‘My work must be political’, says Toni Morrison.

How far is *Beloved* a political novel?

*If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever … isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it isn’t about anything. I’m not interested in indulging myself in some private exercise of my imagination … which is to say, yes, the work must be political.*

A novel for Black women

Womanism: black feminism – aims to celebrate the strengths of black women (e.g. Maya Angelou, Grace Nichols, Toni Morrison) – aims to create sense of community and support to tackle burdens of racial prejudice and of a male-centred society. Black women as ‘mule’ of world. Morrison, and other black women writers, have been trying to develop a new type of novel, one which represents the hopes, aspirations and historical memories of black women.

Toni Morrison focuses on the black female and this theme gathers strength in her later work, where she considers the issues of female friendship, different aspects of love, and the succour afforded by community. She insists that she is a black woman writer and recalls that while black male writers, like James Baldwin, are writing of the plight of black people, they are not writing for her.

She rejects the implicit assumption that man, black or white, spoke for both genders. Black men, ‘write from another place’: that other place where the physical and spiritual beauty of black women is denied, and their sexual exploitation and economic displacement suffered. The black male voice could articulate the experience of blackness but not femaleness.

The issue of slavery

*Beloved* speaks for ‘all the disremembered and unaccounted for’.

Slavery wasn’t in the literature at all. Part of that, I think, is, because, on moving from bondage to freedom which has been our goal, we got away from slavery and also from the slaves, there’s a difference. We have to re-inhabit those people.

Morrison has spoken of her reluctance to write the history of slavery, and to furnish the story with an ending – there is more to be told.

Her concern is to reclaim and find her place within black cultural history … an objective which reaches its climax in *Beloved*, where she faces the unspeakable source of her people’s oppression: slavery. In blocking out that whole experience, of slavery, some things of value might be lost. So courageously she confronts the diaspora (dispersion or migration) of her enslaved ancestors. Yet in doing so, she affirms the positives of black life and culture that enabled survival.

Mother Love

Love of various kinds is to be found in the pages of Morrison’s novels, but particularly that of mothers and elders.

In *Beloved*, the choice of a mother to kill a child rather than let her live as a slave, is the end product of the system of slavery, and this action is at the heart of the novel.

Black women are also portrayed as females destined to become sex objects in an hierarchical society which assigns them the least important role. They grow into a world fashioned first for whites, then for males, and lastly for black women. Although in *Beloved*, this is a situation which has reached its most extreme form through slavery, it is still perceptible within the black relationships of the ‘freed’ slaves.
Community as powerful force within the novel

My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it. Morrison is writing not just about individuals and individual experience but about the experience of a race and a community. Community and the ability of individuals to relate to and respond to that community, is another important aspect of her writing.

One particular preoccupation is with the effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated acceptable self.

The impact of the community on the individual's quest for self is one of the particular problems of Black women, and the laughter and pain which characterise the survival struggle of Black Americans. (Thus Sethe is destroyed by her memories and her isolation with the ghost of Beloved (haunted by slavery), until the community intervenes and saves her.)

Quilts: the novel is like a quilt, and it is important to remember that the quilt, a feminine art form, was used not only to express creativity, but also to map the ancestry of a family as each successive generation added to it.

The Oral tradition

For a long time, the art form that was healing for black people was music ... that music is no longer exclusively ours ... so another form has to take its place. I seems to me that the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before ... I regard it (the novel) as a way to accomplish certain very strong functions.

My novels should be ... both print and oral literature ... It should deliberately try to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and weep and cry ... To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken to have the reader feel the narrator without identifying that narrator ... and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book ...

Note – Baby Suggs' speech in the clearing. Also the difficulty of the narrative, its non-linear plotting and complex chronology – aspect of oral style. Also use of a chorus, commenting on the action as it goes ahead – Stamp Paid, Ella, Lady Jones, Bodwins ...

Supernatural and real

One of the most distinctive aspects of Morrison's writing is her ability to combine the supernatural and the real in a way which allows the reader to suspend disbelief and accept all that is happening as normal. She did this in several novels before *Beloved*, in which perhaps it reaches its most extreme form.

(My aim was to create) ... a tone in which I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend these two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting.
Ancestry

Morrison also places great emphasis on ancestry, on background, on the rediscovery of the Black American's roots, on which their self-identity depends. Thus, there is also a place for an 'ancestor', an archetypal elder in each of her novels … as Baby Suggs in Beloved.

There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.

Morrison identifies the 'place' where the female voice originates as the site of struggle for a self-definition and self-love whose nourishment comes from a reclamation of ancestry. The need to reclaim the past in order to define the female self in terms of inherited culture is both a feminist and racial urge. Hence Sethe’s need to accept her own past in order to build a future for herself.

The Power of Naming and Language

In Beloved single events are revisited from different perspectives in a narrative which employs both first and third person perspectives. The novel explores how authoritative discourses – e.g. historical, biblical, cultural, political – bury alternative interpretations and silence other voices. A preoccupation with unearthing narratives which have been hidden or buried reflects the need for both the individual and society to confront the horrors of slavery.

The power of naming is white and the struggle for black identity begins with an insistence on being named correctly. Nel in 'Sula' is reduced to 'gal', while Baby Suggs is given the name 'Jenny' which means nothing to her. All the 'Garner' slaves are given the names of the slave owner, while 'Sixo' has been reduced to a mere number. Other characters in the novels have been named by the random opening of the Bible, with the ironic naming of a girl 'Pilate' in 'Tar Baby' or even more ridiculously, 'First Corinthians', and 'Magdalene'.

Morrison also raises questions over the ability of language to describe horrific events. When Sethe tells Paul D about the infanticide she is aware of the limitations of words:

but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn’t any more power than she had to explain. (161) …

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one./ … If they didn’t get it right off – she could never explain. (163)

Sexual Battlefields

As well as revealing white oppression in a more dramatic and intense form in each of her succeeding novels, Morrison also underscores what it is to be a Black woman as opposed to Black man. In Morrison's works, Black men and women -regardless of class or culture - never sustain harmonious relationships in heterosexual love. Men can love male friends; women can love female friends; parents can love children; but men and women cannot love each other permanently either in wedlock or outside it.

Consider the relationships in Beloved from this point of view. The most (only?) intense love in the novel is that of mother-love. Paul D. and Sethe's relationship is at best that of comfort and at worst a thinly-veiled fear and antagonism. There are, of course, complex reasons for this, rooted in their memories of slavery and fears about security. But even at the start, the sexual culmination of 18 years of desire is a severe anti-climax, and Paul D.'s removal from the house, ostensibly under the influence of the ghost of Beloved, is also linked to the inability of Sethe and him to forge a truly intense relationship. Even at the end, we are left with the impression that although they may have found mutual support and comfort, they have not, and will not, find love.