

## 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

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**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