

Tony Morrison's Concern towards Historical Consciousness in "*Beloved*"

Dr.R.Meghana Rao¹

Assistant Professor of English

KU College of engineering and technology, Warangal

Mahammad Azam²

Research scholar Department of English Kakatiya University Warangal, Telangana, India

Abstract

This article examines Toni Morrison's concern for the history of slavery and its influence on the race that has been victimised by it, with a focus on her novel *Beloved*. The importance of historical understanding is highlighted. To demonstrate this, the researcher looked at the link between history and literature, relying mostly on the notion of history as a meeting point of the actual and fictional worlds. The second objective is to examine slave tales as both historical records and fictional works, in order to demonstrate how the representation of slave women in these narratives contributed to the formation of a negative image of slave women in literature and in life. Finally, all of these concepts demonstrate Morrison's particular talent in resurrecting the voice of the black woman, both in writing and in reality.

Keywords: History, Historical Consciousness, Slavery, Black Voice

Introduction

Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, catapulted her to the forefront of conversations about the position of the black woman in current political, intellectual, and literary American society. Her career, which has been marked by both humiliation and success, demonstrates her ability to uncover the social consequences of being a black woman and her mastery of the literary language. Her work also demonstrates the significance of the black imagination in the development of African-American and American literature. However, the honours she has received throughout her career are a result of a national awareness of black people's artistic creation, as well as her tremendous ability to translate the inner, personal, and communal lives of black people into words and images. This understanding began with the 1960s Black Liberation Movement and feminist studies. Despite the fact that none of these books included the black female as a subject of study, they were a source of inspiration for those working to change the position of black people in general, and the black woman in particular, in literature and society.

The Black Woman Writer Behind the Work

Morrison uses history and magic to portray black women, particularly in the context of motherhood under slavery, and to demonstrate how she gets a profound sense of female identity via this representation. Literature, for Morrison, is a method of clarifying and nourishing roles that have been clouded in the past. Although her major goal is to free the oppressed black woman in literature and in reality, she also stresses the community's and the black man's roles in this rescue, demonstrating how community, male and female, complement each other in the search for identity. In her works, the strength of community and the search for identity are recurring themes.

Tony Morrison is widely regarded as one of the most important characters in modern African-American literature. Since the release of her debut book, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970, her career as a writer has taken a significant turn. It seems that American literary criticism at the time was not yet ready to embrace a black woman writer as someone worth reading.

Morrison's acclaim did not come easy. Her first book was written in the evenings, while her children slept. As the only provider for her family, she spent her days in Syracuse as a textbook editor. Her debut book received little notice from literary reviewers, despite the fact that it held seeds of what was to come. With the release of two more books, *Sula* in 1974 and *Song of Solomon* in 1977, she garnered increased attention and established herself as a well-known novelist. In 1981, with *Tar Baby*, she became the first African American woman to appear on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine since Zora Neale Hurston in 1943. Morrison planned to create a trilogy on many forms of love with *Beloved*, which was released in 1987. She focuses on the nature of mother love and the American preoccupation with ownership, which dates all the way back to slavery, in this book. *Jazz*, released in 1991, and *Paradise*, published in 1998, complete the trilogy. She also authored a play, *Dreaming Emmett*, which premiered in 1986 in New York.

Beloved, released in 1987, cemented her position in American Literature. She received many prizes including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for its release. Complete recognition came in 1993, when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Of all her books, *Beloved* has garnered the most literary attention, demonstrating that Morrison reached a stage when she aided in the consolidation of African-American Literature in the academic and literary world. However, she is not just a literary figure. Morrison rose to prominence as a symbol of Afro-American women, a spokesman for the black community's yearning for freedom and fight against injustice.

Her Concern Towards Historical Consciousness

Morrison views literature as more than a matter of beauty and imagination; it is also a potent vehicle for addressing social and political issues affecting both the individual and the society, as she puts it:

If anything, I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write), isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfils only the obligation of my personal dreams - which is to say yes, the work must be political.... It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. (Apud Gates Jr. and McKay 2094)

This powerful connection between her work and the social, political, and aesthetically beautiful aspects necessitates a profound emotional engagement between writer and reader. In reality, her work anticipates, even requires, participatory reading, not just because it is political, but also because her language leaves certain gaps and places for the reader to enter.

Despite the efforts we as readers must do to fill in the gaps left by Morrison's language, it seems that Morrison succeeds in her job as measured by her success and popularity among readers. Participating in the creation of a text, as Morrison encourages us to do, is a complicated connection between reader and writer. Because it requires both emotional and intellectual work, entering a text makes us feel vulnerable and nervous. Despite the fact that we are often permitted to share the omniscient narrator's knowledge in Morrison's books, we are also encouraged to engage dialogically with the major characters in her stories.

Morrison is very proud of her ancestors. Black music, black language, black mythology, and black folk rites influenced her early existence, all of which were reflected in her childhood stories and songs. Morrison combines the richness of her own heritage, with its use of magic, enchantment, and rhythmic repetition, with the qualities of Western classical tales she studied during her academic career.

A Historical Account as the Source of Beloved

Deborah Horvitz writes in a critical article on *Beloved*, "the book is sufficiently anchored in historical fact that it might be utilized to teach American history courses" (157). Many critics who engage with Morrison's book, like Horvitz, interpret or examine it in terms of the connection between a historical event in the United States, namely the time of slavery, and its creative legacy. This is not to say that *Beloved* should be regarded a historical book; it isn't. A book set in the past "It may contain both fictitious and actual people, and it places its events and characters in a well-defined historical framework. It is characterised (in its most reputable versions) by a convincing comprehensive depiction of the customs, buildings, institutions, and landscape of its selected location, as well as a general effort to create a feeling of historical verisimilitude." (Hawthorn 16)

Morrison did not write *Beloved* with a dedication to historical accuracy in mind. In reality, she discovered the inspiration for the book while editing *The Black Book* and came across bits of an old newspaper article about a black mother who murdered her daughter to save her family from being deported back to slavery. Margaret Garner, a black woman, fled her master with her four children (the eldest a five-year-old boy, the smallest a breast-feeding baby), her husband Robert, and his parents. They were apprehended at a friend's home in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the tragedy occurred. Margaret Garner put a shovel to her three-year-old daughter's neck and attempted unsuccessfully to murder the other two boys when she spotted her master and her husband's master with a posse of police and knew they would be caught. Margaret Garner was imprisoned, then tried, then returned to her owner. Nobody knows for sure what occurred following the trial. Some claim she drowned along with her youngest daughter while returning to her lord across the Ohio River.

Although *Beloved* is set in a specific historical setting and is based on the actual lives and tragedies of African slaves, particularly Margaret Garner, her children, and her husband, the focus is not on what occurred in their nameless lives. Instead, as Morrison argues, it is necessary to engage with the act's purpose and consequences as a means to stay in touch with one's ancestors in order to discover one's own identity. This capacity to connect with the past, with forebears, is mainly dependent on the ability to reconstruct memories. The objective is to concentrate on how it looked and why it appeared that way. *Beloved*, unlike a historical book, does not strive for historical accuracy but instead draws on black people's collective memory of their history.

Despite the fact that literature and cinema use distinct media, Jameson's three points may be applied to *Beloved*. Slavery in the South, the Underground Railroad, the Middle Passage, Abolitionism in the North, and the position accorded to black people are all discussed in Morrison's book. Second, *Beloved* demonstrates the distinctiveness of visual impressions, particularly in regard to the white guy, who is referred to as "man without skin," and the novel's absence of colour. Third, *Beloved* focuses on the violent actions perpetrated against black people during and after slavery, extending physical suffering to reach unimaginable degrees of psychological and societal harm. Although no studies have been conducted to determine whether there is a link between violent historical periods and the use of magic realism in literature that originated in or refers to those periods, one could conclude from Jameson's analysis that certain historical moments and events are so irrational that only resorting to magic and the supernatural appears to provide a fair account. As Wyatt notices, *Beloved* assumes a double role:

On the personal level, *Beloved* is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in *Beloved*, the ghost

represents-as the generic name Beloved suggests-all the loved ones lost through slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the slave ships. (479)

Beloved gives an account of this experience, dislocating historical linear barriers of time and space:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it if we had more to drink we could make tears we cannot make sweat or morning water so the men without skin bring us theirs in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men. (210)

Morrison links Beloved to the "Sixty Million and More" in the novel's epigraph by comparing her to a slave ship passenger: "I see the black face that is going to grin at me, it is my dark face that is going to smile at me, the iron circle is around her neck... she goes in the sea with my face" (212). Morrison enlarges the meaning of loss and hunger by extending the conflation of Beloved's and the woman's faces to Sethe's own face when Beloved says:

When I open my eyes after the sun has gone down, I see the face I've lost. Sethe's is the face that has left me. Sethe notices me and I see her grin; her happy face is the spot for me; it is the face I've lost. (Beloved 213)

Beloved, who returns to life as a ghost is a figure with roots in Africa, linked to memories of 136 slave catchers kidnapping her mother and other black people and transporting them to America on slave ships. One way for black people to reclaim their identity is to rewrite their past in history, which Morrison attempts to accomplish in her book. To make it more powerful, Morrison goes even farther and imagines a journey in the collective consciousness of black people that has never been written about: the Middle Passage, the trip aboard a slave ship that crossed the Atlantic carrying captives from Africa.

Conclusion

Beloved also symbolizes the importance of the past in the present's structure. The characters' current circumstances are influenced by their previous experiences. The tale emphasises the need of recovering African-American people's unwritten history and confronting it in its entirety. However, it also implies that we must avoid becoming helpless victims of it. We must not let the past to take precedence over the present, or we will become

a teetering Sethe smothered by a pregnant Beloved. Instead, we must understand the past in order to understand how to alter the present. Maybe we could take a page from Denver's book. She'd had a close relationship with the past, but when she realised that Beloved was slowly consuming her mother, that Sethe, not Beloved, was in need of protection, and that the three of them were on the verge of being swallowed by the gliosis of the past, she decided it was time to put a stop to it and find a way to change it.

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