



REVIVIFYING SELFHOOD: THE GOTHIC AND OTHERNESS IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is widely considered a representative of gothic novel, since it involves the gothic elements under the background of slavery in the southern United States. Following the convention of fear and horror in gothic narrative on the basis of the supernatural intervention, this novel further suggests a changed attitude towards the image of the Gothic from a loathsome existence to a hint of optimism at the end of the novel. This optimism replaces a negative, irrational destruction usually done by the Gothic with the baby ghost's materialization, *Beloved*, in a factual world as a joyful company to her sister Denver, and ultimately with an image of *Beloved* as a pregnant woman wearing a dazzling smile. Both the ghost and its incarnation together offer Morrison the occasion to investigate the unspeakable truth of such potent sufferings inflicted upon Sethe and *Beloved* under the burden of slavery too painful to endure. In exploring the way Morrison manipulates the gothic elements, she unfolds a new realm of narration, in which the tale of the supernatural is revealed through disconnected time framework, and among disintegrated facts and images. To be more specific, the core of this novel exposes a theme about the impossibility of articulation, which deforms and disfigures slaves, and the eventual transformation of the horrible with the representation of the gothic elements. If the Gothic is often associated and represented with monstrous otherness, past horror and social injustice, then this exploration of the gothic elements in *Beloved* scrutinizes the Gothic and further concludes by seeing it with a perceptive presentation as a "subject," in which the selfhood seems to dwell.

Keywords: Toni morrison, *Beloved*, The gothic, Otherness.

Analysis of Gothic Elements

While conventional gothic narrative usually "ends with the predictable destruction or containment" (Khair 6) of the ghost, *Beloved*, on the contrary, starts with the supernatural disturbance in the real world at the very beginning:

as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. (Morrison 3)

The intervention of the baby ghost appears and arouses each's private uneasiness and anxiety that leaves 124 a haunted house "full of a baby's venom" (3), and makes this haunted space threatening and uncomfortable. In this sense, the gothic manifestation emerges and is recognized as a mysterious, uncanny and even detestable presence. After living in the scandalous house marked with the invisible

being for a few years, the two boys, Howard and Buglar, flee in fright; the other members of the family, however, treat the supernatural intrusion with either indifference or condescension. Since 124 is a source of the gothic atmosphere, Toni Morrison keeps this place within the subjective focus, and intends to emphasize more on the supernatural being's impact upon the main characters as well as their responses to it. For Sethe and Denver, they are the only victims who do not surrender to the persecution of the ghost, and instead by the gothic existence elicits an imaginative response of their own. They try to interact with the ghost through "[p]erhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something [can help end the persecution]" (4). Holding another view, Baby Suggs ignores the various traces of the ghost, yet rebukes Sethe for not being indebted to the annoying presence which reminds her of her lost eight children instead. Sethe and Denver's "creative" reaction as well as Baby Suggs' ignorance, however, do not correspond to Paul D's negative response when he first experiences the spirit's manifestation in 124: "Now he was trembling again but in the legs this time. It took him a while to realize that his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it. The house itself was pitching" (21). Facing with the gothic disturbances, "Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs immediately interpret them as the unquestionable signs of the return of the murdered baby girl" (Di Prete 66) with seeming "acceptance"; Paul D, nonetheless, confronts the spirit and is anxious to expel it from the house. At this point, the abominable ghost is regarded as monstrous Other by Paul D.

It seems that fear, abomination and annoyance are the primarily negative feelings for the supernatural intervention. It is these manifestations of the ghost that contribute to grotesque plot and horrid atmosphere, and further arouse dismay and loathing of the characters, except Denver, who anticipates her dead sister's companionship, carrying with "a vague smile on her lips" (Morrison 21) as the only one exclusive of the prevailing, gothic atmosphere in the novel. A sharp contrast between the abomination of the ghost's presence and Denver's expectation to its appearance is effectively enhanced after the ghost is gone:

With a table and a loud male voice [Paul D] had rid 124 of its claim to local fame. Denver had taught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped on them; the assumption that the haunting was done by an evil thing looking for more. None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but *knowing* the things behind things. Her brothers had known, but it scared them; Grandma Baby knew, but it saddened her. None could appreciate the safety of ghost company. Even Sethe didn't love it. She just took it for granted. (45)

For the most members of black community, the baby ghost is simply seen as evil, monstrous otherness incompatible to the real world. Laura Di Prete expounds that "[the] symbolic reading [of Negroes as well as the remaining three women of 124] places them in the victim position, as the separation between self and the other is clearly defined" (67). However, either acquiescence, condescension or rejection of the characters to the supernatural, the Other plays a significant role in perceptibly gothic narrative. Tabish Khair indicates that "it is when the Other enters...that the action of most Gothic narratives really commences" (6), and in *Beloved* this abstract Other later returns as a substantial existence. As Ellen J. Goldner puts it, "*Beloved* defines the gothic as the real" (Goldner 72), the ghost in the novel, unlike the gothic convention of the simple, mystic haunting, further materializes into a human figure with a picture of young lady and baby strangely mixed. Signifying physical immaturity and psychological ambivalence, this incarnation presents to readers with a shape and dressing of a woman, who is smiling, with "new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands," (61) yet with the behavior of a baby who loves sweets, cannot walk, "holding on to furniture, resting her head in the palm of her hand as though it [is] too heavy for a neck alone" (Morrison 67). Not only is her appearance elusive but also her manner of speaking seems mysterious and hardly comprehensible. The gothic not only grows real but also contains unusual, supernatural power: *Beloved* impalpably disappears and reappears at will in a shed with no footfall, which terrifies Denver for her possible loss of company; from Paul D's witnessing, *Beloved* can "pick up the rocking chair single-handed" (67). Here *Beloved*'s supernatural ability is implicitly revealed and marked.

As Fred Botting elucidates,

Gothic productions were considered unnatural in their undermining of physical laws with marvelous beings and fantastic events. Transgressing the bounds of reality and possibility, they also challenged reason through their overindulgence in fanciful ideas and imaginative flights. (Botting 6)

Proceeded by conventional gothic narrative, Morrison's text transgresses the boundary of physical laws beyond rationality. Through various manifestations the ghost makes itself not only visibly but also audibly perceptible, of which Stamp Paid is the witness. When Stamp Paid went to visit Sethe, tried to knock on the door of 124, he could not enter the house but could only circle it instead. He sensed on Bluestone Road the unidentifiable loud voices that:

What he heard, as he moved toward the porch, he didn't understand. Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn't nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word mine. The rest of it stayed outside his mind's reach. [...] the voices drained suddenly to less than a whisper. (Morrison 202-3)

While Stamp Paid heard unusual sound, Denver in 124 after two-year-long deafness also "heard" the abnormal existence, "the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs" (122). In this respect, 124 has become a site where unspeakable fear of the heavy historical trappings returned to the present, and the gothic atmosphere of these gloomy episodes has haunted the house and "repeatedly signaled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter" (Botting 1). What Stamp Paid has perceived is the past cultural anxieties and mysterious incidents that blur historical boundaries. He recognizes that these voices of incomprehensible language spring from the "ghost" of dead black folks in lynchings, for it is *Beloved* that "magnetizes 124, attracting all that lost life now returning to lay claim to its own" (Lawrence 195) as a reminder of the unsettling past. The visual and audible manifestations of the ghost along with *Beloved*'s physical embodiment with supernatural force construct a ghastly picture, plot and gothic atmosphere.

But the incarnation of the ghost later makes things more complicated than "poltergeist outbreaks" (Schmudde 413) in the conventions of gothic narrative. While the ghost haunting in the house makes it simply an annoying disturbance, the incarnation of the Gothic opens up a space, beyond chronological time convention, of moving back and forth between past and present, between facts and ideas. Through this incarnation Morrison extends the possibility for novelistic expression and unfolds a distinct domain of narrative experience, and the characters in the novel, presumably, acquire an access from shifting time frames to relieve from the psychic burden of physical and mental pangs. Ya-feng Wu elucidates that "the Gothic allows interaction of different time frames for various purposes. [...] the Gothic discourse leads us to see the stylistic and perspective shifts as unresolved hauntings" (Wu 177). The incarnation of the invisible brings Sethe irreconcilable and contradictory feelings of mental compensation for her motherhood and that of physical reminder of her act of murder attributed to slavery. When Sethe is asked by Denver to retell her slave life, Sethe is at first brought back to the painful past, the time "beyond which she would not go" (Morrison 45) as it is unveiled: "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. [...] the hurt was always there" (69); but later when she is asked by *Beloved* about the earrings, "she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was *Beloved*'s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected *pleasure*" (69; italics mine). By story telling, Sethe suffers from the disturbing return of the past of slavery upon the present life, and she

is brought by Morrison across different time frames, perceptibly, to go on a journey to procurable healing from traumatic experiences as Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber exemplifies this “the importance of verbalizing trauma and the need for an empathetic witness to hear the trauma story if one is to recover” (Schreiber 2). Through utterance Sethe’s unresolved haunting, signifies the difficulty of articulation of past cruelty, torture, and atrocity as confrontation as well as healing in recollection, also illustrate and lead the reader to the traumatic events. On the route of remembering, Sethe illustrates changes which “move from a refusal to acknowledge the past to confrontation and to reconciliation with the pain made bearable through retelling” (Raynaud 48) and even to an “unexpected pleasure.” This accounts partly for Morrison’s method of storytelling in flashback. And following the shifting perspectives Morrison demonstrates other characters’ perceptions, visible or audible, of the manifestations of the ghost: for instance, Sethe and Denver’s visual encounters; Paul D’s tactile sensation; Stamp Paid’s aural sensibility and Denver’s hearing recovery. In a motive to resolve the narration of incoherence and shifting perspectives, Morrison engages a task of expression which redirects both the horrible past as well as physical and psychical pangs suggested by the Gothic discourse towards the effect of the Gothic “fantasy.” In this respect, the incarnation of the ghost not simply symbolizes the haunting past, but also deploys narrative skill of time shifting, “either ticks with threatening deliberation or flies with destructive rapidity” (Haggerty 20), that the Gothic, including the ir-rational, illogical plot deployment and narrative skill, inextricably haunts the whole novel.

The embodiment of the ghost’s body is too an emblem of social injustice within the slave narrative, which carries witness of the slave’s horrible experience of persecution under slavery: it is the inhuman slavery, under which the human body of black slave is inassimilated and marginalized by white folks as merely the Other, abjected by the White, that forces Sethe immorally and atrociously to end her “crawling-already” daughter’s life. This is not only a demonstration of motherly love to an extreme but also a repulsion of unbearable cruelty in slavery. What lies in between unfolds the dehumanization done to the slaves. This is the way Sethe, a black slave woman, withstands the physical abuse and sexual exploitation long endured under the social injustice of slavery. Schreiber expounds the social and cultural background of racism in America: “In a culture where whiteness is the norm, black identity is marginalized, and the nuances of this marginalization suggest a range of trauma associated with black experience. Blacks in America are continually defined as “other” by mainstream culture” (Schreiber 1). Being a black slave means an unresolved bond to a physical mark as dissimilarity and to a psychological burden of marginalization, scapegoating, and otherness. In this respect, the black slave is regarded as the abject, an alien presence which corrupts and defiles a systematic order in the mainstream society of America. Julia Kristeva explains the being of the abject: “what is abject...the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws [the subject] toward the place where meaning collapses [...]. From its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (Kristeva 2). Indeed, as the abject, the black slave is entirely excluded from the lines of kinship and social life, the central, by which it is separated, refused and opposed. This abject, however, signified by the incarnation of the ghost, attempts to trespass against the systematic order and conventional border of American society. And it is the physical violation and transgression that foster an attainable development of the self. Here, the return of Beloved hence can be seen, metaphorically, as a materialization of the abject’s bottomless venom and an attempt to unsettle and to transgress the conventions.

The gothic elements in the novel are only too explicit as the character, plot and narration carry various references of the “macabre”: ghost, headstone(5), soul, blood(179), and killing(301). To be sure, Morrison deploys these gothic elements in order to manifest how slavery and racism at their cruelest level disfigure a black slave like Sethe and how the inconsolable blemish of both the psychical and the physical tortures the slaves, and what’s more, how the verbalizing of history by slaves themselves unmask ethical and political discourse which ought to bring this historical truth to light and for the slaves to embark on a process of “healing.” These gothic elements play an important role central to the structure and core of the novel that in *Beloved* they break down the existing limit of expression. The supernatural as well as the incarnation of the ghost, on the one hand, together create the ghastly and suspicious atmosphere encompassing the novel, and on the other hand, are allowed to explore, problematize and to challenge

gothic narrative. Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert further points out that Morrison revises the gothic narrative by “using African cosmology to resurrect the ghost of Sethe’s daughter” (73) and to “demonstrate the alternative cultural logics of the community and narrate the experiences of Africans during the Middle Passage” (Heinert 87), since resurrected *Beloved* supports African communal belief in reincarnation. However, if Gothicism is often associated with and understood as evil, monstrous otherness, haunting past and social injustice, the materialization and violation of *Beloved* offer the Gothic an occasion to release emotions and to unveil “the selfness” within the Other. Khair indicates the “negativity” embedded in the understanding of the Other:

The Other, in philosophical terms, is not necessarily just a negative image, or a shadow of the Self. Yet, the tendency in postcolonialism to see Otherness as simply a negative imputation by the European self is grounded in historical facts, because often the difference of the European from the non-European, real or imagined, was cast in the light of a lack, a deficiency, an abnormality of the non-European. (Khair 13)

Otherness in the reading of postcolonial discourse tends to be associated with negativity and abnormality. In her monologue, *Beloved* is represented both as a baby victim and as the black slaves from Africa, who later undergo a transportation to America, witnessing horrifying dead scenes during the Middle Passage. She however *voices* for the “sixty million and more” on slave ships the pangs among the undeniable and unrecorded truth of slavery, somehow in a way of spiritual release and rather a suggestion of affirmation when she narrates:

those able to die are in a pile I cannot find my man [. . .] the little hill of dead people [. . .] the men without skin push them through with poles [. . .] they fall into the sea which is the color of the bread [. . .] I see the bottoms of my feet I am alone I want to be the two of us I want the join [. . .] I am not dead [. . .] there is a house [. . .] Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me (249–52)

The unbearable death scenes and *Beloved*’s visceral desire for return suggest an expectation and hope for selfhood long repressed under colonial history. Here Morrison arranges an unusual monologue, in which the Gothic is intriguingly unmasked by making the one character, *Beloved*, represent the figures, trespassing on a realistic chronological time framework as “Sixty Million and More” during the Middle Passage and as the protagonist of the infanticide under slavery. She creates a fancy combination more explicitly of slavery by depicting the physical experiences during the ship transportation and by sharing the psychological fear of repression and longing for reunion. These occurrences picture an outrageous historical context and Morrison’s “non-linear narrative” (Raynaud 45) shows an overstepping among displaced historical truth and representative images. The heavy historical truth might provoke disturbance of readers’ emotion, yet the gothic violation in reality evokes violent sentiment and physical sensation when *Beloved* reversely predominates Sethe’s soul:

Sometimes [*Beloved*] screamed, ‘Rain! Rain!’ And clawed her throat until rubies of blood opened there....Then Sethe shouted, ‘No!’ and knocked over chairs to get to her and wipe the jewels away....*Beloved* bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when *Beloved* needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger *Beloved* got, the smaller Sethe became. (294)

Beloved, in seeming madness, presents herself a dramatic figure of the devil. She carries insatiable desire for revenge on her mother when “Sethe spit up something she had not eaten,” (286) which signifies “the way that *Beloved* has begun to possess [*Sethe*’s] body and soul” (Peterson 56), and this “ate up her life” (295). *Beloved* here has become “a witch, a ghost, a devil, or a succubus” (Harris 129) with her

domination of things around her. Trudier Harris explains Beloved and Sethe's corporal relations in this way:

Like a vampire feeding vicariously, she becomes plump in direct proportion to Sethe's increasing gauntness. Vengeance is not the Lord's; it is Beloved's. Her very body becomes a manifestation of her desire for vengeance and of Sethe's guilt (132).

In this light, the possession of Sethe's life by her daughter not only unveils one's visceral emotion and desire but also reverses the mother-daughter relations, and more importantly, it increases violent sensual perception and creates "a confusion of intense emotions and physical sensations" (Peterson 74). Beloved's desire appears to be a destructive and irrational power that attempts to take over Sethe's life and to exceed social boundaries. Fred Botting notes the conventional Gothic narrative in the aspect of excess: "In Gothic productions imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws" (Botting 3). Untamed and unstrained by her growing physical power and insatiable demand, the gothic figure, Beloved, evokes excessive, complex emotions and sensations beyond rationality and social proprieties even beyond human comprehension.

Revision of Conventional Gothic Narrative

This can be seen from Beloved and Paul D's sexual engagement as well as Beloved's violence against Sethe. At a simple level, Beloved and Paul D's sexual relationship, metaphorically, signifies Paul D's "need for recognition of and by an other in order to animate his dormant capacity for intimacy, to open his heart, which is rusted shut like a tobacco tin" (Bergner 132) when Beloved seduces him: "You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name" (137). Their consummation, though ghastly yet transformative, invokes Paul D's inner change with respect to intimacy, sensual perception, and his self-consciousness. This consummation wakes not only Denver but also Paul D as "a first step in initiating [both] into a social world of relational difference" (Fowler 22). By their coupling, reason, social propriety and moral law relinquish to sensuality. But Dennis Childs' interpretation is more thoughtful. Their sexual bond can be seen as the slaves, men and women, being packed, "horizontally pressed together and vertically stacked upon each other" (Childs 276) on slave ships. This

signifies an attempt on Beloved's part at recreating the mixing of man and woman that occurred aboard the slave vessel on something close to her own terms rather than those imposed by the slave trader. She desires a consummation of two "living" bodies rather than the commingling of the dead and "living dead" that occurred in the hold. (283)

At this point, Beloved's sexual desire and instigation for Paul D not simply means a transgression within a social context, but more importantly, in a political sense "an expression of how slaves attempted to fashion sexual agency, intimacy, and love out of conditions bordering on death" (283). Slaves' sexual desire is deformed and thus is presented by Morrison in a form of unconventional gothic description.

Furthermore, Morrison rewrites the protagonist's development in the conventions of gothic narrative. Beloved's later transformation into a devil-child releases her strong and violent sentiments in "torturing" Sethe. When Beloved makes Sethe repay for her murder, she, as rumor has it, "beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair" (Morrison 300) and in this manner she gradually "ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (295). Love and decorum here relinquish to evil revenge. The physical body of Beloved incessantly grows plumper after her sexual engagement with Paul D, and she is portrayed, mysteriously or not, as "a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling" (308). The final figure of Beloved is downright revised by Morrison in a gothic novel that her pregnancy implies a birth of living, as a sign of revivification of vitality, and a persistence of the dynamics in the cycle of nature and culture. This further suggests a

chance for the development of selfhood that has dwelled alongside on this gothic existence, *Beloved*, represented as otherness. The forthcoming “birth” of pregnant *Beloved*, symbolically and physically, foreshadows a new-born baby as a “rebirth” of individuality and selfness in direct contrast to the distorted selfness the fugitive slave women have long sustained. While *Beloved*'s portrait at the end of the novel bears a suggestion of optimism, the women of the community, however, perform an exorcism of the ghost, for *Beloved* is believed to be the resurrected ghost. In this moment, *Beloved*, seen as Otherness in need of being filtrated and excluded, represents how the Gothic is normally treated and shut out of the centre in gothic novel: exclusion, exorcism, and annihilation. Tabish Khair explains “how much of colonial literature, including Gothic fiction, tends to see Otherness as either absolutely opaque and hence only capable of genocidal confrontation, or simply as a difference waiting to be redeemed into the Self-same by civilization, conversion, education, capitalism” (Khair 17). But in *Beloved* Morrison rewrites and undermines the conventions of gothic narrative by having the Gothic resurrected, voicing for itself and restoring its individuality and selfhood.

Conclusion

As I've tried to illustrate the Gothic in association with Otherness above, it is explicit that the world of the Gothic is exposed as a response and “an interaction with the Other, who may complete us or tear us apart” (Khair 94), and the Gothic in *Beloved* reveals a pertinent situation. *Beloved*'s occurrence does not simply show the selfhood prevailing the movement of confrontation with the identity as an Other through the whole novel, but this existence insists on the implication of an irreducible presence experienced “as a valorization of emotion” (94), a way of expression through fierce sentiments. Therefore, gothic narrative, as a genre, discloses certain conceptions and beliefs; in a gothic narrative, rationality does not always address truth. That is, “the Gothic genre also suggest that some truth and thoughts are accessible through emotions; that rationality does not have a monopoly over the understanding of experience” (94). I suggest that the Gothic centered on the haunting power throughout the entire novel shall neither be qualified as a privilege of emotions against rationality and normality nor shall it be represented merely as a psychological confrontation of and emancipation from and mourning for inarticulate, repressed past. It seems that *Beloved* in the end tries to emerge from all chaotic contentions as a “Gothic heroine” to find herself disentangled from the enslavement and to get away from a long-existing ghostly figure, obtaining an elevated sense of selfness. Thus Morrison's most complicated character “[s]tanding alone on the porch” (Morrison 309), holds a smile and tends to have revived a spiritual new life with her resurrected body. This can be understood as a hint of freedom from eventual “reparation,” a term suggested by Dean J. Franco, which implies “a combination of psychical and spiritual, as well as material and political redress for wrong done to the injured party” (Franco 428). *Beloved* seems to eventually underwrite the traumatic and gothic contentions of healing, compensation and reconciliation, as well as to rewrite her resurrected body as an object in order to achieve an identity as a “subject,” which consists of her own selfhood. The gothic elements throughout the novel ultimately not only infer “the struggle to claim ownership of one's own self” (428), but also foreground the affirmation of selfhood and individuality.

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