THE BODY IN PAIN: METAPHORS OF TRAUMA IN *BELOVED*

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Abstract: his paper attempts to engage with the issues of sexual violence and exploitation as a site of personal, historical and linguistic trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). I shall begin by exploring the idea of motherhood in the novel, and the particular kind of motherhood which is espoused by Sethe. The same further leads to an inquiry into notions of selfhood in a world where the "self" of the slave is essentially an empty category. While freedom can be bought or won by escaping, selfhood (or Paul D's "manhood") remains an elusive idea. Struggling with identities and memories, the narrative is plagued by the violence of centuries. The paper also tries to explore how – and whether – the novel allows the fundamentally silenced slave to communicate not only her individual trauma but that of her people.

Keywords: Language, Motherhood, Slavery, Trauma.

Introduction: The experience of reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is deeply rooted in its documentation of the violence perpetrated on the body and psyche of the slave. Almost all (black) characters in the novel have been through extreme abuse. While there are some harrowing descriptions of physical torture in the novel, it is interesting to see that this violence is often metaphorised in the slave's body. For instance, the iron bit which was put in a slave's mouth as punishment is given a painful and morbid association with empty smiles. Remembering her mother, Sethe thinks: "She'd had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile." (Morrison 392). Similarly, Sethe's whiplashing becomes a Chokecherry tree on her back which is always in bloom. Turned by Amy Denver into a symbol of beauty and growth, Sethe later begins to identify with it and call her own. The beautification of an experience as gruesome as being whiplashed is suddenly made bearable for the slave and the reader – but there is a caveat to the same. The most memorable image from the text, that of the chokecherry tree is not Sethe's; it is created by Amy and always remains unseen by Sethe: "Whitegirl. That's what she called it. I've never seen it and never will. But that's what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree" (Morrison 31). The fact that she carries around the tree on her back yet can never see it is indicative of Sethe's relationship with her past – it is a past which is made unbearable to her by the white man and is then contained and sealed in the metaphor given by 'whitegirl'. Only through Paul D, a slave who has known torture himself, do we get another and a very different interpretation of the scars on Sethe's back:

"And the wrought-iron maze...was in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting". (Morrison 40)

The impact of rape or other forms of sexual violation on the subject is not just limited to Sethe. Paul D, for instance, is still haunted by his time in the chain-gang and remembers how along with the others, he was made to perform fellatio on white guards each morning. Ella and Sethe's mother reject the children they bore with white men through rape. Even when Beloved first comes to the house, Sethe imagines a tale of sexual enslavement in her past, which is in turn suggestive of the deep rooted acknowledgment of the fact that it is very common for a black woman to be exploited by 'white folks':

"Sethe...told Denver that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind." (Morrison 230)

Escaping from places and escaping to places – the image of the runaway slave comes to weave an understructure for the various broken stories in the novel. The "men" at Sweet Home, Ella, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid – all had bought their freedom in exchange for something or had run away. Sethe is much the same – a maroon[1]. However, what makes her different from the rest of the characters in the book is her determination, her ferocity. As she muses at one point, "Other people went crazy, why couldn't she?" (Morrison 137). Tattered, broken, raped, beaten and just out of labour, she arrives at 124 Bluestone Road with a dream which survives even the possible death of her children's father – the dream to feed her daughter the milk which was rightfully hers. She asserts her right over her world and herself, be it in choosing Halle, in having children with him, in getting her milk to her daughter or in the act of choosing to kill her daughter to save her: "If I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Morrison 386). She claims her children and her family like no one else in the novel does:

All I knew was I had to get *my milk to my baby girl*. *Nobody* was going to nurse her *like me*. *Nobody* was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. *Nobody*

knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on *my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me.* (Morrison 32. Emphasis added)

In saying and doing what she does, Sethe makes a very powerful political and social statement. This has to be understood within the institution of slavery, wherein the idea of a family is an empty concept for the slave. As Michele Mock tells us in her essay, "a slave cannot "own". Not her individuality. Not her children. Not her milk. Nothing is sacred for those enslaved" (Mock 3). The slave is denied the family by her owner always. For the master, the idea of two slave bodies coming together and bearing children is an entirely economic enterprise. The slave body is just a commodity and Paul D had realised this years ago:

"He has always known, or believed he did, his value--as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm--but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future" (Morrison 434). Similarly, Sethe was another skilled worker, prized by Schoolteacher himself: "the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left." (Morrison 289).

It is significant to note that in this world order the slave comes to be identified through her body and its labour, apart from the number of "breeding years" she has left. The slave's world is one of hard labour and in this physicalised world, the slave narrates herself through the body – the body and its labour allow the slave to be seen by the master. In order to be heard, she raises the axe.

The slave does not have any social anchor; any property or an institution like the family. 'Allowing' the slave a family and a claim over something of her own would fundamentally rupture the slave-master hierarchy. Dependent on the master for even their names (the Paul Garners), they are necessarily deprived of any resources. However, while slaves are not allowed to have families, Sethe and Halle are able to choose each other and have their own kids at Sweet Home. The bleakness of the promise that Sethe mistakenly sees in her marriage to Halle is visiblised in the tatters she puts together to make her wedding gown. The marriage is smiled down on by the white superiors as if it is a game for them to watch, and the unsuspecting slave is proved wrong in her dreams of cherishing a family and claiming her own self, which in this case she derives from her motherhood, her other anchors lost.

Sethe's motherhood is rooted very strongly in the act of breastfeeding. While this has an immediate context in the instance of Schoolteacher's boys drinking her milk, it gains a larger context when situated in the longer history of slave communities wherein a woman was not allowed to nurse her child for more than a few weeks. Thereafter they were fed by wet-nurses, an example of whom we see in the figure of Nan, who had nursed Sethe. We get to know that Sethe's mother nursed her only for two-three weeks, later leaving her to be nursed by Nan, who nurses other children as well. The nurturing bond between the mother and the child is thus broken. Sethe has to wait for Nan to nurse all the other kids before her turn comes and there is never enough for her. In giving us this insight into Sethe's past, Morrison actually provides a context to her acts and her fierce desire to nurse her children herself:

"I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get *my* milk no more except *my own* children...I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left." (Morrison 384. Emphasis added).

The lessons Nan's "small girl Sethe" learned at her breast would not leave the grown woman Sethe. She would come to know that living at Sweet Home under Schoolteacher would never allow her to love her children. To desire was to ask for too much. To desire that which was the master's was sacrilege. Sethe knew she could love but she did not know how to, never having been able to claim anything as hers, as her "beloved". It was the desire to own, to be free and to be able to love that spurred her on to reach Cincinnati, despite her trauma:

I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved 'em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love 'em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon--there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (Morrison 309)

And of course, Paul D knows this only too well: "He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose--not to need permission for desire--well now, that was freedom." (Morrison 310). The dream of this freedom is snatched away from her when Schoolteacher makes his nephews rape her; or rather, rape the mother that she is. The mother-child relationship is travestied in the moment when the Garner boys handle her like "the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (Morrison 384). In corrupting the sacrosanct space shared only by Sethe and her children, Schoolteacher snatches away from her the semblance of a relationship – he not only physically abuses her but emotionally scourges her. Milk and butter, both symbolic of the bond between the mother and child,

become perverted now, coming to signify the fateful night of their failed escape – they are terrible reminders of Halle's insanity and Sethe's defiled motherhood, for whom it is the taking of her milk that haunts her:

"They used cowhide on you?"
"And they took my milk."
"They beat you and you was pregnant?"
"And they took my milk!" (Morrsion 33)

The slave body and the space it inhabits are always already victimised and animalised by the master. The body and its relationship with its surroundings is severed repeatedly and the slave is left with no space to call her own. As she recognises herself in her bodily existence and productivity, the degradation and dehumanisation of her physicality serves to completely break her already fragile sense of selfhood. It is at this point that the violence committed on the body is metaphorised. The slave has no means to communicate the incessant attack on her person: this does not stem from a literal idea of illiteracy but from the sheer fact of lacking the vocabulary to understand and express the wrongs committed on her person. A defeated Paul D asks Stamp Paid:

"Tell me something, Stamp." Paul D's eyes were rheumy. "Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?"
"All he can," said Stamp Paid. "All he can."
"Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" (Morrison 450)

It is in an experience of incomprehensibility that the body of the slave becomes a living monument to her suffering, which could otherwise go unnoticed because it is not vocalised. It is in such a moment that Sethe identifies with the chokecherry tree on her back, along with the rest that she has got and which she claims as her own: "I got a tree on *my* back and a haint in *my* house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in *my* arms." (Morrison 29. Emphasis added). It is reminiscent of Sethe's own mother who had told her daughter to identify her by the master's mark under her breast – it gave the mother a means to speak to her daughter, even in her death. On the other hand, the nature of such violence also breaks some characters, rendering them unable for any attempt at communicating. For instance, the betrayal of the Black community and the infanticide committed by Sethe breaks Baby Suggs – from being the leader of her tribe, she suddenly gives up and starts searching for colour: "Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't" (Morrison 3)[2]. Ella simply tells Sethe that she "couldn't think up...what them two done to me",[3] even though she remembered all of it (Morrison 228). Paul D kills speech and memory by locking up his stories in his tobacco tin and shutting it down.

"It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open." (Morrison 219)

It is interesting to note that the rust of this tobacco tin falls off in flakes when Paul D and Beloved have sex. The tortured past of eighteen years is prised open, waking up Denver and Paul D himself. While sex with Beloved makes her pregnant with Paul D's child, it is a child bearing the mark of the violence of an entire history. Not regeneration or hope, but the possibility of her child becomes a nightmare for those around her, as they realise it is Sethe's "Baby ghost came back evil" (Morrison 509). The unwanted child brings back to the narrative the weight of several other children who were discarded by their mothers. Born through rape, Ella, Sethe's mother, perhaps even Nan, cast out their children. It is important to note that in a novel which talks of whiplashing, beating and the iron bit, rape becomes the most recurrent motif. Within Sethe and Paul D's experience, sexual violence coincides with crucial junctures in their lives, and their memories of the same become an overwhelming aspect of the novel.

Before Schoolteacher's coming, Sethe had begun to identify her family as an entity where she belonged. She was in love with Halle and she had all her children with him, unlike, say her own mother or Baby Suggs. However, Schoolteacher's arrival marks a shift in the lives of those at Sweet Home and they[4] plan an escape. Sethe is caught as she comes back looking for Halle on the night of the escape and is raped – the very moment which held the potential to change her life for better is turned into the most traumatic experience of her life. Her growth as a woman engaging with her a family and beginning to identify herself in different relationships is curtailed and in an instant she is made to feel like "the cow, no, the goat" (Morrison 384). The same incident breaks Halle because he is made to feel powerless and helpless as he sees the boys rape his wife – his illusions of freedom are trampled on ruthlessly as he realises that there is nothing he can do in the face of the awesome power of his white master – his "manhood" is shattered. Before either can escape, the white master drills into their minds forever the fact of their powerlessness and slavery.

On the other hand, Paul D's crisis is rooted in two episodes. Firstly, the sight of Halle smearing butter on his face; and secondly, him being forced to perform sexual acts on the white guards while being tied in the chain-gang, punished with the bit in his mouth. Paul D had always been insecure of his

"manhood" while at Sweet Home, but Halle and Sixo to him were 'men':

"It was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will?" (Morrison 420). When he sees Halle break down, it brings home a shocking knowledge – the slave is perhaps never a "man". His insecurity regarding his manhood gets played out in the disturbing act of Halle smearing butter on his face. The time he spends in the chain-gang is, however, the most degrading and most torturous of his life, something which he attempts to forget and never remember. In his escape from the chain-gang he runs North, runs for eighteen years. The promise in the night of the escape from Sweet Home becomes a will-o'-the-wisp which he chases all his life, finally coming to rest at 124, Bluestone Road.

What this seems to suggest is that within the novel, experiences of sexual violation either coincide with or are in themselves the watershed moments which mark a change in the course of self-realisation for the slave – from attempting to define oneself to then completely giving up, from trying to create families to committing infanticide, from once escaping to running for eighteen years. Both Sethe and Paul D have many things to say to each other but they have not yet acquired the means to say them. While coming from a starkly different background, the same helplessness in expression is echoed in the documentation of the trauma experienced by Elie Wiesel in the Nazi concentration camps:

I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? (Wiesel ix- preface)[5]

The characters in *Beloved* suffer from a similar handicap. Their language is the master's language, that language of oppression in which Sethe's 'animal characteristics' had been documented. It is significant that Sixo stops speaking in English "because there was no future in it" (Morrison 48). Sethe, on the other hand, cannot go back to her mother's language even if she wants to. She only has a faint recollection of what her mother and Nan spoke in: "What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message--that was and had been there all along" (Morrison 123). Left with the white man's language which gives the slave no room for expression, she finds her own metaphor, her body, where the scars given by Schoolteacher can be seen and called a chokecherry tree. Yet it is a metaphor of violence, violence which never leaves but lives on as a festering sore on the ebony skin of the slave. It is Sethe and Paul D's past and their fear of it that finally creates the greatest metaphor of all – Beloved, ghost or spirit or reincarnation; the reader is never sure as she eludes all meaning while being at the centre of the narrative. Beloved becomes another metaphor for the violence which is the essence of slavery – violence which makes a mother kill her child; violence which lives in the house, literally walks and talks with Sethe and Denver and then begins to feed on the former. Beloved restricts speech and understanding – between all of them and most notably between Sethe and Denver, the mother and daughter whom the reader meets at the other end of eighteen years. It is when the community comes towards 124 that this metaphor of violence and suffering is exorcised and Sethe's solitary experience of torture and trauma is turned into a community experience of healing and understanding. The novel literally erases its name out in Beloved's exorcising. It is the moment when speech and metaphors become seamless and inessential, the moment of an understanding which is beyond the oppressor's language.

References:

1. Escaped slaves, as they were called, living in independent settlements.
2. It is interesting that the colours which Baby Suggs asks for are all associated with femininity and regeneration – lavender, pink, red. In the face of the brutalisation of Sethe's spirit, it is perhaps only in these colours that Baby Suggs can keep herself from going insane.
3. "Something like that had happened to Ella except it was two men—a father and son— and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her locked in a room for themselves." (Morrison 228)
4. Sixo, Halle, Sethe, all the Pauls and the children.
5. The autobiographical work, *Night,* 1958

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