

## Slavery and motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

The novel is a portrait of the black slave woman's experience. The story is important for its demonstration of the concern that slave mothers had for the welfare of their children. Additionally, it is an attempt to understand the forces, both historically and personally, that would cause a mother to murder her child rather than allow her to experience the horrors of slavery.

**Keywords:** slavery, motherhood, race, sex, humiliation

### Introduction

Toni Morrison is a great novelist and whatever she has written is really her remarkable contribution to both English fiction and human society. She wanted to bring a dynamic change in the lives of black people through her novels. That is why; we are face to face with the pains and sufferings, torture and humiliation of the black people in her novels. The purpose was to make the people aware of the double standard adopted by the society of her age and undoubtedly, she succeeded in this regard. The world recognized and appreciated her writings and thus she did not become only one of the greatest novelists in English but also the winner of Nobel Prize for literature in 1993.

In the novel *Beloved*, Morrison paints a somber picture of the brutal effects of slavery. It examines both the mental and physical trauma caused by slavery as well as its effect on survivors. The novel follows the story of Sethe (pronounced "Seth-uh") and her daughter Denver as they try to rebuild their lives after having escaped from slavery. The novel follows in the tradition of slave narratives, but also confronts the more painful and taboo aspects of slavery, such as sexual abuse and violence, which Morrison pushes to the edge of questioning the idea of being human and of being a mother. She explores the effects on the characters, Paul D and Sethe, of trying to repress—and then coming to terms with—the painful memories of their past.

In America, the black man was not allowed to form or protect his family, As a result, the burden of the family had to be taken up by the black woman and for this reason, this class becomes the matriarch hardly dominant society. Because the mother runs the family, the daughters learn everything from their mothers, The effect of such a bond is very strong but in Morrison's world of fiction, this relationship can be destructive or constructive. Living in the classiest, racist and sexist society, black woman, faces different kinds of humiliation. Realizing the relation between the three Pairs – Sethe and Beloved, Sethe and Denver, Denver and Beloved—one finds that these three characters are linked together to tell the reader how black people survive and keep their history alive.

Denise Heinz describes that for Sethe "beloved represents more of a psychological than a supernatural phenomenon" (*Beloved*, P.176)

Sethe's body is a text upon which is inscribed the text of slavery, when the Schoolteacher appears on the scene after the death of Mr Garner, Sethe recounts the sweet home experience to Paul D:

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs., Garner on, em school teacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree, It closed it made a tree, It grown there still" (*Beloved*, P.23)

Above Sethe depicts the misery of women that they were milked like cows and branded as animal. This act of dehumanization speaks a volume about the misery of women.

"Her back had been dead for years" (*Beloved*, P.18)

Here Paul reads the story of slavery engraved on Sethe's back by the white master's whip; and, as the scar tissue is without sensation. Whilst illustrating the dehumanization of black Morrison brings hope in black in the preaching of Baby Suggs. She counters this marginalization by a collective act of self-glorification in which all those damage by dehumanization and hate can learn to love and nurture themselves in a manner that affirms their solidarity, Suggs encourages black:

"In this here place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass, Love it hard, Yonder they do not love your flesh, they despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it, And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty, Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your

face cause they don't love that either. Your got love it, you!" (Beloved, P.88)

In above text Morrison has shown direction to black community for cooperative self-healing, land forging a livable life for them. She has shown that through communal interaction the individual proceeds from repressive isolation to a developed sense of self. Here we see that facelessness and anonymity imposed by the whites on the black in America is to be fought by black in collective voice and ideology forged out of cultural and social absence.

Morrison's conscious focus on collective rather than individual struggle is clarified through her repeated assertions that Beloved is the story of people rather than a person. She says: "The book was not about an institution- slavery with a capital S. It was about those anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they are willing to risk, however long lasts, in order to relate to one another- that was incredible to me"(Bonnie 48) Morrison has shown that when Afro- American are at different positions their way of approach differ to one another:

"You got two feet Seth, not four----- what you did was wrong" (Beloved, P.202)

Morrison has also shown that when Afro American women are more trusting to their fellow beings and different times they are cheated not only by white but also by blacks:

"Sethe feels sorry to have been so trusting so quick to surrender" (Beloved, P.212)

Sethe mistakenly believing the completeness of her world with her daughter and giving her full time even leaving her job again shows the devotion of Afro American women towards the children:

"The world is in the room. This here's all there is and there need to be" (Beloved, P.224)

Sethe though ruined by repeated rapes and untold humiliations by the white masters, considers her children the best and the clean thing of herself, and hence, she would not let anybody taint that part of her. That Sethe would go to any extent to dirty herself to retain the purity of her children is sadly evident when she agrees for

"Rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on" (Beloved, P.5)

For ten minutes as a price to be paid for engraving the word "Beloved" on the tombstone of her dead daughter.

"But those ten minutes----were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (Beloved, P.9)

This History, or rather her story, unfolds with her after prison life but there are pages and pages of flash back, spared initially by the return of Paul D to 124 Bluestone Road outside

Cincinnati in Ohio. The year is 1873, year after Emancipation Edict. Technically blacks are free now, but they have to live with their harrowing past of only few years ago. Sethe is the daughter in law of Baby Suggs, the wife of Halle and the mother of Howard, Buglar, Beloved and Denver. She is known as iron-willed women from the beginning. However, her new master, to whom she sold, "Punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes". As a result, Sethe and the other slaves of sweet home flee during which Halle is dislocated and not found, chances are there that he might have been shot dead. Sethe has to ran with her three children and the forth in the womb. However when the white master find her, instead of surrendering she stops them by hacking the throat of her daughter by hand saw. In this manner, she ruthlessly refuses to send back her daughter to the same terrible world, which has fully sucked her virginity and vitality, Above all, what a black woman considers heinous is a forced sex imposed on her by a white man and Sethe does not want her daughter face the similar plight in future, In this event the physical act of murdering one's own child needs a lot of moral and emotional courage, It is the outcome of a compelling situational background in which survival is uncertain every moment and dignity is put to acid test every second of survival. Therefore, Sethe concludes that killing is putting her daughter to safety. She says:

"I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Beloved, P.87)

Sethe, thus, is the embodiment of black endurance and fortitude. She has been whipped so many times and with so much of ferocity by the whites that her back has been pulped to resemble a chokecherry tree. This has left a permanent pain on her back and she does hardly allow anyone to touch it.

Slavery came between women and their children so often that it was dangerous to put that much emotional energy into loving children. When they are taken away, it can really destroy the person who loves them.

Even the act of marriage for slaves has no meaning in the eyes of their masters, it implied superfluous meaning of a woman sleeping with one man for quite some time, until either one or both are sold, or are separated in misadventure.

Another epitome of the black courage in the novel is Baby Suggs. She is rather powerful a presence then Sethe even when it comes to strong nerve. It is Baby Suggs who receives Sethe at Bluestone when she returns to her after running away from slavery. Baby Suggs has already crossed sixty. Except her brave heart there is nothing left intact in her body because slave life had,

"Busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" (Beloved, P.87)

She starts to clear a part of the forest and gathers all the blacks of the locality for preaching to them the value of their race, rituals that would endow them with enough stamina to forget the past humiliations and lead a happy life.

"Accepting no title of honor before her name... she became unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and

open her great heart to those who could use it... uncalled, unrobbed, anointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence”

There is such a force of conviction in her talk that the blacks gathered there forgot temporarily their miserable plight and encouraged by her speech begin to laugh full-heartedly:

“Let your mother hear your laugh, she told them and the woods rang” (Beloved, P.87)

Similarly she tells them to dance and they dance and the ground under their feet trembles. She tells them to cry out all their griefs, their eyes run loose, and they weep out all their sorrows. She teaches them to love everything of life and love “it hard.” As whites have exploited all the parts of black body, Baby Suggs invites them to love all their limbs. She encourages the black people not to be ashamed of their blackness, not to be distressed by their past and slavery but to take a dignified look on all parts of their body, even on, she says,

“Your life holding womb and your life giving private parts” (Beloved, P.209).

For the whites, enjoying sex is not the rightful thing a black woman is expected to do. As told by her:

“Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feeling on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down” (Beloved, P.273)

There are numerous instances of slavery interfering in families. Baby Suggs's husband escaped, so they are apart. Paul D's brother was sold away from Sweet Home. Stamp Paid had to allow his master to use his wife sexually for a year. When there are families, it is dangerous to love too much because slavery may steal away family. Sethe loves her children too much, and they all suffer for it.

Thus, the story of *Beloved* moves back and forth through time, telling in flashbacks the story of the character's slave past. It is a portrait of the black slave woman's experience. The story is important for its demonstration of the concern that slave mothers had for the welfare of their children. Additionally, it is an attempt to understand the forces, both historically and personally, that would cause a mother to murder her child rather than allow her to experience the horrors of slavery.

## References

1. Toni Morrison. *Beloved*, London: Picador, 1987.