

TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED: AN ANALYSIS

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He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers. "Me? Me?"

As a prolific writer, activist, professor, speaker and a Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Toni Morrison is one of the well-acclaimed African-American writers. Her works navigate the experience of black people living in America in the past and contemporary times. Having been brought up surrounded by black culture, Morrison has always embraced it with pride which is greatly visible in her works. A sense of belonging to a culture, a community and a people has been central to her writings. She offers a political and social critique on the issue of race and identity by discussing the psychological conflicts related to selfhood. Her first novel, *The Blue Eye* (1970), gives the account of a young African-American girl, Pecola Breedlove, who believes that she would have an incredibly better life if only she could have blue eyes. Her Pulitzer Prize winner *Beloved* (1987) explores similar concerns of the black people and their experience in America.

Set after the American Civil War, *Beloved* was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, a former slave, who escaped slavery in Kentucky by fleeing to Ohio, a free state. Morrison read about her in the American Baptist published in 1856 as "A visit to the Slave Mother who Killed her Child." As a novel of love, community and the supernatural, *Beloved* explores the importance of identity with relation to memory and history. The plot of the novel revolves around the character of Sethe, (based on Margaret Garner) who, as a former slave escaped the perils of slavery at a

great cost. She risks her life and that of her family to get them to safety and freedom because that was the only way to survive. As a result of this, she chooses death for her daughter by slitting her throat as opposed to giving her the life of a slave. As a result of her actions and her experiences, she is haunted literally and metaphorically by the ghosts of her past.

As a modernist writer, Morrison has been compared to William Faulkner and James Joyce and has been credited to bringing the African American literature and culture into the consciousness of the mainstream audience. Her novels are complex and absorbing, making it difficult to categorize. The multiple narratives in *Beloved*, for instance, brings out the characteristics of realism. The narration happens in fragments resonating the reality of various layers of human interaction, contributing to the realistic effect of the novel and yet, the presence of the ghosts of infant *Beloved* and adult *Beloved* brings it closer to the supernatural, and thus, away from reality. The novel can also be seen as a bildungsroman where Sethe and Paul D begin to discover their self-worth and identity. It is further considered to be a historical novel because it is based on a historical incident and experience. The dedication itself, "Sixty Million and More," suggest the link to the history that the black community has endured.

Morrison intends on creating a canon for African American literature that is similar to the Western tradition but stands in its complete opposition. The characterization as well as language further contributes to this distinction, making the text stand out. The character of the novel, particularly Sethe, must do away with the prejudice and judgment that has been internalized in them by the dominant

section and subscribe to their values and culture for answers.

Morrison uses a more feminine way of writing similar to the semiotic language that the French feminist Julia Kristeva talked about. There is a certain free play of language with fluidity to words and sentences that lack control. This play with language also distinguishes her writings in the face of the Western canon. The lack of punctuation and a 'un-structured' sentence pattern loaded with intense emotion contributes to the effect of fluidity. Language portrays a significant mark of resistance becomes an important tool for creating the African American Literature canon that Morrison aims to achieve.

"There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

(No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear)

The backdrop of the bloody history of racial degradation may make *Beloved* a novel about slavery, but it is more about the challenges and experience of Sethe and other characters, who, even after being free, are still hung up in their past. Through Sethe, we don't just learn about the dehumanizing of black people, but also the situation of black women slaves who are further exploited, assaulted and degraded. Sethe's account of getting the writing on the headstone for her dead daughter is on such instance where she had to sell her body to get those seven letters on the tombstone. What is remarkable is that Sethe is not seen to be upset about what happened to her body but about the fact that she couldn't get "Dearly Beloved" on top of it.

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half-hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. (Part I page5)

Morrison presents the exploitation of the female body in both a physical and a psychological way. The 'stealing' of her milk, for instance, during her rape and the tree on her back that she got as a result of her resistance brings out the physical and psychological trauma she endures. Motherhood becomes central to Sethe's identity, leaving no space for her individuality. Morrison's emphasis on this enhances the importance she lays upon the individual more than the various roles he/she/ others may be subjected to. The scars on her body and mind hold her down from moving on in her life. Her guilt and remorse for her dead child further lead to her entrapment in the past. Her strong sense of motherhood comes to her before her sense of womanhood as well as personhood. Her past, her guilt, her trauma and her sense of loss drive her actions her present which ultimately leads to the exit of her sons, and later Paul D. Her desperate actions are also condemned by the community which further leads to her exclusion. Her actions her inability to do away with the ghost of her daughter stems from her guilt and love for Beloved, who never received her mother's love.

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em.

Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was pregnant?"

"And they took my milk!" (Part I, pages 19, 20)

The character of Beloved, then, becomes the epitome of the past and present entwined in a single consciousness. She is a baby in the physical form of a woman, who seeks the love and support of her mother who killed her as a desperate gesture of her

mother. Sethe herself could never experience the love of her mother whose true face she never saw due to her distorted smile from having spent too much time with the “bit.” This could, perhaps, be seen as a reason why she did not know how to connect with her children.

If the effects of slavery on women have had a two-fold impact, it has also created a crisis of identity for men in their experience with masculinity. Where on the one hand Morrison depicts the struggles and exploitation of women and their body, she further highlights the masculine conventions that become very toxic for men. Halle, for instance, like many others, cannot ensure the safety of his wife and family, because he is simply not able to do so. The idea of possession and ownership is central to one’s masculinity. As slaves, when a man has absolutely no authority and ownership of even self, let alone others, it becomes a serious problem for their identity.

The end of the novel is symbolic for the hopeful message that Morrison gives out. With all the various turns and narratives, we see how difficult life is for Sethe, Paul D, Denver and others. They struggle to deal with their present, memory and history. They struggle to maintain a functional relationship among the family. They struggle to find their self-worth and identity. the long dialogue between Sethe and Beloved in the third part of the novel gives a sense of acceptance for the bond that exists between them which gives a sense of long due closure to the reader. The last dialogue between Paul D and Sethe that leads to the ultimate realization of the ‘self’ finally embodies the essence of the novel making it a text not just about history or race or love or identity or freedom, but a journey that encompasses all.

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