

Morrison's *Beloved*: An All-Encompassing Representation of the Gothic

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Abstract: *The objective of this paper is to explore the presence of gothic elements in the novel Beloved (1987). The purpose of gothic story often is to shock and sensitize the audience. Toni Morrison's Beloved is considered a representative of gothic novel, since it involves the gothic elements under the background of slavery. The gothic novel form has been one of the means through which Morrison addresses her concerns regarding factors of life, mainly social and cultural as well as individual. In exploring the way Morrison uses the gothic elements, she unfolds a new realm of narration, in which the tale of the supernatural is revealed through disconnected time framework and unusual happenings. The gothic elements speak of the unspeakable, incredible things like the presence of ghost and its manifestation. Morrison uses techniques that are derived from the Gothic period to master her story of Sethe, a former slave, who is haunted by the ghost of her own murdered daughter Beloved.*

Keywords: gothic, slavery, supernatural, sensitize, shock

1. Introduction

The term Gothic Fiction broadly refers to stories that combine elements of horror and romanticism. The Gothic Fiction often deals with supernatural events occurring in nature that cannot be easily explained or over which man has no control. And it typically follows a plot of suspense and mystery. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is widely considered an example of gothic novel. It represents the gothic elements under the background of slavery and racism. The novel follows the convention of fear and horror in the light of supernatural occurrence. Both the ghost and its incarnation together offer Morrison the occasion to investigate the unspeakable truth of such compelling sufferings inflicted upon Sethe and Beloved under the burden of slavery which is too painful to endure. Morrison unfolds a new realm of narration. She narrates tale of the supernatural through disconnected time framework, and among disintegrated facts and images.

2. Analysis

Gothic Fictions are the stories written in the style popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. They describe romantic adventures in mysterious or frightening surrounding. When one speaks about the gothic elements, one has to understand that Gothicism is a particular genre in English, mainly characterized by a gloomy and mysterious atmosphere surrounded by degeneration and decay. Blessing Diala-Ogamba argues that Gothicism creates terror and suspense for readers. In her work "Gothic Elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*" she writes, "The term Gothicism is not new in literature. It is a genre that creates terror and suspense for readers" (410). Elements of gothic literature include gloomy atmosphere, supernatural beings or monsters (ghosts, vampires, zombies, giants), romance, a castle or mansion, distress, intense emotions, horror and terror, an unlikely hero, a sinister villain, murder or death, decay, and isolation. Gothic elements work together to create a setting showing a fallen world, one where traditional elements, such as a castle that would evoke thoughts of power and success, are used to demonstrate the opposite and appear in a form of decay or ruin. Regarding

gothic elements Jerrold E. Hogle in the "Introduction" of the book *The Cambridge Companion To Gothic Fiction* states:

. . . a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story. (2)

Gothic tale usually takes place in an antiquated space, which is associated with some secret from the past that hunt the characters. Gothic elements are used in novels to create a feeling of dread and mystery.

The conventional gothic narratives usually end with the predictable destruction or repression of the ghost. But in *Beloved*, the situation is different. On the contrary, the novel *Beloved* begins with the supernatural disturbance in the real world at the very beginning. There seems to be a presence of an invisible being inside the house. Hogle further writes, "These haunting can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) . . . to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view" (2). In *Beloved* the ghost seems to be baby's ghost whom Sethe had earlier murdered. The intervention of the baby ghost creates problems for everyone. The ghost appears to be breaking and shaking the things in the house and causes everyone's private uneasiness and anxiety. The members living there face frequent disturbance. In this sense, the gothic manifestation emerges and is recognized as a mysterious, uncanny and even detestable presence.

The first place depicted to be haunted by ghost in the novel is 124, Bluestone Road. Sethe's two sons Howard and

Buglar cannot stand the terror caused by the ghost. They get horrified so they flee. As the narrative reveals:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children . . . Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old-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 wait to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in the heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. (3)

After living in the scandalous house marked with the invisible being for a few years, the two boys, Howard and Buglar, flee in dread. The other members of the family, however, treat the supernatural intrusion with either indifference or disdain. Since 124 is a source of the gothic atmosphere, Morrison keeps this place within the subjective focus. She intends to put more emphasis 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 harassment of the ghost.

Holding another view, Baby Suggs also ignores the ghost's presence. He scolds Sethe for not being indebted to the annoying presence which reminds her of her lost children. Sethe and Denver's 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. As it is stated in the novel:

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. (18)

When Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs feel the gothic disturbance, they immediately know that it is the return of the murdered baby girl. They show indifference to the situation. Paul D also feels this disturbance. In the beginning it becomes difficult for him to understand anything. But later when he knows the reality he becomes restless. He begins to think about the way to expel the spirit from the house. Eusebio L. Rodrigues opines that Paul's arrival creates motion in the narrative. In his work "The Telling of *"Beloved"*" he writes, "Paul's arrival sets the story in motion. Outraged by the spiteful persecution of a "haunt" that resents his sudden irruption into a house it has taken possession of, Paul attacks it and drives it out" (153).

It seems that fear, abomination and annoyance are the primarily negative feelings for the supernatural intervention. The manifestation of the ghost contributes to grotesque plot and horrid atmosphere. It creates disappointment and loathing of the characters, except Denver, who anticipates her dead sister's companionship, carrying with "a vague smile on her lips" (18). It is the existing, gothic atmosphere in the novel.

For the most members of black community, the baby ghost is simply seen as evil. They feel disturbed by its frequent presence. The ghost in the novel, unlike the gothic convention of the simple, mystic haunting, further transforms into a human figure with a picture of young lady and baby strangely mixed. 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. As it is quoted in the novel, "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). Beloved's supernatural ability is implicitly revealed and marked. She appears and disappears and terrifies Denver and other members. She also picks up the rocking chair in her hand in a strange manner and it amazes every one.

Like conventional gothic narratives, Morrison's *Beloved* transgresses the boundary of physical laws beyond rationality. Hogle holds the same opinion and writes, "Gothic fictions generally play with and oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural" (2). Through various manifestations, the ghost makes itself not only visibly but also audibly perceptible, of which Stamp Paid is the witness. When Stamp Paid goes to visit Sethe, and tries to knock on the door of 124, he cannot enter the house but circles it instead. Stamp Paid also hears unusual sound of Denver's existence in 124. In this way 124 becomes a site of these gloomy episodes where unspeakable fear of the heavy historical trappings return. It repeatedly signals the disturbing return of past upon presents and evokes emotions of terror. The thing that Stamp Paid perceives is the mysterious incidents that blur historical boundaries. The visual and audible manifestations of the ghost along with Beloved's physical embodiment with supernatural force construct a horrible picture, plot, and gothic atmosphere.

The incarnation of the ghost later makes things more complicated. The ghost's haunting of the house creates disturbance. The incarnation of the baby ghost in 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. 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 discrimination under slavery.

The novel also reveals that being a black slave means an unresolved bond to a physical mark. It is a type of dissimilarity and a psychological burden of marginalization for blacks. In this respect, the black slave is regarded as the abject. Hogle writes, "Kristeva argues for ghosts or grotesques, so explicitly created to embody contradictions, as instances of what she calls the "abject" and products of "abjection" (7). Indeed, as the abject, the black slave is entirely excluded from the lines of both kinship and social life. They are separated, refused and oppressed. This abject, however, signified by the incarnation of the ghost, attempts

to trespass against the systematic order and conventional border of American society.

The gothic elements in the novel are explicit. The character, plot and narration carry various references of the ghost, soul, blood, and killing. Morrison uses these gothic elements to manifest how slavery and racism at their cruelest level disfigure black slaves like Sethe. Such elements play an important role in *Beloved*. They break down the existing limit of expression. The supernatural occurrence creates the terrible and suspicious atmosphere.

Madness is a common theme in the Gothic narratives, which creates suspense for the readers. It also explores aspects of human nature that cannot be easily understood. *Beloved*, in seeming madness, presents herself a dramatic figure of the devil. She carries insatiable desire for revenge on her mother. *Beloved* becomes a witch, a ghost, a devil, with her domination of things around her. Trudier Harris in his work "*Beloved: Woman, Thy Name is Demon*" explains *Beloved* and Sethe's corporal relations 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). *Beloved* creates difficulties for her mother Sethe. The possession of Sethe's life by her daughter not only unveils one's illogical 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.

The setting of the novel *Beloved* uses flashback to create gloominess. It is the feeling of Sethe and other residents of the house traveling not only in physical distance but also the passage of time that creates a haunting quality. It is the element of the ghost that furthers the notion of the unknown for the reader. These all things help to analyze Sethe's character. It is the haunting that brings her story to the forefront of attention. Eric Savoy in his work "The rise of American Gothic" writes, "All Gothic writing seeks to induce in the reader a particular affect from within the spectrum of horror" (181). While the house is physically haunted by *Beloved*'s ghost, it is also haunted by the collective experience of all its residents. The story is told not only in flashback but also from different points of view, which adds to the suspense.

This novel *Beloved* works to capture the essence of slavery's consequences for its characters. It narrates the truth which is created in flashback and ghost story. It aims to create mysticism only memory can illustrate. The characters are trapped in the present because they are imprisoned by the horrors of slavery. Morrison's use of magical realism in the form of *Beloved* the ghost is evident in the novel. This strange creature shakes the furniture, puts tiny handprints on the cakes, and shatters mirrors. Sethe and Denver get shocked. The physical ghost acts as an embodiment of Sethe's sorrow and guilt. The consequence of *Beloved*'s actions only feed Sethe's inability to function in the present.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that *Beloved* is connected with the readers on many levels. Gothic narrative, as a genre, *Beloved* discloses certain conceptions and beliefs. In a gothic narrative, rationality does not always address truth. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept that Morrison's *Beloved* is a Gothic narrative. It can be argued that Morrison has used many techniques which are derived from the Gothic period to narrate her story of Sethe. Sethe is a former slave haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter, *Beloved*. The novel has many interwoven techniques of storytelling that make reading a challenge to analyze. Morrison tells the story which was not told before by revealing a very real situation with the use of Gothic elements.

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