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## Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: From Servitude to Self-Worth

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### **Abstract:**

The publication of *Beloved* in 1987 was a turning point in Toni Morrison's career and it made her known to the world. The novel exclaims the ultimate love of a mother on her child through the terrible act of killing her own child. The act of killing the child depicts the clutches of bondage that African slaves underwent in the 'Sweet Home'. Slavery in the history of Africans is an unforgettable past. In an interview with Time Magazine, Toni Morrison opined that the slavery in the African history is something that people do not want to remember. In simple words, she calls it as a 'National Amnesia'. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel experiences the callous treatment of her masters during her slavery at plantation. After escaping from slavery, Sethe attains the sense of self-worth. This research paper discusses the transformation of a black slave woman into a self-determined woman.

**Keywords: Slavery, love, realization, self-worth.**

Toni Morrison is a living legend in the American literature. She is a Nobel laureate and widely read author in the world. Morrison's artistry, which brings out the stark realities of the black community, is evident in all her writings. Being a women writer Morrison focuses mainly on the plight of black American women in the white dominated society. Morrison's objective is to throw light on the trauma, depression, helplessness and identity crisis the black women slaves experienced. She probes into the inner self of a black woman and shows how a slave woman can turn out to assert her self-worth. Barbara Christian, a renowned African American writer in her *Black Women Novelist: The Development of a Tradition* says, "Toni Morrison's work is earthly fantastic realism. Deeply rooted in history

and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. There is something primal about her characters, they come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but basic as the earth they stand on” (Christian 24-25).

*Beloved* is a Pulitzer winning novel for Toni Morrison. It was in the final list of 1987 ‘National Book Award’. It was adopted to screen starring Oprah Winfrey in 1998. It was considered as the best work in American fiction from 1981 to 2006. The novel deals with neo-slave narrative, which depicts the trauma of the protagonist Sethe Suggs. The novel is based on the real incident that Morrison read in a newspaper article published in the *American Baptist* in 1856. The article was titled as “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child”. It was about a black woman named Margaret Garner who escaped slavery in Kentucky and fled to the liberated State Ohio. She killed her own child in order to save her from enslavement. When Morrison edited the same incident in *The Black Book – a Miscellaneous Compilation of Black History and Culture* (1974) at Random House, this incident left an enduring impression on Morrison. Morrison’s experience as an editor gave her wide-ranging exposure to the writing of black authors. She edited the works of both male and female authors, which awakened the author inside Morrison. Though Morrison’s ancestral influence and family background contributed much to her writing career, her editing experience takes equal credit in her success as a writer. Susan Bowers in her article “*Beloved and the New Apocalypse*” strongly remarks Morrison is writing as if she belongs “Long tradition of African American apocalyptic writing” that looks back in time, “unveiling” the horrors of the past in order to “transform them” (Bowers 209-230).

Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, is an African born slave woman who experiences brutal slavery. She loses her parents who were slaves and was brought to the plantation named ‘Sweet Home’ in her teens. She never knew her name but became Sethe Suggs after marrying Halle Suggs. She loses her husband and does not know how; finally she loses herself (self-worth) because of the callous treatment she experiences in the slavery. She doesn’t have right on her own life. She is a puzzled, helpless and a confused individual who loses her self-worth. She is illiterate and is vulnerable to the vicious treatment at the plantation. Sethe represents the white oppression on the black community. Houston A. Baker Jr. in his *Black Literature in America* rightly mentions, “African men and women are tortured, brutalized, oppressed and exploited beyond imagination. Arriving in America, these African men, women and children were systematically and legally robbed of their humanity” (Baker 2).

Black slave women were treated as toys to be played with. They were sexually exploited by the white men and were thrown away like garbage. These women give birth to children and throw them away unnamed. This shows the loss of identity, self worth on the part of black women slaves. This servitude made the lives of black women fragmented, with throbbing memories and awful past. They are treated as 'self with no self'. Morrison in her Nobel Lecture, 1993 affirms, "Oppressive Language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge." This is clearly portrayed through the characterization of Sethe in the novel. As a slave, Sethe remains voiceless but after fleeing from slavery to Kentucky, she becomes audible through her violent deeds.

Slave women in Africa were viewed as less-intellectuals. They are made to serve the dominant social system through their bodies, be it a work in the plantation or pleasure giving sexual act. They are subjected to the level of underdogs. White elites think that these women slaves are "hypersexual and the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism" (Hooks 153). The word slave brings the visual image of blackness in the minds of Americans. Black women are forced to labour and they were degraded as powerless creatures. Patricia Hill Collins has categorized the enormous stereotypes of black women as 'the mummies, the matriarchs, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, the welfare queens and essential to the political economy of U.S' (Collins 67). This shows the social sensitivity and historical conditions in 1980's. Maya Angelou in her seminal work "I know Why the Caged Birds Sing", fervently talks on the position of African American woman. She opines that "African American women were caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power" (Angelou 65). Slaves in America lived in horrible conditions, almost in chains, without freedom. They were not cared for and purposefully they were disconnected from their family and children. Slave owners claimed ownership on the offspring of the slaves too. They remained ignorant of their individual self and lost the capacity to take decisions on their own. They were captured, leashed like dogs, traded and sold like animals in the fair.

Sethe Suggs and her daughter Denver live in 124, Bluestone Road, Cincinnati. This house was scary because the spirit of her dead daughter haunted it. The novel begins with the fact that "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom" (Beloved 1). The baby is the one, which Sethe killed to save her from slavery. Sethe has unconditional love towards her children. During Slavery, Slave women who give birth to children are not allowed to enjoy motherly love from their children. Slave owners separate the mother from the children. These slaves

lose familial identity. Sethe experienced the separation from her mother. She never saw her mother's true face and does not have connection with her mother. Morrison accurately depicts this feeling of seethe in the novel. Morrison says, "Of that place where she was born...she remembered only song and dance...Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did" (*Beloved* 30-31). Therefore, she does not know how to show motherly affection to her children. The schoolmaster, who took ownership of 'Sweet Home' after the death of Mr. Garner, harasses Sethe. He is very cruel and malicious person. He is a representation of wickedness in human beings. Turdy Hammer has well defined the oppression of whites on black slave women as, "The black slave woman had no such untouchable sphere. She herself was the property of her white master. Not only did he control her labour, but in all too many instances he controlled her body as well" (*Hammer* 30). The Schoolmaster thinks that degradation and murdering blacks is a solution to social problems. With his arrival, everything is changed at 'Sweet Home'. Morrison depicts, "He broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect the firelight" (*Beloved* 9). Day by day, he grows wilder. The Schoolmaster and his nephews nurse the milk from Sethe's breasts when she was pregnant with her fourth child. Sethe tells Paul D later about the sexual abuse at 'Sweet Home' while pregnant with Denver:

... 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 up my back, and when it closed, it made a tree. It grows there still. (*Beloved* 20)

Sethe cannot bear this cruel act and decides to escape from slavery. Though she is pregnant, she runs away from 'Sweet Home' bare-footed. The Schoolmaster's trails to chase her end in vain. People like Schoolmaster are stated as, "Primitive barbarian, breeders, indulgent mummies, sex-hungry jezebels and tragic mulatto" (*Mitchell & Taylor* 113).

Sethe's eighteen years of slavery at 'Sweet Home' was terrible. The name of the plantation is ironical in its sense. It is neither sweet, nor home. "Sweet Home becomes not the Eden of tranquillity and unity, but the place where the serpent not only exposed her of her

innocence but also bit her” (Beaulieu 11). Morrison proclaims this fact through the voice of Paul D. When Paul D’ arrives at Sethe’s home in Cincinnati, Sethe’s daughter Denver asks him, “How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it? Looks like if it was so sweet you would have stayed.” Paul D answers, “True, true...It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home.” However, Sethe interrupts: “it’s where we were...All together. Comes back whether we want it to or not” (Beloved 13-14). Sweet Home was filled with natural beauty, but the slaves living there documented the wilderness of nature in it as white people’s stronghold. Sethe witnessed the torture of her mother. Sethe remarks, “she’d had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn’t smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile” (Beloved 203). Her mouth became disfigured from “the bit”. It marked her as an animal designed for work. Dixon comments on how “slaves knew that as chattel they were considered part of the property and wilds of nature, which a smoothly functioning plantation could restrain” (Dixon 17). During her slavery at ‘Sweet Home’, Sethe experiences solace and comfort in nature surrounding the ‘Sweet Home’. She tries to claim ownership of the kitchen of ‘Sweet Home’. The violence that goes on in that plantation was veiled in the beauty of flowers. Sethe wants to decorate the kitchen to gain some power over the place. Soon she realizes that it does not belong to her. It belongs to Mrs. Garner and she is only a slave, not even a servant of her master. Sethe realizes that she is merely a thing- less than an animal. She does not have freedom, Self worth and distinctiveness as someone called “SETHE”. She may get a temporal pleasure in the presence of plants and flowers that grow at ‘Sweet Home’ but she realized that nothing belongs to her.

Though the outer appearance of that Home was green and beautiful, the interior is withered and lifeless. The people who live there experience callous treatment by the schoolmaster. It has a negative impression on the slaves there. The strange combination of beauty and pain threatened Sethe. She feels ‘the most beautiful sycamore in the world’ paralyzes her with shame and fear. It reminds her of her own powerlessness” (Beloved 6). Sethe faced impoverishment at ‘Sweet Home’. She was beaten, her milk was stolen, her back was ploughed, she lost her husband, and she delivered her baby in the boat. Sethe shares the agony she underwent at ‘Sweet Home’ to Paul D. She says, “they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses” (Beloved 200).

Sethe's happiness in escaping slavery did not last long. After twenty-eight days, she comes to know that her master is going to recapture her and seize her children. Sethe says, "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 95). Sethe understands that it is difficult to claim ownership of herself. She starts depending on her mother-in-law Baby Suggs who was a great counsellor and started to preach at the Clearing. However, Sethe finding no other way to save their children decides to save them from horrific enslavement by killing them. She slaughters the head of her little child and injures both her sons. The two boys escape death in the hands of the mother and run for life. Although this seems to be a cold-hearted act on the part of Sethe, but deep down in her heart, there is supreme love of a mother. All the painful incidents she experienced at 'Sweet Home' bring a kind of conviction in her to save her children from this plague of slavery. Wilfred D Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems remark that in Sethe's killing of her child, her intention, "clearly... is not denial but rationalization; yet, it is rationalization based on conviction" (Samuels & Weems 108). Sethe could not digest the fact that her children are going to be enslaved by the Schoolmaster and so she did commit that murder. She is imprisoned for the murder. Sethe defends this act of killing and tells Paul D, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (*Beloved* 193). This very statement speaks of the courage and the power of decision-making that Sethe attains because of her love for her children. Sethe who once remained mute and silent now voices out her feelings. This is the first step towards achieving her self-worth. Black women do not know the meaning of 'self'. They were treated as secondary sex who has no right on their own lives. Nevertheless, the liberty Sethe experiences outside 'Sweet Home' makes her realize her self-worth.

Sethe does not want her children to be dirtied by the whites. She knows the fact that, 'If they captivate them, they can do anything they wanted to do to them'. She had experienced the trauma and the pain induced by the White elites. She doesn't want her best thing (her children) to undergo that pain. Sethe says:

[A]nybody 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. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best things she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right,

but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing -- the part of her that was clean. (Beloved 25)

Sethe undergoes a lot of pain and trauma as a slave and is afraid of losing familial contact with her children. She is already separated from her husband. She doesn't want to lose her children and so she takes a drastic decision of killing four of them. However, she could murder only her little child 'Beloved'. Though Sethe loses her child, yet she is connected to her child through her redressed and healed pain. The incarnation of her dead child comes back in the form of 'Beloved'. They both become so possessive and finally mother and daughter are united as a single soul. Sethe says "Beloved, she my daughter, She mine" (Beloved 236).

Black women are expected to foster self-empowerment, self-affirmation and liberty. Black women writers try to re-claim the power of voice. In the beginning of the novel, memory seems to be unwise but at the end of the novel, the readers, including Toni Morrison believe that 'rememory' is the only way to move on with the life. Morrison uses the technique of 'rememory' by introducing the dead child 'Beloved' in the form a ghost. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy opines that the "primal scenes" in Morrison's novels are "an opportunity and affective agency for self-discovery through 'memory' and rememory" (Rushdy 135 –164). Rushdy's statement is truly implied to the character of Sethe, wherein she attains self-discovery through 'rememory'. After escaping from slavery, Sethe gets an opportunity to discover her true self. In fact, rememory of the past only strengthens her to become unyielding to the circumstances. Morrison says, "It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (Beloved 69). Obviously, the condition of Sethe becomes such that she gets hurt at the every mention of her past, yet she takes it as an inspiration to live an individual and different life.

Realizing the self-worth is a basic quality. Servitude to whites made the black women lose their identity. Once into slavery, there is no question of individuality; if any slave tries to escape, they will be hanged. When the Schoolmaster finds Sethe, he does not want to buy her back because he thinks that she was no longer fit to serve them and has released her from the servitude. Even before this happens, she kills her own daughter to save her from slavery. She takes the surviving child Denver with her to the jail to protect her from the schoolmaster. Sethe does not feel guilty for killing her daughter but she thinks that she did her best to save her children. Sethe knows that Black slave women do not have right to name their children



yet Sethe exhibits a great sign of self-worth by naming her daughter. Though she was not named, Sethe takes the courage to name her dead child as 'Beloved'. She names her after she kills her. Although this seems to be ironical, it is true in Sethe's view as it shows the deep-rooted love a mother has for her child. Sethe cannot imagine living without her children. She is desperately passionate about her maternal bond of love. She says, "I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (*Beloved* 203). This self worth makes her to take a decision to subject her body for ten minutes sex with the engraver of the head stone for her baby's tomb carved as 'Beloved'. Actually, Sethe wants it to be carved as 'Dearly Beloved' but she doesn't have strength for ten more minutes. This incompleteness of the tombstone depicts how slavery continues even after getting freedom from slave owners. Sethe is physically liberated from the slavery but psychologically she was imprisoned by the memories of the past.

Black slave women are regarded as "breeders but they are not allowed to mother their children. African American slave mothers were more primitive ; they are not civilized and are not attached to their children" (Wolfe107). Sethe was different from the long tradition that has been followed. She does not want be disconnected from her children both physically and mentally. She claimed ownership of her children and wanted to be united with them psychologically by losing them physically. Claiming ownership on their children shows Sethe's self-worth. It is against the regulation related to slave women. Sethe is obsessed with 'thick love' towards her children. Love can make people strong, confident and individual beings. She calls them 'best thing'. She does not want them to be killed by Whites and so she killed her daughter. She strongly feels, "[I]f I hadn't killed her she would have died and this is something I could not bear to happen" (*Beloved* 200). Sethe reached to a psychological state to defend the outrageous act that she has done as right thing and believes that it is a sign of love. For Sethe, "what she had done was right because it came from true love" (*Beloved* 252). In a white dominated society, black slave woman is inflicted with the worst conditions. The Black slave women are triply oppressed based on race, sex and gender. Above all slavery is something that was more terrible. Morrison exclaims this through the mouth of Baby Suggs, saying, "there is no hard luck in the world except white men" (*Beloved* 198).

Baby suggs was a freed slave woman. She bought her mother's freedom by working extra on Sundays. Her life at 'Sweet Home' was miserable. Her masters sexually exploited her. She also underwent trauma for losing her children in the slavery. Bloom says, "Baby Suggs is also a woman who has lost all of her children except her son Helle. She was haunted

by the traumatic memories, the memories of her lost children. She recalls that her life at Sweet Home was dominated by silence. She finds it difficult to voice her thoughts” (Bloom112). After getting liberty from slavery, Baby Suggs becomes an un-churched preacher at the ‘Clearing’. She feels happy to be united with her Sethe and Denver. She was a nurturing and healing presence to Sethe and Denver. She develops a positive attitude towards life. Her words and preaching instill strength in ex-slaves. Sethe feels the presence of Baby Suggs even after her death. Sethe draws inspiration and courage from her mother-in-law.

Sethe becomes a determined and courageous character who could live by her own thoughts and deeds. She doesn’t fear for other’s opinion about her. This is because of her maternal love towards her children. She is very possessive. Jean Wyatt, a feminist critic supports this fact saying, “While celebrating the courage and determination Sethe draws from this attachment [with her children], Morrison’s narrative also dramatizes the problems of Sethe’s maternal subjectivity, which is so embedded in her children that it both allows her to take the life of one of them and precludes putting that act into words” (Wyatt 476). Attaining freedom and independence makes Sethe enjoys her Self -worth. Deborah Ayer Sitter rightly states that, *Beloved* depicts, “Slavery’s insidious power to distort the two most basic human instincts: love and self-preservation” (Sitter 18). Sethe experiences the lack of these two basic human instincts. She loses her beloved husband and she could not preserve herself from the exploitation of the Schoolmaster. This made her to resort to an outrageous act of killing her child in order to protect her from loss of love and self-preservation. She risks her life; to escape from the slavery, to kill her own beloved child and to get the headstone carved for her child’s tomb.

Morrison portrays her women characters as the women emerging from powerless slaves to the women of power. These women serve as a source of inspiration to the community. Baby Suggs is the best example for this. Sethe created a role model to the ex-slaves in the community by exhibiting strong will power and determination to do whatever she likes. She leaves an example of a great mother, who does not want her children to suffer the trauma she suffered. Sethe, desiring to claim the ownership of her freed self, shows it in her actions. This brings self-realization in Sethe. Though her deeds are violent, people understood the ‘thick love’ that a black freed slave mother has for her children. Sethe thinks that she has no option because the community did not warn her about the menacing Whites heading towards them. She feels that even her children would think that death in the hands of

their own mother would be better fate than being captivated in servitude by the wicked Schoolmaster. Sethe is unlike many African American slave women, who were insensitive towards the plight of their children. They remain mute and do not question the white slave owners. However, Sethe shows a different solution to this enslavement of her children. Morrison does not mean that killing is the only solution to this problem. Nevertheless, she probably wants the reader identify the growth in the characterization of a slave woman. The conviction and the will power that the protagonist Sethe shows in the novel proves that there is a ray hope in the life of darkness.

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