Davidson and Wagner-Martin maintain that in America in the nineteenth century, the traditional roles of female black slaves as mothers, daughters, and wives were not possible. These women were the property of their white masters and as such were only seen to have commercial value based on their ability to work and breed. They provided the labour force for slavery. This regime was maintained through ‘legalised sexual terror’ in which these women were regularly abused by their white masters and so disconnected psychologically and physically from their families and communities. Each black woman was forced to seek personal meaning and self-affirmation within herself (1995, p.814).

Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Beloved, tells the story of an amazing black woman, Sethe and her struggle to not only survive her enslavement, but to make the transition from slavery to emancipation: ‘freeing yourself was one thing; claiming freedom of that ownership was another’ (1997, p.5). Trying to live a life beyond the psychological and physical scarring under bondage was extremely difficult for all those who had lived under such a system, especially if you were born into it as Sethe was. The remembering and the not-remembering of the terror experienced by these tortured and tormented people were just as painful as each other, and until such memories were confronted and accepted these people would be unable to claim true emancipation. In the novel Sethe’s daughter, Beloved returns from the dead in a ghostly form and Sethe is forced to face the pain and horror of the past.

Partially based on the life of Margaret Garner (Parker 2001) the story tells how Sethe tries to save her children from the wrath of slavery by escaping Sweet Home, their place of servitude. As her master comes to take them back, Sethe kills her little girl rather than see her daughter suffer what she has suffered under enslavement. Morrison has masterfully introduced an aspect of Sethe and other black characters of ‘black subjectivity’ in which these characters are able to ‘reason and maintain histories, knowledge and language’ (Fusion-White 2002, p.3). This element provides the reader with an insight into the character’s state of mind rather than just their external state of being. Through this technique Morrison creates an authentic richness of the experience slaves endured, which is far beyond the earlier ‘white, heterosexual, patriarchal hegemonic’ approach in which the black narrative was marginalised ( Fusion-White 2001, p.1). Just as the historical of the black slave trade centred on a white interpretation, so the raising of black children remained the decision of the white master ‘anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind’ (p.251). Such a system ignored the important role that the black family and community had in nurturing their own offspring. Holden-Kirwam claims that the mothers’ absence greatly ‘impaired’ the development of the child’s identity (1998, p.6). Sethe remembers of her mother ‘she didn’t even sleep in the same cabin most night’ (p.60). It is no wonder then that the significant lack of bonding and exposure experienced by Sethe as a child in her relationship with her mother lead to the development of a maternal identity that was overwhelmingly ‘embedded’ in her own children (Wyatt cited in Holden-Kirwam 1998). Sethe rationalises to Paul D her reasons for murdering her young child:

It ain’t [her] job to know what’s worse. It’s her job to know what is and to keep them [her children] away from what [she knows] is terrible. [She] did that (p.165).

Koolish (2001) contends that Morrison highlights this disturbed unity between Sethe and her daughter, Beloved through the use of the snake as a symbol for Beloved in the early haunting of 124 Bluestone as the was ‘full of baby’s venom’; and the use of the same snake symbol for Sethe: ‘down in the grass, like the snake she believed she was...’ (p.17). Through Morrison’s use of a fragmented narrative in which past experiences remembered by each of the characters intrudes upon the main storyline, the reader is provided with a first hand insight to the abuse and cruelty experienced under enslavement. As Koolish suggests, it is not surprising that Sethe becomes traumatised by such monstrous treatment over a long period of time and becomes mentally ill. Koolish outlines how she may be suffering Post Traumatic Stress, which can only be healed by her remembering and integrating her ‘denied self’ (2001. p.7). Through Morrison’s creation of the character Beloved in a ghostly, surreal form, a psychic space is opened to Sethe in which she is given the opportunity to face and accept the pain and suffering she has caused Beloved.

It is in the desolate and cold environment of 124 as haunted by the baby, Beloved, that the arrival of Paul D and Beloved in flesh form takes place. Sethe gains new hope as Paul D ‘disrupts its (the house) timelessness and isolation’, and she decides that she ‘wants him in her life’ (p.99). At first Beloved is loved by both Denver, Sethe’s second daughter, and Sethe. But the powerful force of the unforgiven past weakens Sethe and Denver until their energies are swallowed by Beloved’s voracious appetite for love and vengeance. According to Jesser, ‘Sethe and Denver lay claim to Beloved; Beloved lays claim to Sethe’ until there are no boundaries between the three (1999, p.12). Sethe’s hope for a better life collapses as Paul D leaves 124 after he realises that Sethe has killed her baby. Morrison’s complex, supernatural portrayal of the character Beloved invites the reader to enter the psychological suffering and pain experienced by Beloved as a small child when separated from her mother. The ‘other’ worldly existence of Beloved also effectively presents to the reader the horror of the ‘cultural losses’ of the African people as they were torn from their biological mothers and their Motherland (Dobbs 1998). Beloved
becomes enraged and hysterical as she accuses Sethe of leaving her behind after she was murdered and tells her how terrible things happened to her when she was alone, ‘dead men lay on top of her’ and ‘said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light’ (p.241). Beloved’s confusing yet vivid, dark images of her survival aboard a slave ship, together with her fragmented deathly utterances to Denver and Sethe, illustrate the importance Morrison places on the almost inherited and unforgettable black history that both daughter and mother must revive in order to heal.

The lack of support in the black community caused Sethe to become isolated when she most needed their help, and thus contributed greatly to the distrust she showed in others. Just twenty days after Sethe escaped Sweet Home, four white horsemen came to Bluestone Road to take Sethe and her children back to the bondage of slavery. Surprisingly, none of the black community warned Sethe of their coming and none tried to help her escape. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs showed great love and generosity to her people by the use of her house as a way station and her uplifting preaching at the Clearing. Such love and compassion manifested in great abundance in the form of a huge party to celebrate Sethe’s safe arrival at 124 in which ‘ninety people ate so well, and laughed so much…’ (p.136). Jesser (1999) maintains that the ‘reckless generosity on display at 124’ (p.137) that Baby Suggs observed led to the fact that no one came to Sethe’s aid as the people in the community became alarmed and offended ‘by such excess’ (p.138). Jesser also contends that with the invasion of white people from the outside, and the betrayal by the ‘pride of her own people’ on the inside, Sethe is caught in between and as such rages against it all and murders her daughter (1999, p.10). Through the sacrifice of Sethe’s freedom to pay for a crime that is based in the insanity of the white slavery system and the consequent breakdown of the identity of the black community, Morrison effectively highlights the question of who is really responsible for the murder of Sethe’s daughter.

Throughout the novel, Morrison brings the spirit and community together through the singing of song or the lack of it. When the singing or humming of voices by the black community could have helped Sethe greatly, it was not there. As they take Sethe away for the murder of her child ‘black faces stopped murmuring’ (p.152). The community could have supported her ‘some cape of sound [could] have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her’ (p.152) but they didn’t. Dobbs suggests that this is turned around when the community comes to Seth’s aid to banish Beloved from Sethe’s house. Instead of silence and inaction, this time a group of black women lead by Ella, an outspoken woman, come to 124 in the hope that they may stop the suffering that Beloved’s presence is having on Sethe and Denver (1998, p.4). ‘[F]or Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come….where the voices of women… [made] the sound that broke the back of words’ (p.261). Dobbs also suggests that the strength of a community is heard when the message is sung with their own cultural sound (1998, p.4). Such spiritual community support that ‘makes a hill’ (p.262) is so powerful that the ghostly form of Beloved is banished and ‘Sethe [trembles] like the baptised in the wash’ (p.161). Morrison highlights her belief that with compassion and forgiveness the human spirit can overcome evil and suffering.

The power of the spirit of the community to face past suffering, together with the support from Sethe’s family and friends, eventually clears the psychic space for Sethe to face her own demons and perhaps then to create a future for herself. Even though Denver has not been out into the community for twelve years, she bravely leaves the house and gains assistance from the black community firstly in the form of attaining food and then in the banishment of Beloved from Sethe’s house. The return of Paul D to 124, and Denver’s will to work and become part of the black community, raises hope that Sethe too will find the strength to heal her wounds from the past. It is with the last words Paul D says to Sethe, ‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are’, that Morrison gives us a chance as the reader to share in his feelings of admiration and love for Sethe. Her reply of the surprised ‘Me? Me?’ (p.273) finally brings to bear the lack of acknowledgement Sethe has had for herself, but there is the possibility that with the love of Paul D and her own people this will change.

Reference list


