

# THE SUPERNATURAL IN 'BELOVED'

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**B**eloved is a novel by Toni Morrison, an African-American woman writer who has, in her writing, concentrated on the dynamics of Afro-American socio-political realities, principally in the way they impinge on the female condition. She is one of the few women Nobel laureates, having won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, after the publication of her much acclaimed novel *Jazz* in 1992. *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1998.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, there is a fairly thorough exploration of several gender-related issues through the device of the supernatural. In terms of plot, the book deals with the experiences of Sethe, a slave woman who has managed to escape her white slave masters. Faced, after her escape, with the threat of recapture, she kills her little daughter, choosing a quick death for the child rather than the slow one that slavery entails. The return of the murdered daughter as a ghost provides the other-worldly platform from which Morrison enters into the discourse of gender and sexuality from the perspective of the enslaved black female.

Maternity, a highly troubling and problematic area in slave experience because of the many forced separations of children from their mothers, is dealt with on two levels – the personal and the political – although it is doubtful how far the two can be considered separate from each other. On the level of the personal, the ghost underscores a fairly conventional, usual view of motherhood and mothering. The nature of the relationship between Beloved and Sethe certainly indicates a rewriting of the sentimental idea of maternity, because Sethe and Beloved are caught up in an exchange of pain, not love. This exchange reaches two high points—where Sethe cuts Beloved's throat, and where Beloved tries to strangle Sethe in the Clearing. The conventionally accepted, consecrated notion of maternity as the principal site of cherishing, nurturing, and protecting, is flung aside by Sethe when she kills Beloved. Because she is a slave, she cannot 'love' her child ordinarily, usually, unreservedly, as the idealized mother of popular culture does. That freedom is denied her. Paul D reflects that "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..." He tells Sethe her love is "too thick", and though she in her turn says that "thin love ain't love at all", the murder she committed was compelled by the fact that "thick love" is not a legitimate privilege for the slave. Which is why freedom, for the enslaved, is "to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire..."

Therefore, Sethe's love, her prohibited 'thick love' and her agency, can only find expression in killing her child. As Stamp Paid says "She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter." But, no matter the love that compelled it, the haunting by the baby ghost and the coming of Beloved is the indictment of her for that killing. In one way, by killing her child, Sethe divests herself of the luxury of motherhood, because it is one that slavery does not afford her. But the ghost's presence is also a statement to the effect that motherhood is not, under any circumstances, to be shed as completely as all that. When she first sees Beloved, her incontinence is a re-enactment of the breaking of water before birth. So in its function in highlighting the fact that the tie that binds mother and child is so inseparable that, in this case, it is one that spans the real and the other world, the ghost of Beloved underlines a fundamentally conventional notion of motherhood.

On a politico-literary level, it is interesting to consider Marianne Hirsch's point about the connection between feminism and maternal discourse. Hirsch quotes Mary Helen Washington who finds in black women writers' work an attempt to "piece together the story of a viable female culture, one in which there is generational continuity, in which one's mother serves as the female precursor who passes on the authority of authorship to her daughter and provides a model for the black woman's literary presence in this society." In *Beloved*, this idea of establishing a black matrilineal literary tradition by passing the story on through your daughters, is symbolically brought to a crisis by Sethe's killing of her daughter. The killing is a resistance to, a breaking of, the 'generational continuity,' by Sethe, because the story she has to convey must contain the black female slave experience, which is too painful to pass on. There is continued insistence in the book that "This was not a story to pass on." The ghost, then, becomes Morrison's tool to assert what Hirsch calls "the different story of the black writer", because the murdered daughter's apparition which forces Sethe to remember her experience, to relive it, and to come to terms with it, reads as an insistence that this 'different story' must be passed on, with all its pain.

Where the question of gender relations is concerned, the ghost reveals what Gilbert and Gubar in *No Man's Land* call "the irresistible antagonism (of males) toward the non-helplessness of women." If the growing connection between Sethe and Beloved, after Beloved's reappearance, can be interpreted as the increasingly successful attempt to re-establish the continuity of a female tradition, Paul D's resentment of Beloved reads as male hostility and opposition towards Beloved as the link in this continuity which makes it possible. When Beloved comes to him, he wants to "knock

her down." He plans to impregnate Sethe to keep her bound to him and away from Beloved, to 'hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell – all in one.' It is Paul D's male authority that Beloved challenges and threatens. He is repulsed and ashamed that he can be "picked up and put back down anywhere anytime by a girl young enough to be his daughter... Because he was a man and a man could do what he would..." It is only after Beloved's departure that he can re-assert and be re-assured of his male-ness, obtaining once more a hold over Sethe, which is what his reconciliation with her amounts to. "He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' His holding fingers are holding hers" (my emphasis). His 'holding fingers' are the sign of re-possession, of circumscription, of entrapment. This last scene contrasts sharply with that of his leave-taking where the presence of "that bitch... looking at me... right over my head looking down through the floor at me" caused a forest "trackless and quiet" to come up between him and Sethe, and that is how the supernatural in the book impedes and resists the patriarchal order of things in gender relations, which Paul D tries so hard to impose.

The supernatural in *Beloved* serves principally as a device to combat this black female subjugation, and to establish the authority of a black matrilineal literary tradition. But in its wider application, it serves the purpose of a universal feminism that seeks to challenge the regulatory function, politically and literarily speaking, of patriarchy, which contributes to the appeal of the book as a truly compelling read.

## WORKS CITED

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## CASTING PEARLS

*The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*, by Malathi de Alwis & Kumari Jayawardena, published by the Social Scientists' Association

Manel Tampoe

**W**hile one might think that it is the title of a new novel, "Casting Pearls" is the deliciously ironic title of a little volume that recounts the campaign waged in Sri Lanka to win the franchise for women in the 1920s and the early 30s. It has been compiled by two very experienced researchers, Malathi De Alwis and Kumari Jayawardena for the Gender Project of the Social Scientists' Association.

It has been the case in Sri Lanka, as perhaps elsewhere, that except in exceptional circumstances, history has been male focused, with barely a reference to women's achievements in most ages. The Gender Project of the SSA has tried to redress this imbalance by retrieving some of the achievements of womenfolk.

The first chapter, "Universalising the Franchise" outlines the relevant aspects of the local socio-economic background and places the local franchise movement in perspective against the Suffragette Movement in western countries. It becomes clear that the franchise movement in Sri Lanka was neither foisted on us by foreign women, nor was it a matter of local women imitating European suffragettes, though local women were very aware of their militant struggles.

There is a great deal of information on the subject couched in the simplest language condensed into this slim volume. The immediate reason that led to women campaigning for voting rights was the restrictive franchise granted in 1921 which was not only limited by property and educational qualifications but also completely

excluded women. It was actually engendered by a confluence of two socio-economic processes that had been operative for several years in a context where a catalyst was present. These were the growth of a local capitalist class of a multi-ethnic composition during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the establishment of that most potent force for modernisation in the British colonial period— education in the English medium—that benefited the children of the affluent living in the metropolis and a few other urban centres. Education in the English medium was extended to girls from the 1880s, and in the schools run by various Christian missionary societies, girls were open to liberalising influences from the west. The Burgher community, its women in particular, performed a catalytic function by providing examples of socially emancipated women.

The way the franchise was achieved makes an interesting story, truthfully narrated without bias or distortion, or a tendency to romanticise. The demand that the franchise should be extended to women was advocated by a group of liberal women of all the communities in Colombo, including some foreign women domiciled in the country. The inaugural meeting of the Women's Franchise Union with Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike as President took place on 27 December 1927 and its memorandum to the Donoughmore Commissioners only requested that women who possessed a qualification equivalent to the School Leaving Certificate should be given the franchise but the Commissioners went well beyond that and recommended that the franchise should be

extended to all women over 30 years. There were no militant struggles, no arrests: the women of Sri Lanka won the right to vote in a very different manner from their European counterparts.

What this signified is interesting: the Women's Franchise Union was a class-based organisation of bourgeois women and their agitation—if it could be called that—did not arise from powerful political aspirations as in the case of Indian women, where it was linked to the Independence Movement, or from strong ideological commitment as with the Maxists; but it was more the articulation of a demand for a more complete form of social emancipation for women. It was chiefly owing to the liberal predisposition of the Donoughmore Commissioners, who, with their experience of the suffragette movement in the U.K., were inclined to be sympathetic, that the franchise was granted to Sri Lankan women in 1931.

The important thing is that they were there to articulate the demand in terms to which the Commissioners could respond at that particular historical conjuncture. The story does not end there: there was a coup staged by the new rich in the WFU, led by Florinda Wijekoon against the older rich in which the former were successful; Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike was ousted and the Women's Franchise Union was replaced by the Women's Political Union.

The granting of the franchise eventually benefited all classes of women in Sri Lanka and had an enduring multiplier effect with women contesting parliamentary seats in the early 1930s, Adeleine Molamure entered Parliament in 1931 to be followed in 1932 by Neysum Saravanamuttu. However, they did not contest on distinctly feminist issues or rock the local political boat. The granting of the franchise benefited all classes of women who thus became entitled to exercise a cherished democratic right.

An aspect that is of particular interest today are the reactions of different groups to women winning the franchise. The only people who were supportive were the few radicals like some members of A.E. Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union. Most English educated men whose views were exposed in the local press or in the legislature had reservations, thought it a joke or scoffed openly. The spokesmen for the Sinhala and Tamil traditionalists were alarmed. The Hindu Tamil traditionalists objected on the grounds that it would blemish the purity of Tamil women, by which they meant that the right to vote would give women an independence of outlook with the result that in the future Hindu Tamil men might not be able to count on total subservience to their own wishes on the home front.

The Sinhala Buddhist traditionalists moaned that it was totally against "Sinhala Culture," the general attitude being that Sinhala women were given sufficient freedom at the time that Sanghamitta their came to the island, so respectable Sinhala Buddhist women should not join any organisations for the purpose of winning the franchise for themselves or get involved in labour unrest. But in general they took the opportunity to indulge in tirades against the

westernisation of women which was anathema to them. An article in the *Sinhala Jatiya* went as far as predicting it would lead to the end of the Sinhala nation: "Our Sinhala nation is now nearing its end because a terrible epidemic has gripped our women. This contagion in the form of a new civilization is emanating from Europe. It is very dangerous" (1/4/1926). Such views in Sinhala and Tamil were rebutted by several women, particularly Tamil writers like Meenakshi Natesa Aiyar and Mangalamaal Masilamany.

The title of the book derives from an outrageous comment made by no less a person than Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan in his reply to the Donoughmore Commissioners on the question of granting the franchise to women. "Do not throw pearls before swine, for they will turn and rend you .... What suits European women will not suit us." It seems to have been the considered view of this worthy knight that such an act of folly would only result in women viciously attacking the male of the species. What it signified was a deep-seated fear that male supremacy would be undermined.

One of the things I particularly enjoyed in this book were the brief pen-portraits of the principal protagonists in the franchise drama. We have all heard of the Honourable S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and of his father, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, the Maha-Mudaliyar, but who, besides the immediate family has heard of Lady Daisy Dias Bandaranaike, the wife of Sir Solomon, who was the first President of the Women's Franchise Union? She is described as a "matriarch of great character and strength who defied convention," obviously a redoubtable woman. Why has she been hidden from history? We should like to hear more of her. It might be of particular relevance in the political context of today.

There are several other colourful characters like Agnes de Silva née Nell the wife of George E. de Silva, Florinda Beatrice Silva, the daughter of a wealthy businessman N.P.D. Silva. (There was a wedding cake 16 feet tall at her wedding to Gerard Wijekoon.) There are several more: Dr. Nallamma Satyavagiswara Aiyar, Leelavati Aserappa, Nellie Gunasekera or the first women representatives in the State Council who deserve greater prominence in the island's history.

This is an eminently readable book, even for those who are not specifically interested in the history of the Women's Franchise Movement, for it is also sketches in the Lankan scenario that obtained in the 1920s and 30s. It is the work of two researchers who have experience in the handling of detail. There is enough detail to create a lively picture but not so much that it acts as a drag on the story. The simplicity of the language masks the wide scope encompassed in the book. The irony is quite delicious at times, for instance when the office bearers of the newly formed Women's Franchise Union are suddenly confronted with the prospect of appearing before the Donoughmore Commissioners or the absurdity of most of the male reactions. Considering the nature of the material, what I found particularly attractive was the lightness of touch for it would not have sounded right had the granting of the franchise to Sri Lankan women been dealt with in a tone appropriate to a momentous event like the French Revolution, as many researchers are unfortunately wont to do, notwithstanding the nature of their material. ■

## FOCUS ON AFGHANISTAN

### AFGHAN WOMEN - BARGAINING WITH PATRIARCHY

"**O**ut go the Taliban, but will Afghan women be excluded again?" is the title of a comment by LaShawn Jefferson of the women's rights division of Human Rights Watch. This is certainly the question posed by feminists, women's groups and gender-conscious males around the world, who are watching the proceedings of the UN-sponsored conference in Bonn that started on November 27 to try and form a provisional government composed of the various forces in Afghanistan. History and politics, Joan Scott once said, "are enacted on the field of gender." This has been particularly true of Afghanistan.

Although under the Taliban the situation of Afghan women sank to an all-time low — no girls' schools or employment for women, no mobility and strict purdah for women who were also forbidden to leave home without a male relative. But was it always so? Many write about Afghanistan as if it were a totally primitive, backward tribal society, ruled by warlords, bandit chiefs and ferocious Mullahs — a case of classic tyranny and classic patriarchy. This is not, however, the total picture. The country has a history of moving one step forward and two steps back from the 1920s. Afghan women have a history of periods of advance on women's rights, which they can draw upon today while in the process — in Deniz Kandyoti's words—of "bargaining with patriarchy."

#### Amanullah's Reforms

**I**n 1919 Amanullah Khan united several tribes, seized the throne, and tried to modernize the country. Calling himself a revolutionary, King Amanullah developed close ties with Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union. A proposed new constitution in 1923 gave voting rights to women, and Amanullah claimed that "the keystone of the future structure of the new Afghanistan will be the emancipation of women." He introduced a Family Code in 1921 forbidding child marriage, encouraged girls' schools, and banned polygamy for government employees. In 1928 his wife Queen Surayya appeared unveiled, and by decree, women were made to discard the veil. But unlike Turkey under Mustapha Ataturk where similar reforms were successful, the forces of tribal patriarchy and reaction prevailed in Afghanistan. Opposition to women's rights and modernization set in and the King was deposed in 1929. His progressive reforms were annulled, but his rule was not forgotten and is cited by Afghan women even today.

#### Turn to the Left

**I**n 1965 the women's issue again came to the fore with the formation by Afghan intelligentsia of the People's

Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA was for a democratic government to liberate Afghanistan from feudal rule. Its demands included equal treatment for women and education for all. That year six women activists formed the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW).

This organization aimed at doing away with female illiteracy, forced marriages and brideprice. As a result of this pressure women obtained the right to vote and four DOAW women entered parliament.

In 1978 the left-wing PDPA took power and introduced bold measures including land reform, cancelling rural debt and enforcing women's rights. The latter included a limit on the traditional practices of marriages for cash, brideprice, forced marriages and early marriage. A minimum age of 16 for women and 18 for men was introduced along with compulsory education for girls. This was keenly resented by traditionalists and (as one observer noted) opposed "by Afghan men, whose male chauvinism is as massive as the mountains of the Hindu Kush."

By 1979 there was organized opposition to the PDPA along with internal fighting. President Taraki was killed, succeeded by Hafizullah Amin who was killed and succeeded by Barak Karmal. Karmal ordered a gradualist approach to change, but attacks continued resulting in the Soviet invasion in December 1979, to protect the Afghan Communist government.

#### Soviet Invasion

**I**n the period up to 1992 many changes took place in women's status. Women entered government service, worked on airlines, radio and television, in hospitals, as teachers in schools and in the army. Many women had prominent positions in public life. In the 1980s 65% of students in Kabul University were women. The DOAW, renamed All-Afghan Women's Council, was led by Massouma Esmaty Wardak, a member of parliament; other notable women were Soraya, director of the Afghan Red Crescent, Dr Soheila, Chief Surgeon of the Military Hospital, and Jamila Palwasha and Rubafza Kamyar, members of the Central Committee of the PDPA. There was also a Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), founded by the late Mina Kishwar Kamal in 1977, which now operates in exile in Pakistan.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops led to the downfall of the Communist government in Afghanistan, and the Taliban movement was supported by Pakistan, USA and Saudi Arabia. The powers