

Chapter VI

Foregrounding Resistance: *Beloved*

Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, once said this about resistance, particularly resistance to the Vietnam War:

. . . resistance, at root, must mean more than resistance against war. It is a resistance against all kinds of things that are like war. . . . So perhaps, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly. . . . I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness. (qtd. in hooks 43)

What is remarkable about this statement is that resistance is equal to an opposition to a system that becomes threatening to a people's existence. Resistance also regenerates one's individuality, effects reclamation of self, and creates a space for the individual in which s/he is not the subject of domination by an institutionalised system. With the release of the oppositional strength of

one's self-consciousness, which lies otherwise repressed by dominant ideologies, one can have a taste of freedom, which, in turn, heals many of the wounds inflicted by a racist, sexist and classist society. Despite the abolition of slavery in the US with the Emancipation Proclamation Act and the 13th amendment in 1863 and 1865 respectively, it is hardly possible to efface the past from the present. Historical reflections on slavery, both in attack and in defence, are controversial in the present context as they fail to determine the nature of differences characterizing the past of a society. In order to understand the power structure that permits slavery, it is very essential to measure the power of forbearance of those people who are "less powerful" in a thoroughly asymmetrical social relationship. The master narrative of slavery, exposing its devastation and yet avoiding the more violent aspects of it, can never trigger the imagination of those who have never gone through the horrible experience; rather it perpetuates the system. Historical "truth" of any system comes down from generations according to the instructions, either direct or indirect, of the ruling power/culture. Walter Benjamin has rightly described such cultural practices as a "triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those lying prostrate." He proceeds further by saying ". . . the spoils are carried

along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures. . . . There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (286). The master narrative of the slave's history avoids its contradiction as much as it can by deleting certain records and highlighting others according to its conveniences. The "produced" meanings offered by the historical/cultural products giving shape to the identity of those people, fail to focus on their "selves," because the way the master narrative "naturalises" them as their owned property writes them off as "subjects" with their claim on "themselves." To form one's individuality or the collective identity of a group of people, particularly that of black people, and especially that of black women, who are deliberately marginalized, a resistance to this "produced naturalness" is required. Only then men and women can build up their own history.

Beloved, the most acclaimed novel of Toni Morrison, deals with the nature of historical knowledge, fictionality of history and several other burning issues relating to it. Walter Clemmon has rightly evaluated the masterpiece in *Newsweek*:

[In this] magnificent novel, . . . [a slave's] interior life is re-created with a moving intensity no novelist has even approached before.

. . . The splintered, piecemeal revelation of the past is one of the technical wonders of Morrison's narrative. We gradually understand that this isn't story telling but the intricate exploration of trauma. . . . I think we have a masterpiece on our hands here: difficult, sometimes lushly overwritten, but profoundly imagined and carried out with burning fervor.

(David 123-24)

The novel has focussed on the darkest interior of the slaves' lives and made public their daily struggle for existence along with the strategies those people adopted to withstand the horrors of slavery. Morrison tries to make it a personal experience because she seems to be less interested in slavery as an institution than in the personal narratives of those anonymous people called slaves. Except for the informative accounts of the traditional slave narratives, there is rarely any reliable account projecting a slave's personal life because remembrance of slavery, Morrison thinks, is like "national amnesia" which people, either black or white, hardly want to encounter. In order to make the history of these people "real," remembrance is essential, but in such a manner that memory does not overpower imagination in a destructive way. In her 1988 interview with Marsha Darling Morrison pointed

out how much important it was for her to offer in her works a "life like" representation of her people:

One of the things that's important to me is the powerful imaginative way in which we deconstructed and reconstructed reality in order to get through. . . . So it's important to me that interior life of each of those characters be one that you could trust, one that felt like it was a real interior life: and also be distinct one from the other, in order to give them--not "personalities," but an interior life of people that have been reduced to some great lump called slaves. (252-53)

Morrison takes stock of the slave past in *Beloved*. A journey back from the free present to the slave past, the novel reverses the progressive movement of the traditional slave narrative. In exploring her characters' traumatic experiences, something that is rarely done in objective or subjective historical accounts of slavery, Morrison is telling a "free story" (qtd. in Grewal 97) in order to expand the scope of her readers' comprehension by engaging them in an act of investigation of a crime, that is committed not by a slave owner, but by a slave who is not only black but also a woman. Sethe slaughters her baby daughter, *Beloved*, in order to protect her from white

masters, who would otherwise "dirty" her so much that she would never like herself anymore. The narrative voice says:

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. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing-- the part of her that was clean. (*Beloved* 251)

The novel highlights the tension of a slave mother who has to exercise the most violent and aggressive motherly affection when "her own," "the beautiful, magical best thing" is in danger. The slave mother chooses to end the life of her child against the slow, gradual, social killing of her so as to resist devastation. Sethe's raw act of defiance robs the white authority of its power to decide the fate of a slave mother's child. For the slave catchers Sethe has gone "wild," the result of the "mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her." By deconstructing the stereotype of the black woman as a submissive and

subservient breeder of slaves, Morrison, in her new representation of slavery has reconstructed the image of black woman as bold and violent, and at the same time a loving and caring mother, who can never be subjugated by the dominant power when her children's security is in question. The horrifying scene of the "nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other" stupefies the school teacher and his group. The school teacher realises "that there was nothing there to claim"; Sethe, who was an object to be "bragged about," a matter of pride in the slave market because she made "fine ink," "damn good soup" and above all a good breeder for continuing the process, "having at least ten breeding years left," has gone "wild" now (149). Morrison's novel thus creates a "public space of trauma," a space, defined by Lawrence Kirmayer as "provid[ing] a consensual reality and collective memory through which the fragments of personal memory can be assembled, reconstructed, and displayed with a tacit assumption of validity" (qtd. in Grewal 14).

The idea of *Beloved* came from an actual event published in a 19th century newspaper about a woman, named Margaret Garner, which Morrison discovered while editing *The Black Book* at Random House. In her interview with

Gloria Naylor, Morrison narrated the story of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave thus:

. . . she had escaped from Kentucky, I think, with her four children. She lived in a little neighbourhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill two others. She hit them in the head with a shovel and they were wounded but they didn't die. And there was a smaller one that she had at her breast. The interesting thing . . . was the interviews that she gave. . . . She said 'I will not let those children live how I have lived.' And she had made up her mind that they would not suffer the way that she had and it was better for them to die. And her mother-in law was in the house at the same time and she said, 'I watched her and I neither encouraged her nor discouraged her.' They put her in jail for a little while I'm not even sure what the denouement is of her story.

(206-207)

Margaret Garner becomes Sethe in Morrison's fictional representation. Margaret may be a burning issue for the Abolitionists; her case may be effectively used in determining the superiority of one political power to

another; also she can be controversial to moral preachers for drawing ethical judgements--but her anguish, her trauma shall always remain "under the veil" because historically the woes and sufferings of all "Margarets" are shrouded in silence. Historical records, projecting the lives of slaves, female slaves in particular, are sparse.

Plantation records offer little insight into the lives of slaves, and most of the slave narratives that exist today are authored by men. In her essay "The Site of Memory" Morrison has reflected on the limitations of the 19th century writers of the slave narratives who had to be very careful so that the narrative account would not be objectionable. Those narratives and those "proceedings too terrible to relate" were kept under the "veil." Now for the author it became the most important task to "rip that veil" so that the "interior life" of her people could be accessible. She says that for her, who is a black and a woman, the job is very different and critical. To quote the author:

The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of

all, I must try my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. . . . But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me. (110-111)

Beloved is the fictional representation of the "unspeakable" stories of the slave mother, whom the white intellectual tradition categorises in its own way. In order to make her stories known to all Morrison depends much on her power of imagination in such a way that the telling of her stories would create an African American presence to withstand the hegemonic course that deliberately white washes the stories of those "disremembered and unaccounted for" (274). *Beloved* is not only a work of recovery that is intended to represent knowledge, excised from dominant ideologies, but also one of charting a traumatised past of beleaguered people through amalgamation of multiple voices for healing the wounds of her race and thus offering a "kind of truth" (Morrison, "The Site" 115).

The novel begins with the description of a house in Ohio, a house called 124, which is "spiteful," "full of a baby's venom." From the beginning it calls attention to the pain in the lives of ex-slaves. Sethe and her only

living daughter Denver, who are the only victims of that "baby's venom," decide "to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost" in their way of conversation: "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on" (*Beloved* 4). The readers, thus from the very opening lines, are thrust into a haunted house where time seems to have been suspended between a traumatised past and an uncertain future of the ex-slaves. Sethe wants to avoid confronting the past: "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious" (6) and it would not allow her to forget her past: "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost . . . the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (58). They must forget their horrifying past for the purpose of survival because historically a beleaguered people can not look back; they must keep going on to meet the demands of the present. But the past, in spite of being repressed intentionally, can never be effaced totally as it remains latent and occasionally comes up to take its hold on the present. For the people who undergo trauma, Cathy Caruth observes, "it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; the survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis" (9). The narrative voice says, "Freeing yourself is one thing; claiming ownership of that

freed self was another" (95). In the Clearing scene after the "enchantment" caused by Sethe's "somebody choked me," (96) her "old rememories" (95) occupied her: "Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples . . . her spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not" (98).

In the novel it takes Sethe 18 years to counter that part of her which were buried within, and when she does, that buried and repressed part of herself engulfs her totally. 124 is being haunted since Sethe killed her baby daughter. Both Sethe and Denver can co-exist with the ghost and they are used to its presence, "It's not evil, just sad," says Sethe (8). Now with the arrival of Paul D, "the last of the Sweet Home men," the past seems to have been erased to make the present more meaningful and project new possibilities for the future. Though Sethe first thought that Paul D had come "to punish her further for her terrible memory," (6) later she finds in him an outlet for all her suppressed anguishes. Each recalls for the other buried images of tumultuous emotions, connected with the days of their slavery on a farm called "Sweet Home." Paul remembers those days when Sethe was brought as a replacement for Baby Suggs, "a timely present for Mrs.

Garner." She was thirteen when she came, an "iron-eyed girl" who was an object of yearning for the "five Sweet Home men" (10) "all in their twenties" and finally "She chose Halle" (11). Sethe relates her story, full of anguishes, to Paul D:

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. . . .

Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.'" "

'They used cowhide on you?'

'And they took my milk.'

'They beat you and you was pregnant?'

'And they took my milk!'" (16-17)

It is by sharing each other's sorrowful past they seem to lessen the burden of their painful memories. According to H.A. Rushdy, in Morrison's novels, particularly in *Beloved*, "memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of property is that it is interpersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers" (321-22). Paul D touches her back, ". . . every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years." Sethe wonders if there

would be "a little space . . . to push busyness into the corners of the room" in order to "feel the hurt her back ought to," and feels that she can trust "things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?". But before they could make love to each other there was something violent and harsh that made Paul D's leg trembling; the floorboards were shaking; and the "house itself was pitching." He shouted fiercely--"God damn it! Hush up!", "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!"-- to drive out the spirit and went on fighting it until "everything was rock quiet" (18). Later he invites Sethe to begin a new life:

"We can make a life, girl. A life."

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Leave it to me. See how it goes. No promises, if you don't want to make any. Just see how it goes. All right?"

"All right."

"You willing to leave it to me?"

"Well--some of it." (46)

Paul D takes Sethe and Denver to a carnival on a "Colored Thursday" (48). For Sethe it was her first social outing in eighteen years; and she "returned the smiles she got" (49). However, it is not only that Paul D enlivens Sethe, but she also has her influence on Paul D in turn.

The lessons he got from the Schoolteacher and from the underground slave camp of Alfred, Georgia, had taught him to "shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing."

However, after seeing Halle's wife alive, the "closed portion of his head opened like a greased lock" (41).

Painful memories come back frequently, and both Paul D and Sethe suffer the "uncontrollable flashbacks" of post traumatic stress (Schmude 127).

In her representation of the story of slavery Morrison's non-chronological narrative thus presents, an "intricate exploration of trauma" as Walter Clemons has said (David 124). Sethe has to surrender to her "rebellious brain" (*Beloved* 70). Before Paul D had come she had been used to it. In her dreams she "kept her husband shadowy but there--somewhere. Now Halle's face between the butter press and churn swelled larger and larger" (86). Paul D has added something new; "new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart" (95). Her "rebellious brain" would not refuse anything: "No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?" The new information provided by Paul D refreshes the horrible picture for her:

Two boys with mossy teeth, one suckling on my breast, the other holding me down, their book-

reading teacher watching and writing it up. I'm still full of that, God damn it, I can't go back and add more. Add my husband to it, watching, above me in the loft--hiding close by-- the one place he thought no one would look for him, looking down on what I couldn't look at all. And not stopping them--looking and letting it happen. But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more--so I add more. (70)

Morrison's disjointed and "splintered" narrative thus makes Sethe and Paul D expose their wounds to each other. Paul D says that after his failure to escape he was chained and tethered to a wagon. He bares his ignominious self by remembering Mister (a rooster) who seemed to have individuality and autonomy which Paul D, one of the five Sweet Home men lacked: "Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was. . ." He further remembers,

Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was

less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.

(72)

The narrative represents fragmented stories, psyches and memories that gradually are becoming whole, like Sethe's wedding dress, stitched by joining scrapes of worn-out clothes. In this way Morrison focuses on the interior selves of these freed or ex-slaves who never experienced time/history as an ordered/linear sequence of events.

Paul D's attempt to repress the past is interrupted by the appearance of Beloved "on the very day Sethe and he had patched up their quarrel, gone out in public and had right good time--like a family" (66). The narrative voice announces the appearance of Beloved thus: "A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of water" (50). Now she is no longer an invisible spirit, but a corporal form, exactly of the same age, she would have been if she had lived. Paul starts to feel that Beloved is casting a mysterious force on him. His plan to settle down with Sethe, not by replacing her living daughter Denver but by "making a space along with her" (45), is shattered as Beloved, the incarnation of both Sethe's and Paul D's suppressed and unresolved past, fills up the gap between them and thus seems to block the progressive movement of the present into the future. Though Sethe and Paul D have created an emotional space for each other, they must confront their past. Paul D's

"merely kissing the wrought iron on her back" (20) is not enough for Sethe to feel the hurt; nor is Paul D's deliberately "shutting down" his past "in that tobacco tin buried in his chest" (72) would fulfil his plan for a nuclear family. Each has to go through a slow and gradual process of self recovery. In the cold house, "separated from the main part of 124," (116) Beloved makes Paul D confront his past. She wants him to touch her on the "inside part." She says, "You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name" (117). Beloved's demand for her name is suggestive of the resurrection of those forgotten facts, those "disremembered and unaccounted for" in order to heal up individual and collective traumas. By touching Beloved, metaphorically, he touches his past, which he kept airtight in the rusted tobacco tin. As soon as he calls her "Beloved," he is moved inside. Morrison's narrative voice says, ". . . when he reached the inside part he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again" (117). Later Paul D, in his conversation with Stamp Paid, says: "She reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember" (234).

Beloved contributes largely to a postmodern theoretical debate about history and representation. Postmodernists do not believe in teleological

metanarratives and argue that contemporary cultural has lost a sense of historical consciousness of cause and effect. In an interview, Fredrick Jameson said, "Time has become a perpetual present and thus spatial in postmodern culture" (qtd.in Stephanson 46). He also regrets that postmodern flattening of time has deprived people of the true sense of history because our postmodern society is "bereft of all historicity, whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles . . . the past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (*New Left Review* 66). Such controversial stance has provoked many antagonists to speak out, e.g. Linda Hutcheon, who in her two studies of historiographic metafiction has suggested that much of the postmodern fiction is strongly invested in history, but most importantly in revising our sense of what history means and accomplishes. Morrison's treatment of history bears some similarity to Hutcheon's, as K.C. Davis has pointed out in "'Post modern Blackness': Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History." Back in 1974, Morrison "expressed concern that would be echoed by Jameson, a concern that real history was being replaced by historicism--the textualizing of time as a mere representation. . ." (80). Though Morrison seems to be a precursor of Jameson, later she realizes that there is no

difference between history and historicism because it is hardly possible to distinguish between "authentic history and inauthentic historicism." She comes to believe that all knowledge of the past is derived from textual representations. While working on *The Black Book* in the early 70s, Morrison seemed to have been occupied with the idea that the ideas collected in the compendium would reveal the 300 years history of African Americans as "life lived" and therefore real. But later she finds out that no totalising truth can ever be reached as she doubts of the assumption that there is a knowable reality behind the inauthentic simulation or representation. Realizing that the fictional account of the interior life of a former slave would be more historically "real" than the official documents, Morrison offers "her story" to shape the "real." In the novel, Paul D's reaction, when Stamp Paid shows him the newspaper account of Sethe's deed, reminds the readers of the gap between "reality" and "reproduction" and suggests that we can only know the past through discourse or representation. "I don't know, man. Don't look like it to me. I know Sethe's mouth and this ain't it" (154)--this is how Paul D reacts. It is through her new representation that the author tries to "change our perceptions of "historical reality." The authenticity of the newspaper story of Sethe is put into question as Paul D doubts white

culture's representation. The narrative voice also says, "And it must have been hard to find news about Negroes worth the breath catch of a white citizen of Cincinnati" (156) and so the picture of the woman in the newspaper does not look like "real" Sethe whom Paul D knows well. But it is not a total reclamation of the past of her people that Morrison seeks, rather a new way of writing or rewriting their history, particularly that of the black women. For this purpose she demystifies the master historical narrative so that she can raise a competing version of African American history. She sees herself as a creative historian who reconstructs by deconstructing official history. As an artist she has a great deal of faith in the power of fictional representation to redefine our perception of reality. Like Denver's attempt to weave a story out of the fragments of her mother's story by "giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her--and a heartbeat" (78), Morrison wants to give "blood" and "heartbeat" to the "scraps" in her fictional representations of black women's history. But it is hardly possible to accomplish a total reconstruction; many gaps, plenty of "holes and spaces" (Tate 125) should be filled up by multiple narratives which offer no single history or "truth" but numerous histories and "truths." In the novel the death of the "crawling already?" (the baby child) has

been artfully demonstrated from multiple perspectives, as the narrative focus shifts from Baby Suggs's version to the slave catchers' as well as from Stamp Paid's to Sethe's own version. Each tells a different story and thus together they offer multiple "truths." K. C. Davis quotes Anthony Hilfer's suggestion and says that "Morrison's novels offer a 'both-and,' dialectical, indeterminate character, a doubleness that Linda Hutcheon would argue is itself as distinctly postmodern strategy" (78).

The ghost child Beloved is the mysterious return of Sethe's repressed past. She has come back to claim her mother's love and attention which she has been deprived of: "But it was Beloved who made demands" (240). Sethe also takes it as an opportunity to offer her unfulfilled motherly love and affection. She feels that Beloved, her daughter, would understand why she did it: "I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already" (200). But Beloved has her own complaints against her mother "of not being nice to her." Sethe goes on talking, explaining, and listing her reasons one by one: "Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. . . . Give up her life, every minute and hour of it,

to take back just one of Beloved's tears." But none of these explanations/pleadings seems to have any effect on Beloved. She starts taking the physical possession of her mother by dressing like her, talking "the way she did," and imitating her gestures so much so that it became difficult for Denver to tell ". . . who was who" (241). Sethe is gradually devoured by Beloved. The narrative voice describes, "She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman, yielded it up without a murmur" (250). Beloved's "eating up" Sethe's life and becoming "swelled up" by it metaphorically seems to suggest that the sources of information on the lives of black women, which are buried within the mines of forgetfulness, need to be dug out in order to be represented in a new factitive way, being processed and reprocessed through multiple perspectives. Sethe's deliberate way of creating a "timeless present" (184) in order to "get to the no-time waiting for her" (191) can never be a solution for the demands/complaints of a repressed past. Sethe expresses her belief that time is spatial which operates like a wheel:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. . . . Places, places are still

there. . . . The picture is still there . . . if you go there--you who never was there--if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again. (35-36)

Though Sethe thinks that she has created an idyllic "no time" present in 124, the "timeless present" must be broken; otherwise she will be strangled as she had been almost in the Clearing Scene, and her history, namely the history of all black women, will be erased from the cultural memory of African Americans.

Beloved is not only the projection of Sethe's unresolved guilt but also a revelation of Sethe's experience of her own sense of abandonment and loss that she as a daughter had suffered. She says, "You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be the one." Through out the novel the occasional memories of her mother haunt Sethe and she tries to console herself by trying to mask those haunting memories as soon as they surface: "I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she?" (203).

Schmudde's contention that *Beloved* is the incarnation of

both the "abandoned daughter" and "abandoning mother" is justifiable in this sense (131). It is in *Beloved's* disjointed narrative, which is composed of phrases, with no punctuation, in the images of capture in Africa, of the Middle Passage, that the distinction between historical past and present seems to fade away and there seems to be no boundary/gap in the continuum of sufferings/losses in the lives of black women who face their predicaments as both abandoned daughters and abandoning mothers. *Beloved* says:

They are not crouching now we are they are
floating on the water they break up the
little hill and push it through I cannot
find my pretty teeth I see the dark face that
is going to smile at me it is my dark
face that is going to smile at me the iron
circle is around our neck she does not have
sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket
she goes in the water with my face. (212)

Though the passage is full of ambiguities, it calls our attention to the visual spaces on the page that is metaphorically suggestive of the gaps/omissions in the story-telling process, done to avoid the most horrible part of it. The image of "iron circle" reminds us of the nooses that the slave women had to put on. The last part of this

rambling account is also an allegorical indication that it is because of white hegemony's intentional blindness to the miseries of black women and of the absence of a proper African American social agency that the stories of the racially and sexually marginalized "go in water", sink deep down the veil of forgetfulness. Sethe's story is "unspeakable" because the white intellectual tradition does not provide the appropriate vocabulary or allow for an alternative one to detect the spot where it hurts in the heart of a slave mother. Traditionally definition/language belongs to "the definers--not the defined," (190) as Schoolteacher says to Sixo.

This "unspeakability" that has made her people voiceless and thus "absent" in the Enlightenment tradition, is a challenge for Morrison, who in her new representation wants to make them powerful by giving them their own voice. The horrible act of killing one's own daughter, which is regarded as "wildness" by the institutionalised parameters of guilt, runs counter to the policy of the dominant power that interferes with a mother's choice. Sethe's infanticide, her raw act of defiance, is an expression of her disapproval of the system of slavery. By killing her child, Sethe dares to claim her property and thus thwarts any intrusion to trespassing. The emotional pain of a slave mother can find no articulation either in the

master's language or in constrained slave narratives. Morrison through her project of rewriting the history of black women has offered a new code of language to express the harrowing pain and anguishes of black women. In *Beloved* Sethe's back carries the language of domination, inscribed by the whip of the "definer" on the flesh of the "defined." According to Hortense Spillers, the oppressed bodies carry on their flesh a "cultural text" that explains the (negative) values of the culture (67). Such is the case with the "tree" that "grows" on Sethe's back. While the scarred flesh is dead and insensitive to feelings, the tree is "growing," the "cultural text," inscribed by the dominant culture, remains alive and speaks continually of the history of oppression. In the opinion of Gurleen Grewal,

Beloved makes it brutally clear that aside from 'equality of oppression' that black men and women suffered, black women were also oppressed as women. The novel demonstrates that physical torture is humiliating but the added emotional pain of a mother is devastating. They were routinely subjected to rape, enforced childbirth, and natal alienation from their children. (100)

Through her reconstruction of the life of a slave mother (Margaret Garner) Morrison wants to dramatize the violence

of psychic turbulence one has to exercise to resist devastation from outside. The novel investigates the cost of Sethe's resistance. Her infanticide is registered as a heroic act of resistance that Morrison defines as a "desperate strategy" in an interview (qtd. in White). Sethe's strategy is one among many such other strategies, adopted by black women in their daily struggle for existence. Ella, the good woman of the town "had delivered but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound" (*Beloved* 258-259). Sethe's mother threw and abandoned the children white men forced upon her, but kept only Sethe, who was born of an African father, as Nan had told her: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man" (62). By foregrounding the resistances of all these slave women Morrison dissolves the stereotypes of the mammy figure. Thus by deconstructing the foundation/fixed referent, that has marginalized the black women, Morrison has solidified a viable path for the formation of a black subjectivity that would offer a new identity for her characters, who are black and women. Paul D confronts a "new Sethe," when she

describes her act to him. The narrative voice describes Paul D's bewilderment thus:

The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle's girl was obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and work-crazy (like Halle). He was wrong. This here Sethe was new. . . . This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him. (164)

Morrison in *Beloved* has reconstituted the history of black woman by "telling" her own "tales" in her own way and by making her "claims" identifiable, and in this sense the novel seems to demonstrate agency for an overt political agenda of African American social protest. Her new representation of slavery thus empowers the "powerless" who recalls the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (274) and those "sixty Million and more," (to whom the book has been dedicated), who died as captives in the Middle Passage, never being "presentable" in the cannon of American

history. Like the ghost child called Beloved, the tragic stories of slavery cannot be forgotten. Beloved lives within the presence of slavery, within the shadow of deep frustration of the people who are racially, sexually and economically marginalized. Morrison has inscribed and reinscribed these stories in the process of rewriting the history of her people, particularly that of black women in order to make them a "present" presence rather than an "absent" presence due to a people's amnesia. "This is not a story to pass on" (274) has its implication in not forgetting the past, however unbearable it might be. A people's trauma can be exorcised through remembering and hearing, which does not mean plain forgetting. Morrison ends the novel with the word "Beloved," suggesting that the past is a lasting presence, waiting to be resurrected and reconstructed in an innovative manner: "Down by the stream in the back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit" (275).