

Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Psychoanalytic Study

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Abstract

The age where and when the novel was written, the writer's biography and the portrayal of the characters are fundamentals that one cannot neglect while analyzing a novel. The portrayal of the female characters is not enough to understand their outlook toward what they are living. The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison presents the emotional effects of enslavement, but at the same time it demonstrates the effects of slavery on the psyche of the characters, mainly Sethe. Her psyche calls to the reminiscence and she lives in her recollections, each time she reveals her current life to the previous one. Therefore the present paper is a psychological study of the character of Sethe in and the way she was influenced by the heritage of slavery.

Keywords: Struggle, Psychology, Slavery, Relationships, Reminiscences.

Introduction

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Sethe – a Slave

The novel presents the emotional effects of enslavement, but at the same time it demonstrates the effects of slavery on the psyche of the characters, mainly Sethe. Sethe's life is a full of struggle. In the past she was struggling against slaveholders, and then she struggles against the society. She was considered to be a savage mother and blames her of murder. The struggle that harms her mainly is the one with herself. Her psyche calls to the reminiscence of her deceased baby, although she knows that she murdered her for her own sake. All this provides Sethe instable traits. The outside atmosphere influences her individuality. She lives in her recollections, each time she reveals her current life to the previous one.

Sethe as a Mother

Sethe is exceedingly dedicated to her children. She believes them as a part of herself: Sethe starts to converse, clarify, explain how much she had undergone struggles for her children by waving away flies in grape arbors and crawling on her knees to a lean-to. This former slave woman is an instance of a rebellious mother, who kills one of her four children to avoid her bodily and emotional fear of a life spent under slavery.

Sethe is provided with the task to talk about the past. She speaks about the act she commits when she tried to cut the throats of her daughter. That hurts her but she had no alternative, for her that was the best and the only way to defend her baby. Sethe was certain that if her daughter is taken back to slavery, she will undergo sufferings like her mother. She will demise under the cruel regulations of slavery or she will be murdered by the masters; “if I hadn’t killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear happen to her” (*Beloved* 142).

Sethe’s experience of slavery was the reason that made her to murder her daughter. She knows that mercy doesn’t present in the hearts of the masters. She announces that even though she feels sorry for what she did to her daughter, she chosen that rather giving her to slave owners. Her act of murdering can be understood as Sethe’s extreme love for her children. One can say that it is right that Sethe have psychological plights because of her past as a black woman slave, but the most influential power which thrusts her to do so with her daughter is her maternal nature. Her deed can also be justified by her life during slavery, “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (*Beloved* 117). She remembers all what she lived, and she imagines what if her children experienced that.

Sethe by no means practices her mother’s love “My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don’t remember. I didn’t see her but few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo” (*Beloved* 44). This can explain her connection to her children. She tries to do with her children what her mother didn’t do with her. She wants to protect them.

The connection between son and mother is evidently seen in the novel. Sethe is very close to her daughters, mostly Beloved, she wants to get back all the lost time when Beloved was remote from her. Sethe’s feels sorry about her slaughtered daughter pushes her to think that this woman who came to her home is her daughter. So she presents all her life and time to Beloved, just to serve her whenever she wants; “We’ll smell them together, Beloved. Beloved. Because you mine and I have to show you these things and teach you what a mother should” (*Beloved* 143). She killed her daughter, but she is so preoccupied by the arrived ghost. Soon after she convinced that it is her dead daughter who returned and now haunts the house. Sethe’s relationship with Beloved is a deep one. Beloved made Sethe remember always the past and live it in the present.

The essential constituent to form a strong individuality is the family, but Sethe didn’t have a family; she didn’t even saw her mother; “By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright, they worked by its light. Sunday, she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me

two or three weeks—that’s the way the others did” (*Beloved* 44). Sethe’s despairs during her enslavement created her a distressed personality.

A mother is thought to love and take care of her children. The motherly instincts create a very sturdy strength beside Sethe. Sethe’s odd and instable acting up reflects her psychological distress. Her mindful experience in the past controls her present life, she could not forget it. Her reminiscences threaten to haunt her every day. She is so scared of slave holders, because she knows that if they discover her, they will take her back to slavery. She got the suffering because of what she lived in the past, and she doesn’t want to experience that anymore. A child is believed to have a happy childhood, but Sethe spent her childhood in slavery.

It is true that being a slave for Sethe is hurting because she experienced much, but it wasn’t an obstruction for her to make a new start. She became much stronger and she is capable to tackle everything. Her relationship with Denver was so close, because she is the only one who lives with her. She tells her something about her past “You never told me what happened. Just that they whipped you and you run off, pregnant. With me” (*Beloved* 27). Denver had been alone forever: her mother relived her past for herself. Her mother’s resolutions caused her solitude.

Sethe’s Bond with Men

Sethe’s relationship with her husband Halle is powerfull because they loved each other when they were at sweet Home, but then she hates him since he was not present when she wanted him. She feels that if he was by her side, those horrors that Sethe lived wouldn’t occur. She believes her husband is the only accountable person for her deed of killing her daughter and for her two boys running out from home. She was unaccompanied with no security neither from her family nor from her husband. But she was proud of what she did to secure her children “I did it. I got us all without Halle too” (*Beloved* 115).

Opposite to Halle, she loved Paul. D. They practiced slavery together, so they know many things about each other. Almost from the moment of Paul D’s entry, Denver is threatened by his relationship with her mother and by the reminiscences that they share but she does not. Sethe was very happy when Paul. D told her that he desires to have a baby with her; “I want you pregnant, Sethe. Would you do that for me? Now she was laughing and so was he” (*Beloved* 92). One can say that Paul. D emerged at the moment when Sethe required someone to share her pain with.

To Conclude

Comparing to all the slaves in the novel Sethe is the most influenced one by the past; she caused ache to herself and to the ones who encircle her. Through *Beloved* one can assume that slavery gravely harm slaves’ mind-set and emotions. Slaves were measured like beasts or nastiest things that slave owners can buy and sell as they want. This was hurting for the slaves, knowing that they lost their identity.

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