

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a Neo-Slave Narrative

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Slave narratives, written widely during the nineteenth century, are considered the first genre of African-American literature. These narratives acted as an opportunity for the slaves to exercise their right of freedom of expression. But it has often been noted that such narratives were incomplete or undone because “there was a careful selection of instances” that would be recorded and a “careful rendering of those that they chose to describe”. The experience of slavery was often shaped to make it “palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it”. This means that working to end slavery sometimes required to mute the sharing of details of one’s life and race But no more. A neo slave narrative is an African-American genre which investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth century slave narrative tradition. In Timothy Spaulding’s words, it is a form that “forces us to question the ideologies embedded within realistic representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction”. The aims and

audiences of neo slave narratives like *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison are very different. The traditional slave narratives hoped to lead to the abolition of slavery while its postmodern cousin, the neo slave narrative, underlines the historical legacy of slavery by unveiling the past. In fact these silences and self masking from a painful past in slave narratives- which mainly catered to the white audience- makes people like Morrison consider it their job “to rip over that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate”, to bear witness to “the interior life of people who did not write their history (which doesn’t mean that they didn’t have it) and to “fill in the gaps that the slave narratives left”.

Neo slave narratives’ audience includes contemporary black readers who must, like *Beloved*’s Sethe, come to terms with their own personal, familial histories of slavery. *Beloved* is drawn on the slave narrative tradition but is revised to serve the

needs of the new community of readers who now realize that emancipation was not alone sufficient to uplift the African Americans but was an essential step in the journey to regain what was rightfully theirs-personhood. *Beloved* is inspired from a real life incident(1856) of a runaway slave, Margaret Garner who slaughtered her two year old baby when the whites came to recapture them under the Fugitive Slave law (which mandated the return of the escapees to their owners). According to Stephen M. Hart, this reference to Margaret Garner's anecdote is what may be called the realism of the novel, its roots in specific historic circumstances. But the extraordinary element of the book can be realized when "Morrison blends this realism with a magical event, the resurrection of the murdered child". She follows a defamiliarizing strategy and introduces a more mysterious world. The beginning of the book "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom" itself sets an uncanny set up for the rest of the novel. But at the same time it would be erroneous to call *Beloved* a ghost story. It is an embodiment of memory. The importance of the supernatural presented in the novel is that it is "the

projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people...It is directly expressive of societal oppression and related to the repression of the African- Americans in the nineteenth century America". The character of *Beloved* helps Sethe reconnect with her memories of the past. Morrison acknowledges the fact in her essay *The Site of Memory* that the "memories within" are the subsoil of her work accompanied by the act of imagination which gives access to the interior life of these people. She also tries to keep up with the rich African oral tradition of passing on the stories. Storytelling becomes a method of reviving memories and memory the means of survival. Realities which have been submerged are brought to the surface through this oral tradition.

But as integral as memory is in shaping this novel, its characters try to evade it or are unable to remember. It is this precarity of human memory and the fear of forgetting that the book deals with. Baby Suggs says, "My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread...Eight children and that's all I remember". To which Sethe replies, "That's all you let yourself remember". But Sethe's own memory of her

son Burglar was fading away. Also no matter how much Sethe tries not to cling to her past, with the coming of *Beloved* everything changes. “Tell me”, “Tell me your diamonds”, “Your woman she never fix up your hair?” *Beloved*’s constant questioning becomes an agent to dig up the past, the past that Sethe and other characters like Paul D try to resist remembering or mentioning. “Working, working dough. Nothing better than to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” Sethe says. Paul D’s own tobacco tin, the tin of old memory which was “rusted shut” shatters when he makes love to *Beloved*. Through these instances Morrison tries to bring up this problematic notion of ‘healing by letting go of the past’. It sounds ironic but the more one struggles to let go of the past, to elude, the more s/he is confronted and haunted by it. The moment one acknowledges it, accepts it, the suffering begins to alleviate. Sheryll Vint in her essay *Limitations of Realism* mentions:

The need to create the past as present points to the problem that the past has been repressed rather than acknowledged and hence continues to have effects. Like any other

repressed content, the root cause must be acknowledged and dealt with before the individual –or collective subject- can be free... [*Beloved*] articulate[s] the need to overcome a mind/body split, represented as a subject/object dichotomy in order for the protagonist to achieve healing and psychic wholeness.

Morrison celebrates the beauty of the scarred slave bodies and constructs the history of the slave body as the site of historically inflicted oppression and violence. “The body becomes the site through which the work of recovering and healing is done”. Sethe’s experience of slavery is recorded on her scarred body, especially the “chokecherry tree”. It is a metaphorical comparison between the scars and the trees. But when Paul D “rub[s] his cheek on her back and learn[s] that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches...the tears were coming fast” it more than erotic becomes a healing encounter which heals her emotionally and sexually.

One can witness a crumbling selfhood in the line: “Women saw him and wanted to weep-to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too...secretly they longed to die”. Like all the other emotionally and physically broken women of her race, Sethe too was crumbling and wanted someone to relieve her from her burden, “What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else’s hands” . But towards the end of the novel Sethe discovers that she can be her own “best thing” when she unites body and mind. By no longer thinking of herself as a body there to serve someone whether her children through her breasts or the slave owners through her labour, she accepts that her body is herself. This realisation and acceptance marks an important understanding of the concept of selfhood.

Morrison complains of lack of mention of the slaves’ interior lives in their narratives. Hence she makes it a point to explore as well as expose the little details of their inward lifestyle which have otherwise been erased from the official historical discourse. Sethe’s desire to look like a bride is one such fine example. She is in no hurry

when she describes Sethe’s assembling of her bridal gown and writes it in an elaborate fashion.

“White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle... the more coloured people spent their strength in convincing how gentle, loving, caring and human they were...the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside”. Morrison probes the past and celebrates the truth. There is no reflection of embarrassment or hesitation when it comes down to mentioning the horrendous and shameless treatment of the slaves. From human skin and blood being cooked in a lynch fire, the pseudo scientific racism, racial imagery, the denial of their identity as humans by comparing them to work horses, referring to them as trespassers among the human race, branding them like animals, incessant rapes of the female bodies, to the unspeakable emotional and mental heaviness felt due to the iron bit, Morrison describes it all.

Morrison and many other authors like her with works like *Beloved* “demonstrate the importance of neo slave narratives, retellings that show us that the



past is us and that only by accepting this history as part of ourselves can we resist its [detrimental] influence and work toward the healing [process]”. By looking in the past and remembering the harsh realities of slavery, we can move beyond the past and look towards the more hopeful and promising future and move into a transformed world. But acknowledging and incorporating into a collective understanding of the reality is crucial to such transformation or else one would be trapped and fear the memories surrounding him/her just like Sethe did till she accepted the suffering she had undergone.

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