



## Pastoral as Apocalypses of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract:

*Violence and trauma notify much literature about the lives of Afro-Americans during and even after slavery. The terrible losses during the crossing from the South to the North, the everyday loss of life on the slave plantations and the distressing losses sustained through the psychological and physical brutality of slavery all causes emotional pain in the lives of slaves, a pain so agonizing that no amount of grieving or lamentation will ever be enough to work through. The more the slaves tried to ignore this horrible past, the more they lost their sense of self, which made it very difficult for them to plan a future even after getting out of into freedom. The plantations in the South were a cultivated pastoral setting which was carried out the narratives of slave dehumanization and apocalypse. The development of an apocalyptic tradition within the Afro-American literature, Morrison as a well-known writer deals with these apocalypses in her novel *Beloved*. The aim of the paper is not only to authenticate the assertion that there is an apocalypticism in the Afro-American tradition as an effort to rewrite American history for black perspective but also to show how *Beloved* has employed the images creating an alternative to black fictional discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Apocalypse, Pastoral, Plantation, Slavery, Violence*

Violence and trauma notify much literature about the lives of Afro-Americans during and even after slavery. The terrible losses during the crossing from the South to the North, the everyday loss of life on the slave plantations and the distressing losses sustained through the psychological and physical brutality of slavery all causes emotional pain in the lives of slaves, a pain so agonizing that no amount of grieving or lamentation will ever be enough to work through. Their common experience of the dehumanizing conditions of slavery creates a powerful collective voice. Though during slavery, and after, blacks managed to preserve their value system including-music, songs, voodoo, beliefs, spirituals, religion, ancestors, kinship-ties, herbal medicines, food habits etc., which they carried with them from the South by forging their cultural principles into new forms of expression that would sustain the conditions they met in the North. The experience of institution of slavery and later discrimination was so traumatic that much of the Afro-American narratives are a true record of an effort to remember events that they were not able to forget easily. The plantations in the South were a cultivated pastoral setting which was carried out the narratives of slave dehumanization and apocalypse. The development of an apocalyptic tradition within the Afro-American literature, Morrison as a prominent writer deals with these apocalypses in her novel *Beloved*. Traumas and apocalypses both are at the heart of the novel and the damage done is not merely physical but economical, sexual, psychological, emotional, intellectual, and linguistic as well.

Renowned critic, Cuddon defines "Pastoral as a genre in the mainstream English literature, characteristically representative of nostalgia for the past, some hypothetical state of love and peace which is now missing. What comprises the principal theme of almost all pastoral is the quest for simple life which is distant from life of the court and the city, or from corruption, war, the love of gain, earning and spending." (490). In fact in Afro-American scenario "Pastoral" is a harmonic blend of nature and culture in addition to urban and rural. In the novel, the theme of violence, as dealt with by Morrison, also leads the reader to experience a kind of cathartic effect. The reading of the novel

arouses various emotions in the hearts of its reader. To quote Susan Bowers: “Apocalyptic literature is very like Greek tragedy in arousing emotion and creating the condition for catharsis” (40).

In apocalypse, then, there is evidence of the crisis ridden Afro-American experience: the movement from country to city, the change from a rural or agrarian to an urban or industrialized environment, and once history disappointed the hope for progress, the search for a tenable reaction to ongoing racist oppression. Much of what comprises an apocalypse in the Afro-American tradition remains encoded in a rich oral tradition.

The original meaning of apocalypse originates from the biblical texts of ‘Revelation’. The paper is going to apply the term apocalyptic to Afro-American writings only partially in the biblical sense of Revelation. In the face of collective losses, coupled with their lives of continuous suffering, fragmentation and the aspiration for freedom, there was a need for the black slaves to rebirth themselves, and this could only be achieved by confronting and coming to terms with the abrasions of history, whether spiritually or physically, individually or collectively. Some of the places and spaces which the characters in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* occupy play a vital role in opening up possibilities of modification from unlivable to livable lives through healing. The characters’ connections and interactions in and between these spaces allow them to comprehend who they are and this recognition of themselves gradually helps provide a kind of psychic healing through personal and communal interconnections. With this healing, they are able to (re) construct both individual and collective identities that comprise them and give them a feeling of self in the place they must call “home”.

Undoubtedly because of its horrible nature, the institution of slavery was something preferably to be forgotten in both by the black and white American. For blacks, it was extremely painful to recall the trauma of slavery. In writing a novel that brings back fresh memories of that terrible past, Morrison argues that there is a necessity to come face to face with the horrors of the past, not so much as to continue its psychological blow, as it is digested and be able to overcome it. Toni Morrison portrays the apocalypses; beginning with the Middle Passage, in her most renowned novel *Beloved*, giving particular attention to the experiences of the black slave that had been largely polished over or made invisible till then. Unlike the early slave narratives, Morrison has deconstructed the white literary tradition in *Beloved* (1987) by bringing ‘home’ to the reader the real horrors experienced by focusing on every phase of a slave woman’s life, from infancy to old age, without the moralizing usual of such narratives.

*Beloved* is a novel through which Morrison strongly represents the apocalyptic tradition by taking the theme of violence and portrayed it in all its colors. In the novel, *Beloved*, Morrison represents the violence induced on the black by the white. But, there are also illustrations where sufferings and miseries are carried out on the white by the members of their own race. Then, there are scenes and moments where the Negroes not only oppose but get back in violent ways. Quite like the white, the black also do not spare their own black counterparts. They impose violence on the members of their own community. But, the white behaving with violent disposition towards the black is preponderant in the whole novel.

The white injure or harm the black in many ways. The Africans are whipped, sexually beaten and alienated from their family members frequently. The black were kidnapped by force from their own land by the white. Their primary objective was to use them in the form of cheap labor. Now, in order to infuse their domination, they use physical force to make sure that there is no fight or rebel. They believe in the maxim might is right. This makes the school teacher convey to Sixo when the latter tries to outwit the former: “Definitions belong to the definers-not the defined” (225). Whenever any slave becomes recalcitrant, he is penalized savagely. Any response or revenge is considered as wickedness by the masters, which leads to the most strict punishment i.e. whipping or lynching. For example, Sixo is tied to a tree and shot and burnt later. Paul A is also hanged on a tree with his torso.

Paul D is first iron collared and a bit is planted in his mouth. Sethe, similarly, is whipped brutally when she complains against the stealing of her milk before Mrs. Garner. Beloved also reveals in her recollections of her past life that when she, along with her mother, was picking flowers, she was vigorously abducted and was taken away to America in the most insanitary of circumstances. The list seems endless. The white left no stone unturned in beating, whipping and disfiguring the black slaves. Not only just physical torments were used as means of containment, but sexual torments were also quite common. The master took unwarranted advantage of the female bodies who were working under them. Elizabeth Fox Genovese delicately maintains; "Since the nineteenth century, it has been common to assert that slavery was necessarily worse for women than for men, since they were subjected to special brutality and indignity on account of their sex"(98).The whites' wanted complete domination and control over their slaves.

For this, they even abridged not only the black men, but black women too to something or toy with which they played in compliance with their own will. And Beloved is stuffed with abundant examples of this kind. In the words of Pamela E. Barnett, "while Morrison depicts myriad abuses of slavery like brutal beatings and lynching, the depictions of and allusions to rape are of primary importance; each in some way helps explain the infanticide that marks the beginning of Sethe's story as a free woman"(193). Sethe slew her own daughter because she knew well enough that to be a woman in the times of slavery was a cardinal sin. She herself was exposed to this intense attack. Sethe was held down by two young boys, one held her down while the other stolen her milk. An ex-slave, Ella, likewise was kept in a room and was physically abused by the father and the son for several days. Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of Sethe, had to exchange herself in order to make sure that her third born might not be auctioned away from her. Not just that, even Sethe's own mother, as Nan told her, was, along with her shipmates, frequently taken up by the crew. Sethe also had to give up her body to an engraver so that she may engrave 'Beloved' on the tomb of her dear daughter. To believe that only the black women were sexually exploited will only be half-truth. Even the black men had his difficult time when he was forced to fulfill the unwanted desires of the masters. For example, Paul D, along with other members of the chain gang, is required to fellate the white guard, and on simple viewing this, he pukes out. Pamela E. Barnett notes many such examples in her study of the novel. She also remarks: "Morrison depicts rape as a process by which some white men keep some black women and even some black men in state of fear" (204).

Moreover physical and sexual violence, the white masters also induced emotional violence on their black objects. The masters played with the emotions of their black slaves. First, the Negroes were segregated from their lands, their communities, their culture and their language and then whatever community they entered in during middle passage was also mercilessly knifed. In the words of Margaret Atwood: "The slaves are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, their kin. It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of everyday legal policy" (7).

The novel provides several examples to verify this fact. For instance, Baby Suggs had eight children, but she was never given any possibility to keep any one of them. The only one she kept the longest was her eighth child, Halle, who in 1855, when Sethe arrived in 124 at Blue Stone road, was either missing or dead. She recalls that her first two baby girls were sold away from her during their infancy. Morrison categorically writes: "Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (27-28). Similarly, Paul D, Paul A and Paul F, who were three half-brothers, having same mother but different fathers, were also insulated from one another whenever the occasion demanded. For example, first this trio was acquired by Mr. Garner and brought to Sweet Home. After the demise of Mr. Garner, lady Garner sells Paul F in order to clear the debts. Likewise, the school teacher's act of selling Paul D to another white owner is an example of psychological damage inflicted on the black slaves.

The examples of physical violence within the black race are not many in the novel. The Africans, already slaughtered by the white Americans, exhibit a strong bonding yet there are extensive situations when anger or frustration or some other emotion gets better of their sense of unity. For example, Sethe's own mother slapped her own daughter when the latter inquired as to why she was not marked beneath her breast like her mother. In response, she only receives a slap. She is never able to make out the reason of that slap till she receives her personal mark on her back. The act of slapping was not paved the way by a desire to hurt which is the criteria of judging any gesture to be violent yet it was enveloped in sheer anger and frustration which Sethe's mother docked against her exploiters and which Sethe's mother could never give vent to because of her marginalized status.

Pamela E. Barnett draws parallels between succubus and incubus on one side and Beloved on the other which can be cited to illustrate the sexual violence mounded on the black by the black themselves. According to orthodox belief, a succubus is the incarnation of female demon that gets up from the grave in the night and sucks the substance out of men. Likewise, incubus is the reincarnation of a dead man who in the night sucks the women of their substance.

Beloved in the novel is both, succubus and incubus. As a female demon reincarnate, she steals semen from Paul D, and becomes pregnant. Paul D here is almost crippled. He is reluctant to yield, but he can't help it. He reflects upon this situation later in the novel when he recalls that "coupling with her was not even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive" (311). Linda Krumholz verbalises this perspective in different words. She opines: "she functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed past, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of man in slavery" (86). When she comes in his cabin and seduces him, he is confronted with the same emasculation which he had to undergo during the time of slavery. His heart, which is like a red tobacco tin in which are stored all the painful memories, is unlocked and he yells in pain, "Red heart. Red heart" (138).

Beloved is also equated with vampire or incubus. Though, she is not the male spirit impregnating the slumbering women, "but the vampire figure in Beloved enacts as incestuous, homosexual desire" (199) as has been established by P.E. Barnett. Beloved has come back for Sethe. She wants to take vengeance on her for her premature murder. She drains Sethe of her vitality. First, in the clearing, she plants a deadly kiss over Sethe's neck, then later she enacts as if she is a just born child. Sethe is ready to fulfil all her desires. Whatever Beloved wants is given to her such as the best chair, the best food and so on. And when Sethe runs out of things, Beloved invented desire. Later, one notices Beloved with protruding belly and Sethe becoming thinner and thinner. So thin that flesh betwixt her fingers and thumb dissolves. In this way, the advent of Beloved and her over-demanding attitude become detrimental to Sethe. The black community harms its own people by impairing them psychologically and emotionally as well, and Margaret Atwood succinctly remarks: "Toni Morrison is careful not to make all the whites awful and all blacks wonderful" (8).

Apart from racial and intra racial violence, one also notices self-directed violence in the novel. In such cases, an individual, instead of perpetrating atrocities on others, directs them at his own self. Now, in Beloved, it is Beloved herself who enacts such an episode. Actually, what psychoanalyst affirms is that whatever is repressed tends to come out in various ways, and injury to self in sheer frustration is one among many of its manifestations. In the novel, Beloved, the reincarnation of Sethe's dead daughter, is frustrated when Sethe dotes more on Paul D than on her. Beloved wants that Sethe must remain most of the time with her because she has come back for her. But, Sethe's propensity is more for the last of the Sweet Home's man, Paul D. At this, enraged Beloved pulls her tooth out and shows it to Denver and thinks, "This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop may be one at a time, may be all at once" (157).

The destruction of self is yet another ramification of the violence. The characters, more particularly the Africans, in Beloved lose their self-identity. There is regression in them. For example, Halle goes

frantic after watching his wife's milk being stolen. Sethe goes berserk and decimates her daughter in order to save her from the violence which she herself has experienced. Paul D also feels less than a chicken when he contemplates: "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I was not allowed to be and stay what I was" (86).

Alienation or loneliness is yet another outcome of the violence induced on the characters. For example, when Sethe kills her own daughter, she is hated by the locality of the black. She, along with her daughter, lives in complete isolation. In the same way, when baby ghost becomes discolored and violent, it exhibits its anger by breaking the mirror and placing its handprints on the cake. The effect of this is that Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, are so scared that they run away from 124 and Sethe and Denver are again remaining bereft of any human company until Paul D comes after 18 years. The characters are revealed through the treatment of violence by the writer. For example, the White, who claim to be more educated, more civilized and more cultivated are represented as more barbaric, more uncivilized, and more horrid when they unleash so much of violence. For example, the school teacher who is supposed to be the representative of a cultivated and disciplined outlook on life fails to stop his nephews when they violate every lesson of the book called humanity and put Sethe down and steals her milk. Sethe was whipped mercilessly; but nowhere does one notice in the novel either of these characters ever cursing anyone for his/her fate. They accept stoically whatever comes their way. The violent treatment of the black at the hands of the white masters not only joins the black with one another, but also makes them one with one of the white who receives similar handling. The common experiences of the black make them react collectively against the masters. For example, Paul D escapes with 45 other members of the chain gang. Similarly, Sethe and company also decide to flee with all the other slaves at Sweet Home. They understand each other quite well because each of them had a similar sort of experience under excruciating circumstances.

Violence loaded on the characters also becomes instrumental in their growth. When an individual gets too much of violence, physical, sexual and psychological, one usually stops to think. But, in the novel, Sethe and Baby Suggs are two characters who are exclusions to this common idea. Sethe has faced too many hardships in her life. She is beaten, her milk is stolen, her back is scarred, she has to deliver on the boat, her husband is not with her yet she never loses her capacity to think. With absolute confidence and sense of possession, she speaks to Paul D, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (193). Wilfred D Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems remark quite pertinently: "clearly, her intention here is not denial but rationalization; yet, it is rationalization based on conviction" (108).

Above all, with the help of the theme of violence, Morrison is able to unveil her outlook on life. What Morrison seems to be suggesting is that life is not the bed of roses? One has to confront many difficulties. Each individual reacts to the hostile environment in his or her own way. In the novel as well, one notices different types of individuals responding in different ways to the oppressive circumstances. First, there are Paul D and Sethe who unflinchingly face all atrocities. For example, Paul D lost his brothers and his friends, and was himself treated as even worse than an animal. Similarly, Sethe lost her three children and her husband and lives in sheer segregation for 18 long years until Paul D and Beloved arrive in 124. But these characters are never noticed grumbling or beating their heads. They tolerate every misfortune with immense tenacity. Then, there are men and women who also try to change the situation by acting accordingly. For example, Sethe, who is a veteran as far as the excruciating experiences of slavery are concerned, tries to alter the fate not only of her children but hers as well. When she learns that in future her children might be separated from her, she resolves to send them to a safe place. First, she sends her three children through underground rail road and later she herself escapes from Sweet Home and successfully makes it to Baby Suggs in 124. After her advent, when few days later she is traced by school teacher and his gang, Sethe again comes into action. Instead of letting the masters capture her and her progeny, she decides to end the life of her children so that they might be saved from hellish circumstances in slavery. Her plan is to slit all her children, but she is only able to do it with one of them.

In a nut shell, Morrison through the novel, presenting apocalyptic traditions, suggests that the history of slavery and its consequences like-dehumanization, discrimination, trauma and violence should not be erased and forgotten too easily but should rather serve as a kind of racial therapy to Afro-Americans for a redefinition of their ethnicity and traditional values through the voices of the dead. This is why she converges and accumulates the hidden and visible truths of history in the character of Beloved and forces the other characters also to relive these truths so as to know and accept themselves for who they really are.

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