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Creativity and dissidence: A study of Toni Morrison's beloved

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's works are linked to race and gender, steeped in popular black culture, music and folklore. The most significant purpose of her writings is "to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left to part" Morrison's presentation of racial oppression and reaffirmation of black culture isn't her attempt to de-centre the white logos but finally rebuilt the centre. The focus of present paper is to bring out the precision with which Morrison highlights the trauma of black people, specifically women who survived despite insurmountable difficulties, immeasurable physical, emotional, mental agony they underwent during Middle Passages. Their survival strategy amidst unspeakable torment, torture and isolation lies only on an indomitable and invincible spirit to fight odds whether it is Baby Suggs, Sethe, Ellia, Denver, Vashiti.

Keywords: Race, gender, black, culture, oppression, trauma, survival, invincible spirit

Introduction

The context for Toni Morrison and her work is clearly linked to her race and gender. She herself identifies a black style, an 'ineffable quality that is curiously black' (Nellie McKay: An interview with Toni Morrison) and her work is steeped in popular black culture, its music and folklore. Her novels juxtapose and combine joy and pain, laughter and tears and love and death. Writing in the twentieth century, Toni Morrison's purpose is still a corrective one: the history of slavery must not be forgotten. Her purpose is "to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left-to part" that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that (she) heard" (Toni Morrison: The Site of Memory: 110) Viewed from the black woman's perspective, the history of black woman has been the history of her economic and sexual exploitation on the basis of race. The rape which you gentleman have done against helpless black women in defiance of your law is written on the foreheads of two millions of mulattoes, and written in ineffaceable blood" (Die Bois: 106) Morrison's presentation of racial oppression and reaffirmation of black culture is not her attempt to decentre the white logos but finally rebuilt the centre.

History always knocks on the door
Sometimes we notice it and sometimes ignore
There are ghosts all around
Only waiting to be found.

(Amit Ranjan: Hashtaged Icon)

Black women can reclaim their history by writing about it, and the style of *Beloved*, which pays tribute to the non-literary background of black culture, places the novel at the very heart of this process. Morrison uses different protagonists' varying vision of events to compile her history of slavery, and this can be seen as part of a contemporary trend to see history as multiple and inconclusive. There are significant gaps in her narratives: the past is not divided from the present. The two are interdependent and the boundaries between them are blurred. This is very different from the precision of history books. With their attention to prominent figures and the treatment of facts as fixed entities it is possible to view *Beloved* as a 'history of the present', where the consequences of slavery's brutality are examined through the 'rememory' of her characters.

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Around the speck of Margaret Garner's historically true story, Morrison weaves the fabric of *Beloved*. She didn't intentionally investigate the details of the slave woman's life because she 'wanted to invent her life that might be pertinent today' (Marsha Darling: 5) The accumulation of the stories of Sethe; Denver, *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Paul D, Halle of Sweet Home, Amy, Ella, Vasthi, the call and response pattern, their gradual merging into a single story, Sethe's story, create an interesting structure, sometimes it is the omniscient narrator, at time voices of characters, each offering its own fragmented perception of the truth while the author bridges the gap between the telling and what is being told. *Beloved* revives the female and the male slave narrator's voice though the female voice is heard more dominantly than the male's.

Morrison succeeds in presenting a comprehensive picture of reality in the context of the utter exploitation of negroes, especially, the females among the lot. Just before and after the Emancipation Act, such was the suppression of Blacks during those years, that William Styron wrote "beat a nigger starve him, leave him, leave him wallowing in his own shit, and he will be yours for life" (William Styron: 70) Blacks were treated as sub humans. In Morrison's words "men and women were moved like checkers" (Morrison: *Beloved*: 23) Always living on the edge of life, they were "beaten, bartered, bruised, raped, hanged, rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, exchanged, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (ibid: 23) *Beloved* is a creative record of black dissidence shown by 'sixty million or more' who died and the many more who endured as exemplified through Sethe, the central character, and the rest who revolve around her. "Eighteen seventy-four and white folks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky, four coloured schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children, children whipped like adults, black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken...." (ibid: 180)

'The focus of this paper is bring out the trauma of major characters of *Beloved* who survived despite unsurmountable difficulties, immeasurable physical, emotional, mental agony they undergo. Their survival strategy, amidst unspeakable torment, torture and isolation lies only on an indomitable and invincible spirit to fight all odds. Sethi is the pivotal character who rarely saw her mother and was brought up by a one -armed woman named Nan, while her mother worked in the fields, as a slave. Her mother took her aside one day to show her a mark which was branded on her ribcage. Later Sethe finds her mother hanged, along with many other women, but she never discovers the reason why just as she never came to know what happened to her husband Halle. Loss of knowing is what resulted in loss of tradition, loss of history, and loss of self. Sethe is presumably a second-generation slave, since she can remember her mother speaking another language, the language that she has forgotten "the same language her mother spoke" (ibid: 76) She was familiar with her mother's branding 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest is dead' (ibid: 76) Sethe's memories of her mother and her own youth are vague and obscure. Mother-daughter bond is strong and firm yet her memories of this relationship are filled with gaps. At the age of thirteen, she is sold to Sweet Home, a farm in Kentucky. She is bought to replace Baby Suggs, whose son she later marries and to whose home she

escapes and reaches crossing bloody Ohio River in Cincinnati.

While Sweet Home is run by Mr. Garner and his wife, Sethe lives in relative tranquility. She works in the kitchen, hangs a handful of myrtle in kitchen handle, trying to personalize the kitchen as Baby Suggs aptly remarks 'A bigger fool never lived' (ibid: 24) She makes ink for Mr. Garner with which he writes animal characteristics of blacks working on farm house. All five of the male slaves would like her as a partner, but after a year she chooses Halle to be her husband, make love to him in Cornfield as remaining men watch their activity. "The restraint they had exercised possibly only because they were Sweet Home men the ones Mr. Garner bragged about" (ibid: 12). Sethe gets pregnant every year and has three children, two boys named Howard and Buglar and a baby girl. She is nineteen and pregnant for the fourth time when Mr. Garner dies. So Sethe's Eden is soon violated with arrival of school teacher who draws the limiting line by pronouncing 'definitions belonged to the definers- not to the defined' (ibid: 234) With this aphoristic statement, Morrison rips the golden veil. School teacher's atrocities force them to plan escape and she sends her three children on ahead to Baby Sugg's house. Her wings her clipped quite decisively as she offers resistance against the stealing of her milk and is rewarded with 'chokecherry tree' etched on her back by the nephews. Forcefully milked like a cow and beaten up like a wild animal. She refuses to give in because her too thick love for her children defies the attempts to break her. She flees to Cincinnati, taking secondary routes, hiding among trees and bushes for fear of white boys hunger to rape black woman at their whim and desire. With the help of Amy Denver, she finally reaches Cincinnati in the welcoming arms of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Sethe has strong conviction to protect her children "I'll protect her (her children in general) while I'm alive and I'll protect her when I ain't" (ibid: 56) Sethe nurturing instinct overpowers her destiny as a slave. Madhumalati Adhikari opines "The Demeter image is common in Morrison's novels. It articulates the idea of motherhood that leads to fulfillment and the recognition of the self" (Adhikari: 161) For twenty eight days she enjoys freed life before school teacher arrives with Mayor and slave catches, symbolizing four horsemen of Apocalypse to take her back. Rather than allow this to happen, she takes her children into the woodshed and tries to kill them all to preserve them from a life of hopeless slavery. The intolerable nature of her life is no different from that of many other black characters in the novel. The difference lies in her dramatic response. She is able only to kill one of her daughters. Linden Peach opines "Sethe's decision to kill her child rather than have her taken into slavery has to be seen in the context of her past, only a month previously she had endured an almost fatal whipping and suffered the denigration of being chained while the white-men sucked her lactating breasts" (Peach: 9) Sethe's act is disapproved by her community and she is alienated and segregated from all. That Sethe would go to any extent to dirty herself to retain the purity of her children is sadly evident when she agrees for "rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on for ten minutes as a piece to be paid for engraving the word 'Beloved' on the tombstone of her dead daughter (*Beloved*: 5) And "those ten minutes for her were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood and soaked her fingers like oil" (ibid: 5)

The history, or rather her story unfolds with her after-prison life but there are pages and pages of flashback, stirred initially by the return of Paul D to 124 Bluestone Road outside Cincinnati in Ohio. After Eighteen years when Paul D joins her and her daughter Denver, she feels shadows holding hands are of Paul D, Denver and she herself. She starts contemplating future with Paul D, a life perhaps, little realizing that her dead daughter is all ready to make a comeback in her life. Paul D looks at her possessive love for Denver and describes her love as 'too thick' and recognizes that to love in such a way is 'risky' given the precarious nature of slave existence. Nevertheless, her daughter Denver and the spirit of her dead baby, (which finally makes a comeback) Beloved, become focus of her life. She will never allow Paul D to chastise them, she gives up her job and centres her world within confines of 124 Bluestone Road. Even when Paul D leaves her she feels "whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. The here's all there is and all there needs to be" (ibid: 183) She believes wrongly that Beloved's resurrection will mean an ability to live in present because we as readers know that girl will prove to be force of darkness and past. Sethe feels her daughter is back and she understands all, there is no need to explain. Sethe sees her act of infanticide as an act of dispatching, her best thing, her small daughter to safety by cutting her throat with a handsaw. She sees this act as one of protection and provision for child but paradoxically it proves to be an act of destruction, lending gruesome irony to the phrase "mother love was a killer" (ibid: 132) by turning towards her children, Sethe makes an age-old bid to reconstruct her life with the participation of Denver and Beloved. The scene of skating on the 'frozen creek' is a beautiful example of Morrison's capacity to capture the meaning nuance of the moment. Morrison uses the frozen creek as a symbol of infertility and incompleteness. 'Nobody saw them falling' (ibid: 213) is a figurative projection of their futile struggle to stay afloat amidst the destructive and disintegrating currents of this world. Leaving the job leads to loss of identity that further leads to more rigid circumscription and isolation, always self-destructing. As a result it humiliates Denver her mother playing the role of serving and coaxing and always apologizing. Perhaps Sethe wants to repay for axe. Beloved ordered and she complied. It is quite ironic that Sethe's daughter reverts her back to slavery from where she pulled herself away, paying a huge price. The Journey to past turns out to be regressive and self-destructive. Beloved had returned 'to fix her mother' (ibid: 313). If one of her daughters (Beloved) brings about her deterioration, the other (Denver) becomes instrumental in her resurrection. Morrison clearly demonstrate that the mother daughter relationship can be destructive as well as constructive. Until Beloved's physical manifestations. Sethe copes with the guilt of her own act and cohabits with her strength she is beaten by Beloved, allow herself to be swamped by her guilt. Mother and daughter become involved in a terrible deadlock of love. Strangely, Sethe is both idealized and demonized in Beloved's eyes; all loving and all abandoning. Morrison wants to convey how destructive centering one's life in the past can be as Sethe pleads with Beloved "Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now?" (ibid: 215) Toni Morrison has relied on Afro-American folklore and has handled it with dexterity and superb chiasm. As Margaret Atwood remarks on use of supernatural in the *Beloved* "Ms.

Morrison blends a knowledge of folklore-for instance, in many traditions, the dead cannot return from the grave unless called, and it's the passions of the living that keep them alive – with a highly original treatment" (Atwood: 1) Sethe is embodiment of black endurance and fortitude. Frustrated by running away of Buglar and Howard, what remains for her is the sorry sight of "their backs walking down the railroad tracks" (Beloved: 192). So with whereabouts of husband not known, her three children gone, mother-in-law dead, Sethe leads life of reculsion and denial for eighteen years till the arrival of Paul D and Beloved. Beloved comes back neither sad nor evil but a rebuked ghost, a repressed memory. Nevertheless, the final exorcism of Beloved and the return of Paul D seems to imply the possibility of future and Denver is instrumental in reintroducing Sethe into the community from which she has been on exile "Sethe you and me we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (ibid: 273) Sethe is claimed by Paul D, Denver and her community as a result of which she is able to reclaim her wholeness. This epiphany of the intimate relationship with her near and dear ones finally tears off the veil that had been keeping her away from herself. Her last words 'Me? Me?' (ibid: 273) promise a new life for Sethe in which she, absolved of her guilt can value herself as her own best thing. Morrison uses a combination of the multiple point of view in her narration. Sometimes it is the omniscient narrator at other times the voices of different characters replace that of narrator each offering its own fragmented perception of truth while the gaps sometimes remain. Morrison herself state "The language has to be quiet: It has to engage your participation.... The reader supplies the emotions....My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it" (Claudia Tate: 125) Beloved is not only Morrison's emotional and intellectual response to problem of race and gender, but also an exercise to evoke an emotional – intellectual response and participation from the reader "I really want this emotional response, and I also want an intellectual response to the complex ideas there. My job is to do both at the same time, that's what a real story is" (Toni Morrison: Interview by Charles Raus: 97) Readers feel the dread and awfulness of Sethe's experience that is ever darkened by her haunting sense of guilt. Sethe is impressively strong. Her determination manifests itself in her successful escape from Sweet Home. Her strength is embodied in her 'iron eyes and backbone to match' (Beloved: 9). Another epitome of courage and forbearance in the novel is Baby Suggs. Although she is dead yet she is missed and alluded to by many of characters. Baby Suggs had eight children by six different fathers. Scattered through the narrative are allusions to the pain of never seeing one's child grow. She never saw any of her four daughters in 'adulthood' (ibid: 139) After Halle has bought her freedom, she tries to reunite her family but her efforts are thwarted. She focuses all her remaining affection upon Halle's new family whom she receives at 124, Bluestone Road, Cincinnati. Her life is a practical example of the brutality of the slave system. This is exemplified by the way that her employer misname her for the duration of her working life. She subtly expresses her uneasiness with this name because it is a blow to her black identity 'Sugs is my name, Sir, From my husband. HE didn't call me Jenny" (ibid: 142) Though she has no idea about whereabouts of her husband yet emotional bond and love continues. She is one

of the many women in the narrative who have suffered sexual abuse. She recounts briefly the way in which she was blackmailed and betrayed by a 'straw boss' who coerced her into 'coupling' with him. Similarly the overseer of the overfull ship in which the two daughters Nancy and Famous perished, bring her the news of their deaths in the hope 'of having his way with her' (ibid: 144) rather than through any altruism.

While she lives at 124 Bluestone Road it is focal point for the community 'a cheerful buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed' (ibid: 86-87) Sethe describes the services that Baby Suggs held in clearing urging her hearers to love themselves and their bodes, in contrast to their evaluation by white people "And O my people, they don't love your hands. They only use, tie, bond, chop off and leave empty" (ibid: 88) but Sethe's action of murder makes her give up her role of 'unchurched preacher' and she returned to her bed to contemplate colours- to indulge in a little sensuousness – regressing to a child-like state. Slave life "busted her legs back, hand, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" (ibid: 87) In fact the system of slavery and supremacy of whites permitted school teacher to invade her yard. Denver paraphrases what her grandmother felt 'she had done everything right and they came in her yard anyway' (ibid: 209). For all her strength and wisdom, she is shattered by Sethe's infanticide, a fact Sethe herself acknowledges. Baby Sugg's devastation is as pathetic and tragic as Sethe's reaction to the institution of slavery. Despite the hard earned freedom for by her son she dies of heartbreak caused both by whites and blacks. She cannot even be buried in the clearing due to a rule devised by whites and her funeral is a scene of divisive spite 'buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation' (ibid: 171) Before dying she tells Sethe and Denver 'There is no bad luck in the world but white folks' (ibid: 89)

Slavery was bad for men but worse for women and Beloved truthfully exposes their vicious exploitation. Easy target of frequent sexual abuse, they were looked upon as objects of instant or long-term sexual gratification with absolutely no commitment. Ella remembers how she was shared by a white father and his son in her puberty, whom she refers to as 'the lowest yet' (ibid: 256) Ella sees life as a 'test and a trial' (ibid: 256) and has been beaten 'every way but down' (ibid: 258) The tale of Stamp Paid's life which he recounts to Paul D demonstrates another way in which white people sullied the lives of black people. After his wife Vashti was taken from him to please his master's son, Stamp renames himself with his present name Before he was called Joshua. His choice of a new name "Stamp Paid" signifies that he considers himself responsible for his own salvation that he is debt-free and has no remaining obligations. Stamp Paid challenges white power by renaming himself. The self-baptism is an assertion of self-worth and self-ownership and therefore a direct refutation of slavery. His name alludes to the subtext of commercial exchange that inform the novel, the pricing of Paul D and the other slaves.

In the penultimate section of *Beloved*, Paul D tells Sethe that 'we got more yesterday than anybody' (ibid: 273) Together with Sethe, Paul D provides the details of oppression and suffering that are the context and justification for Sethe's dramatic gesture in the woodshed like Sethe, Paul D's life is full of horrible details and his description of his past prompts some of the more historically

allusive passage in the novel, his experience in the civil war, travel to the North and time spent at the prison camp Paul D's narrative voice gives us the chilling details of Six O's death, the humiliation of 'Choke Collar' and of white dominations. He keeps all this 'in-that-tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be, its lid rusted shut' (ibid: 72-73)

Until we are forced to echo his desperate words on the church steps "How much a nigger supposed to take" (ibid: 235) and Stamp Paint replies 'All he can', (ibid) After break-up of Sweet Home, he attempted to kill his new owner and was taken to a prison camp. He escapes the hiding finding his way along with other members of Chain gang he meets extended families of slaves. He feels envious of them as he has been deprived of roots to family. During the period of enslavement he puts up with 'anything and everything to stay alive' (ibid: 221) gradually, he becomes physically very strong yet the whites 'Clipped him' (ibid: 220)

Despite his dreadful experience, he is generous and loving man, with an ability to provoke emotions in others. With his 'immobile face' (ibid: 7) there is 'something blessed in his manner' (ibid: 17) At carnival his good humour is appreciable, he brings a brief sunshine in Sethe's desert like life – till he leaves her after learning about her murderous act. His dream of creating a family unit with her is ruined. His relationship with Beloved is antagonistic. He resents and questions the presence of the full-grown Beloved 'a room-and-board witch' (ibid: 164) She gives him a feeling of rootlessness. Finally he returns to Sethe and decides to take her up for all she is, to tell her that their pasts are complementary 'he wants to put his story next to hers' (ibid: 273) and the possibility of their having a future together necessitates coming to terms with their shares and traumatic past. The two of them are forced to confront each other's past and it is this confrontation that gives the novel its force. Denver's courage is exemplified in the novel. She has to live with the misapprehension of a terrible mother who might go crazy and kill her like she killed her sister. She remains vigilant to protect Beloved from her saw-wielding mother but later on she suddenly realizes that she must save her half-crazy mother from Beloved. "The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved. Now it was obvious that her mother could die and leave them both" (ibid: 245) She reacts not with sullen resentment she feels when Paul D arrives but as an adult. She is forced to leave the yard and find work. When Paul D meets her in the penultimate section of the novel, she is calm, composed and mellow, searching for a new job. So advent of Beloved is a catalyst for a development in Denver's character and way of living. Finally she is successful in breaking out of the narrowly defined, self – destructive circle of family relationships in 124 Bluestone Road.

While a linear study of the ethos in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is useful in understanding the note of oppression, protest and liberation it is equally useful to analyze how Morrison shows her, characters responding to the hegemony of race, class and sex at different points of time in the history. She presents the characters in grave crisis. Hence *Beloved* offers a useful study in the issue of survival and the strategies of survival. This strategy is exemplified in the portrayal of Sethe, Paul, Stamp Paid and Denver. Morrison's chief aim is to rupture the 'totalized' view which

she calls “a definitive or an authoritarian view” (Toni Morrison: Interview with Elisa Schappell P.124)

What makes her novel unmistakably hers is Morrison’s uniqueness of relativism with which she looks at African – American history. “History should not become a straitjacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten. One must critique it, test it, confront it and understand it in order to achieve a freedom that is more than a license, to achieve true, adult agency” (ibid: 114) This statement of Morrison clearly underlines her intellectual response to history. She achieves this response to history, which helps her reader to achieve the same through non-linearity in her novels.

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