



**What Refuses to Stay Buried: Abjection, Trauma, and the Maternal in Toni Morrison's
Beloved**

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Abstract

This article applies Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as elaborated in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), to Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987). It argues that the novel enacts and complicates the Kristevan abject at three intersecting levels: the corporeal (Sethe's violated maternal body and the chokecherry tree), the psychic (the spectral return of Beloved and the dissolution of subject boundaries), and the historical (slavery's systematic construction of the enslaved person as racially abject). Through close reading of key passages from both primary texts, the article demonstrates that Morrison's formal strategies--fragmented chronology, polyphonic voice, and the paradoxical ending--are not merely stylistic but constitute formal performances of the abject condition Kristeva theorises. The article further argues that Morrison's novel simultaneously illuminates and tests the limits of Kristevan theory, revealing abjection to be not merely a universal psychic structure but a historically specific political condition produced by the institutions of chattel slavery.

Keywords: *abjection, Julia Kristeva, Toni Morrison, Beloved, slavery, the maternal, trauma, the semiotic, postcolonial theory, African American literature*

Introduction

Beloved (1987) is, at its core, a novel about what refuses to be contained. The ghost that haunts 124 Bluestone Road will not remain outside the thresholds of the living; the milk that Sethe carries across state lines cannot be kept from being stolen; the memory of slavery will not be quieted by the act of forgetting. These refusals make the novel an extraordinarily rich site for the application of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as developed in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). For Kristeva, abjection names the violence by which the subject establishes itself through the expulsion of what is radically other yet disturbingly intimate--what is, in her formulation, "not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (2). Morrison's novel dramatises precisely this paradox across multiple registers: the spectral body of *Beloved*, the violated maternal body of Sethe, the haunted house as an extension of traumatised subjectivity, and the larger structures of racial abjection under slavery. This article argues that *Beloved* enacts and complicates Kristevan abjection at three

intersecting levels--the corporeal, the psychic, and the historical--and that reading the novel through Kristeva's framework illuminates how Morrison transforms the abject into a site of both devastation and radical political critique.

The theoretical intersection between Morrison and Kristeva has attracted scholarly attention since the 1990s, though it has often been pursued in limited terms, focusing primarily on the ghostly body or on maternal horror in isolation. This article seeks a more comprehensive account, reading abjection as structurally constitutive of the novel's form as well as its content. Morrison's fragmented prose, her dissolution of boundaries between voices, and her refusal of linear chronology are not merely stylistic choices but formal enactments of the abject condition Kristeva describes--a condition in which identity, system, and order are perpetually disturbed. *Beloved*, in this reading, does not simply depict abjection; it performs it.

I. Kristeva's Abjection: A Theoretical Overview

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* develops the concept of abjection within the broader frame of psychoanalytic and semiotic theory. Drawing on Lacan's structural linguistics and Freud's account of primary narcissism, Kristeva locates abjection at the threshold between the pre-Oedipal and the symbolic order--the moment at which the subject must expel what threatens to undo it in order to constitute itself as a coherent "I." The abject, Kristeva argues, is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Crucially, abjection is not repression in the classical Freudian sense. Where repression presupposes a formed subject who pushes unwanted content into the unconscious, abjection precedes and enables subject-formation itself. The abject must be expelled for the "I" to come into being, yet the very possibility of expulsion implies that the "I" is never fully free of what it casts away.

The primary site of abjection for Kristeva is the body--specifically, the body's fluid boundaries. Bodily fluids and waste--

blood, milk, excrement, the corpse--are paradigmatic abject objects because they mark the threshold between inside and outside, between self and other, between the living and the dead. Kristeva's account of the corpse is worth quoting at length, as it maps with unusual precision onto the central preoccupation of Morrison's novel:

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance... The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva 3-4)

The corpse does not simply represent death; it is, in Kristeva's account, death infecting life--the abject in its most extreme form, the point at which the subject can no longer maintain the fiction of bodily integrity and clean separation from the other. This is why the encounter with the

cadaver produces the characteristic double response of fascination and revulsion that defines the abject relation.

Equally central to Kristeva's theory is the maternal body. The process of abjection is, in the first instance, a process of separation from the mother. The infant must abject the mother--expel her as a too-intimate, boundary-dissolving other--in order to enter the symbolic order of language and law. Yet this expulsion is never final. The maternal body haunts the subject as an archaic memory of undifferentiation, of the pre-linguistic semiotic realm that Kristeva elsewhere calls the *chora*--a space of rhythms, drives, and bodily intensities that precedes and exceeds the symbolic. As Kristeva argues, "abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being" (5). It is this dynamic--of loss, expulsion, and uncanny return--that *Beloved* dramatises with such sustained intensity.

II. The Haunted House as Abject Space

Beloved opens with a declaration that is also a diagnosis. The house at 124 Bluestone Road is introduced not as a domestic space but as an abject space--a place in which the normal laws of the living are contaminated by the dead, where the boundary between the human and the non-human has been catastrophically breached. Morrison's famous opening lines enact this contamination with economy and force:

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. (Morrison 1)

In Kristevan terms, 124 is a site where the abject has refused expulsion, where what should have been cast out has returned to occupy the interior. The ghost of *Beloved* has "encroached upon everything" in precisely the sense Kristeva describes of the corpse: it is "death infecting life," a border that has dissolved rather than maintained itself. Morrison describes the house as "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" (4), a

formulation that resonates powerfully with Kristeva's characterisation of the abject as "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

The effects of this contamination are registered not only in the supernatural phenomena that drive away Sethe's sons and terrify the neighbourhood, but in the social isolation of the house's inhabitants. 124 is quarantined by the community. Its occupants are neither fully inside social life nor expelled from it; they inhabit a threshold condition that mirrors the abject status of Beloved herself. The house does not belong to the realm of the living or the dead; it is, in Kristeva's sense, improper--neither one thing nor the other.

Paul D's entry into the house dramatises the abject encounter with particular clarity. He walks "straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood" (8). The red light is a direct emanation of the baby's ghost--of the abject body that will not stay dead--and its effect on Paul D is precisely the double movement of fascination and horror that Kristeva identifies as the characteristic

response to the abject. The house has become what Kristeva calls a "fortified castle" (47)--a space in which the usual boundaries of identity have collapsed into "a pure and simple splitting, an abyss" (47). For the inhabitants of 124, this splitting is not merely psychological but historical: it is the direct consequence of slavery's violation of the boundaries of the self.

III. Sethe's Body: The Maternal Abject and the Chokecherry Tree

Sethe's body is the novel's central site of abjection. The scarred back that Amy Denver calls a chokecherry tree--"Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves" (16)--is both the literal inscription of slavery's violence and a figure for the abject condition of the enslaved maternal body. Sethe herself has never seen her own back: the tree is, in the most precise sense, her abject--radically hers yet radically alien to her, carried on the part of her body she cannot perceive. The scar tissue is simultaneously the most intimate part of Sethe and the part most thoroughly belonging to another's violence.

The violation that produced the tree is structured by Kristeva's account of the abject at its most fundamental level: the theft of Sethe's milk. Sethe's account of this violation is one of the most harrowing moments in Morrison's novel:

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... Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. (Morrison 17)

In Kristevan terms, this is a violation of the most archaic boundary--the boundary between the maternal body and the infant, between the sustaining inside and the threatening outside. It is not "merely" physical assault; it is an attack on the material bond that constitutes the mother-infant dyad, the very relation that Kristeva identifies as the origin of subjectivity itself. The enslaved maternal body cannot be a proper body in Kristeva's sense--cannot maintain the *corps propre* (one's own clean

and proper body) through which the subject constitutes itself--because it is never its own.

Paul D's response to the scar stages a complex negotiation with the abject. His tactile attention to the tree, the tenderness with which he traces its contours, represents an attempt to restore to Sethe a form of bodily integrity she has been denied. Morrison writes that he tolerated no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of the chokecherry tree with his mouth (18). Yet this restoration is partial and melancholy. Sethe could not feel the touch because her back skin had been dead for years (18). The abject wound has produced a permanent zone of deadness in the body--a region where the living and the dead coexist--a condition that mirrors, at the level of flesh, the larger condition of 124 itself.

IV. Infanticide and the "Improper":

Sethe's Act in Kristevan Perspective

The central, shattering act of the novel--Sethe's killing of her infant daughter to prevent her recapture into slavery--is the event through which *Beloved*'s narrative is organised and towards which its various revelations converge. In Kristeva's

framework, the most extreme form of abjection is the abjection of self: the recognition that "impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject" (5). Sethe's infanticide might be read as precisely this recognition--an act in which she abjects the condition of slavery by abjecting the child who would be returned to it.

Yet this reading must be handled with care, for Sethe's act is not a simple embrace of abjection but a complex negotiation with competing claims of love and horror. Morrison is emphatic about the love that motivates the killing. Sethe tells Paul D: "I got to a place where I could love anything I chose--not to need permission for desire--well now, that was freedom" (162). The act of killing her daughter is, in Sethe's own account, the ultimate expression of this freedom--the refusal to let her child become the property of another. This is a love so total that it encompasses the destruction of its object. In Kristevan terms, this is precisely the logic of the maternal abject pushed to its extreme: the mother who abjects the other in order to preserve the

child becomes, through the very totalisation of her love, the agent of the child's destruction.

Kristeva writes that "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Sethe's act is precisely such a disturbance. It does not respect the border between love and violence, between preservation and destruction, between the maternal function and its negation. The community's response--which withdraws its sympathy and subjects Sethe to an isolation that long predates the narrative's present moment--registers the social character of this disturbance. Sethe has become the improper mother, the figure whose love is excessive and uncontainable, whose act transgresses the rules of both the white legal order and the black community's norms of survival.

Denver's ambivalent relationship to the story of her birth and her sister's death encodes this abjection at the level of kinship. She is the child who survived; she is also the child who was in Sethe's womb when the

killing happened, who is constituted by the very act that destroyed her sister. Morrison presents Denver as perpetually on the threshold--unable to enter the community that excludes her mother, unable fully to occupy the domestic space haunted by Beloved. She inhabits, structurally, the in-between position that Kristeva identifies as the abject condition.

V. Beloved's Body: The Living Corpse and the Return of the Abject

When Beloved returns in corporeal form, stepping out of the water and leaning against the gazebo, the novel enacts in the most literal sense Kristeva's account of the abject's refusal to stay expelled. Beloved is "the jettisoned object" that "does not cease challenging its master" (2)--the expelled child who comes back. Her embodiment is excessive, uncanny, and disturbingly intimate. She appears with "new skin, lineless and smooth" (50), with a hunger that is at once corporeal and psychic. She is, in the fullest sense of Kristeva's phrase, "an imaginary uncanniness and real threat" (4)--both the product of hallucination and an

actual presence that disrupts the social and domestic order.

The stream-of-consciousness monologue that constitutes Beloved's own interior voice is one of the most formally radical passages in Morrison's fiction and one of the most sustained literary enactments of the abject in the Anglophone tradition. The monologue dissolves the boundaries between subject and object, between self and other, between past and present, that normally constitute coherent subjectivity:

I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing... All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too. (Morrison 210)

This is the utterance of a subject who has not successfully abjected the maternal, who remains in the undifferentiated space of the pre-linguistic semiotic that Kristeva calls the *chora*. Beloved's language enacts what Kristeva describes as the borderline patient's

reduction of discourse to the state of a "pure signifier" (50), a language in which "sense does not emerge out of non-sense" but in which "non-sense runs through signs and sense" (50–51).

The specific content of *Beloved's* monologue is equally significant. It weaves together the experience of the Middle Passage with the experience of an infant waiting to be acknowledged by its mother. The monologue refuses to distinguish between these two registers, treating the trauma of the slave ship and the trauma of infanticide as continuous experiences. This refusal is itself an abject gesture: it violates the temporal and categorical orders that would separate historical trauma from personal grief, the collective from the individual, the past from the present. *Beloved* is, in this reading, the abject figure through which Morrison renders visible the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

Beloved's growing parasitism on Sethe--her consumption of Sethe's life force, her swelling body as Sethe wastes away--enacts the abject's most dangerous possibility. What was expelled returns not

merely to trouble the subject but to engulf it. Kristeva writes that the abject "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4), and this is precisely what happens as *Beloved's* presence becomes totalising. The community eventually intervenes, gathering to perform an exorcism that finally expels *Beloved* a second time. But the novel is careful to suggest that this second expulsion is no more final than the first. The penultimate pages, with their triple repetition of "This is not a story to pass on" (274–275), insist on the persistence of the abject even in its apparent disappearance.

VI. Racial Abjection and the Structures of Slavery

Beloved does not restrict its engagement with abjection to the level of the individual body or the domestic space. It also makes visible the structural dimensions of abjection--the way in which slavery constructed the enslaved person as the abject of American civil society. In this broader frame, the enslaved subject occupies the position of what Kristeva calls the abject: the entity that the dominant social order must expel in order to maintain its own

coherent identity, yet that it cannot entirely exclude because it depends upon the object's labour, presence, and embodiment.

The figure of Schoolteacher is particularly illuminating in this regard. His practice of measuring and classifying the bodies of the enslaved--assigning them "animal characteristics" and "human characteristics" in two separate columns of his notebook--represents a systematic project of abjection. He constitutes the enslaved as the in-between, the ambiguous, the neither-fully-human-nor-animal, in precisely the terms Kristeva associates with the object condition. His taxonomy does not simply describe; it produces. By classifying the enslaved as the composite of human and animal, Schoolteacher constructs them as constitutively improper, as bodies that trouble the category of the human and must therefore be subjected to special regulatory violence.

Paul D's experience in the chain gang at Alfred, Georgia extends the novel's engagement with racial abjection to the male enslaved body. The tobacco tin he constructs in his chest--the metaphor for the psychic

closure through which he protects himself from his own suffering--is an internal version of the object strategy: the expulsion of intolerable affect in order to maintain minimal subjectivity. The tin "rusted over" until nothing it held could have any force (113). This is abjection as survival strategy--not the expulsion of what is other, but the foreclosure of what is most intimately one's own, a self-abjection that enables survival at the cost of interiority. Baby Suggs's late-life retreat into the contemplation of colour represents a similar withdrawal from a world that has constituted her as radically object: her body has been the instrument of reproduction for the slave economy, and her withdrawal is the rational response of a subject for whom engagement with the symbolic order holds nothing but further violation.

VII. Morrison's Form as Object Practice

The formal dimensions of *Beloved* are inseparable from its thematic engagement with abjection. Morrison's prose does not merely describe a condition of boundary-dissolution; it enacts one. The novel's chronology is fractured and non-

linear, moving between the present of 1873, the recent past of Sethe's escape, and the more distant past of Sweet Home and the Middle Passage without clear demarcation. Memory and event, past and present, the living and the dead interpenetrate throughout the text in ways that mirror the abject's resistance to temporal and categorical order.

The proliferation of voices in the later sections of the novel--Sethe's, Beloved's, Denver's, and their intertwined stream--enacts at the level of narrative voice the dissolution of boundaries that abjection names. Kristeva describes the semiotic as a "rhythm" and "energy charge as well as psychical mark" that "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (*Revolution* 25). Morrison's prose in these passages is precisely semiotic in this sense--it is organised not by the logical and grammatical structures of the symbolic but by rhythmic repetition, affective intensity, and the pressure of drives that exceed the capacity of conventional language to contain them.

The novel's ending--with its elegiac, paradoxical insistence on forgetting the unforgettable--is itself an abject gesture. Beloved is expelled from the narrative just as she was expelled from life. Yet the act of expulsion is also the act of preservation: in being told not to be remembered, she is remembered. The abject, in Kristeva's account, "does not cease challenging its master" (2) from the place of its banishment. Morrison's formal strategy ensures that Beloved continues to challenge from precisely this place--that the expulsion the ending formally performs is continuously undone by the novel's own existence as a text.

Conclusion

Reading *Beloved* through the lens of Kristevan abjection reveals the novel's extraordinary coherence as a meditation on the costs and consequences of the violated body--maternal, racial, spectral. Morrison's ghost story is also a theory of subjectivity: an exploration of what it means for the subject to be constituted against an other that cannot be fully expelled, in a historical context where the very category of "subject"

was systematically denied to those whose labour and bodies built a nation. Kristeva's framework, developed in the European psychoanalytic tradition, here encounters its limits as much as its usefulness: the abjection Morrison describes is not a universal condition of subject-formation but a specific historical violence, one structured by the institutions of chattel slavery and their long aftermath.

Beloved shows what Kristeva's theory illuminates and what it cannot fully account for--the ways in which abjection is not merely a psychic event but a political one, not merely an archaic structure of the subject but a condition produced and maintained by specific social arrangements. The novel suggests that the abject can be reclaimed, not by denying its horror but by insisting, as Morrison's prose insists throughout, on the humanity of those who have been made to inhabit it. This is the work that *Beloved* performs: not the resolution of abjection but its witness, its mourning, and its transformation into an art that refuses the clean borders of form just as

its subject refused the clean borders that slavery attempted to impose on the self.

Beloved ends where abjection begins--at the threshold between speech and silence, between memory and forgetting, between the self and the other that cannot be expelled. In occupying this threshold, Morrison's novel becomes what Kristeva calls, in her final definition, the only signified of abjection: literature itself.

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