

Quest for Identity and Voice in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison, originally born Chloe Anthony Wofford, was an eminent American novelist, essayist, editor, teacher, and professor emeritus at Princeton University. Born and brought up in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison graduated from Howard University, America's most distinguished black university in Washington. She returned to this university later on to teach after completing a Master's degree at Cornell University. Most of her early life was spent in academia and in an educational environment and she only published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, at the age of thirty. The first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1993, Ms. Morrison was the author of 11 novels as well as children's books and essay collections. Among them were celebrated works like "Song of Solomon," which received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, and "Beloved," which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

She was well aware of her status both as an African American and as a woman. She knew well that these facts might hinder her literary recognition and success. Naturally, she was confronted with misogynistic resentment and racist outrage from the start of her career; however, the acclaim that she has received from the critics and the audience make up for any begrudging criticism that she received. As she was conscious of the resistance in the literary world that she will encounter from the outset of her artistic profession, she attempted everything to make it as smooth a transition as possible, even taking into account that she had to transform her persona as an author in order to be accepted, and even had to suppress her personal identity, in order to safeguard her privacy.

... she was conscious of herself as a black woman entering a field where the high ground was held by whites. Not wanting her employer to know she was publishing with another press, when the book [*The Bluest Eye*] was eventually published her new identity emerged along with it because she had changed her name and even withheld her

photograph from the book jacket. Given the recurring concern in her work with the search for identity and with the significance of names for black people, this is probably one of the most interesting biographical details about her as far as the novels are concerned. (Peach 6)

Published in 1987, *Beloved* is considered to be Toni Morrison's Masterpiece. In 1983, Morrison became the first African American to receive Nobel Prize in Literature. She has garnered numerous awards for her fiction including the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*. Morrison is responsible for helping bring African American literature and culture into the consciousness of the mainstream reader.

The themes of voice and identity recur on a regular basis in Morrison's writing as they are essential to African American literature in general and to her as a writer in particular. She revisits slavery and its aftermaths in *Beloved* and does not only point out its atrocities, but also indicates in what way the former slaves tried to create a community for themselves or how they attempted to reintegrate the existing social structures that were accessible to them. Her writing illuminates the fact that female African Americans do not only suffer from the double-consciousness, which W.E.B. Du Bois dissected in his works, due to which people have to come to terms with their African roots and their American upbringing, but she also points out the fact that women are even more inhibited by the restrictions laid upon them by society. "Being black, the African women suffered from racism; being females they were the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks and being former slaves, the white establishment forced them to live on meager resources and were compelled to remain poor" (Sumana 22).

By exploring the historical background of slavery and using a precise case as a fictional background, namely the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed her daughter to save it from returning to its life in bondage and who tried to do the same to her other children, and by developing its essence into a tale, Morrison manages to visualize all the atrocities connected to it. "It [*Beloved*] represents the quotidian realities of family life under slavery: absent men, a loosely matriarchal family, the family as buffer. It also embodies the extremity of the Margaret Garner story: the tearing of the family by oppression, punishment and infanticide" (Reynolds 122). The family as a core element does not exist as a unity on the plantation, as the

masters did not wish their property to feel obliged and attached to one another. This would have made their selling and buying more difficult and by ignoring any, even filial attachments, the financial transactions were made easier on their conscience, and thus destroyed the archetypal sense of commitment to the family.

Beloved provides a feminist's perspective on historical writing. It, in fact, challenges the accepted content and narrative mode of historical documents. Morrison brings forth those, who have been silenced and marginalized by history. She chooses to focus on a slave woman's act of murder as a historical incident to be narrated, and she recounts it through a tradition of storytelling which is the principal literary form in African American culture. Morrison's achievement in *Beloved* is her contribution to the recording of an important part of American history from the viewpoint of the oppressed.

Beloved highlights the unbearable sufferings of black women slaves. It, in fact, centers on the power of memory and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and wilfully try to forget. Yet for Sethe, the protagonist, memories of slavery are inescapable. They continue to haunt her, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe had murdered this daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who like Sethe, killed her child to save her from slave catchers. *Beloved* straddles the line between fiction and history, from the experiences of a single family, Morrison creates a powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery. Morrison's central intention in writing an individual history of a former slave is to reclaim the unrecognized past and to furnish these records to future generations, ensuring that the horrors of slavery will not be repeated.

After its publication, Margaret Atwood wrote about *Beloved*: "Morrison's versatility and technical and emotional range appears to know no bounds. If there are any doubts about her stature as a pre-eminent American novelist, *Beloved* will put them to rest." Reconstructing a true incident in *Beloved*, Morrison tries to understand the intention of the mother's action. The novel reveals that Sethe's act of murder is rooted in a motherhood crippled by slavery.

Beloved explores the physical, emotional and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt the former slaves, even now in freedom. The most dangerous of its effects is its negative impact on the former slaves' sense of self and the novel contains

multiple examples of self-alienation. Paul D from Sweet Home plantation is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's. The cruelty of slavery has left Paul D with a tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He is the only man left from Sweet Home plantation, an ironical name for the hub of slavery. His brothers Paul F and Paul A were sold away or hung, while Six O was burnt and Halley went insane.

The dehumanizing effect of slavery is the prime theme in the novel. Sethe was also treated as a subhuman. She once heard the school teacher giving his pupils a lesson on Sethe's "animal characteristics." He considers slaves as creatures to be "handled" similar to dogs or cattle. He thinks while pursuing the runaways unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin.

Sethe seems alienated from herself and filled with self-loathing. She sees the best part of herself in her children. Yet her children also have volatile, unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with Beloved, the embodied spirit of her dead sister. Slavery has also limited Baby Suggs' self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the opportunity to be a true, wife, sister, daughter or loving mother. Stamp Paid muses that slavery's negative consequences are not limited to the slaves. Just as it turns slaves into animals, it turns owners into monsters. He notes that slavery "changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be".

Morrison tries to display how the insidious effects of slavery affect not only the identities of its black victims but those of the whites who perpetrate it and the collective identity of Americans. In the novel, some characters learn the meaning of exhilarating freedom while others slowly discover its value. When Halley buys his mother freedom, Baby Suggs gradually learns its value. "She could not believe that Halley knew what she didn't; that Halley, who had never drawn one free breath knew there was nothing like it in the world."

Differentiation between physical ownership and psychological possession is another significant theme. The characters in *Beloved*, particularly Sethe, must learn to judge themselves and one another according to their own values rather than those imposed on them by the dominant white culture.

Those white values, in a sense, are represented by the poltergeist, the tantrum-throwing ghost of the murdered baby, Beloved. Sethe's son, Buglar, leaves home when the ghost has achieved search power that he can no longer look into a mirror without shattering it. Metaphorically, the African-American past, dominated by subjection, has forced the African Americans to internalize the white judgement of black inferiority.

Written in African-American storytelling tradition, *Beloved* is full of metaphors and symbols that suggest slavery, such as water. Separation of the African slaves from their homeland took place in the middle passage across the Atlantic Ocean. In the novel, Denver's birth is in a river and Beloved too first rises from a river. The image of a ghost also suggests the situation of slaves, who possess nothing. Furthermore, it symbolises the African American reality that has been treated as non-existent from the perspective of the dominant society.

An accurate portrayal of the black slave woman's experience has been given in *Beloved*. Although the kind-hearted slave owner, Mr. Garner prides himself on the kind treatment of his male slaves, he nevertheless has the slave-master's agenda of using slave women for the purpose of childbearing. School teacher also values Sethe for her childbearing capabilities and the money she represents.

In slavery, the basic value of a woman is her role in the reproduction of her master's commodities as well as in his sexual pleasure. In the circumstances, mothers are neither nurturers nor protectors of their children. Baby Suggs remembers little of her seven children who were sold away; Ella, another slave woman, refuses to nurse her baby born from rape by her master. Beauvoir explains how unlike males, female bodies exist in separation from their self. Their bodies are seen as docile objects meant for consumption by males. Thus, men consider their right to have sex with women even without their consent. They take it for granted that those women's bodies exist for them.

Paul D is able to understand and verbalize Sethe's dilemma by concluding that it was dangerous for a slave woman to love anything, especially her children. Slavery ignored the slave mother's right to determine the future of, to mould the character of and to nurture her own children. In the novel, the recovery of an individual's history parallels that of all slaves. Sethe and Beloved, both abandoned children who cry out for the missing ties with their mothers, represent all slave mothers and children. They also signify the longing of many African

Americans for the missing ties with their cultural heritage in Africa. While Sethe's experiences mirror the suffering of the "sixty million and more" slaves to whom Morrison dedicates this novel, *Beloved* represents those who are not even counted in the official numbers in slavery.

Barbara Schapiro concluded "Beloved's struggle is Sethe's struggle; it is also Denver's, Paul D's, and Baby Suggs's. It is the struggle of all black people in a racist society, Morrison suggests, claiming themselves as subjects in their own narrative." Schapiro further hailed the novel's psychological [realism](#): "*Beloved* penetrates, perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery."

Sethe's act of infanticide illuminates the perverse forces of the institution of slavery. Under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them. She thus protects them from the more gradual destruction wrought by slavery.

Crucially, in *Beloved*, we learn about the history and legacy of slavery, not from enslavers' point of view, but rather from Sethe's, Paul D's, Stamp Paid's and baby Sugg's perspective. *Beloved* recuperates a history that had been lost either due to willed forgetfulness or forced silence. From Sethe's experience, we learn that before a stable future can be created, we must confront and understand the ghosts of the past.

To sum up, Morrison calls attention to the fact that wherever slavery exists, everyone suffers a loss of humanity and compassion. The effect is even more brutal on women. For this reason, Morrison suggests that her nation's identity, like the novel's characters, must be healed. America's future depends on the sound understanding of its past. Therefore, before we can address slavery's legacy in the contemporary problems of racial discrimination and discord, we must confront the dark and hidden corners of the nation's history.

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