



Perennial Fluidity: An Analysis of ‘Water’ Imagery in Toni Morrison’s “Beloved”

Dr Tulika Sinha

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Royal College of Arts, Science & Commerce Mira Road Maharashtra, India.

Corresponding Author: Dr Tulika Sinha

Email id- tulikasinha06@gmail.com

Abstract

Water, across various cultures, has significant value as human needs and spirituality are interconnected with water which is suppose to purify and heal. Water is symbolic of divinity and serves various ceremonial, social and economic purposes. Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved” uses water as a recurring image represented as indispensable in African religion and culture. Water is used to reveal the mind and psychology of characters, a symbol of birth, afterlife (rebirth) and emancipation, power and destruction, in the novel. This research paper aims to explore the semantic and contextual understanding of the imagery of water that will provide a new perspective to a deeper understanding of the novel.

Keywords: Rebirth, Purification, Emancipation.

Introduction:

“Beloved” (1987), Toni Morrison’s fifth novel, portrays the insidious degradation imposed on the slaves by their masters. The novel explores the matrilineal ancestry and the relationship amongst enslaved, freed, alive and dead mothers and daughters. Beloved, the ghost child, who comes back to life, is Sethe’s two-year-old daughter, whom she murdered eighteen years ago. The ghost of Beloved stimulates Sethe to remember her own mother from whom she was cruelly separated. Hence, Beloved’s arrival leads to blossoming of countless painful memories that were repressed in Sethe’s mind. It leads to a metamorphosis in Sethe that gives her courage to speak what she had thought to be unspeakable. Memory plays a vital role in Morrison’s novels. Her novels present the idiosyncrasies of individual memory, the peculiarities of their reminiscence and recollect them in order to unfold the history. Historian, Michael Roth has remarked, writing the past,

“is one of the crucial vehicles for reconstructing or reimagining a community’s connections to its traditions”. (Roth, 10).

The emphasis on the interiority of Morrison’s characters, and the acknowledgement of desire, becomes a way of resisting the subordinated, alienated self. Thus, memory has a therapeutic effect. The relationship between water, traumatic past and healing are central to Morrison’s novels.

Analysis:

The imagery of water is all pervasive in ‘Beloved’. Water, an element on Earth, is of

profound importance in almost all cultures and in the present novel it is linked to the lives of the characters and reveals its significance in the African culture. Water is considered as sacred resource in many culture that is symbolic of life, purity, possessing healing properties, renewal and vitality. It is used in religious rituals like baptism (Christianity), sacred bath (Hinduism), and ablutions (Islamic). In literary works, water is denoted as an image symbolizing emotional transformation, changing feelings and sadness-just like the depth of the ocean. It represents deeper human emotions and like the ebb and flow of the tide it can represent the changing temperament of a person. Water is also a universal symbol of life-nothing can survive without water- a fetus needs water in the womb for growth and vitality. Because of this life-giving energy, water symbolizes health and invigoration. It has properties that can heal an ailment. Water, deep down in the oceans and seas, is a mystery; similarly, it can represent the subconscious mind and behaviour of a person-that is unpredictable, ever changing and vast.

Sethe was a slave at Sweet Home plantation of Mr and Mrs Garner. After their death, schoolteacher takes control of all the slaves. His treatment forced Sethe to run away from Sweet Home. Before she decides to escape, Sethe, who was pregnant at that time, sends her two sons and her baby girl to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in the fear that they would be sold by schoolteacher. Amy Denver, a white woman helps Sethe find Ohio River. The river was “one mile of dark water. It

looked like home to her and her baby” (P.93). Sethe’s crossing of river Ohio is pivotal as it shows her transition from slavery to freedom. The river acts as boundary between her past and future and crossing the river is a kind of baptism or rebirth for Sethe. The scene highlights the transformative power of water – from bondage to freedom; from tension to hope.

Water becomes a symbol of life and renewal, with Sethe giving birth to Denver in Ohio River. As Sethe gives birth while fleeing to freedom, water becomes a symbol of survival and new beginnings. Breaking of Sethe’s water is related to the flow of the river water- “As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it. The break followed by the redundant announcement of labor, arched her back” (P.98). Water also becomes representative of both the physical and emotional journey of motherhood and liberation. The circumstances created during Denver’s birth highlight Sethe’s determination and strength as a mother. In the dire situation, Sethe’s ability to give birth to her baby and care for her emphasizes the survival instincts and resilience of an enslaved mother.

The theme of fluidity and change resonates in Denver, as she was born in water and gets tied to the natural world. In this context, water symbolizes continuity of generations and flow of life. Denver’s birth is a reminder of the traumatic experiences endured by Sethe. The crossing of the river and giving birth to her child are fraught with pain and danger reflecting the harsh realities of slavery. Hence, water serves a dual role- a source of life and reminder of past. Water continues to influence Denver’s life throughout the novel. Her birth in the river sets the stage for her personal growth and development as she navigates her identity and her family history. The imagery of water and its connection with Denver is reflected in her journey towards self-discovery and liberation.

In the novel, the imagery of water is not only linked to Denver and Sethe, but to the other characters, who have unique relationship with water and that reflects their own journey and struggles. Water, for Paul D, is a reminder of his sufferings as a slave. He memorizes his time spent in a chain gang, where he was forced to work in waterlogged conditions, shows the dehumanizing treatment that he got. On the other hand, Baby Sugg’s association with water is one of spirituality. Her gatherings in the clearing, where she preaches the community to cleanse themselves emotionally, represents the image of water as a source of purification, spiritual healing and community bonding.

Water is intricately linked to the portrayal of memory. Memories in the novel are perennial and fluid just like the flow of water that has no shape and no boundary. Like the ebb and flow of waves,

memories surface unpredictably to Sethe and Paul D about their haunted past. For Sethe “Every mention of her past life hurt, everything in it was painful or lost” (58). Water represents the unknown depths of the human psyche and here it highlights the mysterious and unfathomable aspects of memory.

A month after Sethe escaped slavery; schoolteacher found her and tried to bring her back. Instead of letting her daughter face the trauma of slavery, Sethe kills her.

Sethe is interested in protecting her family, providing them life and sustenance. The novel deals with the theme of great mother as nurturing and nursing figure. Sethe is a mother who kills her child in order to save its life. Sethe’s intention was to kill all four of her children, not only one. Upon seeing the slave catchers, Sethe automatically knew that returning to slavery was not an alternative. Her children should not become slaves like her. She says –

“I couldn’t let all that (the brief freedom they had known) go back, and I couldn’t let her (Beloved) nor any of ‘em live under schoolteacher”. (Beloved, 163)

Sethe believed that death would provide her children a life that was better than anything she had experienced at Sweet Home. Eighteen years after her death, when Beloved re-emerges, she does not differentiate herself from Sethe- who is her primary identification.

Sethe, throughout the novel, uses water as a source to deal with her painful memories that always resurfaces. Sethe’s sufferings are often referred to as “heavy knives” – “Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where dear water rushed on below” (P.102).

Beloved’s return as a ghost child is again marked by water imagery, drenched in water she appears, sitting on a tree stump outside Sethe’s house.

“A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree”. (P 60).

Her water-soaked appearance represents the flow of time and the way past can return to impact the present. This scene can be connected to Ohio River which Sethe crossed to gain freedom. Water, here signifies the resurfacing of the repressed trauma and memories that not Sethe and other characters will confront. Beloved’s arrival in water signifies a kind of a second birth, emerging to reenter Sethe’s life. This birth is symbolic of the haunting past that cannot be forgotten.

Though Water symbolizes purification, but with Beloved’s arrival, it signifies a sense of contamination. Beloved’s drenched state suggests a cleansing process, yet her presence is filled with turmoil and distress. This indicates that the past is

both, purifying as well as contaminating. The mysterious way of Beloved's emergence coupled with water imagery, enhance the supernatural element in the novel. Water, that represents the unknown and hidden depths of human psyche- the subconscious mind, reveals Beloved's enigmatic qualities and her supernatural connection. Though Beloved appears like a newborn-drenched in water and vulnerable, yet her presence is haunting. This duality reflects the theme of life and death; memory and reality; cyclical nature of trauma and the inescapable pull of the past.

Sethe takes a bath in a bathtub, after Beloved's arrival, which signifies her attempt to cleanse herself of the past sins and trauma and the emotional burden she carries of murdering her baby. The water in the bathtub is literally and metaphorically represents her cleansing as Sethe tries to wash away her guilt and burden. Sethe is forced to confront the possibility of the return of her dead daughter. The presence of Water heightens the emotional intensity of the scene as Sethe's reaction is one of confusion, unease and difficulty in recognizing her daughter, Beloved.

When Beloved arrives 124 Bluestone Road, her insatiable thirst for water represents her extreme need for connection and the unresolved nature of her existence. Her thirst is symbolic of her character's longing for resolution and confrontation of their troubled past. Water, as a life sustaining element parallels the nurturing role of a mother. Sethe's act of breastfeeding Denver is the symbol of essential nourishment that a mother provides to her child.

After Beloved's arrival, Sethe recalls the scene of the theft of her breast milk by the School teacher's nephews. This scene is also significant of water imagery. Milk, is a life-giving fluid, for babies. The violent theft of her milk symbolizes the dehumanizing act and the violation she experienced. This profound trauma resurfaces with her dead daughter's arrival, emphasizing the connection between motherhood, memory and water. Sethe's connection with water, whether crossing River Ohio or taking bath in bathtub, denote her ongoing struggle, to transform her pain into healing. This ability of water to change form-from turbulence to calmness- mirrors Sethe's emotional journey.

The drowning imagery associated with Beloved is a powerful symbol of the trauma faced by the characters and their process of healing from their pasts. Thus, throughout the novel, Water imagery is crucial in establishing Beloved's role as a symbol of memory, rebirth, trauma and emancipation- thereby establishing a strong connection between nature and human emotions.

References

1. Roth, M. (1995). *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma and the Construction of History*. New York.
2. Morrison, T. (2005). *Beloved*. London, Vintage.
3. Samuels, Wilfred. D. and Clenora Hudson W. (1990). *Toni Morrison*. Boston, Twayne Publishers.
4. McKay, N. (1998). *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston, MA: GK. Hal & Co.