


Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 60
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* - Part 6


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Concluding Thoughts



The role of red in *Beloved* is a complex one. On the surface, shades of red appear both in the form of an actual physical presence, such as blood or the rooster's comb, and in metaphorical images, such as the red heart, whenever slavery's horrific consequences occur. Thus, red serves as a highlighter for the reader, marking and intensifying the seemingly boundless influence of slavery. Yet, just as *Beloved* does not limit itself to a positivist approach to narrating slavery's cruelties, choosing instead to complicate notions of trauma, time, memory, and healing, the text employs red in a more meaningful and complex way. The color red and the characters' intense interaction with it are themselves a text within *Beloved*. They tell the story of the characters' process of dealing with the psychological wounds inflicted upon them. From involuntarily being in physical contact with red and falling silent to internalizing and repressing red images, those generations who lived in slavery go as far as they can. It is up to the daughter not born into slavery to be fed her family's past and to find her identity in serving up her own story.

In its efforts to relate to the reader the horrors of slavery, Morrison's novel itself imitates the effects of trauma on the psyche. By conspicuously utilizing the color red, the novel performs the inability to use everyday language to portray a traumatic event. Moreover, it chooses to merge the voicelessness of individuals, which results from their inability to process a wounding event, with the forced silencing of blacks in slavery. Thus, *Beloved* powerfully bespeaks slavery's paradoxical status as a phenomenon which, like trauma, not only "demands our witness" but "simultaneously defies" it (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 5).



This NPTEL course titled "Trauma and Literature" on Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved". We are reading through the lenses of this particular essay which talks about the colour coding the symbolism the embodiment the corporeality the spirituality and of course the politics of slavery diversity plot against progress different complex ways.

We were talking about the liminality and two particular scenes for example the shed scene and the tombstones scene and both scenes are equally important and symbolic because they talk about the shedding of subjectivity the shedding of agency and how those two scenes become sites of horror sites of grotesque violence and sites of liminality.

Change happens existentially politically corporately and both scenes are connected to the complex orders of voicelessness which get manifested throughout this novel. So, voicelessness spectrality corporality they all become connected categories in this novel about trauma and slavery.

The role of red in “Beloved” is a complex one. On the surface shades of red appear both in the form of an actual physical presence such as blood or the roosters come. And in metaphorical images such as a red heart whenever slavery's horrific consequences occur thus red serves as a highlighter for the reader marking and intensifying the seemingly boundless influence of slavery.

There is this boundless quality about slavery and that is manifested in the spilling over of the red colour through blood to different kinds of imaginary there is always this excessive quality about the red imagery and that is corresponding to the boundlessness of trauma the boundlessness of slavery the boundlessness of horror. Yet just as “Beloved” as a novel does not limit itself to a positivist approach to narrating slavery's cruelties choosing instead to complicate notions of trauma, time, memory and healing.

The text employs red in a more meaningful and complex way the colour red and the characters intense interaction with it are themselves a text within “Beloved”. There is this textual quality about redness and the way the characters engage with different orders of redness. So, that engagement itself becomes a text within the text of the novel.

They tell the story of the character's process of dealing with the psychological wounds inflicted upon them from involuntarily being in physical contact with red and falling silent to internalizing the and repressing red images those generations who lived in slavery go as far as they can. It is up to the daughter not born into slavery to be fed her family's past and define her identity in serving up her own story.

This is the point where spectrality and identity become really connected categories. The daughter was not born the daughter is not physically present Beloved the child was killed who becomes the story who becomes the title of the novel. We can see how the quality of spectrality is connected to identity and that becomes political because identity as a black category identity as from the black subject is always spectral it is always shadowy it is never quite real it is always an approximation.

It is something becoming it is never quite there because identities are generically white in quality. The spectrality of identity is actually a very authentic representation of

identity in this context of slavery because the black identity is always spectral it is always already spectrum. So, that since the symbolism of the ghostly child or the cold style is actually a political manifestation of blackness in the context of this novel.

So, in his efforts to relate to the readers the horrors of slavery Morrison's novel, it imitates the effects of trauma on the psyche. But conspicuously by conspicuously utilizing the colour red the novel performs the inability to use everyday language to portray a traumatic event now this is something we talked about earlier as well. It is to keep connecting it back to Catherine Malibu's idea of "The Ontology Of The Accident".

So, how the language of trauma how the expression of trauma how the communication trauma is always outside the radius of normative conversation the radius of normative language that is the ontology of the wound the ontology of the accident. It gets more complicated here in this novel because there is always the additional element of spectrality. The ontological quality and borrowing from Derrida the idea of huntology.

The haunted ontology the ontology which is haunted and in that sense recursive and quality the reputation of the haunted order it keeps coming back and that connects very interestingly with the Freudian idea of traumatic reputation. The very beginning when we started reading this novel how Morrison's "Beloved" is a very frightened study of trauma.

There is a ghost this half dead undead presence which keeps coming back and in that reappearance of spectrality the reappearance of ghostliness there is almost a political quality there is almost a spectral quality and the spectrality and the political identity. They become very connected and very complex almost organic ways the dead child the body of the child the specter of the dead child which does not quite go away becomes a manifestation of the political reality in which this novel is set.

It lies outside the ordinary everyday language in a sport trail the traumatic event. Moreover, it chooses to merge the voicelessness of individuals which results from the inability to process a wounding event with a full silencing of blacks and slavery. We talked about how the idea of not being able to process becomes a marker for trauma, the

very idea the very experience of trauma the very ontology of trauma lies and is inability to be processed.

It cannot be integrated into the consciousness it just falls directly into the consciousness as it were in that it changes the consciousness. The metaphor of the bone marrow which was used earlier in one of the sessions which we did and how the trauma enters the bone marrow. It is just the depth of trauma and also the holiness of the body the hollowness of the subject was just identified by trauma who is shaped by trauma does not listen nothing outside of the trauma that a subject can be identified or marked by.

So, in that sense it is quite literally a traumatized subject. The identity is sort of marked by the internalization and consumption the constant consumption of trauma and that becomes the experiential condition which informs Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved". This is the inability to process a wounding event with a forced silencing of blacks in slavery.

Thus, "Beloved" powerfully bears witness to slavery's paradoxical status as a phenomenon which light trauma not only demands our witness but simultaneously defies it. This is catholic root again from unclaimed experience and it is interesting we stop at this point because after this we move on to Kerut and exactly this book and unclaimed experience we look at catholic root and whitehead both critics and philosophers which we have referred to this essay refers to in the study of "Beloved".

Kerut is saying in the end the whole idea of witnessing as well as a defiance of witness and how these two are not really ontological opposites of each other but they connect to each other in very complex ways in understanding that the phenomenon of trauma. It is to question the phenomenon of trauma. If we just go back to this conscient understanding of no men and phenomenon no man phenomena.

The phenomenal understanding of trauma is an experiential understanding of trauma. That experiential understanding this is quality of silence which is very strong, progressive, we have seen how in this novel in particular some of the most horrific moments of violence and trauma and grotesque abuse occurs through silence, the tombstone scene for instance the shed scene for instance where the child gets killed just

liminal moments where change happens physical corporeal psychological existential change takes place those operate through silence.

The stillness of silence a marker of trauma to a certain extent. The meaninglessness of silence the sort of notional theoretical meaninglessness of silence is exactly what informs and shapes the traumatic design of those moments now what that means at a theoretical level at an experiential level as Kuru is saying that a novel like "Beloved" it demands our witness it forces us to read the horrors of slavery.

It forces us to engage with the horrors of slavery but at the same time it simultaneously defies our witnessing of it. The entire scene is sort of shown to us from this cliff catcher's point of view from the school teacher's point of view who is a slave catcher and he is going to hunt down Sethe.

They realizes that she is about to be captured she kills a child in his paradoxical effort this desperate effort to liberate the child from the shackles of slavery now interestingly the focal point used in that scene. And we have discussed it is a white slave catcher's focal point and that is a lens to which the entire novel that that episode the central episode of trauma the moment of killing the moment of violence is shown through the white eye through the slave catches high.

Now what that means is we never get to see we never got to know set his account or the even we never get to see her eye her lens that is just endlessly elusive it just stays elusive throughout and this is what Kuru means over here when she is saying there is this invitation to witness a demanding witness of the spectrality of slavery but the same time it is defying that witness.

It is not it will not give you the point of view it will not give you the focal point. So, in resisting the focal point and resisting the voice it is actually offering some kind of a subversion of the white case and the only gaze that we can get is a white case the only voice we can get is the white voice. This voicelessness from a position of agencylessness it begins to shift to a position of subversion.

Because one never gets to hear we never get to know set these side of the story. So, in that sense it is a defiance of the politics the witnessing as a defiance of the experience the ontology of witnessing. So, it is an extremely complex novel it is one of the most heavily anthologized novels in English literature is consistently ranked as one of the best American novels written in 20th century, it is a phenomenal text.

But what we can see quite interestingly is the many ways when vicious texts can be read like any great work of literature We read some really interesting works of literature in this course this is a final work of fiction in this course after which we will move on to two theoretical works. But suffice it to say, this is a very good testimony to the power of fiction to the strength of fiction the phenomenality of fiction through which a horrific historical moment a horrific historical experience can be.

So, condensed into one episode can be condensed into one moment into one experience one subject. The subject of Sethe for instance, the spectral subject of "Beloved" is how this whole horror of slavery gets manifested it gets repeated gets traumatized. There are not lies the possibilities of fiction therein lies the power of function their subversive quality of fiction.

Because it can combine multiple points of view, it can play with points of view it can deny a point of view you can block a point of view. We have talked about how the narrative is software's at several points of time very deliberately exercise blockages through which the convenient linear plot is interrupted. It is something we just seen already happening in "Slaughterhouse-Five" as well.

We read in a novel where displays with diamonds play space display with temporality the play with sequentiality. In a way becomes very authentic representation of trauma a very authentic representation of the traumatized mind the post-traumatic stress disorder sufferer who happens to be the protagonists in that novel. And how in an interesting way, the connection with "Slaughterhouse-Five" and "Beloved" can be made with a child imagery.

We have seen how in that novel, the character of the Pilgrim Billy Pilgrim is consistently infantilized. The infantilization of the protagonists who was served in the war was

witness a great scene of bombing etc that infantilization in a way is also a manifestation of powerlessness against the mighty forces of history against the mighty forces of identity politics.

The mighty forces of political movements and in the case of “Beloved” for instance the political movement and. So, on slavery is one of racism is one of exploitation one of torture or one race or the other race and that exploitative category what we see quite consistently is a complete agencylessness powerlessness shall we say of the human voice now what makes it more complicated as that is powerlessness and voicelessness becomes.

So, internalized in this novel that it almost becomes; a subversive condition that we never get to hear the voice at all. As readers do it demands our witness as Kuru is saying it forces us to acknowledge the horrors of slavery it forces us to see and witness the horrific slaughter torture abuse violence of slavery by the same time it defies our witnessing because it does not establish a dialogue with a witness it does not offer a dialogue with a witness.

In that resistance to witnessing lies that defiance lies as a version of the novel like “Beloved”. It is an extremely important novel from the perspective of trauma studies and we've seen how some of the finest figures in the field like categories like Roger Locus like Anne Whitehead they have all engaged with this particular text, it is about slavery it is about spectrality.

It is about identity it is about trauma it is about the politics of trauma and the trauma of politics. It is phenomenal novel it is one of the like he mentions one of the most heavily anthologized novels in the history of American literature Toni Morrison's “Beloved” is a classic in a true sense and it is something which keeps getting re-interpreted at different points of time.

Even if we were to locate this novel in the context of today. So, in a movement like “Black Lives Matter” which is a very direct manifestation of how racism still prevails. So, racism still persists, not just in a covert way but in a very overt spectacular public way that public racism that the denial of honor the denial of dignity to a certain extent on

the black body on the black subject is something which we still see randomly across all kinds of discursive settings in America.

In other parts of the world and the “Black Lives Matter” emerged and sort of solidified in the united states but that is something which we experience everywhere in the world that's a racial discrimination racial denigration racial vilification racial abuse and that is something which we see in a very grotesque form in Toni Morrison's novel.

That moment in history where slavery is at his high point of horror where slavery is just exercising as just ultimate and violence the ultimate grotesqueness it is abusing the human body abusing the human identity and it is a complete denial and dehumanization of human identity that is something which is seen throughout the novel and how does a black subject engage with that through an act of counter violence which is also a violence on itself.

And killing the child and killing his own child her own child is also violence on herself but in a way there is also some kind of a protection some kind of a defense mechanism in a very perverse way perhaps in a very deeply psychological way some kind of a defense mechanism through which this gets manifested. It is a very profoundly political novel it is a performance psychological novel.

But it is just one of those texts in literature and which really should be foregrounded in a course like this because if we remember when we started off with this course we were talking about how we are always looking at the interplay of the politics of trauma and the trauma of politics. This novel is a classic case in point of that how the politics of racism which is a very political movement, it is a discursively defined movement.

It is to question how that creates a trauma how that creates an intergenerational collective trauma in a similar way that collective trauma also informs the politics. It is like a dialogic multi-dimensional multi-directional movement between identity politics spirituality and trauma which we see in different combinations in this novel this magnificent work of fiction.

The last component of the course will be spent talking about two major works of theory trauma theory categories unclaimed experience which we have referred to already here and this as a reference to here is one of the reasons why this essay is chosen because it begins to prepare us for that theoretical moment with which this course will end.

We have category and trauma fiction and we refer to both works and selectively and also in terms of how that theory that philosophy connects the other works which we have done so, far including that of Catherine Malibu and the other works of fiction that we have engaged with in this course. So, with that we end Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and we move on to the theoretical component and the course in subsequent sessions.