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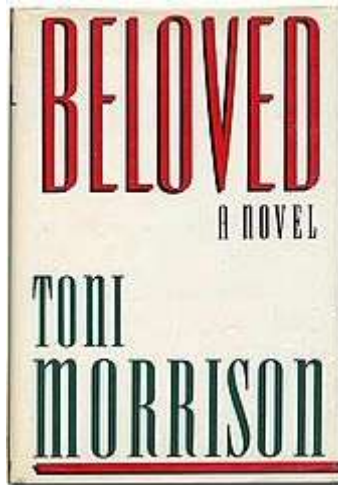
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African American Feminist Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

N. Banumathi, M.A., M.Phil.



Inventive Blend of Realism and Fantasy

Toni Morrison's literary products have opened the eyes of the perceptive readers and have made them become aware of the plights and predicaments of women in general and black

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women in particular. In all her works the principal characters are women and it is through the female protagonists that Toni Morrison creates the right kind of woman consciousness. Cynthia David says:

Toni Morrison's novels have attracted both popular and critical attention for their inventive blend of realism and fantasy, unsparing social analysis and passionate philosophical concerns. Her world and characters are inescapably involved with problems of perception, definition meaning; they direct attention to Morrison's own ordering view and its implications. (322)



Toni Morrison

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison

The Novel *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* reflects African-American feminist consciousness effectively. *Beloved* deals with the life of a female slave, Sethe, who kills her own daughter to prevent her from slavish sufferings. Sethe's is an act of mercy killing, an act performed by a mother out of concern for her daughter and her community.

Though *Beloved* in general is about slavery, it is not a call for the abolition of slavery, as it is a story narrated to a twentieth century audience. It is mainly a story of a black female slave who develops awareness about her own subhuman status on the Sweet Home Plantation, which ultimately awakens and forces her to develop a quest for freedom. It records the cruelty and

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degradation which makes a female slave, Sethe, understand her situation and awaken from a deep slumber.

Sethe, as a slave, has undergone many inhuman insults. In the beginning of the novel, she is brought to "Sweet Home Plantation," which is neither Sweet nor Home to replace Baby Suggs, another slave woman, who is old now. Baby Suggs has given birth to eight children. Her freedom is purchased by her own son, Halle Suggs, with his five years of working on Sundays. Baby Suggs has served as a breeding slave woman and has attended to Mr. and Mrs. Garners.

Slaves to Slave Masters - No Way Different from the Cattle

Morrison shows that for the plantation owners, black slaves were in no way different from their cattle. She describes how Sethe and Halle mate on top of a mattress kept in a cabin. For the first two times, they also used the cornfield like animals. While mating, they were under the impression that they were hidden. In fact, "Halle wanted privacy for her and got public display" (qtd. in Puri 27). By the time she is nineteen, Sethe is pregnant for the fourth time. In all, she gives birth to two sons, Howard and Buglar, and two daughters, Beloved and Denver.

The atmosphere in Sweet Home was tolerable when Mr. Gamer looked after the plantation. However, once he dies, Mrs. Gamer is the only white woman on the plantation with the six black male slaves. So she requests her brother-in-law, a school teacher, to come to Sweet Home Plantation. It is after his arrival that Sethe is forced to undergo inhuman experiences and brutality of the evils of slavery.

In due course, Sethe realizes that the school teacher represents the most treacherous kind of institutional evil. Therefore she plans for the safety of her kids. The school teacher maintains a note book. His note book symbolizes the dispassionate and cold-blooded scientific racism that has marked Western culture. Once she realizes what the notebook is about, she experiences the true erosion of her very black female self.

Being a female slave herself and also well informed about the atrocities faced by Baby Suggs and her own mother, she thinks time and again about the future of her own kids. She understands that everyone Baby Suggs knew and loved ran off or was hanged or was rented out, or loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, gagged, won, or seized. As a result, Baby Sugg's eight children had six fathers. She had no permanent relation with any man in her life. So Sethe decides to run away from the plantation.

It is only after arriving at 124 Bluestone, Cincinnati, where Baby Suggs is waiting for Sethe, that she understands the length and the power of the hands of the slave-master. 124 Bluestone was the new place of the emancipated Baby Suggs. The sole aim of Sethe to take her children to 124 Blue Stone was to protect her children from the sufferings she has undergone. However, the school teacher ultimately arrives in 124 Blue Stones too.

The novel *Beloved* concerns Sethe's former life as a slave on Sweet Home Farm, her escape with her children to what seems a safe haven, and the tragic events that follow. She lives on the edge of town with her daughter Denver and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs. The novel hinges on the death of Sethe's infant daughter, Beloved, who mysteriously reappears as a sensuous young woman. *Beloved's* spirit comes back to claim Sethe's love. Sethe struggles to make Beloved gain full possession of her present and to throw off the long, dark legacy of her past.

Social-psychological Impact

On a socio-psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe Suggs' quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. She struggles with the haunting memory of her slave - past and the retribution of Beloved, the ghost of the infant daughter whom she has killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery.

Legendary Level

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On a legendary and mythical level, *Beloved* is a ghost story that frames embedded narratives of the impact of class, race and sex on the capacity for love, faith and community of black families, especially of black women, during the Reconstruction period. Set in post-civil war Cincinnati, *Beloved* is a womanist neo-slave narrative of double consciousness, a post-modern romance that speaks in many compelling voices and on several time levels of the historical rape of black African American women and of the resilient spirit of blacks in surviving as a people.

Establishing Connections

As in her previous novels, the need for women to re-establish connections with one another is powerfully rendered in Morrison's *Beloved*. It was all the more important in that era of slavery because there was a profound and real need for physical as well as psychological survival. Commenting on her effort to explore a relationship between two women, Morrison says:

We read about Ajax and Achilles willing to die for each other, but very little about the friendship of women, and them having respect for each other, like it's something new. But black women had always had that, they have always been emotional life supports for each other. (qtd. in Puri 32)

When Sethe arrives with her new-born daughter tied to her chest, Baby Suggs welcomes her. Sethe has a powerful culture mentor in Baby Suggs who kindles a desire in her to know her past and to love herself as a person.

Dual Oppression

Sethe, like Morrison's other female protagonists is a victim of both sexist and racist oppression. She is a runaway slave woman, a slave mother, who is brutally treated by white men, the school teacher and his nephews. Morrison explores a black woman's self-conscious protest to the dual oppression. It is not only the sexual exploitation that Sethe feels most oppressed by, but

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the humiliation of her nurturing abilities as a mother- the stealing of her milk.

One of the most damaging effects of the dual oppression of black women, against which Morrison writes, is murder of one's own child. Murder becomes Sethe's act of mother love, which she explains saying, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (qtd. in Sumana 118). She prefers to murder her daughter, Beloved, rather than see her in bondage. According to Deborah Gray White, infanticide represents one of the avenues of resistance on the part of a slave woman.

Balancing the polemics, racial and sexual, that is at the back of every personal outrage suffered by Sethe, is the brilliant, "poetics of the long black song of the many thousands gone" (qtd. in Rao 92). Sethe's back is so hardened that she cannot feel Paul D. pressing against it, "but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree." (BL 20). Similarly, through another powerful image, that of the truckless quiet forest abruptly appearing after the first dialogue of Sethe and Paul D, the author brings out by implication the metaphysical ambivalences of Sethe, the slave mother. As observed by Bernard W. Bell:

This metaphorical silence is an ingenious, ironic use of the technique of call and response that invites the impelled reader in Wolfgang Iser's words, that "network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. (9)

By choosing to narrate the real life and actual experiences of a run-away slave woman, Morrison proves the power of art to demolish stereotype. Sethe's experience is treated with many ironic overtones that point to certain paradoxes and many fundamental intricacies of her quest for freedom. *Beloved* strikes a different and perplexing note because it deliberately avoids chronological development of the narrative and linear structure. Beloved's mother, Sethe, is caught in the ambiguities of a quest that presents itself as a succession of memories. Each recorded incident, act or word further unfolds her story. Sethe's story is presented piece by piece through the act of memory, a pattern of revelation of her past, of recognition of the

history.

Sethe's black awareness and rejection of white perception and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other slaves as non-human are synthesized with her black sense of self-sufficiency. Sethe reconciles gender differences first with her husband, Halle Suggs, and later with Paul D., in heterosexual, endogamous relationship. Although by implication the author blends racial and sexist consciousness, the structure and style of the text foregrounds the ambivalence of slave women about motherhood that violates their personal integrity and that of their family.

The Feminist Mode of Black Women

The feminist qualities that Morrison advocates through Sethe's portrayal are the traditional beauty, strength, resistance and integrity of black women. She is sensitive to feminist concerns and includes all those elements of black female experiences in her text which are of compelling significance to a woman. In her interview with Rosemarie K. Lester, Morrison expresses her views on an extremely painful and unattractive history of black women in the states where black women have always been both mother and labourer, mother and worker, and have worked in the fields along with men:

They were required to do physical labour 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.
(48)

Morrison, thus, uses a beautiful metaphor to emphasize that black women are much more suited to an aggressive role in the mode that feminists are recommending.

Genocidal Elements

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In *Beloved* most forms of isolation are genocidal for the race. For instance, when Baby Suggs labours alone to feed the community, she insults it: "Too much, they thought. Where does he get it all. Baby Suggs, holy? ... And loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone ... Loaves of bread and fishes were His powers" (BL 161). Since it is usually best for all that individual needs and desires be conditioned by those of the collective, Baby Suggs' self-oriented behaviour is tantamount to heresy. Indeed, the repercussions of this God-like action - the attempt to do alone that which should be done together- is felt for two generations. For the community, in spite, refuses to warn Baby Suggs that slave trappers are approaching, setting in motion the conditions under which Sethe murders Beloved:

The good ... news was that Halle got married and had a baby coming (Baby Suggs) 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. (BL 173)

Personification of Isolation

Interestingly enough, Beloved becomes the symbol by which Black people are to measure the devastating effect of isolation. Isolation literally tears apart the family. The personification of isolation and all things inherent in it, including selfish individualism, greed and destruction, Beloved succeeds in dividing 124 from the rest of the African community. Denver's isolation in life, 124's isolation in the community, and Beloved's isolation in death, all serve to further divide the Black community, and as a consequence, leave it vulnerable to the oppression and exploitation of the slave society. It is she who drives Howard and Burglar from home and separates Paul D., Sethe, and Denver just when their three shadows hold hands and just when they erect bonds with the Black community:

Paul D. made a few acquaintances; spoke to them about what work he might find. Sethe returned the smiles she got; Denver was swaying with delight. And on -the way home, although leading them now, the shadows of three people still held hands. (BL 59)

Paul D. seems to be more spirited and determined. He is the son who does not give up but returns to struggle again and again, the Malcolm who teaches his people the value of struggle. His presence sets in motion the necessary purgative confrontation between Sethe, and the Cincinnati Black community. Significantly when he comes, things become what they are, not what Sethe and the Black community have imagined. Once the enemy is identified, the community struggles collectively against that which divides them.

The Role of Collectivism

Thus, the stress on shared relationships, community and race responsibility - the traditional Black principle of collectivism - is the dominant theme of the novel. As we go through the novel, we find that life is hell, but togetherness, shared experience and brotherly love help the characters to survive, if not to forge better lives for themselves. This emphasis on social responsibility, the unselfish devotion of Blacks helping other Blacks, makes Beloved, Morrison's most conscious novel.

In the novel, the character of Beloved, whose haunting presence makes the boundaries between myth and reality disappear, Morrison explores the possibility of the existence of various levels of consciousness. At one level, Beloved's ghost is a manifestation of Sethe's guilty conscience. In a world where whites wish to see black people kept under as if they were dead, it is not surprising that the birth of Sethe's daughter, Denver, is a miracle; that murder of her other daughter Beloved is the subject of so much talk and that the ghost of Beloved appears and disappears among the living like "the sunlit cracks." And the living can become wholly dedicated to the dead - as Sethe and Denver are to Beloved: "But my love was tough and she back now" (**BL 236**). At another level, Sethe's identification with Beloved is very deep: "I AM BELOVED and she is mine" (**BL 248**).

Here you can hear an echo of what the woman in the Bible book of Songs of Solomon says about herself and God, "I am my Beloved's and He is mine" - it is a metaphoric visualization of the devotee and God as the lover and beloved. God is a spirit and maybe

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Morrison uses that fact in bringing the ghost of Beloved to come back and intervene in Sethe's life.

Visions Born of Guilt and Fear

As an individual whose cultural and communal exile is most profound, Sethe is haunted by waking visions born of guilt and fear. Again, Morrison explores the psyche of a slave mother who must deal with haunted life on every level, from the fires of the flesh to the heart-breaking challenges of the spirit:

"Tell me the truth. Didn't you come from the other side?" "Yes. I was on the other side."

"You came back because of me?"

"You rememory me?"

"Yes. I remember you."

"You never forgot me

"Your face is mine."

"Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now."

"Where are the men without skin?"

"Out there. Way off." "Can they get in here?"

"No." (BL 254)

In the final part of the novel, the roles of mother and daughter are reversed. And the job Denver started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved:

Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water.

She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while

Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it.

(BL 295)

The community watches silently these scenes of madness. And the craziness of the black

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world is only matched by the white world's devices. When the women of the neighborhood assemble outside 124 and make the ghost of Beloved disappear in her final leap. Beloved wheels into her mother's arms and then is left behind alone, she flings herself out, freeing herself.

Gender Oppression – Not a Visible Problem

In *Beloved* gender oppression is not a visible problem that exists between Black men and women, but is one that exists within the context of the economic relationship between master and slave. And race is only a later justification for the oppression of the Black people. Clearly, then, Morrison's choice of setting is germane in crystallizing the nature of the Black's oppression, for the economic source of both race and gender oppression is unobscured in slavery.

The relationship between Black men and women is not always oppressive. Many black men are known to be negative and domineering. In regard to women, Paul D. is characterized as a man who has never mistreated a woman in his life and as a man who is grateful to women for his life. He is described as Christ-like on occasion, at least in his manner toward women: "There was something blessed in his manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep - to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too". (BL 23)

Not long after he sees Sethe for the first time in many years, "He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (BL 23).

It is his presence at 124 Bluestone that forces the necessary purgative confrontation between Sethe, the community, and Beloved. Paul D. is, in fact, the only major male protagonist in the Morrisonian canon who has a positive relationship with a female and, furthermore, who struggles with a female to forge this positive relationship. He believes that "Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers" (BL 273).

It is a mark of Toni Morrison's heightened consciousness that she depicts the life that Paul D. struggles to build with Sethe as one based on a common history and a common struggle. Sethe is a typical Black woman who is satisfied with the real happiness love brings, not with the artificial contentment bought by status and wealth:

Perhaps, it was the smile, or may be the ever-ready love she saw in his eyes
- easy and upfront, the way colts, evangelists and children look at you;
with love you don't have to deserve - that made her go ahead and tell him
what she had not told Baby Suggs, the only person she felt obliged to
explain anything to. (BL 136)

Unlike Paul D., Sethe struggles to forge a positive life under the most oppressing conditions. Like gender oppression, race oppression is examined as a consequence of the economic exploitation of Black people.

Slavery in America

To accomplish her goal of clarifying the dialectical relationship between race oppression and class exploitation, Morrison documents history by showing that the European slave is represented by Miss Army Denver of Boston. Denver says: "My mama worked for these here people to pay for her passage. But then she had me and since she died right after, well, they said I had to work for 'em to pay it off" (BL 40).

Also, the novel speaks of the bond forged between the Black and the Native American based on their common oppression. Morrison shows the Native Americans' willingness to make a home for run-away Black slaves, allowing them to become part of the tribe or to leave them as they pleased:

Buffalo men, they (the Indians) called them (the runaway slaves) ...
Nobody from a box in Alfred, Georgia, cared about the illness the
Cherokee warned them about, so they stayed, all forty-six, resting,

planning their next move. Paul D. had no idea of what to do and knew less than anybody it seemed. (BL 132)

Morrison seems 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 woman by European men are driven home to the reader. Perhaps, more important that Morrison's skillful way of bringing to life the facts about slavery is her adeptness at correcting myths about slavery. One such myth is that slave life for some was good. Morrison shows how slavery was slavery, on Sweet Home or any other Plantation. The conditions of slavery were qualitatively indistinguishable whether the slave had a 'good' master or a 'bad' master. For instance, Baby Suggs reveals that life for her has been a continuous cycle of oppression. Her past has been intolerable like her present. Also for a 'free' African American living in a 'slave' society, life is not qualitatively different either.

In *Beloved*, Morrison reinforces her theme of one people, one struggle, and one solution in several ways. First, she begins each chapter in the novel in the present, and then returns to the past in order to bridge the gap between occurrences of the past and those of the present. Second, the beginnings are often structured in such a way that they seem more like middles thereby emphasizing the fact that oppression for the African exists as one uninterrupted continuum.

Morrison further shows that Africans all over the world are one people having the same history and sharing the same plight since they are seen as one by those outside the African nation, no matter what their class status might be. Clearly she wants African people to see themselves as one people, undivided by their class status.

Morrison's greatness as a novelist, however, lies in her extraordinary power of achieving a harmonious fusion of her social concerns and the demands of novel as an art form. What Morrison has worked out in *Beloved* is an extraordinarily effective Gothic blend of post-modern realism and romance as well as of racial and sexual politics. For the characters of the novel as well as the implied author, the scars of racial, sexual, and class oppression are more horrible on the soul than those on the body.

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To Conclude

Thus Morrison has brilliantly succeeded in her attempt to make *Beloved* "unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful." (qtd. in Sumana 165). It is a beautiful narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery and the collective memories kept alive through oral tradition. It is also a story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and to keep their history alive. Morrison's self-conscious interest in the celebration of black women's strength, their values and beliefs, stems from a desire to correct the wrongs that have been historically leveled against black women. She seeks to celebrate the legends of black women like Baby Suggs and Sethe, and weave their dreams into myths that allow us to recover their past.

By using the kind of narrative pattern in which each character becomes part of his or her own history and must be put together in quilt fashion, Morrison reminds us that the oral tradition is so strong in black culture that it is still alive. The stories of different characters bear witness to the past, to the struggle of black slaves to survive and escape to freedom. The reality and fantasy of their lives create history. Thus, in form and content, *Beloved* is about gaps which must be imaginatively filled in and intelligently interpreted by the reader. Thus, *Beloved* is as artistically appealing as it is socially and politically gratifying. It is full of beautiful prose, dialogue as rhythmically satisfying as music, living characters and scenes so clearly etched.

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