

# TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*: REDISCOVERING HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT:

*The works of Toni Morrison largely reflect the history of African Americans. As a leading figure of the African American Renaissance, Morrison makes history a priority whether it is present, past, or future. She has made use of novel writing as a way of reshaping the discourse of slavery. Her novels reflect her desire to draw on people, places, languages, values, cultural traditions and politics, which have shaped her own life and that of African American people. The basic idea embedded in the narrative of Toni Morrison's fiction is the position of blacks in the white American society, both in the present and the past. Her literature is completely committed and devoted to her folks and is a constant endeavor to put things in the right manner and context for them. Her works are considered artistically, historically, and politically important for this century. *Beloved* (1987) negotiates history as a narrative of the ownership of the most concrete fact of human existence as well as the most abstract of human relationships. It is a history and a representation of the complexities of love and sexual attraction. It foregrounds the dialogic tendencies of memory and its imaginative capacity to construct and reconstruct the significance of the past.*

**Key Words:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, African-American, History, memory, past, slavery

Toni Morrison through her novels presents the non-linear African-American socio-historical reality, fragmented by a historical past of disconnection and ruptures. Her works offer a fresh perspective on black life, their history and genealogy. Through her works, she focuses mainly on apartheid, slavery and racism, and their psychological and social effects on the blacks over the ages. The social history found in her novels is the history of daily inescapable assault by a world which denies minimum dignity to the black. Morrison has given an exceptionally new perspective to the reading of the history. She has re-read and thus re-written the history from the angle of a neglected race which is not yet able to come out from the horrifying past of slavery and other unspeakable traumas. She revises the past which is a dark reality in the form of racism, slavery, subjugation of women, the destruction of cultural identity of the African-Americans and various other cruelties. Morrison picks up the issues of unknown historical personages in order to revive their painful past as well as to construct them as a hopeful presence in a contemporary setting. She makes us rethink American history from the point of view of slaves. She returns to history not to find claims for separation or reason for despair, but to find something subjective and complexly and compellingly human.

Published in 1987 Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a complex novel. Attempting to historicize the traumatic experience of slavery it also seeks to explore human relationship within and across race and gender thematizing shared pain. Morrison, dedicating her novel *Beloved* "to sixty million or more", who failed to survive the "Middle Passage", sets out to give voice to "disremembered and unaccounted for"—the women and children who left no written records. The novel both remembers the victimization of ex-slaves and asserts the healing wholeness in their communal lives. The novel uses the conception of history derived from call and response patterns and the communal nature of art that is an important part of black tradition.

A study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals her growing concern for the African-Americans who own a horrible and troubled past. *Beloved* deals with not only 'reconstructed memory,' but also deconstructed history. Morrison believes that the continuity between past and present is very crucial because it creates bonds, mutual obligations and a shared communal history of struggle. Morrison's own articulation of her motives in rediscovering history for artistic expression in the article "Rediscovering Black History,"

There is no need to be nostalgic about "the old days" because they weren't...but to recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of blacks, now growing up. (Morrison11)

reveals how deeply she is concerned with celebrating the unique historical cultural values and "qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity" that were so much part of the black people's past. *Beloved* discovers this past in order to ensure that it is not lost. History is the central theme of the novel because it is the most prestigious and painful heritage of the whole black community and this community will never forget it.

*Beloved* is set in Cincinnati in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War. The passages of time neither heal nor anesthetized the pain and effects of slavery. Instead the characters in *Beloved* are formed and deformed by their experiences in slavery. Paul D, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, and Ella have been mortally humiliated in countless ways about which the reader comes to know from different angles. So, we travel back and forth across the scene of slavery such that the narrated circumstances begin to crystallize into a tight verbal net from which no feeling or emotion can slip through unfelt. Marliyn Sanders Mobley in "A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in *Beloved*" attempts to demonstrate how Black history becomes a narrative device. *Beloved* is not just a document of history as experienced by Sethe alone; it contains versions of the past as narrated by Paul D. Baby Suggs, Denver and *Beloved* herself and each of their versions or fragments of history, "amplifies or modifies Sethe's narrative for the reader."(Mobley,359)

In order to depict the historical reality of the period, Morrison focuses on the 1860s and 70s and how Afro- American heritage was maintained during the period of dramatic social changes before and after the civil war. Morrison carefully pinpoints temporal and historical markers. In the beginning of Chapter one, the mention of the specific year 1873, and places such as Cincinnati

and Ohio, ground *Beloved* within the political and geographical realities of history. Morrison develops the social and psychological aspects which characterize the lived experiences of historical transition. Paul D, a Sweet Home man, recalls during and after the war blacks were homeless and without people, moving, walking, running, hiding, stealing and moving on:

During, before and after the war he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who like him, stole from pigs; who like him, slept in trees in the day and walked by the night.... He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own children. (78)

Morrison deconstructs the 'official history' in *Beloved*. The text is loaded with the moments of self-reflexivity which indicates that Morrison is after all constructing a textual representation of the past. The newspaper account of Sethe's deed clearly shows that textual documents often or always fail to capture life exactly as it is made experienced. Though Paul D cannot read, he finds the representation of Sethe's face to be inauthentic: "that ain't her mouth." (181) His reaction to the picture of Sethe makes the reader aware of the difference between a real live original and a stimulated/ copied photograph or text. Morrison suggests that a fictional account of the interior life of a former slave might be more historically 'real' than actual documents, which were often written from the perspective of the dominant culture. Of course Morrison makes the past available to us through textual traces in *Beloved* and thus lessens the claims to authenticity.

Morrison has written the novel in order to re-possess the past by remembering the ancestors not only in an aesthetic act but also in an act of historical recovery. The novel is an act of discovering deep within herself some relationship with the painful past through a "collective memory". In the novel Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs express this dark truth. She knows that "death was anything but forgetfulness." (4) That remembering is both a resurrection and a pain testified to Amy Denver, who assisted in the birth of Seth's daughter: "Anything dead coming to life hurts." (42) In the novel past is expressed and revealed in remembering and forgetting, accusing and embracing, burning and receiving through joy and oppression.

The powerful corporeal ghost who creates matrilineal connection between Africa and America, Beloved stands for every African woman whose story will never be told. She is the haunting symbol of the many Beloveds— generations of mothers and daughters – haunted down and stolen from Africa; as such, she is unlike mortals, invulnerable to barriers of time, space and place. Among other things, Beloved is the embodiment of the white folk's jungle, the psychological effects of slavery. Beloved thus represents not the single child but the pain and anguish of sixty million blacks who have been enslaved, tortured and perished. Thus before his reconciliation with Sethe, Paul D realizes that Beloved is his link to his past. His need for her is like the need for air, "the clear air at the top of the sea", but the life he unwittingly seeks is his own unreclaimed history, the "ocean deep place" of the dead female ancestors to whom he once "belonged". Beloved is the crucial link that connects Africa and America for the enslaved women. Between worlds, being neither "in", nor "of" a past or a present, she is a confirmation of a killing history and a disabling present. Beloved insists on the need to find a place for herself. Her being

depended on not losing herself again. “Call me my name,” (137) *Beloved* insists on the need to find a place for herself. Her being depended on not losing herself again “Say my name”, *Beloved* insists Paul D. She demands to be removed from her nothingness, to be specified, to be “called”.

Morrison creates a history for such marginalized people by using magic realism to give the sense that ‘the real’ is actually ‘beyond language’. Morrison claims she wrote the novel *Beloved* as an attempt to recover the stories of slavery from the point of view of slaves in order to remind African-Americans of their past. For this depends on the African-American oral culture and mythology adapted from the West African culture. *Beloved*’s “Middle Passage” is most difficult as the sentences run without punctuation and phrases seem to elbow out each other: “I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I come up I need to find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am not ...” (250) These lines are intended to evoke a mood, to give voice, pay homage and honour to millions of Africans killed during Middle Passage. In death, *Beloved* merged with her own dead ancestors in an underwater nightmare of the collective unconsciousness.

*Beloved* then “is a deeply imagined historical novel, in which what is commonly called the supernatural is also the manifestation of history.” (Ferguson,113) Barbara Hill Rigney in “The Disremembered and Unaccounted For: History, Myth and Magic”<sup>19</sup> observes that Morrison’s novels are ‘historical novels’, because they are both subjects of and subject to history, i.e. events in ‘real time’, that succession of antagonistic movements that include “slavery, reconstruction, depression and war.” (Rigney,61) Rigney states that history in Toni Morrison’s fiction is a matter of ‘time and place’ and authenticates her statement by quoting places of historical importance in Morrison’s novels—Detroit in *Song of Solomon*, or post-slavery Cincinnati in *Beloved* and Isle des Chevaliers in *Tar Baby*. History for Morrison is not just an account of or record of events in a chronological order, but a “recovered time.”(Rigney,75)

The ambiguity of the repeated phrase: “It was not a story to pass on” (324) enacts the simultaneity of moving forward and looking back since “passing on” has two meanings—sharing the tale with future generations and walking on by and forgetting the story. Thus although Morrison promotes a dwelling into the historical past, she realizes that the past must be processed and sometimes forgotten in order to function in the present and to “pass on” to the future. One way to free oneself from the horrors and complexities of the past is to re-enact and reconfigure the past in the present. Sethe does the same with an ice pick at the end of the novel, attacking the white man Bodwin whom she perceives as a reincarnation of her slave master, schoolteacher rather than her own children. The refiguration of the past introduces us to a changed Sethe who shows some sort of possession of her past exorcised in *Beloved*. Morrison seems to endow more subversive powers of agency to Sethe. Morrison delineates a postmodernist view by acknowledging both Sethe’s complicities and her subversions while recognizing that Sethe has limited power to revise or erase the past.

The above discussion illustrates that Morrison’s *Beloved* is replete with history and its undocumented and unrecognized facts. Morrison has almost rediscovered history in this seminal work. The very end of the novel paradoxically appears to belie the crucial theme of the book, that

it is imperative to preserve continuity through story, language and culture between generations of blacks. The authorial voice says repeatedly “this is not a story to pass on,” although it seems in this text that not to repeat is to lose stories crucial to Black heritage and American history and to the personal lives of the millions of slaves.

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