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**BEYOND SUBJECTIVE VIOLENCE: A ZIZEKIAN READING OF TONI
MORISON'S BELOVED**

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ABSTRACT

Morrison's *Beloved*, the winner of Pulitzer's prize for fiction, is a narrative of American post-civil war through memories of an emancipated black slave, Sethe. Sethe importunes and fulfils her escape from plantation farm, though she pays for her freedom by being raped and filicide, her reaction against slavery is groundbreaking. There are different types of violence in *Beloved* that in the light of Žižek's theory they are divided into subjective and objective violence. Sethe is the victim and agent of subjective violence that is rooted in objective violence, discrimination, and racism in the history of America. The revolutionary side of the novel justifies Sethe's filicide as a phenomenon to resist against exploitation and slavery, a reaction that convicts ontological violence to defend equality of ethnic biological essence. The subjective and visible side of violence represents the objective and invisible side of violence indicating that genetic inferiority of blacks is a cultural and social ideology of dominant white society. It indicates that symbolic violence enclosed the codes of blackness and inferiority unravels the roots of violence and introduces systemic violence as the invisible source of generating all types of violence.

Introduction

Beloved, Toni Morrison's (1931-2019) the most famous novel and Pulitzer's prize winner for fiction in 1988, was published in 1987 and soon became a bestseller novel. Protagonist of the novel, Sethe, is depicted in different periods of her life, from being a slave to the time of emancipation and death (Facts, 2019). When Sethe was 13 years old, she moved to Sweet Home in Kentucky, managed by Mr. Garner and his wife Lillian, a couple seemingly kindhearted and different from all other masters. Sethe chooses Hall Suggs as her husband and gives birth to three children; a daughter and two sons. Everything runs well until the death of Mr. Garner, a time when the schoolmaster, Lillian's brother, controls the farm.

The schoolmaster's behavior is very different from Mr. Garner's kind and considerate behavior. He whips, tortures, and dehumanizes the slaves. When Sethe is pregnant, she faces cruelty of the schoolmaster and his nephews. Unable to tolerate the conditions, she decides to escape from the farm. The themes of *Beloved* are inner struggle, delusion of racism and violence. The novel is open to different readings based on manifestation of characters' behavior, but the study of violence and abuse in the light of Žižek's violence is not performed on the novel.

Slavoj Žižek (1949-) is a Slovenian born philosopher and professor of University of Ljubljana, University of London and New York University. He is known for ideas such as ideology as an unconscious fantasy in structuring reality, revival of dialectical materialism, and theories of violence. In (Žižek, 2008), he introduces two types of violence: subjective and objective. Subjective violence refers to visible crime and terror whether in the social or individual level. Objective violence is both visible and invisible that is manifested in forms of systemic violence in racism, hate-speech, and discrimination. Systemic violence as the most invisible and effective violence, refers to the catastrophic effects of economic and political systems. Žižek believes that the victims of violence (the marginalized groups, black women, and women in general) may perceive or misperceive the violence due to complexity and diversity of this concept in action (Žižek, 2008: 9-12).

There are limited studies on violence in Morrison's novels; however, in Pormouzeh's thesis who studied violence in Morrison's selected novels, he indicated that Morrison's writing style is prone to narrative study, but there are all elements of violence, postcolonial studies, feminism and ecofeminism in the novels (Pormouzeh, 2019). He indicated that the buried and unspoken implications of violence and intergenerational conflict are not theoretically explored in Morrison's novels (Pormouzeh, 2019). In Žižek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, a new perspective to the study of violence is proposed that can explain different types of violence in Morrison's novels and unravel the latent causes of subjective and symbolic violence. Accordingly, in this study the following questions are answered with respect to the study of Morrison's *Beloved*.

1. What kinds of Žižekian violence are introduced in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*?
2. How does Žižekian theory unravel perception of buried systemic violence in *Beloved*?
3. How does Morrison reflect ontological violence in *Beloved*?

Theory and method

The theoretical foundation of the present study is based on Žižek's theory of violence whether subjective (visible) or objective (invisible). Though not pioneer in the study of violence, Žižek's theory can be applied on novels with different forms of violence. In Žižek's terms, subjective violence is the most visible violence that is manifested by crime and terror and it is "against the background of a non-violent zero level." Subjective violence is "enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, and fanatical crowds" (Žižek, 2008: 2-11).

Žižek defines objective violence as a normal condition to specify subjective violence and considers it as a "very zero-level standard against which we perceive

as subjectively violent.” Žižek attributes the objective violence to historic setting which gets new shape with economic system of the time and capitalism and believes that objective violence can be manifested in forms of systemic and symbolic violence in which government and language are the two key items related to them (Žižek, 2008: 2-12).

Žižek asserts that “symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms” and believes,

violence is not only at work in the obvious-and extensively studied-cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms; there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning. (Žižek, 2008: 2-24)

Any type of violence related to encoding entities and symbols to constitute language belongs to the category of symbolic violence. Some forms of systemic violence are verbal violence, ontological violence, divine violence that Žižek introduces them as subcategories of symbolic violence since symbolic language shapes them (Žižek, 2008). In Žižek, systemic violence is like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence. (Žižek, 2008: 2-14)

In systemic violence, people are mostly blind to the results associated with capitalism and different ways of exploiting community. However, it may result in subjective violence and crime, while the generating effect of violence as systemic phenomenon is completely latent.

Žižek introduces ontological violence as “pertains to every founding gesture of the new communal world of a people, accomplished by poets, thinkers, and statesmen, one should always bear in mind that this “uncanny/demonic” dimension is ultimately that of language itself” (Žižek, 2008: 68). Žižek explains that one’s being is not associated with what it is socially and culturally identified with. For instance, associating slaves with inferior position is not the matter of their being, while it is a cultural issue and manifestation of racism. Accordingly, in this study the entire forms of violence introduced by Žižek are implemented as theoretical concepts to reveal how one form of violence can be emanated from other forms of violence to explain the agents and causes beyond subjective violence that are manifested in criminal actions, slavery, and filicide.

Discussion

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is the story of Sethe, a woman who escaped from a Kentucky plantation badly abused in the farm of Mr. Garner and his wife Lillian, a kindhearted and benevolent couple. In this study, it would be specified that kindness and benevolence are types of objective violence buried under subjective or visible violence. However, Sethe and her husband, Hall, get married and give birth to three children; a daughter and two sons. When Mr. Garner dies, the farm is left to a schoolmaster, Lillian’s brother. Under the control of the

schoolmaster, Sethe suffers many tortures. She is dehumanized and abused by the schoolmaster and his nephews. She escapes from plantation while she delivers a child; meantime they abuse her and shatter her mentally. According to Žižek physical violence and abuse are representation of subjective violence with obvious agent, but this analysis seeks to answer questions concerning the hidden roots of such subjective or violent abuses.

When Sethe sends her three children with the other slaves away, she is waiting for her husband to join her. Since her husband, Hall, does not arrive at the promised place, she stayed near the farm and waits to join him. Schoolmaster finds out about her scheme and catches her. He wipes her back so that scars remain on her skin through her remaining life. She is more decisive to get away from that place, but due to her pregnancy, she fails and remains there until the birth of her child. At last, with the help of Amy, a white servant, she manages to escape. Crossing the Ohio River, she reaches her mother-in-law's home with her newborn baby, but her happiness does not last long when a slave catcher and one of schoolmaster's nephews arrive to capture Sethe and her children. She tries to kill her children, but only kills her daughter. She wishes to put her baby somewhere safe, but prefers to kill her baby than letting her misfortune fate. "O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (Morrison, 1988: 140). This type of filicide is however rendered as a motherhood love in the novel and for such misdeed; she was jailed with her baby daughter, Denver.

Sethe works as a cook for earning money. In this time, Paul D, one of the slave boys in Sweet Home comes into her life and at the same time a twenty years old lady appears and claims that she is Beloved. Sethe believes that she is the ghost of her daughter, but Paul D is suspicious and warns Sethe for Beloved's behavior because when Paul D sleeps outside in a shed, Beloved forced him into intercourse. One day Sethe tells her life-story to Paul D, but it revolutionizes him and leaves Sethe alone, because he finds Sethe a cruel person who can easily kill her own baby.

Filicide is a type of subjective violence, but it is important to unravel the reason of this crime. As Žižek discussed subjective violence is manifested in crime and terror which is "against the background of a non-violent zero level" and "enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds" (Žižek, 2008: 2-3). The crime of filicide is a subjective violence which its motives are not personal, but social and cultural. It indicates that though Sethe committed subjective violence, her crime is an outcome of systemic violence. Sethe believes that it is easier to kill her daughter than letting her spend her entire life in the farm and works as slave and bear another generation of slaves. However, she is broken with her memories vows when she thinks of her aggressive filicide and says,

BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be. Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to

come back to me in the flesh. I bet you Baby Suggs, on the other side, helped. I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. (Morrison, 1988: 206)

Sethe justifies her crime by believing that she if she was alive she would have died now and considers her crime a mercy or a kind of benevolence. In addition, it implies that violence is changed and becomes an intergenerational matter. In Lena Hall intergenerational violence occurs as “stresses and disagreements between generations in the family and in society [...]the struggle between family members and families to meet the needs of all the members” (Hall, 2004: 97). Accordingly, Sethe’s conflict is not an intergenerational one, but she looks for a paradigm change and prefers death to slavery and humiliation.

In addition, the sexual abuse in the novel is foregrounded using the techniques of “unspeakable things unspoken” (Morrison, 1988: 121). Morrison’s writing does not directly describe the subjective violence in the form of sexual abuse and rape, instead she discusses that her strategy is to leave many things unspoken. When the white boys seize Sethe and abuse her, they take her milk, After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.

They used cowhide on you?

And they took my milk.

They beat you and you was pregnant?

And they took my milk! (Morrison, 1988: 72)

This abuse is a subjective violence that is described by speaking unspeakable. Sethe tells her memories of violence and repeats them to herself to alleviate her own pain. However, there is a considerable gender and racial violence in taking Sethe’s milk, which is the consequence of invisible systemic violence. Shelby Larrick in *Psychological Criticism of Toni Morrison's Beloved* focused on Sethe fate in the Sweet Home when she escapes and the two boys rape her. In Larrick’s view Morrison has foregrounded stealing of her milk, since the milk is the source of nutrition that belongs to her daughter and states that “memory of the boys taking her milk became much stronger than her memory of being raped, because she chooses to block out that memory entirely” (Larrick, 2007). It implies that she foregrounds the concept of milk more important than rape to alleviate herself. Also, Larrick emphasizes the suffering of characters in the slavery time through remembering of Sethe. Therefore, by the concept of milk, Sethe goes beyond merely sexual violence and refers to the long established violence and exploitation of black women and slaves.

Sethe escapes from plantation and the farm to be independent and free. She undergoes a series of mental pains to pay her own freedom. Remembering her memories indicates that she has been the victim of a discrimination system which

let the white people exploit black people. In *To Be Loved and Cry Shame": A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's Beloved*, Lynda Koolish emphasizes the painful memories of slaves after emancipation and the painful mental suffering that they were not able to escape from. Koolish argues that retelling of memories are shameful to Sethe, filicide is painful, but she tells all her story to change her attitude toward her state, to escape from memories, but though she has escaped but memories are sufferable for her and for those who shared with her such memories (Koolish, 2001: 171). Sethe's escape is a revolutionary action and reaction against both subjective and systemic violence. She rebelled against the ideology that humiliates blacks and the pretention that blacks are inferior: Colored people and white people both look down on her for that. Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it. (Morrison, 1988: 215)

The text implies that blacks are devoid of human feeling like pleasure and indicates that blacks are not committed in marital relationship, and they can endure pregnancy of several children to add up the population of slaves. In fact, white people consider blacks' essence or being as inferior. Slavery, in essence, is a form of symbolic violence because it eliminates human dignity and freedom another human doer and reduces the person's value to the level of a commodity. Žižek categorizes one's inferiority for its mere 'being' as ontological violence and believes that 'inferiority' is a socially constructed term mostly by white racists and a symbolic violence inherent to language.

The dehumanizing effect of slavery on Sethe as a representative of African American black women in slavery time is regarded as ontological violence, a term considered by Zizek as symbolic violence. Tanrıtanır and Özcan tried depict the brutal and dehumanizing aspects of slavery and indicate that this novel is a documentary and real story of the life of a slave named Margaret Garner. They concluded that the ending of the story is horrific and the fate of Sethe is painful since she "became mentally and spiritually exhausted and had no energy left to live a meaningful life" (Tanrıtanır and Özcan, 2008: 258).

Sethe's reaction to slavery and filicide is a rebellion against systemic violence that is invisible and treats black people as inferior; in effect, Sethe's resistance is to regain the black identity which had been ignored through symbolic violence. When one's identity is humiliated, then its essence is questioned, while the inferiority of blacks is the consequence of cultural constructions and the ideology of white racists. In addition, female gender is more concerned by Morrison than males. Aamer Shaheen considers the role of gender in the study of *Beloved* and argues that black women are dehumanized in slavery time by patriarchal society, but their consciousness about their position threatens the dominant patriarchic and white government (Shaheen, 2014: 92).

To start a revolutionary movement against violence and discrimination, Sethe's scheme is harsh and aggressive. Priya and Parvathi indicate that Sethe is a desperate black slave and any mother in her condition may not tolerate such

cruelties, but her deed is symbolic that means to die or to say no to slavery. However, she “indulge in the act against their will and wish just to save their daughters from slavery and sexual abuse” (Priya and Parvathi, 2017: 174).

Another reason for killing *Beloved* by her mother was to deprive the white farm owner of free services on farm, a fate that Sethe has suffered in her master’s farm. Maria Mörk believes that Sethe is saving her daughter from the same fate of herself, though in religious view it is guilt and sin, but in her logic it is an early salvation and states that “the novel points out love as the solution to overcome Sethe’s trauma of killing her daughter and her wounds of slavery” (Mörk, 2009: 20).

The symbolic violence in the novel was restricted to cases which Sethe in specific and all black generation in general are humiliated and exploited as farm workers. In fact, blacks are simulated with nature or they were identified as natural beings similar too what ecofeminists consider as symbolic language for females. The idea that soil never dies and human agents or labor are always available identifies symbolic violence as introduced by ecofeminism indicating that “ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (Gaard, 2012: 1). Sethe as a farm worker is considered the same natural being identified with nature and a place for plantation and growth to rare children. Dragoş Osoianu perceives the story in ecocritical lenses and attributed the body of Sethe to ecological and wild nature and the realm of patriarchal society of white men. He concludes that “race, gender, society and nature ought to be overcome in order to establish an ontological and epistemological equilibrium between a white patriarchal society and a culturally racialized and gendered nature, between identity and alterity” (Osoianu, 2015: 896). Therefore, the present study, against previous studies, reveals that beyond subjective violence is objective (invisible) exploitation and dehumanization of blacks that is revealed in the form of subjective violence.

Conclusion

Morrison’s *Beloved* is a significant novel due to inclusion sorts of motives such as slavery, violence, and rape. The study of different types of violence motives in *Beloved* as introduced by Žižek implied that the prominent type of violence in the novel is subjective violence in which the protagonist of the novel has experienced, as both the victim of crime and criminal. Sethe is raped in the farm and she kills her own daughter to save her from slavery and repetition of rape and violence cycle in the farms. Thought paradoxical, the motherhood love in Sethe is represented in her violence and filicide, because she reacts to a general and pervasive violence and discrimination against all blacks. Her rebellious action is an alarm to dominant power to cease the slave trade and the ideology of ontological violence. Morrison’s representation of ontological violence in dehumanizing and misusing black women’s body and attributing them to senseless non-human beings indicates that blacks’ being and essence is humiliated and this a form of ontological violence the symbolic meaning of blackness.

In addition to subjective violence in the novel, through the actions of Sethe, systemic violence is revealed as the latent causes of the entire subjective violence

in the novel. Sethe's subjective violence is a reaction to her inferiority that is a social attitude of white racists than a matter of their being as black humans. She sheds light into the invisible side of violence to remind the disconnected reader from history that exploitation of blacks and slave trade dates back to human trafficking in 17th century and there is nothing as genetic inferiority of blacks. Findings of the study indicate that symbolic violence enclosed the codes of blackness and inferiority, and to track the facts beyond subjective violence, this study unraveled the roots of violence and introduced systemic violence as the invisible source of generating all types of violence.

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