

Rethinking Resistance: The 'Hysterical' and the 'Suicidal' as Political Dissenters in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

In this paper I explore 'resistance' and 'agency' in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) using a deconstructionist approach for a feminist historiography. The paper aims at recovering the subject of the black female from the history of the Atlantic slave trade. This is thus somewhat a double transgression- it not only tries to recover the history of the 'disremembered and unaccounted for' but also tries to locate feminist resistance and agency within that 'recovered' history. For this, I would use two psychoanalytic categories for feminist resistance- 'hysteria' and 'suicide'- and analyse it through *Beloved*.

Towards this feminist historiography, a narrative strategy that Morrison uses in the novel needs to be mentioned – 'rememory' which is a careful reworking of memory that has a healing potential to confront, reclaim and transform the pervasive presence of the traumatic past in the making of an agentive sense of the self. This reworking of the memory to forge a feminist historiography uses the conceptual tools of 'hysteria' and 'suicide' as forms of expressions of political dissent. That is, it treats the body as a text and uses corporeal discourse to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable. However, the hysteric in the novel has a wider of signification than just the corporeal. Hysteria in *Beloved* is a product of personal as well as of public repression. So the potential of the hysteric to subvert symbolic law works on two grounds – it mimics hegemonic mode of behavior of imposed femininity to excess, and in this act of mimicry it also mimes the hegemony of Western history by creating a separate history through its corporeality.

Like hysteria, suicide too works through the body. It is another rhetorical impasse, a sign clear but incommunicable. It is a dual impulse towards erasure and survival and in *Beloved* it operates on two levels- it functions as a political form of resistance, a break in history; and within the narrative it acts a discursive strategy, an axis that organizes meanings, along with a break in textual time. This rethinking of suicide in political terms surpasses the physical death of just one body, because the African Americans identify 'I' as 'we' and this is best exemplified by the solidarity of the women in the final exorcism scene. The interconnectedness of the bodies (that defeats death in physical terms) introduces a distinct epistemological structure to understand the African American feminist version of reality.

Using and critiquing Freudian and French feminist theories of hysteria along with a context-specific careful theorization of suicide, I would try to locate the agency of the black female subject against the normative mode of historical writing. I further aim to address whether such subversions could be antagonistic enough to actually establish a separate epistemological basis of understanding, or whether it would still be co-opted by the ulterior discourse of colonial oppression.

Keywords: *Beloved*, hysteria, suicide, resistance, agency, feminist historiography.