

GOOD TOUCH AND BAD TOUCH: THE RELEVANCE OF THE TACTILE IN TONI MORRISON'S 'LOVE'

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Abstract: *The concern with the different kinds of touches to sensitize people especially children has been a discussion in recent times. The importance of identifying the nature of a touch and deriving meaning out of it is essential to respond to it. This response can affect an individual's understanding of oneself and things around. Hence, it can arguably be considered as life-defining.*

The attempt of this study is to explore the impact and relevance of the tactile in the personal journey of the characters in Toni Morrison's novel 'Love'. The focus is on the main characters 'Heed' and 'Christine' and the moment of 'touch' that redefined their relationship. The character of Junior, a wild and modern girl, is also a victim of touch and ironically is healed towards the end by Romen's caring touch of her wounded heel. Touch, therefore, becomes a weapon of power, exploitation, abuse, sexual harassment and sometimes assurance in the novel. The effort is to build a case for the characters in failing or succeeding to empower themselves as a result of the perennial impact of the touches they had experienced in the past and the present.

Keywords: *Touch, exploitation, sensitize, perennial impact, empower*

I. INTRODUCTION

'Not even in the language they had invented' could the touch be explained or decoded. Toni Morrison's novel 'Love' (2003), works around an unconventional narrative technique and temporal order or disorder to reach the denouement where the two female lead characters have an epiphany of sorts. It is the moment when they realized that their entire life and the mutual relationship was compromised for two different touches, experienced and witnessed by Heed and Christine separately but on the same day. The significance and meaning of these touches remained unexplained to them for the major part of their lives until the last chapter of the novel.

The impact of the tactile on human psyche cannot be denied. The understanding of tactile sensation and its associative meanings is important to respond to it. Sometimes the knowledge, intention and the consequence of a touch may be unavailable to the recipient until a later stage when it is triggered. Freud's model of *Nachtraglichkeit*, which Jean Wyt in her essay 'Love's Time and the Reader: Ethical Effects of 'Nachtraglichkeit' in Toni Morrison's, Love' intensively discusses the deferred impact of an act or an action on the consciousness of an individual.

An awareness of the quality of a touch and the ability to segregate them as good or bad, is quite a relevant narrative in the present era. Sensitizing children about good and bad touch, to enable them to identify the difference between the two and hence respond to them at an immediate level, are almost the unwritten curriculum of all educational institutions and child-care homes in today's world. Ironically, the knowledge and sensitization of such touches and its immediate responses were not known to Heed, one of the lead characters of Toni Morrison's *Love*, in their primary years.

The intention and the response of touches may or may not align. There are chances when one is not an immediate recipient of a touch but is a witness to it. However, it does not make the impact any less real or intense as is seen in the case of Christine, the other main character of the novel. There are moments and situations where the sexual nature of a touch is explicit and is intentional. Rape and sexual assault can be manifested by violent touches. Romen, the helping hand in One Monarch Street, the residence of Heed and

Christine, is involved in a gang rape. His inaction in the act to sexually touch the victim and his healing touch on Junior towards the end of the novel, once again become milestone in the lives of the characters.

The novel has many instances of touches, physically and symbolically, which make or break the characters. Every character has either been victimized or healed by various touches. Physical and emotional proximity are the unspoken, more often unrealized, 'phantoms' behind the actions and relationships of the characters.

II. MORRISON'S *LOVE*

Set in South Eastern United States, covering a range of years from 1890 to 1990, *Love* is essentially a bildungsroman of two female characters, namely Heed and Christine. It is a non-linearly structured novel with characters swinging back and forth from the present to the past, memory, trauma and re-witnessing play very significant roles in the narrative. Thus, to explore the intensity and the consequence of the touches in the novel, revisiting the past becomes an absolute necessity. The novel also takes us through the journey of Junior, an outsider to the geographical and the personal world of the Cosey's. Her romantic and sexual escapades with Romen provides not just an interesting sub-plot but helps in reiterating the emotional, personal and the social conflicts in the main plot. But the name that is ubiquitous in both the plots and in the novel is that of Bill Cosey.

Bill Cosey, a quintessential upper-class, successful, maverick businessman, runs an elite hotel resort at the Up-Beach. A large section of the novel is about this larger-than-life creation of Bill Cosey and the influence he has on people around him. What makes Bill Cosey and his accomplishments an interesting study is the racial and class angle. As Morrison says, 'The Cosey's had always been a heated topic' (*Love*, 42). The money behind the establishment of the hotel was also a food for speculation. Inheriting a large amount of wealth from his father, Bill Cosey chose to invest it on a business which at the time of Jim Crowe would flourish like no other. The hotel and resort were a haven for upper-class, privileged, money-loaded blacks, who were denied access to the white domain. Thus, the world of Bill Cosey was an affected imitation of the larger white world looming large. This world had as much discrimination in terms of class and gender as did the Big Bad world of the Whites. The motto of the resort 'The best good time this side of the law' was self-explanatory. The irony is 'this side of the law' was no kinder than the other.

III. GOOD TOUCH AND BAD TOUCH

The non-linear disorientated structure of the novel problematizes our understanding of the relationship between Heed and Christine. The twin narrative technique also adds to the vacillating thoughts regarding the love-hate relationship they share.

'Standing there, one to the right, one to the left, of Bill Cosey's casket, their faces, as different as honey from soot, looked identical. Hate does that. (*Love*, 37)

What is really noteworthy in the funeral scene of Bill Cosey is the spatial distance between the two women. The lack of physical touch generally associated during such moments to recreate consolation for the loss is remarkably missing. This makes a profound statement of the hatred between the two. As we read further into the lives of the two characters, we understand that Heed is the widow of the omnipresent (ironically as he is mortally dead) Bill Cosey and Christine is the granddaughter. The two women, almost of similar age, part of the Cosey legacy, shared a mutual untouchability. We watch them from a distance, through the verbal narrative of the loyal cook of the Resort and most closely through the constant gaze of the third person narrative. What becomes evident is the eye-for-an-eye and tooth-for-a-tooth equation between the two sixty-something women. Living in the same house, they choose to live in their spatially and psychologically divided spotlight. Once-Perhaps twice-a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped.....More on the mark was their unspoken realizations that the fights did nothing other than allow them to *hold* each other.' (*Love*, 82 *Italics mine*). The craving to touch each other even if it is associated with violence makes one inquisitive of the nature of their relationship. Was the animosity about power, property, inheritance and ownership? Or are we missing something? some notes, some hidden details, some unspoken truth? The answer to all these is realized not until the last section of the novel. The oh-so-that- is -what -it -is, moment comes at the climax when ironically Christiane holds Heed with her hands to prevent the latter from a fall, as both of them were slyly aiming to reconstruct Bill Cosey's will!

The moment of epiphany comes while recalling a single day's event and the disturbing impact that an inappropriate 'touch' had on the friendship of the two girls. As the two physically and morally dishevelled old women sit in a neutral space of the ruins of the once-upon-a time dazzling Resort, they fail to keep on the

charade of hatred any longer. The intimate conversation between the two takes us back to an idyllic past of two eleven-year-old girls sharing innocent moments at one of their regular picnics at the beach. They reminiscent with the thought of 'We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere'. They regret losing 'touch' with each other because of the rivalry that was created between them by the overpowering personality of Bill Cosey. The conversation that flows from here is more an attempt to establish the reason behind their falling apart. But this brings them to the most well-kept secret between the two. A secret that not only tore them apart but was tantamount to bringing havoc in the lives of everyone around. A secret that Heed and Christine 'Even in Idigay they had never been able to share a twin shame'(Love,219).

A flashback to 1940, and the two little girls innocently playing at the beach, enjoying their packed picnic lunch at the privacy of their conjured Celestial Palace. Enjoying the company of each other, dressed in their bathing suits with identical hairstyles, they discover that they had forgotten the jacks in the hotel. Heed volunteers to get them and 'bumps into her friend's (Christine) grandfather (Love,220) at the hallway of his hotel. After some regular enquiry on Heed's background what followed was something that could be interpreted as a paedophilic extremity.

'He *touches* her chin, and then –casually, still smiling- her nipple, or rather the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her dot ever changes'(Love,221, Italics mine). This psychologically and morally fatal 'touch' turns the eleven-year-old Heed's innocent world upside down. Regardless of Bill Cosey's age, one still cannot condone the sexual perversion of the act on a minor. The psychological impact of such a 'touch' could be extremely disturbing. Here the knowledge of good and bad touch (that is a pertinent subject in today's context) probably could have helped the child to respond adequately. However, Jean Wyatt interprets that Heed is catapulted into the world of adult sexuality without having the agency to comprehend it at the time.

'Heed stands there for what seems an hour but is less than the minute it takes to blow a perfect bubble'. (Love,221). This confused response of an uninformed little girl to the molestation reconfirms Jean Wyt's application of Freud's model of *Nachtraglichkeit*. The complex temporal structure of the novel dividing it into two sections helps in creating a huge gap between the moment of action and the moment of realization. *Nachtraglichkeit* or deferred action as it may be loosely translated to, refers to an incident that an individual experience without understanding the significance and consequence of it and fails to react appropriately at the moment. However, any remote incident in the future could trigger this past and stimulate the individual to realize and comprehend the significance and the enormity of the past act. Ironically it took Heed years of time and not until her death-bed moment, in the proximity of his long-lost friend turned enemy, could she fathom the nature, the intention and the significance of the 'touch' that changed her life forever. The inappropriate touch followed by a hasty marriage to the fifty-year-old Bill Cosey did give Heed the social recognition that she used as guard to avoid the disturbed consciousness within her. At the most obvious level, this marriage proved fatal to the friendship between the little girls. Nothing remained the same ever since. Devoid of the most organic bond of friendship that the two girls shared, what followed was an equally intense relationship of betrayal and hatred.

Christine saw the marriage between her best friend and her grandfather as a transgression. It made everything that they shared between them a lie. It ended the biggest source of sustenance and security for them.

The inappropriate touch could be read as an exploitation of the most vulnerable, powerless and voiceless – the black American woman/girl-child with no wealth, by the, entitled, rich masculine power. A black Feminist study of the condition of black women brings forth, the double denial of respect, security, choices and agencies to such women. The Feminist movements were customized more for the white middle-class women of the West and the civil rights movements were essentially led by patriarchy. Thus, the Black American women were discriminated based on race, colour, gender and class. The Black men, having been deprived of their masculine entitlement amidst the whites, found the easiest prey in their own women. The civil rights movement becomes a mockery when we have a desperate poor imitation of a white man in men like Bill Cosey. Despite all his wealth and reputation, what cannot be missed is that his business thrived on the money and the good-will of rich blacks only. The Resort, during its hey-days was not open to people belonging to a certain section and class. Though ironically it was open to all when the richer blacks stopped visiting the hotel. But what is also evident is that, this place was a haven for the blacks away from the white gaze. Thus, Bill Cosey could assert his economic, social, sexual and voyeuristic power only amidst the helpless. His lack of remorse for his paedophilic touch followed by the audacious act of marrying the minor against money to her folks, underline the embedded patriarchy in the constitution of a system across race. Bill Cosey is no better than an invented, inculcated, distorted version of a white man, bathed in patriarchy.

To revert to the day when Bill Cosey felt the little eleven-year-old Heed, there was some other 'touch' that was equally disturbing and defining for the other friend, Christine. As Heed had gone looking for the jack, Christine followed to meet her friend at the service entrance. But what she witnessed when she looked toward the window of her own room, where she expected Heed to be looking for the jack, completely took her by shock. She finds her grandfather 'touching' his penis and masturbating. Though Bill Cosey did not intend it for Christine to see him in the act, the latter was petrified by the sight. These two back-to-back episodes of touch brought in the first silence and gap between the two friends. The experience of touch can be personal even if one is witness to it without being the recipient.

'It wasn't the arousals, not altogether unpleasant, that the girls could not talk about. It was the other thing. The thing that made each believe, without knowing why, that this particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech' (Love, 223).

Not even in their language of innocence can the consequences of these 'touches' be registered.

The occurrences of the tactile is not just limited to the main plot. The sub-plot narrating the volatile romance of Romen and Junior has multiple instances of physical proximity, sexual abuse and the healing touch. We first meet Romen in a dramatic scene of gang rape where his rowdy acquaintances encourage him to be a 'punk' and devour the helpless girl. Romen at the moment of action, refuses to sexually 'touch' the victim. Contrary to his own determined intention of establishing himself as the 'dude' as we would address him in today's lingo, Romen helps to untie the girl and escorts her back safely. This note of 'good touch' is important in our realizing the character of Romen. Coming from a middle-class family, raised by his grandparents, who were associated with Bill Cosey, Romen represents the other side of black American life. Romen 's parents were enlisted in the army and as a consequence he was fostered by his grandparents, who were completely committed to inculcate the right values in him. Romen was a regular at One Monarch Street, helping in odd jobs. Morrison shows the inner conflict in Romen's psyche in his constant indecisiveness in being the 'punk', the wild young black American reckless boy or the kind, benevolent and empathetic man, his family values directed him to.

The relationship he has with Junior is violently sexual and passionate. They seemed to have made out at every corner of One Monarch Street and beyond. They enjoyed their sexual escapades, risking to be identified, but the careless attitude is what makes it fun for them. Romen was satisfied to have found his macho identity, at least in bed. Though the text has ample instances of graphical description of sexual touches between the young couple but what really stands out is the healing touch he provides to Junior on her wounded, merged foot during a wild course of love making at the bathtub.

'Feeling strong and melted at the same time, Romen reached under the water and raised Junior's misshapen foot above it' Then, bending his head , he lifted them to his tongue.' (Love, 210)

The 'touch' of care and affection is what brings in a transformation in the hard-hearted Junior. The young girl, from Settlement, rejected by his folks, dejected by their insensitive behaviour when her foot was ran into by a truck at the behest of her uncles, Junior learnt that the best way to deal with inappropriate 'touch' is to confront it the hard way. At the Correctional,' while the Administrator's *hands* were busy unbolting his trousers, hers went to the back of his knees, upending him over the railing'. (Love, 138. Italics mine). This single episode gives a clarity of the fact that Junior is no damsel-in -distress and can stand up for herself to counter 'bad touch'.

One can see even at a later point in her life, when Christine was heavily invested in the civil rights movement, in association with her partner Fruit, standing up against an inappropriate act of touch. When a member of the organization engages in rape, and Fruit seemed nonchalant and careless about it., Cristine chooses to move away. However, the importance and the pathos in the desperate need to 'touch' each other is evident in the lines which demonstrates the bitter relationship between Heed and Christine over the years.

'Once-perhaps twice -a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped'. (Love, 82).

But the juvenile violence in this behaviour is explained in the following lines, ...the fights did nothing other than allow them to hold each other....,Like friendship, hatred needed more than physical intimacy...' (Love,82), Heart wrenching lines, that exposes and establishes the absolute need of tactile validation to sustain strong emotions. The final scene where Heed falls down accidentally in the ruins of the hotel and Christine 'gathers Heed in her arms' is the finale representation of the significance and relevance of touch in bringing the story and the friendship to its consummate climax.

IV. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *Love* is a tale of love, betrayal, reconciliation and struggle. It is a tale that portrays the uncertainties, vulnerabilities and insecurities of black American folks across class and gender. But most importantly it enables the reader to be invested in a beautiful homosocial relationship between two vulnerable and strong women. To establish and express the multiple layers of the text, Morrison both extensively and intensively uses the tactile as a tool. It also makes the good and bad touch relatable to the twenty first century readers and how on the fundamentals of these touches can an entire era from 1890 to 1990 be recreated.

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