

Politics of Difference, Sisterhood and Transformation: Study of Partial Identificatory Relationship(s) in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract: *The study of identificatory relationships among women have acquired tremendous significance in recent times to comprehend the ways in which culture and racism impact the varying modes in which women relate to each other. In this context, this study attempts to explore the transformative potential of identificatory politics through the use of Lacanian registers—namely, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real—to enable a reading of identification that negates its assimilative and hegemonic tendency in the feminist discourses of women of colour. For this purpose, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has been focused upon to unravel the modalities of symbolic sisterhood based upon partial identification that does not assimilate or negate differences in pursuit of the elusive ideal of universal monolith notions of sisterhood, rather it treasures the differences to arrive at a better epistemic understanding of these differences—material and racial—without the assimilation or usurpation of the other's self and individuality. The framework employed for this purpose includes Jean Wyatt's notion of 'partial identification' and Max Scheler's 'transcendence of self' juxtaposed with Lacanian registers. The interracial and communal patterns of identification depicted by Morrison open a space where difference(s) can be employed as a bridge to negotiate cultural conflicts and can act as a site of creative solidarity and empowerment for women from different as well as same racial backgrounds.*

Key words: *Difference/alterity, Partial Identification, Transcendence of Self, Lacanian Registers, Sisterhood*

Study of identificatory practices among women has acquired tremendous significance in recent times to comprehend the sameness-alterity debate raging fiercely in the feminist circles. As identification is essential for the process of self-recognition so this debate has assumed an essential status to understand and define the path that feminist studies will take in future. As Diana Fuss (1995) opines:

Identification is, from the beginning, a question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside. (p. 3)

Identification is a relevant debate in the fields of psychoanalytic, literary, cultural, and feminist studies. (Wyatt 2004) It, no doubt, has political connotations as well. The study of identificatory practices in literary works and society leads to the understanding of the ways in which marginalization and oppression on the basis of race and gender work in society. This brings into play the political nature of identification. Identification can be used as an effective political weapon to fight against and to reinforce the marginalization of various groups as well as gender discrimination. Barbara Halow as cited in Fuss (1995) highlights this aspect as she believes that

“‘Identification with’ is not a personal moral duty but a political choice.” (p. 8) Fuss (1995) warns against “the imperializing character of many cross-cultural identifications.” (p. 8) Sommer as cited in Fuss (1995) describes it as “the ultimate violence...appropriation in the guise of an embrace.” (p. 9)

But identification is also deemed as an effective political weapon. Michael Moon (1995), while elaborating the significance of identification to end racial discrimination, emphasizes the role of identification with one’s own cultural models as “a mechanism that helps us [re]construct identity and take our dead ancestors to various battles we must wage in their names.” (p. 355-56) Thus the feminist project to reconstruct women’s identities across the globe will be incomplete without a study of identifications between women and between feminist groups. As Jannis Stavrekakis (1999) puts it:

What we have then is not identities but identificationsInstead of identity politics we should speak of identification politics. (p. 29-30)

In this context, this paper attempts to decipher the multiple patterns/structures of identificatory bonds employed by women in sisterly relationships or in the communities based upon the ethos of sisterly relationships. For this purpose, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* has been focused upon to unravel the modalities of sisterhood in the narratives produced by women of colour. This study aims at capturing the ambivalent vulnerability that this identificatory bond is susceptible to in Morrison’s narrative along with the transformative potential imbibed in this narrative. For this purpose, I will draw upon the Lacanian notions of the real and the sociosymbolic order and then with the help of textual analysis will probe whether identification can be modulated to incorporate the standpoint of the other—be it the racial other or the other belonging to the same gender/race/community—through the use of sociosymbolic function or by the acknowledgement of the real. This study also employs Wyatt’s and Scheler’s frameworks to investigate the role of identification across differences---racial and material.

1- PARTIAL IDENTIFICATION

Wyatt (2004), in her work “Risking Difference: Identification, Race, and Community”, elaborates the notion of partial identification which she also names ‘heteropathic identification’ in accordance to Max Scheler’s (1970) notion. Max Scheler in his work “The Nature of Sympathy” (1970) enunciated his notion of sympathy which he termed “unalloyed fellow-feeling which is a genuine out-reaching and entry into the other person and his individual situation, a true and authentic transcendence of one’s self.” (p. 46) This fellow-feeling which is the basis for heteropathic identification makes the subject identify “his own self with the other,” as opposed to assimilating the other into him. (Wyatt, 167) Wyatt adds to Scheler’s idea that for an identification to qualify as heteropathic or partial, it must be “based on a clear perception of the other’s differences.” (p. 167) For this purpose, Wyatt emphasizes the use of Lacanian registers---the symbolic and the real---to safeguard and positively utilize differences.

In keeping with Wyatt's and Scheler's notions, this study explores Partial Identification from the perspective of the identificatory bond between Sethe and the white girl Amy Denver and also from the perspective of the coming together of Sethe's community of sisters to exorcise Beloved, the living reminder of the haunting trauma of slavery.

2- Sethe and Amy: Differing Symbolic Registers and Transcendence of Self

Partial identification opens up the possibility of interracial identification with transformational possibilities. Morrison, through the relationship between Sethe and the white girl Amy Denver, presents the possibility that identification opens up to sameness as well as difference. Sethe and Amy represent two distinct symbolic registers, namely the Afrocentric symbolic and the Eurocentric symbolic. This difference in their orientation in the world of language and culture should lead to incompatibility in their identificatory relationship. But, on the contrary, this difference in their symbolic registers strengthens their identificatory bond for the very reason that this bond encompasses the similarities in the positioning of the subjects as well as the differences that ground their symbolic registers. Audre Lorde in her work "Sister Outsider" (1984) --- in response to the question 'how do we redefine difference for all women?'--- emphasizes:

It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences. (p. 122)

The reluctance to recognize differences based on race, class, ethnicity and language leads to the imaginary tendency to assimilate the other into ego. Imaginary identification, in which the ego takes an external object and appropriates its form to sustain and feed his/her own image as a perfect and unified being, enhances the negative side of identificatory relationships. It obliterates the subjectivity of the other and reduces it to a mirror to reflect (through contrast, in case of racial other) the perfect wholeness of the subject. As Lacan (1953) puts it:

Each time that, in the phenomenon of the other, something appears which once again allows the subject to reproject, to recomplete, to feed,...the image of ideal ego...each time that the subject is captivated by one of his fellow beings, well, then the desire revives in the subject. (S I 171)

The revival of desire to feed, re-project and re-complete on the part of the ego reduces the other to a familiar image to be assimilated by the self. This imaginary appetite for identification can be countered by the symbolic register which, unlike the mirror stage imaginary identifications grounded in the image of the other as a perfectly integrated being, functions through alterity and difference. Sethe and Amy play out this difference through their preferences and priorities. As Lacanian symbolic register encompasses sociocultural and linguistic structures, so the desires and experiences of both, Amy and Sethe, must be understood within the framework of their race and class. Their bonding on the way when Sethe escapes from Sweet Home reflects Scheler's notion of genuine fellow-feeling.

2.1- Preferences, Choices, and Needs: Resistance to Homogenization

Right from the moment when Sethe and Amy face each other, the difference in their social positioning and race is maintained and emphasized through their preferences, choices and needs. Both Sethe and Amy are ‘running’ (p. 39) but both have very different motives. Sethe is “trying to get to her three children, one of whom was starving for the food she carried” (p. 39); Amy, on the other hand, has very different desires. She is on the lookout for ‘velvet’:

Boston. Get me some velvet. It’s a store called Wilson. I seen the pictures of it and they have the prettiest velvet. (p. 40)

This difference in their needs is further elaborated when Amy asks Sethe, “ever seen any [velvet]?” and she replies: “If I did I didn’t know it. What’s it like, velvet?” (p. 40) This marked difference in their needs as well as in the knowledge of each other’s symbolic registers is maintained, by Morrison, throughout the depiction of their relationship. It emphasizes the possibility of an interracial identification without the hazards of assimilation caused by the process of mirroring.

The role of symbolic register in mitigating the assimilative/colonizing tendencies of cross-cultural identifications has been highlighted by Morrison through the use of signifiers, the notion of dialogic exchange which keeps the differences in the symbolic domain intact through articulation. As when Sethe and Amy cross each other’s paths, both are hungry. Sethe, apparently, has the hunger to defend herself in her precarious plight against attack from any white man, as she tells Denver, “I was hungry, just as hungry as I could be for his eyes,” (p. 38) while Amy simply desires something to eat as she says, “I like to die I’m so hungry.” (p. 38) But the way both indulge in ‘talk’, in the dialogic exchange, in “the game of the just,” (Lyotard 1985, 72) signifies that the hunger is for talk on Amy’s part and for being listened to on Sethe’s part. The desire to “eat” on Amy’s part can be said to mirror the West’s desire to eat the other, to assimilate and homogenize the tale of the racial other while the hunger on Sethe’s part to destroy the other can be presumed to mirror the racial, marginalized other’s desire to subvert the center. But these tendencies---to erase the differences and to destroy the other---can be kept in check, Morrison emphasizes, only through dialogic exchange culminating in the act of recuperation.

They did not look directly at each other, not straight into the eyes anyway. Yet *they slipped effortlessly into yard chat* about nothing in particular---except one lay on the ground. (p. 40) [Emphasis Added]

2.2- Hybrid Space: Recognition of Differences through Similarities

Sethe and Amy, both, recognize their differences through their similarities. In this way they embody the process of interracial partial identification. Both have been traumatized by slavery but the intensity of trauma and suffering differs for both, depending upon their racial background. Both, for instance, have been whipped and brutally tortured by their white masters

but Sethe's "chokecherry tree...red and split wide open, full of sap" (p. 93) bears no comparison to Amy's experience of physical torture.

I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this.
(p. 93)

As stated above, the relationship between Sethe and Amy encompasses the similarities as well as the differences in their social positioning and race. Although Amy states quite clearly "Glad I ain't you," (p. 94) yet the realization of difference does not serve as a hindrance to racial integration. It does not dissuade Amy from indulging in measures to better Sethe's predicament. These differences, rather, have been elaborated by Morrison as an expression of creative solidarity among women from different racial backgrounds. Morrison, here, seems to create a hybrid space where racial differences do not melt to form a unified homogenous being; this hybrid space, while preserving the differences as well as the similarities intact, translates the differences into opportunities for solidarity and empowerment as Amy, despite her articulation of difference as "Glad I ain't you" (p. 94), still turns her partial identification into a site and expression of united resistance to oppression.

2.3- Symbolic Integration

Despite their belonging to different symbolic registers, it is Amy, the white girl, who gives meaning to the language written at Sethe's back by the white school master; she is the one who deciphered the coded language of slavery carved on Sethe's body and attached signifiers to it-- "a chokecherry tree." (p. 93)

That's what she (Amy) called it. I've never seen it and never will.
But that's what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk,
branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. (p. 18)

Morrison, here, seems to put her faith in a future when the Afrocentric symbolic will be integrated into the Eurocentric symbolic, and when the trauma of slavery will be voiced and acknowledged by the perpetrators of this inhuman practice as well. Rather than labeling the black body as erotic, sensual and wild, as the Eurocentric order is usually presumed to perceive the black body, Amy signifies it as "tree" which is a symbol of fertility, regeneration and also continuation---in short, a symbol of patient and persistent resistance.

2.4- Interracial Identification and Futuristic Transformational Possibilities

The hybrid space created by Morrison contains futuristic transformational possibilities in interracial identificatory practices. It is hinted at by Morrison through the description of bluefern spores growing along the riverbank in the scene describing the moment of Dnever's birth. Morrison terms these spores "seeds" (p. 99) which symbolize potential for a future based on racial integration. These "seeds" (p. 99), Morrison states, are often mistaken for "insects" but in reality they symbolize the hybrid space where the two races can unite together.

They are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one--- will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. (p. 99)

This hybrid space where a “whole generation sleeps confident of a future” (p. 99) can be materialized through partial identification where the “perception of the other’s differences” (Wyatt 2004, 167) does not hinder transformation rather the very realization and acceptance of differences facilitates the “true and authentic transcendence of one’s self.”(Scheler 1970, 46)

3- Sisterhood, Difference, the Real: Women’s Communal Identificatory Ritual in *Beloved*

In this part, I will discuss, in contrast to the role of symbolic order discussed in the previous section, the role of Lacanian real in facilitating or disrupting interracial identification. Moreover, the role of difference in the bonding between women belonging to the same race will also be elaborated.

3.1- The Lacanian Real

Lacan (1954) talking about the real elaborates it as “this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail.” (S II 164) The symbolic order, Lacan believes, fails to encompass the material world. It is structured around an absolute impossibility which resists signification and comprehension. This impossibility is encompassed by the real which engulfs all that which is excluded from the symbolic. Wyatt (2004) believes that the real can erupt into the symbolic at any moment and disrupt our understanding of reality which is organized around and sustained by the logic of the symbolic.

As discussed in the previous section, the multiple symbolic registers can be utilized to facilitate and enhance the interracial identificatory relationships but the real, as opposed to the symbolic order, can serve to disrupt this process. This can be illustrated with the help of bonding in the form of sisterhood exhibited by the women in *Beloved* who gather to perform the communal ritual to exorcise *Beloved*---the living presence of past in the present. But this use of the real by Morrison will also be analysed in the backdrop of an effort by the marginalized section of society to resist homogenization.

3.2- The Real and Women of Colour’s Resistance to Western Assimilation and Appropriation

The gathering of women in *Beloved* to exorcise the living past in the form of ghost can be regarded as a communal ritual that is part of the Afrocentric register. This communal ritual which elides comprehension for the subjects belonging to the Eurocentric register serves as part of the real. As the real is “the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization fails” (Zizek 1989, 169), so the communal act of sisterhood also resists comprehension and symbolization for the Eurocentric subject. Their act stands as a sudden and abrupt break and disruption in the

Eurocentric subject's symbolic register which cannot be translated or converted into intelligible signifiers. Their act of "hollering", of taking "a step back to the beginning" (p. 305) highlights the concrete presence of something which cannot be encompassed by signifiers, something around which the symbolic is structured.

They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (p. 305)

I argue that their communal act to stop praying and stepping "back to the beginning" (p. 305) where "there were no words" (p. 305) is an act of discarding the symbolic and reverting to the real where no words exist and which, consequently, cannot be symbolized. This act of reverting to the real serves as an absolute impediment to the subject not belonging to the Afrocentric register; it serves as a hindrance in the Eurocentric subject's comprehension of the reality of woman of colour. In other words, it can be regarded as an effort by Morrison to emphasize the differences between the white woman and the woman of colour's perception of reality and also as an effort to preserve these differences by making them unintelligible. Morrison, here, seems to be imposing limits on the appropriation and comprehension of woman of colour's world by the white woman/subject to resist absolute merging in the form of homogenization. Their disbelief of language, of signifiers which constitute the symbolic order, reinforces their incredulity and skepticism towards interracial identificatory practices which require complete understanding of the other's reality and which can result in "the imperializing character of cross-cultural identifications." (Fuss 1995, 08)

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. (p. 308)

The search for sound that "broke the back of words" (p. 308) refers to a space where words lose their meaning, where they become incomprehensible to everyone from a different cultural background or symbolic register. The use of sound which elides meaning sets limits on the knowledge and assimilation of the cultural and racial other. Morrison, through her emphasis on the real, seems to set boundaries and limits to which the other can be known and identified with. Although she reinforces and enhances interracial partial identification, as the partial identificatory relationship between Sethe and Amy exemplifies, yet she delineates her skepticism and ambivalence towards the potential appropriation and homogenization inherent in interracial identificatory practices through the incorporation of the real.

By placing the communal ritual in the domains of the real which is incomprehensible to the Eurocentric register, Morrison seems to safeguard and protect woman of colour's cultural integrity from becoming appropriated and assimilated in the Western perspective. She seems to emphasize the need to respect multiple cultural formations and integrities. By placing this communal identificatory ritual outside the bounds of Western epistemological positioning, Morrison emphasizes that every cultural experience cannot and should not be known and brought within the Western categories of thinking. But this notion should not lead to the conclusion that Morrison despairs of the potential possibility of interracial identificatory relationships. Through

the depiction of the bond between Sethe and Amy which is based on partial identification, Morrison emphasizes the need to build bridges across race but, through the domain of the real, she also expresses her skepticism and ambivalent incredulity towards its potential susceptibility for “ultimate violence...appropriation in the guise of an embrace.” (Sommer as cited in Fuss 1995, 9)

3.3- Communal Identificatory Ritual and Differences among Women of Colour

While Morrison expresses her ambivalent distrust of interracial identificatory practices through the use of the real, she also highlights the need to bridge differences, not to ignore or overlook them, in the communal relationships between women belonging to the same race, the same symbolic register. The women who gather to perform the communal ritual also exemplify the coming together of the women of colour to perform a transformative act. It highlights the existence of differences between women of the same race; Morrison does not negate the existence of these differences rather, for her, the women belonging to the same symbolic register do not form a homogenized monolithic whole. She does not negate alterity for the sake of sameness. The women who come together to help Sethe are able to form a unified front only when they have chalked out, lived through and, finally, moved beyond and risen above their differences.

These thirty women, who gather to exorcise the ghost, do have their differences with Sethe. Ella, who was sexually assaulted by her white masters---father and son---whom she calls “the lowest yet” (p. 301), did understand and empathize with Sethe, even her act of infanticide was not incomprehensible to her but she disagreed with Sethe’s “reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected.” (p. 302) But Ella did overcome her differences and reservations with regard to Sethe and joined hands with other women to help her in her pathetic predicament.

Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. (p. 302)

Here the process of partial identification urges women not to blur their differences; it motivates them, rather, to move beyond their differences and to turn their differences into a site for resistance and empowerment. While other women believe that the arrival of the murdered baby’s ghost in Sethe’s life is an act of justice by the providence, it is Ella who persuades them to judge this matter differently.

‘Guess she had it coming.’
‘Nobody got that coming.’
‘But, Ella---’
‘But nothing. What’s fair isn’t necessarily right.’
‘You can’t just up and kill your children.’
‘No, and the children can’t just up and kill the mama.’ (p. 301)

In this way, the process of partial identification which in Wyatt’s (2004) words is “based on a clear perception of the other’s differences” (p. 167) leads the women to express their solidarity with Sethe and indulge in a transformative act to better her predicament.

Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith---as sword and shield. Most brought a little of both. (p. 303)

Thus, the communal ritual performed by these women can be regarded as an act based on partial identification where the differences, rather than being negated or suppressed, lead to a better understanding of the other's predicament.

4- Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that the shortcomings inherent in the identificatory relationship of sisterhood can be mitigated through an identificatory relationship that is premised on the acknowledgement of the differences as well as the similarities between sisters, a relationship which does not negate alterity at the cost of sameness. Through the use of partial identification, Morrison emphasizes the need to bridge differences between races. Through the depiction of partial identification between Sethe and Amy Denver, Morrison broadens the horizon of identificatory practices. Partial identification does not result in the hegemonic disavowal and disregard of the other's differences; the differences are, rather, treasured to build strong bridges to navigate across differences without the assimilation or the usurpation of the other's self and individuality. Thus, Morrison makes an effort to redefine the monolithic, assimilative ideals of sisterhood to incorporate and assert a space for the other's, in other words, the periphery's differences.

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