



Impact of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

It is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. Slavery has always been a curse for any society and the present research paper aims at finding out the impact of slavery on African Americans as depicted by Toni Morrison in her famous novel *Beloved*. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* gives a poignant portrayal of the horror of slavery of African Americans in explicit details, she describes the physical and mental abuses suffered by Sethe, Paul D, and other Sweet Home slaves. The novel is a complex literary work that seeks to understand the impact of slavery, both on the psychology of individuals and on the larger patterns of culture and history. Morrison denounces slavery in the novel and expresses an intense longing for the freedom on behalf of all slaves. She seeks to show the historical truth that collective struggle is the only pragmatic solution for African people. Morrison writes a historical novel *Beloved*, which explores most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. The central figure in the novel is a wounded and deprived infant, *Beloved*, who demonstrates that the worst atrocity of slavery is the resultant psychological death of an individual. The most critical event in the novel is the murder of the infant *Beloved*, by her mother, Sethe.

Key words: slavery, exploitation, struggle, black identity, culture.

Morrison's *Beloved* earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Toni Morrison speaks about the story presented in *Beloved*, "There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course, there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to

remember" (Darling, 1988, p. 248). Toni Morrison speaks about the importance of remembering the past and how it should be always preserved in your memories. She always tries to give this message to her community people that they can have idea about their culture through the past only and they should live together in a community. *Beloved* reveals the lives of African Americans, the former slaves,

who try to create their lives for themselves through the penetrating personal histories. Toni Morrison tries to represent this fact through the main characters of the novel; Sethe and Paul D. African Americans were marked by the legacy of their individual experiences with American slavery. The protagonists Sethe confronts a question of what it means to be a woman and mother; and Paul D raises a question of what it means to be a man, when the basic elements of freedom and humanity are denied to them. Morrison speaks about such serious issues through her works, which attract the attention of the reader and make him think about the humanity denied to the African Americans by the Institutions of the said time. "Though literary critics have described Morrison's work as transgressive, she prefers to call herself "a saboteur," an author who continually challenges her reader's and her own preconceptions about some of the defining issues of American culture: racism, civil rights, slavery, patriarchy" (Langer, 2003, p. 212).

Impact of Slavery in the Novel, *Beloved*

Beloved is the most reputed novel of Toni Morrison and it provides a clear-cut picture of Toni Morrison as a writer, as a writer of black culture. The idea of *Beloved* was inspired by certain incidents in the life of the slave, Margaret Garner, who escaped in 1856, from her master, Archibald K. Gaines, with the intention of finding refuge in Cincinnati, crossing the Ohio River. But Gaines followed her, where she was staying with her husband and four children. Although her husband tried to shoot the opponents, he was overpowered. Realizing that there was no escape, Margaret, with a butcher knife, slit the throat of her little daughter, whom she liked the most. She was captured when she attempted to kill the other children, before taking her own life. Rather than being forced to slavery, Margaret opted death for her most beloved child. Morrison herself has pointed out that: A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself.

That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied. (Conversation 584) *Beloved* is a metaphor for what must be reborn in order to be buried properly. It is Denver, who probably, is the site of hope in this novel. In 1985, Morrison herself had remarked that her intention was to transfer the story of *Beloved* as the narrative of Denver. For Sethe too, who has killed her own child, the process of healing commences when she takes responsibility for her action from within a larger framework. Sethe gets to know from Nan, her grandmother that her mother too had killed all the children born out of the White men. Ella is another person, who helps Sethe in exorcising her painful memories. *Beloved* reminds Sethe of her guilt, which represents the inhuman aspect of slavery. Denver becomes the other daughter in the novel, who represents the healing power of love and the need to remember the past. She becomes the beacon of hope in that dark world and is the first to recognize that the ghost is the incarnation of the infant *Beloved*, whom Sethe had murdered. Denver is also the first person who comprehends the need for a positive return to life, for which she must confront the past, so that she can boldly face the future. Barbara Schapiro, in her article "The bonds of love and the boundaries of self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", says, the novel depicts how the institution of slavery that deprives an individual of his autonomous status, impacts the psyche. The internal scars are so deep that even if one is freed from the enslaved condition, an authentic experience of freedom will still be a distant dream, as the self would still have not recovered from the trappings of the inner world. As Sethe points out, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 95) The novel focuses on the crucial problem of comprehending and claiming one's subjectivity and it illustrates how this cannot be achieved by dissociating oneself from the social milieu. The central figure in the novel is a wounded and deprived infant, *Beloved*, who demonstrates that the worst atrocity of

slavery is the resultant psychological death of an individual. The most critical event in the novel is the murder of the infant Beloved, by her mother, Sethe. When her dignity as a human being is violated by her slave master, she kills her own daughter, to protect her from the inhuman experiences that she herself has gone through and wants to save her from dying psychologically. "If I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her".(Beloved 200) Psychic death relates to one being denied existence as an individual. The self of an infant which has its own desires and impulses, yearns for recognition and affirmation as an individual, which gets fulfilled when it interacts with others. The denial of these requirements as a child has serious repercussions on the psyche, as demonstrated by Pecola, Sula and Sethe. The loving response and recognition that one gets from another, would determine one's experience of self as a reality. This aspect is repeatedly highlighted in Morrison's novels. When Sethe was young, another child points out her mother to her. When she becomes a mother herself, she is unable to fulfil the needs of her children, as she herself is in a terribly deprived and depleted state. The major characters in the novel undergo a deep loss of self as the relation between the self and the other breaks down, quite early in life. "The intense desire for recognition in Beloved, develops into an enraged narcissistic omnipotence and a terrifying, tyrannical domination".(Barbara 197) As the infant has been denied acceptance and affirmation from its mother, the craving for love, that it has, assumes dangerous and threatening proportions, which gets projected onto the parent. Beloved is repeatedly seen stating in her fantasies that Sethe "chews and swallows me". (213) In the second part of the novel, she has two dreams: 'exploding and being swallowed' (133). The fantasy of annihilation, thus, figures orally in most parts of the novel. The worst part of Sethe's rape was when she was robbed of her maternal milk, by the White boys. We also get to know that Sethe too, was deprived of her

mother's milk, when she was an infant. "The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own" (200). The nursing milk symbolizes the emotional starvation that Sethe had to go through, as a child. Deprived of the nursing milk, which is the essence of one's self, Sethe feels that she has no self of her own. "Thus even before she was raped by the white farm boys, Sethe was ravaged as an infant, robbed of her milk/ essence, by the white social structure" (Barbara 198). Beloved's eyes too are remarkable for their emptiness: "deep down in those big black eyes there was no expression at all"(55). Beloved, Sethe and Denver yearn to know and be known. The overwhelming hunger for acceptance, threatens to eliminate the self and the other, in just a stroke. Morrison uses the technique of monologue to indicate that the borders between self and the other have broken down. Sethe, in the end, recognizing that her dead child has been reborn as Beloved, surrenders completely to her will. She refuses to tend for herself and becomes emotionally and physically drained. The unclaimed and unrecognized Beloved arouses intense feelings, towards the end: Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. (274). In a way, the pain that Beloved goes through is true of all other Black characters too, though of lesser intensity. Baby Suggs, having been freed from slavery, more than being elated, feels sad for not having known her 'self'. Beloved also focuses on the idea that early mothering could arrest or even hinder a woman's sense of self. Sethe is forced to kill her child to save her from being swallowed by the institution of slavery and thus being denied the natural cycles of maternal bonding. The fact that she chooses to kill her daughter is also significant, as it is equivalent to killing one's own authentic self. The child is viewed by her as her own extended self. Even

her escape from slavery was not for herself. It was the thought of the unborn child that gave her the strength to move forward. Beloved refuses to leave Sethe's heart and conscience. The dead child is for the mother, her own truncated self. Her feeling that the best thing that could have happened to her, is her children, gets so ingrained into her psyche, that it is Paul D, in the end, who makes her realize that the best thing for her was herself. With Paul D's arrival, she accepts her need for him and his understanding of her 'self' that Sethe plans for a future relationship, that will release her from pain and suffering. Sethe, all along, has been defining her 'self' through her bonding with her children and remains caught permanently in the web of natural processes. She moves towards individuation, only after bonding with Paul D. It is the community of mothers, led by Ella, who finally succeed in exorcising Beloved and thus freeing

Sethe from the chains of motherhood. Morrison seems to say that women can traverse the stages of mothering, with help from other women, specifically mothers. Mothers definitely require fellow travellers. Although, the presence of Beloved is felt throughout the novel, towards the concluding part, she becomes marginal, indicating that Sethe has been able to dissociate herself from Beloved, paving the way for her own 'self' to emerge. Beloved is a novel which explores the aftermath of appalling hurts and the psychic as well as material damage inflicted by slavery. The story of Beloved is based on the absence of a home, self-determination, power and even language to articulate one's thoughts and feelings. Their plight is clearly portrayed by the narrator: ...in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So 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 (23). Beloved narrates the story of a few people, who try to escape from slavery and the impact this inhuman institution has on them. Sethe is subject to the worst assault when the School Teacher's nephews, on his orders, steal the milk from her breasts. This is followed by whipping, which leaves huge scars like 'tree' on her body. The 'tree' is one of the many physical reminders of the horrors of slavery and when Paul D sees this, he "learns that way her sorrow, the roots of it" (17). Paul D too has to go through the trauma of slavery, while at Sweet Home. Broken and psychologically destroyed, he struggles to regain his manhood. Although Denver has not gone through the travails of slavery, like her mother, but is also enslaved by her mother's haunted memories. She is forced to stop her formal education, as one of her fellow classmates questions her on whether her mother hadn't killed her own child. As a consequence of this, Denver goes deaf for almost two years. Sethe accepts Beloved as the reincarnation of her dead daughter and hopes she will be rid of the horrific memories of the past. She also tries her best to explain to Beloved, the ghost, as to why she killed her, when she was an infant. Denver also realizes that it is the fear of being killed by their own mother that her (Denver's) two brothers run away. Beloved represents the ghost of Sethe's daughter, but implicitly she also represents the ghost of slavery, which wreaked havoc in the lives of various characters. After the arrival of Beloved, Denver undergoes a transformation and tries her best, to reach out to her mother. However, by the end of the novel, Paul D, Sethe and Denver, seem to emerge from the clutches of a traumatic past, and look forward to a brighter future as free men and women. Beloved presents slavery as both an individual and national trauma, exploring the damaging effects on characters who try to repress and who finally come to terms with their painful past. Although Sethe belongs to the first generation of slaves to be freed, she and her children continue to suffer, from the trauma and

pain, inflicted by slavery. 'The dehumanizing effects of the institution of slavery serve as the background for the novel and it demonstrates how it can control identity and sexuality and rob the enslaved of their native African culture.'

Almost all the characters in this novel – Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, Paul D and even the ghost of Beloved, have been severely impacted by slavery, both physically and psychologically. They have been deprived of a childhood, as it was a struggle for survival for their parents, trying to escape from one slave master after another.

Although these characters paint a sordid picture of life, they don't wither away like Pecola. Of course, Baby Suggs, the grandma, dies of old age. Towards the end of the novel, Sethe and Denver are seen picking up the various pieces that their life has become and are seen making an effort to see some meaning into it. The consciousness about the self sets in Sethe, after the ouster of Beloved's ghost, with the help of Ella. As the novel concludes, Sethe is still feeling lost and laments the disappearance of Beloved. But it is Paul D, who helps her in putting things in a better perspective, by telling her: "...me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow...You are your best thing Sethe. You are" ([273]).

Conclusion

The conclusion gives the hope that Sethe, with Paul D's support, will be able to create a space and a life of her own, having emerged from the looming shadow of her daughter. Though, not as devastated as Sethe, Denver too has not evolved as a complete individual. But towards the end, we do see her using her sense of judgment and rationality and tries to understand the reasons behind her mother's action and is able to see things from a larger perspective. She is seen venturing out of the confines of her home, looking out for a job, which probably is the first step that she takes toward self-realization.

The harmful consequences of the institutionalized dehumanization of the African Americans have shattered their lives. The history tells us that during the slavery African Americans have lost humanity and compassion for the African Americans. Remarkably, in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has presented the history and legacy of slavery through the victims of slavery like Sethe, Paul D and others. Thus, African Americans were culturally, linguistically and socially marginalized by the whites in America. No mobilization was allowed to these people and castration of these people is done by the whites during slavery. The questions raised by the protagonists are so difficult to answer in all time as they are not literally enslaved after the Civil War, but their memories of the past and formative experiences haunted their thoughts and actions in such a way that it appears to them as someone else's property.

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