

A Feminist Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an intersectional feminist analysis of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, which suggests the identity of Black women, maternity, trauma, and resistance following slavery. Based on Black feminist theory, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as the classical theory of feminism proposed by Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, the analysis questions how Morrison reveals the collected violence of racism and patriarchy. The historical example of Margaret Garner inspired Morrison's *Beloved*. The traces of the enslavement are dramatized by *Beloved*, restoring the voices that have been silenced by colonialism and slavery through non-linear narrative and polyphonic views and symbolic motifs, especially the ghostly figure of *Beloved*. By reforming motherhood as a place of oppression and survival, making the female body as a place of trauma and strength, and storytelling and community unity as healing tactics. This study can situate Black and classical feminism as an archival storehouse and place of Black woman resistance that refutes historical removal, regains lost memory, and adds to the discussion of liberation and Black womanhood re-imagination across the world.

1. Introduction

In its approach to slavery, Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, goes beyond being a representation of slavery and instead serves as a radical intervention of the discursive politics of memory and identity, as well as feminist resistance. Traditional historiography and the dominant literary canon often have tombstone, or put down, the lived experience of enslaved women, denoting them as mere characters of other histories of racial victimization. Morrison alters this erasure through the story, which does not allow a conclusion and demands the face-off of the trauma to restore the voice of Black women and the gendered aspects of slavery, sexual violence, reproductive exploitation, and maternal dispossession, and make them inseparable. By doing so, the novel challenges established historiographic traditions as well as universalized feminist discourse, which has historically given precedence to the white, middle-class viewpoint.

The main issue of this inquiry is not only the portrayal of slavery but the systematic lack of Black women's survival in the dominant cultural discourses. The text Morrison writes requires a theoretical approach that can explain the multiplied violence of race, gender, and class. Such a lens can be offered through intersectional feminist theory, which is described by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberle Crenshaw, and through the works of classical feminist theorists, who shed light on the processes of identity formation and performance: Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Coming through this two-fold framework of reading *Beloved*, one can understand that as Morrison turns motherhood into a place of vulnerability, it is also a space of resistance and is also able to show that the female body becomes both a place of trauma and survival.

This study, therefore, makes *Beloved* a feminist archive that addresses the silencing of Black women in history and literature. The study claims that the novel does not just record the traces of slavery but has an act of cultural reclaim in it by questioning the narrative strategies through which the novel is written, non-linear temporality, polyphonic voices, and symbolic haunting. Morrison asserts that memory, voice, and community cannot be separated in what Black womanhood should be redefined, thus offering to the wider feminist argument regarding survival, resistance, and liberation.

This paper aims to examine Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a radical feminist novel reclaiming Black femininity, survival, and memory in the silence of the prevailing historical and literary discourse. This analysis does not focus on the novel simply as a descriptive narrative of slavery but critically explores how the novel is characterized by non-linear temporality, plural voices, and symbolic haunting to uncover the accrued violence of race, gender, and class. The key to this goal is the renegotiation of motherhood, in which Morrison reconstructs the maternity space as a position of weakness in the field of struggle and political action. Combining Black feminist theories and literature, especially uses of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, with the classical feminist tradition, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler), the paper anticipates the epistemic power of the lived realm of Black women and questions the universalizing practices of this mainstream feminist discourse.

The importance of this study is not only adding to the field of feminist literary criticism but also to the discourse on intersectionality. It shows how *Beloved* can be described as a feminist archive, as an object that fights against the removal of history and recovers the lost voices, and at the same time places literature as a political demonstration of cultural recuperation. Morrison's *Beloved* becomes the place of intersection of trauma, memory, and resistance, where liberation is offered, both personal, collective, and revolutionary. The research investigates Morrison's portrayal of racial and gender power dynamics through a global feminist perspective while demonstrating that the novel functions as a permanent location for Black women to fight against oppression and find healing and develop new identities, which serves as the primary focus of *Beloved*'s critical examination.

2. Literature Review

Beloved scholarship has made Toni Morrison's novel a foundation of feminist literary criticism, but the methodologies used to accomplish it demonstrate its depth and its weaknesses. Barbara Christian (1985) suggested that the stories by Morrison are political actions of putting the experience of Black women at the centre, and Bell Hooks (1981, 1989) pointed to the fact that Black women suffered in the novel, which

is not idealised as it undermines the discourse of mainstream feminism, where the suffering of racialised black women is erased. These interventions represented a break in the long-standing insufficiency of approaches that could not consider intersectionality, but they also revealed how unsatisfactory such a method has always been. Another powerful perspective has been the trauma theory. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that the accessibility of trauma is based on the repetition of a narrative in which she asserts that the fractured temporality and polyphonic voices of Morrison. Horvitz (2000) sees this as the reflection of the psychological displacement of enslaved women, and Koolish (2001) sees the ghost in *Beloved* as the embodiment of the unresolved grieving. But these readings tend to give traumas a privileged status as an abstract form of category that may lead to minimising the lived experience of Black women into a generalised form of psychology as opposed to a historically defined oppression.

Survival and resistance have been predated by other critics. Valerie Smith (1990) interprets this act of killing her child as a powerful expression of the power of the maternity of Sethe, relating to the concept of Judith Butler (1990) that resistance may be an action that is in opposition to social norms. On the periphery, Rushdy (1999) places *Beloved* in the contexts of the neo-slave narratives, which focus on how it is a contribution to the revision of historical memory. However, Hortense Spillers (1987) goes to greater lengths when she reveals the way slavery created a grammar of the flesh that still dominates the Black female subjectivity. These perspectives indicate that Morrison is critiquing the existing historiography, but often, they do not consider the full usage of the Black feminist epistemologies that make lived experience a site of knowledge production.

This work expands on and leaves these lines of scholarship by making syntheses of trauma theory, classical feminist theories and Black feminist theories. Although earlier studies have either focused on narrative or on trauma, the current study demands intersectionality as the important axis on which *Beloved* should be read. Based on the call by Lorde (1984) to interrupt silence, Collins (2000) standpoint theory, and Crenshaw's (1989) clarification of intersecting oppressions, the analysis places the novel by Morrison as a work not just a reflection of the legacies of slavery but also as a feminist collection of authoritative silence. In such a way, it fills a gap in the current

scholarship: the necessity to read *Beloved* as both a practice of literary recovery and a theoretical intervention redefining Black womanhood as a place of resistance and survival, as well as collective healing.

3. Methodology

The theoretical framework of the proposed work is based on the conjunction of Black feminism and classical feminism theories, which is prompted by the need to understand the radical interventions of Toni Morrison in her work, *Beloved*. Researchers like Barbara Christian (1985), Bell hooks (1981, 1989), Audre Lorde (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Hortense Spillers (1987) believe that the real-life experience of Black women forms a unique epistemological position. Their academics anticipate intersectionality, which brings out the functioning of race, gender, and class as they cooperate to produce an worsened oppression. In this context, motherhood, the autonomy of the body and voice are not just individual phenomena but political places of struggle with system domination. The narrative techniques through which Morrison expresses the story, fragmentation, polyphony, haunting, reflect in this epistemological assertion, dramatizing the silences and gaps historically excluded in mainstream feminist discourse.

Other theorists who have given different interpretations of how identity is constructed and performed include classical feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Judith Butler (1990). The idea of woman as the Other, as developed by De Beauvoir, helps to understand the historic marginalization of women to the subjectivity and how the theory of performativity formulated by Butler enables to see the possibility of survival being exercised through subversive practices that disrupt normative orders. However, each of them, especially when used on its own, runs the risk of universalizing the experience of women and ignoring the racialized aspects of the oppression, of which Christian (1987) critiques in her essay '*The Race for Theory*'. That is the failure that Morrison reveals in *Beloved*, the feminist theory needs to take into consideration the particularity of the Black female subjectivity.

Through the amalgamation of these ways of thinking, the theoretical framework of

this paper makes *Beloved* an example of feminist archive reclaiming the Black femaleness in narrative techniques of haunting and fragmentation. The ghostly presence of the novel is an embodiment of repressed pasts, whereas the infanticide that Sethe contests is a dramatization of motherhood as powerlessness and extreme survival. This two-lens approach allows placing Morrison's *Beloved* in the context of global feminist discourse and emphasizing the particularity of the reality of Black women. By so doing, the framework highlights the cultural reclamation undertaken by the novel as a place of merging of memory, voice, and community and its capacity to challenge the patriarchy based on race and reclaim the conditions of feminist resistance.

4. Discussion

4.1. Motherhood as Resistance

Morrison makes fun of traditional ideas of motherhood in her work, *Beloved*, with motherhood being considered a place of radical survival during slavery. The act of infanticide committed by Sethe, which most of the time is interpreted as a moral crime, denied her child to be enslaved. Her persistence “had I not killed her, she would have died, and that I could not stand to see her die of this” (Morrison, 1987, p. 236) redefines maternal love as a way of political resistance. This example illustrates that Black motherhood has traditionally served as an expression of burden and resistance (Collins, 2000) and an instance of how slavery could divide maternal identity through the commodification of reproduction (Spillers, 1987). Morrison melodramatizes this break, although she also legitimizes maternal subjectivity as a place of resistance. By so doing, she criticizes universalist feminist models that do not explain the racialized maternal experiences. The addition to this is evident when Morrison redefines motherhood as a political practice of survival, thus confronting patriarchal interpretations of maternity and feminist theories that erase racial particularity.

4.2. Trauma, Narrative Strategy, and Memory

The trauma of fragmentation, repetition, and haunting is part of the narrative form in Morrison's *Beloved*. The paradox of trauma, the need to remember the event and the

inability to describe it completely are summarized in the refrain, which states that “it was not a story to tell” (Morrison, 1987, p. 275). According to Caruth, direct narrative repetition is impossible, and the availability of trauma is only ensured in an indirect manner, as is the case in Morrison through non-linear narrativity and polyphonic narration. This fragmentation is construed by Horvitz (2000) as reflecting the psychological dislocation of the enslaved women, and by Rushdy (1999) as a part of the neo-slavery narrative tradition, as one of the traditions of revisioning the historical memory. However, Morrison does not stop there, the ghostly *Beloved* makes it clear that the oppressed past life cannot be forgotten, but it is always ready to disturb historiography, and feminist reclaiming is necessary. This part of the paper shows that even the method of describing the story that Morrison employs is a form of resistance, showing the ineffectiveness of the theory of trauma when it is not viewed through the lens of intersectional feminism.

4.3. The Female Body as Archive

The female body in *Beloved* acts as a storehouse of violence and resistance at the same time. “The scarred back that Sethe has can be characterized as a chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, even leaves cut the trauma on flesh and represents the strength” (Morrison, 1987, p.93). According to Wyatt (1993), the maternal body is perceived as a symbolic location where there is an amalgamation of trauma and action. According to Lorde (1984), the independence of the body is the most important feminist resistance. Morrison does not want to turn the body into oppression but make it living record of survival. The presence of generational pain in *Beloved* also demonstrates how the body carries unsolved grief over time and this is in line with the claim by Spillers that “slavery instilled a grammar of the flesh, which still dictates the subjectivity of Black females of the present generations” (1987, p. 69). Morrison insists that the female body is to be read as a site of oppression and a site of survival and is thus a challenge to patriarchal and racialized notions of femininity.

4.4. Silence, Voice, and Re-Telling

Morrison anticipates silence and voice as the main feminist liberation. The line “it was not a story to pass on” (Morrison, 1987, p. 275), is the show of the need to remember and the intolerable burden of trauma. The power that changes the voice of the person is reflected in Denver, who decides to seek help when she says that “she would have to go out of the yard, off the edge of the world, leave the two and go ask someone to help her” (Morrison, 1987, p. 243). Lorde (1984) believes that silence is a feminist sin that must be broken, but Hooks (1989) emphasizes that voice and its reclaiming is a key to the empowerment of Black women. Morrison’s narrative demands that storytelling is not only aesthetic but political and recovery of suppressed pasts and bringing memory to collective strength. The value of this part is that Morrison has criticized not only the silencing of women, by their patriarch, but also feminist universalism and demanded the uniqueness of the voices of Black women as an act of survival and defiance.

4.5. The Universal and the Group Therapy

Female solidarity and not redemption by patriarchy helps in healing in *Beloved*. The dispossession of *Beloved* by the women together, “they came, and they did not come empty-handed... First there were no words at all. Even the initial sound was low-pitched, yet this proved the ability to change society” (Morrison, 1987, p. 261). Lorde (1984) emphasizes the strength of unity in the fight against oppression and Gilroy (1993) places diasporic memory as one of the carried forward the survival forces of culture. The “healing ritual” that is shown by Morrison supports the idea that freedom is reached because of collective survival, memory, and articulation (Morrison, 1987, p. 259). Morrison criticizes individualist models of liberation and prefers freedom must be interpreted as a collective plan based on unity and collective memory.

5. Conclusion

This paper has revealed that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is not just a neo-slave story but a radical feminist document that challenges and redefines Black womanhood. Morrison disrupts established historiography by foregrounding motherhood, trauma, the female body, voice, community and revealing the insufficiency of universalist feminist models, which have traditionally favored white and middle-class views. The controversial aspect of infanticide perpetrated by Sethe, the ghostly aspect of the character of *Beloved*, and the mutilated maternal body all come to play as the symbolic locations where histories of trauma and survival intersect and make literature a means of cultural acquisition.

The uniqueness of the current study is the synthesis of the Black feminist theory and classical feminist ideas that is intersectional. Black feminist activists like Christian, hooks, Lorde, Collins, Crenshaw, and Spillers demand the epistemological power of survived Black female experience, whereas classical theorists like de Beauvoir and Butler support the performativity and construction of identity. *Beloved* proves that one of the two frameworks cannot be used without the other; only their intersection can make the feminist intervention of the novel complete. This two-lens reflects how Morrison reinvents what motherhood is, as political survival, the body as an archive of survival, and voice and community as a means of liberation.

These findings have an implication beyond literary criticism. The story of Morrison is an example of literature as a form of political resistance, restoring the oppressed past and redefining cultural memory. This paper confirms the place of *Beloved* in the cultures of feminism around the world by arguing that the novel continues to be relevant in the current intersectional justice struggles, and the fight against racialised and patriarchal hierarchies. The novel demands the removal of universalisation of Black womanhood and perceives it as a historical location of trauma, resistance, and reclamation.

Finally, *Beloved* contributes to the feminist theory because it undermines the exclusions of the feminist theory and extends the horizons. It shows that literature can both preserve the erased past and create a new future of liberation, thus *Beloved* cannot be ignored in the current project of feminist study. This conclusion evidences

the dual role of the novel, as a cultural work that is difficult to forget and as a critical intervention that re-establishes the terms of feminist opposition and survival in the world.

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لێکۆڵینه‌وه‌یه‌کی فێمینستی (مێینه‌ی) له‌ رۆمانی (بیله‌قت) ی تۆنی مۆریسون

پوخته:

ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ شیکردنه‌وه‌یه‌کی فێمینستی یه‌کترب پێشکەش ده‌کات له‌ رۆمانی (بیله‌قت) له‌لایه‌ن تۆنی مۆریسون، که‌ ناسنامه‌ی ئافره‌تی ره‌شپێست، دایکایه‌تی، تراوما و به‌رگری دوا‌ی کۆیلایه‌تی نیشان ده‌دات. له‌سه‌ر بنه‌مای تیۆری فێمینستی ره‌شپێست، ئۆدری لۆرد، بیل هووکس، پاتریشیا هیل کۆلینز و کیمبه‌رل کرینشاو، هه‌روه‌ها تیۆری کلاسیکی فێمینیزم که‌ له‌لایه‌ن سیمۆن دی بۆفوار و جودیت به‌تله‌روه‌ه پێشنیار کراوه‌، شیکردنه‌وه‌که‌ پرسیار ده‌کات که‌ چۆن مۆریسون توندوتیژی که‌له‌که‌بووی ره‌گه‌زه‌په‌رستی و پیاوسالاری ئاشکرا ده‌کات. مۆریسون نمونه‌ی میژوویی مارگریت گارنر ئیله‌هامی وه‌رگرتووه‌، و برینه‌کانی کۆیلایه‌تی له‌ فیلمی خۆشه‌ویستدا درامای ده‌کرێن، که‌ ئه‌و ده‌نگانه‌ ده‌گێڕێته‌وه‌ که‌ له‌لایه‌ن کۆلۆنیالیزم و کۆیلایه‌تییه‌وه‌ بێده‌نگ کراون له‌ پێگه‌ی گێڕانه‌وه‌یه‌کی ناھێلی و دیمه‌نی فرده‌ده‌نگی و بیرۆکه‌ی سیمبولی، به‌تایبه‌تی که‌ سایه‌تی تارمایی خۆشه‌ویست.

به‌ دووباره‌ دیزاینکردنه‌وه‌ی دایکایه‌تی وه‌ک شوێنێکی لاوازی و ئاژانس کردنی جه‌سته‌ی مێینه‌ به‌ شوێنێکی تراوما و هێز، و گێڕانه‌وه‌ی چیرۆک و هاو‌پشتی کۆمه‌لگا وه‌ک تاکتیکی چاک‌بوونه‌وه‌، پۆمانه‌که‌ دایکایه‌تی پێناسه‌ ده‌کاته‌وه‌ و جه‌سته‌ی مێینه‌ وه‌ک شوێنێکی لاوازی و هێز داده‌مه‌زرێنێت. ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ ده‌توانێت فێمینیزمی ره‌ش و کلاسیک وه‌ک کۆگایه‌کی ئه‌رشیفی و شوێنی به‌رگری ئافره‌تی ره‌شپێست دابنێت که‌ سرپه‌نه‌وه‌ی میژوویی به‌درۆ ده‌خاته‌وه‌، هه‌ر یاده‌وه‌رییه‌کی ون‌بوو ده‌گه‌رێنێته‌وه‌ و بۆ گفتوگۆی ئازادی و دووباره‌ خه‌یاڵکردنه‌وه‌ی ئافره‌تی ره‌شپێست له‌ سه‌رانه‌ری جیهاندا زیاده‌کات.

دراسة نسوية لـ (بيلافت) توني موريسون

الملخص:

تقدم هذه البحث تحليلًا نسويًا تقاطعيًا لـ "بيلافت" لتوني موريسون، والذي يمهد لهوية النساء السود، والأمومة، والصدمات، والمقاومة بعد العبودية. استنادًا إلى النظرية النسوية السوداء، أودري لورد، بيل هوكس، باتريشيا هيل كولينز، وكيمبرل كرينشو، بالإضافة إلى النظرية الكلاسيكية للنسوية التي اقترحتها سيمون دي بوفوار وجوديث باتلر، يطرح التحليل تساؤلات حول كيفية كشف موريسون عن العنف المتراكم للعنصرية والنظام الأبوي. استلهم الفيلم "محبوبة" من المثل التاريخي لمارغريت غارنر، وندوب الاستعباد، حيث أعاد الأصوات التي أسكتتها الاستعمار والعبودية من خلال سرد غير خطي ووجهات نظر متعددة الأصوات والرموز الرمزية، خاصة شخصية الشيخ في فيلم "بيلافت".

من خلال إعادة تصميم الأمومة كمكان للضعف والوكالة، وجعل الجسد الأنثوي مكانًا للصدمة والقوة، وسرد القصص والتضامن المجتمعي كتكتيكات شفاء، تعيد الرواية تعريف الأمومة وتؤسس الجسد الأنثوي كمكان للضعف والقوة. يمكن لهذه الدراسة أن تضع النسوية السوداء والكلاسيكية كمخزن أرشيفي ومكان لمقاومة المرأة السوداء التي تدحض المحو التاريخي، وتستعيد أي ذكرى مفقودة، وتضيف إلى نقاش التحرر وإعادة تصور الأنوثة السوداء في جميع أنحاء العالم.