

Module:1

SEM-IV(Hons.), American Literature

BELOVED Analysis

Toni Morrison is one of the leading 20th Century African American Woman novelists, who have endeavoured to articulate problems of prejudice and discrimination through her fictional world. Being African American woman, Morrison boldly presents African American feminist consciousness through her literary endeavour where she strongly expresses her philosophy as a feminist. She is awakened and conscious about women's life and problems and believes that human consciousness is the peer experience. Consequently, her novels manifest and highlight Black women who are doubly differentiated in the form of male standard and poverty as well as Euro-American women's standard. In her work, Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. The unique cultural inheritance of African Americans is the centre of her complex and multi-layered narratives.

Morrison has written the novels namely, *The Bluest Eye*(1970), *Sula*(1974), *Song of Solomon*(1977), *Tar Baby*(1981), *Beloved*(1987), *Jazz*(1992), *Paradise*(1997), *Love*(2003), *A Mercy*(2008)and *Home*(2012). Subsequently, she has produced Children's literature (with Slade Morrison).These are *The Big Box*(1999)and *The Book of Mean People*(2002). Her short fiction is *Recitatif* (1983).She has written plays also namely, *Dreaming Emmett*(performed 1986),*Desdemona*(first performed 15 May 2011 in Vienna)and libretti, *Margaret Garner*(first performed May 2005). Her nonfiction are: *The Black Book*(1974),*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*(1992) etc.

Beloved, novel by Toni Morrison, published in 1987 and winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The work examines the destructive legacy of slavery as it chronicles the life of a black woman named Sethe, from her pre-Civil War days as a slave in Kentucky to her time in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. Although Sethe lives there as a free woman, she is held prisoner by memories of the trauma of her life as a slave.

Summary

The novel is based on the true story of a black slave woman, Margaret Garner, who in 1856 escaped from a Kentucky plantation with her husband, Robert, and their children. They sought refuge in Ohio, but their owner and law officers soon caught up with the family. Before their recapture, Margaret killed her young daughter to prevent her return to slavery. In the novel, Sethe is also a passionately devoted mother, who flees with her children from an abusive owner known as "schoolteacher." They are caught, and, in an act of supreme love and sacrifice, she too tries to kill her children to keep them from slavery. Only her two-year-old daughter dies, and the schoolteacher, believing that Sethe is crazy, decides not to take her back. Sethe later has "Beloved" inscribed on her daughter's tombstone. Although she had intended for it to read "Dearly Beloved," she did not have the

energy to “pay” for two words (each word cost her 10 minutes of sex with the engraver).

These events are revealed in flashbacks, as the novel opens in 1873, with Sethe and her teenage daughter, Denver, living in Ohio, where their house at 124 Bluestone Road is haunted by the angry ghost of the child Sethe killed. The hauntings are alleviated by the arrival of Paul D, a man so ravaged by his slave past that he keeps his feelings in the “tobacco bin” of his heart. He worked on the same plantation as Sethe, and the two begin a relationship. A brief period of relative calm ends with the appearance of a young woman who says that her name is Beloved. She knows things that suggest she is the reincarnation of Sethe’s lost daughter. Sethe is obsessed with assuaging her guilt and tries to placate the increasingly demanding and manipulative Beloved. At one point, Beloved seduces Paul D. After learning that Sethe killed her daughter, he leaves.

The situation at 124 Bluestone worsens, as Sethe loses her job and becomes completely fixated on Beloved, who is soon revealed to be pregnant. While the lonely and largely housebound Denver initially befriends Beloved, she begins to grow concerned. She finally dares to venture outside in order to ask the community for help, and she is given food and a job. As the local women attempt to stage an exorcism, Denver’s employer arrives to take her to work, and Sethe mistakes him for “schoolteacher” and tries to attack him with an ice pick. The other women restrain her, and during the commotion Beloved disappears. Paul D later returns to the grieving Sethe, promising to care for her, and Denver continues to thrive in the outside world.

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. Beloved explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves even in freedom. The most dangerous of slavery’s effects is its negative impact on the former slaves’ senses of self, and the novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation. Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else’s. Slaves were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul D is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real “man,” and he frequently wonders about his value as a person. Sethe, also, was treated as a subhuman. She once walked in on schoolteacher giving his pupils a lesson on her “animal characteristics.” She, too, seems to be alienated from herself and filled with self-loathing. Thus, she sees the best part of herself as her children. Yet her children also have volatile, unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with Beloved’s, and Beloved feels

herself actually beginning to physically disintegrate. Slavery has also limited Baby Suggs's self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the opportunity to be a true wife, sister, daughter, or loving mother. As a result of their inability to believe in their own existences, both Baby Suggs and Paul D become depressed and tired. Baby Suggs's fatigue is spiritual, while Paul D's is emotional. While a slave, Paul D developed self-defeating coping strategies to protect him from the emotional pain he was forced to endure. Any feelings he had were locked away in the rusted "tobacco tin" of his heart, and he concluded that one should love nothing too intensely. Other slaves—Jackson Till, Aunt Phyllis, and Halle—went insane and thus suffered a complete loss of self. Sethe fears that she, too, will end her days in madness. Indeed, she does prove to be mad when she kills her own daughter. Yet Sethe's act of infanticide illuminates the perverse forces of the institution of slavery: under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them and thus protecting them from the more gradual destruction wrought by slavery. Stamp Paid muses that slavery's negative consequences are not limited to the slaves: he notes that slavery causes whites to become "changed and altered . . . made . . . bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be." The insidious effects of the institution affect not only the identities of its black victims but those of the whites who perpetrate it and the collective identity of Americans. Where slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity and compassion. For this reason, Morrison suggests that our nation's identity, like the novel's characters, must be healed. America's future depends on its understanding of the past: just as Sethe must come to terms with her past before she can secure a future with Denver and Paul D, before we can address slavery's legacy in the contemporary problems of racial discrimination and discord, we must confront the dark and hidden corners of our history. Crucially, in *Beloved*, we learn about the history and legacy of slavery not from schoolteacher's or even from the Bodwins' point of view but rather from Sethe's, Paul D's, Stamp Paid's, and Baby Suggs's. Morrison writes history with the voices of a people historically denied the power of language, and *Beloved* recuperates a history that had been lost—either due to willed forgetfulness (as in Sethe's repression of her memories) or to forced silence. "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. 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. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened." (3.88)

Narrative Style

The structure of the work is compounded with an ever-switching point of view. Every character, even the dead ones and half-alive ones, tell parts of the tale. At one point, Paul D and Sethe exchange flashbacks that finally meld into one whole (chapter 2). At another, the point of view switches off between four white people, who unreservedly show the biased point of view of some men who view slaves as tamed animals. The diversity of the point of view creates a tapestry of people who interact individuals joined by past or present into a community. Very few readers will miss the experimental structure of *Beloved*. It is not a linear tale, told from beginning to end. It is a story encompassing levels of past, from the slave ship to Sweet home, as well as the present. Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present (with highly unusual use of the present tense). The novel is, in essence, written in fragments, pieces shattered and left for the reader to place together. The juxtaposition of past with present serves to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the present, and by giving us fragments to work with Morrison melds the entire story into one inseparable piece to be gazed at. In forcing the reader to put back the pieces, Morrison forces him also to think about them and consider the worth of each. From a stylistic perspective, Morrison's artistry in this regard is nothing short of breath taking. Morrison's use of both verse and stream of consciousness writing where necessary is unsurpassed and not often matched in literature. Strict narrative, she realizes, is not enough to capture the feelings of a people, and she manages to capture them in some of the most well-known passages of modern literature. Finally, her use of objective correlativism should be noted. The use of Biblical allusions and much ambiguous symbolism creates an atmosphere riddled with force and drama. *Beloved* is meant to be more than a story-it is a history, and it is a life.

Critics' Observations

The publication of *Beloved* was much acclaimed and recognized by many renowned Newspapers. It is stated in Stephen Metcalf is Slate's critic at large. He is working on a book about the 1980s. *Beloved* still widely regarded as her masterpiece, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Three legs make a stool: This past month, in a New York Times poll of 200 critics, writers, and editors, *Beloved* was named "the single best work of American fiction published in the last twenty-five years," beating out novels by such luminaries as Roth, DeLillo, and Updike. I participated in this survey and can attest that, from the moment the solicitously hand-typed letter from the Times Book Review arrived in the mail, *Beloved* was the presumptive winner.