

Dehumanizing Aspects of Slavery: A Critical Appraisal of Toni Morrison's *BELOVED*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison has built a permanent niche in the realm of African-American writings. *Beloved* which was published in 1987 is her fifth novel. She has received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and Nobel Prize in literature. The novel articulates the sense of intense pain and suffering caused by the white master. She in this novel picturizes the unrelieved violence in all its manifestations like incest, rape, infanticide which were the dark consequences of slavery. She basically in her work strove to bring African- American experience. She in this novel delves deep into the psyche of the slave exploring the wide, frightening terrain of their thought process. This paper is a modest endeavor to shed light on certain issues like dehumanizing effect of slavery, gender discrimination, hyphenated identity of individuals and unceasing quest for freedom, happiness and self-discovery. A few other writers and poets like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou also deals with these issues, but Morrison has, perhaps, done the most detailed analysis of the concept of slavery. The novel is a saga of struggle of the slaves to arrive at authentic selfhood and freedom.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, pain, violence, incest, infanticide, slavery, selfhood, freedom.

Introduction

Beloved is a classic in black literature. It is in fact an unbearably heartbreaking saga of reckless exploitation of the slaves. The intensity of torture that the white people had done to the black is unnarratable in words. She through this novel endeavoured hard to project the dilemma of the black African American people. She vehemently exposes in it the human prejudices. The novel is in the genre of slave narrative.

Slavery is the darkest period not only in the history of America but also in the history of

entire mankind. With the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, some of the burning issues such as slavery were raised in the forefront. Slavery is a very important part of the text.

The central character of the novel is Sethe. She has a daughter by the name Beloved after which the novel is named. *Beloved* is in the tradition of Afro-American folk narrative where we have the spirit of the dead child coming back to haunt the house. The spirit of Beloved is in a way the representation of the memory of the suppressed and repressed past as well as slavery. *Beloved* is a novel which is multi vocal because we have narratives from the point of view of multiple characters such as Beloved, Sethe, Paul D, Denver, Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, etc.

The Central Story in a Nutshell

The central story of the novel is unbearably heart-wrenching and it revolves around Sethe's history and the bold action that she had taken when she ran away from Kentucky Plantation. She already had by that time two young sons by the name Howard and Buglar and a daughter by the name Denver who was hardly two years old and she was also pregnant with another daughter. So, when the slave catcher was about to catch her, she kills her own daughter Beloved with a view to free her from future slavery. This is the central story around which the rest of the story moves around. *Beloved* is inspired by the true story of a mother committing infanticide. The name of the mother is Margaret Garner and she was a runaway slave. In her foreword to the book *Beloved*, Morrison writes about the lady. The book is dedicated to 'Sixty Million and more'. Her text was dedicated to the lives that were lost as a result of the Atlantic slave trade.

Psychological Impact of Slavery

The slaves were caught, killed, seduced, murdered, oppressed and depressed in their heart and mind. In many cases, most of the characters are so psychologically traumatized that they represent the past denying its existence because it was too painful for them to reminisce the past again. *Beloved* in the novel is not just about a ghost, it represents the traumatic history of slavery. One of the minor characters of the novel by the name of Amy remarks,

“Anything dead coming back to life hurts.” (Morrison, 35)

Impact of Slavery on Family Life

There is a graphic portrayal of slavery as an institution. As an institution, slavery was anti-family. Slavery didn't allow family. As we go through the novel, we come to know that husbands were separated, wives were separated, and children were separated. Children had no memory of their parents. They had to grow without affection, guidance and tenderness of their parents. The parents could never meet their child again.

Slavery is one of the driving forces for the psychological trauma for the slave of not having a

family. The slave never had a constituent family. Every mother lost her children; children are deprived of mother's affection. Motherhood is actually one of the recurring themes of many slave narratives. We have seen the meaningless mother-child relationship in the narrative. Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar are afraid of not only of the Beloved's spirit but also afraid of their mother because they could remember that their mother was once tried to kill them. In doing the criminal act of infanticide she was trying to out hurt the hurters. There is a hint of infanticide in Ella's past also. She doesn't want the past to intervene in the present. She was raped mercilessly by one white man and from this act was born lots of children and she regarded them as 'a hairy white thing' (Morrison,128) and refused to feed them. So, some of them die. So, there is a hint of infanticide in Ella's past.

Dehumanization of Slaves

Slavery is also significant so far as the dehumanizing of the slaves is concerned and the white people had the power to dehumanize because they were the masters and superior to them. The white masters are depicted as devoid of feeling and sense of responsibility. Baby Suggs's husband escaped from slavery. Halle Suggs who is the husband of Seth has brought his mother's (Baby Suggs) freedom from slavery. It was a great event in his past. He had to work continuously for so many years without any break and wage. Even on Sunday and Saturday he used to work. Paul D had to allow his masters to seduce his wife for a year. Such was the helpless and pathetic condition of the slaves. They were not only helpless but also hapless.

The white people had the power to dehumanize the slaves. Slaves were not considered as human beings, but they were considered either as property or animal. The slaves were unable to define any stable identity to define themselves. Slave women were regarded as breeders in the sense that she would give free future slaves by giving birth to children. The use of the words such as 'slaves', 'niggers', 'beast', 'animals'- these kinds of use of words degraded the slaves and compared them with animals. The white schoolteacher used the slaves as a subject of experiment. Like an anthropologist, he measured their heads and classified and noted the good and bad things of the slaves. He also noted down the human and animal behaviour of the slaves. The slaves tried to forget their past so that they moved on life. They didn't have ownership over their own body and their body is determined by somebody else.

The white people had power over language. Stamp Paid in *Beloved* tells that the white men have the power over language, and they were the ones incessantly speaking, scolding, taunting the slaves. They had a preconceived notion that the African-American people were full of dark forest inside of them. So, they designated them as debased, barbaric, and uncivilized and so on.

“White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift

unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way... they were right... But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place... It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread... until it invaded the whites who had made it.... Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own." (Morrison, 99)

They thought that their culture was uncivilized, and they were a primitive race of people. They all had been tortured and their culture had been mangled and they had to undergo a suffering of insomnia and identity crisis. It was Mr. Bodwin who at the end of the text realizes the misdeeds done by them to the black community.

Complete Dehumanization of the Slaves/ Inestimable Pain on Slaves

Sethe's life was full of ups and downs. There are lots of traces of complete dehumanization of Sethe in the story. In fact, it is she for which the central story revolves around. Her body is in fact a text of slavery. Sethe tells that there is a tree with numerous branches growing behind her back. Sethe said "I got a tree on my back..." (Morrison,7). This means that there are lots of lashes behind the back of Sethe caused by the whip of the two nephews of the schoolteacher. This tree symbol is a very rich symbol that Morrison uses in her novel and this is symbolic of the physical cruelty of slavery. These scars on her back projects the dehumanizing years as a slave. Sethe tells Paul D thus:

"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. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. " (Morrison,8)

Sethe has to sell herself for ten minutes in order to inscribe the words 'Beloved' on the tombstone of her first dead daughter.

"But those ten minutes...were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (Morrison,2).

Sethe was so much caught up with her miserable past that she had even forgotten about her present. The women depicted in the novel understand each other's pain.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to comprehend the limits of inhumanity that a particular race especially the

master or the white or the superior could inflict on another race, the way they are dehumanized, and the evil that comes with this institutionalized slavery. *Beloved*, in a sense, is a retelling, rewriting of all the slaves who never got the chance to narrate their story and what Morrison found in many of the slave narratives was that number of these narratives had in a sense toned down their voice for the sake of a white audience. In an interview, Morrison tells that she is just retelling, and she is just refilling those gaps that have been left in those slave narratives. (Rose1:02:32) What Morrison insists upon is recovering and giving voice to all these kinds of narratives. So even though we have the story of Sethe, we have to remember that the book is dedicated to sixty million slaves. So, the rape of Sethe is the rape of the black women and even men who were exploited by their masters. A travesty on Sethe's individuality is a travesty on all those slaves.

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