

Accosting the Past: A Perusal of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* investigates the harrowing life of enslavement and its persistent influence on every individuals and the African American community. She was conferred with several accolades for her contribution to black literature. The objective of this present work is to analyse how Morrison tackles the past and the traumatic experiences encountered by African Americans with painful memories that cannot be effaced from history. It has to be relived in the present and must be confronted before actual healing transpires. It examines the main protagonist, Sethe's repressed past, which has to be confronted before actual recovery takes place. By presenting the tragic past of enslavement in her in *Beloved*, she helps avid readers to explore the African American cultural world, which has been neglected for a long time by the conventional literature. The present study is qualitative and in an embedded form. The methodology of this study employs a close textual reading and interpretation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* by using the ethical theories of Kantian Deontology and Utilitarianism perspectives. Ethical theories of Kantianism and Utilitarianism are applied to this study to evaluate the moral quandary brought up in the literary text. These two ethical theories are employed in understanding Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for examining the fictitious characters and moral issues presented in the novel. The result of the present investigation reveals the importance on addressing the dark history; nevertheless, excruciating, it is an important step towards individual and collective healing.

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Introduction

Toni Morrison is an exceptional contemporary novelist in the African American literary canon. She came from a humble family from the town of Lorain, Ohio, amidst the Great

Depression. She was conferred with numerous accolades during her lifetime, including the Nobel Prize for Literature. She was presented with the Pulitzer Prize for her distinguished novel, *Beloved* in 1988. Her acclaimed works

were greatly motivated by the history of her black community, which cemented her attachment to her African American roots. She brings forth the voice of her community in her novels, making its presence felt in American literature. She has contributed immensely to the making of African American literature as central, not tangential. Through her fiction, Morrison vividly shows that the traumatic experiences encountered by African Americans cannot be effaced from memory. It has to be relived in the present and must be confronted before actual healing transpires.

Morrison dedicated her fifth novel *Beloved* to the millions of African Americans who were severely affected by slavery. The novel highlights the poignant fate of the slaves in America and their racial past. Margaret Atwood in her review of Morrison's *Beloved* posits that Morrison's *Beloved* stood out for its adaptability, practicality and emotionality. Her novel, cemented her as a prominent and distinguished writer of her days and other generation. Atwood describe the author's *Beloved* as tantalizing and breathtaking (The New York Times 1987).

The novel portrays the agonising suffering of Sethe, before and aftermath of enslavement. It described the tale of Sethe and her daughter, Denver, as they try to re-establish their lives after fleeing from slavery. According to Parker (2001, 12), the spirit of *Beloved* is "the spirit of the memory of her African American ancestors." The stifled 'rememory' that is resuscitated through *Beloved* ought to be passed on for healing to spring forth. *Beloved* depicts both the re-embodied daughter of Sethe and the phantom of enslavement.

Methodology

The methodology of this study employs a close textual reading and examination of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* by using the ethical theories of Kantian Deontology and Utilitarianism perspectives. Ethical theories of Kantianism and Utilitarianism are applied to this study to evaluate the moral quandary brought up in the literary text. These two ethical theories are employed in the scrutiny of Morrison's *Beloved*

so as to explore the fictitious characters and moral issues presented in the novel.

The ethical theory of Kantianism or Deontology is proposed by German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Deontology is derived from the Greek word 'Deon', which means duty. Hence, it is also called 'Duty-based-Ethics'. Ethical theory of deontology asserts that one is ethically compelled to perform in compliance with a certain set of ideology and rules, in spite of consequence. With the core concept being 'duty', Kantianism affirms that justly ethical actions are unsubstantiated on personal gain or the paramount benefit, but on moral obligation and equitable approach to judgment.

Kant advocates that a man's duty is developed from the categorical imperative. The word imperative in Kant's categorical imperative implies a command or an order. Conversely, disparate most other commands, which generally come from certain authority, this mandate comes from inside, from our own rationale. The categorical imperative contends that one ought to only act according to the axiom in accordance with which one can, simultaneously, will that it should become ubiquitous.

The second part of the categorical imperative asserts that one must not use people simply as a means to an end, but rather as ends in themselves, implying that they must never forfeit themselves or forfeit others for their own selves. Kant articulates this idea in the second part of his categorical imperatives which states that one's act should apply humanity, whether in one's own person or in the person of any other, concurrently as an end, in no way merely as a means.

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory, meaning the ethical properness or unfairness of an action solely depends on the consequences it brings about. The theory is associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Their philosophical ethics is grounded on the principle of utility, which affirms that the ethically right act is the act that

generates the utmost good (Driver, 2014). Utilitarian proposes that one need to maximise the comprehensive good, particularly, advocate the good of others along with one's own good. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill promulgated the doctrine of the greatest happiness principle, which promotes optimal benefit for the majority. Utilitarianism affirms that an act is ethically correct if it brings out the maximum pleasure or by rendering greatest benefit to the largest number. Utilitarian deem the consequence as more important than the input, as their maxim aims for the greatest benefit for the majority of the people.

Institution of Slavery

Millions of African people were forcefully brought to America amid the Atlantic slave trade under dreadful circumstances that resulted in demise and starvation. Majority of the African slaves were brought to America from Central and West Africa. The institution of slavery in America ushered in wealth and prosperity for white masters. The African slaves were prohibited of their fundamental human rights as they were coerced to serve their masters for life, and their servitude would be endowed by their children. In the past, chattel slavery was legally practiced in America, in which African slaves and their offspring were permanently owned by their white masters and treated as sole property to be bought, sold and inherited under duress and brutal violence. Africans were illegally captured from their native homeland and shipped to America in horrible conditions to work for the socio-economic benefit of the enslaver. The slaves had no personal liberty or any human rights to frame decision of their personal lives. Approximately 10.7 million Africans were shipped to various parts of America, and over than two million African slaves were recorded to have vanished during the harsh voyage. Historian John Blassingame recounts how the captured African slaves were brought to America across the Atlantic Ocean in overcrowded ship under dreadful circumstances. The bared African slaves were

chained together on a wooden board, solidly pressed together that make even their slight movement horrendous. The gruesome voyage takes three weeks or more than three months. The horrible condition and the scorching temperature in the vessel brought unbearable pain to the slaves. Many of the slaves on the ship lost their mind, while some took the desperate measure of ending their precious life due to depression. (Equal Justice Initiative 2018)

The white masters used brutality, mistreatment, and the law to deprive the slaves of their rights and marginalise African Americans for well over a century. The practice of enslavement was barbaric, and the hereditary status of bondage was bequeathed to the children. The enslaver not only exploited the bond slaves in terms of labour but also sexually abused them violently, as the slaves were not protected by the law. The slave master had absolute authority entrusted to them by the law over the enslaved men, women and offspring as they were acknowledged as his property. The slaves do not have any laws to protect them. Thus, they were detached from their own family and auctioned by the white master according to his vagary. Documented accounts of slaves recorded that there were cases of incarcerated mothers who leaped to their deaths and fathers who committed suicide instead of been separated from their kindred.

Abraham Lincoln in 1863 issued a presidential order through of the Emancipation Proclamation to abolished slavery in America. The Civil War turned the war into a fight to end slavery. The presidential decree heralded the thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865, which legally eradicated enslavement all over the United States. The Amendment guaranteed that the newly freed slaves would be amalgamated into American society. Though the slaves were granted freedom, they continued to suffer both in law and in everyday life as they were segregated and abused in the public sphere. The impact of slavery is an ongoing struggle, as the heritage of past events is ineffaceable although they attempt to

disremember. Acquiescence with a complicated history is unachievable without genuinely challenging the awful past and detecting a course of action which is considerate and accountable.

Suppression of Marginalised Voices

The voices of African Americans were arbitrarily suppressed by the superior dominant culture. The practice of enslavement has incarcerated blacks in untold miseries. They were deprived of the universal right to freedom of expression and education. The historical truth about African Americans' experiences was erased and suppressed in many documented records. The bond slaves were prohibited to retain their cultural beliefs and their languages. The slave masters gained absolute authority over the African slaves. The enslaved Africans were deprived of the practice of their ancestral culture, which further encumbered their progenies to European methods of cultural hegemony. Africans in the United States were denuded of their historical memory, identity and culture and were forced to involuntarily adopt the dominant culture. The portrayal of African Americans in the mainstream literature and media world was exhibited as caricatures with negative racial bigotry.

Toni Morrison, through her novels, redefined African Americans by depicting them as black people in their authentic selves. Morrison wanted the African American writers to construct a closer affinity to the black community—"there must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it" (Morrison 1984, 339). Her novels vividly bring forth the voices of the marginalised people by taking her people through the pain and dissent of the racially hunted past to recuperation space. Morrison's novels act as a catalyst to amplify the African American voices, making it possible for the black stories to be heard and accredited in the mainstream literature.

A Compendium of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is set against the milieu of slavery in the 19th epoch in America. *Beloved* is inspired from a real account of an escaped chattel who took the life of her child so that it would shield her from the harsh life of enslavement. In the preface to *Beloved*, the author (Morrison 2007, X1) asserts:

A newspaper clipping in *The Black Book* summarised the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother, who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them return to the owner's plantation. She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave Laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners. Her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers. She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom.

In 1851, Margaret Garner had confronted the brutality of enslavement by accepting the outcome of deciding infanticide. After many years of Garner's unpleasant incident, the Emancipation Proclamation came into existence in 1865, followed by the 13th Amendment, which prohibited the practice of slavery throughout the United States of America. In the novel, Morrison revamped the slave past in an attempt to bring out the facts of slavery that are repressed and even obliterated in many recorded annals. *Beloved* recounts the tale of American history connected with the horrific institution of slavery. Morrison creates the past through the actions and thoughts of African-American slaves. In *Beloved*, Morrison constructs history as a process of healing for herself, the community and the avid readers. In this novel, she delineates the suppression of women under patriarchal society along with the dreadful life of bond slaves.

The novel elucidates the painful life of Sethe prior to and after the emancipation of enslavement and post-slavery. The buried past continues to haunt the various people in the

novel as they try to grapple with the present life. The inescapable memory of Garner's plantation in Kentucky can be seen on Sethe's back as she bore the symbols of the 'cowhide' inflicted upon her by the schoolmaster's nephews. The blemish on Sethe's back looked like a "chokecherry tree... Tiny little chokecherry leaves... that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know." (Morrison 2007, 18). Paul D's presence at 124 Bluestone Road facilitates Sethe to repossess her appalling past.

Beloved delineates Sethe's journey from servitude and her escape from the slave plantation, to a pivotal moment when her residence is disturbed by the apparition of her deceased child at 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe's murdered daughter virtually comes back in the embodiment of a baffling woman named Beloved. When Sethe saw the mysterious arrival of Beloved at her house, she has sudden urge to pee which reminded her of the time when her water broke delivering Denver on the Ohio River. Sethe relive the same experience and sensation of her water breaking when she saw the exhausted face of Beloved at her home.

The spectre of Beloved has reappeared to assert her mother's love and nearly ruins her, but the timely intervention from her community leads her to the trail of recovery. Beloved is the most alluring persona in the novel. She is represented as a spectre and a figure of suppressed history. Beloved emerges as a youthful lady in her prime years, yet behaves like a child.

Sethe married Halle Suggs at the Garner's plantation and gave birth to three children. She could not find her husband when the family fled from Kentucky. Accosting the past can solely rejuvenate Sethe to move forward in life. The interconnection of Sethe and Paul D with Beloved's enigmatic appearance at their home enables them to deliberate on their shared past. Beloved sudden revelation at 124 compelled Sethe and the other people to confront and reenact the past in memory and actions. Beloved informed Denver that she came to 124 to see Sethe's face, which implies that she is the

resurrected daughter of Sethe, whose throat was slit by the mother. Confronting the frightful history of enslavement is the key factor in understanding oneself. Sethe embodies all the black women who were stripped of their fundamental human rights as they faced sexual abuse and unimaginable violence at the hands of their enslavers. The children born to black female slaves are usually detached from their birth heritage and cultural ties, resulting in natal alienation. Sethe explained to Paul D about her genuine love for her children, though she took cognizance of the fact that her offspring will be forcefully snatched away from her. She says, "When I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between" (Morrison 2007, 190). Sethe suffer the same fate of every female slave, who was deprived to nurture her child as they were considered the property of the enslaver.

She ended her daughter's life, so that Beloved will not undergo through the same horrid life of bondage. She firmly believes that she has saved her child's life by intentionally slitting her throat. The mother is engulfed by the intense emotions of anger at the Garner's plantation in Kentucky and racked by guilt for slaying her daughter. Baby Suggs persuaded Sethe to confront her resentment and guilt and move ahead in life. Morrison, through the portrayal of Sethe, longs for the African American community to grapple with their ineluctable history and move forward and not be caught up with the harrowing past. Healing came through the communal effort of the African American society as they "got down to business" in order to liberate Sethe from the clutches of reincarnated Beloved. No matter what the mother had done, Ella did not like the brooding thought of "past errors taking possession of the present... The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind" (Ibid, 302).

Denver stands for the post slavery period, where she is well acquainted with the traumatic history of her people; nevertheless, she has overcome the dreadful memories of the former times. Sethe and Denver welcome the return of Beloved to their home, 124, and Sethe gets

consumed in the proximity of Beloved. Sethe acknowledged the appearance of Beloved as the embodiment of her dead infant. She was overwhelmed to find Beloved coming back to her- "You are my Beloved You are mine" (Ibid, 255).

Denver, the only surviving daughter of Sethe, represents the future. She plays a pivotal role in helping her mother to confront the dreadful memories of the gruesome past life with the support of the community. Paul D comes back to 124 after Beloved has left forever, and he tells her that both of them "got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Ibid, 322). Paul D further reinvigorated Sethe with the assurance that she is the best version of herself.

Literary Appraisal

Within the framework of Deontological ethical theory, a Kantian would argue that Sethe's action in slaying her daughter emanates from the belief that a mother's responsibility is to safeguard her offspring from the systemic oppression of slavery, even though it engages an ethically disputable act. Sethe's strong devotion for her children compels her to take the fretful step of killing her baby. Stamp Paid informs Paul D about Sethe, that she ended her child's life out of concern and love. "She was trying to out-hurt the hunter" (Ibid, 276).

Sethe's deed was not honourably acceptable because it was an infringement of the child's right to live. Sethe's attempt to take away the life breath of her child goes against the second part of the categorical imperative, as her intention was to slaughter her children and free them from the clutches of enslavement. Sethe's plan was to take all her offspring to another site where her biological mother went, i.e. to the world of death. In this context, Sethe's conduct is immoral as she includes not only her own self, but her own offspring as a means to obtain the cessation of enslavement. Paul D confronts Sethe and discloses to her, "What you did was wrong ...There could have been a way. Some other way" (Ibid, 194).

Sethe's motherly instinct and duty of keeping her children safe invigorated her to commit the crime regardless of the outcome. She does not want the enslaver to drag them back to Kentucky and relive through the excruciating pain of enslavement. Therefore, when she saw four people coming with the schoolmaster to 124 to take them back to Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky, Sethe murdered her daughter, Beloved. Slaves were subjugated based on the colour of their skin. So Sethe did not want any white man to capture her family because she knew the ill fated life of enslavement.

Whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter (Morrison 2007, 295-296).

Through the lens of Kantianism, Beloved's re-embodiment is perceptible as the unsolved ethical obligation of Sethe's past deeds. Beloved unleashes her anger and resentment towards Sethe as she wants accountability and self-respect allocated to the dead infant. Though Sethe's action in killing her child is driven by motherly love to escape the dread of slavery, it does not justify her from her ethical commitment. Sethe's redemption finally came, when she learns to accost her past and not be possessed by the past.

In the context of Utilitarian ethical theory, Sethe's actions are permissible as her resolution to terminate her child is discernible as an endeavour to thwart greater affliction brought on by enslavement. Nonetheless, her action brought intense agony to her community by creating a sense of trepidation both in her two sons and the community at large. The spectre of Beloved returns to torment the household of 124, which compels Sethe's sons, Howard and Buglar to flee at once "as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it... as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake" (Ibid, 3). The community surrounding 124 stopped visiting the house, which made Denver

to vent out her frustration, as nobody communicates with any of the living member at 124. Paul D's return to 124 provides an outlet for healing, resulting in greater happiness for Sethe, Denver and her community. Paul D's character depicts a man of strong will, in spite of the difficult and harrowing experience meted out to him at Garner's Kentucky plantation. Sethe and Paul D are connected by a shared evocation of unpleasant past which continues to haunt them in the present. He could face and make peace with the brutality of his past and was able to move forward. Thus, he offers Sethe to confront her tormented past as it is the only path to deal with a wearisome present.

Conclusion

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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* illuminates the importance of confronting the lingering shadow of slavery on individuals and the community. The research findings of the novel reveal that addressing the dark past, nevertheless excruciating, is an important step towards individual and collective healing. Toni Morrison, through the character of Sethe, highlights how an individual can find redemption when one learns to confront the bitter memories of the past. Morrison's *Beloved* remains pertinent in academic discourse as it is endowed with the tales of enslavement and racial past that has been neglected for a long time by the mainstream literature.