

THE ROLE OF BELOVED'S GHOST IN TONI MORRISON'S EXPLORATION OF SLAVERY IN 'BELOVED'

Mr. V.R. Suresh Kumar ¹, Dr. A. Arun Daves ²

¹ M.A., M.PHIL., Head & Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph College of Arts and Science, Cuddalore

² M.A., M.A., M.PHIL., Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jawahar Science College, Neyveli

Abstract

African American writers have exhibited a unique engagement with supernatural elements, particularly ghosts, not merely as conduits for Gothic themes, but as participants in an emerging genre known as the "story of cultural haunting." This study aims to explore the significance of Morrison's choice to employ a ghost as a medium to bridge past and present in her novel, "Beloved" (1987). Through this exploration, the research delves into Morrison's utilization of magical realism and the ghost's interactions with key characters like Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, as well as its ties to the African American community. The analysis highlights the dual impact of the ghost on both individual and collective levels. Specifically, it contends that Beloved's spectral presence embodies personal and communal histories, aligning with Morrison's conceptualization of the past. Moreover, the research examines how the ghost functions as a cultural agent, fostering the healing process for African Americans affected by the trauma of slavery.

Keyword: Toni Morrison, Beloved, Slavery, Magic Realism, Gothic Tradition, Supernatural Elements

Tales featuring ghosts are a common thread in diverse cultural traditions around the world. This spectral narrative tradition has deeply entrenched itself within both European and American literary canons. The incorporation of ghosts and their narrative roles has been a subject of discourse among writers for centuries. Often, ghosts serve as pivotal plot devices, propelling stories centered around malevolent apparitions seeking restitution or vengeance. A quintessential example is Hamlet's father's ghost in Shakespeare's "Hamlet,"

urging his son to avenge his murder. In contemporary literature, however, the role of ghosts has evolved beyond mere plot utility, gaining figurative and symbolic significance. Notably, within African American literature, ghosts have taken on a distinct purpose—reviving a poorly documented and partially erased cultural history. Kathleen Brogan introduces the concept of "cultural haunting," signifying the persistent inclusion of ghosts in African American narratives to actively redefine their historical connections. Brogan suggests that these narratives emerge during times of rapid, often traumatic change, fostering the reconstruction of social bonds and group identities [3]. Thus, the rise of cultural ghost stories by contemporary African American writers, exemplified by Toni Morrison, reflects a deliberate divergence from Gothic themes toward a genre aimed at recollecting and reimagining history unconventionally. In "Beloved" (1987), Morrison employs the ghost as a conduit linking personal histories with broader cultural contexts. The spectral manifestation of Beloved influences characters to confront forgotten pasts, acknowledge themselves, and their roles within the African American community. Consequently, the ghost's role as a bridge to history catalyzes the characters' personal growth.

This research endeavors to elucidate Toni Morrison's rationale for incorporating a ghostly presence in "Beloved" (1987). Morrison's contention is that ghosts facilitate the connection between past and present, fostering a cultural mechanism to reexamine history, analyze the present, and redefine the future. In this vein, the study explores the ghost's interactions with other characters, such as Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, alongside its link to the African American collective. The research underscores the ghost's impact on individuals associated with it, embodying the sentiment: "They can

touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do" [8]. Additionally, Morrison's implementation of magical realism within "Beloved" (1987) offers readers a profound exploration of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D's individual psyches.

Moreover, this study aims to demonstrate the ghost's dual influence on personal and collective levels. Lastly, it probes the ghost's cultural role in the healing process for African Americans who bear the scars of slavery's trauma. Embedded within Morrison's literary works is a keen awareness of the necessity to confront a painful past and strive toward personal and communal healing [9]. Morrison's conceptualization distinguishes between a private past shaped by individual agency and a collective past inherited through family, community, nationality, and faith. This research examines how Beloved's ghost traverses between these two dimensions of the past, serving as a catalyst to recall personal histories while simultaneously invoking the collective memory of African Americans' ancestral suffering during slavery. Morrison's endeavor to endow the ghost with a sense of reality is pivotal to achieving this objective.

African Americans have borne the enduring burdens of slavery, their souls forever marked by its indelible imprint. This historical legacy continues to reverberate through their daily experiences. Morrison identifies slavery's roots deeply intertwined with the African American historical narrative and perceives her authorial responsibility as an inquiry into this past. She aptly encapsulates her role as reimagining and shedding light on the past's unexplained or unclear elements—making the past simultaneously haunting and resurfacing [15]. Morrison recognizes the dual facets of the past: both its weighty burdens and its transformative blessings. She decries the culture's tendency to either overlook or romanticize history, emphasizing that a true reckoning with the past remains lacking [8]. Morrison maintains that a connection with ancestors is essential for African Americans' continuity [8]. Her works consistently depict the past as an ever-present specter, influencing and tormenting the present and future. Morrison's conviction underscores the importance of revisiting history as a precursor to living in the present. The trilogy comprising "Beloved" (1987), "Jazz" (1992), and "Paradise" (1998) collectively grapples with the historical

legacy unique to African Americans, with "Beloved" centered around slavery's aftermath and immediate consequences.

Morrison's portrayal of African American history, particularly slavery, emphasizes the necessity of memory as a double-edged sword. While acknowledging the horror of the past, she advocates for a memory that is constructive and non-destructive [12]. Morrison perceives slavery's memory as an ever-present ghost, profoundly affecting the present and future of African Americans. Sharpe aptly notes that slavery's stories, particularly those of enslaved women, remain underexplored, leading to their improper burial. However, this inadequate burial does not render these narratives irretrievable [14]. Morrison anticipates slavery's return as a spectral presence, driven by its absence in the collective memory of her people. Despite the pain of revisiting the past, Morrison maintains that remembering is essential for African Americans' healing and progress [8]. She challenges conventional historical documentation, contending that such accounts are often biased, and do not capture the true essence of African American history [14]. Morrison's belief in the potency of fictional narratives to unearth the interior lives of slaves transcends the limitations of official documents. This conviction finds resonance in "Beloved" (1987), where textual and visual representations fall short of conveying authentic experiences [9].

The foundation of a ghost story rests on key elements such as the setting and the presence of supernatural phenomena, which significantly contribute to the central theme of the narrative. In this context, one can posit that Toni Morrison's "Beloved" (1987) initially follows the conventions of a traditional Gothic tale. The setting of 124 Bluestone Road, described as "spiteful" and brimming with an infant's malevolence, aligns with Gothic sensibilities [9]. The house itself embodies an intriguing dualism—it is inhabited by the living echoes of the departed, and it possesses human-like attributes, weeping, sighing, trembling, and even succumbing to fits [9]. Notably, when Sethe's sons flee the household, the atmosphere is palpable with the house's animosity, propelling their hasty escape [9]. This evocative setting reinforces the sense of "Beloved" (1987) as a ghostly narrative. Supernatural elements also feature prominently, as evidenced from the outset. The reader

encounters a poltergeist, symbolizing a ghost causing disturbances but never causing harm—a manifestation of Sethe's infant daughter's ghost [9]. This ghost, her deceased baby, orchestrates playful pranks on the household, particularly the male members, seemingly in a bid to expel them:

Sethe's sons, Howard and Buglar, vanish by the time they turn thirteen, fleeing in response to cues—a shattered mirror in Buglar's case and tiny handprints on a cake in Howard's [9]. The trajectory of their departure is of no consequence to Morrison, as her Womanist perspective emphasizes the valorous efforts of African American female protagonists like Sethe and Denver. This focus on heroic resistance rather than escape or flight contrasts with conventional narratives. Both Sethe and Denver courageously confront the ghost, seeking to comprehend its motives through a dialogue rather than an exodus [9]. Their attempts are driven by a desire to decipher the ghost's intentions:

United in purpose, Sethe and Denver grapple with the mysterious presence that afflicts their lives, enduring upset slop jars, smacks on the backside, and sour gusts of air. They comprehend the source of this turmoil as clearly as they grasp the essence of light [9].

Sethe is acutely aware of the ghost's yearning to understand the circumstances leading to her tragic end and is prepared to offer an explanation. Unfortunately, Paul D's arrival interrupts this attempt at understanding. The vacuum left by Sethe's sons' departure is filled by Paul D's arrival, resembling a paternal figure. Raised within an African American culture steeped in the belief in ghosts, Paul D recognizes the presence of a specter. He draws parallels between the baby ghost and a headless bride haunting the woods near Sweet Home—a figure from his past [9]. Similar to Sethe and Denver, Paul D acknowledges the ghost's existence, remarking, "You've got company... What kind of evil have you got in here?" [9]. Rooted in a cultural legacy that comprehends ghosts' motivations, Paul D deduces that the ghost seeks something from them [9]. His attempts to banish the ghost are successful, leading to a transformative manifestation. The ghost metamorphoses from a spectral, unseen presence into a corporeal being—a "real" ghost in the modern sense, robust, tangible, and insistent [9]. This transformation

aligns with Dorothy Scarborough's characterization of modern ghosts—more robust, vigorous, and lifelike than their earlier counterparts [13].

The spectral presence of Beloved's ghost serves as a literary device through which Morrison expresses her connection to her cultural heritage. Bani Younes contends that Beloved's arrival serves as a technique for Morrison to establish a link between past and present, offering a metaphorical embodiment of various roles within the narrative [2]. Morrison's upbringing on ghost stories underscores her affinity for the supernatural, a trait she views as integral to her heritage [10]. In an interview with Mel Watkins, Morrison openly acknowledges her belief in ghosts and their role within her cultural legacy [16]. Within African American heritage, ancestral ghosts of those lost to slavery are believed to haunt the living. This concept is evident in "Beloved" (1987), where the African American mindset is pervaded by spirits. As per Morrison's narrative, African Americans frequently encounter these spirits due to their belief that "people who die tragically do not remain in the earth" [8]. The African American experience is perceived as laden with spirits, with homes resonating with the grief of departed individuals [8]. Consequently, the belief in ghosts and the supernatural is deeply ingrained within their heritage.

Morrison leverages this cultural belief and employs ghosts within her novels for specific purposes. Brogan emphasizes that authors like Morrison utilize ghosts to "reimagine a fractured, partially erased history, looking to a re-envisioned past to redefine their future" [3]. This notion aligns with Morrison's inclination to explore this tradition. Furthermore, she employs the ghost of Beloved as a vehicle to resurrect the historical memory of the atrocities inflicted upon African Americans during slavery. The presence of Beloved's ghost illustrates how history's specter persists even in the absence of conscious awareness. Gordon aptly notes that the ghost serves as a conduit for political mediation and historical memory, highlighting not only its presence but also its symbolic significance [7].

Toni Morrison's incorporation of Beloved's ghost raises a complex issue concerning the readers' interpretation of the story's authenticity. The presence of Beloved's ghost blurs the line between the supernatural and

historical reality, challenging Morrison's ability to maintain a balance between the conventions of a ghost story, which often involve superstition, and the imperative of presenting her novel as rooted in historical fact. According to Morrison, Beloved's ghost represents the boundary between reality and the supernatural, past and present, life and death. In her conversation with Marsha Darling, Morrison articulates the intricate interplay between historical facts and fantastical elements within "Beloved" (1987). Thus, for Morrison:

Beloved is, on one hand, a literal representation of what Sethe perceives her to be—a child returned from the dead. She must function as such within the text. Simultaneously, Beloved embodies another type of death, one that is corporeal rather than spiritual—the survivor of the factual, historical trauma of slavery. She speaks a traumatized language of her own experience. [5]

When Beloved's ghost materializes in the form of a woman emerging from the water, the boundaries between reality and fantasy become increasingly indistinct. This embodiment of Beloved presents a paradoxical fusion of realities, combining baby-like characteristics with the stature of a grown woman—an enigma that defies straightforward categorization. The descriptions further contribute to the confusion, as Beloved's ghost is described as having a new, flawless skin and a slim frame, yet moving with the weight and gait of someone older [9]. This ambiguity blurs the boundaries between realms, underscoring the spectral nature of Beloved's existence.

Morrison uses the technique of magical realism to navigate the complex relationship between reality and fantasy, allowing Beloved's ghost to exist on the threshold between these worlds. Magical realism, characterized by the interweaving of the extraordinary with the ordinary, facilitates the coexistence of the real and the supernatural. Beloved's ghost hovers between these realms, representing a bridge connecting past and present, the living and the dead. Morrison's application of magical realism enables her to explore these themes without completely severing the ties to historical authenticity. The ethereal presence of Beloved's ghost acts as a conduit for negotiating the multifaceted

relationship between the real and the fantastic, providing a narrative space in which both can coexist.

Beloved's ghost significantly influences the main characters of the novel—Sethe, Denver, and Paul D—as well as the African American community at large. The ghost's impact is both personal and collective, evoking deep introspection and reflection on historical and individual experiences.

The arrival of Beloved's ghost serves as a catalyst for Sethe's confrontation with her past, specifically her traumatic act of killing her own child. Sethe's initial recognition of Beloved as her resurrected daughter prompts a revisitation of her painful memories. Beloved's presence compels Sethe to confront her unspeakable past, ultimately seeking reconciliation with her actions and the ghosts they have left behind. Sethe's personal journey of remembering, acknowledging, and seeking resolution parallels the larger African American struggle to confront and acknowledge the historical trauma of slavery.

Denver, as the embodiment of the future, is influenced by Beloved's ghost in a different manner. Through her connection with the ghost, Denver transforms from a reclusive, isolated individual to an active participant in her community. Beloved's ghost serves as a catalyst for Denver's reintegration into society, prompting her to reach out to others and seek help beyond her home.

Paul D's relationship with Beloved's ghost is one of the most intricate in the novel. Initially, Paul D's understanding of Beloved's presence is grounded in realism, and he interprets her as a real, traumatized woman. However, as the narrative progresses, he comes to recognize her as a ghost and becomes increasingly aware of her influence over Sethe and the household. Beloved's power to evoke suppressed memories in Paul D is a testament to her role as a bridge between past and present, reality and the supernatural. The interactions between Paul D and Beloved's ghost lead to his own self-discovery and a reckoning with his personal history, paralleling the larger theme of African Americans confronting their collective history.

Beloved's ghost impacts the African American community by prompting a reconsideration of Sethe's

actions and a collective reflection on their shared history. The community's interpretation of Beloved's ghost as the embodiment of Sethe's guilt and trauma reflects their own complex relationship with the legacy of slavery. As they rally to support Sethe and confront her past, the community members are also acknowledging their own history and the unspoken pain and suffering endured collectively. Beloved's ghost symbolizes the unresolved trauma of slavery that haunts the African American community and underscores the importance of acknowledging and confronting this painful history.

In conclusion, "Beloved" by Toni Morrison expertly employs the presence of Beloved's ghost as a profound metaphor representing the enduring legacy of slavery within African American history. Morrison skillfully utilizes the ghost as a symbolic embodiment of the unresolved past, a haunting reminder of the anguish and suffering endured by generations of African Americans. Through a skillful blend of Gothic elements and magical realism, Morrison constructs a narrative that seamlessly navigates both the supernatural and historical realms. This innovative approach allows her to navigate the intricate interplay between history, memory, and identity within the African American community.

Morrison's portrayal of Beloved's ghost serves as a potent commentary on the enduring reverberations of slavery and its profound influence on the present and future. The ghost becomes a conduit for confronting and reevaluating suppressed and painful historical aspects, both on an individual level for characters like Sethe and Paul D, and on a communal level for the wider African American community. The ghost catalyzes self-discovery, healing, and the communal acknowledgment of shared historical experiences.

The novel's utilization of magical realism provides Morrison with the means to bridge the gap between the tangible and the metaphysical, effectively blurring the boundaries separating reality from the supernatural. This stylistic choice underscores the inherent connection between the past and present and underscores the imperative of recognizing and confronting historical trauma. Morrison's inventive narrative approach not only illuminates the haunting aftermath of slavery but also honors the fortitude and resilience demonstrated

by the African American community when faced with adversity.

"Beloved" beckons readers to engage with the intricacies of history and its enduring consequences for individuals and societies. Through the spectral presence of Beloved, Morrison delivers a poignant exploration of the ongoing quest for comprehension, healing, and reconciliation. The novel's significance extends beyond its historical context, embracing universal themes of memory, identity, and the potent capacity of storytelling to confront painful truths and contribute to shaping a future marked by equity and compassion.

WORKS CITED

- [1] Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann (ed.). *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003. Print.
- [2] Bani Younes, Moayad. "History, Identity, Trauma and Narratives in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in relation to 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM)." MA Thesis. Södertörn University / School of Culture and Communication, 2016. Print.
- [3] Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*. University Press of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- [4] "American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographer." *College English*, vol. 57, no. 2, Feb. 1995, pp. 149-165. National Council of Teachers of English. DOI: 10.2307/378807. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378807>.
- [5] Darling, Marsha. "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." 1978. In Taylor-Guthrie, Danille (ed.). *Conversations With Toni Morrison*. UP of Mississippi, 1994, pp. 246-254. Print.
- [6] Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*. Routledge, 1994. Print.
- [7] Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- [8] Armitt, Lucie. *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic*. Palgrave, 2000. Print.
- [9] Mori, Aoi. *The Womanist and Toni Morrison: The Reversionary Recovery of Archetypal Mothers and Their Stories*. Thesis (Ph. D.), State U Of NY At Buffalo, 1994. Print.

- [10] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Knopf, 1987. Print.
- [11] "Behind the Making of the Black Book." *Black World*, Feb. 1974, pp. 86-90. Print.
- [12] "'Living Memory': Toni Morrison talks to Paul Gilroy." *City Limits*, March 31-April 7, 1988, pp. 26-27. Print.
- [13] Rice, Alan. *Creating Memorials Building Identities, The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*. Liverpool University Press, 2010. Print.
- [14] Scarborough, Dorothy. "Modern Ghosts." Peter B. Messent (ed.). *Literature of the Occult*. Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1981, pp. 105-116. Print.
- [15] Sharpe, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. U of Minnesota P, 2003. Print.
- [16] Upadhyay, Purva. "The Concept of Nostalgia in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities, IJELLH*, vol. IV, issue III, March 2016. Print.
- [17] Watkins, Mel. "Talk with Toni Morrison." In Taylor-Guthrie (ed.). *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. University Press of Mississippi, 1994, pp. 43-47. Print.