

MAKING THE ABSENCE SHOUT: TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AS A PALETTE OF COLOURS

Tanuka Chatterjee
Research Scholar
Department of English
Faculty of Arts
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221005

Abstract

A story about individuals and their experiences of slavery, *Beloved* narrates the persistent foreclosure of working through the trauma of American slavery and its uncontainable significance for the African – American subject. However, Toni Morrison's synaesthetic vision lends dynamic hues to this neo – slave narrative. By buttressing and negotiating the issues of the trauma of slavery and the decimation of selfhood, which calls for a bleak and iniquitous backdrop, Morrison's fictional style serves to accentuate these hues. Her prose is imbued by a rich palette of colours which vivify her language beautifully. This paper is an attempt to delineate and explicate the riot of colours which brighten the canvas of *Beloved*.

Keywords: *Beloved*, colour, synaesthesia, slavery, trauma, communality

Beloved is set in 1873 during the Reconstruction Era, in the wake of the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the United States. In this novel of unspeakable horrors, Morrison confronts us with the irreparable and irredeemable harm done by what Margaret Atwood deems as “one of the most viciously anti – family institutions human beings have ever devised” (6), a system that sought to deprive human beings of what it is that makes them human. Morrison's writing style in *Beloved* – a historiographical structure simultaneously fixed and fragmented, oneiric and yet ever so firmly grounded in the material realities of black life during the Reconstruction – is evinced in the starkness and unspeakable incommensurability of the title itself. The ethical imperative that the novel sets forth is for one to recognize the immensity and terrifying reality of loss of selfhood, self-actualization and freedom. Her novels, spanning a literary career explicitly engaged in articulating black identity in the context of a dominant and encircling white culture, invite the reader to partake at many levels and at varying degrees of complexity. However, the most enduring impression is that of empathy and compassion with one's fellow human beings and the community at large. It is through this empathy that Morrison performs reclamation of slavery effectively.

The sordid representation of consequences of the incorrigibly and devastatingly powerful institution of slavery in the novel is further reinforced by the sepia tone of the evidently bleached canvas of *Beloved*. In fact, the dismal background of the novel is so pronounced that Morrison herself has observed that “[t]here is practically no color whatsoever in its pages, and when there is, it is so stark and remarked upon, it is virtually raw” (Morrison, *Unspeakable*, 397). The colourless canvas of the novel, however, is imbued principally by the colour red, which is employed quite conspicuously. The use of red in the novel is to depict the evils of slavery and negotiate the issues of the consequent trauma and the novel narrates the characters’ processing of their trauma through their individual interaction with this colour. Bast claims that redness, which can be read like a “text in itself” (1072) and of itself as well, becomes a complex trope of the trauma of slavery to stand in where verbal representation is simply not possible. The colour red chronicles the development of trauma from the event, to the subsequent voicelessness to the potentiality of healing, where Bast understands voicelessness as the “cognitive unavailability of traumatic memory” rather than verbal silence (Bast 1072). The vivid and numerous instances of the red colour tend to underscore the blood-red carnage and the blood spill that predominates in the narrative.

However, a cursory reading of the novel affirms the surprising amount of energy the text expends in portraying various colours. *Beloved* repeatedly invokes a delightful montage of colours. Green, blue, yellow, white, lavender, orange are some of the colours which make their vibrant presence felt on the drab canvas of the narrative. These colours represent and vividly portray intense moments of pleasure, gaiety, overwhelming beauty, indulgent luxury as well as potentialities of healing experienced and aspired to by the characters of the novel. Morrison employs these various colours as a symbolic tool to represent an idyllic, *free*, peaceful, graceful, happy and sanctified life, an altruistic empathy and compassion for one and all as well as heartfelt and harmonious involvement in family and community. These colours also attempt to convey a character’s hope and ardent desire for such a happy, carefree life which assuages one’s sense of self-respect and self-worth. In an interview with Elsie B. Washington, Morrison elaborated on the centrality of self-worth to enslaved Africans in America: “Those people could not live without value. They had prices, but no value in the white world, so they made their own, and they decided what was valuable” (Washington 235). That these colours further illustrate the sense of satisfaction, contentment and fulfilment these characters enjoy only after achieving this idyllic life is noteworthy; peace, serenity, hope, a peaceful potentiality for the future as well as a possibility of healing from the trauma which has engorged their lives and notions of selfhood are portrayed beautifully by the symbolic use of such bright and aesthetically pleasing colours. Morrison has maintained that, “For Sethe, when she finally falls in love, or thinks she is going to have a mate, suddenly the world takes on color” (Noakes, Reynolds 84).

However, the delightful presence of these colours is further reinforced by the withdrawing of colour which Morrison claims is necessary in order to lend credence and intense aesthetic pleasure to the various colours. One can *feel* the vivacity of these varied colours better against the stark backdrop of the novel. Morrison has explained this aspect in detail:

A lot of it [the colour] is the palette, the placing of color in the text. Or, the withdrawing of color. As in *Beloved*, for example, where everything is sort of colourless, sepia, I saw that bleached canvas. So that when color appears, it's wild. But, normally the color is withdrawn, for that reason, so that when it does appear, then it has a *momentous*, *heavy* and *theatrical* quality. (Noakes, Reynolds 84; italics mine)

This aspect has been exemplified beautifully in the text when Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home slaves, has trouble sleeping in the rooms of 124: “In Ohio, seasons are theatrical. Each one enters like a prima donna, convinced its performance is the reason the world has people in it. When Paul D had been forced out of 124 into a shed behind it, summer had been hooted offstage and autumn with its bottles of blood and gold had everybody’s attention” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 116). This riot of colours is subtly juxtaposed against the opening note of the novel which posits an unmistakable withdrawing of colour: “Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color” (4). The withdrawing of colour is further exemplified when Morrison describes the keeping room of Baby Suggs, communal mother and mother-in-law to Sethe, where she usually ruminated. Baby Suggs’s craving for some colour, something lively and animated that wouldn’t harm or have any ominous repercussions for anybody was underpinned by her dour surroundings:

. . . it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn’t any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-coloured, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool – the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild – like life in the raw. (38)

The ebullience of the colours employed in the narrative has been accentuated by the bleakness of its surroundings or the inveterate dour circumstances under which they are encountered.

In an interview by Elissa Schappell for *The Paris Review*, Morrison waxes eloquent:

...the slave population had no access (even) to what color there was, because they wore slave clothes, hand-me-downs, work clothes made out of burlap and sacking. For them, a colored dress would be luxurious; it wouldn’t matter whether it was rich or poor cloth . . . just to have a red or yellow dress. I stripped *Beloved* of color so that there are only the small moments when Sethe runs amok buying ribbons and bows, enjoying herself the way children enjoy that kind of color. The whole business of color was why slavery was able to last such a long time. It wasn’t as though you had a class of convicts who could dress themselves up and pass themselves off. No, these were people marked because of their skin color, as well as other features. So color is a signifying mark. . . It is a kind of luxury. We are so inundated with color and visuals. I just wanted to pull it back so that one could feel that hunger and that delight. (29)

This is evinced in the scene where Sethe, an escaped slave and the protagonist of the novel, along with her daughter Denver and Beloved, the spirit of the daughter she had been forced to slay when their previous owners came to repossess them, go into raptures buying “Bright clothes with blue stripes and sassy prints . . . yellow ribbons, shiny buttons and bits of black lace. By the end of March, the three of them looked like carnival women with nothing to do” (Morrison, *Beloved* 240). She is able to exult in the sheer pleasure afforded by these colours since the last colour she remembers noticing was the pink chips on the headstone of her daughter’s grave. This subtle and deliberate juxtaposition of the bright colours into the raw ambience of the novel lends a greater synaesthetic richness and intensity to the life-giving properties of Morrison’s language. The description of Sethe’s eyes as “fever-bright” (240) while

shopping for colour gains intensity and vibrancy when contrasted to her eyes and rather drawn countenance at the opening of the novel: “They were like two wells into which he [Paul D] had trouble gazing. Even punched out, they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held” (9). This is echoed by Paul D’s wildness of the eyes upon being manacled by the iron bit, an antebellum torture device.

The colour green, employed generously throughout the narrative, is represented as a source of pleasure, beauty, sanctity, companionship, security and a potentiality for healing the mind and body against the ravages of slavery. For Paul D, peace, assurance and trustworthy companionship resided in trees, particularly in the sylvan image of the dazzling green canopy of his tree Brother from Sweet Home. The majestic expanse of Sweet Home, the slave – holding plantation, was almost painful in its iridescent grandeur: “Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 6). Paul D attempts to flee Alfred, Georgia and escape to the North which is to him “Free North,” “Magical North,” “Welcoming, benevolent North” (112) which held an indubitable promise and solace of a free, safe and happy sanctuary and a peaceful and self – respectful life. A life completely removed from the personalized type of torture of the chains of slavery. To speak of iron here is to recall a classical ideal of manhood, intimately linked to the notion of a master race. Acting upon the communal and helpful instructions of a Cherokee remnant, Paul D judiciously follows the tree flowers scanning the horizon “for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world” (113). The alliance between the Cherokee and the escaped slaves echoes the real affiliations between Native American groups and enslaved and free African Americans. There are many historical instances of Native Americans and African Americans joining forces and resources to assist each other. Paul D witnesses a riot of colours as he follows the promised route to freedom from the reprehensible manacled torture of Alfred, Georgia:

. . . he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out, he headed out for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear. At last he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. Spring sauntered north, but he had to run like hell to keep it as his travelling companionship. (112)

The whip-scars on Sethe’s back, according to Amy, a young runaway indentured labourer, appear in the form of a ‘chokecherry’ tree: “. . . here’s the trunk – its red and split wide open, full of sap and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 79). Remarkable as the description might be, it posits the incorrigible and contemptible physical and visible legacy of slavery, attesting to the brutal dominance of white slave owners over enslaved African Americans. In the scarring, Sethe’s body becomes a site of particularly brutal kind of writing meant to encode black identity, to name flesh by assaulting flesh. However, Sethe’s ‘tree’ bears the fruit of multiple resonances which often suggest the scar as an emblem of communality, of Sethe’s interactions with other slaves. Wendy Faris focuses on the scar’s inveterate power to link Sethe with Amy Denver in an unusual relationship of female healing and companionship: “The curing powers of a female relatedness to nature are celebrated in the cobwebs Amy applies to what she calls the chokecherry tree on Sethe’s whipped back” (178). She proceeds to read the scar as a generational bond between Sethe, her mother and *Beloved*, observing that Sethe carries the family tree on her back. Faris maintains that Morrison’s portrayal of the lost mothers of African-American history inscribes indelibly the daughter’s usually reckless willingness to bear the signifying mark of the mother’s pain. Thus, colours

portray the idyllic days of carefree pleasure and frolic. When Sethe thinks of colours, she cannot help but reminisce about Sweet Home: “I remember the peas still has flowers. The grass was long though, full of white buds and those tall red blossoms people call Diane and something there with the leastest little bit of blue – light, like a cornflower but pale, pale. Real pale” (192).

Sethe visits the green – blessed wide open space cut deep in the woods – the Clearing where Baby Suggs preached to the black community of Bluestone Road – at the far end of a bright green corridor of oak and horse chestnut for peace, solace and comfort. This further reminds the reader of Sethe and Paul D’s vibrant green cornhusk bedroom which instills the same sense of comfort, security and pleasure in Paul D’s company as Sethe derives from the Clearing and Baby Suggs’s preaching of communal empowerment. Denver’s own refuge, which provided an overwhelming sense of pleasure, magnificence, protection, compassion and communality to Denver, was amongst the woods that rounded off the narrow field beyond 124 “hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring . . . stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 28). Its vibrant live green walls, comprised “fifty inches of murmuring leaves” (28) was hardly able to contain the effervescent emerald light which irradiated the little enclosure splendidly. Similarly, the placid evening on which Sethe gives birth to her little girl along the banks of the Ohio under a resplendent shower of silvery – blue starlight has been beautifully observed by Morrison: “Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river’s edge when the sunshots are low and drained” (84).

Baby Suggs, holy leads the rest of the black community of escaped and fugitive slaves in a spiritual gathering in the Clearing to mend the shattered lives of the newly freed and still seeking and Calls them to the Clearing to mend their spirits. Baby Suggs uses the complementary spiritual forces of 124 and the Clearing for a two-tiered communal initiation process, inviting the resolution of all conflicts and the unification of everything bifurcated. However, a life engorged and devastated by trauma and Sethe’s heinous choice between life as a slave and violent death that is almost the only choice slavery allows its victims wearies her down. Morrison avers, “Slaves are not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 209). Believing that she has let herself get too involved in life – that she has begun to feel that things might go well for her and her family, that she has let herself care and somehow has tempted God to smack her down because she has been presumptuous – she withdraws from life and devotes her time single-mindedly to “ponder color” (4) to the exclusion of everything else. Colours don’t accentuate the appalling trauma encapsulating her life nor remind her of the staggering number of people she has lost; it doesn’t lead to blood spill or infanticide: “Blue. That don’t hurt nobody. Yellow neither” (179). Thinking of colours is a luxury for her that she has been grievously deprived of her whole slave and freed life. Therefore, she craves for colour: “Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don’t” (4).

Morrison claims that “The orange patch on the quilt is like a gunshot” (Noakes, Reynolds 84). This immediately reminds one of the countenance of Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, who has been described as “indigo with a flame – red tongue” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 21). Baby Suggs’s craving for the two orange patches of the quilt as well as the colour lavender mitigate the forbidding neutrality of the keeping room both for her and its subsequent inhabitant, *Beloved*, who also gravitates towards a rich, fiery hue. Similarly, Amy Denver’s inordinate craving for the

luxury of some crimson coloured velvet is equally intense: “velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 33). The piece of Calico cloth from which Sethe was supposed to make a scarf for her daughter has been described as having the most pleasing colours, “a rose, but with yellow in it” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 163), a self-confessed extravagance and selfish pleasure for her. The diamond earrings gifted by Mrs. Garner, wife to the owner of Sweet Home plantations, to Sethe on her wedding made her believe that not all whitefolks were abominable and brutish; that white people were capable of human compassion, empathy and genial camaraderie with the slaves. The visage of the white cotton lisle dress Denver sees hanging on to Sethe in a posture of warm embrace signifies to Denver as being vested with ‘plans’ for the future. Planning for the future was a luxury the freed African American slaves couldn’t afford. The white bedding dress Sethe sews for herself for the night of her marriage incites the same intense sense of pleasure, extravagance, security and comfort to Sethe as the gray cotton dress prepared for her by Baby Suggs after she reaches 124, having given birth to Denver and having secured all her children from the clutches of the schoolteacher and other white slave – owners. Paul D experiences this same sense of almost indulgent luxury when he is introduced to some extravagant white cotton bed sheets by a woman in Wilmington he succeeds in bedding. These are, however, a far cry from the black lace dress *Beloved* is seen wearing once she emerges out of the river into Sethe and Denver’s lives.

The stairs and the railing in 124, painted luminous lightning white so that Sethe’s baby girl could crawl her way up to the second floor, days that had been filled with pure happiness and frolic, has been described as ‘lily –white’: “. . . a white staircase climbed toward the blue-and-white wallpaper of the second floor. Paul D could just see the beginning of the paper; discreet flecks of yellow sprinkled among a blizzard of snowdrops all backed by blue” (Morrison, *Beloved*, 11). The black community, designated as Bluestone Road, is like a sapphire, a jewel that forms in nature. The colour blue as an extravagance is evident when Denver steps into the beautifully furnished house of the Bodwins: “All around her was thick, soft and blue. Glass cases crammed full of glistening things. Books on tables and shelves. Pearl – white lamps with shiny metal bottoms” (253). Paul D finds Sethe disregarding the riot of the late – summer flowers, “Sweet william, morning glory, chrysanthemums” (270) outside 124 – grimly ensconced, as she is, under a “quilt of merry colours” (271). This quilt patched in carnival colours provides Sethe the same feeling of sombre luxury, complacency and security from the emptiness that wearies one’s marrow down that the quilt with the two orange patches provided Baby Suggs. Marking the departure of *Beloved* and the arrival of Paul D., this quilt designates the phase of Sethe’s gradual healing. Opening old wounds creates the conditions of the possibility of healing. She already knows the answer to her own unspoken question: “And if he [Paul D] bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (272). Like the patched covering, both Sethe and Paul D. will become mended – fragmented remnants being pieced together, or held together, into whole selves. In fact, the ending of Morrison’s story is actually indicative of another beginning, a movement toward Paul D’s suggestion for some kind of a peaceful and happy future together in each other’s company which would provide them a real possibility for healing from the trauma that has vehemently dominated their lives.

Morrison’s versatility is evidenced from her tactful portrayal of the characters’ absolute delight and pleasure at these colours even when a pall of redness and its connotations hang over them. Varying interpretations of the Sethe’s whip –scars point to the absolute necessity of finding a suitable metaphor for describing the physical suffering of the slaves. Being metonymic of the novel as a whole in so far as it rescues the slave body from commodification, it celebrates

the beauty of these marked bodies and also constructs a history of the body as the site of historically inflicted oppression and violence. Therefore, Sethe's scars assume a majestic leafy splendour, the cut throat of the little girl becomes a dazzling necklace; the iron bit Paul D is manacled with, a gruesome and personalized type of antebellum torture device, turns into "neck jewelry – its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air" (Morrison, *Beloved*, 273). Colours provide Baby Suggs the sole respite from the disempowering tedium of life brought on by the fact "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that comes to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and could think it up" (177). This leads Baby Suggs to seek refuge and derive solace and pleasure in thinking about the reassuring colour of things. Which goads Stamp Paid to fervently hope that Baby continues fixating on all the colours with the exception of red. *Beloved* remembers seeing Sethe joyously pick yellow flowers from their green leaves just prior to the arrival of the schoolteacher and Sethe's reckless attempt to save her children from him. The 'shameless', magnificent grandeur of Sweet Home overwhelms one and all even though it is essentially a slave – holding antebellum plantation.

For Morrison, colours are an integral part of her synaesthetic vision; a propitious merging of the visual and the linguistic accentuate the appeal of her fictional *oeuvre*. Morrison thinks in colour. By binding the everyday and the phantasmagoric together effortlessly, by letting words say so much more than they imply, Morrison doesn't fail to enlighten. If we listen attentively, we will see her rhythm, hear her vision and *feel* her colours.

Works Cited:

- Atwood, Margaret. "Haunted by their Nightmares." Rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. *New York Times Book Review* 13 Sept. 1987: 1. Print.
- Bast, Florian. "Reading Red: The Troping of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Callaloo* 34.4 (2011): 1069-1087. Print.
- Farris, Wendy. "Devastation and Replenishment: New World Narratives of Love and Nature." *Studies in the Humanities* 19.ii (1992): 171-82. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Print.
- . *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1989. Print.
- Noakes, Jonathan, and Margaret Reynolds. *Toni Morrison: The Essential Guide*. New York: Vintage, 2003. Print. Vintage Living Texts.
- Schappell, Elissa. "The Art of Fiction No. 134: Interview with Toni Morrison." *The Paris Review* 128 (Fall 1993): n. pag. Web. 13 June 2015.
- Washington, Elsie B. "Talk with Toni Morrison." *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994. 234–38. Print.