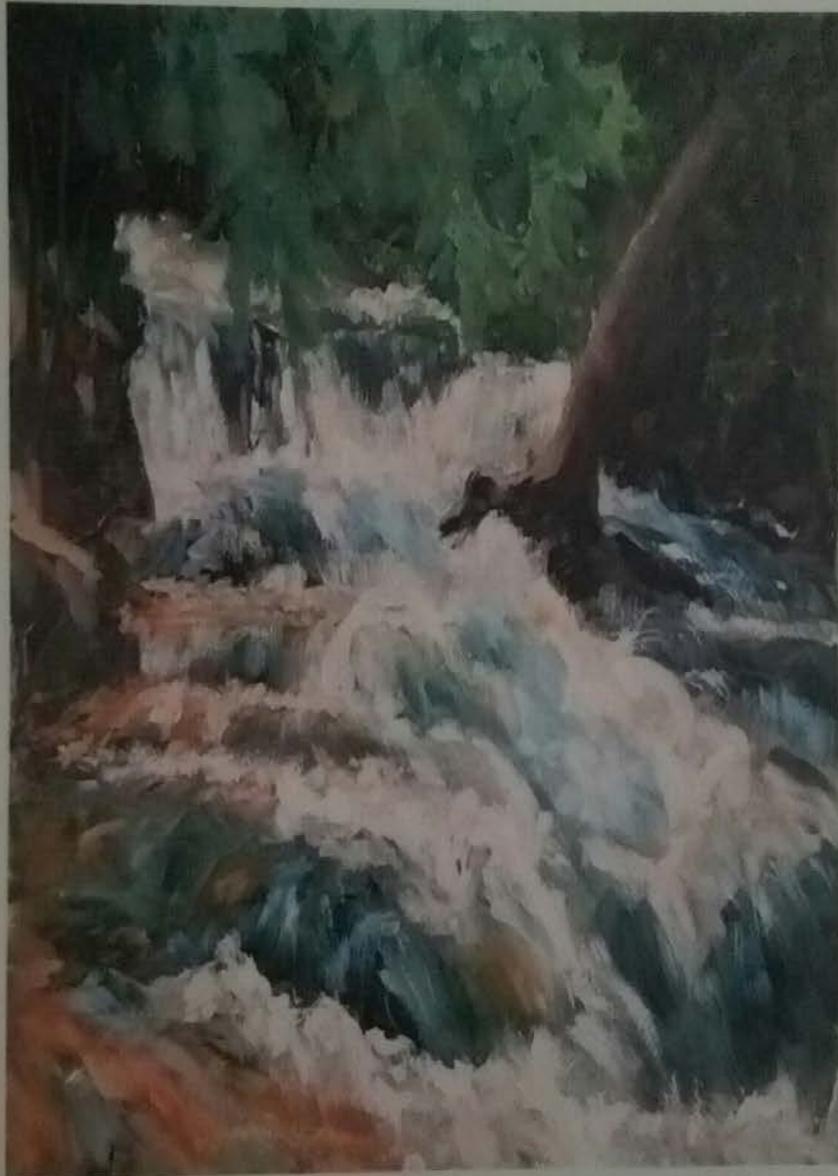


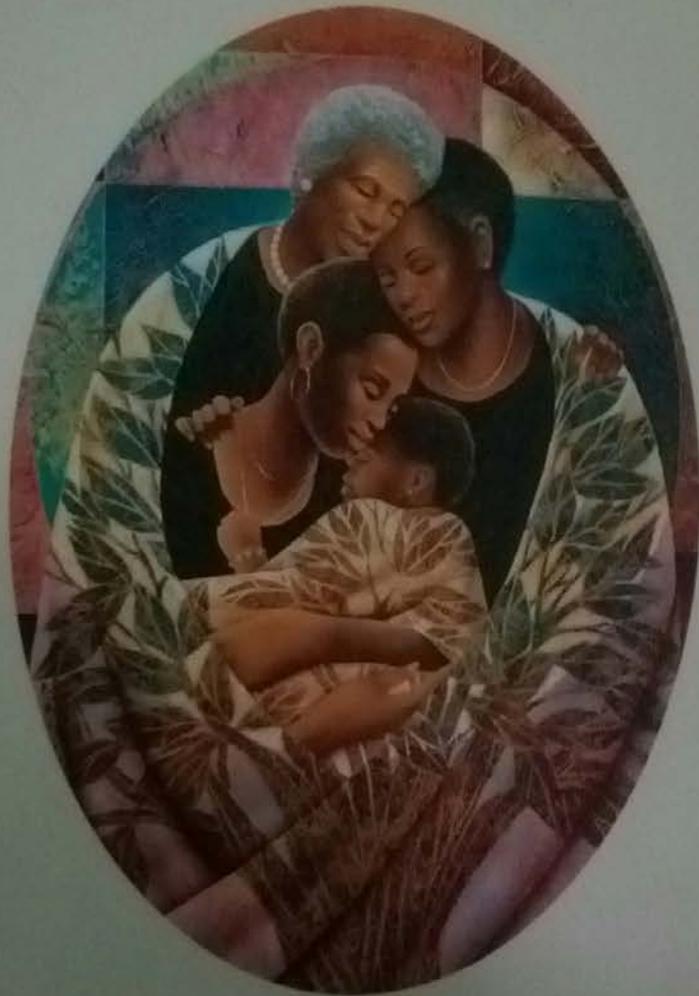
ECHOING CASCADES

*GOMEZ SOPHIA
U. ANAMICA*



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women
(Autonomous)
Periyakulam, Tamilnadu, India

Torrential are they
Their voices keep echoing



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THE SYMBOL OF RESURRECTED SPIRIT IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Dr. J. JOSEPHINE

Beloved Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning fifth novel fits into the sub-genre of African-American literature known as the neo-slave narrative. It is a powerful novel that set a new standard for African American literature, and indeed, a new benchmark in the history of American letters. Set during the era of reconstruction, *Beloved*, is based loosely on the true story of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who killed her own child rather than allow her to be sold into slavery. By means of powerfully lyrical, deep suggestive language, the novel resurrects the dead baby and presents her insatiable desire for maternal love as well as the unfathomable depth of the mother's sense of loss. Morrison is at pains to show us how much strength her people have summoned to get them through, to keep on in spite of every effort to lay them low. But the energy and audacity of books is in its pain and in the ambivalence of its characters towards their memories, their forgetting. As in many folk and fairy tales, the witch spirit is the one that prevails in memory and nightmare. No one has been haunted, Sethe who is one of the central character a black woman and previous slave, who was orphaned by the death of her slave parents. She thinks, knows the downright pleasure of enchantment of not suspecting but knowing the things behind things. In addition to its other surprises, *Beloved* brings us into the mind of the haunter as well as the haunted. That is an invitation no other American writer has offered, let alone fulfilled with such bravery and grace.

Beloved explains how black behavior in terms of social conditioning, as if listing atrocities solves the mystery of human motive and behavior. It is designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn't weaken. The novel begins with the words of Morrison "Sixty Million and more" and finishes with a verse from the King James Version of the New Testament of the Bible. Here is the epigraph:

Sixty million

and more

I will call them my people,

Which were not my people;

and her beloved,

Which was not beloved.

(Beloved 272).

Morrison told Newsweek that the reference was to all the captured Africans who died coming across the Atlantic. But sixty is ten times six, of course. That is very important to remember. For *Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface holocaust novel. It seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experience of Jews at the hands of Nazis. As a holocaust novel it includes disfranchisement, brutal transport sadistic guards, failed and successful escapes murder liberals among the oppressors, a big war, underground cells, separation of family members, losses of beloved ones to the violence of the mad order, and catatonic by the past.

Morrison choice to set the Afro-American experience in the framework of collective tragedy is fine, of course. But she lacks a true sense of the tragic. Such a sense is stark. But it is never simpleminded. For all the memory within this book, recollections of the trip across the Atlantic and the slave trading in the Caribbean, no one ever recalls how the Africans were captured. That would have complicated matters. It would have demanded that the Africans, who raided the villages of their enemies to sell them for guns, drink, and trinkets are included in the equation of injustice, something far too many Afro-Americans are loath to do—including Toni Morrison. In *Beloved* Morrison only asks that her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do.

Morrison has real talent, an ability to organize her novel into a musical structure, deftly using images as motifs; but she perpetually interrupts her narrative with maudlin ideological commercials. Though there are a number of isolated passages of first-class writing, and though secondary characters such as Stamp Paid and Lady Jones are superbly drawn, Morrison rarely gives the impression that her people exist for any purpose other than to deliver a message. *Beloved* fails to rise to tragedy because it shows no sense of the timeless and unpredictable manifestations of evil that preceded and followed American slavery, of the gruesome ditches in the human spirit that prefigure all injustice. Instead, the novel has done in the pulp style that it has dominated so many renditions of Afro-American life since *Native Son*.

As in all protest pulp fiction, everything is locked into its own time, and is ever the result of external social forces. We learn little about the souls of human beings, we are only told what will happen if they are treated very badly. The world exists in a purple haze of overstatement, of false voices, of strained homilies; nothing very subtle is ever really tried. *Beloved* reads largely like a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of the miseries.

The book's beginning clanks out its themes. Aunt Medea's two sons have been scared off: there is the theme of black women facing the harsh world alone. Later on in the novel, Morrison stages the obligatory moment of transcendent female solidarity featuring a runaway indentured white girl, Amy Denver, who aids pregnant Sethe in her time of need..... Woman to woman, out in nature, freed of patriarchal domination and economic exploitation, she deliver baby Denver. Amy is also good for homilies. While massaging Sethe's feet, she says "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35) When Sethe quotes the girl as she tells Amy's namesake the story of her birth. Morrison writes, "A truth for all times, thought Denver". As if that weren't gooey enough, there's the fade-out: "Sethe felt herself falling into a sleep she knew would be deep. On the lip of it just before going under, she thought. 'That's pretty. Denver is really pretty'" (85).

Morrison is best at clear, simple description, and occasionally she can give an account of the casualties of war and slavery that is free of false lyricism or stylized stoicism. But Morrison almost always loses control. She can never resist the temptation of the trite or the sentimental. There is the usual scene in which the black woman is assaulted by white men while her man looks on; Halle, Sethe's husband, goes mad at the sight. Sixo, a slave who is captured trying to escape, is burned alive but doesn't scream: he sings "Seven-o" (226). over and over, because his woman who is pregnant has escaped. But nothing is more contrived than the figure of Beloved herself, who is the reincarnated force of the malevolent ghost that was chased from the house. Beloved's revenge—she takes over the house, turns her mother into a servant manipulated by guilt, and becomes more and more vicious—unfolds as portentous melodrama. When Beloved finally threatens to kill Sethe, 30 black women come to her rescue. At the fence of the haunted property, one of the kneelers and the standers join her. They stop praying and take a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like.

Morrison defines the goals of these narratives as twofold: first to give a historical, personal yet representational account of slavery and second to persuade the reader that black people are human beings. However the slave narratives were silent on some issues. As Morrison argues in spite of memory it was difficult to tell the whole truth about slavery, to expose all its horror, without alienating or offending the white middle class readership that had the power to effect political change. Perhaps as a result of this silence, there is an absence in these narratives of what Morrison calls "interior life", an absence which demands a process of literary archaeology in which the writer must journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. *Beloved*, in its reading back to the first Afro-American writer can be seen as making a new contribution to the African-American slave narratives, revising the genre in order to make the truth of the experience of slavery accessible to readers.

As Toni Morrison argues the "discredited knowledge that black people had" was "discredited only because Black people were discredited"(121). Morrison's work might, she admits, fall into "the realm of fiction called fantastic or mythic or magical or unbelievable". In the minds of some, however, her use of supernatural or unreal elements can also be seen as accentuating the reality of her subject.

The border between what is 'true' and what is not is purposefully blurred—Morrison says the crucial distinction for her is not that between fact and fiction but between fact and truth—because "Fact can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot". It is significant that it is only when Sethe, Beloved and Denver, away from society, create their own symbolic language that they can decipher each other. Thus Sethe can explain to Beloved her reasons that stripped, beaten and suckled by grown up boys she had to tolerate the onslaughts of racism and sexism and poverty but was determined that her children would never face it.

Beloved, tries to strangle Sethe and kisses away the pain of her grip. Both fight and love each other, rationing all their strength for it, forgetting Denver. As her revenge Beloved is sucking back from Sethe the life she had snatched away from her so that "*the flesh between Sethe's forefinger and thumb was thin like China silk*"(91). She is afraid that Beloved may once again go away, before understanding that it is still better to die at loving motherly hands than to be demolished in white and male hands.

Obviously, Sethe hadn't reckoned with the will to live in her daughter that nurtures her beyond death so that even in the grave her consciousness fights for a resurrection. Beloved is not only Sethe's rebuked child come to claim her due, she also represents in a large sense the unbridled desire that hundreds of years of slavery had created. Morrison thus makes *Beloved* the symbol of the resurrected spirit.

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