriminated and was treated miserably because she was a slave woman.

By learning and confronting her past as the past of her community, it was Sethe's process of getting cured in the novel *Beloved*. In the writings of Arnold Rampersad's W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Linda Krumholz quotes, "*The repression of the historical past is as psychologically damaging as the repression of personal trauma.*" (Linda)

Toni Morrison's novels are conveniently identified by their close consideration and the dynamics present in all the black community and the focus is on the female experience. One of the main purposes of writing about the black experience was to search for the identity of the black women that was suppressed by the white imagination and invention. Morrison advocates that her work must "*bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded.*" (Marks, 2002). She also advocated the specific hardships that the black women had to face in American society even outside the rings of slavery. The oppressive scenario within Toni Morrison's novel depicts how her characters agonize physically and emotionally. *Morrison detest slavery and without any hesitancy responds vigorously that slavery is a disaster to*

*all women and mother*(qtd. In O' Reilly 73) because it follows a flesh exploitation malfunction and loosing their children.

Morrison's novel *Beloved* is a reply to the depiction of the Black woman's life in African American literature with the specific focus on the negative and unexpected events of the dominant white society and the masculinity over the female characters. The novel also depicts the oppression by the Whites combined with discrimination based on race, class and gender that women must tolerate. It also shows the White men's paradigm in using physical assault and constructing the assumed identity for women. So, the women were not only struggling with the slavery but also this presumed identity where had to go on with the quest of their subjectivity by enquiring about the terms of love, autonomy and liberty. In order to come out as a winner against all the difficulties, the black women should resist all kinds of aggression and oppressions as beating and abusing and even the controlling negative stereotypes like "mule" and "jezebel". The purpose of community gathered is also one of the most important factors in women's encouragement towards emancipation.

Slavery has been a holocaust for not only for the primitive generation of black but also for the generation who were worn down with the sufferings since its inception. The suffering was not restricted to not only physical but also mental that challenged the humanistic emotions and expressions. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*(1987), the "neo-slave narrative" has become one of the most widely read and discussed forms of African American literature. The autobiographical and fictional descendants of the slave narrative confirm the continuous importance and vitality of its legacy: to enquire the origins of psychological as well as social oppression and to critique the significance of freedom for blacks in the white American society.

Toni Morrison's novels particularly depicts the world of women and explored their length with deep rooted significance. With most novels women centric and recounts the horrors of being a woman trapped in the system of slavery. In her novel *Beloved*, she particularly she recounts the lives of the black men and women that portrays the complexities and paradoxes present in the times of slavery that leads to oppression and denial of self-identity.

*Beloved* is written by a woman writer that exhibits the negative and problematic influence of the white men over their black slaves especially the female ones. They continuously torture them and put all kinds of restrictions and regular oppressions. They either escape or commit some dangerous act in order to show resistance and demand equality and humanity.

The past not only is dominant in the minds of the characters, recalling the events that had affected them physically, psychologically, sexually and racial discrimination but also gives them opportunity to witness it again and making them realize of their past mistake. As in the case of the ghost of the *Beloved* who not only makes Sethe realizes her act of infanticide but also sucks the life out of her. *Beloved* who has return as young nineteen years old girl in form of the ghost is keen to bring the past Infront of Sethe and wish to relive the moments that were lost when she was killed as a young child by her own mother. Toni Morrison has captured the tale of pain and sufferings of the slaves who had been captivated by the Whites and were forced to lead a life that was worse than the animal. The character Sethe has been inspired from a real-life character Margaret Garner, who had also fled away from the clutches of the slavery and was forced to take the life of her children as she did not want them to be part of the slavery.

Sethe also in the same manner was forced to kill her own child, *Beloved* when she came to know that the Whites were coming again to take her back and force into the world of slavery. Toni Morrison tries to bring the past and present together with the returning of another slave Paul D, who calls the memories of past along with Sethe. The memories of slaves recall that how their white captivators consider them as object or a commodity, treated like an animal. The character Baby Suggs, who is Sethe's mother-in-law who has seven children but all were taken away due to slavery and the ruthless The schoolteacher who considers Sethe as animal and Paul D as a tobacco teen. Sethe was very sure that she needs to destroy and kill her children because "that nobody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you." (251) *The novel Beloved embodies this witchery, this other knowledge, but Toni Morrison does a different kind of exorcising than Certeau's historian (Grewal).* While exploring the characters and their traumatic memories, Toni Morrison tries to experiment with the character's psyche and focus on their narration that makes them stagnant due to their past and needs a catalyst to release them from their past. Morrison is finally, in William Andrew's phrase, telling a free story. "The representation of slavery in *Beloved* is made powerful by the positioning of desire at center stage, precisely what had found only a choked articulation through slavery and in the emancipation narratives that emerged from it. Morrison moves us into what Barbara Christian calls "the chaotic space of mother-love/mother/pain, daughter-love/daughter-pain."(Grewal).

The main conflict of the novel deals in the core issue of the slavery where Sethe who is a slave mother dares not call her own children as her own children or property instead of the slaveholder's. The path of slavery and racism have haunted the characters of the black community in a manner that they cannot evade their sour past. Sethe is really trying to hide her past and live with it for her rest of her life. *Infanticide, Sethe's raw act of*

*defiance, runs counter to the slave community's response of resistance, namely, their determined effort to keep family ties alive despite the master's attempt to sunder them.* (Grewal).

*Sethe, the central protagonist of Beloved, incurs rancor and resentment from the women in the community because of her refusal to define herself as a breeder of slaves. In the course of the novel, Morrison redirects this moral outrage to the institution of slavery.* (Grewal). Along with Sethe, other characters of the novel such as Paul D, Baby Suggs, Denver, Beloved and Sixo are also victims of horrors of slavery.

*As in the words of Andrew Levy notes, "unspeakability" is the challenge Morrison works with, "because the institutionalized parameters of guilt and responsibility do not provide the vocabulary to 'tell,' legally or narratively, the anomalies of a slave mother's infanticide."*(Grewal).

Sethe recalls the horrific events that she had witnessed in the forms of whipping, rape and assault by the white men that she had no choice left but to escapes from the Sweet Home. Sethe recalls her past through the conversations with Paul D, of how she was raped by the White men and how she suffered with each passing moment when her milk was taken away. She was treated worse than animal and the worse act was of taking her milk away that was for her daughter. Sethe never wanted to return to the place that had taken from her everything. Even her husband Halle could not be found once he escaped from there, and Sethe alone only had to run from the place with her children along.

As Cathy Caruth emphasizes, *"To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event." Trauma, as the figure of Beloved uncannily registers, is "literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits."* (Caruth)

According to Caruth, "It is the literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its return, absolutely true to the event. It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the center of its pathology or its symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself." (Caruth).

The novel begins when Paul D comes to visit Sethe at her home in 124. We see that that the character is psychologically affected when she relives the past that was dehumanizing. It was a painful memory where the milk was stolen, that was the symbol of love and devotion towards her children.

It is only when Paul D meets Sethe after eighteen years of separation that the past and present are stirred to life. Each recalls for the other buried images tumultuous emotions connected to their slave days. Each also brings the other hope for the future. After Paul D touches her back, which is etched with scars resembling a branching tree and numb to any sensation, Sethe wonders if she should "feel the hurt her back ought to"; she feels she can "trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank."(Grewal).

The act of killing could not be justified but with circumstances started unfolding with the arrival of the Beloved as a ghost, it became cleared to the readers that Sethe had to face the brutality of slavery at the Sweet Home, and this she did not wanted her children to face. In order to protect them Sethe was ready to live with the guilt of infanticides for rest of the life. We also see the scars on the back of Sethe that were many in number which resembles the trunk of a tree with its branches. Se the bears scar on her back because she was whipped as she tried to escape from the slavery. After escaping from the Sweet Home, Sethe tries to forget her past, but it influenced her daily life. She attempts of forgetting the dreadful past, but with the arrival of Beloved it is revisited in the form of hardships-indeed, the futility-of trying to repress as a slave. Sethe also has a bad memory of her mother who was hanged and Sethe fails to recognize the African language spoken by her mother is a premeditated move on part of Morrison to show the kind of cultural desolation and havoc was cast upon the slaves in African-American history.

*The arrival and departures of Beloved easily lend themselves to a metaphorical reading. The novel begins in 1873 at Sethe's house, haunted ever since she killed her baby daughter rather than let her be taken back to slavery in accordance with the fugitive Slave Act. Both Sethe and her daughter Denver are used to the presence of the ghost, whom they accept as being not evil but sad. They live their lives in resigned solitude under a pervasive gloom. Since Sethe, too, makes him grapple with his past, the flesh-and -blood Beloved is the spirit of the past that touches them both.*(Grewal).

Along with Sethe and Paul D in the novel, Beloved is a character who is haunted by a traumatic past and compelled to relive different moments of it. On being asked by Denver about her name, she replies, *"In the dark my name is Beloved"*(75).

*Slavery puts into high relief every psychoanalytic feminist utterance describing women and the family in patriarchy. Paul D's cruel reminder to Sethe that she has two feet (human), not four (animal) refers to the brute*

fact that under slavery black women were listed under the category Animal, valued as breeders, not mothers.(Grewal).

Along with the Black women, men were also victims of slavery and it also accounts for their painful experiences. The novel depicts the Black man's pain with great sensitivity.

*The painful memories of Paul D-the collar, the bit, the lynching, the enforced sodomy- create a composite picture of the male slaves showing the breaking of his spirit; a lame rooster, a cock called Mr., has more going for him than a black man. The account of Halle, the strong and responsible son and husband, finally breaking down at the sight of his wife being raped is moving; as Paul D insists, "Amanain'tagoddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside(69). Still. The emphasis in Beloved is upon the maternal trauma incurred under slavery.(Grewal).*

On the other hand, Sixo who is a slave who is known as a wild man, as he was a black slave, when he tries to make an escape from the slavery, he was burnt alive.

The plot of the novel is constructed on the coming back of the oppressed and sufferers after the gap of eighteen years. Denver realizes that her mother is in danger and is convinced to help her mother from the demonic acts of Beloved. Denver realizes that there could be a situation of taking revenge, which was even communicated to the community, they immediately responded intervened. Led by Ella, thirty women gather outside the house and pray. When Sethe is haunted and locked in the past, where she feels that a white man is approaching her house in order to take away her second daughter, Denver away, she instantly, attacks the approaching man. Fortunately, the community of women and Denver save her from herself.

Toni Morrison introduces Beloved as a ghost, who stimulates and acts as a catalyst to Sethe's memory and instigates Sethe recall the story of her mother who was hanged. Beloved as a character who inspires other characters to grow and face their past. Beloved's spiteful and revengeful behavior comes to the light when she acts as a parasite on Sethe and wants to make Sethe pay for her guilty of killing her own child.

It is Denver who protects her mother, as she realizes the spiteful behavior of Beloved towards Sethe. She responds quickly and seeks help of the whole community in getting her mother free from the evil presence of the ghost of Beloved through the act of exorcism. They come together in front of her house and conduct a kind of collective ritual.

*Beloved, who has been standing naked on the porch holding Sethe's hand, is also prey to the past; in Sethe's sudden departure from her, in the crowd of black people, she is reminded of the hold of the slave ship; in the white face of MrBodwin she sees "the man without skin, looking ... at her" (262). She flees the scene that unfolds the horrors of her past. (Grewal).*

In that Sethe who is standing the porch with Beloved clinging to her feels the coming of the White man, MrBodwin who would take her daughter Denver from her. And for one last time, Sethe screams out to attack the real like image of white man in order to protect her daughter and finally gets rid of her past by facing it and reconciling with it and accepting her guilty of killing her own daughter.

At the end Beloved vanishes and leaves the house 124 and what happens to her is explained to her at the novel where she is "*Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?"*"(274)

*However, at the metaphorical level, Beloved is gone because the past she represents has been confronted; by facing the past, Sethe is released into the present. Beloved disappears, having served her functions of "rememory"; the sound and fury is over, and spiteful, loud 124 is finally quiet. Paul D may lay his story beside Sethe's.(Grewal)*

*Beloved goes as she comes; the unaccountability of her whereabouts, her physical absence, constitutes the experience of loss at the heart of slavery.(Grewal).*

In the novel, Beloved following non-linear slave history which becomes the focal point expresses the trauma and realities of the characters specifically of black community that makes them unite at the end. No matter how painful the past may be, the outcomes of the slavery are part of it becomes part of their character. Morrison dedicates the novel to sixty million slaves who had been forgotten and were now considered as national amnesia. It is with dynamic nature of recalling the past, the spirit/fleshed characters of Beloved were able to move freely between the past and present moments and tries to achieve the sense of identity in a society dominated by white cultural values.

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