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## The dehumanizing effect of slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

Toni Morrison's novels aim to critique the myth of black inferiority and subordination which prevails in largely white culture. Her novels investigate the devastating effects of the beauty standards of the dominant culture on the self image of the African-female adolescent. Toni Morrison's novels are, quest tales in which key characters search for the hidden sign, capable of giving them strength and identity. Toni Morrison's shows the exploitative nature of logo centric orders. Her novels are exploration of the meaning of blackness. She wants the readers to work jointly with the writer in formulating the meaning of her novels. She puts forward the characters, which are evacuated to the margins of the society in the name of their race and gender alienation. She also brings the out of the anonymity and narrates their own history in their own words. She also assesses the core of the African American reality, particularly, that of an African female and female alienation, feminist issues in most of her novels. She focuses on their physical and mental tortures from the white men and women because of their Blackness. The inhuman treatment to the Black women from men, both Black and white is explored. It investigates the struggles of Black women in their search for identity and their failures in achieving their identity. Toni Morrison has distinguished herself as an author, editor and critic who has transformed the American literary landscape with her presence in the African American literary tradition.

**Keywords:** Dehumanization and Slavery

### Introduction

The novel *Beloved* presents a black community unwilling to confront their past, and thus haunted by the embodiment of it. The author does not protest slavery, but is rather concerned with its effects on the African American psyche. In 1873, slavery was abolished in Cincinnati, Ohio for ten years. This is the setting in which Morrison places the characters for her powerfully moving novel. Sethe, a black woman of extraordinary power, is the heroine of this novel who is willing to sacrifice not only to gain her own emancipation, but also to prevent her children from falling under the yoke of forced servitude. Sethe, 13 year old child, who seems older than her age, of unnamed slave parents, arrives at Sweet Home, an idyllic plantation in Kentucky operated by Garner, an unusually humane master, and his wife, Lillian.

Toni Morrison has vividly portrayed the condition of Sethe in *Beloved*. The cruel situations of the plantations at Kentucky is painfully narrated in her novel. The slave women are immersed in physical and emotional fetters of life. The position of Sethe is very pathetic. Even the escape from slavery was not really for herself. Her swollen breasts and the baby ticking within pressed her onward to the baby waiting for her milk. Biological necessity made her create a life that would allow her children to grow up. Sethe carries *Beloved* on her conscience and in her heart. For the mother, the dead child is maternity in potentia, the mother truncated.

Sethe mentions the fact about her mother who was a slave too who worked in indigo field from dawn to nightfall. In fact, her mother was hanged. She recalls that many slaves were killed along with her mother, and that Nan, a one-armed black governess, took over the role of parent and taught Sethe her mother's native dialect. In this respect, Morrison reveals that Sethe has lost the sense of motherhood. During this period, Sethe selected Halle Suggs to be her mate. They got married while she was 18, and bears him three children: Harrow, Bulgar and Denver. The slaves Paul D., Paul A, Sethe and Sixo lived in a farm ruled by the benign

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Garners, a childless couple. After the death of Garner, his wife turns control of the plantation over to her brother-in-law, the school master, who proves to be a brutal overseer. The situation has been described by the writer to reveal the unbearable case of their lives. She expresses: There had been four of them who belonged to the farm, Sethe the only female. Mrs. Garner, crying like a baby, had sold his brother to pay off the debts that surfaced the minute she was widowed. Then school-teacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight. As a result, the harmony of the farm was destroyed by the inhumane behaviour of the schoolteacher who forced the slaves to desperate measures of flight and rebellion. Hence, Sethe, tries to reveal the cataclysmic situation of torture, horror and bad memories for trying to escape the plantation.

Sethe and her daughter, Denver, reside in a haunted two-storey house at Bluestone Road outside Ohio. As a matter of fact, her house was once a way station. Historically, the way station was a treasured salvation for ex-slaves who lacked food, clothing, and safe passage among the whites. The way station also served as a postal centre, and message drop. Chance meetings with other wayfarers sometimes reunited them with friends and loved ones. In addition, the way station provided a warm, dry and safe rest stop along the wearying road away from slavery. Sethe's description of the assault was straightforward; she told Paul D very succinctly the roughness and cruelty of those white people especially the two white boys--the schoolmaster's nephews who beat her while she was pregnant with Denver injuring her so badly that her back skin had been dead for years. She refers to the station as follows: Those boys came in there and took my milk, that's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it.... School-teacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. They used cowhide on me and they took my milk they beat me and I was pregnant. And they took my milk. (B, 17)

On the other hand, we notice that she was very anxious about the feeling of Beloved, her murdered child. She stated "Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now" (B, 170). But later on, it seems to us that Sethe tries to justify her deed by saying or declaring that "If I had not killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (B,175). As a matter of fact, a mixture of motherhood images roils in Sethe's tangled internal monologue. Being the victim of slavery, Sethe often thought about her daughter and had lived with her daughter's ghost for years. Being inferior to others, Sethe thinks that this feature is the best way to save her child from slavery, from being treated just like an animal. For her, it is a natural right to protect her child from the apparition of slavery, while on the other hand, it is something against the law of nature. Hence, Morrison alludes to an important idea at that time when Sethe's picture appeared in a white newspaper. News about blacks does not normally appear in white papers unless something terrible enough has occurred to capture the white reader's interest. Just as it is unnatural for the white community to acknowledge any blacks, it is unnatural for a black community made up of ex-slaves not to protect their own from white slave catches. That is what happened on the day Sethe tried to murder her child.

In that place, the beating she received for freeing her children cost her a piece of tongue that she bit off when the

lash opened the skin on her back. She recalled her humiliation at hearing the schoolmaster instructing his nephews to catalogue her human traits and her animal traits. The author mentioned that "the picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water" (B, 6). The realization that Buglar and Howard would soon be larger enough for schoolmaster to sell disturbed her sleep. She, in turn, congratulated herself for managing to save her children from slavery. In place of harmony, Sethe rewarded herself with the satisfaction that she succeeded in rescuing her children from whipping, lynching, starvation, and sale. Not only was Sethe the victim of the brutal white society, but also the victim of her husband. She suffered from her husband who was supposed to be her protector from the external world. Here, Halle, the husband, mistreated her. He, to a certain extent, let the schoolmaster's nephew to steal her breast milk while he was hidden in the barn loft. Traumatized by his wife's suffering, Halle eventually lost his mind because "it broke him" (B, 69). Being a victim of slavery, Sethe was deprived even from a natural right as a living human being when she naively requested a marriage service to honour her union with Halle. Here, it is worth mentioning that slaves do not have the same type of marital conventions as white. Finally, she enjoyed her brief honeymoon in Mr. Garner's cornfield. The plight of slavery will shift from Sethe to Paul D Garner, a former slave from Sweet Home who survived the horrors of slavery and had evolved into a resourceful, contemplative man. He pondered his servitude after schoolmaster took over the management of Sweet Home the slave realized that they had nurtured a false sense of security. Paul D. has undergone terrible, dehumanizing experiences which had toughened him and made him nearly impervious to hardship and pain. Morrison reminds us of his toughness when she describes his working conditions at the slaughter we know by now, is not a man who is easily shocked. He is horrified, terrified by the nature of Sethe's crime and by her inability to comprehend why her actions were wrong. His entrance into Sethe's life represented the potential for a happier future for her and Denver. The writer reflects the ill-treatment and the dehumanizing of those black people especially Paul D. who relives the savage treatment that he endured while shackled to ten other slaves and transported to a brutal prison for the crime of threatening to kill Brandywine, the man who bought him from schoolmaster after the attempted escape from Sweet Home. Eighty-six days into his sentence, Paul D. and the other prisoners, chained together and threatened with suffocation under a mud slide, dived beneath their cell's restraining bars and escaped. The prisoners fled to a Cherokee Camp, where native Americans fed them mush and released them from their leg irons. Those black people could comfort each other by applying fingers and hands as a kind of tangible blessing. As a matter of fact, those characters were incapable of obliterating the hurtful memories of enslavement. Here, we notice that Paul D. suffered from the bad memories of his experience that he was stifled by an iron bit as he waited for transportation to Camp in Alfred, Georgia. Paul D. informed Sethe that the worst of being captured by schoolmaster was the glare of mister, the deformed rooster that he helped hatch from his shell. He declared confession of pain and degradation. The

bestial image of mister, the regal rooster, smiling from his tub, destroyed Paul D's remaining sense of humanity as he waited to be carted off to prison. He was stripped of his human dignity and treated like an animal. He mourned the man of Sweet Home, "one crazy, one sold, one missing, one hurt, and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me" (B,195). Schoolmaster struggled to take Paul D. alive but eventually determined that Sixo was of no use to Sweet Home. He, in a very savage way, lit a fire and roasted Sixo who was tied at the waist to a tree, then the schoolmaster shot Sixo to quiet his singing to his unborn child; They came to capture,... By the light of the homing fire Sixo straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs.... His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes. He laughs. Something is funny. Paul D. guesses what it is when Sixo interrupts his laughter to call out, "Seven-O! seven-O!" (B, 226)

Both of them, Sethe and Paul D were dehumanized during their slave experiences; their responses to the experience differed due to their different roles. She suffered a lot, her separation from her husband and the trauma of a severe lashing caused her to be a miserable woman. Hence, the arrival of Paul D. offered a serious challenge to the permanence of Sethe's suspended life, for within hours of his arrival, his presence had inspired Sethe not only to recite details of her traumatic past, but also to mourn that past: "may be this one time she could remind the baby girl Sethe killed come in the form of a mirror shattering, tiny handprints appearing on a cake, and a pool of red light undulating in front of a door" (B, 204). Beloved herself is the traumatic past in bodily form. Morrison links her not only to the murdered baby, but also to the other experiences of trauma that Sethe as well as the other community members, lived through during slavery and middle passage. Once Sethe believes that Beloved is her baby returned to flesh, she thinks she has been freed from the pain of that trauma "I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back them" (B, 79). She thinks, recalling her daughter's death "now I can, I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She came back to me, my daughter, and she is mine" (B, 204). Because she is living with the embodiment of her catastrophic past, Sethe is being smothered; her life revolves entirely around her past.

Not only does Sethe suffer from the nightmares of her past life and what she did, but we see that her living daughter, Denver, suffers from the same trouble or effect. Denver, a solitary child-woman, takes refuge in a circle of box-wood shrubs and inhales the fragrance of cologne. Sethe makes plain to Paul D. that Denver is the centre of her life and the sole concern of her daily existence. Although Denver has never been lived as a slave, she suffers from the ramification or complication of her mother's experiences and the magnitude of discovery caused her to withdraw from the community and to retreat into the sheltered but unhealthy Denver; after the death of Baby Suggs, she lost her trust, even in herself because Baby Suggs played an important role to lead Denver to the right path. Baby Suggs, the spiritual guide, taught her to appreciate and love her own body. Now, the hope of Denver's future is Beloved, who returns to fill the emptiness left by Sugg's death. It is worth mentioning that the intrusion of Paul D. helps Sethe and Denver to forget their terrible life, but that visitor who is the embodiment of Sethe's daughter, Beloved, destroyed their

harmony. In this respect, Beloved embodies not just the spirit of the child Sethe killed but also all of the past pain and suffering from which Sethe and Denver have never been able to escape. Thus Beloved is their voice and their experience. Here, Morrison shows us that Beloved is a multifaceted character: she is the ghost of a child, the ghost of the nameless slaves, the ghost of a terrible but inescapable past. Sethe and Denver will have to learn to overcome Beloved's power, the power of the past- before they can create a life for themselves in the future. Like Sethe, Denver examines her seclusion which is made bearable now by the company of her ghostly sister. Isolated and longing for sisterly communion, Denver loves this visitor saying that "she is mine, Beloved. She is mine" (B, 125). Serving a self-imposed sentence of nameless fear, alienation, and yearning, Denver retreats to the "secret house," the green chapel that shuts out the hurt. Denver prefers to cling to the presence of the ghost of Beloved and resenting Paul D.'s intrusion into her and her mother's lives. In this sense, Paul D, the intruding male figure in a female-dominated environment, disturbs Denver. So, after three days, she demands to know whether Paul D intends to stay or not. Paul D. knows enough of the past-slavery era to realize that it is dangerous for "a used to- be slave woman to love anything that much" (B, 272).

After Beloved disappears, Sethe becomes immersed in her mourning. Paul D reminds her that there is life beyond their pain: "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (B, 273). She refocuses on herself by asking "me? me?" Knowledge is the path toward recovery; thus Morrison focuses the end of the novel upon the possibilities of healing and future happiness for the black community, and in particular, for Sethe and Paul D.

Throughout the novel, the characters have been emotionally crippled by their pasts. The mental and the spiritual wounds caused by slavery are still fresh and have not been allowed to heal. They endure severe indignities, degradation, dehumanization and suffering under the law, and are consistently victims of prejudice from American society.

Sethe, the heroine, cannot overcome her outrage and sense of violation from her Sweet Home experiences, nor can she work through the guilt she feels about her daughter's death. Although Sethe and Paul D. are both dehumanized during their slavery experiences by the inhumanity of the white people, their responses to the experience differ due to their different role. Sethe managed to create her own family with Paul D. Within her psyche, she is a new and a different woman. Thus, Sethe's process of healing in Beloved, her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right where we live. On the other hand, we have Paul D. who initially appeared to be a normalizing force in Sethe's and Denver's lives. His entrance into their private lives signalled the beginning of a healthy relationship for Sethe and the introduction of a father figure for Denver.

Here, Toni Morrison posits that the black community as a whole must attempt to heal from the trauma of slavery and the middle passage by mourning the past. Moreover, she believes that community can heal the spiritual crisis of individuals. The end of the novel also emphasizes that happiness may be found in looking towards the future, rather they remained mired in the past.

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