

**ONTOLOGY AND LIMINALITY: TONI MORRISON'S
BELOVED AS DISCOURSE IN PLURISIGNIFICATION**

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Jean Baudrillard made out post modernism as a riot of 'disparate fragmentary experiences and images that constantly bombard the individual ...' thereby rather obscuring the discourse of connectivity in a historiographic form. Frederic Jameson, Francis Fukuyama and the like, too, believe that postmodern culture, and therefore, literature has a rather spatial or flattened out concept of history where fragmentary images of the past are recycled into a semblance of history that has no real insight into the episteme of a historical context.

Yet, Linda Hutcheon, Clifford Geerts, Kobena Mercer and other New Historicists emphasize on the spatial and temporal rooting of a given text in the periphery of a contextual framework that is historical per se.

History of course then cannot be skirted around. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the novel at the focal spotlight of my dissertation is a novel flowering out of a past that is equally horrendous and intriguing into a future that is hopeful in its promises through a present, torrid with the energy of flux. Toni Morrison in a *Times* Interview on Jan 21, 1998 said "I'm interested in the way in which the past affects the present and I think that if we understand a good deal more about history, we automatically understand a great more about contemporary life." (Time)

Taking her at her word, one would suspend her novel, *Beloved* at a juncture swivelling between the past and the future.

Talking about the past, the novel would insistently rake up the issue of Blackness and slavery, as the chief characters of the novel spend their life negotiating memories of horrendous days in the past when they had to spend beastly days as slaves.

Beloved, brought out in 1987, came well after the History of Blackness crossed the vicissitudes of the Harlem Renaissance or the 'Flowering of Negro Literature' as James Weldon Johnson would have it and the uprise of the likes of Aime Cesaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas, standing up valiantly for Negritude. *Beloved* brings up the insidious impacts of the institution of slavery through a fictional framework spanning a handful of characters grappling with the

shrivelling memories of their days in bondage. Sethe with the ‘chokecherry tree’ on her back—the infamous mark of cowhide on her skin, Paul D with his ‘rusted tobacco tin’ of a heart, Baby Suggs with her attempt to wash out the evil of the past with her ‘holiness’—all flounder in a sea of bewilderment trying to figure out ways to negotiate the past.

Toni Morrison, in an interview with Susanna Rustin in *The Guardian*, Saturday issue, on 1st Nov, 2008, said that “the emphasis placed by critics on race has meant other aspects of the writing to have received less attention.” (Rustin) Again in yet another interview with Bonnie Angelo on *Time*, May 22, 1989 issue, Morrison stated clearly that “the book was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about the anonymous people called slaves, what they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they’re willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another.... I was trying to make it a personal experience.” (Angelo)

The point I am trying to make, then, is that, placing her book on a scale of historiography and judging it there from would be to peer at the book through a blinkered lens of blackness and negritude that would threaten to choke down issues that were more basic, instinctual, human, psychological and as Morrison says, ‘personal’ in nature—independent whatsoever of ‘blackness.’

Beloved is a piece of fiction that sets out its storyline in fragmented narratives that reflect life in pieces like a mirror shattered to smithereens, thereby reflecting a postmodern perspective through a schema that moves away from the teleological metanarrative mode. *Beloved* is and is not about slavery. The storyline is set, not at the time when the characters – Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs – battle the unspeakable horrors of slavery at Sweet Home but after it. Sweet Home during and after Mr. Garner’s time only features in flashbacks. It constitutes the past in the temporal framework of the novel. The book, dwelling in the present, finds the characters trying to come out of it — either by confronting it or by forgetting it. Morrison in an interview with Susanna Rustin said, “... The pressure was not to remember it (the history of slavery) but to get over it. So when I was writing *Beloved*, part of the architecture was forgetting it.” (Rustin)

So, it was about this ‘getting over’ and ‘forgetting’ that *Beloved* was all about. Forgetting is a complex psychological process – especially if it necessitates a face off with a horrendous past. *Beloved*, named ironically after the little baby who turns poltergeist a short while down in the novel, in essence pivots around Sethe – or rather her labyrinthal psychosomatic meanderings as she tries to come to terms with her ‘past,’

her cross – to be able to look forward to a more liveable ‘future’. The novel centres on the ‘present’.

In an age when we swear by our Oprah Winfreys, Danny Glovers, Morgan Freemans, Carl Lewises, Dizzy Gillespies and Harry Belafontes, it does seem a wee bit difficult to actually visualize and empathize with what it could have been for a black community to be born without a specific, personalized identity. Sethe, in *Beloved* never knew her father. Her mother – her ‘ma’am’ was singled out by the mark of a crossed circle branded below her breast – ‘burnt right into the skin’ (*Beloved* 72). ‘I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead’ (72) says Sethe’s mother – indicating that she, known by her mark was only one in a group with no individual name to honour her. Sethe herself later on got the infamous ‘chokecherry tree’ on her back – a hieroglyphic of shame and sorrow and a despicable telltale reminder of her horrendous past stamped on her by the cowhide of the schoolmaster. Paul D – named alphabetically – only stands as one in a series as does Sixo who probably was the sixth one in a series – reft of individual names to identify them – no better than animals in a herd. – The names are lost – irrevocably lost. Morrison once remarked in an interview with Thomas LeClair: ‘If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name. That’s a huge psychological scar.’ (LeClair)

It is this psychological crisis – the crisis of being swept along in life without a proper name to identify them with their ‘family’ – the angst to ‘belong’—that is what *Beloved* is all about. The characters in *Beloved* keep trying to figure out their identity in various ways. Baby Suggs rejects the slave name that was given to her on her bill-of-sale, Jenny Whitlow—to adopt the rather droll Baby Suggs. None of the names identified her back to her ‘family’. Yet ‘Baby Suggs’ at least signified a whiff of freedom and love that her husband afforded her before being swallowed into the whirlpool of slave trade. Stamp Paid stepped away from his slave name Joshua to call himself by a name that in itself declared all his debts to the world cleared thereby making him a free man. The names in *Beloved* are only clues to ownership with no trace of origin, hence, identity. Sethe rummages her life for her identity. Martin Heidegger, building up his theory of ontology on the thesis of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, speaks of the ontological need of human beings to reach out to what he calls the ‘Dasein’ – etymologically combining ‘ex’ or in German (Da=there + sein = being) connoting the core entity of any being. It is through a wrench of angst that a human being searches for his Dasein – his identity.

Essence is prior to existence, as Sartre would say. The human psyche has to come to terms with what the psychoanalysts would call his 'subjective identity'. Therefore a search, a quest for an identity, to formulate the 'essence' that forms the core of being or in Heidegger's terms the quintessence of the Dasein is forever afoot. Identity shapes itself through a number of decisive factors like nationality, religion, colour, race, parentage, profession and the like. Yet, that only fleshes out what we would call the 'objective identity' in contrary to 'subjective identity' which reflects what an individual sees himself as. Conflicts are inevitable, then, if the subjective identity finds itself at odds with the objective identity. After a dubious period of straddling fences, it necessitates a changeover. In identity negotiation, the individual is faced with the challenge of stepping out of the chrysalis of what was hitherto known as his identity in the world outside (objective identity) to reach out for the identity he dreams of (subjective identity).

Sethe in *Beloved* was born into slavehood. Her ma'am could never be there for her. She was nursed by a nanny as her own mother was working away in the fields with her nose to the grindstone – too busy or too tired to be there for her children. So Sethe had to be there for her children. She needed this history of filial severance to stop. She had to be there for her children – she had 'milk for them all' – she needed to get it to them. She needed her children to grow up the way she couldn't – free to live and love.

Erik H. Erikson analyses the psycho-social biases of the human behavioral patterns in *Childhood and Society* (1950). According to the Eriksonian Theory a human being, whatever spatio-temporal perspective he belongs to, has to traverse through life in eight specific psycho-social developmental phases, each of which pivots round a definitive crisis. The first five stages centre on infancy to adolescence – hence we shall leave them out in defining the adult Sethe. A study of the sixth, seventh and eighth stages would provide a very clear insight into the psychobiological tumults that kept tearing Sethe apart in her inexorable search for who she was.

According to Erikson the sixth stage of development faces a person with the crisis of 'intimacy versus isolation.' This stage tests a person's ability to love – the capability to form lasting and intimate relationships. A person who fails to clear this crisis often ends up in isolation. Sethe as *Beloved* first opens on her, was cloistered in a segregated isolation where 124, Bluestone Road with its 'hainting' was her sequestered cocoon. She had moved away from community or rather community had moved away from her because of Baby Suggs's exuberant show of excess. Baby Suggs, who set great store on 'knowing where to

step,' outstepped her own boundaries for once, and lost her community – a community that cannot stand the excess of 'having' in the face of their own legacy of 'not having' the money, freedom, identity—all that slavery took away from them. Paul D walked into Sethe's life with his rusted tobacco tin of memories, and with a presence that let women open up and cry, affording Sethe a chance to get over her crisis and make a crossover from isolation to intimacy. Community, too opens up, with the arrival of Paul D, on the day the threesome of Sethe, Paul and Denver walk to and back from the carnival – their shadows holding hands. Intimacy shows up in the horizon.

Yet this is where Sethe confronts the next crisis in her life in what Erikson would call the seventh stage in her developmental quest for identity – the crisis of 'generativity versus self-absorption.' Erikson describes this as the "need for individuals to overcome selfish, self-centred concerns and to take an active interest in helping and guiding the next generation." Just as Sethe began to find love – which one has to admit is a rather 'self centred' interest, her motherly instincts were challenged by the forceful assertion of motherhood and its duties in the form of Beloved. Significantly enough, Beloved materialized before Sethe, just as she was returning from the carnival, basking gingerly in the furtive hope of a life for herself. Sethe, as she reaches home, finds Beloved perched on a 'stump not far from the steps of 124' (60). 'And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity.... There was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now' (61). Beloved was born again – metaphorically, spiritually – to remind Sethe of her 'generativity' as opposed to her new found 'self-absorption.' Conflict rises again. Sethe had to decide between the two. She had to choose. Like all 'choices' – ontologically speaking – this one too came with its share of angst. Sethe chose to play mother to the hilt – generativity won the war against self-absorption. The process of inching Paul D away began. Event after event found Sethe at an ultimate point where her anxiety to explain to Beloved why she had killed her, and her eagerness 'to make up for the handsaw' (295) allowed Beloved to prey on her – "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (295). It was this parasitic, incubal 'hainting' on Sethe's existence that was feeding on 'her final crisis, i.e., 'integrity versus despair' at the last and eighth stage of the Eriksonian developmental theory. People look back and ask, "Did my life have any meaning?"—"Did my being here really matter?" (344). Sethe had no answer. But Denver had. Community had. Coming together at a juncture of crisis, Denver comes of age, finds her own individuality and merges

into community ending eighteen years of excommunication, thereby reversing the process of isolation versus intimacy, for Sethe.

Community exorcised Beloved out of Sethe's life – allowing her a second chance away from isolation towards intimacy – both social and personal, away from generativity towards self-absorption, away from despair towards integrity. Paul D returns: “Sethe me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.” (322) “you your best thing Sethe. You are” he reassures – reasserting her lost identity. ‘Me? Me?’ – says Sethe as she finally finds herself – not through the bounden duties of motherhood, but in her own solipsistic ‘self’ – her ‘me-ness’—to use the vocabulary of another Morrison creation Nel, in *Sula*—the me-ness that had lost itself first in its slavery to the ironically named Sweet Home and then its slavery to motherhood.

In fact, all of Sethe's life, she had been escaping in search of a place which would afford her the freedom to love as ‘thickly’ as she wished to. Even while at Sweet Home at Mr. Garner's time, she tried to create a vraisemblance of love around her by bringing in salsify to the kitchen because she had “to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it...”(21). Even then she was escaping reality to lull herself into the peace of nympholepsy. Yet it took no time for Halle's words to sink in: “It don't mother, Sethe. What then say is the same. Loud or soft.” So she escaped – in search of a more liveable place – a home of her own – a place to love in – to live in, unlike her mother who had migrated from her Africa to an unliveable plantation only to lose the freedom to love even her own child. Paul D runs away from sweet Home to Cincinnati and then finally, meanders into 124, in search of a ‘life’ there. Sethe's sons Howard and Buglar too run away – from the ‘haunting’ of a house ridden by ‘rememories’ in search of some place better. Denver invents a sanctorum for herself in the clearing where seclusion created a semblance of a place made liveable by the suspension of time, place and community. She escapes there. Beloved too escapes – from the grave of the forgetful past to 124 to rake up memories, ask questions and demand answers with vengeance.

Yet all said and done, Beloved was only an extension of Sethe's guilt – an exteriorization of her past. Twice born – once from the womb and again from the depths of the mind, Beloved fitted into place to maintain the trademark haunting of 124. First Baby Suggs was gone and then Beloved, Sethe and Denver remained after Paul D was gone. The threesome – symbolized metaphorically through a pair and a half of ice skates – melt borders. Identities merge so much so that she began losing

her own selfhood. Sethe did not mind – as she thought that she couldn't just do enough to make up for what she did to her child – when she slit her throat with a handsaw. Based on the nerve-wracking real life incident of Margaret Garner who killed one of her children and tried to kill the others to allow them an escape from slavery, Sethe's filicide offered Morrison scope enough to ponder over the justification of the incident. In an interview to Don Swaim on September 15, 1987, Morrison said that Sethe's filicide "was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it It was the only thing to do, but it was the wrong thing to do." Right is wrong then and wrong is right – the foul is fair and the fair foul in a world, set asunder by the dementing unjustness of slave tradition. (Swaim)

Sethe knew this. All along her life Sethe had been swept off her feet by powerful feelings – feelings of yearning for her mother when she was a child – a craving for 'belonging' when she came into Sweet Home – a yearning for love when she married Halle and had children – the longing to be a good mother – to engulf her children in the love she had for all of them – symbolized and equated in her mind by the 'milk she had for all of them' – the love she needed to take to them – and finally the overwhelming sense of anxiety to steer her brood away from the ruthless institution of slavery – insane aggression when she found herself cornered with her worst fears coming true – the resultant sway of emotion that made her prefer death for her children than a lifetime of humiliation – and finally the engulfing sense of remorse – the huge psychomachia of knowing what she thought to be practically correct was morally, horribly wrong. She was a mother with all her love. Yet she killed her own child.

So she decided to atone. She gave in to Beloved's machinations. By letting herself be 'eaten up' by Beloved, she was paying back. She was paying for her killing of Beloved by letting Beloved kill her. She was trying to be another 'Stamp Paid' – paying off her dues.

Once reborn, Beloved follows a very specific course of infancy – the infancy of the little two year old she was when she was hacked to death by her mother – an infancy that can be traced psychoanalytically by Freudian steps that could trail clues to her final vengeance. According to Freud, every individual crosses certain stages in the course of his or her psycho – sexual development. Each stage, states Freud, revolves round a certain libido or instinctual force that drives and energises the id – or the innermost compartment of the human psychology. These libidos focus on certain parts of the human body in its quest for pleasure of fulfillment. Too little or for that matter too much of gratification on that

account amounts to abnormality which often in turn, results in strange kinds of ‘fixations’.

According to Freud, the first stage of psychological development would be the initial ‘oral stage’ where the ‘psychic energy’ centres round the mouth. This stage lasts until we are about eighteen months old. The pleasure principle stems from eating, sucking or even ogling. Significantly, when Beloved appears with her full grown body, her mental age still hovered round when she was killed by Sethe eighteen years ago. She still behaved like an infant. No wonder then her libidos fed on sweets and she focused all her being on watching Sethe smiling at her : “she was about to smile at me when the men without skin took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea.... She was getting ready to smile at me ... and she left me there with no face or hers.” (253) She compensates for the lost smile with sucking or all the sugar she can lay her hands on.

As days went by, Beloved’s psychosexual advancement saw changes. According to Freud, humans in the age of two to three, go through the anal stage where the libido concentrates on the anal zone through processes of psychosocial elimination corroborating with pleasure principles. This is the age when children normally receive toilet training from parents. Failure to adapt would result in the beginning of an indisciplined and chaotic personality. With Beloved, this stage proved to be uncontrolled and wanton, signalling the forthcoming confusion in her relationship to Sethe: Four days she slept Denver tended her... She rinsed the sheets secretly.... She boiled the underwear and soaked it in bluing”(64) Beloved’s chaotic self manifested itself through the erratic bedwetting or the errant sexual behavior with Paul D in the outhouse, before bursting forth into the cacophony of riotous thoughts and desires voiced in a staccato of sentences in the first person toward the end of the book. Beloved’s libido races into a fixation on her mother that borders on what Melanie Klein would call the ‘pre-oedipal’ obsession in her Object Relations Theory in psychoanalysis. According to Klein, a pre-oedipal infant’s being is suffused with a range of conflicting but very strong emotions and dependence on its parent – especially the mother figure. The infant then ‘projects’ its feelings and emotions into the external agent – in all likelihood – the mother, transforming the agent into a ‘fantasy object’ or ‘imago’ (Klein 87).The imago is then introjected back into the infant consciousness, giving rise to a personalized identity of the infant in relation to its mother – or whoever is the ‘imago’. Beloved appears with all her conflicting emotions of vengeance warring with very strong dependence on Sethe, symbolically visualised in Denver’s sighting of the white clad arm around

Sethe's waist, or Beloved's caressing of Sethe's neck in the clearing, which startlingly ends up in an attempt at asphyxiation. Beloved's dependence on Sethe manifests in the need to see Sethe smile at her, the need to be physically close to her, to follow her around so much so that Beloved even walks down to meet Sethe on her way back from work, in her eagerness to see and be with her. This parasitic, familiar-like proximity is projected into Sethe who, when she transforms into the imago, introjects the feeling of close togetherness – often deadly too, back.

The incubus of dependence grows – and Sethe let it—as a weird way to make up for her act of aberration in the past. The incubus feeds on Sethe and waxes big as Sethe wanes. It is here then that community steps in. Morrison once stated in interview with Bonnie Angelo that “two parents can't raise a child any more than one— you need a whole community – everybody to raise a child... the little nuclear family is a paradigm that isolates people into little units – people need a larger unit” (Angelo).

Denver in *Beloved* grew up cloistered and sequestered into a shy, rather abnormal girl who had problems in reaching out into the world, hence all of whose internal energy was directed at tending to and nursing Beloved. Strangely enough, Beloved's excess shoved Denver out into the arms of community. Community received her back. Denver grew up, she came to terms with the world outside – the real world that is not the haunted little space called 124, Bluestone Road. It takes all the strength of community to prise Sethe's individualized entity – her identity away from her dangerously consuming, confused image as the 'errant but atoning mother of Beloved.' The community song at the end of the book is an interesting reversal symphony of Baby Suggs's 'holy' song – to save Sethe's soul by encouraging what Baby Suggs encouraged – self love. The community mothers, epiphanising the ancient maternal figure that had once surfaced in Baby Suggs, who had carried 'her great heart to the clearing' – to tell everybody to 'love' their own flesh: “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.” Baby Suggs struggled to deliver her Black community from the clutches of slavery to the whites – if not physical then mental as well.

Sethe too, learnt. She discovers her 'me-ness'. She learnt to live. She learnt to understand that she herself is her 'best thing'.

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