

## **A Folkloric Reading of “Beloved” by Morrison**

Khalid Ahmed Faraj  
Department of English Language and Literature,  
Faculty of Science and Letters  
Suleyman Demirel University, Isparta, Turkey  
khalidalanbaky@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

Folklore involves an imperative place and fair piece of one's social character. As the interminable social collection of one's genealogical legacy, it reflects one's association with his past, how to experience his present. What's more, how his future will be. The term legends may appear to be bygone to modern reader at first sight, however truth be told, straightforward investigation of word's two segments 'folk' which implies people and the word 'lore' which implies conventions, it can be seen that fables implies the exercises, traditions, and customs that are shared by a gathering of individuals and it considered as their own. These customs are normally oral and transmitted orally starting with one age then onto the next as a social legacy. Folktales, fantasies, legends, narrating, melodies, music, dance, maxims, and examining are the premise of oral writing. Concerning the African American, as they were tore from their country, endured a long history of slavery and underestimation, holding on their foundations, telling, stories, singing, and moving, were their encouragement, their methods for comfort and their source of strengthening. Toni Morrison [1931], the African American essayist the Pulitzer prize winner [1988] and Noble prize gain [1933] utilized her composition abilities to restore her social legacy, as a cognizant endeavor to make her kin mindful of their social legacy, approach topic to be pleased African Americans, and to not let their horrendous past of subjection be motivation to be embarrassed about their identity or make topic indeed slaves to criteria and measures long time back their predecessors defeated by means of solidarity and clutching their foundations. The research aims at investigating the importance of folklore and its types in Toni Morrison's Beloved.

*Keywords:* folklore, oral writing, Morrison, African American, Beloved

### **Introduction**

#### **Toni Morrison: A Biographical Sketch**

“Toni Morrison (1930- ) was born Chloe Anthony Wofford to parents who had settled in Lorain, Ohio. She was the second of four children in a black working class family. Morrison displayed an early interest in literature, since she grew up in a family of musicians and storytellers. Morrison's mother, Ramah Willis Wofford was a gifted singer and was active in the church and so Morrison was inspired by the songs and stories she heard as a child. Early on she developed interest in language, folklore and literature”. (Beaulieu 2003: 255)

“When describing her childhood, Toni Morrison frequently mentions the music that was always playing at home or the fact that her mother sang both jazz and opera... Her most engaging relationship to music, however, may be the way she translates it into the written word.” (Gillespie 2008: 4)

Morrison also recalls her mother's resistance to the racism of Lorain. She says that her mother refused, for example, to sit in the segregated section of the movie theater. Between her father and mother's response to the world they lived in and her grandparents' stories, Morrison's world was richly imbued with a sense of place, community, purpose, and identity that would, in time, infuse the rich fabric of her imaginative narrative universe.

"Morrison was enrolled in Howard and Cornell Universities for humanity studies and continued her academic career at Texas Southern University, Howard University, and Yale. In 1958, Morrison got married, had two children with her husband and was divorced in 1964. After the divorce Morrison moves to New York City where she works as an editor, specializes in African American literature. She played an important role in establishing the African American literature into the mainstream American literature". (Wilfred D. 2007: 68)

"Morrison now is hailed as one of the greatest African American authors of the twentieth century. As an African American woman writer, she attracts the greatest attention in recent years evidenced not only by the numerous awards her fiction has received (including Ohioana Book Awards for Fiction for *Sula* in 1975, *Paradise* in 1999, and *Love* in 2004; the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for *Song of Solomon* in 1977; the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *Beloved* in 1988; and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993), but by the quality of her fiction and prose that have fulfilled an urgent need to make visible the heretofore invisible and mute presence that has essentially defined a past and shaped the ways in which Americans and Africans have understood themselves and have been understood. As indicated by the prizes and honors Morrison has accumulated, she has achieved phenomenal literary success—both popular and critical. Critics have examined her works, especially *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, from a multitude of perspectives and have enthusiastically praised her fiction and her role as a public intellectual". (Ibid: 68)

"Morrison's multi-faceted creations span more than one literary genre; starting with novels, short stories, essays, drama, and children books. Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was immensely successful so were her following titles: *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (nonfiction collection published in 1991, a book of literary criticism), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), and *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and the short story *Recitatif* (1982). *Dreaming Emmet* (1985) remains Morrison's only play, based on the real life incident of the fatal mutilation of black boy by white men." (Morrison 1993: 19)

### **Folklore: Definition, Origin and Scope**

Folklore is as old as mankind. As sociable beings, humans found different ways to communicate with each other, to share knowledge, pass it, or express themselves through it. Since folklore is "a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, a kind of art, and a communicative process," (Watts 2007: 151) it frames humans experience in a set of activities that vary from one culture to another.

Knowing about the folk's life provides a true key to that society. It provides a real impression of man's identity and psychology tracing his cultural progress step by step up to our age. Although the idea of folklore seems very archaic in our days of fast-paced society, but it still necessary to give man a sense of continuity and belonging to his own ancestral culture.

"In the eighteenth century, scholars began to act as collectors and investigators of the folks' lore. At first they gave the name "popular antiquities" to everything related to folk's life. But, The term folklore was coined in 1846 by the English antiquarian William John Thoms as a substitute for the rather awkward expression "Popular Antiquities". The term folklore has been approved by most European countries and is now current in many languages other than English. This subject under discussion has been identified by various scholars by such terms as oral literature, traditional literature, folk literature and folklore. These terms simply attempt to emphasize the fact that this literature is delivered by word of mouth. These terms put emphasis on the fact that this type of literature comes from the past and it is handed down from one generation to another". (Ibid: 151)

J.A. Cudden's definition of folklore concentrates on its oral nature. He describes it as "the creation of primitive and illiterate people and therefore much of it belongs to oral traditions". (Cudden 1979: 273) So, folklore was people's device to record their life, experience and history to pass it to the coming generations to get use of it. Isador Okpewho defines folklore as:

"Oral literature may be defined as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree that artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression."(Okpewho 1992: 31)

The oral nature of folklore implies that in the performance of some of its types, the performer's voice, body movements, gestures and facial expressions are devices used to convey certain messages. That spontaneous act is a genuine proof of man's close connection with nature, the essential part that modern man's life lacks because modern man is caged in his materialistic pursuit in life in getting more and more involved in the shackles of the mechanical world until he himself become a senseless machine. William Wilson stresses the humanistic aspect of folklore, which leads us to explore what it means to be human, Wilson says "it is this attempt to discover the basis of our common humanity, the imperatives of our human existence that puts folklore study at the very center of humanistic study". (Wilson 1988: 156-176)

William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard in *A Handbook to Literature* define folklore as:

"The composition and identification of the survivals of archaic beliefs, customs, and traditions in modern ages... Although concerned primarily with the psychology of early man or with that of less cultured classes of society, some of the forms of folklore ... belong also to the life of modern man, literate or illiterate."(W. Thrall & Hibbard 1960 :205)

In a major article published in 1945, William Bascom in *The Four Functions of Folklore* argued that folklore can serve four primary functions in culture:

"Folklore lets people escape from repression imposed upon them by society, folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe, folklore is pedagogical device which reinforce morals and values, last but not least it is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control."(Bascom 1965 :279-298)

### Background of Beloved

*Beloved* (1987), is Toni Morrison's fifth novel, and it is her Pulitzer Prize winning novel in 1988. It also wins the Anisfield- Wolf Book Award in Race Relations. *Beloved*, is often classified as historical fiction, gothic horror story, and bildungsroman (coming of age novel), since it chronicles the life of a Black woman named Sethe, following her from pre- Civil War life as a slave in Kentucky to her life in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1873." (www.britannica.com/E.Bchecked/topic/60089/Beloved)

According to Morrison, the idea for the novel is "inspired by the historical narrative of Margaret Garner." (Gillespie 2008: 17) The true story of this "African American slave woman, who in January 1856 escaped from her owner Archibald K. Gaines of Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River, and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. She was pursued by Gaines and a posse of officers. They surrounded the house where she, her husband, and their four children were harbored. When the posse battered down the door and rushed in, before being overpowered she seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, she killed her baby, in order not to grow up in the life of slavery." (Heffernan 1998: 558)

The story of Margaret Garner sparks Morrison's imagination and it eventually becomes the historical analogue of the plot of *Beloved*. Morrison says in the foreword of *Beloved*: "The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's place". (Morrison 2004:14)

Based on and adapted from the historical story of Margaret Garner, *Beloved* evinces Morrison's efforts to register and revise, that is, to rememorizes the American history of slavery. Graham Thompson points out that:

"Morrison changes the known details of Garner's life in several ways but, rather than just investigating the events of Garner's escape and return, projects Garner's life into the future to imagine the undocumented legacy of these events and, most hauntingly, the return of the murdered child, *Beloved*, to Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati." (Thompson 2007: 55)

Morrison's *Beloved* has three main sections distributed in twenty eight fragmented, unnamed chapters with remarkable shift in times from present to past in form of flashbacks and memories. Set in Cincinnati in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War, *Beloved*'s opening takes place in 124 Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, home of Sethe and her eighteen years old daughter, Denver. Sethe's other sons, Howard and Buglar, have fled; her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, died after their departure. Sethe leaves the house only to work at a restaurant; "the \_\_serious work of her day involves \_\_Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past, make-a-new-step, slide, slide and strut on down," (*B*, 142). She is aware of the futility of this, as the briefest glimpse or slightest sound can evoke memories of Sweet Home, the Kentucky farm where she was forced to work as a slave with her husband Halle, a Native American man named Sixo, and three men named by the farm's owner as Paul D, Paul A, and Paul F. "After the farmer's owner Mr. Garner dies, his wife turns control of the plantation over to her brother in-law, the schoolteacher, who proves to be a brutal overseer." (Gillespie 2008: 19)

### Folklore in Beloved

If one does not keep in touch with the ancestor, in fact, he/she is lost. Keeping in touch with the ancestor, the case Morrison concentrates on in her, —Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation sheds light on how the novel functions as a means of restoring the ancestor's presence by providing the mythological and archetypal stories through which cultures define themselves. This process of self-definition, Morrison says, "is a form of healing, with contemporary novels serving a purpose akin to music's role in the African American community". (Bealieu 2003: 343) Eventually her work, she states, "must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded. It must signify on the past and make it palatable for a present politic eschewing that part of the past which has been constructed out of a designative ideology an reconstructing that part which will serve the present." (Morrison 1984 :339-45)

Morrison's conscious emphasis on community, on the vital presence and love of the ancestors, as a means of empowerment, survival, and emancipation both physically and mentally is often traced back to the Black's ancestral cultural heritage.

"In the fiction of Toni Morrison, folklore is a device for reclamation and rediscovery of the "ancestor", "the ancient properties" and "the village values" necessary for the survival and substance of community. While Morrison's works focus on individual conflicts, triumphs, and failures, exploring the remnants of the "spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of community," the salvation of the individual is not the point. The individuals in Morrison's fiction define themselves both inside and outside communal boundaries, but ultimately it is the strength and continuity of community and culture that are at state of being tested." (Billingslea-Brown 1999: 17)

"Testimony to this ancestral heritage is observed most notably in the spiritual practices as well as music, dance, and language. It is the continuity of African culture coupled with the arduous experience of struggle in America that informs poems, prayers, and groans of the African American. Heard in the work songs of the labourers, the conjures of —root workers,<sup>l</sup> and sermons of the preachers, African culture also makes its presence known in the written literature".(Blassingame 1972: 25). W. B. Blassingame comments on the importance of tradition with regard to survival. He writes:

"Clearly, one of the general means by which Africans resisted bondage was by maintaining their link with the past. Rather than accept the slaveholder's view of his place in society, the African tried to hold onto cultural determinants of his status".Ibid:25

The status that Blassingame speaks of does not concern their position as captives; the Africans, unlike their captors, were women and men of import in the African communities they left behind. They were priestesses and priests, queen-mothers and kings, griottes and griots, conjurers, blacksmiths, architects, and agricultural experts. They were educated in the traditional fashion of their respective cultures.

Thrust as the African Americans were into this malevolent environment, their only freedoms were mental. They held tenaciously to their cultural remembrances and stored them protectively in memory. These resources were collectively shared and the combined wisdom was embodied in the folklore of the enslaved Africans.

"As a way to affirm one's own culture while at the same time rejecting European cultural domination, African people in America have repeatedly argued through folklore

the existence in America of a dynamic African culture. It is the oral tradition, the vehicle of folklore that has allowed the African to pass the collective wisdom and cultural morals to the subsequent generations". (Smitherman 1977: 73). Smitherman stresses this idea:

"The oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for —gettin' ovuh. That tradition preserves the African American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people. Lessons and precepts about life and survivals are handed down from generation to generation. We rely on word of mouth for its rituals of cultural."Ibid:73

Morrison claims that "the black oral historical tradition should be memorialized and in modern time novel is the means to achieve this aim the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before. . . . We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago". (W. Andraws & Mckay 1999: 56) Those stories must have a place in African American culture, and they've found their place in the novel.

"Beloved also can be read as a novel about ancestry and the relationships among enslaved, freed, alive, and dead mothers and daughters. Equally it is about the meaning of time and memory and how remembering either destroys or saves a future. Written in a lyrical style in which biblical myths, folklore, and literary realism overlap, with historical reality", (Horvitz 1989: 7) with *Beloved*, Morrison provides an opportunity to grapple the troublesome past. Morrison states:

"With *Beloved*, I am trying to insert this memory that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature. Not only to write about a woman who did what Sethe did, but to have the ghost and the daughter return as remnant of a period that was unspoken. It was a silence within the race. So, it's a kind of healing experience. There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back and deal with them". (Patton 2013: 38)

For Morrison, putting her people in confront with their painful history is a part of a communal healing process, and this process would be more effective if it can be seen, heard, and felt, so what is better than finding consolation in one's folklore, and being proud of reviving one's cultural heritage:

"Morrison's use of suppressed popular communicative forms-visual, oral, musical, and more- is, as Trudier Harris has pointed out, an integral part of her uncovering "discreted" knowledge. Morrison,... negotiate a very complex matrix of reality in which the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements becomes the very possibility of opening up a new space of cultural practice. To give the past different reading, to represent black American experience not simply as it has been measured by dominant norms but as it has emerged in terms of multi-leveled and differential struggle over meaning and subjectivity since slavery, involves a re-invention of tradition and of dominant language tropes." (Khayat 1999: 313-324)

As a model for cultural preservation, folklore is the location for the restorative values that bring one back to the center because folklore helps one to develop pride in cultural heritage and provides the necessary support for the telling of one's story as it maintains the link with the past. These goals are achieved in folklore by providing myths to sustain

the psyche, creating motifs that make the telling of each story fresh, and by furnishing the essential symbols to bring the group's beliefs to the fore.

### Conclusion

In *Beloved*, which is inspired by one of many documented accounts, about slavery and the trauma it causes. Morrison brings forth the victims of the Middle Passage and let them speak via the characters tongues, clamoring to tell their stories; stories of severance, cruelty, and inhumanity.

Folklore, as deployed by Morrison is a medium used by self-emancipated Africans like Pilate, Therese, and Baby Suggs, functions as a means to sustain, to restore, and to heal in a sense of collective consciousness of the African American people whose ancestral cultural power, in Morrison's view, should be rejuvenated and preserved as a pivotal axis in constructing the African American identity and ensuring its continuity and the ideology and ethos of identity, solidarity, and freedom.

### References

- Andraws, William and Nellie McKay, *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Bascom*, William R. *Four functions of folklore* ( In *The study of folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1965).
- [www.britannica.com/topic/60089/Beloved](http://www.britannica.com/topic/60089/Beloved).
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann ed. *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Bealieu, Elizabeth Ann ed. *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).
- Ben-Amos, Dan *Toward A Definition Of Folklore* (the journal of American folklore vol.84,no. 331, 1971).
- Billingslea-Brown, Alma Jean *Crossing Borders Through Folklore, African American Women's Fiction and Art*,(USA. Columbia. University of Missouri Press. 1999).
- Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community*, (New York: Oxford Up, 1972). *Casebook* ( Oxford ,Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Cudden, J .A. *A Dictionary of literary Terms*, (great Britain: Hazell Watson and Viney Ltd., 1979).
- Flint Thrall, William and Addison Hibbard *A Handbook To Literature, Revised And Enlarged By G. Hugh Holman* (New York Odyssey Press,1960).
- Gillespie, Carmen *A Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to her Life and Works* (New York: Facts on File, 2008).
- Gillespie, Carmen *A Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to her Life and Works* (New York: Facts on File, 2008).
- Gillespie, Carmen *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2008.
- Heffernan, Teresa *Beloved and the Problem of Mourning* (in *Studies in the Novel* 30,no 4 winter 1998).
- Horvitz, Deborah *Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession In Beloved* (*Studies In American Fiction*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Autumn, 1989).
- Khayat, Abdellatif *Representation, Race, and the language of Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative* ( Indiana State University. *African American Review*. Vol.33, No.2, Summer 1999).
- Morrison, Toni *Jazz* (New York: A Plume Book, 1993).

- Morrison, Toni *Beloved, A Foreword* (New York: Vintage, 2004). But, henceforth, all subsequent quotations are from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) and are cited within the text as (B) followed by page number.
- Morrison, Toni "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984).
- Okpewho, Isadore *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).
- Samuels, Wilfred D. *Encyclopedia of African – American Literature*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2007.
- Smitherman, Geneva "Talkin" and Testifyin'" (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).
- Thompson, Graham *American Culture in the 1980s ( Twentieth-century American culture)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2007).
- Watts, Linda *Encyclopedia of American Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2007).
- Wilson, William A. *The deeper necessity: folklore and the humanities*. (Journal of American Folklore, No.101, 1988 ).
- Quoted in Venetria K. Patton, *The Grasp that Reaches beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in the Black Women's Texts* (Albany: State University, New York Press, 2013).

## APPENDIX

Note: This paper has partly been produced from the dissertation titled "Themes and characterization: a Study of Tomi Morrison's Selected Novels