Dealing with Trauma in “Beloved” by Toni Morrison

Posted on January 6, 2024

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The novel “Beloved” explores the characters’ personal experiences with their traumas and how they deal effectively with those traumatic experiences in order to overcome them. Each character in the novel faces similar trauma that is slavery but has individualized effects and distinctive ways to unbound themselves from the trauma and shackles of guilt and slavery. Morrison’s characters, actually, find it difficult to leave their traumatizing past behind to move on in their lives and therefore must go through the pain of memorizing the past events they spent in slavery. These traumatizing events haunt them every now and then as Sethe says to her daughter Denver “It’s never going away” to emphasize Morrison’s demonstration that every character is chained to their painful pasts. The remembrance of past events to avoid encounters with the past embodies that the emotional wounds caused by slavery can never be forgotten. This essay seeks to explore how Morrison’s “Beloved” reflects the harsh reality and intrusive memories of the central figure of the novel, Sethe Suggs and how her thoughts switch from the present to her traumatic past which makes her almost impossible to unburden herself from the outcomes of the misery and anguish she has faced.

Slavery’s Psychic Damage to the Mother-Child Bond

“Beloved” through the character of Sethe probes deeper into the psychic damage of slavery to the mother-infant relationship which haunts the protagonist Sethe throughout the novel. Sethe, born in the Deep South, married a fellow slave, Halle Suggs, and moved to Ohio with Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, has killed her baby named Beloved to save her child from the monstrosities of a school teacher who is the owner of a Sweet Home. Throughout the novel, Sethe is haunted by the guilt of having committed infanticide and the trauma worsens when she sees the grown-up reincarnation of her murdered child in a haunted house after Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road. She commits infanticide due to her devotion and love for her children as she is unwilling to relinquish her children to the trauma she has endured at the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels as a slave. So, she murders her daughter in an act of motherly protection, devotion, and love so that her daughter and other children would be protected from captivity forever. Even Paul D after 18 years of Sethe’s escape recognizes that her motherly love is risky for her children and people around her “for a used to be slave woman to love anything was dangerous especially if it was her children who had settled on to love” (Morrison). Sethe wants desperately to make Beloved or the reincarnation of her

murdered daughter understand that she killed Beloved to save her from the atrocities of slavery as she herself suffered. However, the reincarnation of Beloved, the murdered child of Sethe, becomes mean-spirited and does not forgive her mother Sethe rather exploits her pain. The way Sethe allows Beloved to consume her and succumbs to her murdered daughter's demands shows that Sethe is majorly enslaved by her past and through this mother-daughter relationship, Morrison clearly demonstrates that the relationship can be destructive to the extent where the moral ambiguity can pervade a child (Wyatt).

Rememory and the Path Toward Recovery

The novel "Beloved" follows Sethe's trauma through the concept Morrison calls "re-memory" where she tries to deal with her past by recalling the traumatic past events of her life that she has witnessed during slavery. She has had to better deal with the sexual trauma, isolation, racial discrimination, abuse, and the loss of her loved ones by recollecting her painful memories and guilty feelings of the past. However, the step of murdering her daughter Beloved is like an escape mechanism for the protagonist Sethe as she has done so to her child in order to restrict future trauma for her child and to avoid her own past traumatic experiences in the hands of the owners of slaves who were so cruel to her (House). Fortunately, as the story develops, Sethe's other daughter Denver helps her mother out of the abyss by making her realize the intimate relationships close to her which bring Sethe back from the threshold of death in life. Moreover, Paul D's reappearance and Sethe's murdered daughter Beloved's final departure make Sethe fearing off the veil that has been keeping her away from her relationships and most importantly from herself as the result of which she claims her wholeness back. Thus, the first step to recovery for Sethe is claiming ownership of her own life to get rid of the traumatic experience of slavery and the guilt of murdering her children in the guise of protecting them from the atrocities of slavery. By the end of the story, Sethe becomes able to open up about her past, traumas, her love for her children, and her emotional struggles not just to Beloved but also to Paul and her other daughter Denver which allows her to move past her trauma.

Memory, Community, and Sethe's Restoration

In a nutshell, the novel "Beloved" opens up emotionally the traumas of the central figure Sethe and her struggles in the process of restoration and growth to put emotions to the memories through the process of "Rememory" stated by Morrison in the novel to remove the associated pain and panic of Sethe. The story of Sethe and the other related characters and their traumas is titled as such because an external character in the novel, Beloved, the reincarnation of Sethe's murdered daughter aids Denver, Paul D, and the community to claim Sethe so that she can work through her past traumas. The traumatizing memory of murdering her own child remains the same in Sethe's memory even after the final departure of Beloved as she states "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay!" which concedes the fact that the memory will find a way to persevere in one way or another.

Works Cited

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