

Finding the “Self” in Remembrance of the Past in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

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Abstract

In her fifth novel *Beloved*, Morrison, recovers the main female character, Sethe, from the horrific experiences of the institution of slavery. Nobel Prize-winning book, published in 1987, was defined as a masterpiece by the American press winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Toni Morrison in her novels provides a very detailed description of the different experiences of African Americans who have been in search of their identity. She deals with multiple oppressions that contribute to the identity formation of African Americans, in general. She explores African American identity by a process of going deeper into the main character’s past. This paper ventures to understand the more nuanced and poised, and circular nature of human relationships, generally overlooked, particularly the mother-child relationship through Sethe and Beloved along with other characters in the novel. The novel is based on the true-life story of a runaway slave Margaret Garner who escaped slavery during the American civil war, from a Kentucky plantation to Ohio, killing one of her infants with a butcher knife only to save the baby to be taken back to the brutalities of slavery. *Beloved’s* protagonist, Sethe lives with her daughter Denver excluded by the community in a small house at 124 Bluestone Road haunted by the baby ghost of Beloved. The main theme of the story is the painful experience of slavery, especially the repressed memories of slavery. This kind of repression of the past leads to problems with negotiating individual identity. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, all experience this kind of loss which can be only remedied by recovering the memory of their original identities. The comprehensive construct of this paper is that it starts with a brief introduction of real-life Sethe- Margaret Garner, followed by an illustration of a short summary of the novel, followed by agonies of Sethe as a mother. Then comes the victim, the ghost of baby Beloved, and ultimately how Beloved becomes Sethe’s salvation by compelling her to embark on the journey towards finding her ‘self’ by the way of remembering the memories of the horrific past. The paper ends with a conclusion/ highlight of how important is motherly love for children and this timeless pious relationship and unconditional love of a mother for her child and the other way round. With Sethe, the complete journey of finding the self in remembrance of the past is traced out.

Keywords: self, memory, Toni Morrison, Beloved

Introduction:

Morrison portrays her story based on true events, after reading about Margaret Garner’s story. “I wanted to understand about that period of slavery and about women loving things that are important to them” (Taylor-Guthrie 4). Set in the period after the American Civil War (1861-1865),

Margaret Garner, a runaway slave, escaped slavery in 1856 in Kentucky by heading to Ohio and tried to kill her child with a butcher knife rather than being recaptured again. Graham Thompson in his *American Culture in the 1980s* points out that,

Morrison changes the known details of Garner’s life in several ways but,

rather than just investigating the events of Garner's escape and return, projects Garner's life into the future to imagine the undocumented legacy of these events and, most hauntingly, the return of the murdered child, Beloved, to Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati (qtd. in Lei 8).

Generally, in Morrison's fiction storytelling is intertwined with memories of the past and present, and plays a crucial role in reminding people about their African American heritage, and their roots. Her renowned and groundbreaking books explore people, both groups and individuals, who are victims of various forms of oppression, including those related to gender, race, freedom, white society, politics, etc. All of her works look into the conditions of those being oppressed. This paper focuses on the protagonist Sethe who is struggling on her journey to find their identity. Morrison in detail explores the character's quest for identity. As identity is a recurring motif in her works, many different demonstrations of this theme serve as important means of characterization and thus help develop other closely related topics such as lost love, trauma, home, memory, past, etc. These mentioned demonstrations of identity in Morrison's novels may be seen as a result of the character's internal and external conflicts in African American communities as a result of slavery.

A pertinent question that comes up in every novel by Morrison is the origin of the character which in turn shapes that character's identity. Similarly, Morrison also depicts in her novels that the idea of 'home' is critically related to the sense of self. Usually, there is at least one character in the fiction who desires to go 'home',

back to the roots. In addition to this, Morrison also seeks an understanding of the formation of determinants and connections of identity.

Several characters looking for their identities are present in Morrison's other books like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Sula Peace in *Sula* (1974), or Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* (1977). *A Mercy* (2008) also deals with the quest for identity. It tells the story of an enslaved mother, like Sethe in *Beloved*, who, to save her daughter from being sexually abused by her slaveholder, gives her up to another white slave master whom she views as less likely to abuse her child.

In light of all this, the main purpose of this paper is to understand the more nuanced and poised, and circular nature of human relationships, particularly the mother-child relationship through Denver, Baby Suggs, and Halle, with the main focus on Sethe and Beloved. The vice of slavery rendered deep emotional wrought and ugly psychological impacts on the lives of slaves. The slaves being always owned by other human beings tend to lose their sense of self and loss of identity. This paper traces the compelling journey of Sethe as a mother, her journey of finding the self who has lost all sense of self, and how Beloved acts as an important catalyst in the redemption of her mother to find her identity which is long lost, just as Halle did for his mother Baby Suggs.

Illustration:

"Sixty million and more I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." (ROMANS 9: 25) (Beloved (1987)).

The dedication at the beginning of the novel has been devoted to sixty million

people who died during the institution of slavery and to those who have never experienced the slave trade. *Beloved* represents the rebirth of black identity among downtrodden people.

Morrison in one conversation says “there is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember” (Taylor-Guthrie 248). Stating this, Morrison stresses the fact that overcoming the trauma and horror of slavery brings more remembering than forgetting and wants her readers to understand African-American history, as Faye Kegley in *Remembering Slavery Through Toni Morrison’s Beloved* expresses, “through non-western eyes by re-telling history through the lives of former African slaves” (3).

According to Morrison, to recover from slavery means to recover the home that has been lost, unfortunately. In *Beloved* home is essentially the black female body. Due to the legacy of slavery, which is interwoven throughout the whole story, emphasis on the body reveals that the female body itself becomes the physical place. Sethe’s body full of scars is unsuitable to live in because it is not a place where identity can be recognized in a positive way. Until Sethe can open herself to speak about her memories and recall her story, she cannot recover her identity and her body remains crippled and thus her identity remains wounded. As for Sethe, telling her story of horrific experiences enables her to reclaim her identity and recover from slavery with *Beloved* as the medium, who makes it possible.

The unjust barbarity that compelled Sethe to commit such a monstrously unthinkable and un-motherly act of murdering her own infant daughter can be realized by deeply moving moments in Sethe’s life. The first is when early in her life Sethe is put on the animal side of the list of features according to Schoolteacher’s education. Sethe overhears Schoolteacher’s lessons to his nephews when he draws a thick line between an animal and a human being. To provide his students with a more obvious example, he represents Sethe as an animal. Sethe, after this humiliation, begins to trust Baby Suggs, “there is no bad luck in the world but white folks” (*Beloved* 92).

Another incident takes place the moment when Schoolteacher’s nephews beat Sethe while pregnant to the point that they injure her so badly that “her back skin had been dead for years” (*Beloved* 18). They held her breasts and “they took her milk” (*Beloved* 22) by force. Furthermore, feeding white boys with Sethe’s milk over feeding her own child is as brutal as it denies a mother her motherhood. Exactly like Sethe in her childhood was deprived of her mother as well as her milk. Sethe feels robbed of her identity and loses her fundamental essence as a mother. When Paul D appears in Sethe’s life eighteen years after the horror of killing *Beloved*, to Sethe’s disappointment, Paul D is not able to come to terms with her committing such a horrific act of murder when he says: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (*Beloved* 194). This is even more humiliating for Sethe because Paul D implies that Sethe is a human being, not a beast.

After being shunned from society for the act of infanticide her isolation among the four walls of 124 Bluestone Road can be perceived as a place of redemption where

Sethe is able to some extent define her identity where Paul D suggests they move out of this haunted place, Sethe promptly resists saying that she would not run away anymore from anything. Piotrowska says "Sethe's having locked herself in the house can be perceived as an attempt to revise the past in order to free herself from the burden of her murder" (14). Sethe's deep longing for the explanation of the past action, and for forgiveness, wake into being the ghost of her murdered daughter Beloved.

Beloved has strong and corrosive power as a ghost, sufficiently terrorized 124 Bluestone Road, drove away Sethe's two sons, Howard and Burglar, and even the family dog Here Boy. One day, a real woman in flesh appears in front of the people: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree" (Beloved 60). Paul D, Sethe, and Denver find her as they return from the carnival. Sethe immediately starts to feel a strange need to involuntarily urinate, a reminder of her water breaking before Denver's birth. Clearly, Sethe is reminded of the birth of their babies and her sensitivity toward childbirth. Sethe's body recognizes her dead baby's revelation before her mind does. Denver and Paul D take her inside the house, where she hydrates herself with endless cups of water before dozing off like a baby. In this context, water represents life and rebirth. Beloved seems to be her name. She has no recollection of the past, and her skin is as soft as a baby's. Her development was stopped when she was a crawling baby because she was never given the chance to mature. Her mental state is therefore similar to that of a child. She reveals that she is returning to

reclaim what was taken from her while making egotistical demands for everything. Beloved's initial appearance gives Sethe the impression that she will eventually be loved. As the days pass, Sethe and her daughter Denver do everything they can to show the new member of the family all the love. To spend all of her time with Beloved, Sethe even quits her job. She gradually stops playing the motherly role as she gradually loses control of her own life. Sadly, Sethe falls short of Beloved's lofty expectations. In actuality, Beloved looks for restitution for previous abandonment. Sethe's purpose becomes serving as Beloved's possession. The baby ghost shows up as a main threat to its mother's life.

Sethe constantly unifies her identity with that of her child, unintentionally naming Beloved after herself when the priest at her child's funeral addresses the living "Dearly Beloved" (Beloved 217). The Reverend, in Sethe's opinion, is referring to her late daughter. Sethe chooses to have "Beloved" engraved on her tombstone rather than her child's name. This is a reference to both Sethe and the deceased infant. This demonstrates how Sethe confuses herself with Beloved. Sethe feels devaluated and humiliated by her experience as a slave, puts her energy into loving her children. Interestingly, her own identity is clearly defined in terms of motherhood as she regards her children as "the best thing she was, was her children" (Beloved 296).

In the novel as a whole, Beloved's contribution to the development of Sethe's identity is of the utmost importance. Beloved is a potent representation of the connection between the past and the present in addition to being the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter. The connection

to her past that Sethe makes through the ghost of Beloved forms the basis of her identity. Beloved is a link between the present and the past even though she is neither a part of the present nor the past. As a result, the past that Beloved impersonates is connected to Sethe and Denver's lives. Beloved's arrival causes Sethe's slavery-related wounds to reopen. This demonstrates the power Beloved has over Denver and Sethe. In order to heal these wounds as Piotrowska confirms, "black people have to learn to forget and leave the harmful experience behind" (17). Beloved is thus also understood as a symbol of the pain Sethe has experienced in slavery.

However, Beloved's detrimental impact on the main characters is also quite evident. Denver develops resentment toward Sethe after Beloved appears and wants to get close to her sister. This reveals Denver's desire for a sister and Sethe's desire to mend any damaged bonds with her daughter. Denver first recognizes the relation between Sethe and Beloved: "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her" (Beloved 295). Denver makes the decision to shield Sethe from the damaging effects Beloved has on her mother after observing Sethe's breakdown. Denver's search for identity can be characterized as beginning at the precise moment when he starts acting like an adult. Denver is now in charge of taking care of her mother and is looking for assistance from the black community. When this action is taken into account, Beloved can be said to have a favorable impact.

Conclusion:

In *Beloved*, Sethe, a former slave woman, is depicted as an example of a rebellious mother who kills one of her four children in order to escape the brutal physical, psychological, and oppressive horrors of a life lived in servitude. One of the daughters she manages to kill returns as a ghost that now stalks the house, where Sethe lives with Denver, the only survivor. Gurleen Grewal in her *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* indicates Sethe's action as a heroic revealing the whole idea of slavery and proves it through the statement: "If the master could subject the slave children in bondage to a slow 'social death,' the mother could release them through physical death" (101). On the other hand, Kristina Groover openly states that Sethe's act is a "desperate act of love" (qtd. in Piotrowska 70). Sethe, however, declares "if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear happen to her" (Beloved 236), further says, "to kill my children is preferable to having them die" (Beloved 243).

The physical and psychic scars and wounds from Sethe's past make her body an unsuitable place for positive identity recognition. Sethe's cruel past has shaped her life in such a way that she is unable to regain her identity, and as a result, it has remained wounded. This act of killing can be understood as Sethe's salvation from the institution of slavery and Sethe's love for her children. This proves that Sethe's love for her children is much stronger than killing them. Sethe's deep love for her children can be explained by the fact she is an unloved woman.

Finally, this paper brings a shred of evidence of the quest of Sethe's identity tracing her whole journey to a complete circle from not having her identity to

finally finding her 'self' via *Beloved* by remembering her past and traumatic experience for as long as a lifetime-physically, emotionally, mentally, psychologically. Examining the central

character in detail it is evident that traumatic past lives and repressed memories influence their search for identity.

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