

## The Restoration of History through Magical Realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

*One of the most significant narrative devices, magical realism, emerged in postcolonial literature for a number of reasons. Many authors have used it in their works for a variety of purposes. Toni Morrison, one of the most important postcolonial writers, has utilized this technique in her novel *Beloved* to reconstruct the history of enslaved African-Americans. For this purpose, she has used magical realism as a valuable tool to defy the prevailing command of history. The history of slavery significantly influences the psyche of the characters, i.e. Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul. D. This study highlights the response of black people to re-establish their history and re-narrate it from their own viewpoint. The textual analysis technique employed in the book, within the context of postcolonial theory, shows how Toni Morrison gives voice to the marginalized and restores history.*

**Keywords:** Magical Realism, historiography, postcolonialism

### Introduction

Magical realism is a type of narrative in which the real and the fantastic collide. It is the blend of the supernatural and reality in such a way that the magical/fantastic is accepted as real rather than felt. The fantastic is presented realistically, and the readers are made to believe that the fantastic is also real.

This practice arose from colonial experiences and commonly held fringe views. African-American traditions, like Latin-American customs, have a regional flavour of oral, fanciful stories. Magical and fantastic occurrences and myths were part of this oral culture. Therefore, Magical realism settled and found its roots in the colonial literature of the colonised people. Postcolonial authors use magical realism as a narrative device to explore the unfair history of colonized peoples and reclaim the genuine events that took place within those histories. Bowers (2004), in his book *Magic (al) Realism the New Critical Idiom*, argues that the stories of those who have long remained on the periphery of mainstream culture and political power are brought back to life through magical realism. This genre primarily takes place in nations once colonized and now fighting off colonial relics. It illuminates the difficulties and battles endured by people who consider

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themselves marginalized and oppressed by colonial forces. In the postcolonial setting, magical realism is of utmost importance. Postcolonial authors offer a voice to the underprivileged and marginalized through magical realism.

Toni Morrison, one of the well-known African-American writers, has utilized the Magical Realist technique in her novel *Beloved* to reinterpret the history of black people. She has re-narrated the history through Magical Realism from black people's perspective and established the identity of the black people. The misrepresentation of black society throughout history has been healed by Morrison in *Beloved* when the social status of black people was acknowledged in American society after the Civil War of slavery. History is not always 'absolute truth' but narrated from the 'dominant group's perspective', so it can be challenged by the oppressed groups (Razmi & Jamali, 2012). In turn, the oppressed are always ignored in considering the traditional history and the views of those in power are highlighted.

### **Literature Review**

According to Razmi and Jamali (2012), Morrison uses magical realism in *Beloved* to address the historical problems faced by colonized people. She questions the old narrative of history, written from the colonizers' perspective, and works to mend the historical wounds of black people. Additionally, they say that magical realism in *Beloved* recovers historical wrecks from the perspective of colonized people. Using magical realism as a narrative device, Morrison depicts the colonized people's previous events and colonial experiences. She exposes the terrible state of slavery in *Beloved* from the perspective of the neglected people. Khatana (2013) argues that Morrison rewrites African American history from the perspective of the oppressed people, giving it fresh air. She claims that Morrison's *Beloved* captures her family's earlier history. To ensure that the history of black people is still a significant documentation of their painful memory that will never be forgotten, she emphasizes the little-known facts about it.

Morrison narrates the past experiences of enslaved people in *Beloved* and challenges the intuition that black people are inferior and incapable of progress. She constructs black history in the novel and gives voice to marginalized people. *Beloved*, according to Khaleghi (2012), emphasizes the "confronting, reclaiming and transforming history, and it points to the healing potential of memory. In her novel, Morrison shows what slavery did to black people's bodies and minds" (p. 473). He continues by saying that the novel informs us of the period of slavery. Black people were regarded as objects and as if they were animals throughout the time of slavery. It was forbidden for the enslaved people to feel like individuals. The book's main character, Sethe, suffered and was treated inhumanely by the school teacher. The

school teacher's nephew assaults Seth, injures her back and sucks her milk, which is a sacred object to her. Memories of enslavement plague the main protagonists, Sethe and Paul D, throughout the entire book. In her article, Krumholz (1992) discusses the same notions that in *The Beloved*, Morrison reforms the history of African Americans. In the novel, she depicts the historical perspective of the black community and reconstructs it through her point of view rather than the perspective of white masters.

A real occurrence in the history of the black community served as the inspiration for the novel's story. Using the magical realist method, Morrison recounts the historical tale of a slave woman named Margaret Garner. Slave Margaret Garner ran away from Archibald K. Gaines, who owned her, in January 1856. She killed her daughter out of fear of enslavement when her white master and slave catcher attempted to capture her in Ohio. Rushdy (2013) makes the case that Margaret Garner would have preferred death for her daughter to agreeing to accept slavery if she hadn't killed her unborn child. She rejects the inhumane treatment by white overlords she endured. She demonstrates that suffering under slavery might be worse than death. He continues by saying that the primary character, Sethe, represents Margaret Garner. Sethe ran away from her beloved home to protect herself from the brutality and dehumanization of her white rulers. She killed her two-year-old daughter to protect herself from the effects of servitude when her master returned to take Sethe once more. Later, the infant ghost begins to stalk the house.

The best slave tale, as presented by Morrison, is *Beloved*, which explores the history of slavery and how it affected enslaved Black people's psyches. The novel's plot is the juxtaposition of the past and present, allowing the author to reveal the long-hidden history of slavery. The characters' memories of the past call readers' attention to the shared memories and reciprocal history of enslaved Africans. According to Akker (2013, p. 3), the novel's blending of the real and fantasy elements allows an understanding of the history of slavery. Morrison uses a ghost to bring our attention to the Middle Passage voyage's history. The emergence of the *Beloved's* spirit is more than just a ghost; it serves as a reminder of what has previously happened to enslaved people. Rody (2001) argues that in the novel, Morrison intends to bring back the torture, misery, and enslavement of enslaved people, which historians frequently ignore. To demonstrate how they endured at the hands of white masters, she invites her characters to share their sorrows from the time of slavery with the readers. According to Farshid (2012), the book *Beloved* is an artistic reconstruction of the history of those enslaved people who were physically and psychologically abused by their masters. The voice of those enslaved people whom their masters silenced is described in the

book. The worst instance of whites oppressing enslaved people on a plantation is the abuse of a teacher and his nephew by Sethe and Paul. Qasim (2013) contends that Morrison depicts the life of enslaved African women in *Beloved* and exposes their unspoken tales of abuse and dehumanization. She goes on to explain that Morrison demonstrates slave women were viewed as little more than animals through the portrayal of Sethe in the book. White slave owners mistreated and exploited their bodies. The experiences of those slave women whose voices are absent from American history are told by the ghost of *Beloved*. Morrison exposes the anguish and suffering of those enslaved people who perished on the slave ship and had no one to speak for them during the history of slavery.

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses the qualitative content analysis technique as its research methodology. It involves the qualitative analysis of available data from the novel, adhering to a qualitative design rather than a quantitative approach (Khan and Sohail, 2021; Creswell, 2012; & Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The novel's analysis is carried out within the framework of postcolonial literary theory. Postcolonial theory examines colonial notions, racial prejudice, dehumanization, history, and the symbolic techniques incorporated into literary works. Interrogating colonialism, anti-colonial struggle, native identity, and reclaiming the past of the colonized people are all aspects of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism aims to show how colonialism left the colonized people's beliefs, identities, indigenous cultures, and personal selves in ruins. It gives the colonized and oppressed people a sound opportunity to speak for themselves. Magical realism is a very effective literary method of narrating and exposing many historical episodes. In realistic settings, magical realist literature combines unusual or otherworldly qualities with elements of ordinary life. The characters in the books accept these events as part of daily life, which aids the authors in questioning the conventional view of history.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

With the desire to re-narrate African American slave history, Morrison has utilized the magical realist technique in her novel *Beloved*. The story of *Beloved* is based on a real historical event. Margaret Garner was a woman who killed her daughter before plunging to her death in the sea after being returned to her owner. This provided an inspiration for Morrison's story, in which she highlighted the traumatic experiences of slavery and the sufferings of black society. It is the dramatization of the psychological impacts of slavery

and past experiences of the blacks that is central to the story of the novel. Morrison has denied the image of blacks presented in history and has inserted that these people have the same feelings and sensibilities as those possessed by whites. The whites considered them aggressive and ready to spill white people's blood. Morrison proclaims the same as she states, "White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin, was a jungle. Swift un-navigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood" (Morrison, 1988) (p. 198). It was not the case; the maltreatment at the hands of the whites made the blacks rebel against the aggressive and ferocious attitude. Morrison has portrayed that blacks have their own system, perception, and history.

Morrison employed a technique by utilizing a fantastic character in the person of Beloved in the novel to pave the way for the re-narration of history. This character is a ghost with no place in the real world, but Morrison has presented her in such a way that the readers consider her to be real, as other characters are in the novel. All the people of the house believe in the existence of a ghost, as Baby Suggs says about Beloved: "Not a house in the country isn't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky, this ghost is a baby" (p. 5). The novel's characters believed in ghosts, which was a natural phenomenon for them. Through the character of Beloved, we learn about the history of Sethe and others. It is through the attachment of these characters to each other and the acceptance of Beloved into their family by Sethe and Denver that the real and fantastical are combined. This Beloved is treated as a living member of the family. Sethe and Beloved are closely attached, and Sethe says about her, "Beloved, she, my daughter. She mine. She comes back to me of her own free will, and I don't have to explain a thing." (P. 200) Similarly, Beloved is also closely attached to her, and she emphasizes her love for Sethe. She expresses her love for her mother by saying, "I am Beloved, and she is mine . . . I would help her, but the clouds are in the way. I can say things that are pictures. I am not separated from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own." (p.210). Beloved vividly recounts the excruciating dilemma of the enslaved people on the ship, sharing with Denver the unbearable conditions they endured. She says;

*"I am always crouching; the man on my face is dead . . . in the beginning, the women are away from the men, and the men are away from the women. Storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men; that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time. I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me . . . he locks his eyes and dies on my face... the*

*others do not know that he is dead (Morrison, 1987, p. 211-212)''*

The enslaved people who had been seized during the Middle Passage were confined to gloomy spaces between decks. They are unable to stand or move around. A lot of enslaved people perished from the excruciating heat and foul smell. In the book, when Denver inquires about Beloved's house before arriving at Blue Stone 124, Morrison describes a similar state of slaves. Beloved says to Denver that she was in a "Dark" place: "Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in... A lot of people are down there. Some is dead" (Morrison, 1987, p.92). This depiction of Beloved makes it abundantly evident how uncomfortable the slaves were within the ship. The slaveholders used hot iron rods to bind the slaves and denied them enough food and drink. Beloved was quite thirsty when she arrived at house 124.

"The woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert" (Ibid., p. 64). Beloved symbolically represents the countless unnamed slaves who were abducted and forcibly transported from diverse African tribes. Through the character of Beloved, the novel vividly portrays the brutal and inhumane treatment inflicted upon enslaved Africans by their white masters throughout history. In the novel, a poignant spotlight is cast upon the harrowing era of slavery in African-American history. This institution of slavery was a grim system in which individuals were cruelly dehumanized and stripped of their fundamental rights. It erased the enslaved's historical narratives and obliterated their identities, cultures, and the very essence of self-determination. The white masters of enslaved African-Americans, in their oppression, treated these human beings as mere objects, often subjecting them to treatment even more degrading than that of animals. As asserted by Qasim (2013), the era of slavery bore witness to a deplorable dehumanization of black slaves at the hands of their white masters. These individuals were tragically regarded as mere commodities and valuable pieces of property. The period of slavery was marred by heinous crimes such as the ruthless killing of black slaves, torturous practices, sexual abuse, the heart-wrenching sale of their offspring, and a litany of other egregious violations that stained the very fabric of this institution. Beloved further compels Sethe to narrate her own story by asking about various things. So, the history of black people is reconstructed, and the readers are introduced to the traumatic experiences of black people in the past. Their psychological trauma has been revealed through the reconstruction of the history on the insistence of Beloved

by asking several questions. In this process of re-narration, Denver is also involved when she asks questions about various things from her mother; therefore, the real and fantastical combine to resurrect the past of the slave Sethe, and thus, through her, the past of the whole black community is reflected.

Through the narration of Sethe to Beloved and Denver, we are exposed to the traumatic world of slavery and the unforgettable past of black people. We learn about the past, the history of the slaves, and how they faced hardships and were doomed by the curse of slavery. The ghost of Beloved is often involved in the narration of past experiences. As she states in the novel about the past experiences of slavery in the following terms: "It is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or around basket she goes in the water with my face" (p.212). The whole history of the slaves is revealed from their forefathers. When Sethe narrates her mother's story, we learn how black people were tortured without committing any wrongs or explicit reason for their punishment. Beloved asks about Sethe's mother, and she starts narrating her story that she was a slave and hanged in the end. We come to know that her life was also a critical one, and she suffered torture. Through the story of the mother, the experiences of the slaves are revealed, and we know the historical abuse of slavery. While combing Denver's hair, Sethe is asked by Beloved what had happened to her mother, to which Sethe answers: "Hung. by the time they cut her down, nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (p. 61). Later on, when Denver asks about the reason for her grandmother's death because she had heard about her for the first time, Sethe replies, "I never found out. It was a lot of them" (p. 61). However, the history is recollected from the blend of real and fantastical, i.e. a ghost and living people.

Through the introduction of this fantastic character of Beloved to the black community, we learn about the history of the black community. The history of Sethe is symbolic of the black community's collective experiences. Razmi and Jamali (2012) state that Beloved's stories and actions reveal and indicate the atrocities and oppressions committed against all the black children, taking away their mothers from them in white culture (p. 118). All the black people have gone through such experiences. All of them have lost their relatives and dear ones. The loss of children was a common experience shared by these people, but no white historian took pains to write about them. The resurrection of Beloved serves as an important symbol of the exposition of the trauma felt by ex-slaves for the loss of their relatives and other bitter experiences. The beloved's spectral presence in

conversations with Sethe serves as a haunting reminder of the past, intensifying the guilt that weighs upon her. It is the dramatization of the guilt that she feels for the murder of her child, which is central to the novel. When she realizes the fact that the whites are to be blamed for her act, i.e., the murder of her daughter, she recovers and diverts the historical facts. Sethe was considered guilty and punished by the law for the murder of her child, but actually, the real murderers were the white people and the institution of slavery, which was to be abolished. Sethe is relieved of the guilt to some extent that the guilt lies with the others as she explains, "I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her, she would have died, and that is something I could not bear to happen to her", (P. 200). She did not want her child to be a slave, as her. It was the horrific life of slavery from which she tried to save her child. She thought death was rather less horrific than living a life of slavery and pain.

### **Conclusion**

Morrison has been successful in the re-narration of the story from the black people's point of view. She has utilized magical realism to reveal the historical wounds of black people and assert that they went through very bitter experiences in the past. When recounted by individuals from the colonizer's standpoint, these experiences have undergone distortion, revealing only one side of the coin. However, when viewed from the perspective of the colonized, the other side has been authentically unveiled. She has clarified how black society has looked upon the disturbances of the Civil War and the events preceding it. She has very vividly portrayed the psychological trauma of the black community.

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