Memories of the Daughters from “Recitatif” to Beloved

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Abstract This paper focuses on the repressed memories of female characters in “Recitatif” and Beloved, both written by Toni Morrison, to examine their characteristics. Both works connect with each other in the memories of daughters. The female protagonists in both stories face and recreate their memories with the help of other women. Female solidarity also empowers the female protagonists to establish their own identities. From “Recitatif” to Beloved, the bond widens, beginning between daughter and daughter and black and white, expanding to mother and daughter and finally to women in the community. By developing the theme of sharing memories, Morrison shows that women’s traumatic memories can be healed by other women.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, “Recitatif,” Beloved, memories, daughter(s)

Introduction

Toni Morrison’s fifth novel, Beloved, is considered her masterpiece, earning her both a Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize. The novel explores slavery and its consequences. Her only short story, “Recitatif” (1983), published before Beloved (1987), has not been discussed much, partly because the original anthology that included this short story is out of print. Therefore, these two works have not been treated together in former studies. However, there are some commonly used motifs in “Recitatif” and Beloved: the use of twenty-eight days, the absence of the fathers, the feeling of being abandoned, the smell of flowers, and so on, even though there is a one hundred–year gap between their settings. Not only these motifs, but also two of the most notable themes can be seen in these works.

First, both “Recitatif” and Beloved treat racial issues. Both works use real black-American historical incidents as background frames for their plots. Beloved takes place around the years of the Civil War (1861–1865), before and after the abolishment of slavery, and “Recitatif” refers to school integration after the U.S. Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education (1954). “Recitatif” is so skillfully written that readers are not told the races of the two female protagonists. We only know that one is white and the other is black. Critics have analyzed and tried to solve their racial mystery. However, Morrison refers to “Recitatif” in Playing in the Dark by saying, “The only short story I have ever written, ‘Recitatif,’ was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial” (ix). She deliberately tries to make readers recognize the existence and incorrectness of their racial and stereotypical prejudice. Morrison teaches us to see them as human, which is more crucial than racial differences.

The second similar theme, which is not as obvious as the first one, concerns the memories of the female characters. Morrison herself relies on her memories when writing, as she writes in “The Site of Memory” that “memories within’ are the subsoil of my work” (302). She also said this of Beloved during an interview:

I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia. (120)

With the term “amnesia,” she describes the state where people, beyond race, try to repress their painful memories. This paper focuses on the memories of female characters in “Recitatif” and Beloved to examine their characteristics.

The Memories of Twyla and Roberta

“Recitatif” is a story about two female protagonists, Twyla and Roberta. They first meet when they are eight years old in an orphanage called St. Bonny’s. Their mothers dump their daughters in St. Bonny’s because Twyla’s immature mother likes to dance all night and Roberta’s mother is in a mental hospital. Twyla and Roberta become close and even collude with each other despite their racial differences in order to fight back against the true orphans. They also fear big girls, whom they call “gar girls.” They understand each other without talking. After leaving the institution, they happen to meet four more times. These encounters cast some mystery on their memories. Is Maggie, who tends the kitchen of St. Bonny’s, white or black? Did both Twyla and Roberta kick Maggie? They Recall their memories, but they do not coincide. The reader is left with a big question, not only about the truth of those mysteries but also about the reason: why do their memories differ so much?

Roberta mentions that Twyla’s memories about Maggie are seemingly “blocked” (“Recitatif” 476). Twyla relates her memories about Maggie’s race:

Maggie couldn’t talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen. I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like...
To Twyla, Maggie’s race—described as “sandy-colored”—is not important. Twyla’s memory focuses only on Maggie’s legs: their shape and movement; crooked and swaying. This description can be compared with the ones of Twyla’s mother who likes to dance, leaving her daughter to St. Bonny’s. We can infer that Twyla has some repressed feelings for her mother, which is reinforced by her memories of the smell of the orchard of St. Bonny’s in association with the perfume of her mother.

The selective nature of memories is shown by Twyla in her first reunion with Roberta after leaving St. Bonny’s. Twyla wonders, “if she [Roberta] would remember me. Or even if she wanted to remember me” (472). People tend to remember what they want to remember. Twyla does not want to remember St. Bonny’s because she does not talk about it even to her husband after their marriage. She also cannot help but dream about the orchard of St. Bonny’s. This gives us a hint that something is hidden behind her memories. As “How to believe what had to be believed” (475) is also mentioned, these powerless little girls unconsciously have to select or avoid some parts of their memories according to their necessities.

At Twyla and Roberta’s second encounter, the truth of their memories about Maggie becomes the main issue. Twyla believes a milder version of her memory—that “she fell down and those gar girls laughed at her.” If this were true, it would be very strange for Twyla to have memorized that trivial matter and to dream about the orchard so many times. On the other hand, Roberta believes, “Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes. In the orchard” (476). Roberta sharply points out to Twyla, “You blocked it” (476), “Those girls laughed at her.” If this were true, it would be very strange for Twyla to have memorized that trivial matter and to dream about the orchard of St. Bonny’s. This gives us a hint that something is hidden behind her memories. As “How to believe what had to be believed” (475) is also mentioned, these powerless little girls unconsciously have to select or avoid some parts of their memories according to their necessities.

Twyla is forced to face her memories by Roberta’s words. She becomes aware that what really happened and how she felt about it—stays, and not just in her rememory, but out there, in her powers.Undoing her memories about Maggie makes Twyla accept her sealed memories.

Roberta comes up to Twyla in their fourth encounter to talk about the interpretation of her memories about Maggie, with the help of a little alcohol:

I thought she was crazy. She’d been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn’t kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that’s not true. And I don’t want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day—wanting to is doing it. (481)

Roberta considers Maggie mentally sick, as her mother is. She remembers Maggies’s mental characteristics more than her physical ones. Roberta also identifies herself with Maggie and fears that she is going to be like her mother. Therefore, she secretly wants to kick Maggie. Both Twyla and Roberta now share the true feelings of their hatred and guilt toward their mothers. In psychological terms, what they have done is “peer counseling.” They get together and talk about themselves, sharing their burdens.

In the last scene of “Recitatif,” they finally admit and voice their feelings as being “lonely” (482) and “scared” (482), which contrast with the idea, “neither of us wanted the other one to know it” (408) when they were eight years old. They blocked, changed, and selected their memories because they couldn’t accept their own true feelings. Freud’s term “repressed memory” 3 can be applied here. The reunion forces Twyla and Roberta to think about what they really feel. Maggie is the image of their mothers and themselves. The title of the story also shows the importance of talking about memories with somebody else. Remembering together helps them form a strong human bond, which is substituted for the loss of their mothers’ love, and then they can heal their mental wounds together.

The Memories of Sethe and Denver

In Beloved, it is well known that Morrison uses the word “rememory”. Mary Paniccia Carden explained that “‘Rememory’ differs from ‘memory’ in its active force independent of the remembrance.” Sethe talks about this uncontrollable “rememory” to Denver, her second daughter:

If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (43)

Sethe’s “rememory” haunts her not only in her head, but also in the real world. It is also said, “Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” (69). Caroline Rody claims, “‘Rememory’ is the imaginative act that makes it possible to realize one’s latent, abiding connection to the past” (28). In other words, if Sethe cannot face her dreadful experiences consciously, those memories do not go away. Her memories are also referred to

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as “unspeakable” (69) both by Baby Suggs and Sethe, whereas Denver loses her hearing because she thinks her mother’s act in the past is “unhearable.” Sethe has flashbacks that prevent her from building her own identity in the present; this is similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. As an aftereffect of Sethe’s “rememory,” she confines herself to her house except for work, and does not get in touch with other people.

As in the encounters of two female protagonists in “Recitatif,” Sethe is forced into the position of facing up to her past. Beloved, who is interpreted to be Sethe’s dead daughter, asks Sethe to talk about her past, by saying “Tell me” (69) innocently. This prompts Sethe to start to face her repressed memories, which she has avoided for a long time. Starting with her happy memories about the earrings she received as a wedding gift, she finds herself wanting to talk more. Sethe opens her repressed memories about her mother little by little. She had to work even right after she gave birth to Sethe, and could not spend enough time with her, not to mention nesting up to her. In her behalf, Nan, the nanny for whites, took care of Sethe. Sethe refers to Nan’s African language which Sethe cannot understand: “But the message—that was and had been there all along…she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood” (74). Sethe’s memory is erased not only by the language difficulties, but also by the defense mechanism of her mind. She now tries to collect the essence of “the message”, not the language. This brings Sethe to face her feelings of the past, to restore her past and make new memories. It is a painful task to remember her mother being hanged in front of her, and she also feels sad about not being able to take care of her mother.

Even daughters restore the mother’s memories of themselves on their own by using imagination. Sethe is so obsessed with her past that she cannot afford to love Denver, nor function as a mother. Beloved asks Denver to tell the story of her birth, when Denver affects her. Sethe opens her repressed memories about her mother little by little. This brings Sethe to face her feelings of the past, taking her mother’s part.

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Morrison commented on her method of writing stories in her essay, “The Site of Memory,” referring to recollection and memories as follows:

First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant…. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people.

Only the act of the imagination can help me. (302)

As Morrison says, Denver starts to “recollect” her mother’s “memories” using her own imagination. Morrison lays an importance on “the act of the imagination” in developing memories, which is equal to making collaborative stories between Denver and Beloved. Sethe’s “unwritten interior life” is replaced with Denver’s creation of her mother’s feelings. Both daughters, Denver and Beloved, build a strong bond by sharing their mother’s memories. With understanding and recovering the consistency of them, Denver is able to feel proud of herself. This is the same as in “Recitatif,” where mothers are not functioning and daughters have to unite to heal their wounds.

Female solidarity is also strongly written in a wider way in Beloved. The daughters’ traumas have something to do with their mothers. This is also true of a white indentured servant, Amy Denver, who saves Sethe on their way out of their owners’ place. When Amy is about to leave Sethe, Sethe is frightened to be left alone. Therefore, she calls Amy back by asking about her mother, “Your ma’am know you on the lookout for velvet?” (40). This question keeps Amy at Sethe’s side and they start to share their memories about their mothers, relating beyond race. Amy says, “My mama worked for these here people to pay for her passage. But then she had me and since she died right after, well, they said I had to work for em to pay it off” (40). Though Amy is white, she and Sethe have some similarities; they are at the bottom of the social rank, their mothers are dead, and they do not know who their fathers are. Along with sympathy, Amy’s song that her mother sang consoles Sethe. Amy acts as a substitute mother for Sethe, who gets well again through Amy’s mental and physical treatment. This bond of friendship and mother-like affection beyond race is then relayed to Sethe’s daughters.

In Beloved, the memories of daughters are also shared among women in the community. When thirty women come to help Sethe, they first see the “rememory” of their happy days as daughters when their mothers were alive: “Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep… Mothers, dead now, moved their shoulders to mouth harps” (304). By sharing these happy memories, their bond gets strengthened, which induces the next step. Their leader, Ella, who is a woman of action, has a horrible “rememory”: the image of her child, whom she left to die after countless rapes by the white owner and his son. Her memories are almost the same as one of Sethe’s. To fight against her repressed memory, Ella finally “bellowed” (305) to it in flashback: “Instantly the knellers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (305). Ella cannot help but “bellow” and the other women follow her, and this leads to a big prayer to save Sethe—to change the situation. Not only Sethe and Denver, but also other women have to repel their personal and historical trauma. Their voices beyond language change things for both Sethe and Denver. Sharing memories with and giving solace to other women can release them from their traumatic past.

Conclusion

“Recitatif” and Beloved connect with each other in the memories of daughters. The female protagonists in both stories face their memories about their mothers, fill in the blanks, and talk to other women, recreating and reinterpreting those memories. In this way,
they can share their wounded parts, restore the mother-daughter relationships, understand and accept the situation, and acquire the power to live in the present. The women who share the feelings function as a self-help group to fight back the trouble. Female solidarity also empowers the female protagonists to establish their own identity.

In *Beloved*, the theme of sharing memories among female characters is deeper than it is in “Recitatif.” The bond widens, beginning between daughter and daughter, black and white, expanding to mother and daughter, and finally among women in the community. This is partly because of the longer length of the story, but this also reflects the time when Morrison wrote them: first “Recitatif” then, four years later, *Beloved*. In *Beloved*, after developing the theme of sharing memories, Morrison positively shows more powers of women, such as Amy who can act toward her freedom and gives comfort beyond race, and Ella who does not yield to her past memories and even leads other women. Morrison shows that women’s traumatic memories can be healed by other women, no matter how severe those memories may be.

**Notes**

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1. “Recitatif” was originally included in Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women (1983).


3. Morrison shows her interest in psychoanalysis in Playing in the Dark, noting that “the narrative into which life seems to cast itself surfaces most forcefully in certain kinds of psychoanalysis” (V).

4. Concerning trauma and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), trauma theory has been emerging as a field of critical theory in cultural and feminist studies. Deborah M. Horvitz suggests that “an analogous process occurs in literature in which ‘fictional characters experience trauma and, subsequently, as a self-protective response, repress its memories. And, it is within the discourse of healing that the operative dynamics among memory, remembering, and its narrative converge” (10). See also Whiteness and Trauma by Victoria Burrows on her reading of Morrison’s works using trauma theory.

**Works Cited**


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