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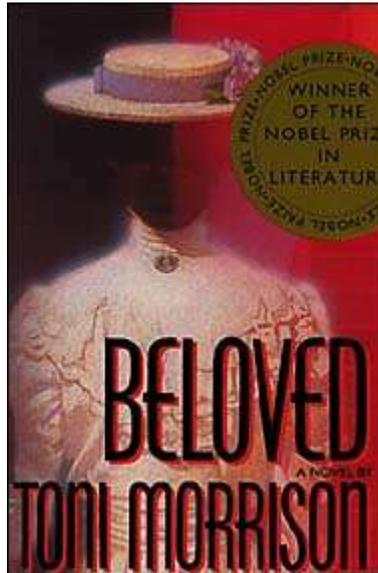
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The Ghost of Slavery: Individual and communal Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988) highlights the importance of confronting, reclaiming and transforming history, and it points to the healing potential of memory. In her novel, Morrison shows what slavery did to black people bodies and minds; what it meant for them to be owned by somebody else as well as the difficulties of claiming ownership of oneself. What is very specific for this story is the mark of alienation that slavery left for African-Americans. Morrison rewrites the life of the historical figure Margaret Garner (1856), who killed her child to prevent her recapture into slavery. John Hope Franklin describes the way that Slave Codes embodied the repressive culture of slavery, almost completely denying personal wholeness (124). These laws forbade marriage, free mobility, self-defence, and a host of other activities among slaves.

Key Words: Slavery, Memory, Depersonalization, Identity, Horrible effects of slavery

Beloved examines the connection between an enslaved past and the distortion of identity. Slavery, after all, was a system predicated on dehumanizing and impersonalizing human beings; the system was called for the crushing of the language, family names, culture, and tribal history of the slaves. The enslaved Afro-Americans were treated like objects and were “moved around like checkers” with no respect to filial relationships (*Beloved* 23). In fact, most enslaved Afro-Americans were treated worse than animals. Barbara Schapiro states that “the worst atrocity of slavery, the real horror the novel exposes, is not physical death but psychic death” (156).

Under times of slavery, blacks were not allowed to have a sense of self, a sense of individuality or self-worth. The dehumanization which Sethe and Paul D experience as slaves causes them to lose their sense of self-worth and leaves them questioning their existence as humans. These characters do not refuse to look back. Their history haunts them until they finally reconstruct the pieces of themselves and, in the process, embrace love. The ghost in *Beloved* represents the psychological effects of the experiences of slavery repressed by Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and other characters in the novel.

Beloved, The Baby Ghost

Morrison gives Sethe's dead daughter the distinctive name everyone privately gives to their most beloved; her name is the same as the only word inscribed on the headstone of Sethe's dead daughter, and when Sethe first sees her, her water breaks (*Beloved* 52). Beloved also appears to be the age Sethe's daughter would be if she were alive, “nineteen or twenty,” but she acts as though she is the age she was when she was killed, “like a two-year-old” (*Beloved* 55, 98). For Sethe Beloved is her resurrected “crawling-already” girl. The community also believes that Beloved is the reincarnated ghost of Sethe's daughter. Not only the characters accept the presence of ghosts without question, but Sethe tells Denver that “nothing ever really dies” (*Beloved* 37) and another character states that “people who die bad don't stay in the ground” (187), a traditional African belief (Hurston 280).

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Memory

One of the reasons Sethe is so overjoyed by the resurrection of her daughter is that it relieves her of the need to explain the past and relive her actions, “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (*Beloved* 183). Sethe explains her experience of time and “rememory,” “Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world . . . even if I die, the picture of what I did, or know, or saw is still out there” (*Beloved* 35-36). She says to Denver, “Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real” (*Beloved* 36).

The Loss of Motherhood

And though the plot turns upon the loss of a child, this history-as-daughter’s-rememory is pervaded with grief for lost mothers, *Beloved*’s aching desire for Sethe; Sethe’s mourning for Baby Suggs, and Sethe’s loss of her own mother, remembered in excruciating fragments, a hat in the rice fields, a scar under her breast (*Beloved* 61). Missy Dehn Kubitschek makes the insightful comment that “beneath Sethe’s passionate commitment to motherhood lies an equally passionate desire to be mothered, to be a daughter to her mother” (170). This multiple mourning for mothers inscribes the tragic experience of Afro-American children and women under slavery.

Maternal Milk, Sethe’s Personal Misery

Sethe tells Paul D very succinctly when she goes to the barn to look for Halle, her personal misery continues when the milking occurs. One of schoolteacher’s nephews beat her while she was pregnant with Denver, injuring her so badly that “her back skin had been dead for years” (*Beloved* 18). Sethe narrates thus:

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. Then 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!” (*Beloved* 17)

The milk is the only gift Sethe has for her children, a symbol of her motherhood, “Milk was all I ever had” (*Beloved* 195). “Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children,

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who have travelled to Baby Suggs's house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself" (Field 3). Therefore, when recalling the incident eighteen years later to Paul D, the milking still causes her to weep. The theft of Sethe's milk is clearly traumatizing to her, for, as Schapiro writes, "she feels robbed of her essence, of her most precious substance, which is her maternal milk" (159).

Halle, A Broken Twig

Hiding in the barn, Halle sees the entire incident of the milking. The horror of viewing the consideration and treatment of his wife as animal breaks Halle. Like Sethe, it seems that Halle didn't want to see what was in front of him—he just "couldn't get out" in time (*Beloved* 72). Seth's womanhood is violated by the rape she has lived and her husband, the father of the owners of the "milk," observes and does not stop it. Not only would he be unable to free her from slavery, he was helpless to halt the process of brutality. Escape from the plantation was Halle's only other avenue for the salvation of his family and himself from slavery. Halle is last seen by Paul D "sitting by the churn . . . [with] butter all over his face" (*Beloved* 69).

White Angel

Sethe maintains her decision to run though she was six months pregnant. Just as she had given up all hope of life for herself or the baby, Amy Denver, a white girl, helps her. She aids in the birth and delivery of Sethe's baby, Denver, carefully wrapping her in the rags of her own skirt (*Beloved* 84). Sethe and her four small children came to live in freedom with Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs washes Sethe, soaks her feet, "grease[s] the flowering back," makes her a dress and drops just about anything to massage her neck when the weight of things remembered or forgotten was too heavy for her (*Beloved* 93).

The Main Misery of the Novel

When Schoolteacher arrives at 124 twenty-eight days after Sethe's escape, Sethe flies to the shed to demonstrate her claim to herself and her children, the property that schoolteacher seeks as his own. Sethe reflects on this time, "bit by bit, at 124 . . . she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that free self was another" (*Beloved* 95). She pushes her "best thing[s]", her children, into and over the veil; "[She] took and put [her] babies where they'd be safe" (164). Sethe's response when faced with returning to slavery and surrendering her children to that fate is "No. No. Nonno. Nonono" (*Beloved* 163). She cut her two-year-old daughter's throat with a saw, so that no "gang of whites [would invade] her daughter's private parts, [soil] her daughter's thighs" (*Beloved* 251). Commenting on Sethe's murder of her baby, Morrison says, "It was absolutely the right thing to do . . . but it's also the thing you have no right to do" (Rothstein 17).

Motherhood does not liberate Sethe. It limits her self-image and her capacity for agency. According to Carole Boyce Davies, Sethe's heroic response to enslavement paradoxically becomes the kind of mother-love that society enforces on women (54). Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape; that worse than death is the fact that "anybody white could take your whole self . . . [and] dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (*Beloved* 251). Pamela E. Barnett analyzes Sethe's actions as such, "For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and "dirtied" by whites; even dying at the hands of one's mother is subordinate to rape" (419).

Who is Responsible?

Although some of the others saw schoolteacher and his posse "nobody ran on ahead" to warn Sethe and Baby Suggs of the imminent danger (*Beloved* 157). Spite, malice and jealousy prevented them from alerting Sethe. Kristina K. Groover theorizes that here "the community fails to perform its role" (71), although Baby Suggs, known as an "unchurched preacher" (87) teaches them to love themselves through a hybrid sort of spirituality. She directs them to love each part of themselves, and of each other. That can only happen by honouring "the essential need . . . for *mutual* recognition" (157). The Cincinnati community of former slaves is indirectly responsible for Sethe's infanticide. As Melissa Walker says, it is "the collaboration of the black community with the conditions of slavery that led to the murder" (37).

The day before the main misery, Baby Suggs had hosted a party to celebrate the safe arrival of her daughter-in-law, the guests wake up the next day resentful and envious of Suggs for having had the audacity to be so free and generous. Elizabeth Kella suggests that the community perceives Baby Suggs' celebration as a threat to communal identity and a violation of exchange economy in making reciprocity impossible. She simply gave too much and therefore "offended them by excess" (Kella 138).

The Beginning of Isolation

Sethe's interpretation of love, saving her children from slavery through infanticide, indeed splits both she and Baby Suggs "wide open," breaking them both (*Beloved* 162). As Clenora Hudson-Weems states, both Sethe and Baby Suggs are consistent in their love and commitment to family; they both quest for wholeness through freedom (131). After a lifetime of resisting slavery and racism, Baby Suggs is beaten down, not only by the oppressive white society but by the failure of her own people, so that "her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse" (*Beloved* 109).

After the misery, Baby Suggs isolates herself in her room. Although she concludes that "there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks," the communal disjunction which led to the misery also contributed to her eventual heartbreak and death (*Beloved* 89). In her postmodernist reading of *Beloved*, April Lidinsky observes that Suggs's death "forms the brutally lucid index of

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the limitations of masculinist models of individualism, for she does not fail the collective in her loss of faith. Rather, her loss of faith stems from the collective's failure" (208).

The entire community then, and not just Sethe, was complicit in the misery. Indeed, as Walker points out, Sethe's infanticide cannot be isolated from the social context—"slavery itself and the public policies—the Fugitive Slave Act and lynching—that slavery engendered"—within which it occurs (39). The betrayal by the community is itself a twisted, inhumane response to the brutality of slavery. When Sethe emerges, under arrest, to head to the jailhouse, their feelings of animosity and their continued hesitance in freely giving love are displayed afresh. "In perceiving Sethe as a monster for having killed her child, the community projected its own guilt for its complicity in that act" (Winsbro 152). The continued hostility between Sethe and the black community serve as a barrier, which isolates her. Groover estimates "Sethe's self-isolation unforgivable" (70).

Beloved Reborn

124 is full of spite and venom. The baby's ghost is understood to be "evil," by Paul D, "sad," by Sethe, and "lonely and rebuked" by Denver (*Beloved* 13). The ghost reminds Sethe every day of the freshness of her past history. Although Sethe begins her day "working, working dough" as a means of "beating back the past," she cannot beat back the ghost (*Beloved* 73). This time Sethe's past refuses to be silent. She is trapped by her memories, "her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (*Beloved* 70). Judith Thurman points out that the impossibility of erasing the past is due to the fatal relationships which slavery produces. In fact, these relationships—master-slave, mother-child, etc.—are "what we experience as most sinister, claustrophobic and uncanny in the novel, and [they are] what drive home the meaning of slavery" (Thurman 179).

At the heart of *Beloved* are Denver's and Sethe's journeys toward self-definition and a newly constructed sense of self. *Beloved* does act as a catalyst for the liberation of Sethe and Denver from their years of isolation and of incomplete or distorted identity. Ralph D. Story discusses "Sethe's inner quest . . . for completeness; her destiny was to fulfil her promises as a mother: to love, to cherish, to protect, to teach and to give" (22). Sethe refuses to accept oppressive ways of living that do not allow her to love her children freely. Sethe with a fierce desire gives her children all that had been denied to her—mother's milk, freedom and love. In her role as mother, she loves, and thereby provides an example of resistance to oppression.

When Paul D drives the baby ghost out and then heads upstairs with Sethe, Denver resents his presence and ejection of "the only other company she had" (*Beloved* 19). *Beloved* is not only a ghost of Sethe's killed daughter, but also a symbol of the link between the present and the past. Therefore, through the recreation of the maternal bond, Sethe searches for her self-affirmation. It is not until *Beloved*'s physical arrival that Sethe is finally allowed to "re-examine her story with regard to sacrifice, resistance, and mother love" (Kella 129).

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Beloved seduces Sethe in to telling her story. Coming from the place of the dead, this ghost begs to have history told to her. Talking about the past is usually too painful for Sethe, but with Beloved, she finds herself enjoying the process. Winsbro observes that “Beloved’s spirit feeds off the stories told by and about Sethe because these stories define her own individual rather than collective identity” (136). 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 then,” she thinks, recalling her daughter’s death. “Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (*Beloved* 204). “Despite the characters’ efforts to diffuse the power of the past, the ghost baby, like the traumatic nightmare, intrudes on the present, forcing Sethe and Paul D to remember what they have tried unsuccessfully to forget” (Barnett 420). The baby girl, who has come again eighteen years later, is the actual characterization of Sethe’s psychological torments. She embodies Sethe’s “quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness” (Bell 8).

“Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken”

When Sethe discovers Beloved’s identity, she interprets her reappearance as a sign of forgiveness and in immense relief turns her back on the world and devotes herself to loving Beloved; she believes she is forgiven and given a second chance. Beloved wants to completely join with her mother. “Rather than illuminating the singular self, a mirrored unity is revealed, and the mother and daughter witness the singularity of their indivisible selves and their material and spiritual forms” (Washington 181). Beloved’s goal is for her and Sethe to be joined as one.

Sethe and her two daughters, now isolated and passionate trio have joined together, bound up through history, memory, love and motherhood. Katherine B. Payant sees the moment in the women’s lives as reunion between the mother and the sisters, thus emphasizing the positive aspect of the ghost’s appearance (199). Each speaks a monologue in turn, “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine;” “Beloved is my sister;” “I am Beloved and she is mine” (*Beloved* 200-210). Their voices then join in a fugue of woman-woman love, “You are my sister/ you are my daughter/ you are my face; you are me;” “I have your milk/ I have your smile/ I will take care of you;” “You are mine/ you are mine/ you are mine” (*Beloved* 216-17). The longings of all three may have created Beloved, “the ominous claim ‘mine’ reflects all three women’s claims on each other” (Kubitschek 169).

Beloved manages to separate Paul D from Sethe by moving him slowly from the house and seducing him against his will. Eventually, he is forced to give in to her order, “You have to touch me on the inside part and you have to call me my name” (*Beloved* 117). Barnett links her to the succubus, “a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen” (418). In some supernatural way, she effectively rapes Paul D. Beloved moves Paul D out of the house just as Paul D had chased the baby ghost out of 124 Bluestone. In fact, it is Paul D’s own fear of facing his past that displaces him.

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Maternal Love

Playing and interacting with Beloved becomes the centre of Sethe's focus, first to the exclusion of her job and then to the exclusion of Denver, "she cut Denver out completely. Even the song that she used to sing for Denver she sang for Beloved alone" (*Beloved* 240-41); "Excluded from the Beloved-Sethe dyad, Denver is forced into the role of the outside other and assuming that role is her salvation" (168). Beloved demands more and more from Sethe, while Sethe diminishes, so that it seems to Denver that "the thing was done," "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child . . . Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (*Beloved* 250). No matter how much Sethe explained, cried and sought to convince Beloved of her love for her, "Beloved denied it" (*Beloved* 242). However, after Sethe kills Beloved to prevent her from being taken into slavery and to put her somewhere where she would be safe, Beloved "vacillates between rapturous awe of her mother and pathological desire to destroy her" (Washington 183). Beloved may not want to completely destroy Sethe, but she does wish to strip Sethe of any individuality she may possess, or, as Teresa N. Washington states, "she wants the two of them to 'join' and return fully unified to the 'other side'" (183). The ownership love that drove Sethe's desperate action was now being enacted through Beloved's accusations and demands. "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that" (*Beloved* 251).

Denver's Self-Definition

When Denver sees her mother "spit up something she had not eaten," she leaves 124 to look for help and then work to support her mother, her sister and herself. She is encouraged by Baby Suggs spirit, which directs Denver to "go on out the yard. Go on," it is the "rememory of Baby Suggs that finally transforms isolation into a quest for help" (Lidinsky 210). Denver must go into the world to find some, and so begins to bring her haunted family back into its community and into time. Kubitschek points out that "Denver feels her potential to become a mother while simultaneously affirming her status as daughter" (171-72). Denver's new identity is an ideal blend of self-interest, personal responsibility toward Sethe, and a relationship with the greater black community. Groover summarizes this act as Denver's "rite of passage into womanhood" (74). It can also be viewed as a voyage into adulthood and self-recognition in the eyes of the community. In other words, Denver provides a developmental model of a person who escaped the threat of total alienation and became aware of her place in the social structure.

Female Solidarity

When the women of the town hear that Sethe's murdered baby has returned, they overcome their long time disgust and decide to save Sethe from Beloved's life-threatening abuse, "the past [was] something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (*Beloved* 256). Doreathe Drummond Mbalia comments on the unity and communal bonds inherent in this gesture; "Once the enemy is identified, once it is out in the open, the

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community struggles collectively against that which divides them” (91). Moreover, it is significant that the community is involved in the exorcism because Beloved represents the pain of slavery they all suffer in some way. Her story is the story of a whole community, a small narrative that overflows into a larger narrative. The women share the feelings function as a self-help group to fight back the trouble. Amy Binder sees the road to social change in “subjective negotiations of a sense of individual self and identification with a group that aim together at forming collective identity” (qtd. in Kella 37). Female solidarity also empowers the female protagonists to establish their own identity. Sethe’s *journey inside* in search of her own identity could not have taken place without the community’s reassessment.

Healing through Bonding

Thirty-strong women come together in a communal effort of their own; they march to the house and perform a collective exorcism:

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (*Beloved* 261)

Beloved disappears without a trace; by exorcising Beloved, the community exorcises the past, opening the way for the old harmony, inspired and nurtured by Baby Suggs (Winsbro 153). Sethe cannot heal herself; she needs the collective power of the community. Mbalia noted, “It is only through the collective will and the action of the people that Beloved, the enemy, dies” (91). Sethe now has an opportunity to redefine her identity on the basis of her cultural heritage. Despondent at Beloved’s departure, Sethe resigns herself to death; fully convinced that Beloved was “best thing” (*Beloved* 272). Sethe suffers from losing her child again and ends up a broken woman. She continues to deny herself the truth of her own self worth. “When you kill the ancestor,” Morrison said, “you kill yourself” (“Rootedness” 344).

End of Alienation

There is hope at the novel’s end when Paul D re-enters, as a Baby Suggs like figure, to wash Sethe, as Baby did when she had first arrived, and to call her to claim, to accept and to love herself. He tells her, “You your own best thing, Sethe. You are” (*Beloved* 273). Paul D “wants to put his story next to hers” and he tells Sethe, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). Healing allows Sethe to see that she is worthy of love—Paul D’s and her own. Sethe and Paul D look back to embrace their individual and communal history and move into a future where love is a real possibility. With Denver out in the world, Paul D by her side, the ghost chased out of her life, and the community of women ready to accept her back into their fold, Sethe’s life holds more possibilities than it ever has and offers a more “liberating vision of motherhood” (Kubitschek 165). All of them have a chance to leave the

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past behind and start again by focusing on the future. They are agents in each other's healing, and their relationship is intertwined with the community that surrounds them (Hudson-Weems 120).

Beloved is a fine illustration of the journey to self-reliance on a *communal* as well as *individual* level. The novel portrays successful development of the "black identity" in times when a black person is denied it. During the struggle for self-definition, Sethe and Denver learn to *self-possess* their own *selves*, and overcome the conviction of being someone else's *possession*. *Beloved* concludes with emphasis on the importance of communal participation in the processes of emotional and spiritual healing and stability. It delineates "the intrinsic value of collectivism to the African community" and risks of "isolation" both for the individual and "for the race" (Mbalia 88-90).

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