

# 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

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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.

*Key words: Beloved, hysteria, suicide, resistance, agency, feminist historiography. 124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom.*<sup>1</sup>

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* introduces terror at the outset. The historical time in the novel is 1873, ten years after slavery has been institutionally abolished in the United States of America, which should have made life at '124 Bluestone' peaceful. But it is 'spiteful' instead, haunted and terrorized by a ghost from the past. The ghost is that of a baby girl who was killed by her own mother in her second year of birth. She has now arrived, 'returned' rather, from *that* past which is lost to history, to man, or even to the lore. Nobody had looked for her because she had no name. Now she has returned, nameless as it were, and with her has brought the trace of an entire nation that too lies namelessly lost beneath the Atlantic.

The novel is inspired by the real life story of a Kentucky slave named Margaret Garner who escaped from slavery in 1856 to Ohio, a free state. In the novel, the protagonist Sethe is too a slave running from slavery to Cincinnati, Ohio. But twenty eight days later, the slave owner tracks down Garner to retrieve her and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which gave the slave owners the right to pursue their absconding slaves across borders. Like Garner, Sethe slits the throat of her two year old daughter to protect her from slavery and being taken back to the Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from where Sethe had fled. Years later and no longer a slave, a young woman presumed to be Sethe's dead daughter comes back to haunt her Ohio house at 124 Bluestone Road. So the story opens with an introduction to this ghost – '124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom' – and ends with a dedication to the 'sixty million and more' referring to the millions of faceless, nameless Africans who died during the Middle Passage on their way to North America during the Atlantic slave trade.

'A new history is [thus] coming,'<sup>2</sup> and with *Beloved/Beloved* that seems

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to have arrived in its actual, lived experience. The baby's killing was not without purpose, it was to save her from slavery, and the saviour was her own mother. The immensity of such trauma thus suffered by both ends cannot be just mitigated on the personal level alone, it requires some sort of historical mitigation as well. That is to say, history must bear some answer, some witness, some accounts for the sufferings of those slaves who had lost their lives, or had rather chosen to die, during the Middle Passage in the Atlantic slave trade. *That* history has now come, with *Beloved/Beloved*, who/which has seized upon this moment in the post-colonial (for a specifically African-American context) for an insurgency of a corporeal kind that can confront, reclaim, and transform the past in the making of an agentive sense of self.

This notion of 'corporeal insurgency'<sup>3</sup> now brings us to the immediacy and the materiality of the body, and of the body alone. Here we are dealing with a novel that takes body as text – the insufficiently documented slave past could be arrived at from the materiality of the body itself. Such a past thus (re)constituted dismantles the 'truth', the 'phallusy' of the so-called official history and disperses the points of slippages to bring out the account of barbarism from its erasure to the foreground, the barbarism which has itself been the very condition for the epistemological status of that 'official' history in the first place. The body of *Beloved* discloses that account of barbarism, brings to life a history from the dead, and she has her corporeality as the signifier. Such signifying process uses memory as its archive, in fact strategically reworks it, and Morrison has a special term for it – 'rememory'<sup>4</sup> – which is an act of moral imagination that selects memories from the past and discharges their 'affect' through physical symptoms, thus using a corporeal discourse to articulate what has been originally/historically suppressed. This certain category of 'rememory' through which Morrison invites us to re-think the post-colonial African-American condition uses the conceptual tool of hysteria which, in this context, is endowed with sufficient political signification capable of positing a self outside of and in opposition to the symbolic order.<sup>5</sup>

The word 'hysteria' comes from the Greek word 'hysteros' meaning womb. This implies that the umbilical relationship, in order to have a hysterical effect, must consist in a pre-Oedipal, homosexual desire for the mother. The two sections that start with 'I am Beloved and she is mine' and

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'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'<sup>6</sup> suggest a womb-like fusion with the mother, a return to the choral state, a place of 'no-time', a place before history itself. This symbolic retreat into the chora,<sup>7</sup> with its ramification of a temporary semiotic disruption of the symbolic, clears a space for amendments in the umbilical relationship that was initially disregarded by colonial slavery. Such a space thus created precedes time and language and takes one back to the start where relationships, before their entry into the symbolic, could be revisited, revised, re-organized so as to purge them off their traumatic content which in this specific context means, an act of remembering in order to forget, in order to render it 'disremembered', and to make such memories 'compatible'<sup>8</sup> with the realm and order of the symbolic.

*Beloved*/Beloved's hysterical manifestation now entails an 'excess' of the available modes of behavior. She is 'greedy', her hunger is insatiable, and her mother, Sethe, notes that the longing in her eyes is 'bottomless'. Her fixation is sugar which as a substance invokes powerful stereotypes of femininity, which as a hysterical subject Beloved takes it to its extreme so that the effect is that of parody of that order that has normalized those behaviour and has also produced the hysterical, deviant subject in the first place. Her unappeasable appetite for sugar is then displaced onto her mother to an extent that her appetite now becomes cannibalistic and she thereupon invents the desire of devouring up her mother metaphorically: '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.'<sup>9</sup> In this 'excess' mode of behaviour, the hysterical Beloved performs a self-fashioning where the consequent representations of femininity become mere mimicry of the gender stereotypes in the symbolic order.<sup>10</sup>

So far hysteria has been considered only in the immediate familial terms. However, the range of signification of the hysterical in *Beloved* cannot be reduced to just the domain of the familial alone. It is a response to what has been repressed in history as well. She is that symptom that brings to light the amnesia that has characterized the post-colonial African-American condition and which has been used as a defense to deal with the trauma of slavery. The realization that follows does not remain limited to the personal alone, but includes the public also when they confront the truth that the

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'manifest'<sup>11</sup> history has been conditioned by the suppression of certain historical events but they have been written off from both history and memory. Such events when make their abrupt emergence have to be dealt with not only at the individual, but at the communal level as well. As a hysterical symptom *Beloved* represents the return of the repressed and the community's response towards her indicates possible ways of dealing with a shared past of historical trauma.

In mediating between the personal and the public the figure of *Beloved*, besides invoking the immediacy of the socio-historical, frustrates the man/woman binary. To rephrase it, it means that in this specific, hysterical re-reading of the novel and its subject, the man/woman distinction becomes redundant because the African Americans have historically been denied the privilege of forming units of family for having born into the commodifying ideologies of colonialism. In 'fending off'<sup>12</sup> the traumatic symptom of the past the community of black women too invokes the semiotic to exorcise the ghost of *Beloved* and make pre-linguistic noises, 'the sound that broke the back of words.'<sup>13</sup> The community's 'sound' helps to break the redundant cyclicity of *Sethe's* imprisonment within the dominant discourse that in turn links her to the potential of realizing her own subjectivity outside the colonial discourse. It is as if she was baptized in its wash and reborn outside the confines of a limiting ideology into an alternative and empowering communal discourse. The exorcism scene thus successfully differentiates between hysteria as pathology and hysteria as a temporary and productive strategy for subversion of the cultural constructions of gender and race in the discourses of history. It brings about a structural change, and that change is signaled by the retreat of *Beloved* through successful exorcism.

It would now be convenient, after discussing communal unanimity, to come to the question of suicide that too, like hysteria, works through a certain conceptualization of the body. Suicide as a thematic trope pervades African American fiction writing. In *Beloved* a woman jumps overboard during the Middle Passage. Suicide here is a gesture, a suicidal rejection of slavery, a form of political consciousness. In the final chapter of *Beloved* there is an allusion to the *others*: 'By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there.'<sup>14</sup> The line refers to the 'sixty million and more' to whom this novel

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has been dedicated. The novel relies structurally on the suicidal impulse that emerges from the reading of its characters. The political investment in the *idea* of the suicide can be traced in both Sethe's and Beloved's behavior, but it operates at a very subtle, structural level that often leaves it unnoticed.

First, I am considering Sethe in this suicidal behaviour. Sethe suffers from the guilt of having killed her own child. We are not considering the nobility of purpose here, just the act alone. So when Beloved returns, Sethe has to make amends for the act she has committed before. Referring to that quote again where '... Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. While the older woman yielded it up without a murmur,' it carries with it the element of self-destruction which becomes politically invested as it aims at giving her daughter the chance at subjectivity that she had earlier denied, or at least participated in its denial. Within the relationship with her daughter Sethe reinvents the master/slave relationship allowing Beloved to play her master this time. However, in doing so she herself internalizes the colonialist paradigm of domination where one of the parties controls the fate of the other. But that *is* suicide as an idea here. This 'adopted' position of a slave within the relationship with her daughter is an act of choice which does not aim to subvert the ulterior colonialist paradigm, but to reorganize personal relationships that have been historically affected. Such suicidal act of choice will not change the history that has affected it in the first place, but would re-member a certain past that has suffered historical denial in a way as to render it 'disremembered'. That is to say, to remove the whole disquiet about the absence of that certain past in history and for that end it adopts a positionality which reworks memory and makes the process of forgetting follow its normal course. That positionality in this context becomes exclusive and suicidal.

Secondly, taking up Beloved as the next suicidal example – she represents the 'sixty million and more', she is the metonymy of an entire lost population that cannot be quantified. To 'fend off' the hysterical symptom, which is Beloved herself, the original act of her killing has to be re-enacted. She had to disappear anyway; it was in the very purpose of her return. Beloved describes a certain woman on the ship as 'the woman with my face' but consistently avoiding the word 'mother'. Here the onus is on the 'face', a longing for a certain face that would make identification possible among the sixty million and more. She concludes that Sethe is that

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face, but herein lies the problem – the ability to identify requires a certain knowledge of lineage, of ancestry. Middle Passage had exhausted any such possibility, ‘the face’ has been permanently lost to history, to the Atlantic, and *Beloved* cannot pin it down to that of Sethe’s alone. So she must continue her search for that lost face that was about to smile at her before she jumped overboard, and for that she must return to the water again, to merge with the “sixty million and more.” She had to leave, she had to retreat to the place she came from; being suicidal was the very condition of her return. She could not stay as she might not be Sethe’s *Beloved*;<sup>16</sup> she was only a metaphor for a possible healing of a historical trauma that helps reorganize memories and put them in somewhat ‘proper’ place. Her return and retreat mark the history of a face, its infinitude, and to that end *Beloved* has to be consistently suicidal even if she returns as a ghost for the second time.

Through this careful working out of the hysterical which is simultaneously suicidal here, *Beloved* towards its end shifts its narrative into an awareness of its own passing: ‘This is not a story to pass on.’<sup>17</sup> The text too thus aims at a closure after memories have been rearranged, remembered, and then forgotten. The hysterical and the suicidal, in this gendered, corporeal re-visioning of a shared past, historicizes fiction and fictionalizes history – a historico-fictional position informed by dissent and hence necessarily political.

**Endnotes :**

- 1 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (NY: Random House, 1987), p. 1.
- 2 Helen Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p.253.
- 3 The idea of corporeal insurgency has been derived from Cixous’ coinage of ‘insurgent writing’ in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa.’
- 4 Toni Morrison, ‘Site of Memory,’ *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 103-24.
- 5 By ‘symbolic order’ I mean the Lacanian symbolic order or The-Law-of-the-Father.
- 6 Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 210.
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.94.

- 8 Sigmund Freud, Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria* (London: Hogarth, 1955),p.37.
- 9 Morrison, *Beloved*, p.250.
- 10 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1885), p.365.
- 11 Freud, and Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, p.35.
- 12 Freud, and Breuer, *Hysteria*, p. 35.
- 13 Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 259.
- 14 Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 275.
- 15 Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 60.
- 16 In fact, there could be an argument towards the end of the novel that Sethe and Denver have misread *Beloved* as their lost daughter and sister respectively.
- 17 Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 275.