



Self -Expression in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Semiotic Approach

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Abstract

Throughout the last hundred years, masculinist and feminist theorists alike have toyed with the idea of an anatomically determined body language, which translates the terms, and articulations of the body into that body of articulated terminology that we can call language. This paper is a semiotic analysis of aspects of self-expression of the black-woman protagonist portrayed in the writing of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This study uses semiotic in non-linguistic terms, including kinesics and proxemics

Key words: Morrison, *Beloved*, self-expression, semiotic, body language, slavery, plantation, Sweet Home, oppressed, escape, freedom

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Introduction

The term "semiotics" is simply defined as the science of signs. In addition, *The Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* defines Semiotics or Semiology as follows:

[It is] difficult to distinguished sharply from structuralism; perhaps best as different focuses within one emergent and as yet unformed complex disciplines. 'Semiology' is F. de Saussure's term (1916) for a projected new science devoted to study ' the life of signs within society'_ 'sings including non- linguistic signs. R. Barthes follows Saussure, regarding patterns of social behaviour (fashion, cooking, architecture, etc.) as ' languages'- communicative codes. 'Semiotics' is a traditional term in those branches of philosophy particularly concerned with signs. (Roger, 1982, pp.168-169)

Jonathan Culler in his book *The Pursuit of Signs* (1983), describes the term semiotic as the science of signs and explains that the semiotician wants to discover what the species of signs are, and how they differ from one another. He adds:

Confronted with a plethora of texts communicate various meanings to their readers, the analyst does not pursue a meaning; he seeks to identify signs and describe their functioning. Semiotics has in general claimed that the study of literature ought to be above all an investigation of the ways and means of literary signification. (viii)

The sign, as Umberto Eco states in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1985), is usually considered as “a correlation between a signifier and a signified or between expression and content and therefore as an action between two pairs” (1).

The Greek word of sign was “*to semeion*”. The modern ‘*semiotic*’ is derived by a way of a “Medieval intermediary from the Greek *semeiotikos*, meaning an observant of signs, one who interprets or divines their meaning” (qtd in Clarke, 1987, p.12). The term semiotic is also used to stand for facial expression or behaviour, “as blushing is sing of shame or a grimace a sing of felt pain. Aristotle give a woman’s giving milk as a sign that she lately bore a child and a fever as a sign of illness” (Clarke, 1987, p.13).

During the middle Ages, a very different conception of the sign emerged. St. Augustine’s view is: “A sing is something which is itself sensed and which indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself. Nature sings are those which, without any intention or desire of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, as smoke signifies fire” (qtd in Clarke, 1987, p.19). Signs within this ‘natural language’ are said to be “modulations of the voice, gestures, and features” (Clarke, 1987, p.23).

Thematic Concern

Toni Morrison, the author of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tara Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992), was the first African-American woman writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Apart from winning the Nobel Prize, she won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Beloved* (1987), the 1978 National Critics' Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977).

The events of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* revolve around the topic of slavery. It is about the different fates of groups of slaves who once lived in a plantation in Kentucky – Sweet Home – “of course neither 'Sweet' nor 'Home' ” (Snitow, 1998, p. 26).

In *Beloved*, Morrison dares to delve into the past “ that African-Americans would rather forget, and deftly leads the reader through and beyond that painful place to peace” (Russell, 1990. p.108). Morrison describes the reality of white cruelty “ and the pervasive ability of a depraved system to corrupt the oppressed as well the oppressor; she also insists in *Beloved* on the necessity of personal responsibility” (Otten, 1991, P. 81).

In Morrison's works, she activates the language:

[Morrison] scatters her signs, her political insights, and it is only through an analysis of her language that we can construct an idea of the political and artistic revolution constituted in her work. ‘Confrontationa,’ ‘unpoliced,’ hers is the language of black and feminine discourse-semiotic, maternal, informed as much by silence as by dialogue, as much by absence as by presence. Morrison seems to conjure her language, to invent a form of discourse that is always at once both metaphysical and metafictional. (Rigney,1991, P.7)

One of the freedoms that Morrison's claims in her novels is to move beyond the language “ even while working through it to incorporate significance beyond the denotation of words, to render experience and emotion, for example, as musicians do” (Rigney,1991, p.8). And if *Beloved* is not a story to pass on, “then it is certainly to be sung” (Rigney,1991, p.8). All women's songs, as Morrison indicates, “ are just outside music; often also they are codes, ways to break an enforced silence; they constitute a protest” (Rigney,1991, p.9).

Beloved is developed through a “series of flashbacks. It artistically dramatizes a haunting amalgam of the past and present experiences of unescaped female slave, Sethe, tracing the heroine's quest for meaning and wholeness in slavery and in freedom” (Rigney,1991, p.94).

The events of *Beloved* constitute the past of the black slave Sethe, which the reader has to construct gradually and which Sethe herself tries to avoid: “she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (*Beloved*, p.8).

Beloved was dedicated to the sixty million of the Blacks, who died because of the brutality of slavery. In 1994, *The New York Times Book Review* considered *Beloved* to be the best novel of the past twenty-five years. In one of the conversation Morrison states that:

There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there is a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and it and making it possible to remember. (Taylor-Guthrie ed. 1994, P. 248)

Valerie Smith (1995) explains that the novel problematizes the character's hostile relationship to the past, “explores what it means for them to confront the history of their suffering, and considers, additionally, what it means to move beyond that past. Perhaps most importantly, it considers the place of black bodies in the construction of narrative of slavery”(p. 346). Morrison addresses the status of narrative in relation to formers' salves own memories of their inslevements.

Beloved opens with the description of 124 Blustone Road, the home of Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs.

124 was spiteful. Full of baby venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the childern. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims.(*Beloved* p.1)

The novel starts with an omniscient narrator tells that "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom". The missing number 3 in the house's number, which may refer to the loss of the third child in the family, and the adjective " spiteful" sets the tone of the narrative: a horrific tale of loss and absence.

Morrison compares the house to a human being full of venom, whose inhabitants tolerate its hatred. She activates the body of the house through a kind of hightened sensibility, like the volume of radio turned up. Sethe and Denver do what they can and what the house permits for them; for they understand the source of anger and know the source of grief.

Sethe's real history of suffering and misery has started when she has been in Mr. Garner's plantation. In fact, she is brought to “Sweet Home” to serve as a sexual mate to any of the

men, amongst whom she has to choose a husband. Thirteen-year-old Sethe is brought to replace Baby Suggs, who is too old to work in the field or reproduce:

She waited a year. And the Sweet Home men abused cows while they waited with her. She chose Halle and for their first bedding she sewed herself a dress on the sly. (*Beloved* pp.10-11)

The depth of Sethe's innocence “as a woman-child is indicated by her naïve expectation of a wedding ceremony”; but she shows her personality “to undermine the system of slavery” (Samuel & Hudson-Weems, 1990, pp. 94-107) when she succeeds in having a wedding dress and a honeymoon, albeit in a cornfield.

That Sethe cannot remember much of her life before the age of thirteen, is due in part to her successful act of “dismembering”, of consciously obliterating her painful past. “Most painful had been the denial and severance of any semblance of meaningful relationship with her mother, who had been branded and later hanged because of her daily resistance to

slavery” (*Beloved*, p. 99). The “Sweet Home” territory is a marked improvement on the world of continuous forced labour, where Sethe vaguely remembers her mother as a stooping back among other backs. She later remembers the mark that her mother, in one of her rare moments of rest or relief, shows her: on her rib is a circle and a cross-burnt into the skin. Morrison semiotically deals with this through the words of Sethe's mother; the woman's identity is “negated and reduced to a mark” (Harding & Martin, 1994, p. 139). Sethe's mother says:

“This is your ma'ma. This” and she pointed. I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by face, you can know me by this mark. (*Beloved*, p.61)

The child Sethe asks, “But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too. Mark the mark on me too” (*Beloved*, p. 61). Sethe's plea to be reduced to a mark too, is for the sake of being identified by her own mother, in a system of slavery which denied such a right of identification to its slaves. As Wendy Harding has noted, this reduction of a human being to a mark “launches the book's major symbolism and introduces its ritualistic dimension” (p.139)

The focus on the semiotics of the body is clear in the scenes of physical and scarred bodies. *Valerie Smith* notes that the focus on bodies “Is also evident in the characters experience the past sensorially” (p.347). Although Sethe tries to forget her enslavement, “sensory perceptions set flashbacks in motions; to Sethe, the present is always the past” (Smith, 1995, p. 348). Morrison takes us through Sethe's inward eyes, showing vivid pictures of her bitter memories:

Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. ...

Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out

the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (*Beloved*, P.6).

Sethe's history slowly unfolds. She is desperately trying to “keep the past at bay” (*Beloved*, p.42), as she tells Paul D, the escaped slave who comes to 124 Bluestone Road after 18

years of his flight from “Sweet Home”, to find Sethe settled in the house of misery, pain and suffering.

Sethe and Paul D are both haunted by memories of slavery that they both seek to avoid, “Paul D's presence signals an opportunity to share both the positive and negative memories of life there” (Mobley, 2007, p. 362). Remembering the death of Mr. Garner, the owner of the slave plantation, and the coming of the white schoolteacher who arrived to put things in order, Sethe relates to Paul D how one day she overheard the schoolteacher addressing his white pupils. He says:

“Which one are doing?” And one of the boys said, “Sethe.” That's when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was doing. Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of time and turned a few pages. Slow. I was about to turn when I heard him say, “No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up.” (*Beloved*, P. 193)

The slave woman's identity is thereby negated, reduced, degraded and dehumanized. She is merely transferred into an animal or a commodity. The schoolteacher values Sethe as a commodity for her childbearing capability; she represents a precious capital, “a property that produced itself without a coast” (Hashem, 1997, p.228). In body language, Morrison

describes, semiotically, how the slave woman is referred to as a piece of property, and her children, the product of her body, are to circulated as commodity. Sethe's identity is invalidated. She is a capita that increases by itself without effort or coast. She is humiliated, her status as a human being is questioned, and her body is measured. She realizes this fact and learns the meaning of “characteristics” from Mrs. Garner; she discovers that the schoolteacher's intention may include the selling of her children when they are old enough.

Sethe can think only of protecting her children and getting them safety. Morrison verbalizes Sethe's decision to flee through her body's action. Her action seems almost instinctive “like the behaviour of nesting birds” (Samuel & Hudson-Weems, 1996, p. 105). Her willful act, the escape from the plantation, appears when she “imitates the quest for freedom from a degenerate garden” (Otten, 1996, p. 87). Sethe succeeds in getting her children on board the northbound caravan:

And if she thought of anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simply. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they could be safe. (*Beloved*, p.163)

Not only do Sethe's memories of slavery come to her sensorially, or through her body, but she also bears on her body the sign of great ordeal at the “Sweet Home” plantation. At that time, she is heavily pregnant and already has two boys and a two-year-old daughter, Beloved. However, before she can join her children, she becomes the sport of the schoolteacher's nephews, who violated her by stealing her milk. Another prospect of Morrison's semiotics is by casting Sethe in the role of nurturer. “Morrison returns once again to the now-familiar image of the great mother as embodiment of the feminine principle. Here, however, we find not merely the focus on mother as nurturer but as (wet) nurse, symbolized by her full breast which she uses to nurse both Beloved and Denver ” (Samuel & Hudson-Weems, p.102).

Sethe tells Paul D:

“I had milk, ” she said. “I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I had not stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Bulgar.”

I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. ... The milk would be there and I would be there with it. ...

“Those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Hold me down and took it. ... Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. ”

“They used cowhide on you? ”

“And they took my milk. ”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk! ” (*Beloved*, pp. 16-17)

In *Beloved*, Malak Hashem (1997) notes, Morrison's aim is to restore the language to its original power, and she does so “by personalizing body language, the language of the body disfigured; fragmented, mutilated and dismembered ” (p.259).

Barbara Hill Rigney (1991) explains that the white masters by taking Sethe's milk “not only violate Sethe in an act comparable to rape, but also violate the sacred state of motherhood and the African spiritual values, which for Morrison, that state represents ” (68). Sethe herself, as a child, was robbed of the important bond with her own mother. She is familiar with “the psychological devastation her baby girl would be subjected to without her milk ” (Samuel & Hudson-Weems, 1990, p.103). Recalling her own childhood, Sethe reveals to Paul D that she had been nursed by her mother no more than three weeks before she was nursed by a surrogate “whose job it was ” (*Beloved*, p.60). Moreover, accordingly, she had lost access to “the same language her ma'ma spoke ” (*Beloved*, p. 62).

The final insult, the ultimate cruelty that causes Sethe to flee “Sweet Home” is not the beating that results in the tree scars she bears on her back, but the act of the schoolteacher's nephews taking her milk. Pregnant, bare-foot, and scared, Sethe escapes to Ohio, to her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, and to her children including her baby girl, *Beloved*.

Sethe's back bears the traces of the schoolteacher's whip, and although the mark on her back is not before her eyes, it gets much of its significance through other people's eyes. First, it is seen through the eyes of the poor white girl Amy Denver, after whom Sethe calls her newborn baby. Amy looks at Sethe's back and describes what she sees:

It's a tree; Lu. A chokecherry tree. ... See, here's the trunk_ It's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves too, look like, and dern, if these ain't blossoms. (*Beloved*, p.69)

The tree on Sethe's back records the history of her fertility, “her commitment to motherhood (nurturer), and the consequences she had borne for it” (Samuel & Hudson-Weems, p.129). Sethe's back and body become a living sign for all to interpret according to their comprehension. Baby Suggs notices, while she heals Sethe's back, “roses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders” (*Beloved*, p. 93). While Paul D reads her back as a piece of sculpture, “the decorative work of an iron smith too passionate for display, ” and reads the suffering on her body with his own body: “He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow. ... And he could tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years ” (*Beloved*, pp.17-18). Later still, Paul D describes it as a “wrought iron maze he had explored in the kitchen like a gold miner pawing through pay dirt” (*Beloved*, p.21). Perhaps that moment of perplexity in Paul's mind, as Wendy Harding puts it, “is the most revealing. Sethe's storied back is at the same time a place of confusion and a place of discovery. Her back designates the scram-bled message that she carries to the other side, and her breasts indicate her future mission as a nurturer in the emancipated community” (p. 140). It can

thus be argued that the scar is, used by the writer to establish her heroine's position - physically and psychologically.

Married at the age of fourteen to Halle, Sethe is pregnant with her fourth child by the age nineteen, and driven by a love for her children that is, as Paul D asserts, “too-thick” (*Beloved*, p. 203). This makes her struggle to reach Cincinnati at any cost to join her children from whom she has been separated for the first time. During her flight, she gives birth to Denver on the Ohio Rover.

The schoolteacher crosses the river and tracks Sethe down, reclaiming her and her children for slavery, and out of desperation, Sethe tries to kill her children. Sethe takes a saw to her daughter's throat because, as she tells Paul D: “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that come to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore” (*Beloved*, p. 251).

Though she and others live through and get over it, Sethe could never let it happen to her own: “The best thing she was, was her children. White might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing, the part of her that was clean” (*Beloved*, p. 251).

Sethe slits her daughter's throat in the hope that she will be “safe, ” she tells Paul D, for under slavery “the only safe child is a dead child” (p. 262). Sethe thus sees death as a “sanctuary from an oppressive life ” (Samuels & Hudson-Weems, 106). It is a painful semiotic act, by slitting her daughter's throat, Sethe believes that she has protected her “and defeated the white man [the schoolteacher] who has come into her yard to claim her children as his property” (*Beloved*, 106).

Sethe's love for her children is “too-thick” as Paul D states; she loves them beyond the limitation allowed by the system of slavery. She tells him: “Look like I love'em more after I got there [Cincinnati and freedom]. Or may be I couldn't love'em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love ” (*Beloved*, p. 45). It is Paul D “who is able to understand and verbalize Sethe's dilemma” (Samuels & Hudson-Weems, p. 111). He thinks, “for a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (*Beloved*, P.45).

Sethe defines and perceives herself “firmly in terms of a world of care and protection for children” (Samuels & Hudson-Weems, p.108). She has no interest in Paul D's accusatory remark about her deed:

“It worked,” she said.

“How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the

Other won't leave the yard. How did it work?”

“They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em.”

“Maybe there's worse.”

'It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.'

"What you did was wrong, Sethe." (*Beloved*, pp.164-165)

It is essential to mention that there is a tension created by the system of slavery and the maternal instinct of the slave woman. "Slavery claimed ownership of all its property, irrespective of age and gender, including the siblings of its female slave. Simultaneously, the slave mother instinctively sought to hold on to her progeny" (Samuel & Martin-Weems, p.112). This tension creates the paradox of the novel, or in other words, "the symbolic logic of the novel" (Harding & Martin, p.140). Sethe embodies paradox, as Paul D thinks: "This here Sethe talked of safety with a handsaw" (*Beloved*, p. 164).

Sethe is empowered to "nurture and sacrifice by a remarkable body discourse, namely, by the fluids that her body makes - milk and blood" (Turner, p.87) namely,

the milk that has been stolen by the schoolteacher's nephews, and the blood that she sacrifices by slitting her daughter's throat with her own hands.

Hence, the history of slavery that Morrison writes in *Beloved* is "not a story to pass on" as the narrator notes, but is something that is "unspeakable, unconscionable, unbearable" (Rigney, 1991, p.25). Sethe is surely the victim, the image of woman "as token of economic exchange rather than as a figure of glory, as she buys the engraving on Beloved's gravestone with her own body" (Rigney 1991, p.70). She is obliged to give her body in return for what she wants:

Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against down colored stones with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust. (*Beloved*, p.5)

Morrison's motive to have Sethe act/speak with her body, "to commit that one politically significant act_ the murder of her own child_ which translates the body into the word, establishes her place in history, and serves to document the nature of the most brutal of realities, to indicate slavery as an institution" (Rigney, 1991, p.70).

As Paul D knows, "there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear" (*Beloved*, p. 155).

The rare happy moments she shares with Paul D ends; he leaves her because he cannot bear the brutal act she has committed, and is "fearful of the fierceness of her love" (Otten, 1991, p.89).

Sethe suffers more, this time at the hands of Beloved, who is incarnated as a twenty-year-old girl. Beloved assumes the person of a newborn; "she has 'new skin' and 'soft and new' hands and feet, and she emerges from the water [of the river]" (Otten, 1991, 85). Water serves not only to symbolize rebirth "but the torturous passage of a slave ship *en route* to America. ... Morrison permits *Beloved* to articulate her 'unspeakable thoughts'; Beloved relates her flight from 'the other side' to escape from a slave ship" (Otten, 1991, 85). Beloved tell Denver that it was hot 'over there.' "Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in" (*Beloved*, p. 75). The ship was like a grave, she was forced to crouch in the overcrowded boat, "in the ship's belly with a dead man's face pressed against her" (Otten, 1991, p.84) with "the iron circle" around her neck (*Beloved*, p.213). *Beloved* describes her flight from the other side of the world, the world of the dead, to the world of the living. *Beloved*, then, "is both Sethe's doomed infant and one of the 'Sixty Million and More' ..., a victim of both Sethe's 'rough love' and the manifest cruelty of slavers" (Otten, 1991, 84).

Beloved bears in her body the marks that identify her as Sethe's murdered child; the three scratches on her forehead where Sethe held her steady while she slits her throat were "so fine and thin, they seemed first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under her hat" (*Beloved*, p. 51).

We hear Sethe's "salient concerns resonating in her reflections of the infamous day" (Samuels & Hudson-Weems, 1990, p. 106), as well as her argument that a mother must and will do anything to ensure the safety and welfare of her children. Sethe tells Beloved:

I wouldn't draw breath without my children. ... My main plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. ...

You [Beloved] came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one. ... I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No, not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? (*Beloved*, P.203)

Sethe loves and embraces Beloved as her lost child. She feels obligated to explain, to gain Beloved's assurance that she did the right thing. She explains to Paul D: "She

had to be safe and I put her where she could be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be" (*Beloved*, p. 200).

After Paul D's departure from Sethe's house, the house becomes "a veritable witch's nest, a semiotic jungle in which language itself defies convention and the laws of logic; voices merge and identities are indistinguishable" (Rigney, 1991, p.17). Sethe bitterly says:

I AM BELOVED and she is mine. ... I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing ... she is the laugh I am the laughter I see her face which is mine ... she knows I want to join she chews and swallow me I am gone now I am her face my face has left me I see me swim away a hot thing I see the bottom of my feet I am alone I want to be the two of us I want to join ... a hot thing now we can join a hot thing. (*Beloved*, pp.210, 212, 213)

According to Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (1986) the feminine language, or the mother tongue, is "the resonance of fore-language. She [Morrison] lets the other language speak the language of one thousand tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death" (p.217).

The more demands Beloved makes of her mother, the more Sethe tries to win her sympathy by telling her how much she suffered for her. She pleads for forgiveness,

Counting, listing again and again her reason: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. ... Whispering, muttering some justifications, some bit of clarifying information to Beloved to explain what it had been like, and why, and how come. It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out. (*Beloved*, pp. 251,252)

Beloved will not free Sethe of her past, of the consequences of her murderous love, "and lays claim of her very self. Denver notices the convergence of her mother and sister, as though their identities begin to merge and then reverse in a single self" (Otten, 1991, p. 92). Her persistence to merge with her mother is semiotically evidenced through the kinesics of Beloved's imitations of her mother. Dressed in Sethe's clothes, Beloved laughs, walks, moves her hands, sighs and holds her head much like her mother. Through the gesture of the body, Beloved's identity is mingled with her mother's:

She imitated Sethe, talking the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way

down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt. It was difficult for Denver to tell who was who. (*Beloved*, p. 241)

What *Beloved* seeks in Sethe is the maternal space, as the narrator explains, the “loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's smoothest and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin” (*Beloved*, p. 274). *Beloved*'s desire “to reenter the womb almost kills the mother” (Rigney, 1991, p.16). The community women believe that “Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled” (*Beloved*, p.255).

In Morrison's usage of body language, we see *Beloved*'s intense desire for recognition witnessed through “horrifying greediness and a tyrannical need for domination” (Hashem,1997, p.266). *Beloved* comes to take revenge for having being slaughtered. Due to her separation from her mother since she was two, she is now fiercely hungry for her mother's love. Her desire is greedy and devouring that “she is seen to almost literally chew and swallow Sethe” (Hashem,1997, 266). *Beloved*'s accusations against her mother take the form of fierce anger, and she begins to assume Sethe's role, punishing her like a stern mother. Sethe, on the other hand, reverts to the helplessness of childhood, “the destroyer becoming the victim” (Otten, 1991, p.92). Denver finally

senses that “the thing was done; *Beloved* bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child” (*Beloved*, p.250). Denver watches Sethe “sit in a chair licking her lips like a chastised child while *Beloved* ate up her life, took it, swelling up with it, and grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it without a murmur” (*Beloved*, p.250). When we enter *Beloved*'s thoughts through Morrison's masterful use of stream of consciousness, we learn that *Beloved* does not distinguish herself from her mother: “I am *Beloved* and she is mine. ... I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place her face is” (*Beloved*, p. 210). This merging identity is made evident when *Beloved* makes sure: “You are my face; you are me/ you are mine” (*Beloved*, p.216). Denver realizes that it is not *Beloved* she needs to protect from Sethe, but Sethe from *Beloved*.

Only the help of the community that excluded them can save Sethe and Denver. Accepting responsibility for the courageous Denver, Lady Jones welcomes her former pupil, and the kindness of other women soon follows. “Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain” (*Beloved*, p.216). Ella, to whom Sethe's crime was staggering, finally leads the group of women to cast the spirit out through exorcism, and the process is verbalized semiotically by Ella and dramatized through the movement of the women's bodies accompanied by their prayers:

Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past error taking possession of the present ... nobody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge. ... Denver heard mumbling and looked to the left. She stood when she saw them. They grouped, murmuring and whispering, but did not step foot in the yard. 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 prayers only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it. Maker, do it. Yes ... then Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (*Beloved*, pp. 258-259)

After the spirit has been cast out of the house, Paul D comes back and finds Sethe settled in it alone. Denver now has a job in the town and works in the afternoons at Mr. Bodwin's house and at nights to help her mother. Paul D finds Sethe lying at the bed of Bay Suggs, as if she is waiting for death. But it is Paul D “who can bring her into her present, free her from wanting to die like Baby Suggs, defeated at last by the whites ... and abandoned by the community. Paul D pronounces their freedom from the past” (Otten, 1991, p.94), if not its end: “We got more yesterdays than anybody.

We need some kind of tomorrow” (*Beloved*, p.273). Semiotically, the kinesics of Paul D, when he sits rocking beside Sethe, is a movement signifying healing and giving comfort. In addition, it is verbalized when he reassures Sethe, by the kinesics of their bodies as well, and gives her identity:

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers.
“Me? Me” (*Beloved*, 263)

Beloved is a novel about love healing and restorative. Through the words expressed by Baby Suggs, as Sandi Russell (1991) notes, Morrison implores her people to realize and accept the value of self-love as “the only true vehicle to rebirth” (p.114).

Conclusion

Morrison's *Beloved* underlines the brutality of slavery and its denial of the right of the slave to have a separate identity by presenting the black body in pain. Sethe's decision to flee “Sweet Home” in Kentucky to keep her children safe is described semiotically as the behavior of nesting bird. Her flight to freedom indicates her commitment to motherhood. The violation of her milk by the schoolteacher's nephews in the plantation, the tree marks left by the whipping that Sethe bears on her back, are

physical sighs of her sacrifices as a mother and nurturer and the consequences of this role in the institution of slavery. However, the horrifying act of slitting her daughter's throat, Sethe seeks safety for her daughter, seeing death as a state free from an oppressive life.

Beloved, who is incarnated as a twenty-year-old girl, bears on her body the marks, which identify her as Sethe's murdered child. Her persistence to merge with her mother is semiotically evidenced through her kinesics of her mother's gestures.

With the help of the community, Sethe and her daughter Denver are saved after the group of women in Cincinnati cast the spirit out through exorcism. The process is dramatized through the movement of the women's bodies accompanied by their chanted prayers and Sethe is then finally free of her past.

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