

Owning the Past and Claiming the Present: Recalling and Reacting to Reconstruct Memories in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

M. Shanthi and Deepa Prajith

Black writing challenges the omnipresent white *weltanschauung*; in foregrounding the marginalised voices of African American women writers, space is the crux: the focus on oppressed characters and their particular experience of violence and trauma. This space is reclaimed by sifting memory to repossess the physical, emotional, social, psychological, and discursive spaces via media representation of African American narratives. Questions of identity, place, and belonging are then inquiries into who we are, where from we have come, and where we belong. These questions persist in Literature where humanity's upheavals are recorded. Toni Morrison's poetic parlay intersects the tidy silos of African-American storytelling—where the violence is muted lest it disturb the reader (mostly white), prompting a sense of improbable disbelief that such events ever came to pass and for fear that such a response would jettison the cause of the Abolitionists. Morrison's *Beloved* wrests the attention of the reader to the resistance portrayed and the price it exacted.

Morrison's *Beloved* is a spiralling nautilus that emanated from a real-life incident at its core. In Morrison's 'Foreword' to *Beloved*, she speaks of being assailed by a debilitating sense of anxiety and panic before realisation dawns upon her that having quit her job and being *free* had different connotations for women. She recalls,

A newspaper clipping in *The Black Book* summarised the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation.

She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners. She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom (xi).

This then is a clear indication that Morrison would plumb the depths of the historic event by fictionalising the discourse, “So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women’s ‘place’” (Morrison, *Beloved* xi). Morrison draws on memory for the centrality of African-American writing was taken over by slave narratives—sagas of intense dehumanization, emblematic of the individual experience of victimisation and trauma. What Maurice Halbwachs calls the socially circulating signs is an appellation for memory. The power of this memory is elucidated in African-American writing. African American narratives represent the underbelly of colonial history—as slaves, the connections to their native communities were severed, racial identity was foisted upon them, their sense of history was attenuated, and they were reduced to utilitarian functionality. The role of memory in piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of collective history and the individual’s place in it is what animates this paper.

Slave narratives drew on the displacement they faced, and the consequent isolation, which made them victims of oppression that eventually led to violence. Such sagas, though based on individual experience, are simultaneously representative of all victims of slavery and allude to generational trauma—wherein, the victim-survivors’ unresolved trauma is carried by their descendants. Slave narratives were propelled by memory because they were structured as autobiographies, memoirs, or witness accounts. Morrison hastens to point out that this genre is the written legacy of African Americans and is different from oral literary traditions. Toni Morrison privileges personal narratives to remember, re-claim, and re-construct the traumatised self. *Beloved* succeeds in fulfilling Morrison’s averred intent: “I wanted the

reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defence" (xii). Reading *Beloved* is a harrowing experience of the invisibility of human beings becoming chattels (Chang 24).

The introduction is by way of a background to the oeuvre of Toni Morrison, an acclaimed and awarded writer of the African-American experience. The introduction has already paved the way for history to be foregrounded, and the paper will use the frames of memory studies to eviscerate memory as a technique as delicately and powerfully employed by Morrison. The return to the past and its continued iterations in the present is a concerted effort on Morrison's part to transform the past (history) into a site for a socio-cultural critique. Morrison's essay titled "Sites of Memory" is another source to suppurate the act of narration as in *Beloved* where the telling of remembered events is simultaneously private and public. Memory is an episteme in activating re-recovery—remembering the past, coming to terms with it, and thereby attempting to release the hauntings of the past. This paper analyses Morrison's use of memory to grapple with past injustices and present inequities. This paper has taken up Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to explore themes and techniques of representing the past through recalled memory. The express intent is a quest to excavate and record recalled memory as a reclamation of social trauma to assess the past and lay claim to space and history by challenging received notions of history which is but one side of the narrative.

Beloved is Sethe's journey from rupture, trauma, release, and repair. Sethe, a former slave at Sweet Home, Kentucky, attempts a daring escape along with her family to freedom, which is aborted when the Schoolteacher catches up with them. The imminent re-captivity sharpens Sethe's will and she opts to kill her children in a valiant attempt to spare her children the shackles of slavery. She ends up killing the youngest, a mere babe, an event that has the Schoolteacher judge her as insane and he abandons them. She wished to have 'Dearly Beloved' engraved on

her daughter's tombstone, but could only manage 'Beloved'. Kathleen Marks verifies and labels it 'apotropaic' which she elucidates as "The apotropaic, then, are those gestures aimed at warding off, or resisting a danger, a threat, or an imperative. More exactly, apotropaic gestures anticipate, mirror, and put into effect that which they seek to avoid: one does what one finds horrible so as to mitigate its horror" (2). Eighteen years later, 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio is home to Sethe and Denver and it is also home to Beloved's ghost. The coming of Paul D, a fellow slave at Sweet Home, somewhat mitigates the angry haunting. Sethe and Paul D initiate a relationship, only to have it destroyed by the arrival of Beloved, whose knowledge of things past suggests a reincarnation of Sethe's dead daughter. Sethe does everything in her power to soothe the manipulative Beloved for she perceives it as an opportunity to ameliorate her guilt.

Beloved seduces Paul D. Paul is appalled to learn that Sethe had murdered her daughter and, afterward, Beloved is pregnant. Denver, who had befriended Beloved, is rattled enough to seek out her community for help. Sethe has lost her job and is completely in the thrall of Beloved. The community stages an exorcism, when Denver's employer arrives to take her. Mistaking him to be Schoolteacher, Sethe attempts to assault him with an ice pick. In the ensuing commotion, Beloved disappears. Paul D arrives and seeing the broken Sethe promises to care for her. Meanwhile, Denver relishes her new-found freedom and flourishes in the outside world.

Memory Studies

Maurice Halbwachs in "The Reconstruction of the Past" offers an interesting insight when he opines, "We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated" (47). Halbwachs proffers a disclaimer when he says that present priorities tend to compete for immediate attention; these memories surface when time and leisure permit their recollection. Unlike a penchant for nostalgia for a time past that Halbwachs speaks of in this

essay, Black writers assert the imposition of the traumatic past on the present. Memory is about a time and place that no longer exist in the present; despite this, African Americans narrativize memory that has borne witness to their degradation and endless suffering. The questions of identity, place, and belonging are anchored in the diaphanous strands of memory. Place as the locus of identity and belonging is the conventional approach for it foregrounds communitarian ties. “Of course, extraordinary events are also fitted within this spatial framework, because they occasion in the group a more intense awareness of its past and present, the bonds attaching it to physical locale gaining greater clarity in the very moment of their destruction” (*Ibid* 2). For African-American slaves, a place constantly shifted, and identity was erased along with the sense of belonging. Halbwachs views memory as a process of social activity and circulating signs of memory keep the past alive in the present; the investing of energy to make meaning, and thereby oscillate back and forth to achieve this.

Jan Assmann in “Communicative and Cultural Memory”, arrives at a distinction: specific functions lead him to ‘communicative’ wherein personal accounts are shared to facilitate functioning within a group, and ‘cultural’ memory which invokes the spatiotemporal axis represented by material objects which spur memorialization. He clarifies, “We preserve Halbwachs’ distinction by breaking up his concept of collective memory into “communicative” and “cultural memory,” but we insist on including the cultural sphere, which he excluded, in the study of memory” (110). Assmann warns that memory is “...*not a memory but a metonym*” (*Ibid* 111, emphasis added). As conceptualised by Assmann, cultural memory evokes memorialisation through objects that evoke collective meanings for the social group involved. He further elaborates on those assimilative strategies (in the case of migration) and claims “...forget(ing) the memories connected with the original identity” (*Ibid* 114). The inverse also holds strong as it proscribes a ‘forgetting of the original identity’ which is assessed in terms of a ‘fear of loss.’ The institutional structure of cultural memory is validated through participation.

Toni Morrison, in the essay “The Site of Memory,” quotes the validation of memory issues from the autobiography (85). While Halbwachs and Assmann template their research on memory from a Eurocentric experiential plane, Morrison advocates a deeply personal remembrance that recollects and narrativizes personal experience of rupture, erasure, and degradation that denies identity, place, or belonging to the African-American slaves. There is no antecedent to such depredation based on racial privileging—the auto-narrative is the archive and the episteme. Reversing prejudice, seeking empathy, and raising consciousness to the embattled self of the slaves, slave narratives were a mode of memory that provoked the readers to spare thought on the issue of freedom from slavery. Education became a tool for empowering themselves, and writing, the *modus operandi* of writing the self into existence. Morrison notes with insight, “But most importantly – at least for me – there was no mention of their interior life” (*Ibid* 91). Morrison intends to make her fiction an exploration of the inherent silences in the slave sagas—an exposition of the personal harrowing experiences that restrict themselves to the iteration of incidents minus the emotional memory. Morrison has a compelling justification,

Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus, memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, “Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.” These “memories within” are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. only the act of imagination can help me” (*Ibid* 91-92).

Through an empathic position, Morrison breathes life and character into the historical time and people that her fiction celebrates. Kimberly C. Davis assesses Morrison’s *Beloved* as ‘historical archaeology’ and opines that Morrison’s fiction, “(Is) an overt and passionate quest to fill a gap neglected by historians...” (78). The conviction of her writing

springs from her ability to read into the gaps, to listen to the silences, to pick on the excisions, and to precisely tell the tale in complete, wilful emotive disarray. The deliberate adherence to factual truth validates the debilitating and exhausting ways they were exposed to that erased their filial bonds and thereby, any access to making meaning of their self, place, and belonging. Piecing identity together is by conjuring an image and then imaginatively reconstructing the text. As Morrison opines, “What I want to do in this talk is to track an image from picture to meaning to text – a journey which appears in the novel I’m writing now, which is called *Beloved*” (*Ibid* 97).

Beloved is a candid engagement with the trauma of subjugation and victimisation experienced by slaves in the atrocities visited upon them. The novel doesn’t elide into an easy categorisation of a slave narrative; *Beloved* is engineered as a follow-on of the slave narrative in the way it endeavours to perform the afterlife of a slave. While slave narratives avoided visiting the gruesome and macabre aspects of their life histories upon the readers, they did this in two ways: they either chose to conform to the existing norms for writing or enfolded these unpalatable recollections in self-censorship. Slave narratives had an agenda: to badger a reversal of the prevalent and pervasive opinion of the lack of intelligence among the African-Americans, to provoke the conscience of the reader, and thereby, enlist their empathy to the abolitionist cause. The extenuating circumstances of powerlessness excite further depredations; revealing this could result in evoking fierce hostility among the readers or they may dismiss the narrative as fantastic and not anchored to the terrain of realism.

Morrison advances the slave narrative from the moralising fervour of a morality play to force the reader to confront the silences as she provides Sethe the discursive space to re-visit her act of desperate courage, permit the trauma to sift through her guilt, assuages her guilt by making amends, being manipulated in the retributive vengeance of *Beloved*, and having been wrung out, she repossesses herself. This convoluted journey disembarks the past in the nemesis of consequences that sanctions the suffering to be unfolded without thought to the readers’

discomfort or disorientation. *Beloved* is afflicted by the ghosts of 'realism' and 'representation', of 'appropriation' and 'plagiarism'. The degree of victim trauma depicted ensures a constant sense of being pulled into the overwhelming vortex of an emotional whirlpool. This destabilises the readers, who are assailed by a keen sense of helplessness and disbelief and are thrown off kilter. The serrations incisively cut through the surfeit and closed world of the readers to draw them into the supplicative telling as they witness the brutalities in the recurrence of psychological dissociation. The resident ghost of *Beloved* has driven away Sethe's two sons, and when Paul D walks back into her life, he is assaulted by its malevolent presence. His continued presence dilutes the ghost's overpowering malevolence and life for Sethe, Paul D, and Denver move on an even note of stability.

124, Bluestone Road, Ohio, Cincinnati was haunted. Moving would perhaps present them a shot at living in a semblance of peace. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, was averse to moving. "What'd be the point?" (Morrison, *Beloved* 6) asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief..." (*Ibid* 6). She knows each house has its share of ghosts who haunt the place and the people. Baby Suggs recounts, "I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil" (*Ibid* 6). Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. "My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember" (*Ibid* 6). Sethe's retort that that is all Baby Suggs permits herself to remember echoes the vanishing traces of how Buglar appeared. Perhaps with time, Howard too may evaporate from memory. For Sethe, the ghost is merely sad. The *tree* on Sethe's back is another sorrow and conjures the ghost of the past. Paul D chases it and it leaves.

Baby Suggs' funeral is the cite where the intransigent neighbours and Sethe with Denver arraigned on either side in tableau pose, depict the unbending stance where neither party is willing to reach forward to sew rends that held betrayal and deceit in captive imagination.

‘Rememory’ uncoils the serpentine sequence of incidents and meshes the events with the narrative to extrude the power of loss. Sethe had revived in the benign generosity of Paul D and her self-sufficiency has transformed into a familial set-up of memories and presence. Halle’s absence is over, and the ghost of Sethe’s daughter is accepted. However, this knowledge is confided by Stamp Paid to Paul D., and the unravelling of horror pushes him away. Denver is sad for her mother. The need for explanation and justification is long past. “BELOVED, she is my daughter. She mine. See. She comes back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quickly. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be” (*Ibid* 236). In the words of Esther Ohito, episodic and autobiographical memory performs “...(the) recounting or telling memory-stories, in both private and public contexts (29). Memory has a way of intruding; each invasion startles anew; none of the memories allay fear or comfort the soul. Much blame is laid at Sethe’s feet and she is wounded in the choices she craved by carving her flesh. “And look how he ran when he found out about me and you in the shed. Too rough for him to listen to. Too thick, he said. My love was too thick” (Morrison, *Beloved* 239). The patriarchal value scale tipped against her; what slavery did to women was to render them invisible. J. A. Rogers offers this insight, “These are the many examples of Black feminist writings that, in their insistence on the political significance of communal and self-love, dismantle the subject-object dualism that acts as the philosophical basis of Western modernity, and as the alibi for its history of dehumanization of gendered and raced subjects” (202). Sethe’s defiance and stubborn insistence on serving a helping hand in preventing the enslavement of her children is beyond comprehension; most people just avoided her.

The darkness of the past intrudes into the present when *Beloved* arrives. The possibility of escape and the despair of being caught strengthened Sethe’s resolve. To taste freedom but not savour it; to be threatened by imminent capture and return to the old life was abhorrent to her. A

woman has deep resourcefulness and if she decides against a particular thing, nothing will swing her from that resolve, she will find a way to succeed in her resolve, ready to pay the price. Mired in honouring the dead, Sethe's relationship with the reincarnated Beloved leads her to a tipping point. Denver ventures out for help and keeps an eagle eye on her mother. "Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 295). The concern pushes her to seek the help of the community and the women stage a prayer meet to evict Beloved. Beloved disappears and Sethe is exhausted. Denver has matured and is finding life cheerful. Paul D returns and she admonishes him to treat her mother right. *Beloved* ends on a recuperative note as Sethe regains herself. Morrison's repeated chant of, "It was not a story to pass on" (*Ibid* 323-24) shows the stages of forgetting and letting go. How many stories have people lived but remain unknown and therefore untold?

Conclusion

The recent contentious judgement of the US Supreme Court terms—what was once labelled judicial activism to ameliorate race inequalities through educational scholarships for Black students and other minorities—as unconstitutional as it is perceived as going against the spirit of American democracy and its cornerstone of merit. Roald Dahl's estate has pulled out certain books that do not agree with the current sensibility concerning racial issues. Margaret Mitchell's Estate is keen on erasing the casual aspect of slave presence as was entrenched in that milieu. Both these instances are of immense concern. This put paid to the slave experience and the archive that preserved their invisible presence. 'White-washing' narratives by white authors/their estates to cushion the generations to come of the ugly and discomfiting truths sends a chilling warning about preserving privilege while doing away with the associated criminality. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka elaborate on the notion of cultural memory in their paper 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity' to offer the idea that "...cultural memory is characterised by its distance from every day" (129). This is defined

by Morrison's *Beloved* where the distanced past is communicated through interactive re-memorisation to bridge the gap between the past and the present.

Beloved amplifies the social construction of memory; Morrison forwards the slave narrative by reviving the persona and performance of the past to narrativize history. If we consider Assmann's belief that memory is transformed into history, then Morrison centralises the historicity of memory. Toni Morrison concludes her essay "The Site of Memory" by recalling a memory and using it as a metaphor for her writing,

...the act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for the houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact, it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there, and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding" (99).

African-American writing emphasises visual memory as a mode of remembering. African-American women writers' locus operandi is to lay siege on memory to promote a visual telling of emotive experience presenting readers with an epiphanic insight into their reality.

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