

# Rewriting of History: Slave Narratives and Toni Morrison's Novels

Dr. Min Pun, Associate Professor  
Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

## Abstract

The paper argues that the slave history writing is not only the concern of historians but also of creative writers. The slave narratives are one of the examples of such writings. The African American writers at present are more interested in the subject of black voices against slavery. Toni Morrison's novels of slavery use experiences of horrors in slavery as a door to history remembered. For instance, she uses "rememory" in her two novels, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, to describe the process of remembering what has been forgotten. She, thus, uses these novels in remembering slavery in literature.

**Keywords:** Slavery, slave history, slave narratives, Morrison's novels

## 1. Introduction

Writing on the slave history is not only done by historians, but also by creative writers, who turn to the past in order to better understand and establish a tradition for the present. The slave narratives can be taken as an instance for such writings. In much of the literature in the United States today, the black resistance to oppression takes more center stage than the passive acceptance and the romantic passion that characterized some of their nineteenth-century anti-slavery predecessors. As such, Toni Morrison's novels, known as neo-slave narratives, use a live informant with experiences in slavery as a door to history remembered. So the black writers of today have taken up the subject of early black voices against slavery. In addition to the recent appearance of many literary works on slavery, Morrison not only attempts to revise the tradition of slave narratives; but also she explores how her narrative poetics operates through memory and history.

In this paper, part of Morrison's project in her novels is to recuperate a history that had been lost to the ravages of forced silences and forgetfulness. For instance, she has used the term "rememory" in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* to describe the process of remembering what has been forgotten and simplified as recovering the history of the oppressed. In particular, she writes Sethe's story in *Beloved* and a *minha mãe's* story in *A Mercy* with voices of people who have historically been denied the power of language. From Sethe's experience, before a stable future can be created, the Americans must confront and understand the ghosts of the past. Morrison suggests that like Sethe and a *minha mãe* have experienced in the novels, the present-day Americans must confront the history of slavery in order to address its legacy.

## 2. Remembering the Disremembered History

Through the use of dialectical images, the storyteller articulates experiences of those crushed under the catastrophic progression of history. Thus, the storyteller can create a link through which the disremembered can be remembered. For example, in her novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Morrison as a storyteller develops "a way through the door of memory, even if that way entails a precarious balancing act between the danger of forgetting a past that should not be forgotten and remembering a past that threatens to engulf the present" (Lawrence, 2007, p. 56). According to Lawrence, Morrison brings the present face to face with the image of the smashed bodies of black slaves, forcing the readers to remember them and account for their experiences.

In *Beloved*, a story is told from an African worldview, where the dead interacts with the living. *Beloved* is the ghost of Sethe's murdered baby, but she is also a representative of many millions who died in the Middle Passage, which is Morrison's way of paying homage to or remembering those who never made it into slavery. "Remembering," therefore, "is an act of gathering the pieces, as the body parts need to be held together, collected" (Raynaud, 2007, p. 52). As such, *Beloved*, more than anything, speaks for all "disremembered," and Morrison's novels remind the present-day blacks of their responsibility to remember the past and to learn from it.

Likewise, in *A Mercy*, Florens, "a young slave whose faltering but poetic voice forms the novel's heartbeat" (Miller, 2008, "Morrison," p. 8), can be seen as the embodiment of slavery itself because she is traded to Jacob Vaark like a commodity. Slavery, for the black writers, becomes a collective experience, which is why their telling of it often takes the form of myth. They remember slavery in narrative forms that are sometimes stunning, especially, when their remembering moves outside of chronological time.

Morrison writes about the African American experience. Her main characters are usually the African Americans who are celebrated by the African American community. They are equally of interest and importance to all Americans as well. In fact, when she tackles an issue such as racism, she does it in such a way as to show how it affects all races and is often propagated by the victims themselves. When reading any of her books, it is often difficult even to know the races of various characters because she only brings up race. In the context of

*Beloved* and *A Mercy*, the memory of slavery, in particular, probes its “effects on the individual psyche of black and white people, but also the repressed memory of slavery in the make-up of the American nation” (Raynaud, 2007, p. 43). In this way, Morrison reworks the African American history, telling about racism and slavery, to recreate the moving texture of memory.

In *Beloved*, the context of rememory is neither close friendship nor family, but a subjugated culture. The story traces merging lives of Sethe and Paul D, the last two living ex-slaves from Sweet Home. The action is set in a house in Ohio, a house called “124.” Each of the three parts of the novel begins with a reference to the mood of the house: “124 was spiteful”; “124 was loud”; “124 was quiet” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 3, p. 169, p. 239). Each of these moods is related to the state of existence of Beloved, the baby who haunts the story in three forms: first, as the spiritual ghost; then, as incarnated ghost; and finally, as disremembered ghost.

Beloved is many things. She is Sethe’s baby daughter whom she murdered at age two in order to save from a life of slavery. Beloved is also a medium of the story that was left untold, and unrecalled: “It was not a story to pass on [...] Remembering seemed unwise” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 274). Morrison, thus, uses Beloved to bring back painful memories of slavery because of the importance for the American society to come to terms with and understand the trauma that took place. For Beloved is finally what must be “disremembered” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 274), and what must be deliberately forgotten by everyone involved. Once again, Morrison has presented the readers with a story in which memory is the crucial device of being. Interestingly, her *Beloved*, then, is a story that stops haunting when told and stops being when disremembered.

Just as a new family structure begins to tentatively coalesce, Beloved arrives to do what the ghost could not. Her narrative strand confronts the romance strand with an interference that rememory poses to memory, the crucial problem underlying romantic remembering. The textual evidence supports her existence on three interconnected planes. She is the “true-to-life presence of the baby” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 119) that Paul D drove out, returned in the flesh to reclaim her place in the family and possibly to mete out punishment for her death. She is also an African girl, a child who survived the Middle Passage only to be “locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 119). After the white man’s death, she finds her way to the house on Bluestone Road where she mistakes Sethe for the mother who either died and was thrown overboard or committed suicide by jumping off the ship during the passage from Africa.

Although Beloved appears approximately eighteen years old, the violent interruption of her family by the slave economy has left her stunted when her mother went into the sea without acknowledging her. Finally, Beloved is the material manifestation of the “Sixty Million and More” that the Africans lost on the Middle Passage as well as the uncounted numbers “disremembered and unaccounted for” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 274) in American slavery, whose stories and names would never be known. As the embodiment of these unspeakable losses, Beloved interrupts what Caroline Rody terms Sethe and Paul D’s “mutual talking cure” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 99), their amelioration of history through romance.

Until Beloved’s arrival at 124, the novel had been structured around the reunion of Sethe and Paul D and their negotiations for a new domestic order. Morrison’s plot gradually loosens and finally dismantles this narrative frame, shifting relations between characters, their views of domestic locales, and their expressions of memory. Beloved’s presence exacerbates Paul D’s sense of unmanly powerlessness while simultaneously calling on him to act as a father figure to another resistant daughter: “He wanted her out, but Sethe had let her in and he couldn’t put her out of a house that wasn’t his. It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless coloredgirl out in territory infected by the Klan” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 66). Sethe, perhaps mindful of her own torturous journey to a fragile kind of freedom, insists on defending Beloved from the dangers of being “a coloredwoman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on you” (*Beloved*, 1987, pp. 67-68). She considers Beloved as a “nice girl company for Denver” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 67) and is “flattered by Beloved’s open, quiet devotion” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 57); the “company of this sweet, if peculiar, guest pleased her the way a zealot pleases his teacher” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 57). Sethe wants Paul D in her life and works to “launch her newer, stronger life with a tender man” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 99). Sethe also refuses to sacrifice Beloved to his need to be the man of the family. Disregarding Paul D’s reservations and accepting Beloved into her home, Sethe diverts her priorities of the household away from maintenance of the romantic couple.

For her part, Beloved recognizes none of the male-centered domestic ideals that other characters take for granted. Her overwhelming need for her mother’s love exceeds boundaries of the nuclear family: “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 57). Her touch, “no heavier than a feather,” is “loaded, nevertheless, with desire,” and her gaze contains a “bottomless longing. Some plea barely in control” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 58). Ignoring other family members’ attempts to enforce their domestic norms, Beloved pursues a kind of symbiosis with Sethe, a relationship that would ultimately eliminate all other contact. Sethe is “the one I need,” Beloved tells Denver, “you can go but she is the one I have to have” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 76). 124 Bluestone Road, Beloved says, is “the place I am” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 123). In Beloved’s infantile romance, the figure of Sethe as a mother reflects her vision of selfhood. Because her desire for Sethe is for an impossible reversal of loss and because her

fragile sense of identity depends on the equation of Sethe-mother-self holding, she lives in a constant danger of falling out of existence.

Beloved has two dreams: “exploding, and being swallowed” and has difficulty in keeping “her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 133). Sethe gradually directs more of her attention to the urgency of Beloved’s needs and the severed bond of the past takes precedence over the romantic bond that provides for the future. When Sethe feeds Beloved with stories of her past, the context and purpose of remembering shift to accommodate demands of a voracious history. It becomes apparent that they were a family somehow and Paul D was not the head of it.

Such a disruption is also reflected in Paul D’s steadily increasing sense of restless discomfort. Made uneasy by Beloved’s seductive desire, he finds the stability of heterosexual romance increasingly compromised by her presence. Even though he knows that she is moving him out of the domestic spaces of 124, he remains strangely helpless to stop her as she forces him into the cold house and unable to resist her. She comes in the night and says, “You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 117). Although the nature of the connection between Paul D and Beloved, who actively dislike each other, caused by the dismemberment of her family in slavery. As this connection results from historical trauma, the sexual act seems to signify possibilities for reencountering the past. It opens his tobacco tin to expose the red heart secreted within, performing a “bodily cure” (Smith, 1993, “Circling,” p. 348) for the disease of history.

Later, Paul D remarks that Beloved reminds him of something look like. He is supposed to remember and equates his “coupling” with her as it is described in the novel:

Coupling with her wasn’t even a fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. Each time she came, pulled up her skirts, a life hunger overwhelmed him and he had no more control over it than over his lungs. And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 264).

The repeated implications of a perilous but essential encounter with memory suggest that sex with Beloved stages Paul D’s necessary engagement with his avoided history and, therefore, leads him to the reanimation of his red heart. As the novel sets the task of confronting history for all its characters, the fact of his sexual relations with “a girl young enough to be his daughter” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 126), a girl who, in fact, would reassert the importance of the past.

However, because Beloved is more than embodied memory, this scene calls up possibilities for and losses of other encounters as well. Beloved approaches Paul D out of her hunger to be recognized, her need to be known, as Barbara Schapiro (1991) suggests, in her “inner being or essential self” (p. 201). But as she articulates this need in connection with hearing her name, it is clearly a need that cannot be met; Paul D cannot speak her name because he does not know it. “Beloved” was not the “crawling already?” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 99) baby’s name, but the name Sethe had inscribed on her tombstone, the first words of the preacher’s “Dearly Beloved” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 5) sermon at her grave. “Beloved” is not the African girl’s name, but one of the names she was called by her white captors, “ghosts without skin,” who “stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 241). When she lost her mother, she lost her name. Not only that, she lost her developing sense of the self as well.

Morrison’s *Beloved* does not record what impression, if any, sex with Paul D has on Beloved. Following the “bodily cure,” there is no any noticeable change in her because no part of her past is closed down or hidden. There can be no opening of repressed memory. Locked in an endless past, there would never be a time when she is not crouching in the hold of the ship watching others die and waiting for her mother’s smile. Beloved is unable to contextualize her losses. She cannot save herself by confronting history because she lacks the distance that would afford the new perspectives that project possibilities for a new life. Just as the novel provides no sign of Beloved’s response to her initial encounter with Paul D, it gives no reason for her returns to him. She is obviously not motivated by any concern for the condition of his red heart nor can she use him as a medium through which to confront her history. Continually, reliving profoundly agonizing events that cannot be contained as memories, Beloved has no history. For her, in this way, “all of it is now, it is always now” (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 210).

In *Beloved*, the central romance plot is aimed at pulling history into a manageable framework through the “mutual talking cure” that reorganizes the past that pulled men and women apart by denying them “the female’s and the male’s desire that engenders future” (Spillers, 1987, p. 73). Paul D’s relationship with Sethe promises a joining of memory within functional structures, a route to normality and to the family that engenders future. But his cold house sex with Beloved projects memory outside the structures of a home, violating the gender role compacts of romance and family, and scrambling positions of domestic authority. This sexual act releases his red heart further compromises the viability of romance plot by confounding any expectation that his relationship with Sethe, whom he loves and who endured Sweet Home slavery with him, would open his tobacco tin. His vulnerability to Beloved indicates that the “talking cure” could not reach his red heart because locked away there

are the demasculinizing experiences that hamper romantic remembering. In other words, Sethe and Paul D's memories do not draw them into a domesticity intelligible in American culture because these memories are of being refused traditional male and female roles.

In Paul D's absence, Sethe recognizes Beloved as her daughter returned from "the other side" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 203), and a new family structure emerges based on a new view of memory. While Sethe's relationship with Paul D brought her "another kind of haunting" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 96) in the form of a new information about the past, she interprets the return of her daughter as the end of such hauntings, as deliverance from the burden of memory. As Sethe rejects memory as a means to a new life, she eliminates her limited contact with the community. She is entirely devoted to Beloved.

Gradually, however, Beloved's desire for possession grows punishing and consuming. Despite Sethe's assurances that "Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 242), that her children are "her best thing" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 251), Beloved accuses her "of leaving her behind [...] not smiling at her [...] they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 241). Sethe addresses Beloved as her infant daughter, but Beloved answers as the African girl whose mother went into the water, taking her name and her face away. No matter how sincere her assurances of love, Sethe cannot repair losses Beloved suffered on the Middle Passage. Like Paul D, Sethe cannot utter her name. As their play turns to violent recriminations and fruitless explanations, 124 Bluestone Road becomes noisy with women's voices mumbling and jumbled so that the only word decipherable is "mine" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 172). Together, "the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (*Beloved* 199) are the voices of "the black and angry dead" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 198). 124 Bluestone Road becomes a place where the past possesses the present, a household without domesticity or familial hierarchies.

Insofar as the past consumes Sethe, Denver draws on her memory of Baby Suggs, who advises her to simply "know it, and go on out the yard" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 244). Taking on the "job" of "protecting her mother from Beloved" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 243), Denver faces her fears, adapts her views, and acts. Reestablishing a contact with the community and developing relationships of her own, she comes to the "new" realization that she has "a self to look out for and preserve" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 252). This new sense of selfhood has occurred to her.

This vision emboldens Denver to venture further into Cincinnati, where, in order to get help, she tells the whole story of 124. A group of African American women, then, set out to restore proper order between worlds, to prevent "past errors" from "taking possession of the present" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 256). Acting in the community, they produce songs, withholding from Sethe after the murder in order to exorcise Beloved. But this communal ceremony is interrupted by Mr. Bodwin, the white abolitionist and the owner of 124, who turns out to be the primary player in Beloved's exorcism. When he arrives to take Denver to work, Sethe believes him as the schoolteacher and attacks him, prompting Denver and the singing women to restrain her. As they fall on her, they form what Beloved sees as "a hill of black people, falling" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 262). The imagery of the pile of bodies thrown off the slave ship is Morrison's use of rememory that recapitulates the sequence of events that led to her loss of her mother. "Standing alone on the porch," Beloved "feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 262) and sees above the falling bodies. Having again lost the gaze of the beloved, for the gaze that dirties and destroys, Beloved vanishes.

Morrison, more importantly, foregrounds a horrifying act in *Beloved*: a runaway slave, caught in her effort to escape, cuts the throat of her baby daughter with a handsaw. Here, she determines to spare the girl the fate she herself has suffered as a slave. A similar indelible act stands at the center of her new novel, *A Mercy*, a story that is a kind of prelude to *Beloved*, and a variation on that earlier book's exploration of the personal costs of slavery, a system that casts a looming shadow over both parental and romantic love. In this way, in both of her neo-slave narratives, the slaves are remembered to be told and are told to be disremembered.

### 3. Rewriting of Slave History

The slave experience in the United States is being rediscovered in the form of neo-slave narratives today, the concept of black literature includes literature on black themes by the black and non-black writers alike. So the theme of slavery has become a constant use in the United States, where the institution had its longest run.

All of this writing or rewriting of slave history is not just a symptom of the present time. Many black intellectuals first took Douglass's *Narrative* as a slave autobiography; some started back in 1845 that created their own versions out of Douglass. Douglass's *Narrative* is really the only slave autobiography in the United States. A document he produced is a remarkable account of the survivor of slavery who willed himself the knowledge to be able to write about it.

The black writers, especially black women writers, are telling the intimate history of slavery through a black "womanist" perspective, a term in the current usage that goes beyond the goal of socio-political freedom to restore "the place of love, growth and healing as satisfactory solutions to both life and literature" (Taylor, 1985, p. 795). The term "womanish" as originated with Alice Walker embraces love and tenderness. It is used in the recent literature of several black women writers who have written about slavery. Among them is Morrison. The

black women writers look within and focus on the interior life of the slave. Especially, it focuses on the intimate history as that institution affected inner feelings of what family life there was. The black American women writers are in search for the inner world of the slaves.

Morrison wrote *Beloved* and *A Mercy* on the foundation of historical events: American slavery, Reconstruction, and Great Migration. As Paul Gray (1987), in this regard, argues, "Writing a novel about slavery in the U.S. would seem to be a fail-safe endeavor" (p. 43). In *Beloved*, the most significant event within the novel, Sethe's murder of Beloved, is based on the 1856 murder by Margaret Garner of her children to prevent them from being recaptured and taken back into slavery with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Morrison discovered it while helping edit a scrapbook on black history. The novel itself can be seen as a reworking of the fact into something with a very emotional central message. History is woven throughout the novel. The Middle Passage is referenced along with the Underground Railway in many parts of the novel. The "Sixty Million and More" to whom she dedicates the novel may refer to many who died during the Middle Passage. The entire concept of slavery described in the novel such as Paul D's confinement in Georgia and the description of the "bit" and legislature are all based on history. This gives the novel a powerful impact.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison wants to "return to early works to rewrite" (Grossman, 2008, p. 55), for example, what she got wrong in *Beloved*. Hence, she undertakes the theme of slavery and its particular burden on women, so hauntingly expressed in *Beloved*. The story is set in Virginia in the late 1600s, at the dawning of the thriving trade of black slaves that would shape America's history. Slavery was alive and well but was not yet equated with race. The slaves were blacks, whites, and Native Americans; buying and selling of them were a common practice.

Morrison focuses on the story around four women. Rebekka is white, the wife of Jacob Vaark, a landowner and trader who bought Lina, a Native American woman, to work as a servant for her. Despite their initial distrust and dislike of each other, Rebekka and Lina forge an unlikely partnership and quickly come to depend on each other. Out of kindness, Rebekka and her husband have taken in Sorrow, a poor black girl who has been raped and abused, and later Florens, the daughter of a slave, who comes to the master's care when her mother begs him to take her daughter from their current master as payment for a debt.

Morrison's major themes rise up in her *A Mercy*: the horrible sacrifice that a mother makes to protect her child, the deadly vanity of benevolent slaveholders, and the abandonment of a past too painful to remember. For example, "When Rebekka grows ill, the tenuous equilibrium between the four women is shattered" (Miller, 2008, "Morrison," p. 8). But this is a smaller, more delicate novel, a fusion of mystery, history, and longing that stands alongside *Beloved* as a unique triumph in Morrison's body of work. The main storyteller in *A Mercy* is Florens. As abandoned first by her mother and later by her lover, the blacksmith, she feels "an ice floe cut away from the riverbank" (*A Mercy*, 2008, p. 158). But her voice is just one in a tale that not only emerges as a heartbreaking account of lost innocence and fractured dreams, but it also stands, with *Beloved*, as one of Morrison's most haunting works yet.

One of the significant themes within *Beloved* and *A Mercy* is that of slave history. The main characters of the novel are haunted by their personal histories and by the history of their people. For example, in *Beloved*, the character of Beloved represents the history itself that can invade the present. Sethe does by losing her identity and life as she does through her obsession with her resurrected daughter. It shows that Morrison demonstrates her focus on the past that was all-consuming and destructive. But Sethe sees her life in Paul D as she tells her: "Sethe [...] me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 273). In this way, Sethe can forget her past as Paul D shows his love towards her. She may discover that she can define herself through her future that she creates with her family.

Morrison, who approaches slavery through intimate histories of people trying to live through it, recently spoke about omissions in the slave narratives written for the abolitionist readers during the nineteenth century. She believes that since the blacks were addressing the sympathetic whites, they tactfully suppressed feelings of outrage that might offend their audiences. They forgot many things and there was no mention of their interior life. She recreates this interior life in *Beloved* "with a moving intensity no novelist has ever approached before" (as cited in Jackson, 1990, p. 139). Both of her novels tell a very old story. *Beloved* has at its center the story of Sethe, a slave girl, who "split to the woodshed to kill her children" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 158). For slave mothers like Sethe and a *minha mãe*, freedom is setting their children free. *A Mercy* reveals what lies beneath the surface of slavery. But, at its heart, it is a story of a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her. In the novel, the story begins as a slave girl Florens narrates about her own exchange as payment of her mother's debt. This act is the mercy of the book's title. It is a profoundly small mercy, of course, but, at her mother's wish, Florens's life is passed from the cruelties of Senhor D'Ortega's plantation to the relative ease of Jacob Vaark's farm.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's first concern is to make sure that her children are safe; then, she can worry about herself. Her milk flows from her breasts, making her powerful and vulnerable at the same time. When waiting for the time for her to run away, Sethe's only worry is that she must make it at any cost in order to carry her milk to her child: "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 16). Despite the fact that the

milk is stolen from her by schoolteacher's nephews who hold her down and take her milk, she carries her milk to her child whatever amount left with her. With this scene, Morrison has created a powerful synthesis of the theft against black motherhood upon which the institution of slavery depended. Sethe herself was nursed by a woman whose task on the plantation was to nurse: the white babies first and then, the black ones if there was any milk left. She knows well what it means to be starving for one's mother's milk. The implications of this violence on the black man are also highlighted when Halle, Sethe's husband, goes crazy because he has witnessed the scene of violence against his woman.

Sethe chose death for her children since they could not grow up in freedom to a livable life. Here, Morrison displays her assessment of the external reality of slavery by exploring its effects on the personal lives and feelings of individuals who are for the most part black women. Sethe herself has recognized and explained her preference for the intimate history:

'Usually a book on slavery,' she has said, 'is about slave masters, the institution – a predictable plot. When I say *Beloved* is not about slavery, I mean that the story is not slavery. The story is these people – these people who don't know they're in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day. I deal with five years of terror in a pathological society, living in a bedlam where nothing makes sense [...] But these people are living in that situation, and they survive it – and they are trying desperately to be parents, husbands and a mother with children' (as cited in Jackson, 1990, p. 139).

Morrison talks of these people in the present tense although she has put herself into their past, seeing them in their struggle as it is unfolding. There is no story or history more intimate and personal than the family, and the author attacks the absurd logic that tore it asunder in slavery as Morrison points out: "Slavery depends on the absence of a family. You can't have families if you're going to have slavery because then you're got another family, then another, then a clan. People start getting furious and say 'give me back my daughter,' 'give me back my wife.' So they had to destroy the family" (as cited in Jackson, 1990, p. 139). *Beloved* has been called a "vividly unconventional family saga" (Rumens, 1987, p. 11) in which the author goes to the core of the family fabric which is the mother instinct, even in a slavery designed to distinguish it. In this regard, Morrison says, "I started out wanting to write a story about the feeling of Self. Women feel themselves best through nurturing. The clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head. I had to deal with this nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder" (as cited in Clemons, 1987, p. 74). Morrison recounts a true tale of infanticide. That event is the factual and intimate center of her novel both structurally and emotionally, but she builds layers onto it, recreating in the process, the cruelty and terror of plantation life in the 1850s and after.

Morrison always gives her readers the perspective of black slaves who lived in those times and who suffered the moral abomination and outrage of slavery. People get desperate when all seems lost. For example, in *Beloved*, returning to slavery after having escaped it was to lose everything, that is why, Sethe tried to kill all her children and herself too, to avoid going back. Morrison's novel covers a time when even freedom was no paradise. The novel shows that even after slavery, "daily reality for the freed slave continued to be a matter of perpetual struggle" (Rumens, 1987, p. 12), a fact of black life all over the world.

Morrison uses the black history that helped give her the perspective necessary to get inside the slave's mind. She understands that bondage is bondage whatever the system. For this reason, she relied on the interior evidence wherever she could find it. As her novel focuses on "the holocaust of slavery and the blood-soaked years afterwards; the vicious tools used to humiliate slaves, the grotesque prison chain gangs" (Donahue, 1987, p. D1) in the United States, the slave mentality she recreates reflects the difficulty of living black slaves everywhere.

Like *Beloved*, her most admired work *A Mercy* is set in the distant American past and tells the story of a slave mother's apparent betrayal of her daughter. "I'm just trying to look at something without blinking," Morrison has said, "to see what it was like, or it could have been like, and how that had something to do with the way we live now" (as cited in Miller, 2009, Rev., p. 1). If *Beloved* can be described as an attempt to see what slavery was like to depict its historical and psychological repercussions for America, *A Mercy* is an attempt to see what could have happened if slavery had not taken full root in the New World, a tale of America.

In *A Mercy*, then, Morrison uses her storytelling to transport the readers back to a time, the 1680s, in America when religion, class differences, prejudice, and oppression were a common practice. That was a time in the American history when the seeds of slavery and racism began to take their root. The novel centers around the decision of Jacob Vaark who despite his revulsion to the business of slavery, accepts a young slave girl as payment on a debt. The decision to take Florens "with the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady" (*A Mercy*, 2008, p. 24) impacts the lives of other women living on Jacob's farm. There is Rebekka, Jacob's wife, who questions her God as she loses one baby after another to the harsh realities of the New World. A Native servant, Lina, a survivor of the smallpox epidemic, who hungers for Florens's love to replace the family taken from her. There is Sorrow, a quiet black woman, who is a survivor of a terrible incident on a slave ship.

With Morrison leading the way, the black writers in the United States today continue to see the black

history as their duty to combat the stigma associated with the black slave past. It is not an easy task when that legacy is perpetuated both in literature and in life. In African American literature, there is an extensive folk literature based on black themes that reflects the inheritance of slavery. The African American writers in the United States today confront that legacy, where the blacks are still bearing the burden of slavery, but the effects of slavery have been felt all over.

Morrison's novels often show similar situations for the blacks in the United States where, certainly during the early part of the twentieth century, many lived in slavery of a different form as Luis (1984) observes, "The slave master has become the owner and the slave is now the worker" (p. 212). Only the terminology has changed. It would seem, then, that while the black writers are rewriting slave history, the legacy of the slave past, while inspiring a black unity, continues to "cast a heavy shadow" (Topin, 1970, p. 8) that hampers their efforts to overcome the stigma associated with that legacy.

Morrison knows well how painful it is to remember the horrors she presents. She has said in an interview that she, for example, expected in *Beloved* to be the least read of all her books because "it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember" (Morrison, 1989, "The Pain," p. 48). However, because *Beloved* insists on remembering, the novel is able to recover and honor the symbolic spirit of a black girl whose ribbon and piece of scalp Stamp Paid found. In so doing, it makes possible the contemplation and creation of a future in which the African Americans can respect and honor themselves and their ancestors, and be beloved. As Paul D says to Sethe, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (*Beloved*, 1987, p. 273). What the novel suggests is that tomorrow is made possible by the knowledge of yesterday. For the African Americans of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the knowledge can be gained from imagining what it was like to walk in the flesh of their slave ancestors.

Morrison is an ideal storyteller of Benjamin's model. The reason for this is that as a key African American woman writer, she has rewritten and revitalized a history which largely ignored the African Americans and women in particular. Hence, she wrote *Beloved* and *A Mercy* to tell about the legacy of slavery in America and how the African Americans can establish a sense of identity in the face of such an abuse.

#### 4. Conclusion

In short, the insidious effects of the institution of slavery affect not only the identities of its black victims but also the collective identity of Americans as a whole. So far as slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity and compassion. America's future depends on its understanding of the past; for example, in *Beloved*, Sethe must come to terms with her past because she can secure a future with Denver and Paul D.

Most importantly, in *Beloved*, the readers learn about the history and legacy of slavery not from the white characters' points of view, but rather from the black characters'. Here, the white characters are represented by schoolteacher and the Bodwins; and the black characters are by Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, and Baby Suggs. So is with *A Mercy* in which the infant history of slavery is revealed through memories of black characters involved in the storytelling. Morrison, thus, rewrites history with the voices of a people historically denied the power of language. In her slave narratives, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, she redeems a history that had been lost as in Sethe's and a *minha mãe's* repression of their memories. To her, if history has become a way of clarifying the black reality, then, remembering the past means creatively rethinking the present and imagining the future.

#### Acknowledgements

This paper builds upon my Ph.D. dissertation entitled "The Politics of Slave Narratives: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity in Toni Morrison's Novels". The Ph.D. degree was awarded by Tribhuvan University in 2010.

#### References

- Clemons, Walter. (1987, September 18). A gravestone of memories. *Newsweek*, pp. 74-75.
- Donahue, Deirdre. (1987). The lyrical world of Toni Morrison. *USA Today*, p. D1.
- Gray, Paul. (1987, September 21). Something terrible happened. Rev. of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. *Time*, p. 43.
- Grossman, Lev. (2008, November 24). The corrections. *Time*, p. 55.
- Jackson, Richard. (1990, Winter). Remembering the 'Disremembered': Modern Black Writers and Slavery in Latin America. *Callaloo*, 13(1), 131-144.
- Lawrence, David. (2007). Fleshly ghosts and ghostly flesh: The word and the body in *Beloved*. In Harold Bloom (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's Beloved* (First Indian Edition, pp. 45-56). New Delhi: Viva Books.
- Luis, William. (1984). History and fiction: Black narrative in Latin America and the Caribbean. In William Luis (Ed.), *Voices From Under: Black Narrative in Latin America and the Caribbean* (pp. 201-221). Westport, C T: Greenwood.
- Miller, Cheryl. (2009, March). Abstract. Rev. of *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison. *Commentary*, Retrieved from

- <<http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/a-mercy-by-toni-morrison-15088>>.
- Miller, Michael. (2008, December 15). Morrison, mellowed. *Time*, p. 8.
- Morrison, Toni. (2008). *A Mercy*. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knoff.
- Morrison, Toni. (1987). *Beloved*. London: Picador.
- Morrison, Toni. (1989, May 22). The pain of being black. By Bonnie Angelo. *Time*, pp. 48-50.
- Raynaud, Claudine. (2007). *Beloved* or the shifting shapes of memory. In Justine Tally (Ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (pp. 43-58). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rumens, Carol. (1987, October 16-22). Shades of the prison house. *Times Literary Supplement*, pp. 11-12.
- Schapiro, Barbara. (1991). The bonds of love and the boundaries of self. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Contemporary Literature*, 32(2), 194-209.
- Smith, Valerie. (1993). Circling the subject: History and narrative in *Beloved*. In Henry Louis Gates, Jr. & K.A. Appiah (Eds.), *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (pp. 342-355). New York: Amistad.
- Spillers, Hortense. (1987). Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics*, 17, 65-88.
- Taylor, Clyde. (1985). Black writing as immanent humanism. *Southern Review*, 21(3), 795.
- Topin, Robert Brent. (1970). From slavery to fettered freedom: Attitudes toward the Negro in Brazil. *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 7(1), 3-12.