



MYRIADS OF OPPRESSION IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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Abstract:

*Toni Morrison depicts the various causational incidents of the power to suppress the powerless. The binaries or the multiple oppressions depicted in her works make them different from other contemporary writers. She authoritatively voices for equality and 'equal individual dignity'. The history of slavery that Morrison portrays in *Beloved* is too pathetic as the novel is wholly about the atrocities of the white and the resultant death of many Africans in America. The arrival of white men, the fear of return to slavery, the dread of physical torture and hunger, have sapped the power of speech from the African-Americans present there on the scene. Sethe's murder of her child is the primal scene in *Beloved* which exposes the extremity of the bane of slavery. By portraying the lives of Africans in the American continent right from their immigration to till date Morrison throws light on the African-Americans' traumatic experiences in the name of race, class and gender discrimination. She, herself one of the African Americans reconstructs the pangs and pains of her people with concern and sympathy. Hence the portrayal of the trauma of her people in her works forms the conflicts and her imagination and the resultant assertion after many civil right movements of her people especially her women become the solutions to the unexplored questions that she has put forth in the conflict portion of her works.*

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The United States is a pluralistic society wherein operates several cross currents of cultures. Citizens of almost all European countries had come to settle down in America in the 16th century. The same religious faith and the similar racial features and appearance of the immigrants however, did not bar them from upholding their native identity which in each case is unique. Such heterogeneity was widened and expanded with the influx of the African race with the Negroid features. But the Americans considered such an intermingling of races and cultures as a mole on a beautiful bright face of the virgin land. Ultimately the arrival of Africans ended up with several commotions and resulted in freedom struggle which sparked off various socio-political events, faithfully recorded by many African-American writers in their writings.

Toni Morrison depicts the various causational incidents of the power to suppress the powerless. The binaries or the multiple oppressions depicted in her works make them different from other contemporary writers. Toni Morrison talks about the binary that arises out of racial difference thereby advocating a tremendous change of social order for the marginalized section of the society. She authoritatively voices for equality and 'equal individual dignity'.

Most countries and cultures have empowered groups at one pole and impoverished ones at the other, the former of which enjoy absolute 'power' while the latter suffer as 'powerless'. The empowered people enjoy freedom, social status, and security of life while the suppressed are drenched in fear, insecurity and injustice. The form and nature of marginality is decided by the magnitude of penury. The subjugation based on caste, creed, colour religion or race is a kind of affliction that hurdles the growth of the society. Hence Toni Morrison depicts the intensity of marginality meted out to her people by the so-called empowered groups.

There are sections of people even today who are deprived of equal opportunity, social status and individual dignity. Naturally, they express their concerns, anxieties and anguishes in their writing. Question like, 'Who are we?' 'What is our future?' 'What is our status?' haunt the mind of Toni Morrison which motivated her to pen – picture the oppressed conditions of her people. In fact, her quest for self-identity is eclipsed by their fight for identity of her folk which is a greater concern. She explores their past with a detailed description of dreams they have and nightmares they confront and struggles to establish their identity for their future. The African-American woman's impulse to write is spurred by her need to articulate her own pain, trauma and suffering inflicted on her by others. Hence it is no wonder that the African-American woman began writing initially and mainly for herself in her attempt to understand her own slave experience and the true meaning of slavery that had so brutally deprived her of her freedom. Through writing the African-American woman reverberates her inner voice, hitherto unheard. She unfolds her narrative, giving expression to the nuances of her painful experiences that has roots in slavery.

It is Toni Morrison's strong and unshakable belief that in the African-American history, the women of this community play a pivotal role which still continues in the current social and political development in America. In *Beloved* Morrison sheds light on the conditions of marginalized African-Americans' experience in the American continent. She also argues how African women experience triple marginality in the hands of their men as well as white men. As an activist, Morrison is enraged at this social inequality and at the same time pities her people and demands social order. Awareness gradually grew among the African-Americans to lodge protests and launch the movement to liberate themselves from the bane of slavery.

The history of slavery that Morrison portrays in *Beloved* is too pathetic as the novel is wholly about the atrocities of the white and the resultant death of many Africans in America. The arrival of white men, the fear of return to slavery, the dread of physical torture and hunger, have sapped the power of speech from the African-Americans present there on the scene. Their eyes eloquently expressed their latent fear. Morrison artistically has brought into focus the eyes of her people to suggest more than what they express. Sethe's murder of her child is the primal scene in *Beloved* which exposes the extremity of the bane of slavery. A mother is made to kill her own infant under searing terror of living in slavery as she thinks that death offers the comfort and freedom to the child which are so brutally desired in the present wretched conditions of existence. It is the motherly love that kills the child and not the urgency of the circumstances. Toni Morrison brings in only one such ugly and abominable example of a mother who finds no alternative but to kill her child to save it from the curse of slavery with the deeper implications of prudent suggestiveness.

The meaning of marriage and sex appears as one of the conflicts in Morrison's *Beloved* which is a faithful record of the pathetic plight of the African-American community under the reign of terror of the white masters. Their life is torn by violence, rampage, savagery and atrocities. Baby Suggs is a mother of several children by several men. Sex is so rampant that the legitimacy of men-woman sex has lost its significance. Slaves have no choice against debauchery. African-American women are free property for men to choose and use. They are mothers without the trace of legitimate fathers. The sanctity of marriage is a big question that rolls through the race. Sex becomes a necessity of convenience.

As 'sex' of African women is thwarted, Morrison's novels are women centred and the 'self' of women becomes central to Morrison's concern. She endeavours to create a

concordant African-American female identity, as she claims in *Presence Africain*, "I had to bear witness to what was not recorded for this person, this female, this black did not exist 'centre self'" (*Beloved*45). Hence her conflicts exist in how she has portrayed her female protagonist against the backdrop of not only the dominant white culture but also the patriarchal society of the African-American.

Morrison's female protagonists invariably represent black culture. They question their own marginalized and exploited conditions, and try to subvert the racist white cultural domination. Morrison explains in *Essence* "I think what is important... is the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it" (*Beloved* 235). She has consistently articulated her sensitivity to the interiority of the complexity of diverse African-American women's lives unaddressed by her literary antecedents.

Morrison basically theorizes the devastating effects of slavery on African-Americans. Even within the discourse of slavery the denial of the basic values of humanity dominates in every walk of life. Sethe, the central figure in *Beloved* internalizes the maternal discourse of good mother to adopt a subject position. Through her act of rememory, Sethe traverses back in time to unveil aspects of slavery in America that dehumanized and debased the black slaves. As Beaulieu puts it: "In narrativizing history, Morrison calls attention to the way she engenders her characters in order to dramatize what she perceives as perhaps the cruelest legacy of slavery: an alienation even from the self" (*Beloved*14). The system of slavery gives anonymity to the slave, denying him the parental role or rights. So by asserting her position as mother, Sethe asserts her subject position in the discourse of slavery. Sethe's body is a text on which the text of slavery is inscribed. When the school teacher appears on the scene after the death of Mr. Garner, in order to help Mrs. Garner to run Sweet Home, he becomes the speaking subject of slavery's discourse. Sethe recounts the Sweet Home experiences to Paul D:

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.
School tender made one open up my back, and when it closed it
made a tree. It grows there still. (*Beloved*16-17)

Rafael Perez-Torres in this connection opines "Sethe's body is violated: once when its nutrient is stolen, then again when torn open by a whip. Just like the page of school teacher's notebook, Sethe is divided and marked, inscribed with the discourse of slavery and violation" (696).

Morrison describes the atrocities of men on women as one of the conflicts in the novel, *Beloved*. Even the whites in poverty line have no escape from exploitation. Both Sethe, as a black slave and Amy, as a white indentured servant, know the evils of slavery and sexual violation. Paul D reads the story of savagery and slavery engraved on Sethe's back by the white master's whip, which resulted in "her back skin had been the dead for years" (*Beloved* 18). Sethe's back in a sense, is not her own. It has been appropriated by the white masters and bears the marks of their cultural text. Amy, however, reads the same text in a different way. While she affirms her solidarity with the bathed, pregnant Sethe lying on the banks of the Ohio River, desperate to reunite with her children, she gives a different interpretation of the bloody marks on her back, as she tells her: "It's a tree, Lu.A.Chokecherry tree... You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and darn if these ain't blossoms" (*Beloved* 79).

Unable to erase the marks of slavery, she teaches her a survival tactic. The atrocities inflicted on Sethe leads to her escape from Sweet Home and ensuing birth of Denver. Sethe is whipped until blood oozes out of her skin, the scar of which remains all her life, as a symbol of pain and suffering and also her helplessness to fight the white power, being a black and female. Schopp Andrew's critical comment on the conflict of Morrison is worth recorded:

Tree-Sethe's metaphor in many ways obscures and contains the emotional and psychological wound her physical world signifies – namely the abuse of her body when the boys forced her down and took her milk and lack of personal agency, the lack of control over one's own body and definition of self, and that this abuse signifies. (371)

Conveyed through Sethe's perspective, it unveils a facet of slavery that was barbaric and inhuman: "two boys with massy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book reading teacher watching and writing it up..." (70). In this poignant depiction, Morrison, suggests how a woman's body becomes the site of eroticism, an object for the male desire:

Sethe's "breasts" as site of violation... also epitomize how "private" body parts become commodified, public and "un-own"ed by the self. The over-determined meaning of Sethe's breasts results in part from the lack of appropriate language to speak the outrage of slavery. (Lee 578)

As Sethe can neither resist her physical assault nor is empowered to articulate the pain of her experience she silences it through repression. School teacher's later pursuit of Sethe to capture her back to slavery suggests that Sethe is consistently viewed in the animal role besides the sexual one which is crucial for furthering American economy. "Capitalism appears in *Beloved* in the muted or displaced but crucial form of school teacher's brutal, dehumanizing, efficiency, oriented rationalism" (Dekoven 77). That Sethe interiorizes white man's imposing sexual image is suggested in her object surrendering of her body to the white engraver for ensuring a ritualistic burial for her murdered daughter:

Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son... those ten minutes she spent pressed up... Her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life. More alive, more pulsating them the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. (*Beloved* 5)

Sethe's attempt towards self-definition under the Garners suffers distortion due to school teacher's legitimized racism and making her a cook at the Sawyer's. But this is tested by reinsertion of patriarchy embodied in Paul D. and threatened by *Beloved*'s inducing maternity on Sethe. Paul D.'s visualization of Sethe as a commodified sex object is suggested when Sethe first enters Sweet Home as a teenage slave. He along with his male counterpart considers her for sexual satisfaction of the male, "all in their twenties minus women... dreaming of rape... And waiting for the new girl... (11). Paul D assesses Sethe's capability to appease a male, sexually just as the school teacher measures up Sethe for the child bearing capacity. With his patriarchal arrogance he, "not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could make the woman cry... He held her breasts in the palm of his hands, He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (*Beloved* 17). The tree not only symbolizes Sethe's suffering 'self' victimized by slavery, but being

“dead” suggests Sethe’s individual efforts to transcend slavery for selfhood. Deborah Ayer Sitter poignantly makes a comment on Paul D by saying:

Paul D’s refused to acknowledge that her scars cohere into an awful but beautiful image reveals his inability to accept Sethe’s integrity, her wholeness. As the metaphor of the tree develops, it become clear that the chief barrier to Paul D’s committing himself to Sethe is an ideal manhood, which is threatened by the woman she is. (23)

Paul D’s mind is completely dominated by the white man’s concept of manhood as he was sold to the white when he was a small orphan, which ultimately results in losing his own identity. Unlike Sixo who resists slavery till his death, “Paul D allows himself to be captured back into slavery and hence defines it in his unconsciousness, “Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home and by his leave” (220). For totally absorbing the white’s definition of manhood, he does not foresee its inherent threat to his self-identity which is why he primarily views Sethe and later Beloved as sexual objects. Sitter explains: “in *Beloved* Morrison dramatizes Paul D’s enslavement to an ideal of manhood that distorts his image of self and others. Since this ideal is unspoken, it can be interrogated only if it is made to speak” (18).

Paul D’s initial relegation of Sethe is seen in his “inability to accept the fact that Sethe had survived without male assistance from him or Halle, that reveals his internal tensions, ones that lie deep in a male psyche...” (Samuel 130). Sethe’s individuality is a threat to his manhood. For he has viewed Sethe primarily as a co modified object:

He had never known a woman who lit up for nobody in particular who just did it as a general announcement. Always, in his experience, the light appeared when there was focus. ...It was there the instant he looked at Sethe’s logs, otherwise she never would have been bold enough to enclose her in his arms and whisper into her back. (*Beloved* 65-66)

Paul D, however discovers in Sethe, two vitally important qualities - a strong sense of feminist thought of equality for women and outrage against women’s discrimination, and her artistic nature that activates him to respect her through love. But his latent sexist biases create a conflict in him to believe that she be a dependent and subordinate. In order to safeguard his manly ideal, he requests Sethe’s help to document his manhood which suggests that he like his white master forces the animal image on Sethe. Rather than empathizing with Sethe as a fellow who is traumatized equally if not more, he consciously alienates himself from her.

Sethe had believed that she and her children are safe in Cincinnati but when the school teacher discovers her there, she has no choice but to kill her children, but succeeded in killing only Beloved. “That school teacher values Sethe for her child bearing capabilities and this for the capital she represents, is indicated both by his decision to capture and return her to slavery” (Samuel 6). She explains how the reality of horror of slavery made implicit in the school teacher capturing her, forces her to commit a crime so terrifying in its intensity:

No No... she just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and beautiful and carried, pushed dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there outside this place, where they would be so safe. (*Beloved* 163)

Even though Sethe has not reconciled to her child's loss, she rationalizes that it were better than being victimized by slavery that cannot protect her children, as Schopp observes: "For Sethe, then safety equals freedom from the control of and subjugating to a master, at the same time, safety equals death" (355). Sethe reasons that it was solely and entirely her independent decision and as a mother she had a right to abort what was not her right to love: "I birthed them... I got em out... wasn't no accident. I did that... it was my doing... me having to look out. Me using my own head... I felt... right" (162). She defends the killing of what she had borne to love but was not privileged to love, as slavery contradicted her notion of love. Sitter commenting on the theme of the novel states, "*Beloved* depicts slavery's insidious power to distort the two most basic human instincts: love and self preservation" (18).

Moreover Paul D's patriarchal version of a woman as a commodity is reinforced by his designation of Sethe as an animal. But it can be seen as his unconscious fear of Sethe's individuality because the sexual and the animal roles are assigned to Sethe by the dominant ideology which he has unconsciously imbibed. Similarly, he transfers onto Beloved, the sexual image he had foisted on Sethe. "Beloved was shining and Paul D didn't like lit" (64) for "...Always, in his experience, the light appeared when there was focus" (65). But fails to realize that Beloved is a threat to his masculinity "for this girl; Beloved homeless and without people beat all..." (*Beloved* 66). and hence "he wanted her out..." (*Beloved* 66).

Beloved represents not only Sethe's murdered daughter but also slavery, the horrors of which are laid bare in a stage-by-stage revelation. Morrison herself has explained the necessity of bringing the daughter back, in order to accelerate Sethe's confrontation of her past. Sethe's slave narrative unveils facets of horrors of slavery hitherto submerged in Sethe's subconsciousness. Sethe's rendition also is counteractive as it activates Beloved's own slave narrative. Beloved's search for Sethe is motivated by a mistaken notion that Sethe is her mother. Beloved's own mother attenuated the horrors inflicted by slavery by throwing herself into the sea, thus asserting herself, but perceived as desertion by Beloved. Beloved seeks Sethe as her lost mother because of this belief. Both Beloved's and Sethe's mistaken identities by which they confront each other is a stylistic device employed by Morrison to effect their respective narratives in the African oral tradition. It is worth mentioning Malmgren's observations here:

By personifying slavery as history's ghost, Morrison reimagines the institution and its legacy as a kind of abnormal excess that finally defies rational explanation, a ghostly figure from out of a nightmare. Indeed, she gives the novel the name of character who is the ultimate historical victim of slavery, someone totally brutalized and dehumanized, someone reduced to ghost herself. (100)

Paul D realizes how he had unconsciously imbibed the white man's notion of selfhood and reduced himself and Sethe as animals, failing to define himself, independently. Likewise he failed to acknowledge Sethe as an equal. He also realizes with shame, that unlike him, Sethe had not dehumanized him like his whitemaster but as a fellow slave, had empathized with him, granting him humanity denied by the whiteman: "Her tenderness about his neck jewelry... how she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast" (*Beloved* 273).

By portraying the lives of Africans in the American continent right from their immigration to till date Morrison throws light on the African-Americans' traumatic

experiences in the name of race, class and gender discrimination. She, herself one of the African Americans reconstructs the pangs and pains of her people with concern and sympathy. Hence the portrayal of the trauma of her people in her works forms the conflicts and her imagination and the resultant assertion after many civil right movements of her people especially her women become the solutions to the unexplored questions that she has put forth in the conflict portion of her works. Therefore her works which have to be read and re-read for the theme of social realistic concerns.

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