

CHAPTER IV

***BELLOVED :
CELEBRATION OF BLACK-SELF IN
THE CONTEXT OF HISTORY***

Beloved is the third novel under study published in 1987; explores the difficulties in the emergence of black woman's self in the context of institutionalized slavery through character typology.

Slavery, says one character, "ain't a battle; it's a rout " (300) with hardly any of what one can confidently call survivors. Still, those who remain must exorcise the deadly past from their hearts or die themselves. Beloved is the tale of such exorcism.

It is Morrison's brave and radical project to center a novel on a dead child ignored by history, cruelly forgotten along with so much else that happened to black people in slavery. A slave baby murdered by its own mother is "not a story to pass on" (337).

In this novel Morrison has explored the psyche of a slave mother who deals with haunted life on every level, from the fires of the flesh to the heart-breaking challenges of the spirit.

I

Sethe : Wounded slave-mother

Through Sethe, Morrison explores a black woman's self-conscious protest to her dual oppression. It is not only the sexual exploitation that Sethe feels most oppressed by but the humiliation of her nurturing

abilities as a mother. According to Bernard Bell, Sethe is the brilliant "poetics ... of the long black song of the many thousands gone."¹

When Paul D, Sethe's friend from Sweet Home plantation arrives at 124, she shares with him both the good and bad memories of life there. They remember their master, Mr. Garner who always trusted them. Unlike other slave-holders, he called them "men". He gave them freedom to buy a mother or choose anything they wanted. He even gave them an opportunity to learn. Moreover, he not only believed and trusted them but also listened to them. But after Mr. Garner's death, everything changed into worst. The arrival of the school teacher destroyed their lives.

In fact, the school-teacher stands as a symbol of white male authority. Unlike Garner, he does not allow the slaves to express their own opinions or to learn, to read and write. Instead, he makes them the subjects of his own interpretation. He measures and dissects them in his notebook. And when necessary, he silences their voices with an iron bit. In fact, when they remember Sweet Home as a place; they say "... it wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (17).

For Sethe. Sweet Home was never truly her home. Basically in the beginning she is brought to Sweet Home to replace Baby Suggs, another slave woman of the plantation. Unlike Baby Suggs, Sethe has had "six whole years of marriage" to that "somebody son who had fathered every

one of her children.” With regret and grief Sethe remembers her life at the plantation; where her life was not different than that of the cattle. Morrison describes how Sethe and Halle, her husband mate on top of a mattress kept in a cabin. For the first two times, they also used the cornfield like animals. While mating, they were under the impression that they were hidden. In fact, “Halle wanted privacy for her and got public display”(33). By the time she is nineteen, Sethe is pregnant for the fourth time. In all, Sethe gives birth to two sons, Howard and Buglar, and two daughters, Beloved and Denver. But when she can not endure the torture of the school teacher, she joins the Sweet Home slaves who have planned to run. Sethe joins them because she knows that she might never see her children grow like Baby Suggs’s, who saw seven of her children sold. But unfortunately, everyone are caught except her husband Halle, who is mysteriously lost forever. Sethe manages to get her three children on the train, but she herself gets caught, assaulted and beaten.

Until Paul D’s arrival Sethe is locked in memories of her slavery, the failure of her husband, Halle, to show up at planned time of escape; having her breast milk stolen and being beaten by schoolteacher’s nephews; her murder of her child and of exchanging sex for the engraving on her daughter’s tombstone.

Paul D's arrival excites Sethe. For her, he is the living presence of memory. Whereas, Paul D remembers young Sethe :

Halle's girl ... the one with iron eyes and backbone to match.
(10).

But after seeing her, soon Paul D recalls the school teacher who,

... punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight (11).

Sethe's memories of the brutal handling she endured under slavery come to her sensorily. Her body is inscribed with the marks of white dominance. She says :

I got a tree on my back ... I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something... it cost too much ! (18)

Paul D tries to comfort her by touching 'a chokecherry tree' on her back. He 'learnt that way her sorrow, the roots of it, ... '(21). Now, Sethe's black skin which has been 'dead for years', feels the hurt it ought to. In him she finds a man who is ready to catch her if she sinks.

In fact, even in freedom, Sethe is constantly haunted by memory of the day when she cut her daughter's throat under appalling circumstances. Her memories of the funeral service throw light on the helplessness of mother-love that is chained in slavery and poverty. According to Margaret Atwood her helplessness shows the world^{of} slavery. "Where everything has its price, and the price is tyrannical."²

While she has murdered Beloved to save her from the future, she raises Denver by “keeping her from the past”(53). These two different manifestations of maternal love show Sethe’s genuine efforts to protect her children from the horrible consequences of slavery.

Sethe takes her children away from Sweet Home because she says she cannot “... love ’em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love” (199). And so when she comes to Baby Suggs, she , at any cost, does not want her children to return to slavery. The freedom makes her mother-love stronger. Like Baby Suggs, she does not allow her children to be sold. Thus, for Sethe, loving her children becomes a testament of freedom. Even Paul D understands what she means :

... to get a place where you could love anything you choose -
... well now, that was freedom (199).

But at the same time he considers Sethe’s unlimited love “risky”. For him, the far safer way is ,

... love just a little bit; ... so when they broke its back ..., well
may be you’d have a little love left over for the next one (56).

But Sethe does not compromise with love. She insists,

Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all (202).

Sethe brings Beloved into freedom because she does not want her to grow under schoolteacher’s torture. And she murders her so that

... no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper (309).

Sethe's humanity is violated by the school teacher. To reaffirm her own humanity as well as her children's, she protests him against his possessing her family as slaves. Her protest ultimately is manifested in the infanticide which helps her to retain her dignity as a human being.

Sethe cannot forget the rape which has robbed her of her essence, of her most precious substance that is maternal milk. Sethe wants to give her milk to her babies which she could not get during her childhood. She remembers :

The little white babies got it first. ... There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without milk that belongs to you. (246).

Sethe herself is deprived of mother-love. However, Sethe's excessive investment in mothering is an impossible attempt to make up for her own loss as a daughter. So she insists upon her role as mother and in doing so she replaces her individual identity with her maternal love. Not recognizing the separateness of her children, Sethe makes life-and-death decision for them. Sethe's confusion thus lies in slavery. Which positions her as an object and denies her the experience of bonding with her own mother. But it precipitates her entry into good motherhood. so while explaining infanticide she says,

It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that (202).

Thus for her, murder becomes an act of 'mother love.'³

Thus, Sethe's infanticide is the manifestation of her agitated psyche under the cruelty of slavery. Sethe's protest is a black woman's self-conscious protest to her dual oppression. Sethe feels oppressed by the sexual exploitation. But more than this, she feels oppressed by the humiliation of her nurturing abilities as a mother.

She prefers to become an "outlaw", to prove her love. But in Sethe's attempt to assert herself, Denver has to suffer alienation from her mother as well as from the neighborhood. Even Paul D, leaves them when he realizes that he does not have enough courage to share the enormous burden of Sethe's guilt. He cannot understand the maternal love and Sethe's strong desire for survival.

With Paul D gone, Sethe spends her time in attending Beloved who according to Sethe is her own murdered child. But Beloved's presence distorts her life. However, she is rescued by Paul D who returns to "put his story next to hers" (335).

As Sethe's cultural and communal exile is most profound, she is constantly haunted by waking visions of guilt and fear. Here Morrison explores the psyche of a slave mother who has to deal with haunted life

on every level. Thus finally, the doubly bereaved Sethe, who has lost her 'Beloved' twice, is nursed back to life by her other daughter, Denver and her lover, Paul D.

Through Sethe, Morrison has intensified the experience of motherhood. In Sethe, Morrison creates an antidote to the submissive, delicate heroine who once served as an ideal for women. Sethe's scars enhance rather than diminish her dignity. Her beauty lies in her exceptional ability to endure. Moreover, Sethe's "thick" love for her children is depicted in contrast with the traditional concepts of motherhood.

Sethe, the character, raises the question about what it means to have a self, and to give that self away. If mothers cannot 'own' their children or themselves, they experience separation and loss all the more intensely. Thus, Morrison's feminism is given a new dimension of meaning through Sethe.

II

Beloved : Incarnation of Sethe's guilt

Beloved represents not only the spirit of Sethe's daughter; she is also the projection of repressed collective memory of a violated people.

The ghost of murdered child, Beloved epitomizes the inconceivability not only of slavery but of the extent to which it dehumanized people.

Beloved is Sethe's own unforgiving memory, the return of the dreadful past. It grows obese with Sethe's guilt while Sethe withers to an emaciated condition. As Ann Snitow comments,

Beloved is a snare to her anguished, hungry mother's heart and keep her in the prison of guilt forever... In her, the breathtaking horror of the breakup of Sweet Home lives, ...⁴

Sethe's infant daughter, Beloved mysteriously reappears as a sensuous young woman. Her spirit returns to claim Sethe's love. Through her mother, she wishes to sustain herself as a living memory. Moreover, she wishes to fuse with her mother into a single "hot thing" (259), as she says,

...Sethe's is the face that left me ... her smiling face is the place for me... now we can join ...(259).

Beloved forces Sethe to tell about her past. Even though it "hurts" to tell Beloved of her past, Sethe finds herself "wanting to " and "liking it". This Beloved's thirst for memory draws Sethe ever closer to her own rememory.

When Sethe learns that Beloved is indeed her daughter, she isolates herself from Denver, Paul D and the neighborhood. She is convinced : "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room" (224). Now she is content to become engulfed only in her

'rememory'. Overwhelmed with ideal mother love, Sethe offers her own life to her daughter, as she says, " I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter" (246). Moreover, Sethe wants to renew her memory by explaining Beloved the reasons of her killing. She thinks :

... if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her (246).

Sethe is happy to get her child back. She showers her love on Beloved in order to blot out the memory of the bleeding child she had held in her arms.

For Sethe, her Sweet Home, her journey to Baby Suggs, her children, her Beloved, all these memories are rightfully hers. But for a long period, they are repressed and silenced. Through Beloved they are released from their bonds of shame and guilt. Beloved gives purpose and meaning to them. Soon Sethe, Beloved and their memories merge until it becomes difficult to Denver "to tell who was who" (296). Sethe becomes so obsessed with Beloved that at one level, she identifies herself with Beloved. And she says :

I AM BELOVED, and she is mine (264).

But Beloved denies restoration of innocent joy to Sethe. The death Sethe wants to forget is Beloved's central and primal experience. She leads her mother back to same terror and loss that she is trying to erase.

Beloved acts as a daughter intent upon making her mother pay for her brutal act. She lacks the forgiveness and compassion for her mother. Though Sethe devotes herself to Beloved, she never gets "enough for anything" (294). Her endless demands consume all of Sethe's emotional and physical strength. Thus Beloved is not an entirely beneficent presence in the house. She hungers equally for the memories of both life and death. Her propelling of Sethe's rememory shows her malicious insistence for memory. Soon, Sethe's desire to recreate the memory only leads her to further guilt. As Ashraf Rushdy comments, Beloved is "... the incarnation of Sethe's guilt."⁵

However, their relationship culminates when Sethe sees in Mr. Bodwin the reappearance of school teacher who had precipitated the murder years ago. In Sethe's unconscious attempt to undo and change the past, she now attacks the source of the threat, rather than protecting the child. She wants to triumph this time. Instead of facing him with the mangled child, she tries to kill him and preserves the daughter she cannot bear to lose again.

For many years, Sethe has lived a solitary life away from the neighborhood, but when she absorbs herself in the community Beloved disappears back to the land of the dead. Finally, through Beloved Sethe achieves her own form of self-exorcism, her own self-accepting peace.

Thus, for Sethe, Beloved represents more of a psychological phenomenon than a supernatural one.

In fact, Beloved is a painful memory not only for Sethe, but also for those who never knew her. She is a reminder of the depths of pain they endured in slavery. The chorus "This is not a story to pass on" (337), indicates that it is unwise to pass on this story because it is too disturbing and too unsettling. It has depths of pain that may never be plumbed. The character like Beloved is not thereby erased from history, she lives on in some way. Thus, in the body of Beloved, individual and collective pasts and memories have become united and inseparable.

Through Beloved, Morrison has shown the loss of many innocent African children who suffered from the tragic consequences of slavery. As Babara Schapiro admits :

In the case of Beloved, the intense desire for recognition evolves into enraged narcissistic omnipotence and a terrifying, tyrannical domination.⁶

III

Beloved : As Denver's Playmate

For Sethe, Beloved is a manifestation of her guilt whereas for Denver, Beloved is her sole playmate. Since her mother has murdered

her sister Beloved, Denver has little intercourse with the outside world. She knows a secret feeling of her mother. She says :

... the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother (252).

Denver is imprisoned in 124, Bluestone Road because, Sethe has kept her away from the community which cannot understand a slave-mother's intention behind murdering her own daughter. Her brothers have run away from the 'die-witch', her grand-mother is dead and her mother is isolated from the community. As a result Denver with her mother "... live ... ostracized, proud and alone life" (18). So her only playmate for years has been a ghost of her sister, Beloved.

Denver wants to be related to her sister Beloved, whose blood she has swallowed right along with her mother's milk. Whenever Sethe tells a story of her birth, she feels that she is the inheritor of the story, which includes pain, death and dream of life. This story is the only source for Denver's imagination, to create her own world with her playmate.

After Beloved's arrival as a 'dreamy eyed sleeping beauty' (67), Denver constantly protects her, as Beloved embodies for her 'sweet secrets' (35). But soon Denver finds that Beloved is nothing but a ghost of Beloved who has arrived to take a revenge on her mother. She also knows that Beloved is the 'faith' through which Sethe keeps her memory

and life alive. Initially she does not reveal Beloved's identity, for the fear that she will lose her playmate. Thus Denver's desire to keep Beloved is as great as Beloved's desire to stay and possess Sethe. Denver knows that her 'sister girl' Beloved, who is an incarnation of the baby ghost's 'plans' is her companion but now she is primarily dedicated to Sethe.

A bond of affection unites Sethe, Denver and Beloved until Denver realizes that her mother has become oblivious to her and has begun to devote her attention exclusively to Beloved. As Denver watches her mother deteriorate physically and mentally with guilt and consuming love, she leaves 124 and with the help of the community rescues her mother from Beloved. Thus Denver buys her mother's freedom, in ways comparable to her father Halle who 'paid for' Baby Suggs.

Through Denver Morrison intends to show that the children of the slaves though do not experience the actual slave life, have to face the tragic consequences of it. These innocent ones sometimes have to protect the elders who have lost their sense of self. So commenting on Beloved, Babara Schapiro says,

Toni Morrison's Beloved penetrates ... the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery.⁷

IV

Constructive attitude of Baby Suggs, Paul D and Stamp Paid in contrast with Sethe's destructive attitude

Unlike Sethe, Baby Suggs', Paul D's and Stamp paid's wounded psyche breeds sanity, balance and constructive behaviour in them. Though all of them have gone through the same wretchedness of slavery, their responses show their specific temperament. As Eric Fromm states :

Society can have both functions; it can further man's healthy development, and it can hinder it, ... the question is only to what degree and in what directions their positive and negative influence is exercised.⁷

The inhumanity of slavery compels Sethe to act destructively, where as it fosters a constructive sense of social responsibility in Baby Suggs, Paul D and Stamp Paid.

Baby Suggs' slave life at Sweet Home plantation has given her nothing except her 'heart'. She had no permanent relation with any man in her life. She cannot even remember her children, as they are either sold or have run away from her. But her last child, Halle buys her freedom.

A twenty-year old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change ... (13).

In fact Halle gives Baby Suggs freedom when it does not mean a thing to her. Yet she never asks him, "what for ?" (173) However, soon she realizes what freedom is :

... she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that Halle, who had never drawn on free breath knew that there was nothing like it in this world (174).

She becomes aware of her 'own' hands and heart.

Baby Suggs becomes almost a preacher, "uncalled, unrobed, unanointed"(106). She dedicates her life to encourage the former slaves and teaches them to love themselves. She fosters the selfhood which the racism has denied to each of the ex-slaves. Thus she tries to heal the broken and suffering bodies. She says :

... in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, ... Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. ... love your heart. For this is the prize (108).

For Baby Suggs, 'heart' is compassion , generosity of spirit. She also awakens Sethe's desire to know her past and to love herself as a person. Thus Baby Suggs enhances Sethe's sense of womanhood. But when Sethe murders Beloved, Baby Suggs withdraws herself as she sees her own failure in Sethe's infanticide. Baby Suggs becomes ashamed of God. Realizing her helplessness she says : "There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (109).

Thus, while Baby Suggs spends constructive, ideal life after freedom, Sethe destroys hers. Eventhough Baby Suggs has gone through the same tormented life like Sethe, she restores herself by loving her 'self' and others. Unlike Sethe, she understands her responsibility towards her community. While Baby Suggs forgets her past by embracing community, Sethe gets more and more entangled in her past memories and hence isolates herself from everybody. In doing so, Sethe makes hers as well as Denver's life unbearable.

Like Baby Suggs, Paul D offers Sethe the opportunity to live in his world, the world of love and remembrance, the world of hope. Paul D is a forward looking man. He hopes to build a future for himself and Sethe. As much as Sethe, Paul D's past is devastating, still he is more spirited and determined. When his escape from slavery is failed, he is captured by rifle-and-lamp carrying whites. After he is captured, Paul D realizes his ultimate degradation and dehumanization. He is reduced to chattel where his feet are shackled, a three-spoke collar laced around his neck, and a bit placed in his mouth before he is taken to be sold away from Sweet Home. Thus, slavery has emasculated him physically and mentally, his determination to sustain his 'self' is neither abated nor destroyed.

As much as Sethe, Paul D lives within the paradox of past and present, self and place. But he does not make his past a necessary part

of the present. Sethe is so obsessed with the past that she cannot understand that an immersion into the past can diminish her present. Like Sethe, Paul D's life is not passive; but he continuously tries to overcome the mental agitation created by slavery. So optimistic as he is, Paul D thinks that he and Sethe can create a meaningful existence. He says to Sethe : "We can make a life, girl. A life " (57).

Paul D's attitude to Sethe's murder also reveals his constructive and orderly behaviour. He knows the other ways to deal with oppression. So he says, "... you got two feet, Sethe, not four "(202). His reaction to Sethe's murder is similar to that of Baby Suggs'.

Though Sethe remains detached from him, with Sethe, Paul D finds a sense of rootedness. He tries to create stability in the ghost haunted house. When he sees that there is absence of order, unity and meaning in the lives of Sethe and Denver, he tries to provide stability in their lives. Thus he helps Sethe and Denver to come out of 'ostracized' life. When Beloved is exorcised, he assumes complete responsibility for the lives of Sethe and Denver. He assures Sethe : "... I'll catch you, girl. ... " fore you fall" (57). Thus he joins with Sethe in struggle for survival and for as he says, " some kind of tomorrow"(335). He enables Sethe for the first time to see herself as an individual, as mother, as her own "best thing" (335).

Thus like Baby Suggs, Paul D has the hope for better future. Unlike Sethe he leaves his past behind. And makes Sethe to forget her past and recognize her 'self'.

Stamp Paid, another ex-slave in the novel is also gone through the covert oppression of slavery; but he is not possessed like Sethe. Rather than accepting an identity which his slavemaster has given him, he has learnt to assert his own essence. His body may be enslaved, but his mind is not. Like Baby Suggs, when he literally frees his body, he helps the recently escaped slaves. By offering his wife to his white master, he thinks :

... he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off ... (227).

He extends his debtlessness to the runaway slaves by ferrying them to the secured place. No doubt, he blames himself for his wife's degradation but he tries to overcome this guilt by offering his services to his fellow blacks.

In fact, the slave life has taught Stamp Paid that powerlessness is not equivalent to hopelessness, and that being owned is not equivalent to being possessed. Stamp Paid thus, directs his anger into more constructive channels. By reaching to a level of maturity and self, he enjoys his freedom. He wants everybody to lay their burdens down. Unlike Sethe, he shows others that slavery cannot ultimately dehumanize

anyone. On the other hand, he encourages others to make their lives more meaningful.

Thus the positive attitude and constructive life of Baby Suggs, Paul D and Stamp Paid is contrary to the life that Sethe leads. The humiliation she has experienced during slavery does not allow her to seek a better future. However, the same humiliation creates self-awareness in Baby Suggs, Paul D and Stamp Paid, which makes their lives more purposeful.

Thus Beloved is the story of the black slave woman who tries to assert her 'self' in the immoral and unjust white world. She endeavours to change her fate and also the fate of black women slaves by liberating herself and her children though in an unusual way. It is also the story of the people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create their 'selves' and to keep their history alive. Beloved is thus, a celebration of black self in the context of history.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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