

“Beloved” under the Scrutiny of Freud’s Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

The present work dissects and analyzes the phenomena and the events in Beloved: Sethe’s house hunting by the baby ghost, Sethe’s infanticide and her trauma as a slave through the lens of the Freudian theories coupled with an introspective look into the phenomena of anxiety and hysteria.

Keywords

slavery, trauma, infanticide, anxiety, hysteria

Beloved is one of the most important works of Toni Morrison. It is complicated but at the same time accessible through the exhibited life and death situations, it is intriguing but at the same time predictable, it is cruel but, at the same time, it is the extension of the purity of soul of the characters. If it were for us to characterize *Beloved* in a single sentence this would be the following: a synergy of opposite forces in a dynamic combination towards a literary outcome. The characters, plot, succession of events combine to such an extent creating the genial literary swirl of Toni Morrison. The characters’ discourse makes them palpable, the chaotic leaps between discourses simulate the unpredictability of the human character and the difficulties in the characters’ lives accentuate the implacability of their choices.

The novel focuses on the misery and pain of slavery having as central character a female protagonist called Sethe who is, unfortunately, from a psychological point of view, trapped between two worlds: the world in which she has the status of slave and she desperately wants to escape from and the post slavery world of her, in which she constantly strives to fit in but she cannot because the wounds of the past are too deep Sethe’s entire psychoanalytical adventure is the symbol of Freud’s patients who became “...’fixated’ to a particular portion of their past, as though they could not manage to free themselves from it and were for that reason alienated from the present and future...” [6, 273]

One of the main concerns of this work is to show how the traumatic events in *Beloved* represent a rich psychoanalytical ground for the Freudian *Structural* and *Topographic* theories integrated in the complexity of *anxiety* and *hysteria*.

The *Topographic* theory has as central elements the three important spheres of the human psyche: *the conscious*, *the preconscious* and *the unconscious*. They are the paradigm of the omnipresent schism, of the complicated phenomenon called Racism, the trauma and the negative consequences derived from it. They are three opposite, very important poles in an intricate and complex relationship, which offer important clues for the fine mechanism of human psyche. Using these three elements one is able to analyze the human being's identity from the perspective of the complicated and unpredictable entity of the human mind.

The *Structural* theory divides the psyche into *the id*, *the ego* and the *super-ego*. The ego finds itself in the *conscious* and *preconscious*, whereas the *id* and the *super-ego* are situated in *the unconscious* of the psyche. The interaction between these three elements is the generator of conflict and anxiety making the *Defense Mechanisms* to react. *The id* is the repository of our primitive instincts: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. The second one gave Sethe the possibility of killing her daughter and the first one helped her avoid the painful recollections with the aid of the pain avoidant mechanism of the *id*. These self-protection mechanisms allowed Sethe to survive the terrible act of infanticide. The violent haunting of Sethe's house by her dead child and the appearance of the character Beloved meant at a metaphorical level the incapacity of the ego to keep the violent *id* under control, the impossibility of the ego to restrict the materialization of Sethe's painful experiences: "... the ego restricts the generation of painful experiences: 'In this way the release of unpleasure is restricted in quantity, and its start acts as a signal to the ego to set normal defence in operation'..." [5, xxxiii]

The violent bursts of the *id* were symbolically translated in the violent ghost hunting of Sethe's house and the strange behaviour of Beloved represented the failure of the *ego*'s function to avoid painful experiences. Sethe was defeated by her own self, by the memory of her painful past. There was so much unpleasure and pain in Sethe's existence that not even a new start in life after the trauma of slavery could stop the oppressive outburst of painful memories. They were impossible to keep under control because they could not be "restricted in quantity": "...Anxiety [*Angst*] has an unmistakable relation to expectation: it is anxiety *about* something. It has a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*...we use the word 'fear' [*Furcht*] rather than 'anxiety' [*Angst*] if it has found an object..." [5, 100].

The anxiety that Sethe experienced during her lifetime was of such an extent and proportion that it became indefinite and lacking object. In Sethe's case anxiety became identical with fear because it was omnipresent and it transformed into Sethe's natural state of existence. The things that Sethe feared during slavery were so diverse and intense that "fear" turned into "anxiety". This transformation was damaging for Sethe's psyche whose life was a universe of intense anxiety because of the looming influence of slavery.

In order for us to understand Sethe's psychological context we have to understand that anxiety was an omnipresent element in Sethe's life. The mechanisms of anxiety are very much similar to the workings of *Defense Mechanisms*. They both work on the anticipation of dangerous situations and on the avoidance of pain. In the case of *hysteria* the *Defense Mechanisms* cannot suppress the memory of the suffered trauma; thus a conflict is being created between the *id* and the *ego*. The salutary influence of anxiety in the case of hysteria no longer helps the individual avoid the "danger-situation" instead, it accentuates the hiatus between the ego and the id. The ego can no longer prevent the violent manifestation of the primal, instinctual id and this situation is being translated into the violent hysterical behaviour. This situation is materialized from a literary point of view by the violence of the past elements outwardly reiterated by Sethe's unhealed psyche representing a solid base and a strong confirmation of the fact that: "...Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences..." [7, 7] a vital argument for Sethe's entire drama.

The disfunctionality between the different areas of Sethe's psyche is translated in the phenomenon called hysteria. The symptoms, in Sethe's case, are reflected in her chaotic and violent existence. Her symptoms transcend the reality of the disorder into the supernatural phenomena of the exterior: the house hunted by the baby ghost and the strange existence of the character Beloved. Instead of manifesting herself violently, Sethe projects the memory of the traumatic experiences in the form of those supernatural events. The tensions between the three elements of her psyche are so powerful that condemn her to face the consequences of her past traumatic experiences projected under the form of the house hunting and the whimsical, strange behaviour of Beloved:

"Taking this sequence, anxiety-danger-helplessness (trauma), we can now summarize what has been said. A danger-situation is a recognized, remembered, expected situation of helplessness. Anxiety is the original reaction to helplessness in the trauma and is reproduced later on in the danger-situation as a signal for help..." [5,102]

When Sethe killed her daughter she anticipated the situation of helplessness that she would have been in, when the slave owners captured her and her baby. She was very familiar with the feeling of helplessness because her life doomed her to a lot of dangerous and anxiety producing situations. When she committed infanticide she once more refused to feel helpless and she counterbalanced helplessness with murder. It was one act that she could perform without interference from the exterior, without being under the strict, watchful eye of the Garners. Through murder, she chose to deal with anxiety in her own way and her revenge on the perpetual trauma was called the irrationality of infanticide.

The cynical principle by which the *id* functions represents the triumph of life against death and the victory of evolution against regression. The *ego* works by means of the *reality principle*, making the individual realize that every action has consequences. The *super-ego* comprises social morals and values which the individual learned in its childhood from parents. Sethe did not experience the normal free childhood of an ordinary child but one in which the values and social morals were distorted. Sethe was born a slave and accumulated a lot of pain, anger and frustration in her *unconscious*. Her life full of restrictions, aggression and abnormal, inhuman treatment caused an even bigger conflict between the *unconscious* represented by the *id* and *super-ego* and the *conscious* described by *ego*. The *unconscious* developed from the start with an anomaly in comparison with a *normal unconscious* thus and so exacerbating the instincts of aggression.

The conflict and tension mentioned by Dr. Freud in his therapeutical work resulted, in Sethe's case, in infanticide and, later, in the defense mechanism of *repression*. After killing her daughter Sethe tried as much as possible to live a normal existence. She repressed the bad memory into her unconscious thus adding even more strain to her mental existence. From a metaphorical point of view, this complex clash between the conscious and the unconscious resulted in the appearance of the ghost of the murdered girl, which re-enacted the act of repression existent in the cases of hysteria. The ghost was the externalization and a testimony of the power and violence of the unconscious: "...Contrary thoughts are always closely connected with each other and are often paired off in such a way that *the one thought is exaggeratedly conscious while its counterpart is repressed and unconscious*. This...is an effect of the process of repression..." [2, 72]

In order to better understand Sethe's drama we have to perceive *Beloved* as the collective conscious of the slaves. It is the metaphor of the unconscious of the African Americans that works as the collector of all their fears, anxiety, panic, horror gathered during their existence and imprinted in their genes. Sethe is the

representative of the universal slave who tried to suppress all the existent negativity in order to survive and to prevent self-destruction. *Repression* was a common manifestation of the mental of the African Americans. They were not allowed to manifest their feelings, to exercise their qualities; they were not allowed to express themselves like normal human beings. They had the status of inferior brutes meant to bring profit to their masters. The external force represented by the abominable life conditions established by their masters was in constant opposition with their normal human desires, everything resulting in punishment and suffering if the desire was fulfilled.

Sethe is the exponent of a tragic evolution because as a slave she killed her little daughter with a chainsaw lest her daughter be captured by the masters and suffer the consequences along with her mother. After the difficult times she spent in slavery she begins a new life along with her loved ones. Her apparent tranquility is shattered by the presence of the ghost of her killed daughter and then by Beloved, a being with no past, no origin, no memory, which is seen by everybody as the reincarnation of Sethe's killed daughter. The drama of Sethe's life is illustrated by the burden she has to carry with her constantly and which she cannot get rid of. Elements of the present and past mingle. The elements of anger and disgust are symbolic for both present and past, for Sethe's infirmity related to society and to her background. The mixed feelings create the stillness of Sethe's soul who is incapable of adding even more sorrow to her life. Remembering the soul of the little girl adds even more pressure to an already confused and paralyzed Sethe.

The spirit of the dead child along with the character Beloved is, from a figurate point of view, the alternative, parallel world, which is represented and used by all the generations of slaves to deflate and externalize every corner of frustration accumulated in their minds. It is both the Hell and the Purgatory of the African ancestors which by reasons of historical and psychological constraints weren't allowed to evolve freely. Unfortunately, repression never works in favour of the individual and in Sethe's case once again acts like a boomerang defeating the conscious vigilance, hitting it with a great amount of force and violence. This violence and force of the repression is translated into the behaviour, state of mind and speech of the spirit of the dead girl and the force with which it strikes is equal with the force of forgetting, of repressing the bad, the ugly and the past.

Psychotherapy performed by Dr Freud was based on the confrontation between the individual, and his past-repressed emotions. The tension manifested by the ghost is the reflection of Sethe's tension between herself and her past. Through the ghost, the past seeks justice and tranquility. The mechanism involved is the

same one existent in the sexually molested patients of Dr Freud. At first they did not admit being molested as children, they denied the memory of molestation. They were patients suffering from hysteria, anxiety, neurosis. Only after more sessions, they admitted the fact that they were sexually molested as children. The memory of sexual molestation is replaced, in Sethe's case, by the memory of the physical, psychological abuse she suffered as a slave and the psychological consequences that occurred were transgressed into the spirit of the killed child, a complex entity with erratic and confuse behaviour. Sethe had the opportunity through the ghost to confront her fears, her interior struggle and her anxiety. The violence of ghost haunting represented the inner door which had kept the feelings locked and which Freud tried to shatter during his therapy sessions. Just as their literary correspondents, Freud's patients behaved violently during hypnosis therapy, revealing locked emotions and memories. Their psyche, as well as Sethe's psyche, repressed them as a safety measure. They were too painful and destructive in order for the psyche to face them safely. The spirit of the ghost recreates, in a metaphorical sense, the therapeutic results in a psychotherapy session performed by Dr Freud. The ghost, as the patients going under hypnosis, revealed a lot of anger, violence and anxiety so much so that Sethe's interior pressure grew to such an extent that it reverberated violently in the form of the spirit of the dead child. The character represented that force that had to manifest itself in order for Sethe to heal from the past and the haunting memory of her killed daughter.

It is very important to perceive the existence of *Beloved* from a psychoanalytical point of view because in this manner one can better understand Sethe's mental life which is metaphorically the reflection of the spirit's mental life. The following lines explain why Sethe repressed a lot of painful memories and feelings inside her mental world and why the spirit shattered Sethe's life violently. The ghost is the symbol of Sethe's unconscious explosive mental cocktail, which was usually attained in the psychoanalytic sessions performed by Dr Freud during hypnosis therapy:

“But we have arrived at the term or concept of ‘unconscious’ along another path, by taking account of certain experiences in which mental dynamics play a part. We have found, that is, we have been obliged to assume, that very powerful mental processes or ideas exist—here a quantitative or economic factor comes into question for the first time... We need only say that this is the point at which psycho-analytic theory steps in—conscious because a certain force is opposed to them, that otherwise they could become conscious...” [3, 11]

The explanation is relevant and suggestive for Sethe, who experiences the same psychological steps. The killed girl is present in both the ghost that haunted Sethe's house and the girl called Beloved who appeared from nowhere in front of Sethe's house. In both cases, the ghost and Beloved are the representatives of Sethe's unconscious. In it, there was a lot of anxiety, conflict, feelings of pain due to Sethe's past and the traumatic experiences she had to face as a slave and as a mother. The spirit of the child and Beloved manifested in the main character's life after a past plagued by slavery, made Sethe capable of linking the conscious and the unconscious in a harmonious way. The constant fight between the burden of the unconscious packed with negativity, craving to get out of the surface and the conscious, the protector of Sethe's mental, constantly repressing the unconscious, resulted in the ultimate form of assertion which was the haunting spirit. The ghost and the spirit of Beloved represented the release of Sethe's tremendous interior pressure, which otherwise could have led to the collapse of her complete mental system. Sethe knows her guilt but she does not fully emotionally acknowledge the severity of her acts and the actual re-living of the traumatic, psychological consequences of the infanticide. This interior conflict triggered the materialization of the ghost of Sethe's killed daughter. The violent behaviour of the spirit of the little girl is very well illustrated in the following lines and it is an eloquent anticipation of the phenomenon called hysteria:

“...The house itself was pitching. Sethe slid to the floor and struggled to get back into her dress... Denver burst from the keeping room, terror in her eyes, a vague smile on her lips. "God damn it! Hush up!" Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg...” [8, 35-36]

The above description is the embodiment of all mental disturbances of the hysterical patient occurring as a result of the conflict between the conscious which encapsulated reality and the unconscious represented by the repressed, a metaphor for Sethe's interior struggle. Figuratively, the ghost of the murdered girl presents traits of anxiety and hysteria. The violent ghost hunting recreates one of the violent episodes of a person suffering from anxiety or hysteria. Her violent and moody behaviour makes her become a real individual and makes the transcendence between a paranormal universe, psychologically determined in our case and its material literary correspondent. The following quotation explains very well the interdependent relationship between Sethe and the ghost, creating the situation in

which Sethe involuntarily and unconsciously influences the character's state of existence:

“In the case of hysterical patients, on the one hand...the affect remains in a ‘strangled’ state and the memory of the experience to which it is attached is cut off from consciousness. The affective memory is thereafter manifested in hysterical symptoms which may be regarded as ‘mnemic symbols’ - that is to say as symbols of the suppressed memory...” [7, xviii]

From a figurative point of view, the affect of Sethe has been in a strangled state since she committed the crime and the memory and of the awful experience was cut off from consciousness. Sethe's existence after the tragic murder of her daughter is representative of the affect of Sethe which remained in that “strangled” state. The hysterical symptoms in the case of our main character are represented by both the violent manifestations of the ghost of the dead and by the ingrate behaviour of the girl Beloved, perceived as the reincarnation of Sethe's murdered girl. The two representations of the murdered little girl are the ‘mnemic symbols’ which in Sethe's case are the testimonies of her suppressed memory. Beloved the character and the spirit of the dead child are the continuation of Sethe's tragedy. The manifestation of the ghost's hysterical symptoms is figuratively the manifestation of Sethe's masked hysterical symptoms. The paranormal phenomenon and Sethe are in an interdependent relationship. They cannot exist without each other and they cannot manifest without the presence of the other. They crystallize around memories which are the unfortunate link, allowing them to grow and to develop.

All in all, *Beloved* reassembles a lot the pattern of human personality with emotional curves going up and down, with flashing memories which come out of nowhere and penetrate without warning just like the emotional pattern of the human being. It is a constructive chaos of self-discovery both for the narrative thread of the novel and for the characters whose identities take shape in the continuous swirls and twitches of the narrative world. The characters and plot of *Beloved* live and evolve in special situations thus creating various and difficult psychological contexts. They are the coveted material put under the microscope and voraciously analyzed and devoured by the psychological, social and literary eye of the reader. The novel represents the thrill of the wizard who is constantly on the rush of seeking the unseen, the magic, the miracle of life.

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