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SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED AND SONG OF SOLOMON*

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**Prabal Jagadeesh
Roddannavar**

Ph.D Research Scholar Karnataka University, Dharwad

ABSTRACT

Unlike other black writers of her contemporary, Toni Morrison maintains her unique style of writing. What makes her stand out of the crowd is her love for the past, the history of the black. Her characters speak the untold and forgotten history. Like Mahasweta Devi, the Indian writer and activist who believed in writing the history from below, Toni Morrison does also try to retrieve the black people's history. In one of her interviews, she says it clearly, "... the presence of the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours." (DiPace 1994) This is what Morrison achieves in her *Beloved and Song of Solomon*.

Toni Morrison uses history and memory to recreate the past of 1873 in *Beloved*. Morrison resembles a lot in her work with Mahasweta Devi, the Indian writer and activist. She too draws her characters from real life. Sethe, the major character of the novel *Beloved*, is based on Margaret Garner, a former slave who tried to escape but ended up killing her child to free her from slavery when traced by her owner. (2-3)

Beloved is a horrific record of former slaves. It picturizes the conflict that arises in the mind of the slaves when they are freed at last. Their haunting past disturbs their present life and makes their future uncertain. It is only after their acceptance of past, they are freed to think of their future. Morrison deliberately creates such kind of situation where her black characters are not allowed to move forward to the future unless they know their history; For Morrison, American history will be completed only when the forgotten history is written. This is evident in both her *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. (3)

Sethe, in *Beloved*, faces a situation, where a school teacher, to give an example of animal traits, describes Sethe. Sethe, felt lost her identity, begins to see her 'self' in her children, who, infact, have lost their identity too in the world of slavery. Denver, the sister of Beloved, tries to find her identity in Beloved. Denver's grandmother, Baby Suggs, searches her identity in the past, where she could neither be a daughter, nor a sister, or a wife or a mother; she could not be any one of them in the haunting world of slavery. Sethe, like Margaret Garner, escapes to free herself and her children from slavery. When learns she will be caught and taken back to the world she has left, Sethe, not wanting her daughter to be a victim like her, kills the little child. A noticeable point, here, is Sethe's 'act' of killing her child. 'Killing' works as an 'agency' for a subaltern woman to speak to her oppressors. The fact is a subaltern woman speaks to her oppressor. Sethe's act, though non-vocal, is a strict 'no' to slavery. Morrison leaves no stone unturned in recording 'the history from below'; the act of killing is well picturized in *Beloved*. This is why Morrison stands different from her contemporary writers. (4)

A liberated slave Paul D, unlike other subaltern characters: Aunt Phyllis, Halle, and Jackson Till, tries to be himself. Denver, unlike Sethe, loves her past though she doesn't know much. Denver, in the novel, unfolds the Afro-American slave history. Hence, she also acts as a subaltern historiographer. (4)

Successfully, Morrison reconstructs the Afro-American slaves' history through Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs and other subaltern characters. The uniqueness of Morrison is she gives hardly any space to the white characters in her writing. Her black characters are built huge compared to her white, who more often deserve the negative side in Morrison's writing world. As Morrison says, it is important to know the emotional status of a subaltern and she does it through accessing the psyche of Sethe. Being aware of her 'subaltern position', Sethe tries to do something about her situation that is to liberate herself and her daughter from the constructed 'other'. To do so, she escapes from her owner. Ultimately, when she learns it is impossible to change her

'subaltern position', she shows resistance against her oppressors by killing her own daughter, refusing the continuity of the slavery. These kinds of acts are bold historical subaltern voices which have to be documented. That is what Morrison does in her writings. (5) Like Mahasweta Devi's subaltern characters are strong willed and stand against their worst situations, Morrison characters too are strong enough to stand against their oppressors. As Devi believes in documenting even the slightest protest done against the mainstream, Morrison too takes care of such kind of historical events in documentation. (Hirpara 2016)

Beloved, the dead daughter of Sethe, does the job of the subaltern historiographer. She brings with her the past. It is only after her entry, the life of the survivors of the slavery gets disturbed. They feel relieved and think of moving towards future only when they recognize her; symbolically, it is the acceptance of the forgotten history, the history of the slaves, gives justice to the black community. What Morrison would like to say is without the history of the subalterns, the American history remains incomplete. The unwritten history should be rewritten.

Song of Solomon is again another novel of Toni Morrison wherein she tries to reconstruct the 'history from below' as she has already done it in her *Beloved*. Here in this novel, the history is retrieved through Milkman based on the multiple-histories that he hears from many people. (81)

Milkman through his community collects the authentic information and fills the gaps in his family history and rebuilds it. Circe provides him with some insights of his family history which he had been looking for with little knowledge collected from his father and Pilate. (82)

Song of Solomon that Milkman hears is actually an oral song which plays a significant role than any documented history. It is through this song, Milkman discovers his family history which had been blurry for him for a long time. Now he gets the clear picture of his own people. This is where Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison resemble each other in their writing style and their dedication towards reclaiming the subalterns' history. The subaltern historiographers who speak of writing the 'history from below' can clearly witness how these two writers give it a try.

In this novel, like Denver and Beloved in *Beloved*, Milkman acts as a representative subaltern historiographer who goes in search of the unknown history, the history he never gets in the form of writing, but only orally; whatever he learns from the people comes only in the form of oral narration and memory based and, though oral, it is vital to the situation in which the subalterns are living.

Morrison aims at providing the Afro-Americans with the history, the history of the marginalized recovered through 'rememory', which is ignored or intentionally suppressed. And this act of re-writing the history reminds the value of the presence of the blacks in American history, without them the written history remains incomplete forever.

The restless hunt for the history by Milkman represents the Afro-Americans restless memories of being victims to the racism. Looking into the past is not at all bad to the blacks as it exposes the shallowness of the whites and fills the blacks with pride that how their subaltern ancestors fought back against the hegemonic power structure. (84)

Milkman in the novel is neither oppressed nor racially discriminated; he can't just go together with his people. He feels his identity is under threat and has to find out, and he finds it through his ancestral history when hears the "Song of Solomon". (84)

In *Song of Solomon*, time plays a very important role. As we see in Morrison's *Beloved* where the characters can't think of their future without looking at their past, here as well Morrison doesn't allow her characters move forward without recalling their past. Morrison is obsessed with bringing the past to the present and, after its acceptance, she lets her characters think or move to the future. This is what absolutely vital in documenting the 'history from below'. Milkman is made to stuck with his past; it is only after he manages to retrieve his family history, Morrison relieves him from the burden of past.

At the end of the novel, Milkman leaps toward Guitar and this scene is left to the readers to interpret by themselves. The leap scene occurs only after Milkman's realization of history which signifies that after looking back at the history, though terrific it might be to face off, provides us with enough strength to stand against our oppressors. As Milkman has learnt his self identity through history, it doesn't matter to him whether he lives or dies; he can now fight and be in one of the oral histories like Solomon.

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