



Re-Inscription of Black History/Body in Morrison's Beloved and Paradise

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Abstract

This article contends how Toni Morrison has used her black fiction to reject the dominant conceptions of reality and truth constructed by the white pahllogocentric discourses that tended to perpetuate white power interests. The poststructuralist assumption that knowledge and reality are socially constructed phenomenon provides useful insight into Morrison's narrative strategies and helps understand how, on one hand, she represents the ways the history of the black Africans had been badly disfigured in the white discourse resulting in the construction of the negative stereotypes of the black people as barbarians, savages, and uncivilized people whose mythical history and social values were invalidated as inauthentic and savage that needed the enlightening intervention of the white Europeans and, on the other hand, apart from revealing the discursive facts that control reality formation, she disrupts and displaces dominant and oppressive white knowledges.

Key Words: Black Feminism, Black History, Body, Morrison, Pahllogocentric Discourse.

Introduction

Morrison's commitment with rewriting the history of her people, gender, myths and communal identity is evident from the fact that all of her novels, particularly the *Beloved* (1988) and *Paradise* (1997) deal with the questions of slavery, survival, repressed desires, silenced voice, misrepresentations of her people, the psychological impacts of their subjection to slavery, and their sustained efforts for freedom and self-actualization. She has taken the responsibility of redressing the wrongs done to her people by the so-called champions of the rights of human beings, by deconstructing the racially biased representations of the black people in a unique ecriture feminine mode of narration. In her fiction, she articulates the traumatic history of the institution of slavery and the terrible after effects of this psycho-physical subjection of the black races. In this regard, *Beloved* and *Paradise*, privileging women's experience of traumatizing slavery and its terrible effects upon African subjects, epitomized the dehumanized history of the centuries long suppression of the Black generations, the suppression that alienated them from their past traditions, mythical beliefs, and strong connection with the world of nature. As the subversion of dominant patriarchal order requires resistance to, rather than uncritical acceptance of, the prevalent forms of subjectivity, Morrison's serious engagement with the black feminist writing from the indigenous perspective has led to the retrieval of Afro American people's mythical past and glorious integrated communal life. Establishing a feminine tradition of Afro American writing, the one that subverted the pahllogocentric structure of language which is particularly designed to distance woman from her body, and which conversely serves male purposes, she employed forms of language that reframe linguistic structures, push out rules, and uses [Kristeva's \(1986\)](#) quintessential pre-oedipal semiotic language rather than [Lacan's \(1993\)](#) symbolic language. Her use of feminine language that "surpasses the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric [discursive] system" ([Cixous, 1976, p. 883](#)) to reconstruct the identity/subjectivity of black women is subversive

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and cutting edge in its non-confirmative stance towards phallogocentric writing and thus signals the great contribution of the Afro American women towards the inclusion of the black women writers in the cannon.

Literature Review

[Helen Cixous \(2002\)](#) encourages women to write since it is as much important for them as it is for males. For [Cixous \(2002\)](#) women need to completely own their bodies and experience because they are the only owner or holder of their bodies, not men. The best way to actualize their potential identity is by writing but women were kept away from the process of writings by patriarchy because the act of writing was supposed to be reserved for “great men”. Subverting this myth of writing attached with men she invites women to “Write! Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man” ([Cixous, 1976, p. 877](#)). [Luce Irigaray \(2004\)](#) is also one of the writers who talk about women writings by making a critique on the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Luce Irigaray argues that “in our culture, woman is outside representation: ‘the feminine has consequently had to be deciphered as forbidden, in between signs, between the realized meanings, between lines” ([Irigaray, 1974, p. 20](#)). For that reason, females are culturally and socially assigned an inferior status and are continuously demoralized by these patriarchal cultures and their phallogocentric theories. Male theorists have defined females with all the negative connotations. Male writers tend to have an oppressive attitude towards females which is a great reason for their subjugation and marginalization. [Moi \(2003\)](#) claims, “the thinking man not only projects his desire for a reproduction of himself (for his own reflection) on to woman; he is incapable of thinking outside this specular structure” (p. 133). Within the philosophical system and structure, female sex is described as the ‘other’. These female writers are speaking themselves on the behalf of those silenced women of a patriarchal society whose abilities are being suppressed under the male desires. So, the language of a woman articulates and expresses those experiences of their bodies which were devalued by the male dominant discourses. In Irigaray’s opinion, the problem is that women are not allowed to speak for themselves in the patriarchal world, but the problem gets worsened when males authoritatively speak on the subject of femininity as if they have the legal right to speak for female sexuality.

[Julia Kristeva \(1986\)](#), a French philosopher, and critic also earned her name by challenging the man-made language structures and talks about the language differences. Kristeva believes that language is acutely dependent on the linguistics that how they define their subjects with different perceptions and connotations. Meanings are man-made. Males plot the negative meaning against females which become the major cause in the rise of power structures in patriarchal societies where ideologies represent women as passive and oppressive being. For Kristeva “the ideological and philosophical basis for modern linguistics is fundamentally authoritarian and oppressive” (as cited in [Moi, 2003, p. 151](#)). [Ana I Zamorano \(2005\)](#) argues that one can never make an attempt to fix the meanings as they can be changed and replaced according to the given context, therefore, for Zamorano, language is “a complex signifying process rather than monolithic system” (p. 136). [Kristeva \(1984\)](#) highlights the hierarchical conclusions that were forcefully connected with the language and meanings. With her attempt to break these hierarchies, she focuses on the idea of the free play of signifier where language and meanings are opened to several interpretations. Through this, she states that it is an absurd idea to define someone as a man or a woman. She writes in this connection “to believe that one ‘is a woman’ is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that ‘one is man’” (as cited in [Moi, p. 163](#)).

Afro American Feminist, Patricia Hill [Collins’ \(2002\)](#) understanding of Afro American feminism involves black women’s issues regarding gender, class race and sexuality. [bell hooks \(1981\)](#), to deconstruct the conventional, mythologized negative images of the black women as aunt Jemimas, Sapphires and Jezebels that still continue to circulate in the American culture, points out that this stereotyping is the reflection of the domineering colonial outlook to keep the colonized blacks suppressed and stresses that black women must rewrite themselves through their own narratives. It is important to note though that in her seminal work *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), she just doesn’t blame white male sexism for what she calls “imperialism of patriarchy” but also includes and refers to the black male sexist attitudes also that existed in pre-slavery era and continues through Civil Rights Movements to the present day. The efforts of women writers from marginalized nations are concentrated on challenging Western system of domination and suggesting the ways to addressing the power

inequities. They suggest that both white and non white male and female must not refuse to listen to each other's stories especially when these stories tell truths that are different from the others truths.

Research Methodology

This study entirely relies upon the theoretically informed textual analysis of the selected works of Morrison (1988; 1997) from historical and ecriture feminine standpoint, relying upon [Belsey's suggestion \(2005\)](#) that qualitative analysis always triggers new debates, (2005) seeks to offer new interpretations of the discursive reconfigurations of the cultural, historical, gendered and racial themes inscribed upon her literary and cultural artefacts, that is, women's fiction. What justifies the employment of textual analysis as the most appropriate methodological tool for this qualitative research, dealing with interpreting textual data, is that it collects data that is in the form of words and meanings and interprets it in the light of relevant critical theories and comments to enhance the understanding of the complexity of events and ideologies inscribed on the data. The two novels I have selected for the present study – *Beloved* and *Paradise* by Toni Morrison – to discuss the ways Morrison has discursively encountered the racial images and stereotypical misrepresentations of her community authentically represent the black women's emperical experiences. Since scholarly textual analysis aims to make a genuine contribution to knowledge by revealing something new, it requires on the part of the researcher a wide-ranging study of the secondary sources in order that he may draw upon variety of knowledge fields to come up with informed analysis of the complicated con(text) under discussion, accordingly this article also makes extensive use of secondary sources to support, establish, substantiate, contest and prove its knowledge claims about the complexities and interpretations of the Afro American women's literary and cultural representations.

Re-Inscription of Black History/Body in Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

Representation of the Unreprent Tables in *Beloved*

[Morrison \(1988\)](#), among other Afro American literary giants, stands prominent when she gives a primary importance to the tortured, enslaved and exploited blacks in her writings. She makes an unending effort to remind not only the Africans about their glorious but forgotten African values, but also the Euro-Americans who, under the delusion of their power, have been using white- governed discourse and media on the African people for centuries to enslave them and suppress their sense of dignity. For this purpose she uses literary archaeology to exhume the horrendous history of slavery as she is well-aware of the functioning of power- mechanism and the remarkable role of discourse due to her political inclination and race-consciousness. She knows the extent of difficulty in capturing the story and narrating the sufferings of those who have been deprived of their fundamental rights, and are perpetual victims of injustice and oppression of the slavery-system, still practiced by the Whites in different forms. She was fully conscious that she was going to discursively reconfigure “the unrepresented” and “the unrepresentable” as the mainstream Euro-American discourse does not allow either to tell the uncountable stories of the system of slavery or to narrate the horrendous and atrocious activities of the suppressors which are not found in numbers and statistics of slavery, but are a part of common and everyday life of the slaves. An important character in the novel is the title character Beloved. We are introduced to her body and appearance that was not even two years old when she died, “Too little to understand, too little to talk even” ([Morrison, 1988, p. 5](#)). As a young child/baby of two years old, we know her only through her body whose re-entrance in the world is a magical realism, an ecriture feminine narrative tool Morrison uses to deconstruct the hierarchical patterns of euro-centered patriarchal writing. “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water ... Nobody saw her emerge or come accidentally by... amid all that she was smiling” (Morrison, p. 60). Something seems abnormal and changed because of Beloved's smile. It also points out towards magical realism, an example of ecriture feminine narrative style, that asks us to suspend our reason and accept the extra-ordinary appearance as reality and go away from a phallogocentric reasoning by accepting a woman who is semi-ghost and who walks out of a river “fully dressed”. Beloved's growth increases her bodily needs leading her to an immense increase in her power. At first, she is a baby that is too feeble to get out of bed but later she grows quickly, attains womanhood and seduces Paul D. She goes through a “spiritual sexual negotiation” ([Henderson, 2002, p. 89](#)) with Paul D but her innocence may not be neglected when she asks Paul D to “touch me on the inside part” and “call me my name”

(Morrison, p. 137). Her innocence does not let her name any word to the act of sex. She does emphasize “her breath surgery from fingerfuls of molasses or sand-cookie crumbs” (Morrison, p. 143). She is addicted to sweets and this need to consume grows to destructive levels.

Usually, *Beloved* seems to be a ghost story but it is more than that as it transports the readers to so many memories where the other characters also move in their respective ways. When the identity of Beloved is disclosed to Sethe, she is “excited to giddiness by all the things she no longer had to remember” (Morrison, p. 216). When Beloved points out that the storm mixes both men and women together, she actually conveys the idea that it is the hard time that convinces the men to consider women more than a sex-doll otherwise women have always been neglected in every society. She also mentions the white men by calling them “the men without skin” whose bodies are piled on top of her, so the story of the *Beloved* changes from the memories of being buried or dead to the multiple narrators that lead to some other conclusions. In this regard, Henderson points out that it may be argued that Beloved’s presence within the novel symbolises an immediate need that caters to both personal and communal memory ([Henderson, 2002, p. 91](#)).

This does make Beloved a uniting force for another “body” that is called a community. Seen from ecriture feminine perspective, it is obvious that these are the bodies that move the plot along but at the same time these needs of bodies as well as the speeches of bodies determine the relationships among the characters. Whether it is the relationship between Beloved and Sethe or Denver’s self-discovering of a life outside the socio-religious bounds, it is the bodily hunger and speech that determined a relation. In the beginning when Beloved comes to the house, she is thirsty and drinks four glasses of water to quench her thirst as if she had crossed a desert but Denver smells another hunger in Beloved which she satisfies by giving her sweets. It is not the speech of tongue that talks about Beloved’s hunger rather it is the signs of body that make Denver understand the demand of Beloved. Denver knows that the baby-ghost has come to life, so she wants to form a bond with her in order to please her. It is not that only Beloved is hungry, the hunger can also be seen in Denver who is hungry for love and affection as she is leading a lonely life.

She wants to catch and inhale sweet air from and in the mouth of Beloved in order to satisfy hunger, her hunger can be related to her mother’s milk for which Beloved is also hungry. [Cixous \(1976\)](#) believes that breast milk is actually “white ink” which may be used by every woman writer to acknowledge the strength and power of a woman. Though some critics accuse her of using female biological essentialism yet this new language outside the pahllogocentric language helps women in raising their voice against patriarchal traditions of oppressing. Toni Morrison pays direct heed to the words of Cixous and uses breast milk and blood and water as the “ink” of her story. This ‘white ink’ is seen when Sethe narrates her story and beings with: “I had milk ___ I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my body girls” (Morrison, p. 19). She narrates how the school teacher’s boys made a sexual assault on her by coming closer to her to get milk from her breasts. Morrison, through the mouth piece of Sethe, uses words carefully. She does not use the words like “sexual assault”, ‘rape’ or “beatings” rather she uses the language of body by saying that the men robbed women, especially the mothers by taking away something precious from the mothers- the thing that made them the mothers: “There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you” (Morrison, p. 236).

Sethe may not consider it souring but Denver knows that the blood of her sister is mixed with her mother’s milk which has caused a souring in Sethe’s milk. This mixing of blood and milk is not a new tool used by any writer. In this connection, [Traci C. West \(1999\)](#) writes that one of the different ways slaves were tortured was a form of sexualized torture in which pregnant women and nursing mothers were whipped so brutally “that blood and milk flowed simultaneously from their breasts” (p. 278). It is quite clear that the emotions and feelings which do not find flow through tongue as the tongue has been caught by the cruel hands of slave rulers, body expresses those feelings and emotions through the running blood and flowing milk. If one part of the body (the tongue) fails to express what runs in brain, the other part comes forward as it can’t be stopped. This is the very difference between body and tongue. One is bound to the external pressure and restrictions whereas the other has no limit that is why the language of body is much more powerful and affective than the tongue. Morrison expresses this very idea through *Beloved* that since the language of body can’t be restricted so why don’t the other writers, especially the female writers use this very language of body as a tool to express what is hidden in their brains. This is the effective use of this sort of innovative and expressive language that communicates the purely feminine

experiences and distinguishes Morrison from others as she shuns the conventional language of phallogocentrism. She knows well that such phallogocentrism as has been conventionally used by the writers may not serve the purpose of doing justice to her stories. If she uses the conventional language of phallogocentrism, she may never be able to enjoy the space provided by Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine* (1976). To break the boundaries of phallogocentrism, it is essential to break boundaries of logic and reason and to focus on bodily language. Otherwise, her story would also be drowned into the bottom of deep conventional sea.

Reclamation of Black History/Body in *Paradise*

Morrison's fictional world comprises of victims of slavery, racial and gender discrimination, for instance characters in *Beloved* (1988) and in the same way domestic and communal violence is evident in case of the group of women in *Paradise* (1997). The textual analysis of *Paradise* offers deconstructive examples galore of the Western dichotomous concepts categorizing the bodies based on the polarization of the mind and the body in which "the primary term defines itself by expelling its other" and by doing so establishes its own discursive parameters to construct an identity for itself (Grosz, 1995, p. 3). The corollary of this binaristic definitions of mind/body is the discursive construction of the black body as passive, subaltern, voiceless, non historical and irrational thus depriving the blacks of agency, subjectivity and voice of their own. Women in *Paradise* have different background but one thing that binds them together is that all are controlled and suppressed by the men. Cannie or Consolata is an important character in the novel who runs the convent. Her past shows that she has been taken to an Oklahoma convent by Mary Magne after being abused by phallogocentric society. [Morrison \(1997\)](#) shows through the characters of Consolata that women, in a phallogocentric society, always remain a slave of authority. This authority may also be exercised by a female. After being taken to convent, Consolata remains obedient to Mary Magne and does not do anything according to her own free-will. Her mindset is already set to follow Mary Magne's will. No doubt that Consolata is a sympathetic lady who is ready to help every needy and deserving person but she, still, is a victim of authority that runs her according to its own particular desire.

Consolata is among those women who have surrendered themselves to the others and are not going to show any resistance against aggression. She is the traditional woman who is ready to feed everyone through the milk of kindness and love. That's why, when in the second last chapter, she is attacked by men, she does not resist the man who tries to kill her. Her love for her boyfriend, (who has betrayed her) never ends till the end of her life.

Another important character is Mavis who is a negligent lady and is abused by her Patriarchal husband. Her husband Frank is alcoholic and abusive. She bears the harsh and sometimes indifferent behavior of her husband who, following the patriarchal and phallogocentric ways of society, treats her violently and harshly. This thing adds to the fears of Mavis who, in order to escape from the maltreatment of her husband, tries to run-away from house. She is afraid that her husband and three children would kill her. Morrison conveys the idea through her character that fear is sleeping partner of every black-woman because the woman knows that she would never be free in the male-dominant society. Fear of punishment, fear of being left alone, fear of being killed and many more fears surround the black woman since her birth.

This fear compels her to take refuge in the Convent. Her story presages the confusion and misconceptions that arise due to the difference between visual or social perception and personal intuitive perception. Mavis is the representation of all those women who yearn to appear as competent mothers and free women but, under the callous and suppressing hands of a patriarchal society, they fail to uplift their heads and express their feelings and thoughts. Their expectations always meet a failure in a phallogocentric society. But Mavis breaks this particular shell and poses to be a lady free from patriarchal bonds. This happens when she accidentally kills her children. All eyes focus on Mavis and her perception is shown as muddled and unreliable as "the shine of excitement in the eyes [of people] was clear" ([Morrison, 1997, p. 21](#)). Under the conciliatory gestures of people, there is hidden a sort of hatred for Mavis. Similarly, the same shine in eyes can be seen in the photographer who comes with a reporter to make a record of her story. Despite all these facts, Morrison shows that Mavis breaks the patriarchal shell of phallogocentrism. She wears sunglasses even on cloudy days which indicate the flashy life her family tries to present and her denial of reality.

Women in *Ruby* are not suffering from racial prejudice as much as the suppression perpetrated upon them by their own black community. Within families, the object or subject relation is dominant. Masculinity is always

subjective whereas femininity is defined as object- women are object and inferior. Morrison shows that it is not the men at fault rather women themselves are the guilty ones. Power is exercised only when the weak ones refuse to resist against power. In any society, if power holds its dominant position, it is only because the people accept the reality principles determined and set by the authorities. Same is the case here in Ruby: women, since their childhood, have surrendered themselves to a phallogocentric society. They have in their minds the concept of male superiority. They have never thought in any other way. It is only women who are ready to be suppressed. They love to live in a passive condition and are not ready to revolt. In ecriture feminine tradition, Morrison wants them to speak, if not through their tongues, at least through their bodies. Women in Ruby are ignorant of their fundamental rights. They accept everything that comes from their husband or their fathers passively whether they like it or not. Mavis's life is controlled by her husband who always prevents her from having friends.

Conclusion

The articulation of the simultaneity of the multiple structures of oppression suffered by the colored women with disturbing realization that even the extrication of one form of oppression may still leave black women battling against the other equally dehumanizing form of oppression even today remains the most significant critical contribution of the black feminist thought. So, when black feminists raised their voice against the interlocking system of oppression, black men, instead of supporting their cause criticized them and placed them in the same inferioritized half of the white/black, men/women duality that the white men and women had assigned them for the perpetuation of domination. The sexual exploitation of the black women by the white men, as Toni Morrison (1988) has exemplified in case of Seth's humiliating sexual molestation at the hands of the white nephews, on the morbid white assumptions that black women are excessively lustful and temptresses has been historically used as an excuse to vindicate white men while dehumanize the black women. Black women's marathon struggle to liberate themselves from the imprisonment of sexism and racism in order to gain agency as a subject which they had been denied by the white as they were treated as objectified others of the superioritized white subjects has opened new humanist avenues of societal organization.

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