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HOME MAKING THROUGH JOURNEY: NEGOTIATING MEMORY AND RE-MEMORY IN  
TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

Memory and 're-memory' play a crucial role in facilitating a search for home through the journey for African Americans. Having been traumatized by oppression meted out to them by the supremacist white culture, African Americans try sometimes to repress and sometimes to bring back past trauma in order to deal with their present predicament. This paper is an attempt to address the issue of home making through the journey undertaken by African Americans in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. How Morrison's black characters experience the illusion and reality of the home making process through a movement across spaces constitutes the core issue of the paper. The abuses and traumas of slavery, racism, and sexism confronted by these characters in their journey across diverse spaces complicate their search for home. How they look forward to a viable home in spite of such barriers and how Morrison artistically represents the matter in her novel are the primary issues the paper seeks to understand in a better way.

**Keywords:** Home, journey, memory, 're-memory', trauma, slavery.

Introduction

The history of African-Americans is basically a history of their negotiation of home and identity across multiple spatial scales. Their search for home in colonial and postcolonial America has assumed a complex character with the passage of time and with the unfolding of the psychosomatic and psychosocial disturbances resulting from psychophysical exploitation meted out to them as slaves during colonial rules and as 'niggers' in 'neo-colonial' America. The legacy of slavery is passed on and/or brought back to them through 'personal memory', 'collective/cultural memory' and 're-memory'. Substantiating a constantly repeated statement in *Freedom Charter* – "our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" – bell hooks makes a distinction between 'nostalgia' and 'remembering' in so far as "politicization of memory" is concerned (147). Nostalgia, for hooks, is a useless act because it longs for a retaining of the past in its original form and, therefore, it is too stagnant to bring about required modification and transformation. Remembering, on the other hand, is a conscious and useful act on the part of memory to "redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that serve to illuminate and transform the present" (hooks 147). Memories are basically both personal and collective and are complementary to each other. Personal memory relates to the past experiences of an individual which in many cases can be a part of the collective and/or cultural memories of a particular group, community, and nation. Collective memory gradually rolls into cultural

memory with the passage of time epitomizing itself in the form of “texts, images, rites, [songs], buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes” (Assmann 128). While temporality is the determining factor in this transition from collective memory to cultural memory, the spatial dimension of this process is equally important. The fusion of past and present underscores the fusion of the temporal events in spatial matrix thereby upholding the notion that cultural memory can still influence collective and/or community bond in the present. This thesis is a critique of the views of thinkers like Maurice Halbwachs, who probably have thought that “once living communication crystallized in the form of objectivized culture . . . the group relationship and the contemporary reference are lost” (qtd. in Assmann 128).

Memories of trauma, both personal and collective, as in the case of African Americans, problematise any simple remembering of the past in so far as there has always been a conscious attempt on their part sometimes to repress and sometimes to bring back past trauma. Morrison has introduced the concept of (re)-memory in *Beloved* to give vent to the complicated interplay of personal and collective memories in redirecting and reconfiguring past trauma in what Walter Benjamin calls “messianic” time. One is also reminded of T. S. Eliot’s philosophically ruminated concept of time as “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past” (*Four Quartets* 13). In other words, Morrison’s idea of (re)-memory highlights the reincarnation of past trauma in the present when trauma victims, exposed to a similar situation in the present moment, react in a manner which is at once reminiscent of and different from the way they or their ancestors reacted long back. The ambivalences that (re)-memory consolidates in the process of its stimulated exploration of past trauma can be attributed to the filtering of the past in the present to look forward to a future which is neither idealistic nor fixed, but realistic and multiple, and hence, open to continuous reinterpretation.

The concept of home making through the journey is associated with the migration of people, whether forced or intentional, across and beyond national space. Such a notion of home challenges the idea of fixed home and identity. The concept of multiple homes and identities spearheaded by migration makes these people negotiate between rootedness and rootlessness. African Americans, in particular, are destined to keep on moving from one place to another. These journeys are essential for them because they offer a means for escaping slavery and initiating a movement towards freedom. They become mature and knowledgeable during these journeys to face harsh realities of life from which they cannot escape. These journeys also offer them a space to negotiate black/white binary and to look forward to a viable home for them. By placing temporal events in spatial matrix — e.g. locating legacies of slavery and racism both in the wider nation space and in the community space — African Americans engender “hybridity”. For Homi K. Bhabh “hybridity is the third space which enables other positions to emerge” (211).

This paper takes up the issue of home making through the journey in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Through a movement across spaces (one of the determining factors of colonialism) Morrison’s black characters experience the illusion and reality of the home making process. The abuses and traumas of slavery, racism, and sexism confronted by these characters in their journey across diverse spaces complicate their search for home.

### Analyses and Discussions

The constant mobility of Sethe and Paul D in *Beloved* exemplifies an America in which colonialism continues through slavery and racism. Sethe’s memory of Sweet Home, her escape to her new home at 124 Bluestone Road, and her endeavour to rebuild her home and self-worth with Paul D in the neo-colonial space of the American Nation, make such reading of *Beloved* quite exploratory and revealing. By making Sethe and Paul D undertake a colonial journey across postcolonial spaces of the nation, Morrison makes them confront hopes and impediments of such journeys. The restrictions imposed on free movement of African Americans across these spaces foreground the retaining of colonial practices and structures, which make a mockery of their search for home and thwart any positive move on their part to move to the centre.

Based on the real story of Margaret Garner, Sethe’s journey to freedom entails a legacy still being reenacted in postcolonial America. Sweet Home appears to be a microcosm of the American nation exercising restrictions on the free movement of the slaves, who, in spite of having little freedom there – “one step off

that ground and they were trespassers among the human race" (*Beloved* 125) – have bitter-sweet memories of that house. In tune with the possibility offered by the American nation, Sweet Home offers the possibility of negotiating black/white binary to make home possible for Sethe and Paul D. As *Beloved* reveals, during slavery African-Americans are made to live as slaves in the homes of the slaveholders where they are mostly treated like animals. But there are also occasions when they are treated as human beings by some of the slaveholders. Such exceptional experiences have the potential to evoke in the minds of the slaves a sense of home. These experiences act as a positive memory for them in post-slavery period and encourage them to establish home where the seeds for reconciliation as well as resistance can be sown to be germinated later on. In this way, a revision of their subaltern position is made possible through a refreshing of both soothing and debilitating memories.

Such positive gestures on the part of the dominant group are necessary for the black in order to make possible an America free of racism. This also shows the possibility of creating such a situation in post-slavery and post-colonial America. This highlights differences within the dominating culture itself towards the institution of slavery and the black's endeavour to establish a sense of self and subjectivity in response to such diverse ways of the white's treatment of the slaves. For instance, Sweet Home evokes bitter-sweet memories in Sethe. While living as a slave there, she remembers feeling like a daughter to Mrs. Garner who reciprocates the former's feelings by trying to satisfy her small needs. While Sethe's desire to celebrate her wedding ceremony remains unfulfilled, she receives a positive response from Mrs. Garner in the form of her gift of a pair of "diamond" earrings to her to commemorate the event. This affirms Jennifer Fleischner's observation that "the slave girl turns to her mistress in search of maternal care, self-esteem, and a sense of self" (8-9). Paul D also retains similar memories of this home under the Garners. However, in a microcosmic representation of the American nation, Sweet Home also exemplifies the obstacles erected by people like Schoolteacher and his nephews to thwart the sustainability of such endeavour on the part of the African American. Sethe is made to endure whipping from Schoolteacher and atrocities such as stealing of her milk by his nephews in Sweet Home. Paul D's experience under the new master is also similar to that of Sethe. The arrival of Schoolteacher makes him homeless as he is sold out and sent to Georgia. But their positive memories of that place get the better of the negative ones. Evaluating the impact of the positive memories of that place on Sethe, Evelyn J. Schreiber rightly maintains that "nostalgic memories of her 'family' life at Sweet Home support her subjectivity" (39). This indicates the possibility of overcoming black/white and master/slave binaries even in the space dominated by the white.

Restrictions on the free movement across the national space and beyond are both physical and mental barriers for the black to have access to freedom and equal rights. But, in spite of these restrictions, the slave population is not ready to give up movement. Paul D notes: "If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up". It is through the movement and journey that a slave can hope to escape from slavery and, in the process, put up a resistance to such colonial practices. Such journeys are important for gathering experiences and making oneself matured and determined to keep on living and make alive one's hope for a viable home against all odds. Sethe's excruciatingly painful journey as a pregnant woman with her white female ally Amy, for instance, makes her stronger in her determination to keep herself alive and not "to die on the wrong side of the river" (*Beloved* 10, 90). One of the factors responsible for her adopting such a positive attitude is perhaps her encounter with Amy whose sisterly assistance in making her escape possible inspired her to hope for a better future and a viable home.

This journey thus offers a space for revising conventional outlook. In their journey across the river in a cool evening, far away from the impact of racism and patriarchy, the two girls—one a "slavegirl" and the other a fugitive "whitegirl"—assisted each other in "wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore" (*Beloved* 99, 100). They could do that because there was nobody to disturb them – neither a patroller nor a preacher to snigger at the sight of "two lawless outlaws" in a situation like that (*Beloved* 100). This unpredictable gender alliance between the two girls – unacceptable beyond that spatial matrix – produces an emotional bond between them making the white girl hope that the slave girl would tell her daughter about her who brought her into this world. The sustainability of this mutual bond is validated by Sethe's naming of her new-born

daughter after Miss Amy Denver. Such subversive atonement of black/white binaries caused by spatial necessity questions the privileging of “temporality” and “sociality” over “spatiality”, which produces a history biased and lopsided, and which ignores alternative perspectives.

Such journeys, on the one hand, make the slaves encounter white oppression and seemingly insurmountable black/white estrangement. The same journeys, on the other hand, provide them with opportunities and situations futuristic enough to move beyond such binaries to a “third-spatial” prospect which opens up unlimited possibilities for negotiating such dualities. Amy’s sharing of white oppressions with Sethe to ensure her safe delivery ashore the river leading to her relocation in the house at 127 Bluestone Road is a case in point. These journeys are, therefore, both personal and collective – like the Middle Passage. Collective because slaves are made to undertake such journeys to fulfill the white’s needs; personal because survival depends on personal fortitude during such journeys. The journey Paul D was made to undertake along with other slaves ends with the escape of many of them and Paul D himself. Paul D. gets a home at Delaware with a woman who was kind enough to “adopt” him and protect him from losing his humanity and identity. Unless there is a family and community bond, it is almost impossible to create home. Connectedness, whether imaginary or real, is a must for overcoming trauma and searching for a viable home. Both Paul D. and Sethe can derive that connectedness from their past lives at Sweet Home. Apart from that, Sethe can rely on the memories of her journey to freedom with Amy Denver as well as her sweet memories of the home at 124 Bluestone Road under the care of Baby Suggs. In a similar way, Paul D tries to constitute his self and subjectivity by invoking his positive memories of the home at Delaware and at 124 Bluestone Road. Such journeys, therefore, bring with them volatile possibilities affecting location, dislocation, and relocation. These journeys provide the necessary dislocation for the slaves (though not always welcoming for them) leading to their relocation and realization of homing desire.

Thus positive memories of Sweet Home and the nurturing environment of the home at 124 Bluestone Road helped Sethe to look forward to a sustainable home in the latter under the caring wings of Baby Suggs. She “bathed [Sethe] in sections” in order perhaps to restructure her into a whole being with the parts holding together to make sense of the world. She developed a sense of unity under the care of Baby Suggs and later through the assistance of the community. After her infanticide, Sethe again lost her balance with her body and self fragmented into sections. Here again Paul D. offered to bath Sethe in parts in order perhaps to replicate Baby Suggs’ action to reorganize her parts to bring back her wholeness. While appreciating his offer, Sethe asked the most crucial question: “And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (*Beloved* 98, 272). What she perhaps suggested was that wholeness once lost could not be restored in toto; and that reorientation would lead her to a different whole in mind and body. Such healing was made possible only in the private space of home with subsequent sanctions from the community. Here home became community and community became home. In other words, domestic space merged with communal space to put up a resistance to the larger group’s infliction of trauma on the black. Black people needed a home to share and verbalize their trauma with the family members, but that home could be made possible only through the community support. Without community assistance and protection African Americans were vulnerable to the debilitating effects of slavery and racism.

But the arrival of Schoolteacher at 127 Bluestone Road to claim Sethe and her children as his property (in the pretext of Fugitive Slave Law) jeopardized the tranquility of that home. This contributed to the evoking of past trauma and, in re-enacting her mother’s act of infanticide, Sethe reacted violently killing her daughter Beloved to prevent her from going into slavery. It indicates that transmission of trauma stories bore an indelible mark in the psyche of the descendants of those slaves and if they happened to encounter similar situations, there was every possibility that they would react in the same manner. Such acts only compounded their trauma so much so that they were doubly haunted by these memories from which they could not easily escape. This is what happened to Sethe. Having the traumatic experience of being abandoned by her own mother and becoming aware of her mother’s act of killing all the children she had from white men, she found herself in a dilemma as to what she should do with her daughter Beloved when she herself was claimed by Schoolteacher as his property. She immediately rejected the first option realizing the agony she herself had

undergone due to her mother's abandonment of her. If she was claimed as a property by the School teacher, her daughter would automatically become his property. So she could think of no other option at this crucial moment but to replicate her mother's act by slaying her daughter Beloved. But such reenactment of ancestral act of violence only compounded her trauma to the extent of being haunted by it. The return of Beloved as a ghost that haunted 127 Bluestone House is a metaphor for the haunting memory of slave trauma. Sethe alone could not make her home free from the possession of the ghost, who had already exercised its magic spell on her other daughter Denver. It was with the help of Paul D that Sethe could remove the ghost of Beloved from his house. He converted the haunted house to a viable home. This repetition of past trauma in a similar situation in the present that prevents any simple remedy or escape from that trauma is defined by Morrison as "re-memory" in *Beloved*.

The return of Beloved in *Beloved* problematized African Americans' search for home by deleting the past from memory in order to live in the present. Beloved and Denver's act of retelling the past stories of their lives associated with the horror of "slave-sheep", plantation life and Sethe's journey to freedom was an indication of the African American's unavoidable predicament of undertaking journeys to slavery as well as to freedom—whether the journeys were psychic or physical. Recollection of those memories helped them interrogate their present and placed them in the "liminal" space from which alternative envisioning of a future could be made possible. The retelling and sharing of trauma stories related to such journeys helped African Americans aspire for a home which they could hope to create with the necessary support from individuals and the community. Morrison also seems to suggest that the future for African American women lies both in their ability to work in co-ordination with their men folk and in their ability to build up solidarity among themselves as well as with those white women who have empathy for them. Sethe would not have been able to dream for a viable home without the help of Paul D. and Baby Suggs on the one hand, and Miss Amy Denver and Mrs. Garner on the other.

The trauma of slavery handed down from one generation to another acquired such horrendous proportion in the collective memory of the black that it became very difficult for the community to assist individual victims of trauma to put up a resistance by looking forward to a viable home. The community itself got confused at the face of unexpected reaction on the part of trauma victims even though the precedents of such action still lingered in their collective and/or communal memory. For example, the community, which helped Sethe to cope up with the new situation at 124 Bluestone Road arising out of her escape to freedom, refused to accept her after her infanticide. Abandoned also by Paul D., Sethe had to rely on Denver as well as her fond memories of both Sweet Home and the present house (124 Bluestone Road). Denver's coming out of the house to interact with the community reconnected the lost link between 124 Bluestone Road and the community so as to pave the way for creating a home out of a hopeless situation. With Denver, Paul D. and the community, Sethe would again be able to convert the house into a viable home.

### Conclusion

African Americans always carry home in their psyche and, that is why, they are in a position to create home at any place and under any circumstances. By undertaking journeys across diverse spaces they keep on building and rebuilding home in response to the urges of their personal and collective memory and "re-memory". The materiality of home is as important for them as the "imaginary" of home because they can convert a house into a home through family support and community assistance, and by embarking on positive memories of past home.

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