

Healing Through 'Rememory': A Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Anindita Langthasa

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Arya Vidyapeeth College, Guwahati

Abstract

Based on fragments borrowed from the Margaret Garner incident, Morrison explores the harrowing nature of slavery in her fifth novel *Beloved* (1987). But far from being an objective account of slavery, *Beloved* (1987) is a psychological exploration of traumatic experience which examines and internalizes slavery by focusing on the day-to-day lived experiences of the slaves rendering enslavement as an intimate experience for the readers. In the novel, Morrison presents the tortured inner turmoil of the former slaves and the stultifying lives they led. The slaves underwent unspeakable pain and suffering that remembering any of their horrifying experiences put them in danger of losing their sanity. Rather than confronting and trying to overcome their shame and pain, they chose to repress those traumatic memories as such they ended up remaining slaves to their own tragic past. The following paper seeks to examine *Beloved* (1987) as a novel about healing through 'rememory'. In other words, overcoming trauma by recollection of painful memories. The paper attempts to show that as a physical manifestation of the past and the repressed memories, the character Beloved initiates the healing process of Sethe, Paul D and Denver and liberates them from the haunting pain of their slave past.

Key words: rememory, repression, trauma, healing, slavery, freedom

In a 1989 interview by Bonnie Angelo, Toni Morrison speaking about "national amnesia" emphasizes that *Beloved* (1987) is not about slavery as an institution but "about those *anonymous* people called slaves" (qtd. in Rushdy 39). She dedicates the novel to the "Sixty Million and more" black slaves who perished during the Middle Passage. Her novel is a response to the "exteriority" (Hendersen 81) of the slave narrative. She intends to fill up the gaps left behind by most slave narratives of 19th century by internalizing the experience of slavery in her novel and exposing the deep psychological scars of the slaves. In words of Karla F. C. Holloway, Morrison revisions:

[...] a history both spoken and written, felt and submerged. It is in the coalescence of the known and unknown elements of slavery—the events, minuscule in

significance to the captors but major disruptions of black folks' experience in nurturing and loving and *being*— where Morrison's reconstruction of the historical text of slavery occurs (68).

In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison throws light on the interior life of the slaves emphasizing their psychological agony. Inspired by a historical account of an African-American slave named Margaret Garner who had killed one of her children to save them from slavery, the novel centres around a community of former slaves that has been “spiritually incapacitated by the trauma of slavery” (Holloway 68). *Beloved* (1987) revolves around “the wish to forget and the necessity to remember, to reject and to reclaim; and to elide the boundaries between past and present” (Mckay 12). In the novel, the character Beloved is Sethe's baby girl reincarnated as an adult woman. She is the physical manifestation of Sethe's most painful memory of committing an infanticide to protect her children from slavery. As Linda Krumholz observes:

Beloved is Sethe's “ghost”, the return of her repressed past, and she forces Sethe to confront the gap between her mother-love and the realities of motherhood in slavery. Beloved is also “everyone's ghost”. She functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed pasts, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of a man in slavery, and enabling Denver to deal with her mother's history as a slave (115).

In the novel, Beloved is “a disruption necessary for healing.” (Krumholz 110). She represents both the pain and the cure (Krumholz 114). As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy puts it:

In giving that ‘ghost’ a renewed voice and life, Morrison not only criticizes the institution responsible for Beloved's death but also shows the healing knowledge that accrues to those attentive to the ghost's presence (61).

Beloved brings about individual healing processes of Sethe, Paul D and Denver. Being the embodiment of the repressed past and the physical manifestation of suppressed memories, she acts as “an unconscious imp, stealing away the volition of the characters, and as a psychoanalytic urge, she pries open suppressed memories and emotions” (Krumholz 114). It is only after Beloved forces them to face their suppressed memories and relive the trauma that they fully experience freedom from their slave past. They are reconciled with their traumatic memories and come to terms with their haunting presence in their lives.

In *Beloved* (1987) the ritual methods of healing are exemplified by Baby Suggs' lessons in the Clearing. Baby Suggs was a slave for more than sixty years but when she finally earns her freedom, her joy knows no bound. She feels her own heartbeat and is overwhelmed at owning her body for the first time (Krumholz 110). Baby Suggs decides to "open her great heart to those who could use it" and becomes an "unchurched preacher" (Morrison 102). She engineers a ritual practice to "heal" former slaves and enable them to reconcile with their memories which continue to traumatize them even after the experience of slavery has long been over (Krumholz 110). For her spirituality, she is called "holy" (Morrison 102). Baby Suggs' rituals are carried out in an open space, a cleared land called the Clearing (Morrison 102). It is "a place that signifies the necessity for a psychological cleansing from the past, a space to encounter painful memories safely and rest from them" (Krumholz 110).

For Baby Suggs, good and evil cannot be compartmentalised in definite terms. Both depend on what is called "situational ethics" (Krumholz 113):

'Everything depends on knowing how much,' she [Baby Suggs] said, and 'Good is knowing when to stop' (Morrison 102).

She is aware of the white slaveholders' lack of control over their oppressive actions which test the limits of human endurance both physical and mental. She knows the slaves endured unspeakable suffering in the merciless hands of their white masters. In her last hours, Baby Suggs reveals to Sethe "the lesson" she had learnt from her experience as a slave for sixty years and as a free soul for a decade:

[...] there was no bad luck in the world but white people. 'They don't know when to stop', she said (Morrison 122-23).

Due to this lack of control, "slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering" (Krumholz 114). The unbridled oppression of the white slave master is evidenced from the suffering endured by the slaves. In the novel, they "took" (Morrison 20) Sethe's milk and "[d]ivided her back into plant life...battered Halle's face; gave Paul D iron to eat; crisped Sixo; hanged her [Sethe's] own mother" (Morrison 222) and drove Sethe to murder her "crawling-already?baby" (Morrison 178). All these incidents are examples of the white slave masters' lack of control over their actions: their lack of moral goodness (Krumholz 113). Such actions leave wounds which are deeper than physical injuries. The slaves suffer mental anguish which is beyond human imagination.

The overwhelming pain and shame of the slave past, as Krumholz observes, “necessitates a closing down of memory” (114). In the novel, Paul D and Sethe have felt it imperative “to lock away their memories and their emotions as a means of surviving the extreme pain of their past” (Krumholz 114). Paul D’s suppression of his slave past is vividly described in concrete terms with the image of a tobacco tin:

He would keep the rest [of his past] where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister’s comb beating in him (Morrison 86).

“Like Paul D’s tobacco tin, Sethe’s repressed past is like a rusted box closed inside of her” (Krumholz 117). Closed shut with her every attempt “to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (Morrison 6). But “traumatic repression”, as Krumholz points out, “causes neurosis” (114). Suppression of their memories may save them from going insane but not help them to lead a wholesome life. Neurosis breeds stagnancy. As a result, we find Paul D and Sethe living a dull and secluded existence. In order to liberate themselves from the haunting presence of the pain and shame of their slave past, Paul D and Sethe must undergo a healing process similar to the rituals Baby Suggs performed in the Clearing. As Susan Bowers argues:

Sethe and Paul D are able to help each other to a point, but until they have intimate contact with the original pain and the feelings it created that had to be suppressed, they cannot be purged of its paralysing effect (216).

Sethe’s healing process

Sethe’s healing process is central to the novel. Her “future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Morrison 51). She works hard to save her children from falling prey to “rememory” (Morrison 43), which she describes as follows:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear...It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place [Sweet Home] is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm- every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there- you who never was there-if you go

there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you (Morrison 43- 44).

Morrison coined the term 'rememory' in *Beloved* (1987) to describe the act of recollecting and confronting painful and traumatic memories which are kept repressed. In words of Mae G. Hendersen, "[r]ememory" is "something that possesses (or haunts) one rather than something that one possesses. It is, in fact, that which makes the past part of one's present" (86). 'Rememory' implies to remember so acutely that one relives one's memories, feeling every pain and emotion, as though they were taking place right at that moment. But since "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (Morrison 69), Sethe is unable to face her painful memories of slavery and mainly her guilt of taking her own child's life. In spite of being free for eighteen years, this inability keeps her "mentally and emotionally enslaved" (Krumholz 122):

Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 111-112).

Sethe remains, in words of Henry Louis Gates Jr., "a slave to [her] self, a prisoner of [her] own power to recall" (qtd. in Hendersen 91). Her mind stayed "homeless" (Morrison 241) but "Beloved's resurrection exhumes the past Sethe has buried deep inside her" (Krumholz 117).

Beloved's return is described in the following words:

A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of the water...she sat down on the first handy place- a stump not far from the steps of 124 (Morrison 60).

Beloved's emergence from the source of life, 'the water', denotes her rebirth and the moment of realization that Beloved is the reincarnation of Sethe's dead baby is beautifully described as finding buried treasure which comes as no surprise:

A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow...No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp as a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along (Morrison 207-208).

Without hankering after any rational explanation, Sethe simply accepts Beloved's rebirth as being most natural thing to occur and throws herself like one possessed to prove her love and atone for the murder which proves almost detrimental to her (Sethe's) health:

Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that [...] (Morrison 295).

Krumholz observes, “Beloved is the murdered child, the repressed past, Sethe’s own guilt and loss, and so Beloved can never forgive Sethe”(114). Just as Amy Denver the white slave says in the novel, “[a]nthing dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison 42). A group of thirty African-American women then sets out to restore the natural equilibrium between the worlds, forbidding “past errors” from “taking possession of the present” (Morrison 302). The local women led by Ella come to Sethe’s house where they begin their choric chants to exorcize the ghost. The women’s voices joined together initiates the healing process which “symbolizes and ritualizes Sethe’s cycle from spiritual death to rebirth” (Krumholz 118). The healing process is described with baptismal connotation:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (Morrison 308).

Krumholz observes, “The women’s voices carry Sethe from the apocalyptic end to a new beginning” (118).

The cleansing ritual provides Sethe the opportunity to relive the traumatic scene of her most repressed memory. When Mr. Bodwin, white abolitionist and owner of 124, happens to arrive during the ritual, Sethe is perplexed and thinks he is schoolteacher who has come to put her and her children back into slavery. Had Denver not restrained her mother at the right moment, Sethe would have lethally wounded Mr. Bodwin. Sethe relives her trauma “with a difference” (Krumholz 119). As Krumholz notes:

As a freed woman with a group of her peers surrounding her, Sethe can act on her mother-love as she would have chosen to originally. Instead of turning on her children to save them from slavery, she turns on the white man who threatens them. (119).

Reliving the traumatic scene ends the ritual of healing, and banishes Beloved (guilt and pain of past memory) from Sethe's life. “The exorcism of Beloved is a purgation ritual, a baptismal cleansing and rebirth and a psychological clearing” (Krumholz 118). Sethe can finally put down the “sword and shield” (Morrison 101) that she has held up so long to keep her memories at bay.

Paul D's healing process

The life of a black slave was an abomination, a curse, a fate worse than death. The black slaves were treated as commodities and “moved around like checkers”. They “got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized”(Morrison 28). They were bred as poultry and a mother barely glanced at her child because “it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn the features [she] would never see change into adulthood anyway”(Morrison 163). It was a world where a rooster's life was better off (Morrison 86) and a world with no place for “a big love” (Morrison 191). To cope with such a de-humanized life, Paul D “the last of the Sweet Home men” (Morrison 7), learnt that “[t]he best thing...was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit...” (Morrison 54). Thus, in his company “[e]motions sped to the surface...Things became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot.” (Morrison 48). After he escaped from Alfred, Georgia prison, he becomes “a walking man” (Morrison 55) and finally comes to Sethe with hope to “make a life” (Morrison 55) with her. When Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, he witnesses the disturbing activities caused by the baby poltergeist and forcibly exorcises it from the house (Morrison 22). It is the exorcism that leads to Beloved's rebirth. Returning home from the carnival, Paul D, Sethe and Denver find her on the front yard (Morrison 61). Beloved detests Paul D because she sees him as a rival to her mother's affection and eventually manages to drive him away by seducing him, which creates a rift between him and Sethe. However, it is Beloved's seduction that initiates Paul D's healing process. As Susan Corey points out:

The arousal of his bodily responses is accompanied by an awakening of his emotions and memories: the lid of the ‘tobacco tin’ protecting his heart gives way, leaving him vulnerable to the repressed emotions from his past... Although confronting these memories is exceedingly painful... Through his contact with [Beloved], Paul D has begun to reconnect to his body, his emotions, and his unconscious memories (39).

Another critic Pamela E. Barnett also agrees that Paul D's consummation with Beloved forces him to re-experience the previous sexual assault in Alfred, Georgia and eventually leads to his healing. She says, “Without this nightmare experience, Paul D would not be able to overcome his numbing defense mechanisms” (423). After Paul D learns that Sethe had murdered her child to save it from the clutches of slavery, he calls her love “too thick” (Morrison 193) and leaves 124. But Paul D's thoughts remain constantly occupied with Sethe:

Wanting to live his life with a whole woman was new, and losing the feeling of it made him want to cry and think deep thoughts that struck nothing solid" (Morrison 261).

Walking no longer suffice to put things at the back of his mind and forget. It is not only Sethe that runs in his mind on a daily basis, but also all the memories about the life at Sweet Home: the history he left behind in that place. After years of suppression, without any warning everything that he has tried to repress and hold back pours out:

His tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey (Morrison 258).

Paul D is thus ready to move on, to put the past to rest and create a future with Sethe. Holding her hands, Paul D tells Sethe that she is her "best thing" (Morrison 322) and they "got more yesterday than anybody [...] need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison 322). The union indicated through their entwined fingers conjures up a picture of a hopeful and a happy family life which was an impossibility without 'rememory'. Reliving their worst memories, they have faced their past in all its horrors and degradation and are finally reconciled with it. They become truly free to move forward and embrace their future.

Denver's healing process

Like Sethe and Paul D, Denver too has her own share of memory to repress: "the hurt of the hurt world" (Morrison 35). Like her mother, she attempts to prevent the past from intruding her present life:

[S]he had her own set of questions which had nothing to do with the past. The present alone interested Denver [...] (Morrison 141).

Denver was only a breastfeeding baby when Sethe commits the murder. She drinks her murdered sister's blood mixed with her mother's milk and spends time in jail with her mother. She distances herself from people wanting to know about her past and grows up lonely in an isolated house with only Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the baby ghost for company. "In her lonely withdrawal from the world, due in part to Sethe's isolation, Denver is as trapped by Sethe's past and Sethe's inability to find psychological freedom as Sethe herself

is.”(Krumholz 119). It is with full intention that Sethe always keeps Denver ignorant about the past:

As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered (Morrison 51).

But “the unacknowledged past”, as Krumholz points out, “keeps Denver from moving into the future” (120).

When Beloved returns, Denver is forced to confront the past she hated and repressed because she (Beloved) makes Sethe relate stories of her past. Soon Denver finds the past dangerously threatening her present life and her future. Eventually “[w]hat Denver must do is remember, and she must do so by revising her memory-her history and her mother's history” (Rushdy 48). History for Morrison, as Krumholz observes, “is not an abstract factual recital; it is a ritual engagement with the past. Denver begins to experience the past through the stories she tells Beloved” (120). It is only when she narrates her birth story to Beloved that Denver begins:

[...] seeing it now and feeling it-through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked (Morrison 91-92).

In the middle of part two, there are four chapters which “form a ritual of mergence and possession for Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. In the first three chapters, Sethe first proclaims her possession of her daughter Beloved, then Denver of her sister Beloved, then Beloved of her mother” (Krumholz 120). In the fourth chapter, their joint memories culminate into “a poetic chant” (Krumholz 120) of possession-“You are mine” (Morrison 256). It is only when Denver undergoes this “ritual of mergence” (Krumholz 120) that “she remembers everything-her own past and her mother's past, her fear of her mother as a child murderer, and her imaginary reunions with her father. The ritual of possession breaks through her isolation and grants Denver an experience of the past that can lead her into the future” (Krumholz 120). Drawing on her memory of Baby Suggs, who simply advised her to “[k]now it, and go on out the yard” (Morrison 288), Denver takes on the “job” of “protecting her mother from Beloved” (Morrison 286). It is her recounting of her mother's condition to Lady Jones and Janey Wagon that brings sustenance in terms of food and rescue in the form of the neighbourhood women led by Ella to the doorsteps of 124. By re-establishing connection with other people and developing relationships of her own, she comes to the “new” realization that she “[has] a self to look out for and preserve” (Morrison 297). In the

end, Denver transforms from the lonely and aloof girl into an independent “woman” (Morrison 292) and takes responsibility of herself and her mother. Susan Corey argues that Denver holds the promise of potential inter-racial healing (45). It is Denver who stops her mother from attacking Mr. Bodwin and thus puts an end to the past haunting the present. She begins working for the Bodwins and Miss Bodwin even plans to send her to Oberlin to attend school.

Beloved liberates Denver from her self-induced isolation and paves way for her (Denver) to march forth into an existence where future and happiness is possible. Denver's transformation is one of the most important instances of healing in the novel.

By forcing them to confront their repressed memories, Beloved makes Sethe, Denver and Paul D accept their past, and promotes a healing that enables them to live with their past's presence. During the ritual in which Beloved is exorcised, the women see her as “a pregnant woman.” (Morrison 308). Beloved embodies “the suffering and guilt of the past, but she also embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future, pregnant with possibilities” (Krumholz 115). In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison depicts a healing process through “the door of memory, even if that way entails a precarious balancing act between the danger of forgetting a past that should not be forgotten and of remembering a past that threatens to engulf the present” (Lawrence 244). Repression only festers the wounds left by traumatic past. Instead of avoiding or suppressing the past, one must confront the pain of the past till it can no longer hurt. This is possible by reconciling with the past through ‘rememory’: confronting repressed memories and overcoming them by making the past part of one's present. Only through ‘rememory’ can one put to rest the ghost of past and ensure healing. Along with the characters in the novel, the reader too partakes in a painful sojourn involving an emotional healing process which leaves him/her with a deeper sense of understanding about the depth of pain and shame the slaves suffered in slavery.

Works Cited

- Barnett, Pamela E. “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*”. *Modern Language Association*, vol. 112, no.3, 1997, pp. 418-27. *JSTOR*.
- Bowers, Susan. “Beloved and the New Apocalypse”. *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, edited by David L. Middleton, Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000, pp. 210-225.

- Corey, Susan. "Toward the Limits of Mystery: Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, edited by Marc C. Conner, University Press of Mississippi, 2000. pp. 31- 48.
- Hendersen, Mae G. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text". *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, edited by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, OUP, 1999, pp. 79-106.
- Holloway, Karla F. C. "*Beloved*: A Spiritual". *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, edited by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, OUP, 1999, pp. 67-78.
- Krumholz, Linda. "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, edited by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, OUP, 1999, pp. 107- 126.
- Lawrence, David. "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*". *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, edited by David L. Middleton, Garland, 1997, pp. 231- 246.
- McKay, Nellie Y. "Introduction". *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, edited by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, OUP, 1999, pp. 3-19.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2005.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. (1999). "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, edited by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, OUP, 1999, pp. 37-66.