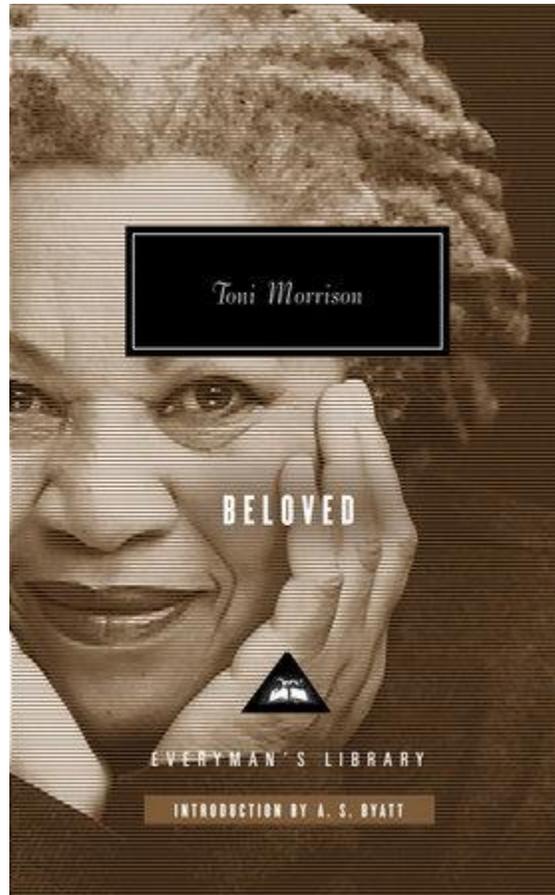


## Gender Discrimination in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

This article is a study of gender crisis in Toni Morrison's novel '*Beloved*'. It is the psychological study of black women who were oppressed in the hands of both white men and black men. It examines the black women's struggle to create an identity by tackling the whites as well as blacks. Gender discrimination, with its accompanying horrors, mutilated the backs and minds of slave women, defied their sexual feelings and scarred them psychologically for all time.

African American women are the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the white masters as well as the black men. They are slaves of slaves. This paper illuminates the black women relation not only to white master, white seducer but also to black father, black husband and black son. The African American women have to fight for survival both inside and outside their home. It further elaborates the suppression of black women by the patriarchal and traditional constraints. The analysis is based on Alice Walker's Womanism. This study is significant for its special focus on the works written by a black woman, her own cultural background, her presentation of female characters and their relation with one another and with male characters

## Introduction

Woman in a patriarchal society was the socially sanctioned 'other' and her psyche was the product of social constraints. As Simon de Beauvoir pointed out:

One is not born, but rather becomes woman....

It is civilization as a whole that produces this  
Creature, intermediate between male and  
Eunuch, which is described as feminine (16).

From the moment of birth, a female was constantly bombarded with social images, rewards and punishments that were designed to her. It ensured that she didn't develop any quality associated with the other half of humanity. She must be feminine and restricted herself to a 'woman's place'. It was the patriarchal civilization that defined woman as a most marginalized creature. Her definition and differentiation were always made to be in dependence on man. A woman was never considered as autonomous self, but as just incidental, the inessential and an appendage to man. She was considered as burden to the family.

The present article aims to examine the issue of gender identity and racism, faced by Black women and the ways in which they can break free of such issues as portrayed in her fifth novel *Beloved* (1987). My reading of Toni Morrison, for this article, examines the representation of black women and the mental stigma they harbored in their lives simply because of being a Black in the hands of whites and men.

To be black and female was to suffer from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and gender oppression. Being females, they were the victims of sexual atrocities in the hands of the white patriarchs as well as the blacks. Being former slaves, the white establishments forced them to live on meager resources and were compelled to remain poor. Sexism, with its accompanying horrors, mutilated the blacks and minds of slave women. The black women were scared psychologically for all time. Suffering in the hands of both black and white men, the African-American women had to fight for survival both inside and outside her house.

On the whole, the black women had the greater cause for grievance, being oppressed both as a black and a woman. It was her story which more vividly described that horrendous tale and its accompanying woes. The entire African-American community was condemned to endless

suffering. Yet the black woman's condition was worse than the black man's because "To be black and female was to be in Double Jeopardy" (Frances 90).

Black women, especially poor black women had suffered greatly in the black community because the black men had been insensitive to them as persons. They had embraced the values held by the white male culture of America. The black men had been socialized into male superiority. Black men's sexism plunged deep into the troubled waters of black male-female relationships. They were caught mercilessly in the narrow space where brutality and dehumanization were rampant. As Ahad said, "The sexism of black men was like pouring salt into the open wounds that racism cut into the souls of black women" (15).

Toni Morrison's novels were the literary counterparts of her community's oral traditions, which in the American life had become more and more the domain of women. Toni Morrison's novels reflected certain qualities of the community as well as her vision. In depicting the black life in her novels, Toni Morrison's approach was essentially allegorical, where nature and human being converse and where the images of the stories move to create their own structure and their own parables. She investigated the folk history of her characters, as they groped toward self-understanding. There was a thematic reflection of the pursuit of personal and societal wholeness. She analysed a major dilemma of black families, the relationship between one's responsibility for one's life and the restrictions of sexism and racism.

Morrison seemed to be at her best in documenting slavery and its aftermath. The treatment of slaves as beasts of burden and the sexual exploitation of African women by European men were depicted artistically. Sethe's trauma began when she was taken from her mother by a system of slavery that regarded the children as property and the adults as work animals that had no time for raising children. Sethe was raised in a communal environment by Nan. Since she was in charge of cooking and caring for all the slave children, she had no time to nurture them. Both Sethe's mother and Nan came as slaves from Africa during the middle passage. Being women, they had to endure unbelievable torture, for they were raped innumerable times. Their only means of resistance was to kill any child born out of such union and to refuse to put their arms around their rapists. The female slaves were also cruelly branded on the chest in order that their owners could always recognize and claim them. When Sethe's mother grabbed her daughter and showed her the brand on her chest, it was a sad commentary. Since Sethe had not been permitted to know her mother, Sethe's mother could not mark her identity for her daughter in anything but a brand that indicated that she was a slave.

Sethe was married to Halle, a slave who was trying to make his mother free. They had two sons and a daughter when they were in the plantation. The owner of the plantation was changed because of Mr. Garner's death. Mrs. Garner gave the charge to her brother-in-law, the School Teacher. The School Teacher and his nephews treated the slaves brutally. Before Garner's death, the rule of the plantation was if they paid the desired work to the plantation, they would be freed. Halle worked hard to free his mother, Baby Suggs. He paid the debt to Mr. Garner and freed his mother.

After Garner's death, the rule was changed. Halle found it difficult to pay the debt for his wife and three children. Halle, Paul D, Paul A, Sixo and Sethe planned to escape from the plantation. Thus, the story revolved around the impact of slavery on black people. The novel hinged on the death of Sethe's infant daughter, Beloved, who mysteriously reappeared as a sensuous young woman. Beloved's spirit came back to claim Sethe's love. Sethe struggled to make Beloved gain the full possession of her present. Sethe's experience was treated with many fundamental complexities in her quest for freedom.

On socio-psychological level, *Beloved* was the story of Sethe's quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. On mythic level, *Beloved* was a ghost story that framed narratives of the impact of class, race, sex on the capacity for love, faith and community of black families. In the novel Sethe was a victim of both sexist and racist oppression. She was a runaway slave woman, a slave mother who was brutally treated by white men, the School Teacher and his nephews. The most damaging effect of the dual oppression of black women, against which Morrison wrote, was murder of one's own child. Murder became Sethe's act of mother's love, which she explained saying "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (B 193). She preferred murdering her daughter, Beloved, to see her in bondage.

Sethe's awareness of black color and rejection of white-perceptions and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other slaves as non-human were synthesized with her black feminist sense of self-sufficiency. Sethe reconciled gender differences first with her husband, Hall Suggs. Later she lived with Paul D, painful and unattractive history of black women in the States where black women had always been mothers and laborers, mothers and workers. They had worked in the fields along with men.

They were required to do physical labor in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance/female subordination... Black women are both ship and safe harbor. (B 19)

Morrison juxtaposed isolated struggle with collective struggle and selfish individualism was conditioned by social responsibility.

In *Beloved*, most forms of isolation were based on gender. For instance, when Baby Suggs worked alone to feed the community, She was insulted by it:

Too much they thought. Where does she get it all Baby Suggs, holy? ... And loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone...Loaves of bread and fishes were his power. (B 136)

She worked for the community. But they refused to warn Baby Suggs that slave trappers were approaching, setting in motion, the conditions under which Sethe murdered Beloved:

The good news, however, was that Halle got married and had a baby coming [Baby Suggs]. She fixed on that and her own

brand of preaching, having made up her mind about what to do with the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio river. (B 147)

*Beloved* became the symbol by which African people were to ensure the devastating effect of isolation. Isolation literally tore apart the family. Denver's isolation in life, 124's isolation in the community, Beloved's isolation in death- all divided the African community and as a consequence, left it vulnerable to the oppression and exploitation of the slave society.

The life history of Sethe, was not less crucial and frightfully horrifying. She was a helpless victim of the slavery system. Poverty, hunger and destitution were causes of the black community that brought them down to their knees to obey their white masters who provided them food for their labor. Physical torture and sexual assaults were rampant, especially for young black women. Children were forcibly taken away from their mothers and were put to work somewhere. Sethe too was deserted from her mother and two sons, who were never retrieved. There were many events closely associated with her struggle to sustain and survive. These events included the death of her mother; her marriage with Halle; a whipping which almost killed her; her escape and refuge in the house of her mother-in-law; her recapture and the infanticide of her child; her period of imprisonment; the subsequent years in 124 house; her sons-Howard and Buglar-being driven away from there; her years in an all female household where the third member was a ghost-daughter.

Though the African American writers had highlighted in one way or another, the black experience in white America, Toni Morrison's work stood out because of its comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the Afro-American experience. She invented universally identifiable characters, recreated their tragic past, highlighted their traumatic present and envisions a better future for them-in an extraordinary prose style that had a power, beauty and richness all its own.

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