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## Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A New Stylistic Narrative Form

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### ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison faces a great challenge in representing the Atlantic slave trade. In contemporary narrative form, the novel, *Beloved*, portrays the devastating effects of forced transnational migration. She confronts conventional silences surrounding the aspect of slavery by presenting displaced Africans on their way to America. Her text defines both black literature of the late twentieth century and troubles the status quo as an experiment in aesthetic expression which demonstrates the legacy of trauma fabricated in American culture. She stylizes her narrative form of language for particular effect by using direct references and subtle allusions to the aspect of slavery. Drawing on the coded discourse of oral history and slave narrative as fashion of writerly texts, Morrison takes her readers as participants in the construction of cultural memory. The present article takes up the formalistic and cultural approach to critique the aesthetic means by which Morrison's verbal style signifies the content of her story, *Beloved*, which results in a new genre as African-American literature that establishes itself in the late twentieth and the present century world literature.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Stylistic Narrative, African-American Literature, Slavery

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### 1. Introduction

In narrating the story of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison portrays the devastating effect of slave trade in contemporary narrative form through direct references and subtle allusions. She draws on the coded discourse of oral history and slave narratives as she fashions writerly texts, drawing in her readers as participants in the construction of cultural memory. She constructs the bilderverbot tradition, an injunction against depiction of sacred or

supposedly unrepresentable subject matter (Hughes, 1962). Morrison writes not only against traditional subject matter restriction but also against the conventional limit of her respective media's language by using words and images despite living in a white-dominated society. Her critiques identify formation while in bondage by cycling through an obsessive litany of sound and image fragments. Many researchers have scrutinized the interaction of history, memory and fiction, melancholy and

trauma, women's loss and female subjectivity in their works but none has dealt with the canonical text of *Beloved*, deemed as a touchstone of African-American literature. This article is concerned with Morrison's approach articulated in words and images in order to dismantle and reveal the verbal signification which portrays the Atlantic slave trade from Black perspective. The interface between American literature as an institution and that of celebrated artist as a social activist reveals the problem of defining and promoting transnational Black literature. In this regard, she avoids reductive debates on ethnicity and identity politics by characterizing and thus giving voice to the traditionally silenced Africans on their way to America.

## 2. Discussion

Toni Morrison's subject in *Beloved* is that of separation, loss, and renewal afforded by memory. She draws on documents of the Atlantic slave trade and slave narrative, grounding her stylized fiction in historical fact. She carries the legacy on Black Arts Movement started in early 1970s with her groundbreaking novel and more recent works demonstrating an ongoing commitment to bring Black experience into the mainstream American literature. She selects and combines details with rhetorical emphasis which signify, in a realist mode, with a traditional reverence for history as a verifiable fact. As a matter of fact, she tends to invoke and dismantle simple binaries such as victim/victimizer, mother/daughter, black/white by stream of consciousness episodes which signify in a subversive non-standard way. By the use of dialectic tensions based on these dichotomies and deconstructing them, she increases the possibilities of rhetorical style of language.

Morrison represents the theme of separation of family members from each other and from their African homeland through the device of the ghost story in the *Beloved*. This is the first time that she puts into words the experiences of a slave mother who expresses: "I would rather see my children killed than have them given up to the slaveholder's power; death is better than slavery" (Morrison, 1987, 62). The bitter experiences she goes through include: childbirth, nursing, the desires of preverbal infant and the sufferings of Africans who died on slave ships. She uses subject matters which were normally excluded from western cultural narratives.

Through the narration of the ghost of an infant, *Beloved*, who has been killed by her mother to save her from slavery, Morrison articulates a new mode of expression against the traditional subject matter restriction and conventional limits of media and language. *Beloved*, the dead infant, returns in the body of a nineteen-year-old who is able to express infantile feelings otherwise unarticulated in normal life: "Her desire to regain the maternal closeness of a nursing baby powers a dialogue that fuses pronoun positions and abolishes punctuation, undoing all the marks of separation that usually stabilize language" (Wyatt, 427).

Morrison's slave narrative shows a collective identity of *Beloved* as an African American who died on the Middle Passage of Atlantic slave trade. Regarding the narration of the story, Wyatt (1993) describes the conditions on the slave ships "in fragmented images without connective syntax or punctuation, capturing the loss of demarcation and differentiation of those caught in an "oceanic" space between cultural identities, between Africa and an unknown destination" (Wyatt, 73).



Morrison selects and combines verbal signification with emphasis on coherence to show the Atlantic slave trade from black perspective. The rhetorical images signify realistic mode regarding traditional reverence for historical fact. She tends to invoke and dismantle simple binaries as victim/victimizer, mother/daughter and black/white. Sethe, Beloved's mother, insists on her physical presence and a firm relationship to her children. She is willing to accept the separation and substitution of her child to avoid the further suffering from slavery. Here, she will not apply any kind of signifiers to represent her nursing baby so as to tell the secret of her infant's murder. According to Rose (1982) "the novel's discourse tends to resist the substitution of the very law of metaphoric operation" (38). By creating dialectic tension, Morrison deconstructs the dichotomy to increase rhetorical possibilities in language.

Morrison fashions a new representation of slave narrative that once was neglected in the history of black slavery which has now become the central concern of American literature. The strategy of her narrative rhetorically implicates the involvement of readers who may take stand against the issues she poses. She depicts the power of discourse in destroying African-American slaves' sense of selfhood. The major characters of the novel are born into slavery and experience "the imposed objectivity of its commodifying ideology" (Elliot, 2000: 181). Hence, power is maintained not only through physical violence, but also by recourse to other "instruments of subjugation particularly language and discourse" (Palsa, 2000: 234). In exposing slavery's machinations, Morrison pays particular attention to "ethnographic and historical scholarship" (Abdullatif, 1999: 55).

According to Raynaud, the whole process of making history with the tools of master (reading/writing) is reflected in the character of the schoolteacher who represents scientific racism (46). Sethe makes the ink with which the schoolteacher and his nephew define on paper her "animal characteristics;" the ink, a tool for communication produced by her hands, is turned against her. Irritated, she asks Mrs. Garner for the definition of "characteristics" and "features," vainly to exert control over the very words that have defined her body in a notebook (Morrison, 1987, 194-5). The terror Sethe feels in seeing herself defined and divided: human characteristics on the left, animal ones on the right (193) is reflected in her statement that the Whites can "dirty you so bad you forgot who you were" (251). She murders Beloved not to let anyone on this earth to "list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of paper" (Ibid).

In the world of slavery, binary oppositions are at work to make the slave distinct from the master. Numerous references in the novel recall the journey, especially the literal and symbolic division of slavery and freedom. In the *Beloved*, Morrison mentions the idea of Whites about Blacks: "Whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their white blood (197). Lawrence (1998) commenting on the expression remarks "This belief [...] abstracts the human corporeality of the slave into a sign for the other in the discourse of the dominant ideology" (89). The writer parallels the structural tension that signifies the resistance to the existing situation. This is done by careful balance and unbalance on the linguistic level which troubles the deep waters of cultural values and norms.

Lawrence is of the opinion that Negroes internalized such views of slaveholders by mentioning "further, such invasive signifying upon the black body generate a self-fulfilling prophecy, as blacks find themselves unable to assert an identity outside the expectation imposed upon them (90). The author confirms this in the continuation: "The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside" (198).

According to Fuston-White (2002), Morrison's work is a strong challenge to modernist tradition of knowledge, reason, language, history and identity (461). She is self-conscious and metadiscursive as a postmodern writer, though she questions the scope of the postmodern moment as an historical event and the conventions of its style as aesthetic. Fuston-White's assertion signifies that Morrison in *Beloved* deconstructs the foundations that have marginalized and essentialized African-Americans. However, Morrison's method of narrating the story of slavery is innovative and she attempts to depict the "disremembered and uncounted for" those "sixty million and more" who died as captives in Middle Passage (Morrison, 1987, 274). Fuston-White further adds that Morrison's aims are to revive "the collective cultural memory" a brutalized and dehumanized history that has been erased from the minds as in Fisher's term, "hegemonic whitewashing" (2002: 463). Such prejudice is evident in *Beloved* when we come across the reaction of white observer to Sethe's infanticide. Here, the readers come to know that Sethe did it out of agency, while schoolteacher and his

companions look at it as a sign of madness. By depicting the distance between a white's superficial interpretation of an event from its complex reality, Morrison "begins to blur the dichotomous representations which in enlightenment thought so easily categorized truth and falsehood, good and evil, history and myth" (Fuston-White, 2002: 464).

Morrison's aim of narrating the story of Sethe's infanticide is to disclose "the multiplicity of truth, all of which merit legitimation" (Ibid). The role of community in Sethe's killing her daughter is not negligible. However, identity is formed in the context of community in this novel. According to Anzaldua the border culture is emerged by "the life-blood of two worlds meaning to form a third .... a border culture (qtd. in Elliot, 2000, 188). The community Sethe lives in is similar to "borderland". The blacks live in a borderland between their own culture and the white slaveholders' culture. The free black community in this story "has no fixed, institutionalized, organized, moral and social codes of behavior and thought. Its vulnerable existence is compounded by unrelenting white hatred and disrespect (Elliot, 2000, 188). The white community has internalized social and moral codes and does not provide any support to Sethe. Such codes remind us of inherited codes of past slavery which finds its manifestation in Sethe's killing of her child. She rationalizes and justifies her act by telling "that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore (Morrison, 1987: 251)".

Morrison has an astonishing power of storytelling through which she represents history and connection of families that had been lost in slavery. Sethe and her mother's



discontinued relationship is made alive through the act of storytelling “as she began telling Denver and Beloved about her earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events, or her thirst for hearing it-in any case it was unexpected pleasure” (Morrison, 1987: 58). Sethe’s speech-act is an attempt to express her thoughts and feelings clearly in words that bond between her and her mother in an infrequent encounter the facts of her loss which serves to conjure up the memories of the past in present.

Morrison’s great contribution to the fabric of American literature is a rendition of history of slavery nearly lost to the consciousness of people of the world. She attempts to give voice to those who died in the Middle Passage which in Fuston-White’s term were “so easily erased from the cultural text” (465). She shatters the accepted social custom of silence surrounding the Atlantic slave trade lifting up hypothesis of human repression under colonizers by giving an instance of a game of language and logic such as the beating of Sixo by the schoolteacher and highlighting that no more “the definition belongs to the definers-not the defined” (Morrison, 1987, 190).

By presenting Sixo in the game of language and logic, and other instances in the story, Morrison signifies stylistic consideration of language and authentic mode of African oral tradition in which history is passed on to the readers orally. The basic structure of slavery is transcended to create a superstructure of resistance and revival that naturalizes the institution as cultural practice.

Through the use of gestures, signs, exophoric references, characters’ language in Morrison’s story becomes mysterious through time and space. Endophoric

references highlight the exophoric references. Young Sethe and her mother articulate few words between each other but the message of connection and identity is so strong that signifies an eternal effect. The image of Sethe’s mother nurturing breast to show the branded scars and small Sethe seeking a pile of corpses for her mother’s body draws the readers’ consciousness into the meaning-making process of the novel. Ignoring the reductive binaries of negative against positive or good against evil, Morrison applies her stylistic shifts to show the similarity and difference between black and white, victim and victimizer, death and victory. The focus of her attention in the novel is to draw the readers to a realization of the text which in the process of reading .... can make an ethical development of it to react potentially to the world at large.

### 3. Conclusion

The great mystery of the novel *Beloved* lies in the rational connection between the mother and the lost child. As a mother, Sethe learns her history through retelling the story told to her. The mother figure takes a contradictory position in the discourse. The speaking subject forms her sense of identity by poeticized linguistic process. The identity of mother owned by self-definition makes Morrison form a new narrative in which it signifies the subjectivity that illuminates the political structure of social domination. She treats the historical fact of slavery and establishes the depth of a mother’s love and breaks the link of family relationship in the context of Middle Passage. Applying semiotic openness of meaning in her often ambiguous expressions, she addresses the issues of the ever-evolving human identity particularly fabricated in US culture.

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