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*Beloved*: The Enslaved Black Female and the Realities of Gendered Trauma

The classical definition of a feminist novel is a novel that projects women overcoming gender roles, sexism, and discrimination. In 19th-century America, women in society, their role and their sexuality regularly micro-managed, were prompted to seek solidarity to redefine these aspects of identity and demand social equality. However, black women in this period of history were either pushed behind the scenes or fell silent in this fight for women’s rights. Racist and sexist socialization conditioned a generation of black women to devalue their femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of their identity (hooks 1). In other words, not only were black women denying a part of themselves, but taught socially to submit and to accept both their racial and sexual inferiority (hooks 2). This deep rooted history of violence and dehumanization to the enslaved black female continues to perpetuate trauma and identity fragmenting through each generation. In addressing the experiences of these individuals respectively, as it pertains to victims of oppression and persecution, it is not meant to discredit or speak on behalf or account for every narrative but to illuminate a critique to the semblance of trends in the process of power that validate driving forces of gendered and racialized persecution. Using intersections of race and gender to analyze Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in the context of its female characters, a connection can be drawn to the historical and social constructs of power in their capability to dehumanize individuals and the use of literary mechanisms to cope with the violent realities done to women of color. Morrison presents a text foundational to black feminism that illuminates the dualistic constraints imposed on black women and presents fiction parallel to factual instances that break down fulcrums of oppression and compels the characters to address points of problematized healing and prosper past their convictions.

Race is a cultural construct. And racism is not merely something a few people or institutions choose to practice, but a structural regime featured in the social, economic, and political systems in which we all exist. According to George Lipsitz, “racism is reproduced in new form in every era, the possessive investment in whiteness has always been influenced by its origins in the racialized history of the United States-by the legacy of slavery and segregation, of ‘Indian’ extermination and immigrant restriction, of conquest and colonialism” (3). This reproduction, in part of the racialized nature of laws, courts, customs, and housing, continues to establish a complicit consent of the public abiding violent social causes and consequences. From the very beginning of *Beloved*, Morrison historically and theoretically illustrates the atrocities inflicted upon people of color and situates a conversation to make space for victims of slavery and their descendants. By examining the multiple representations of black women in the text and illuminating the horrifying historical trend of persecution, detainment, and dehumanization, this paper seeks to acknowledge the aftermath of racism and the culmination of these issues reflected upon the black female body in *Beloved*.

The term “normalized chaos” comes to mind when navigating Morrison’s neo-slave narrative through an intersectional lens. “Normalized chaos”, coined by Shawn Arango Ricks, is defined as a defense mechanism used by black women to minimize daily hassles and life situations, viewing them as part of their “normal” life (343). While each character in *Beloved* can exemplify a behavior or an action connected to this term, Sethe is the character drawn into the limelight of the narrative. Reflective of how the narrative is relayed to the audience, the structure itself is fragmented and at times, incomprehensible. Samantha Schreiner describes identity as not only fashioned from one’s physical attributes, “but also mental, emotional and spiritual attributes” (39). Sethe, as a result of her suffering from her past of slavery, proceeds through her life in this continual state of pain and repression. In an attempt to suppress the memories of her past, she is a disassociated figure, a figment of her former self, unable to reconcile the trauma of her memories in order for her to heal. Through this association of normalized chaos to aspects of the text, the oddities also become normalized for the rest of the characters and for the readers. For example, this can be seen in the very first description of Sethe and her family’s home:

124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old-- (Morrison 1)

That is, if 124 can be called a home. The site of a malicious presence - a haunting - that the characters have accepted as a daily part of their life. This if a defense mechanism to their “normalized chaos”. Opposed to dealing with the realities of her trauma, reconciling her memories and her subconscious that continues to plague her, Sethe would rather remain idle in a disturbed house as her sense of self and the members of her family continue to dwindle.

The influence of Sethe’s repressed trauma and connection to the notion of “normalized chaos” as she navigates her everyday life is also evident in her interactions with her daughter, Denver. In reinforcing the memories of the past and how they reenact and afflict themselves in the present, Sethe describes for Denver what “was”:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what. (Morrison 18)

Denver, the last of Sethe’s children, mirrors her mother’s acceptance of this unsettled sense of normal. Denver’s life situation of the majority of her family gone and the lingering ghost of her dead sister as ordinary. However, these tragic circumstances only serve to reduce the realities of their trauma, a way to dissociate and attempt to rationalize the horrific aftermath of enslavement in their own way. Schreiner identifies the family unit as responsible for shaping the personality and the culture in a young child’s early life (39). In this case, Denver’s way of making a connection to her mother, but also the desire to savor that semblance of memory of her sister. The inescapable past and the confines of slavery, pertaining to the enslaved and to their descendants presented in this passage of the text, cements the idea as “Black identity becoming surrendered to white masters” (Schreiner 39). Similar to Sethe, Denver is unable to claim her identity as a whole as it continues to exist grounded in her mother’s trauma and defining their everyday conventions.

The third central woman of color presented in the text with intense ties to the structure of the narrative and Sethe’s trauma is the third of Sethe’s children born to her, Beloved. As mentioned previously, the house in which Sethe and Denver reside, 124 Bluestone, is considered an entity of its own. The house number ‘124’ is missing the number three, just as third child of Sethe is the only child missing that drives the actions of the novel and, in one way or another, causes the remainder of the family to eventually leave the house. The site of 124 therefore can be seen as Beloved personified. Beloved adapts and becomes a focal point to each individual in how they address the figurative presence of their missing family member and furthermore, how Sethe, Denver and Beloved behave throughout the text. Throughout the novel, Sethe, Denver and Beloved are dependent on another as they physically and theoretically struggle in claiming ownership of their identity.

The manifestation of Beloved, metaphorically as ‘124’ and then physically among the characters, is a point of normalized chaos. Ricks describes defense mechanisms as “techniques used to deal with issues and events that place people in perceived or real psychological danger” (344). Beloved, beginning as a ghostly presence controlling 124, is presented as a figure with feelings and reactive to actions in the house to which both women, Sethe and Denver, define their identity to. The dead figure of their family member they consider essential to their existence. To the point it becomes problematic when another character is introduced to the premise, Paul D, which notes the strangeness of their circumstance and attempts to rid them of its company:

“God damn it! Hush up!” Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. “Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!” (Morrison 24).

The house physically reacts to Paul D’s company and the act of him touching Sethe to the point the floorboards quaked and the table lunged towards him. Then suddenly the house is quiet and as Sethe and Paul D proceed up the stairs, Denver, remarks “Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had. Denver dipped a bit of bread into the jelly. Slowly, methodically, miserably she ate it” (Morrison 25). Ricks notes that through defense mechanisms of normalized chaos, “Black women minimize and justify painful, chaotic, and even traumatic lives” (344). Here, the house reacts to Paul D’s affection towards Sethe. The manifestation of Beloved, speaking to the trauma Sethe has endured in her past and has just relayed to Paul D, “and they took my milk!” (Morrison 23). The house breaching its once haunting presence to physical violence towards the occupants as a force to assert possession of its habitants. The ghostly “re-memory” of Sweet Home, Kaplan connects “as a window into the structural and ideological contradictions on which the paternalistic system of chattel slavery depended” (107). This notion Kaplan expounds on with the past of Sethe’s life on the plantation and to how Morrison indicates the “fraught construction of the domestic under slavery” that is reproduced on the enslaved: their home and their body (107). In rehashing Sethe’s memory of trauma and enslavement that occurred at Sweet Home, in further connection to the image of her as a mother and also to Denver as a daughter and sister, Beloved reacts as this memory manifested - horror that isn’t quite done with either of them.

Sethe and Denver are still dependent to the presence of Beloved, the exemplification of their trauma and their connection to each other, which attempts to exclude anyone outside from interfering on this basis of dependency as they cling to the safe confines of what they have normalized - what they have denied in order to suppress the unhealed and fragmented part of their identity in part to enslavement. This becomes even more apparent when Beloved is no longer the haunting presence of 124, but instead the fresh, soft, and tiresome figure in front of Paul D, Denver and Sethe, “Sethe was deeply touched by her sweet name; the remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kindly toward her. Denver, however, was shaking. She looked at this sleepy beauty and wanted more” (Morrison 55). From this point forward, the three women become even more intrinsically bound to one another. Sethe appears enchanted by Beloved’s storytelling, stating:

It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left. (Morrison 61).

In her relationship with the figure of Beloved before her, Sethe finds peace and comfort. She does not have to linger on her past or allow herself to recognize her grief or her hurt. Beloved serves to represent the memory of her murdered daughter and what she was willing to do to prevent a life of slavery. Sethe even declares:

BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be. Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh. (Morrison 187)

As the manifested idea before Sethe, superseding the reality that Beloved is dead, she does not have to come to terms with the actions of her past or address her trauma so long as she sits idle in accepting this presence as normal. This same normalization to the presence of Beloved is seen with Denver in the text, “BELOVED is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk” (Morrison 191). The normalized chaos in *Beloved* has now become a full blown manifestation for Sethe and Denver to reject their connected trauma and their loss. Ricks illustrates in addressing normalized chaos, “the process of healing traumatic experiences cannot occur with acknowledgment and awareness” (347). So long as Sethe and Denver accept Beloved as a real person and still part of their lives, they continue to deny the trauma afflicting their life.

Through Sethe’s and Denver’s behavior in the text and how they react to the physical event of Beloved’s arrival, each of the female characters are forced to either confront or surrender to the roots of their trauma. While initially surrendering to their trauma and content with the idea that their dead loved one has returned, Sethe, Beloved and Denver seemingly become one innate identity, unable to be separated. The passages of the text become less and less comprehensible as each of their voices appear to merge together and the concept of Beloved encompasses each of their identities:

Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face; you are me

I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine (Morrison 200)

This point in the narrative becomes distorted and dissociative of the characters as they struggle to grapple with their sense of self and their reality. In connecting further to normalized chaos they have conditioned themselves to in the text and as it appears to approach the point of no return, Ricks addresses that black women “must acknowledge not only that are they hurt by daily microaggressions and gendered racism, but also that they inflict further pain upon themselves by engaging in denial and utilizing maladaptive defense mechanisms” (347). It is only when Beloved is finally cast from 124, theoretically and physically, is Sethe able to reconnect with herself, and allow both Denver and her to come to a point of recognizing their trauma and restoring their identity. In this aspect is Beloved no longer the tangible memory present that allows them to normalize chaos, but the memory that forces them to confront the trauma of slavery and its violent aftermath.

“Race is a cultural construct, but one with deadly social causes and consequences'' (Lipsitz 2). By examining Morrison’s *Beloved* through an intersectional lens, literary critique and literary fiction resonate and draw parallels to speak on the horrors that befall women of color and expose the “unending impact that slavery and the attempts of the enslaved to free themselves have on former slaves and their descendants, both living and dead” (Kaplan 96). Morrison, through her main female characters, credit the intersections of identity they must bear and how dualistic constraints prevent black women from recognizing microagrressions and gendered racism as traumatic events. Sethe, Denver, and Beloved are characters that draw parallel to the brutal realities of slavery to provide a small segment, a brief instance of a historical timeline that could in no way encompass generations of trauma, both past and present, as it pertains to the injustice and extreme violence created by gendered racism. There is nothing normal about the chaos black women experience or the point to which these circumstances and conditions should be accepted to the point these individuals are unable to heal. *Beloved’s* narrative encompasses the intimate lives of the enslaved black female and her descendent in their attempt to reconcile their identity and their memory of traumatic violence. The novel becomes a point of reference in literature capable of addressing gendered racism and the points of problematized healing to which the black female characters must navigate the influence and the repression of their trauma.

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