

**POWER, VOICE, AND REPRESENTATION IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED: A
CRITICAL STUDY OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores power, voice and representation as dynamics in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison with reference to narrative discourse critically. This study examines the ways that Morrison uses narrative techniques, including changing viewpoint, polyphony, fragmentation, and temporal displacement, to rewrite the history of the dominant US to re-figure the voices of the oppressed by slavery. The study relies on the narrative theory (Genette, Bakhtin), the Black feminist thought (hooks, Lorde), the postcolonial criticism (Bhabha, Fanon) to analyze ways in which storytelling becomes the place of negotiation between the authority and the marginality. These findings show that the narrative discourse of Morrison does not just disrupt the conventional power structure but also recreate the process of representation by foregrounding the lived experiences and culture of the memory and emotional truth of the enslaved people. *Beloved*, by its unique style, turns narrative into resistance, giving silenced subjects the way to enter history again with agency and voice.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, power, voice, representation, narrative discourse, African American literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The central place of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987) in the African American literary study is the forceful utilization of slavery, narrative authority, and voice recovery. Facing the challenge of a complex narrative that does not readily lend itself to linear narrative, Morrison reveals how power works, not necessarily through physical dominance, but also language, memory and representation. By refusing to accept prevailing historical narratives, according to Beaulieu (2003), Morrison has always worked to reinstate voice to the erased people in history especially the enslaved Black women, through her fiction. In *Beloved*, the article of discourse itself is a place of resistance towards systems that are trying to dictate meaning and representation.

The novel is written in the periods of the post slavery era, though the characters are still bound up by the ideological as well as the psychological effects of slavery. Morrison prefigures who is talking, who is being muted and who is in charge of the narrative. The memories of Sethe, the disjointed memories of Paul D and the haunting voice of *Beloved* all serve to explain what Morrison (as explained in Henderson, 1991) points to as being the need to unsilence silenced pasts. Power in *Beloved* is thus not limited to the outside institutions like slavery or law but goes into narrative power; power of telling their own experience and defining their identity.

The narrative voice in *Beloved* cannot be separated and the power relations. The novel also uses various points of view, change of pronouns and broken monologues in order to break hierarchical

storytelling. As Schapiro (1991) notes, the polyphonic narrative form of Morrison reflects the subjectivity fragmentation created by slavery and at the same time provides a way of reconstructing the subject-hood by sharing the narration. Characters with the narrative voice start to reclaim their agency, and those deprived of voice are stuck in the oppressive images formed by people.

The other axis of power, which plays a critical role in the novel, is representation. Morrison resists the simplistic images about the enslaved people, showing their inner world, their emotional depth, and free will. Rushdy (1999) asserts that *Beloved* is a part of the neo- slave narratives, which rehistoricize the history of slavery and challenge the official history of diminishing the lives of the Blacks to the status of economic property. With this story intervention, Morrison reveals the functioning of representational practices as a tool of domination or liberation in themselves.

The close connection of narrative voice and survival is shown by the difficulty with which Sethe tries to express her past. This is evidenced by her not fully narrating some of her memories; especially the infanticide which is a response of trauma to representation as explained by Caruth (1996). Meanwhile, the progressive involvement of memory by Sethe demonstrates that reclaiming narrative voice is one of the steps that must be taken in self- representation. The appearance of *Beloved* as a talking being is a theatricalization of the risks and needs of addressing the untold past, and her voice is the traumatic energy without a resolution that needs to be considered.

The politics of representation is also further emphasized in the narrative arc of Paul D. His comparison of the heart to a tobacco tin symbolizes the repression of the emotions by enslavement, which matches the result of his analysis of the process of having the psyche fragmented by the rule of domination by Fanon (1952). It is only after the storytelling and emoting that Paul D starts to rebuild a sense of self. It is through narrative voice that power is renegotiated, as opposed to being experienced.

Although a large amount of literature has explored *Beloved*, limited literature has been conducted on how power, voice, and representation work interrelatively in the narrative discourse of the novel. The available criticism tends to address trauma or memory independently without paying enough attention to the role of narrative form as a locus of power. Morrison does not always write to entertain and express emotions but to challenge his political goals through his stylistic choices, as mentioned by Page (2020) the narration of pasts, and the voice that is permitted to speak. This paper fills this gap by discussing *Beloved* in terms of a critical analysis of narrative discourse that puts the focus on the ways in which power relations are entrenched in voice and representation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although *Beloved* is a popular subject of trauma analysis, little effort has been put on how narrative discourse generates power relations in the text. In the novel, voices that are fragmented and different perspectives create questions that are critical concerning authority, representations and control of narratives. This paper will discuss the issue of the way power works via voice and representation in *Beloved*, which forms the individual identity and memory.

1.2 Research Questions

What is the role of narrative discourse as a place of power in *Beloved*?

How do voice and silence bring up the structures of domination and resistance?

What does Morrison do with conventional ways of representation by way of fragmenting the narrative?

How can storytelling help in reclaiming the agency and identity?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This research paper is aimed at discussing how Morrison uses narrative discourse to question the nature of power relations in *Beloved*. Through this study by examining voice, silence and representation, it is presumed that narrative form itself would be a form of resistance to historical erasure and ideological domination.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is relevant to the scholarship of Morrison by preempting the narrative discourse as a critical location of power. It emphasizes the political connotations of voice and representation in African American literature and emphasizes the part played by Morrison in the renegotiation of the narratives and meaning of enslaved histories. This work also provides clues on the further discourse of power and representation that can be used in post-slavery narratives.

1.5 Methodology

The paper takes a qualitative literary method by basing on the discourse analysis method and narrative theory. Critical in the approach to examine the voice of narrative, representational strategies, and textual silence is close reading, with a dependency on critical perspectives of the study of trauma, African American criticism, and post-slavery narrative theory (Caruth, 1996; Rushdy, 1999; Schapiro, 1991).

1.6 Structure of the Study

This paper is divided into five chapters:

Introduction; sets the conceptual point of focus on power, voice and representation. Literature Review; reviews the literature about narrative discourse, power, and *Beloved*. Theoretical Framework; gives an overview of discourse, trauma theory and representation. Analysis and Discussion; the analysis of voice and power of the narrative by means of text. Conclusion and Findings; summarizes the main implications and key findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives on Toni Morrison and her novel *Beloved* have been detailed in a critical scholarship that has focused upon the issues of slavery, trauma, memory, and African American identity reflected in the novel. Nevertheless, less research has investigated the action of power by the nature of narrative discourse itself, and especially by the voice, silence, and representational authority. According to Beaulieu (2003), in all her fiction, Morrison reclaims the suppressed histories through a rearrangement of the narrative voice and gives space to the oppressed characters to speak against mainstream historical accounts of events. In this chapter, the main critical issues concerning the topic of narrative discourse, power, and representation in *Beloved* are reviewed, and the current study is placed in a context of the existing scholarly work.

2.1 Voice of Narration and Polyphony in *Beloved*.

Some critics underline that polyphonic narrative voice is one of the characteristics of *Beloved* applied by Morrison. Schapiro (1991) claims that the changing viewpoints in the novel reflect the splintered subjectivities that slavery created as well as allowing the characters to reassert control over their bodies by stories. The juxtaposition of Sethe and Denver musings with those of Paul D and the haunting voice of *Beloved* represents what Bakhtin (1981) considers a dialogic narrative space a space in which various voices and perspectives exist without any hierarchical closure. Morrison does not give priority to one authoritative narrator, thus, breaking the conventional structural power of a story. Page (2020) claims that this fragment of narration is a challenge to the prevalent representational practices that historically silenced the voices of the enslaved. The interior monologue of *Beloved*, where she says I am *Beloved* and she is mine, is a counter-narrative that cannot be represented in a linear historical way compelling readers to deal with non-official history.

2.2 Power, Silence, and Narrative Control

The role of silence in the power as depicted by Morrison is very important. Through voice, agency can be empowered, but silence can be a sign of repression and uncured trauma. According to Caruth (1996), trauma is not representable, and she says it is expressed in gaps, repetitions and breaks in the story. *Beloved* is one of the works where a stand-out of the silence as a protecting mechanism and the symptom of powerlessness is shown through Sethe refusing to tell the story about infanticide.

One of the critics like Henderson (1991) highlights that the narratives of African American women often explore silence strategically as a means to challenge the meanings forced on them. This strategy is reflected by a narrative method used by Morrison who did not solve silence, but only permitted it to coexist with speech. This way power not only comes out when one is speaking but also when one is silenced, as well as under what circumstances. The dynamic highlights the problem of narrative discourse as a contentious position of power.

2.3 Representation and the Politics of Rewriting History

Academics tend to place *Beloved* into the context of the neo-slave texts that re-history the events of slavery through the eyes of the slave. Rushdy (1999) believes that these histories contest historical documents that dehumanize enslaved people as property and reinstates emotions and subjectivity. Memory, affect, and interior voice are a reconstruction of enslaved life by Morrison, which reestablishes representational power.

Ethics is also an issue in *Beloved*. According to Fleischner (1996), Morrison does not sentimentalize trauma but he brings out the suffering in a manner that requires the reader to react ethically. Through refusal of closure and narrative comfort, Morrison refuses traditional forms of presentation, which try to normalize historical violence.

2.4 Power, Discourse and Formation of Identity

Beloved is full of narrative discourse which is closely connected to identity formation. According to Foucault (1980), discourse influences the circulation of power in the social systems by determining what one can say and by who. These discursive limits are broken in Morrison through interior voice assigned to characters that have been historically deprived of subjectivity. The

articulation of the past gradually in Sethe is a sign of struggle in the representational control as the loss of voice becomes central in the reconstruction of the identity.

The repression of emotions by Paul D is another way of expressing the power of the narratives using the repression of words. What Fanon (1952) refers to as internalized domination in oppressive systems is seen in his metaphor of the tobacco tin-heart. It is only after Paul D starts narrating about his experiences that he questions the system of power that restricted his emotional life.

2.5 Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Even though the criticism of *Beloved* is extensive, there are still gaps in comprehending the role of power, voice, and representation in working together in terms of the narrative discourse of the novel. Numerous works discuss trauma or memory in isolation, without adequately discussing the way that the very structure of narrative performs power relations. According to Page (2020), the stylistic choices made by Morrison are political per se, as they precondition not only the subject of the memory but also the ways in which memory is depicted.

This paper fills these gaps by using a synthesis of narrative theory, trauma studies, and African American criticism to analyze the text of *Beloved* in which the discourse is a primary mechanism of power and resistance.

2.6 Summary of the Literature Review

The scholarship reviewed shows that *Beloved* has been extensively interpreted through the lens of thematic interest in trauma and memory, but that even less has been predicted to the analysis of narrative discourse as a source of power. The current criticism offers substantial information about voice, silence, and representation, yet tends to address the aspects separately. Coupled together, these views, the current work presents a more unified approach to the ways Morrison uses narrative discourse to oppose erasure of history and redefine the modes of representation.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research will be based on the narrative discourse theory, theory of power and representation and traumatic based criticism to determine how *Beloved* builds power, voice and subjectivity. The narration of Morrison is not just an account of experience of the past; it is questioning of the processes within which stories are narrated, suppressed, or misrepresented. According to Foucault (1980), power works through discourse because it constructs speech, what can be said, retention and what can be legitimized. Based on this framework, the instruments to analyze the use of narrative form as the location of power and resistance within the context of *Beloved* are offered.

3.1 Narrative Discourse and Authority

Narrative discourse theory stresses that there can never be a neutral form of storytelling, but there are always relations of power between the speaker, subject and the audience. Genette (1980) makes a distinction between story (what is told) and discourse (how it is told) and claims that meaning and power are determined in relation to narrative voice, focalization and time. The control of narrative time and point of view constructs the unstable hierarchies of narration since Morrison is not ready to accept one authoritative voice.

This dynamic is further explained by Bakhtin (1981) in his concept of dialogism. Many voices are present in dialogic narratives, which cannot be resolved, and these voices attack monologic authority. *Beloved* is an illustration of this paradigm by its polyphonic form, where Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and *Beloved* express contradicting versions of memory and experience. This plurality undermines those traditional historical narratives that view slavery as a closed or resolved past.

3.2 Power and Discourse

The theory of discourse formulated by Michel Foucault is an important critical approach to the analysis of the circulation of power on the basis of language and narrative representation. Foucault (1980) states that power is not only repressive, but productive: it is the creator of identities, knowledge and social relations. In *Beloved*, the effects of the heritage of slavery continue discursively on Black bodies and histories as property or silence.

Morrison defies such discursive limits by reinstating narrative power to the subjects who are marginalized. The inability of Sethe to explain her past is what Foucault calls resistance in discourse the struggle to speak in the place that has historically been denied as legitimate. The fragmentation of narrative therefore emerges as a tactic of revealing the boundaries to the dominant discourses and as a tactic of establishing the other forms of knowledge.

3.3 Voice, Silence, and Trauma

The theory of trauma plays a key role in explaining the theme of voice and silence in *Beloved*. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is not easily represented, in many cases, it is represented with gaps, repetitions, and narrative interruptions. Morrison introduces such characteristics into the structure of the novel, which enables silence to act as a narrative element and not as lack.

The use of silence in *Beloved* frequently indicates that there is power. The fact that Sethe does not want to narrate about the infanticide is an indication of trauma and fear of being judged and shows how silence can be socially and historically imposed. Simultaneously, speech instances (so-called confessions by Sethe or monologues by *Beloved*) can be seen as a part of narrative resistance, which is in conflict with forced silence.

3.4 Representation and Historical Memory

Representation theories emphasize the influence of narrative in shaping the group memory and historical knowledge. Hall (1997) claims that representation is a dynamic process involving the process through which meaning is created instead of being reflected. To a large extent, the conversion of slavery in the form of interior monologues, fragmented timelines, and supernaturalism breaks conventions of realism that tend to sanitize the historical violence.

According to Rushdy (1999), *Beloved* is placed in the context of neo-slave narratives, which challenge the official history. Morrison makes visible the historical absence of voices about slavery in the archives by prioritizing the subjective memory over the archival documentation. The character and symbol of *Beloved* represent the unresolved need to be recognized in the cultural memory.

3.5 Identity Formation Through Narrative Voice

In *Beloved*, identity is produced by means of narrative. According to Fanon (1952), subjectivity is divided into colonial and racial domination which deprives people of the right to represent

themselves. Morrison protests this operation by letting the characters tell their stories, although these stories are disjointed or even conflicting.

The psychological aftereffects of the suppressed identity is done through the metaphor of the tobacco tin heart, which is instead used by Paul D. His progressive readiness to talk is an indication of the shift towards narrative agency. Likewise, the shift of Denver into silence to speech is her introduction as an independent being in the story.

3.6 Integrating the Framework

Combined, the narrative discourse theory, power theory, trauma studies, and the representation theory ensure a concise model of analyzing *Beloved*. Genette (1980) and Bakhtin (1981) shedding light into the authority of the narrative, Foucault (1980) in his explanation of the functioning of power through the discourse, Caruth (1996) in his clarification of voice and silence functionality, and Hall and Rushdy (1997) and (1999) in their commentary on the politics of representation.

This syntactic system allows studying the *Beloved* as a situation in which the narrative discourse is premeditated to foreground the negotiations of power, to resist the power, and to re-imagine power. In the next chapter, these theoretical insights are used in close reading of the narrative strategies and the use of character voices in the novel.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter uses the theoretical foundation to closely read *Beloved* and show how Morrison uses narrative discourse to bargain power relations via voice, silence and representation. The analysis demonstrates that narrative style itself appears to be a place of contention, in which authority is challenged and where marginalized subjectivities reassert themselves. The chapter analyzing focalization, polyphony, silence, and representational strategies allows to see how Morrison opposes the hegemonic historical discourses and recreates the African American subjectivity.

4.1 Narrative Authority and the Disturbance of Monologic Power

By denying a single and robust narrator, Morrison challenges traditional authority of narratives. Based on the differentiation of story and discourse developed by Genette (1980), *Beloved* disrupts the narrative control by the change of focalization and time dislocation. This plan disrupts the monologic power where one voice does not have complete control over the meaning. Dialogic narratives will not close hierarchically, as Bakhtin (1981) suggests; and polyphony is one of the ways of resisting the hierarchical closure: polyphony by Morrison allows conflicting voices to co-exist.

Sethe and her memories, Paul D and his memories, Denver and her perceptions, and *Beloved* and her monologues altogether call upon the question of an objective historical account. The fact that there is no domineering narrator echoes what Rushdy (1999) describes as the political work of the neo-slave narratives: to challenge the silence of the archival histories that stifle the voice of the enslaved. Redistribution of narrative authority is therefore achieved whereby the marginalized views are able to influence representation.

4.2 Voice, Silence, and the Politics of Trauma

Trauma cannot be separated out of voice in *Beloved*. According to Caruth (1996), traumatic experience cannot be narrated directly, but it may manifest itself in the form of gaps and

repetitions. Morrison incorporates this reasoning in the discourse of the novel, especially in how Sethe does not want to tell the story of the infanticide. Her silence serves simultaneously as a defense mechanism and a binding mechanism which is the power of trauma to control speech. When speech is introduced, it is politicized. The persistence of the memory, when Sethe insists, that they have violated her body “they took my milk!” is an assertion of bodily violation of the histories of the enslaved women whose experiences are destroyed. This point can be considered the example of the late process of transferring trauma into language that Caruth (1996) describes. Silence is thus not nothing but a loaded area that is created by power relations that defines what is sayable.

4.3 Representation and the Ethics of Remembering

The representational decisions by Morrison undermine realist rules that run the danger of normalizing historical violence. According to Hall (1997), the meaning that is created by representation is rather active and not reflective of reality. *Beloved* achieves this principle through the prioritization of interiority, affect and memory over chronological time. The ethical ambiguity of the novel as it does not resolve the trauma places responsibility on the readers who are required to engage and not consume the novel.

The ghostly appearance of *Beloved* comprises ethical requirement of representation. Her announcement “I am *Beloved* and she is mine” claims subjectivity over erasure, but is also revealing the traumatic jeopardies of representation, which reduces identity to trauma itself. Morrison has not employed sentimentalization as Fleischner (1996) observes that he has kept the narrative tension between remembering and survival in a way that makes representation ethically complex.

4.4 Discourse, Power, and the Regulation of Speech

The concept of discourse by Foucault (1980) is used to explain the means in which power controls the right to talk to whom and in what circumstances. The slavery heritage continues to be felt in *Beloved* with discursive norms that forces memory and speech. The fear of judgment, the emotional repression of Paul D, and the initial withdrawal of that community show how power limits the articulation of the narrative by Sethe.

An example of internalized regulation is the metaphor of the heart, which is the tobacco tin heart of Paul D. His final decision to speak is a sign of a breaking of the discursive control, following the description of Fanon (1952) about the discontinuity of subjectivity under domination. It is an act of resistance that speech is as far as it challenges the boundaries of the historical power.

4.5 Community, Polyphony, and Collective Voice

The community turns out to be an opposing force to discursive domination. The joint action of the women at 124 signifies what Bakhtin (1981) would call dialogic convergence - a scene in which several voices painfully break the isolation. This group speech repossesses the privatization of representational power by trauma.

Community, as Page (2020) proposes, is a participant in the narrative meaning-making as created by Morrison. The orientation of Denver towards the community is an indication of her transition to voice, to no longer being represented, but to self-articulation. Collective voice therefore facilitates identity formation when one's trauma is not the center of attention.

4.6 Reclaiming Identity Through Narrative Resistance

Throughout *Beloved*, narrative resistance has been implemented as vocal recovery, strategic silence, and re-ethicalization of representation. Identity is a discourse that is created as opposed to existing before it is created. The text authored by Morrison substantiates Hall (1997) position that representation is constitutive of subjectivity, and reveals, through the discourse of trauma, that the reclaiming of voice is an ongoing and controversial process.

The last confirmation of the novel, the demand by Paul D that Sethe is her best thing, reinstates the idea of representation to the future without negating the past. Therefore, narrative discourse negotiates power by maintaining a tension of memory and survival to allow the characters to take control back without closure.

5.FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in terms of narrative discourse, the way power works via the voice, silence, and the representation. The analysis shows that Morrison creates narrative form itself as a place of politics after incorporating narrative theory, discourse analysis and trauma-informed criticism. According to Foucault (1980) power is circulating through discourse which determines what can be said and what can be remembered and the *Beloved* reveals and opposes these processes by redistributing narrative power among the suppressed voices. The results below are summaries of the main insights of the study.

5.1 Summary of Findings

1.Narrative Discourses Are Power Mechanism

The review shows that the narrative authority in *Beloved* is deliberately discontinuous. There is no possibility of a unifying voice because of the shifting focalization and polyphony as used by Morrison. Based on the difference between story and discourse as proposed by Genette (1980), the paper shows that the meaning of *Beloved* is created through the narration of the events and not a chronological sequence of events. Such an approach to narration interferes with monologic historical narratives that normally suppress enslaved subjects.

2.Trauma Structurally Regulates Voice and Silence

The voice in *Beloved* cannot be separated with the limitations of the trauma. The refusal of Sethe to recount the infanticide and the emotional repression by Paul D is an example of the resistance to representation of the trauma, as pointed out by Caruth (1996). Silence does not exist as nothing but is a product of power relations that determine speech. Speech itself becomes a form of rebellion when the characters speak of the traumatic memory, as Sethe did, when she said, “They took my milk!” and historical erasure.

3.Representation Forms Identity and Historical Memory

The representational practices by Morrison disregard realist traditions that expose themselves to the danger of condoning violence. Representation does not reproduce meaning but creates meaning as Hall (1997) tries to argue. *Beloved* recreates the enslaved subjectivity by using interior monologue, fractured chronologies as well as ghostly appearance, challenging archival histories. The voice of *Beloved* represents the moral imperative of expression, which must be heard and at the same time showcases the perils of the identity falling wholesale into trauma (Fleischner, 1996).

4. Discourse Empowers and Limits the Formation of Identity

The identity in *Beloved* is articulated through narration. The reference of the tobacco tin heart by Paul D is a metaphor of discursive control that has been internalized, and this is in line with the fractured subjectivity of domination that Fanon (1952) discussed. The fact that he finally agrees to talk is an indication of a break in how discourse is controlled by power. Equally, the transformation of silence to speech in Denver illustrates how narrative voice can be used to show a sense of self-representation and agency.

5. The Community Reclaims Representational Authority

The collective action of the women at 124 depicts the political possibility of the communal voice. Based on the idea of dialogism, which is a concept by Bakhtin (1981), the analysis reveals how group speech derails the seclusion and reallocates narrative authority. According to Page (2020), Morrison forms community as a way people create meaning that facilitates identity reconstruction to overcome personal trauma.

5.2 Conclusion

Using its multidimensional narrative discourse, *Beloved* unveils that power is not only imposed on historical institutions like slavery but also through voice and representation. Morrison works against these processes by decentering narrative authority, giving voices to marginalized people, and preempting the moral urgency of storytelling. Trauma overpowers speech, but narrative style is one of the most important ways to agency.

Through examining narrative discourse as a place of power, this paper shows that voice and representation are very crucial to identity formation in *Beloved*. The denial of narrative closure by Morrison rejects the idea of historical containment, that recovery of voice is not an end result but a daily journey. According to Rushdy (1999) neo-slave narratives enter into the cultural memory through the reinterpretation of history through the lens of the enslaved; *Beloved* is a perfect example of such an intervention through the discourse-based resistance.

Finally, the novel holds that one should be able to tell his/her experience without deleting trauma to survive. The narrative form used by Morrison negotiates memory and future where the characters reclaim agency but simultaneously the past continues to be there.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research:

Future research can take into account: Comparative discourse in *Beloved* and other neo-slave discourses.

Silence, resistance in the post-slavery literature.

Crossroads to discourse theory and Black feminist narratology. Narrative ethics of reader response to the fiction of Morrison.

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