

## Framing the Black Experience: The Film Version of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Rakesh Desai

*Beloved* (1987) is the Afro-American writer and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison's fifth novel. It was adapted to a film, entitled "Beloved," which was released on 16 October, 1998 in the U. S. A., directed by Jonathan Demme. This paper aims at exploring the relationship between the cinematic text of *Beloved* with its novelistic form. It explores the way the cinematic text departs from the novel, with thematic implications, and the losses and gains of the cinema as a different medium, being primarily visual, and concerned with space. It also explores the degree to which the medium of the film suits the presentation of the black experience.

The Afro-American cinematic image has its own history – films were with black themes even before the black participation in it. The blacks have been often presented from the white viewpoint, often as flat characters of servants, criminals, comic figures, athletes and side-kicks, and that has been corrected by the black creativity in films. Edwin S. Porter made a film version in 1903, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), but the film did not have a black actor, and the character of Tom was played by a white actor. The early part of the period of silent films presents the five fundamental types which dominate black characters for the next fifty years – "Tom," "socially acceptable Good Negro characters;" "a group of coons," "the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon;" "the tragic mulatto," "made likeable, even sympathetic;" "Mammy," "closely related to the comic coons," "big, fat and cantankerous;" "the brute black buck," "a barbaric black, out to raise havoc" (Mandal 106-108). In the late 1940s and the 1950s, the problems of black people came to be presented in the films. By 1959, racism was identified as national illness. By the year 1969, "the Blacks were demanding their rights and the decade moved from traditional goal of cultural and academic assimilation to one of almost absolute separatism and the evolution of a black cultural aesthetic" (Mandal 112). In the recent decades black filmmakers have treated black themes in films in an avant-garde way, e. g. films by Spike Lee and Charles Burnett.

*Beloved* (1987) is set during 1873, following the period of American Civil War (1861-1865). It is based on a true story which Morrison discovered while editing *The Black Book* (1974) – Margaret Garner, an African-American slave, fled Kentucky to Ohio, a free state, and killed her two-year old daughter to spare her slavery from the posse which had arrived to nab her and her children. Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, kills her daughter Beloved, and attempts to kill her other three children when the posse comes to Ohio to claim them as slaves and take back to Sweet Home, the plantation, in Kentucky. The daughter Beloved comes back to avenge her killing and haunts the house.

The novel *Beloved* was adapted to a film, entitled "Beloved," released on 16 October, 1998 in U. S. A., directed by Jonathan Demme, with the runtime of 172 minutes, with the cast of Oprah Winfrey as Sethe, Danny Glover as Paul D Garner, Thandie Newton as Beloved, Kimberly Elise as Denver and Beah Richards as Baby Suggs.

*Beloved* as an Afro-American novel, reflecting on the tragic Black experience in the white America, justifiably employs the mode of memory as an alternative to official history. Retrospective narration as a narrative technique is integral to the novelistic tradition, but its adaptation to the cinematic medium in the case of the film *Beloved* has required a degree of modification. The novelistic narrative begins in 1873:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). . . . Each one fled at once—the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, in the dead of winter, leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. (Be 3)

Further, a few paragraphs later, during Denver's talk about the ghost of *Beloved*, narrative retrospectively describes Sethe's forced submission of her body to the engraver as a payment for engraving the word "Beloved" on the headstone at the graveyard:

The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips. Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free.

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? . . . She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust. (Be 5)

The film version telescopes these events. Its beginning treats the story in a chronological order: it refers first to the graveyard, followed by the ghostly interventions, the brothers Howard and Buglar leaving the house in 1865, and Sethe's exploitation by the engraver is not shown. And this is followed by the year 1873. The film *Beloved* begins with the subjective camera moving and focussing on the headstone with the word "Beloved" inscribed on it. Its close up dissolves into the long shot of the house with the captions on the screen sequentially appearing: Ohio, 1865; outskirts of Cincinnati; 124 Bluestone Road. The appearance of the captions also carries the sound of the helpless barking of the dog (later shown as thrown away by the ghost). This skilfully manages in audiovisual terms the effect of *Beloved*'s death on the house, and her ghostly revengeful disturbances in the house, with the simultaneity of space and sound, characteristic of the cinematic medium. Further, after Howard and Buglar leave, the caption appears on the screen: "1873 Eight Years Later."

Further, Denver's emotional dependence on the mother Sethe is obvious, as both of them live alone in a haunted house which is avoided by the people: "Outside a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124" (Be 5). The film often shows passersby on the road casting a special look at the haunted house. But Paul D Garner's entry into the house begins to lessen Sethe's total attention and love for her. Denver feels in her first meeting with Paul D Garner:

*Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*  
Vol X No II December 2014

Now here was this woman with the presence of mind to repair a dog gone savage with pain rocking her crossed ankles and looking away from her own daughter's body. As though the size of it was more than vision could bear. And neither she nor he had on shoes. Hot, shy, now Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother—serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing. None of that had mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now, making Denver long, downright *long*, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost. (Be 14-15, emphasis is Morrison's)

Denver resists Paul D's presence in the house. She tells him: "We have a ghost in here" (Be 15). This disunites him and Sethe from their common fund of Sweet Home memory. Denver tells him further that the baby ghost is "not sad either," "Lonely and rebuked," defining it more troublesome (Be 16). And later "Denver ran a mighty interference and on the third day flat-out asked Paul D how long he was going to hang around" (Be 52).

The film manages to show Denver's loneliness, her mother's lessening attention to her in visual terms. In the film, Denver's reluctance to shake hands with Paul D is obvious. Her sense of being a member of a lonely family in the town, the haunted house, the sad memory of the brothers who had left the house, and presently the mother looking away from her, Denver's crying, described in words in the novel, are objectified in her crying and saying in the film. The mother Sethe consoles her. This is followed by the ghostly disturbances, with the happy face of Denver as this could make Paul D think of leaving the house, but to her dismay, Paul D resists the ghost, drives it out of the house. The novel describes the later action:

It was gone. Denver wandered through the silence to the stove. She ashed over the fire and pulled the pan of biscuits from the oven. The jelly cupboard was on its back, its contents lying in a heap in the corner of the bottom shelf. She took out a jar, and looking around for a plate, found half of one by the door. These things she carried out to the porch steps, where she sat down. (Be 22)

The film easily follows this obvious action sequence on the screen. But it has also to manage Denver's intense feeling of loneliness:

She missed her brothers. Buglar and Howard would be twenty-two and twenty-three now. Although they had been polite to her during the quiet time and gave her the whole top of the bed, she remembered how it was before: the pleasure they had sitting clustered on the white stairs—she between the knees of Howard or Buglar—while they made up die-witch! Stories with proven ways of killing her dead. And Baby Suggs telling her in the keeping room. She smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night, for Denver would not sleep in her old room after her brothers ran away.

Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had. Denver dipped a bit of bread into jelly. Slowly, methodically, miserably she ate it. (Be 22-23)

The following scene shows in visual terms Denver's alienation from Sethe, her recollection of her brothers: Paul D and Sethe in a bed upstairs make love, and Denver is in the kitchen downstairs, ashes over the hearth fire, takes her food in a broken dish,

suggestive of the recent ghostly intervention, goes out and sits on the porch. Now the camera begins zooming in, widening the frame leading down to the gate and hedge of the compound, suggesting Howard and Buglar running away from the house, shown earlier in the film. The final long shot of Denver eating in the porch of the house presents both the floors in symbolic terms, Sethe and Paul D making love on the first floor, Denver alone on the ground floor in the porch, visually underlining Denver's consequent loneliness. This is more significant with reference to Denver's usual attitude to the house. She considers it "as a person rather than a structure" – "A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits" (Be 35). The visual sensation of zooming in and the long shot have their own impact enough to equate with, if not to surpass, the language.

Further, the film depicts the novelistic mode of memory, quite crucial to a black narrative, in a selective way. The film skips Sethe's exploitation by the engraver for inscribing the letters on the headstone – possible explanations could be that it could have been too painful for a visual medium, or such exploitation is accommodated within other shots could be the possible explanation. The film follows the narrative sequence of memories through Sethe's talking about it to Paul D while forming and rolling the dough out in the kitchen: but along with Sethe's words the most painful memories are visualized in flashes: the arson and firing by the white, the Sweet Home shed, Sethe handing over her kid, the close up of the schoolteacher's face upside down, the two white boys ("sons or nephews") about to suck, milk the breasts with its close up, the medium shot of the schoolteacher with a book, noting down; the two white boys each sucking a breast, a close up of the boys' faces and the breasts, and laughing; Mrs. Garner on her death bed with the lump in her neck; Sethe being whipped at Sweet Home. Needless to say, the visual flashes of the traumatic memories add pain to them.

In the novel, while talking to Beloved and Denver, Sethe responds to Beloved's question about Sethe's mother, and she remembers and narrates the tragic tale of mother's life – the suffering of a black woman slave of earlier generation. She talks to them about her mother's nursing only for "two or three weeks" and her exhaustive toil (Be 72). Then Sethe informs that she was "Hung" (Be 73). Then an obvious action takes place:

Sethe walked over to a chair, lifted a sheet and stretched it as wide as her arms would go. Then she folded, refolded and double-folded it. She took another. Neither was completely dry but the folding felt too fine to stop. She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. (Be 73)

Then she remembers Nan, who had nursed her, telling her:

What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message – that was and had been there all along. . . . She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The

others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. I am telling you, small girl Sethe (Be 74)

The film version telescopes the whole sequence of talk and action. It presents Sethe folding and refolding a sheet, showing it earlier than it occurs in the novel, letting it symbolize remembering and intensity for all the events: a chain gang, a black slave hanged with the support below taken away, a white gun man sitting on a tree. This is followed by Nan's talk with subtitles in English, suggesting her language, as mentioned in the novel, incomprehensible:

"That is your mother, there." (A close up of the face of Sethe's mother, with a gag over her mouth)

"I tell you this, little Sethe." (A long shot of black slaves, hanged from the tree branches, with fire in the backdrop)

"Your mother and I were taken up by many men, many times." (The camera zooms in on the scene)

"Only you she gave a name." (A middle shot of Nan telling the little Sethe, laying her hand on Sethe's shoulder)

(The close up of the mother's face at the noose)

"She put her arms around only your father, child." (The preceding shot continues)

"The other men, she never put her arms around. Never!" (The same shot continues)

"I tell you this, little Sethe." (The close up of little Sethe).

(The simultaneous appearance of the close ups of the faces of little Sethe and her mother's face at the noose)

(This shot dissolves into the middle shot of Sethe at present.)

The film presents a part of Sethe's random memories about her mother, subjects it to a logical sequence and presents Nan talking to the little Sethe while her mother is being hanged, unlike it happens in the novel.

The most traumatic memory of the novel is Sethe's attempt at killing her kids to save them from slavery at Sweet Home. Sethe's attempt at killing her children appears quite early in the film when Paul D finds it as a glimpse, too sudden and horrible to be understood at that point for him, when he faces first the ghostly disturbances in the house. But the film, with its visual logic, connects the ghost with its killing by the mother, suggestively placed in the beginning of the film with the close up of the word "Beloved" inscribed on the headstone. In the novel, the foregoing narrative context is Baby Sugg's life, her freedom from slavery, earned by her son Halle, her coming to Cincinnati:

The good news, however, was that Halle got married and had a baby coming. She fixed on that and her own brand of preaching, having made up her mind about what to do with the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River. And it worked out, worked out just fine, until she got proud and let herself be overwhelmed by the sight of her daughter-in-law and Halle's children—one of whom was born on the way—and have a celebration of blackberries that put Christmas to shame. Now she stood in the garden smelling disapproval, feeling a

dark and coming thing, and seeing high-topped shoes that she didn't like the look of at all. At all. (Be 173)

The film has a different context leading to Sethe's attempt at killing her children. In the film version Paul D is shown the news paper clipping by Stamp Paid, carrying the news of Sethe's killing her daughter, along with her photograph. Paul D comes to Sethe, seeks clarification, and she tells him the story. The film attempts at turning Sethe and Paul D into the conventional pair of lovers, centrally located in the story. Sethe's narration begins with the description of Baby Suggs's inspired address in the forest to the black people reminding them to their human dignity, Further, it manages to focus on, with a middle shot and close up of Baby Suggs in the garden of the house, with a worried look, "smelling disapproval, feeling a dark and coming thing," and then Sethe catching the sight of the horsemen:

When the four horsemen came—schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff—the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late. Three of them dismounted, one stayed in the saddle, his rifle ready, his eyes trained away from the house to the left and to the right, because likely as not the fugitive would make a dash for it. (Be 174)

The novelistic narrative begins the narration from the outsiders' viewpoint, while the camera in the film begins presenting the scene from the insiders' viewpoint. The reason could be that the event is narrated by Sethe, an insider, in the film. The film records the same actions connected with the bloodshed:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother's swing. (Be 175)

The visual presentation of the killing is more shocking with its directness and simultaneity of all its details.

In the novel, the exorcism of Beloved by the community of the black women, organized by Denver, ends with Paul D coming back to Sethe:

"Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." (Be 322)

And then the narrative treats the departure of Beloved, the world without her, her traces gradually disappearing:

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there.

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. Beloved. (Be 324)

In the film also Paul D comes back to Sethe. And Sethe remembers Baby Suggs addressing the black people in the forest, telling them to love themselves, their hands. And this scene dissolves into the long shot of the house, now blessed by the memory of the visionary Baby Suggs, unlike it is in the beginning of the film, the shot of the head stone dissolving into the house, presenting it as haunted by Beloved. Thus the exorcism of Beloved and her traces disappearing are suggested in the film by the long shot of the house in the context of Baby Suggs teaching. Further, the memory of Baby Suggs at the end, unlike in the novel, also gives the film an ideological dimension, the black protest against the oppressive white, which the novel certainly has. Harold Bloom comments on *Beloved*:

The characters are problematic, for me; unlike the protagonists of Morrison's earlier novels, they suggest ideograms. I think that is because *Beloved* is a powerfully tendentious romance; it has too clear a design upon its readers, of whatever race and gender. The storyteller of *Sula* (1975) and of *Song of Solomon* (1977) has been replaced by a formidable ideologue, who perhaps knows too well what she wishes her book to accomplish. (Bloom 1)

The film *Beloved* manages the ideological edge of the novelistic narrative by presenting Baby Suggs, preaching to the black people in the forest, a different end to the film.

Further, the mode of expression of the Black experience is memory. And, this mode has political overtone with respect to the history of the marginalized. Bhaskar Sarkar comments in this context:

By the early 1990s, the vicissitudes of memory—its partial, fragmentary, impressionistic, and transient nature—had become its source of strength. As critiques of humanism and its foundations dislodged essentialist notions of subjectivity and historical agency, memory marked by its incompleteness and amenability to endless revisions, emerged as the favoured narrative organization of human experience, a timely alternative to history. The polarization between history and memory gained potency through its metonymic links to other binary opposites: official/ popular, elite/ subaltern, objective/ subjective, monolithic/ polyvocal, truth/ hearsay, Western/ non-Western, oppressor/ victim. Memory came to be construed as the domain of resistance: to remember was also to listen to oral testimonies, to recover forgotten traditions and worldviews, to bear witness to the experiences of the oppressed. (Sarkar 11)

Thus, memory is an alternative to official history and also a mode of memory. Further, talking to Denver, Sethe comments on the lingering “rememory”:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. 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. (Be 43)

Memory, or rememory is a significant mode of Afro-American experience.

Memory, or rememory is visual in its operation. And the medium of cinema, fundamentally visual, is obviously suitable to the presentation of the black experience, through the mode of memory, if not more suitable than the novelistic form. The sudden flashing shots of the black memory in the film are quite effective to communicate the agony and oppression in visual terms, and further, memories of different characters could also be realigned and remixed in the shots. It is quite possible that Sethe's memory of her mother presents lynch fire, which could be a part of Stamp Paid's memory in the novel (Be 212). The film *Beloved* succeeds in presenting the black experience in visual terms, apart from the director's creativity, the visual nature of memory & the mode of feeling the black experience, required in the film, are the forte of the film as a medium.

### Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Viva Modern Critical Interpretations. Ed. Harold Bloom. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2007. pp. 1-3.
- Mandal, Somdatta. "Framing Blackness: The Afro-American Image in Film." *Film and Fiction: Word into Image*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005. 105-118.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1987. London: Vintage Books, 2004. ('Be' in parenthesis in this paper refers to this text.)
- Sarkar, Bhaskar. "Introduction: National Cinema's Hermeneutic of Mourning." *Mourning the Nation: Indian cinema in the Wake of Partition*. pp. 1-43.