



Research Paper

## “Journey of Women from Subordination to Sublimation in Toni Morrison’s Beloved”

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**ABSTRACT:** Toni Morrison is an American author, editor, professor who got Pulitzer Prize for her fiction *Beloved* in 1998. She is the first black woman to receive Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. Toni Morrison’s original name is Chloe Anthony Wofford. She grew up in an American family that possessed an intensive love and appreciation for black culture. Morrison’s novel characterized by visionary force and poetic import gives life to an essential aspect. She is pioneer in Black feminism. This article explores the African-American culture where slavery has become an unfortunate issue of the past and still haunts the present. Two major reason of suppression in that culture is being black and a woman. Women strive hard to assert their identity as human beings.

**KEYWORDS:** Slavery, Black, Women, Subordinate, Sublimate, Beloved.

Received 28 March, 2019; Accepted 08 April, 2019 © the Author(S) 2019.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In *Beloved*, Sethe is a major character who interlinks the past with the present. Life of free slaves is presented to be haunted by the traumatic experiences of the past. Sethe works in Sweet home but being a slave woman she is treated brutally and raped. She escapes with her two children but lost her husband during this escape. She names her Denver after the poor white woman who helps her with delivery. Sethe has the support of her husband’s mother, Babby Suggs. Babby Suggs, is strong and bighearted. She preaches her fellow blacks that they must learn to love themselves in a world where no one else does. Sethe kills her ‘Beloved’ baby daughter fearing that the child of hers would also be forced into slavery.

The scars on Sethe back are an embodiment of the past growing like a tree on her body. The tree which usually symbolizes life or family tree in her case represents the haunting memory that can never be erased. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands. Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to ... just stand there a minute or two . . . relieved of the weight of her breasts . . . and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because he last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank? (*Beloved* 17)

It is clearly evident that the extreme measure she has undertaken in order to save her family is not something planned or foreseen. It just had to be done, and if she was not stopped, they would have all been together on the other side, as Sethe desperately tries to explain to *Beloved*: How could she have left her? And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to – that she had to get them out, away ... That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. (*Beloved* 241)

Babby Suggs admits the risk of becoming a slave which takes away everything on the body. Whatever makes a benefit are overpowered by the other party, especially the masters. “... because slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue which she put to work at once (*Beloved* 87). In a very emphatic way, Morrison uses *Beloved* to show in painful detail one of the ways black women’s bodies were “scarred and dismembered by slavery and then salvaged and remembered in the acts of free love” (*Rushdy* 102).

*Beloved* regains her physical body only when Babby Suggs is long gone; then she can arrive and start her real reign of terror only with the wise, motherly figure out of the way. In order to bring some kind of order in dismantled life that established itself with the arrival of *Beloved*, Denver seeks advice from her grandmother who urges her to go into the world. Denver’s venturing into the world brings the spirit of ancestors back, as the community gets active in the preservation of life again:

She did not see the women approaching, accumulating slowly in groups of twos and threes from the left. ... Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. ... and then Ella hollered. Instantly

the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (Beloved 257-259)

The impact of slavery is seen in the novel when we find that Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother, Sethe and all female servants were denied a mother's role for their children. Baby Suggs also is a case of female exploitation at the white men's hands. She bewails that black motherhood is a loss. She cries out because all her thirteen children were sold into slavery and no one heard her pain except Jesus. Joel Kovel tersely describes this pain of black people in the hands of their white masters. He says that the white master, "first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange" (18).

Beloved is a novel that speaks manifold about the suffering of black people. It reflects the harsh reality of being a black mother and voices the positions of daughters, grandmothers, fathers, male friends, neighbors, community and mother herself. Barbara Christian says,

They had to work; most could not be ornamental or withdrawn from the world; and, according to the aesthetics of this country, they were not beautiful, but neither were they men. Any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part, qualities necessary for participation in the work world, were constructed as unwomanly and tasteless. (Christian 79)

Within the historical frame of American slave culture, Morrison depicts the capacity for destructive love from a historical truth. Otten points out that "infanticide was a common experience among slave mothers, at times in rage against malefic white fathers, at times in paradoxical acts of mercy directed toward their children" (657). Sethe Suggs' love for Beloved is "tough and she back now" (Beloved 200). She tries to justify her action by pretending that there is just no alternative to what she does; "How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Beloved 200).

Living under patriarchy has a profound effect on Sethe and Ginny beginning with how their subjugation shapes their identities in comparable ways. Morrison tries to trace the scars of slavery on the psyche and emotions of people of black community. The human psyche has deep impacts on being enslaved due to one's incongruity to establish him as human being. As Sethe points out, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Beloved 2). People were objectified as commodities in the black slave's community. They were deprived of every right to develop their own self. While anyone who tries to assert individuality was rejected by the society.

But this is the difference between the novel's horrific past and its uncertain present and future: "Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again" (Beloved 262).

For Morrison's characters, what they should embrace is "something that involves learning to confront grief without being governed by it, to possess the past without becoming possessed" (Parker 16). The repressed re-memory that is resurrected needs to be carried on, though the history does not represent a glorious past, its burden must pass on and no denial is possible.

Women are oppressed on multitudes level due to the reason of gender politics. Firstly, women are oppressed by the patriarchal institution of the social world. Secondly, being a black woman is a double burden. Thirdly, the brutal institute of slavery robs them from the right of motherhood as well as womanhood. Woman tried to exist and play their roles in all the possible ways in household and society whereas, men were either absent from the families or shrunk from their responsibilities. Women have strived hard under the institution of slavery to fulfill their roles as mothers. This realization of self identity is the main craving of feminists and it becomes their predicament in societies where woman are taken as an inferior beings, as commodities with a prize tags. In order to come to terms with themselves black women, fight for their rights and are cherished members of the black societies.

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Mr.S.Sibi chakkaravarthy "Journey of Women from Subordination to Sublimation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* , vol. 07, no. 3, 2019, pp. 21-22