Protest Literature: Deconstruction of Antebellum Proslavery Ideology in Toni Morrison's Beloved

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The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2014
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0444

Abstract

Slavery is a cruel and inhumane institution. Yet during the 1820s to 1860s, proslavery intellectuals and political leaders of the American South relentlessly defended slavery as a "positive good." I argue Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) deconstructs antebellum proslavery ideology through an ambiguous and sophisticated retelling of the African American slave experience. Conflicting meanings arise through the use of grotesque to portray the horrors of black slavery. The novel thus leaves room for readerly imagination, or what Wolfgang Iser describes as "narrative gaps," about slavery. Readers are exposed to counternarratives which disrupt the simplicity of Eurocentric proslavery arguments. My protest literary reading of Beloved deprivileges Morrison's role as the sole authority of the work's meaning and creates a platform for comprehensive discussions regarding slavery.

This paper examines Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) from a protest literary perspective akin to Wolfgang Iser's aesthetic response theory. According to Iser, the literary work is an aesthetic object which "must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader" (21). The indeterminacy of the protest literary work allows the reader and the text to collectively formulate meanings towards sociopolitical issues. In Beloved, Morrison deconstructs antebellum proslavery ideology through what she coins as "rememory" of the shock and horrors of African American slavery. During the 1820s to 1860s, proslavery intellectuals and political leaders relentlessly defended slavery as a "positive good." I argue Morrison's retelling of the African American slave experience not only reminds us of the inhumanity of slavery practices, but also creates a platform for comprehensive discussions regarding slavery.

Antebellum Proslavery Ideology in the American South

Historians initially were ambivalent towards Southern proslavery ideology. Amongst other reasons, earlier historians perhaps simply did not wish to convey to their readers they "mourned" the demise of slavery (Young 3). Recent scholarship, however, discovers the proslavery arguments as surprisingly refine. Eugene Genovese even believes the arguments "constitute a searing critique of some of the most dangerous tendencies in modern life" (3).

Many of the Southern defenders of slavery were important educators, writers, and political leaders of the time. They devised multi-faceted justifications, covering social, political, religious, and philosophical fields. Although many of the proslavery arguments were racist, the most insightful ones only saw racial inferiority playing a minor role. Peter Kolchin observes that Southern defenders realized it was "intellectually risky" to defend slavery solely with racial inferiority because the Northern white abolitionists already accepted blacks as an inferior race (193). Moreover, the capabilities of Southern whites varied; it was difficult to argue all whites were superior to blacks (193). Proslavery intellectuals therefore resorted to emphasizing how slavery was a positive good which benefited slaves, slaveholders, and non-slaveholders alike.

Religiously, the stories from the Old and New Testament appealed to proslavery defenders. Thomas R Dew, a professor of law and economics, countered arguments that slavery was against the spirit of Christianity by citing numerous proslavery examples from the Bible:

> The children of Israel themselves were slaveholders and were not condemned for it. All the patriarchs themselves were slaveholders; Abraham had more than three hundred; Isaac had a 'great store' of them; and even the patient and meek Job himself had 'a very great household.' (Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832)

Indeed, even Protestant ministers of the South were convinced that slavery was compatible with and a necessary practice of Christianity. They felt slavery helped blacks develop Christian virtues like humility and self-control (Boyer et al 431-432).

Sociopolitically, the proslavery intellectuals scathingly criticized capitalism. They stressed how the South's slavery institution was far superior to the North's free-labor system. George Fitzhugh, a sociologist, was one of the most important advocates. In Cannibals All! Or, Slaves without Masters (1857), Fitzhugh described the North's free labor as "wage slaves" in worse conditions than their Southern counterparts:

> We do not know whether free laborers ever sleep. They are fools to do so; for, whilst they sleep, the wily and watchful capitalist is devising means to ensnare and exploitate them. The free laborer must work or starve. He is more of a slave than the negro, because he works longer and harder for less allowance than the slave, and has no holiday, because the cares of life with him begin when its labors end. He has no liberty, and not a single right. (29-30)

Such criticism was especially potent since much attention was given to the poor working conditions in British and American North industrialized societies. Slavery supporters, by contrast, boasted the conditions of Southern slaves were "better than that of any equal number of laborers on earth and is daily improving" (qtd in Kolchin 194). More importantly, Fitzhugh argued that in a capitalist society free labor was not "free" at all. Similarly, politicians like James H Hammond saw freedom as illusory and proclaimed "inequality is the fundamental law of nature, and hence alone the harmony of the universe" (qtd in Kolchin 195). Hammond later introduced the infamous "Mudsill theory," which saw human inequality an essential factor to the development of society. The African race was the destined race "to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life" (qtd in Mrydal 443).

Proslavery defenders challenged the fundamental basis of Western modernity. Their alternative, albeit controversial, readings of Christianity and capitalism critically questioned the definition of morality and immorality. Perhaps they were simply apologists and casuists. Nevertheless, slavery defenders revealed the complexities of antebellum Southern slavery.

Aesthetic Response and Rememory of Slavery in Beloved

In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984), Toni Morrison highlights orality as one of the "major characteristics of black art" (59). She notes the importance of making "the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken" because it allows "the reader [to] work with the author in the construction of the book" (59). Morrison elaborates on the role of orality in her writing:

> They always say my writing is rich. It's not—what's rich, if there is any richness, is what the reader gets and brings him or herself. That's part of the way in which the tale is told. The folk tal[e] [is] told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It's not over just because it stops. It lingers and it's passed on. It's passed on and somebody else can alter it later. You can even end it if you want. (Darling 253)

For Morrison, the collectiveness and open-endedness of orality is the key to the "richness" of her writing, a feature evoking the African American folkloric tradition. Bernard W Bell illustrates African orality with the myths and legends told by Yoruba kings: "Instead of clear-cut categories, the same story may be told in one society about a god or deity, in another about a trickster figure, and in yet another about a legendary hero; by one people it may be considered sacred and by another entertainment" (73). Because multiple voices are allowed, stories become complex and ambiguous, in terms of both didactic function and aesthetic form.

In Beloved, Morrison introduces the idea of "rememory" which adopts African American folkloric orality to collectively and consciously reconstruct memory. Morrison contends that "memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular

way" ("Memory" 385). An important feature of rememory is the participation of more than one person in maintaining a piece of memory. Lisa Cade Wieland observes how the concept of rememory "establishes a community of rememberers whose consciousnesses overlap at times, and at other times remain independent" (208). Chiji Akoma further defines rememory as an act of "dwell[ing] on a past that the dominant [master] narrative has tried to erase through contrived history" (81). Beyond the communal uncovering of hidden or forgotten history, rememory in Beloved is also an act of critically revisiting African American slavery. As Morrison explains, the objective in memory is to understand "why" a particular memory has occurred in a particular way. Rememory can be viewed as a communal "willed creation" and a search for the reason and cause of memory ("Memory" 385). In Beloved, this very memory is the trauma of slavery.

Morrison's idea of rememory can be further understood with Wolfgang Iser's concept of "aesthetic response." In The Act of Reading (1978), Iser states the meaning of the text becomes "virtual" (21) because it is formulated by both the text's existing framework and the reader's subjective imagination (x). Since every reader's unique interpretation is derived from the same text, it allows for different interpretations to co-exist simultaneously. There is no "wrong" interpretation. The source of this ambiguity in textual meaning is aesthetics. According to Iser, aesthetics are the difference between reality and text. Aesthetics detach the reader from reality and allow him or her to have a unique experience and to view reality "as a thing freshly understood" (140). In order to maximize the reader's unique experience, reader involvement is crucial (46). Hence, aesthetics should be indeterminate in nature. The more gaps and blanks in the text, the more space for imaginative interpretation for readers.
Aesthetic response theory reveals the protest potential of the act of rememory, and Beloved as a protest literary work. For me, the goal of protest literature is to raise awareness towards sociopolitical issues through the collective construction of textual meaning. Readers are able to participate in Morrison's collective rememory of the horrors of slavery due to the simultaneous presence of determinate facts and indeterminate gaps in the text. Our understanding of Beloved and African American enslavement is constantly adjusting and open for discussion.

I identify the aesthetics of grotesque as the prime source of textual ambiguity in Beloved. The term "grotesque" comes from the Italian word grottesco. While grotesque is often used to describe vulgarity, Frances K Barasch refines it as a literary aesthetic which "simultaneously attracts and repels, excites laughter and terror, invites pleasure and disgust" (85). Susan Corey similarly observes the grotesque being "an aesthetic form that works through exaggeration, distortion, contradiction, disorder and shock to disrupt a sense of normalcy and stimulate the discovery of new meaning and new connections" (32).

Hints of grotesque appear at the very beginning of Beloved. In 1873, a house located on 124 Bluestone Road manifests signs of paranormal activity: "mirror shattered," "two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake," "kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor," "soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill" (3). Sethe, an ex-slave, and her family, are uncertain of the provenance of these disturbances. They "understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light" (4). The opening two lines of the novel seem to suggest a baby ghost

haunts the house: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children” (3). The suspenseful and supernatural details warn of ghostliness. Moreover, readers are forced to ponder whether to understand Beloved as a historical novel or a ghost tale.

The Chokecherry Tree Scar and the Rememory of Slavery

18 years after Sethe’s escape from a slavery plantation ironically called “Sweet Home,” another former Sweet Home slave, Paul D, arrives at 124. Sethe sporadically recounts her experiences at Sweet Home and her escape from it. She begins by casually mentioning a white indentured slave, Amy Denver, once told her that there was a “chokecherry tree” on her back. Sethe even believes that the tree “[c]ould have cherries too” (16). Yet when Paul D wishes to learn more about the “tree,” she unconsciously avoids talking about it. Sethe instead digresses about how she is separated from her baby immediately after birth. When Paul D further presses about the chokecherry tree, Sethe reveals how the Sweet Home slaveholders had raped her after giving birth: “[Sweet Home] boys came in there and took my milk [...]. Held me down and took it” (16). She concludes the horrific incident resulted in the tree on her back (17).

Sethe’s chokecherry tree scar embodies her traumatic slavery experience at Sweet Home. Whether readers are able to share Sethe’s pain, however, is unclear. Although the scar is shockingly described as “back skin [which] had been dead for years” (18), the other characters who see it acquire completely different meanings. Amy Denver calls the scar a “chokecherry tree” (16). Paul D finds it resembles a “sculpture [...] like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display” (17). Even Sethe, who has never seen her own scar, views it ambivalently. She innocently wonders if the “tree” might be bearing “cherries” (16).

Sethe never speaks of her trauma since escaping from Sweet Home because the scar of slavery is literally and figuratively etched on her back. Morrison cleverly uses Sethe’s back scar to symbolize the inexpressible nature of trauma. To see the “chokecherry tree” on her back, to remember her trauma, Sethe requires the help of others. It is through Paul D’s curiosity and sympathy towards the back scar that Sethe cathartically rememorys the abuse, rape, and the separation from her baby. The incapability of African Americans to speak about the traumas of slavery also echoes Morrison’s concerns of how white historical accounts “imagine [blacks] and imagine for [blacks]” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 375). However, as demonstrated by Paul D’s insistence towards learning about Sethe’s scars, unspeakable traumas can also be expressed by the victim’s own account through patience.

The scar’s conflicting connotations also reveal the contradictions of the slavery experience. On one hand, readers can view its “positive” connotations—to be whipped on the back to the point that a fruit-bearing chokecherry tree or a sculpture is formed—as exemplifying the scar’s horrific origins. On the other hand, the scar reveals the ambiguity of the plantation farm’s name “Sweet Home.” The farm is named by the original slave-master Mr Garner, who sees his farm as a utopian paradise for African American slaves. He proudly proclaims how “at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one” (10). He teaches them how to read, never abuses them, and even allows his slaves to buy themselves out of slavery, like the case of Halle, who works extra

hours to buy freedom for his mother Baby Suggs. Sweet Home is apparently more humane than typical plantation farms. This pertains to how George Fitzhugh and other slavery defenders once argued how the case of the black slaves "is now better than that of any equal number of laborers on earth and is daily improving" (qtd in Kolchin 194). And yet Sethe is gang-raped and seriously abused at the Sweet Home slavery plantation. Morrison destabilizes our presumptions of African American slavery with Sethe's chokecherry tree scar.

Beloved and the Rememory of Slavery

The title character Beloved's ghostly presence is immediately felt. A few weeks after her arrival at 124, Paul D finds "something funny 'bout that gal" (56). The longer Beloved stays in 124, her grotesqueness becomes more evident. For several nights, Paul D and Sethe, now lovers, sleep at Sethe's upstairs bedroom. But when Paul D wakes up in the morning, he is in a rocking chair downstairs. He doesn't remember how he gets there. One night, he even feels compelled to leave the house. He wonders if he is having "house-fits" (115). Paul D feels that Beloved "had moved him" (114), as if she is trying to move him out of 124. He goes to the storeroom outside of 124 and tries to sleep there. Beloved suddenly appears and seduces him: "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name [...]. You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name" (116-117). Paul D resists at first. He eventually succumbs.

Paul D's sexual encounter with the underage Beloved superficially appears to be scandalous. Yet readers' expectations are subverted when Paul D reveals that having sex with Beloved actually helps him restore his long lost humanity:

> She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again. (117)

The tobacco tin is the metaphor Paul D uses to describe his act of locking up memories and emotions from his enslaved past, which include being sold to Georgia to work on a chain gang where he experiences torture, abuse, and starvation (106-113). When he arrives at 124, his tobacco tin is so tightly closed that "nothing in this world could pry it open" (113). But when Paul D has sex with Beloved, his tobacco tin becomes a "red heart" again, indicating that his slavery trauma and human emotions resurface. Near the end of the novel, Paul D reveals his gratefulness to Beloved for bringing him to that "ocean-deep" place (264) where he reconnects with his past traumas. Like Sethe, Paul D requires the help of others to collectively rememory the scars of slavery.

Morrison's decision to use sexual intercourse as the key to assist Paul D's healing is bold. Slavery strips away African American representative manhood. Not unlike Cholly Breedlove incestuous rape of his daughter Pecola in Morrison's first novel The Bluest Eye (1970), Paul D regains his manhood after having sex with Beloved. Proslavery defenders cite the Old and New Testaments to show that slavery is not inhumane, that the practice is a positive good. These defenders argue even prominent biblical figures like Abraham, Issac, and Job are slaveholders (Dew, Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832). In this sense, Morrison deconstructs the supremacist Christian mores in the context of African American

slavery and racism by presenting morally ambiguous situations such as sexual intercourse between adults and minors, and luring readers into making moral judgments. She then presents a counternarrative which infinitely complicates our preconceived notions towards slavery and sexuality. Readers can no longer make any knee-jerk value judgments.

Morrison's deconstruction of hegemonic Christian morality is further evident in the sermons of Baby Suggs, who is the mother of Sethe's husband Halle. As an unchurched preacher, Suggs preaches about self-affirmation and collective reconnection to mind and body:

> This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (88-89)

Suggs' preaching stresses a communal love of the flesh as a corrective to post-slavery racism. She tells her followers to touch one another and love every part of their flesh, including their "inside parts," because whites do not see blacks as humans. Rather, they see them as "slop for hogs." Most importantly, Suggs' sermon offers an alternative religious belief for blacks. She teaches blacks to self-validate and -recognize their humanity by loving "heart." Suggs' sermon links physical and sensual pleasures as subversive to the traumas of slavery. The collective love and embrace of the body is perhaps the first step to recovering human dignity and identity after slavery. Beloved's seduction of Paul D can be reinterpreted as a means for Paul D to regain his long-suppressed masculinity. The repetition of "inside part" evokes this re-reading.

Exorcism and the Rememory of Slavery

The scene which ultimately confirms Beloved as a ghost narrative is the exorcism in front of 124. Rumors of Sethe being haunted by her own baby ghost surface. It appears the baby ghost is actually Beloved who now has "taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun" (261). Denver, Sethe's daughter, is certain Beloved is the ghost of the baby who Sethe tragically murders in order to prevent her children from experiencing slavery. Sethe commits infanticide to "keep [her children] away from what [she] know[s] is terrible" (165). In response to Denver's plea for help, a group of 30 women from the community come to the front of 124 to perform an exorcism through prayers:

> A woman dropped to her knees. Half of the others did likewise. Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes. (258)

The outcome of the exorcism is unclear. Some say that Beloved "disappeared" and even "exploded right before their eyes" (263). Others report how "a little boy [...] saw, cutting through the woods, a naked woman with fish for hair" (267). In fact, the mere existence of Beloved comes into question:

> 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 in other separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away. It was not a story to pass on. (274)

Morrison once again subverts our understanding of Beloved. The exorcism of Beloved clearly points to the fact that the novel is a ghost story. But no one from the community officially admits that such an incident had occurred. If the ghost of Beloved epitomizes the horrors of African American slavery, how should readers understand the novel and slavery? Is Morrison asking us to believe in the existence of ghosts? Or is Beloved and slavery unbelievable like ghost tales?

The exorcism is perhaps a product of repression, a struggle between amnesia and rememory. On one hand, the community consciously does not mention Beloved. Like a terrifying ghost legend, Beloved becomes the nameless girl left in the wild rural zone "where long grass opens." Deep inside their rememory, nevertheless, they know that this nameless girl does exist. But the community chooses not to acknowledge her presence, to "not claim" her. The sentence "it was not a story to pass on" is repeated three times in the final pages of the novel (274, 275, 275), indicating that although the community wishes to forget about Beloved, they cannot stop talking about her. Indeed, earlier historians viewed slavery as "not a story to pass on," which perhaps resulted in slavery becoming a taboo subject in American society.

This repression of memory is touchingly displayed in the final scene between Paul D and Sethe. Sethe is deeply depressed due to the sudden disappearance of her child Beloved. She tells Paul D that Beloved "was my best thing" (272). Paul D reminds Sethe that "you your best thing" (273), implying to her that she should move on and let go of Beloved. Sethe appears to be in a state of disbelief. She doubtfully replies "Me? Me?" (273). Like the community, Paul D wants Sethe to forget the slavery related memories the girl represents. Paul D wants her to move forward. But Sethe is unable to let go of her beloved daughter, of her haunted, and haunting past.

The ghostly presence of Beloved and the final exorcism shape how readers interpret the novel. Beloved appears as a historical novel based on the post-abolitionist period. The novel is specifically set in 1873. Readers find numerous details of slavery experiences. But the uncertainty that Beloved and the exorcism evoke challenges the reliability and plausibility of the novel. Historical documents and studies show the stories of the Sweet Home slaves did occur during the slavery period. For example, the "chokecherry tree" is a reference to an iconic photo of an African American male slave with his back heavily deformed from whipping. In Beloved, these stories are presented alongside a "devil-child" who may not even exist. Pelagia Goulimari argues that the supernatural and grotesque element in Beloved is "a form attuned to the sublime and the 'stupendous' and to bearing witness to the unpresentable: extreme phenomena defying human reason," not unlike modern slavery (88). The presence of the central but paranormal character Beloved turns the African American slave narrative into more of a ghost myth than factual history.

The black slavery experience is perhaps well-documented, but David Lowenthal reminds us that "the past itself is gone—all that survive are its material residues and the accounts of those who experienced it" (xxii). Ultimately history is never the truth of the past. Morrison opens up black slave history by intentionally re-presenting it as an inconclusive, unreliable ghost myth.

Beloved as Protest Literature

Morrison re-remembers and re-constructs the lives of former black slaves in Beloved so as to engage readers' discussions about racial slavery. Her intentions are apparent from the novel's opening epigraph "Sixty Million and More," which is a dedication to the 60 million slaves who died in slavery. The number can also be viewed as an inflated version of the Nazi Holocaust. Such numbers and associations immediately explain the urgency for Morrison to write a novel that would allow readers to rememory the unspeakable and haunting traumas of African American slavery. Claudine Raynaud remarks on how Morrison is "the truest of historians" because of her preference in describing "history as life lived" by the oppressed African American slaves, and not to the "history as imagined" by white master discourse (46). In Beloved, Morrison uses grotesque portrayals to create textual gaps for readers to re-imagine and discuss slavery in comprehensive and often contradicting terms. She reconstructs the complicated internal issues of the former slaves through the chokecherry tree scar, the ghostly character Beloved, and the communal exorcism. Rather than explicitly condemning slavery as evil and immoral, Morrison strives for sophistication in her literary representation of slavery. Beloved, as such, goes beyond slave narratives like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and destabilizes binary accounts of slavery.

Beloved is a classic example of protest literature because it simultaneously informs and intrigues readers on sociopolitical issues. As a protest writer, Morrison does not attempt to represent a traditional sense of historical and psychological realism. Beloved utilizes the grotesque as a means of exploration of African American subjectivity. Howard Zinn observes how protest literature is also the "literature of the absurd" as it creates "bizarre and unreal situations which upset our ways of thinking about the world by going outside the boundaries of 'rational' thought, thus compelling us to make a radical break from the orthodoxies that confine us" (240). Beloved defies the fixed rules of modernist white literary genres in order to present the African American experience with a subjective African American "others" point of view. New perspectives and information are derived from African American "others" and ambiguously presented through sophisticated aesthetics. This compels readers to reimagine the paradigm of racial slavery. Unlike proslavery advocates who justify slavery through the seemingly indisputable arguments of history, science, and religion, Morrison champions aesthetic uncertainty.

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