

## **Slavery to Liberty: A Heroic Journey of a Marginal Black Woman in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

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### **Abstract:**

African-American Literature intersects in its portrayal of the subverted marginal through Literature. It has received universal acknowledgement since the works of both the men and women writers attempt to show the poignant struggles undergone by the African Americans, not for money or power but for asserting or claiming their basic human right of parity and liberty. But men writers have failed to witness the sufferings of women in the enslaved community. Women are given much importance in the literary arena of African- American women as they are the most affected group and the jeopardy of the male dominant society. They are not only the victims of the white dominant society but also of their men. The African- American women writers have highlighted the liberated spirit of black women which will redeem them from their bitter journey of slavery to the victorious state of freedom. One of America's best women writers who consciously free black women from their state of enslavement in their writings was Toni Morrison. Her *Beloved* is absolutely a best fiction that has represented the black woman Sethe's journey from slavery to liberty.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Liberty, Freedom, African- American Literature, Psychological Trauma, Sense of Self, Sethe's Journey.

### **Introduction:**

Morrison's famous fiction *Beloved* sets against the backdrop of mid- 80s when slavery came under attack from the abolitionists, helps us to understand the problems that still pursue the blacks. For centuries, Black women have been called the *mule of the world* and *slave of a slave* and had the status of the wretched on the earth. The black woman's condition in exile was worsened. Her virtues were violated. Her silence was the silence of the oppressed. When asked by an interviewer what had inspired her to take up writing, Morrison commented: "This country is seething with the presence of black people but it was always necessary to deny that presence when we discussed our literature"

**Morrison very aptly observes this in *Beloved* as:**

"During, before and after the war, he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or

bereft it was a wonder they called or said anything who like him, had hidden in caves and fought for food; who like him, stole from pigs; who like him, slept in trees in the day and walked by night; who like him had buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, paterollere, veterans, hill man, passersby and merry makers” (31- 32).

The description of a particular slave family in *Beloved*- Baby Suggs’ family- takes the story back to the pre-civil War period. Morrison uses a series of flashback in her narration of the story. Her narration is not only concerned with what is recorded in the history of slaves but what has all omitted; the “unspeakable” past (58) of the black slave woman. Her memory is “loaded with the past” (70) when the protagonist Sethe tells her story. Every mention of “her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” (58). Sethe remembers that though now haunted house, once 124 had been “a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (86-87). “Baby Suggs’ long-distance love was equal to any skin-close love she had known” (95).

Sethe the central character of the story *Beloved* encounters with evil begins in “Sweet Home” and it is personified through the school master and his sons. Her experienced mother-in-law’s comment is, ‘There is no bad luck in the world but white people’ (127). Despite their racial power, the whites can neither break her nor make her feel inferior to them. In fact, she never permits a male to dominate her Sethe had selected her husband and when it becomes necessary, she rejects the impotent man who had lost the power to protect her milk: her white maters are defeated by her; and Paul D is also ignored as he attempts to regulate her morality.

When Sethe answers, “[i]ts there all the same” (15), she clarifies that invisibility or absence determines the present state of existence to a large extent. But more than that, her answer signifies the “social reality” of gender difference in slavery. The history of black women and their sexual dispossession by white men during slavery continued to be the “Unspeakable unspoken” shame that remained historically silenced even after the abolition of slavery. The atrocities of slavery, however, need to be articulated in a form of obscurity. Morrison’s novel conveys this obscurity in the form of a metaphor or palimpsest of memory that is inscribed on Sethe’s back yet not directly accessible to her.

In order to calm the wrath of her two-year-old baby's ghost, *Beloved*, Sethe puts up with the place's ridiculous antics. Sethe is only loosely affiliated with the Black community. After doing the “staggering” crime (256) of murdering her own daughter, she lives in a schizophrenic state, in which her marginality is constantly confronted with the outside world. The alienation of Sethe from her community affects her role as a mother. Her daughter Denver feels as if she is neglected and cut off from the society. This notion comes to her when nobody speaks to them and no one comes to their house anymore.

Sethe is haunted by walking visions born of guilt and fear, as an individual whose cultural and communal exile is most profound. Morrison explores the psyche of a slave

mother who must deal with haunted life on every level, from the fires of the flesh to the heart-breaking challenges of the spirit. Sethe's traumatized psyche is also visible in her physical appearance. Her eyes are described as "empty", Paul D thinks of Sethe's face as "a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes" (12). Her eyes reflect the psychic loss and denial of the self she has experienced at all levels in her life. "Beloved behaves like a psychologically scarred child" (105). She serves as a symbol for the psychic loss of many innocent African female children who suffered from the tragic consequences of slavery, as Barbara Schapiro states in *The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's Beloved* follows: "The major characters in the novel are all working out of a deep loss to the self, a profound narcissistic wound that results from a breakdown and distortion of the earliest relations between self and other. In the case of Beloved, the intense desire for recognition evolves into enraged narcissistic omnipotence and a terrifying, tyrannical domination" (197).

The wounded psyche effects human behavior in different ways. The book *Beloved* demonstrates how a person's mental reality is profoundly affected by their external state of captivity. Because of these deep internal resonances, one is expected to act in ways that are not natural. The psychic state created by slavery and their effect on the behavior of Sethe constitute the underlying socio-psychic interaction of the novel. Pointing out this, Johnson writes:

"No one has offered, sentence-by-sentence, a more painfully compelling and microscopically detailed account of the daily humiliation of 19<sup>th</sup> century bondage than Morrison achieves in her story about a Medea- like woman who murders her daughter to save her from a slave master" (37).

Here, she mentions that it is the complexity of how black people especially women behave under the pressure of white hegemony that is of interest to her. Her works chronicle the everyday, unavoidable attack of a society that denies Black people even the most basic dignity. Cynthia A. Davis' remarks as follows:

"White brutality and insensitivity are part of the environment the black characters must struggle with, but they are most often conditions, institutionalized and often anonymous, rather than events with ritualistic overtones" (325).

This does not allow Morrison to write about white women's forcing direct authority, but on the black women's troubled psyche and its effect on their behavior within the context of oppression. According to Janeway, the book exposes how Black people are victimized inside a racist social structure: "Morrison's stunning insight reveals the disrupted emotions produced by living in a world where white standards and goals are presented to blacks as uniquely important and, at the same time, impossible for them to achieve" (383).

Morrison handles a beautiful metaphor to emphasize that black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending. Sethe is an embodiment of that image. When Paul D who has earlier deserted Sethe for her "Staggering

Crime”, returns because “Sweet Home Gal” (Beloved 263) has made him to lose his mind, he admits: “She is a friend of my mind. She gathers me, man. The pieces I am, she gathers them and give them back to me in all the right order..... only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers” (272-273). The mark of the chokecherry tree was also permanently etched on her back and yet the wound was the loving touch of the community. Sethe must undergo many physical tortures: “the chokecherry tree with its roots, branches is a permanent fixture on her back” (21) and yet, her wholeness ever remains intact. She concludes that no price is too dear to pay for freedom.

Sethe very confidently and jealously protects her freedom and her self-awareness leads her towards wholeness. Her bitter life experiences never defeat her but become the strong woman. As she is so very sensitive, she is distorted by the inconvenience of life's occurrences. She is represented as the girl who “was soft trusting” (231). Sethe is made to understand that her status of a chattel gives her new masters the power to place her ‘inhuman characterizes on left, her animal ones on right’ (237), and count them as if she was an object and not a human being. Her initiative protest or fight through the various storms of life makes her a woman of wisdom to appreciate the idea, ‘freeing yourself was one thing: claiming ownership of that freed self was another’ (116), she refuses to accept the ‘silent second-class status’ (Meridian 121).

One of the most damaging effects of the dual oppression of black women, against which Morrison writes, is the murder of one's own child. According to Gillespie, “Murder becomes Sethe's act of mother love” (60). Further she explains, “I took and put my babies where they'd be safe” (P.163). She wants to kill her daughter Beloved rather than see her in slave bondage. In White's (1985) views, “infanticide represented one of the avenues of resistance on the part of a slave woman” (88). Sethe attempts to demonstrate the extent of the restrictions she would be subject to by killing Beloved. The circumstances surrounding Sethe's murder do not lessen her significance, even though it may be seen as restrictive by modern standards.

Steven Weisenburger writes in his book *Modern Media* that Margaret Garner, the historical person Morrison partially based her Sethe character on, committed infanticide which is “used in support of the most poisonous racist theory, or it was a tableau of the most divine mother love” (279). The critical reception of *Beloved*, moreover, has done little to challenge the normative conception of motherly love. Thus, the murder as claimed gives Sethe back Beloved before her daughter's ethereal reappearance. Similarly, according to Homi Bhabha, Sethe “regain(s) through the presence of the child, the property of her own person. This knowledge comes as a kind of self-love that is also the love of the ‘other’”. Bhabha goes on to parallel Sethe's act by putting it as “an ethical love in the Levinasian sense, attributing to Levinas a notion of self-love that is anathema to his philosophy as well as discounting the violence evinced by Sethe's act” (17).

Sethe killed her infant daughter, Beloved, since her cruel slave owner, the

schoolteacher, was about to be taken back. She argues that she killed her kid to protect her from the psychological scar of childhood since this man has so severely abused her humanity and because of her entire history as a slave woman. Sethe wants to avoid psychic death for her daughter, and she defends as: “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” (200). As Stanely Elkins mentions, “We may suppose that every African who became a slave underwent an experience whose crude psychic impact must have been staggering and whose consequences superseded anything that had even previously happened to him” (159).

Sethe keeps saying that the white lads' holding her down and stealing her milk was the worst part of her rape. Her slave owners milk her like a cow. She feels as though her soul and most valuable resource—her mother's milk—have been stolen. The readers come to know that as a child, Sethe has been deprived of her own mother's milk. “There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you” (200). Thus, the system of slavery has stolen Sethe of her essence and ravages her as an infant before the white farm boys rape her. She has suffered psychological harm from this type of social circumstance, and her behavior is influenced by it.

In order to prevent anyone else from killing her, Sethe murders her beloved. Sethe's acts make sense as a kind of resistance against the slave master's claim, despite their apparent contradiction. Killing her own daughter is equivalent to asserting her ownership of the child above and beyond the master's claim. As Fox – Genovese puts it in “*Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Ghosts and Memories in Beloved*”, Sethe cuts her daughter's throat “to ensure that she could be a daughter – that Sethe could be a mother” (108). Since violence is the root of kinship, Sethe's claim of violence is not incompatible with the justification she offers Paul D: that she had to place her kids “where they'd be safe.”

Toni Morrison's feminist consciousness has got a new dimension through the characterization of Sethe in *Beloved*. Sethe is an outlaw, much like Sula. In the same way as Sula decides to “make” herself, even if it means separating herself from other black women, and tries to establish her identity, Sethe has little choice but to disregard the community: “That she lived in 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons, mother-in-law, she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do” (164).

Sethe has experienced not only the material horrors of slavery but a psychic trauma which undermines their sense of self. Kleinian psychoanalysis argues that selfhood is gained in relation to others: first to the mother, and gradually to all those who form the individual's environment. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs facilitates the community in forging its member's identities: ‘the community thus performs the function of an extended “mother”. She too, is a mother-deprived daughter’. “If my mother knew me, would she like me?” Her sense of self is also weak: “The sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self-made its home” (140).

But when she attains freedom, that is, when the discourse of slavery has lost its power, she discovers what it means to identify one's own hands, heart- beat, and person. Her response is to foster the selfhood which racism has denied to each of the ex-slaves. She insists on a collective act of self-appreciation, in which all those damaged by dehumanization and hate can learn to love-or "mother"- themselves, in a manner that fosters tenderness for their joint humanity:

Here", she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.... You got to love it, you! ..... This is flash I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. (88).

It is not so easy for a marginalized Black woman to get away from the clutches of the power as slavery is deep rooted within her in all aspects. But Sethe develops awareness about her subhuman status on the plantation which ultimately awakens and forces her towards the victorious freedom through her Voice. Sethe has represented the entire marginalized women of the universe who seek freedom from the hegemonic power.

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