

*“Unspeakable Things
Unspoken”*: Toni Mor-
rison’s Legacy of ‘Root-
edness’, ‘Rememory’ and
‘Playing’ with Differences

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Silence from and about the subject was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing strategies. What I am interested in are the strategies of breaking it. (Morrison 1992, 51)

In her Nobel Acceptance speech delivered in 1993, Toni Morrison (18 February, 1931 - 5 August, 2019) nar-
rates a story about a blind old woman, a seer , living at

the margins of the community and a group of young boys who are unconvinced of her mythical powers. In the story, the boys tease the old woman, placing a bird in her hand and asking whether it was living or dead. The wise old woman answered, "It is in your hands" (1993). The anecdote, especially the woman's enigmatic response, is a metaphor for the poignant relationship that men and women, especially the African-Americans, have with their ancestors; it is also a parable of the inextricable links between knowledge and power, the limits and possibilities of language and the responsibility of the artist towards her community. These are perhaps the iterative concerns articulated in the entire breath of Morrison's work. An author of eleven novels, children's fiction, nonfiction, criticism and libretto, Toni Morrison is an artist who received both popular acceptance and critical attention. Her work reveals her commitment to the recovery of black history by unpacking the collective and individual black lives, speaking to the present while crafting an envisioned future. The men, women, children of her novels are reminders or manifestations of the stories that were suppressed, forgotten, 'passed on', but needed to be articulated, sustained and carried forward. Morrison tried to speak the 'unspeakable' and bring to centre, in her work, that has been historically marginalised.

Morrison has been steadfast in her assertion of artistic autonomy which is not always coterminous with an un-

questioning adherence to ‘tradition’. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) reminds one of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), yet she steers clear of the modes of representation favoured by her predecessors. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison emphasizes this difference: “I was preoccupied with books by black people that approached the subject (the African-American girl) but I always missed some intimacy, some direction, some voice. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright – all of whose books I admire enormously – I didn’t feel were telling me something. I thought they were saying something about it or us that revealed something about us to you, to others, to white people, to men.” (Ruas 1994, 96) In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Morrison explores the complexity of racial identity experienced by a black girl child, Pecola Breedlove who is a tragic casualty of the apathy and cruelty heaped upon by society. In this novel, Morrison treats the troubling issues of parental neglect, child-rape, family dysfunctionality and racial discrimination with remarkable tenderness and poignancy. The empathy and ‘presentness’ that set her apart in her first novel only grow deeper with time and artistic maturity. The predicament of the black child in a hostile and unstable world has been an iterative motif in Morrison’s work since her first novel. Her last novel *God Save the Child*, published in 2015, suggests a circularity of her engagements and creative agendas. Bride, the central protagonist, is scarred by her unloved childhood, her mother’s disdain and her father’s abandonment. Towards the end of the novel Morrison employs a magic realistic twist when Bride

undergoes strange physical transformations, regressing towards her girlhood. The trajectory of Morrison's work manifests her concerns with what it is to be a black, especially a black woman, in a society that thrusts 'invisibility' upon them. Her work evolves with the untiring and unflinching self-examination with regard to the role of an African-American woman writer in negotiating language and narratives to question and dismantle the hierarchies of power that withhold the freedom of individuals of particular race, class and gender. Morrison has left behind a majestic legacy of fictional and non-fictional work, but the singularity of her heritage is the freedom of thought and audaciousness of hope that her writing generates in her readers. Trudier Harris's enthusiastic claim in an early essay is valid and richly deserved:

By any standard of literary evaluation, Toni Morrison is a phenomenon, in the classic sense of a once-in-a-lifetime rarity, the literary equivalent of Paul Robertson, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, Chris Evert, or Martina Navratilova, the superstar whose touch upon her profession makes us wonder if we shall ever see her like again. The indelible word portraits she has created, the unforgettable mythical and imaginary places, the exploration of the psychological trauma of slavery, racism, and war, and the sheer beauty of prose that frequently reads like poetry have assured Morrison a place in the canons of world literature. (1994, 9)

Toni Morrison shared the common concerns that were

articulated by the group of African American women writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker et al who were committed to the task of consolidating the agency of the black American women. The early novels of Morrison coincided with the rising awareness of the specificity of the black woman's experience which often times was blindsided by the dominant Euro-American feminist discourses. In *Sula* (1973), Morrison closely examines the intertwined lives of two young black women, Nel and Sula, from their childhood onwards to trace the connections between individual lives and their community. The recalcitrant figure of Sula anticipates Morrison's later creations such as Pilate, Jadine, Florens and Bride. Sula is, as described by Morrison in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken : The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", " quint-essentially black, metaphysically black...She is the new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness... improvisational, daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out- of- the- house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable" (1997, 233). Sula is a self-proclaimed individualistic, a pariah to her community, who measure their sense of superiority by the fiendishness that they identify in Sula. As Pecola does with her 'ugliness' in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula does with her 'evilness'- both purify the society around them, their perceived otherness compensate for the inadequacies the community suffers from : " Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in unaccounted yet mysterious

ways...they...in general band together against the devil in their midst” (Morrison 1997, 117). Morrison’s understanding of Sula as “an artist with no art form” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 121) underscores the radical individualism and rebelliousness that define her, the ‘otherness’ compelling a reconfiguration of the categories of the black womanhood. Unlike her friend Nel, who chooses the safety of domesticity, Sula rejoices in self-creation. She loses herself when she surrenders her autonomy to Ajax, the recurring image of the black man in Morrison’s work as the irresponsible, infantile, abandoning figure.

Morrison incorporates several myths and folktales unique to the African-American experience in her novels. Her interpretation and employment of these myths however, reveal her aesthetic and artistic mission to probe deeper and identify hitherto unexplored patterns. The ‘universalist’ assumptions of the mythical vision are revised by Morrison to address the concerns of the minority and the marginalised. In *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, Morrison reinvents the relevant myths to provide a more poignant perspective to the ‘lived’ experiences of the African Americans. Her re-mythification of the tropes of the ‘flying Africans’ and the ‘tar baby’ introduces several issues that turns the scope of analysis and exploration inwards. Morrison avoids the didacticism and self-pity that often diffuses the intensity of ‘literatures of suffering’; the courage and wisdom that is manifest in her introspective vision is especially evident

in her handling of the myths and folklores. The 'flying African' myth of Solomon, an Icarian masculine myth, is reconceptualised in *Song of Solomon* not only as a flight from oppression and exploitation but also as an act of abandonment. Solomon flies off from family and social responsibilities leaving behind wife and children. Morrison underscores this ambivalence of the motif of male flight:

I used it not only in the African sense of whirling dervishes and getting out of one's skin, but also in the majestic sense of a man who goes too far, whose adventures take him far away...black men travel, they split, they get on trains, they walk, they move...It's a part of black life, a positive, majestic thing, but there is a price to pay – the price is the children. The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children... remember, half in glory and half in accusation. (Watkins 1994, 46)

In the novel, Milkman Dead redefines the paradigms of the hero of the Western myth - he too is on a quest inviting immediate comparisons with Jason and the Golden Fleece or Ulysses's journey home but his journey is more historically specific combining the individual and the community. It is a quest not only for self-definition or self - aggrandisement but also to retrace his culture and ancestry. By the end of the novel, Milkman does not 'fly' towards individual freedom but rushes towards his wounded friend Guitar. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison uses the

Tar baby myth as a subtext for exploring the undercurrents of racial constructions bringing together the white and the black in closer interactive spaces to provide a composite picture of American society. The novel reveals Morrison's engagement with the multiple possibilities of the concept of blackness through the representations of Jadine and Son. The Tar baby story has several connotations, in the African - American variation the farmer or fox figure is the white master who is continuously being outmanoeuvred by the 'trickster' figure of the rabbit. The trickster figure a part of an oral tradition stands in opposition to a repressive system. The trickster becomes a source or symbol of self-respect and moral superiority in a discriminatory society. Tar Baby marks Morrison's increasing concern with the role of black aesthetics and the black artist caught between the conflicting pulls of black nationalism and a global multiculturalism. Jadine the Sorbonne-educated Parisian model is the 'black face' that fetishizes and commodifies a particular brand of blackness, whereas Son is the embodiment of the 'excess' that is associated with blackness in the construction of racial identity. Jadine too associates 'tar' with the authentic vision of the black woman compared to which she finds herself inadequate. Thus 'tar' in Morrison's novel also becomes a trap in which the characters find themselves locked in their attempts of self-definition. Blackness is thus constructed by Morrison as an ontological essence, an ethical practice, a historical fact and a way of seeing.

Beloved (1987) is Morrison's attempt to recover a history of blackness which is marked with pain, humiliation and dehumanisation. It is also an act of reclamation of the 'sixty-million and more' lives lost in the Middle Passage and slavery from oblivion; it is also a communal exorcising of the past, a commitment to remember and resurrect the stories that were passed on. The depiction of history in *Beloved*, Morrison's fictional reconstruction of the interior life of Margaret Garner as the model for Sethe and the return of the murdered child as a young woman to haunt the present compel a re-viewing of the interpretative strategies of reading the novel. The urgency of the novel was felt by Morrison since she identified an unease in the American consciousness to come to terms with the reality of slavery in its past. She insists that the book was necessary because, "...it is about something the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember" (Bonnie 1989, 120-122). Morrison intended the book as a corrective to this historical amnesia, to provide an alternative story, a counter - argument, a different but a valid version of the historical 'reality'. The novel is set in the Reconstruction era following the Civil war and using the trope of reconstruction as a metaphor. 124 Bluestone Road becomes the locus of the unresolved histories that come back to haunt those who are left behind. Morrison unsettles the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present, public and private in the novel which

emerges as a palimpsest of the lives that were never remembered or acknowledged. The novel becomes an act of 'rememory', slipping between the genres of family romance, ghost-story, neo-slave narrative, to offer a vision of healing from the trauma and grief of loss. At the centre of the novel is the horrific act of infanticide; Sethe the fugitive slave mother in an desperate attempt to save her infant child from being taken back by the slave-catchers murders her child. The story is modelled upon a real-life incident of Margaret Garner, which Morrison came across while editing *Black Book*. Morrison reworks this incident in her novel to recover, repossess and rename the stories of slavery that were forgotten or neglected. Morrison's project, therefore, is intertwining the individual tragedy with the collective histories of suffering. She compels the readers to raise quite a few questions at Beloved's return to the centre of Sethe's story in 124 Bluestone: Who is Beloved? Why does she return? Is she the slaughtered child, come back to haunt the mother with an irredeemable grief? Is she the embodiment of the history that is lost? Is she one of or all of the 'sixty millions and more'? Is she living or dead? Morrison agitates the framework of understanding history as linearity of sequences and emphasises the importance of unravelling the traditional narratives to discover the disremembered and excluded. The novel ends with the exorcising of the spectral presence of Beloved by the female community led by Ella and thirty other women ; it also ends with the word 'Beloved' as if it were a

prayer, an assertion, a plea for forgiveness, a chant for hope. This circularity of the movement suggests the impossibility of ever escaping the past, especially for the African –Americans with their fraught and complicated history. Morrison’s scepticism with ‘postmodernism’ as a label however does not undermine the relevance of Linda Hutcheon’s insight in this context , “ The past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled... the past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power” (Hutcheon 1988, 58). Morrison revisits this act of deconstructing and reconstructing of history in order to narrativise the African-American experience from the criss-crossing networks of slavery, tortured motherhoods, lost children, emasculated men, in a later novel *A Mercy* (2008) which serves as a prequel to *Beloved*. Geneva Cobb Moore calls it a ‘demonic parody’, a la Northrop Frye:

Morrison’s *A Mercy* qualifies as a demonic parody of the colonial American experience for Native Americans, black Africans, black Americans, with demonic imagery of their gradual genocide and enslavement emphasizing the hell on earth they suffered, shortly after the arrival and settlement of the Europeans. (Moore 2011, 3)

Like *Beloved*, the novel recounts another act of ‘mother-love’, ‘a mercy’, a mother giving up a girl child to a be-

nevolent master in slavery than risking rape and torture at the hands of a malevolent one. The novel opens with Florens articulating her ‘mother hunger’, her feeling of abandonment by her mother ; the novel closes with Florens’ *minbamae* attempting to justify her act of ‘mercy’ just as Sethe does in *Beloved*, rationalising her murderous act of love . Morrison however does not limit the scope of the novel to just being about slavery, rather, it becomes a tapestry of several lives – the Anglo-Dutch settler Jacob Vaark, his wife Rebekka, the Native-American slave Lina, the strangely apart girl Sorrow, the free Blacksmith and the indentured labourers , Willard and Scully. Morrison articulates her interest in that time of American history when the New World was ‘ad hoc’ and fluid. *A Mercy* provides a view from the margin of a society still in the process of formation, at a threshold of modernity in terms of colonization, slave trade and capitalism. Morrison’s ‘historian’ in this case is a daughter of slavery, Florens who invites the readers into a history of a nation to be formed, communities to be forged, people to be decimated or enslaved : “ Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you ...” (2008, 1). Morrison, the literary archaeologist (Morrison 1995, 92), offers counter-narratives against totalising histories , while realigning the categories of motherhood, childhood, community, family, race, gender , class and nation from the distinctive vantage of the black American experience. Morrison is an archivist with a bricoleur’s vision assembling and reassembling diverse histories, including the Salem

witchcraft's trial, King Phillip's war, the Middle Passage, construction of slave laws, to recover the lost, hidden or marginalised histories. Karavanta points out, "Morrison's text does not simply rewrite the history of American national community's origins but also counter writes the entire tradition of frontier literature that has translated the agony and struggle of the frontiersman to fulfil his Manifest Destiny into cultural figuration of nation building" (2012, 739). Just as the women in *Beloved* provided a piecemeal, fragmented yet in unanticipated ways a continued narrative of black American womanhood, the women in *A Mercy* - Florens, Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow - offer an interesting archive of the stories from the marginalised positions. Florens writes her story on the walls and then burns down the house – a metaphor for owning one's own story and deciding one's own destiny while dismantling the hegemonic, unyielding structures of the 'master's' narratives.

Displacement, migration and journey are major motifs in Morrison's novels which suggest their centrality to the black American experience. In *Jazz* (1992), the City is the backdrop to the story of Joe and Violet Trace who have migrated from the rural South. The City in the novel is the 1920s Harlem, which witnessed a massive influx of black population predominantly from the rural South and gradually morphed into a centre of black aesthetic renaissance. The City, however also represents the second displacement of the black Americans, the first/

original being the Middle Passage, which uprooted them from their ancestral homes to the American shores into slavery. Displacement on several levels – physical, psychological, psychical – connects the characters with the City. The City provides a site for retracing the trauma of fragmentation, the sterility of alienation, while the oral and written language offers the possibilities of improvisations and structures of the jazz and blues. Jazz provides a cultural mooring, a particular African – American ethos to the narrative apart from allowing multiplicity of voices and points of views. There is no single story, neither is there a single or dominant voice. Morrison has an uncanny ability of mediating the breaks and silences in the individual and collective histories to narrate the particular nuances of the African American lives. The story of *Jazz* is in many ways a continuation of the story of *Beloved*; Dorcas the young girl Joe loves and kills is the *Beloved* in this story. She is the thing that both Joe and her wife lack and desire; she is their hope of self-fulfilment. Carolyn M. Jones observes: “Dorcas is the *Beloved*: the lost and dead parents; the lover who opens up loneliness; and the child that Joe and Violet choose not to have” (1997, 482). History, memory, storytelling are strategies used by Morrison to explore the interior lives that were never expressed, of worlds that were neglected or devalued, repurposing these traces to reconstruct the incomplete or untold truths. In her later novels *Love* (2003) and *Home* (2012) Morrison’s engagement with the African American reality takes on a different

turn. In *Love*, Morrison continues with the themes that are present in her earlier work: the location and identity formation of the black American in a predominantly white hegemonic structure, the modes of negotiations adapted by the black women to confront and overcome patriarchy, the probing into the shadows and crevices of history that were neglected or excluded. In *Love* Morrison addresses the twentieth century debates about black families in America, the expropriation of the middle class ideology and the romanticized mythification of the 'happy family' unit. Critics have swooped upon the not so subtle Bill Cosby/ Billy Cosey connection that Morrison invokes and critiques in her characterisation of the idealized and absolute figure of paternal authority in the novel. Mary Paniccia Carden argues, " Her (Morrison's) invocation of Bill Cosby and her character of Bill Cosey suggests that *Love* draws a correspondence between contemporary debate about the nature of the present crisis in African American communities and earlier uplift discourses, both of which join man-making rhetoric with the language of socio-economic hierarchy" (2011, 131). *Love* like most of her novels concern with the role of memory in confronting and healing trauma. The tensions between Heed the night (Cosey's child bride) and Christine (Cosey's granddaughter) remind one of the girlhood solidarities and the grief and trauma of misunderstandings and separation in *Sula*. They were childhood friends, sharing a secret language, until Billy Cosey introduces a rupture between them by his 'adult nasti-

ness'. It is only at the end of the novel that they realize that their animosity issued from their repressed shame and a sense of betrayal triggered by the ambivalent father figure and the illusion of the family romance. Love, like many of Morrison's earlier novels also presents women's friendships as transformative in a repressive and discriminatory society. In her only short story 'Recitatif' (1983), Morrison uses the same trope of female friendship, but complicates the issues of race, class and gender by disrupting the racial markers – in the story, she never specifies which woman is black and which is white. The conscious omission of the racial identities of the two women in the story marks a significant departure in Morrison's artistic vision. Her engagement with contemporary issues such as foster children and gentrification is radicalised by this exclusion since she insists on a realignment of our understanding of gender and class as subject positions. Susana M. Morris argues , “...’Recitatif’ should not be a forgotten part of Morrison’s oeuvre , for it engages with many of the same questions and concerns as Morrison’s other works, highlighting an author consistently interested in the ways in which women understand their worlds and each other. (2013, 176)

The enigmatic novel *Home* (2012) set in 1950s America in the aftermath of the Korean War traces the twenty four year old war veteran Frank “Smart” Money’s search for a ‘home’ gathering together Morrison’s continuous engagement with memory, history and racial identity.

Money's journey to Lotus, Georgia, is not only geographical but psychological and spiritual. It is a journey back to memories which are not entirely without pain in order to overcome a trauma of another kind. Morrison uses the perspective of a marginalised subject to reflect upon an important but often forgotten moment in American history to expose and incorporate the silence and obscurity of lesser known narratives. The multiple connotations of 'home' are ever evolving in Morrison's canon; it is symptomatic of the realities of uprooting and dislocations that is integral to the cultural memory of the African Americans. Because of the forced and voluntary migrations, the ancestral home for the African Americans remain the idealised space of return, safety and renewal. In the rapidly changing psycho-social structures of American society of the 1950s Money's negotiation with the possible meanings of a home, therefore, acquires a nuanced complexity. *Home*, however, offers hope at the end, Money along with her sister Cee revisit the site of their childhood trauma where they had witnessed the burial of the mutilated remains of a victim of lynching. It is an important and significant act since it completes a 'circle of sorrow', suggests continuity and offers a possibility of transcendence.

Morrison has repeatedly debunked the assumptions regarding race, class and gender retained by the privileged discourses. *Race(ing) Justice, En-Gendering Power* (1992), a collection of essays that Morrison edited on the debates

about Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill controversy, addresses the contradictions of the codes that determine the hierarchies of power. For Morrison, race is ubiquitous; it is present even in its absence and invisibility. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison underscores the relevance of race to the American canon. In an earlier essay “Unspeaking things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1988), she had referred to the lurking shadowy Africanist presence that hovers in the American literary tradition, even when there is an attempt on the part of the white writer to obliterate it. Morrison raises the question of authenticity of representation and the author’s agency: “What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race free? In other words, how is ‘literary whiteness’ and ‘literary blackness’ made, and what is the consequence of that construction?” (1992, xii- xiii) Morrison’s legacy is especially significant in the present times of supremacist narratives, her humanity, the majesty of her vision, her extraordinary courage to fearlessly write truth to power offer us a vision of a regenerative future. She embraced the label of the African American writer not in its narrow and limited scope of representation but as an expanded and nuanced vision of a world from a marginalised, excluded and neglected position of being. The oral quality of Morrison’s narratives, the black

cultural idiom she translates in her work and the stories she tells consolidate the assertion she made at the end of her Nobel Acceptance speech: “We die - that may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives” (1993). It would not perhaps be far-fetched to claim that Morrison’s voice expressed the conscience of America, the complex history and latent contradictions of the nation were communicated in a language that was neither apologetic nor conciliatory. She remained a political writer grappling with the conflicts that surrounded her but offering a vision of justice, peace, hope and stability. The intimacy she creates in her literary space sets aside any alienating space between the author and the reader. The ‘response-ability’ on the part of the author, she insists, is predicated on this empathy between the writer and the reader:

Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty...both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer’s notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability.(1992, xi)

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