Symbolic Significance of Trees in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. Nistha Parashar
Assistant Professor of English, Hindu College, Sonepat (Haryana), Email: scholar.nistha@gmail.com

Abstract

The image of tree offers myriad interpretations. Infact in every culture, religion and country, the image of tree fetches various meanings. In some cultures trees are worshipped, in some cultures they are not. Some find soul in trees and consider them alive. There are some who find them totally inanimate. So, depending upon the cultural context and the life and mental state of the characters involved thereby, the image of trees delineates its meanings to the readers. Being an environmentalist as well as novelist, Morrison has dexterously employed the image of trees to picture the emotional, physical and mental state of the characters in the story. And that's the reason why sometimes the image of trees bring good memories and sometimes they fetch bad memories for the characters.

Key Words: Toni Morrison, Whites, Blacks, Trees, Family, Slavery.

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Trees, however, play a crucial symbolic strand in the thematic networking of the novel. When Paul D comes tomeet Sethe after so many years, Sethe tells her that there is a tree on her back. Now this tree is not a biological tree which grows on the back of Sethe. Rather, it is the tree of her terrible memories of exploitation of the past. Though Sethe has come out of Sweet Home where she was a slave and treated like animals, the exploitation was so barbarous and deep that they are still intact with Sethe and she could not escape from them. The memories of Sweet Home are compared to a tree because as a biological tree grows its branches and leaves with time, so Sethe's memories of the tormented past haunt more and more with the passage of time. Moreover, this tree grew on her 'back' only because the memories belong to the back part of Sethe's life, i.e. her past.

That tree exists because she is ransacked of her feeling of motherhood and of being a woman which nature has given her. A mother's milk is the gift of nature bestowed upon a mother. This milk of Sethe was exclusively for her daughter. But, Sethe then relates to Paul D how this milk which is symbolic of her natural motherhood was stolen by the boys at Sweet Home. She remembers the story so clearly when she tells Paul D about how she sent her first daughter away, while she was nursing that baby girl. At that time, she was also pregnant with Denver. When she was at Sweet Home, her milk was nursed by the grown nephews of School Teacher who was the owner of Sweet Home. When she reported the matter to Mrs. Garner, the wife of the original owner of plantations, she was brutally beaten by the School Teacher before she escaped the Sweet Home. Sethe was beaten so brutally that the scars of that beating left a mark of Chokecherry tree on her back that she has been carrying it with her for eighteen years.

Once again, the tree surfaces in her statement which is symbolic of her fearful past of exploitation. Sethe was exploited both because of gender and her belongingness to black race. The result of this exploitation, however, does not end here. This violence on blacks by whites have distorted and fragmented blacks' relationship with nature. When blacks see that nature is a mute witness to the horrible treatment they are subjected to, they become terrified with nature and here comes a confused state in their relationship with nature. The original love of blacks towards nature gets converted into the state of bewilderment. Sethe's act of knocking down of the dog in order to take out his savageness shows this confused state,

And to take Sethe out of this bewilderment stage, Paul D comes close to Sethe so that in that act of communion, she may shed all her emotions

of the past by revealing all her heart to him. He was aware that the anger which has persisted in her since her stay at Sweet Homeis somehow killing her. She needs to vent out all that so that she might get relieved of the scar of that Chokecherry tree. Not only Sethe, even her daughter Denver who has just heard about the stories of exploitation at Sweet Home carries forward this image of tree, "She smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night" (23).

Paul D comes to heal the tree of Sethe's haunted memories. But after the sexual union of the two, when Paul D once again witnesses that tree, he finds the same tree repulsive. The image of tree on the back seems to him ugly repulsive scars. The reason for this is that Paul D's memories and conception of the trees at Sweet Home is completely different from the memories of Sethe. Sethe's memories of Sweet Home are filled with violence and abhorrence whereas Paul D has good memories of trees at Sweet Home because for him trees are beautiful, welcoming and adorable. And that's why he is unable to relate with Sethe's conception of tree and finds it just a scar. For Paul D, "trees were inviting things" (26).

It is not like Sethe doesn't admire the natural beauty of plantations at Sweet Home. She misses certain things which brought happiness to her in Sweet Home. It was a place where she lived all her life, got married and gave birth to her children. So, she has a lot of fond memories at Sweet Home but her admiration and enjoyment of natural beauty of plantations is often accompanied by horrifying images like "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world" (6). Sethe oscillates between the aesthetic beauty of Sweet Home and her remembrances of the violent tortures she suffered there, the violence and the endurance which marked her body and heart forever.

For Paul D, nature is a comforter, a soothing agent. He believes that Sweet Home has the prettiest trees in the world. He has also befriended a tree and named him Brother. He, Halle, other Pauls and Sino gather around that tree, cook food,talk and enjoy a lot. Under this tree, they forget all the sufferings at Sweet Home. Brother, a tree, hence becomes a symbol of happiness, love, friendship, bonding, brotherhood and solace. Paul D remembers how Sino, once had to travel seventeen kilometers both ways to meet his lady friend. And on his return, he was too tired to work. So, his friends co-operated him and did his part of work without any food so that their master but might not reprimand him. This episode clearly reflects the harmony and love that this tree Brother brings in Paul D. And, this is the reason he cannot relate with Sethe's tree at her back and takes it as a clump of scars because Sethe and Paul D's experience are altogether different in relation to nature and trees in particular at Sweet Home.

Not only because of his experiences at Sweet Home and his relationship with Brother but also because of his later experiences in life with nature and trees, he can never develop the attitude of Sethe towards tree. Sethe's memories of Sweet Home and the abuse and exploitation she endured there have affected and plagued her mind and have a deep impact on her bonding with nature. But this is not the case with Paul D. When Paul D escapes from a chain gang in Georgia, he runs to freedom in the North by following the "blooming trees along the way" (112).

Infact, if studied carefully, throughout the novel the symbol and imagery of trees offer various manifestations and variegated interpretations. The first and foremost interpretation is the idea that in the novel trees acts as a shield against the exploitation and violence perpetrated in the story. Sethe has a traumatized past which is full of all sorts of cruelties. Memories of all these barbarities keep on haunting her all the time. Though she tries her best to suppress them, they keep on hovering over her life like a black cloud. She herself becomes a slave of these memories of traumatic past. In order to protect herself from all these ugly memories, Sethe has always conflated them with the image of the trees so that her minds stick to the beauty of trees rather than the ugliness of her past sufferings. Thus trees act as a shield against that exploitation memoir. Here, she gives more importance to the beauty of the sycamore tree rather than the brutal loss of her fellow inmates at Sweet Home. Her brain effectively makes use of the beauty of tree to divert her mind from the terror of the situation which that memory brings whenever she recalls this situation.

And, this is just one instance. All other experiences which Sethe faced or witnessed which come along with the curse of slavery are confronted well by Sethe through the aid of

'trees'. Trees act as a tool of survival for Sethe. Tree imagery offers a resistance to all her memories which white people have thrusted upon blacks with their brutal handling of blacks. Most of the Sweet Home slaves diedin the vicinity of tree. Sino was tied to a tree and burned, Paul D hanging also happens on a tree, and even Halle whose death remained a mystery appeared to be the same dead body which was hanged alongwith Paul D. For some men who could not escape from Sweet Home, trees become a symbol of despair. But for Sethe, the same trees become a symbol of hope and happiness because the same trees bear witness to the Sethe's miraculous escape from the age old clutches of slavery. For Sethe, trees mark a desire to live, a hope to sustain.

However, the story which weaves trees and positivity doesn't culminate here. When Sethe escaped from Sweet Home to forest, she was pregnant with her daughter. Her situation was very pathetic as her health was deteriorating rapidly. But, once again tree comes to her rescue and bring relief in the form of Amy Denver who in order to help her "comes out of the trees" (220). Had Amy not come at the appropriate time, both the mother and the child couldn't have survived. Amy's breath is also shown by Morrison, "like burning wood" (220). Now Amy is also burning, i.e. struggling along with trees to bring both the mother and daughter in a healthy state. Trees become healer like Amy Denver. Amy prepared a bed of leaves so that Sethe's injured body could find some relief after this tumultuous journey. And, when she saw Sethe's feet, she found them so swollen because of journey that she could not bear the painful sight. She immediately prepared shoes and stuffed them with leaves which will protect Sethe. And, it is only because of her help that Sethe survived and after breaking the fetters of slavery achieved freedom for herself and her daughter.

Not only Sethe, her daughter's relationship with trees is also a special one which can be equated to a spiritual relationship. Denver's mindset is also conditioned by white domination and slavery. She is always conscious about her status in the society and is scared of roaming outside. Though she is completely free at 124 Bluestone Road, her mind is chained with the thoughts of exploitation meted out to slaves. So, she doesn't prefer going outside. And, to gain spiritual peace from the terrifying atmosphere of slavery, she has formed her own emerald closet which is'boxwood of bushes' in her garden. Denver comes here often whenever she feels disturbed.

This house play of Denver which is made of leaves and surrounded by trees gives her a big relief from the outside world. Denver's loneliness also gets recovered in this closet where she feels elated, safe and in love with her own existence. The place thus becomes a site where her imagination gets satiated which pulls her out of the lonely world she resides in. For her, this house is not merely a structure. Rather she personifies this house. For Denver, trees become a tool to assert her freedom and as a mode of escape mechanism from the oddities of life.

Ever for Paul D, as discussed earlier, trees are welcoming things. He was mesmerized by the beauty of trees at Sweet Home and had also forged a bond with a tree whom he had named "Brother". Not only during his stay at Sweet Home but also during his journey of escape, trees helped him and bore a witness to his freedom from slavery. When he escaped from the prison in Alfred, Georgia, he was accompanied by the blossoming tree flowers. Without the aid of these blossoming flowers of various kinds, he could never have achieved his long cherished desire of liberty. Trees directed him for a journey which moved from life to death. His resurrection happened in the presence of trees. When he asked Cherokee about the way to escape, Cherokee with a smile on his face told him that floods had turned everything in this area into streams and blossoms and asked him to "follow the…flowers…As they go, you go" (133).Thus trees become a guide in Paul D's life to achieve his destination of free world.

But, this is just one side of the story. Trees not only carry with themselves positive memories. The image of tree also collaborates with negative and terrible events which complete the use of the imagery of trees in the novel. Infact, if trees and nature have rendered healing powers to its lovers, they have also been an area which welcomes fear, terror and violence. Weather conditions themselves are an obstacle to the people who depend upon nature. Same threat is posed by wild animals. Natural elements brings with them both help and hindrance. If we look at the Paul D's escape, we see how the blossoming flowers and trees help him during his escape and give him directions so that he can reach his

desired land of liberty. But in the initial stages of escape, these trees were a huge obstacle along with weather conditions. Paul D was escaping with other men. The total count was forty six and all of them were chained. Nature played havoc in the form of a heavy rain which created a muddy swamp and made it even harder for the men to escape. The ditch in which they were made to live in by their owner was getting flooded with muddy water. They were trying hard to escape but the trees came in between because all of them were chained and the forest was so dense that it was very difficult for all the chained men to cross the trees in one go. And since all are tied with a single chain, it means that if one was lost in the muddy forest, all would get lost in this dense forest. Trees became an obstacle and delayed their whole journey of escape.

Even for Sethe, nature calls for certain negative elements which have a deep impact on her life. Be it the death of her fellow inmates Paul A and Sino, be it the separation from her husband Halle and be it the inhumane conditions at Sweet Home, the trees of the Sweet Home bring back the horrifying pictures of humanity being killed by the humans only. Trees bore a witness to all this barbarity, tortures, beating, etc. Women in particular were deeply impacted by these trees as they were the silent observers when they were brutally raped by their white masters. As Blumtoo writes, "Just as the wilderness could serve as a hiding place for beneficial aspects of black culture, it could also hide violence against women" (253).And it is for this reason that Sethe still carries that Chokocherry tree scar on her back after several years of escape. When School Teacher's nephews stole her milk, she reported the matter to School Teacher who beat her so brutally that it left a permanent mark on her body. And that scar resembles a tree because just like nature and trees, Sethe is also a silent victim of their exploitation.

Another episode where Sethe located trees as a site of violence is the one where School Teacher at Sweet Home enlistedall the slaves of Sweet Home with animalistic characteristics. He took the measurement of their bodies, counted their teeth as if they are animals. This disturbed Sethe a lot because while making this list the school teacher was using the ink which Sethe had prepared for them from cherry gum and oak bark. Sethe felt disturbed because with the help of her ink, he had converted the human beings into animals forever. She is full of guilt. Had she not prepared this ink, the school teacher would never have been able to put all her fellow mates in the category of animals. As Lorie Fulton puts, "She cannot help but feel that she facilitates her abuse by making the ink he used to record these characteristics. Trees, thus become a source of guilt for Sethe"(192).

Moreover, when Sethe was a kid, she remembers how her mother was beaten so many times that her face got completely disfigured. Her face turned into a face of animal. And this happens because slaves are always linked by whites to the 'wildness' of nature. And they know only one way to curb that wildness and that one way is violence. And Sweet Home's natural beauty was a mute spectator of all this. Even Paul D, who was deeply attached to trees realized that his attachment to these trees was only going to put him into danger. When we love something, we consider that object as our own. But whites had considered 'nature' as their exclusive site of possession. They didn't like the intrusion of blacks in owning anything which they owned. Paul D had to keep himself a bit detached because he knew that this sense of love was only going to welcome violence for both nature and him. Though he was captivated by the grandeur of Sweet Home, he collected all his emotions in his little tobacco tin box.

It is because of this relationship with the trees that when Paul D and Sethe have conversation about Sweet Home, both of them can't help praising the beauty of Sweet Home despite various barbarities they had witnessed there. Even the name Sweet Home here becomes symbolic and ironical at the same time. It becomes ironical because Sweet Home was not Sweet because of the cruel treatment given to slaves. Hence, they all escaped that land because they could no longer trace sweetness there in the behaviour of plantation owners. And the Sweet Home name is also symbolic because its inhabitants like Sethe and Paul D can't stop praising and reviving their memories of Sweet Home. Denver is so perplexed at this ambiguity that she often asks them why they escaped Sweet Home if the place is so close to their hearts. Paul D and Sethe are so much in awe of the place that they want to revisit that place again and again through their memories because it is the only

place on this earth where their whole family was together. The place thus despite its horrors of slavery is dear to them and they miss it a lot.

Morrison through this love and hate relationship wants to demonstrate that though Afro-Americans are closely attached to the Southern landscape and consider it as their home, white domination and perpetual violence showered on them in this land have fractured their relationship with this land which is the home to all their memories of marriage, birth of their children and time spent together with all of them. And that's why they hesitate in considering this land as their own and escape to other places where they can atleast assert their independence. As Rachel Stein remarks, "Social geography of racial segregation and white supremacy dispossesses black of any secure relationship to homeland" (89).

It is thesememories which oscillate between happiness and sorrows and penetrate the mind of Sethe through the image of tree. Infact, if one looks at the character ofBeloved, one finds that she is symbolic of tree. Just as trees aid and obstruct Sethe in getting over her haunted past, in the same way, Beloved helps and hinders Sethe in getting over his struggling days of slavery which she faced at Sweet Home and after.

Beloved's presence reawakens that past in front of her and she has no other option left but to face her buried past with all its horrors. Sethe and Denver's lives have come to a standstill. However, Beloved who is associated with trees brings back a fresh lease of life in the otherwise deadly state of their lives which they have been living after Beloved's death. Beloved's arrival is the resurrection of the life of both Sethe and Denver. Before the arrival of Beloved, Sethe was deliberately trying hard to bury her past which was dominated by whites. And this fear that the past might not come back to her had stifled Sethe to a large extent that she had lost her identity. She neither remained a Sweet Home slave nor free women at Cincinnati. Her distorted identity was killing her day by day. Beloved's entry into her life is the only reason that she comes to terms with her past and revives her true identity. Thus, Beloved comes as 'a tree of life'in their lives because it forces Denver to go out to find job and also allows Sethe to pick fragmented parts of her past to create a true identity of her own. Anne Snitow too puts that the survivors of slavery, "those who remain must exorcise the deadly past from their hearts or die themselves" (47).

Some critics have also argued that Beloved is a 'dead tree' rather than 'a living tree' because after sometime her existence looms so large on Sethe that she cannot handle that pressure and succumbs to it. As the story unfolds, one sees how Beloved has to leave so that Sethe can survive. Many critics have debated that rather than dead, Beloved is a 'felled tree. Morrison's words in the novel too support this opinion. She writes, "The sawyer who had planted them twelve years ago to take the sin out of slicing trees for a living." (57). Now if one closely observes this statement, it refers to the slicing of trees whose seeds were sown twelve years ago by the sawyer. Twelve years after the trees he planted had grown up and were full of sin. So, it became necessary to slice these trees for their own welfare.

Now, this slicing of tree could be equated to the slicing of Beloved's throat by Sethe. Sethe herself bore this baby and was deeply attached to it. But when the School Teacher comes back to take her children, in a fit to prevent Beloved from the sin of slavery, she herself despite being a mother slit the throat of her own daughter. Thus Beloved here assumes the picture of a felled tree. Another logic which supports her equation to a felled tree is the one when after carnival Paul D, Sethe and Denver locate her in front of a tree stump which means that in front of a felled tree.

However, even in her image of a felled tree, Beloved symbolizes resurrection as it is only after a tree is felled that a new sapling will grow after it. Beloved is thus symbolic of a new life that will emerge out of the dead. The stump, where Sethe and Beloved first meet is a place of hope as it is hoped that it will resurrect the life of Sethe which is haunted by the dark past. She is thus a fresh sapling which will come out of the dead stump of a tree. When Sethe sees Beloved for the first time near the stump, the event is associated with the water breaking of Sethe. Water breaking is symbolic of birth. Thus Beloved is not a felled tree but a fresh sapling that will sprout if Sethe will water it through her love and affection Sethe's water-breaking is symbolic of the fact that Beloved is thirsty of water, i.e. motherly love and that's why her water breaks on seeing Beloved. Infact, when Sethe takes Beloved home, she was so thirsty that she gulped down all water. Beloved here is like a dry sapling which needs water to

grow up. Denver took so much care of Beloved that she forgets to visit her emerald closet of trees. And, all this happened because a fresh sapling has now arrived which has infused lots of hope in the life of Sethe and Denver. Thus Beloved can't be compared just to a living, dead or felled tree because she is representative of all these stages, viz. she gets birth, is made to fell and die by her mother and ultimately resurrects as a fresh sapling in the lives of her family members.

Thus it can be asserted that in relation to Beloved and all other characters in the novel, trees are representative of the contradictory images of both life and death. In some instances, trees signal life and bring home the idea of peace whereas sometimes they bring so disastrous tales back to mind that it becomes an imagery of death. The whole story revolves around this duality offered by trees. And the resurrection implications which are drawn from the fresh sapling of a tree perhaps hints at the possible solution to this problem. However, what needs to be identified is the fact that this dual representation of trees imagery surfaces because of the struggle of life and death which the blacks faced during enslavement. Whites sometimes identify slaves with nature and sometimes exploit them like nature as it suits their means. Despite being ardent nature lovers historically, blacks cannot claim nature as their own. And this has led to a fractured and hazy relationship with nature as has been described in relation to the imagery of tree.

Moreover, this fragmented and distorted family tree bereft the blacks of any kind of genuine and legal lineage which took away any kind of rights to citizenship on the land of whites. If one goes by the laws of citizenship, a natural citizen is one whose ancestors belong to a particular place or have inhabited a particular land for many years. Blacks didn't fall in either category. Their original ancestors belonged to Africa. Going by the second norm, these Afro–Americans were bought and sold so many times. Their children didn't know where their parents were. Husbands were not aware of where their wives were. The family tree was thus completely destroyed by the slavery system thrusted upon blacks by whites. As a result, no official record of their family history was ever written nor any kinds of document verifying their family traces could even be located. Ultimately, this lack of record of family history prevented them from having any claim to the citizenship on this white land. In fact this ripping off the branches and leaves of the family tree could be a deliberate attempt of the whites to exclude blacks out of the cultural, social, political, framework of America by devoiding them any citizenship rights.

Undoubtedly, sometimes trees symbolized the slaves themselves and sometimes they became a site of fear and violence for the slaves as these trees bore a witness to their exploitation. Trees reminded them of the mental and physical oppression they faced at the hands of whites. Then, there were instances, where trees recalled positive memories because they gave them comfort and solace during their days of tortures. Moreover, if trees bore witness to the evil events, the same trees bore witness to their marriages and the birth of their children as well. That's why for some blacks like Paul D, trees even became 'Brother' to share his experiences and love. As novel moves ahead, the imagery of trees only helped and supported the blacks to regain their lost identity, their lost roots and family lineage as exemplified through clearing. Though physically all the characters had escaped the clutches of slavery, the mental fetters of the haunted past of slavery could only be unchained through the image of trees. And therein lies the success of Morrison's art as by using the image of trees she has fabricated all the threads of her story, viz., nature, slavery, blacks, family history, etc. in such a way that it has added a lot of novelty and depth to the saga of black suffering.

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