

Political Technology of the Body in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract. One of the most abiding characters Toni Morrison has ever created, though a repulsive one, is the ruthless schoolteacher she portrays in *Beloved* (1987). The conduct of this seemingly *civilized* slave-holder exemplifies power/knowledge interaction and slavery's "political technology of the body" in a brazenly appalling way. Like other slave-owners, he appraises the corporal features of slaves as profit-making commodities, but his scrutiny has a pinch of *science* in it. He studies slaves as the unknown, subhuman *other* – the amalgam of human and animal that to his racist mind present a low-grade rung on the ladder of the social Darwinist evolution he believes in. Besides investigating their attributes and attitudes, when they disobey him or attempt escape, he tortures their body in the most brutal ways, and thereby his pretense of civilization subsides. Despite his idiosyncrasies, however, he embodies slavery's atrocious "technology of the body", seeing that similar callous treatments of slaves as non-human forces of production are observed in several other cases in Morrison's poignant novel.

Keywords: Power/Knowledge relation, Political technology of the body, Scrutiny, Subhuman other, Exploitation.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's present status as one of the most prominent African American writers has not been achieved only through her entrancing imagination, mastery of language and superb writing aptitudes, but thanks to her enduring endeavors to articulate the age-silenced voice of her slave ancestors and to portray the anguish of subsequent generations of black Americans. Perhaps more than many distinguished African American writers, she has contributed to the process of bringing black people from the margins of literary, critical and academic texts to the center of such texts by subverting the notion of whites' superiority. To accomplish such an enterprise, she has ardently resisted the power of Euro-Americans who enslaved and tortured her ancestors and subdued the subsequent black generations in a degraded position via their economic, political power besides their white-centered media that altogether mortified African Americans in the position of the inferior "other".

One of the most inexorable characters Morrison has created to subvert such Euro-American myths as the virtue, benevolence and righteousness of white people is the callous schoolteacher she portrays in her *Beloved* (1987). The behaviour of this allegedly *cultured* slave-holder exemplifies power/knowledge interaction and slavery's "political technology of the body" in a shamelessly horrendous way. Like other slave-owners, he appraises physical features of slaves as profit-making commodities, but his scrutiny has a pinch of *science* in it. He scrutinizes slaves as the unknown, *subhuman other* – the amalgam of human and animal to his racist mind, standing on a lower-than-human rung on his social Darwinist ladder.

The picture Morrison draws of Schoolteacher is one of the remarkable features of *Beloved* which is the imaginative reconstruction of the hi(story) of the "Disremembered, unaccounted for" (*Beloved* 274) slaves. Those slaves were entrapped in their motherland to be traded as merchandise, whose labor force was terribly exploited by slave-holders, whose bodies were manipulated and tortured, who were callously lynched, whose children were deprived of their parental care, but all the same their voice was suppressed by the dominant discourse and hence remained unheard through ages.

The original conception of *Beloved* was formed in Morrison's mind after reading the account of a real event she encountered while working as an editor at Random House – the story of an escaped slave who had murdered her infant child. Caught by slave catchers after escaping and reaching the North, Margaret Garner, had tried to kill all her children to impede her former master from taking hold of them, but was arrested after killing one of them. *Beloved* is the artistic reconstruction of that appalling event and many other horrible

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things. As its epigraph reads, it is a tribute to “sixty Million and more” Africans who died on the slave ships or underwent loads of dreadful things in the Promised Land of European settlers.

Most critics have considered *Beloved* the imaginative reconstruction of “the historical text of slavery” (Holloway 1999: 68) which “offers a radical revisioning and recounting” (Perez-Torres 1999: 195) of the official history that has frequently ignored the “other history” of slavery. By writing this novel of suffering, Morrison has taken “large steps”, as McKay suggests, beyond both official history and “the genre of the slave narrative tradition *to excavate*, then *to reclaim and recreate*, the hitherto hidden lives of those who survived the ravages of the inhuman institution” of slavery [emphasis mine] (“Introduction” 1999: 10-11). Therefore she has come to be regarded as the “truest of the historians” by writers such as Raynaud who argues that Morrison relates “the history of the oppressed” who were “left voiceless by the history books” (2007: 46).

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the eminent French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault contends that “power and knowledge directly imply one another”, seeing as there is “no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (27-28). This correlation is vividly illustrated in Morrison’s portrayal of Schoolteacher’s coldhearted *scientific* scrutiny of Sweet Home slaves.

In his inquiries into disciplinary techniques in the same book, Foucault argues that human body is “directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks” (1975: 25- 26). He considers this procedure the “political investment of the body” that is associated with its “economic use” as “a force of production” that must be “subjected” to bring on profit. Subjection of the human body, he argues, “is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology”, rather “there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body” that in cooperation with those instruments “constitutes what might be called the political technology of the body” (26). By creating such a character as Schoolteacher who is the flagrant representative of the hideous institution of slavery, Morrison has creatively re-enacted the “political technology of the body” of that institution.

2. Political Technology of Slaves’ Body

One of the most haunting characters Morrison has ever created is the ruthless slave-holder she portrays in *Beloved* (1987). She pictures Schoolteacher as the merciless representative of the horrendous institution of slavery, and thereby subverts Euro-Americans myths of whites’ benevolence and high merits. By relating and dramatizing Schoolteacher’s behaviour and deeds, she exposes that beneath his seemingly *civilized* pretense exists a malicious racist mentality that is more callous and inhuman than racialism of many other slave-owners. His devastating *scientific* attitude toward Sweet Home slaves presents him as an advocate of a particular kind of social Darwinism, since he considers them subhuman creatures that should be studied and scrutinized to know exactly *what* they are, to detect whether they would be *fit* by applying scientific methods to train them, and to invest their body as the means of production more profitably.

Schoolteacher does “invest” the body of Sweet Home slaves as the “force of production” in the same way Foucault refers to in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). He investigates their behaviour and attributes and tries to “train” them like animals. When they disobey him or their behaviours do not match his expectations, he uses “instruments of violence” against them and tortures their disobedient, non-subjugated bodies in the most brutal ways that do not tone with his initial seemingly “pretty manners”.

To exert his power over Sweet Home slaves and to exploit their body more profitably, Schoolteacher mostly analyzes and classifies their attributes and behaviours, nonetheless when they disobey him or attempt to escape from the hell he has induced, he tortures their body in the most brutal ways, and thereby his charade of civilization disintegrates. The demeanor of this supposedly *civilized* subject of knowledge does not only epitomize the appalling institution of slavery, but also exemplifies the power/knowledge correlation and “political technology of the body” in Foucault’s terms.

To counteract his dehumanizing, racist view of the slaves, Morrison has not given Schoolteacher and his nephews any names to diminish them contemptuously to the level of non-human creatures that merely function as the agents of inhuman forces of slavery. Just once in the novel his real name is used by another slave-holder, whereas Sweet Home slaves merely refer to him as the schoolteacher which highlights his double master/teacher function that is furthermore underpinned by his investigative attitude toward them. His inspection of their physical features is manifestly a particular form of detecting slaves’ corporal traits due to

regarding them as commodities, though his racially prejudiced views about them as *subhuman creatures* are more accentuated by his claims to *scientific* observations of them.

He becomes the master of Sweet Home after the death of Mr. Garner, since Mrs. Garner does not “want to be the only white person on the farm” where six slaves work, thus she asks “her husband’s sister’s husband” (*Beloved* 1987: 36) to come and run the plantation. Schoolteacher’s position as the concurrent holder of power and subject of knowledge is gradually depicted in the novel due to its fragmentary narration. First of all his name signifies that position, since he is not an ordinary slave-holder, but a teacher who is determined to train Sweet Home slaves whom he regards as the subhuman *other* – hence the *object* of his knowledge. Besides his name, his character and behavior illustrate the correlation of power and knowledge. He is a physically feeble man who controls the slaves by his mental power rather than his corporal strength and who deems himself civilized. Early in the novel Sethe tells her daughter Denver that he was “a little man. Short” who “Always wore a collar, even in the fields” (*Beloved* 1987: 36). Morrison’s sarcastic tone toward him is quite felt here, though her fragmentary narration does not let the reader know anything about his callousness at the moment.

Schoolteacher’s seemingly *civilized* manner is the next highlighted point. Sethe recalls him and his nephews having “pretty manners, all of em. Talked soft and spit in handkerchiefs. Gentle in a lot of ways. You Know, the kind who know Jesus by His first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face” (*Beloved* 1987: 36). Morrison’s strong ironic tone is especially observed in the last sentence of the quotation which shows Schoolteacher’s claims to a god-like status in the disguise of respecting the divine power. While reading the novel for the first time, the reader cannot guess the extent of cruelty he reveals in the future, though the above-cited part somehow foreshadows the subsequent miseries of the slaves as a result of his supercilious appraisal and treatment of them that impels them all to attempt escape from the inferno this arrogant man raises out of Sweet Home.

What mostly establishes Schoolteacher’s position as the concurrent power/knowledge holder is his investigative attitude toward the slaves. When he promises to come to Sweet Home, Mrs. Garner does “feel good that her husband’s sister’s husband had book learning” (*Beloved* 1987: 36), since it distinguishes him from other slave-owners and makes her feel safe in his hands. Conversely what appears constructive in the first glance, very soon is exposed to be entirely destructive. Sethe describes Schoolteacher’s conduct this way: “at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn’t know that right away. We just thought it was his manner to ask us questions. He commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what we said” (36).

As the advocate of a cold, scientific approach toward slaves whom the schoolteacher considers unknown creatures, he takes notes of whatever they do to scrutinize them scrupulously. Moreover to exercise and retain his power, he fabricates, Henderson has also heeded, a “correlative constitution” of knowledge about them as “a form of subhumanity that serves” to “confirm his own sense of superiority” (1999: 88). His “chilling scientific rationality”, as Lawrence terms it, “abstracts the human corporality of the slaves into a sign for the other in the discourse of the dominant ideology” (2000: 233) which he endorses implacably.

Since Morrison’s narrative strategy is based on the use of flashbacks and fragmented memories, her readers should be patient enough to wait for more than 150 pages to know more about Schoolteacher’s “chilling scientific” method for gaining knowledge about slaves. Then Sethe recalls: “schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth” (*Beloved* 1987: 191). Now the reader can discern what “tore Sixo up” (36) – assessing them as animals. He scrutinizes their body to train, discipline and exploit it – what Foucault calls “the political technology of the body” (26).

Once Sethe overhears him asking his nephews to do what makes her utterly unnerved. She does not tell other slaves about it, but it lingers in her mind and acts as the main cause of her escape and later her hysteric decision for killing herself and her children when she is tracked down and caught up by slave-catchers. Years later she recounts it to Denver:

I never told anybody this. ... I almost told Mrs. Garner, but she was so weak then and getting weaker. This is the first time I’m telling it.... I couldn’t help listening to what I heard that day. He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, “Which one are you doing?” And one of the boys said, “Sethe”. That’s when I stopped because I heard my name Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back.... I heard him say, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to *put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right.* And don’t forget to line them up”. I commenced to walk backward *I just kept lifting my feet* and pushing back. When *I bumped up against a tree* my scalp was prickly. ... *My head*

itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp. I never told Halle or nobody. But that very day I asked Mrs. Garner a part of it. [emphasis mine] (*Beloved* 1987: 193)

To Schoolteacher's racist mind, slaves are the unknown, *subhuman other*, the amalgam of human and animal that present a lower rung than that of human on the ladder of his social Darwinist evolution. The impact of his order to classify slaves' "human" and "animal" characteristics is so intolerable for Sethe that she instantly loses her control and feels being tortured: "Like some-body was sticking fine needles in my scalp". Due to her strong personality, however, she keeps quiet about it and merely asks Mrs. Garner what the word "characteristic" means, while the mistress's reply unnerves her further. Despite her silence, the words flow in her mind and impel her to escape, to tolerate all difficulties on her way northward, and to choose taking the life of her children in a moment of frenzy when she recognizes that very man coming to take possession of them again.

The ruthless violation of Sethe's body by the schoolteacher and his nephews is one of the thousands instances of inscribing "the discourse of slavery" on the body of powerless slaves to make them "subjected" labor forces. Slave-owners marked slaves' body to confirm it as their property. Brazen instances of that marking are also observed on the face and body of Sethe's mother. Like other slave women, she has not raised her own child, because slave-owners separated female slaves from their children when they gave birth to them or after a while, and made other women nourish the children, so that they would not feel any motherly affection for them. Sethe has seen her mother "but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo", and guesses that she had "nursed" her "two or three weeks" and then "went back in rice", while Sethe "sucked from another woman whose job it was" (*Beloved* 1987: 60).

One of the things Sethe recalls about her mother is the fixed "smile" on her face due to several wearing of the "bit" – an iron piece by which the mouth of disobedient slaves was fastened, and "days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corner of the mouth but nothing [could] soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye" (*Beloved* 1987: 71). Sethe recalls that her mother "had the bit so many times [that it seemed] she smiled. When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and [Sethe] never saw her own smile" (203). Besides that counterfeit smile, Sethe summons up the time her mother was hanged: "By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (61). Her body has been so much mutilated and deformed before hanging that the brand on her chest is no longer recognizable.

Slavery's "political technology of the body" has affected Paul D's body comparatively the same. After his failed escape from Sweet Home, Schoolteacher locks him up, puts "a three-spoke collar on him so he can't lie down", chains "his ankles together" (*Beloved* 1987: 227), and puts a bit in his mouth (69). Simultaneously and for the first time, Paul D realizes what he has been ignorant of all his life – his position as a profit-making commodity. He overhears the schoolteacher talking to his neighbors about his price: "He would have to trade this here one for \$900 With the money from 'this here one' he could get two young ones, twelve or fifteen years old" (227). Schoolteacher's reference to Paul D as "this here one" reinforces slavery's view of slaves as bartered objects.

Locked up and chained, Paul D looks at the roosters of the farm, especially one of them named Mister, and feels himself lesser than them. Eighteen years later, he tells Sethe, "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. ... Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun" (*Beloved* 1987: 72). Schoolteacher mortifies him to "a less than a chicken" state, and the appalling, ironic situation in which he is caught up "makes the sight of Mister so painful", seeing that as "an objectification of freedom and a metaphor for manhood", as Harris argues, that rooster has "more freedom and control over his existence" (1999: 153- 154) than Paul D in the hands of Schoolteacher.

Slavery's brutal "technology of the body" has exploited Baby Suggs not less horribly than Sethe or Paul D. Since slaves' body was a means of production for slave-owners, proliferation of labor force by coupling the slaves was one of the means of investing their body. Female slaves were either raped by the masters or forced to copulate with male slaves and give birth to the children they should have submitted to masters, thus "Baby's eight children had six fathers" (*Beloved* 1987: 23). Therefore the "slave life [has not only] 'busted [Baby Suggs'] legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue'" (87), but has deprived her of the eight children she has given birth to; all are "gone away from [her]. Four taken, four chased" (5).

She has lost all of them, even Halle who was not taken from her, but seems to have lost his mind and died due to the agony of watching his wife being violated. Everyone Baby Suggs "knew, let alone loved,

who hadn't run off or been hanged", she tells Sethe, "got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (*Beloved* 1987: 23). Besides being "busted" in several parts, her body has been exploited by slave-owners as a prolific means of reproducing other forces of production – all taken out of her hands.

By narrating the insufferable experiences her fictional slaves have gone through, Morrison depicts slavery's hideous "political technology of the body" whose particular practitioner in this novel is the schoolteacher whose only difference from other slave-holders is his *scientific* attitude toward slaves and his allegedly *civilized* sham that is, however, torn when their behaviours do not match his expectations.

3. Conclusion

In her portrayal of Schoolteacher, Morrison dramatizes power/knowledge interaction and slavery's horrendous "political technology" of the body. That brazen representative of the atrocious system of slavery scrutinizes Sweet Home slaves as the *subhuman other* – the synthesis of human and animal to exert his power over whom he mostly tries to discern and identify them. Like other slave-holders, he does "invest" slaves' body as the "force of production" and tries to "train" them like animals. The difference between him and other slave-holders lies in his *scientific* approach toward slaves and his purportedly *civilized* facade that disappears when they break his rules or attempt to escape from the hell he has erected out of Sweet Home. Then he uses "instruments of violence" against them and tortures their disobedient bodies in the most brutal ways that do not accord with his seemingly "pretty manners", hence his charade of civilization falls apart. Despite his particular manner, he represents slavery's appalling "technology of the body" that is also depicted in similar cruel treatments of slaves in several other cases narrated in the novel that on the whole unveil the horrible history of slavery and subvert the alleged notion of white people's munificence.

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