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## A Womanist Reading of Denver in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### **Abstract**

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* represents a watermark in the slave narrative. The novel speaks about the physical and psychical consequences of slavery on African Americans either as slaves or former slaves. Yet, the novel brings some ways to challenge these effects and create an identity. This article examines the black female stereotype created by the end of *Beloved*, by which Morrison tries to put an end to the expansion of slavery on the African American mind. Drawing on Alice Walker's Womanism, our findings indicate that Morrison challenges the traditional gender roles by creating a womanist model of gender roles; a model that gives the Black women the ability to face gender, race and class oppression.

### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* challenges the traditional gender roles embedded to the white woman by introducing new roles fulfilled by her black female characters. Morrison's depiction of the character Denver by the end of novel attains the reader's whole attention. The increasing importance given to Denver's transformation from a childish and selfish girl to a mature and responsible woman shows the writer's focus on that character to illustrate the new black woman stereotype.

### **1. Denver Loves Herself Regardless**

Before *Beloved* knocks on the door to 124, Denver lives an empty life. She does not have anything or anyone in the world that makes her feel good about herself. She also misses the feeling of belonging somewhere. Accordingly, she becomes increasingly lonely, self-centered and afraid of the outside world. Nevertheless, Denver is the first to accept her sister's ghost as a friend, even if it is reckless and often destroys things, because she has no one else other than her mother. She suffers from having lost even her early wounded sense of self in her need for the companionship of *Beloved*. When Paul D first arrived and expelled the baby ghost haunting Sethe's home, Denver cried "for herself" (123), since that ghost was the only company she had. She continuously complains, "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (14).

As Denver ignores how the outside world perceives her, she lacks a real picture of herself either. This lack of self-representation makes of her a girl who does not know what she can achieve in her life, or even that she can accomplish anything. However, by the coming of *Beloved*, a new life begins for Denver, along with new discoveries of herself. What attracts Denver to *Beloved* is primarily the opportunity to establish a friendship with a young girl like herself. Her reaction to *Beloved*'s arrival is very positive, because she at that time cannot look for a friend outside 124. This new friendship is one of the most important events in her journey towards self-autonomy. Denver shows her will to defend in ways that she has never done before, which is illustrated in the fact that she hides *Beloved*'s incontinence, due to *Beloved*'s sickness at her arrival.

Denver assumes the role of Beloved's protector. She wants to warn her about Sethe, "[d]on't love her too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children [...] I have to protect [Beloved]" (206). She creates the feeling in her that Beloved needs her, because she has finally found someone she can care for for the first time in her life, "[s]he will forgo the most violent of sunsets, stars as fat as dinner plates and all the blood of autumn and settle for the palest yellow if it comes from her Beloved" (121). Denver, thus, is transformed from a lazy and childish girl to an active and mature woman. She has never been able to do this for Sethe, because Sethe is "the one who never looked away" (12), who can watch a man get stomped to death or repair a pet dog with a dislocated eye and two broken legs. Unlike Sethe, Beloved lends Denver a context within which she can define herself, since Denver conceptualizes herself as a caretaker, baby-sitter, friend, protector, educator and finally sister, "Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved" (78). Therefore through Beloved, Denver feels herself vibrantly alive.

In addition to Denver's need for someone she can care for, she also shows her need for someone who will care for her. In doing so, Denver prepared to patiently capture and bring Beloved to her own world, "[p]atience, something Denver had never known, overtook her" (54). She "[has] worried herself sick trying to think of a way to get Beloved to share her room" (67). Her expectations come true and she can have Beloved to herself at least for a little while. By having Beloved to herself, Denver moves to another stage in her development. Now through her odd friendship with Beloved, Denver becomes sufficient and worth noticing because Beloved actually talks to her and recognizes her presence. In other words, Beloved provides Denver with the notion of being seen and listened to. She starts recognizing new things concerning her ignored self, and she can actually like herself, "Denver grew ice-cold as she rose from the bed. She knew she was twice Beloved's size but she floated up, cold and light as a snowflake" (74). Beloved encourages her to appreciate herself more instead on holding on to an unfair view of herself. Therefore, the return of the murdered daughter to life calls forth from Denver a projection of self.

However, Denver still shows her need for Beloved's attention to be constituted as an individual. As long as Beloved is with her, Denver feels vibrantly alive. Being viewed by Beloved provides Denver with subjectivity, "[u]nder that gaze [-the gaze of Beloved - Denver finds herself] (n)eeding nothing" (118). Denver feels herself complete when looked at by Beloved's interested eyes. Thus, she has lost herself in this relationship. Yet, her excessive dependence on Beloved makes her remain passive when she sees Beloved's attempt to choke Sethe. She realizes that she is so needy of Beloved that she can do nothing, "Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe, but felt helpless to thwart it, so unrestricted was her need to love another" (104). Her dependence on Beloved for her identity shames her, "[t]he display she witnessed at the Clearing shamed her because the choice between Sethe and Beloved was without conflict" (104).

Denver continuously attempts to keep Beloved for herself, because only with her does she feel comfort and real companionship. The two girls go skating on ice together "[h]olding hands, bracing each other, they swirled over the ice [...] The girls, screaming with laughter" (174). Denver, then, echoes Beloved's refrain about Sethe. She says: "she's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (209). Just as Beloved needs Sethe in order to have a "self," so Denver needs Beloved. While Beloved focuses solely on the hours spent with Sethe, Denver concentrates on her time with Beloved, "Denver is a strategist now and has to keep Beloved by her side from the minute Sethe leaves for work until the hour of her return" (121). After the numerous departures in her life (Howard, Buglar, Baby Suggs, and the father she never knew), Beloved's arrival is sweet and miraculous. Beloved gives Denver a life, a self, and satisfies

Denver's hunger. In fact, Beloved becomes Denver's self. When Beloved disappears in the cold house, Denver cries because she has no self. She believes that she too will disappear, "she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing" (123). When Beloved reappears Denver "pinches a piece of Beloved's skirt between her fingers and holds on" (123-4). At this point in the novel, neither young woman realizes that a self must come from within. Both attempt to share another's self. While Beloved tries to join Sethe, Denver tries to join Beloved.

Nevertheless, Denver's dependence on Beloved ends when she finds herself excluded from Sethe's and Beloved's game. She sees how Sethe is starving so Beloved can eat, "spit up something she had not eaten" (243), a perception that "rocked Denver like gunshot" (243). Denver shows a side of personality not found in any other character. What makes Denver unique is first her ability to see and feel this destruction. She recognizes hers and her mother's destruction and it is this recognition that saves her from completely losing herself. Thus, Denver reopens her journey towards empowerment and self-actualization when she realizes that Beloved, ironically, has come to resemble the schoolteacher who invaded Baby Suggs yard, to threaten not her but her mother whom Denver loves and fears. As a matter of fact, Denver loses selfishness and wants to take care of her mother and begins "protecting her mother from Beloved" (243).

Finally, Denver moves to another stage of self-affirmation when she refuses to be passive, since living in the past is no longer an option for her. Rather, she slowly grows as a character, giving herself the advantage of being courageous, even when she understands that Beloved truly only cares about being with Sethe. As Beloved tells her, "[Sethe] is the one. She is the one I need. You [Denver] can go but she is the one I have to have" (76), Denver acknowledges her own self and requires neither the look of her mother nor Beloved to attain subjectivity. She, rather than loving Beloved and loving her name that is engraved on her sister's tombstone, loves "the beauty of the letters in her [Denver's] name" (102). Her own sense of self supersedes her dependence on Beloved. One can observe how Denver grows stronger in herself and starts to move towards a life where she is the central and important part. Ultimately, as the relationship between Sethe and Beloved becomes increasingly absurd in the closed world of 124, Denver slowly understands that she must "leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (243).

Denver gathers courage and spiritual nurturing from a conversation with her dead grandmother. Baby Suggs tells her that although there is no defense against whites (and thus against fear itself), she must nevertheless "know it, and go on out the yard" (244). Denver conquers her fears and leaves the house. Her freedom from the burdens of 124 echoes the day when Baby Suggs becomes free after more than sixty years of slavery. Baby Suggs feels her own heart beat and cannot believe that she owns her own body for the first time. She, then, opens her great heart to those who could use it. She teaches the townspeople many things and insists on the need for self-love. These lessons in self-love ultimately save Denver.

The influential woman Baby Suggs is the one who provided blueprints for how Denver is to live her life and what consideration she takes for herself. Baby Suggs opens the door for Denver in order to love herself and to love others. However, Denver realizes that before she can save Sethe she must save herself, "[i]t was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). This thought marks a new stage in her development of self. Fittingly, it is Nelson Lord who affirms Denver's self by saying, "[t]ake care of yourself, Denver" (252). This one sentence, equating "Denver" with a "self", "[opens] her mind" (252) and allows her to participate within the community. Thus, Denver is strongly supporting Walker's definition of

a womanist. She echoes the womanist's unconditional love and respect of the self. Alice Walker claims that a womanist "Loves herself. *Regardless*" (Walker 19). Denver starts loving herself even if no one else expresses that love. She loves herself by first knowing herself. Then, she loves herself by respecting herself and not being dependent on someone else's acceptance or disregard for her. Finally, she loves herself by seeking the best for that newly discovered self.

## 2. Denver's Commitment to Survival and Wholeness of Entire People

Beloved's presence consumes Sethe's life. The strength of Sethe's love towards Beloved leads her almost to a point of death. Sethe is willing to "[g]ive up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears" (242). In addition, Denver knew it was on her to get help. While Beloved tries to survive by claiming another self, Denver survives by claiming her "self." She successfully increases her life-force by discovering the human power of herself. She also grasps that she must separate herself from them to do that; she must "step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (243). Whereas Baby Suggs and Sethe find their free selves as they arrived at 124, Denver discovers and develops herself only when she leaves. Realizing that Sethe and Beloved were incapable of breaking their mutual obsession with one another spurs Denver's transformation from child to responsible young adult.

Denver's courageous nature and her love for herself and her mother make it possible for her to step outside the world of 124. Filled with a sense of duty and purpose, she obtains the help of the community and cares for her increasingly self-involved mother and sister. Her decision to leave the secure domestic space is a monumental progress in her mental. Though Denver, like Beloved, is victimized by Sethe, she overcomes this victimization through human courage and strength rather than through magic. In doing so, Denver fits into Walker's definition of the womanist as being, "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" (Walker 19). As Denver manages to solve and put an end to Sethe's struggle against the past under the shape of Beloved, she reconnects spiritually with her father, Halle. Just as Halle works to buy Baby Suggs's freedom, Denver frees Sethe from enslavement to Beloved. Thus, while Sethe retains a tie to her father in name only, Denver retains a tie to Halle through heroic action.

Denver's journey into the community not only saves her mother but also enables her to resume her self-creation. Ironically Denver encounters Nelson Lord, who in telling her to take care of herself, awakens Denver to another level of self-worth. Moreover, Denver understands that one of the most important tools for survival is community. Denver's initiation continues when she approaches Lady Jones for help. She will realize later that it was the word "baby", said softly by Lady Jones "that inaugurated [Denver's] life in the world as a woman" (248). She, then, takes her first step towards reconciliation with both her self and the black community. She recognizes the importance of communal unity to recover the past and reclaim the present. She breaks down the wall of silence that has surrounded 124 Bluestone Road and the community and asks the community's help. The community accepts Denver as they did not accept Sethe because Denver, unlike her mother or Beloved, does not try to "do it all alone" (254) at least she "had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed" (256). As Denver reminds the women of her mother's deed eighteen years before, she also reminds them of their responsibility for that deed. In doing so, she is giving the people who have shunned them for eighteen years opportunity to mend the gap between past and present at the same time healing themselves as a community of survivors.

Armed with new-found strength from the community's support, Denver decides to do the necessary for hers and her mother's survival. She brings the thirty women to 124 in order to return Beloved to her rightful place. Before the disappearance of Beloved and exactly at the moment when Sethe takes an ice-pick and attacks Mr. Bodwin, Denver reacts quickly and stops her mother. Thus, she is once more the survivor of her mother from complete disaster. In doing so, Denver corrects Baby Suggs passivity, for she could not or would not do anything to stop Sethe, as she now disarms her mother before she kills Mr. Bodwin. In this scene, Denver shows a determination and readiness that save the situation. To Denver, who has spent all her life in the house isolated with only her mother and the ghost as company for the last eight years and before that only Baby Suggs and the brothers, this is a tremendous change. Therefore, Denver is committed to both her own survival as well as her mother's survival.

By bridging the gap between 124 and the local community, Denver not only saves her mother's life but also that of the black community. Morrison evokes that the trauma of slavery is not only implanted in the mind of the individual but also the whole community. Through the exorcism of Beloved, the community's members not only free Sethe from the past but also themselves. Morrison is indeed interested in survival, but not solely of the individual. She is deeply committed to the survival of the African-American community. Thus, *Beloved* echoes Walker's definition of womanism in which she emphasizes the survival of both the individual and the community (Walker 19). Nevertheless, Denver's commitment does not end by bringing the healing process to both Sethe and the black community, rather her commitment comes across in her participation in community activities and the belief that she is commissioned to spread a message of faith that can lead to a better life.

### 3. Denver's Grown up Doings

When Denver enters the outside world, she at first walks down the road with lowered head. However, she starts looking at the things surrounding her and notices how small they look, or more appropriately she notices her growth. She eventually finds her way to Lady Jones' house where she is welcomed. The first thing she asks is "I want work, Miss Lady" (248). Denver wants to help herself by being independent and not relying on anyone's help, so that she does not ask for food or money but for a job. According to Alice Walker, moral autonomy is a woman's ability to define and celebrate herself and her people as agents of a human community (qtd in Phillips 139). She finally succeeds in establishing her own self by rebuilding her life and personality around independence and freedom. Moreover, she succeeds in imposing herself as a useful member of the community to the point that Stamp Paid is "proud of her [Because] [s]he turning out fine. Fine" (266). Thus, Denver puts an end to the infantile stage in her life and starts functioning as a member of the society. She transforms herself from an adolescent to a grown up woman taking whole responsibility for her family's future. She becomes a free being, freely interacting with others and inserting herself as a member of the community.

Denver's maturity is evidenced in her last encounter with Paul D. He is amazed by the change that has come over her. She appears confident and full of life. She is now working in the outside world in order to make some money to help Sethe. She feels like a real person for the first time in the novel. Thus, her mortal enemy affirms her new identity with his observation, "[y]ou grown" (267). Moreover, when he proposes her his opinion about who or what Beloved was, Denver's self conscious character is rendered apparent as she cuts off her conversation with him and replies, "I have my own" (267). While this response is evidence of Denver's assertion of subjectivity and independence, it also shows her maturity in ending the

discussion. She underscores her newfound maturity. She presents herself with more civility and sincerity than in the past and asserts that she now has her own opinions. Presumably, as the novel's enigmatic final chapter suggests, Denver and Paul D will never mention Beloved again. They "[forget] her like a bad dream. After they [make] up their tales, [shape] and [decorate] them" (274). Paul D realizes that Denver has grown and ceases to consider her as a young, helpless girl. She, unlike traditional female's weakness, passivity and submissiveness, becomes stronger and able to overcome her fear of the outside world. Denver progresses from a shy, secretive, frightened, idle girl as described at the beginning of the novel to a strong, competent, self-assured, opinionated young working woman at its end. She, thus, echoes Walker's definition of the womanist as not only acting but also being grown up, which means being responsible, in charge and serious (Walker 19). A womanist regardless of her age has a sense of maturity, responsibility. In being so, Denver gains individuals' respect. When she meets Nelson Lord for the first time, he had asked her the question that had defeated her. Now he calls her "Miss Denver" (267).

Denver also engages with the systems of material and ideological power of her time. On the one hand, she engages with technologies of labor through her employment at Miss Bodwin's house, where she certainly becomes increasingly skilled in using equipment to perform her tasks, thereby interacting with the fact of developing industrial and utilitarian technologies of the nineteenth century America. While women may be seen as physically weaker than men, Morrison does not consider her mentally weaker. A woman's strength is the reason of her independence. In addition to, Women are seen as strong and influential persons capable of handling any role given to them. They are seen as just as capable as men in any aspect. In other words, through Denver's work Morrison insists on the point that gender should not limit women's community occupations.

Furthermore, unlike Sethe who makes the ink that Schoolteacher uses to write her animal characteristics and Paul D who knows that a newspaper cannot print anything about blacks he would want to read, Denver engages with the information and education technologies of the time through her learning of "book stuff" (266) from Miss Bodwin and her envisioned study at "Oberlin" (266). Denver's womanist ideology is also found in her desire to know more. Walker's womanist definition includes the point that a womanist wants to know more. Therefore Denver will become a schoolteacher, taking up the educational task from the teacher Lady Jones and Baby Suggs. I would like to turn to the scene in which Denver and Paul D discuss the possibility of Denver's receiving a college education.

"You on your way home?"

She said no. She had heard about an afternoon job at the shirt factory. She hoped that with her night work at the Bodwins and another one, she could put away something and help her mother too. When he asked her if they treated her all right over there, she said more than all right. Miss Bodwin taught her stuff. He asked her what stuff and she laughed and said book stuff. "She says I might go to Oberlin. She's experimenting on me." And he didn't say, "Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher." Instead he nodded and asked the question he wanted to. (266)

Although this passage hints at the dangers associated with Western literacy, the tone is hopeful. Denver is moving as a thinking subject. Paul D, however, worries when he learns of her intention to go to college, silently cautioning her, "watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (266). Nevertheless, education as a womanist method of social change seeks to enhance the wellness of the body and psyche as a foundation for the wellness of society. Womanhood is about getting an education and always looking to

advance. Education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change and empowerment in African American communities. Alice Walker claims that "[t]hrough exploration and education [black women] instruct members of the sisterhood about the twin evils of the presence of [the different] destructive forces" (qtd in Bates 100). By being a Schoolteacher, Denver will be in a position that allows her to take from the white Schoolteacher the power to define African Americans and make their history in a way that steals their past, their souls and their humanity.

### **Conclusion**

Morrison's *Beloved* challenges the traditional gender roles and reestablishes new ones. The novel introduces a new female stereotype, a womanist one. Denver grows as typically a womanist figure. She is described, by the end of the novel, as having a strong spirit and an independent personality, in her desire to know more than what was allowed. She has an uncompromising love for herself and other influential women in her life. Moreover, she is committed to survival of entire people. Consequently, through the continuous growth of Denver, Morrison is undermining the patriarchal structure of the traditional nuclear family and insisting on the importance of gender equality in order to fight both racism and classism.

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