

The Study of Feminine Sensibility in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. Deepak. T. R.

Head and Assistant Professor
Department of English
Government First Grade College
K. R. Nagar
Mysore District, Karnataka

Abstract:

Woman stands at top as a chore figure in the composition of social endeavours. She is notified as a key persona in the creation of familial conducts. Her distinctive values, patience, dedication, commitment, love and motherhood are very much construed in literary mechanisms from different perspectives. Even she is depicted as a pictogram of silence, sacrifice and suffering. Toni Morrison has made a sober exertion in illustrating the moral fibre of women in literary advocacies. Her novel *Beloved* (1987) is a benchmark in connoting feminine sensibilities. It touches upon the black women as slaves during the instance of slavery. The notion of slavery never permits them to perform the task of motherhood in the true sense. They are observed as failures in bestowing nurturance and training to their offspring. Black women are often treated as forced mothers in the hegemonic world. They never display their propensity to comprehend the primordial possessions. Hence, the research article provides a platform to witness the dehumanizing strands of slavery and how a heart wrenched mother kills her own daughter as a response to stop slavery, though intolerable in the belief of society.

Keywords: Woman, Motherhood, Slavery, Silence, Suffering, Sacrifice.

Introduction:

Toni Morrison came to light as one of the greatest literary personalities in the twenty first century. Her works of literature mainly deal with the issues of Afro-American communities. The novels directly or indirectly study the aftermath of motherhood particularly in *Beloved* (1987). It portrays the resentful period of slavery that pushes women to the state of losing bonds. Even it avoids the proposition of problems that slavery has brought, therefore enhances the monetary revenue and steadies market. The slave mothers did not possess any command over themselves or towards their children. They were treated as nothing more than businesspersons in welfare of the white rulers. In *The Making of a Man: Dialogic Reading in Beloved*, D. A. Sitter writes:

In the works of Toni Morrison, positive values are associated with specific practices of West African culture: naming traditions, ancestor worship, and acceptance of the supernatural, harmony with nature, and linking of individual wholeness to the rootedness in a community. (1992)

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* makes an attempt to illustrate the ideology of different families that have managed to represent the motherhood. The tradition of Afro-American families is separated by the concept of slavery through sale. This is very much evident in *Beloved*, where slavery upholds cultural inheritance or chronological proceedings. It has the vigorous power to erase the notion of Afro-American motherland and repudiates the people of Africa from their antiquity, compassion and civilization. The slave mother as reflected in literature embodies humanity and selflessness. She has tried to guard her children from the clutches of slavery. Her outbreak is seen as the treatment of woman as a reproductive scheme which upholds slavery.

In *Beloved* mothers are shown as desolate and sympathetic, but they are pictured as women who bestow absolute love for their progenies. The novelist typifies their competence in highlighting the ominous circumstances of feminine sensibilities. It is done to reveal the survival and regime of black women in the tough situations of bondage. In the novel it is sarcastic that the black women are appointed to protect the children, whereas men are not represented as slavery survives. Here the black mother has no value, but she cannot escape from the world of slavery. In a way, the anxiety of women is revealed in their approaches to motherhood and their confinement to prompt their adoration towards children.

The structure of family plays a significant role in the novels of Morrison. The woman is not just an individual, but she has the ability to symbolise her mental and physical sensibilities. The notion of slavery and racism reflects a resilient association with motherhood. When women are seen as the sole performers in the families, they have to face the consequences of racist culture. Even the relationships between mother and daughter are also made unadorned by the racial conflicts. In a racist society, they are made to follow the restrictions imposed on them at various levels of their existence.

In the instance of Afro-American literature mothers are asked to perform the role of wives in the hegemonic social order. They do not even inculcate the strategy to take care of their own children. The men enjoy all the supremacies of society and confine black women to the state of mere mummies. The whites have only imposed and demonstrated the black

women to safeguard the white children rather than their own children. Though the decision of Sethe on her children is construed in the wrong manner, but her motherly warmth is exposed in a straight and unpleasant custom. Therefore, the black women not only resist subjugation, but also silence the voice of men in the process of delivering the role of motherhood in the Afro-American society.

In the beginning of *Beloved*, Sethe understands the condition of her mother that she does not even breast feed her affectionate child. This girl develops the intuition to comprehend that her mother is in a period of slavery. Only the physical punishment can be given by my mother during the time of fleeing away is what Sethe believes. The mother-daughter relationship is notified as completely incomplete and this has been dishonoured by hostile slavery. Nevertheless at difficult times her mother has tried to go rebellious against slavery. But she has to endure all the assaults, difficulties, accusations, traumas and humiliations just for the sake of protecting her children.

The mother of Sethe has decided to sacrifice her feminine image because she has to provide the liberation for her children. Her mother has tried her level best to keep her children away from the world of slavery, but she could not escape from the grasps of slavery. In a way, the notion of motherhood was inaccurate because the women in control understand that their children were demarcated as possessions to someone. These children were also becoming part and parcel of slavery possessed by white men. These black women were destined to be away from their children for a longer period of times. This situation of black mothers has forced even their children to nurse the children of white masters and doing their household activities.

The girl Sethe always moaned for the love of her mother and expected her to satisfy the starvation. She gently recalls that her mother was enforced to deliver duty on field and breastfeed the children of whites. Therefore, the women in the clutches of slavery were tainted as wicked mothers. Even these women were deprived of the privileges to take care of their own children. As they were reflected as local breeders and their status was confined to the level of animals. As a result, the women in the world of slavery have started to experience a separation from their own children. But these black women had to survive with the heaviness on the work fields and forced to please their white masters. These black women were always moving from one plantation to another plantation in the control of white masters. In *Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, D. White writes:

In the slave community, women became the focus of familial relationships, and in such a community there came the supremacy of the mother-child bond over all other relationships. (1999)

All these incidents make it very clear that Sethe cannot foster feminine image in the future prospects. Her mother never understands this notion as she never came across this nurturing in past. The most important aspect that one needs to comprehend is the mutual recognition between mother-daughter relationships. Here, the child must be allowed to develop the capability and to understand the status of women in the world of slavery. On the other hand, being a mother she is forced to deliver the role of both a mother and worker. The girl Sethe as a young daughter does not possess the ability to understand the condition of her mother. All these pessimistic approaches of white people towards the black women have left the children triggering for themselves. Either they are in a position to understand the condition of their mothers or do possess the ability to withstand social control of the white masters over black people. This has made a way to develop a kind of inhuman relationship between mother and daughter as noticed in *Beloved*.

The feminine relationship between daughter Sethe and mother provides a picture of physical chastisement to daughter than anything else by the mother. In a conversation with mother, Sethe happens to observe the marks of wound on the body of her mother. She understands that these marks of wound are the gifts bestowed by white slave masters for black women. This incident of punishment has left a great mark of wound in the psyche of Sethe. These brutal acts of slave masters highlight the status of black women and their place in the hierarchy of human society. It also indicates that the white masters consider the black women as only products, but not as human beings in the barter system. This cruel act pushes the black women to the world of broken spirits and in turn, they breathe in the atmosphere of shattered hopes. But when Sethe understands all these situations, she can only interpret it as the love of maternal world.

Sethe goes on to the extent of killing one of her children and later she would kill herself. This incident tells the inner self of Sethe where she had decided to give an answer to the white masters. Even the other women who dwell in the world of slavery also thought of killing their children and later themselves. The important reason for this serious decision taken up by black women tells that they never wanted to push their children to the world of slavery; the fathers of these children are not black men; and the treatment meted out to

women in the hegemonic society. Many critics have made an attempt to analyse the status of women in the world of slavery and that too in the hegemonic society as cruel, brutal and barbaric. In *Foucault and Theology*, Jonathan Tran asserts:

Power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of the window, or of killing the other. That means that in the relations of power there is necessarily the possibility of resistance... (2011)

The act of infanticide is considered as a major social evil and in the modern days it is labelled as a crime. Morrison's *Beloved* has dealt with the theme of infanticide. Actually, it was disseminated by number of slave mothers in the scenario of real life. The girl Sethe comes to certain age and is detached from her mother. This sudden detachment from her mother has created a kind of panic. Slowly and steadily she understands that the slavery never permits the mother and daughters to live together. After this separation, Sethe unwillingly joined the school teacher who hails from white community. But she plans to escape from them with the intension of providing her children a good ambience to dwell.

The school teacher never treats Sethe as human and does not permit to foster her children. Instead, Sethe is seen only as a sensual entity to his adored white master. Lastly Sethe has tried her level best to escape from the authorities of white master. Unfortunately she is trapped and severely beaten by the followers of white master. The followers of white master took away her milk and this has created a rage in Sethe's husband. It is very well known that the motherhood of Sethe is completely spoiled as she is not allowed to nourish her own children. This has created a sense of negative energy and loss of feminine image in Sethe.

When Sethe makes her final decision to escape from the commands of white master, she is conceived. Therefore, she decides to reach the forest and developed acquaintance with Amy Denver, a girl from the white clan. Even Amy Denver becomes close with Sethe; notices the marks of wound on her body and assists Sethe to deliver her child. The main intension of Sethe is to breast feed her child and thus plans to escape from the control of white master. She had firmly believed that as long as I stay with white master; I cannot breast feed my child. Keeping this notion in mind, once again she has planned to flee away from the school master.

For Sethe the act of breast feeding becomes symbolic of her feminine image. This act brings an emotional bonding between the mother and child. Through breast feeding she develops a kind of maternal resistance. It has managed to develop a strong bonding between Sethe and Amy Denver. The altercation of milk between the children manages to have a better understanding among two women who hail from different races. The tale of Amy Denver motivates herself to develop a kind of confidence and quest for her identity.

When the female protagonist Sethe reaches the new house, she is very confident and feels that she can impart proper training to her children. Here, the role of a mother is very much noticed in the overall progression of a child. In the world of racism, the black children are treated as inferior, incompetent and not trustworthy. But in reality, the motherly love of black children is considered as an act of resistance. In the process of nurturing the children, the black women instil in them the positive qualities of love, caring, self-esteem, and humanitarian values. These instilled positive qualities directly or indirectly; it enables the children to challenge and undermine the racial dissertations which are prevalent in the society. The black children try to project them as human beings, rather than being treated as animals.

In the Afro-American culture, the biological mothers are not given ample importance. They are just treated as labours in the world of humanitarian concerns. Baby Suggs always supports Sethe in her endeavours. Sethe is tired of doing cumbersome activities like washing clothes, bathing her and dressing the wounds. The real care of Baby Suggs provides a breathing space for Sethe. In the care and company of Baby Suggs, Sethe has started to rejuvenate herself from the wounds of physical and psychological stress. In addition, Baby Suggs has tried her best to relieve the traumatic conditions which are imposed on Sethe in the world of slavery.

Generally, Baby Suggs is a priestess and known for humanitarian values. She is projected as a matriarch who always reserves various healing powers like love, affection and sympathy for the betterment of civic society. The surrogate mothers are quite common in the culture of Afro-American society, the real biological mothers come across various problems in the process of breast feeding and nurturing the children. Consequently the matriarchal figure Baby Suggs showers maximum care for Sethe and Denver. It is quite a normal practice in the western society of Africa.

With the possible support of Baby Suggs, Sethe has managed to recover from her mental trauma. But the school teacher once again follows her to take control of the children. Sethe had regained her selfhood with greater effort, but once again she faces a threat from the school master. She goes on to the extent of killing one of her children, rather than surrendering to the school master. This act of firmness clearly indicates that she has decided to provide a proper platform for her children and reserves the best future prospects for everyone. Just by killing the child she enrages against the entire communal hut and is positioned at the compassion of an implacable spirit.

The female lead Sethe assesses the situation in an elaborate manner. She thinks if the school teacher is allowed to take control of the situation, he will once again water the untoward practices in the Afro-American society. Thus, she decides to kill her child as a mark of protest against the system of slavery. This cruel act of killing the child very meaningfully emanates the situation of heart wrenching motherhood. The narrative of Morrison is treated as the best response to the awful experience of feminine sensibility. The character of Sethe has to be viewed from two focal points. Here, the questions of morality and resistance are dealt with equal importance. If the notion of morality is given ample importance, then the perceptions of slave world manage to have the upper hand. On the other hand, the power of giving life to a person is accepted, but taking the life of an individual is not permissible in the human society.

The love of a mother towards her children is regarded as an act of power. Here, the intention of Morrison in highlighting the practice of infanticide is to deal with the issue of courage among readers. It only validates the penetrating love of a mother toward her child. Keeping this notion of love, the concept of motherhood plays a significant role in the novel of Morrison. Being an ardent and emotional mother, Sethe is anxious to witness the progression of her children. Even some of the critics have gone on to the extent of treating the action of Sethe as heroic.

Sethe is the quintessence of all values in Morrison's *Beloved*. In a way, *Beloved* is the daughter of Sethe. As and when *beloved* reappears, she quests for her mother and finds her. Her meeting of mother is one of the enjoyable moments in the life of the daughter *beloved*. But when she meets her mother, she comes to know that her mother has forgotten the daughter. She speaks with Paul D and continues to move him away from her mother. She forced him to involve in sensual pleasure with her and promises her association. The female

lead purposefully abolishes her association with Paul D with the intention of enjoying the acquaintance of her two girls. Here, the female protagonist Sethe uses all the instances to uphold the qualities of motherhood in Afro-American society.

Sethe never misses any opportunity to take her mother to the world of realization where she could achieve her feminine image. Actually, it is the daughter who takes the mother to the world of submission, forgiveness and remembrance. But this is not the same case with her acquaintance Denver. She is completely ignored and neglected by her mother. The loneliness is clearly visible in the life of Denver than ever before and lastly she detached herself from everyone. All these situations made Sethe to dwell in the world of confusion where loneliness started to produce more noise. Besides, the community comes to the rescue of Sethe and she is born once again with a different state of subjectivity. In *Conversation with Toni Morrison*, G. Caldwell writes:

The girl Beloved's voice at the end of the novel is wrenching testimony, not just her private suffering but of all the ravages of slavery. (1987)

Towards the end of the novel, Sethe reaches a stage where she could permit a motherly speech and partisanship to materialize. With the support of her allies she managed to think of the present situation. The novel exhibits a power of community which has strength, concern and commitment for the dispersion of humanitarian values. Paul D has tried to sow the seeds of realization in Sethe which represents the phase of salvage, convalescence and curativeness. The female lead Sethe understands that she is good enough to live in the world of love where motherhood has more significance. Finally, Sethe reconstructs her acquaintance with both Amy Denver and Paul D. She manages to disburse anything for her daughter; and understands the limitations of racist societies. It is love, affection, adoration, sympathy, empathy and respect which disseminate solution for every hurdle in the dwelling and progression of feminine sensibilities.

Conclusion:

Toni Morrison is well known for the exposition of humanoid doctrines which shower peace in the world of complex relationships. Her novel *Beloved* studies the intuition of black mothers from different genres of human psyche. After construing the ample novel, one adheres to apprehend that motherhood goes past the glassy of selfhood. The incumbent character Sethe practices slavery as a major chunk in her life and is not destined to overcome from the account of slavery. Thus, the impression of motherhood has created a space to

enslave from the site of authority and confrontation. She has slayed one of her children as a protest against the practice of slavery. During the days of trauma, she gets succour from the complements to squeeze the aftermath. This incident has not only liberated her from the ghastly blemish, but accomplished to instil in her a new-fangled lifespan. All these vicissitudes facilitated Sethe to appreciate the vigour of feminine sensibilities. However, the reverie of motherhood for Sethe socialises the agony of the bygone time imprinted in the spirit beloved.

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