

Memory and Displacement in *A Question of Power* and *Beloved*

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Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* respectively allude to the aftermath of apartheid and slavery on black people, but more accurately, how these people try to overcome their plight and live with their distressing past in a contemporary context. This effort for survival is characteristic of the restless flux of memory between past and present. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* leaves South Africa for Botswana to escape the trauma of apartheid. But in her country of exile, her memory still goes back to her past in her moments of mental stability. As for the slave Sethe in *Beloved*, memory is lived as a remembrance of the pain of slavery. Both characters' struggle then amounts to a search for a freedom that is outreached only outside their place of subjugation. In this paper, I insist on memory as a recall of historical events and on the displacement of the characters as a (re)construction of their identities fragmented by these events. This analysis will be carried out through postmodernist features such as allusion, irony, to quote just a few, that permeate the two narratives.

1- Memory/Remembrance: Speaking the unspeakable

Truly, Morrison and Bessie Head's texts speak the "unspeakable." They explore the horrors Blacks experienced and what seems unworthy of them to remember. They may thus be interpreted as illustrative of a conception of history as the "reconstruction of the past according to the present since the collective and the social set constitutes its focal point" (Wieviorka, 2001, 170, translation mine). The authors reproduce historical reality while adapting it to contemporary sociological context. They portray the complex relationship between history and individual memory, going from lived experienced as it can be reconstructed from historical documents and then, represented in literature. They therefore posit history as a site of memory where the past of their people is visited or revisited. The personal memory of each character is explored as a collective memory through the threads of fiction and through a process of re-memorization.

At different levels, the two narratives show intertextual structures. The stories of Sethe and Elizabeth are rememorized in the present of the narrators' memory through constant references to the history of their country and the experience of their communities. On the whole, the theme of slavery is pervasive in Morrison's text. The protagonist's story reflects the devastating experience of Blacks in southern plantations at the time of slavery. Sethe accounts for it when she talks to Denver about her relationship with her mother:

By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was [...] She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. (60-61)

Morrison condemns the capitalistic ideology of slavery that considers Blacks as properties. The narrative gives another potent example through the character of Baby Suggs whose life is essentially made of sadness: "Her past had been like her present – intolerable."

(4) She has been exploited sexually, revealing the reduction of black women's body to a simple object of pleasure, of reproduction and of production:

Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers [...] Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for *hearing* that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her. (23)

The sexual exploitation of black women goes hand in hand with their physical burden. Here, the memory of slavery is revived through the scars on some slaves, which spoke of their victimization. For instance, Sethe's mother wears a circle and a cross burnt in her skin under her breast (61). Her experience becomes collective when she shows Sethe the characteristic trait of their family: "This is your ma'am [...] I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell by my face, you can know me by this mark." (61) This particularity distinguishes Sethe's lineage and sets her family memory at work. Moreover, slavery appears as a main cause in the destruction of black families since it breaks family ties. Parents cannot care for their families because most of their time was devoted to farm work. Halle and Sethe experience this situation:

Halle was more like a brother than a husband. His care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim. For years they saw each other in full daylight only on Sundays. The rest of the time they spoke or touched or are in darkness. Predawn darkness and the afterlight on sunset. So looking at each other intently was a Sunday-morning pleasure and Halle examined her as though storing up what he saw in sunlight for the shadow he saw the rest of the week. And he had so little time. (25-26)

Memory is also explored through remembrance. When Paul D meets Beloved for the first time, fragile and dirty, and she starts to tell him her story, his memory begins working. Suddenly, the image of millions of slaves fleeing southern plantations for the North passes through his mind:

This girl Beloved, homeless and without people, though he couldn't say exactly why, considering the colored people he had run into during the last twenty years. During, before and after the War he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who, like him, stole from pigs; who, like him, slept in trees in the day and walked by night; who, like him, had buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, paterollers, veterans, hill men, posses and merrymakers. (66)

By leaning on the memory of lived history, the text recalls the episode of the "Underground Railroad" for which Harriet Tubman was a legendary figure. As such, personal memory is transformed into a collective one to reconstruct and celebrate Blacks' history. The dedication of *Beloved* also alludes to slavery: "Sixty Million and more." If this figure informs about the depopulation of Africa by the Peculiar Institution, it clearly draws attention by the quantifier "more" to authenticate and legitimate the polemic about the number of Africans who were deported to the Americas and those who perished during the Middle Passage. The narrative opens with a precise reference to the History of America: "1875", namely eight years after the Civil War (1861-1865), a period during which Blacks started to think that they

were totally emancipated. It then presents a partial assessment of their situation eight years after the emancipation proclamation.

Morrison and Bessie Head's arrangement of their plots is of importance and needs our interpretation. It greatly adds to the analysis of their texts from a postmodernist perspective. In Morrison's novel, the story is first told vertically (from mother to daughter): Sethe recounts the family story to Denver. Then, it is transmitted horizontally (from sister to sister) when Denver relates it to Beloved. This technique helps the narrator keep the family story alive within the family sphere even if in her monologue at the end of the novel, the heroine advises not to do so: "This is not a story to pass on." (275) In fact, the atrocities of slavery Sethe wants to remove from her mind force her to refuse to pass her story on. But at the same time, because it is full of horrors, this story must be repeated to make it known. The protagonist's assertion is then an ironic call for a larger diffusion of Blacks' history.

Painstakingly, Morrison leans on the story of a baby girl who comes to life after being killed by her mother, to attack the very foundations of slavery and deconstruct it from within. She uses the infanticide of her heroine to pass criticism on this system and what it created as psychological trauma for Black Americans. By killing or trying to kill her offspring, Sethe wants her victims to escape the suffering of slavery as she explains it to Paul D: "All I'm saying is that's a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn't let her nor any of 'em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (163), and later to Beloved: "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is." (203) Because she knows what slavery is, she does not want her offspring to experience it. Death becomes therefore a short cut for freedom.

In Bessie Head's text, memory is explored as a recollection of the atrocities of apartheid on South African Blacks. The writer uses the metaphor of madness to furtively blame the inconsistencies of this political system. The experience of Blacks is essentially recounted from the psychological breakdown of the protagonist. This characterization is an efficient means of denouncing this oppressive system without being exposed to punishment, since the attack is indirect. The character of Elizabeth embodies one of the most poignant forms of political alienation. The causes of her madness result from the system of apartheid that has already destroyed her mother. But the conditions of this destruction are hidden to her until she enters the Mission School: "They had kept the story of her real mother shrouded in secret until she was thirteen. She had loved another woman as her mother, who was also part African part English, like Elizabeth." (15) The discovery of this story, which is also hers, provokes a psychological shock in her and marks the beginning of her mental deficiency.

If Elizabeth's mother is thought to be mad, she is also crazy according to the ideology of segregation as the principal of the Mission School tells her: "We have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane [...] Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable, who was a native." (16) Really, the insanity the heroine's mother is accused of, is that she married a black man, breaking thus the taboo of inter-racial marriages. Accordingly, she can only conceive insane children. And the treatment accorded her by the head of her school testifies to this alleged insanity that passes for a "hereditary" character for her:

Once Elizabeth struck a child during a quarrel, and the missionary ordered:
'Isolate her from the other children for a week.'

The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth's isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up. They took to kicking at her with deliberate malice as she sat in a corner reading a book. None of the prefects would listen to her side of the story. (16)

Bessie Head develops the characters of Sello and Dan after whom the two parts of her novel are named, to show her anger against the unfair treatment leveled at her people. These

characters always crop up in the protagonist's mind anytime she is alone. Her treatment by them ironically refers to the cruel situation that victimizes her race and gender. For instance, Sello is used as a symbol of Medusa, the goddess of Greek mythology that incarnates all that is vicious, vile and lewd. Under this symbolic form, he represents the phallogocentric ideology that leads the individual to develop an anti-narcissistic behavior, a rejection of self, of his/her self. Gradually and surely, he tortures Elizabeth till her destruction. In his endeavor, he manipulates the gestures of the Greek goddess, as the heroine comes to realize later:

She was aware that Sello had been manipulating Medusa's words and the gestures and studying their effects on Elizabeth. He had defined the future, in Africa terms, as one of uncompromising goodness. It had been fixed for her securely in his earlier attitudes. Then he had tried to weave Medusa into this structure. She was too powerful a personality for his methods: the slow, interweaving pattern of life where one thing influenced another, where cells formed and re-formed in a natural way without violence. Why did he display only that aspect of Medusa? Why had he occupied himself all the time with evil? (95-96)

When Medusa tells Elizabeth that she is a creator of evil, her words cross-refer to the destruction of Blacks and minorities through apartheid: "I will it. Nothing withstands my power. I create evil. I revel in it. I know of no other life. From me flows the dark stream of terror and destruction." (92) This system creates evil indeed to maintain Blacks in a status of second-class citizens.

As far as Dan is concerned, he treats Elizabeth like a pervert. He hankers to dominate her morally and psychologically; he wants her to feel jealous by telling her about his multiple sexual adventures:

You are supposed to be jealous.
You are inferior as a colored.
You haven't got what that girl has got. (127)

This sex mania is well illustrated when he stands in front of her, takes down his pants, takes out his penis and tells her: "Look, I'm going to show you how I sleep with B...She has a womb I can't forget. When I go with a woman, I go for an hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina..." (13) Then, he makes the list of his women:

Miss Pelica-Beack, Miss Chopper, Miss Pink Sugar Icing, whom he was on the point of marrying, Madame Make-Love-On-The-Floor, where anything goes, The Sugar-Plum Fairy, more of Body Beautiful, more The Womb, a demonstration of sexual stamina with five women, this time with the light on, Madame Squelch, Madame Loose-Buttom – the list of them was endless. (148)

The revelation of Dan's sexual adventures aims at acting on Elizabeth's psyche, giving an affective impact on her alienation. His attitude has also a political aspect. It sheds light on male will to dominate the female being: "[He] wasn't only doing that with Elizabeth. He was applying the hawk's eye to Africa. The social defects he heightened in himself, then up before Elizabeth as the epitome of the African male." (137)

Like *Beloved*, *A Question of Power* scrutinizes memory as a remembrance. When Elizabeth is depressed and sent to the hospital, the principal of Motabeng Secondary School, a South African too, is sensitive to her suffering. Her crisis reminds him of his own situation and draws his attention on what it means to be an exile. He tells Elizabeth: "I suffer too, because I haven't a country and know what it's like. A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns." (52) The individual memory of Elizabeth connects the principal with the

collective memory of thousands of South African Blacks who, like him, are forced to flee their country to escape oppression. And in their exile, they feel homesick to the extent that some of them sink into mental disorder. The hostile environments in which Sethe and Elizabeth live contribute to their fragmentation. To (re)construct their identity, they must leave these environments.

2- Displacement: (Re)constructing a fragmented identity

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), Carole Boyce Davies writes: "Migration and exile are fundamental to human experience. And each movement demands another definition and redefinition of one's identity." (128) This puts forward the theme of displacement, a recurrent device in the two novels, and what it means for the characters. In these texts, the journey is both spiritual and physical and has the same goal. In *Beloved*, for instance, it revolves around the splits provoked by the Peculiar Institution in the characters and their difficulty to recover from these splits as Sethe reveals it: "Freeing yourself is one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." (95) Their suffering results therefore from their continuous subordination, their impossibility to get rid of their past. To claim their identity, they must revisit the sad realities of slavery. On the whole, Morrison's characters are physically and spiritually destroyed. This destruction stems from the emptiness that surrounds their personality since they live in a racist and proslavery America that prevents them from defining their "self". Baby Suggs, for instance, is described as a "home" of sadness, a no self, so much her life is marked by desolation: "Sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was *no self* made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive." (140, italic mine) Her fragmentation is threefold. First, as a wife, slavery separates her from her husband. Then, as a mother, all her children except Halle, are taken from her and sold as goods. Finally, as a woman, her identity with her former masters, the Garner, consists in caring for the cattle. Thus, having no identity, she questions her true nature:

She knew more about [white people] than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me? (140)

Baby Suggs knows well white people for serving them for many years without ever caring for herself. Her negative perception of herself shows her incapability to define her identity. As for Sethe, she has a gloomy look that reveals the lack of hope as she is traumatized by the horrors of slavery (9). Denver is distraught because she cannot interpret the strange signs of the ghost, nor can she get accustomed to its presence (123). Paul D wanders carrying his past in a corner of his heart and refusing to talk about it because he too, cannot fully enjoy his identity (72-73). Beloved is disoriented since she engages in an endless fight for a family cohesion. But by coming back to real life, she claims her identity that has been taken from her through her death. This is well illustrated by her great attention while listening to Denver relate their family story (78) and her greedy and devouring look at her mother:

Sethe was liked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting, in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work. In lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their two shadows

clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords. She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. (57)

In the end, by seeing her mother, she discovers her true identity as she declares in her monologue: “Now I have found her in this house. She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling. I will not lose her again. She is mine.” (214) Both Beloved and Sethe fuse. Beloved’s identity is fulfilled through her resurrection, synonymous with her displacement from the world of the dead to real life.

Even if the characters are destroyed, their new environment offers them some kind of new identity. At 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe enjoys twenty-eight days of freedom in the company of the other inhabitants before the appearance of Beloved:

From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days. Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day. (95)

This communion and freedom of action provide her with comfort and an identity. She can henceforth forget all about slavery and live a free life. But her new identity is plainly achieved when, under the instigation of Ella, the other women gather in a collective prayer to relieve her from the ghost:

They grouped, murmuring and whispering, but did not step foot in the yard. Denver waved. A few waved back but came no closer. Denver sat back down wondering what was going on. A woman dropped to her knees. Half of the others did likewise. Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer – only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes. (258)

Their prayer proves efficient since Sethe and Denver finally run up to join the group, leaving Beloved and a white friend of theirs whose visit to them with a whip in his hand recalls Sethe of slavery and creates a great fear in her (262). This scene can be interpreted as an ironical representation of slave escape and slave-owners or overseers on their trail during slavery. For Paul D., the possibility to (re)construct a new identity means to get access to the North. This is why he desperately craves to get North: “[He] finally woke up and, admitting his ignorance, asked how he might get North. Free North. Magical, Welcoming benevolent North.” (112) The character’s desire reveals that the North represents the Promised Land where Blacks can plainly experience freedom they have never known in the South.

As far as Baby Suggs is concerned, she acts as an ancestor for Sethe. After Halle bought her freedom, she arrived in Ohio with an experience of sixty years mostly as a slave. With her new identity, she plays a key role in the community of 124. For instance, when Sethe arrived at Bluestone Road “all mashed up and split open” (135), she helps her to enjoy freedom through healing sessions. She asks her to forget her former “being,” symbol of exploitation and fragmentation and develop a new one, synonymous with freedom and hope: “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself.” (95) At the communal level, Baby Suggs stands for a spiritual guide for the community of 124. She leads prayer ceremonies during which she calls for the spirituality of the community. She teaches

them that the future they can hope for resides first in the belief that it really exists and to achieve it, they must cultivate love:

In this her place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard [...] More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love it hard. For this is the prize. (88-89)

Really, she invites them to develop love for themselves and also for their torturers. All these acts she undertakes are illustrative of the new identity she has acquired by coming to 124 Bluestone Road.

In *A Question of Power*, displacement is essentially physical and leads to freedom and the (re)construction of one's identity. At the beginning of the novel, when the principal of the Mission School warns Elizabeth to be careful to avoid getting insane like her mother (16), she understands that she must leave this "prison" like South Africa if she wants to be free. This warning, added later to the ill-treatment and the homosexuality of her husband, hastens her leaving for Motabeng where she can blossom and fulfill her dream:

Women were always complaining of being molested by her husband. Then there was also a white man who was his boy-friend. After a year she picked up the small boy and walked out of the house, never to return. She read a newspaper advertisement about a teacher needed in Botswana. She forced to take an *exit permit*, which, like her marriage, held the '*never to return*' clause. She did not care. (19, italic mine)

The exit permit with its special note "never to return," is an allusion to the fact that face to oppression, some Blacks choose to go on exile by taking this document as a way of escaping the hostilities they undergo. Through the heroine's exile, Bessie Heads revisits this episode of South African history to denounce its exclusion of Blacks on the basis of racism. Actually, in Motabeng, Elizabeth finds a social balance and becomes useful for the other inhabitants. This testifies to the new atmosphere of serenity she now lives in, contrary to that of her native country. She explores her new sense of freedom and enterprise. For example, she uses her agricultural skills that South African system smothered. Birgette, a woman of the village, notices this freedom of enterprise when passing by the heroine's vegetable garden: "There was nothing here a month ago, she remarked. I passed this way and found only rock and stones and bush. And here you have a complete garden full of everything." (80) Elizabeth's reply well illustrates that Motabeng offers her what her country denies her: "I've stolen some of the teaching work [...] I have a group of women working with me and I've been teaching them to make seedlings in plastic bags." (80-81) By using her gardening skills, she contributes to the development of her community and to the progress of humanity. One of the best illustrations of the new identity she has acquired is found in the female association she helps to create and whose objectives she records in a memorandum:

We have a large vegetable garden in the valley, a part of the local-industries project. In our garden we are going to plant a great number of Cape Gooseberry bushes. We would like to sell the fruit of the Cape Gooseberry to housewives as it makes a very tasty jam, which is simple and easy to prepare. The Cape Gooseberry is also a good health food for the family as it is rich in Vitamin C, which helps prevent skin ailments like scurvy. We therefore hope the little children will patronize us and come to favour the Cape Gooseberry above the varieties of wild bush berries which they now eat and which cannot be so nutritious. (152-153)

Thanks to her knowledge of agricultural techniques, she becomes an important link in the success of this project as her friend Kenosi observes: “You must never leave the garden [...] I cannot work without you. People are teasing me these days. They say: ‘Kenosi, where’s your teacher? You are not in school’. People have never seen a garden like our garden. It came there in one day.” (142) Obviously “invisible” in her country, Elizabeth gets a full identity in her new community. She helps women to think and to produce for themselves, discovering thus the importance of humane relationship in the fulfillment of the self. We can therefore deduce that through the decisions she freely makes, her displacement helps her to reconstruct her identity.

A Question of Power and *Beloved* explore the experience of Blacks in South Africa and America from the individual memory of their characters. Through the mental disorder of Elizabeth, Bessie Head tries to deconstruct the system of apartheid that “imprisons” Blacks in South Africa and creates great psychological effects on them. Likewise, in Morrison’s text, it is the very foundations of the institution of slavery that are attacked through the homicide of her heroine. In this work, I have analyzed the commonality in the two situations from a postmodernist perspective to show that face to the difficulties they go through, only the northward movement can help the characters to achieve freedom and get a new identity. This displacement establishes a connection between the individual experience of the characters and the collective history of their people.

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