

**THE POST TRAUMATIC EFFECTS OF SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S
BELOVED.**

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to reflect the traumatic context of Toni Morrison's Beloved. Most of the characters of Toni Morrison are represented as the captives of their own lives and choices. This has been made possible by analyzing the human psyche within the psychological framework of racism. Her creative works prove that the human psyche takes an important role in subjecting an individual to pressure and trauma in every stages of the evolution of the characters. This essay makes a humble attempt to highlight how Morrison focuses on the importance of confronting, reclaiming and a transforming history. It also points to the healing potential of memory.

Toni Morrison, a famous Afro-American novelist began writing fiction as part of an informal group of poets and writers at Howard. Her life and writings are, strongly, influenced by black self image; equality in marriage and the power of black community. Her novels are known for their epic, themes, vivid dialogue and richly detailed characters. It typically concentrates on black women and traumatic effects of slavery yet she refused to identify her works as feminist. Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved*, a Nobel Prize (1993); the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Robert F Kennedy Award (1988) winning novel which is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her daughter in a desperate bid to save her from the misery and indignity of slavery when threatened with recapture would be a good example of a kind of traumatic impact of slavery on the black psyche. She was touched by the tragic scene and notes down:

I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old, and observe that it had a large bunch on its forehead. I inquired the cause of injury... I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I am now, and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered piece-meal. She then told the story of her wrongs. She spoke of her days of suffering, of her nights of unmitigated toil, while the bitter tears coursed their way down her cheeks and fell in

the face of the innocent child as it looked smiling up, little conscious of the danger and probable suffering that awaited it.¹

Morrison's *Beloved*, a contemporary work of fiction which is set just before and directly after the abolishment of slavery deals with psychological trauma which articulates trauma of experiencing the black body as white property. She has succeeded in attempting to show that even though the civil war ended and slavery got over legally it has only started haunting the psyche of African-American. It highlights the importance of confronting, reclaiming and a transforming history and points to the healing potential of memory.

The black community were looked down as slaves and also seen, merely, as property of the whites. The importance of family was not considered when deciding where they would be sent to work. Many children were torn from their mothers at very young ages, a trauma that is nearly impossible to recover from. Morrison focuses on this trauma and its psychological impact on her characters. She seeks to offer glimpses into the traumatic event as it gradually becomes comprehensible to its survivors. The allusions concentrate upon the incomprehensibility of the trauma.

Beloved not only deals with the trauma of slavery but also with self-sacrifice of motherhood, the black experience in America and an inescapable history which will haunt the bravest at heart. It is actually a historical novel that doesn't feel grounded in history. As Marilyn Sanders Mobley stated, "Morrison's purpose is not to convince white readers of the slave's humanity, but to address black readers by inviting us to return to the very part of our past that many have repressed, forgotten or ignored".² Morrison designs *Beloved* not to conjure with the past as a concrete reality but the past, in all its ugliness, breaks into the present. Her use of the past ruling the present is her greatest aspect and technique.

Roger Sale in his essay, "Storytelling as Rememory in *Beloved*" remarks, "It is Toni Morrison's ambition to create a form, and a storytelling, that keeps alive the struggle to remember, the need to forget, and the inability to forget".³ From the beginning, the novel focuses on the import of memory and history: Sethe struggles daily with the haunting legacy of slavery in the form of her threatening memories. This is followed by the memories of the cruel act and the brutality she herself suffered as a slave in her earlier life at Sweet Home and her daughter's aggressive ghost, the daughter she murdered in an act of motherly love and protection from the more gradual destruction wrought by slavery. "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that".⁴ Sethe's thought of the past revolve round her murdered child. She remains haunted by this and spends her life attempting to avoid encounters with her past, "her past had been like her present – intolerable and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness...".⁵ Her rememory represents the consciousness and the identity that she has lost through the trauma of slavery but is now trying to reclaim that life and identity.

The scene of Sethe murdering her daughter not willing to relinquish her children to the physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual trauma as a slave reminds us of another mother Eliza Harris running to the North and crossing the dangerous Ohio River to protect her only son by

floating on the ice when she discovers that her son has been sold to a hard hearted slave owner in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is also comparable to Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, a story about a mother in desperate straits who kills her children as revenge against her husband, the hero Jason, for abandoning her for another woman.

"Rememorying" is the central activity in *Beloved*. "The characters' rememorying epitomizes the novel's purpose of conjuring up the spirits and experiences of the past..."⁶, says Susan Bower. Like the return of Beloved and the enduring curse of slavery itself, rememory is both a reconciliation and vexation, both a healing and a wounding. Even after Sethe acknowledges Beloved's identity of being the reincarnation of her murdered daughter, she shows herself to be still enslaved by the past because she allows herself to be consumed by Beloved. Beloved forces Sethe to be paralyzed in the past whenever she is with her. Once she said to Denver, "She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have"⁷ and Sethe also stated, "BELOVED, she my daughter... she come back to me of her own will... she had to be safe and I put her where she would be"⁸. Beloved represents slavery's victims; she explores the physical, emotional and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those who are former slaves even in freedom. She also represents the inescapable, horrible past of slavery returned to haunt the present but she also signals the possibility of a brighter future by giving the people of 124 and the entire community, a chance to engage with the memories they have suppressed. Sethe's hard won freedom is threatened by her inability to confront her prior life. However, Paul D's arrival resurrects memories that have lain buried in Sethe's mind for almost two decades and gives Sethe the opportunity to finally come to terms with her painful life history. His union with Sethe also allows him to come to terms with his past too.

Black identity is closely linked to being dehumanized which Sethe regards as a malevolent presence that defies even death has actually damaged Sethe and Paul D. He sacrifices much of his humanity by giving up his selfhood by repressing his memories. He ends up satisfying the white man's image of him due to the definitions given by the whites,

"White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle... The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were... it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them."⁹

His traumatic experiences have caused him to lock away his memories, emotions and ability to love in the "tin-tobacco box" of his heart. Another character called Ella who had helped Sethe's escape in order to exorcise Beloved from 124 and who is traumatized by the sexual brutality of a white father and son who once held her captive, she, believes, like Sethe, that the past is best left buried. This act also reveals the existence of the trauma.

Sethe begins to descend into madness due to her traumatic past. It occurs because the character of Sethe starts to become lost as she remembers the event. And she even tries to shelter Denver from the past by isolating her in a house plagued by the ghost of Beloved. In contrast, Denver doesn't try to flee from the past, because she ardently desires a history. She

longs for the self that history provides. "When I came back to 124, there she was Beloved. Waiting for me... Ready to be taken care of; ready for me to protect her."¹⁰

Like the ghost, the address of the house is a stubborn reminder of its history. The character refers to the house by its number 124. These digits highlight the absence of Sethe's murdered third child.

America's future depends on its understanding of the past just as Sethe must come to terms with her past before she can secure her future with anyone. At the end of the novel, the entire black community makes up for its past misbehavior by gathering at 124 to, collectively, exorcise Beloved. As stated by David Lawrence in his essay, 'Exorcising Ghosts from Body and Community in *Beloved*', Sethe's rememory "casts its spell over the entire community, drawing the members of that community into one person's struggle with the torments of a history that refuses to die"¹¹ by driving Beloved away, they secure Sethe's and its own release from the past.

To conclude, Morrison's succeeded and a famous novel *Beloved* truly portrays trials and tribulations of slavery shortly after the civil war; the black experience in America and the haunting of post traumatic effects of slavery in the present hard won freedom. Truly, *Beloved* is the novel written not only with the main purpose of de-establishing racism but is a "landmark for fixing two targets – social freedom and psychological perfection."¹² On a much broader level, it can be said that Morrison's *Beloved* shows not only the ability to simply repeat the past descriptively but to "transform the chaos of history into a fable of love and bereavement."¹³

End Notes:

¹ Shail Bala. "Beloved: An Interrogation for the Identification." *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: Narrating Black Women's Experiences*. New Delhi: Prestige Books International, 2012, p. 112.

² Sanders Marilyn Mobley. "Call and Response Pattern in *Beloved*." *Viva Bloom's Notes: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Viva Books Private Ltd, 2007, p. 38.

³ Roger Sale. "Storytelling as Rememory in *Beloved*." *Viva Bloom's Notes: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Viva Books Private Ltd, 2007, p. 32.

⁴ Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. Vintage Books London, UK, Random House, Second Edition, 2005, p. 194.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶ Susan Bower. "The Transformation of Homer into knowledge in *Beloved*." *Viva Bloom's Notes: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Viva Books Private Ltd, 2007, p. 40.

⁷ Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. Vintage Books London, UK, Random House, Second Edition, 2005, p. 89.

⁸ Ibid., p. 236.

⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 243.

¹¹ David Lawrence. "Exorcising Ghosts from Body and Community in *Beloved*." *Viva Bloom's Notes: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Viva Books Private Ltd, 2007, p. 43.

¹² Shail Bala. "*Beloved*: An Interrogation for the Identification." *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: Narrating Black Women's Experiences*. New Delhi: Prestige Books International, 2012, p. 114.

¹³ Kottiswari, W.S. "Postmodernism in the American Context- Toni Morrison as a Postmodernist." *Postmodern Feminist Writers*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2008, p. 83.