'Anything Dead Coming Back to Life Hurts': Elements of Magic Realism in *Beloved*

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Abstract
This paper explores the elements of magic realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, situating the novel within the broader tradition of magic realism as a narrative mode that blends realistic settings with supernatural or extraordinary elements presented as part of everyday life. It highlights how magic realism often emerges from marginalized communities, particularly postcolonial societies, as a means of expressing cultural memory and trauma. Morrison's use of African American folklore, ancestral spirits, and collective memory reflects this tradition, serving both as a vehicle for cultural identity and a therapeutic process of confronting racial violence and historical trauma. The ghost of Beloved symbolizes racial memory—the haunting legacy of slavery—and disrupts the lives of the characters, invoking African ancestral beliefs about restless spirits and the importance of proper burial rites. The paper further analyses the community's role in exorcising this ghost, emphasizing collective healing through shared cultural rituals. Morrison's narrative technique, including the sudden, disorienting introduction of Beloved, immerses readers into the characters' traumatic experience, reinforcing the participatory and aural qualities of African American storytelling. The analysis also draws on postcolonial theory to contextualize the novel's engagement with colonial amnesia and the necessity of remembering for emancipation. Ultimately, *Beloved* is shown as a powerful example of how magic realism can articulate the complexities of African American history, identity, and resilience through a fusion of myth, memory, and lived reality.

Keywords: Magic realism, Toni Morrison, Beloved, racial memory, African American folklore

Considering the myriad definitions of magic realism, it has always been difficult to determine which definition is more apt. However, the interpretation of the term rests on the common interpretation of the words--'magic' and 'realism'. Thus, magic realism implies a realistic world in which magical elements or extraordinary events are presented in a believable manner (Bowers 21). It is imperative that the setting remains real so that the magical aspects remain believable:

> The extraordinary in magical realism is rarely presented in the form of a dream or a psychological experience because doing so takes the magic out of recognizable material reality and places it into the little understood world of the imagination. The ordinariness of magical realism's magic relies on its accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and material reality (Bowers 22).

Magical realist writers have often presented their setting as minor towns or rural countryside as places away from the centre of political power as in the case of Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Toni Morrison. Although this is not true for all magic realist texts, it has indeed become a trend in this genre, and therefore, the term has become associated with highlighting the marginalized sections of society who are devoid of politico-economic power as well. Thus, it is not unlikely that countries still grappling with the aftermath of colonization have turned to magic realism as a narrative mode.

In a conversation with E. Gonzalez Bermejo, Marquez reveals that magic realism as a technique is about using his cultural context in his writing through the oral storytelling tradition that his grandmother used: 'I realized that reality is also the myths of the common people, it is the beliefs, their legends; they are their everyday life and they affect their triumphs and failures' (Williams 79). Writers of different ethnic groups, including Native American, Indian, African, and African American, have done the same by using their cultural myths, ancestors, and spirits in their writing.

Though Morrison left Ohio long ago, it is her 'back there' (Guthrie xii)–the place she revisits in her mind's eye and the community she grew up in when she writes. The loss of the exclusivity of black music makes it imperative that it be replaced by another cultural form in the African American community. Morrison believes that the contemporary African American novel could do just that (Morrison 341). In elaborating on the characteristics of the same, she says that it possesses a 'participatory quality between a book and reader; an aural quality in the writing; an open-endedness in the finale that is agitating; an acceptance of and keen ability to detect differences versus a thrust toward homogenization; acknowledgement of a broader cosmology and system of logic in touch with magic, mystery, and the body; a functional as well as aesthetic quality; an obligation to bear witness; service as a conduit for the "ancestor"; uses of humor that are frequently ironic; an achieved clarity or epiphany and thus a tendency to be prophetic; and an ability to take the "tribe" via art through the pain of a historical experience that that has been haunted by race to a healing zone' (Taylor-Guthrie x).

Leela Gandhi, in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, argues that newly independent nations often try hard to forget the colonial past and it is this amnesia that postcolonial theory tries to revisit, remember and examine. She insists that it is necessary to do so as the 'mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounter' (Gandhi 4). Her interpretation of postcolonialism as a 'therapeutic revival of the colonial past' is

pertinent to Morrison's cathartic processes of collective healing in her novels (Gandhi 5). Nevertheless, when it comes to Morrison's novels, Sam Durrant suggests that there are two kinds of memory —cultural memory and racial memory–and that cultural memory comprises 'both written and oral, official and unofficial—accounts of a community's history, ' whereas 'racial memory remains nonverbalized yet somehow passes itself on from generation to generation, as if it were secretly encrypted within the cultural text' (Durrant 80). He opines that while cultural memory is a healthy way of remembering and is complementary to the individual's sense of identity, racial memory is unhealthy as it implies a 'melancholic identification *with* the dead, a life-threatening, other-centered mode of being claimed *by* the dead, a mode of being-for-death' (Durrant 80). Thus, the nature of violence in Morrison's novels can be perceived as a resurfacing of this racial memory— the memory of the violence inflicted on the black body and community.

In the Foreword to *Beloved*, Toni Morrison begins with how she gave up her editing job in 1983 and the ecstatic freedom she experienced soon after. While thinking of the idea of freedom for black women in the past, Morrison admits that she herself was reluctant to go through that pain and grief and was unsure as to what she should write and how, when she recalled a newspaper clipping in *The Black Book* about Margaret Garner, a young mother who had killed one of her four children and tried to kill the rest when she was compelled to return with them to the owner's plantation. For her, death was a better option than living as a slave. Despite having murdered her own child and being considered insane by others, her sanity and determination surprised everyone, and she soon became a celebrated legal case in the fight against slavery and the Fugitive Slave laws, which 'mandated the return of escapees to their owners' (Morrison XI).

Thus, *Beloved* is named after the murdered child and not the murderer: 'the one who lost everything and had no say in it' (Morrison Beloved XII). Morrison states that Beloved's return to the house must be sudden, without any introduction into either the house or the novel. She says: 'I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense' (Morrison XII). The ghost of Beloved creates havoc in their lives so much so that 'the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive' (Morrison XIII).

The traditional Western ghost story, which revolves around any kind of supernatural creature—ghost or monster—has an evil force creating disorder in a home or any secure space. This is generally succeeded by the entry of a character who investigates all possible kinds of explanations for this chaos, ultimately coming up with the correct name, source, or reason for the terror. The final stage comprises the appropriate ways of destroying the ghost or monster. African culture perceives the supernatural in a completely different manner. Africans believe in a 'collective consciousness of the ancestors that is carried among the living, which often results in ancestor worship' (Beaulieu 2). The woman, more often than not, performs the role of a leader in this ancestral community to the extent of assuming demi-god status or goddess-like qualities. In such a community, burial practices are of great importance, as corpses that have not been buried properly are believed to return as angry ghosts that stay among the living or return to raise hell in their lives. The living are also thought to be able to connect easily with their ancestors. These elements play a significant role in the lives of the Suggs family, particularly the women.

In the Western tradition, the murder of Beloved makes her soul restless. Nevertheless, 'she was named and received her gravestone in an act of sexual submission by her mother, and this wrongful burial has made her spirit angry and restless in the African mythological tradition' (Beaulieu 2). As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu points out in The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia, tricksters are important in African mythology. Beloved, whose naming has not been done traditionally, turns into a trickster and causes trouble to the living:

'This trickster characteristic is reminiscent of the Signifying Monkey of the Yoruba mythology. In his myth, Monkey tells insults to Lion that were supposedly told to him by Elephant, in order to set Lion and Elephant against each other. Beloved's manipulative presence in the household similarly causes conflicts in many of the domestic relationships. Beloved's deeds turn deadly because of the collective weight of the ancestors' experiences of slavery that she brings upon the living from the dark side' (2).

In an interview with Mel Watkins in 1977, Morrison spoke of her desire to use magic, superstitions, and black folklore in novels and underlined the fact that black people believe in magic. She reveals: "Once a woman asked me, 'Do you believe in ghosts?' I said, 'Yes. Do you believe in germs?' It's part of our heritage" (*Conversations* 46).

Full of a 'baby's venom' (Morrison 3), the ghost of Beloved makes life a living hell for Baby Suggs, her daughter-in-law, Sethe, and her three grandchildren—Howard, Burglar, and Denver. However, by 1873, Sethe and Denver were the only ones who had to put up with it. Baby Suggs had passed away, and Sethe's sons, Howard and Burglar, had run away as soon as they decided that they could not take any more. For Burglar, that moment arrived when a mirror shattered when he merely looked in it; for Howard, the breaking point came when he found two little handprints on the cake. Despite such day-to-day troubles, they never moved to another house, as each of them had different reasons for doing so. Baby Suggs, who had had enough troubles to last a lifetime, insisted that every house in the country was packed with coloured people's ghosts and, therefore, saw no point in moving at all.

Sethe's reasons for not moving were different. She had only run away once, and although she had been successful, unlike most of the other Sweet Home slaves, the price she paid for it was too much—with the murder of an infant daughter, two sons who ran away, the loss of her husband, her friends, and the loss of life as she knew it. What remained was a lifetime of memories and a ghost of a baby that haunted her and her family. Years later, when Paul D tries to persuade Sethe to leave, she refuses saying: 'I will never run from

another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much!' (Morrison 18). Indeed, it cost her too much.

While running away from the Schoolteacher and his nephews at Sweet Home, Sethe was not sure she would make it, nor was Baby Suggs. Therefore, her arrival with a newborn in her arms called for a celebration, which made the others jealous of Baby Suggs's prosperity and freedom, and this gradually evolved into hatred and later passivity when, by not cautioning her family about Schoolteacher and his men, they failed to protect them. When Sethe tries to kill her children rather than let them be dragged back into slavery, she is only trying to 'out hurt the hurter' (Morrison 234). However, the Schoolteacher does not reclaim Sethe as he believes she is mentally unstable and therefore killed her child. What he does not realize is that Sethe's love for her children is so 'thick' that she would rather kill them than allow them to be dehumanized by slavery (Morrison 193).

Baby Suggs' efforts to free the former slaves from their traumatic past are upset by an 'act of (self-)destruction that suggests the return of racial memory' (Durrant 95). This act not only damages Baby Suggs' enthusiasm and takes away a life, but also renders the African American community incapable of forgiving Sethe as her act of infanticide, in their opinion, confirms the racist genetic theory of the colonizer that insists that the dark skin implies savagery of the jungle to which a black person tends to revert to—'a racial memory of having been identified as less than human, a memory that lodges itself in the flesh precisely because it is a memory of having been reduced to flesh' (Durrant 96).

Almost a decade after Baby Suggs' death, Paul D, the last surviving man of those at Sweet Home, comes to Cincinnati to visit her and Sethe, and changes her world. He beats out the ghost with a table and the words, 'You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!' (Morrison 22) and stays back at 124. Just when it feels like Sethe could dare to hope again, Beloved enters, soaked and sleepy, sitting on a tree stump in their yard. After constantly drinking water and sleeping for days, she finally wakes up with no memory of her past. All she can recall is water, staying on a bridge, and the fact that she had stolen the clothes and shoes she was wearing—details that are too vague for them to understand who she is or where she is from.

The three of them have different reactions to Beloved: Paul D is suspicious because she sounds and looks sick but has flawless, glowing skin and soft hands and feet, and also lifts a rocking chair with one hand; Sethe is kind to her because she thinks that Beloved must have been captured and raped by white folks for so long, the way Ella was, but mostly, she is touched by her name, which reminds her of her dead daughter; only Denver suspects that her dead sister's ghost has returned in flesh. One does not know for certain if Beloved is actually a spectre of the murdered child or a completely different individual, but she has been interpreted as a link between the ghost of the child as well as the sixty million and more victims of the Middle Passage, in particular, and slavery, in general, mentioned in the epigraph. Beloved's murder relegates her to the 'precultural limbo' as the slave, and on return, she brings with her, the traumatic memories of that place that seems similar to the condition in slave ships (Durrant 89).

Beloved's demand for things from Sethe, as well as her time and affection, increases gradually. She even manages to drive Paul D away after forcing him to couple with her. The moment of revelation comes for Sethe when Beloved sings a lullaby that Sethe had created years ago for her children. It is at that moment that she believes that her dead daughter has returned, but what follows this revelation scares Denver. The only sane person in the house, she bears silent witness to the other two women raging at each other—her mother apologizing incessantly and Beloved accusing her of having left her. Sethe's devoted attempts at becoming the best mother to Beloved makes her neglect work so much that she is fired. With less and less to eat, Denver decides to attempt to solve the problem herself. Cut off from the community for eighteen years, she becomes the bridge that links 124, Bluestone again to the outer world.

Denver manages to recall the way to Lady Jane's house, her former teacher, asking her for work so she could be paid with extra food. Taking pity on her, she spreads the word among the other women, and Denver finds a plate of food, or a bag of beans, or a basket of eggs every day on a stump in her yard. Though she refrains from mentioning Beloved at first, passing her off as a cousin, she realizes that she must go out to work in order to ensure that the house is run properly and her mother survives. It does not take long for the community to realize that the 'cousin' (Morrison 299) is none other than the ghost of the dead baby. Though the story is blown up out of proportion and agitates them all the more, it takes them some time to calm down and come to an agreement as to what should be done about it. The women were divided into three groups: 'Those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through' (Morrison 301). It was Ella who took matters into her own hands and convinced everyone that they must put a stop to it. Confined to a house where a father and a son raped her repeatedly in her youth, in her terms, 'the lowest yet' (Morrison 301), Ella too had killed the baby born out of rape by refusing to nurse it. What she refused to believe was that it would be alright to let that baby return from the dead to plague her (Morrison 305). So it was on her insistence that the women gathered outside 124 with whatever they believed would work—Christian or otherwise.

Beloved's all-consuming presence and with it, the return of racial memory—that of the sixty million and more victims of slavery—takes away Sethe's ability to digest anything she eats . It is only when she 'spit[s] up something she had not eaten' (Morrison 243) that Denver realizes the seriousness of the situation and tries to seek help from others in her community. At the beginning of the novel, she cries because of her lonely depressing life at 124; now at the end, Denver enters the community and gradually becomes stronger, making decisions for herself and the welfare of her family. It is through her and her decision to ask for help that the role of the black community is revived. The community finally gets the chance to redress the wrong that it had inflicted on Sethe and her family—first by not warning them and later, by cutting off Sethe from themselves for eighteen years.

When the group of thirty women arrived at 124, they did not see Denver sitting on the steps. Memories of their childhood greeted them—memories of them eating salad and catfish at the feast, playing with the other children as Baby Suggs looked on and laughed. Thus, the women grouped and whispered their prayers in low, earnest syllables—'Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it' (Morrison 304). Then Ella hollered and the others joined her: 'They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like' (Morrison 305). When the sound reached Sethe's ears, she thought the Clearing had come to her and she 'trembled like the baptized in its wash' (Morrison 308). But when she sees Bodwin in a hat, driving his cart, she mistakes him for Schoolteacher and rushes to attack him. Though she is stopped by Denver and the other women, Beloved escapes. When she feels the emptiness where Sethe's hand was and sees her rushing toward the 'hill of black people' and the 'man without skin' at the top, she runs away (Morrison 309).

The image of the Clearing underlines the therapeutic power of women collectively, and the allusion to baptism indicates that Sethe will begin anew from this moment. As Sam Durrant underlines in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*,

> 'It is only the power of *their* collective voice—as opposed to that of the women of 124—that is able to dematerialize and "disremember" Beloved and reclaim the (barely) living from the dead. Beloved has to be exorcised—spat out—into the epilogue precisely because of the intolerable nature of her claim on the living' (91).

The journey across the Black Atlantic had made the ancestors of the African American community lose sight of Africa forever. What remains of their homeland is an image of Africa created by the community, the '*Pre`sence Africaine'* as Stuart Hall stresses that it is not about ever recovering a lost Africa as such: 'whether it is …an origin of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is . . . open to doubt' (Hall 217). The bond that they share with each other is a product of that shared history and cultural codes which bring us together as one people— this oneness remaining the same in spite of changes in our actual history. Hence, it is this oneness that is the essence of the black experience. In post-colonial societies, unearthing this cultural identity is commonly the subject of what Fanon called a "passionate research…directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others" (Fanon 169). Thus, Baby Suggs's ritual can be seen as an attempt to purge the 'ineffaceable…wounds that the colonial onslaught has inflicted' on her people (Fanon 200). Not just this ritual, but the act of exorcism can be seen as an effort to 'mercilessly expel' from their land and their spirits, the 'tinctures of decay' that imperialism has left in its wake (Fanon 200): 'It was not a story to pass on' (Morrison 324).

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