

# The Flashbulb Memory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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**Abstract—** This paper demonstrates the Flashbulb Memory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The novel is written by the African American novelist Toni Morrison. The novelist portrays slavery in a very disgusting manner so as to touch the sentiments of the reader. Apart from slavery, the novel shows motherhood and memory through some tragic stories of various African American characters. The Flashbulb Memory occurs when someone experiences traumatic events and these events latter on come back to perturb memory and life. Through applying the theory, the paper aims at finding out how the traumatic experiences and shocks disrupt the characters' memory especially the main characters like: Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and through flashbacks, the deceased Bubby Suggs. The novel is also analyzed in terms of mother's passion towards her children and how the consequences of Sethe's actions would occupy her life and causes mental disorders. The mother's character would be analyzed to show whether she has the right to murder her own children or not. Her actions and behaviors are also examined and evaluated in terms of flashbulb memory when she exceeds the social boundaries and norms. The reappearance of the slaughtered daughter, Denver, represents the past and memory of Sethe that comes back to the present life.

**Keywords—** slavery, memory, motherhood, African Americans, Flashbulb Memories.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Beloved* is one of the outstanding works of the African American novelist Toni Morrison. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. In this novel, Morrison displays race discrimination and ethnicity within the American community in the mid-nineteenth century. The blacks, both male and female characters, have painful memories in *Beloved*, which is demonstrated through flashbacks and stories told by the characters. The characters are mainly divided into two groups: the blacks, who have been enslaved in the Sweet Home plantation and live an unpleasant life presently, and the whites, who have been the owners of the plantation. The latter group has been the cause of all the hardship and persecution that blacks have faced and still face. Apart from servitude, blacks have faced various forms of oppression, including rape, hard labour, injustice, cruelty, and physical and emotional torture. Whatever belongs to the Sweet Home Plantation reminds

Sethe of her unpleasant past. From this angle, this paper applies the theory of flashbulb memory to some characters in *Beloved*. Flashbulb memories, as defined by Roger Brown and James Kulik in 1977, are those that are triggered by a tragic event or traumatic experience and last for a long time, even if they are not lifelong. It especially occurs when someone hears of the death of one of the family members or a relative, and due to the importance of the deceased person in the life of the affected one, the incidents and circumstances are saved as a permanent memory. In this novel, such memories are depicted as flashbacks, which disturb the characters and bind them to the past. This study would look into the characters' demeanours through the lens of the past to see how flashbulb memories have affected their lives in the present.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mathieson states that Sethe remembers the traumatic events that happened nineteen years before. The tragic memories stick to her present consciousness as if they have happened recently. The tragic murder of *Beloved* at her hands has seized her memory and prevented it from working properly, which means that she cannot behave as a normal person. These thoughts and memories reappear as a human being, a stranger, after eighteen years. It is possible to say that the mother's love for her children is demonstrated by her sophisticated behaviour. Thus, there is a strong connection between Sethe and *Beloved*, as the mother tells her that she is hers and that her countenance is like her mother's. The demands of the grown-up child are, physically, the same as the primitive desires of a small child, as if she is the same baby murdered eighteen years earlier. Thus, the mother's wounds have not healed as a result of her captivity to her thoughts and previous misdeeds. (Mathieson, 1990).

Bast states that the characters try to keep pace with memories of the hardships of their past while old traumas let down their attempts and stay unforgettable. The appearance of the character *Beloved* represents the return of a kind of repression that has resulted from the long-term distress of slavery. Such a trauma, here, is not only normal for Sethe to live with, but it is also engraved on her mind, which is inevitable. It overpowers the character, who is personally involved in the event, and she is portrayed as a victim. The painful memories are remembered repeatedly as a result of some of the unconscious urges that trigger the psyche of the black characters. They are represented as laments that harden the lives of the affected characters. (Bast, 2011).

Story says that Sethe has a great love for her children since she would like to keep them away from servitude and the tribulations of slavery. Sethe becomes enslaved by her memories, depriving her of all the vivacity of life. She faces many difficulties after the tragic incident when she decides to infanticide her own child. Although she is alive bodily as the novel begins, she does not have any kind of enjoyment as her life has become tasteless. Beloved's ghost returns to her mother's present life as a result of the mother's traumatic memories. Sethe and her mother-in-law believe in the spirits of their beloved ones as living creatures around them. Such a belief binds them to their gloomy past. Morrison depicts the suffering of three generations from a feminine perspective: The grandmother Baby Suggs, her Son Halle and daughter-in-law Sethe, and her granddaughter Beloved. (Story, 2002)

### III. METHODOLOGY

The flashback memory by Roger Brown and James Kulik (1977) is applied to examine the emotions and psychological status of the major characters in *Beloved*. The qualitative method has been applied through reading and examining the novel to see the impact of the bygone events on the on-going lives of the characters. Through contextual analysis, the characters' actions, behaviours, and manners are investigated and shown so that the reader can get a clear image of their sensations and feelings.

### IV. DISCUSSION

*Beloved* starts in House 124, a house in Cincinnati where Sethe and her eighteen-year-old daughter live. The house is haunted by the ghost of Beloved as a sign of slavery's anguish. As Sethe meets Paul D in chapter 1, after eighteen years, the confrontation hurts her because it takes her back to the days of servitude as she recollects her wretched past. In *Beloved*, Morrison shows a moral lesson to humanity: slavery cannot be forgotten since its impact on the Afro-Americans is still present to a great extent, and the influence depends on the sufferings that they are exposed to. Much of Sethe's painful memories stem from her traumatic experiences and distressing life on the Sweet Home plantation, where she had lived in deplorable conditions as well as with other African Americans. It is clarified by Christian in "Beloved, She's Ours" that the most distinguished feature of Morrison's writing style is her ability to combine political issues with social ones (Morrison, 36). Apart from social discrimination, what makes the situation worse for the black characters is the law which gives the right to the whites to practise slavery. In addition, it does not regulate servitude so as to grant the slaves some rights. Morrison dramatizes the real situation of the blacks in her novel so as to get the public's sympathy. Discrimination has political as well as social roots. The minority's social inequalities are still prevalent in many modern communities. According to Daves in "Postmodern Blackness": Toni Morrison's *Beloved and the End of History*, the novelist wishes to remind the reader of the intervention between African Americans and modern politicians through memory and retaining the past. (Morrison, 1987)

The novel suggests that it is important for the blacks to understand their history so as to avoid its negative effects and to adapt themselves to their present lives. Living with the traumatic memories would worry the characters and make their lives meaningless. Baby Suggs is stranded between living life and leaving it as a result of the heavy burden of her tragic life. Morrison, in *Living Memory*, believes that blacks have not developed in the postmodern world because of the restrictions and limitations related to the past, specifically the nineteenth century. To deal with these matters, they need to go back to this period and earlier times so as to reach the source of their difficulties and to help them gain a kind of emotional immutability (Morrison, 254).

The mysterious character of Beloved first appears as a ghost, then as a regular human being, but is psychologically and emotionally childish. She represents the past, and her presence at the moment is a recollection of the flashback memory for her mother. Morrison, in the foreword of *The Bluest Eye*, talks about the mother-daughter bond, which is based on the lover's situation, not the loved one's. The loved one is helpless and is overcome by the admirer. Morrison shows love in Beloved as the following: "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses the gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye." (Morrison, 163) Here, love can be destructive since it depends on the perception of the lover, and the loved one is the object of desire as it has been described by Lacan in his *Desire and the interpretation of desire*. In an attempt to prevent her children from physical and spiritual exploitation, Sethe tends to filicide her own children out of motherly devotion. Sethe's crimes against her children come as a result of her fears of slavery, and, as a result of her worries, she infanticides them to save them from enslavement. In *Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved*, Saesar believes that "By concentrating upon a slave mother's act of infanticide and its consequences, Morrison critiques the notion of motherhood as a liberating bond between mother and child, full of libidinal freedom appropriable by the symbolic order of society" (Morrison, 120).

Thus, the mother is shown guilty and criminal because she attempts to free her child; in doing so, she violates social norms and crosses familial boundaries. It is all because of slavery's influences on the human psyche that they have altered Sethe's senses and consciousness. In *Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's Beloved*, Moglen says that the novelist tries to demonstrate the destruction and rebuilding of the principles that society has built on (Morrison, 22). It tells the reader that Morrison does not only show the disorder of society, but that by arousing such disgusting images of slavery, she wants to wake up the nations and make them aware of the race discrimination that African Americans have faced in the USA. After she succeeds in killing her daughter, Sethe cannot get rid of this traumatic incident. She tries to explain her actions to her beloved daughter, but she fails since Beloved was so small when she was murdered, and that is why it is impossible to understand her mother's feelings. In her contemporary work, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Hirtch talks

about the connection between the mother and daughter as well as the mother's obligations. He portrays the mother as despondent and helpless in the face of her child's death. He states, "When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing" (Morrison, 196). From this point, it could be said that slavery has been shown as the antagonistic force in the novel. It is also shown as the ghost of Beloved as well as the chaotic memory of Sethe.

The novel shifts between the sad present circumstances of the characters to their inauspicious pasts. It is displayed by retelling their stories to each other. This can be seen distinctly when Sethe narrates her story to Denver. This story affects not only the murderer but all those around her. The mother murders her own child, who later haunts Room 124 as a ghost. Denver is told by her mother that when someone or something dies, a part of that person or thing stays alive. (Morrison, P.37) This shows the experience of the mother with the ghost of Beloved. The presence of the ghost around the residents of 124 would never make them feel at ease because it reminds them of their malicious past. Aside from that, Sethe's deceased acquaintances do not simply vanish from her memory; they each occupy a piece of it and bind her to the past. Then, with the disappearance of Beloved at the end of the novel, Toni Morrison tries to give Sethe hope that she can move on and adapt to her new reality.

Sethe and Denver decide to end the repression by calling forth the ghost in 124, which makes them tired. Perhaps a conversation—an exchange of views or something—would help. So they held hands and said, "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on." (Morrison, p.5) It clarifies to the reader that both the mother and her surviving child have longed for the victimised child. Apart from discovering the identity of the ghost, Sethe needs it to discharge her depressed feelings that she has kept for eighteen years. Sethe opens her eyes. "I doubt that," she said. "Then why don't it come?" "You forgetting how little it is," said her mother. "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even." (Morrison, p.2) This quotation shows the reader how the mother has suffered in 124 and after what she has seen and felt in her disastrous past life. The mother and her surviving child, here, try to release their oppressed feelings by confronting the ghost that has become a part of their lives. To call it to come and appear demonstrates Sethe's pain and anxiety because she would no longer bear pondering about the past and its impacts on her life. It is plain that she has a considerable sorrow for her beloved, as she laments her by saying that she could neither speak nor understand to defend herself or express her feelings.

A considerable part of the novel is consisted of symbolism which Morrison uses as a technique to show the ugliness of the past. While negative emotions and frustrations are kept in the heart, the physical torture leaves traces on the body of the characters by which Morrison tries to convey the hardship both emotionally and physically. The ghost of Beloved is the traumatic experience that Sethe lives throughout her bondage. It is not necessarily terrify the inhabitants of 124, but reminds them the intimidated bygone time. At the same time, The engraved tree on Sethe's back is one of the major symbols in

the novel. It follows her and distorts her body. It occupies her back and it seizes her from behind and reminds her the trauma of savagery. Whereas, Paul D carries a black, heavy tobacco tin in his chest. This gloomy image tells the reader how this character feels inside and how he has endured his fate. The emotional disturbance is more torturous than the physical one. It can be called repression since he does not share it with others, these aching memories may have lived with his all the time.

Although she is a factual example of sacrifice as a result of injustice and exploitation, Sethe is still a benevolent character by showing no reactions towards the definers. "Fitzgerald foreshadows Dick Diver's disillusionment with any practical experience of his ideal manners through this cultural and moral exposition of his hero's background". (Rauf, 2020, P. 66) Identically, Morrison as an african, firstly, and then as a female writer, leads the reader to sympathize Sethe. The reader is led to feel compation with this character.

## V. CONCLUSION

The novel shifts from present to past through flashbacks when the characters remember the past, and this phenomenon is shown along with the progress of the characters. Sethe suffers greatly even after she escapes the Sweet Home plantation because of slavery. She hopefully manages to flee from the plantation, but she still lives with the sorrowful events of slavery. Any encounter with white people recalls her bad memories, as when she once faces Mr. Bodwin, an abolitionist who worked to release her from slavery, she tries to kill him. By demonstrating the presence of three generations in the novel—Baby Suggs, her son, and her granddaughter—Morrison demonstrates the continuation of the hardships of slavery as well as its influences on the new generations. Denver has never seen or experienced slavery, but she has felt it. She had seen her grandmother's painful life after the enslavement period. Finally, it is clearly seen that the trauma of slavery still prevents Sethe, Paul D., and Denver from experiencing real freedom, though they have freed themselves physically. Therefore, the flashbulb memories overcome all those characters who have seen the death of their loved ones, and the details of these traumatic memories are shown as they retell the stories. Symbolism is used by Morrison to show the impact of the traumatic past on the present. The tobacco tin which has not been opened within Paul D's chest demonstrates the bitter facts that he had faced during the slavery period.

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