

Critical Race Theory: A Counter-Storytelling in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

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Received: 01/09/2024

Accepted: 04/10/2024

Published: 01/12/2024.

Abstract:

This article explores how Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) serves as a powerful example of counter-storytelling through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Employing a qualitative approach and textual analysis which delves into the complex narratives of former slaves and their descendants, highlighting how Morrison challenges dominant historical and racial discourses. By focusing on themes such as resistance against systemic oppression, identity formation, and melodrama. The article underscores how Morrison's *Beloved* criticizes the issue of racism through a historical narrative of real events. The finding of this article delves into the success of Morrison's *Beloved* as a critical and counter-narrative to issues of racial segregation.

Keywords: Counter-storytelling; Critical Race Theory; *Beloved*; African-American Literature; Racism.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework for understanding the complex dynamics of race and identity within American society, with a particular focus on the counter-storytelling in analyzing Morrison's *Beloved*. The first part of this article reviews the foundational literature on CRT, establishing the theoretical framework necessary to analyze historical and contemporary issues of racism in America. The discussion then shifts to a historical overview of racism in the United States, setting the stage for a detailed analysis of *Beloved*. Through the lens of CRT, we examine the novel's counter-storytelling, focusing on themes of resistance, African American identity, and the use of melodrama to evoke global empathy for the African American experience.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, theoretical framework, the article explores the theory that effectively illustrates how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* serves as a form of counter-storytelling against racism. The focus will be on defining Critical Race Theory (CRT), with particular attention given to its core principles, especially the key principle that forms the foundation of this article.

2.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was incorporated by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) into five major themes to create "a CRT and LatCrit framework in education" (**qtd. in Chávez-Moreno, 2023, p. 506**). These themes included: (1) emphasising race and racism while connecting them to other forms of subordination; (2) challenging dominant ideologies; (3) promoting social justice; (4) giving experiential knowledge priority; and (5) using an interdisciplinary approach (**Chávez-Moreno, 2023, p. 506**). The critic Demaske Chris defines CRT in his article "Critical race theory" (2009) as a movement known as critical race theory (CRT) challenges the notion that traditional legal approaches are sufficient to achieve social and economic justice and promotes legal approaches that acknowledge race as a fundamental component of American society (3).

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2.2 It's Origin

In the 1970s, a number of attorneys, activists, and legal scholars nationwide realised that the substantial advancements gained during the civil rights movement of the 1960s had come to a standstill and were, in many cases, even being undone. This realisation gave rise to Critical Race Theory (CRT). Early authors like as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado took up the issue of addressing the more subtle kinds of racism that were becoming commonplace by acknowledging the need for new ideas and approaches. Others quickly joined them, and in the summer of 1989, the group convened in a convent close to Madison, Wisconsin, for its inaugural workshop. Subsequent conferences and meetings ensued, including of private sessions aimed at addressing internal concerns and honing important ideas **(Delgado,2023,p.4).**

2.3 Tanets of Critical Race Theory

The primary tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is that racism is not an uncommon event but rather a common, everyday part of existence for people of colour. It's incorporated into how society typically runs. Second, it's common knowledge that the white supremacist system satisfies both material and psychological demands. Effective racism prevention is difficult since racism is a common occurrence. Formal equality, which exclusively addresses equal treatment, is limited to addressing overt types of discrimination, such as bias in hiring or housing. The second concept, commonly called "interest convergence," contends that racism serves the interests of working-class people as well as white elites, hence lessening the incentive to eradicate it. This is demonstrated, for example, by Derrick Bell's contentious claim that the historic ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* may have been motivated more by the desires of white elites than by a sincere wish to assist Black people. The "social construction" thesis, which forms the third tenet of CRT, asserts that racial categories and race are socially constructed rather than innately derived from biological or genetic realities. These are classifications that are made by society and

modified as necessary. Lastly, the idea of intersectionality, which has to do with uneven racialization, highlights the fact that people have overlapping multiple identities. For instance, an African American activist may identify as homosexual or lesbian, while a white feminist may also be Jewish or from the working class(Delgado,2023,p. 3).

This article's central idea is counter-storytelling, which is its main topic. Narratives that depict the lives of marginalised people, whose tales are frequently ignored, are referred to as counter-stories. These stories are useful for exposing, dissecting, and opposing prevailing racial myths that defend privilege. Counter-stories have the power to upend complacency, challenge accepted racial narratives, and further initiatives aimed at racial reform. Not only can they originate from prevailing narratives, but they can also come from the experiences that people of colour have yet to tell about themselves. Disseminating these counter-narratives can strengthen cultural, political, and social resistance traditions(Solórzano,2002,p. 32).

2.4 Types of Counter-Storytelling

The first category consists of personal narratives or anecdotes that detail a person's firsthand experiences with sexism and racism. Narratives describing other people's experiences, which offer a third-person account of how people have dealt with racism and sexism, are the second category. These frequently consist of a socio-historical framework and a biographical analysis of the experiences of a person of colour in American institutions. The third category consists of composite tales or narratives, which combine several types of "data" to portray the lives of people of colour in terms of race, sexual orientation, and class (Solórzano, 2002, pp. 32-33).

3.Review of Literature

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used to analyse Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) in great detail, with a special emphasis on the novel's use of counter-storytelling. This study of the literature will look at important academic works that investigate how Morrison's book challenges popular historical narratives about slavery and has wider implications for CRT.

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3.1. Early Engagements with Counter-Storytelling in Morrison's *Beloved*

In "Rewriting of History: Slave Narratives and Toni Morrison's Novels," Dr. Min Pun, an associate professor at Tribhuvan University's Department of English, explores how slave narratives function as a historiographical issue and as a vehicle for Black voices to resist slavery, concentrating on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Morrison's story serves as a means of resistance against oppressors, as Dr. Pun's work highlights(Punn,2017,p.1).

In a similar vein, Trudier Harris explores the idea that the figure *Beloved* haunts the African American society as a real and figurative ghost in "*Beloved: Woman, Thy Name Is Demon*" (1991). According to Harris, *Beloved* serves as a counter-story that compels the reader to confront the atrocities of the past that are frequently ignored in popular narratives by embodying the suppressed memories of slavery. The foundation for seeing *Beloved* as a literature that resists the erasure of Black experiences from history through counter-storytelling was established by this early study (Harris, 1999).

3.2. Counter-Storytelling and the Historical Context of Slavery

The groundbreaking study "Daughters Signifying History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" by Ashraf H.A. Rushdy (1999) expands on the concept of *Beloved* as a counter-narrative. Rushdy investigates the ways in which Morrison's book interacts with historical documents and slave narratives, reinterpreting them to offer a more complex and true portrayal of the lives of those who were held as slaves. He contends that *Beloved* challenges the prevalent historical narratives that are centred on white people while also criticising the shortcomings of historical record in terms of fully expressing the psychological and emotional effects of slavery (Rushdy, 1992).

3.3 Counter-Narratives

Linda Krumholz's "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1999) also touches on this issue. Krumholz explores how the novel breaks out from the confines of conventional historical fiction thanks to Morrison's use of magical realism. Morrison provides a narrative space where the unsung stories of slavery may be aired by fusing the supernatural with the real. The way that Krumholz's work challenges the erasure and distortion of African American history by highlighting how *Beloved* serves as a tool for historical recovery makes it especially important (Krumholz, 1992).

African-American traumas in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in reference to the Black Lives Matter movement are the subject of Bani Younes's *History, Identity, Trauma, and Narratives in Toni Morrison's Beloved* in relation to "Black Lives Matter" (BLM). In specific historical and social settings, it aims to investigate those positions in the two story modalities that obstruct African-Americans' access to justice and peace (Bani, 2016, p. 5).

The amount of writing that has been written about *Beloved* and CRT shows how strong a counter-story the novel is, challenging established historical narratives and providing a potent criticism of racial and gender oppression. *Beloved* remains a key novel in CRT, from its early explorations of the concept of historical recovery to more contemporary talks about its continued importance. Morrison's *Beloved* is a powerful example of counter-storytelling that reclaims and redefines African American history and identity because of its creative narrative tactics, nuanced portrayal of motherhood, and emphasis on the lasting agony of slavery.

4. Counter-Storytelling in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Before analyzing Morrison's *Beloved*, the focus will be on providing an overview of the history of racism in America to better understand the events depicted in the novel. This context will enable a critique of the concept of racism during that particular period.

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4.1 The History of Racism in America

The arrival of twenty servants in Jamestown in 1619 marked the beginning of Black history in the English colonies. Swedes and Dutch were the first people to settle in Delaware; however, in 1664, the Dutch were supplanted by English. Anthony was the first Black person in Delaware history. He was taken prisoner in 1638 and sent to Fort Christina in 1639, where he subsequently worked as Governor Printz's personal assistant. Between 2,000 and 5,000 slaves existed in Pennsylvania and the three lower counties of Delaware by the early 1700s; the majority of them were employed as domestic helpers or agricultural labourers, while some had received training in skilled occupations. Enacted in 1700, discriminatory laws curtailed Black people's rights and enforced harsher punishments, such as preventing them from voting and marrying outside of their race. The Delaware General Assembly raised import taxes on slaves in 1773 and tried to outlaw the slave trade in 1775, but Governor John Penn vetoed this proposal out of fear of slave uprisings. A 1776 statute prohibiting the importation of slaves did not stop unlawful commerce. Delaware's Black community had a variety of responsibilities in aiding the military effort during the American Revolution. Leaders like Caesar Rodney and John Dickinson joined the Delaware Quakers in emancipating their slaves in 1775, after being influenced by individuals like Warner Mifflin. However, by 1790, Delaware had 3,899 free Black people and 8,887 slaves according to the census. Debates on slavery were sparked by Delaware, the first state to adopt the new federal Constitution in December 1787. Many Delawareans were in favour of sending liberated Blacks to Africa, but some were in favour of manumission. Abolitionist groups were established, and people like Black abolitionists and Thomas Garrett actively assisted slaves through the Underground Railway. Although there were fewer slaves by 1860, there were still limitations on Black people who were free. Delaware Blacks eventually served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and the remaining slaves were emancipated in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. The Delaware Legislature further restricted African

American citizenship after liberation, a reflection of prevailing racial prejudice. Delaware's Jim Crow laws originated in 1866 when the Democratic legislature proclaimed Black people inferior and passed laws restricting their privileges. In addition to being barred from professional employment, jury service, and the practice of law, Black Delawareans also experienced significant social, economic, and political discrimination. Notwithstanding these obstacles, there was some advancement in political representation and education, as demonstrated by Thomas E. Postles' election to Wilmington's City Council. But occurrences of racial violence, like George White's lynching in 1903, highlighted persistent tensions. Organised civil rights resistance began in 1915 with the founding of the NAACP in Wilmington. Delaware's Black Americans suffered greatly economically during the Great Depression due to high unemployment and low-paying occupations. Though there was little progress politically, individuals such as William W. Coage achieved noteworthy achievements. Over 4,000 Black Delawareans served in World War II, yet discrimination against returning veterans persisted. Civil rights movements that began after World War II gathered steam, with notable judges like Louis Redding spearheading important court cases to end segregation. The Black population in Wilmington kept increasing, and milestones such as the 1993 election of James Sills as the city's first Black mayor demonstrated the city's growth **(Marks,1997,pp. 14–29).**

4.2 Toni Morrison's Biography

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in the 1930s and is well-known for her concentration on African American female heroes. Growing up in the working-class community of Lorain, Ohio, the setting for *The Bluest Eye*, she attended Howard University and earned her degree in 1953. She subsequently went on to Cornell University to complete her master's degree, where she wrote a thesis on suicide in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner's writings. She married Jamaican architect Harold Morrison when she was a Howard professor, and the two of them produced two boys, Harold Ford and Slade. She relocated to Syracuse, New York, and then New York City with her kids after divorcing her husband in 1964.

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There, she was employed at Random House as a senior editor. She shaped the memoirs of people like Angela at Random House. She worked at Random House on *The Black Book* (1974), an anthology that captured the lives of nameless Black people in America, and helped shape the autobiographies of people like Muhammad Ali and Angela Davis. Morrison has also been a professor at Rutgers and Yale. Among her many achievements are the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1988 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, which she won, being the first Black woman to do so (Havlíková, 2011, p. 1).

4.3 The Summary of the Novel

The protagonist of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is Sethe, an escaped slave who lives in post-Civil War Ohio and is plagued by the spirit of her dead daughter. A spiteful spirit, whom Sethe believes to be her daughter Beloved, whom she killed years ago to free herself from servitude, is disturbing her home at the beginning of the novel. Sethe is forced to confront her traumatic history and the people around her when a young lady named Beloved emerges out of nowhere. The book explores a number of subjects, including the terrifying effects of slavery, the challenges of parenting, the quest for identity, and the desire for liberation. Morrison tells a gripping story on how the legacy of slavery impacts people individually and in their communities through deep psychological analysis and beautiful symbolism (Morrison, 2007).

4.4 Counter-Storytelling in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

4.4.1 The Power of Resistance

Morrison's self-reliant depiction of Black women is a reflection of their continuous fight against structural injustice. Their sense of self-worth is challenged by the mental and physical violence they receive, which leaves them with severe psychological scars. Characters like Sethe exhibit a spirit of defiance and struggle against their captors in spite of these difficulties. The ghost of Sethe's dead daughter acts as a haunting reminder of the tragedy of slavery in this story, which explores the lasting effects of the past through supernatural themes. The conflict between community and

isolation in the African-American experience is another topic covered in *Beloved*. Characters like Sethe are frequently alienated by their terrible pasts, despite the fact that community brings strength and support. The experiences of marginalised women are highlighted by the way in which these themes are woven throughout the novel. The struggle Sethe had to become free from slavery serves as an example of the severe suffering Black people endure. Similar to this, the difficulties of marginalised populations dealing with various types of oppression are shown in Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of tribal women in *Draupadi*. Sethe's resistance and *Dopdi*'s rejection of her oppressors are similar in that both women represent tenacity in the face of injustice. Morrison and Devi question the prevailing social conventions through their stories (**Bhowmick,2024,pp. 45–46**).

Morrison's *Beloved* features a powerful example of resistance when Sethe, the protagonist, murders one of her children to spare them the atrocities of slavery. She considers death to be a more compassionate alternative than being a slave (**Edis,2019,p. 96**).

The theme of resistance in Morrison's work is appears in several passages of her novel, such as when she writes, "It was not a story to pass on" (**Morrison 324**). This quote illustrates the nuanced connection between pain and memory, especially in light of slavery. The implication of the expression is that there are certain stories that could be too unpleasant to revisit or recount, especially those that include significant suffering. This concept deals with the societal and individual memory of terrible events; historical events can be overwhelming and painful to endure, even if they are an important part of the past.

4.4.2 Highliting African-American Identity

In this part,the focus will be on highliting African-American identity by analyzing quotes from the novel.For instance,when Toni Morrison says"I am Beloved and she is mine"(**Morrison,2007,p.210**),and this is reliable to the title.The quote means that Beloved asserts a close bond with Sethe in this line by embodying both the trauma of slavery as a collective and the spirit of Sethe's departed daughter. The term implies a

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blending of identities—*Beloved* stands for both Sethe's individual loss and the greater historical suffering endured by African Americans.

The interdependence of individual and collective identity within the African American experience is highlighted by this phrase. *Beloved* is a character in her own right as well as a representation of the dark history that African Americans still have to face. Sethe and *Beloved*'s relationship highlights how the agony of slavery is carried down through the generations and becomes ingrained in a person's personality. Morrison emphasises in this sentence the strong, often painful connection that African Americans have to their past, and he makes the argument that accepting and reclaiming this past is crucial to identity development and healing.

Morrison also highlights the African-American identity in the following quote "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (**Morrison,2007,p. 88**),this idea underscores the importance of inner strength and the capacity to imagine a better future as crucial steps towards achieving grace. This quote highlights the power of imagination in shaping one's reality, especially in the context of African American identity and resilience. It suggests that grace—symbolizing hope, dignity, and freedom—can only be attained if one can envision it, even in the face of oppression and hardship.

In another quote "The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (**Morrison,2007,p. 256**),this quote means that the future is shown as a sunset, indicating a fresh beginning, while the past is something to be left behind. If the past tries to return, it must be dealt with firmly, even aggressively, to go on. The idea is to focus on what's ahead and not allow previous burdens obstruct development.

4.4.3 Melodrama in Morison's *Beloved*

The critic Edis, Zeki argues in his article "Identity in Toni Morrison's *beloved* and the bluest eye"(2019) that Writers frequently highlight societal difficulties in their writings and sometimes provide

remedies. Renowned author Toni Morrison utilises her writing to illustrate the struggles that marginalised and underprivileged Americans confront. Morrison, an African American author, focuses on the issues that the Black community faces(p.95).

Morrison's *Beloved* aims to "repossess, re-name, and re-own *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* representation of slavery by transforming its melodramatic power into narrative of healing." Bigger Thomas is an anti-Tom who inflicts wounds (qtd.in Kelleter *et al.*,2007,p.264).

In the quote above, Bigger Thomas is referred to as the "anti-Tom," indicating that he is very different from Uncle Tom, the docile and meek figure from Stowe's book. In contrast to Uncle Tom, who is presented as suffering helplessly, Bigger Thomas is portrayed as responding violently and angrily to his persecution by "inflicting wounds." He stands for a more assertive reaction against the institutionalised racism and oppression that African Americans experience.

Morrison aims to reclaim, rebrand, and redefine *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* depiction of slavery in *Beloved*. Morrison channels the emotional impact of Stowe's novel—which used melodrama to arouse compassion and moral outrage against slavery—into a story about identity restoration and healing. By doing this, rather of merely depicting misery, Morrison's art tackles the profound psychological scars left by slavery and provides a method to process and overcome the trauma.

The critic Otten Terry intertwines melodrama with the views of literary historians, arguing that literary historians frequently disagree over the quantity and veracity of slave tales, but they all seem to agree that these tales have a similar format. Usually centred on the dangerous escape from slavery and the quest for freedom in the North, the main storyline focuses on a dramatic and poignant voyage. The perils, hardships, and aspirations of the oppressed people seeking freedom are highlighted in this voyage, which is frequently shown with romantic and melodramatic overtones. This fundamental narrative structure, which emphasises the great human yearning for freedom and the lengths individuals would go to in order to

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obtain it, is a distinguishing feature of the slave story genre, despite variances in individual stories (1998,p.285).

4. CONCLUSION

This article explores the critique of racism within the African-American community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It begins by introducing the basics of critical race theory, with a focus on counter-storytelling. Additionally, a review of literature on the same topic from different perspectives will be addressed later on. The article then provides a historical overview of racism in America before analyzing Morrison's novel, emphasizing the role of counter-narration in exposing the factors of racist criticism.

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