

THE CAUSE-AND-EFFECT PRINCIPLE: OPACITY OF SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

When Toni Morrison embarked on her exploration of slavery, she grappled with two crucial inquiries. The first question delved into the resilience of her nation in enduring the unimaginable cruelties inflicted upon them. The second question probed the conspicuous absence of any mention in European historical records regarding the origins of the slave trade and the subsequent forced migration. The novel is a fearful picture of how bestiality and cruelty could come together to question the crude practices of sexual exploitation, emotional breakdown and physical torture in the name of developing the Western economy. The paper is an attempt to look at the circumstances that gave way to the genesis of one of the most important forerunners of slavery and its repercussions.

KEY WORDS: Slavery, Slave Narratives, Exploitation, Memory, Trauma

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* happens to be the fifth of her novels, and to date, this is the only work that is not only widely taught but also widely written about. When the novel had its publication run of close to one million copies, general readers, scholars, and critics alike commented that this would be one work that could stand as a formidable rival to her earlier novel, *Song of Solomon*. There had been a misconception about Morrison that she was more of an American writer when she tasted instant success by publishing four of her novels. The fifth proved to clear the decks when the readers realized the reality that she had written it to bring forth a profound hidden history which had been concealed about the African Americans about how slavery had been a subject of horrific and harrowing experiences which the shipped enslaved people at the Transatlantic, the ship which carried them, had encountered and endured. *A Bench by the Road* is a kind of memorial, a lasting tribute to those enslaved people who had to live as well as die a life of suffering for having been born black as well as an enslaved person. The novel gained such remarkable acclaim that it was included in the *Black Book*, a collection showcasing the works of numerous Black writers. Toni Morrison herself acknowledged that the true understanding of her writings comes from empathizing with Black women who have faced multiple layers of oppression, both for being women and for being born into slavery. The quote below from Toni Morrison: *A Case Book* by William Andrews includes what Morrison felt about colour segregation.

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presence of or recollect the absence of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or a wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There is no 300-foot tower. There is no small bench by the road, not even a tree scored. An initial that you can visit, or I can visit in Charleston or Savannah. (2)

Morrison had lived in a close-knit family of three generations living together under one roof. It was habitual for her to listen to stories that discussed horror, ghost experiences, tales of animals, and moralistic stories told to her by her large family. She used these cues to construct her novels later in time. *Beloved* offers a profound lament, a horrendous reminder of how traumatic the lives of slaves were soon after the American Civil War, which debated about keeping slaves or declaring their states as free states. Therefore, the novel serves as a historical reminder of the historic victory the Black people achieved in keeping their past alive. *Beloved* sounds more like a memoir, but it is indeed a memory novel that reminds us of the brutal killing of the daughters of Margaret Garner, the woman who felt it was better to die than live life as a slave.

There have been many glorifications of motherhood. Many myths and stories have always shown mothers as embodiments of love and sacrifice. Margaret Garner had a different story to offer. She decided to prove her motherhood by killing three of her daughters to prove her motherhood by killing three of her daughters. She believed

it was better for them to die than to endure the suffering and enslavement at the hands of plantation owners. Garner is reported to have slit the throats of her daughters, a horrific act reflecting the complex emotions she felt in trying to protect them from a life of torment. She killed them all because she did not want them to carry her legacy of being a slave. At the very same time, the killing is a reminder of how cruel slavery could be and how much she hated the ill-treatment at the plantation houses.

All the folksongs, poetry, fables and stories had a big void. There was never a mention of the darkest periods of history that spoke about collective anguish and the excruciating pain of being taken across America in slave ships to work long hours as slaves. Through *Beloved*, Morrison tries to infuse the lost and often unspoken history of the past that never saw the light of the day. As a writer, she wanted to write a story with horror elements. The word horror is ambivalent and ambiguous because she has tried to weave a story about a ghost that tries to return home after its killing, and the other meaning for the word horror is the writer's attempts to present the horrors of slavery to the general public through literature.

Childhood is one of the essential facets in the lives of all and sundry, but this particular period becomes hopelessly fragile, especially in the lives of black women. *Beloved* was just two years old when her throat was slit, and before the mother could kill the rest of her children, the enslaver arrived and took them all away. Motherhood is a precious gift granted to women, yet it ironically becomes a source of pain in this context. A woman, unable to have children with just one partner due to her circumstances, ends up with multiple children, each fathered by a different man.

Moreover, sex is never consensual, for it is most often a rape, and hence one cannot expect her to have feelings of love and affection towards her child. Most of the children born are either malnourished or deformed because pregnant women were neither given proper food nor the space to rest. They had to be at the beck and call of their masters. The novelist has outlined all these problems to remove the tarnished image of why a mother had to kill her child even before it reached a stage to enjoy being a child. The novel is set ten years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation Treaty that laid the foundations for abolishing such inhumane acts. The quote below is an excerpt from the declaration signed by Lincoln, which was taken from *The Law of Justice*, which Lincoln authored himself.

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, all persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state, the people whereof shall be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then thenceforth and forever free and the executive government of the United States, the military and the naval authority will thereof will maintain and recognize the freedom of such persons and will not act to repress such persons.

Morrison initially did not want the book to be a work of horror and history combined. She wanted the novel to draw a parallel to the news reporting even after the signing of the treaty to ban slavery. She wanted to give the sufferings of the day-to-day lives of slaves who worked across plantations rather than providing an overall perspective on the lives of slaves in the U.S. The moral aspects of the killings and the empathetic rhetoric had to be covered up, and hence, Morrison made the novel striking as well as interrogating the roots of enslavement. The very beginning of the novel is heinous because she talks about *The Blue Stone House*, which initially had no number. After all, Ohio had only seventy districts, and these places did not perforate geographically. The number 124 was given at a later point in time when the abolitionists had protested this practice of dehumanization. The beginning of the novel talks about being spiteful, which is the imminent vengeance, and the anger is seen through the actions of a spirit who wants to wreak revenge and seek justice for its killing.

Sethe, the protagonist of the novel and her daughter Denver, the last survivors, had been the victims of the killing. The novel shifts between the past and the present; hence, the narration is more fragmented and reliant on memory. One of the things which the novel mention at the very beginning is the act of juxtaposing the past with the present. Sethe was the luckiest of the women in the vicinity because she knew who her husband was, and she had the privilege of bearing four children with the same man. This is a foil to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who does not remember her past or present, for both had been painful and seemed to have no difference between them. Sethe's mother was hanged when she was born, and hence she had no chance of meeting her while Suggs's husband had deserted her at a very early stage, and the children born to her did not know their father, nor did she know how many people had raped her. She is seen lying in the death bed, trying to remember the events of her life in vain.

There are two different versions of escape given in the novel. The first is leaving their house with the boys, two of whom decided to take care of themselves once they reached the appropriate age to be self-reliant. Morrison wanted to make the story credible, which is one reason she made the ghost more vengeful. She was certain that none of her novels would beat the same storyline, but this was the toughest because she had to write a historic novel with elements of magic realism. Making the novel ghost-ridden was the most challenging aspect, requiring the author to convincingly portray the existence of ghosts to lend credibility to the story. She aimed to persuade both herself and her readers of the reality of ghosts, leveraging the widespread global belief in their existence. This time, this ghost was different; *Beloved* served as an exorcist to drive the fears of the past away from the victims of being made to work as slaves or slave survivors. Morrison says the novel would be more relatable to those who have been through this traumatic experience. The quote below gives a brief idea about how beloved behaved hysterically to emphasize her presence and, at the same time, expose the pangs in the institution of slavery.

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way but by the year 1873, Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother Baby Suggs was dead and the sons Howard and Buglar had run away by the time they were thirteen years old. (1)

Morrison's narrative is much concealed, and she is the kind of novelist who does not indicate how her novels should be read and understood. *Beloved* is one novel that broke the thumb rule because she had written an essay titled. "The Site of Memory" which has clear guidelines as to how her work needs to be inferred. To her, the slave narratives were the bedrock of African American literature, so she wanted to rest her forte in them. More than that, she has argued at length that the history of the West speaks about the age of enlightenment, where human beings were equated to reason, and this very reason was derived from education. Both these values were forbidden for the slaves, and more than that, the law was lopsided for them because it never did help to put into practice what Lincoln had decided to implement. The novel looks at the failed promise of Lincoln and how slavery could still make people succumb to their worst psychological fears at the very thought of it.

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