



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 224-226
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 07-04-2024
Accepted: 13-05-2024

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Haunting the haunted: Memory and repression in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1d.192>

Abstract

Freedom understood in its narrow political considerations often eludes the finer, more existential questions regarding its nature and extent. It is these finer nuances pertaining to the psyche, memory and lives of the African Americans in post-Abolition American that becomes the centre piece of Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. This article, attempts to delineate the innovative use of the idea of a haunted house in *Beloved* to indicate and explore, the psyches that are haunted and tormented by a gory past. It shall also delve into the tradition of the Gothic novel and its echoes found in Morrison's novel. The article highlights how through the motif of a haunting spirit, Morrison engages with repressed memories of slavery, the effects of the repression and a national amnesia about the horrors of institutional slavery. Morrison's characters are forced to undergo a process of de-numbing to sensitize them to their own feelings and trauma. This, in turn, leads to a vocalisation and thereby a documentation of the brutal history of the dehumanisation of the community forced into slavery. The article also investigates how the trope of the haunted house is used in the novel, to accord a subjectivity to its characters who hitherto have remained statistics- subsumed within a homogenized taxonomical category deprived of a psyche, emotion and individuality.

Keywords: Memory, psyche, repression, documentation, gothic

Introduction

"To invite readers (and myself) into the repellent landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts."

-Toni Morrison

Beloved is a 20th century novel written by Toni Morrison. Set in post-civil war America of 1873, the novel engages itself with lives of erstwhile slaves of America while drawing inspiration from real life events. Setting the novel at a time when slavery has been abolished allows Morrison to force her readers to question the nature and extent of freedom given to the African Americans; the erstwhile slaves of 'Sweet Home' may be politically free of slavery but are trapped by the unbreakable chains of their gory past. Along with the force of her writing and innovative use of language, Morrison uses the literary motif of a haunting spirit to lead her readers to such questions. Through the motif of a haunting spirit, Morrison engages with repressed memories of slavery, the effects of the repression and a national amnesia about the horrors of institutional slavery. The novel holds its readers hostage in 124, Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio where the reader encounters the ghosts of repressed memory, from 'Sweet Home', from the ridge near the Ohio River, from the field where a lady with a cloth hat stooped at work, from pink chipped grave headstone that said 'Beloved'. From the 1790s the idea of ghosts or the haunting spirit found manifestations in English writing in the form of Gothic novels like *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Dracula* (1897) and *Frankenstein* (1823). The content of the Gothic novels dealt with the desires and ambitions of the people, that did not find expression in the real world but were not entirely buried. After an admirable development of the genre in Europe, the writing of the Gothic novels was taken up by American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, who brought a fresh edge to the genre. Hawthorne used the elements of Gothic literature to address the crimes of American past.

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As Eric Savoy puts it "especially important in this American tradition of using the Gothic is personification by which abstract ideas (such as the burden of historical crimes) are given a body in the spectral figure of a ghost. It thus achieve [s] the ultimate effect of the haunted, the uncanny and the return of the repressed while placing them thoroughly in the deaths of American life and American psyche ^[1]." Morrison's writings seem to be an amalgam of various treatment meted out to the Gothic tradition by various authors. She uses the ghost to address personal issues as well as issues of her society- especially those that did not receive adequate representation in popular discourse, much like what Shelley attempts in *Frankenstein* [1823]. Morrison uses the tradition to unearth the silenced history of America, akin to Hawthorne's endeavors in *The Scarlet Letter* [1850]. Morrison uses the gothic tradition as a psychological tool to enter the interiors of her characters, a technique abundantly utilized by Poe. Morrison's use of the ghost as a metaphor for memory, later find an echo in Irish author Frank McCourt's memoir in *Angela's Ashes* [1992].

Hence, following and reworking the tradition of the Gothic, Morrison uses the ghost or the haunting spirit at two levels in the novel. At one level, it is the spiteful spirit that shatters mirrors, leaves "two tiny handprints on a cake", leaves "kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor" and shakes up the house ^[2]. On the other hand, the spirit is used as a metaphor for buried and recurring memory. The metaphorical haunting experienced by the residents of 124 and the rest of the African American population becomes the central nerve of the narrative. The experiences of slavery were concomitant with the memories of rape, physical mutilation, humiliation, and denial to a holistic undivided self. In the period following the Abolition of slavery, in which the narrative is located, African Americans find themselves haunted by these buried memories of trauma and horror. The difficulty and pain involved in a confrontation with such memories leads to the most obvious response: repression of the 'Un-speakable' memories. In such a context, the narrative technique of the ghost/ spirit allows "that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the Herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. ^[3]"

Such repressions come at a cost. The narrative highlights the various effects of such a deliberate act of repressing memories and maintaining a status quo vis-à-vis the spirit. The accumulation of emotions that needed release have rendered Sethe numb, both physically and psychologically. Living in a house "suspended between the nastiness of life, and the meanness of the dead" Sethe's mindscape now refuses to notice the colours around her just like her body refuses to feel the branches of violence on her back ^[2]. The presence of the ghost (which is a metaphor for the repressed memories) has isolated 124 and its residents. By highlighting such an isolation Morrison is able to communicate to her readers, how even after the "emancipation" of the slaves, African Americans aren't truly free. The effects of slavery travel from one generation to the other. Denver who may not have borne the direct consequences of slavery is definitively affected by it, through isolation and a broken family. Another aspect that the novel ponders over is that years of silence and detachment from the past has refracted some parts of Sethe's memory in 'pretty colours'. For example, in Denver's

memory Sweet Home "Never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too" ^[2]. To add to her distress, Sethe remembers sycamores more than her children, this is a peculiar remark on slavery and how slaves were never truly free to be parents.

Such a numbing acceptance of the status quo is broken, first by the entry of Paul D and later by the girl who walked out of the water, Beloved. Paul D's entry into the lives of Sethe and Denver sets a few things in motion. A person of the past, Paul D's presence and company allows Sethe to give the repressed memories of brutality a release, this in turn shakes 124, the calmness of which dependent on various self-imposed silences. Paul D's presence also allows Sethe the opportunity to share the responsibility she has so far single-handedly shouldered. As members of a shared past, Sethe and Paul D help supplement and complete each other's memories. Through the retelling of the past and the sharing of the traumatic experiences, Sethe sets in the direction of a confrontation with the memories of a horrific past. It is at this juncture of a new journey that the haunting spirit of 124 recedes. With the clearing of the haunting mist that fogged Sethe's life, her emotions are finally given an expression and a fissure develops in her isolation. This is elucidated in the text by Sethe recognizing the orange patches on Baby Suggs' blanket and the hope of a family that she derives from the hand-holding shadows at the carnival.

While Paul D's entry and the receding of the ghost sensitizes Sethe, it scares Denver. Denver feels threatened by what she perceives as Paul D's attempts to invade her relationship with Sethe. She is afraid of being distant from her Ma'am, the only relation she now has. She further resents Paul D because the ghost stops making its presence felt after his entry. While for Sethe the spirit was associated to her traumatic past, for Denver the spirit was the one constant presence in the isolated life of 124. She thus, grabs the first possibility to distance Paul D from Sethe by befriending Beloved, towards whom Paul D is extremely suspicious. The entry of Beloved plays another very crucial role- she becomes the catalyst that leads Sethe to vocalise her memories. It is during the process of vocalisation of memories that Denver realised the various aspects of the stories she thought she knew completely and thus accept, if not appreciate, the many struggles of Sethe. Sethe finds unexpected pleasure in the retellings- "But as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it ^[2]. Vocalisation of memories worked in a spiral, one led to another till they engulfed Sethe and compelled her to confront her memories. While Beloved forces Sethe "to confront the gap between motherlove and the realities of motherhood in Slavery, she... forces Paul to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of a man in Slavery" ^[4]. It is the catharsis offered by Paul D and later beloved that frees 124 of its ghosts.

The vocalisation of memories can be extended further to an important aspect of African American history, that of oral traditions. Oral traditions played an important role in keeping alive their history, the history of the experience of slavery, of their journeys and their community. By deliberately not talking about their past, in repressing their memories, the community runs the danger of losing contact with their culture and collective identity. This collective identity will play an important role in rebuilding their lives

after the Abolition of slavery, because the real emancipation will come from within.

Up until recently, as far as, the history of slavery is concerned there seemed to be an all- pervasive silence about the crimes committed through institutionalized slavery; the American state seemed to have been plagued by a national amnesia. The drive for clean slates, political and economic considerations, the psychological needs to stay guilt-free and the pain of remembering the horrors of slavery had cast a stupor around the subject. Therefore, there was a pressing need for the voice of the murdered- "The one who lost everything and had no say in any of it"- to be heard ^[2]. Morrison uses the idea of haunting innovatively yet again as she penned down a novel that contains the voices of the silenced and thus makes the novel itself, a haunting presence. Similar to how "etched on her (Sethe's) body the scar is inscribed for later generations to witness, experience and decode the lines of racial injury" the novel is etched in American history to unnerve it by reminding it of its inhumanity, while it gloats of its Republican and progressive identity ^[5]. A presence that will not let anyone forget the self-sacrificing love of the many Halles of history, the murderous protection offered by mothers like Sethe, the communal healing provided by Baby Suggs, the cost of communal betrayal, the unasked questions of the ghost, the isolated existence of Denver. *Beloved* will continue to haunt us so that we do not relapse into silences and forgetfulness. *Beloved* gives subjectivity to the "Anonymous people called slaves" by establishing an intimate relation with the residents of 124 and opening for its readers their psyche while keeping alive in the readers mind that similar experiences are being lived by all other slaves- "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" ^[2]. In doing so it explores how for the 60 million and more slaves just like Sethe "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" while telling us of the need and urgency of confrontation ^[2]. *Beloved* is needed to remind us that the fragmented pieces of memory need to be woven together in a shroud, a shroud tainted with the blood and experiences of 60 million and more slaves, a shroud that will allow African Americans to confront their past and remove the forced numbness, a shroud that will become 'A Bench by the Road'.

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