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Fethia El Hafi

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Gèlèdé Spectacle and the Return of the Mother in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

Beloved is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead...She is also another kind of dead that is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship... (Darling 247).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is extravagantly beautiful, colorful and funny. The reader is impressed by Morrison's enchantment and profound concern with African art. To understand her work, one has to dig not only in her African American milieu, but also in her African cultural heritage, and more particularly in the Yoruba visual art. She is a complex writer and part of her complexity derives from her deep communion with African cultural paradigms. In particular, she unquestionably enjoys the color, drama and dance of the famous Gèlèdé spectacle.

Gèlèdé originated in the dances performed to pay due regard to Ìyá Nlá (Mother Nature). It is primarily interested in the veneration of the ancestral mother who epitomizes love, care and devotion. Gèlèdé is a Yoruba word, and there are three common explanations of such a word. One of them "refers to something that cools and relaxes, *i.e.* Gè-Lè-é-dé-é" (Lawal 75). Lawal pays serious attention to the prominence of the mother's appeasement. Therefore, Gèlèdé festival is staged so that the living can continue tradition and maintain close relationship with the visiting ancestors who "have greater potentialities than they enjoyed when on earth...it is believed that they can be of tremendous benefit" (Awolalu 27). In the Yoruba concept of life, reincarnation is one of the most complex areas of Yoruba thought. The spectacle is performed for women, to cleanse the society of diseases and keep strong ties with the deceased mothers. In addition, it ensures fertility, promotes social and spiritual order, and maintains peace. The magical performance creates a happy mood for the world of the living to gather and enter into communion with the venerated ancestors. In *Art, Dialogue & Outrage*, the Yoruba writer and Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka writes: "man is grieved by a consciousness of the loss of the eternal essence of his entity and must indulge in symbolic settlements to recover his total being" (122). In Yoruba societies, the evocation of the ancestor is part of the cultural dominant trends, because he is the one who represents the spiritual link between

the living and the dead, connects the present with the past and human society with cosmological hierarchy. For this reason, ancestral spirits are, periodically, invited after death. In the Yoruba world view, there are three realms which are interdependent, coexist and interact: the realm of man, the realm of the ancestors and the realm of spirits: "the concern of the ancestors with human beings is [...] intimate" (Abimbola 75), and beings from the world of the dead should constantly be appeased. It is also believed that at death, the physical shape dies, but the vital force of the deceased remains indestructible. The dead can make visits and interfere either positively or negatively in the world of the living. They serve as a vehicles for reestablishing contact with the human world: thus, their invocation or appeasement reconfirm their sacredness.

The word Gèlèdè also refers to "an obese woman, alluding to the mythical image of Ìyá Nlá as the plentiful, pot-breasted mother, the nursing mother with the rolling buttocks" (Lawal 75). Gèlèdè festival is performed in honor of Ìyá Nlá, the Great Mother, who "was the primeval sea out of which habitable land emerged at Ilé-Ifè, the cradle of Yoruba civilization" (71). She is, above all, the nurturing mother, although she remains quite mysterious, for she is the Mother of All and the mother of mothers. Ulli Beier points out that "Gèlèdè is the secret of women" (Beier 5) who are revered to keep society balanced by ensuring protection and continuity of the race. Another festival is performed in the honor of a female power, Yemoja, the Yoruba water goddess whose "festival in Ìbarà, Abèòkúta" (Lawal 44) precedes that of Ìyá Nlá. Women adore such ritual ceremonies for they feel enormous pride and empowerment as mothers and life givers. By the same occasion, children are blessed and bathed by Yemoja to be protected from premature death. "The female principle in nature has been personified as Ìyá Nlá" (Lawal xiv). Therefore, the Gèlèdè society endeavors to keep peaceful and harmonious relations with mothers. Also, it shows respect for motherhood and encourages members of a given community to cherish and interact with one another so as to reduce the incidence of evil and violence in human society. It is clear that Gèlèdè is a symbol of female power among the Yoruba, and its aim is to appease the Great Mother on the one hand and to dissolve social tension on the other hand. Given the association of Gèlèdè society with peace, harmony, fecundity, stability and the perpetuation of life on earth, the Yoruba celebrate the return of the mothers, seeking the protection of Ìyá Nlá, and bringing her vital forces into actual existence. This concern with Mother Nature is an indication that the male superiority is not absolute in this society. The mothers are honored for they can "influence human fertility" (Lawal 62).

They can bring health, wealth and fertility or famine and disasters to the land and its people. Marla Berns points out that “Gèlèdè serves a range of purposes, but above all confronts the striking and implacable powers attributed to the mothers” (2), who are believed to return, not only to bless, but also to punish antisocial behaviors.

I read great scholarly debates over who Beloved is and what she represents. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi pays scant attention to Toni Morrison’s exploitation of the Yoruba mythology in *Beloved* by associating Beloved with the abiku phenomenon.¹⁰ Teresa Washington provides another useful interpretation of the role played by Beloved as a re-embodiment of àjé¹¹. Whereas most of the critics discuss in depth the return of Beloved the murdered daughter, I will limit my discussion to Beloved, Sethe’s mother.

My purpose, in the present study, is to explore Morrison’s exploitation of an African visual art to dissolve tension in her book. She associates Beloved with Ìyá Nlá, the Great Mother in the Yoruba mythology. The paper analyzes Beloved’s role as a pacifier, who returns to soothe, and to be soothed. The paper seeks to demonstrate that Yoruba art is used by the writer, as an alternative, to neutralize evil and stimulate love. Additionally, it functions as a metaphor for promoting spiritual and social harmony within the community of ex-slaves. The paper, also, underlines Morrison’s preoccupation with the feminine vital force, concentrating on the maternal principle, quite visible through the female costume, namely: the dress, the baby sash and the headwrap, as symbols of maternal care. The paper, finally, focuses on the release of tension through mask celebrations and dances.

Morrison’s novel opens and closes with women’s powerful presence: “The women in the house knew” (3) that 124 was haunted by a ghost, and almost at the end “the women assembled outside 124” (261) to release Sethe from it. The first and last pages of the book portray Beloved as Yemọja, the (Mother of All Waters), before embodying Ìyá Nlá the Great Mother, because

¹⁰ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi observes that “The Yoruba refer to the denizen, back from the chthonic region and born again, as abiku; the Igbo call the living icon ogbanje” (663). She explains that “Abiku is a Yoruba state of consciousness regarded with trepidation because of its links with death. (The Yoruba verb *ku* is ‘to die’; *iku* is ‘death’.) Having been to the other side and back, thereby commingling death and life, the abiku child is no longer held thrall by death. As an agonist, it emerges as a perverse, ghostly intimation of a horrendous past, a critique of a tedious present, and a reminder of mortality” (664).

¹¹ Teresa Washington makes it clear that “*Aje* is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in Africana women; additionally, spiritually empowered humans are called *Aje*. The stately and reserved women of *Aje* are feared and revered in Yoruba society. Commonly and erroneously defined as witches, *Aje* are astrally inclined human beings who enforce earthly and cosmic laws, and they keep society balanced by ensuring that human beings follow those laws or are punished for their transgressions”(171).

Yemoja festival precedes that of Gèlèdè. Beloved came from the water and returned to the water. Sethe remembers that “the woman with [her] face is in the sea” (211). Like Yemoja, who emerges to close Gèlèdè festival, Beloved is seen by the stream at the end of the novel; she has fish for hair. Sethe’s mother and Nan were together from the sea and both were taken up many times by the crew (62). Nan explained to her that her mother threw away the children of rape, except Sethe whose father was black.

Beloved is the “fully dressed woman” (50), who walked out of the water and seemed to drift from a lost origin, in search of a hospitable home. She flooded the porch with her soaking wet dress, reminding one of the birth scene and Sethe’s amniotic liquid, which broke to join Ohio River. She was so thirsty, that she “gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert” (51). She was so exhausted that she abandoned her body on the trunk of a mulberry tree. Sleep came down so fast. Her state of exhaustion is, clearly, symbolic of her painful journey through the Middle Passage. Such a journey was exhausting for African slaves who experienced brutal practices, and endured unspeakable horrors. The writer pays homage to the African ancestral mother through the resurrection of Beloved: “The idea of reincarnation is not alien or foreign” and explains that “the resurgence of spirits and the ability to be possessed by another spirit [...] is not outrageous in the early days of the culture as it survived in this country, and it still exists in lots of places in Africa.” She shows her interest in Beloved’s mystery: “Beloved’s language is the language of someone who has been returned from the other side” (Toni Morrison in Bragg’s interview).

Like Ìyá Nlá, Beloved returns from the other side in time of distress: “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (3). The murder of Beloved,¹² the baby daughter, caused disorder and tension in the family. Baby Suggs died of grief. She had eight children, all gone. Howard and Buglar, her grandsons, deserted, and Sethe lives like a pariah with Denver. The book revolves around the vital forces of Beloved’s spirit that emerges to counteract various powers that menace Sethe’s social equilibrium. Delivery from the specter of her painful past requires the return of the mother to remedy such circumstances.

Like Junior in *Love*, she is lying in bed, “booted, hatted” (115). Exhausted, drifting towards a may be permanent sleep, guided by her dragging feet, she climbs the stairs of 124. Everyone notices how strangely she is be-

¹² Sethe, a runaway slave woman, murdered her two-years-old baby daughter, to save her from slavery.

having, her shoes are dusty as though she was walking, letting her head tilt sideways. Morrison makes it possible for the community of the living to interact with the ancestors and spirits. She establishes a channel between Sethe and the spirit of her mother. The latter moves between the world of the dead and that of the living to sustain harmony, protect her daughter and enable her to live and prosper. The reader is informed from the very beginning that Denver, Sethe's daughter, had lived all her life in a house peopled by the "living activity of the dead" (29). 124 is now full of touches from the other side and becomes a space for "the playing of spirits" (86). Like *Ìyá Nlá*, she moves from the world of the dead to the world of the living, experiencing a state of resurrection. She has a "new skin" (50), her "eyelids were heavy and her breath sounded like asthma" (50). The woman has difficulties to breathe and the place where she landed "is heavy" (54). She, certainly, feels Sethe's burden and moral chaos from the first instances spent in the house.

Sethe, on her part, suffered from the missing mother, who never nursed her, never gave her a breast to suck, and never fixed her hair. Memory of her beloved mother made her so infuriated because "she was remembering something she had forgotten" (61). Sethe confesses that when her mother "wasn't smiling she smiled", but she never "saw her own smile" (203). For this reason Beloved returns with a dazzling smiling face: "Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. Not because she was wet, or dozing or had what sounded like asthma, but because amid all that she was smiling" (50). She returns to smile to Sethe who always complains about her disappearance before smiling to her. She approaches to smell the quilt with the awareness that many bodies slept, been ill and died under it.

Sethe "was sliding into sleep when she felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire" (58). The soothing mother returns to nurse, cool and appease. Her main goal is to dissolve tension, establish peace and create new family ties. Beloved has never nursed her daughter and never fixed her hair either. In addition to the blessing and healing soft hands, there is a desire for the missing daughter. She profoundly longs to mother her with tenderness: "Beloved's fingers were heavenly. Under them and breathing evenly again, the anguish rolled down. The peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her" (97). Stroking Sethe's head, she is all-embracing affection, with a promise of security. Running her fingers through her hair, she fills her with wondering softness. Sethe loves her mother's hands, so precious and kind, particularly, in moments of distress. Sethe feels a strange new thing: Safety. Her craving desire to nurse

and rock her baby back and forth is strikingly visible. Sethe's burden of pain and fear seems to vanish at the touch of her mother's healing fingers. Beloved is cajoling her, providing her with the blessing of a good night sleep. Those appeasing touches which come from the other side are, certainly, those of Beloved, the mother who is deprived of mothering. Even after her disappearance, Beloved will continue to "come and go" to brush Sethe's cheeks with her "knuckles" (275). As soon as she, tenderly, starts massaging Sethe's neck, the latter remembers Baby Suggs bathing her, wrapping her womb, combing her hair, oiling her nipples, stitching her clothes, cleaning her feet and greasing her back. Progressively, the gentle touch grows harder and abusive. She presses, smooths and tightens the skin and when she starts soothing Sethe's pain, "she reached out her hand and touched the splotches, gathering color darker than Sethe's dark throat, and her fingers were mighty cool" (97). She had almost strangled her own daughter, who is left trembling, shuddering with awe and confusion. Beloved's key words: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (210) with the refrain "you are mine / you are mine / you are mine" (217), are indicative of a possessive love. She has a grip on Sethe, and longs to live in symbiosis with her. She is deprived of loving and nursing normally, therefore, she returns to mother in her own way. Morrison describes Beloved's longing for the daughter while working in the rice field: "the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile" (213). The absence of punctuation underlines the tragedy of being separated from one's daughter. There is a desire to merge with Sethe. She could not love and nurse her properly on the plantation because she was not hers to love. She returns to reclaim her relationship to her daughter: "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (57). Her scrutiny is for Sethe and is fully satisfied by the simple sight of her daughter's face "smiling a wide happy smile" (58). The frustrated mother took every opportunity to ask perplexing questions. One can notice how greedy she was to hear Sethe's talk, which functions as therapy talk.

Like any woman, she wants to make the rules, control the house, the children and grand children. Her love is fierce and intense, but harmless. She actually bears on her neck the mark of the "iron circle", symbolic of the atrocities experienced on the slave ship. She suffered discrimination at the hands of whites and endured remembrance of pain, childbirth, slavery, illnesses, bruises, lynching, lack of sleep, cleaning, harvesting, kneeling... Her desire is unfulfilled as a mother. This is made clear through her questions,

which are focused on the mother and not the daughter. She was eager to know if Sethe's woman has ever fixed her hair. The former could not even remember her mother's face: "By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks-that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (60). She sees her mother only few times, and explains to Beloved how hard it is to lose a mother and suck another woman's milk. Sethe knew only trauma in her life. Beloved's return stirs so many shameful memories, but the only thing Sethe can remember is the circled cross on her mother's rib. Morrison points to maternal loss, and Beloved's separation from her daughter merges with the losses of the Middle Passage.

After the episode of the clearing and her symbolic death, Sethe is smiling and moving the fire while Beloved is sleeping. Like Tuere¹³, in Okara's *The Voice*, she makes the place warm and hospitable by waking the fire, as "she fed its dance until it was wild and fast" (181). Her face reflects her satisfaction. 124 sparkles with inviting warmth. It becomes clear that Beloved's return splinters at last the knot of fear and boredom. Sethe ponders on the meaning of her kiss in the clearing and "had gone to bed smiling, eager to lie down and unravel the proof for the conclusion she had already leapt to...She slept...and woke, still smiling" (181). She forgets about the pain in her neck the next morning, and "looked at Beloved's face" in her sleep "and smiled" (181). Sethe is relaxed and relieved for the incident serves a healing function by discharging emotional excess.

Sethe remembers and insists on acknowledging the spirit of the dead mother who suffered and endured trauma. Like Iyá Nlá, Beloved returns to soothe and to be soothed and accounted for. She has a grip on Paul D who does not know anything more confusing. Something strange is happening to him when he thinks of her as "something in disguise" (127). He, certainly, fears her awesome powers, the powers of the dead. Nothing can make Beloved leave Sethe's house at night, but her desire to be soothed. There is a place she can be interested in now; it is the cold house, a shed behind 124 where Paul D sleeps at night, after having been forced out of Sethe's room. Who cares if she sneaks around with him? It is good for him. Fun for her. Beloved moves forward, darkness wraps them, connects them. He stands

¹³ Tuere: A persecuted female character in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*. She is the one who offers shelter to the protagonist Okolo who is chased by the villagers : "the face of Tuere was satisfaction, for her breath and shadow had gone into the flame. She remained kneeling before the dancing flame with face intent, looking at the flame, looking at what is behind the flame, the root of the flame"(33).

there, weary and out of sorts. He does not deny her dazzling looks, they do arrest the mind. She stands there naked as truth and Paul D's heart kicks. He trembles and expresses a sense of loss as she lifts up the hem of her dress to her navel saying: "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name (116)". She begs once more: "Please call it. I'll go if you call it" (117), which he does, but she does not go, which renders this episode hilariously funny. She demands the naming and claiming of her womanhood, which is denied to a slave woman, who knew only rape. Her nakedness stands in his eyes with accusation, but he is unwilling to nest with her. He makes an ugly face, is bored and irritated, for she is playing nasty. Like a Great Mother, Beloved is the authority. She wants to control and patronize, she returns to be appeased and above all honored and loved: "Down by the stream...her footprints come and go, come and go" (275). She functions as Homi Bhabha suggests, "to release from erasure and repression, and to re-construct" (146). She does not hesitate to bother Paul D because she wants to be loved. She makes him feel uneasy, but she, undoubtedly, restores his manhood and reveals his Red Heart.

The celebration of the female power and capacity to revive a man's virility, recalls one of "the female mask called Àghòbí" (Lawal 63), reputed to have the same power in the Yoruba culture. Morrison uses the sense of sight through her description of the scars on Beloved's face: her "skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and raped into the masses of black yarn under her hat" (51). It seems that the scratches on Beloved's forehead, sexually, aroused Paul D. In "Senses in Understandings of Art," Drewal points out that for the Yoruba, when a woman's scarifications are touched by man, he becomes sexually aroused (88). Several Gèlèdè masks represent vertical scratches on the forehead and the cheeks. The lines are called *pélé* and "are very popular among Òyó, Ègbá, Ègbádò, Kétu. Hence, those who have the mark on the face are given the nickname *Péléyejù* (*Pélé fits the face*)" (Lawal 236). Beloved gives Paul D a reason to remain connected, to figure out how precious this relationship is. She revives "in him the masculinity that has been denied for years. By so doing, she transfers to him her healing principles as he becomes in turn Sethe's healer" (El Hafi 103).

In "Senses in Understandings of Art," Drewal shows that Gèlèdè is a "spectacle of sights, sounds [...] touches and movements captured in the praise" (4). He pays serious attention to the beauty of the spectacle and the costume, which along with the headdress is visual art. It is either a "white

dress" (38) reminiscent of *Ìyá Nlá's* dress, or an assemblage of colorful cloth strips that, like the mask, responds to the movement of the dancer. The visual effect of the colors is essential to the spectacle. Additionally, bulky dresses, skirts, headwraps, babysashes, etc. fit the dancer in movement and seduce the spectator. Morrison exploits the bulkiness of the dress and skirt so important to *Gèlèdè* costumes in her novel. The drenched *Beloved* "had to lift her skirts" (51) to let the water run down her body. She appeared in heavy clothing wearing an assemblage of skirts. Cloth folding increases the bulkiness of her dress which provides the visiting stranger with a physical form and becomes visually distinguished from the world of the living. Morrison also points to *Sethe's* heavy dress and the oppressive atmosphere awaiting her with the following refrain: "heavy as it was" (46). *Sethe* often lifts and stretches sheets: "she folded, refolded and double-folded" (61). On the frozen creek, the wind blew in the three women's cold cheeks and lifted their skirts that "flew like wings" (174). After ice skating, they remain near the cooking stove, "wrapped in quilts and blankets" (175). Such episode refers to *Gèlèdè* costume, and the dancer's ceremonial flying dress caught in the movement of the dance. The book abounds with references to *Beloved's* dresses. It's clear that what holds her up is nothing but her dress. She is as tired and frail as *Harryette Mullen's* female characters, working as semi-automatic housekeepers: "What's holding them up. If not straps, then laces. Buttons and bows, ribbons and laces set off their faces. Girls in white sat in with blue-saddened slashers" (34).

At the beginning, *Beloved* appears with unlaced shoes and a black dress, the color of protection for a runaway slave, and is often seen lifting her skirts around her hips or above her calves. By the stream, *Denver* stares at her "standing barefoot in the water...dropped the folds of her skirt. It spread around her" (105). Once again, Morrison draws attention to the beauty of the dress in movement. At the end of the novel, she refers to the "dress so loud" that "it embarrassed the needlepoint chair seat" (247) and the "rustle of a skirt...and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep" (275). She suggests hearing the singing dress, instead of seeing it, to open her readers' eyes to the importance of the senses. The rustle of the skirt reminds one of the rustling of leaves. In "Senses in Understandings of Art," *Drewal* explains that the "plants that are used to cleanse, purify, and renew human bodies are the same ones used by the leaf masquerades to purify communities" (88). Similarly, Morrison associates her female characters with the vegetal world and the myth of regeneration by referring to *Sethe's* tree on her back, leaf shoes (34) and *Beloved's* "vines of hair" (261). *Harryette Mullen* uses a similar

beautiful expression: “honey jars of hair” (119) in her famous collection of poems “Muse & Drudge”, mixing the animal and the human. She also pays attention to “botanica Yoruba” (124), epitomizing the sense of fertility and rejuvenation.

Another element, so important to Gèlèdè costume, is the baby sash which stands for the Great Mother, Ìyá Nlá. Both men and women dance with baby sashes (Òjá) to attract Ìyá Nlá's blessings. The baby sash tied to the Gèlèdè costume “features prominently in rites associated with female fertility” (Lawal 63). Symbolic of Sethe's protection is the baby sash that epitomizes the maternal, and associates Beloved with Ìyá Nlá, the caring mother. Beloved comes back to nurture and save her threatened and fragile daughter. The baby sash symbolizes the female vital force and is, for the Yoruba, a protector of children and indicative of maternal care. According to their saying: “A child must not fall off its mother's back” (Lawal 186). Gèlèdè dancers wear baby sashes to highlight safety during Gèlèdè festival. Both men and women dance with baby sashes around the waist to reinforce the image of Ìyá Nlá, the procreative and nurturing mother. Morrison uses a word play: “baby lashes”, which sounds like baby sashes, and associates it with “the unmistakable love call that shimmered around children” (247) as a metaphor for the baby sash, the protector of children. Before the three women go ice skating, they got out their “shawls” (174) symbolic of Baby sashes and headed for the frozen creek, significant of a Gèlèdè arena. It was an occasion for Sethe to “lay it all down” as Baby had advised her. She enters “the perfect peace” (174) with Beloved. The ice, the sky, the winter stars, the oak and pine on the banks...double their merriment. Losing their balance and landing on their behinds, they “laughed till they coughed. Sethe rose to her hands and knees, laughter still shaking her chest, making her eyes wet” (175). The three women feel free and released. One witnesses their indivisible self, living in symbiosis, enjoying the perfect unity. Walking back home, Sethe, in a protective gesture, “put an arm around each girl at her side” (175).

There is a similar episode that depicts the snowy weather and Sethe's merriment with Paul D in the white fields: “he had backed into her, hoisted her on his back and was running down the road...breathless at last, he stopped and she slid back down on her own two feet, weak from laughter” (130). Here is her man, holding her, lest she stumbles and falls like a child. But, securing Sethe on one's back is obviously the mother's role. Coming from another world, Beloved is indifferent to the cold and the heavy whipping snowflakes crashing on the ground. Although uncovered, she tenderly

stretches out her arms, wraps Sethe with the only shawl she is holding, and “tried to circle it around” (130) her protecting her from the freezing cold. She is nursing her with the same passion as a female gorilla nurses a newborn. Her behavior, clearly, emphasizes her positive social role as a mother. Jealous of Paul D, she wraps the shawl around Sethe suggesting to secure her on her own back. Another allusion to the baby sash as a protective element in the book is the burial of blankets near the creek because they are needed later by Sethe “to tie her baby on her back” (222). Before heading to the sacred forest which attracted so many children in Baby’s time, Sethe “put on a shawl and told Denver and Beloved to do likewise. All three set out late one Sunday morning” (89). She grabs her shawl, throws it on her shoulders and leaves for the clearing full of promise.

The clearing is real to her. She becomes part of it and the clearing part of her. This African wood becomes a site of healing and a locus of ancestral connection with the invisible, reminiscent of a Gèlèdè arena. It seems that it is Sethe’s habit to make a regular pilgrimage to Baby’s place and its flat rock, symbolic of a shrine. It is taken into Sethe’s consciousness at the deepest level to become a constitutive part of her sensibility and memory, a reflective intimate of her very being. The rock blurs the notion of time and this journey in the deep forest full of spiritual meaning, resembles a rite of passage, and gives the impression of a mysterious experience that will transform Sethe’s life. She is not without hope. Beloved and Denver accompany her to the sacred space where safety, love and protection become possible because Sethe’s mother in law used to teach her community members, to feel and love their bodies. The clearing seemed to Sethe the same “but with a difference” (98). The three generations of women connect and forge a circle which will never break. Distracted from the dull pain of a life of routine, they feel a delicate hopefulness. More importantly, Sethe is enormously enriched by her journey, discerning a whole spiritual world in the woods. All of a sudden, she is profoundly perplexed about Beloved’s mystery for there is something beyond control. It is clear that the resurrected Beloved is different from the one she claimed. Strangely, the latter starts doing things to excess by loving Sethe wildly and caressing her neck roughly, almost strangling her. Having been dispossessed of her baby girl, the mother, like Sethe, resorts to thick love. At this stage, Sethe experiences a symbolic death and spends a night of terror, but she awakes the next morning full of energy. Even more important is the initiation and renewal pattern presented by Sethe’s journey. What happened to her has the significance of a rite of passage. Like Iyá Nlá, who returns to punish and bring peace, Beloved, symbolically, strangles

Sethe as a punishment for the crime she committed, and appeases her at the same time. The mother recognizes and knows about the presence of forces other than good ones, for she killed all her children, the results of rape, except Sethe. The latter is, probably, the victim of a curse carried in her mother's breast. According to Iya Mate, the herbalist and healer, who ages as Earth ages in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, "[e]vil hands soon find a use for the best of things" (291). In Morrison's book, evil hands, suddenly, turn into soothing touches.

Another central element of Gèlèdè costume is the head wrap (Gèlè) and, like the baby sash (Ọjá), it symbolizes maternal care. For the Yoruba, the headdress is to the costume what the head is to the body. The Gèlèdè headwrap pays homage to the deity Ìyá Nlá, the ancestress and Mother of All, and is unquestionably associated to baby rearing.

When Beloved appeared, nobody saw her. She was wearing a straw hat and a bulky dress (50). Like a Gèlèdè headdress, the hat fits on her head. Before Sethe could secure "her headcloth" (130) under the falling snow, she was surprised by Paul. D's advice: "You need some babies, somebody to play with in the snow" (130). Furthermore, when Sethe escaped across the Ohio River, her hair was covered. She met Amy Denver, the white runaway slave and nothing of her "was intact [...] except the cloth that covered her hair" (34). Sethe often remembers her mother making her way up in the hills and standing in the onion field: "what she saw was a cloth hat as opposed to a straw one, singularity enough in that world of cooing women each of whom was called Ma'am" (30). Morrison, recurrently, refers to the cloth hat of Sethe's mother that brings to mind the last glimpse of her in the African field, collecting flowers and putting them in a basket. At the end of the novel, the narrator refers to "little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth" (262). The association of the headtie and the bird suggests her prudence, vigilance and empowerment.

Gèlèdè dancers wear headties, surmounted by a wide range of masks, displaying a beautiful spectacle of visual imagery. In "Senses in Understandings of Art," Drewal reveals that "The eyes that have seen Gèlèdè, have seen the ultimate spectacle" (4). It is famous for its artistic representations and aesthetic enjoyment. The masks are worn by men, and had an origin in ritual dances originally performed by women, in honor of Mother Nature, to ensure fertility, promote social harmony and spiritual well-being. Therefore, celebrating the Mothers' positive social roles in society is primordial through mask celebration. In "Gèlèdè, Art and Female power Among the Yoruba," H. J. Drewal and M. Thompson Drewal point to the secret forces of Yoruba

masks: "An initiate who dedicates himself to a deity will have certain substances rubbed into incisions on the top of his head to allow the deity to 'mount' his inner head or possess him"(79). The mask is a ritual device used by the dancer to play an intermediary role between the world of the dead and the world of the living. In *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Soyinka explains that "[t]he masks alone occasionally suggest a correspondence to the chthonic realm" (3). The mask motif provides the visiting ancestor with a physical form and paves the way to ancestral powers and spirits. The masked figures also epitomize the spirits of the dead who return to bless and dissolve tension. Such masks give prominence to the female image because the mother figure is a dominant feature in Gèlèdè. The theme of the nurturing mother dominating the festival is visible. Headdresses, representing pregnant women and nursing mothers with protruding breasts and bellies, allude to the generosity that humanity expects from Ìyá Nlá, the Mother of All. In the Yoruba belief, "wide hips and buttocks allow for easy and safe delivery, thus encouraging a woman to have as many children as she wants" (Lawal 187). The generous female body is referred to as a metaphor for fecundity and deliverance. The Yoruba are grateful to the vital contribution of the female sex, for on them, depends the survival of human race. Morrison refers to such masks in her novel. At the end of *Beloved*, "a pregnant woman, naked and smiling" was standing on the porch "vines of hair twisted all over her head" (261). Furthermore, *Beloved* often dances around the house, "her belly protruding like a winning water melon," reminding one of Gèlèdè mask of the pregnant woman, celebrating motherhood and fertility.

Before the spectacle, the sacred mask Ìyá Nlá, painted white, leaves the Gèlèdè shrine and enters the arena when it is complete darkness, to announce the coming of the Great Mother. As soon as the Ìyá Nlá mask appears in white, the elders start singing and praising it in order to invoke the spirit of the "powerful mothers" to come and enjoy the celebration with the living. "*Ewá*" (Lawal 238), the Yoruba word for the essence of beauty, is central to Ìyá Nlá's mask which is associated with *Beloved* static beauty. Her heavy lashes puzzled Denver who "didn't see no such thing" (56). By the stream, she remarks her grace again as the "beautiful head lowered in rapt attention" (105). This cosmic being "bothered" (66) Paul D and dazzled him. Before she vanishes, Mr. Bodwin is struck dumb by her shining beauty, "glistening" body and "dazzling" (261) smile. Such beauty is doubled by the presence of "spirit-double (*enikeji*), emphasizing the benefits of togetherness at the material and spiritual levels of existence" (Lawal 264). Yoruba women used to carry trays displaying twin statuettes and participate to Gèlèdè dancing. Morrison,

recurrently, refers to similar double faced masks identified with twins, because Beloved often speaks of “the woman with my face is in the sea” (210), or “my dark face is close to me” (213). After the dancing, the mask retires to the Gèlèdè shrine. It is believed that it embodies power to challenge the forces of darkness and anti-social behaviors. It is a necessary element to the cooling ritual dance. It ensures peace and harmony within the community, guarantees wisdom and the presence of the numinous. This white mask with wide beautiful eyes and several vertical scratches is exploited by the writer to associate Beloved with the Great Mother. The white color is “the predominant color of the Great Mother’s mask and other masks associated with her” (Lawal 238). The white color, so sacred to *Ìyá Nlá*, recalls one of the white cloth that covers Gèlèdè masks in locked shrines. We know that Beloved was kept “locked up in the house with a white man over by Deer Creek... Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup” (235). And at the end, she retires in “the keeping room” (261), reminiscent of a shrine. Furthermore, the white color signifies coolness quite recurrent through references to the “salt rock,” the “ice” (261) and the snow piling itself around 124, “bringing it-self. Higher. Deeper” (134).

Beloved’s appearance in a state of sleep, on a carnival day, is striking. All the elements are gathered to indicate the presence of extraordinary powers on a face that resembles *Ìyá Nlá*’s mask: amazed, Sethe looked at her “sleepy beauty and wanted more” (53) whereas Denver is struck dumb by her eyes’ excessive whiteness, and “felt her heart race. It was not that she was looking at that face for the first time with no trace of sleep in it, or that the eyes were big and black. Nor was it that the whites of them were much too white-blue-white. It was that deep down in those black eyes was no expression at all” (55). They stand stone quiet scanning her fascinating beauty as clean as rain: the lids, the lashes, the shiny skin. She is celestial. Almost holy. Confused, their eyes so wide with interest, they look at the pair of fascinating eyes and stare at the angelic beauty, coming out of the water, wondering who could this stranger be.

Mask iconography on the elaborate headdresses also include animal forms. Among the most popular ones are the snake, the tortoise, and the bird. In the Yoruba thought, the snake is associated with “fertility” and “regeneration” (Idowu 34). Several Gèlèdè masks represent the snake and emphasize its spiral movement. Among such masks, there is one that exposes two pythons attempting to devour a tortoise and it is believed that, when the python succeeds in swallowing the tortoise, it chokes to death. This mask

which warns against imprudence is exploited by Morrison. Like a snake, Beloved penetrates 124 and sleeps every night on her chest or curls on her back, “sometimes [...] she screamed [...] and clawed her throat [...]. Other times Beloved curled up on the floor, her wrists between her knees, and stayed there for hours” (250). She often curls tighter, feels small and, very often, confines herself to a corner and keeps “crouching in a dark, dark place, forgetting to smile” (252). Curling up in a micro space, reminds one of Not Sidney, who, in Percival Everett’s *I am not Sidney Poitier*, is stuck “all folded up into a four-by-four-foot corrugated-tin cube” (51). African American writings abound with such images that provide the protagonist with rejuvenating powers.

Another animal motif, which features prominently in Gèlèdè masks, is the tortoise. It is believed that carrying such masks relaxes the body and induces fertility. Beloved is associated with the turtle motif and, like the turtle, she comes from the water. By the stream, recalling one of the “Ògùn River, the domain of Yemọja” (Lawal 41), Denver steps with her into the water, so sacred to the Goddess of All Waters. Denver is amazed by the spectacle of Beloved, admiringly, staring at a turtle that “inched along the edge, turned and climbed to dry ground” (105). This episode reminds one of Christine who, in *Love*, “stops to avoid a turtle crossing the road” and “did not ask herself why her heart was sitting up for a turtle creeping along Route 12” (87). Morrison, recurrently, refers to the turtle motif, symbolic of procreative powers. The Gèlèdè mask, displaying two snakes biting a tortoise, is interpreted as a warning because it is not prudent to eat the shell. Furthermore, in the same episode, Beloved is associated with the “four placed plates under a hovering motionless bowl” (105). Household utensils like the plates and the bowl that are represented in the spectacle, bring Beloved close to Mother Nature, as the source of all food, and reflect aspects of Yoruba life too.

Another important animal motif, so important in the Yoruba folklore, is the bird that is admired and has a positive image. In Ifá divination rituals, the bird symbolizes honor and prosperity (Abimbola 206). Also, the Yoruba believe that the bird endows women with power. Conversely, the bird mask represents the power of “the *àjé* (destructive mother)” that “change into birds and fly at night” (Lawal 278). Birds are often associated with the dangerous work of witches, or menopausal mothers who turn into birds and are blamed for vengeful and unpredictable behavior or witchcraft. The *Èfè* who displays dancing skills in the forest puts on a headdress with a parrot motif on top. It is believed that the *Èfè* mask implores the *àjé* to protect his head (Lawal

114). But, the bird motif often suggests beauty, danger and hints “at the need for caution and prudence in life” (Lawal 204). Additionally, “[t]he Gèlèdè social agenda rests on the Yoruba maxim *Èsò l’ayé*” (the world is fragile)” (Lawal xiii) which requires from humans to be prudent and solve their problems without tension.

Morrison’s exploitation of the bird mask is visible as she opens her book with the drawing of two masks with wings, and the second part, with another different mask. She evokes her interest in the interaction of the human with the natural. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, she depicts the world of her novels as “an animated world [...] in which the presence or absence of birds is meaningful. You have to be very still to understand these so called signs, in addition to which they inform you about your own behavior” (100). At the end, Sethe “heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair” (163). The bird surmounting her headwrap empowers her and suggests her flight. The humming, as in Love, that opens and closes with the word “hum,” suggests human potential to interact with the spiritual and the divine. Sethe’s shoulders, slowly, turn into wings as she, immediately, flies towards Mr. Bodwin, whom she mistakes for schoolteacher, and attempts to attack, not her flesh this time, but the oppressor. Sethe has, undoubtedly, grown more prudent and wiser. Unlike the dead robins in *Sula* where not a single one twitters, Sethe’s bird is not scared, it stands triumphant. Unlike Sula, who abandons herself to death, Sethe is full of energy. Morrison believes that evil forces must be neutralized, avoided and precautions must be taken to secure Sethe. Like the powerful mother in the Yoruba folklore, Beloved turns into a bird to watch on her daughter, and maintain safety for her, because she needs to live life with special care and extreme vigilance. The presence of birds is positive and refers to the proclamation for a just and humane society, in which every individual will have the chance to develop a potential without fear. It is, unquestionably, associated with peace and love. Both the snake and the bird are metaphors for potential crisis which could be prevented through prudence. Above all, the reader enjoys the spectacle of the mysterious Beloved, turning into a snake as she coils in a corner, a bird, a turtle, and at the end, into a fish as she disappears in the stream. She is fascinating and so funny.

The release of tension is very well articulated through the dances too. “Gèlèdè originated in ancient Ketu from Ìyá Nlá’s practice of dancing about with a woodcarving balanced on her head [...] Her public dances attracted many women and small children” (Lawal 43). It is stylistically distinct from other Yoruba dances and its aim is to appease the Great Mother, on the one

hand, and to dissipate social tension on the other hand. Furthermore, the dances express human interaction with the invisible, for, through dancing, the passage between the visible and the invisible dimension becomes possible. Gèlèdè dancers wear baby sashes, headwraps, masks and colorful bulky dresses or skirts, emphasizing voluptuous breasts and large hips for the Gèlèdè performance.

It is clear that the dances in the Yoruba folklore have parallels in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Nobody dances in 124 after Baby's death and before Beloved's return. Now Denver's bedroom is full of merriment and entertainment. The place of spite, suddenly, turns into a Gèlèdè arena, cheerful and buzzing with laughter. Not only pain and spite emanate from the house, warmth and love also make of 124 a nice place to escape to. Beloved returns not only for her daughter, but also for fun. The only dance she enjoyed was stooping and moving to the row's end to stand. Sethe misses her so much that she can remember watching her with the other slaves in the watery field with her back turned away from her: "when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did" (31). Unlike Beloved's dynamic dance, this one is a dance of decay invoking pain. With their chained feet, the slaves including Sethe's mother, furiously, move with a contempt leading them to condemn themselves. Conversely, in 124, both Beloved and Denver appreciate each other's company. They dance in the tiny room: "Beloved put her fists on her hips and commenced to skip on bare feet" (74) swinging rhythmically and twisting her hips while her skirt sways from side to side. She often dances around the house with her fattened body, voluptuous and swollen breasts, recalling one of Gèlèdè dancers' generous forms. Denver looked at Beloved dancing and "sat on the bed smiling and providing the music" (67).

Morrison points to the corporeal and the musical as Beloved, spontaneously, responds to the rhythm and follows the crescendo of the life-enhancing music. Denver "had never seen Beloved this happy" (74). The trance seems to take ritual overtones as the music fills the house with restlessness. Black music, for W.E.B. Du Bois, is about "the death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world" (207). Similarly, the dance expresses Beloved's repressed desire to mother her daughter normally. "Not ten minutes had passed since Beloved had fallen backward to the floor, pop-eyed, thrashing and holding her throat." The writer, undoubtedly, exposes the sufferings of slave women through the dance. "Now, after a few seconds

lying in Denver's bed, she was up and dancing" (74). She is kept on edge, agitated and caught into an ecstatic state to the point of becoming possessed. Her eyes scanned the sky. Her voice was breathless. She expressed intense emotional responses associated with her trauma and painful memories. Being possessed suggests her state of suspension and assumption of an intermediary role between the visible and the invisible. Denver's music energizes Beloved's emotion which reaches its peak in the trance. It is clear that Denver's music is perceptible in terms of ritual and engenders a spiritual atmosphere. Beloved is often seen spinning like a wheel that never stops as the dance grows frenzied, reminding the reader of the rising sound of the drum made visible as an *egungun*¹⁴ dances in circular swirling movements. It is a dance that appeals to the senses through the rhythm of the music and the visual effects of the costume. Denver's face is satisfaction as the dance grows frenzied, and wonders where Beloved learned to dance. She is, above all, seized by laughter and "the two of them, merry as kittens" (74). Beloved releases tension through dancing. She is pacified and creates, at the same time, a spectacle for Denver who, as an audience, maximizes the impact of this show. Then, they dance together and as the dance reaches its climax, they sink into the depth of frenzy. Their trance appears to be deepening; their steps heavier, "exhausted they sat on the floor" (74) and the spiritual mood gives way to self-release. This dance is reminiscent of Gèlèdè paired dancing that requires the two dancers to synchronize their steps. The dance appears, in Morrison's book, as a power capable of building up a show akin to rite. Its movement facilitates communion with the spiritual world." A dance always imitates an archetypal gesture or commemorates a mythical moment" (Eliade 525). Dances in *Beloved* are often performed to cool and appease the mother, making her vital forces visible. The performances, throughout the novel, are visual and kinetic attempts to counterbalance evil forces, restore order and release tension. Beloved's frenetic dances also stand for her sense of domination. She cannot help turning around, burning with delight. On the frozen creek, one can imagine the three women dancing, spinning under the falling snow, whitening their coats and shawls and intensifying their communion. After ice skating the three women made their way back through the woods, symbolic of a Gèlèdè arena. Like a Gèlèdè dancer, "each girl [...] had an arm around her waist" (175). The body becomes an important site of investigation as the writer makes the reader conscious of the female bodily experience.

¹⁴ *Egungun* is the festival of the dead among the Yoruba.

It is four o'clock in the morning when Sethe and Paul D reach the city's edge. As soon as it starts snowing, they joyfully rush down the roadside feeling the dry flakes on their cold cheeks. Extenuated, Sethe sits down but Paul D drags her, "hoist[s] her on his back" (130) and childishly dances down the road uncaring about any passersby. Amused, they dissolve in laughter. Their healing dance engender emotional release as they enjoy each other's company and learn that there is so much fun in the world. One can imagine Paul D's silhouette surmounted by Sethe head cloth. This episode associates him with Gèlèdè dancers as he carries her on his back to perform the mother's dance.

CONCLUSION

Beloved's spectacle is transitory and a manifestation of another worldly reality. It has a metaphysical dimension and possesses the power to bring a spirit into existence. This concept seems essential to Morrison's thought, for, like Wole Soyinka, the spiritual writer, she acknowledges the ancestors' vital powers in reordering the lives of the living. Allusions to the mask are meant to give expression to the invisible and the numinous, to capture a spiritual situation and an essence of that mask in movement. Such allusions, clearly, counteract the forces of darkness. The writer advocates caution and prudence which remain the wisest resolutions in human contact. Her concern centers only on masks reinforcing the theme of vigilance as she draws attention to the fragility of the world, the delicate, unpredictable nature of human existence, and warns of the dangers of violence.

Community welfare is Morrison's first preoccupation. Beloved functions as social unifier, promoting cordial relations within the living. In spite of the pain endured by her people, the writer leaves a way out of despair. Denver, Sethe's daughter, is portrayed as an agent of change, a dynamic figure capable of assuming a new role, as she, willingly, steps outside 124 to negotiate a place in society. Like Gèlèdè festival's design, Morrison's is to center on community survival. She is the artist healer, suggesting that art, certainly, serves to soothe trauma that affects the individual. Her book is an artistic therapy against anti-social behavior and a celebration of the victory of the human spirit over death. She also links the present with the past, thereby enabling the living to face the future with hope. Apart from the writer's concern with Sethe's safety and well-being, the novel is a lesson on tolerance and love. Her work of art is certainly beneficial for her community because the

success of Beloved's visit depends on love, the title of one of her fascinating novels.

Morrison uses an African art to reconnect with her origins and keeps on digging into an art form which remains exclusive, communicating it to the world through her novel. She manages to present it as a viable alternative medium and places it in response to the era of slavery which is, an original way of addressing trauma. In "Rootedness," she explains that "music is no longer exclusively ours [...] so another form has to take its place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before" (340). It is clear that her exploitation of Yoruba visual art is another desire for exclusiveness and a reinvention of an umbilical connection with mother Africa.

Fethia El Hafi¹⁵

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¹⁵ Ph. D, Assistant Professor, University of Sousse (Tunisia) fethiaelhafi@yahoo.fr.

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