

## Morrison's Art of Violence



\* Dr. Deepa Rani

\* Govt. Polytechnic Colony, Nilokheri

The impact of slavery on the psyche of the slave victims has been mapped out in all its details by scholars of slave narratives. It denies all human quality, degrading an individual to the level of animal. Most commentaries on *Beloved* also throw light on this issue. It is constantly argued how slavery not only impairs humanely instinct, but also awakens how slavery not only impairs humanely instinct, but also awakens psychic imbalance in them. Sethe, the female protagonist of the novel suffers from the guilt of infanticide which she committed by killing her "crawling already" daughter. *Beloved* followed by this same psychic imbalance. The memory of the brutality of slavery could not escape the woman even in her post-slavery period in Cincinnati. Consequently, *Beloved* returns, both literally and metaphorically, demand an answer for the act.

It is not difficult to see how the novel weaves its narrative around fractured relationships and abnormal psychic behaviour of the characters even in post-abolition era. It has been argued that slaves are reborn as human beings in the Reconstruction and post-Abolition era. Interestingly, both in the course of slavery as well as liberation, the identities of the freemen-become-slaves-become-freemen are violently yanked away from them. *Beloved* is as much about slavery as about its aftermath; for, what is after slavery is an important question that cannot be put aside. "To confront a past they cannot forget. Indeed, it is apparent forgetting that subjects them to traumatic return; confrontation requires a direct attempt at remembering" (Barnett 419). Morrison achieves her goal by strategic use of memory. The fact cannot be denied that most of the experiences in the novel's context are brought to the perception of the reader on the level of memory.

Memory and rememory make remark-

able fusion in the characters lives. *Beloved* asserts the truth that slavery is not an isolated experience and cannot be recovered without collective effort. In the words of Cynthia A. Davis it is "less single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives" (Davis 323). Without being a part of other's pain and a capacity to feel with others, and the necessary sympathy towards another's experience, Sethe cannot even know the depth of her own pain. It is interesting to see how the novel narrativizes the slave experience of many character with the same intensity like that of Sethe only to emphasize the fact that no experience is isolated in African American slave history and only braiding and fusing of memory make possible the new knowledge slaves seek about their post colonial condition.

This fact is asserted by a chain of deferred memories that help Sethe to bring some occluded, forgotten texts that have not been placed in the documented African slave history. Morrison finds it important for Sethe to remember them and resee her own action. While in a futile act of explaining her infanticide to *Beloved* again and again, Sethe's memory grabs an erased but important text, a text that is "privately shameful" but must be recovered. Sethe, even as she is retelling the story of the murder, is forced to recollect the story of her forgotten mother. It is the story of many African-American women who committed infanticide, during and after the infamous Middle Passage.

Nan... told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. you she gave the name of the black man .... I am telling you .... Sethe." (62)

While the story may or may not help Sethe in

making Beloved accept what had compelled her mother to do what she did, it surely ensures that Sethe's rememory helps her in the process of making herself. It is important to notice what many women marked selfishness in Sethe after she had been liberated. She was "prideful, misdirected" as observed by Ella, a victim of slavery, and "her pride outstripped" (256) all her actions because of her reasonably better position both in the slavery and post slavery period. It not difficult to see how Sethe enjoyed the pleasure of a complete family life even in bondage with husband and all children, a rare privilege any slave woman enjoyed during slavery. As observed by Baby Suggs, her own mother-in-law Sethe lived "as though she were alone" (256)

She had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that 'somebody' son who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one. (23) Contrary to her daughter-in-law Baby Suggs could never remember anything but the small hands and feet of her children. The point is that Sethe's sense of pride overshadowed the stories of thousand others whom she must remember to understand the meaning of real suffering. It may be noted that the community's assessment of Sethe's infanticide as an outcome of pride makes her reevaluate herself in relation to other characters. It is that process which brings to the fore other characters' experience so important in Sethe's life but somehow forgotten.

Beloved is a novel that grows out of its own ruin. Each action in the present is determined by an old memory consciously or unconsciously brought to surface by the victims. Memory, thus, breaks down the boundaries of previous meanings and interpretations. Sethe must remember those 'sixty million and more' to whom the novel is dedicated, to add new meaning to her text. It is not difficult to see how every page of Beloved is filled with the cries of victims like Ella, Vasthi or Stamp Paid who are no less victims of shame and humiliation than her. Sethe needs to place herself by their side for a better perspective of her life in past and present. For Ella what she receives from the white father and the son who kept her for their own pleasure is incomparable.

Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called "the lowest yet." It was "the lowest yet" who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape ... whatever she listened and nodded. Nothing compared to "the lowest yet". (256)

The story of Vasthi, Stamp Paid's wife, is perhaps equally important for Sethe if she wants to understand her own pain in relation to the collective experience of other African-Americans. The pain and humiliation Stamp Paid experiences while handing his wife over to the white master may not be unique but no less shameful than Sethe's rape. While female trauma is narrated in places, the men are expected to be silent or taciturn about their experiences. Their manhood becomes 'a bit in their mouths'. Paul D closed all possibilities of emotion, Halle, Sethe's husband went mad after he had witnessed Sethe's rape, but none of these examples is isolated. The nature of violence they undergo may be different at times than that of the women, but they cannot be put aside and Sethe must remember there. Although Morrison focuses on the plight of women during and after slavery in America, in this novel at least, she brings out the suffering of men alongside that of women to lend a wider dimension to the tales of oppression, a fact Sethe must not forget.

By putting Sethe's story in a framework larger than the individual, Morrison allows her to experience the cathartic side of her feelings. In the process, Sethe is allowed to overcome the burden of harmful memories and pick up a few positives from a ruined past. The positivity shown by certain characters in the novel is not only unique but also exemplary for victims like Sethe who recollects past without creativity. From many victims of slavery that the novel portrays one can learn how to build life out of the remaining lot. Worst sufferers like Baby Suggs, Ella or Stamp Paid never forgot the pains of the brutality. But they try to transform their pain into something positive: Ella tries to forget things by helping the slaves to escape through the rail road; Stamp Paid keeps the memory of slavery alive by keeping the red ribbon of an unknown black girl that he finds in the river Ohil:

But what Stamp Paid did was gone for 'blue, yellow and may be green' but 'never fixed on red' (182). For him letting go the pain does not mean forgetting the past. People can learn to live in spite of a lived memory of the terrible past. In fact, Morrison seems to be strongly in favour of not forgetting this history of the African Americans in spite of her final declaration that 'this is not a story to pass on'. What one needs is a capacity to transform the horror into beautiful, ignorance to knowledge. In spite of the shame and humiliation these people do not stop living their lives. Not only living themselves but also teaching others the art of living.

The best message *Beloved* conveys is that the act of rememory itself is a great creative process. As observed by Cheryl Hall in case of story telling that "The knowledge transmitted is not static, however, though essential details may be retained. It is enriched and modified with every telling, and by each different storyteller..." (Hall 92). Those who know this art can enjoy real free-

dom. Metaphorically it is revealed through the tree like shape on Sethe's back that opens up possibilities for various interpretations. Sethe, captured in an act of artless rememory always considers it as the symbol of brutality. For Paul D it looked "like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (17), while for both Amy and Baby Suggs the mark represents a tree, full of leaves and flower. In the same manner Sethe's horrible memories are transformed into self-knowledge when she leaves the boundary of narrow selfishness. Placing herself by the side of the other women Sethe understands what Baby Suggs means when she calls her a lucky one. Once Sethe realizes this she begins "looking at things again" (2001). When memories so long repressed are brought to the surface they not only fade but are filtered out. The pain encountered during this process empowers the victim to make meaning out of individual and collective experience, to recover what is lost and loving into life.

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