

Sites of Memory in *Beloved*: A Postcolonial Perspective

Navneet Sethi

There was a house in the village Vijah, near the city of Lahore in Pakistan. I have seen the nooks and crannies of this house, touched the warmth of the sun, heard the call of the morning bird in this very house. I know this house very well even though I have never lived in it. This is actually the house which witnessed the birth of my father, raised him here till the year 1947. The events of 1947 cleaved a nation in two and fragmented the lives of millions of people like my father, who were torn apart from the ‘places’, the sites of their experiences which would gradually be congealed as the “sites of memory” in the postcolonial years. Fed over many years on the experienced warmth of the house, that life lived by my father until the age of 16, I have seen my own hunger grow to nourish the demands of my own imagination ... so much so that the house that has grown in my mind has been touched, ornamented by the citing creativity of my imagination.

The process of handing me the ‘bits and pieces’ of his childhood energized me enough to ‘construct’ in my mind ‘a site of my father’s lived in memory’ which is unique enough to be mine as well as collective enough to echo the feelings of millions, who though they gained freedom from the yoke of British imperialism actually lost their homes ... homes which live on as sites of memory, having a life of their own inspiring creative overtures through the process of citing them. The citing of the site of memory through the medium of language significantly tantamounts to actually recreating the ‘site’ anew, possibly in a more enduring form layered within the scaffolding of words.

A major feature of postcolonial literature is:

the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special postcolonial crisis comes into being, the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. The dialectics of place and displacement are always a feature of postcolonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention or a mixture of two. (Ashcroft, 1)

Elleke Bohemer, in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures*, defines postcolonial literature as:

that which critically scrutinises the colonial relationship. It is a writing

that which sets out in one way or other to resist colonial perspective. As well as a change in power, decolonisation demanded symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writer sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization-the myths of power, the race classification, the imagery of subordination ... that condition in which colonized people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise as historical subjects. (2)

In any initiative that I take to cite the ‘house in Pakistan’, the site of memory lodged in my father, I would be engaged in a revisionist act of resistance and would naturally be creating a “palimpsest, a kind of parchment on which successive generations will and would have inscribed and reinscribed the process of history”, which is postcolonial in content and form (Ashcroft, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 346). In as much as my act of citing the site would unravel the relationship between my father and the house, the site determined by the events of the Partition of India and the bloody aftermath in 1947, my creative overture would be postcolonial to the core. The memory inlaid into the site would be aligned with the active agency of the citation itself and would create a postcolonial textual site unique as well as a creative heirloom in its own right.

Singh and Schmidt in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature* suggest that, “because of its current position of power and the neo-colonizing role it has played, the postcolonial nature of the U.S has generally not been recognized”... its “relationship with the metropolitan center as is evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for postcolonial literatures everywhere” (3). Further, Singh and Schmidt observe,

while the U.S. defined itself as the world’s first independent and anti colonial nation state it simultaneously incorporated many of the defining features of the European colonial networks... the U.S. may be understood to be world’s first postcolonial and neo-colonial country. Anti-slavery resistance at its founding worked to secure an economy that thrived by appropriating the labor of racially defined ‘aliens’ not allowed the ‘inalienable rights of full citizenship’. The founding fathers were caught in a constant refusal to acknowledge the conflicts between slavery and nation’s democratic ideals. (4)

Margaret Atwood’s phrase, “home grown literature” embraces literatures in the U.S. that seriously “look within themselves and without and are engaged in exploring issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class from the perspective of U.S.

studies as well as the transnational focus of postcolonial studies as well” (Singh and Schmidt, *Postcolonial Theory*, 18).

Colonization was finally a struggle for supremacy, for control of markets, nations, people and creativity. Consequently, “the process of ‘othering’, fundamental to colonization created alienation of vision and crisis in self image produced by displacement” (Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back*, 9). Therefore Denver’s exasperation, “how come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it? Look like it was so sweet you would have stayed”, (*Beloved*, 13) voices the post postcolonial descendant’s absence of bonding emerging out of a realization of one’s absence from the site of experience and without being experimentally displaced, feeling piquantly the gap within the self where the connection should have been.

The gap, which opens between the experience of place and the language available for describing it, forms a classic and all pervasive feature of postcolonial texts. And this is where the “site of memory” for Sethe, which is Sweet Home, is articulated as a shared collective legacy and viewed as a ‘thought picture’ for Denver, whose ‘part in the story’, the one that ‘she loved best’, began after she fled Sweet Home running to her children and to hold them as wide as she could in the ‘circle’ of her arms. Sethe tells Denver,

... Some things go. Some things pass on. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Others things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down its gone but the place—the picture of it stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world... even if I die, the picture of what I did or know or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. Someday, you will be walking down the road and you hear something or hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think its you thinking it up... no... it’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real it’s never going away. Even if the whole farm, every tree and every blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more if you go there, you who was never there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was it will happen again, it will be there waiting for you. (*Beloved*, 36)

Even as I know that, that house of my father in the neighbouring country, Pakistan, may not actually be there but if I was to go to that place, and someone would point out the place to me, the transferred inherited energies would ‘suffuse’ the pictures in my mind of the house. Those pictures would be about the same

place but the process of those pictures being cited for me by my father, I citing them all over again the “site of memory” that existed and the “site” created through creative synergy would acquire a uniqueness and a doubleness created through an act of language. The theory of place in postcolonial discourse,

does not simply propose binary separation between the ‘place’ named and described in language and some ‘real’ place inaccessible to it, but rather indicates that in some sense, place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process. The sense of lack of fit between language and place is that which creates the rationale to construct a new language, that which is equipped to ‘cite’ the “site of memory. By ‘place’ we do not simply mean ‘landscape.’ Place in postcolonial discourse is a complex interaction of history, languages and environment. (Ashcroft’s *The Postcolonial Studies*, 391)

The dynamic of naming becomes a primary colonizing mode because it appropriates, defines and captures the place in language. And yet the very process of naming opens the wider epistemological gap which it is designed to fill, for the dynamic mystery of language becomes a groping step into the reality of place, not simply reflecting or representing, but in some mysterious sense involved in the creation of the place, of its coming into being. Citing or ‘naming’ is crucial to highlight the significance of the site embedded in the memory as a site that has been lived and as a site that has been passed on to be cited as posterity. Naming is crucial in the postcolonial context as a rejoinder to the naming of the colonized slave by the colonizing Sweet Home owners and the schoolteacher’s ferocious attempt to list the human and animal characteristics of the human piece of property.

Sethe flinched at the idea of her children being subjected to naming by the schoolteacher, “so she collected every bit of life that she had made” (*Beloved*, 163) and ran. The fatal hand that fell on the crawling already daughter of Sethe was in many ways also an agonized resistance to the ‘heads’ of “Sixty Million and more” who perished in the Middle Passage.

In dedicating her novel *Beloved* to Sixty Million, Morrison situates the novel as a resounding indestructible site of collective memory that courses through the veins of the community and the action. If a novel is the monument, a memorial constructed by Toni Morrison, then Sethe’s efforts to give all that she had to procure the words, “Dearly Beloved”, on the pink headstone of her slain “crawling already” daughter is a heart wrenching memorial. *Beloved*’s site, her ‘unnamed grave’ needed to be cited. It had to be cited to make her come into existence. ‘Dearly Beloved’—the words uttered and *Beloved* emerged out of the dark,

formless caverns of the past, rose from within the recesses of the grave, emerged from the waters as if she had been waiting to cross the ‘bridge’ where she had been left behind during the historic, tumultuous passage of human cargo, of life’s passage into death itself.

When the word was uttered and filled the environment, some ‘form’ was created, some ‘inscription’ made. Citing of the memory ensured that Beloved, “the dismembered, unaccounted for, who had no claim” (*Beloved*, 274) was actually Dearly Beloved if for no one else but for her mother Sethe. In refusing to be content with the ‘nameless’ grave for her slain daughter, Sethe engages in a markedly postcolonial act of resistance by ‘naming’ her, by ‘citing’ her ‘nameless’ ‘site’ into existence.

This is a significant postcolonialist concern in which the *place* comes into being, place here being the concretization of the memory and a grudging acknowledgement of the history to that place, the interaction therefore being between language, history and environment that creates the place, the site within the postcolonial critical discourse. The words, ‘Dearly Beloved’ created ripples in the collective unconscious of the past, of the nation out of which rose a ‘fully dressed woman’, the one whom ‘everybody forgot because it was not wise to remember her’ (*Beloved*, 274). She rose from the waters creasing the placid tranquillity of the river and shaking the nation out of a sense of self-complacency. The unmarked grave of Beloved was actually the unmarked site of the unaccounted history/ past of the nation. And Dearly Beloved is Sethe’s efforts to give voice to the conveniently forgotten betrayal enacted towards the ideals of liberty enshrined in the encouraging choric voices of the founding fathers, and the brutal treachery carried out on the “crawling already” daughter waiting for the wide embrace and ready milk of her mother, Sethe.

The widened embrace that Sethe spoke of to Paul D to signify her oozing need to bring milk to her waiting daughter reveals the experienced truth of Sweet Home. The truth that slavery sucked the life out of men and women had another dimension as Sethe reminds Paul D, “But maybe you don’t know what it was like for me to get away from there”. Paul D realizes, “her price was greater than his, property reproduced itself without cost” (*Beloved*, 267). Postcolonial discourse has consistently seen connections between the condition of the colonized, and the marginalization of women, especially women of colour. Sethe widens her arms and when she says, “this wide” to Paul D, she is possibly trying to embrace the different trajectories of the same experience and merge them together. Sethe entrusting Paul D decides that “her story was wearable because it was his as well to tell, refine and to tell again” (*Beloved*, 72) and

which is why for Sethe the act of citing the site of her memory had more to do with gathering the strands together in the ‘wide’ embrace and enclose them within the circle of her life.

Round and round the room. Past the jelly cupboard, past the front door. Paul D sat at the dining table watching her drift from the view, then disappear behind his back, turning like a slow but steady wheel. Sometimes she crossed her hands behind her back, the wheel never stopped. (*Beloved*, 159)

Though her children, the ‘circle of her life’ were unsafe at Sweet Home, still the place was a site of memory for Sethe and it would remain that for her. The ‘spinning around’ was not a gesture to weave in life again but the “movement of circling. Circling, gnawing at something else instead of getting to the point... the circle that she was making around the room, around him, the subject would remain one” (*Beloved*, 163). In fact, the site of Sweet Home’s memory was so painful that, “she was circling around, never coming to the point” (*Beloved*, 162). The “gnawing” at was actually postponing the actual moment of the gruesome revelation of the consecration of her back as the enduring parchment bearing the hideous script of slavery, the ‘keeping at bay’ of the final moment of recognition that had been kept in abeyance by Paul D when he had said that, “that ain’t her mouth” (*Beloved*, 154). The citing of Sweet Home by Sethe in a circular motion highlighted the underlying reality of the doubly marginalized situation of the female slave and Sweet Home. Denver’s exasperation at Sweet Home as the site of memory that excluded herself, moves to a point where she realizes that between Sethe and *Beloved*, “somebody had to be saved”. This reckoning is a far cry from the petulant Denver who ‘loved’ to tell’ only the part of the story where she could step into and ‘retell again the journey of Sethe from Sweet Home to her children. Through the act of ‘citing’ the ‘memory’ of the moment of her birth, Denver recovers and reclaims her freed self again and again.

The sheer force and skill of language creates in the reader a willing sense to be ushered into believing Denver, “as she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window” (*Beloved*, 29). Here is the undeniable instance of how actually in the process of telling, in the very moment of citing is the site of memory created.

It may not exist a moment prior to the act of citing but it acquires a presence, a forming of the very formation of worlds till the non-existing ‘place’ in the forest where Sethe meets Amy. It was not as if the site never existed. It was a moment lived by Sethe and then stowed away in the archives of memory.

The postcolonial discourse is echoed here in as much place itself is a flux and is created through language. This dimension of postcolonial condition is evident in Denver's interjection and creation by the act of citing a site that was simultaneously Sethe's as well as Denver's.

...there was only one door to the house and to get to it from the back you had to walk all the way around to the front of 124, past the storeroom, past the cold hose, the privy, she, and to get to the story she liked best, she had to start way back, hear the birds in the thick woods, the crunch of leaves underfoot, see her mother making her way up into the hills. (*Beloved*, 29)

It is significant how language changes its form here, from a description that physically propels the reader to the 'lace', the shift is towards a moment when all the senses are engaged to feel, see, hear, taste and smell the moment of Sethe running into the white girl, Amy, on her swollen feet. The citing creates a site of memory in a classic example which highlights Denver not only as a passive recipient but as an active agent involved through the enterprise of 'citing' to create the site that she would want to remember, somewhat akin to Toni Morrison's goal to write the books that she wanted to read.

I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginalised already and completely known and knowable in my work. (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 9)

In her relationship with *Beloved*, it is Denver who finally becomes the agent for claiming, appropriating the past, which is *Beloved's*, the unclaimed one. She chooses to 'tell' *Beloved* what was experienced by Sethe and in the act of telling, in the act of citing, Denver creates a compelling bond because of the creativity innate to it that could recapitulate the site by citing it. Denver in citing the site not only creates a memorial to the memory of that site, but also makes Denver a creative agent to generate newer memorials of free selves. The strategic narrative actually gives scope to the reader to enter into the narrative, to empathise with it, be bonded with it, and in the process of telling and retelling it, create a site of memory that is paradigmatic of most postcolonial literatures. The effort is to create a narrative that rejects the colonizer's control over experience and the languages to control it.

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it through *Beloved*. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more details that she

provided the more Beloved liked it. Denver spoke and Beloved listened and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe know because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterwards to shape it. (*Beloved*, 78)

Denver through the process of citing created not only new site of memory for Sethe, but importantly brought together Beloved and Sethe, all that the past and the present meant to each other. They had experienced the site of Sweet Home but it was the creative negotiation with the site by Denver that an enduring textual memorial could be created. Denver in her postcolonial condition ensures that the site of memory lives on beyond Sethe, beyond Belovedthrough the act of citing it and passing it on....my father's house lives in me...and maybe one day I will visit the site of his memory with him in Vijah, Sargodha district in Pakistan.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text" ('De l'œuvre au texte', *Revue d'esthétique* 3, 1971), trans. Stephen Heath, in Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp 155-64. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Routledge, 1989.
- . *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge, 1995.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
- . *Beloved*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Singh, Amritjit and Peter Schmidt. eds. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature*, University of Mississippi Press, 2000

— * —