

Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison, a pioneering voice in Afro-American literature has been instrumental in developing an African-American narrative through her works that exclusively highlights the miserable plight of her race in the white dominated society of America. The narrative built up by the writers of the western literary canon never actually brought the true side of the story and hence people did not get to know the African-American perspective on slavery and its repercussions on the African Americans due to the onslaught of Atlantic slave trade. Therefore, through literature Morrison embarked on a voyage to bring out the African-American experiences as lived by African-Americans. Quite early in her life she felt the need to write the kind of books that one wants to read and she once famously said that "If there is a book you really want to read, but it has not been written yet, then you must write it". In her widely acclaimed novel *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison brings out various pertinent themes like slavery, motherhood, racism and resistance. Set in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, the novel depicts the story of a former slave Sethe who escaped slavery and killed her child in order to save the child from the abuse and torture of slave masters. Morrison's novel *Beloved* often termed as the darkest and most proving for her powerful rendition of slavery and its psychological manifestations.

Keywords: Slavery, Motherhood, Repression, Consciousness, Resistance, Protest.

Introduction

Morrison was awarded with the prestigious The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel *Beloved* in 1988. An actual event forms the basis of the story of the novel *Beloved*. The story of a young mother caught the attention of the Abolitionists as well as the newspapers at that time. She

had sanity, intellect, ferocity, lack of repentance and was certainly a single-minded woman of substance who had the willingness to risk anything in order to fight for what she believed was for the necessity of freedom. In this novel Morrison has portrayed an extremely oppressive predicament Afro-Americans resultant of the Atlantic Slave Trade that was at its peak in America in the nineteenth century. *Beloved* is a story of an Afro-American woman named Sethe who kills her child in order to save her from the abuse and cruelty of the white masters.

When Morrison was working at Random House, she came across an incident, "A Visit to the Slave Mother who killed Her Child" that was 1856 newspaper article as she edited *The Black Book* in 1974 which was a miscellaneous compilation of black history and culture. Therefore, the story of the novel was inspired by an actual instance that occurred during the mid-nineteenth century in the state of Kentucky, America and based on the life of Afro-American woman Margaret Garner who escaped slavery by crossing to the state of Ohio via frozen Ohio River in the cold winter of 1856. When she was tracked by her owner in Cincinnati, where she had reached with her children and mother-in-law, she was faced with immediate capture and therefore she attempted to kill her four children so that they could be saved from being enslaved and returned to plantation, however, she could only kill her three-year-old daughter.

Having come across the fascinating and heartrending story of a runaway slave mother, Morrison was overwhelmed to bring out the story through her novel. In the novel's dedicatory note, Morrison had dedicated *Beloved* to "sixty million and more" where she refers to all the Afro-Americans who lost their lives due to the Atlantic slave trade in America. The epigraph of the novel is taken from Romans 9:25 that says "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, that was not beloved." The novel is set in Ohio, a small town and the home (124 Bluestone Stone Road) is inhabited by Sethe, the mother and her daughter Denver. Morrison describes in detail the immeasurable physical, mental and emotional trauma that Sethe, Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law), Denver and Paul D had to undergo at the hands of white masters at Sweet Home. The home they live in is haunted by the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter who was killed by Sethe herself. When Paul D, a former slave from Sweet Home (Nothing sweet about it but a brutal Slave House) comes to live with them and he exorcises the spirit from the house but what follows is something unimaginable happens as the ghost of the dead child returns in the form of a young girl whose name happens to be Beloved, taken from the gravestone. Morrison's novel with modernist narrative technique through the use of flashbacks, fragmented

narration and multiple points of view, details the events that led to the murder of her daughter Beloved and Sethe's after prison life. Sethe's maternal instincts above all always sought the safety and protection of her children from the abuse and humiliation of slave masters even if it could only be achieved through infanticide.

Through Sethe's act of murdering her child, Morrison has given vent to the feeling of repression. The Freudian psychoanalytic theory of repression takes over her motherly love. The unfulfilled desires, or traumatic past experiences/memories get stored in psychic storehouse which are then forced out of the conscious into the realm of unconscious. As Sethe lived an inhuman life under the slave masters and what she went through is still afresh in her mind and soul. Because she was carrying those repressed desires and feelings with her throughout, they get sublimated when she finally carries out them in her own way and her motherly love becomes a murderous one. Her intention of killing her children and eventual act of murdering her three-year-old child is motivated by those past experiences and this is her way of resistance against the oppressive forces. Sethe's profound love for the child she killed with her own hands and her reason behind the killing is poignantly reflected in the following words;

BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing...She had to safe and I put her where she would be... I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. 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. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever has tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. (Morrison, *Beloved*, 236)

Although, the protagonist Sethe physically survives but she completely remains emotionally subjugated and her desire to give and receive love becomes a calamitous force. In this novel, Morrison has powerfully addressed the difficulties faced by the former slaves in keeping the horrors of their past enslaved life that submerges within the subconscious mind. The character of Sethe can be understood as the embodiment of the collective pain and anguish of the millions of slaves who lost their life in the middle passage of slavery and suffered inexpressible tortures. Sethe's past experiences make her take this extreme step and she had no other choice

except killing her dear child for her freedom forever. Denver comments on her protective mother and her love for her children;

BELOVED is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk. The first thing I heard after not hearing anything was the sound of her crawling up the stairs. She was my secret company until Paul D came. He threw her out. Ever since I was little she was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy. Me and her waited for him. I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me die-witch! stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to.

(Morrison, *Beloved*)

Beloved is a comprehensive study of the brutal exploitation and abuse of the blacks by the whites at various levels. It is often categorized as a gothic novel, and ghost story. The novel depicts the acute mental turmoil that the characters, especially the women, undergo as a result of torture inflicted upon them in terms of racism and sexism. It is a tale of bravery and resistance at its extreme level wherein the mother is compelled to take life of her own beloved child in order to resist enslavement by white masters. In this novel Morrison has re-conceptualized the African American racial history which is very much apparent throughout the events unfolding in the lives of the various characters. Morrison has given vent to the historical aspects concerning slavery and oppression through the acts and consciousness of African American slaves from a purely African American perspective. Sethe's consciousness through historical and past memories is reflected in the following words in her conversation with her daughter Denver;

I was thinking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Over things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place---the picture of it---stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. (Morrison, *Beloved*, 43)

In this way Morrison's characters seem to be expressing something that was long felt and lived but never ever came to be heard or read anywhere because the western narratives purposely omitted to suit their vested interests. All of Morrison's novels and this novel in particular, serve as an outlet of expression for the long suppressed and subdued voices that were muted throughout the history. Hence, Morrison is accredited for bringing out the heartfelt rendition of slavery and its psychological manifestations through her. The notion of repression is a storehouse of all unfulfilled desires or traumatic past events and experiences that are forced out of the consciousness into the realm of unconsciousness where they are held up or subdued. Morrison's work throws much light on the principles of repression with reference to repressed and oppressed African American experience that consisted of sheer negligence, segregation, discrimination and marginalization of the people of color. When such repressed feelings are sublimated, they become noble deeds as was observed by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud through his theory of repression.

The severity of repressed feelings and emotions is such that Sethe, the mother figure in the novel commits infanticide because she thought what she experienced should be experienced by her children. When Sethe's act of murdering her own child is seen in the light of Freudian theory, then it is considered nothing but an outcome of the repressed feelings of the African Americans who were looking for ways to get remedy by bringing an end to the mental and physical subjugation. Therefore, Sethe's act of infanticide is sublimated as she committed a wrong deed for a right cause and the infantile rage in the form of ghost of Beloved can be understood as frustrated and murderous love. The intensity of Beloved's rage is apparently related to the power of Sethe's love. There is an intimacy of destructive rage and love that is quite evident throughout the novel which finds expression in various ways.

Sethe, the mother who was subjected to frequent rapes, brutality, and untold humiliations by the white masters, considers her children to be her most precious possessions, the best and clean things, and therefore would not let anyone take advantage of them by inflicting physical abuse, torture or violence. Sethe, like her mother or any other woman, was humiliated as well as robbed of her role as a mother to her children (the stealing of milk for white children). Towards the end of the novel, Morrison sheds light on Sethe's motive behind killing her own daughter;

That anybody 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. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty bet all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing-the part of her that was clean. (Morrison, *Beloved*)

Conclusion

Sethe's act of murdering her child is an act of protest and resistance against the white masters because she was ruined by frequent rapes and inexpressible humiliation and her children were the best and the clean things that she ever possessed and therefore, she would not let anybody spoil that sacred part of her. Through Sethe's character, Morrison has explored a self-conscious black woman's protest and resistance against the sexist and racist oppression. Sethe's motherly love would go to any extent to save her children from the horrendous effects of mental and physical exploitation of slavery as she recalls "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (*Beloved*, Morrison, 193). In *Beloved*, Morrison has highlighted the torturous predicament of the African American through various pertinent thematic concerns like slavery, racism, motherhood, murderous love, infant rage and resistance among others wherein the protagonist is the embodiment of the long-repressed feeling and emotions.

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