

Beloved, Mothering and Psychotherapy

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In this chapter I intend to explore three issues raised by Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. The link between literary fiction and psychotherapy, the issue of mothering, both in its universality and with particular regard to slavery, and the implications of the legacy of slavery in literature for writers, readers and partners in the psychotherapeutic relationship.

Writing Away the Pain – Slavery and Storytelling

The purposes of slave narratives, autobiographies and novels about black people have in my view been written to write away the pain. To some extent these writings were censored to protect the writers, and in other cases the sensibilities of the reader. In the case of slave narratives, which Morrison and myself have integrated into our thinking on race matters, the writing has been severely censored. Abolitionists often used slave narratives in their campaign against slavery. Hence the full story could not be told. Women could only hint at acts of sexual abuse, although they could write about whippings and other acts of torture. This denied black women the opportunity to define themselves as women.

However, they were allowed to speak about being mothers but this was done somewhat defensively. The black woman constantly had to prove that she had motherly feelings, that it hurt her when children were sold away. Like Sethe she had to '*unlock the tobacco tin*' of which Paul D spoke (her heart) in order to tell of her motherly love. When the black woman was granted permission to tell her story, it was in order to claim her right to 'true womanhood'. (1) The story was often told in rather sentimental manner that may not sit readily with modern day readers.

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After slavery was abolished the censorship both imposed and chosen ended. Nevertheless writers were constricted in their work by having the task of ‘uplifting the race’. Black writers’ work became a vehicle for civilising the black person in the minds of white people, as Morrison speaks through Stamp Paid in *Beloved*:

“The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle the blacks brought with them to this place from the other (liveable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them everyone. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were there own.” (p198-199)

Toni Morrison’s fifth novel, *Beloved* is a story about slavery and its aftermath. I tried to read *Beloved* when it was first published in 1987. I could not cope, I could not ‘listen’ or stay with the horrific events in the narrative. I put the book down. With hindsight it reminds me that as psychotherapists we often hear material that is repugnant or disturbing. We are then tempted not to listen to our clients’ material. We can and do ‘put them down’ both consciously and unconsciously. I tried again about a year or so later. I struggled but I stayed with the pain, despair and horror.

Morrison’s text interweaves the period both during and shortly after slavery was abolished in America. There are scenes from characters’ lives depicting plantation life, escape, imprisonment and freedom. Historically the novel is located between 1832 and 1880. This covers the ante-bellum period, the Civil War and the beginning of the period in Black American history as the Reconstruction Era. The protagonists recount their experiences of being enslaved and their lives after escape, purchasing or gaining their freedom through emancipation.

The main character in the text is Sethe, the mother of Denver and Beloved. Paul D is Sethe's brother in law and fellow slave at the plantation ironically called Sweet Home. He and Sethe begin a relationship eighteen years after she has escaped from slavery. Sethe is living in Cincinnati, Ohio when Paul D turns up on her doorstep by chance. For both Sethe and Paul D the eighteen years when they were apart from each other were fraught with pain, their history both shared and unshared nearly tears them apart as individuals and as a couple.

Sethe's story was inspired by a real occurrence of infanticide. The novel is based on a small part of the life of Margaret Garner, Kentucky slave who, with her four children and husband had escaped to Cincinnati, Ohio. (Clark-Hine, Barkley-Brown & Teborg-Penn ed 1994) As a result of the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 a slave owner could have their 'property' traced and recaptured even if the fugitive got to the North where slavery was illegal. (The first act makes it criminal to harbour a slave or prevent his arrest, the second strengthened the first by offering Federal Officers – sheriffs, a fee for the slaves they apprehended. (Ploski & Kaiser Ed, 1971). When Margaret Garner's owner attempts to recapture her she tries to kill her children but succeeds in cutting the throat of only one. Morrison reworks the incident into a tale of slavery, motherhood and murder which becomes the text we know as *Beloved*. The dead child haunts the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road, first as a ghost and later in a physical reincarnation. (p50). We do not learn the child's given name, instead we know her as Beloved. This is the name engraved on her tombstone. Names and naming is a theme that is returned to several times in the text and it is a significant issue in the history of slavery. Sethe herself is named after a man. (p62).

Other important characters are Denver, younger sister to Beloved, and Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother in law. Baby Suggs was a preacher but she has given up the 'gatherings' in the Clearing and taken to her bed. She spends her remaining years 'thinking about color' and its meaning in her life. Two extremely useful characters in the narrative help move the plot along; the incredibly named Stamp Paid (a name he gave himself p185) and Amy Denver. Stamp Paid is important in that he tells Paul D and us about the murder, he also saves the lives of the other children. He is a significant person in the black community, serving it for years as a member of the Underground Railroad. Amy Denver is one of the few white people in the novel.

Amy is a poor white girl who meets Sethe by accident. She cares for Sethe following the birth of her fourth child and enables her to avoid early recapture. Amy assists her as she begins her labour – the child, a female, is called Denver in memory of Amy.

Beloved - A Fictional Case History and the Process of Psychotherapy

'Literature has been friendly to us, openly incorporating a good deal from psychoanalysis. Those in literature see the psychology in fiction. It is our turn (therapists) to see the fiction in psychology'. James Hillman (1983)

Beloved is not an easy tale to read. In my view Morrison helps us to 'listen' by using several characters to tell the story. Beloved is a complex novel; it puts itself into several genres. It is simultaneously a fictionalised slave narrative, a gothic horror, a ghost story, biography and autobiography, love story, historical novel and account of mothering and being mothered. Morrison's work is powerful text that is lyrical and at times poetical in its execution. It gives us insight into the therapeutic relationship at its most powerful.

We are told and retold the same story from the differing perspectives of the various characters, in psychotherapy we tell our stories through the voices of our mothers, fathers, siblings, friends and lovers. In her text, Morrison introduces the concept of 'rememory' Paul D's coming to '124' forces Sethe to retell her story. Until then she has simply lived by keeping the past at bay (p42). The arrival of Paul D (who perhaps acts as therapist to Sethe) unlocks her memories. Sethe has to take his version of the fiction into account thus causing her to 'rememory' her life story in a different way. In therapy we 'rememory' the account of our lives which are therapeutic fictions, the process of therapy allows the patient to recover lost details and change the theme when necessary. Like Morrison the patient can also change the pace of the narrative, whether deliberately or not) contains us by this process of speed and slowness. This helps us to stay with Beloved, which at times moves at a painfully slow pace.

At times I found it difficult to listen and stay with the material, but as therapists this should strike a note of caution with us. What does it mean when therapist and/or patient wishes to rush ahead with the plot? Surely, we need to question for whom the speed is necessary and why. If a patient is recounting a particularly traumatic piece of narrative, the therapist may not be able to listen to the pain, sorrow, shame or anguish.

It may be that the patient's story activates strong feelings or 'rememories' in us. We would need to seriously consider the implications for ourselves if the client and the therapist share similar experiences, backgrounds and/or race. If client and therapist are very different e.g. male or female, black or white, then guilt may enter the consulting room through the door of transference. It is possible that the countertransference may be affected by the difference or similarity and could delay or halt the work in progress.

In *Beloved* it is the sharing of similar experience and the unravelling of the story which helps Paul D and Sethe. Paul D's coming to '124' helps release memories for Sethe. She allows herself to remember and 'rememory' certain occurrences in her life. 'Her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other – the things neither had word-shapes for – well it would come in time' (p99)

The telling of the therapeutic fiction *Beloved* is like a therapy in that it is often not a linear story and at times apparently incoherent in its delivery (Morrison is also known for choosing not to help her readers unravel stories). We need author and reader, therapist and patient to piece it together. (Hillman 1983). Morrison does not take on the role of narrator, she gives us very little to go on, dates are few and far between and hard to remember, (I was aware that had this been a 'real patient' I could be inviting accusations of encouraging a 'false memory'). However, it is Sethe's belief that her story is 'not one to be passed on' which seems to be the cause of the trouble. Sometimes things happen unexpectedly in psychotherapy. The unconscious suddenly becomes conscious – the 'word-shapes' come. Paul D tells Sethe about the traumatic scene in which Halle, her husband, witnesses her milk being sucked from her by one of the master's nephews. Schoolteacher and the other boys are also watching. Paul D says 'I didn't plan on telling you that'. Sethe responds by saying 'I didn't plan on hearing it'. (p 71) With the help of Paul D, Sethe is able to 'speak the unspeakable'.

Thus *Beloved* can be read as demonstrating the link between the external and internal realities used in the story. This is done through different characters and their voices. Sethe has to 'face the future and give up keeping the past at bay'. (p42) Paul D makes her face the past by telling her about Halle's reaction after witnessing her humiliation.

Sethe As Mother and Beloved, Too Long a Child

Kleinian and Winnicottian theories are useful in considering the issues around mothering in *Beloved*. Mrs Klein's theories examine internal processes between mother and child. However, Klein does not totally exclude the environment. (Riviere Ed 1946) Winnicott takes Klein's work further by taking into account the environment and culture.

The main feature of Kleinian thought which comes to mind in my reading of *Beloved* is the early Oedipus complex. We are to some extent constrained by the plot because Morrison has Sethe kill Beloved when she is about a year old. The early Oedipus complex includes the processes of projective identification, splitting, projection and introjections. Sethe cut Beloved's throat in the shed behind '124'. She wanted to protect her children by preventing them from re-entering the institution of slavery, which they had left behind when the family had escaped to the North. Beloved returns to '124' seemingly as a grown woman (p50) but in my reading of the text, her psychic development is arrested; some of her behaviour is similar to that of an infant.

Beloved appears suddenly, she apparently walks out of a stream near '124'. Sethe, Denver and Paul D happen upon her on their return from the carnival. She returns to '124' wanting Sethe exclusively to herself. If one accepts the notion that the we have a woman who is in a severely regressed state, it is not surprising that Beloved displays rather strange behaviour, particularly in the way she relates to Sethe and the other people around her. Beloved's life was taken from her when she is about twelve months old. She could barely have had language. We are given a clue about this baby's development, she is often referred to as the 'crawling-already baby' in the text. Beloved acts out because she does not have language to express herself. (p20-213) She cannot express anger, which seems to be focussed on the fact that she was not given a choice about having a life, even if it meant she would be enslaved. Therefore Klein's early Oedipus conflict can be appropriately considered when we recall Beloved's behaviour in relation to Sethe, Paul D and Denver. As the plot unfolds the 'listener' learns that Beloved's homecoming is not a wholly joyous occurrence.

When Beloved is killed there was no one in the role of father figure. On her return Paul D is in the place of the father she hardly knew. Beloved does not accept Paul D, she resents him as Sethe is obviously very interested in him. After all, like real mother and father figure they have a life and a sexual relationship that Beloved cannot be part of, when she realises this she becomes extremely envious. A child's feelings with regard to the 'oedipal scene' can be very strong, perhaps to the point of being murderous. The child wants to keep mother for him or herself, to do this they believe that they must get rid of father. Unlike the actors in the Freudian version of the Oedipus Complex. Beloved does not appear to know she must give up Sethe and relate to Paul D. She tries to identify with both parents. Hanna Segal in her book *Introduction to Melanie Klein*, describes this interaction as identifying with a 'combination of parents'. Beloved's 'early envy attacks the source of life'. She pushes Paul D out of '124' in stages. He moves from Sethe's bed, to a rocker by the stove and then to Baby Suggs' old room, from where he goes to the store room and finally ends up in the cold house, which is separated from the main part of '124' and is also where the killing took place.

If we continue to use Kleinian though the narrative does illustrate the early Oedipus complex theory in that Beloved is motivated by envy of the sexual relationship between her mother and Paul D. Where Morrison's interpretation differs from that of Klein and Freud is that Beloved does come to possess Sethe almost exclusively. Firstly, in a revengeful manner through and incestuous relationship with Paul D and secondly, by apparently taking psychic control of Sethe. (p241 & 265) Her idealisation of Sethe and subsequent Oedipal triumph over Paul D are not motivated by love but by her hatred of Sethe. Sethe, however, does not see what is happening. She is caught up on a treadmill of guilt and the need for forgiveness with regard to the wrong she has done Beloved. Sethe unlike Beloved believes that she did was right 'because it came from true love'. (p251) Sethe it seems tells and retells her story to Beloved in order to be understood. We can see that Sethe is troubled by the enormity of what she has done. In a moment of reverie, early on in the text, Sethe remembers how she paid for Beloved's name on the pink tombstone. Sethe wonders what she could have had if she had sold herself to the stonecutter for ten minutes more. She could have asked for Dearly before the Beloved. Perhaps the baby who '124' prior to Beloved's return might have been less angry. (p5)

“Die Witch” Tales and Denver’s Fear of Infanticide

Dorothy Bloch’s seminal work *So the witch won’t eat me – Fantasy and the child’s fear of infanticide*, brought back my unease with Freud’s distortion by omission of the first part of the Oedipal Myth. Bloch reminds us that Oedipus’ parents try to kill him in order to circumvent the prediction that he will kill his father. Sethe tries to kill all her children in order to prevent their return to slavery. Denver, Sethe’s youngest child, survives the attack but has to live with consequences of her survival, she is thought of as ‘simple’. Bloch, in her work with children who display the symptomatology of infantile autism, argues that a child with a diagnosis of retardation later revealed a “need not to know”. The need not to know was their attempt to forget that their parents had either injured or killed a child. A child may have witnessed domestic violence which could cause them to think that they might be next. Bloch continues that the “need not to know” masked at least normal intelligence. (Bloch 1979) Denver’s fear of her mother is made conscious by the question asked of her by Nelson Lord: ‘Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?’ (p 104) As a result of the answer Sethe and Baby Suggs give to the question she has been terrified to ask, Denver loses her hearing for two years. When her hearing returns the baby’s behaviour becomes ‘venomous and spiteful’. However, Denver is prepared to live with it, unlike her brothers who leave home, or Baby Suggs who lays down to die albeit slowly. Perhaps Denver is able to live with the baby ghost because it serves as an ‘object’ into which she can project her fears about her mother.

There is a harrowing account of life for Denver. She says, *‘I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again...I need to know what that thing might be, but I don’t want to’*. Denver decides that *‘whatever it is, it comes from outside the house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard so it can’t happen again and my mother won’t have to kill me too’*. (p 250)

Denver continues to describe the fear of living with a parent who had killed a sibling. A routine and regular task, having her hair combed, is fraught with fear, after all her mother could so easily cut her head off. Denver can never allow herself to be sleepy when her mother is braiding her hair or she might not wake up. (p205) Bloch gives an

account of one of her patients who has an adult tells her that she had always thought her father dangerous. *'When he cut her hair for instance, she feared that he would kill her with the scissors – not intentionally, but only because they were "handy". As a matter of fact she thought he would always kill her, but inadvertently, if the opportunity presented itself. (Bloch 1979)* Unlike the children described in Bloch's work, Denver does not need a fantasy world in the usual sense. She has the baby ghost (until Paul D gets rid of it) whose presence is acknowledged by everyone living at '124', yet it does not successfully help her to contain her fear of infanticide.

When Beloved returns Denver welcomes her. Beloved's return although pleasing at first slowly provokes a feeling of suspicion and eventually fear. When Denver acknowledges to herself who Beloved is she thinks she has to protect her sister from Sethe. Then she becomes aware that it is Sethe who is in danger from Beloved's need for revenge. Denver is forced to leave the house in search of help. Paul D has already left, in a state of shock and disbelief at the discovery that Sethe is a murderer. Denver thinks it is simply because of his secret sexual relationship with Beloved. She does not know that Paul D knows the real secret too.

The Experience of Mothering in the Context of Slavery

Just before Beloved returns to '124' Paul D and Sethe have an argument over Denver during the incident he thinks to himself (when is still unaware of Beloved's death) that *'it is risky, thought Paul D very risky. For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous especially if it was her children she settle on to love'* (p45) This 'remark' although 'thought' in an almost casual manner is important as it encapsulates the position of the slave mother. Her children could 'sold down the river' or whipped to death in her presence for some minor misdemeanour she or they may have committed. Prior to Schoolteacher's arrival (which symbolically resembles the Four horsemen of the Apocalypse) with the sheriff and the nephews and their attempt to recapture Sethe and her children, (p148) Baby Suggs muses on motherhood. I quote at length in order to make the point about the experience of mothering as a slave woman and that despite the obstacles mothers and children made genuine attachments:

'The last of her children whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features that you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own-fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She did not know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous' sin take? Was that cleft on Johnny's chin or just a dimple that would disappear soon's his jawbone changed? Four girls and the last time she saw them there was no hair under their arms. Does Ardelia still love the bottom of burned bread? All Seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking hard at the youngest one? But for some reason they let her keep him. He was with her every-where'. (This was her son Halle) (p139)

Segal's *Introduction to Melanie Klein* gives an example of faulty mothering through a client's dream material (p104/5) The client is ambivalent in her relations to the breast, this increases her Oedipal difficulties. Segal goes on to say *'the mother's breast had never been sufficiently established as a good internal object for the patient to identify with'*. For me this notion has serious implications for the concept of mothering within the institution of slavery. Slave mothers were not afforded the luxury of being with their children for very long. Sethe did not really know her mother. She nursed Sethe for only two or three weeks – like other slave mothers'. Slave babies were left with an older woman who could no longer work in the fields. The new mother would be allowed to feed her baby only through authorised breaks. If she was lucky the child would have a wet nurse.

I found myself wondering what was the difference in the white child's experience of mothering, at that point in history; the mistress could and did give her child to a wet nurse –often a black woman who had to deprive her own child in order to feed the owners children. The slave mothers rarely saw their children except on Sundays. The white children could see their mother's every day. The slave mothers struggled to make themselves known to their children as Sethe's mother did. (p61) Nevertheless their knowing was a distant and often hit and miss affair. In the circumstances of the slave mothers it was physically and perhaps emotionally impossible for her to create or experience Winnicott's holding environment. Slave parents often lived in separate

quarters, due to the mindset of the owners who did not see them as human and capable of forming relationships. It did not occur to Schoolteacher and other master's that slaves could have maternal and paternal feelings.

In *Beloved* the experience of mothering is different for Sethe. At Sweet Home she is permitted some freedom to mother her offspring. The two sons Howard and Bugler were the children who benefited the most from this arrangement in terms of the time they had with Sethe. She was close by and she knew them and they her. *Beloved* had only a short time within the context of slavery she had a lot more than most. Denver's experience was unusual even within the confines of slavery. She is with Sethe during the month or so of freedom and then Denver accompanies her mother to jail. It is some time before grandmother Baby Suggs can persuade Sethe to give her up to be cared for outside the prison.

On Speaking the Unspeakable

How does this history, the aftermath of slavery, censorship, and adaptation to white stereotypes of the Negro qualities Morrison writes about affect the therapeutic relationship and process? The patient is not always consciously aware that they are censoring their story. They may be falling back on their proxy self – until the therapist is known and trusted. (Thomas 1995) A black client can, over use this device which is used by everyone to a degree, with a white therapist, even though the client may be aware that they are using this mechanism. The client is already anxious about what to tell. They fear being misunderstood or the white therapist's racism coming into play, through ignorance or the countertransference feelings brought into the room through the pre-transference.

I would therefore advocate that all therapists educate themselves by reading novels, slave narratives and historical works by and about black people. The therapist should remember that patterns of child rearing in the United Kingdom, the Caribbean and America are similar but different. There are also similarities between black and white people. The therapist must bear all this in mind when working with white clients; this knowledge is not just for use with black clients. The white and the black therapist need to know how they will deal with the racist thoughts, ideologies and beliefs of their white clients and some really damaged black clients. Then the therapist must

avoid the trap of thinking they 'know' the individual on the couch through this material. Never forget that each person and their experience is unique, just like that of the white client. Lastly, the therapist needs good supervision, not necessarily from a black supervisor. I know there are those who would disagree with me. However, the reality at the time of writing is that in Britain there is a serious shortage of qualified black therapists and supervisors. The main task as is raised in *Beloved* is to help the client 'speak the unspeakable'. If the therapist can do that then they are working to task.

References:

Hill-Collins Patricia Black Feminist Thought