

Sacrificing he *Disremembered and Unaccounted* for The Community's Welfare: The Counter- Monument of Sethe/Beloved

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the story of *Beloved* written by Toni Morrison in 1987 under the arguments of psychoanalytic criticism especially in regard to memory. While the whole story tells how Sethe, a Black mother, suffers from the pain of murdering one of her children when trying to protect them, it also sets a kind of psychological patterns revealing the fluctuations in remembering and forgetting so as to continue living. At first, Sethe pretends to forget or suppress what has happened and thereby continuing living as if nothing happened but then she realizes that this does not work. As a solution, she remembers the past to forget by facing it as a kind of counter-monument. Nevertheless, this is also not that easy. Consequently, affiliating herself with the rest of the community, she sacrifices her beloved daughter as the disremembered and continues to live leaving her behind. In the end, Sethe accepts what has happened in the form of the counter monument of the past unveiling not only her pestering memories but also the past of colonialism and slavery and continues to live.

Key Words: Colonialism, Slavery, Memory, Counter-Monument

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an incredible story of a mother, Sethe whose love is too thick and deep towards her children. She is a Black captive woman who was once a slave at Sweet Home and had to suffer from its physical, emotional and sexual exploitations. When the time comes to her children, with the aim of protecting them she attempts to murder all of them rather than give each as slaves to the White men. Yet, luckily, she kills only one of her children and saves the others from the White men who

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suppose that they are already dead. Sethe's milk on her breasts mixes with the blood of her two-year-old baby that has a mark of cutting on her throat. Sethe buries her children in haste as if she buried everything about her traumatic past crammed with pestering memories that make her suffer by remembering. Starting from the very first moment of the story, the whole novel problematizes the acts and moments of remembering and forgetting, which primarily forms the core of this article.

Methods

The paper is predicated on certain research methods including;

Psychoanalytical method through which the researcher scrutinizes the fictive story in regard to memory,

Descriptive method enabling the researcher to detail how the story is inextricably interwoven with the memories through the fluctuations in remembering and forgetting, and textual analysis focusing on the language as well as the symbols used in the text to obtain more information on how the story reveals socio-psychological background of the story to make sense of specific lives and life experiences.

To Forget to Continue Living

The story starts with the image of the headstone of the monument of Sethe's dead baby, sharing a fragment of her memory in the setting of the funeral which takes a very short time without any mourning rituals to commemorate the dead. It is just,

[t]en minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten 'Dearly' too? She had not thought to ask him and bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved ... She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver ... That should certainly be enough (Morrison, 2004, p. 5).

It seems that Sethe postpones her mourning after her daughter in a most mechanical way; she supposes that everything is over at the end of the ceremony. However, in accordance with Freud's criticism of mourning and melancholia (1914-15, p. 244), it is

so obvious that Sethe's procrastination to mourn after her dead daughter causes her to suffer more, leading her to go through melancholia rather than mourning which is the healthier way of handling the pain of the loss. Yet, having a healthy way of mourning after such an incredible murder story in which a mother slays her own children in the name of protection seems a little bit impossible and unachievable. This could also explain the reason why Sethe is mistaken to think of forgetting to continue living as if nothing happened. As a result, Sethe builds another monument inside her, nearby her daughter's; she condemns herself to live with her by letting her live within her. She keeps her beloved daughter somewhere inside her.

Feeling that there is no other way but to preserve the loss of her beloved daughter inside her, Sethe makes her a part of herself. This correlation between Sethe and the dead baby is constructed at the very beginning of the story and told by the narrator with these words: "Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl" (Morrison, 2004, p. 5). However, there is a kind of contradiction between the two: When Sethe feels numbness, she forgets the soul of her daughter in a most paradoxical manner. That is, to feel still to focus on how she manages to go through such a loss and how to protect her other children from the threats of the outside, she has to forget, at any rate, suppress her daughter's death. In silence, she undergoes the excruciating pain of leaving her own child behind and feels the compulsion to forget for the sake of a new beginning with her other children. Her state of mind is revealed as follows: "Those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-coloured stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (Morrison, 2004, p. 6). Although she becomes the dead in life whose 'knees wide open as the grave', although she could hardly endure those ten minutes which seemed to last more longer than her life and which indeed will last up to her last breath, she decides to put up with the situation through forgetting.

But to Remember to Forget

Sethe desperately needs to forget so as to continue living as normal as possible. Such an essential act of forgetting is pointed out in Homi Bhabha's critical article of "DissemiNation" (1999) in terms of creating a new nation for the minorities. Similarly, Sethe can be regarded as a representative of a minority migrated from Sweet Home to Ohio in order to build her own nation with her children (even with the ghost of her dead baby). For the sake of a new beginning, Sethe forgets everything and lets her traumatic past go away. However, she is unable to do that no matter how hard she seems to forget. At this point, James Young suggests another solution to the problems of remembering and forgetting in a completely different by thought-provoking context in the article "The Counter-Monument: Memory against itself in Germany Today" (1992). He puts forward that the counter-monument should be visited since the mourning is the responsibility to be performed for the dead and a therapy for the ones who are left behind to suffer from the loss they undergo. If such a performance (or ritual) is not done; then the alive suffers from melancholia, which breeds the uncanny in Freudian lexicon, the unhomely, unfamiliar and unknown phenomena (1914-15, p. 244). In the same vein, as Sethe does not let any memory-work, the alienated, shabby and chaotic presence of Sethe's home has been observed, which is itself another counter-monument for the loss of the Black community in the colonial period. Despite the uncanny elements, what she needs is to remember to forget as Young suggests while Bhabha proposes a total forgetting which supposedly covers all the wounds of the past.

Sethe seems to accept Bhabha's proposal on total forgetting; however, she admits that she cannot forget everything even for a new beginning in her own House that is her own Nation. She says,

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place- the picture of it- stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened (Morrison, 2004, p. 43).

Sethe explicitly utters how she barely keeps the hardest memories inside her; she knows and feels that she is never ever able to forget what she has done and undergone. Yet, she pretends to forget for her other children who are kept in safe in the territories of the house in her mind. She feels glad to be with her all children, even her dead baby's ghost and keep them away from the White men. No matter how extraordinary the situation is, she makes her children get accustomed to live with the ghost that she makes them believe it is their own dead sister. What she attempts to do is to have her life inside a haunted house with her children; nonetheless, her children are unable to welcome this uncanny life. They get on the point of losing their minds because of the presence of the ghost while Sethe is totally unaware of their state of minds. She believes that the more she keeps her children inside the house, the safer they can be. She does not know that the way she thinks she protects their children is indeed the thing which actually harms them. In the end, her sons, Buglar and Howard, cannot endure the haunted house with the ghost of an allegedly dead sister surrounding around in a most uncanny way and run away without looking back. Sethe and her only child Denver keep on living in the same house with the ghost by alienating themselves from the outside, which is an obvious threat for her own nation. They continue living as if nothing happened strange in their lives.

At that point, the house which serves as a form of counter-monument neither enables them to remember nor makes them forget anything about the past. What it does is to make them suppress any scraps of vexatious memory they have. Hence, every fragment of traumatic memories of the past is kept away until one day when Paul D returns. Paul D triggers Sethe's past and causes her to remember; that is, he becomes the compulsion to remember for Sethe. With his coming, the biggest counter monument of the story has been revealed: Sethe's own body holding numerous terrifying stories of slavery. Her body turns into the counter-monument exposing the traumatic past as well as her beloved's grave. This is the monument that she can never manage to face up but always knows its presence.

Throughout the story, the dichotomy between the body and the flesh has been reverberated, especially under the arguments of the counter-monuments. Hortense Spillers puts emphasis on this distinction between the body and the flesh in her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) implying that the hieroglyphics are written on the body as "the marks of a cultural text" which reveals "the mechanism of torture" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) in the flesh. She says "[...] undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of the flesh whose severe disjunctions come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" and in saying this, she seems to imagine Sethe as the body and her flesh as the embodiment of "lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings [and] punctures" (ibid) which Sethe tries to suppress to forget. In regard to this, it can be intriguing to think that Beloved's headstone serves as the body of her while her flesh remains intact. Even Spiller appears to approve that idea when stating "before the body there is the flesh" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) since the flesh is the timeless and primary one whereas the body is just a garment to put on.

The flesh, therefore, should be something more than the body for both Sethe and Beloved; it needs to be felt and thereby recognized. This could also explain why Sethe cannot feel Paul D's touches on her body; they are far away from any emotions. The narrator tells this with these words:

As she raised up from the heat, she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts. She straightened up and knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree (Morrison, 2004, p. 20).

Feeling Paul D's touches means feeling the past for Sethe; and she does not want to encounter any part of it. Therefore, his touches circle around her body; not manage to get through her flesh. However, thanks to Paul D's attempts to make Sethe's body touchable that has been intact so long, he manages to reach her flesh, soul. As in a psychoanalytic therapy, Sethe starts to tell what happened to her eighteen years ago. Revisiting what she underwent in the past induces her to have a therapeutic work of rememory in a way Young describes as follows:

For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden [...] [W]e encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful (Young, 1992, p. 273).

Sethe does such a memory-work through her own body with Paul D, who also needs the same memory-work. In the end, she seems to be relieved to lessen her memory-burden because it is the first time, she has ever articulated it since she ran away from the Sweet Home where she shares her distressing memories with another person. In this regard, Young's paradoxical suggestion of commemoration to forget seemingly works for Sethe. At the end of this therapeutic session, Sethe, Denver and Paul D get out of the house and get into the society in a most promising way.

Not so easy to Continue

Just for a day, neither the death of her baby or its ghostly presence in the house nor the escape of her sons upsets her. She enjoys pretending to be/have a normal family like others; yet what she performs is the repression which is doomed to come back in Freud's psychoanalysis. The repressed returns in a most uncanny fashion in the body of a teenage girl with the flesh of Beloved who gets involved in Sethe's life immediately. Beloved may be another counter-monument of the traumatic past hiding the harsh realities of colonialism and slavery inside. If she was the counter-monument, it would not be merely for Sethe but also for Denver. Denver gets along with Beloved and starts to share her time with her by playing games, talking and dancing. She remembers what she wants to forget (Young, 1992, p. 286) with Beloved and partially she succeeds until Beloved asks for Sethe's attention and affection instead of her.

Dismissing Denver, Beloved starts to crave for Sethe's care, her talking to her, her caressing her, her combing her hairs, her singing to her. She becomes extremely selfish and resists to share Sethe with any other person:

I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be

there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing (Morrison, 2004, p, 248).

Beloved's obsession to possess *Sethe* is seemingly a response to *Sethe's* love to *Beloved*. *Beloved* loves *Sethe* as much as *Sethe* loves her; *Beloved* does not want to lose her again and neither does *Sethe* (Morrison, 2004, p. 250). Their excessive love gets out of control and thereby putting *Beloved* in a position where she thinks *Sethe* is herself and she totally belongs to her. She says "Now I have found her in this house. She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling. I will not lose her again. She is mine" (Morrison, 2004, p. 254). It is so evident that *Sethe* is important for *Beloved* as she is *Sethe's* reflection or even her own self. That means, if she loses *Sethe*, she loses herself. Likewise, *Sethe* does the same process of association and identification with *Beloved*:

Beloved
 You are my sister
 You are my daughter
 You are my face; you are me
 I have found you again; you have come back to me
 You are my *Beloved*
 You are mine (Morrison, 2004, p, 255).

Interestingly, *Sethe* echoes *Beloved's* words, which makes us almost sure that they are the parts of the one. Luce Irigaray elucidates such a kind of togetherness among a mother and a daughter in her article (1981) "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other" as follows:

With your milk, Mother, you fed me ice. And if I leave, you lose the reflection of life, of your life. And if I remain, am I not the guarantor of your death? Each of us lacks her own image; her own face, the animation of her own body is missing. And the one mourns the other. My paralysis signifying your abduction in the mirror (p. 66).

It is so striking to see the similarity in the situation in which *Beloved* is fed by *Sethe's* milk that becomes the ice for her that makes her die or the blood for her that is "too a hot thing" (Morrison, 2004, p, 248). In a similar vein, *Beloved* becomes the guarantor of *Sethe's* death: she "accuse[s] her of leaving her behind, of not being nice to her, not smiling at her" (ibid) while *Sethe* 'lose[s] the reflection of life' suffering from regret

and guilt. Although Sethe “plead[es] for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons”, Beloved refuses her as if she took her revenge in every moment of Sethe’s cries (Morrison, 2004, p, 248).

Echoing Irigaray’s analysis of mother and daughter relationship, Sethe becomes weak, thin and lifeless in a stark contrast to Beloved and this clear opposition between the two is narrated as follows: “The bigger Beloved [gets], the smaller Sethe [becomes]; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away [become] slits of sleeplessness [...] Beloved [eats] up her life, [takes]it, [swells] up with it, [grows] taller on it” (Morrison, 2004, pp. 294-5). These “living mirrors” (Irigaray, 1981, p. 61) collapse their lives unintentionally because of their uncontrollable love; and at the end neither of them has their own image. They have one face with the same reflection and as Irigaray states it is so hard to differentiate who Sethe/ Beloved is (Irigaray, 1981, p. 64).

Sacrificing the *Disremembered and Unaccounted* for the Community’s Welfare

As the situations at home get out of control for Denver, she needs to take charge of supplying food for Sethe/Beloved. She asks for a job from Mrs. Jones (Janey) in return to “a little extra”, food. During their conversation, Denver tells Janey how terrible her mother is because of Beloved and how helpless she feels since Sethe appears to lose her conscious and turns into someone whom she does not remember (Morrison, 2004, p. 299). Janey is so deeply touched that she spreads the news to the other colored women:

Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out her hair (Morrison, 2004, p. 300).

The news circulating around sounds to approve the fact that Beloved becomes the tormenting figure and Sethe becomes the tormented one in the end, which somehow evokes the role of the counter-monument Young describes in this way: “[the] monument to torment [...] They have likened it, for example, to a great black knife [...], slowly being plunged in [...] a self-mutilation, a kind of topographical hara-kiri”

(Young, 1992, p. 281). It is as if knifing yourself to death so slowly that you feel a nagging pain and while doing so the one who keeps lots of memory-burden inside such as Sethe/Beloved turns into a “self-destroying sculpture” (Young, 1992, p. 278). Nonetheless, this is not such a negative process for Young; on the contrary, he believes that such a self-destructive process through reopening old wounds is essential to lessen the memory-burden that person holds and thereby becoming much more forgetful.

The community gives a helping hand to Sethe to assist her to go through such a challenging process; they discuss her situation in a way which reminds Spiller's thoughts on the distinction between body and flesh as follows:

‘[...] A baby?’

‘No. Grown. The age it would have been had it lived.’

‘You talking about flesh?’

‘I'm talking about flesh.’ (Morrison, 2004, p. 301).

In accordance with Spillers' interpretation, the community refers to the soul of Beloved while talking about the flesh. It is the flesh (soul) that comes back and they are aware of it. Therefore, in order to get rid of this tormenting soul, they gather to exorcise it restoring their faith in Christianity (Morrison, 2004, p. 303).

At the time of their praying, Sethe plays with the ice while Beloved sweats in a stark contrast; however, their emotions are the same; “[b]oth women [hear] it at the same time and both [lift] their heads” (Morrison, 2004, p. 308). Sethe/Beloved gets out of the house hand in hand and the chanting of the crowd reaches the very flesh of her. At that moment, the narrator tells how Sethe feels in this way:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (ibid).

‘The right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words’ make Sethe feel the Clearing coming her. The increasing voices get into her flesh (soul) and

make her purged. Thanks to the ritual of exorcism; Sethe feels the water which is a signifier of purification and the chestnut trees which grant life full of emotions to her against the chokecherry tree on her back that blocks all her feelings. In the end, she is purified from all her evils and '[trembles] like the baptized in its wash'. Instantly, the whole ritual is interrupted by Mr. Bodwin, the White man. With his coming, Sethe panics in fear of losing her children once again and in order to protect them from the White men, she leaves the hand of Beloved and "[runs] into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too" (Morrison, 2004, p. 309). Sethe's leaving Beloved behind and merging into the group of people with Denver symbolically show their integration with the community who is ready to welcome them after witnessing Beloved's ritual aiming to turn her into a scapegoat for the uncanny past of Sethe as well as colonialism and slavery.

CONCLUSION

If Beloved is the counter-monument in one way or another, it does not only exist for Sethe to soothe her pains but also for the whole community who feel guilty about the past or who really wants to forget their past. Whether Beloved is a hallucination or not, all community including Sethe, Denver and Paul D believe her existence. They need to sacrifice her to relieve themselves from the pangs of guilt. That is why no one is closer to Beloved than Sethe because Sethe feels the guiltiest one causing her death and thereby begging for being forgiven. On the other hand, the community of Black women also yearn to forget the cruel and merciless story of Sethe which aligns with the stories of pestering memories at the time of colonialism. Looking at Sethe with Beloved in the form of counter-monument makes them remember to forget the traumatic past and finally unite them against anything threatening their present.

In the end, there is loneliness, alienation, lifelessness and inertia for Beloved whereas life, conversation and social activity are attributed to Sethe and Denver with the rest of the community. Beloved is not the beloved at the end but the forgotten; the essentially

required forgotten for the community for their welfare. The end of *Beloved*'s story is rather tragic because she is abandoned once again by her dearly mother first and then by the rest of the community and consequently, she turns into the one who is sacrificed for the benefits of the whole community:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.

It was not a story to pass on.

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her (Morrison, 2004, p. 323).

The narrator ends the story with an emphasis on *Beloved*'s disappearance without any name. No matter how much *Beloved* craves to be recognized and loved, she fails and thus she is condemned to fade away despite her claims since no one reclaims her. *Beloved* attempts 'to eat up [*Sethe*'s] life' to survive; yet *Sethe* with the community act earlier to swallow and digest her uncanny presence. Therefore, the one who manages to eat up the other's life also manages to survive; and this becomes *Sethe* at the end; the one who gets a chance of surviving.

As a conclusion, 'it [is] not a story to pass on' that 'they forget [...] like a bad dream'; as *Sethe* states "[some] things go. Pass on. Some things just stay [...] Some things you forget. Other things you never do" (Morrison, 2004, p. 43). On the one side, *Beloved* becomes the flesh (soul) of the uncanny traumatic past of colonialism and slavery that is always felt deep down by the whole community believing that "[down] by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar" (Morrison, 2004, p. 324). Thus, in the form of counter-monument, *Beloved* remains to be "a great black knife" (Young, 1992, p. 281) in the back of [*Sethe* and the whole community]". *Sethe*, on the other side, becomes the body that lives with her daughter Denver and Paul

D not pretending to be a real family any more but being a more normal family in her own Home which turns into her own Nation. At the end, the loss of the one guarantees the existence of the other in a most promising but also perplexing way.

This paper, in the end, aim to serve the needs of some researchers by offering a different perspective to the fiction of colonialism and slavery in direct relation to psychology. While telling Sethe's pathetic story and painful efforts to survive, the whole story fictitiously documents the common past of Black people who try not to open their old wounds to be able to survive in a better harmony with the rest of the community. When they realize that suppressing old memories is not an effective solution, they agree on possessing the monument/tomb helping them remember when they want and forget when they do not. Such fluctuations in remembering and forgetting and different functions of counter-monuments could hopefully open up new readings and discussions in the field.

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