

Trauma, memory and identity in *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison/ *Trauma, memória e identidade em Beloved, de Toni Morrison*

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ABSTRACT

As a result of doctoral studies, in this article, which has bibliographic, interpretative and qualitative nature, we analyze the presence and configuration of memory - whether individual or collective - as well as the representation of traumas and the processes of loss and (re) encounter of identity of former African-American slaves and their descendants, portrayed in the novel *Beloved* (1987), by the award-winning African-American novelist Toni Morrison. The analysis, we proposed here focuses on the study of the voices of the characters, especially the main ones. We then proceed to an association of the referred elements - memory and identity - to the narratives, of testimonial nature, that link the past and the present of these characters, as well as the traumas experienced and reported by them, in their search for freedom and autonomy, during the period of Reconstruction; post-American Civil War context. For that purpose, our analysis is anchored in Cultural and Post-Colonial Studies of Literature, such as Caze (2015), Nickel (2009), Ribeiro (2017), Silva & Umbach (2013) and Viana (2008). The main result is the importance of the place of speech in the remembrance and retelling of the past, especially slavery, for a better understanding of the traumas and historical facts, as well as humanity itself.

KEYWORDS: Trauma; Identity; Post-colonial memories; African-American literature; Cultural Studies.

RESUMO

Resultado de estudos doutorais, este artigo, de natureza bibliográfica, interpretativa e qualitativa, analisa a presença e a configuração da memória - seja individual, seja coletiva - bem como a representação dos traumas e dos processos de perda e (re)encontro de identidade de ex-escravos afro-americanos e seus descendentes, retratados no romance *Beloved* (1987), de autoria da premiada romancista afro-americana Toni Morrison. A análise, ora proposta, debruça-se sobre o estudo das vozes das personagens, especialmente as principais, procedendo a uma associação dos referidos elementos - memória e identidade - às narrativas, de cunho testemunhal, que ligam o passado e o presente dessas personagens, bem como aos traumas vividos e relatados por elas, na sua busca por liberdade e autonomia, durante o período da Reconstrução; contexto do pós-Guerra Civil Americana. Para tanto, a nossa análise ancora-se em Estudos Culturais e Pós-Coloniais da Literatura, a exemplo de Caze (2015), Nickel (2009), Ribeiro (2017), Silva & Umbach (2013) e Viana (2008). Destaca-se, como principal resultado, a importância do lugar de fala na rememoração e reconto do passado, sobretudo da escravidão, para a melhor compreensão dos traumas e fatos históricos, bem como da própria humanidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Trauma; Identidade; Memórias pós-coloniais; Literatura afro-americana; Estudos Culturais.

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1 *Beloved* and the Afro-American place of speech

Tell a story not who wants to, but who (...) has the power to tell it. (ACHUGAR apud NICKEL, 2009, p.13)

Based on a fact¹, *Beloved*² (2006), by Toni Morrison³, which had its first edition in 1987, portrays the story of a former slave Sethe who, in the present work (1873), lives with her dreamy daughter Denver in Cincinnati, Ohio in the context of Reconstruction⁴, after the American Civil War⁵.

The ghost of her eldest daughter, killed when she was two years old, by her mother, haunts the house of Sethe, located at Bluestone Road, number 124. The infanticide had happened about eight years ago when through the slavery and the war, *Schoolteacher* (her owner in *Sweet Home*, state of Kentucky) found the fugitive slave along with her four children.

Afraid that her children would suffer the same abuses and pains to which she was subjected as a slave, especially violations – constant theme in the narrative – Sethe punched them, in an attempt to kill them. To the boys, she threw blows to their heads; to the eldest daughter, she gave her a saw cut on her throat, leading her to death and, to the youngest, she tried to throw her against the wall, but she was stopped in time.

Eight years after the end of the Civil War and slavery, Sethe and Denver, although ignored and underestimated by the community in which they live now; due to the infanticide and the haunted 124 house, lead a simple and peaceful life. – They keep in the past all the traumas they lived during the slavery.

However, life at 124 is shaken by the arrival of a friend and ex-slave Paul D, and later, of *Beloved*, the personification of the ghost of her murdered daughter, whose presence and thirst for

¹ The novel is inspired by the real story of a former slave, Margaret Garner, who has escaped from a Kentucky farm, and on reaching Ohio, murdered her own daughter, when found by slave hunters (SYLVESTRE, 2013).

² The first book of a trilogy; precedes *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1997).

³ Toni Morrison (born on February 18th, 1931) is the pseudonym of Chloe Anthony Wofford, writer and winner of several literary awards, the most prominent being the National Critics Award (1977), the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (1988) and the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), for the whole of her work.

⁴ The Reconstruction (1865-1877) was the post-American Civil War period, in which the American states returned, gradually, to the unification of the country and started the integration of the former slaves to the “citizen” life, starting from the creation of laws to the Afro-American.

⁵ It is also known as the War of Secession, the American Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865. It had as its main reason the slavery question, when eight slave states of the South of America decided for their withdrawal from the American Union and formed The Confederate States of America, declaring war to the North states of the country.

stories from the past bring back memories and traumas that the protagonist and Paul D had decided to forget.

Between the XVIII and XIX centuries, the period that covers the narrative of *Beloved*, there was, in the North of America, a constant search for the construction of a national culture and identity, which centers itself in white people. This search resulted in the silence of the minority voices that did not have such an identity, as is the example of blacks, Indians, and women. The North American literary historiography also followed this trend, since it, legitimates the canonical and ethnocentric national discourse that forged its own national history (NICKEL, 2009).

In this sense, the history of the North of America was told by a white and educated supremacy that, aiming to answer its interests, impaired, the versions of the oppressed minorities during centuries. It omitted their existence, influence, and socio-historical-cultural relevance.

Therefore, the literature of the minority, born between the 1960s and 1970s; with the emergence of Cultural and Post-Colonial Studies, presents alternative and conflicting versions of the facts rescued from the national memory considered official. These versions not only portray the violence suffered by people, but also criticize and denounce it (SILVA & UMBACH, 2013). It is in this context of claiming the *place of speech* (RIBEIRO, 2017), and black subjectivity, that works of great visibility, written by Afro-Americans, are published, as it is the case of the winning⁶ Morrison work⁷.

It is essential to emphasize that the *place of speech* concerns not only the opportunity to utter words, but also to the right of existence. The speaking also means the possibility to refute traditional historiography and the hierarchy of knowledge resulting from the social hierarchy (RIBEIRO, 2017). This means the recognition of the legitimacy of the subject's speech about itself and about all the things based on the subject's place and knowledge of the world.

⁶ Winner of the following awards: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (1988), Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (1988), Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Award, Melcher Book Award, Lyndhurst Foundation Award and Elmer Holmes Bobst Award. *Beloved* was still elected the best novel in the last 25 years by the New York Times.

⁷ Prior to Morrison, autobiographies deserve an honorable mention of Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and the Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the life of a slave Girl* (1861), as well as the French novel E. W. Harper, *Lola Leroy: or Shadows Amplified* (1893). Despite of did not achieving the persecuted visibility through the Cultural Studies and Post-colonial minority literature, these authors brought contributions of the place of speech of the black man, presented, with true facts, its versions and complaints about the abuses Afro-Americans suffered during the slavery and influenced in subsequent works.

The book may be considered metalinguistic; because, it brings up the importance of memory as a mechanism necessary to overcome the past and, at the same time, it brings the orientation to the future of the black men. The book itself constitutes a memory of an entire oppressed race as it is based on true facts and also in history⁸. Thus, the reading processes of the novel ends up proposing to its public the activation of this memory, from confrontation to slavery as a big historical trauma⁹ - in the context of the American Civil War (1861 - 1865). Moreover, in the worldwide context known to all nations – as well as the orientation to a future of freedom (that it should not be confused with the release). In addition, the autonomy, to not only the oppressed race - the black - but also the entire human race that as the author affirms (1989) does not wish remembering such events.

The *national amnesia* – international, in this Reading, but stronger in the North of America – Morrison refers to, exists. Nevertheless, in a contrary movement to this amnesia, *Beloved* “shouts”, not only by the place of speech of its author and her race, but for the importance of memory and the (re)union of the identity of the black men with himself, in the face of the trauma, she was subjected to during slavery. These elements will be analyzed in this article following topics.

2 The relation past versus future (or *Beloved* versus Paul D)

To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay (MORRISON, 2006, p.69)

Although it portrays disruptive themes as the slavery and the American Civil War, *Beloved* is a book of difficult language, equipped with polysemy, metaphors, analogies, and a tone, sometimes, poetic (SALE, 1990). In *Black English*¹⁰, the story is told in the third person by a *heterodiegetic* narrator – that does not participate in plot as one of its characters, but watching it

⁸ It is important to highlight that author's creative work with its fictional elements are indispensable to the composition and, certainly, determinant to the success of the work.

⁹This is represented in the novel, when the character Sethe confuses the white man who arrives at her house with the Schoolteacher, relives the memory of the infanticide, but, with the help of neighboring women, he ends up realizing that the situation is not repeating itself and recover her lucidity and autonomy, finally, overcoming the trauma.

¹⁰ Or *African-American Vernacular English*, is a variation of English natively spoken by the majority of Afro-Americans. The variation pursues own resources of accent, grammar and vocabulary.

from outside. However, this narrative, organized in three great chapters, it is not linear, once which pursues several moments in *flashback*¹¹, sustained by a tension between the past and the future of its characters, especially of its main character – Sethe.

The tension among the times, that is a starting point to the novel's narrative, is triggered by the arrival, at house 124, of the character Paul D, also former slave and friend of Sethe, and later of Beloved, the personification of Sethe's murdered daughter ghost.

Caze (2015) analyzes the 124 as a *Non-place*, emptied of the past, of memories, of personal or collective references. However, it is important to consider that the house of Sethe is described, by Morrison's narrator, in different moments in the novel, namely in the past, and in the present of the protagonist. In the past, the house is portrayed as a peaceful place, with a red light on the door, with an abundance of food, where there is always something to cook on the fire, inhabited for several escaped slaves who live in harmony. Such description is symbolic and represents another house, which existed: one of the *Underground Railroad*¹² house.

The 124 still brings a number sequence that suggests the absence of the number 3, corresponding to the third child of Sethe, the deceased Beloved. Therefore, the address must not be associated with a depleted place in the past, because it is filled with memories and references, even true.

The time of the present book, where Sethe lives may be analyzed as a *Non-time*, since the main character lives a slumbering life, halted in time: she does not remember the past and her trauma neither. For these reasons, she does not overcome them, does not break free, does not advance or progress towards the future.

This emptying of references relating to the characters, and to the time is represented also in the treatment that the community gives to them. An example is that Sethe and Denver are treated with indifference as if that community does not belong or does not exist. Thus, the population also maintains the past far away from memory, and all avoid interactions with mother and daughter, leading us to believe these people do not overcome the trauma of the slavery too.

¹¹ Or *Analepse*, concerns to a narrative technique of a chronological sequence by the interpolation of events previously occurred.

¹² Network of clandestine routes followed by fugitive slaves, with a help of abolitionists (as the white Amy Denver that assists Sethe in her escape), with the aim of arriving to the states to the northern states in the country or to Canada where he could live in freedom. For this purpose, without the aid of a map, since many were forbidden to learn to read, the North Star guided them.

The Ghost of Sethe's daughter, that haunts her house, seems to settle with the situation of exclusion and loneliness in which her mother and sister live. Nonetheless, the arrival of Paul D does not only contradict the will of this ghost, but it also incites its fury:

"God damn it! Hush up!" Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. "You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!". The quaking slowed to an occasional lurch, but Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet (MORRISON, 2006, p.27)

The acts of the ghost do not discourage Paul D, he fights a verbal and physical fight with the objects thrown by the macabre force that inhabits the house, and defends the mother and her youngest daughter until everything is calm again. Paul D wins the fight, but not the battle. Later, the persistence of the former slave in remaining the protagonist's life makes that the ghost decides to enter in 124 in-person, not more as a ghost – named Beloved¹³, with greater ability to make the mother revisit the past:

Beloved took every opportunity to ask some funny question and get Sethe going. Denver noticed how greedy she was to hear Sethe talk. Now she noticed something more. The questions Beloved asked: "Where your diamonds?" "Your woman she never fixed up your hair?" And most perplexing: Tell me your earrings. How did she know? (MORRISON, 2006, p.76-77)

It is true to affirm Paul D represents the distraction and the future for Sethe, because besides facing the ghost who haunts himself, he proposes to her a new life, and a new family when asks her to have a child with him. On the other hand, Beloved, when feeling thirsty, claiming stories, and memories represent the mother's traumatic past. The element, which supports the narrative of the novel, is a tension between the times and the characters, related to the memory of the trauma experienced.

There is a series of situations in which Paul D suspects of Beloved, in the work, questioning her about her past, and her arrival to the house. These two characters discuss at

¹³ As well as it is written on the tombstone of Sethe's dead daughter that sold her body to the woodcarver then that he was entitled to only five letters (or seven, in the English language version)

different moments in the narrative, as well as fight also about the past and the future in the present of Sethe. Yet, as Paul D does not aim to abandon the house, even with the presence of Beloved, she provokes him and they have a sexual relationship, and after that, he begins to feel guilty.

The narrative does not make it clear, to the reader, whether the sexual relationship between the characters was carried out in a carnal or incorporeal encounter, but explains Beloved takes Paul D to exhaustion, from its simple the same environment to in the collections by stories of the past or to provoke him, sexually. Morrison's narrator describes Beloved as a relentless girl that dates back to superstition being of African origin: the *succuba*, a sort of demon that feeds on the vital energy of men during their sleep.

In the face of the exhaustion and the sense of guilt, adding to the knowledge of infanticide committed by the protagonist, Paul D gives up on 124 in the future and leaves the house. At that moment, Beloved feels free to make the mother succumbs and revisits his memories and trauma more deeply.

3 Trauma, memory and identity in *Beloved*

Anything dead coming back to life hurts (MORRISON, 2006, p 46)

The traumatic memories of slavery reported by Sethe may be considered individual experiences lived by herself. However, in parallel to these described personal experiences, she also reports her testimony about violence and injustice suffered by several other slaves. As well as, the conditions they lived during the slavery in cotton plantations in the South of The United States, mentioned as *The Cotton Kingdom*, which denied the reformist/abolitionist tendencies of the North.

The novel arises from a fact, part of individual experience, but wins new characters soon and passes, during its development, at collective experience descriptions. Such projection gives the work traces of a testimonial literature. Renewed by Viana (2008, p.1) as a literature of "[...] narration of pain, which means, is born from people who seek to represent historical determined situations, in which they, or other people, have been through, and have been marked by extreme violence".

In addition to reporting a violent historical event the testimonial literature also “proposes the narration of trauma as a desire of rebirth on the part of the witness” (CAZE, 2015, p.3). In *Beloved*, the desire of rebirth begins with the main character, but represents the desire of overcoming on the side of an entire race, because according to Caze “memory of trauma is always a search of commitment between the work of individual memory and other built by society” (CAZE, 2015, p.3).

These are fragments of the Slavery memories, a period of repression in a non-chronological flow of time, which are narrated in *Beloved*. One of the first violence reports suffered by the main character during this period is her violation, and next, physical torture by white men, slave lords of Sweet Home, while she had been pregnant of Denver:

“After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.” “They used cowhide on you?” “And they took my milk.” “They beat you and you was pregnant?” “And they took my milk!” (MORRISON, 2006, p.25)

Sethe’s report is shocking because it portrays the absence of empathy, the brutality, and the inhumanity, in which the slave’s owner treated them; the sexual abuse, women suffered, even when they are pregnant; the violence and the pain of the whip, etc. However, what draws more attention in this account is the importance the character confers to the fact that her little daughter’s milk was stolen from her in Ohio, under the care of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. The emphasis on violence falls in the repeated phrase “*And they took away my milk!*” To Sethe is evident in the previous passage that taking away his ability to nurse his daughter was the worst humiliation and violence he could suffer at the time of torture. The act of white men symbolizes the deprivation of the slave in practice her motherhood and her awareness about this fact was what caused her most pain, emotional/psychological one.

It is interesting to analyze, in this passage of the novel, the maternal feeling of Sethe by *Beloved* while we consider that the same character committed infanticide of this daughter, whom she longed to breastfeed. The traumatic act of infanticide is justified by Sethe, however, when reports that aims “to protect” the child of abuse that she had suffered, a fact which is confirmed by Barnett (1997) and Field (2010) in their scientific essays, when relating the crime to Sethe’s

symbolic act of protests against to the rape that women suffered in slavery. The character knew the reality that awaits her daughter in *Sweet Home*, and for this reason, she desired to protect her in a place where no one could harm her or dirty her, in Sethe's words.

According to Barnett (1997), the crime means to Sethe the first step to her body emancipation, previously owned by white men, to whom she responded. Carneiro (2017), in defending the act of the character, compares to another infanticide narrated in the book of *Medea*¹⁴ and verifies that:

Sethe does not kill to take away all the marks of a betrayed love or the isolation of a foreigner who left everything and betrayed her people for the glory of Jason: the act (...) Sethe, the infanticide, is the result of the social affection generated in a terrain where it did not learn to love (CARNEIRO, 2017, p.51).

We share and add to Carneiro(2017) observation, for the slaves of *Beloved* – and, certainly for the slaves of real life – learn to love was not an option. On the other hand, from an early age, it was taught they could not and should not feel affection, since they did not own themselves or their children, companions, or other human beings.

The torture Sethe has been suffered, when she was violated and whipped, is not a punctual event in the novel, just as it was not of the slave Garner in real life. Furthermore Sethe's report, there are several others about sexual and physical violence described in the narrative, as it is the case of her mother. Nam is also a slave, and tells to Sethe, in a passage of the work that she and Sethe's mother had been violated for several times, by crewmembers who takes them to the North of America.

The excerpt of the novel refers to the triangular trade of slavers in *The Middle Passage*, where European countries trafficked Africans as slaves, in slave ships, to the American continent, above all to Brazil and The United States. Africans were kidnapped from their families and trafficked to another continent as labor supply of white Americans.

Nam details that the mother of Sethe threw her children into the sea - she had given birth during the voyage – of the white rapist men and she had only decided to create Sethe because she was the result of a relationship with a black man, whom she loved. Another case of

¹⁴ Greek tragedy of Euripides, dated 431 b.C.

infanticide is the case of Ella, when generating an unwanted child from its rapist, former owner, she lets the baby dies, refusing to breastfeed him:

“Ella had been beaten every way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake, and the scars from the belt were thick as rope around her waist. She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet.’ It lived five days never making a sound”. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 298)

Thus, Sethe was not the only women to commit infanticide. The practice was common and the circumstances that led the slaves to kill their offspring were diverse. From getting rid of unwanted children, the result of a forced sexual relationship, to trying to protect their black children, future slaves.

Another abuse was committed when the slaves’ owners or supervisors proposed something, which interested to the black women in exchange for sexual favors, these exchanges were not granted several times. The slaves were in situations where they were obligated to neglect their dignity, for many times. Such as, it has occurred with Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, sleeping with a foreman in exchange for the possibility of raising one of his children:

So Baby's eight children had six fathers (...) Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her--only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 32-33)

The slaves were prevented to practice the motherhood when they desired, because their offspring were stolen from them, sold, given as a gift to someone, taken as slaves to other farms, etc. In Baby Suggs words, the slaves – men and women – were treated as “pieces of a checkers game”, serving to white men interests, owner of lands and of black people. For this reason, the slaves believed that love would correspond to a feeling that would not belong to them or they do not have the right to feel it. Loving was prohibited to them, as Morrison’s narrator concludes, in this passage:

That child she could not love and the rest she would not. "God take what He would," she said. And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 33)

Further, Sethe also reflects the difference between maternal love in the slavery context, as a slave in *Sweet Home*, and in freedom context, as a runaway slave in Cincinnati. She demonstrates an awareness that the mother's love may not be felt in its fullness while her children belong to an owner, also hers:

I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 188)

As well as Sethe, Paul D was also aware of the risks that a slave mother took in for loving their child:

Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one. (MORRISON, 2006, p.57).

It is in loving her wife, Sethe, and for seeing her being hurt, sexually and physically, when raped by white men, that Halle loses his sanity. The narrator illustrates, in the excerpt where Paul D and Sethe talks about the disappearance of Halle, it was possible and likely happening to black men in slavery times, when these allowed themselves to love someone who belonged to someone else - the white man:

"The day I came in here. You said they stole your milk. I never knew what it was that messed him up. That was it, I guess. All I knew was that something broke him. Not a one of them years of Saturdays, Sundays and nighttime extra never touched him. But whatever he saw go on in that barn that day broke him like a twig."
"He saw?" Sethe was gripping her elbows as though to keep them from flying away.

“He saw. Must have.”

“He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw? He saw? He saw?”

“Hey! Hey! Listen up. Let me tell you something. A man ain’t agoddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside.” (MORRISON, 2006, p.83)

Paul D also reported to Sethe that he saw Halle with his face dirty with butter and both affirm that he did not meet him again, denouncing his disappearance. The madness and the disappearance of the protagonist's husband are represented in the novel, because they allude the loss of reference of this character about herself, and about the world, in the face of a situation of violence that constitutes, for her, as an irreversible trauma, making her disappear. We may conceive of Halle's madness as an analogy to the historical memories absence of their entire race in the face of the slavery. This absence may lead to what Caze (2015, p.6) names “dilution of identity”, according to him, “it is the memory, the first faculty, that feeds the identity. Memory and identity, therefore, aggregate. It is the memory, it can be affirmed, that it strengthens the identity, as in the individual level as in the collective” (Caze, 2015, p.6).

According to Paul D, Halle has suffered another violence series; they have not affected him so much until witnessing the torture of his companion. The madness was, for Halle, a sum of all years of living trauma, but the rape of his wife was the beginning of his loss of sanity since there was a great affective burden involved in the interpretation of that he witnessed.

The last phrase said to Paul D, in the dialogue with Sethe, nonetheless, most likely still refers to himself, since the character is also the victim of different sort of violence, including sexual, subtly and quickly described by the narrator:

Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none -- or all.

‘Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Hungry, nigger?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Here you go.’

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves’, as he stood before the man kneeling in mist on his

right. Convinced he was the next, Paul D retched – vomiting up nothing at all. An observing guard smashed his shoulder with the rifle and the engaged one decided to skip the new man for the time being lest his pants and shoes got soiled by nigger puke. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 127).

During the narrative, Paul D is constantly embarrassed before the interrogations of Beloved. He demonstrates great frustration in having to remember or describe past events and gets tired of telling them. Thus, Paul D is another character that searches the oblivion of his trauma. To Paul D, his violation is so profound that he does not even mention what happened to Sethe, and the narrator is responsible for describing that moment. Considering the violation of the black men, especially in comparison to the testimony of sexual abuses suffered by black women, it is a subject almost or little spoken in slavery testimonies, as the mentioned works in this article, the narrated excerpt reveals Morrison as the pioneer of this theme in narratives about slaves.

The sexual, physical, and emotional violence; the impossibility of loving parents, children, companions, and other human beings; the miserable condition in which they worked and lived; the prejudice, the exclusion, and unworthy treatment. The inhumanity that black people were treated as animals, in most cases, links to a common point: the weakening and even the dissolution of their identities in the individual sense and the collective. This is because, without the emancipation of a race, there is no representation¹⁵. Without representation, there is no memory. Without memory, there is no identity.

Loving, was not possible to slaves, but if there was one right that was transferred to them, it was the manual labor. However, in the face of the conditions of physical, sexual and, psychological violence, they only had the dream of escape from the cotton plantations in which they served in the direction to the Northern states of The United States or Canada. Thus, they planned to cross the borders of neighboring states, following the North Star and living in communities formed by other escaped blacks. It was the dream, which motivates Sixo, a friend of Paul D, to plan an escape with other slaves of Sweet Home. However, Sixo's plan failed and the blacks are captured, resulting in severe physical punishments. As a punishment for the escape,

¹⁵ Social representations are “a system of values and practices which offer to individuals the means to orient themselves in the social and material context to master it... An organized corpus of knowledge and one of the psychic activities thanks to which men integrate into a group or in a daily relation of interchanges, release the power of imagination” (MOSCOVICI, 1978, p. 79)

Paul D was obligated to use the “bridle¹⁶” and to watch the torture and execution of his friend Sixo, burned alive in a fire and then shot by his executioners:

Finally one of them hits Sixo in the head with his rifle, and when he comes to, a hickory fire is in front of him and he is tied at the waist to a tree. Schoolteacher has changed his mind: “This one will never be suitable.” The song must have convinced him.” (...) His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes (...) They shoot him to shut him up. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 261)

The memory of events lived by Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs and other secondary characters in the plot of Morrison concerns to an entire race because as Baby Suggs affirms “not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (MORRISON, 2006, p. 20). Sethe confirms the words of her mother-in-law when she reports to Paul D the number of known blacks or friends that she had seen decapitated or suspended in trees in the *Sweet Home*.

In 1865, in certain moments of the narrative is ordered the end of The American Civil War and the end of slavery. The Declaration of Emancipation proclaimed in 1863, by Abraham Lincoln, president of The United States entered into force for the first time, after long invested by the Abolitionist Movement. Yet, the freedom of the blacks was still far from being reached, since they were victims of prejudice, exclusion, and inequality. As well as, the racist organizations as the *Ku Klux Klan*, three extremist movements in defense to the white supremacy, which consolidates itself in the middle of 1880 and attacked several Afro-American leaders in American History. This context of discrimination of the blacks is well illustrated in the lines of *Beloved*:

Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. (MORRISON, 2006, p. 208)

Then, the concept of freedom cannot be used in place of release, which means the blacks were released of slavery, but were far from being free. Because they still need to lead with

¹⁶ It is an object, which was put in the mouth of the slave to silence him, as it was made of iron, it hurt and bleed.

the difficulties imposed by the racial hatred, for the segregation and for the laws that marked the inequality between blacks and white men, leading many former slaves to the torture and the death.

Furthermore, what did the freedom mean for these slaves when their children there had already been stolen, taken away, murdered? What did freedom mean when the right of loving and being loved was taken from them? What identity did the black man have if the slave condition injured the statute of the human beings? Soon, the trauma of slavery does not stop with its end, on the contrary, perpetuate for many years, especially for the black race, because “just because you cannot see the chains, does not mean they are not there”¹⁷.

The phrase exposed above confirms in the novel since after her release, Sethe faces many problems in favor of becoming free and exercising its autonomy. At the end of the book, Sethe, who was submersed in guilty is consumed by the trauma that makes her remember¹⁸ *Beloved*. However, Denver was afraid of her mother’s sanity, as she was the only who was not a victim with great trauma of slavery, she decided to take the attitude of facing the community in which she lives, and asks for a job to Mr. Baldwin, a white man. Moreover, Denver appeals to other black women convincing themselves to pray for her mother.

Denver, a character almost forgotten in the scientific analysis of *Beloved*, is the one that more progresses in the work towards the real freedom of the black people, because transcends the description given to her, at the beginning of the narrative, of an innocent and imaginative girl, and became a strong and independent girl. Caze (2015), about the character Sethe and her author, Morrison, analyzes that:

A work that lends itself to portray the cruel condition of the black woman after the North American civil war, stumbles on the profile of a character who, by avoiding memories of the past and therefore the effective memorial experience, ends up for undermining the identity speech so dear to writer’s first proposal. (CAZE, 2015, p.6)

If the character Sethe, to Caze (2015), contrasts in attitude with Morrison’s figure, it can be said that Denver is the color and tone of her creator, figuratively and perhaps literally. Since both occupy, in the work their place of speech, claiming the right to black existence and

¹⁷ Phrase included in the script of the film *Beloved* (1998), based on Morrison’s work.

¹⁸ Neologism used by the character *Sethe* to indicate the revisiting of her traumatic memories.

autonomy, making with that their companions remember the past trauma and (re)find their identity.

Final Considerations

To get to a place where you could love anything you choose – not to need permission for desire – well now, that was freedom (MORRISON, 2006, p.189)

As Beloved torments Sethe, making her remember her past trauma, Morrison torments us as readers, with this novel based on true and historical facts, making us revisit the global tragedy of slavery and facing the trauma left of it. It does not matter if we are whites or blacks. The work signals through the metaphors, analogies, and poeticity that the revisiting of the past through the memory is a necessary activity to comprehend it and comprehend us as human race.

To the minority victims of great tragedy, as the black race, in face of slavery, remember the past through the literature, previously not legitimated by literary historiography, with respect to their places of speech. It is important not only to register the historical memory of these social groups, but to the maintenance of a representation that strengthens the (re)meeting of the identity of these people, be this identity collective or individual. To the exercise of empathy and their real emancipation and social freedom.

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