To Forget or not to Forget: The Dilemmas of Denver
in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
T. S. Eliot

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Abstract

In Toni Morrison’s Beloved, the past, the present, and the future of the characters are interrelated, and this interrelation has a deep impact on the characters of the novel, namely, Sethe, and Denver. This study focuses on the character of Denver, and how she struggles to overcome the bitterness of the past in search for a brighter future. The study traces the development of Denver in her attempts to pave a better future for herself and an entire generation of African-American women.

Key Words: the past, the present, the future, ethnicity, feminism, oppression, ethnic cultural feminism.

For a part of my life in the past, I was a teacher of English as a Second Language, teaching English grammar for upper-secondary classes. It was my responsibility to explain to my students the differences between the past, the present, and the future verb tenses. I gave them examples from everyday life; then, I provided them with definitions: The simple past tense refers to an action that began in the past and ended in the past. (Murphy 22). The simple present tense refers to a scientific fact, a habitual action, or an action that is happening at the moment of speech (Murphy 4). The simple future tense refers to an action that will take place at some point in the future (Murphy 14). However, upon reading Toni Morrison’s Beloved, I look back at the definitions fixed in my mind, and I tell myself that these definitions do not make sense and do not apply to the lives of people presented in the novel. In the novel, the past certainly does not refer to an action that began in the past and ended in the past. On the contrary, the past affects the present and may control the future. Thus, the three tenses become interrelated concepts that are mutually dependent: there is no present without a past and there cannot be any future without a present and a past.

This study focuses on the character of Denver, as the daughter of Sethe, and how she understands the past, handles it, and tries (though sometimes fails) to obliterate it. This study also compares and contrasts the past, its impact, its representation, and its
significance on Denver and Sethe. How can Denver’s treatment of the past serve to show that oppression of women is in the process of being put to an end? Where exactly is Denver operating in terms of the many definitions and branches of feminism? Bell Hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexist oppression” (26). Elaine Showalter points out in “Toward a Feminist Poetics” that it is self-conscious interest in and celebration of the values, beliefs, ideas, and behavior uniquely, or traditionally characteristic of women (131). Ethnicity adds to Denver’s uniqueness of position. She is not only limited as a woman, but she is also speaking on behalf of a repressed minority ethnic group who have been brutally wronged. This is what Carolyn Denard calls as “ethnic cultural feminism” which she defines as “a feminism that encourages allegiance to rather than an alienation from an ethnic group” (172). Morrison’s portrayal of Denver combines her concern for both feminism and ethnicity. Denver has been weakened by the damages she has received from Sethe. However, Denver does not allow these negative experiences to be haunting. With the aid of the ethnic community, she gets rid of the haunting ghost of the past.

Throughout the novel, we watch Denver trying to free herself of the horrors of the past. The past, to Denver, as well as to all other black characters, is traumatic, dreadful, and bitter. But Denver is determined in her attempt to live on without giving the past more than its due, even though she herself is hurt by it. In handling the past, she concerns herself only with what she wants to know of it, not what it actually includes: “Denver stopped and sighed. This was the part of the story she loved. She was coming to it now, and she loved it because it was all about herself” (77). Denver tries to overlook the past and take from it only what concerns her; at the same time, she senses that she is, after all, a prisoner of the past. The past is haunting her, blocking her future, and locking her up: “I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either” (14).

The past Denver is locked up in is not her own, but her family’s, especially her mother’s. Denver is a victim not of her own past, but of the past of her mother, of the blacks, and of slavery. She feels she needs to break free because she is paying the price of past events in which she neither participated nor planned. She understands that her mother’s past was horror-stricken but regards it only as the past of her mother, relating it to herself only when she wants to. In this way, Denver succeeds in living in the present, seeking a future for herself.

But what is the present situation of Denver? Her present is caught in between the past and the future. The past can never be left behind because it is a record of the legacy of slaves and it chronicles the life of her mother, with the dreadful crime she commits against Beloved and would have committed against Denver had she not been saved. Similarly, the future cannot let go of the past. The present of Denver is filled with
apprehensions, yet it is also filled with hope. In the present, she adapts herself to living with the ghost:

Denver had taught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped on them; the assumption that the haunting was done by an evil looking for more. None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment of not suspecting but knowing the things behind things. Her brothers had known, but it scared them; Grandma Baby knew it, but it saddened her. None could appreciate the safety of ghost company: Even Sethe didn’t love it. (37)

Being able to accept the ghost (which represents the horrors of the past), Denver seeks a better present. This is very evident in the fact that Denver takes the first step of unlocking herself from the past by being courageous enough to leave, even temporarily, 124 and seek what is outside. She realizes that there is a life outside:

Once upon a time she had known more and wanted to. Had walked the path leading to a real other house. Has stood outside the window listening. Four times she did it on her own—crept away from 124 early in the afternoon when her mother and grandmother had their guard down. . . Denver had walked off looking for the house other children visited but not her. (101-102)

Yet, afraid of the haunted past, “she was too timid to go to the front door so she peeped in the window” (102). But wanting so desperately to live in the real, present world, she finally walks in and: “. . . she had almost a whole year of the company of her peers and along with them learned to spell and count. . . . [T]hose two hours in the afternoon were precious to her. Especially so because she had done it on her own” (102 emphasis mine). When she finally seeks a better present, the past interrupts one more time by reappearing, causing the pleasurable hours to come to an end when a boy innocently asks about her past. The result is that “she never went back” (102).

The future of Denver is presented with glimpses of hope, despite the interference of the past and the present. This is seen towards the end of the novel when Denver returns to the light of hope she once had in educating herself, and consequently, being able to earn a living by herself. She returns to seek the aid of Mrs. Jones again. Because of her optimism for a better future, “Denver’s outside life improved” (250), and she is now “ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch” (243). She comes to a full understanding that, if you give in to the grip of the past, you cannot go on. The future Denver seeks is a future free of slavery, free of ignorance, free of dependence, and above all, free of self-hatred. In freeing herself from self-hatred, Denver carries out the message Baby Suggs advocates—accepting and loving yourself are the first steps towards freedom and a better future:
Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes. . . . Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! . . . This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. (88)

Baby Suggs had an eye for the future and her advice is implemented in “the third generation” (252) represented by Denver. The second generation represented by Sethe could not have followed the advice of the first generation represented by Baby Suggs because the past is too present to be erased. In this way, the words of Baby Suggs serve as an encouragement for Denver, and the black women community at large, to strive to be subjects rather than defined objects.

To Denver, the past is bitter, the present is better, and in the future, hope lies for a good life. Love of the self is the first step Denver needs in order to survive. She knows herself, realizes that she will always be black, and that she will always be the daughter of Sethe; then, she goes on with her life. Denver’s strength and courage, I believe, help her make her way through difficulties. “The third generation” is free now, and is ready, willing, and able to live a life free of oppression and slavery because of strong and willful blacks such as Denver. Yet, it remains to say that even though Denver decides to move ahead with her new way of life, she will never be rid of apprehensions and worries:

I love my mother but I know that she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it. . . . I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don’t know what it is, I don’t know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to do it again. (205)

She will always be in danger, whether it is from her mother or from “outside the house” (205). But the way she manages to confront these fears by leaving 124 and leaving all that is behind it is what makes Denver a winner. She concludes that it is wise for one to think about the past and to learn from it, but it is not wise for one to be in the past. She also believes that it is wise to think about the future and prepare for it, but it is not wise to let dreams of the future possess and control her, realizing there are still many obstacles in the way.

The impact of the past on Sethe is much stronger than it is on Denver. On Sethe, it is a direct impact brought about by a direct memory. On Denver, the past is indirectly being passed on to her. Therefore, Sethe is more attached to the past than Denver ever is, although Denver drinks the past along with all its miseries through Sethe: “I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk” (205). The present and the future of Sethe all reverse and turn back to the past. She has no life but the past. She admits how locked
she is in her past to the extent that she feels that "whatever is going on outside [her] door ain't for her. The world is in this room. This here all there is and all there needs to be" (183). Unlike Denver who decides not to be in the past, Sethe relives the past and makes it all her life. Gurleen Grewal notes that "it takes Sethe eighteen years before she stops to linger over the crevices in the self, and when she does, they engulf her. Remembering makes Sethe lose herself in the past and lose her job" (102). After being freed, Sethe does not realize that it is time to let bygones be bygones. And unlike Ella, who “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (256), Sethe “didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused” (252). Sethe is tormenting herself by not giving way to forgetfulness nor forgiveness and by letting memory control her entire life. She is not a free black woman because she is dominated by memory. According to Denver, it is time to forget and time to look positively to the present and the future, but, in Sethe’s case, she feels that the horrors of the past need to be told and retold to remind the coming generations of the trauma they have suffered as black slaves.

According to Roger Luckhurst, the difference between Sethe and Denver is that Denver wants to remember to forget, whereas Sethe impossibly wants to forget to remember; therefore, Morrison uses the term “to disremember” (275) which Luckhurst explains as “a term that clashes together both recall and an active forgetting of that recall” (250). This is clear in Sethe’s words: “think about all I ain’t got to remember no more” (182) as she brings herself to list, in detail, all the memories that can now be forgotten. Luckhurst explains, “for memories to be disremembered involves a paradoxical act of simultaneous recall and erasure, one that sustains both effects” (250).

Luckhurst’s idea of recall and erasure and their interrelationship is held in the ambivalent term towards the end of the novel: “It was not a story to pass on” (275). Where is the stress in the phrasal verb “pass on”? Does it mean that it was not a story to pass on, i.e. to forget or die, or does it mean that it was not a story to pass on, i.e. to remember or to hand to generations? I believe that Morrison meant both, represented by Denver and Sethe. To Denver, it was not a story to pass on. On a larger scale, the story of Sethe needs both to be forgotten yet remembered—forgotten to enable the succeeding generations of living a peaceful life, yet remembered to remind the human race of the miseries of slavery. Luckhurst concludes his argument by suggesting: “Morrison ends in a closure that affirms the possibility of a life freed from melancholic seizure, but also leaves open, as a gesture of the impossibility of ever finally working through a mourning that . . . cannot end” (251).

Besides showing the dilemmas and the unforgettable traumas of the African-Americans in the novel, Morrison, through the character of Denver, suggests positive ways to help African American women establish new and fruitful beginnings. Elizabeth House emphasizes this idea commenting: “one of the author’s central themes is that humans, to live meaningfully, must create a balance between the order and disorder in
their lives” (27). The disorder in Denver’s life is history. She is aware that if she were to remain history-conscious, she could never create order in her life and find herself, as a Black woman, a position in the world. Therefore, she tries to fashion a coherent, productive life for herself by letting go of the ghost of the past. Sethe, on the other hand, dwindles because she never lets go of the stubborn trace of history deployed by the ghost:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in a chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (250)

Even towards the end of the novel, Sethe remains skeptical about the future, always looking at the dark side because of the deep imprint of the past. When Paul Doptimistically suggests a new beginning, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273), Sethe, not yielding to giving in to any kind of hope, pessimistically replies, “Me? Me?” (273) not even giving way to a slight ray of hope to come into her life after all that she has suffered. The past is not something to leave behind.

Denver is celebrated in the novel because she is the only one who tries to let go of the past in search for a brighter future. Denver has a long way ahead of her but has the potential to be one of the heroines of “ethnic cultural feminism” in her allegiance to her group, but more importantly, in freeing herself from being an enslaved woman wrapped up in the past. She puts an end to the oppression of the ghost with the help of the people around her. In this way, “Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression” (Denard 172). Denver’s evolution to freedom, along with all the paradoxes and ambivalence it entails, is a central issue in the novel, signifying that there are some black women out there that can pave the way for a new beginning. Denver is an example of such a woman. She realizes that it is time to look forward instead of looking back, and this is what makes her the winner in Beloved.
أن ننسى أو لا ننسى: المعضلات التي تواجهها شخصية دنفر في رواية توني موريسون/محبوبة
غادة سعف
ملخص
ماضي وحاضر ومستقبل الشخصيات في رواية توني موريسون/محبوبة. عناصر متتابعة، وهذا الترابط يؤثر على الشخصيات في الرواية، وبشكل خاص على شخصيتها سوث ودنفر. تركز هذه الدراسة على شخصية دنفر وعلى صراعها في محاولتها التغلب على مأساة الماضي بحثًا عن مستقبل أكثر إشراقًا تتبع الدراسة تطور شخصية دنفر وكيف تمهل نفسها والمرأة الأفريقية الأمريكية مستقبلاً أفضل.
الكلمات مفتاحية: الماضي، الحاضر، المستقبل، العرق، النسوية، ظلم واضطهاد، الحركة النسوية الثقافية العرقية
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