

# The representation of black culture in beloved by toni morrison

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## Contents

African-American author Toni Morrison's book, *Beloved*, describes a black culture born out of a dehumanising period of slavery just after the Civil War. Culture is a means of how a group collectively believe, act, and interact on a daily basis. Those who have studied her work refer to Morrison's narrative tales as " literature...that addresses the sacred and as an allegorical representation of black experience" (Baker-Fletcher 1993: 2).

Although African Americans had a difficult time establishing their own culture during the period of slavery when they were considered less than human, Morrison believes that black culture has been built on the horrors of the past and it is this history that has shaped contemporary black culture in a positive way. Through the use of linguistic devices, her representation of black women, imagery and symbolic features, and the theme of interracial relations, Morrison illustrates that black culture that is resilient, vibrant, independent, and determined. Published in 1987, *Beloved* is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel that recounts how those who survived slavery healed themselves and reflects on the period of slavery in " a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive" (Morey 1988: 2). It is this rememory as Morrison calls it that helps those considered " others" become individuals. Set in Ohio, the book focuses on Sethe; Sethe's surviving daughter, Denver; Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs; and the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved. Throughout the book, " Morrison communicates an unforgettable sense of the strength, terror and devastation that is part of the black community, whilst skilfully portraying

the unalterable connections between spiritual and physical life” (Morey 1988: 1093). One linguistic device used throughout the novel is the use of songs. Slaves use songs as a way to pass down stories but also to help them maintain a sense of inner strength. Morrison “ shows how song defines and affirms slave “ personhood” in a world where slave humanity is constantly challenged and denied” (Capuano 2003: 1). Rather than thinking of song in a negative fashion, “ it chronicles her characters’ endurance and ability to survive during and after these periods of physical brutality and psychological abuse” that they experienced during slavery (Capuano 2003: 2). This illustrates how black culture has resilience and an ability to overcome hardship. Singing is an essential aspect of the characters’ lives alongside food, sleep, and shelter. As the novel related, if Paul D could “ walk, eat, sleep, [and] sing,” he could survive and “ asked for no more” (Morrison 1987: 41). While others may not understand the jargon used in the songs, those singing it and other slaves hearing those songs know what it means, and this is a way to strike some independence and distinct culture for themselves during a period where it is uncommon to think of blacks as even human (Capuano 2003: 4). This community of song enables those within black culture to become stronger. It is “ the collective sharing of that information heals the individual — and the collective” (Morey 1988: 1039). In revisiting Morrison’s overall theme of turning traumatic memories into a positive force, the songs are a cathartic process used to take this memory, which is “ vital for revisioning communal and social transformation that is healing” (Baker-Fletch 1993: 4). It is the singing of the women that help exorcise the ghost of Beloved and enable Sethe to break free as if she has

been baptized (Morrison 1987: 308). The novel describes Sethe as “ running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind” (Morrison 1987: 309). In addition to songs as a linguistic device, Morrison constantly returns to the word, “ rememory” and “ disremember” rather than using words, such as “ remember” or “ forget.” Morrison uses rememory to show how Sethe constantly keeps the past in her present existence because she cannot forget what happened and lives with the ghost of her guilty conscience and moral dilemma for murdering her daughter and living through slavery. For example, Sethe explains how she struggles with the past: It’s so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. . . . But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place- the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (Morrison 1987: 36). Morrison’s creation of her own terms related to how the black culture has to continually deal with its past as though it is a metal neck chain that they cannot unlock. Throughout the book, it seems as though this struggle with rememory is constant for Sethe rather than looking forward to a more opportunistic future: “ But [Sethe’s] brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (Morrison 1987: 70). The other characters in the novel attempt to help Sethe loosen the binds of the past. One of the women in town wants to help Sethe exorcise the ghost of Beloved because she “ didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” because “ the past was something to leave behind” (Morrison 1987: 302). As part of the black culture, black women represent the pillars of

strength within that community as protectors and healers. They are the glue that holds everything together when the world is falling apart around them. Many of the characters have been torn from their families because of the slave traders splitting up families and selling them as slaves to various white masters. Together, they share a history of suffering and an urge to heal and become whole people again. In isolation, black women formed bonds to survive and empower each other to withstand the atrocities of slavery. There is also a sense of the sisterhood still found in African American culture today as the women in the community band together to exercise the ghost of Beloved from Sethe's house. It is this camaraderie that helps Sethe heal as an individual and strengthens the black community. In contrast, Paul D and Beloved clash because Beloved sees this male presence as a threat as does her sister, Denver. Both Beloved and Denver want their mother to themselves, furthering the idea that black women stick together while black men are seen as untrustworthy. Paul D does not like Beloved either because he feels isolated from the bond that the women share. However, he lets Beloved seduce him, thereby proving to Sethe and Denver that men cannot be trusted. In terms of imagery, the ghost of Beloved represents the idea that both Sethe and black culture are haunted by a horrible past but being able to live with that spectre in a positive way instead of dreading and fearing their slavery past. As one character states: " Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 1987: 35). Beloved also is what is known in African American literatures as the " trickster." According to one writer, " the trickster, whose fluidity and rule breaking define and maintain culture, embodies a central paradox in Morrison's work: that of balancing the urge to

maintain and foster cultural tradition and the equally powerful urge to rebel” (Smith 1997: 112). Beloved, as a trickster, is playing with Sethe by stirring up the past rather than continuing to repress it. In some ways, Sethe is still enslaved because she cannot remove the shackles of what happened in the past, including her decision to murder her daughter. Beloved works her magic by getting Sethe to re-examine how the past should be dealt with in the present. Beloved’s presence is like a re-birth for Sethe to acknowledge the past while moving forward a stronger, wiser woman for what happened to her and the rest of the black community. The ghost of Beloved really becomes an outward representation of the inward retrospective Sethe is taking of her life so far. While other characters in the novel experience a situation of an alternative self that helps them recover from the past, it is only Sethe that goes through the process under the most extreme conditions. In positioning the black culture as part of society as a whole, Morrison also explores interracial relations in the novel. During and after slavery, relations between black and white cultures are “harsh” (Angelo 1989: 1). The relationship between the two cultures is based on the idea of exclusion and lack of tolerance for others. All the black characters have suffered horrific experiences at the hands of white people. Sethe had been raped while Paul D was imprisoned and Stamp Paid lost his wife. Sethe kills her own daughter, Beloved, because she does not want her to have to be treated to the harshness of life that whites have brought on black people. Between the whites and blacks, it is a relationship of take until there was nothing left of the black person: That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim

you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. . . . The best thing [Sethe] was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing (Morrison 1987: 251) For Sethe, it is easier to lose her daughter to death than it is for her to see Beloved suffer in this world. It did not seem right to live in a world where they were nameless and faceless to white society. Morrison describes this state as being "dismembered and unaccounted for" (Morrison 1987: 323). In writing about the black culture rising from the ashes of a horrific period in history, Morrison makes the point that individuality and community are what bind African Americans together. In an interview about her novel, she said: "The book was not about the institution — Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another" (Angelo 1989: 3). While Morrison shows that black people are the same as white people because they are all human beings, the black culture has struggled with an identity and a purpose after white people had taken that away during slavery. Beloved is about an awakening to the ability to be individuals again and feel empowered after shaking the ghost of a dehumanizing history. Each character – man and woman – within the black community of Beloved go through a process of denial and then self-awareness. A sense of community and sisterhood along with the tight bonds of family that cannot be broken even by physical distance are what help Sethe and the black culture overcome the trauma and sorrow of the past.

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