



Analysis of Tony Morrison's "Beloved"

Dnyaneshwar Kishanrao Chakradev, Research Scholar, PG Department of English Research Centre,
SSBES's Yeshwant Mahavidyalaya Nanded.

Dr. L.V.Padmarani Rao, Research Guide, Professor of English, SSBES's Yeshwant Mahavidyalaya Nanded.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4864583

Abstract

Tony Morrison's fifth novel, "Beloved" (1987) portrays the Afro-American community's struggle for survival and search for identity in the racist American society. The novel represents the horrific torture and trauma experienced by Sethe, her family and entire Afro-American community due to the institution of slavery and racism. In this paper, the writers applied Reader-Response approach to "Beloved" for studying the institution of slavery and racist tendencies which compelled the Afro-Americans to undergo series of socio-cultural atrocities in the United States of America. The aim of the paper is to study physical and psychological struggle for freedom and survival experienced by Sethe and her family which can be viewed as representative of Afro-American people's historical and contemporary struggle for earning a proper livelihood and living a meaningful or wholesome life.

Keywords: Morrison, *Beloved*, Reader Response Approach, Slavery, Racism

Introduction

Tony Morrison, Chloe Anthony Wofford, is considered as one of the major veteran Afro-American writers. She contributed to Afro-American literary tradition with a life-time commitment to portray Afro-American community's struggle for survival and search for identity in the racist American society. Morrison published eleven fictions during 1970-2015. All her fictions are based on the theme of slavery, racism, discrimination, violence, marginalization and socio-cultural oppression experienced by the Afro-Americans in the United States of America.

Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987) won the Pulitzer prize for fiction and Anisfield-Wolf Book award in 1988 for representing the race and race relations aptly. The novel represents the horrific torture and trauma experienced by Sethe, her family and entire Afro-American community due to the institution of slavery and racism.

The researcher's aim at presenting a reader-response analysis of Morrison's "Beloved" is to study the Afro-American people's experiences of facing slavery, racism and violence. As per M.H. Abrams, Reader- Response Criticism mostly came in prominence during 1960s and this critical approach doesn't designate a single critical theory/approach. However, all reader- response theorists agree that a reader plays very important role in creating or producing meaning of a text (256-257).



Reader-response critics of all theoretical persuasions agree that, at least to some considerable degree, the meaning of a text are the “production” or “creation” of the individual reader, hence that there is no one “correct” meaning for all readers...” (Abrams M.H.)

Unlike other literary theories which focus mainly on ‘Author, Text and Context’ for interpreting or analyzing a text, the Reader -Response theory focuses on the reader’s (audience) role in creating and giving meaning to a text (IIT Kanpur). Elena Sprivoska (2019) cited Amer’s perspective of Reader response theory as:

It views the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this transaction... (P 22-23).

Thus, Reader-Response approach provides the reader a participative, communicative and transactional role to the readers in creating meaning to a text and understanding the text from the readers’ perspective.

Discussion

Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) portrays the horrible and horrific experiences of servitude and racial abuses as well as violence experienced by Sethe, her family and her entire community.

The novel is based on the pre- and post-slavery life experiences and struggle for survival as well as identity crises of a runaway slave, Sethe (the protagonist). The novel cover’s Sethe’s life of slavery in Sweet Home Planation of Kentucky as well her life as fugitive slave (runaway slave) in 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe and her family’s story is testimony of physical and psychological violence experienced by Afro-American community living in the United States of America. (Chakra & Rao 1).

Through *Beloved*, Morrison wanted to focus on the historical aspect of Afro-American community wherein they had right to give birth to their children but they had no right to parenting those children (Morrison) Morrison told in one of her interviews that Sethe had no right to kill her child (Beloved) but Sethe thought that it was the right thing to do to save her child from being captive and enslaved (Manufacturing Intellect). The plot of the novel is inspired from a true account of a run-away slave, Margaret Garner, who had killed her children and injured others while attempting to runaway from a plantation.

Sethe killed her two-year-old daughter, when her Sweet Home plantation white masters found her and she was afraid that her children and she would face brutalities and violence of being captured as a runaway slave. After being released from the jail and abandoned by her white masters for this heinous act of killing one’s own child, Sethe lives in 124, Blue Stone Road in Ohio. 124 is occupied by Sethe, Denver(daughter), Howard and Buglar (sons) Baby Suggs (Mother-in-law) and a venomous spirit or ghost of her daughter Beloved. Baby Suggs died of old age and disease and her life represents the horrors of slavery on Afro-American woman. She lost all her children to the forces of slavery and racial



abuse. As and when Sethe wanted to leave 124 Bluestone road, Baby Suggs would aware her of the bitter reality of Afro-American lives that they cannot escape from the clutches of slavery and racial abuses.

“We could move,” she suggested once to her mother -in- law.

“What’d be the point”? asked Baby Suggs. Not a house in the country
ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief...” (Morrison 06)

Baby Suggs’s life is representative of the first generation of Afro-Americans who were enslaved and put to torture and hard labour in several plantations of the United States of America.

Sethe’s husband, Halle and her sons (Howard and Buglar) appear as symbol of socio-cultural or psychological helplessness of Afro-American males which compels them to be silent spectator to Sethe’s struggle and torture. On the Sweet Home plantation of Kentucky, Sethe undergoes serious of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Halle is spectator to this violence but he chooses to remain passive, silent and self-shamed and he couldn’t rescue Sethe from the violence. In 124 Bluestone, the perceived or real ghost of Beloved tortures Sethe or plans to kill her. Being afraid of this ghost, Howard and Buglar runaway from the house for good and they never bother about Sethe, Denver and Baby Suggs.

In entire novel, Sethe is undergoing Post traumatic stress disorder as she never overcame from the shock, shame and guilt for killing her own daughter, Beloved. Paul D Man, a former fellow slave at Sweet Home Plantation, exorcises Beloved’s ghost, Sethe meets Beloved in human form and she feels that she could compensate for her loss by loving and caring for this new Beloved. Beloved becomes Centre stage of her life and, Sethe, knowingly or unknowingly, neglects Denver, her another daughter.

Denver is living a marginal, passive and introvert life as her own community as well as her own mother has failed to understand her internal struggle for being loved and accepted. As Sethe focuses her entire attention on Beloved and Paul D Man, Denver has to just act a silent spectator to Sethe- Beloved and Sethe- Paul D Man’ love-relationship. Denver to wants to escape from 124 Bluestone Road as he cannot bear the trauma of living a neglected life.

“I can’t live here. I don’t Know where to go or
What to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us.
Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me.
Girls don’t either...” (Morrison: 17)

Sethe’s act of killing Beloved and neglecting welfare of Denver is symbol of parenting styles of Afro-Americans. As Afro-Americans had to suffer a lot due to slavery and racism, they could not focus or legally permitted to nourish their kids.

An engraver, who carved the Word ‘Beloved’ on the tombstone of Sethe’s murdered daughter, had performed ten minutes of sexual act with Sethe as the price for his service. Sethe actually wanted to carve “Dearly Beloved” on the tombstone but she had no energy to bear twenty minutes of sex with that engraver. Morrison represents aptly the sexual exploitation of Afro-American women as part of legitimate acts under slavery and racism.



At Sweet home Plantation, her white masters (the school teacher and his nephews/relatives/sons) abuse Sethe sexually and physically. They would indulge in violent sex with her, beat her with cowherds and perform a series of medical experimentation on her body mercilessly.

Through chokertree symbol, Morrison presents the readers a visual memory of physical abuse born by Sethe. Sethe tells Paul D Man symbolically that she underwent sexual abuse and physical torture when she reveals that "...those boys came there and took my milk. that's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it..." (19).

In mid part of the novel, Morrison provides the readers a concrete account of socio-cultural atrocities bore by the slaves:

Eighteen Seventy-four and white folks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped Clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored Schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like Adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken (212)

Upon reunion with Sethe, Paul D Man earns his love and satisfies his lust by having sex with Sethe. Sethe too enjoys physical relationship with him. However, she was failing in loving and providing care and support to Denver, as Denver was traumatized and shattered for not being loved and not living the life she deserved. Denver's trauma is as important as Beloved's tragedy. Only difference is Beloved is exorcised thrice and earned her freedom but Denver never got the freedom and love she desired and deserved.

Halle could not return to Sethe and Sethe is unaware whether Halle is dead or alive. Sixo, a runaway slave, was killed by the white masters. What happened to Sixo's beloved (Thirty Mile woman) with whom Sixo planned an escapade to live a free life is not known. Paul D Man survived all brutalities of slavery as he learned the art of saving his memories in his heart (rusted tobacco tin).

The murder of Beloved and life experiences of Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, Sixo, Paul D Man and other major and minor characters portray the consequences of slavery and racism on Afro-American people. Morrison symbolically ends the novel with a phrase "It was not a story to pass on." Which can have various meanings and interpretations. The writer's think Tony Morrison is revealing optimism that Sethe's story should not continue and the plight of Afro-Americans must change in the contemporary American society. Thus, *Beloved* aptly portrays the horrors and evils of racism and slavery in readers response perspective.

References

- [1] Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. seventh ed., Harcourt College Publishers, 2000.
- [2] "noc18-hs31-Lecture 14-Reader Response Theory: The Phenomenological Tradition" You Tube, uploaded by IIT Kanpur, July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHiPRvKYRS8>



- [3] Sprivoska, Elena. “Reader-Response Theory and Approach: Application, Values and Significance for Students in Literature Courses.” *SEEU Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, pp. 20–35., doi:10.2478/seeur-2019-0003.
- [4] Chakradev D.K., L.V. Padmarani Rao “Portrayal of Violence against Women in Tony Morrison’s *Beloved*” One Day National e-conference on “New Trends in ICT, Film, Literature and Culture organized by Department of English, DVSPM’s BBA, NBC & BPS college, Yavatmal on 12 February 2021.
- [5] *RARE Toni Morrison interview on "Beloved" (1987)*. 2019. [video] Manufacturing Intellect.
- [6] Morrison, Tony, *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 2005.

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.