
«WITNESSES FOR THE FUTURE»: THE GRIOT-HISTORIAN IN FLORA NWAPA'S *EFURU* AND TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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INTRODUCTION

Storytellers, bards, messengers, eulogists, genealogists, moralists, guarantors of tradition, singers and instrumentalists, griots are in Senegal, Guinea and mainly in Mali as well, undeniable masters of speech and music. Present in the works of many writers and film makers, from Pierre Loti and Camara Laye to Sembène Ousmane, they helped the novelist Alex Haley, author of the best seller *Roots*, relate his origins [...]. Their knowledge and talent arouse respect. (Leymarie, 1999, 3, translation mine)

Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) articulate some of the attributes of the griot as defined in the above quotation by pianist and musicologist Isabelle Leymarie. Both novels pay tribute to the griot as historian, upholder of the oral tradition of his/her community. Through *Efuru*'s and *Sethe*'s respective stories, the authors relate the History of people who share the same experience in the tradition of the griot. In this paper, I intend to analyze the role of the griot by tracing interconnected occurrences in both books and showing how Nwapa's and Morrison's texts explore the common threads of Black women's experience from Africa and the Black Diaspora. That the two writers chose female protagonists for their plots is not fortuitous. Morrison uses this process to highlight the horrors of the Peculiar Institution for Black Americans as a whole, and particularly for the community of Black women as productive force and means of production.¹ As for Nwapa, the same process is meant to show African women's enslavement through tradition.

Two attributes of the griot will be discussed: first, the griot as chronicler of historical events and second, as storyteller. However, because Nwapa and

Morrison live in new socio-historical environments where the traditional practice of storytelling is largely influenced and altered by modernity, it is not the figure of the griot himself/herself in the traditional African sense of the term (an individual who used to go about with a cora, singing and praising people) which will be analyzed. It is rather the literary character who is given in the novel, the role that parallels that of the griot. Many other realities (literary production, the world of publication at large) also explain a shift away from traditional oral structures towards a representation of these structures in the text. Literature then, as Morrison advocates, should stand for an appropriate medium to carry on the role of the griot: "We [Black Americans] don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel" (Evans, 1983, 340).

Clearly, the novel stands in Morrison's mind, for a "healing art". It functions as a means of unifying the black community and preserving the cultural identity of the Black American people. As a healing tool, literature helps them relive nostalgically those good old days Morrison refers to. It heals "the pain of not being able to sit around and tell or listen to those archetypal stories" because modern environment has drastically changed those habits.

¹ The capitalist ideology underlining the politics of slavery helps understand Black women's exploitation. Thus, in the same way as capitalism exploited the productive force, Black women in slavery were considered as productive force and means of production: they contributed to the production by their work and created producers through motherhood.

1. The griot as chronicler of history.

Guthrie, 1994, 257-258)

The figure of the griot as historian who chronicles the different forms of oppressions victimizing Black women, emerges from the texture of *Efuru* and *Beloved*.¹ The plots dramatize the story of people whose lives progress from a state of legal/cultural bondage to that of freedom and a substantial degree of self-realization. Yet, this dramatization diverges from one book to the other. In *Efuru*, women's enslavement is cultural whereas it is institutionalized and legalized in *Beloved*. The textual structure of *Efuru* is chronological, depicting Igbo cultural life from pre-colonial to post-colonial period with regards to its oppression of women. On the contrary, *Beloved* is a set of scattered fragments of Black Americans' history. Though the novel is published in 1987, it constantly refers to the period of slavery. It is set during the Reconstruction and hints at the Middle Passage, all of which occurred many years earlier. Thus, like historians, Nwapa and Morrison place their readers at the core of their people's history, drawing their attention onto the "constructed" fate of their race and gender.² Indeed, historians lean on dialogues, letters, family stories to construct the theories of human development in time and space (Omolade, 1994, 110). But for Morrison, history must be interpreted not as a sequential series of events but rather as a lived personal experience fraught with fear and uncertainty. This is what she posits in *Beloved*, as she explains during a conversation with critic Bonnie Angelo:

I was trying to make it a personal experience. The book was not about the institution – Slavery with capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts in order to relate to one another – that was incredible to me [...] There was this ad hoc nature of everyday life. For black people, anybody might do anything at any moment. Two miles in any direction, you may run into Quakers who feed you or Klansmen who killed you – you don't know. When you leave the plantation, you are leaving not only what you know, you are leaving your family. (Taylor-

Morrison then re-writes the experience of slavery not in the way the Institution was structured, but in a process of lived experience. This re-writing passes, as critic Claudine Raynaud mentions, for "prophetic literature" (1996, 23). For the critic, *Beloved* does not follow the chronological sequence of the official history related to slavery. It recalls *The Black Book* (1974), which neither is divided into chapters nor follows a specific order. *The Black Book* can be opened at any page. It contains newspapers articles, songs, pictures found in old trunks, recipes, slave narratives collected during the Depression, registers kept by Black pro-slavers, stories about non black people who were beaten, killed or branded for helping slaves (Raynaud, 23-24). All these elements are also constitutive of the narrative plot in *Beloved*; they support the writer's assertion that her novel is not about Slavery with capital S.

While *Beloved* attacks the institution of slavery itself, *Efuru* portrays a situation of slavery as encoded in the tradition of the tribe. Nevertheless, both books share the common enslavement of Black women. In *Beloved*, the effects of slavery on Black women are seen through the main protagonist. She wears on her body the signs of her greatest ordeal at the Sweet Home Plantation. The story of Schoolteacher's brutality that she endured is recorded in the scars on her back. Paul D discovers this:

He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her

¹ I focus on some of the oppressive forces that victimize Black women because they cannot be all exhaustively explored here.

² In her book *Race, Sexe et pratique du pouvoir : idée de nature*, sociologist Colette Guillaumin argues that the idea of sexual difference is constructed around the sexual organ of reproduction through a materialistic and symbolic ideology intended to successively express, assert and separate sexes. This construction couples the materialistic relationship of the socio cultural division of labor and the social distribution of power. Following this ideology, children of both sexes are taught since childhood how to walk, how to sit, how to use playgrounds and which game they should play. Most of the time, girls receive the exact reverse of the training given to the opposite sex. This goes to prove that the sexual identity of the individual is constructed by ideological structures. (1992, 115-140)

hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl." And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. (17-18)

Here, Sethe's inability to feel anything in Paul D's affectionate gestures is undoubtedly shocking for the reader. The many floggings she has received through her master's cruelty have made the skin of her back insensitive to such an extent that she cannot feel her friend's mouth going gently over it.

As a Black woman, Sethe feels profoundly insulted by Schoolteacher's research on her own and her fellow slaves' racial characteristics. *Beloved* depicts the ill-treatment of Blacks under slavery thoroughly. Sethe's own mother was marked. She wore the imprint under her breast and a bit in her mouth as the heroine tells her daughter Denver (61). This reveals the slaves' reduction to animal status. All the same, that this slave woman is made to wear a bit in her mouth is also a literal privation of her right to speak. By doing so, her master isolates her and prevents her from communicating with her companions. This deprivation is coupled with the impossibility to love freely. Paul D notices this propensity with Sethe: "Risky, [he] thought, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (45).

Slavery also creates a psychological trauma for Black women. It makes the heroine kill and try to commit suicide. But she feels no remorse. On the contrary, she justifies her acts: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (164). Later, she adds: "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). A victim of the institutionalized system, she knows what it means to be a slave or a slave's relative. Consequently, she finds that it is her duty to protect her offsprings. This is why by killing them, she prevents them from having to bear the burden that has been hers for years.

Moreover, Sethe is raped by Schoolteacher and his

nephews and is "milked" like a cow (17). Their act demonstrates Black women's objectification through constant sexual abuses. Baby Suggs, too, is a living symbol of Black women's sexual exploitation during slavery. She conceived eight children with six different men. Like Sethe, all her life is marked by suffering, sorrow, fear, and sadness. Most of the people she knows were only the properties of slave merchants. Thus, the reader is informed that there was nobody she "knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented, won, stolen or seized" (23). As for her children, they were all separated from her, a situation which provokes not only a terrible shock but also exposes the reality of the sexual exploitation of Black women as "means of production" (to use Marxist terminology). The narrative reveals:

Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for *hearing* that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her – only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. (23)

Turning the role of the griot into that of a historian, Morison's narrator collects all the different aspects of Black Americans' lives bit by bit.

Efuru explores female experience from early colonial times to post-civil war period and contemporary Nigeria. The novelist leans on elements of cultural, domestic as well as economic history as they touch on women's lives from the past to contemporary times. Consequently, many scenes are set in the home, by the stream and at the marketplace, all of which are centers of women's social and economic

activities. As a historian, Nwapa collects and depicts the many facets of Igbo traditional as well as contemporary society. By so doing, she demonstrates, as critic Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo asserts, her “remarkable understanding of history, historical process and individual and corporate psychology” (Umeh, 1998, 58). From a feminist point of view, she then evokes what Alice Walker terms the duty of Black women writers and intellectuals in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Walker writes: “*We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone*” (92). This is what Nwapa skillfully achieves in *Efuru*.

Early in the novel, the heroine breaks the cultural structure of her community by accepting to go with a suitor who has not yet fulfilled the traditional law of dowry (3). In the eyes of her community, such an attitude cannot go unpunished. Therefore, she becomes an outcast. All her actions and life are considered as inadequate to the community's mores. Efuru's position in her society runs parallel to that of Sethe in *Beloved*. By killing, Sethe acts against the social order and the communal mores of her society. Her act, like Efuru's, is therefore reprehensible because it does not fit the social organization of Bluestone Road. She is then viewed as an outlaw. This is why the community rejects her until Ella's intervention for her reinstatement.

Throughout *Efuru*, marriage is a cultural and traditional element which contributes to make women's burden heavier. It is intrinsically linked to procreation. Even in marriages based on pure and true love which bring together husband and wife, childbearing remains the main objective. Thus, when Efuru fails to conceive in her marriages, the community finds it unacceptable. For instance, they gossip at seeing her and Gilbert together seeming really happy. A woman says :

Seeing them together is not the important thing [...] The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. *We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage should be fruitful. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use*

is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and *buys* everything in the *market* for you and you are not *productive*? (171, italics mine)

The above quotation brings out the metaphor of feeding through marriage. For Efuru's community, marriage should be fertile; it should produce children. The words “eat” and “fruitful”, build up the metaphor of nourishment. By yielding children, marriage therefore feeds the biological parents and ensures their survival and beyond them, that of the whole community. In addition, the fact that for the community marriage should be productive, throws light on the idea of the materialistic exploitation carried by the words “market” and “buy”. Thus, when marrying a woman, the husband is metaphorically investing. And the income of his investment derives from the children the latter is expected to conceive. It is therefore in light of this economic mentality that childbearing is essential.

Consequently, as Efuru still fails to conceive in her second marriage, the community becomes worried. Omirima indirectly manifests this concern to the heroine's mother-in-law: “Look for a young girl for your son. He cannot remain childless. His fathers were not childless. So it is not in the family. Your daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is wealthy but riches cannot go on errands for us” (205). Efuru's oppression is also physical. She is made to go through female circumcision, a cultural and traditional sexual-oriented prescription supposed to define woman's identity (10). Furthermore, in her society, a woman is “nothing” but only the property of her husband. She must not challenge him and must behave with the greatest respect vis-à-vis him. For instance, at the end of the marriage ceremony, when Adizua offers the glass of drink to Efuru, the people around order her as she holds it: “Kneel down, kneel down, you are a woman” (23).

Almost all the female protagonists of the novel experience hardship. In no way, does the cultural and traditional ideology to which the community is so attached, offer them a possibility for self-realization. Like the heroine, all their existence is characterized by suffering. Ajanupu accounts for this situation when she falls sick. In her agony, “her voice [sounding] as if she [is] far away” (197), she recalls all the misery she has been going through since she

got married. She tells Ossai:

My life has been one long suffering. The bright part of it came when my son married Efuru. But Adizua hated me. He hated me just as his father hated me. He did not want me to be happy, and so denied me that happiness I found in his marriage with Efuru. My son left his wife and ran away with a worthless woman. My gods and ancestors, I have not wronged you. I have been upright. I have never stolen in my life. In all the long years I waited for my husband, I did not commit adultery. But I have suffered as nobody has suffered before. (197)

Nwabata, Ogea's mother, also begins to suffer as soon as she gets married. The narrator explains: "She had her way and married Nwosu. That was the beginning of her suffering. She had to go to the farm with him and she had to learn the hard way. She was able to endure it because of the tremendous love she had for her husband and her children" (212). Like Nwabata, Efuru's two marriages do not help her find happiness. Even if her marriage ceremony with Gilbert is a success, the marriage ends up sorrowfully and painfully. In one word, she is unable to accommodate to modernity while keeping in touch with her community's traditional way of living.

Painstakingly, Nwapa explores women's plight by analyzing their experience through their relationship with male characters. She thus bears witness to the great importance literary tradition offers male characters to the detriment of female ones in Igbo society. Thus, Efuru's first husband, Adizua, deserts her for another woman. When their child dies, he refuses to come back, leaving her to endure the pain alone (93-94). Later, when her father dies, her second husband, Gilbert, refrains from attending the burial ceremony (259). Furthermore, Gilbert brings home the child he has from another woman without taking time to psychologically prepare Efuru and her co-wife Nkoyeni (241), demonstrating that he is the sole master of the household and as such, only his decision counts. Above all, when the heroine falls sick, she is accused of adultery by the whole community, including Gilbert. He asks her: "Efuru, my wife, the gods are angry with you because you are guilty of adultery, and unless you confess, you will die. So you should confess to me and live. I won't ostracise you, you will still be my wife, and I

won't allow anybody to molest you. So confess and live" (274-275).

Instead of dwelling upon her sickness and acting for her recovery, Gilbert is inclined to claim and protect his male dignity. In sum, Efuru suffers because she loves and wants to be loved. Even in joke, she is reminded that she is not a man's equal. As Gilbert tells her, as a woman, she is not entitled to break kola in his presence (104). Like historians, Morrison and Nwapa respectively chronicle Sethe's family story and Efuru's tragedy to construct, in critic Omolade's words, their people's "development in time and space". They dramatize slavery in America and pre-colonial to post-colonial era in Igbo society (Africa) with their oppression of Black women.

2. The griot as storyteller.

While accounting for historical events, the griot fulfills at the same time the role of a storyteller. A novelist can bear testimony to the role of the griot as storyteller in two ways. Either he/she incorporates in his/her text scenes relating this practice or he/she gives the narrative a structural framework that resembles a tale. This double perspective clearly permeates both *Efuru* and *Beloved*. Indeed, the act of storytelling stems from an old tradition dating back for centuries within Black communities. It is a way for tribes and populations to communicate their legends, religious beliefs and their stories. This practice is at the core of the inter-textual relationship between *Efuru* and *Beloved*. It informs the reader that in Nwapa's and Morrison's communities, storytelling is transmitted not only as an heritage, but also as a contribution to the process of education and socialization of the individuals. As Toni Cade Bambara puts it:

Stories keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, in the throes, on the verge – the storyteller snatches us back from the edge. Our lives preserved. How it was, how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do: to produce stories to save our lives. (Evans, 1984, 41; in Kenyon, 1991, 51)

The storyteller then appears as the upholder of oral tradition. But in which way do *Efuru* and *Beloved* respond to this principle?

From Nwapa's text to Morrison's, the process of storytelling is woven into the narrative differently. This distinction cross-refers to folklorist and ethnologist Vladimir Propp's structuring of the tale in his *Morphologie du conte* (1970):

We can call [...] tale from a morphological standpoint, any development starting from a misdeed or from a lack [of misdeed], and going through intermediate functions to lead to marriage or to other functions used as outcome. The final function can be the reward, the taking of the object of the researches, or generally, the repair of the misdeed, the help and the salvation during the pursuit, etc. We call this development a *sequence*. (112, translation mine)

In different episodes of *Efuru*'s and Sethe's tragedies, the idea of pursuit and quest for help or salvation is recurrent. In *Efuru*, the novelist lays more emphasis on the very structure of the tale. This structure revolves around an unspecified reference, establishing the usual form of storytelling with expressions such as "a long time ago", "once upon a time", commonly used in African tales for lack of precise references. The novel reveals this timelessness as Eneke introduces his tale about the young girl who disobeys her mother: "One day, in the land of Idu-na-oba (Benin)" (131). The young girl's misdeed derives from her disobedience to her mother. At the end of the tale, when the spirit dies, the girl's misdeed is repaired and her salvation achieved. *Efuru* also commits a misdeed by breaking her community's traditional law which forbids her to leave her parents for her suitor unless the latter pays the dowry first. But her misdeed is repaired later when she accepts to return to her father's house (280). By accepting her failure as fate, she reconciles herself with her "misdeed" and can henceforth hope for salvation.

In contrast to *Efuru*, *Beloved* focuses on the oral and historical nature of the narration. Sethe's story is recounted orally in three parts. Baby Suggs tells one version. Sethe herself recounts another part and the last version is told by Denver. But when associated, they constitute the heroine's whole story. Many a time, the novel hints at the general history of Black Americans. The story's beginning is very relevant in terms of historical reference: "1873",

namely eight years after the civil war (1861-1865). This reference functions as a hyphen between the plot and the Reconstruction period and the great hope it aroused within the black communities. When translated to the narrative structure of *Beloved*, Sethe's "misdeed" is the murder of her daughter and the reappearance of the ghost indicates that she is pursued by evil. Finally, her salvation is fulfilled through the communal prayer organized by the other women of her community towards the end of the novel to exorcise the malevolent influence of the ghost (261).

One of the essential characteristics of storytelling is the technique of "call-and-response" known as one of the most persistent aspects of Black expression. It is a technique of interaction between a storyteller and an audience or between a soloist and a chorus in which each call from the storyteller is punctuated by a response from the audience. It helps synthesize the storyteller and the audience by creating a climate of cohesion and a communion: "The audience not only aids the speaker's performance, but also *performs* in its own right. Every member of the [...] audience is required to participate actively in communication. The audience, in fact, is a speaker, and the speaker, thriving on the response of the audience, is herself a listener" (Awkward, 1989, 49).

In this act of communication, neither the storyteller nor the audience has a predetermined role. Both are in turn audience and storyteller. In the words of critic Smitherman: "There is no sharp line between performers or communications and the audience, for virtually everyone is performing and everyone is listening" (1977, in Awkward, 1989, 49). The response to a call can be verbal. This is delineated in *Efuru* when Eneke calls his audience at the beginning of his tale: "*Mbadee*". The audience responds: "*de, Mbadee, de*" (131). The communication settled, Eneke can rely on the faithfulness of his audience and freely tell his tale. The verbal response of the chorus to the storyteller's call also occurs in the scene in which Eneke tells his audience about the death of the spirit who wants to marry Nkwo's sister or about Okirikpa's death after the latter becomes so fat that he can no longer fit in his house:

Nkwo brought a tin of kerosene. She poured it on the roof and set the house on fire. The house burnt to ashes, and thus the spirit was killed. 'Serves him right',

the children rejoiced, 'to think that he could marry such a beautiful girl'. 'But that's not the end of the story', Eneke continued. 'The ashes of the burnt body of the spirit were in a heap and as Okirikpa was passing by, he saw the heap of ashes. "What a fine snuff", he says. So he collected some, and with his thumb he put in his two nostrils, and went home. When he got home, he began to enlarge and to enlarge and to enlarge until he was too big for his house, and finally he burst and died. 'Ew-o-o-o', the women and the children exclaimed. (137)

The moral of the whole tale is the price of disobedience. Because the young girl refuses to respect her mother's warning and follows her mates to the udara tree to collect its fruits (132), she comes across the spirit who wants to marry her. By blending her narrative with this tale, Nwapa demonstrates her knowledge of the African oral tradition. This tale is therefore illustrative of the social organization of the writer's community. It also depicts the African traditional way of teaching, educating, transmitting wisdom and knowledge through tales, fables and parables from adults to younger generations. Furthermore, Okirikpa's new physical appearance, after he puts the ashes of the spirit in his nostrils, revives the traditional belief that spirits never die. They always appear in new forms, demonstrating their everlasting character.

On the other hand, the response to the storyteller's call can be non verbal. In *Efuru*, this is given through the attitude of some of Eneke's audience, namely the children who "made faces", some of whom "spate on the ground" (136) as Eneke describes the scene. Through this depiction, Nwapa gives a realistic dimension to the tradition of storytelling and demonstrates its predominant role within African communal life.

A similar interaction to that between Eneke and the group of villagers, translated by a non verbal response to the storyteller's call, and which requires that more information and details be given as the story progresses, occurs in *Beloved* when Denver tells Beloved the story of her birth:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it – through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have

looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her – and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver *nursing* Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to *overfeed* the loved. (78, italics mine)

Here too, the metaphor of feeding, like that in *Efuru*'s marriage with Gilbert, is thrown into relief. It represents a significant stylistic device and constitutes a powerful thread in the novel. In *Efuru*, this metaphor is fulfilled through marriage and precisely through birthing while in *Beloved*, it is provided to the reader by the text. This dual perception of feeding puts side by side the social and cultural reality through which women are victimized in *Efuru*'s and Sethe's communities. Baby Suggs' story, Sethe's infanticide, Beloved's resurrection, in one word, the lineage of Black women's traumatic experiences, are paradoxically told as a process of feeding. First, in a vertical downward process (from grandmother to mother and from mother to daughter) and second, following a horizontal axis (from daughter to daughter or from same to same). However, on either side, the process intends to satisfy the "greedy" desire of the listener. But beyond the very act of feeding, this metaphor relates to the notion of survival. The different stories feed the listeners and help them discover their identity while giving them strength to survive the difficulties they experience.

The rhetorical as well as the structuring powers of storytelling bring *Efuru* and *Beloved* together in inter-textual cohesion. For example, in *Beloved*, the appearance of the baby ghost is a sign of anxiety and fear for the audience and the reader as well: "124 was...full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (3). The narrator presents a baby who comes back from death after an infanticide perpetrated by its mother. Placed into the context of storytelling, that of orality, this beginning foreshadows the unfolding of a good tale, precisely through its mysterious opening. Likewise, in *Efuru*, the reader is placed face to face with a protagonist who is a reincarnation of the river Goddess Uhamiri. The heroine's barrenness, after birthing one child, stems from the river Goddess'

choice of her as her worshipper. As such, Efuru must represent her in all her fullness and infertility is an aspect of this plenitude.

Like Efuru who is inhabited by the river Goddess, Sethe is haunted by the baby ghost who resurrects to claim her share of love. This claim is shown by her narcissistic behavior anytime her mother manages to satisfy her ceaseless demands (240-241), her “greedy” desire and her devouring looks:

Sethe was liked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work. In lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords. She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. (57)

The narration of *Efuru* and *Beloved* is akin to that of a tale. The heroines' stories, their tragedies can be said to be fantasies in so far as they are hardly believable. Indeed, as Todorov writes in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), “fantasy is the hesitation someone who knows only natural laws has, face to an apparently supernatural event” (29). He goes on:

Fantasy creates a particular effect on the reader – fear, horror or curiosity – [...] Fantasy serves the narration, maintains suspense: the presence of fantastic elements allows a really close organization of the plot. Finally, fantasy has at first sight a tautological function: it helps describe a fantastic universe but this universe is not as much a reality outside language; the description and the object described are not different. (98, translation mine)

A close examination of Nwapa's and Morrison's plots reveals their link with fantasy as defined by Todorov. In *Beloved*, the unexpected reappearance of the baby ghost at 124 Bluestone Road disrupts the daily life of Sethe's family. For, “as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it, as soon as [Beloved's] two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake” (3), Sethe's boys (Buglar and Howard) felt it was high time they left to escape the mysterious and frightening atmosphere which haunts their household. Later on, Paul D deserts the house when he realizes that Sethe's love for Beloved has become so immense that she seems to forget him (203). This reappearance even hastens Sethe's loss of her mental sanity. She is housebound by Beloved. This adds not only to the psychic trauma she goes through in remembering the horrors of slavery, but it also makes her realize the threat that hovers over her family life. In addition, Sethe's infanticide can be viewed as a Biblical analogy. It might be a feminine/feminist representation of Abraham's attempt to kill his beloved son Isaac in *The Book of Exodus*. Of course, the two acts do not have the same significance. Abraham's act is the materialization of his people's traditional ritual of worshiping God, whereas Sethe's murder is a symbol of liberation. She sacrifices Beloved to prevent her other children from being taken back to slavery. However, the connection between the two scenes lies in the biological parent's (spiritual/deliberate) intention to kill his/her offspring.

On the other hand, the analogy between Abraham's and Sethe's acts brings forth a triangulation. In his attempt to kill Isaac, Abraham links his relationship with his son to God. As such, he restores God in His status of a supreme being who exercises a right of life and death over human beings. In the end, God is merciful and substitutes a lamb for Isaac. But at the same time, He claims that no human being apart from Him has such right over his/her fellow creatures. A similar triangulation to that occurring among Abraham, Isaac and God is also brought out among Sethe, Beloved and Schoolteacher. As a slave master, Schoolteacher has life and death right over both the heroine and her daughter. But Sethe reassigns this right to “Death” which in her eyes, stands for a supreme “being”. By killing, she raises Death to the rank of a divinity, a redeemer (like God) which must save Beloved from Schoolteacher's cruelty. Sethe's murder therefore proves to be a

mercy killing in the sense that it is intended to avert her daughter's suffering from her master's hands.

In *Efuru*, the heroine's fate is related to the will of the river Goddess which has taken hold of her. She knows that she can no longer do anything by herself without the interference of her "holy" or "water" spirit as she and her father are told by the dibia (the oracle): "The goddess of the lake has chosen her as one of her worshippers. It is a great honour. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you. But you must keep her laws" (191-192). Both Sethe and Efuru are then controlled by forces outside them and beyond their control. It is no wonder then, that their stories can or must be read as tales. Because these brutal forces are beyond human power, they provide both stories with a mythic, or even fantastic, dimension.

Yet, *Efuru* diverges somewhat from *Beloved* in its unfolding of the mythic dimension. Sethe's tragedy occurs in a dreamlike way, giving the novel an oneiric turn instead. The nightmarish tension commences with the first signs of the ghost's presence at 124 Bluestone Road and covers a two year period until the end of the novel, a period during which the heroine must confront and live with that strange reality. Sethe symbolically wakes up from her nightmare thanks to the prayer of exorcism from the neighboring women who help her get rid of *Beloved*. Through this ceremony, the community constitutes a shield for Sethe and gives her shelter, as Baby Suggs presses her to do: "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of 'em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down" (86). Obviously, Baby's invocation proves to be efficient since before *Beloved* appears at 124, Sethe enjoys a twenty-eight day freedom (95).

Like in a nightmare, *Beloved* haunts the heroine. When running away, she finds rescue in the community of women who use the power of their prayer to defeat the ghost (261). She is purified and regains her identity. As far as *Efuru* is concerned, the plot is mythic in the traditional sense of the term. The supernatural power of the river Goddess directs the heroine's life. As a symbolic representation of the river Goddess in her community, Efuru is required to undergo a ritual to appeal to her (192). This is why all her actions are read as a myth since the role she is assigned can be fulfilled only through

dimension of the sacred. From a spiritual point of view, as a human being, Efuru is unclean while the river Goddess symbolizes purity. It is then through the opposition of the unclean to the pure, that she is able to control reality because the power of the river Goddess is uncontrollable by a human being.

In many ways, *Efuru* and *Beloved* can be interpreted as quests. The appearance of *Beloved* at 124 and the revelation of Efuru's being chosen by the river Goddess, respectively characterize their beginnings. These events are landmarks in the heroines' lives and prompt their quests for selfhood. The dramatic events of their lives urge them into a "pilgrimage" which leads them to tell their stories and to explore the interwoven links of their existence. Through the different unfolding of their stories, both Sethe and Efuru realize that their lives evolve in a full circle. For Sethe, the trauma of slavery she wants to erase from her mind and make her children escape is unavoidable: "My plan was to take us to the other side where my own ma'am is" (203). When she declares that she "made up [her song] and sung it to [her] children, [that] nobody knows that song but [her] and [her] children" (176), she indirectly affirms her authority over her legacy of her story which she is the only one able to tell.

When the narrator asserts that the heroine's story "was not a story to pass on" (274; 275), we understand that it has come full circle. Sethe's story starts with the murder of her beloved daughter whose resurrection symbolically stops this story and consequently the passing of the relay. She sheds her blood but she realizes that she has not gotten rid of her child forever because this very part of her true self she has rejected comes back to her. Despite her sorrow, she must succumb to her fate: "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" Amy Denver notes prosaically (35); and she accepts it: "When I tell you you mine" she says, "I also mean I'm yours" (203). At this point, Sethe and *Beloved* are fused. They become whole. It is thus understandable that Sethe has come back to where she started from, like the heroine of *Efuru* after the failure of her two marriages: "I have ended where began – in my father's house. The difference is that now my father is dead" she says (*Efuru*, 280). Similarly, Efuru follows a circular trajectory. Contrary to what she has hoped, she fails both as a wife and a mother through marriage. She then returns to her father's house and accepts her misadventure as a fate: "It is

the will of our gods and my chi that such a misfortune befall me” (280).

Nwapa incorporates in her narrative the indigenous traditional features, characteristic of oral stories. The tale-like aspect of the heroine’s story derives from the fact that she has qualities seldom found in a human being. The narrator is quick to underline this at the opening of the novel: “Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself” (1). Throughout her life, she makes use of these qualities. Even when she is wronged or hurt, she is always ready to do good. For instance, she takes Nwosu, Ogea’s father (126) and Nnona (160) to the hospital and pays for their medical care. Though Ogea’s parents did not pay back her first debt as they had promised and even did not come to tell her that they could not keep their word (151), Efuru accepts to help them face their financial problems once again (216). In addition, she makes the necessary arrangements for her husband Gilbert to marry her maid Ogea as his third wife (273). In sum, Efuru is a character endowed with a high morals based on self-abnegation. Such qualities are rare; this is why she deserves to be the river Goddess’ worshipper.

As it can be noted, Efuru is charitable to the people of her community regardless of her relationship with them. Her qualities highlight the polymorphous feature of her role and raise her to the rank of a divinity. This mythic dimension is then fulfilled through the various levels of her relationship with the other members of her community. Besides, her kindheartedness offers her role a more divinatory aspect than Beloved whose mythic feature evolves in her relation with Denver, Sethe and Paul D. She appears as a sister for Denver with whom she learns her family story. She stands for Sethe’s mirror through which the heroine remembers the trauma of slavery and her share of the burden under

Schoolteacher’s tyranny. Finally, she urges Paul D (her mother’s lover) to make love to her (117). These relations between the ghost and the triad of characters contribute to the symbolic structure of the narration. Unlike Efuru, Beloved’s relation with these characters is rather destructive as it is revealed through the unfolding of the narrative: Paul D deserts 124 because Beloved’s presence frightens him and prevents Sethe from loving him. Towards the end of the novel, Sethe and Denver run away for they too, can no longer withstand this presence.

Another essential stylistic feature which brings *Efuru’s* and *Beloved’s* narrative plot together into a cohesive set, needs to be analyzed. It relates to the oral technique. In *Efuru*, this technique evokes the established values of communal life and the traditional moral order represented by the old spirits. For instance, the scene in which the stolen fish bites the hand of the thief, is not simply a crime, but also a sacrilege against the community, the moral order and is justly punished by Uhamiri (161). Likewise, the traditional word games and playsongs the writer incorporates into her narrative represent these ideals of family unity (127), while the house building songs (143) stand for (female) social roles which are constitutive of Efuru’s society.

In *Beloved*, the oral technique is also played out in the conversation between Denver and the baby ghost. Beloved explains Denver where she comes from, how her life was there and how she has been prevented by Sethe from coming back (75). In the end, she decides: “[I gonna] stay here. I belong here” (76) because, as she says: “[she has] come back to see Sethe’s face” (75). From then on, Denver realizes that her mother is caught in a spider’s web. Later, Beloved asks her: “Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat” (76). In fact, the ghost’s final concern is essential for the understanding of the family story. Through it, she links her story to Sethe’s attempt to murder her other children. It is then clear that Morrison sums

up Black Americans' history as she is reiterating her contribution to the tradition of storytelling. Moreover, this question alludes to the Middle Passage and establishes the writer's participation in the portrayal of the historical events of slavery. On the whole, by blending tales into their plots or and by shaping them like tales, Nwapa and Morrison respectively carry out the role of the griot as a storyteller.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of *Efuru* and *Beloved* imply through the manner of telling Black women's experience, Nwapa's and Morrison's testimony to the practice of storytelling. Like griot-historians, both writers go deeply into the untold or neglected side of this experience, emphasizing the specificity of women's plight. As such, they bear witness to their people's past and gather informations about this past for the generations after them. These novels confirm Nwapa's knowledge of Igbo cultural tradition and Morrison's criticism of slavery's ordeals for Black Americans. In using the craftsmanship of the griot to convey Black women's predicament, both novelists show artistic strength, pointing to possibilities and ways of telling stories to depict Black women's oppression.

2- I focus on some of the oppressive forces that victimize Black women because they cannot be all exhaustively explored here.

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