



The Subaltern's Ordeal

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Abstract:

Recreating the experience of slavery through testimony and dialogism, Toni Morrison attempts to recognise how silencing forces of trauma and oppression have shaped and distorted humanity and how humanity remembers and responds to such events. Even while *Beloved* is a ghost, functioning as a symbolic spirit of slavery, Morrison delineates the horrors of slavery with such powerfully proactive poetic imagery that the effect of reiteration, the "rememory" is startling. From Morrison's perspective, as developed in *Beloved*, the institution of slavery remains so devastatingly powerful that even the characters who are free, whether through running away or through emancipation have yet to overcome their mental enslavement.

Keywords: Slavery, Psychological Trauma, Marginalisation, Assimilation.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) explores the psychologically shattering effects of slavery by exposing the societally sanctioned terror tactics used by white slave owners to rob black women and men of subjectivity and agency. She attempted to recognize how the silencing forces of trauma and oppression have shaped and distorted humanity and how humanity remembers and responds to such events, changing conceptions of history and relation to death.

Morrison recreates experiences of slavery through testimony and dialogism, and by exploring the complex interrelations of collective and personal history. *Beloved* enacts one of the primary aspirations of Morrison's work, i.e. to recover the silenced voices and experiences of African Americans by recreating the struggle to witness despite a "national amnesia" about slavery.

As the novel begins, the ex-slave Sethe and her daughter Denver continue to experience the psychological trauma of marginalisation inflicted by slavery years after slavery had been abolished. Sethe and Denver live isolated from the community at 124 Bluestone Road, a house that is haunted by what appears to be the ghost of baby daughter Sethe killed eighteen years ago, in a bid to save her from slavery. Mother and daughter seem to be on the edge of madness. Barbara Schapiro opines that they are experiencing "psychic death, the denial of one's being as a human subject". The novel charts the process by which Sethe, Denver and other African Americans recover from the effects of racism and

marginalisation and "claim ownership of (a) freed self".(Bloom 111)

Even while *Beloved* is a ghost, functioning as a symbolic spirit of slavery, Morrison delineates the horrors of slavery with such powerfully proactive poetic imagery that the effect of reiteration, the "rememory" is startling; as if one is reading about slavery's effects for the first time and, consequently, the detailed retelling is fresh as well as painfully revealing. Baby Suggs' comments are particularly noteworthy for this reason. Her age - roughly the age of Sethe's mother and one within those generations of African slaves with discernible Africanisms - gives her 'rememories' fascinating weight. For during Baby Suggs' slave experience, to be separated from one's children and to lose one's children in such painfully traumatic ways was peculiarly common:

not a house in the country aint packed to its rafters with some dead negro's grief we lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours?

You lucky you got three left. I had eight. Everyone of them gone away from me.(p.26)

As Barbara Hill Rigney opines, "the disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter, Morrison reiterates, is also part of the horror of the black experience. Sethe has been traumatised into silence; Baby Suggs looks for colour; Paul D remembers a rooster. And despite the fact that Denver was never enslaved, or experienced slavery firsthand, like the biblical prophecy, the "sins" of the parent are visited upon her. Denver has lived with a mother who could never be a completely devoted mother because of her act.

Morrison has said that "one of the devastating things about the experiences of black people in this country, was the effort to prevent the full expression of their love from one another". Slaves could not love fully because the object of their love might be sold, brutalized or murdered tomorrow. It is this psychological baggage which Sethe carries around; it limits her love for Denver and completely restrains her love for anyone, or anything, else: "So you protected yourself and loved small".(p.81)

Morrison's characters are named aptly and specifically. For example Sethe was named for a black man, the only one who did not have forced sexual relations with her mother. As her nurse Nan tells Sethe, her mother abandoned or 'threw away' her other children while saving Sethe.

The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man.(p.83)

Sethe's mother goes unnamed in the novel except for the moniker Ma'am which is given to her by Nan, the black wet nurse. She is also identified by a brand consisting of a circle with a cross burned into her flesh marks like the one Sethe's mother has which serve to distinguish their racial identity. Barbara Rigney opines that the marks are either chosen or inflicted by the condition of blackness itself, by the institution of slavery which 'marked' its victims literally and figuratively, physically and psychologically.(Story 23) The purpose of these marks was not only to identify these slaves, but to brand them literally and figuratively as property of someone else. A slave's name such as Paul D's & the other Pauls did not designate an individual self so much as a 'segment of community, an identity larger than self.'

The following passage not only questions the symbolic freedom from the debt of slavery, but demonstrates that even with his supposed freedom, Stamp Paid continually suffers under the institution of slavery because the single act of handing "over his wife to his master's son deprived him of his dignity and manhood." Because of his self doubt Stamp Paid continually pays, and will continue to pay with his self inflicted misery for his freedom and his name.

Perhaps.... he (Stamp Paid) has misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed. Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son.. with that gift, he decided he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off.(p.205)

Like wild animals, recalcitrant slaves had to be "broken" by a combination of physical aggression and psychological harassment, their tongues depressed by bits, bitten into submissive silence and silenced by colonizing languages (although Sixo is one, however, who repudiates English). Paul D reflects bitterly that Schoolteacher "broke into children what Garner had raised into men'. He echoes Douglass who comments that the treatment of slaves brings them down to the Hobbesian, pre-civilized model of humanity - indeed, by extension, to the animal level. Here Boy's travails and his inability as a "dumb" animal to express his experience in language signify upon the experience of black slaves, especially that of black men. Similar violence has rendered Part D hyper conscious of his own body and its latent fragilities: "his hands shook so bad he couldn't smoke or even scratch properly.

Sethe's "tough response to the fugitive slave Bill", her decision to kill her children rather than allow them to be remanded back into slavery, is the culmination of her personal experience as a black woman living in the social context of the existence of black slavery. She is placed in an impossible situation the only way to keep her children is to lose them, the only place where they will be safe is in death.

In *Beloved*, each woman beginning with Sethe, has to deal with having her "milk" spoiled. Milk is mixed with blood as black women fight back against oppression through the act of infanticide. Throughout *Beloved*, nature is corrupted, disrupted by rape perpetrated by the whites. According to Deborah Ayer Sitter, the novel shows how "the meaning of slavery's impact on people encompasses more than maternal love, it involves the way internalization of oppressors' values can distort all intimate human relationships and even subvert the self".(Sitter 28)

As the physical inscription of a brutal humiliation and beating by the slave master, Schoolteacher, the scar recalls the horror of that historical past. In order to support his theory of racial inferiority, school teacher had ordered his nephews to take (Sethe's) milk" as part of an experiment to demonstrate the "animal" characteristics of blacks. This scene serves as a prime examples of Slavery's destructive effects on the imagination and inner self.

Baby Suggs, who wishes to see only colour before her death, completely loses her hold on reality when Halle, the only one son she had left, is also beaten down by the system of slavery. Baby Suggs, like Sethe and other black women in the novel, are victims of rape, reduced to sexual machines that exist only for the master's benefit.

Beloved is about the lingering inheritance of racial marginalisation and the unfinished project of reconstruction. From Morrison's perspective, as developed in *Beloved*, the institution of slavery remains so devastatingly powerful that even the characters who are free, whether through running away or through emancipation have yet to overcome their mental enslavement. Many, as illustrated by the character of Stamp Paid, are riddled with so much self doubt and despondency over those whom they have lost, that they are rendered impotent to progress, advancements and can't be assimilated in the mainstream.

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