

The Problem of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Courtesy: www.amazon.com

In her 79th year, Toni Morrison is today, one of the greatest living literary icons of the contemporary world. As an African American, she has been able to achieve the status of distinction in the mainstream American literary tradition. In her works, Morrison deals with major contemporary social issues like racism, class exploitation and sexism. Toni Morrison offers a fresh perspective on black life, their history and genealogy. The socio-history found in her novels is the history of daily assault by a world, which denies minimum dignity to the blacks. The overriding theme of her novel is, therefore, the sense of identity of a black person trying to recover his/her history and culture, which had so far been suppressed due to white narcissism.

As an author and an educator, Morrison sought to move the works of African Americans from the periphery to the centre, in American culture, through her works. With nine powerful novels, an astounding critical work and a number of essays,

Morrison deals with the efforts of African Americans to survive cultural, economic and social disruption within their communities. Her settings are specific American historical period, while her characters are usually black and female, though not always. Morrison's writings are embedded in her desire to 'bear witness' to the enslavement of African Americans as crucial American cultural fact.



Toni Morrison
Credit: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Courtesy: www.amazon.com

The socio-political and literary history of African Americans is discussed in this novel. The three hundred years of slavery and racism has denied blacks of their history, tradition and culture, in the process eliminating their identity and their self. Slavery is the central fact of black history in America which contributed enormously to the economic growth and the creation of wealth in colonial and nineteenth century America.

Toni Morrison, in her non-fiction, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, have argued that what one accepts as 'Americanness' today is the result of the four hundred years old presence, first of Africans and then African Americans in the United States. She, further, says "the contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imaginations."¹

One of the pre-eminent black women writers of the boom period of African American literature, Toni Morrison has highlighted the socio-economic and political

concerns of the African American women. The 60s and 70s are the peak period of black's struggle for equality and liberty from racism. Racism, the remnant and the vestiges of slavery, is responsible for the unequal treatment of blacks in America. Powerful persons such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. are responsible for leading the blacks during the Civil Rights Movement, which brought equality and fraternity from racial segregation and discrimination. The movement also sprouted other such movements like the Black Arts Movement that helped in expanding black literary movements by incorporating black studies and women studies programs. It, later, became an important part of university education by late 1970s and early 80s. The movement sought to correct the oppressions suffered by black people in the US but, the suppression of black women was overlooked by the artist of Black Arts Movement.

Morrison, though, influenced by the movement's principles, did not participate in the movement directly. To correct the racial and gender bias of black studies within and outside the academy, black women writers like Morrison, in the Post-Civil Rights era presented a flurry of writings. Black women's writings gradually generated a body of black feminist criticism in the 80s. Noted writer, Alice Walker contrasted black feminism within white's feminism through the term 'womanists'. Her remarkable works include *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* and *The Color Purple*. Morrison, too, develops a new type of novel, one, which represents the hopes, aspiration, and historical memories of black women.

The inspirational story of Margaret Garner from which Morrison based her novel, *Beloved*. Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who escaped from a plantation in Kentucky, killed her child to prevent it from falling back into slavery. Morrison came across the story of Margaret Garner in *The Black Book*, which she edited. It, thus, became the historical analogue of the plot of *Beloved*.

Morrison explores the psychic damages inflicted upon African American women by sexual abuses drawing on the tradition of slave narrative and creates a neo-slave narrative. Through Sethe, Morrison attempts to examine, especially, the plights of black women – as a slave, as a mother, daughter and as a 'black woman' in American slavery era, as Margaret Garner has gone through. In her interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison says of Margaret as:

A woman [who] loved something other than herself so much [that] she had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That

the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied [or]...hurt.²

Margaret Garner's act exemplifies that the best thing in us is also the things that makes us sabotage ourselves, sabotage in the sense that our life is not as worthy or our perception of the best part of ourselves. Thus, Morrison is made to question "what is it that really compels a good woman to displace the self, her self?"³As a black writer, Toni Morrison is fully aware of the wrongs the blacks and particularly, the black women had to suffer at the hands of white men's hegemony.

The predicaments and problems of blacks during and after slavery are depicted in the novel, *Beloved*. During the days of slavery, blacks were reduced to the status of animals. There were no family structures for black people. Women were just regarded as sexual objects for white men's gratification and as well as to 'breed' slaves for them 'without cost'. Black children had no family and no parents, they were only 'chattel property' and black 'men' were only 'boys' in white men's creed. Hence, such a past makes it difficult for the blacks to forget even though slavery has been abolished. It has become a legacy, a part of their racial memory. Of the American institution of slavery, Morrison had to say:

There couldn't have been another slave society in the world with a Fugitive Slave Law. It could not work with the Greeks and Romans, because they all looked pretty much alike. But with the Black people, skin give them away. You could keep up the remnants and the vestiges of slavery for longer than it ever would have lasted if they had enslaved....⁴

Morrison believed that black people were seen as slaves and subsequently are now seen as 'visible poor' because of the physical differences. Black people are perceived as the lowest of the classes as they are identified that way. What they wore, what neighborhood they lived, would not make any difference. The cause of this prejudice according to Morrison, is that "one can identify the person who was once a slave" or who were in the lower class and this caste system survives longer.⁵

It is observed that Morrison in her narratives put forth disturbing questions before the society. She probes the mind of the readers to examine the socio-economic, political, and cultural problems during and after slavery. Morrison believes that a

work of art should be political as all good arts are and she aspects the same from her works too.⁶

It can be judged from what Morrison has tried to convey through her novel, that black race are the victims of multiple injustices in the American society. This iniquity has been responsible for many of the social and mental problems that the blacks have been subjected to. Unless the white society strive to remove their ‘pride’ that asserts their superiority as a race, it will only thicken the ‘jungle’ that grows among them as Stamp Paid believes.

Exploration on Blacks’ predicaments was one of the foremost themes in Morrison’s fiction, *Beloved* but it would also be thought provoking and challenging to explore on other areas of Toni Morrison’s fictions other than *Beloved*, such as an aspect of post-colonial approach— **Magic Realism**. Morrison employs magic realism in most of her writings. Most African American writers like Morrison have been using myth and magic “to remember, express and account for those experiences that Western notion of history, reality and truth have failed to address”. Hence, it will be interesting to probe how far Morrison uses it to preserve and protect black history, which was neglected.

In *Beloved*, Morrison disturbs as well as enhances our understanding of African American life before and after the Emancipation. Her technique to recapture the past and mingle it with the present and her ability to ‘conjure’ up the hardship borne by blacks in and out of slavery commands our respect and inspires awe of her matchless craft.

NOTES:

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 5.
2. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 207.
3. Ibid. 208.
4. Ibid. 117.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. 3.
