

## **Will-to-forget and Need-to-remember: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as 'not a story to pass on'**

**Dr. Manisha Patil**

*The past is not something to be escaped, avoided or controlled...  
the past is something with which we must come to terms and  
such a confrontation involves an acknowledgment of limitation  
as well as power.<sup>1</sup>*

As it is well known *Beloved* is inspired by the true historical account of Margaret Garner. In January 1856, Margaret Garner escaped from her owner Archibald K. Gaines of Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River, and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. She was pursued by Gaines and a posse of officers. They surrounded the house where she, her husband Robert and their four children lived. At this moment, Margaret Garner seized a butcher's knife lying on the table and with one stroke cut the throat of her baby daughter. Margaret Garner chose death over return to the slavery where her children, like herself, would suffer institutionalized dehumanization. However Morrison claims, '...*Beloved* is not about slavery as an institution, it is about those anonymous people called slaves.'<sup>2</sup>

It is a neo-slave narrative which unlike the old slave narratives does not exercise a willed omission of trauma as a defense mechanism against humiliating memories of slavery but instead uses strategic silences to disrupt the very forces of cultural hegemony and assimilation which forcefully silence the expression of trauma. Historically speaking, at the time of *Beloved's* publication (and even today), there was (is) an all pervading American national amnesia about the disturbing history of slavery as whites did not like to acknowledge their barbarism, and blacks were so overwhelmed by the dehumanization, humiliation and shame brought upon them by the slavery that they tried to force forgetting into a willed activity. But as Morrison herself claims 'it is not a story to pass on' meaning both 'a story to forget' and 'a story to repeat', this story must be remembered so that it is not repeated again in the future.

The major action of the novel is suspended between memory and amnesia. The trauma of slavery is so painful that remembering it can renew all the suffering. So the safe way is to forget it. But even this forgetting is not easy. Even though one wills to forget, one cannot forget because memory is not governed by will. Rather memory has its own will. Some things go; they pass on. Others just remain, on their own. Yet memory of any particular thing is not always the same. Memory by nature is unstable, rambling and changing. Imagination is its integral part. It is not an objective, photographic record of facts but a subjective and emotive re-creation of an experience. Every time you remember a particular thing, it has a different shade of color because the current state of mind inevitably affects the selection and re-creation of that particular memory.

Sethe is the main figure in the novel that both resists and governs memory. Combining verb and noun, she creates her own term *rememory* to refer to her reminiscences of past. ‘The prefix [re] suggests the idea of memory as always already re-created: that memory is never a stable, singular calling up of the past, but rather a partially invented, subjectively selected narrative of that past. The phrase *my rememory* makes explicit a modernist foregrounding of memory as emphatically subjective and unstable.’<sup>3</sup> Sethe ponders how despite the brutality at Sweet Home, what she remembers is its ‘shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too.’ (7) She is also perplexed by the fact that her memory of her sons is fast fading but the events which took place eighteen years ago—picture of Sweet Home, Schoolteacher, his nephews, their stealing of Sethe’s milk, Sethe’s plan to run away, her actual escape, her blessed life for twenty-eight unslaved days before setting in the tragedy, slave catchers’ return and finally her murdering of her ‘crawling already?’ baby daughter, followed by her prostituting with the engraver to get the word *Beloved* engraved on the baby’s headstone—each and every detail of those events are as fresh as if they had happened just yesterday.

These memories are threatening to Sethe because they are evidences of her italics as an object. The central episode in the novel—the murder of Beloved—is also at the center of Sethe’s memory which she both wants to forget and needs to remember because its moral ambiguity is at the heart of deciding her object/subject status and her animality/humanity. This event is too horrific to narrate directly. As a result, even though it is the nerve center of the novel, it explicitly comes to the surface only at the end of Part One, and that too through three separate perspectives.

The first perspective is that the alien white perspective that focuses on the so-called *objective* factual details (*what, when and where*) and thereby *objectifies* Sethe. This incident instantly hit the newspaper because it was ‘out of the ordinary—something white people would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps.’ (183) A mother killing her own child was not only horrific but also *interesting* from a white perspective because it reinforced their notion of black barbarity: ‘All the testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred.’ (177)

This newspaper clipping Stamp Paid shows to Paul D and — the resulting musings become the second version. He compares Sethe to a hawk, in the same fashion as Schoolteacher compared her to a horse. However, Stamp’s account is a little more sympathetic as it takes into account the circumstances (slave catchers’ sudden arrival and betrayal by the black community) leading to the murder. Yet as it is an onlooker’s perspective. Ultimately, it is Sethe who explains *why* she did it.

“I stopped him”, she said, starring at the place where the fence used to be. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.”  
(193)

Sethe’s narrative strongly counters ‘the dominant metaphors of the master(’s) narrative—wildness, cannibalism, animality, destructiveness. In radical opposition to these constructions is Sethe’s re-conceptualized

metaphor of self based on motherhood, motherliness and mother-love.’<sup>4</sup> Her purpose is undoubtedly to protect and not to kill, and her motivation is obviously her ‘too thick’ mother-love. When she is cornered by both whites and blacks and is pushed to the limit, she takes her destiny in her own hands and ‘wards off both transgressors, the one by seeming to confirm the master narrative, the other by transgressing the infanticide taboo.’<sup>5</sup> While both white and black perspectives condemn her action as madness and sin respectively, Sethe’s perspective suggests a radically different interpretation: ‘Sethe’s “rememory” of the act shows its distance from madness, its proximity to agency. Sethe is a thinking subject who acts and uses reason to form what appears to her a logically and rationally determined resolution to kill/save her children... the immorality implicit in her infanticide lay with the slave system, not with the slave mother... It was not madness but the reality of slavery that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality as well as its compassion.’<sup>6</sup>

However, one should not forget that all the three versions including Sethe’s are selective in their approach. However she might justify the murder, she does know that she has done a wrong thing with a right purpose. Killing was not saving because it destroyed the very thing it wanted to preserve. And although it restored agency to Sethe, it further marginalized the baby. Kathleen Marks rightly says, ‘If Sethe’s furious baby has a soul, then the possibility also exists that she may have preferred to live even an enslaved life, anything but this half-life in her mother’s tomb of a mind.’<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the haunting of *Beloved* which starts the novel and continues till the end and even thereafter, suggests that *Beloved* wanted to live at any cost. Even Sethe wants her to be alive and when she actually appears in flesh and blood, Sethe is ready to sacrifice herself for her *Beloved*. James Phelan points out that Sethe’s *will-to-forget* is the main driving force of the novel’s action: ‘Morrison identifies Sethe’s habit of “beating back the past”, her efforts to repress the events of 1855 as both impossible and dangerous; the consequence of this move is to increase the pressure on the revelation of those events—Sethe’s future will be determined by what happens when she faces rather than beats back that past.’<sup>8</sup>

Paul D's arrival starts the process of *re-membering*. He drives out the baby ghost and makes Beloved reappear in human form. 'A fully dressed woman walked out of the water.' (60) Until now, by willing not to remember the details of baby's murder and by considering the ghost as a living member of her household, Sethe tried to negate her violent action. Beloved's return in the flesh seems to fulfill Sethe's desire and negate her *will-to-forget*; furthermore paradoxically it allows Sethe to *re-member* her violent action, its cause and effect. In symbolic terms, water stands for the unconscious mind. Beloved's emerging from the water and that too '*fully dressed*' refers to Sethe's veiled memories which are now gradually coming to the surface. Though Beloved appears to be around nineteen or twenty years old (her actual age at present if she had lived), her behavior is like that of a two year old child (the age at which she lost her life). Beloved also displays open, quiet devotion to Sethe which flatters her. Beloved further engages Sethe's attention by asking her questions about her past life. 'Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from story telling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost... But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself or her thrust for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure.' (69) Thus Beloved compels Sethe to confront her repressed memories and come to terms with them.

No sooner does Sethe understand the real identity of Beloved than she allows Beloved to claim her and take over totally. However with Beloved in power, death rules over threatening the life of both Sethe & Denver. Hinson D. Scot writes, 'Beloved is the manifestation of the past's demands on the present, its desire to usurp the present and to deny Sethe and Denver and the entire community their right to live in the present.'<sup>9</sup>

The Sethe-Beloved relationship also has overtones of the Abiku/Ogbanje myth. It is a Pan-African metaphysical idea (called 'Abiku' in Yoruba and 'Ogbanje' in Igbo) whereby a spirit child caught into an infinite cycle of

birth, death and rebirth, is born to the same mother again and again to play a tug-of-war of both power and love with her. An Abiku child simultaneously resides in the world of the living and the spirit world. With its repeated deaths, it is a reminder of mortality. Yet with its ageless and timeless state and compression of all the past lives in the present life, it is immortal. The mother wants to keep the child under her control through her, authority and love as well as through community norms. The child, on the other hand, eludes all the bonds and instead gradually seizes authority, thereby controlling the mother herself. The mother becomes more and more indulgent and the child becomes more and more demanding. 'Endowed with hindsight, insight and foresight, abiku is the eye of the tornado that tears up the community. He is wise beyond his years as he seeks to appropriate elder rights, the basis of parental authority. From hindsight, he knows what is missing from the past; with insight he manipulates the present; and with foresight he will disappear, then create and move on to a new place. These competing demands result in unsettling reincarnations when abiku becomes an embodiment of history. Yet his is always an unfinished story.'<sup>10</sup> Thus Beloved is at once the murdered 'crawling already' baby of Sethe and the reincarnation of 'sixty million and more' people who died as slaves during and after the Middle Passage. She is both a character in the novel and the embodiment of historical imagination of the black race. On the one hand, she symbolizes the horror of racism and on the other, the radical claim of a lost generation to be recognized as an integral part of history.

I am Beloved and she is mine... how can I say things that are pictures... 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 day light 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 in 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 one time they bring us sweet rocks to suck we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it it is hard to make you die forever you sleep short and then return in the beginning we could vomit now we do not...

We are not crouching now we are standing but my legs are like my dead man's eyes I cannot fall because there is no room to the men without skin are making loud noises I am not dead... those able to die are in a pile... the little hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine they fall into the sea... if I had the teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck bite it away the woman with my face is in the sea a hot thing (248-9)

The above passage, shot through the stream-of-consciousness of *Beloved* alludes to the unspeakable horrors of Middle Passage—thousands of people are chained down and packed up for weeks in a small space at the ship's bottom where no air or sunlight can reach, starved to the extent that they eat human excreta and drink urine to stay alive. However, all of them want to die and some of them do. The dead and alive stay together till the whole lot is brought on to the deck and surveyed. The dead are thrown in the sea and those alive are marked with a red hot iron. More than sixty million people underwent this monstrous ordeal of the Middle Passage during four hundred years of legal slavery. 'Sixty Million and more', a very large, yet indefinite number refers to 'an *occurrence* which was not and cannot be recorded, documented, quantified to the satisfaction of historians' simply because white slave catchers on the ship deemed the life and death of

these black slaves as too unimportant to mention in their ledgers. ‘Toni Morrison writes: “Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived—there is lore about them. But nothing survives about ... that.” (14)... This desperate need not to remember left the Africans in the Middle Passage *disremembered*.’<sup>11</sup> So the question is how to re-member those who were so ‘unaccounted for’ that they have no trace at all? Morrison solves this problem by embodying this untranslatable loss in the figure of *Beloved* who expresses the murmurings of these millions who were dislocated, who lost their names, languages, families, traditions, and lives along with her own loss of self and mother. In the novel, the past, whether recorded or unrecorded, lives alongside the present, seeking revenge, haunting the living and reminding the readers that the past can never really be past, that it cannot be escaped or ignored, because it is always already living alongside the present, dismantling the authority of the word, interfering with the linear narrative of history. This embedded message of the novel’s narrative is very important because the *will-to-forget* is not limited only up to the characters but is extended to all the people in America—black and white. There is a wide spread historical amnesia about America’s slave history. Nobody talks about it and definitely nobody wants to hear about it. The memories of the Middle Passage and the atrocities committed against the blacks shatters America’s self-flattering image as the most free and democratic country in the world, as a land of boundless opportunities. These atrocities were worse than those done against the Jews in Nazi Germany. But unlike Auschwitz the Middle Passage is completely forgotten. According to Barbara Christian, this massive cultural repression of the memory of the Middle Passage, is due to two reasons—guilt on the part of whites, and horror on the part of blacks.

That event [the Middle Passage] is the dividing line between being African and being African American. It is the four-hundred-year holocaust that wrenched tens of millions of Africans from their Mother, their biological mothers as well as their Motherland, in



a disorganized and unimaginably monstrous fashion. Yet for reasons having as much to do with the inability on the part of America to acknowledge that it is capable of having generated such a holocaust, as well as with the horror that such a memory calls up for African Americans themselves, the Middle Passage has practically disappeared from American cultural memory. What did, what does that wrenching mean, not only then, but now? That is the question quivering throughout this novel. Have African Americans, how could African Americans, how are African Americans recovering from this monumental collective psychic rupture?<sup>12</sup>

Morrison is narrative plainly shows the cost of such repression: any attempt of ‘keeping the past at bay’ on the part of the characters as well as the readers is ultimately doomed. At the same time, she is also aware that some memories may prove too horrific to ‘integrate.’ So she uses the twin procedure of retention and removal—retaining only those memories which are prospective and rewarding for the present and discarding the fallow, ill-conceived and harmful from the vastness of the past. Kathleen Marks rightly remarks: ‘The figure Beloved is the difference between what ought to be saved from the past and what needs to be discarded, the limit between what can and cannot be known.’<sup>13</sup> Sethe finally acknowledges her grief and thereby moves beyond it. Similarly, all the readers, black and white, must confront America’s slave history and the brutalities of the Middle Passage so that the past is not repeated.

*“This is not a story to pass on.”*

**(Endnotes)**

- 1 Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge, 1989. p 58
- 2 Bonnie Angelo in an interview with Toni Morrison, *The Pain of Being Black: An Interview*, Times, 22 May 1989, p.p. 48-50
- 3 Dobbs, Cynthia, *Toni Morrison’s Beloved: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited*, African American Review, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1998. p 568

- 4 Qt. Henderson Marks, Kathleen, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2002. p 44
- 5 Marks, Kathleen, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2002. p 45
- 6 Fuston-White, Jeanna, "*From the Seen to the Told*": *The Construction of Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's Beloved*, *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2002. p 464
- 7 Marks, Kathleen, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2002. p 56
- 8 Phelan, James, *Sethe's Choice: Beloved and the Ethics of Reading*, *Style*, Summer 1998
- 9 Hinson, D. Scot, *Narrative and Community Crisis in Beloved*, *MELUS*. Volume: 26. Issue: 4, 2001. Page Number: 147+.
- 10 Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo, *An Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas: A Pre-Text for Rereading Soyinka's Ake and Morrison's Beloved*, *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2002. p 665
- 11 Qt. Morrison, Toni. Heffernan, Teresa, *Beloved and the Problem of Mourning*, *Studies in the Novel*. Volume: 30. Issue: 4, 1998. Page Number: 558.
- 12 Christian, Barbara, *Fixing Methodologies: Beloved* p 364. Qt. Dobbs, Cynthia, *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited*, *African American Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1998. p 573
- 13 Marks, Kathleen, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2002. p 101