

HEALING SPACES IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

Beloved serves to memorialise the Middle Passage – those who did not make it through and those who endured the physical and emotional pain of slavery. For the latter group, the psychological damage was so intense that they almost lost their sense of self. Even after escaping into freedom, these slaves still had to work the haunting experiences out of their minds for them to attain a certain measure of freedom. The following discussion shows that life under slavery was grueling yet Morrison succeeds in converting pain to purpose amid the agony. This form of transmuting pain heals the trauma of slavery both in the individual and within the larger collectivity of African Americans. It is at the backdrop of this that I will show how slavery created awful circumstances for its victims, and how these same circumstances were reversed to give them psychic healing as they look forward to a liveable life.

Key words: healing, love, pain, slavery, trauma

Violence and trauma inform much literature about the lives of African Americans during and even after slavery. The terrible losses during the crossing from Africa to the New World, the everyday loss of life on the slave plantations and the disturbing losses sustained through the psychological and physical brutality of slavery all worked to ensure emotional pain and phobia in the lives of slaves - a pain so excruciating that no amount of mourning or lamentation will ever be enough to work through. The more the slaves try to forget this gruesome past, the more they lose their sense of self, which makes it very difficult for them to plan a future even after escaping into freedom. Yet at some point, they needed spiritual and psychic liberation to make them feel at home in the place where they have come to be.

In the face of these collective losses, coupled with their lives of continuous suffering, fragmentation and the desire for freedom, there was a need for these slaves to rebirth themselves, and this could only be achieved by confronting and coming to terms with the abrasions of

history, whether spiritually or physically, individually or collectively. Some of the places and spaces which the characters in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* inhabit play a crucial role in opening up possibilities of transformation from unliveable to liveable lives through healing. The characters' relationships and interactions in and between these spaces enable them to understand who they are and this recognition of themselves eventually help provide a kind of psychic healing through personal and communal interconnections. With this healing, they are able to construct both individual and collective identities that define them and give them a sense of self in the place they must call home. Thus their hearts that have been rusted shut due to the dehumanizing effects of slavery, closed out on all possibilities of psychic freedom, are greased open, with promises of a new and whole life.

Probably because of its gruesome nature, the institution of slavery was preferably forgotten in both black and white American cultures. In writing a novel that brings back fresh memories of that atrocious past, Morrison argues that there is a necessity to come face to face with the horrors of the past, not so much as to continue its psychological blow, but to digest and be able to overcome it. She therefore chooses to tell a story that many will prefer to avoid; the story of a slave woman who decides to kill her own child instead of giving her up to the horrific and soul-numbing experiences of slavery.

The child returns as a ghost in flesh and blood to claim her history by making it known. The story of all these people, to Morrison, was not one "to pass on" so she had to pass it on by bringing back *Beloved* from the dead so that her narrative, together with that of the living, can merge to give meaning and understanding to what is left of the existence of the former slaves and their descendants. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison complains that nobody knows the names or even thinks about those who could not make it across. She regrets that their existence never survived even in songs and/or lore. It is believed, in West African mythology, that the spirit of the dead come haunting especially if the individuals died unjustly, and again if their names are forgotten.

In *Beloved*, Morrison charts the repressed history of the atrocities of slavery; a history whose knowledge was denied even to its very victims. The slaves' voices that have been silenced

for so long resonate in *Sethe*, *Beloved*, *Denver*, *Paul D* and the others as they tell their stories through the process of rememory. Getting to this point of rememory was however difficult because the initial impulse of the slaves was to forget the horror. This is why Morrison brings in *Beloved* through whom the characters re-live the pain of slavery, and forcefully remember who they really are in relation to their African past thereby making it possible to defeat the mortification caused them in the plantations. These sound like the slaves are just a step away from freedom but they were Garner's property all the same and could only exercise these privileges within the physical boundaries of his farm. So then what difference does it make? No matter how much of their selfhood or manhood Garner acknowledges, it was of no use if beyond the limits of his farm, they were still "trespassers among the human race". This situation soon proves deceptive when Schoolteacher takes over and maintains that there is no freedom in slavery.

Physical and emotional damages replace Garner's privileges; only Garner could have understood Sixo's justification when Sixo explains that he eats the shoat to improve on the property since eating it will give him energy to work harder for more yield. Under Schoolteacher, Sweet Home became the very opposite of Garner's vision and a true representation of plantation life. *Sethe*, *Halle* and the *Pauls* experience to the brim, the brutalities of slavery and come to better understand their place in the slave system. *Sethe's* human form, for instance, is used as an object for both scientific and sexual experimentation by Schoolteacher's students and nephews, and she ends up being classified as both animal and human, and perhaps more animal than human. The retrogressive march and her inability to concentrate on positive thoughts due to the stinging sensation in her head point to both physical capture and mental mutilation.

Death then becomes a safe and sacred space that facilitates both physical and psychic peace; a form of eternal healing. In as much as universal morality and value judgement will dismiss *Sethe's* act as void of any perceptible logic and rationality, human circumstances sometimes leave this as the only open alternative. Creating this space in *Beloved* was not a matter of choice; it seemed the only suitable option for the slaves to ensure their children's freedom from oppression. But in as much as this act appeared the only way out at the time, it

merely added to the trauma and frustration that Sethe left Sweet Home with. The same community that welcomes her with an unreserved joy excludes and ostracises her for this one act of defiance against a system that will bereft every one of them of their humanity at the slightest opportunity.

Denver is spurred by these words and she moves on out in determination. Significantly, by telling Denver Sethe's, Halle's and her stories, Baby Suggs equips her with knowledge of the larger collective of the community and history of which she is part. It is her identification with, and acceptance of her family's matrilineal history, and a subsequent understanding of the forces of slavery, that initiate Denver into maturity and integrity. As she follows her grandmother's voice and steps out of the yard, she is welcome into the community and starts functioning as one of its members. It is believed that community provides the individual with a sense of purpose and belonging which gives them the strength to build a strong foundation for resisting external oppression.

Baby Suggs acknowledges her ancestral heritage and combines it with her experiences as a slave to call to consciousness the entire black community which has internalised the legacy of slavery much to its own detriment. Though she admits that there is no defence against slavery, her religious actions and beliefs are in contrast with those of the oppressors and therefore serve as a means of resistance. Being an untrained and un-churched preacher, with no affiliations to any particular religious denomination, her preaching does not follow the epistemological philosophy of western religion. The rejection of the rules of formal religion and the propagation of a new set of ideas place Baby Suggs as the spiritual and moral backbone of the African American society in *Beloved*. In this position, she stands at the forefront of the fight for self-retrieval which is vital for the mental healing and subsequent freedom of the black community in general.

The life hunger that overwhelms him during the act sets the pulse of his red heart beating again. At this point, he is able to humanize Sethe's infanticide and dispel the horror he first feels at its knowledge. All those agonizing and haunting memories of emasculation, packed away in his tobacco tin, resurface, not to make him feel pain and shame, but this time to reconstruct his

inner self and restore to him authorship of his life. With this new perspective of self, he chooses the path of personal desire and freedom – writing his text alongside Sethe’s. The heavy knives of defence against slavery – the misery, regret and hurt it caused can neither relieve nor free them. They turn to positive rather than painful moments and with their collective spiritual strength, they are able to beat out the ghost of the past. Towards the end of the novel, Morrison states that although Beloved has claim, she is not claimed. Being symbolic of the link to the African American ancestor, she has claim over the black population because it is only through her that they can re-actualize their status as a people.

On the other hand, as a symbol of slavery, she cannot be claimed because slavery is not their inheritance and claiming it will mean averring its legacy and staying trapped in its guile. However, by insisting that Beloved’s is not a story to pass on, these slaves show proof of having risen above their dehumanizing past - classifying it as just another story. This way, they are able to reaffirm their humanity in order to extinguish the dangerous legacies of the past. She suggests that the history of slavery should not be erased and forgotten too easily but should rather serve as a kind of racial therapy to African Americans for a redefinition of their ethnicity through the voices of the dead. This is why she converges and accumulates the hidden and visible truths of history in the character of Beloved and forces the other characters to relive these truths so as to know and accept themselves for who they really are.

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