

Morrison's *Beloved*: A Portrait of the African Female Slave

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Toni Morrison is a name in American Literature not to be mentioned without a feeling of wonder and admiration for her adoption of a strikingly original approach to novel-writing which caters to the needs of different genres of writers and has created a great upheaval among innumerable intellectual readers. This tremendously gifted novelist, a Nobel Prize winner, ventured to impart historical authenticity to the unrecorded sorrows of the black African slave in an American backdrop before the outbreak of the Civil war (1861-1865) with great success, Her *Beloved* under our discussion is a wonderfully successful novel permeated with a panorama of the painful history of the miserable slaves especially that of the women, the narrative of which has been enriched with a mysterious handling of fantasy deep rooted in the black folklore and her family tradition of story-telling.

Beloved has earned a spectacular gravity for its display of black women's search for sense of self. It is a rare piece of writing impregnated with some exceedingly appealing ideas which are basically related to the black American lower class woman protagonist who suffered the trouble and anxiety of not being allowed to know her children, of being forcibly separated from her husband and also of passing the days amidst great uncertainty as well as falling a victim to sexual exploitation. At a glance this novel offers a serious feminist reading.

Morrison's name and fame rest also on her other six novels namely *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, besides *Beloved* (1987) which has finalized her glamour and reputation as a novelist and has also unfolded manifold tenets for most enlightened interpretations and literary criticisms till date. This black minority writer having profoundly felt for her race though many decades back, gave a vigorous expression to their strong feelings

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and reaction in view of their endless sufferings on the plantations and at homes and their quest for freedom from white autocracy through their desperate attempt to escape who were shot dead relentlessly if caught red handed in the process.

The novel having been dedicated to more than sixty million slaves who died on the slave ships in course of their long voyages from Africa to America, has highlighted the brutal and gruesome system of slavery for the black existence. Another device that Morrison adopted was her intellectual juxtaposition of the past and present in the memory of the characters through which she again focused on the hideous practices of the brutes in white shape and size.

Beloved begins with a ghost's visitation whose sinister and spiteful emergence unfolds inevitably and with irresistible force some heart-rending and bitter truths associated with it, speaking instantly of the appalling history of its time. The story has been set after a prolonged period of almost twenty tedious winters interlocked with the central characters who have now looked back into their miserable past in resentment and agony through a process of recalling, reaction and responses to different related character's queries, of which the ghost of *Beloved* is an explosive specimen.

The novel has been entitled after the baby toddler's name which was engraved on her gravestone bearing the evidence of her mother's infinite love who sacrificed much to pay for the carving by undergoing the humiliation of having sex with the stone-mason. Morrison, having refused to be strictly punctual about the time-sequence and systematic progress of the story, intermingled the past and the present through the memory of the characters thereby creating uncertainty and obscurity about the thematic formation. However, the story is terrible since she took into consideration her historical, political and mystical concerns while narrating the story in wedlock of love and sex, persecution and tolerance.

Morrison shows her unrivalled originality in choosing a beginning for the novel which is sufficiently powerful and has the potential to acquaint the readers immediately with the central theme, the theme of horror of inexplicable sufferings of black slaves in the cruel, pitiless and bestial hands of the white though interrupted by some relaxed episodes of love and sex. *Beloved*, in actuality focuses on an improbable reality, the rarest case, about a mother who could go to the extent of killing her own girl-child by cutting her throat, expecting to provide her eternal safety and security in consequence of her anticipating the ugly and horrible sexual abuse and indignity besides the manual drudgery her daughter would be forced to submit to, which she herself was keen sufferer of, making her desperate to commit even suicide though she failed in that endeavour.

Se the, the protagonist of the novel, a black woman slave, though the existence of another invisible protagonist, a ghost turned flesh, must not be over looked in view of its strong impact on the course of the action; was sold

to the farm Sweet *Homme* at the age of thirteen and since then she had been working there along with five other male slaves called Sixo, Halle and the other three half-brothers Paul A, Paul D and Paul F. The owner of the farm was Mr. Garner, a white man who could be considered a little better in contrast with those other cruel white dignitaries who refused to look upon the slaves beyond the animal level. This different lord was liberal enough to grant them some sort of liberty in choosing their partners instead of keeping them for mere breeding besides allowing them to go for hunting pigs which was an act of great joy and relaxation for them amidst their soulless drudgery. But fortune repudiated to smile upon them any longer. To their utter despair and distress this good man unexpectedly joined the kingdom of the Dead leaving them in unmitigated disaster. Because the new occupant who had taken over the farm, a man purely antithetical in taste and temperament to the departed one, created a reign of terror among them with the assistance of his nephews by forcibly submitting them to various investigations and experiment besides using violence and physical assault. Another dehumanizing treatment was the question of naming the slaves who were not allowed to choose a name but it was imposed on them bearing a regrettable witness of the slave owner's ruthless use of tyrannous power. Hence the three half brothers were differentiated only by the alphabetical letter A-D-F compelling them to be doubtful of their existing manhood if inherent or conferred. Seth's early life also was crowded with untold miseries. She couldn't pass her childhood with her mother as the latter was always chained on the slave-ship and not allowed to fondle her. But the most pathetic scene was her mother's being hanged with other slaves and the cause of her murder always remained unknown to her.

Lamenting over their deplorable state, a shifting from bad to worse, the slaves including Sethe, spent the gloomiest and cheerless time and being haunted by an irresistible desire to find out an opportunity to escape from that inferno, they became excited and restless. Sethe was raped by school teacher's nephews and mercilessly beaten keeping Halle, her husband and eye-witness who was in a state of morbidity failing to endure such agonizing and painful scene and he was found lying on his face rubbing butter over. Hundred such intolerable incidents forced all of them to run away. But unfortunately except Sethe and Paul D, all were burnt alive and Sixo was shot dead because of their crime of trying to escape. Paul D was sold and then sent to the prison camp of Georgia because of his attempt to kill the new owner. Sethe, on the other hand, running away from the Sweet Home gave birth to her fourth child and second daughter Denver, on the bank of Ohio being aided by a white girl and could somehow reach her mother in law's house where she joined her other three children. But this wretched creature was not free still, since after only twenty eight days of that forced liberty, the school teacher turned to snatch her away and Sethe violently

reacted to this infamous cruelty by taking instantly her children to the woodshed to dispatch them to a land unreachable by the long hand of heartless brutality. But she was arrested just after accomplishing the killing of her eldest daughter and was sent to prison and she was too fortunate to escape death-sentence resulting from the pressures of certain slavery abolition societies. These are the incidents brought to light through the remembrance and responses of the characters instead of directly stated may be for averting provocation of the white sensibilities.

Notwithstanding these early actions, the novel abruptly opens with Paul D's sudden arrival after about 19 years of separation and the retributive activities of a poltergeist, the supposed evil spirit of Sethe's eldest daughter. But the spiteful acts couldn't be continued as Paul D had driven it out because of his strong hostility. Sethe's craziness for getting her dead child back in human incarnation was materialized when a girl calling herself Beloved emerged and used to stay with her in the house 124 on Bluestone Road rendering the latter a chance to rectify and atone for her former injustice having discarded her daily routine work. Meanwhile the neighboring people tracing a ghost's holding came for their rescue, ransacked the whole house and rid the members of the ghost's clutch by exorcising the latter. But Beloved's exorcism reduced Sethe to an absolute wreck lying on the Baby Sugg's bed completely plunged into the sense of being deprived of the best thing she got back luckily. But Denver's presence and Paul D's timely arrival and effective counsel helped her regain her strength and return to her true self.

The plot of the novel after a minute observation, gives rise to some distinct layers of study for proper justification of it enabling us to be acquainted with Morrison's sensibility constituted by her deep and unblemished concern for the race, her strong advocacy for feminism, her deep-seated faith in supernatural agency as an existing and motivating force in the living human world and above all her unmistakable handling of the subject of love and sex as an unavoidable reality among the slaves which provides them with great relief and relaxation amidst, their dull, cheerless life of countless hardships.

Seth's violent reaction against and dramatic response to the sexual exploitation effecting her runaways constitutes the central core of feminist reading. She was not the only woman to endure the infernal pains, millions of black women were treading her path but they aren't raising their voice against the white autocrats visualizing a hideously brutal consequence. Sethe's breaking away from the chain of slavery leading to her final effort not to yield to an indignant life in the Sweet Home by killing her children and herself emphasizes her self-respect and a longing for liberty. This impressively self-willed woman considered it better to put her children to death rather than accept a life of slave which paradoxically brings the loving mother as a killer to light. However her thinking and adventures with subsequent success have been welcomed with

great applause and admiration by the Feminists as they regard it as an auspicious symptom of women's search for discovering an identity in this universe.

Simultaneously, the text of the novel transcending the fictional boundary leaps up to the level historical land mark with the provision to the readers an opening for peeping into the history of past slavery of the black Negroes without bothering about any painstaking business of reading a vast history and here lies Morrison's credit who could give a historical taste along with the flavour of fiction.

Again Morrison's adaptation to supernatural element for a long duration adds an extra dimension to the fiction excelling even Shakespeare in handling of the same in his famous play Hamlet where unlike *Beloved* spirit it is purely casual, transitory and unreachable, but in both cases the ghost influences the story from the beginning to the end. Hence though it seems improbable and unbelievable for a ghost to live a normal life, it can't be overlooked as baseless in view of certain circumstances initiated to it, rather it may claim authenticity from some perspectives of psycho-analytical possibility. May be the flesh and blood *Beloved* is the resurrected figure of the Repressed in Freudian concept. Failing to fulfill her desire of living a complete life, the baby having been grown up spiritually during such a long interval may be supposed to have a peculiar justification for turning up at the house 124 on Bluestone Road in response to the strange longings of the dwellers. Or another interpretation may be suggested. Perhaps she is the very embodiment of Sethe's sense of guilt who was crazily waiting for her slain daughter to let her understand the reasons behind her dramatic action and to justify herself leading to her final redemption. Sethe was overwhelmed with her sense of guilt so heavily that she couldn't have a moment's peace after murdering her daughter because of being continually tortured by the memory and rememorize of the past and hence on the verge of losing her true sense she desperately craved for the dead's miraculous return and in all probability the latter may be considered as the visible shape of Sethe's inexcusable memory.

Beloved may be defined by several terms. It may be called an American novel and African-American novel or it is a novel of the white and the black people which encompasses the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed determined by the most unlawful, inhuman, savage and villainous act of the white civilians and this horrid disparity in relationship urged Martin Luther King into making his famous speech (1963), "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

At an over view, it deserves reporting that *Beloved* has successfully marched forward throughout the decades arousing the reader's perennial and unspool interest for its wonderfully simple and realistic narrative immediately

arresting the reader's credulity who derives the joy of first looking into something unsearched but worth knowing. In addition to this, Morrison's strong Feminist perspectives which are easily perceptible from her manner of handing the story have highly been appreciated with warm enthusiasm by the later feminism practitioners which is another reason behind her widespread popularity and reputation. Above all, the place and position Morrison has occupied which have been denied to many other black female writers of this century enhances the impression of her uniqueness and originality more intensively, authenticated by more than four hundred articles written about her in paying glowing tribute to her newness in form and content.

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