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You Your Best Thing: Afrocentric Agency and the Reconstructive Power of Rememory in *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The study analyzes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* with a particular focus on the protagonist, Sethe and her reconstruction of identity and agency, challenging the pervasive narrative of victimization commonly and historically associated with African women.

Methodology: This study is qualitative and employ's Mckee's (2003) close textual analysis to interpret the text and examine the construction of identity and agency in Morrison's *Beloved.* It focuses on comprehending the text's structure, the language used to convey information, the underlying themes, the characters, meanings and symbols. It utilizes Asante's theory of Afrocentricity with a particular focus on the idea of 'centeredness' and 'dislocation'.

Findings: The characters transition from the periphery of Eurocentric historical accounts to the center of their own existential experiences. Sethe finds it difficult to deal with what she refers to as "rememory" the notion that painful memories are tangible locations that one may inadvertently revisit. She does not allow these memories inundate her, instead it teaches her how to process them.

Conclusion: The study frames these women as active agents of their own healing and identity, demonstrating that embracing their cultural roots facilitated identity reconstruction and ignited hope for the future.

Keywords: African-American Women, Identity, Afrocentricity, Slavery, Agency, Past.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Morrison's writings are the mirror reflection of the life experiences of African Americans as a race in general, but of Black women in particular. Her novel, *Beloved* is a "modern –day rendition of the nineteenth century genre of the slave narrative…' (Elbert, 1990, p. 38). It is a retelling of an unnerving historical account of Margaret Garner, a "compassionate yet resolute self-emancipated mother's tough love" (Bell, 54). For Morrison this text, "was a conscious act toward healing a painful wound: a studied memorial to the great social wrong of the enslavement of African (Mc Kay, 2006, p.3). She "revisions a history both spoken and written, felt and submerged" (Holloway, 1990, p. 49). It unveils the brutality and the humiliation that the enslaved African Americans suffered in late 18th-century America. *Beloved* is

examined from different perspectives, including racism, sexism, trauma, history, identity, love, and motherhood. Although the text's thematic and formal diversity has produced an extensive body of scholarship, the majority of researchers—within the confines of their particular theoretical frameworks have focused on, or at least touched on, the text's portrayal of physical and emotional trauma and the characters' struggles to survive. This study will examine the female characters, Sethe and Baby Suggs, who, resist and survive the traumatic experiences of slavery by retelling their stories and place themselves at the center of the narratives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on *Beloved* operates at the intersection of psychology and sociology. Sethe's black feminist sense of self-sufficiency is combined with her black awareness and rejection of white conceptions and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other enslaved people as non-human (Bell, 1992). While some critics focus on the internal psyche, others examine how these psychological fractures manifest through Morrison's use of metaphors and skillful textual manipulation (Selfridge, 1994). The novel's red imagery simulates the effects of trauma through constant troping on its own level, explicitly tying them to an array of other red images used throughout the text to symbolize slavery (Bast, 2011). Krumholz (1992) reads *Beloved* as a ritual of healing. As an eruption of the past and the suppressed unconscious, it catalyzes the healing process for the characters and the reader (59). Benjamin (1998) describes the self and the existence of others as a predominant theme of *Beloved*. She illustrates: "In order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for another" (p. 53).

Writers like Schapiro (1991) have looked at how *Beloved* addresses the fundamental problem of "recognizing and claiming one's subjectivity, and how this cannot be achieved independently of social environment" (p.1). Sethe, in *Beloved, "*struggles with a past that is part of white/male historical discourse (Henderson, 1991, p.84). These intricate inter-dependencies between different racial groups and genders have historically demonstrated black women's value both in enslavement and liberation (Elias, 1993, p.44). Even though these critics extensively mapped the scope of the trauma, it is still vital to investigate the mechanisms of reclamation as they have overlooked the specific Afrocentric agency that allows these women to heal. This study extends that healing process into Afrocentricity, moving beyond the split- self toward a reconstructed, centered identity. Beloved fits into the 'Neo-slave narrative' tradition through its struggle against historical discourse. This genre, which first appeared in the late 1960s, reworks the experience of being an Atlantic slave in order to prioritize personhood over position. The emphasis on subject formation also reflects a significant shift away from the term "slave" in the twentieth century and toward the term "enslaved African" to emphasise personhood and humanity rather than only underlining slave status. A fully formed black subjectivity that frequently distinguishes the neo-slave narrative from conventional historiography of "master" narratives confuses or immediately challenges them (Kennon, 2017, p.6).

Although Morrison's story exhibits a more gender-balanced approach towards the suffering of both male and female slaves, she is concerned with the suffering experienced by both sexes: "the oppression or suffering under slavery has no gender preference" (Elbert 38). By examining slave narratives written by women, Fluton suggests that enslaved women place themselves and the other women in their stories at the centre of active resistance to slavery. It also confirms the usefulness of the slave narrative form and black feminism for enabling enslaved people to effectively represent themselves and participate in public discussions on slavery, racial equality, and gender equality (5). Therefore, to understand the disorientation of the Black experience in America, one must look to the "identity problem" which was created over the course of five centuries of white dominance, slavery, racial segregation, and the condescending Jim Crow laws had a part in obliterating the African/Black identity.

Asante's Afrocentric concept posits that Black people were systematically dislocated from their own cultural and psychological centers. Afrocentricity, therefore, is the process of reclaiming that center. The African Americans did not feel like Americans because of their dark skin. Many of them tried to imitate

the appearance and conduct of the white majority by straightening their natural hair and blanching their skin because they were ashamed of being black. Afrocentricity is thought to have emerged from the identity problem.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and employ's Mckee's (2003) close textual analysis to interpret the text and examine the construction of identity and agency in Morrison's *Beloved.* It focuses on comprehending the text's structure, the language used to convey information, the underlying themes, the characters, meanings and symbols. It utilizes Asante's theory of Afrocentricity with a particular focus on the idea of 'centeredness' and 'dislocation'.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Beloved turns history into a tale as potent as Exodus and as personal as a lullaby by gazing relentlessly into the depths of slavery. Morrison's depiction of the veil updates a Du Boisian metaphor originally intended to allude to the gap between blacks and whites in American society. By peering behind this discursive 'veil,' Morrison invites the reader into the specific, localized trauma of 1873 Kentucky. Here, a decade after the Civil War, the protagonist Sethe attempts to navigate a freedom that is still haunted by the 'Sweet Home' plantation. However, a significant portion is presented through the memories and flashbacks of the central characters, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Halle, who were enslaved at the time. Therefore, it is her role as a writer to transcend these discursive constraints by establishing a complementary and dialogic link between the "exteriority" of the slave story and the "interiority" of her own work (Henderson 81). In the foreword for *Beloved*, Morrison writes: "it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what 'free' could possible mean to women" (2). She reinforces how the experience of freedom would be for black women in particular, considering the history of these women, in which marriage was discouraged or illegal, and in which giving birth was required, but parenting them was not allowed.

Sethe, the protagonist, is living with her daughter, Denver, in Kentucky. They live better than many enslaved because of their owners, Mr. and Mrs. Garner, who "ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor" (Morrison 165). Sethe is married to Halle, who liberates his mother, Suggs, by making a settlement with Mr. Garner, allowing her to work overtime and, in exchange, buy her freedom. Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, wonders what an old woman would do with freedom at the age of 60, but the moment she stepped down, she felt, "there was nothing like it in the world" and realized, "these hands belong to [her]. These *are my* hands" (Morrison 166).

American slavery is seen as it was experienced by those who were its objects of exchange, both at its best — which was not particularly nice — and at its worst — which was as horrible as can be imagined. It is regarded as one of the most virulently anti-family institutions that humans have ever created. This is done through the various voices and memories in *Beloved,* including those of Sethe's mother, a survivor of the infamous slave-ship crossing. The slaves lack a mother, a father, their partners, their kids, and other members of their family. People in this world abruptly disappear and are never seen again, not as a result of an accident, a covert operation, or acts of terrorism, but rather as a matter of routine legal policy (Atwood 1).

The atmospheric shift for Sethe occurs when the plantation, ironically named "Sweet Home," offers the most agonizing treatment, as it is taken over by the cruel white schoolteacher and his nephews. She is tyrannized and sexually abused. When she attempts an escape, she is beaten like a brute. Her back has wounds that are yet open and bloody. The scars function as signs of ownership, and she is property. Amy, who saves her, reads it like a tree with branches. The inscriptions on her back mark a symbol of her past, which Sethe is yet unable to articulate as the history of her body's text. Because the white power structure inhibits enslaved people from writing, she is coerced to read herself through the gaze of 'other' (Henderson, 1991).

The school teacher represents the ultimate "Eurocentric center." In addition to whips, he brings paper and ink to Sweet Home. He uses his "science" to chronicle the enslaved people's existence by measuring their teeth and classifying their traits into "animal" and "human" columns. In this context, Sethe's children are essentially possessions or biological specimens rather than her own. Within this "white center," Sethe discovers that her children are ensnared in his "ledger" (Morrison 193) as long as they are within his reach when she witnesses Schoolteacher arriving to take them back into servitude. His conceptions of property describe their reality.

Sethe's life is limited to her daughter, Denver, when the novel opens, until the appearance of Beloved. She names her daughter after Amy Denver, a compassionate white indentured servant who helps her deliver the baby on the bank of the Ohio River. Although race creates an impenetrable barrier between Amy and Sethe, the two women are united by a familiar feeling of motherhood. Beloved is essentially the ghost in the machinery. She is the eerie spirit of the infant daughter that Sethe killed while she was a captured fugitive. She represents the portion of Sethe that, when separated, cannot be mourned: a deep rupture that cannot be healed (Moglen, 1993).

The quintessentially resilient Morrison female lead, Sethe, endures the horrors committed against her and refuses to surrender her motherhood to the system. While her act of slitting her baby's throat is an inhuman act of violence, indubitably, it must not be seen as a mere crime but the horrific extremity of a system that denies women maternity rights. By making a decision, she reclaims her agency, "[c]ollected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil" (Morrison 192).

This act employs an African ontology where the boundary between life and death is porous. By sending the infant "over there" to the spirit world: "put [her] babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison 193), Sethe moves her toward the Ancestral Space, a Black Center where the schoolteacher can exercise no authority in this spiritual domain. His definitions, his whips, and his ink are unable to penetrate the "veil" (Morriosn 163). Rather than her worth as a commodity, the child's identity in the afterlife is determined only by her bond with her mother and her ancestry. Asante (2017) elucidates afrocentricity as “a paradigm that posits African people as subjects and agents of their own historical and cultural reality. It is not a matter of 'replacing' white history with black history, but of Africans being the center of their own phenomena." Similarly, Sethe’s regaining the ability to define safety and existence itself, even at a terrible cost, is the pinnacle of Afrocentric agency

As a slave who in the past had no say in her children's lives, Sethe's controversial act of infanticide epitomizes her refusal to submit to dehumanization and the white/male historical discourse. While socially condemned, her act is the manifestation of systemic and institutionalized slavery, generational trauma, and fear indoctrinated since birth. Furthermore, we witness her tenacity when she trades ten minutes of sex with an engraver to pay him for carving 'Beloved' on her daughter's headstone. However, the twenty-eight days of Sethe's freedom also make her more resilient and self-reliant. She is, as Morrison states, "tougher, because she could do and survive things they neither believed she should nor survive" (Morrison 56).

Just as Morrison historicizes fiction, Sethe has to piece together history and reclaim it. This process of "rememory" is painful, echoing T.S. Eliot's sentiment of "mixing / Memory and desire" (1.2-3) from "The Wasteland". The relationship between Paul D and Sethe, in the context of their dealings with the past, is well defined by the communication attempt that met only with partial success. Both of them learn to, at least in part, vent their own emotions and psychological traumas through their recurrent conversations about the horrors of 'Sweet Home' and the woodshed. Ultimately, Beloved stands in for the "sixty million and more" (Dedication) slaves who perished, a tragedy that must be preserved as history and atoned for. It is a story of both individual and societal loss: the loss of a home, the abandonment of a mother who was held captive, the erasure of a father who had been disinherited, the alienation of her body through rape, and the alienation of her mind through the shattering of the mirror of identity (Moglen 23).

The story is narrated by an "I" but Morrison, for most of the part, has given her slave woman protagonist a voice to reclaim her identity (Davis 151). By attempting the challenging process of reconciling these splits-past and present, Morrison begins to open up the potential of coherence and recognition for the characters in *Beloved* through freedom and alliance with community. However, Sethe must have to claim herself as she says: "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Sethe declares, "Freeing yourself [is] one thing; claiming ownership of that released self [is] another" (Morrison 111). This contrast emphasizes that although physical emancipation is necessary, actual agency necessitates the difficult psychological process of "claiming" oneself. Though arduous, it is in her power to reclaim her past to process new experiences.

The first-person pronouns "I," "me," and "my own" that Sethe frequently uses highlight this newly discovered autonomy. She emphasizes her own part in her kids' survival when she talks about their escape. Sethe says of her children: "I birthed them, and I got 'em out, and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying" She states that "I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (Morrison 191) making this assertion of ownership a daring act. She opposes the "false idea of racial hierarchy" and the social control present in white historiography by claiming her motherhood (Kante, 2016, p.18).

Furthermore, what Morrison once described as "the study of an interior existence that was not written, and the discovery of a kind of reality" (74) is how this story is structured. These unspoken and unwritten inner lives in *Beloved* are the personal narratives of Black Americans who were enslaved. If there is splintering, these fragments must work to reunite and eventually come together. One way to achieve coherence is through story sharing. The characters in Toni Morrison's novels tell stories for a variety of purposes, including "self-dramatization, self-justification, ego-action," according to Skerritt, but most importantly for "self-understanding," as "storytelling is the major folk process in Toni Morrison's fictional world." (qtd. in Levy 116).

Since slavery is a condition that has been passed down through the years, the road to revamping lives is grueling. Escape is a substantial psychological change that requires communal support rather than just a physical relocation. Baby Suggs, Paul D., Denver, and Beloved facilitate Sethe's healing. Beloved's existence is liminal between the past and the disabling present (Halloway, 1992). What helps her heal is the remembrance of her past. In the first part, with the arrival of Paul D, and in the next, it is Beloved who coerces her to confront her past in the irreconcilable roles as a slave and a mother. By participating in "rememory," Sethe moves from a condition of suppressed shock to one of resilience, proving that even though the past is brutally miserable, the only way to a stable present is to reclaim it.

People who have been in violent circumstances frequently express a desire to forget. Following the ferocity and disturbing events that caused trauma, the person's internal reality changes. The most challenging memories are those that are frequently associated with trauma; as a result, other memories could not be mobilised due to the shock experienced. If it is too painful to express, therefore, reassurance to withhold it and give some space is crucial. Nevertheless, as the narrative suggests; in order to forget, one must first recall. Even if it might be challenging to comprehend, resilience is a reality that is a part of one's self. In the same vein, the power that enables Baby Suggs and Sethe to confront and overcome the unprecedented challenges of life lies in their resilience and heroic courage. They inexplicably find themselves battling a sense of loneliness that pervades their lives. Baby Suggs, too, remembers very little about her children—all but Halle were sold off—and even less about herself because "she never had the map to learn what she was like" (Morrison 140). After having her freedom purchased by her son's selfless labor, she asserts a sense of "mine" that challenges the "mine" of Beloved and Sethe. She realizes that the hands that slave traders used to determine her value as a commodity now actually belong to her (Moglen, 1993). Baby Suggs changes her name- when Mr. Garner buys her, she was reportedly listed under the name Jenny Whitlow in the deed of sale- she decides to revert to her previous identity- Baby Suggs. 'Suggs' had been taken from her husband, and 'Baby' was what he called her, so in this way, she anchors

to her African identity. Baby Suggs is seen as a matriarchal authority that rejects white culture and norms, returns to nature, and preaches love and peace from the pulpit to her people. According to Asante, African American women are capable of being strong and independent. Moreover, having strong, independent women fosters a communal spirit that prioritizes the welfare of African American individuals (6). Baby Suggs is reconnecting to the center of her significance as an African American woman through this Afrocentric experience. She recognizes a sense of possession and ownership as a mother. African American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group's efforts to harness black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation (Collins, 1990). Suggs achieves emotional equilibrium. She is a woman of fortitude who takes pride in having unfettered her children. She understands the significance of self-value and community nurturance.

This legacy of resilience is passed down to Denver, who reaches out to the community for help when her mother withdraws from the outside world, as Beloved possesses 124 both literally and symbolically. Similarly, Sethe envisions and hopes for a better future with Paul. She learns about her value as an individual from the healing male energy of Paul D. and is guided toward autonomy. She accomplishes the seemingly impossible and moves on from her past with a life of love and acceptance because of Amy, Denver, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and others who assist her on her quest. These alliances illustrate that while the quest for self-ownership is individual; its success is often communal.

Morrison mirrors this psychological reclamation through modernist devices such as plot fragmentation and shifting narrative voices in *Beloved*, forcing the reader to construct an interpretive framework actively. The reader's process of putting together the narrative parallels Sethe's psychological healing. Repressed fragments of the fictionalized personal and historical past are recovered and constructed. (Krumholz, 1992). Sethe, too, starts with the "rememories" of the past's pictures and shapes, giving them form, drama, and significance through the process of narrativization. She keeps delving into her past and future through Paul D's return and Beloved's presence at 124. It allows Sethe to construct a meaningful life story from a cluster of traumatic images, transforming separate and disparate events into a meaningful whole (Adams, 2002).

5. CONCLUSION

By grounding the text Morrison in an Afrocentric perspective, she empowers characters to retell their stories and assert their existence during a time when white supremacists silenced them. Therefore, it depends on characters like Sethe and Baby Suggs, who are not mere marginal figures but are subjects of their story. Morrison binds her characters to the underlying African identity, culture, and tradition. She establishes the value of tradition and spirituality through Baby Suggs. She creates a brave portrait of a matriarchal figure: in Sethe, who fearlessly fights for the liberation of her children, and in Denver, who embodies a strong woman who believes in protecting her family. Even Beloved personifies a history that cannot be suppressed and forgotten, but instead used to heal.

Morrison's portrayal of the African Americans during the post-slavery era deconstructs the white version of their past and generates Afrocentric agency in her female characters. Asante states that one is obligated to write African history with African agency, assuming the lead role in the story (27). She creates a participatory experience in her fiction (qtd. in Wilentz 92). The female characters narrate their stories in their own voices.

The women reconstruct their past to assert themselves in the present and pave the way for a better future. Morrison makes it explicit that African Americans can be liberated from the discriminatory treatment if they choose to deal with it rather than replicate it. These African American women struggle to uphold their humanity and sense of dignity in the face of prejudice. One might define one's present in relation to white society by taking pride in discovering one's African roots and learning from one's past. Sethe performs a radical rupture by murdering her daughter. "You no longer have the power to define what my child is," (Morrison, 228) she says succinctly. Sethe is an object (a "breeder") in the master's story. She takes on the role of the Primary Subject by killing the child. She challenges the slaveholder's "mine" in

favor of her own "mine," a term that appears frequently in the book. In the framework of Afrocentricity, this horrifying act of agency is a refusal to be a marginal figure in Schoolteacher's narrative. Even at the expense of the child's life, she pushes her own story—being a mother—to the forefront. The women of *Beloved* resist. They are survivors of violence and subjugation. This individual agency is Morrison's way of giving voice to those sixty million who were silenced by history. They embrace their past, their roots, and themselves, hence attaining agency. Sethe believed that her children were her "best thing," which is why she killed them. The culmination of self-ownership is Paul D's correction that, "You are your best thing." Sethe does more than survive when she takes back her past from the "ink" of the schoolteacher. She moves from a state of relationality to a state of intrinsic value. She turns a history of erasure into a testimonial of self-worth, showing that the most radical act of resistance is to love oneself.

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