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**The memory and the reconstruction of postcolonial identities: Toni Morrison`s  
novel *Beloved***

**Abstract:** The purpose of this essay is to develop the idea of possible dissymmetry between the individual memory and the official history, by focusing on the novel *Beloved* of the Afro-American writer Toni Morrison. If the historical discourse of the black slavery is built upon the experiences narrated from the perspective of the dominant subject, and often passes under silence to the violence of these experiences, then the truth about the past cannot be simply reduced to the history. In fact, there is a memory preserved in the conscience of the people, fulfilled with the painful events from the past. The novel is about the necessity of memory in which the author sees a possibility for a slave to develop a re-appropriation of his own subjectivity. The memory has also the function to reconnect because it develops a new form of social organization in the novel: a civil society built upon sharing in opposition of the society of domination.

**Key words:** black slavery, post colonialism, memory, history.

Facing the consequences of black slavery, which left incurable traces in the consciousness of the colonized subject, consequently disrupting his ability to identify himself as a free individual even after the period of physical independence, is the core of one of the novels of Afro-American writer Toni Morrison, the novel *Beloved*<sup>1</sup>. Followed through the consciousness of many characters – former slaves, caught up in the new social situation of Cincinnati in the concrete historical period from the proclamation of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 by the period of the Civil War for abolition of slavery, the novel argues the profound dissymmetry that exists between individual memory and official history. If we agree that almost every historical discourse inevitably takes part of a precise dominant ideology and often leaves under silence the violence that form the dark side of the same experiences, than the truth about the past becomes resistant to its exclusive identification with history. It is true that the history of black slavery in America has left countless inscriptions of the terror experienced by millions of people, but those records were often presented by documented number of their lost lives. What remained unrecorded was referring to the more intimate sphere of these people, often filled with traumatic memories. Therefore, the author will specify that the task of the narrator is “to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate”, to “find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it”, to “fill the blanks that the slave narratives left, to part the veil that was so frequently drawn”, to “implement the stories that (she has) heard”.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the novel becomes a privileged area of questioning the memory as *profound dimension of the human existence*<sup>3</sup>. Hannah Arendt understood the memory as a defense from the threatening forgetfulness of the Western culture, just as the memory presented for her an opportunity to rethink the past through the discourse that accompanies the past keeping the individual in a condition of revolt against the automation of the human kind typical for all totalitarian regimes. In addition, the memory translated into text or narration can participate in creation of a meaning shared within a community, underlining the symbolic link that connects

the elements of the collective story. In the same way, the memory for Morrison has the function to reintegrate, which can also be read according to Mae Henderson in the word *remember*<sup>4</sup>. The verb *remember* has the meaning of re-memory, but it possesses also the meaning of re-becoming a member of a community.

However, one of the central issues that are being opened in the novel is the situation when the colonized subject, - as in this case are the characters of Morrison, - has psychologically interiorized the colonial discourse, that the capability to remember can be re-established only by finding alternative stories about the past events. Despite the representation of the traumatic experiences as stories that the characters would rather forget, the novel speaks of the necessity of memory in which the author sees the possibility for the slave to develop the re-appropriation of his own subjectivity. Morrison invokes the memory in many ways: through the stories that people tell after the official decolonization, through Sethe's effort to accept her part, through the apparition of the ghost of the dead child *Beloved* as materialization of the past. The memory is important for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, because it determines her ability to symbolize, to develop control over her own past. It has also the function of inter-human connection, because the accepted narration creates a new form of social organization in the novel: the civil community built upon sharing in opposition to the brutal governing based on domination.

### **Rethinking the binarity of the colonial discourse as beginning of a different memory**

In Morrison's novel, the discourse of the colonizer insists on the binary opposition between what signifies the culture and the nature. It re-actualizes the old Hegelian dialectic according to which the superiority of the master is confirmed by the animal nature of the slave, while the bestiality of the slave is a condition to recognize the civilization of the other. Several key figures in the novel *Beloved* are an embodiment of this distribution of qualities that actually rationalizes the violence or leads to the idea that the civilization can be formed only by suppressing the animality (in this case typical for the slave). The violence experienced by the slaves at Sweet-home comes from the figure of the Schoolteacher, presented as incarnation of the reason, the culture, the education, the hygiene, the restlessness. The Schoolteacher monitors each of the slaves' actions and as a result of his observations, he sustains his classes where the basic task is to make a list of characteristics and afterwards to divide the slaves' qualities in two columns: on one side their human traits and on the other the animal traits of the slave. "(Schoolteacher liked) how she mixed (the ink) and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about (the slaves) ... He commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what we said"<sup>5</sup>. To narrate the personal story with an own truth means to begin the revelation of the process of designation. When a strict differentiation between the human and the animals is being a basis on which the white man's law can be sustained, the creative speech typical for the free individual should be free from the pattern of binary oppositions. Therefore, the memory for Morrison has the task to put into question the valorisations of all canonically accepted oppositions: nature – civilization, conscious – unconscious, man – woman, black – white, human – animal, body – spirit...

Due to this definition of the slaves through animalisation, the memory in the novel has not only positive connotation to revoke the past, and many of the characters choose not to remember or to repress the emotions of their experiences. The memories of every character are filled with traumas that prevent the formation of their personal stories. There are numerous scenes in the novel that leave painful memory. Just one of these memories is the iron jaw that wears Paul D imitating a horse, his seven-month presence in the dark prison with

hundreds of slaves strung in chains. For Paul D, the repressed memory is the most certain way to erase what the slave is unable to confront. The evocation of the slaves who became victims of insanity after the tortures makes the whole image of the slavery. The black and white women who were raped (like Amy, Sethe's mother, Vashti) opens one more scenery of violation during the slavery as well. The memory becomes a torture for its protagonists, so in one of the internal monologues of Sethe, we read: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there."<sup>6</sup>

In the same way as the bodies and the labor of other slaves were determined by a prize, also Sethe's body is subject to designation by the Schoolteacher. As punishment for trying to escape, Sethe will carry the scars acquired from her flagellation on her back. The fact that the law is presented as an inscription on the body indicates that the force can hit even those areas of life not included in the system of symbolization: the human biology. Hence, the law becomes a measure that decides on the basic expressions of life; it has the exclusivity to decide on the issues of life and death. This stigmatization signifies that the slave woman's identity cannot be lived and constructed by herself, but must go through the process of identification by the Schoolteacher. On one side the figure of the master is able to translate all into pure discourse, while on the other side is all that the slave can live through, but not being able to name it.

The analysis of Hannah Arendt<sup>7</sup> suggests that one of the most serious violence that can be hosted on man is the explanation of his actions by his racial background. Here the parallel between the black slavery and the Jewish question could be stressed. Considering the case of the Judaism the author notes the willingness of the legal system to pardon certain criminal acts committed by Jews. The justification is that the propensity to such an act is characteristic of the race, so nothing can be done against such a determination. Indeed, this kind of pardon is the biggest threat to this breed. Because, if for the individual crime there is a punishment existing, the evil associated with the race leads to a certain justification of the race's extermination. Thus, the privilege turns into a curse. The identification of the evil with the animalism, the body or the race presumes that what demolishes the foundations of civilization is not a trait of individuals, but a predisposition of one specific race, indeed.

### **The Biblical references in the novel**

Beginning with the title which implies love, Morrison suggests that the memory should participate in some kind of re-evaluation that will set the forgiveness and the relation to the other against the cruelty of the law. Thus, in the opening dedication of the novel, Morrison makes an allusion to the Bible, especially on the epigraph from Romans 9:25, which speaks of the Yahweh's call addressed to the Israelites after their apostasy. The quote functions as a kind of inter-text, which should indicate the position of the author, who, in this novel speaks about the destiny of millions of people that lived slavery, making appeal for symbolic possession of their own history: "I will call them my people, which are not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people", there they shall be called children of the living God".

Apart from this comparison that preserves the meaning of the biblical text and applies it on the Morrison's novel, the inter-text points to a wider biblical context that confronts the Old with the New Testament. Namely, the mentioned text announces the replacement of the doctrine that judges, justifies or punishes the committed acts on the basis of already established law (doctrine typical for the Old Testament), with a new doctrine which is based on mercy and forgiveness, and whose instance of judgment is not the Law, but the Spirit. Mae

Henderson<sup>8</sup> emphasized that these two instances are materialized in the novel by two figures: the one of the Masters as a carrier of the law and the other of the spirit of Beloved. This will indicate for the narrator of this story a reconfiguration of the identity of the character, as well as reinventing of the collective memory of the black people.

### **The Tree as object of interpretation**

In order to set a different version of the memory, it is necessary to resort to reading to interpretation. Namely, Sethe carries scars on her back which are materialized traces of the memory that does not allow her spiritual peace. The flagellation that Sethe suffers at the property of Sweet-home leaves traces that resemble to a tree – a symbol that opens series of interpretations. The tree signifies the memory of living through its growth rings, but also the genealogy of one people, in this case the black people. In the ancient mythology, the tree is considered as a spiritual principle, while its vertical axis symbolizes the continuing relationship between the roots and the heaven. But at the same time, the scars are a negative sign of humiliation, placing slaves to an inhuman stage of life.

That is why the scars may become subject to a pluralistic reading: a cherry tree for the white girl who heals Sethe; sculpture for the black man Paul D, who visits Sethe after ten years of persecution and solitude. The way in which the scars could be read indicates the way in which the identity of each of these characters is defined in the codes of the culture: flowers for the white girl, symbolic and cultural product for Paul D. The paradox in this situation is that the finding of a personal narrative, - which is profoundly imbedded in Sethe`s skin as the bad memories are rooted in her consciousness – would represent a creation of a story free from the law`s oppression. Indeed, the signs on Sethe`s back are signs pressed by the master and her punishment is a kind of written discourse, which determines the differences between the two of them. But Sethe`s back cannot be interpreted by herself. She receives the stories only through the reading of the others. The real challenge for Sethe will be finding her own story.

### **The unresolved identity of Beloved**

As the significance of the tree is interpreted by the characters in accordance with their personal experience, Beloved will indicate something different to each of these characters. The novel is based on a true event from 1856 when Margaret Garner, a black slave woman, kills her children in order to protect them from bondage. Morrison takes this story, but changes it significantly, focusing on Sethe`s fragmented past and on her obsession with the committed crime, that keeps her in a persisting balance between culpability and psychosis. This psychosis is materialized in the anxiety that rules the house, and later will be presented by the incarnation of the ghost of the dead child: the girl who suddenly appears in the house. In fact, Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, leaves to Sethe a house “full of children`s anger”, broken mirrors, overthrown plates. Thus the house becomes a chronotope in which Sethe`s psychological hypertrophy is personified, while the heaviness of the memory that pursues her obtains a real form. When at the end of the novel Paul D talks to Stamp Paid about the strange young woman who settled in Sethe`s house, he says: “She reminds me of something. Of something I know, but I have forgotten”<sup>8</sup>. Those are exactly the same words that Freud<sup>9</sup> uses to describe the feeling of uncanny. The German word *unheimlich*, contains the term *heim*, which means home. The negation of the word in *unheimlich* describes the lack of feeling that someone stays on his own territory. The homelessness becomes the interior condition of the person who recognizes something inexplicable and strange, although close and experienced. The house number 124 in which strange events happen function as a metaphor for the state of

Sethe's spirit, in the same way as the tree symbolized the connection of her personal story with the history of her race. The way in which the violence is presented makes Sethe unable to form images of the past, as well as images of the future. Her criticism is focused on the figure of power that discharges the subject from his contain.

Beloved arrives to impose the confrontation with the past, which can no longer be ignored thanks to her. Although the first period of stay of Beloved is ideal and makes a compensation for the child's murder, few weeks later begins the repetition of the domination typical for the colonial situation. At the end of the novel, Sethe becomes a slave of the needs and demands of Beloved. The oppression gains a new form, because Sethe does not confront her past, but defines the actual situation as a debt to her past. The energy that Sethe invest in the nourishing of her daughter is a compensation for the taken subjectivity of the girl. Sethe tries not to repeat the violence she made by killing her daughter as a kind of a colonizer, but taking the role of the colonized subject once again.

Beloved represents actually the liberation of the desire that has been denied to slaves, but also a call to control this energy in the new society based on sharing. The text can be seen as a representation of what Freud calls the *return of the repressed*<sup>10</sup>, or repeating of the prime scene of trauma, because the novel is centered on the character of Beloved as a ghost of Sethe's dead child. The possibility to create a discourse for someone's past or for his experienced trauma, signifies for Freud a way for the individual to get rid of it.

Here the re-evaluation of the body that can be read as a contrast to the spirit and the culture in their cruel version also begins. In fact, the vital force of Paul D was reduced, as the bodies of so many black people were transformed in a physic force used for exploitation, but not as subject of pleasure. That is why Beloved does not represent a concrete person from the past, but she is a mirror in which each one of the characters can project hers or his suppressed ideas. The desire is the basic dimension that Paul D mentions about the boys at Sweet home, and also about Beloved. The story of the past for Sethe, the recovery from the loneliness of her other daughter Denver – are the conditions that Beloved makes possible. But soon, the accomplishment of the desire becomes destructive for each one of the characters – Paul D must run away, Sethe becomes a victim of Beloved who accumulates her demands and keeps Sethe in continual culpability.

In fact, Beloved heals all the scars that the slaves suffer from, but this condition does not last for long. Because the black community must become capable of controlling the desires of Beloved in order not to turn into their victim, reaffirming the animalistic image that was built in the eyes of the master. There is the possibility to create a symbolic speech that will help the individual to make a distance from the things that happened, and to repossess its own future against the terrorizing images from the past. Right here the memory takes part as a narration that relies on the confidence of the listener who does not condemn but can offer an understanding.

### **About the guilt and the forgiveness**

When Paul Ricoeur considers the question of memory, he emphasizes its crucial relation with forgetfulness and forgiveness: "Forgetting and forgiveness mean, separately and jointly, the horizon of all our research. Separately, insofar as they are each a separate issue: to forget the memory and loyalty to the past for the forgiveness of the guilt and reconciliation with the past"<sup>11</sup>. Taking the guilt as essential predisposition of the human nature, Ricoeur invokes the reconciliation that must accompany the culpability. The case would have remained outside the apories if true forgiveness was not confirmed exactly in the moments when its achievement is problematic, as in the case of unforgivable evils inflicted on mankind.

Morrison's novel opens the same ethical question, because the infanticide carried out by Sethe requires from us a different interpretation: not only to forgive instead of punishment, but to read in the act of killing a sign of greater humanity; in the act of heinousness – sign of motherhood. The violence that Sethe has done to her daughter was an answer to the violence of the Master. Or, while the teacher abuses his privileges, Sethe's action becomes a necessity: it stems from the lack of choice within the law. That's why Ricoeur sees the essence of humanity in leaving the circle of accusation and punishment in order to resort to the principle of sharing the stories through confession and forgiveness.

In the same way that Sethe had interiorized the discourse of the colonizer, Paul D and the black community condemns Sethe's acts without leaving any possibility of forgiveness. But, as the memory presents the connection of symbolic elements in one whole, also the individual should be included in the symbolic order of the new society. Because Sethe marks the national identity therefore her liberation marks the process of decolonization of the black people. The location of the novel's action in a period of decolonization points to a process of cultural formation that hasn't yet established moral values and social codes. The new community that represents Morrison should replace the power as an opportunity to rule with the other, with the power as an opportunity to be free subject living and share with others.

### **Motherhood as symbol of creation**

According to the psychoanalytic terminology, we can see that the re-evaluation that Morrison is trying to enforce concerns one phase of the child's psychical development which comes before the formation of the authority of the father (the period of Oedipus), which is the period when the identities of the mother and the child are presented as exchanging fusion. That is why the principle of mother – daughter is repeated many times through the novel, as symbol of memory, putting in the foreground the love instead of the interdiction.

Many critics argue over the question if *Beloved* is really representing the ghost of the dead child of Sethe, or if she represents Sethe's mother. But the story is ambivalent till the end and has two possible solutions. The woman who was responsible for breeding Sethe tells her that her mother was raped and strangled on a boat. In this case the scar that *Beloved* has doesn't have to be interpreted exclusively as a wound acquired by Sethe's act, but can mark the wound that was done to Sethe's mother. Although the motherhood is evoked in Sethe's narration, it indicates its absence. Sethe "didn't see her [own mother] but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo." "She never fixed my hair nor nothing," "She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember."<sup>12</sup>

This absence leaves room to think that perhaps *Beloved* is not only Sethe's child, but rather the return of the love that was not given to Sethe by her mother. Indeed, the attempt to constitute a personal consciousness is related to the valorisation of the love between the mother and the daughter, where we can read what Julia Kristeva calls "the first relation with otherness".<sup>13</sup>

The overcoming of the binary opposition slave – master is symbolically suggested by the threshold that separates life from death during the birth of Denver. The preservation of the life is directly related to the healing, that becomes possible because of the help of a white girl, suggesting humanity and sacrifice as a value that stands against slavery. The stereotypes have changes by the fact that it is a white girl, who is also a slave that offers assistance to Sethe. There are numerous relations in the novel that represent scenes of healing which are presented through the metaphorical relationship between mother and daughter, trying to make allusion on the relation on which the separation between Sethe and *Beloved* is focused. The white girl links the healing with the narration. She is described as a prolix person whose words make Sethe's pain supportable. Also, the white girl is the one who interprets the signs on Sethe's

beck. Baby Suggs who gives home to Sethe and Paul D whose arrival offers Sethe a comfort also participate in the interpretation of what Sethe is carrying as a sign system of torture on her beck.

“It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. 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 enquiries 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....”<sup>14</sup>

Mentioning the female characters, in this novel it is often spoken about the motif of the dress and its fabrication by Amy, Sethe. Beloved is also shown with a beautiful fabric, as the spirit that Denver has seen in the embrace of her mother was reduced only to a white dress. Baby Sags continuously search for the colors in the blanket made of multicolored squares. The dress or the cloth, almost always made of adjoining pieces updated the topic of African quilt, which represents a creation identical to the narration, although it is a return to more simple way of work, close to the folk tradition. The quilt replaces the story of the master, written by his ink. While the writing indicates the nomenclature of features, the narration is accompanied by love and healing, or offering the care for the others.

## Conclusion

Through this novel Toni Morrison sets the request for a new history that will be an intimate story experienced outside the limitations imposed by the discourses of power. The author resorts to alternative solutions that open the female experience, the black narratives, the stories about the right balance between the rejection and the evocation of the past, between the personal story and the experiences of millions of people who lived in slavery. The values of understanding and forgiveness become signs that reject the violence and the cancellation of the otherness, referring to a pluralistic reading and to a deconstruction of the reducing frames.

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Site of memory’ in William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton-Mittlin, 1987), 110-130.

<sup>3</sup> « La brèche entre le passé et le futur », préface à *La Crise de la culture*, Gallimard, coll. « Idées », 1972, p. 15 in Julia Kristeva. *Le Génie féminin*, tome 1: *Hannah Arendt*. Paris, Folio Essais, 2004, p.125.

<sup>4</sup> Mae G. Henderson. ‘Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: re-membering the body as historical text’ (1991) in *A practical reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. Edited by Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson. Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf.

<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Sur l’antisémitisme* (1973). Paris, Gallimard, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987, p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, *L’inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais* (1919), Paris : Gallimard, Folio, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 536 : « L’oubli et le pardon désignent, séparément et conjointement, l’horizon de toute notre recherche. Séparément, dans la mesure où ils relèvent

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chacun d'une problématique distincte: pour l'oubli celle de la mémoire et de la fidélité au passé; pour le pardon, celle de la culpabilité et de la réconciliation avec le passé ».

<sup>12</sup>Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987, p. 60-61.

<sup>13</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Seuil, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987, p. 58.

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