Sixty million and more. So reads the dedication of Beloved, the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by African-American author Toni Morrison. The reader is left in little doubt that this book will take as its subject matter the shameful and destructive practice that haunts the depths of the American psyche – slavery. Sixty million is in fact a conservative estimate of the number of people who died as a result of slavery, or what has become known, somewhat contentiously, as the Black Holocaust. However, Beloved is not just another novel about slavery as an institution. Nor is it a novel which the reader can set aside easily, since it demands a deep engagement with the text by the sheer force of the narrative. Morrison is a writer of such power and precision that the distance is dissolved between the reader and the reality of the experience of slavery in the lives of its victims. Through Beloved’s unforgettable and finely-drawn characters, the reader becomes involved in the full horror of these individual’s experiences of life in bondage, and their painful and heart-rending attempts to rebuild their lives as ‘free’ men and women. The characters themselves articulate the anguish of the struggle, and it is paradoxical that in some of the most simple and understated passages of dialogue that the full force of the ugliness and degradation that an entire people endured is brought home. Consider the following exchange between Sethe and fellow-slave Paul D.:

“Didn’t you speak to him? Didn’t you say anything to him? Something!”

“I couldn’t Sethe. I just...couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“I had a bit in my mouth”. (p. 69).

The impact of these words is visceral. They sicken, they linger; they provide an almost palpable sense of revulsion and grief. It is impossible to read this book and remain unmoved.

When Morrison first became aware of the story of Margaret Garner, (the runaway slave who in 1851 killed her three year old daughter and attempted to take the lives of her other children to prevent their return to slavery.) she felt that the task of recounting this tragic episode was beyond her (David, 2000, p.112). Beloved is the first of Morrison’s novels which confronts slavery directly, and to write it she had to operate outside of hegemonic white discourse. Her narrative style rejects an authoritative linear approach, and as bell hooks suggests, Morrison adopts as her medium a “radical black subjectivity” (cited in Fuston-White, 2002, p.1). She presents not ‘the truth,’ but a variety of truths through the remembering of her characters, and this fragmented storytelling gives authenticity to each of them. By taking control of the telling in this postmodern style, African-American writers like Toni Morrison are challenging hegemonic ideology and literary practice. This is a political act in which the defining of black Americans and their history is being wrenched from those who held power by the very fact of their being the definers. White discourse and appellation ignored and destroyed black identity. On page 220 of the novel, Paul D. exemplifies this when he ponders whether being named a man by his owner Mr. Garner made him a man in reality. And did Garner’s death and attempted to take the lives of her other children to prevent their return to slavery.

Rushdy reminds us, Morrison is “both a participant and theorist of this black aesthetic of remembering, and she has recently set out some of the mandates for establishing a form of theory that will truly accommodate African-American literature” (1998, p. 141).

Readers engaging with a postmodern novel such as this will note the many absences in the text, and should understand these as both a motif delineating the effects of slavery, and a signal of the author’s intention to write (and have her readers read) against the grain. There is the absence of people; ancestors, children, partners. There is the absence of a homeland and a mother tongue, the absence of choice, of self-determination, and of the ability to define oneself. After the baby’s death, there is even an absence of colour in the lives of Sethe and Baby Suggs. The absence of a single authoritative point of view is deliberate, and again serves to mitigate against the linear and omniscient tendencies of white hegemonic discourse. Perez-Torres (1998, p.136) succinctly refers to this textual form as “critical postmodern pastiche”.

A novel such as Beloved does not easily lend itself to examination within the parameters of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Since most such discourse privileges the family, and understands the individual in relation to their role and position in it, those who do not have the choice of autonomy, humanity, or even of belonging to a family can scarcely be seen as fit subjects for analysis. However, Jerome K. FitzGerald (1998, p.13) argues that object relations psychoanalysis may be a useful means of approaching Beloved, dealing as it does with the return of the repressed, and the “psychic struggle prior to the achievement of subjectivity”. Each of the characters in the novel, and especially Beloved, may be considered in relation to this discourse.

What are we to make of Beloved? Her first appearance in the narrative follows Paul D’s seemingly successful effort to drive the ghost of the (already crawling?) baby from 124, and leads the reader to believe that she is indeed Sethe’s dead daughter returned in the flesh. But as Denver eventually concludes, she was “more” (p. 260). Just how much more becomes evident in the stream-of-consciousness passages beginning on page 210, in which Beloved’s monologue is obviously concerned with the ‘rememory’ of the Middle Passage, and her nightmarish journey on a slave ship. Beloved is not simply a ghost, but represents the wounded psyche of all African-Americans and the hell they have endured since captivity and removal from West Africa and through the antebellum period of American history. From the repressed collective unconscious of African-Americans comes a voice, a voice which articulates a jumble of images of past and present pain. Stamp Paid heard the voices of some of these souls when he tried and failed to enter 124 Bluestone Road. “[T]hough he couldn’t cipher one word, he believed he knew what they spoke. The people of the broken necks, of fire cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring”, (p.181). Carmean(1993, p.85) believes that Toni Morrison intended the character of Beloved to serve both as ghost and mirror of the inner lives of the other characters. She cites Morrison as hoping that Beloved would “bridge the gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and present”. As Beloved became flesh, history became tangible – she fleshed out history, both personal and racial, for the author and her characters.

Since one’s selfhood is gained in relation to others, firstly one’s mother and then radiating outwards to other family members and beyond, it is evident that the institution of slavery denies its victims the opportunity to develop this notion of themselves as separate, autonomous human beings. Sethe is doubly victimized by this system: she has no relationship with her own mother, and although she tries to deny it, she instinctively feels that her mother abandoned her by trying to escape. Sethe never had enough milk as a baby, and the seeds were sown there for her overcompensation with her own children, and her fixation on the importance of...
nursing them. Thus the action of the nephews in “stealing her milk” was the worst form of abuse they could have perpetrated on her. Milk represents motherhood, nurturance, her very essence. Since Sethe has no concept of herself as a separate identity, she can only conceive of herself as mother. Her children are “all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful”, and so when Schoolteacher comes to reclaim them, she cannot allow him to take them back to Sweet Home. She must put them “over there where no-one could hurt them” (p.163). If this means killing them, then so be it. Her logic is perfectly simple. Beyond this life they are safe, safe from Schoolteacher’s handling, measuring, studying, abusing, dehumanizing. Anything is better than slavery, even death.

There is no sense in the novel that Sethe’s actions are the result of insanity, or the inhuman wildness that Schoolteacher and the slave catchers believe has caused them. No, in fact Morrison turns the white men’s actions back on them and insists in the telling of this tale that the proponents of slavery accept culpability for what has occurred. Baby Suggs was naturally heartbroken, but she understood. She did not reject Sethe, but rather said; “These white things have taken all I had or dreamed of,…and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitesfolks” (p.89). Stamp Paid, too, feels worn to the marrow by the things he has seen and endured at the hands of whites – lynchings, burnings, whippings, rapes, murders. After discovering part of a black woman’s scalp with ribbon still attached in a stream, he is heartsick. “What are these people? You tell me, Jesus. What are they?”(p.180).

Although the critical reception of Beloved has been overwhelmingly favorable, some critics, such as D, Scot Hinson, seem to find occasion to direct criticism towards the black community as portrayed in the novel, rather than address the multiple instances of white cruelty it depicts. In an article which could be construed as vaguely hostile, Scot Hinson places great emphasis on Beloved’s community violence. He seems to think that the message of the book is that slavery breeds African-American violence. Although he acknowledges the roots of such violence in white supremacist behavior, Scot Hinson seems intent on blaming the victim. The grounds for finding a theme of community violence in this novel are slim, and surely present day conditions in the African-American community are beyond the scope of the narrative. Scot Hinson misreads the passage on pages 198-199, and claims that the pressures of slavery create “a new kind of whitesfolks jungle” (p.5) which causes black people to oppress and do violence to their own. In fact, in this passage Stamp Paid is ruminating on the effect slavery has on its white perpetrators. Stamp Paid’s thought is that the harder Negroes tried to persuade whites of their humanity:

the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitesfolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Made them bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin, the red gums were their own.

Contrary to Scot Hinson’s view, the only direct example of violence in the African-American community in this novel is Sethe’s killing of her child. The community’s distancing of itself from the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road hardly constitutes the “cycle of violence that plagues Sethe’s community” (p.9), nor is Scot Hinson entirely correct in branding Denver a social outcast. The community supports Denver even after her sister’s death, when she goes to lessons with Lady Jones. And when she goes to the community for help after her mother and Beloved become combatants in a life and death psychic struggle, she is warmly received. Food is provided to keep Denver and her mother alive, and as the women become aware of Sethe’s plight, they band together to rescue her in what seems to be a communal atonement for their former treatment of her and Baby Suggs. In fact, their physical and spiritual presence when Sethe mistakenly attacks Mr. Bodwin is crucial. As Duvall points out, Sethe’s “therapeutic re-enactment” of the scene in which she kills her daughter paves the way for her healing, (2000, p.129). In seeking to injure the white slave-master (so she thinks) rather than her own child, Sethe significantly acts in a way that “purges [her] haunted memory and signals Beloved’s departure”. Sethe has, it seems, separated her sense of self from that of her children, and Beloved’s hold over her has dissipated in the healing presence of a community of women. These women represent the legacy of Baby Suggs; what Duvall describes as the “religion of the maternal body” (p.130).

Contrary to what Scot Hinson has concluded, the most positive and hopeful aspect arising from Beloved is surely this community of African-Americans, these ex-slaves who are learning to live and to be and to become in a space in which they are nominally free, but socially and psychically encumbered by the unspeakable burdens of their past. Baby Suggs, Holy, has become liberated to the extent of embracing and celebrating all that the white folks denied and despised in her people, and as a lay preacher she importunes one and all to love their flesh, and to express all that had been forbidden expression – to laugh, to weep, to sing. Her invocations are a mixture of Christian and West African influences, but the African theme has dominance over the Christian, which regards the flesh as evil and the source and agent of sin. Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D. all improvise and retain their tenuous links to their native culture as best they can, especially through song. Sethe recalls fragments of her mother’s language, and her antelope dances, and makes up special songs for her children. Paul D. thinks of Sixo, his much-loved African friend, and his ritualistic dances amid the trees. Paul D. sings his way through captivity, torture, escape and the back breaking daily grind of survival as a black man in a white world. Song, as Arlene Keizer (1999) contends, became a means of communication, coping, and resistance for African-Americans. Keizer recognizes that improvisation, be it verbal, musical or literary, operates at an ideological level where it “undercuts…hostile and patronizing mainstream readings of black culture” (p.10). Morrison is building on the platform laid down by slave songs, the blues and jazz in a process which Keizer describes as the three formal stages of improvisation: “mastery of form, reformation of mastery and reformation of form” (p.10). Morrison is writing from the inside out, combining an extensive knowledge of Western literary conventions with an experiential familiarity with African-American dialogue and storytelling to break new ground for her black subjects, in a position, as Keizer says, “between essentialism and postmodern fragmentation” (p.1).

In this heartbreaking yet hypnotic novel, Toni Morrison has indeed given a voice to the voiceless. Through the extraordinary characters of Sethe, Beloved, Denver, Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, African-American history has been articulated in a truly original and poetic manner. Without moralizing or descending into polemic, Beloved challenges accepted white ideology, and effortlessly naturalizes the African-American point of view. The narrative may be fragmented but it is never disjointed, due to the author’s skill in keeping the trajectory of the story strong yet flexible. The reader shares the lives of the novel’s characters – a most unsettling and moving experience – and apprehends the deeper meanings that lie behind the ‘remembrances’ that tumble out episodically. Beloved is one of the most savage indictments of slavery ever written, while at the same time being a novel of great beauty and eloquence. The penultimate page tells us that this was not a story to pass on. Neither is it one which a reader can easily forget. With its original and evocative

prose style, *Beloved* has certainly earned its place in the annals of American literature. It is an honor well deserved.

**References:**


