



Language, History and Culture in Bessie Head's *a Question of Power*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sembéne Ousmane's *Tribal Marks*

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ABSTRACT

Language, culture and history in a given text are regulated by the episteme of time the author endeavours to recreate. The paper sets out to establish through the theory of New Historicism, that a text is a social document that reflects and responds to the historical situation. It also asserts that the interpretation of a text will be incomplete without its relationship to the various episteme of the discourse, which include the language, culture, and history. Through the interrelationship between language culture and history we have established homosexuality and other forms of perversions in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*; Sethe's infanticide in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Amoo's murder of his wife and his scarifying of his daughter in Sembéne Ousmane's *Tribal Marks*. On the whole we agree with the New Historicists that the text's meaning reside in the cultural system composed of the interlocking discourses of the author: social rules and dictates, and the historical situations as evidenced in a text.

INTRODUCTION

Through language and thought, each period in history develops its own perceptions concerning the nature of reality or what it defines as truth, and sets up its own standards of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In addition it sets up its criteria for judging what it deems good or bad, and what groups of people articulate, protect, and define as the yardstick whereby all established truths, values, and actions are deemed desirable or undesirable. New Historicists call these values "episteme", which are 'found in a variety of discourses – artistic, social, political ... in which people think and talk about their world. ... How these various discourses interact in any given historical period is not random but is dependent upon a unifying principle or pattern' (Bressler 131). The historian must piece together the various discourses and these interconnections among themselves and with any cultural institutions such as a form of government, what Foucault call

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'nondiscursive practices' (Bressler131), to articulate the episteme under investigation. The New Historicists view 'history, culture and language as the competing social codes and forces that mold a given society, and literature as a social discourse' (Bressler131), the trio is the battleground for these conflicting beliefs, actions, and customs.

Through the theory of New Historicism, we will investigate the various epistemes as we focus on language, culture and history as necessary background materials for a valued discussion of works of art, (culture in action) (Bressler:135). Our examination will be limited to Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (*A Question*), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sembene Ousmane's *Tribal Marks*.

In interrogating a 'culture in action', the New Historicists assume that language plays a major role. It shapes and is shaped by these conflicting beliefs, actions, and customs and the culture that uses it. For the New Historicists language is not just the spoken words. It includes 'discourse, writing, literature, social actions, and any social relationship whereby a person or a group imposes their ideas or actions upon another' (Bressler 133). Language then shapes history and culture and connects the episteme. In *A Question of Power*, *Beloved* and *Tribal Marks*, the language is that of violence, the burden of the haves upon the haves-not, the high up over the low down, the language of the definers upon the defined, the language of evil over good. On the whole, the language is that of imposition.

Language

In Head's *A Question*, the language of the 'gods' are principally evil – the language of brutal sex, violent death and vicious maiming. Elizabeth experiences are nightmarish. Her tormentors possess and perfect the instrument of destroying or dehumanizing fellow human beings. Medusa, one of the 'gods' and a lesbian openly prides herself with her destructive powers. After lynching of some blacks, Medusa boldly declares, 'I willed it. I know no other life. From me flows the dark stream of terror and destruction' (92). When a 'god image' boasts of the evil she unleashes on humans (her supposed creation), what then can man do?

Dan another god image combines the language of perversions with direct cruelty as an instrument of torture against Elizabeth, with the sole purpose of either dehumanizing or destroying her permanently. He moves from sexual assault to mental rape by continually bashing Elizabeth's head and exploding her into 'a thousand fragments of fiery darkness' (119). He smashes her inner will, and manipulates her as his stooge. He parades his 'nice-time girls' naked, as chain-gang slaves; hauls them against each other; while they sheepishly confess their potentials for evil' (119). This is morally offensive and spiritually degenerative. It robs persons of their individuality, conscience, imagination, and destroys communal values and ideas. Dan's social action is the language of the powerful over the powerless. Elizabeth's

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birth, childhood and adulthood, are narrations of woes, desolation, despair, agony and discontent even in the hands of the societal 'gods', their agents and almost the whole community. She grows up in a beer parlour where they cater for soldiers and their prostitutes:

There was awful roar of commotion going on all day ...Hours and hours of her childhood had been spent sitting under a lamp-post near her house, crying because everyone was drunk and there was no food, no one to think about children (15-16).

The environment of abuse and starvation informs Elizabeth whole existence. Soldiers, prostitutes and hunger represent the language of physical and moral violence.

The language of slavery in *Beloved* can be said to be that of 'cultural anarchy,' defined by signs written with whips, fires, and ropes. It is this discourse that is literally inscribed on Sethe's back. After putting Sethe's pregnant stomach in a hole in the ground (to save the unborn slave), Schoolteacher lashes her back, creating a 'chokeberry tree' there. He milks her like a cow, and defines her as 'an animal without memory'. Aside from the quality of oppression that black men and women suffer as slaves, black women suffer even more. They are routinely subjected to rape, enforced child-birth, natal alienation from their children because they are valued as breeders and not as mothers. The physical abuse is humiliating, but the added emotional pain of a mother is devastating.

Through the narrative, the hard language of the institution of slavery is heard: Sethe's mother is hanged; Sixo is burned alive then shot; Paul F is sold, Paul A, mutilated beyond recognition, swings from the trees of Sweet Home farm. And with the ink that Sethe makes, School teacher notes and with scientific detachment the animal-like characteristics of Sweet Home's slaves as he subjects them to his own interpretation – measuring and dissecting them. The theft of Sethe's milk and the appropriation of Sethe's ink by schoolteacher is a situation where in Anne Goldman's words: 'both the body and the word become co-modified texts upon which the white man makes his mark' (Grewal: 100). The bodies of these characters become the texts on which the powers of the word or whip are inscribed.

Schoolteacher collars and silences the slaves' voices with iron bits like 'the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle' (Psalm 32:9). He values the Blacks as mules or horses, he bits and bridles them that their voices and their languages, culture and history will not be heard or known, he also sees them as fools as he applies the rod on them ever so often. Harriet Jacobs laments: 'to be a slave is to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another' (60). Blacks are simply treated as beasts of burden.

Two discordant languages emerge from the haunted No. 124 Bluestone Road, ever since Sethe killed her baby rather than let her be taken back to slavery. Sethe's action language predicates the language of the ghost of *Beloved* now spoiling for revenge over her violent and premature death, on

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one hand, and a counter language of slaves since their lips are sealed. Rafael Perez-Torres comments,

Those who live with the absence of power reserve to themselves the persistent practice of decoding and recoding signs. The result is that the texts on which the masters have inscribed one meaning reinscribe those self-same signs and have them signify something new. The master's text becomes the subject rather than the object of language, a master of rather than a slave to discourse (99).

Sethe, in a language that is controlled by that episteme 'reinscribes' her very uncompromising sign-language 'and have them signify something new'. Sethe marks her baby with a most profound form of inscription. She draws a handsaw across her throat. Sethe identifies with the power to name which goes with the power to mark. Such a person reacts to a socially defined status by using his or her deviance as Edwin Lemert postulates 'as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the initial societal definition of him or her as deviant' (Feagin/Feagin:297). Sethe's identity, circumscribed by these 'scientific' practices, is subject to the effects of Schoolteacher's discourse of her as 'an animal.' The treatment she receives as an object of discourse transforms her into an object of violence. The slave-holding community for which Schoolteacher represents symbolizes the distortions of language.

Sethe exacts on the New Historicists' idea of language as: 'social relationship whereby a person or a group imposes their ideas or actions upon another' (113). Though Sethe imposes her actions upon her innocent daughter but she denies the white definer this imposition. She argues 'whites may dirty me all right', she could 'never let it happen to her own' (251). Sethe's 'thick love' language for her children depicts defiance of traditional conceptions of motherhood. To love a child enough to take its life redefines the language of motherhood from the perspective of a slave. The controlling episteme allows Sethe to break all social norms and values that bind the family and society together.

In Sembene Ousmane's *Tribal Marks*, Momutu the 'uncontested leader' of the slave-hunters, like Schoolteacher becomes 'a master of language'. With his men he roams and raids the Savanna taking able-bodied people as prisoners whom he sells to the whites, and collects 'iron bars' (44). The captives are also bartered for the slave traders' other wares like: 'barrels of brandy, crate of knives, and boxes full of glass beads, silk, parasols and gaudy dress of doubtful quality' (45). The prisoners are herded together and guarded by pickets. Their feet and hand shackled. All through the night one hears their whispering and weeping punctuated by the vicious switch of the lash. In an attempt for the ship cooper to escape, he throws himself into the sea 'the black men down in the canoes grabbed him and pierced him with a lance' (41). Momutu batters the psyche of his people and compromises their life for vanity. He intones: 'I warn you that you are my prisoners. The moment one of you tries to escape or commit suicide; I'll get hold of his neighbour and cut his skin to shreds...' (43). Death awaits these ones for

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their actions and inactions. All members of the society share the same value system. However, since members of the society are placed in different positions in the social structure, they differ in terms of class and position; they do not have the same opportunity of realizing the shared value. Momutu, as the Whiteman's stooge therefore, one of the powerful members of this racial group, now stands as a demarcator of language for the weaker members of this society. Momutu sells his people for vanity but his health does not increase, he and his people become reproach, a scorn and derision to the white man.

In the face of these raids, Amoo also painfully speaks his counter language as he kills his wife 'that she might be free' (53), he rationalizes. Like Sethe in *Beloved*, the language Amoo uses to mark his wife is a language of evil and the violence inherent in this culture. He perceives that, by killing his wife, he keeps her safe from the dehumanization of slavery. Again as the slavers close in on Amoo, his only daughter Lomé, and his mother-in-law, Amoo keeping daughter Lomé, tightly wedged between his muscular legs, swears, 'No ... Lomé, you are going to suffer, but you'll never be a slave... Lomé' (54). And with these words he 'scarified her body' (54), with his shape knife, while the mother-in-law wails 'Are you going to kill her as you did her mother?' (54). He then covers the child's body with a shrub 'bantamre' known for the antiseptic quality of its leaves. Lomé only escapes slavery for the reason of her mutilated body, her grand-mother for age, while Amoo is captured. The nature of the society makes Amoo become a deviant. His behaviour is influenced by a vast member of cultural and social factors. But the old woman's knowledge of herbs nurses Lomé's body to wholeness, even as Baby Suggs nurses Sethe's battered body to wholeness on Sethe's escape from Sweet Home. Nevertheless, their marks remain as scripts of slavery. Emile Durkheim regards some crime as 'an anticipation of the morality of the future' (Haralambos/Heald:412). Thus heretics who were denounced by both the state and the established church may represent the collective sentiment of the future. I share most critics' empathy with Sethe and Amoo over their devil driven actions.

The importance of language cannot be overemphasized. It carries the social and cultural values of any episteme. It constructs and deconstructs any given era; it creates and empowers individuals within an epoch positively or negatively. The Biblical Tower of Babel is a monumental exemplifier of the creative ability of language when spoken impartiality and with affection. When the discordant tongues emerge, language becomes an instrument of anarchy. Language therefore, is an instrument of peace or violence. The language an author employs within any given text to express individual or societal concerns, reflects the episteme of the period. Peter Horn postulates: 'Language and story give the functions of an individual meaning, but the individual meaning is always subsumed under the laws of language. Language reaches as far as the supra-individual reality of the subject, because the operations of language are the operation of history' (Attridge and Jolly:29). The necessity to create a coherent story of oneself, to justify

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oneself and one's actions by means of language, is the necessity to acquire the agreement, the desire of the other within a given culture, and not through violence, but in our given texts the authors sadly represent the episteme of their periods through the language of violence.

Culture

Culture, is a people's given way of life, what the New Historicists refer to as (thick description). Clifford Geertz defines culture as '...a set of controlled mechanisms plans, recipes, rules, instructions for the governing of behaviour' (Bressler:132). Each separate discourse of a culture must be uncovered and analyzed in the hope of showing how all discourses interact with each other; institution, peoples and other elements of culture. 'It is this interaction between various discourses that shapes a culture and thus interconnects all human activities, including writing reading, and interpretation of a text (Bressler: 133).

In the three works under this study the authors challenge the dominant culture, where members of the powerful class inevitably criminalize the actions of the powerless to exploit, oppress and subjugate them, thereby preserving, consolidating and perpetuating the status quo of social inequality. Contained in the three works, is a culture where the people 'trust in oppression and become vain in robbery (Ps. 63:10). In apartheid South Africa, it is cultural that the whites address every black as 'boy' regardless of age and status. Thus no black man is defined matured for responsibility, trust or position of authority. This also connotes that a white boy is superior in intellect or otherwise to any adult black man or woman. Through these constant taunts and torments the whites impose on the blacks disoriented consciousness. This bewildered self perception is fallout of many forms of violence exhibited by the blacks, like most of them becoming homosexuals. They openly parade themselves down the streets dressed in women's clothes, with tied turban round their heads, they wear lipsticks, flutter their eyes, hand in hand they talk in high falsetto voices, and kiss themselves anywhere anytime (45). One of the victims bewails:

How can a man be a man when he is called a boy? I can barely retain my own manhood, I was walking down the road the other day with my girl, and a Boer policeman said to me: 'Hey boy, where is your pass?' Am I a man to my girl or a boy? Another man addressed me as a boy. How do you think I feel? (45)

This frightening and overwhelming "'coming out' publicly identifying themselves as gays or lesbians" (Thio:242), as a subculture is a painful redefinition of self. It naturally follows that where a people are born into hatred; violence and self-hate become a way of life. Since the blacks live 'back-breaking' lives with 'permanent nervous tension' (54), they will necessarily have decrepit consciousness and will behave like misfits. The humiliation for indigenes to be identified with passes is evil! The blacks in apartheid South Africa end up with what Ezekiel Mphahlele describes as an:

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'underdog mentality' (2), therefore, they set aside social norms and values, in agreement with Robert Merton's argument in *Sociology: Theme and Perspectives*, that 'the social and cultural structures generate pressure for socially deviant behaviour upon people variously located in that structure' (413). This statement is very true to Apartheid South African cultural structures.

In *Beloved*, Stamp Paid falls back on memory and recollects the culture of lynching, when in 1874 white folks were still on the loose. In that year, whole towns were wiped clean of Negroes; there were eight-seven lynching in Kentucky; four coloured schools were burned to the ground; grown men were whipped like children; children were whipped like adults; black women were raped by the crew; property were taken, and necks were broken (180). As products of slavery, many African Americans respond to the inherent culture of violence in their individual ways; and Sethe's infanticide reaction is case in point. Harriet Jacobs's cries, '... in the land of my birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate. A land where laughter is not mirth; nor thought the mind; nor words a language; nor e'en men mankind. Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows and each is tortured in his separate hell' (38). The blacks end up with all forms of cultural aberrations. Albert Cohen, in *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, argues that 'certain forms of deviance are a normal and natural response to particular circumstances' (214). Certain deviant acts may provide a useful warning device to indicate that an aspect of society is malfunctioning. Sethe's action draws attention to the problem of slavery, and it gives a lead measure to solve it, for some blacks are prepared to waste their lives rather than offer the whites that pleasure.

In *Tribal Marks*, It has become a way of life for the people to live in fear and constantly in readiness for movement into the darkest end of the forest without water because of the consistent raids. They are almost a people without culture as they abandon the spirit of their homestead, their totems and ancestral graves. And as soon as they are settled they take up the culture of '... communal labour' (50), and agriculture. People set out for work and returned in clusters. For if caught, the white man's 'slave factory' (50), opens and shuts men, women and children, where they are tortured, guttered with sorrow and then battered. It is within the culture of the society to generate deviance for its own well-being.

Being pushed into the forests, the blacks begin to assume the forests as ethnic homeland thus constructing new identities for themselves. This brings to mind 'District Six' in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* which is associated with the forced removal and relocation were the blacks were subjected to modalities of belonging in apartheid South Africa. In these inhuman situations, their health is undermined by the numerous diseases – influenza, yellow fever, sleeping sickness, alcoholism is rampant and thousands die. Meanwhile the workload for the women and children increases, in the absence of able-bodied men. The people are generally impoverished and stagnated.

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The social rules dictate the culture of the people found within a text; from the standards of behaviour as reflected in a society's rules of decorum. These behavioural codes simultaneously help shape and are shaped by the text. All texts therefore are social or cultural documents that not only reflect but also, and more importantly, respond to their historical situations.

History

History, to the New Historicists is only a narrative discourse. As in literature or any other narrative discourse, history must now be viewed as a 'language' that can never be fully articulated or completely explained. History and literature therefore become synonymous terms, both being narrative discourses that interact with their historical situations, their authors and their readers and their present day cultures. The New Historicism disavows the old historicism's autonomous view of history, and declares that history is one of the many discourses or ways of seeing and thinking about the world (Bressler: 133/134). Michel Bakhtin also perceives history as acts which are multiaccental and available for divergent uses (Rice/Waugh:260), history, thus is interwoven with language and culture. To the New Historicists therefore history is subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past.

In *A Question*, Head bemoans the historical estrangement of the blacks by the whites: 'In South Africa, the white man took even the air away from us – it was his air and his birds and his land...' (72). The overwhelming evil in the history of apartheid South Africa is metaphorically seen in the air been taken away from the blacks and in the partitioning of every aspect of the entire society. James Garret remarks, 'The power of apartheid as a racist policy and as a hegemonic distortion of society is equaled by its power as symbol both of what man has done to man, and of a world subdivided and classified by surface distinctions' (122). Since the blacks come at the lowest rank of the colour scale they become very pathetic. Bessie Head recounts, '...of South Africa ... People there had an unwritten law. They hated any black person among them ...' (26). Why the awful scorn! After all, it is a historical reality that certain experiences or areas of knowledge were out of bonds for the blacks. Blacks have no voice, no name, no class and no land in their homeland.

The author laments 'they say the black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior, but they made sure to deprive him of the type of education which developed personality, intellect, skill' (54). Andre Brink comments '... whole territories of historical consciousness silenced by the powerful establishment and invaded by the dominant discuss in order to make them inaccessible to other voices' (Attridge/Jolly:15). The 'historical consciousness silenced' includes distortion of right to the land, abuses of all forms, enslavement of indigenous peoples. How then are the blacks to develop 'personality, intellect, skill'? if historically, they are uninformed and confined to specific knowledge and skills?

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Historically, Sethe in *Beloved* belongs to the race, Mack Jones labels as a: group that was singled out for unequal treatment by the Constitution of the United States and by statutory law at all levels of American government – national, state, and local – and whose unequal treatment was sanctioned by social custom and reinforced by the use of terror and economic intimidation and who, as a result of that government mandated and culturally sanctioned oppression, lag behind white Americans on practically every indicator of socioeconomic well being? (Baker: 340-1).

With this historical rank ordering of humanity, Amy Denver's suffering as an indentured labourer in the hands of Mr Buddy is a far cry from Sethe's inhuman treatment in the hands of Schoolteacher. Looking at Sethe's back Denver comments, "I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this" (79). The difference between the two women is also underscored by the separate directions they take. Amy goes to Boston in search of velvet or greener pastures, while Sethe faces the misery of a runaway slave who gets caught. Morrison laments, "... historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were the topic" (111). History is a language of imposition. History, in Foucault's view is 'a product of a will of power enacted through formations of knowledge' (Rice/Waugh:260). There seems a fundamental contradiction in the American society.

Sethe and Denver's experiences agree with the New Historicism emphasis on the subjective nature of history, written by 'people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past' (Bressler:133). Most historians will compromise the fact that the mechanism of oppression and cruelty were the central concerns of slavery. It is true that some writings may not be explicitly harnessed to any course to write certain inhuman treatments meted on the blacks without inviting accusations of fiddling or self-indulgence or avoiding reality.

The slaves in *Beloved* may be said to be products of the Middle Passage, but slaves in *Tribal Marks* like those of *A Question* are 'home-born slaves' (Jeremiah 2:14), indigenes turned slaves in their ethno-centric spaces. They lack power, self determination, identifiable homeland or ancestors, and an acknowledged language. Baby Suggs and all her people have come to learn to identify with the 'nastiness of life'... in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew let alone loved who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized.

So Baby's eight children have six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces include her children (23).

Historically, commodity and exchange serve as the only form of interaction between blacks and whites in *Beloved* and in *Tribal Marks*. Baby Suggs children like other black children are used as pieces in the slave traders' game. This exchange on its most basic level involves the marketing

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of human beings, but exchange also occurs in a more subtle though no less invidious manner.

Invariably, the abolitionists use Sethe's plight to further their cause turn her story into currency. Their concern is not with her as an individual, but with her as a case. Her story disappears in their rush to turn the case into abolitionist propaganda. It is evil that the worth of humans is determined by colour, and the value determined by cash by fellow human beings. Karen E. Field writes '... As units of commodity to be bought, sold or put to use, individual slave stood apart from any authoritative claim to human connection' (163). This is a most painful social and historical reality. Economic institution of slavery destroyed black families not only by the forced separation of kin, but by the radical isolation and appropriation of the individual as merchandise.

Born during the colonial period in Africa, Momutu and Amoo in Tribal Marks become accustomed to hearing cries from their people and agitated flight into the bush. One is left the choice of entering the forest and there die of illness, or killed by wild beasts, or stay in the savanna and be caught by slavers. Choices and decisions are determined by some causes; one such causal factor for Momutu, is the history of buying and selling family members because of lack of social control and differential association. Momutu having lost all familial ties to the slavers chooses to be 'with the hunters than with the hunted ...' (48), a choice that eventually makes him even more beastly than the white slavers. An old man laments 'since my birth, and well before that of father and my grandfather, the whole country has only been living in expectation of being captured and sold to the whites'. And other old man cries 'I've seen all my children being carried off. I don't remember how many times we have changed the site of the village' (50).

Since each historical era develops its own actuality, it is the episteme that controls how that era and its people will view reality. The reality of Amoo killing his wife and scarifying of his only child to avoid slavery can only be understood and appreciated at that historical era. History then, in the view of the New Historicists becomes 'the study and unearthing of a vast complex web of interconnecting forces that ultimately determines what takes place in each culture or society (Bressler:134). Foucault asserts that 'different epistemes exist in their own right; they are neither moral nor immoral but amoral. And changes and breaks from one episteme to another are neither good nor bad'. (Bressler: 132). History is a form of power, that corrupts depending on who wields the power. But history is not destiny. The reflection of a work's historical situation as evidenced in the text. . This episteme of exclusion either by individuals or institutions (nondiscursive practices), is the resultant evil of non-identification of some races within apartheid South Africa, America and colonial Africa's social cultural world view. It also asserts that history can never provide the whole 'truth or give us a totally accurate picture of past events or the worldview of a group of people' (Bressler:134). Any attempt to write the history of a people will be, 'like trying to trap wind in a sieve' (Davidson:1). In every historical epoch,

much remains to be discovered and much remains to be agreed. History has been for so long a male oriented discourse, and in case of our three texts, white dominated master-narrator.

CONCLUSION

Finally, we share the New Historicists opine that there exists 'an intricate connection between an aesthetic object (a text or any work of art) and society. A text cannot be evaluated in isolation from its cultural context' (Davidson: 10). It is mandatory that the societal concerns of the author, historical times evidenced in the work, and other cultural elements exhibited in the text should be investigated before we can devise a valid interpretation. The three works in this study bear the indelible marks of their times reflecting the episteme of the slavery periods in colonial Africa and America and the apartheid South Africa, respectively.

Since it is the society that generates its various deviant, the inverse effects of these abnormal behaviours on the people varies: Sethe kills her yet crawling baby, Amoo kills his wife and scarifies his daughter, rather see them taken to slavery, men take to homosexuality and the blacks are involved in all forms of deviant behaviours and perversions. Hayelen White view 'history as narrative constructions or stories (Rice/Waugh:260), the stories in our three texts present grisly catalogs of the physical and psychological abuses against slaves and non-whites or 'free-born-slaves' in apartheid South Africa.

Beloved like Tribal Marks and A Question of Power, may not be stories to pass on, because they expose the episteme of their respective periods that history alone cannot account for. Yet, they are stories that have to be told so that a healing process can begin, with the family, and community could be mutually restored. Baby Suggs (an ex-slave), with 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue' (87)), has faith in the renewing power of the communal body; what Bakhtin calls 'collective ancestral body of all people' (Connor:40). This is a means of connection, not only to their individual bodies, but to the regenerative power. Ashraf Rushdy also observes that 'memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people' (Grewal: 104). The magic of memory is that it is interpersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers. And history alone cannot reconstruct relationships, without the language that empowers it and the cultural matrix of the text.

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