

## Literary Excavation

In the US recently black writers and activists came together in an unprecedented public tribute to **Toni Morrison**. *Pratibha Parmar* talked to her on her visit to Britain to launch her novel, *Beloved*

**The impetus for your latest novel, *Beloved*, came from a real historical incident from the slave era, when Margaret Garner, an escaped slave, was forced into killing her daughter rather than see her being forced into the brutalities and mutilation of slavery. What pulled you into that era of slavery?**

Margaret Garner was a *cause celebre* in 1855 when she ran away with her children from her slave-holders and arrived in a free state. At the time there was a compromise between the free states and the slave-owning states vis a vis slavery. It stated that the slave owners from the south could come and take away the slaves from the northern free states if they wanted to. That's what happened to her.

So when Margaret Garner saw them coming for her she tried to kill her children. She succeeded in killing her two-year-old daughter but her two sons were only hurt. She said they will not live like I. She was very serene and calm. She was tried not for murder but for what they regarded as the real crime - running away.

**What kinds of issues does that story raise for you and in what ways does it have contemporary relevance?**

I was primarily interested in the ways in which women still have that same problem of a conflict between nurturing and being one's own separate individual. Now women have more choices and are making more and more decisions about either work or children or saying 'what about me' instead of 'what about him'.

Black women had already confronted that problem in the US. They were genuinely modern women because they had confronted modernist problems since the 17th century, as labourers, as mothers, as individuals, as

culture bearers.

Margaret Garner's story had the drama of all those things. Her total identity was those children and in that there was another relationship: a love relationship in which one surrenders oneself to the lover. I thought I would examine that. I don't regard it as progressive that women finally end up being the ultimate single person because in the States this has led to a form of narcissism.

**Ultimately all your novels focus on women's struggle to own themselves. For me, this makes it difficult for the white literary establishment to dismiss your work as of marginal interest.**

The first impulse for my writing is to see black women centre stage, not for any grandiose or egocentric reasons but because I feel that we are not marginal, we are representative. Coloured peoples of the world always seem to me to be the truly non-racist people. We are the only ones asked to be universal, nobody else is required to do that. White people are so accustomed to seeing us as the really distant 'other' that it shocks them that we are universal.

**You seem to succeed in weaving a story which demands an emotionally intense participation from your readers, in the same way as a poem or a painting works.**

That is exactly what I try to do. I tried to figure out ways in which it is necessary for the reader to participate. I don't think a book like this could have been written 50 years ago or even 100 years ago during reconstruction. If it had been written in 1910 people would have resisted it as they did the slave narratives, it would have been dismissed as violent or excessive, probably not even written by them anyway.

It's really archaeology. It's like going back to the site where you pick up one piece

and out of that you make the whole bowl. It's that kind of excavation. But I don't analyse it for its origins so much as use it for what it provokes in me as a writer.

**What is your assessment of the contemporary black movement in the US. What has happened since the civil rights movement?**

The black movement has gone through many changes, maybe deaths. We were just beginning to see the fruits of some of the legislation of the civil rights movement when Reagan was elected. His administration disassembled all the protective legislation of the previous 20 years. They were successful in this. They challenged affirmative action and everything we had fought for.

They began to put their money and their emphasis on something that used to be called black capitalism. That's what happened. Black people who had subscribed to that, viewed the world of success as a very individual and separate notion of how to get along in the world.

Poverty on the other hand is getting worse, and it's not just for black people. You see white people on Fifth Avenue living in cardboard boxes. People are being gentrified out of their homes and neighbourhoods. The emphasis is on the greedy, yuppie world and it's ok to dislike poor people.

**What sort of impact has Jesse Jackson's bid for nomination had?**

It's difficult to tell because the media insists that he is not serious. But, he has a huge following among all kinds of people. It's not unimaginable anymore to have a black nomination. He has no money at all and he is coming in second or third. The feeling is that maybe only black people are supporting him but when I see him on his whistle-stops, that's not true. There are workers and union people who support him even in Ohio, which is a very conservative state. He has support from church people, from the youth, from the disenfranchised people of the 60s and so on. They will have to do some very tricky stuff to say he is not there, to make

him disappear.

**Recently over 100 black writers and activists including June Jordan and Angela Davis organised a public tribute to you and your work. How did you feel about this publicity?**

Oh my dear, it was the best thing. When June and I were on tv together, it was easily the most significant thing that happened to me in my entire writing life. The press's reaction, however, was very strange. They decided that the tribute was about prizes, the Pulitzer Prize. They thought that I was upset about not winning. It wasn't about that. It was very positive. The real point is that to June and Angela and all those people, there



Toni Morrison: Public tribute

was something about what they were saying about honouring our own at a time when Jimmy (James Baldwin) had just died. It was a re-assertion which scared people.

If you write in a culture, from it, for it, within it, the culture says, you are valuable to us. It's such an unprecedented thing. It's something no artist ever expects ever to hear, it's obituary information. That praise-song, that crowning from the community who has said, 'well done' is thrilling and that is the prize. No-one can give me that except them. In fact that tribute destabilised the whole prize-giving process. The establishment cannot enfranchise you if you are taking the power away from them. That's what they were upset about.