

Psychological Explorations as an Outcome of Slavery: A Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison, known for her apt portrayals of the dynamics of human relationships, explores the condition of African-American women in her iconic American novel, *Beloved*. The issue of racism has been delineated and thus, she is able to create a distinctive identity for Black people at large. The present paper is an attempt to address the impact of psychological explorations of racism on Black people and how they struggle to establish their own identity shunning the oppression of the whites. Furthermore, the paper addresses the issue of slavery within its historical context. It critically explores how the heinous act of slavery corrupts the lives and identities of numerous people in the African-American societal fabric. *Beloved* serves as a critique of institutionalized dehumanization. The research paper attempts to examine the multiple dimensions in which slavery casts its appalling effects on the dark historical reality.

Keywords: slavery, racism, trauma, gender injustice, psychology

The connection between an enslaved past and the distortion of identity is critically examined through the apt characterization of Sethe. *Beloved* underpins the harsh reality of slavery that is responsible for impersonalizing the black Afro-Americans, crushing the family, culture and tribal history of the slaves. In most cases, minoritized and marginalised people suffer dehumanization based on class, race, gender and so on. As a matter of fact, dehumanization yields anger, frustration and pent-up vengeance. There is no denying the fact that the inhuman system of slavery causes not only physical death but also psychic death. Richard Roland and Malcolm Bradbury highlight the ways to deal with subjects that refer to the wonderful amalgamation of the present and the past. Their observations are quite pertinent here:

Some of the striking writing comes from black women – Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou – and shows the novel's complex involvement in the most serious issues of the time. The next generation of American storytelling is on the scene and at present in a state of its own becoming, as it too tries to deal with the present and rewrite the meanings of the recent past. (393)

Beloved, a compelling saga of unrelenting pain and anguish, deals with the story of Margaret Garner who kills her child to save her from slavery. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, engages herself in infanticide from the shackles of enslavement. Reference to the past has been a recurring theme that makes the novel distinctive among other African American literary works. Morrison opines regarding the novel's theme: "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 248). Morrison raises some pertinent questions through the characterization of the principal characters such as Sethe and Paul D. The novel seeks to address the question of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. This literary work of Morrison challenges the pre-conceived notions of racism and the age-old practice of slavery of the black people by the whites. The characters become victims to the oppressive forces that never cease to deconstruct their identities and freedom. Nevertheless, the individuals try their best to come out of these constraints. Characters like Sethe and Paul D lose their sense of self and become sceptical about their existence on earth. It is worth analysing the fact that the characters learn to find love despite their horrific past. When the novel opens, Sethe has been living free for over a decade. Sethe and daughter Denver have each other as company and the spirit of the dead child haunts them. As a matter of fact, Sethe is consumed by thoughts of the spirit. Morrison writes about black identities in a variety of contexts but her characters are united by their desire to find love and be loved even when it’s painful. Some of her novels explore when love challenges social conventions, like the forbidden affection that grows between townfolk of “paradise” and their fugitive neighbours. It is important to examine how we can be blind to the love we already possess. The author considers how the human spirit is diminished when you know the things and people you love most will be taken away. Morrison shows that slavery is destructive to love in all forms poisoning both enslaved people and their enslavers.

Beloved, a moving narrative, explores the tale of Sethe who has been living with her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver. Sethe’s two sons Howard and Buglar run away from the house in fear of an unseen spirit before the death of Sethe’s mother-in-law Baby Suggs. Interestingly, the novel begins with an unusual setting where the baby girl of Sethe is dead. As the novel progresses, it is seen that Paul D, an old acquaintance arrives to meet Sethe after a long gap of two decades. Thus, the memories come to the surface which has been lain buried in Sethe’s mind. The fragmented flashbacks of the major characters throw ample light on the vicious effects of slavery on black people's lives. The novel is a chronicle of the inhumanity of the plantation owners who have employed people like Sixo, Paul D, Paul A, Paul F and Hallo. They are victimized as a result of unbearable oppression. Although Sethe suffers the brunt of slavery, her frantic attempts in search of a dignified life pave way for further explorations and interpretations. The theme of the novel delves deep into the embodied spirit of Sethe’s dead daughter, *Beloved*. Sethe makes an earnest attempt to make *Beloved* understand the reason behind this murder. The narrative explicitly justifies the reason for killing her own child as her only way of liberating her daughter from the inhuman experience of slavery. Sethe explains her act of infanticide, “I won’t never let her go. I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her... Schoolteacher wouldn’t treat her the way he treated me” (Morrison 200). Sethe aims to demonstrate her claim to herself and her children after much physical and mental turmoil. She is compelled to cut her two-year-old daughter’s throat, so that no “gang of whites [would invade] her daughter’s private parts, [spoil] her daughter’s thighs” (Morrison 252). In this context, Morrison opines, “It was absolutely the right thing to do ... but it’s also the thing you have no right to do” (Rothstein 17). Several courses of events led to *Beloved*'s disappearance which serves as relief to the residents of 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe laments, “She was my best thing.” (Morrison 171).

Slavery has posed a serious hindrance in the path of establishing their identity. Slavery is so ingrained in Denver's mind that she is unable to separate herself from the drudgery of the inhuman practice. Baby Suggs fails to execute her homely duties as she restricts herself to herself. On the other hand, Paul D concludes that he should stop clinging to one particular thing and save himself from further emotional turmoil. While Paul D is emotionally tired, Baby Suggs's tiredness is somewhat spiritual. The agonized Sethe takes an extreme step to save her beloved daughter from the terror of slavery. This act accentuates the depth of love of a mother who can go to any extent to protect her children. In this way, the whites become "bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be" (Morrison 234). Moreover, Beloved's arrival as a spirit not only aggravates Sethe's painful memories but also reminds her of her inability to be a good mother. Matus opines: "Sethe's confrontation with her own feelings of abandonment and 'mother-lack' develops Morrison's indictment of slavery as an institution devoted to distorting and truncating maternal subjectivity" (109). As a matter of fact, the slaves were not allowed to think on his own, thus it led to the white masters' monopoly and one-sided authoritative attitude. Therefore, the slaves were debarred from raising their voice against the injustice. Morrison states: "There is nothing of any consequence in education, in the economy, in city planning, in social policy that does not concern black people" (258). Though severely poignant in nature, *Beloved* depicts the struggle of African Americans and it is remarkable for the portrayal of institutional racism. Through revision and reconstruction, Morrison shapes and conditions the cultural memory of the past and thus, challenge the cultural domination. *Beloved* insinuates the fact that African American culture is destroyed by the whites for their own self interests. In *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright comments, "we had our own civilization in Africa before we were captured and carried off to this land... centuries before the Romans ruled, we lived as men" (13). The deleterious effects of inhuman slavery insinuate show the fact how the Americans have lost humanity and compassion for African Americans. Moreover, the marginalized characters are potent enough to their courage and fortitude in order to achieve their identity which they have been denied so far.

Morrison examines both racial and gender oppression and their inevitable outcomes. While Sethe is forced to work as a slave due to cultural oppression, she falls victim to sexual harassment time and again. A minute reading of *Beloved* underscores the fact that gender cannot be separated from racial identity. It is also important to analyse how Morrison intertwines history with literary anecdotes and subsequently, this amalgamation leads to remarkable universalizing of cultural studies. Eventually, history becomes an important element of civilization wherein it plays its role in healing the marginalized characters, readers and authors. Recovering from the psychological trauma of slavery somewhat equates with a historical process of national recovery. *Beloved* serves as a witness to the forgotten history of African slaves under the cruel clutches of the Americans. Black women's subjectivity is embedded with physical and psychological pain. Women come face to face with severe identity crises which raises questions about the ability to overcome the interior space of internalized oppression. Sethe attempts to suppress her sense of self reminding her of the troubling memories of slavery and exile. The images of sexual abuse are articulated by Morrison:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forget who you were and couldn't think it up... The

best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing. (141)

The horrific memories of the past are so ingrained in Sethe's mind that she is not able to access the painful details of the past. The moment Sethe sees her dead mother, lynched and burned; she becomes incapacitated for several years. Eventually, Sethe acquires the freedom of her children through escaping. Her self-isolation and self-sufficiency mark the beginning of her first step towards individuality. Her ordeal of "eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" is remarkable in awakening the frantic desire to come out from the clutches of slavery. Sethe states, "Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 56).

The inability to decide whether she is a self or fragmented self-insinuates her being identified or identifiable. When *Beloved* returns, Sethe loses the precarious hold and "sat around like a rag doll, broke down, finally" (136). *Beloved* returns amid the illusion of subjectivities her return is felt when Sethe hopes for her arrival. Her existence is dependent on how much people acknowledge and remember her. The fictional discourse challenges the notion of freedom and poses severe questions about the issue of the instability of a fractured self. She states:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place- the picture of it—stays, and just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (21)

Therefore, it can be concluded that *Beloved* addresses the marginalization of black people through the dexterous analysis of race, class and gender. The narrative traces the origin of violence in the African-American culture and it follows the reproduction of that violence among the black community. The novel marks the triumph of feminist subjectivities. It is noteworthy to critically examine how Hariharan articulates the collective spirit of the black women who define the self under the cruel clutches of slavery. The novel highlights the need of marginalized women to seek inclusion in a seemingly masculine standard of reality and it serves as a healing process to a painful wound of the enslavement of Africans. It exposes the reality of Black women who are forced to live in such hostile environments and psychologically devastating conditions. *Beloved* provides insight about the least analysed themes in the history of southern black women that is the sexual vulnerability of black women and their helplessness in becoming the victims of rape and domestic violence. Min Punn comments:

In the context of *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, the memory of slavery, in particular, not only probes its effects on the individual psyche of black and white people but also the repressed memory of slavery in the make-up of the American nation. In this way, Morrison reworks the African American history, telling about racism and slavery, to recreate the moving texture of memory. (13-14)

Being stuck between the impossible choice of life and death, Sethe takes the extreme step to protect her daughter from the 'terrible' slavery. Sethe prefers to tolerate the unbearable pain

of losing her daughter than to let her daughter suffer from the pangs of slavery. Although severely poignant, *Beloved* insinuates the note of hope in Sethe's redemption. It is only *Beloved* that serves as a catalyst to help Sethe to get rid of her past traumatic experiences. *Beloved* takes it upon herself to make Sethe understand that Sethe herself is her 'best thing' (273). Sethe needs to understand that she has a separate identity for herself apart from being a mother. Moreover, Denver attempts to protect Sethe from *Beloved* who drains Sethe's vitality completely. Denver acts as the redemptive saviour in the novel who tries her best to make a connection between her mother to the rest of the community.

It can be said that *Beloved* is one of the greatest American novels as it underscores the fact that the notion of freedom is not absolute; rather it has to be challenged for the sake of truth. Morrison interrogates the relevance of freedom in the nineteenth-century United States where it is shown that several prerequisites are essential to be a free person. The novel marks a niche for its heart-wrenching struggle for a better life, a better living condition. The characters show their zeal and mettle to chase a better tomorrow. The true essence of the literary work lies in how Denver and Sethe find self-definition and a newly constructed sense of self. The baby girl is the actual incarnation of Sethe's psychological torments. Ralph D. Story opines "Sethe's inner quest . . . for completeness; her destiny was to fulfil her promises as a mother: to love, to cherish, to protect, to teach and to give" (22). Sethe refuses to be a part of the oppressive ways of living and she resolves to provide her children with all that had been denied to her – mother's milk, freedom and love. *Beloved* serves as a potent link between the present and the past. It can be analysed that Denver acts as a developmental model of a person who knows exactly what her place is in the black community. With the arrival of *Beloved*, the whole community comes together to save Sethe from life-threatening abuse, "the past was something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (256). *Beloved* is the embodiment of human slavery that has been experienced by all in some way or the other. The small narrative constitutes into large narrative wherein *Beloved* and the whole black community becomes one. The ghost of the *beloved* provides an opportunity to atone for its past mistake. It is pertinent to observe the following quotation "Beloved acts as a supernatural agent—experienced as daughter, sister, witch, or demon-child—who engages others in a seemingly external but actually internal struggle resulting in rebirth, renewal, [and] resurrection" (Morrison 153). Nevertheless, Sethe's journey becomes impossible without the community's reassessment.

After the disappearance of *Beloved*, the community reminisces the past making it possible for the old harmony to be inspired and nurtured by Baby Suggs. It is noteworthy to analyse that the spirit of *Beloved* could be diminished only by the collective consciousness of the black community. The process of healing allows Sethe to realise that she is worthy of love – both Paul D's and her own. The possibility of Paul D and Sethe coming together arises and highlights the need to establish real love amid the toughest opportunities. All of them dream of a better future shunning the horrific past. The healing of their indelible wounds is intertwined with the community that surrounds them. According to Morrison, mere repression of the painful memories would penetrate into the characters' present; just as *Beloved* takes the opportunity to invade into Sethe's life. It can be said that the protagonist's drastic transformation to a definite self-definition illustrates the conviction of being someone else's possession. *Beloved* foregrounds how the familial ties and entire gamut of maternal instincts are destroyed as an inevitable outcome of slavery. Sethe is shown to be torn between her guilty of killing her own child and the harsh past of slavery. Slavery also distorts the

individuality of the male characters who are degraded because of the slave masters. In this work of Morrison, the past plays a pivotal role in shaping and conditioning the future perspectives of the survivors. Barnett comments, “Despite the characters’ efforts to diffuse the power of the past, the ghost baby, like the traumatic nightmare, intrudes on the present, forcing Sethe and Paul D to remember what they have tried unsuccessfully to forget” (420).

The theme of female solidarity is expressed when the three principal characters viz., Sethe, Denver and Beloved come together with dysfunctional trajectories of lives and haunting past. On the other hand, the reunion in the women’s lives further emphasizes the favourable aspect of Beloved’s presence. It is expressed in this way, “You are my sister/you are my daughter/you are my face; you are me;” “I have your milk/ I have your smile/ I will take care of you;” “You are mine/ you are mine/ you are mine” (216). It can be interpreted that the longing of the three women has culminated in the appearance of Beloved and thus, creating the singularity of their indivisible selves. The collective exorcism is expressed in the novel:

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

With the exorcism of Beloved, the whole community exorcises the past. With the help of the collective power of the community, Sethe overcomes her traumatic experiences.

Beloved is remarkable for its wonderful amalgamation of communal and individual growth. The novel delves deeper about the “black identity” who is denied basic human rights. Among Morrison’s variegated characterisation, the schoolteacher is an exception. As he embodies the atrocious institution of slavery, he represents the cruel system of slavery under the façade of his civilized demeanour. Interestingly, the schoolteacher’s frame of mind symbolizes the dominant discourse of the West that is essentially racist as the primitive concept of “blackness” as “a figure of absence, a negation” in their writings. Interestingly, Morrison has not named the schoolteacher and his nephews to diminish them to the level of nonhuman creatures. The predominance of the racist discourse is highlighted by Morrison’s nuanced portrayal of the schoolteacher with Mr. Garner, the former nonconformist master of Sweet Home. Mr. Garner’s treatment with the slaves have been gentle than other characters. As a matter of fact, Garner’s benevolent attitude stands in sharp contrast with the schoolteacher’s ruthless racism. The mere representation of slaves as unfit, subhuman creatures is negated by Mr. Garner’s attitude towards the blacks. Schoolteacher’s degrading views of the slaves yields in the slaves’ categorizing into several segments. While witnessing Sethe’s hysterical attempt to kill her own child, he hovers upon his nephew’s cruelty, “ she’d gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew’s cruel attitude who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think – just think – what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education ... Suppose you beat the hounds past that point ... Never again could you trust them in the woods” (149).

It should be analysed how the racist ideology has been prevalent since ages and Morrison critiques the notion that the blacks are looked at as violent and menacing forces. Little do they realise that the slaves’ outrageous behaviour is the inevitable outcome of their masters’ cruelty. The traumatic haunting of the characters leaves an indelible mark on their

future. As a result of this, they are not able to escape the haunting and it deliberately effects their lives as a whole. The novel *Beloved* is viewed as a chronicle for the representation of trauma and its subsequent struggle to come out of the traumatic past. As a matter of fact, the past needs to be confronted as the memories of the horrific past comes to the present in variegated forms. The past plays a pivotal role as the memories of the past helps in ameliorating the vulnerable condition of Sethe and other slave characters. One of the most unfortunate parts is that the slaves' bodies are no longer theirs' as they have lost authority over their own bodies and it has happened due to the atrocities of slavery. The principal characters' constant struggle to reclaim their exploited and commodified bodies has been synonymous with the traumatic legacy of slave culture. *Beloved* is a novel that deals with a crisis of subjectivity, a crisis inseparable from the traumatic legacy of slave culture. As a matter of fact, Morrison has not named Beloved, but she is given a generic name that represents all the people who fall victim to the inhuman system of slavery. A terrible past needs to have a proper closure so that the survivor could move on shunning all inhibitions. Since the past has been given a different reading, it has emerged from a multi-levelled subjectivity. In representing the historical struggle, Morrison brings forth a new non-hegemonic realm of meaning and being.

Beloved challenges the very notion of freedom as the ideals of freedom are not absolute. It has to be continuously evaluated for the sake of constructing a nation. Morrison interrogates what freedom stands for and what it takes to achieve that freedom for one's own sake. The novel underscores the fact that one needs to have several prerequisites to lead a free life. Though the characters are enslaved, damaged and haunted, they never stop to chase their tomorrows. The novel explores the dehumanizing and its possible outcomes of the slave trade. They are treated as animals and are valued in monetary benefits. Sethe remains mired in her past and Paul D dissociates himself completely. But in both cases, it's clear that each character has been irreparably scarred. Morrison blends perspectives into timelines to convey how the trauma of slavery ripples across various characters and periods. Though *Beloved* touches on dark subjects, the novel is filled with beautiful prose, highlighting the character's capacity for love and vulnerability. In a stream of consciousness sequence, written from Sethe's perspectives, Morrison unspools memories of subjugation alongside moments of tenderness. *Beloved* exhibits the power of togetherness and how we can use that power wisely. It remains a testimony to the destructiveness of hate, the redeeming power of love and the responsibility we bear to heed the voices of the past. Morrison states in one of her interviews,

I read an article in the 19th century newspaper about a woman whose name was Margaret Garner who had indeed killed or tried to kill her own children. She was a fugitive slave and rather than have them go back she decided to take them all into a permanent place of oblivion and it was an article that stayed with me for a long long time and seemed to have in it an extraordinary idea that was worthy of a novel which was this compulsion to nurture. This ferocity that a woman has to be responsible for her children and at the same time the kind of tension that exists in trying to be a separate complete individual. (Visionaryproject)

African American women writers like Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor and Alice Childress deal with racial injustice and gender inequalities in their literary oeuvre. Morrison gives voice to the unvoiced and this critique of the African-American slave narrative dominate American culture and literature. The novel can be defined

as a historical fiction that represents the large patterns of culture and history. Morrison focuses on collective struggle rather than individual struggle and thus *Beloved* becomes the story of a group rather than a person. Morrison's artifice lies in the fact that she amalgamates social concerns and demands of novel as an art form. Through the portrayal of fictional art, Morrison finds the solution to the collective struggle of the Blacks in white America. The horrible exploitation of class, race and gender underscores the fact that these scars of wounds leave indelible marks on the soul of the implied characters. It can be concluded that the novel marks the celebration of the power of black women like Baby Suggs and Sethe, and bears the testimony to weave their dreams into myths in their frantic attempt to recover the past. The earnest attempt to correct the wrongs on the behalf of black women is the essence of the novel. She condemns vociferously the racial and sexual oppression that violates the personal integrity of the slave women. Her nature of representation, followed by the discourse of contemporary feminism, makes her literary works distinctive among others. The line "this is not a story to pass on" (275) recapitulates the tension between repression and rememory figured throughout the novel. Ironically, the novel underscores how the story must be passed on.

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