

The Pangs of Women in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract:

Women have been portrayed as submissive and subservient in the male-dominated society almost among all cultures and communities. They have been labeled with different epithets like “weaker sex”, ‘second sex’, ‘twisted rib’ etc. The writers and artists depicted the women as weak and frail. The women writers in their works protested against this stereotypical image which has tarnished their role and position in the men authoritarian world. Among these women writers is Toni Morrison, the African-American writer who has portrayed the women, the voiceless and marginalized creatures who every now and then are being suppressed and oppressed. Morrison highlights the double marginalization of African-American women who have been suffering not only because of their gender but because of their colour also.

The present paper deals with the female sufferings which Morrison highlights in the male controlling culture. The whole world is talking about the equal rights, but when it comes to fronts it leads to discrimination and partiality. Women were torched in male society being on account of women. A mother wants to kill her infant baby but didn't give her into the hands of cruel man. In this paper Toni Morrison showed how black women have been browbeaten by the hands through her novel *Beloved*. It is the story about Sethe and her daughter. In this novel she depicted the life of black women.

Key Words: Submissive, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Discrimination and Society

Introduction

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is an epoch making work recounting the agonizing history of black slaves. This novel focuses on the issue of slavery by fictionalizing the historical fact that Slave mothers sometimes killed their children to prevent them from leading a shameful life of slavery and suffering. Morrison's novel is the story of a black female slave Sethe who suffers racialism, violence, and rape. This novel is based on a real story of Margaret Garner and the account of her tale in *The Black Book*. Morrison has used this story of Garner as the base material for *Beloved*. Like Garner, Sethe also kills her daughter and attempts to destroy her other children to prevent them from being recaptured as fugitives. Morrison has written this novel about the bleak past of black female slaves, which no one wants to remember. Morrison says, she wrote *Beloved* with the conviction, "this has got to be the least read of all the books, I'd have written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember. I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, I mean it is national amnesia." (Angelo 1989 257)

In her novel, *Beloved* Morrison again turns back to the history of Slavery. Here, Morrison delineates the psychological and emotional effects of slavery. There is no sense of self; a fear to trust or to love when anything can be taken away at any time. The painful slow growth of the slaves and ex-slaves towards a damaged self-awareness is quite effective. The novel collects and synthesizes myths for the black community. *Beloved* chronicles the fortunes of Sethe, once a slave on the Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky. Sethe and her husband serve under a good master but upon his disappearance (her husband) she is subjected to unspeakable cruelty by the new master. Some of the slaves decide to escape the bondage. Sethe sends her three children to freedom and herself, manages to escape later. On the way, a child is born to her. She names her Denver after the poor white woman who helps her with delivery. Her husband had been shattered after secretly witnessing his wife being forced to give her milk to grown white boys. Sethe has the support of her husband's mother, Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs, is strong and bigheart. She preaches her fellow blacks that they must learn to love themselves in a world where no one else does. Here Morrison

makes use of Gothic fantastic elements of African culture viz. ghosts. The house of Sethe had witnessed the killing of the ghost of “*Beloved*” a baby daughter of Sethe whom she had killed one month before her freedom, fearing that the child of hers would also be forced into slavery and rape. Paul D. and Sethe exorcise the ghost. Denver and Paul D. are about to settle back into a happy family life when the ghost returns – now in the form of a grown up girl apparently around the age “*Beloved*” would be. At this point, the world of the dead and the living converge. It is symbolic of a slave’s life which is a living dead person on the earth. The impossibility seems natural within the Morrisonian plot structure. As should be expected, the ghost of “*Beloved*” turns malevolent and destroys any kind of happiness or life Sethe and Denver would have expected. Denver tries to control the situation. She with the help of other women now exorcises. This symbolizes the end of a haunting past. Paul D. returns and the Sethe household seems to breathe freely again.

Beloved is a novel that speaks manifold about the suffering of black people. It reflects the harsh reality of being a black mother and voices the positions of daughters, grandmothers, fathers, male friends, neighbors’, community and mothers herself. It is just like hell in a cell for slave females. Barbara Christian says,

“They had to work; most could not be ornamental or withdrawn from the world; and, according to the aesthetics of this country, they were not beautiful, but neither were they men. Any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part, qualities necessary for participation in the work world, were constructed as unwomanly and tasteless.”
(Christian, Black 72)

Sethe’s story is a part of historical truth as it underlines the chronological fact that there were hundreds of black women during slavery that suffocated their babies rather than to allow them to be offered up to destruction by slavery. Sethe also kills her daughter ‘*Beloved*’ to prevent her from being a slave. *Beloved*’s ghost is the embodiment of the psychological effects of slavery. It represents not only Sethe’s dead daughter but million blacks who have been enslaved, tortured and then perished. The ghost of ‘*Beloved*’ symbolizes Sethe’s haunting past which tortures her even in

her freedom. It could be seen clearly in the novel that the impact of slavery could not be easily forgotten, the pain is rooted deep in the souls of black slaves and it is impossible to deny the existence of one's soul. The novel examines the impact of slavery on a group of people and its main aim has been to bear witness to a history that is unrecorded. In her attempt, Toni Morrison has relied largely on oral history and has tried to repeat the black female slave's voice, her unspeakable pain and thoughts. The whole manipulation is contrived to create an emotional fictional response to the issue of slavery. *Beloved* is in fact a ghost story, an examination of what it meant to be not to be loved by one's own loved ones. It is an Afro- American political novel and a novel for feminism and humanity. It has a multi-layered structure, mysterious style and lyrical beauty – all combined in one. *Beloved* narrates the story of all those black female slaves who were hired, sold mortgaged and exploited as field workers, breeders and objects of sexual abuse. Morrison's book narrates this tale in a realistic and touching manner. The impact of slavery is seen in the novel when we find that Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother, Sethe and all female servants were denied a mother's role for their children. Baby Suggs also is a case of female exploitation at the white men's hands. She bewails that black motherhood is a loss. She cries out because all her thirteen children were sold into slavery and no one heard her pain except Jesus. Joel Kovel tersely describes this pain of black people in the hands of their white masters. He says that the white master,

“first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; ...he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange.” (*Beloved* 18)

This torture of being a slave horrifies even the reader while reading the novel. This impact of slavery is so tortuous that Sethe chops off *Beloved*'s neck with the handsaw only to prevent her daughter from a living hell. The anguish of slaves is endless. Novel can be read from stream of consciousness view as the writer gives mental condition of the characters. In *Beloved*, Morrison probes deeper into the psychological

effects of missing mother-infant bond and unearths the psychological damage of slavery to the mother-child relationship.

The most harrowing impact of bondage is delineated in the novel when Sethe, a black mother is denied the right to suckle her children. She is rather treated only as a machine for work, breeding more blacks and suckling the white women's children. She has no right even upon her milk and breasts. Thus, Sethe is shocked when the nephews of the school master brutally abuse her, suck milk from her breasts and whip her back mercilessly. Thus, another issue that is raised here is of the basic right of a woman to offer her breast and milk to her children, which is cruelly denied by the crushing bulldozer of slavery. Her fundamental rights were snatched and she is a symbol of African blacks and blacks all over the globe. Gloria Steinem, in her *Introduction to Outrageous Acts and Every day Rebellions*, describes the plight of black female slaves pertinently when she says, '... on the whole it was the black woman, who had the greater cause for grievance being oppressed as both a black and a woman.... The entire African-American community was condemned to endless suffering, yet the black woman's condition was much worse than the black man's because, to be black and female was to be in Double Jeopardy. *Beloved* provides an insight into the structure and working of the African-American culture that denies a woman her basic human and political rights. In committing her brutal act of killing her daughter *Beloved*, Sethe believed she was sparing the child from the 'unspeakable' fate to which most female slaves were heiress. The slave women were not recognized as mothers, having bonds with their children, but considered only breeders and workers. Their slave owners had no scruples about selling children away from their mothers. The infant children could be sold like calves and cows. This pain of black female slaves is explained interestingly, through the imagery of circles by Gloria Wade-Gayles, She explains,

“There are three major circles of reality in American society, which reflects degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in

which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America.”(Gloria Wade-Gayles 3-4)

On a Socio-Psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe’s quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. Morrison brings to light Sethe’s feminine desire to be accepted as a complete individual. She struggles with the haunting memory of her slave past and the retribution of *Beloved*, the ghost of her infant daughter whom she has killed in order to save her from the sufferings of a slave’s life. Her struggle and quest for wholeness end with her realization that this suffering is common to all of them and they can survive only when they unite. One more realization that she had at the end of the novel is that to free one from the horrors and complexities of past, one must reconfigure the past in the present. She does that by attacking Mr. Bodwin whom she perceives as a reincarnation of all European men.

The novel is all about Sethe’s recuperation of a past that she has attempted to forget. Memory plays a pivotal role in *Beloved*, not only in that is used as a mode of narration, but in being what the novel is about. Although the reader comes across numerous stories, the key issue of the novel is narrating, recounting and recollecting; dealing with memory is what the characters mainly do. The process of the novel corresponds to Sethe’s repossession of her most repressed memory whose recollection will work as a healing ritual. The traumatic experience of slavery and the infanticide had been consciously eradicated by Sethe’s will to move on, by a desperate wish to forget something too weighty to be remembered. The presence of the baby ghost in 124 Bluestone Road house is an evident sign of Sethe’s past still possessing her present: what the woman refuses to remember chains her and her daughter Denver to an impossible life; isolated from the rest of the community Sethe’s and Denver’s present is possessed as well as their future.

The narration is dense with powerful eruptions from the past that culminates with the return of the killed baby in the form of a girl called Beloved, after the inscription on her tombstone, whose age corresponds to the one of the baby had she lived. This objectification of the past will slowly induce the characters to recuperate

their memories, to narrate their stories. The baby's return is an emblematic example of the past that, triggered by the present, comes to be reworked. As Plasa observes, this re-envisioning of the past is defined in Freudian terms as *Nachträglichkeit*, literally translated as 'belatedness', the term signifies a 'deferred action' or a 'retroaction'. Freud formulated this notion in relation to the reworking of traumatic experiences through memory where the act of remembering works not only as a connection with the past, but also a means to re-possess forgotten experiences. In *Beloved* past memories are often awakened by the present, thus the subject re-experiences past traumas in the light of later events. The advent of present incidents confers to the past its full significance: the subject, although traumatized after the fact, reaches a closer and complete understanding of his/her memories.

The return of *Beloved* and her role within the novel has been interpreted by critics in several ways. Otten writes as follows: "*Beloved* is both Sethe's doomed infant and one of the "Sixty Million and More," a victim both of Sethe's "rough love" and the manifest cruelty of Slavers. What is more, she becomes a demonic force returned to punish and to redeem Sethe, a remarkably ambiguous force able to free Sethe at last from her past, but only by exacting an enormous price; she is on one hand "an evil thing," on the other a Christ figure come to save. The life of Margaret Garner, an African-American slave notorious for killing her daughter rather than returning her to slavery, it recounts the hard fight of a black female slave for a home, for freedom and safety for herself and her children. Sethe, Margaret Garner's literary counterpart, defies the restraints the multiple jeopardy imposes on her. First and foremost, she refuses to be a breeder instead of a mother, and she loves her children ardently. She refuses to give up her children, willing to do everything it takes to find a safe and free home for them – even if that means that, she has to flee Sweet Home while being pregnant, and even if that means that she has to commit an atrocious act which expels her out of her community. Sethe's journey is scattered around the book: being the victim of a bitter trauma, she is haunted by what she calls "rememories" – which, together with morsels of other Sweet Home survivor's reminiscences, enable the reader to reconstruct Sethe's filthy and hurtful past. Sethe's quest for a home

could be seen as a journey, subdivided into different parts, during which she acquires, or at least seems to acquire, at each time a certain amount of freedom and/or safety. In what follows, I will analyze Sethe's travel chronologically throughout the novel, and see in which ways she hovers back and forth between a room in the house of jeopardies, a "genuflection" in its familiar yard, and a home of her own. By tracing this journey, I will attempt to discover how Morrison deems it possible to find a home after an experience so deeply traumatizing as slavery.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison proves her mettle in the American fiction in general and in the African-American in particular that she fights against the patriarchal structure which has portrayed the stereotypical image of women. The African-American women have to go through the double marginalization. Morrison in her novel exposes the socio-political shams and highlighted the pangs of women in her community. She demonstrates the voice of female imagination in her all novels especially in the *Beloved*. It is a voice of unspeakable.

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