



## The Multiple Voices and the Mellowing Mediation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison is a legend of African-American Fiction. She was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American to win this honor. Her novels develop a literary view of Black American experience that is both fabulistic and realistic. Her writings have been praised universally by many eminent scholars and critics. Whether it is fiction or non-fiction Morrison focuses on a wide variety of themes like race, class and gender, individual and community, history and culture. Morrison's stories are conscious of African cultural heritage as well as African-American history. That's why the Nobel Committee called her "A literary artist of the first rank. Toni Morrison dedicated her fifth novel *Beloved*, to the sixty million Africans who some historians believed, died during the middle passage to North and South America and the Caribbean.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's daughter returns from the grave after twenty years, seeking revenge for her death. Through the use of flashbacks, fragmented narration, and myth, Morrison details the event that led to the crime and her refusal to seek expiation from the black community. The search to find narrative methods that resist the totalising impulse of narrative and of readers themselves, is a central aspect of Morrison's fictional technique, and is certainly connected to her investment in an oral, African-American tradition of storytelling

*Beloved* marks the height of Morrison's achievement, for it is a narrative that resists closure in numerous ways. Morrison's writing is also characterised by its unique way of dealing with narrative. In Morrison's writing, this contrapuntal structure dominates the novel and appears as a device that mediates speech and narrative, the visual and the cognitive, and time and space. Mediation such as the contrapuntal interplay sustains the text and rescues it from formlessness. Even when the narrative structure, for example, dissolves into the eddying recollection of *Beloved*'s memory, the text survives and the reader, almost drowning in the sheer weight of her overwhelmingly tactile recollection, survives this immersion into text because of Morrison's comforting mediation

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Toni Morrison has written eleven novels, a collection of essays and lectures. Her writings have been translated into more than twenty languages in the world. Her novels namely 1.The Bluest Eye (1970), 2. Sula (1973), 3. Song of Soloman (1977), 4. Tar Baby (1981),5. *Beloved* (1987), 6. Jazz (1992), 7. Paradise (1997), 8. Love (2003), 9. A Mercy (2008), 10. Home (2012), and 11<sup>th</sup> novel The God Help The Child(2015). All these novels are very famous in the world of literature. Among these novels, Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* is a unique one which brought popularity to Toni Morrison and won many honors to her. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a most famous, celebrated and studied novel. It received almost universal praise and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize (1988), the Robert F. Kennedy award and the Frederic

G. Melcher Book Award. In 2006, the New York Times Book Review named *Beloved* the best American novel of the past 25 years.

Morrison's *Beloved* is a remarkable novel, which deals with slavery and also illustrates the problems and emotions of all human beings. *The Los Angeles Times* called the novel a "master work" that should be kept "on the highest shelf in American literature". Morrison dedicated her *Beloved* novel, to the sixty million Africans who some historians believed, died during the middle passage to North and South America and the Caribbean. Her novels explore issues of African-American female identity in stories that integrate elements of the oral traditions, post-modern literary techniques, and magical realism to give a narrative voice to the experiences of women living on the margins of the white American society. Discussing the scope of her novel, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison stated:

When I say that *Beloved* is not about slavery, I mean that the story is not about slavery... I deal with five years of terror in a pathological society, living in a bedlam where nothing makes sense. . . . But these people are living in that situation and they are trying desperately to be parents, husbands and a mother with children (1989: 194).

*Beloved* novel is set after the end of the civil war, during the period of so-called reconstruction, when a great deal of random violence was let loose upon blacks, both the slaves freed by Emancipation and others who had been given or had bought their freedom earlier. But there are flashbacks to a more distant period, when slavery was still an ongoing concern in the South, where the seeds for the bizarre and calamitous events of the novel were sown. The setting is similarly divided: the countryside near Cincinnati, where the central characters have ended up, and a slave holding plantation in Kentucky, ironically named Sweet Home, from which they fled eighteen years before the novel opens. There are many stories and narrative voices in this novel, but the central one belongs to Sethe, a woman in her mid-30s, who is living in an Ohio farmhouse with her daughter, Denver, and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs. *Beloved* is such a unified novel that it's difficult to discuss it without giving away the plot.

*Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her daughter in a desperate bid to save her from the misery and indignity of slavery. But it must be said at the outset that it is, among other things, a ghost story, for the farmhouse is also home to a sad, malicious and angry ghost, the spirit of Sethe's baby daughter, who had her throat cut under appalling circumstances eighteen years before, when she was two. We never know this child's full name, but we – and Sethe – think of her as *Beloved*, because that is what is on her tombstone. Sethe wanted "Dearly *Beloved*," from the funeral service, but had only enough strength to pay for one word. The payment was ten minutes of sex with the tombstone engraver. This act, which is recounted early in the novel, is a keynote for the whole book: in the world of slavery and poverty where human beings are merchandise, everything has its price, and the price is tyrannical.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's daughter returns from the grave after twenty years, seeking revenge for her death. Through the use of flashbacks, fragmented narration, and myth, Morrison details the event that led to the crime and her refusal to seek expiation from the black community. The search to find narrative methods that resist the totalising impulse of narrative and of readers themselves, is a central aspect of Morrison's fictional technique, and is certainly connected to her investment in an oral, African-American tradition of storytelling. *Beloved* marks the height of Morrison's achievement, for it is a narrative that resists closure in numerous ways. Morrison's writing is also characterised by its unique way of dealing with narrative. Instead of using straightforward narration on clear chronology, Morrison plays with the order of scenes and the ways in which narration is presented. The narrator may change frequently, or the narrator may be separate from the person through which agency the reader is currently viewing the action. The narrative in Morrison's work is also not always realistic. Morrison incorporates elements of myth, legend, passion, obsession, superstition, religion, and the supernatural. Though she rejects the label of magical realism because it denies a clear cultural influence, many aspects of her novels are characterised by elements of fantasy. Her stories are gripping, emotional and often based on the oral traditions of the Black American folk narratives. So, in her works, we can re-discover the history of African Americans and their cultural roots.

Hence, the events are not explained in a linear method. But it is explained through several voices which are characters of the plot; each character explains the story through his/her perspective. Among them the major narrative voices are Sethe (mother of Denver), Denver, *Beloved* and finally Paul

D. Therefore, the multiplicity of voices can be noticed by various kinds of language and discourse. They can be easily recognised. Here are the opening sentences:

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 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—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard) (3).

Here Sethe and Denver are the central characters and Baby Suggs is the most memorable minor character. Sethe, the protagonist, was born in South, of an African mother she never knew. When she was thirteen, she was sold to Garners, who own Sweet Home and practiced a comparatively benevolent kind of slavery. There the other slaves, who are all men, lust after her but never touch her. Their names are Sixo, Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, and Halle. Sethe chooses to marry Halle, apparently in part because he has proven himself to be generous enough to buy his mother's freedom by hiring himself out on the weekends. Together, Sethe and Halle have two sons, Howard and Buglar, as well as a baby daughter whose name we never learnt. When she leaves Sweet Home, Sethe is also pregnant with the fourth child. After the eventual death of the proprietor, Mr. Garner, the widowed woman, Mrs. Garner asks her sadistic vehemently racist, brother-in-law to help her to run the farm. He is known to the slaves as Schoolteacher, and his oppressive presence makes life on the plantation even more unbearable than it had been before.

Because of gross mistreatment, a number of the Sweet Home slaves plan to escape. However, Schoolteacher and his nephews anticipate the slave's escape, and capture Paul D and Sixo. Schoolteacher kills Sixo and brings Paul D back to Sweet Home; where Paul D sees Sethe for what he believes will be the last time. She is still intent on running, having already sent her children ahead, to her mother-in-law Baby Sugg's house in Cincinnati. Invigorated by the recent capture, Schoolteacher's nephews seize Sethe in the barn and violate her, stealing the milk her body is storing for her infant daughter. Without the knowledge of Sethe, Halle is watching the event from a loft above her where he lies frozen with horror. Afterwards, Halle goes mad, Paul D sees him sitting by the churn with butter slathered all over his face. Paul D meanwhile, is forced to suffer the indignity of wearing an iron bit in his mouth.

When Schoolteacher finds out that Sethe has reported his and his nephew's misdeeds to Mrs. Garner, he whips her severely and despite the fact that she is pregnant. Swollen and scarred, Sethe nevertheless runs away, but along the way she collapses from exhaustion in a forest. A white girl, Amy Denver, finds her and nurses her back to health. When Amy later helps Sethe deliver her baby in a boat, Sethe names this second daughter as Denver after the white girl who helped her. Sethe receives further help from Stamp Paid, who rows her across the Ohio River to Baby Sugg's house. Baby Suggs cleans Sethe up before allowing her to see her older children

Sethe spends twenty eight wonderful days in Cincinnati, where Baby Suggs serves as an "unofficial preacher", she preaches to her fellow blacks that they must learn to love themselves in a world where no one else does. On the last day, however, Schoolteacher comes for Sethe to take her and children back to Sweet Home. Rather than surrender her children to a life of dehumanised slavery, she flees with them to the woodshed and tries to kill them. Only the third child, her older daughter, dies, her throat having been cut with a handsaw by Sethe. Sethe later arranges for the baby's headstone to be carved with the word, "Beloved". The sheriff takes Sethe and Denver to jail, but a group of white abolitionists, led by the Bodwins, fight for her release. Sethe returns to the house at 124 Bluestone Road, where Baby Suggs has sunk into a deep depression. The community shuns the house and the family continues to live in isolation.

Meanwhile, Paul D has endured torturous experiences in chain gang in Georgia, where he was sent, after trying to kill Brandywine, a slave owner to whom he was sold by Schoolteacher. His traumatic experiences have caused him to lock away his memories and emotions, and ability to love in the "tin tobacco box" of his heart. One day, a fortuitous rain storm allows Paul D and the chain gang members to escape. He travels northward by following the blossoming spring flowers. Years later, he ends up on Sethe's porch in Cincinnati.

Paul D's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road commences the series of events taking place in the present time frame. Prior to moving in, Paul D chases the house's resident ghost away, which makes the already lonely Denver resent him. From the start Sethe and Paul D look forward to a promising future

together, until a day, on their way home from a carnival, they encounter a strange young woman sleeping near the steps of 124 Bluestone Road. Most of the characters believe that the woman who calls herself Beloved is the embodied spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, and the novel provides a wealth of evidence supporting this interpretation. Denver develops an obsessive attachment to Beloved, and Beloved's attachment to Sethe is equal if no more intense. Paul D and Beloved hate each other, and Beloved controls Paul D by moving him around the house like a rag doll and by seducing him against his will.

When Paul D learns the story of Sethe's "rough choice" – her infanticide, he leaves 124 Bluestone Road and begins sleeping in the basement of the local church. In the absence of Paul D, Sethe and Beloved's relationship becomes more intense and exclusive. Beloved grows increasingly abusive, manipulative, and parasitic, and Sethe is obsessed with satisfying Beloved's demands and making her understand why she murdered her. Worried by the way her mother is wasting away, Denver leaves the premises of 124 Bluestone Road for the first time in twelve years in order to seek help from Lady Jones, her former teacher.

The community provides the family with food and eventually organises under the leadership of Ella, a woman who had worked on the underground rail road and helped Seth's escape, to exorcise Beloved from 124 Bluestone Road when they arrive at Sethe's house. They see Sethe on the porch with Beloved, who stands smiling at them, naked and pregnant. Mr. Bodwin, who has come to 124 Bluestone Road to take Denver to her new job, arrives at the house. Mistaking him for Schoolteacher, Sethe runs at Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick. She is restrained, but in the confusion Beloved disappears, never to return. Afterward, Paul D comes back to Sethe, who in turn has retreated to Baby Sugg's bed to die. Mourning Beloved, Sethe laments, "She was my best thing". But Paul D replies, "You your best thing Sethe" (322).

The novel then ends with a warning that "[t]his is not a story to pass on". The town, and even the residents of 124 Bluestone Road, have forgotten Beloved "like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep" (324). Like the litany of repetition that is a consistent narrative device in black women's literature, these closing phrases of the novel echo between the seeming contradiction of the initial "it was / this is not . . ." and the final words "pass on". The phrase becomes a directive. Its message reveals that this was not a story to die. Morrison revisions "pass on," inverting it to mean "go on through . . . continue . . . tell" (324). She privileges the consequences of the sustained echo and in this way forces the sounds of these words (orature) to contradict the appearance of the visual (literate) text. Morrison has "passed on" this story in defiance of those who would diminish the experience she voices back into presence.

In Morrison's writing, this contrapuntal structure dominates the novel and appears as a device that mediates speech and narrative, the visual and the cognitive, and time and space. Mediation such as the contrapuntal interplay sustains the text and rescues it from formlessness. Even when the narrative structure, for example, dissolves into the eddying recollection of Beloved's memory, the text survives and the reader, almost drowning in the sheer weight of her overwhelmingly tactile recollection, survives this immersion into text because of Morrison's comforting mediation. Here it's good to remember the words said by Alice Walker, another great African- American writer about Toni Morrison, when she was given the Nobel Prize:

No one writes more beautifully than Toni Morrison. She has consistently explored issues of true complexity and terror and love in the lives of blacks. Harsh criticism has not dissuaded her. Prizes have not trapped her. She is a writer who deserves this honor (14).

According to Morrison, her characters go through difficult circumstances. But by adhering to their true self and identity, they are able to shape their lives. By the end of her novels, as Morrison said, "People always know something profound and wonderful" (9).

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