

Struggle Against Slavism In Toni Morrison Beloved

K.Gomathi Assistant Professor

PG & Research Dept of English

Government Arts College (Autonomous)

Salem-Tamilnadu-636007

Black feminist perspective pervades contemporary African-American literature. Happily, the perspective governs the aesthetic and the aesthetic informs the landscape and the vision. The status of the black women writers is no longer relegated below the status of the males. Instead of being secondary to the literary dominance of black males, the literature of black women is expansive and, what is more, liberating. Unlike in the past when women were supposed to be seen but not heard, the women of today are recognized writers in all fields and genres.

Most importantly, black women are dealing with the political machinations of the racial and sexual beliefs, feelings and actions that black men writers have maintained towards black females, in the street, in the family, and in the bedroom. Their perspective, which is consistent with the aesthetic, is faithful to the actual experiences of black women in America. Toni Morrison is, perhaps, the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature, whose work has been described as “amazingly high”. She astutely describes aspects of the blacks’ lives and especially of blacks as the people they are. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world as ugly, but the uniqueness of Toni Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and the hope beneath the surface of black America. Combining the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women’s Liberation, she seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black. But the artistic excellence of Morrison’s fiction lies in achieving a balance between writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature. Although firmly grounded

in the cultural heritage and social concerns of black Americans, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature, exhibiting universal mythic patterns and overtones. Morrison's extraordinary distinction as a novelist also lies in restoring the language the black people speak to its original power.

STRUGGLE AGAINST SLAVISM IN TONI MORRISON

BELOVED

In her four earlier novels, Morrison demonstrates a keen awareness of concern for dedication to African people in America. As Mbalia puts it, almost "like a scientist, she uses each work as a laboratory in which to research a hypothesis as to the nature of oppression experienced by African people and to posit a solution to it" in terms of fictional art. Starting with the issue of race as the primary form of oppression in *The Bluest Eye*, demonstrating that slavism is as oppressive as racism in *Sula*, adding the problem of slavism exploitation to that of race in *Song of Solomon*, and then recognizing slavism as the primary target against which the blacks must struggle in *Tar Baby*, Morrison proposes in *Beloved* (1987) collective slavism struggle against slavism as the only viable solution possible for the African people in the white-dominated American society. As a result, slavism in relation to race and gender becomes more focal in *Song of Solomon*. The focus is not primarily on the concept of woman, as in *Sula*, for its protagonist is a man bearing a peculiar, but highly symbolic name- Milkman Dead. Though Milkman's quest for his identity is the dominant strand in the novel, the major obstacle he must overcome is the deadening effects of his father's need to own as much property as possible in order to protect himself against racism. This inordinate craze for ownership manifests itself in its worst forms, but is countered throughout the novel by the non-appropriative view of life, most often represented by the women

With the essence of this news clipping, Morrison concocts the story of *Beloved*. She, however, expands, refines, and shapes it so that *Beloved* picks up where *Tar Baby* leaves off. While mulling over this news article what evidently clicked in Morrison's mind was the fact that conditions of oppression then and now as well as our reactions to them have not qualitatively changed.

Because Africans are faced with circumstances almost equally oppressive as those in slavery, Morrison shows them the need to unite as one to confront a common enemy-slavism, the same enemy they struggled against more than one hundred years ago. Certainly Morrison has come to understand that "slavism is but the gentleman's form of slavery".

Morrison's conscious focus on collective rather than individual struggle is clarified through her repeated assertions that *Beloved* is the story of a people rather than a person. She says: "The book was not about the institution-Slavery with a capital S. It was about those anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they are willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to related to one another-that was incredible to me".

Although the novel begins as Sethe's story, it evolves into a story about "these people who don't know they are in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day... and they are trying desperately to be parents, husbands and a mother with children". Morrison's conscious focus on the collective rather than Sethe's personal history is further clarified when she says that the novel "has to be the interior life of some people, a small group of people and everything they do is impacted on by the horror of slavery, but they are also people. The impact of slavery on a people, thus, involves the way internalization of oppressors' values can distort all intimate human relationships and even subvert the self.

Beloved deals with not only ‘reconstructed memory’, but also deconstructed history. Set in post-civil war Ohio, this haunting narrative of slavery and its aftermath, traces the life of a young woman, Sethe, who has kept a terrible memory at bay only by shutting down part of her mind. The novel deals with Sethe’s former life as a slave on Sweet Home Farm, her escape with her children to what seems a safe haven, and the tragic events that follow. Although Sethe physically survives, she remains emotionally subjugated, and her desire to give and receive love becomes a destructive force. Morrison also addresses the difficulties faced by former slaves in keeping the horrors of their pasts submerged within the subconscious. In the words of Ann Snitow, Morrison “twists and tortures and fractures events until they are little slivers that cut. She moves the lurid material of melodrama into the minds of her people, where it gets sifted and sorted, lived and relived, until it acquires the enlarging outlines of myth and trauma, dream obsession”. Thus, Morrison recreates a past, however painful, to undercut the ideological basis upon which it has largely been constructed by whites, employing not only available accounts in slave narratives, but also disengaging the materials from historical documents in order to revitalize them as lived experience.

The novel hinges on the death of Sethe’s infant daughter, *Beloved*, who mysteriously reappears as a sensuous young woman. *Beloved*’s spirit comes back to claim Sethe’s love. Sethe struggles to make *Beloved* gain full possession of her present and throw off the long, dark legacy of her past. Sethe’s experience is treated with many ironic overtones that point to certain paradoxes and many fundamental complexities of her quest for freedom.

On a socio-psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe Suggs’ quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. She struggles with the haunting memory of her slave-past and the retribution of *Beloved*, the ghost of the infant daughter whom she has killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. On a legendary and mythic level, *Beloved*

is a ghost story that frames embedded narratives of the impact of slavism, race and sex on the capacity for love, faith and community of black families, especially of black women, during the Reconstruction period. Set in post-civil war Cincinnati, *Beloved* is a womanist neo-slave narrative of double consciousness, a post-modern romance that speaks in many compelling voices and on several time levels of the historical rape of black American women and of the resilient spirit of blacks in surviving as a people.

Beloved contains Morrison's most extraordinary and spellbinding womanist remembrance of things past. As Alice Walker's epigraphs to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* suggest, womanliest connotes a black feminist, "a woman who, among other things, is audaciously committed to (the) survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female". And it is "because of the silences in the slave narratives due to authorial compromises to white audiences and to self-masking from a painful past, Morrison sees her role as a writer as bearing witness to the interior life of people who didn't write their history and to filling in the blanks that the slave narrative left". Unlike James Baldwin, who also defines the role of slave as bearing witness, Morrison privileges the authority and epistemology of black and Third World women in America.

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