

«COMMUNITY AND LOVE: UNDERSTANDING THE PAST IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELoved*»

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The quest of the black individual for an affirmative self-definition as intimately connected to a community process seems to be a constant element within Toni Morrison's philosophy of life as displayed in her literary production. In fact, the self-exploration on the part of the individual seems to be only undertaken under the «guidelines» or auspices of a loving community that holds on to certain traditional beliefs and values. This literary pattern concerning the interaction between the individual and his/her community is clearly present in her novel *Beloved*, which represents Toni Morrison's clearest attempt to take up the subject of the Afro-American community's experience of slavery and its aftermath.

Set in the years immediately after the Civil War, the novel recounts at a primary level a family story, in which complex emotional relationships are established among its members. Above all, there seems to be a clear sense of the conscious effort on the characters' part to detach themselves from their immediate past, that of slavery, by trying to forget everything related to it. However, it is only through a direct confrontation with it that the characters are finally capable of dealing with the present reality of their lives and of understanding their relation to their community and to the outside world.

In the first place, the analysis of the family relations presented in the novel is clearly dominated by a sense of survival that permeates each of the characters, but especially Sethe-the mother-who, as an ex-runaway slave, clings to what she has got and is not ready to let it go. When talking about her daughter Denver who lives with her, she affirms: «The one I was carrying when I run away is all I got left»¹. And later

1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1987), 10. All further references to this work will appear in the text.

on, she becomes more explicit when refusing to leave the place where they live now: «No moving. No leaving. It's all right the way it is . . . I got a tree on my back and a haint in this house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running-from nothing» (15). So she desperately clings to the present circumstances because it is all she has got, she is unwilling either to change or to complain about them.

The same sense of survival is voiced by Paul D, another ex-slave from the Sweet Home plantation, who has done nothing else but run since he left it: «By the time he got to Ohio, then to Cincinnati, then to Halle Suggs' mother's house, he thought he had seen and felt it all» (41). This character takes the sense of survival a step farther, as if he had exhausted life possibilities in his continuous wandering from place to place. This wandering marks him as a character with no roots, no sense of family or of community, but he still clings to his present life as the only one. Therefore there seems to be a certain need in both characters to affirm themselves in their present as survivors, as opposed to those who did not make it, the dead ones.

Due to this need for affirmation, the overall presence of the dead as a contrasting element is a characteristic feature of Morrison's narrative. This presence emphasizes the superiority of life over death and the difficult task living really is as opposed to «easy» death. Sethe says about Baby Suggs'-her husband's mother-death: «Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part» (7). The difficulty lies in carrying on with life, in not giving up. So there is an urge in the characters to constantly attempt to widen the gulf that should exist between them and the dead, the ghosts from the past, to disassociate themselves from death completely. However, by doing this, the characters admit the unquestionable influence that the reality of death has on them.

So far two alternatives of dealing with life have been proposed: on the one hand, Sethe's refusal to leave and her need, almost despair, to cling to whatever she possesses or is left to her; and, on the other, Paul D's desire to continually move on, as if he wanted to catch up with life that way. Both of them have one thing in common, though: their wish to escape from the memories related to their enslaved past. This is repeatedly foregrounded in Sethe's case: «As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe» (6) and the same kind of task is performed by Paul D: «He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut» (72-3).

This conscious rejection of the past is justified by the characters in the name of the present, of the future that lies ahead, as Sethe puts it: «No thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love» (70). She is interested in the present, in the present feelings that, nevertheless, seem to be blocked by the past she tries to unlearn. Despite all efforts, the past always returns, always defeats her, as she admits: «But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left

her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day» (70). So, in a sense, it seems that the characters are trapped in a sort of vicious circle in which they refuse to remember the past in favor of their present life, but this life is impossible to live without its past account.

Another alternative of treating life is that represented by Denver, who has no past nor need to be concerned about it. However, she is also unhappy with her life as it is, exactly because of that reason: «They were a twosome, saying 'Your daddy' and 'Sweet Home' in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers» (13). Loneliness marks her existence devoid of any sense of belonging or sharing with others. She even feels as a stranger in her own house with her mother, who is not fit company for her. In a way she suffers more from loneliness because it is not her choice, she has been forced into that situation and dislikes it. Therefore her loneliness is provoked by her lack of a past that could make her relate to the other characters, feel with them.

What all this suggests is the impossibility of a present that refuses to remember the past and its dead, and the consequent importance that looking back to the past acquires. Paul D acknowledges this importance in the following revealing passage: «Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out» (46). However, they all seem to be scared of the suffering that remembering the past would bring about and this fear prevents their present feelings. Sethe wonders about this: «Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and *count on something?*» (38). Afraid of remembering their past because of the suffering it would mean, they are unable to cope with feelings in general. As if, by «disremembering» the past, they could also ignore their own feelings.

It is at this point that *Beloved* comes into being. This character is clearly signalled in the text as the personification of the past, as the resurrection of a baby ghost who makes the characters finally face the rebuked past and work it out, despite the suffering it may cause, as the following quotation points out: «Anything dead coming back to life hurts» (35). In the same line of thought the following quotation emphasizes the idea of suffering as the only means for a real liberation: «Good for you. More it hurt more better it is. Can't nothing heal without pain, you know» (78). There is a strong investment in the text to place emphasis on the idea of suffering and feeling in general as belonging to a sort of «life sphere,» whereas refusing to feel would fall into the category of the dead, those who gave up the fight.

Therefore *Beloved* is presented as an instrument to confront the ghosts from the past. In this sense, she is characterized at the beginning as an almost new-born baby who needs to be nurtured by Sethe's stories from the past: «Sethe learned the profound satisfaction *Beloved* got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased *Beloved*) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost» (58). Sethe is capable of learning about her loss through *Beloved*, who only

directs her attention to past events. The pain represents, then, a sort of exorcism from the past, as it were, a way of feeling the past to unfeel it finally.

Toni Morrison's proposal here seems to imply then that suffering, even at its extreme, is good because it frees the characters from the burden of their past and let them feel what they should let themselves feel: love. The center of the suffering in the novel is finally exposed as true love, a kind of love that produces suffering and even death. What the characters have refused to face until now is their loving feelings, to really feel human again after their shocking experiences. The slaves' consign was: «Don't love nothing» (92) and, even after slavery was over, this is what they have been trying to keep up. Their past has shown them that loving is dangerous, too risky, because of the emotional involvement it implies.

Sethe, by loving her children as she did, dared to break this code, to feel free to dispose of their lives because she loved them so much. She did not want them to suffer as much as she had and her great love was the justification for her action, as it is said in the following quote: «Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them» (163). However, she has since refused to come to terms with it and now feels scared of loving again because it may end up as it did before. Her love went beyond the conventional limits and was therefore punished. Now Beloved questions those limits by freeing Sethe from her remorse and thus validating her acts.

The same liberating but painful effect is true in Paul D's case due to the fact that Beloved forces him to open his tin and to let his feelings flow:

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. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart." (117)

So for both characters Beloved represents the reconciliation with their past that implies the possibility of feeling whole, feeling complete, with a heart which is not scared of loving and is willing to trust and risk for that love again. In Denver's case, she also stands for a reconciliation with the unknown past of the other characters, especially an understanding of the reasons that explained her mother's behaviour towards her children. Up to now she has feared her mother strongly because of the knowledge of her sister's killing, which has taught Denver neither to trust nor to love her too much. Loving has been too risky for her too because it could mean her undoing. That fear has then blocked the natural flow of feelings towards her mother. It is only through Beloved that she learns about her mother's feelings and her justification: «Denver was seeing it now and feeling it-through Beloved.

Feeling how it must have felt to her mother» (78). She reaches a point of contact with her mother finally and sees things from the same perspective.

However, this free-flowing of feelings that the characters achieve thanks to *Beloved*'s intervention turns to be devastating very soon. It seems that, by opening up the realm of feelings, these would be so powerful as to loose destruction and death. This sort of reverse process-before love was reached through suffering and pain-means now that the zenith of loving becomes that of infinite and constant suffering. This process is, significantly enough, portrayed through Denver's eyes, because she is the only character who does not get carried away by the past completely. She describes this as follows: «The job she started out with, protecting *Beloved* from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from *Beloved*. . . Denver knew it was on her» (243). She is not too overwhelmed by her feelings so that she can still realise what is happening, how frightful and destructive the violent relationship between *Beloved* and her mother can be for them all.

Then Denver makes a decision that would overturn the path of the events and of their own lives: she reaches the conclusion that they need external help and she is brave enough to go and ask for it to the outside community that, up to now, has been rejected by each of the characters in turn. Sethe is very explicit about it: «Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. Should have known better. Did know better. Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be» (183). So Sethe rejects the outside world in favour of the more intimate one created by *Beloved*'s presence, which becomes the only world worth living in.

In this sense the figure of *Beloved* would embody a clear dichotomy between the «inside» and the «outside» at several layers of analysis. In the first place, at a more individual level, the «inside» has been related to the past and the «outside» to the present in opposition. This means that *Beloved*, by taking the characters in a journey back to their past experiences, functions as a representative of their past that makes them face it in order to, first, make them feel it and, then, liberate them from its ghosts. This process has been defined above as a very painful but fruitful one, due to the fact that the characters lose their fears and are capable of expressing their true feelings.

Secondly, at a more social level, the characters associate the «inside» with themselves, that is, the family living at 124 Bluestone Road and, consequently, the «outside» with everything that lies outside. Denver's awareness of this dichotomy is very telling, when talking about the reasons that lead her mother to kill her sister: «Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard» (205). Here Denver is referring back to slavery days and the way in which the slaveholders came in their yard to capture her family, which was the cause of her mother's killing. However, this sort of threat that lurked in the air in slavery days is

already gone, but it has been internalised and generalised to any «outside» world, including the black community.

What is then surprising is the fact that it is this same character who finally steps out into the strange world to bring some help in. Denver's transformation is undoubtedly effected by Beloved's influence over her mother which proves to be tragically destructive. She is clearly conscious of the urgent need to find a prompt solution to this problem: «Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got some work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to; and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve» (252). Therefore the precariousness of their lives leads her back to the community as the only possibility of survival for them. So in a sense Beloved can be also interpreted as a sort of collective voice or memory by means of which the characters can return safely to their beginnings.

This image of the community as a sheltering place is constantly foregrounded in the novel as related, firstly, to their enslaved past. Referring to Sweet Home, it is said: «It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home . . . But it's where we were . . . All together. Comes back whether we want it or not» (14). So the community acted in those days as their support and their only joy because they really cared about each other. It would serve the function of a family due to the fact that the familiar unity was under extreme and constant threat. They always had somebody to turn to, despite their apparent solitude.²

But it becomes even clearer in the portrayal of the community life in Baby Suggs' time, after slavery. All the references to this period of time seem idyllic with a clear nostalgic tone that informs every description of it. The message coming from the community is voiced in Baby Suggs' words in the Clearing, the epitome of the community sense of living and caring: «'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 . . . more than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize» (89). So this message brings back the idea of loving as the only way to deal with life, to make up for all the loss and the suffering they have been through.

This idea determines Beloved's role in the novel because it is only through her actions that the characters allow themselves to feel once more, to trust and love each other in order to come to terms with their community and the world around them. The development of the characters can be then seen as following different stages: from searching in the «inside» part of their past history to the «outside» flow of their feelings and, afterwards, from the «inside» of their family life to the «outside» of their

2. For a discussion about the role of the community see: Barbara Christian, «Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison,» *Black Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pergamon, 1985), 47-65.

community, a community that claims them back. Their individual and familiar processes become also a communitary process, in which the exorcization of the past is finally completed in a sort of communitary purification:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods of chesnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

It is in this scene that the community unites itself to defeat the evil that has trapped them: loaded with their past, unable either to deal with it or to forget it; they were stuck in a present which had witnessed the loss of their ancestral values based on loving and caring and had found no replacement for them.

Slavery is not to be filed and forgotten, Toni Morrison seems to be saying, but analysed and claimed back the way it was: the roots of a community way of life, of understanding human existence as the presence of individuality supported on a strong sense of belonging, of true caring and sharing. The legacy from the past can be reactivated to illuminate the present reality and to help work out its multiple vicissitudes. Feeling whole can be only achieved through a process of constant re-working and revising the traditional value system based on the ideals of love and trust.

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