



The Condition of Black Women in American Society in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

As a Black writer, Toni Morrison understands the historical injustices faced by African Americans, which caused great suffering, especially for Black women during slavery. *Beloved*, written in the early 1980s and published in 1987, explores the painful legacy of slavery in America. The novel brings attention to important historical events, including the American Civil War (1861-1865), which primarily involved the issue of slavery. While slavery existed long before the war, the Northern states aimed to end it, while the Southern states fought to keep it. Ultimately, the North won, leading to the official end of slavery. President Abraham Lincoln opposed slavery and issued the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. This declaration stated that "all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states are, and henceforth shall be free." Yet, despite this significant announcement, the mental and social wounds of slavery continued to affect African Americans, particularly Black women, who still bear the weight of this history. Morrison's work addresses the challenges faced by Black people in both the past and present. However, she purposely avoids direct criticism of white society. Her main goal is not conflict but rather the exploration and affirmation of Black identity and experience. *Beloved* is inspired by a real incident Morrison found while researching African American history. She discovered a newspaper clipping titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child," which told the story of Margaret



Garner. This heartbreaking event forms the basis of the novel. Through *Beloved*, Morrison portrays the struggles of countless enslaved Black women in America. The novel touches on themes such as identity crisis, the search for freedom, sexual exploitation, brutal rape, and objectification of women, gender inequality, racial oppression, and the degrading effects of slavery. Black women are depicted as victims of ongoing physical, psychological and emotional abuse. White supremacy, enforced through violence and verbal abuse, leads to the systematic oppression of Black women. This research aims to highlight the terrible situation of Black women in American society as shown in *Beloved*. It seeks to reclaim and voice a silenced history that was intentionally buried, distorted, and hidden, giving recognition to the true suffering of African Americans in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Morrison has depicted the harsh reality of the black women in the novel *Beloved*. Being herself a black and belonging to the same community she is aware of the shoddy conditions in which poor blacks are forced to live. She has used various literary techniques that combine both modern and post-modern innovations along with the stream of consciousness to dive deep in the minds of her characters to reveal their free association of thoughts. *Beloved* is a story about a mother, where “mothers are expected to create life” but in this novel a mother kills her own daughter out of extreme love for her, to save her child from the brutal act of slavery. “Slavery” was a brutal act where one human being was owned by another. The whole command of a person’s life was in control of someone else hand. Sethe is the central figure of the novel, she has been humiliated, victim of mammary (breast) rape, she had suffered the horrible experiences of being a slave, the novel also drains Sethe’s physical, emotional and economic trauma. Morrison has inserted various quotes as epigraphs in the novel to illumine the important aspects of the story which head us in right direction. “Sixty million and more” is Morrison’s first epigraph which refer to the number of slaves killed from the time of the ‘middle passage’ (refers to the part of the trade where Africans were densely packed into ships and were transported from one country to another). Morrison in her writings provides true evidences of the horrendous crimes like slave trade, genocide, etc. Through her first brief epigraph she has tried to remind the readers about the frightening dark history of the slaves. The narrative meanders back and forth through the consciousness of the various characters sufferings.



The novel *Beloved* is Morrison's fifth novel, in the beginning of the novel we are introduced to the main character Sethe along with her eighteen years old daughter Denver. They both are living in a haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio. The grandmother named Baby Suggs have died because she was old. She had six husbands and eight children in total. Slave women were sold; they were forced to make many physical relations with numerous men and were strained to produce many children, so that when they grow up they are sold to other owners. All of her children except Halle were taken from her and sold to other slave owners. The male or the female characters both in the novel are affected by the horror of identity crisis or the lack of identity. Slaves were in large number, it was difficult for the slave owners to remember their names, they were not called by their names, and rather they were given numbers or alphabets. Enslaved people in America before the civil war were branded by tattoos and they also wear certain tags in their ears, they were branded on their foreheads to show their inferior status. The tattoos contain their own names or the name of the dominus (owner). If a single needle or a pin gets pricked in any of our body parts we feel immense pain but the slave women were forcefully made to bear that pain on their foreheads. They were not treated as humans rather as objects. Tattooing tends to be a very painful procedure. The injections or the needles cause localized swelling and damage to the skin, the area where the tattoo is made it becomes sore and leaves a permanent mark. One day, Paul D a slave who worked along with Sethe in Sweet Plantation (Kentucky) comes to meet her. His arrival brings back memories for Sethe. She got the flashbacks of other African slaves who worked with her in Sweet Home including her mother in law (Baby Suggs), her husband (Halle), and the three Paul's (A, F and D). She remembers about the schoolteacher who was an atrocious man who gained all the control and management of the plantation field and all the slaves. She narrates her past story to Paul D of her escape from the plantation field. She begins with explaining that she was nine months pregnant when she fled from Sweet Home, and she gave birth in between because of the physical exhaustion. A white woman named Amy Denver helped her while giving the birth and she named her baby girl after her name "Denver". There Sethe gets united with her three older children whom she had sent ahead while the escape. Sethe decides to stay behind and look for Halle her husband whom she loves deeply, but unfortunately she was caught by the schoolteacher's nephews who held her down and brutally raped her, that day she became the victim of "mammary (breast, milk-secreting organ) rape" those nephews sucked the milk out of her breasts and stole her baby's milk, then they whipped her back terribly that in present times the scars are still visible. After all this Sethe could not imagine her children to grow up in slavery and suffer the same as her mother; therefore she slits one of her baby girl's throat who was less than two years old and sentenced her to death. Critics believe that she killed her daughter out of extreme love for



her. But after killing her daughter her sufferings did not come to an end. She wished to arrange a funeral or a burial for the baby; she purchased a headstone to engrave the name “Dearly Beloved”. She has prostituted herself for the pink headstone; she was able to afford only one word “Beloved” engraved on the headstone because in order to pay the engraver, she had ten minutes of sex with him in front of his young son. Sethe had been physically abused many times in her life, when the engraver asked for the fee in the form of sex to engrave the name, she did not have any strength left in her body to suffer the trauma. However she managed herself and was able to engrave only one word “Beloved” in love of her daughter. Paul D is pained to hear her story and thinks about her back life where she became pregnant every year after marrying Halle. Sethe was also thrown down to prison for three months, for her act of murdering her infant child. Sethe did not want any of her children to suffer, torture, ignominy, rape and brutality if the slave was a girl or woman. The female slaves were cruelly branded on the chest so that their owners could always recognize them. The symbol from which they were branded was (a circle with a cross). Sethe’s mother was also a slave, she remembers very little about her mother but the symbols are very clear to her in the mind. Her mother was hanged and sentenced to death along with many other slaves; she could rarely identify her mother by looking onto the mark under her mother’s chest. We can understand Sethe psychological trauma through her painful words, when she said “what I know is terrible”. Through this sentence she is making the readers aware, that she has analyzed her experiences of being a slave woman and she had a strong desire to keep her four children away from the dehumanizing effect of slavery. Sethe kills one of her daughter out of extreme motherly love and protection. Her past memories of the brutality which she herself suffered haunts her even after eighteen years. Her everyday life is being hampered because of her past traumas that cannot be easily eradicated. “Sigmund Freud” was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of the world famous psychoanalysis theory for articulating mental illness, understanding the sub consciousness and repressed emotions in a human being, to understand to abnormalities and etc. He is also regarded as the father of psychology. In the novel *Beloved* in Sethe’s character we find that she has repressed her traumatic experiences from the past. According to Freud people tend to repress or drive from their conscious minds containing shameful thoughts, which is stored in their unconscious mind because they are afraid to say or express it publicly. Sethe’s is raped numerous times, beaten unstopably and many other experiences of her are really horrifying for the readers to digest, especially the information about “Beloved’s” death. It is essential to note that some of the critics have researched and given significance to the numbers mentioned in the first chapter. 124 Bluestone Road where Sethe lives, when we do the sum of the numbers 1,2 and 4 the result is seven, the name beloved engraved on Sethe’s baby tomb also contain seven letters. Bible is the holy book for



Christians and number seven has its own significance in the holy book. Number seven denotes “fullness” or “completeness”, it is believed that god the almighty has created the world in seven days. As a result the seventh day has become the most auspicious day, which today is also known as the “Sabbath day” among Christians. When we move further into the novel we find the description of Baby Suggs life who is Sethe’s mother in law. Being a slave her motherhood was compromised, they were treated worse than the animals, she married many men and had number of children but, at the end all were sold to slave owners except his one son Halle, he was very close to his heart. Mothers always influence their children to live happy lives and contribute their best in society, but the delight of being a mother was snatched away from her. They are the most selfless people on the planet; they begin to love their children even before when they are born. It is the purest form of love one can experience; they can be regarded as the guardian angels for their children. But being a slave they are mothers suffer from malnutrition, the babies are born weak and unhealthy, some die in the hands. The women are the most sentimental creatures on the earth, gazing at their lifeless babies who died out of malnutrition while giving birth fill their hearts with extreme grief. The slaves are not even recovered from the trauma of their baby’s death; then again they are forcefully raped, and are made pregnant to produce more and more babies every year to sell in the markets. One of the statements of Baby Suggs is really important where she says “A man is nothing but a man”. Being a female slave she only knew two types of men in her entire life: the white slave owners who brutally raped and abused her, who includes her own husband as well because he was helpless, powerless, and coward who failed as a husband to help her in anyways and could not remain by her side. The elaborated description of baby Denver’s birth, that she has being born from a vaginal-shaped canoe adds to the motif of genital images. It signifies that the river where Sethe gave birth divides slavery and freedom. The act shows complete devotion of Sethe as a mother. These are the painful memories which Sethe has been beholding throughout. Further in the novel we are again given a vivid description of Sethe’s psychological trauma which affected her health. At times, when she was a young slave girl who was separated from her parents, one day someone pointed out her mother to her for the first time, her urinary bladder fills to capacity, and she has to run around to relieve herself. In this chapter we are introduced to a new character, when Sethe, Denver and Paul D returned home from the carnival which held in their town, they discover a woman who was shivering from being wet and drowsing on the stump of tree. When she got close to the woman to see her face she was shocked and it was hard for her to believe her eyes. Immediately that time her bladder again fills to capacity, and she has to run around the back of her house to relive herself. She peed for so long that she is reminded of breaking of water before a baby is born. Paul D and Denver have taken the woman inside their house and given her water to



drink and quench her thirst. In a very low and rough voice the woman introduces herself saying that her name is “BELOVED”. Sethe notices her flawless skin, it was wrinkle free. The only thing that questions her beauty was a series of three vertical scratches on her forehead. The arrival of Beloved is symbolically the return of Sethe’s past. Denver asks her mother to narrate the stories from the past. She asks Sethe that why her mother was hanged. Sethe answered that she never knew the reason, and mentioned that there were several slaves hanged at the same time. She remembered the dreadful image of the pile of corpse in her mind

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