

Reclamation of the Exploited Body in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract—One of the issues artistically dramatized in Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved* (1987) is the callous exploitation of slaves' body as a means of production by ruthless slave-holders. The appalling handling of slaves as subhuman properties, in addition to the degrading notion of inferiority implanted in their mind damagingly impeded the formation and development of any sense of human selfhood in the long-exploited slaves. Because of their lifelong enchainment, the slaves who escaped to the North or attained their freedom in other ways did not know at the early stages of their free life how to conduct themselves as their own masters and enjoy their dearly-gained freedom. The wise old woman of Morrison's novel accurately comprehends this predicament, and thus attempts to help other ex-slaves eliminate their internalized sense of inferiority and discover the necessary, proper means to gain the mastery of their body and hence "claim" their freed self and thereby regain their sense of human dignity.

Index Terms—Exploitation, mutilation, subhuman other, reclamation of the self

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's literary career presents her enduring endeavor to articulate the age-silenced voice of her downtrodden people who have been kept in the degraded status of the inferior "other" by power mechanisms at work in the American society. She has sturdily resisted Euro-Americans' discourse and subverted their myths in her novels which impressively depict the sufferings of African Americans. In her most applauded novel *Beloved* (1987), Morrison depicts the investment of slaves' body as a means of production and the ruthless abuse of them by slave-holders as one of the horrendous aspects of slavery. Besides she shows that as the result of that callous maltreatment, the long-exploited slaves were impelled to regard their bodies as the property of slave-owners and thus no sense of selfhood was formed and developed in them. Consequently when they escaped to the North or were freed, they did not properly feel the ownership of their body, or even if they did, the mere sense of owning their body was not enough to pursue their life as unfettered, dignified people. The wise old woman of the novel properly recognizes this defect and makes efforts to help other ex-slaves discover the apt, necessary means for gaining the mastery of their body and free self.

Beloved is a multi-dimensional work that pores over the traumatic life of African slaves who have been kept "voiceless" throughout American history. None of

Morrison's novels has ever received the praise and tribute given to this novel which she predicted to be her least read work because of its dreadful subject, nonetheless her prediction did not come true and the novel became a classic very soon. Her imaginative excavation of the hideous history of slavery is mostly formed by delving into the frightful memories of her ex-slaves whose mind is obsessed with their horrible experiences as slaves. By portraying the exploitation, torturing and lynching of slaves by such merciless slave-holders as Schoolteacher, Morrison dramatizes one of the most catastrophic episodes of the world history, and undermines such American myths as the alleged humanity and benevolence of whites and the supposed savagery and violence of blacks.

A remarkable feature of *Beloved* is the elucidation of the role of the white-dominated discourse and media in reinforcing slavery, since Morrison is acutely aware of power mechanism and the considerable role of discourse as "the instrument through which that power is exercised", as she has declared in her "Nobel Lecture" (1993: 268). In different parts of the novel, she displays the function of the dominant discourse in dehumanizing black people and presenting them as anomalies of humankind. This has been noticed by such critics as Rushdy who sees Morrison's sharp criticism of the white discourse as a component of her "overall revisionist motive in criticizing the historiography of slavery" (1999: 57) or Perez-Torres who suggests that Morrison's "critical engagement with history" has led her to consider it "a construction implicated in ideology" (1999: 183). As the result of the implied ideology of Euro-American discourse, Morrison exposes, a sense of inferiority was formed in slaves, and this has been noticed by several critics, but how they should have challenged that annoying sense has been noted by few critics.

II. MUTILATION OF SLAVES' BODY

Various instances of slavery's hideous treatment of slaves are depicted and narrated in *Beloved* (1987) the most ruthless of which seems to be Schoolteacher's maltreatment of Sweet Home slaves whom he considers *subhuman creatures*. His scrutiny of their physical features is markedly a fastidious form of detecting slaves' corporal traits due to regarding them as commodities. To exert his power over slaves and to exploit their body more profitably, he mostly analyzes and classifies their attributes and behaviors, nonetheless when they disobey him or attempt to escape from the hell he has induced in Sweet Home, he tortures their body in the most brutal ways and thereby his charade of civilization falls apart.

Among the most awful things the central character of the

novel persistently recalls is being violated by Schoolteacher's nephews, while he merely takes notes, and then being callously whipped due to telling Mrs. Garner on them. In different parts of the novel, we see how bitterly she remembers "the men coming to nurse her" (*Beloved* 1987: 6); "those boys came in there and took my milk. ... Held me down and took it" (16); "two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (70); "they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (200). One of the striking aspects of Morrison's understated account of the violation of Sethe's body is the use of the verb "nurse". While mostly the slaves nursed white children, the "double transitivity of the verb 'to nurse'" here, Raynaud suggests, "underscores how power deprives the slaves of any agency" (2007: 46), even of what they actually did. By this means Morrison exposes that "the question of authority over one's own body", Lawrence contends, is "consistently related to that of authority over discourse" (2000: 233).

When Schoolteacher detects Sethe telling Mrs. Garner on them, he whips her back so terribly that "the nerves in her back" are incised and then get "lifeless" and its "skin buckle[s] like a washboard" (*Beloved* 1987: 6). The dead scars on her back are so dreadful that Amy (the white girl who helps her escape and has had "some whippings" herself) cannot help expressing revulsion after looking at her back. "Come here, Jesus", Amy yells, and "after that call to Jesus" does not "speak for a while", but afterward tells Sethe: "What God have in mind, I wonder. I had some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this" (79). The brutal violation of Sethe's body indicates her mortification and "diminishment to a less-than-human status", as Henderson affirms, and her "lifeless" back "functions as an archeological site" (1999: 86) on which Schoolteacher's political and discursive power are engraved. Sethe's "doubly violated" body is "marked", as Perez-Torres states, like a "page of Schoolteacher's notebook" that is "inscribed with the discourse of slavery and violation" (1999: 186).

Sethe's memories of her mother are rather dim, however she clearly remembers three points about her: the brand on her chest, her "smiling" face, and her corpse. Once the mother shows her the brand, so that she can recognize her, as Sethe tells *Beloved*: "she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark'" (*Beloved* 1987: 61). Among the slaves she works with, she is the only one who has the brand slave-holders had marked on their chest in the Middle Passage (the procedure of transforming captured Africans to the West by slave ships), for this reason Raynaud considers her the novel's "link to African reality" (2007: 48).

Besides Sethe and her mother, Paul D has gone through different tortures. In addition to Schoolteacher, other slave-holders incarcerate him four more times the worst of which occurs in Georgia where he is sent to "after trying to kill Brandywine, the man schoolteacher sold him to" (*Beloved*

1987: 106). He is locked up in a cage with a "door of bars", "three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt. Two feet of it over his head; three feet of open trench in front of him with anything that crawled or scurried welcome to share that grave calling itself quarters" (106). Forty-six slaves are impounded in those underground cages, and all of them wake everyday "to rifle shot" after which

Three whitemen walked along the trench unlocking the doors When the last lock was opened, the three turned and lifted the bars the blackmen emerged – promptly and without the poke of a rifle butt if they had been there more than a day; promptly with the butt if, like Paul D, they had just arrived. When all forty-six were standing in a line in the trench, another rifle shot signaled the climb out and up to the ground above, where one thousand feet of the best hand-forged chain in Georgia stretched.... The first man picked up the end and threaded it through the loop on his leg iron. He stood up then, and ... brought the chain tip to the next prisoner... (*Beloved* 1987: 107)

The chained slaves are treated worse than horses and hounds, consequently after a while the spirit of life dies in them. Working in chains on the fields, they express their frustration with life in their melancholic songs in which they sing "love songs to Mr. Death" and also kill "the flirt folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it Only when she was dead would they be safe" (*Beloved* 1987: 109). None of the chained slaves thinks about escape, since "if one pitched and ran – all, all forty-six, would be yanked by the chain that bound them" (109). Eighty-six days of that *death in life* make Paul D feel that "Life was dead", and just "beat her butt all day every day till there was not a whimper in her" (109). Then one night it starts raining heavily, and the rainfall continues so many days that the slave-holders decide "to lock everybody down in the boxes till it either stopped or lightened up so a whiteman could walk" (109). Left under heavy rain, locked up slaves struggle with the mud to the point of getting stifled, and then attempt to get released.

In the boxes the men heard the water rise in the trench and looked out for cottonmouth. They squatted in muddy water, slept above it, peed in it. Paul D thought he was screaming....Then he thought he was crying. Something was running down his cheeks. He lifted his hands to wipe away the tears and saw dark brown slime. ... It happened so quick he had no time to ponder. Somebody yanked the chain... and he took both hands and yanked the length of chain at his left ... They waited – each and every one of the forty-six. Not screaming

One by one ...they dove. Down through the mud under the bars, blind, groping. Some had sense enough to wrap their heads in their shirts Others just plunged The chain that held them would save all or none They talked through the chain like Sam Morse and, Great God, they all came up.

Like the unshriven dead...they trusted the rain and the dark...but mostly...each other. (*Beloved* 1987: 110)

The threat of being smothered in the mud and the absence of the guards make them decide to escape, though the fields are like "a marsh" and all Georgia seems "to be sliding, melting away" (*Beloved* 1987: 111). Finally they take refuge in a "camp of sick Cherokee" (111). Eighteen years later,

however, Paul D still bears in mind Alfred, Georgia as the worst place he has ever been.

III. RECLAMATION OF THE EXPLOITED SELF

Because of slavery's "investment" of slaves' body as a means of production, the long-exploited slaves were impelled to regard their own bodies as the properties of slave-owners, consequently no sense of selfhood was formed and developed in them. Due to their lifelong enchainment, the slaves who escaped to the North or attained their freedom in other ways did not know at early stages how to conduct themselves as their own masters and enjoy their dearly-gained freedom. They ought to discover the necessary, proper means for gaining the mastery of their body and hence their self. A few days after reaching the North, Sethe ponders that "along with the others, she had claimed herself", nevertheless she realizes forlornly that "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 1987: 95).

The first experience of the ex-slaves was naturally the joyous sense of owning their own body that Morrison has notably depicted in the scene where the freed Baby Suggs reaches the North. Her freedom is obtained by her son's "five years [working on] Sundays" (*Beloved* 1987: 11) to pay her price to Mr. Garner who now brings her to a Northern town with the intention of asking his friends Bodwins to give her a place to live. When they arrive there, Baby Suggs who feels free then seems to see her body and feel her heartbeat for the first time in her life: "suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud" (141). For the first time in her life, she seems to notice her hands and heart, though they have worked and beaten numerously, because she is experiencing the cheerful sense of repossessing, or better to say possessing, her own body – an experience highlighted by the emphasized pronoun "my".

The mere sense of repossessing the body, however, was not enough for ex-slaves' pursuit of a new kind of life they did not know anything about; they ought to discover the necessary, proper means for gaining the mastery of their body and hence their self. Some days after reaching the North, Sethe realizes that "along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 1987: 95) which was not easily attained. To become the master of themselves, they must have firstly engendered their own names and terms to identify and define themselves and discard the degrading terms slave-holders such as Schoolteacher utilized to refer to them, because "the articulation of a self-defining language", as Lawrence argues, is crucial "to the pursuit of self-ownership" (2000: 235). Morrison's old wise woman Baby Suggs realizes the necessity of "such self-definition immediately upon gaining her freedom" (235), and hence rejects the name given to her by Whitlow. She names herself Baby Suggs on account of the points mentioned below, although the name sounds

ridiculous to her former master:

Baby Suggs thought it was a good time to ask him something she had long wanted to know.

"Mr. Garner," she said, "why you call me Jenny?"

"Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name? What you call yourself?"

"Nothing," she said. "I don't call myself nothing."

Mr. Garner went red with laughter. "When I took you out of Carolina, Whitlow called you Jenny and Jenny Whitlow is what his bill said. Didn't he call you Jenny?"

"No, sir. If he did I didn't hear it."

"What did you answer to?"

"Anything, but Suggs is what my husband name."

"Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny."

"What he call you?"

"Baby."

"Well," said Mr. Garner, going pink again, "if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro."

Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the "husband" she claimed.

(*Beloved* 1987: 141- 142)

She refuses to maintain her slave identity, and thus renames herself to reclaim her black self, although Mr. Garner does not consider it a proper name for a "freed Negro". To rename herself is her first act of "claiming ownership of [her] freed self", however she is wise enough to know that the mere change of name is not sufficient for gaining self-mastery. The next step for "claiming" the "freed self", Baby Suggs accurately realizes, is to controvert the demeaning conceptions the white have implanted in slaves' mind to mortify them and sustain their power over them. Therefore she makes her mind up to help ex-slaves divest themselves of the debasing sense the white have induced in them, consequently when "the warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing – a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" (*Beloved* 1987: 87). The name and size of the place both have metaphoric implication; in a "wide-open" place that signifies ex-slaves' freedom, she makes efforts to clarify and cleanse the degrading sense the white have engraved in their mind. DeKoven confirms that Clearing has "strong utopian resonance" because of its "anonymous provenance, its anti-instrumentality, its spaciousness, and its depth in the woods" (1997: 116).

Baby Suggs's sermons in the Clearing somehow resemble the preaching of the black priests in "the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed" (87), as Peach affirms, which "provided a much-needed opportunity for African-Americans to come together", seeing that "plantation practices prevented them from having meetings" (2000: 113). Despite the similarity of her orations to the sermons of those priests, there is an essential difference between them. The "unchurched preacher" of the Clearing, as Lawrence calls her (2000: 235), who has "opened her great heart to those who could use it" (Peach 2000: 87), neither uses religious vocabulary in her speeches, nor asks her neighbors to forget about the flesh; on the contrary she asks them to

seek their lost grace in their tortured flesh;

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! ... Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away 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.... they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck ... grace it ... hold it up. And your inside parts ... you got to love them. The dark, dark liver – love it... and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts ... love your heart. For this is the prize.” (*Beloved* 1987: 88- 89)

Besides presenting a review of the callous, coldblooded “technology of the body” utilized by the slave-owners to exploit slaves’ bodies, Baby Suggs vigorously defies the racist ideology of slavery by honoring the black body, and thereby helps the community of ex-slaves refute the white’s mortifying concepts of the black and hence regain their lost dignity. She performs all these things by her simple yet ardent language that revives the sense of nobility and self-esteem in these ex-slaves through the “reclamation” and “consecration of black flesh” (Jago Morrison 2003: 128) that has been debased by slavery’s racist discourse. The self-renovating language of Morrison’s “unchurched preacher” retrieves and honors the black self that “has been stifled”, as Lawrence argues, “by the mortification of the flesh endured under slavery” (2000: 235).

Baby Suggs’ “reclamation” and “consecration” of slaves’ exploited/mutilated bodies is simultaneously a contest against the discursive power of slave-holders such as Schoolteacher who regard the black as subhuman creatures. Moreover her emphasis on “prizing” the heart might be read as an endeavor for gaining an inward knowledge that comes out of the heart, not out of the strict, stringent mind of a racist schoolteacher, because “in the context of African

cosmology”, Tally informs us, the “knowledge of the great Thoth, the scribe of the Egyptian gods and inventor of language, was thought to reside precisely in his heart” (2007: 83), therefore to “prize” the heart is to honor the profound knowledge that the black must attain to resist the power of the white.

IV. CONCLUSION

To claim their “freed self”, the ex-slaves should have defied the demeaning conceptions the white had implanted in their mind to mortify them and sustain their power over them. The awful conducts of slave-holders in addition to debasing notions they inserted into slaves’ mind hindered the development of any sense of selfhood in them, accordingly one of the major problems of ex-slaves was to “claim” their freed self – what Morrison’s wise old woman deeply understands and thus makes efforts to help them stamp out those notions and reclaim their vanished sense of human dignity by praising their exploited/mutilated bodies.

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