

Review Article

The Evil of Slavery and Master-Slave Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988)

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Abstract: During slavery, white people had a keen interest for the African continent and took the able-bodied persons to the Americas as slaves. In 1988, Toni Morrison released *Beloved* to castigate the evil of slavery and how it dehumanizes individuals and leaves sequels in their lives. This article pinpoints the hardships of slavery that lead Sethe to kill her daughter to save her from the excruciating treatment of slaves by their masters. Sethe's committing infanticide displays the extent to which women suffer much from slavery.

Keywords: Slavery, Exploitation, Dehumanization, Hardships, Traumatism.

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INTRODUCTION

The African-American female writer, Toni Morrison, denounces the exploitative system of slavery and the inhuman treatment perpetrated in slaves. Morrison shows how slavery drastically affects the life of Blacks. *Beloved* deals with Sethe who is thirteen years old when she arrives at Sweet Home as a slave girl. She finally kills her own daughter to save her from the brutal and dehumanizing evil of slavery. This article aims at revealing how characters have been traumatized, exploited and dehumanized, which leaves sequels for the rest of slaves' lives.

The first part depicts the dark side of slavery and its perpetration in individuals. The second part brings to light the extent to which slaves are traumatized leading them to kill their progeny. The last part displays the sequels and flash backs that result from enslavement. The perpetuation of African-American cultural traditions contributes to the slaves' quest for Identity.

I) The Evil of Slavery And its Perpetration in Individuals

Toni Morrison depicts the horrible treatment of slaves and the consequences that slavery leaves in the mind of characters. She successfully demonstrates it throughout her writings *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, etc. In the aforementioned novels, their

respective protagonists suffer the evils of slavery. Despite its hardships, Morrison also displays harmonious master-slave relationships. Indeed, Amy helps Sethe deliver her baby (Denver) on their way to Ohio. Amy suffers from oppression because she and Sethe both *know the bonds of slavery and sexual violation (for she has been raped by her stepfather). Both escape their position as objects of oppressive discursive practices* [1]. When Amy sees Sethe's bleeding after being whipped by her master, she tells Sethe:

I had some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. Mr. Buddy (her stepfather) had a right evil hand too. Whip you for looking at him straight. Sure would. I looked at him one time and hauled off and threw the poker at me. Guess he knew what I was a-thinking [2].

Both women have been exposed to physical exploitation. Amy, as symbol of her culture and a product of her own community, helps Sethe during slavery. Amy feels relief. Different sorts of white men are observed in *Beloved*. While some are dehumanizing and abusing, others are kind and gentle with black people. Slavery is a devastation that haunts slaves. Morrison gives back the African-Americans true human nature. Slavery is seen as part of black people's history therefore, *Beloved* can be considered to be universal.

The dehumanization and torture that Sethe and other slaves face at Sweet Home push Sethe to save her children from slavery. Sethe knows that her presence in a freed state among freed people will not protect her from Schoolteacher's attack. Thus, Sethe reconstructs her identity which she loses during slavery. She feels that she gains control over her body, milk, mind and decisions. Sethe describes:

Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they weren't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon-there wasn't anybody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to [2].

Sethe heals her traumas that she suffers from. When she sees that Schoolteacher comes back to capture her, she commits infanticide by killing her daughter, Beloved. Mother-daughter bond is well illustrated in *Beloved*. The dead daughter comes back to haunt her mother, Sethe. The latter tries to compensate Beloved for what she has done to her. The embodiment of the traumatic past begins to consume Sethe and deprives her of her potential. The corpse of Beloved becomes so big that it cannot be controlled. This calls readers' attention to the impossibility to delete the traumatic past. The traumatic past should not become a source of fatal obsession. Morrison shows the relationships that exist between masters and slaves. She points out:

allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him, to invent ways of doing things, to see what was needed and attack it without permission to buy another, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to... In their relationship with Garner was true mental: "they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to [2].

Slavery is also highlighted in Ernest Gaine's *Of Love and Dust*. Marshall Herbert puts Marcus out of jail and brings him to Baton Rouge to help him on plantations. On the one hand, Marshall Hubeter's liberation of Marcus is qualified as kindness but also as exploitation, on the other hand. Marshall contributes to Marcus' freedom. Jim Kelly calls:

I knew that white men bonded colored boys out of jail for a few hundred dollars and worked them until they had gotten all their money back two or three time over [3].

The notion of freedom is ambiguous and is defined according to its context. Freedom is when an

individual is free to express his or her feeling and physically able to manifest it. During slavery, the slave is free when he or she is no longer possessed by masters. Blacks' quest for freedom is portrayed in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*. Lucy Josephine Porter and her boyfriend Paul talk about the explorers who crossed great seas, not only for richness but for freedom.

In *The Autobiography of my Mother*, Jamaica Kincaid shows that masters cannot befriend anybody. She says: *a master is one thing, and a friend is something else altogether something completely different, a master cannot be a friend* [4]. The author defends that a friendly relationship cannot exist between a master and an "ordinary person".

II) Sequels of Slavery and Flash Backs

The characterization of Beloved is a technique that Morrison uses to assume the relationship between the past and the present. After her death, Beloved comes back to haunt 124 Bluestone as a hidden ghost who reveals her hidden past. She fails in her mission because she cannot force her mother to narrate her traumatic memories. Paul D drives the baby ghost out. Baby Suggs asserts to Sethe the weakness of the baby ghost and expands the focus from personal to collective approaches. Morrison puts:

Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? Or Yours [2].

Beloved returns as an embodied soul and urges Sethe to narrate her traumatic experiences. Beloved's food is storytelling and she says to her mother *tell me...tell me* [2]. Beloved insists that Sethe retrieve history and remember the traumatic events. She refuses to be forgotten as the symbol of the cruelties of slavery.

As in *Beloved*, in *Song of Solomon* Morrison uses the incentive factors that allow characters to escape from slavery. Solomon's flight escape permits him to leave slavery in the Virginia cotton fields. He abandons his wife, Ryna with twenty one children. Noticeably, women are the most affected characters during slavery. In *Beloved*, women are victims of cruelties. In *Song of Solomon*, women's predicaments start when they are left behind, abandoned by their husbands who flee slavery.

In Alex Haley's *Queen*, Cap'n'Jack is a black slave who maintains other slaves in the Fork of Cypress. They are submissive and do all the services in their masters' houses. However, they are subjected to aggression or attacks when they make a blunder. They are severely punished. Margaret Walker highlights.

Trembling with fear of the whipping, she knew she was going to get, she stood before big Missy who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen and holding the pot of stale pee in her hand. Instead of whipping her, she knew the acrid contents of the plot in Vry's face and said you lazy nigger that will teach you keep your mind on what you are doing? [5].

Beloved shows two different identities of white masters at Sweet Home. The first is represented by Schoolteacher who comes after Mr. Garner's death. He oppresses and represses slaves. He whips, tortures and dehumanizes them. Therefore, slaves escape to get freedom or get rid of humiliation. The second is symbolized by Mr. Garner and his wife who seem better than Schoolteacher. Indeed, they let Sethe and Halle get married. They give Halle the right to work on Sundays and buy his mother. After Mr. Garner's death, the slaves at Sweet Home still do their job as required and never think of escaping.

African-American writers are concerned about equality and social justice. According to them, equality eradicates discrimination and oppression. Race, class and sexuality issues are central to their writings. Most black women experienced hardships, rape and misery during slavery. They also experienced difficulties in their quest for identity, freedom and equality. Toni Morrison stages the importance of identity, the formation of the 'self', and the influence of the environment and society. According to Ron Eyerman "*cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion*" [6].

III) Traumatism and Self-Discovery

In Morrison's characters, the trauma is slavery itself. It is not only seen as an institution or even an experience, but also as a collective memory. It is a remembrance that shapes the identity-formation of a people. *Beloved* deals with victimized, exploited and dehumanized characters because of slavery. The most important question slaves ask when they achieve freedom is "who am I", which is the hard core of African-American identity.

Toni Morrison underscores individual identities and allows several characters to tell their own stories: Sethe, Baby Suggs, Beloved, Denver, Paul D, and Sixo. Each has his or her traumatic story to share with others. In *Beloved*, individuals' stories produce a collective identity. Characters share the similar story of displacement and enslavement. In the novel, slaves are entitled to nothing and treated like animals. As opposed to Mr. Garner, school teacher and his nephews ignore the slaves' humanity. This brings about slaves' self-

loathing. They are committed to shifting from "nothingness" status to "self-assertion".

Sethe is subjected to wilderness when school teacher and his nephews steal her milk that she keeps for her starving children: *After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That is what they came in here for. Held me down and took it* [2]. Sethe is "objectified" by school teacher's nephews. Her "objectification" leads School teacher and his nephew to describe her as an animal with human parts. This underscores Sethe's dehumanization, humiliation and exploitation.

Toni Morrison depicts Sethe's loss of herself. In the days following her infanticide, Sethe redeems her dead baby. Sethe realizes that whatever the hardships of slavery, she could have taken care of her children. Paul D asserts *you, your best thing, Sethe you are* [2]. The description of trauma is very relevant to the catastrophic situation of slaves and ex-slaves. They experience torture, whipping, rape and dehumanization. Sethe and her children are subjected to white-racist supremacy. The first sequels that slavery leaves in characters are traumatic memories. They are traumatized characters who succeed to gain control over their violent experiences.

Paul D is mentally strong to control his memories and listen to Sethe's. Baby Suggs teaches Sethe to keep the past "*unspeakable*" [2]. Sethe admits her incapacity of controlling her memories as wounds caused by slavery. After her traumatic past under Beloved's influence, Sethe becomes a "slave" of her uncontrolled memories. She endures too much pain to free herself from the "prison" of slavery.

School teacher's attitude towards slaves is very traumatizing. Sethe's traumatism is when she first bumps into Schoolteacher at 124 Bluestone. She loses control and kills her daughter. She is so traumatized by Schoolteacher that she finally kills Mr. Bodwin in confusion. According to her, she prefers Mr Bodwin's death to another infanticide. She rewrites her past in accordance with her new reality. Slavery and white-supremacist ideology will still be witnessed by the slaves who undergo the evil. The small statue of a black boy that Denver sees at the Bodwins' residence marks the traces of slavery and the symbol that racism is perpetrated every day.

IV) African-American (Traditional) Identity

Living in community is part of African-American traditional identity. The American dream is a mental attitude in life. Identification is at the height of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Paul Croon interrogates the re-construction of identity by using the "interrogative approach". Croon demonstrates the impact of identity fragmentation. He leads readers to the textually re-

created relationships among four generations of women: from Beloved to Sethe and from Sethe's mother to an African-born woman imprisoned on a slave boat.

While *Beloved* takes readers to the interior lives of African-American during Re-construction, *Jazz* represents a singular moment in black artistic expression, as they call jazz: Jazz Age. Both Tsitsi Jaji and Grace McEnter emphasize the nature of Jazz as a creative and improvisational means. Jaji argues that jazz (and *jazz*) allows for a focus on language as open up the possibilities of difference. It is a means of redemption.

In *Beloved*, one of the central issues related to slavery is identity. But for Amy's contribution, Sethe would not have reached Cincinnati. The traumatic past has an impact on the individual. Morrison uses Sethe to show individual identity in a particular society. Cincinnati, as a black community, is well organized. In this city, there are carnivals and religious practices at the church. Yet, Sethe does not care much about the events that take place in her society. She turns herself into a murderer after her infanticide. She realizes:

Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. Should have known better... whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This there is all there is and all there needs to be [2].

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ex-slaves' attempt to rebuild a family is difficult. Sethe's plan to reunite her family and rebuild a future with Paul D is hampered by beloved's reincarnation. Morrison shows the devastating effects of slavery such as the dehumanization of black people and their constant displacements. She reveals the painful experience they have in common. She tells Gail Cold Well:

The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations until you get a chance to play it over again [2].

Sethe's baby ghost is the symbol of their ancestors and should be linked to the present. Like their

predecessors, African-Americans are confused about their own manhood and escape their confusion with anger like Guitar, Robert Smith and the seven days.

CONCLUSION

Slavery deprived black Africans of their human dignity. The inhuman treatment on plantations motivates the African-American, Toni Morrison to express her anger and frustration in her writings. Inspired by the hardships, dehumanization and the cruelties reserved for African-American female slaves, Morrison published *Beloved* [7] to denounce the evil of slavery.

This paper allows readers to see the extent to which Sethe is dehumanized, exploited and traumatized. Sethe is in quest for ways and means to escape from Slavery. She kills one of her daughters, Beloved, because of traumatism. Sethe does not want her to experience what she (Sethe) has already experienced. Her infanticide shows that female characters have suffered much from Slavery, which leaves sequels, traumatisms and flash backs for the rest of their lives. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals slaves' hard living conditions and their submissive relationships with their masters.

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