

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in context of Bhabha's theory of Hybridization.

Manisha F. Shah

Associate Professor, Arts & Commerce College, Unjha, (Gujarat) India

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to read the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in Postcolonial context. The Postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha gives his theory of Cultural Hybridity in his *The Location of Cultures*. Bhabha himself was highly influenced by Toni Morrison, as he also quotes from *Beloved* in explaining his theory. An attempt to evaluate the novel in context of three dimensions of the process of hybridization and Postcolonialism is made in the paper. African American novel *Beloved* though written from the perspectives of the oppressors and the oppressed can also be read from the perspectives of the colonizers and the colonized. Bhabha discusses the entire theory from the perspective of the colonized and Morrison narrates the sufferings and trauma of the oppressed. The paper discusses some chief features of Postcolonialism such as- the ambivalence, the fragmented personality, the feeling of being unhomey etc.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, hybridization, the oppressor, the oppressed, colonized, colonizers, ambivalence, unhomey

African American created their own tradition of writing during the second half of the 18th century and tried to give voice to their own history and their experiences of racism. The earliest African American writers sought to demonstrate that proportion "all men are created equal" in the declaration of independence required that Black Americans be extended the same human rights as those claimed by the white Americans. Their literary contribution shaped the social and political movements in US as well as other parts of the world. From the poetry of Langston Hughes to the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker influenced people all over the world who suffered from racial oppression. The migration of the African Americans is a forced migration. They were moved against their own will from their homelands to serve the economic needs of the empires from the 16th century onwards. The experience of these black

Americans in US is quite different from other ethnic groups. They suffered race based discrimination in US society. These writers' works reveal the history and the continuing effects of the process of that racial discrimination.

The Postcolonial critics like Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, James Clifford, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said etc have dealt with some challenging concepts of Postcolonialism such as: Hybridity, Mimicry, Ambivalence, the subaltern, Nation, Home, Identity etc. All these concepts are defined and presented from the perspective of the colonized. They reflect the colonized people's ways to resist. Homi K. Bhabha, who was influenced by novels of Toni Morrison, in his well known book *The Location of Culture* deals with the histories and cultures of colonialism and their impact on the present that need to transform our

understanding of cross-cultural relationship. He doesn't look at colonialism merely as a process of straight forward oppression, domination and violence, but considers it as a period of complex and varied cultural interaction. He theorizes the discourse of colonialism as a site of hybridization. He explores hybridity in the context of postcolonial novel and views it as the flexibility of the subaltern and considers the imperial ideology responsible for it. He emphasizes hybridity's ability to subvert and reappropriate dominant discourses. Thus, Bhabha in *'The Location of Culture'* affirms that

The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridity that emerged in the moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha: 2).

He proceeds to argue that colonizers and the colonized are mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture and what he refers to as "cultures of postcolonial contra modernity" are in fact "resistant to... oppressive assimilationist technologies"(Bhabha:6). Bhabha explains that: "Colonialism, with displacements and terrible uncertainties that it brings, is such a radically unsettling "effective experience of marginality" that the colonized subject's plight can be seen as prefiguring poststructuralist indeterminacy and fragmentation (Bhabha: 166).

The influence of Derrida's deconstruction theory can be seen on Bhabha's theory of identity. The deconstruction theorists define the self as a fragmented collection of selves and the same concept is

prominent in Bhabha's theory of identity. The identity of the colonizer and the colonized is constructed through their process of interaction with each other. Moreover, the occurrence of a number of binary opposition may also be viewed as the influence of post-structuralist procedure. Binarism theory was first established by Saussure, where he talks about the signs which mean by their difference from other signs. In the construction of cultural theory, such binary oppositions like black/white, man/woman, oppressor/oppressed and birth/death are very common. These binary oppositions deny the existence of interstitial spaces. Most of post structuralist and feminist theorists believe that in this binary opposition one of the terms is always dominant and any activity that does not fit the binary opposition is subject to repression. For example, in the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized, the colonizer is a dominant one.

Bhabha looks at the colonial uprooted position as a site of hybridization and ambivalence. The colonized are provided a resistance in the process of hybridization as it takes place somewhere in-between the space from the colonizer. In the space of colonizers the colonized feel discrimination, whereas this in-between space is something different and thus it provides the ambivalence for the colonial presence. Bhabha further points out that cultural authority does not reside in determined and fixed objects; in fact the meaning emerges in the "Third Space of Enunciation". Bhabha defines the text of English Book as a Bible to non-English people. Morrison and other non-English writers wrote novels in reaction to the text of English Book in which the non-English,

black and even women were marginalized and discriminated. Writers like Morrison and other post colonial writers wrote novels in reaction to this realist English novel.

Toni Morrison, the noble prize winner African American novelist is noted for her examination of black female experience in America. She grew up in the American Midwest in a family that possessed an intense love and appreciation for black culture. She has about ten novels to her credit. They are : *The Bluest Eye*(1970), *Sula*(1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby*(1981), *Beloved*(1987), *Jazz*(1992), *Paradise*(1998), *Love*(2003), *Mercy*(2008) and *Home*(2012). She has portrayed the experiences of the Black Americans in an unjust society. Most of her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural and national identity in American society. Her use of myths, her exuberant poetic style and her power of imagination provided her stories a rich texture and quality. Her critically acclaimed novel *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993. The novel is based on the life of a runaway slave, who at the time of her recapture kills her young baby to save her from the miserable life of slavery. *Beloved's* central character Sethe kills her daughter and tries to kill other children when a posse arrives in Ohio and wants them to return to Sweet Home, a plantation in Kentucky. Morrison's *Beloved* meets the three dynamics of cultural hybridization process as proposed by McCarthy: social and political resonance, the use of language and the psychologically uprooted state leading to search for identity.

First, as McCarthy argues, "the subject matter of these novels have a socio-

political resonance that takes up beyond the problem and adventure of an individual, and leads us toward an exploration of problems associated with the relationship of the individual to community"(McCarthy:251). *Beloved* represents the rebirth of black identity among the downtrodden people. In the process of cultural hybridization 'third space' is created and the very creation of this third space is the ultimate outcome of the sense of feeling homeless. In *Beloved* the protagonist, Sethe tries to recover from the slavery, this recovery from the slavery is in itself suggesting recovery of home, which is unfortunately lost. The theme of slavery is interwoven in the novel and the recurring references to the body; the female body reveals that the body itself becomes the physical place. Sethe's body is full of scars and is unsuitable to live in because it is not a place where identity can be recognized in a positive way. Until Sethe can open herself to speak about her memories and recall her story, she cannot recover her identity. Her body remained crippled and thus her identity is distorted and wounded. In fact, for Sethe the telling of her story of horrible experiences is to reclaim her identity and recover from the slavery.

Sethe, the protagonist of the novel tries to kill her children to prevent them from being put into slavery. She succeeds in murdering one of her four children, an 18 month old "the crawling-already? Girl" (*Beloved*: 110). Sethe commits this brutal act in the woodshed when she sees Schoolteacher, a man currently managing Sweet Home. He treats and abuses the slaves as animals and has come to take Sethe's children to Sweet Home. This event condemns Sethe to be rejected by the

society and thereafter she finds a place of shelter within four walls of her house at 124 Bluestone Road, where she completely separates and isolates with her daughter Denver from the community. The novel is centered on memory and nostalgia. It explores the psychological and physical devastation wrought by slavery. Morrison has tried to give voice to those slaves like Sethe who have been historically denied the power of language and forced to remain silent. The scars on the body of Sethe have multiple meaning. But the most prominent interpretation given by some scholars is that the scar of "tree" on her back is an emblem of community. Sethe carries the family tree on her back can also be interpreted as a symbol of pain the women bore through the history of slavery. It is the generational bond between the mother and the daughter. It symbolizes the pain of all African mothers. The novel thus links the suffering and trauma of the individual to the entire community. Sethe for the first time develops her sense of self during her twenty-eight days freedom as a part of Cincinnati's community. Denver achieves her sense of self when she becomes the part of society after leaving 124. Paul D and his fellow slaves work together and this working together help them to achieve their identity. The community's gathering at 124 and exorcising Beloved is community's regret for its past misconduct as the black community at Cincinnati fails to alert Sethe to Schoolteacher's approach and this failure results in the subsequent killing of Beloved. Thus, *Beloved* is the story of individuals who were lost and when they were lost, all the members of the community were lost. It is the story of the individuals who were kept silent and who now try to regain their identity by

retelling their story, the story of the slavery and suffering. It is the story of the community, which link them to their past.

The second dynamic of cultural hybridity according to McCarthy is "a self-reflexive and conscious attitude toward the use of language" (McCarthy: 251). In the construction of the story, the past plays an important role. The characters of the novel retell the story of their past for that they need to remember the horrible and traumatic experiences of slavery even though they do not want to remember. Their past life is so horrific and traumatic that while retelling this, words fail to convey the depth of their suffering. Morrison uses fragmented language to convey the insufficient capacity of language. The language of the novel sometime becomes fragmented. This fragmented structure of the novel levies the responsibility on the reader to interpret the story of the suffering and fill in the gaps. The novel does not have a linear or single plot, the past and present are juxtaposed in the structure of the novel and the series of flashbacks revealing the stories of the central characters. Morrison uses multiple plot lines and shifting points of view. Thus, the novel has a complex and layered structure. This very use of different techniques shows the unrepresentable miseries of slavery. Morrison sometimes provides the half of a story and expects the reader to discover the rest.

The third characteristic of Post-colonial fiction according to McCarthy is "a deliberate deflation of characterization and the installation of anti-heroic, flawed, or broken personas at the epicenter of the novel's discursive field" (McCarthy: 251). The novel at the psychological level

presents anti-heroic, flawed and broken personages. The issue of slavery has been interwoven in the novel. The characters when they are free cannot part themselves from the memories of their horrific past. Damaged identities and alienation which they have experienced as the slave haunt them even when they are no longer slaves. Sethe runs from Sweet Home plantation to Cincinnati in the hope of making herself free from the life of slavery, but her short period of freedom is shattered when Schoolteacher comes to reclaim her and her children. Sethe's brutal act of killing her infant daughter is to save her from the life of slavery, where Sethe has always been treated as an animal. But the past and its trauma never allow her peace.

The cruelty that led Sethe to commit this act of murder can be understood by two heart-stopping moments in Sethe's life. The first incident takes place early in her life when Sethe is put on the animal side of the list of features according to Schoolteacher's education. While teaching his nephews, Sethe overhears Schoolteacher's lesson, when he draws a thick line between an animal and a human being. To provide his students with more obvious example, he classifies Sethe as a representative of the animal. After this humiliation, Sethe begins to trust in the words of Baby Suggs, who acts as a mother figure for Sethe: "there is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (Beloved: 92). This, however, is double-edged. Sethe's estimation of white folks, in general, is not fair. They do not only do harm to her, but Sethe also receives help from them. As far as Amy is concerned, it was her, who gives birth to Denver when Sethe is escaping from the plantation. As can be seen from the example, black

community, especially black women have greatly suffered from slavery. The humiliation and hardships they have faced have left them with psychic and bodily impacts. Dehumanization takes place when much later in Sethe's life, she is pregnant with Denver. Sethe's journey of suffering seems to be never-ending. Another indication of the terrible violence practised on slaves is the moment when Schoolteacher's nephews beat Sethe while pregnant to the point that they injure her so badly that "her back skin had been dead for years" (Beloved:18). They held her and sucked breasts. The fact that "they took her milk" (Beloved:22) by force is so traumatising for Sethe as well as for husband Halle, who is a witness to what happens but is unable to do anything. Since he cannot protect her, he starts to feel emasculated, and therefore abandons her. Consequently, as indicated earlier, feeding white boys with Sethe's own milk over feeding her own child is so brutal for her that she is even deprived in the role of being a mother. She is humiliated to the position of a breeder because she is used like an animal for feeding a human being. Sethe feels robbed of her identity and loses fundamental essence as a mother. This, in consequence, can be a logical explanation of her capability of killing her daughter to save her from the brutality of slavery. The victim, as already mentioned, is Beloved, whose central role is substantial in the formation of the characters' identities.

Paul D is also one of the slaves working in Sweet Home. He helps Sethe to come out of the nostalgia and survive. But he himself is so alienated that at one point he cannot say that he could possibly a real man or not. He is very insecure and he constantly wonders about his value as a

person. Mr. Garner, the slaveholder, referred to his slaves as men while he was alive, therefore Paul D considered himself a man if a white man assigned him the title. Paul D is a restless wanderer, who is not capable of settling down in one place. There is no place he can call home. When he happens to unexpectedly knock on the door of 124 Bluestone Road, he tells Sethe: "I go anywhere these days. Anywhere they let me sit down" (*Beloved*: 8). This shows his uprootedness and his continuous search for identity. His identity is shaped by his experience of being sold off, by his escape from Brandywine to whom he was sold by Schoolteacher and by ending up in a prison with forty-six prisoners. Paul D's body and mind are filled with experiences as a former slave. His heart is full of painful and traumatic memories that he wants to have it locked for good in his "tobacco tin [which was] rusted shut" (*Beloved*: 137), which he carries around his neck, in a place where his heart should be.

Denver, Sethe's eighteen-year-old daughter who survives the infanticide, is a solitary and imaginative girl who conflates her identity with her sister's, *Beloved*. Denver first recognizes the relation between Sethe and *Beloved*: "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; *Beloved* was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her" (*Beloved*: 295). After witnessing Sethe's breakdown, Denver decides to prevent Sethe from the devastating influence *Beloved* has on her mother. The very moment, when Denver begins to act like an adult, can be marked as Denver's quest for identity. At this particular moment, Denver shoulders the responsibility for her

mother and seeks some help within the black community.

The term 'unhomeliness refers to the state of displacement resulted due to imperial occupation or may be the transportation from one country to the other by slavery, imprisonment, invasion or settlement. All the characters in 124 can sense this sense of being unhomey. Even the newcomer Paul D, when arrives at 124; he followed her through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood" (*Beloved*: 4). Morrison in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken", talks about her intentions for naming of this unhomey house 124 in numerals rather than spelled out numbers. She named the house 124 with numerals because numbers "have no adjectives, no posture of coziness or grandeur or the haughty yearning of arrivistes and estate builders for the parallel beautifications of the nation they left behind, laying claim to instant history and legend"(Unspeakable Things Unspoken:160).

Spiteful and full of baby venom, 124 on the outskirts of Cincinnati is a house in which characters are living their half-lives. In this mumbling house, you hear the undecipherable language of the black and angry dead; the voice of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken (Bhabha: 14). *Beloved*, a mysterious woman who arrives at 124 goes through various identities: an infant, a sister and a lover. Bhabha defines *Beloved's* character in *The Location of Culture* as a daughter who returns to Sethe so that her mind will be homeless no more; she is the sister that returns to Denver, and brings hope of her father's return, the fugitive who died in his escape, and she is the daughter made of

murderous love who returns to love and hate and free herself. Her words are broken, like the lynched people with broken necks; disembodied, like the dead children who lost their ribbons (*Beloved*, 25).

Beloved, as a memory and history of the Reconstruction era in 1873, straddles the line between fiction and history; it also

relates the characters stories and scars to other members of their communities. The novel is a story of what happens in silences of traumas and retells the story of characters that are marked by the legacy of the American slavery. The novel is a story of ambivalence and resistance that questions the boundaries between self and other.

Works Cited:

1. Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
2. Cameron McCarthy, S. David, K. E. Supriya, C. Wilson-Brown, A. Rodriguez, and Heriberto Godina PhD. "The hypocrisy of completeness: Toni Morrison and the conception of the other" *Cultural Studies* 9.2 (1995): 247-255 at: http://works.bepress.com/heriberto_godina/20
3. Lonien, Dagmar. *Houses Packed with Grief – Trauma and Home in three Novels by Toni Morrison*: <http://ubt.opus.hbz-nrw.de>
4. Morrison, T. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1987. Print
5. Morrison, T. *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-american Presence in America Literature*. The University of Michigan. 1988. Print.
6. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/926640/African-American-literature/>