

Mutilated and Misplaced: Propounding Black Women Servitude in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Dr. Anand Uddhav Hipparkar

Professor and Head, Dept. of English, Dada Patil Mahavidyalaya, Karjat, Dist. Ahilyanagar, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The white people had a keen interest for the African continent and took the able-bodied persons to the Americas as slaves during slavery. In 1988, Toni Morrison released *Beloved* to criticize the evil of slavery and how it brutalizes individuals and leaves unforgettable upshots in their lives. The present paper identifies the hardships of slavery that lead Sethe to kill her daughter to save her from the excruciating treatment of slaves by their masters. Sethe's committing infanticide displays the extent to which women suffer much from slavery. The present paper stresses the body of a black female, which, historically, refers to black slavery. The first abuse against the black women was slavery. The Black females historically experienced oppression, abuse, misery, and oppression on the basis of race and gender. Thus, they were sufferers of sexist and racist oppression. They never received any kind protection of their males, unlike the white females who were protected by their male members and cultural standards to get transported into a comfortable maturity.

Keywords: Slavery, Exploitation, Dehumanization, Hardships, Victims, and Trauma, etc.

Introduction

The African-American female writer, Toni Morrison, denounces the exploitative system of slavery and the inhuman treatment perpetrated in slaves. Morrison shows how slavery considerably affects the life of Black women. *Beloved* deals with Sethe who is thirteen years old when she arrives at Sweet Home as a slave girl. She, finally, kills her own daughter to save her from the brutal and dehumanizing evil of slavery. This article aims at revealing how characters have been traumatized, exploited and dehumanized, which leaves sequels for the rest of slaves' lives.

On the contrary, the Black women were physically raped in a social place controlled by white community standards. Violence

against Afro-American women had a significant influence on American society, which had been substantially unfair and irrational towards the black community in general, and towards the black women in particular. The White male and black male threatened the female body of black women. Their masters as well as the black male members of their family raped black women. As a result, the black women, under these terrible and awful conditions, struggled a lot and lost hold on their lives.

Women and children endure victimization during the time of war, protest and in the guise of development and civilization in any society. Thus, Pecola and Sethe become victims. They are black and therefore they are victims. They suffer for no reason and are not responsible for their sufferings. They are

females and thus they are prone to victimization. The patriarchal creed always subordinated them and has muted their individuality. Being a black woman, in America, is very different from being a mere woman. Many a times, the reason for becoming victims is just being a black woman. In Morrison's novels, for instance, Sethe is a victim of brutal slavery and Pecola is one of white fantasy.

Discussion

The dehumanization of African-Americans is definitely a major concern of the novel *Beloved*. Sethe thinks to herself, "...After they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (p. 237). The theme of the dehumanization of African-Americans and using animalistic language to describe them is not just subtly imbued in the text, but overtly manifested in the character of the Schoolteacher, who represents and perpetuated the absolute worst of the racism and abuse that Sethe experienced. One of her most haunting experiences with Schoolteacher does not even involve corporeal pain, of which he inflicted much, but extreme emotional abuse. She describes overhearing a lesson that he was teaching to his three white pupils, in which he instructed them to make a division (physical and symbolic) on paper, and list her human characteristics on one side, and her "animal characteristics" on the other. On top of this insidious atrocity, Sethe had to grapple with the fact that she did not fully understand what he was saying at the time, and went so far as to ask Mrs. Garner what the word "characteristics" means. Later, Sethe revisits this experience, when she says "And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her

daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (p. 298). Perhaps this is one of the reasons Sethe felt she had to kill Beloved, in order to keep her human. There is also a "hunting" theme in the elements of the novel. Another connotation of "rutting," since it is connected to deer, may be hunting game. In looking at the first scene one examines, the "look" in the son's eyes may also be one of possession and achievement in "catching" Sethe. And then there is the larger institutional practice in slavery of chasing runaway slaves with dogs and guns, ready to beat them the moment they are discovered. Perhaps "hunting" is a further extension of the themes you identify in your post.

Throughout Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a consistent thread appears that depicts the dehumanization of slaves at the hands of those with privileged identities. Within the text, Morrison uses animalistic language to describe different scenes in which Sethe and other slaves are being beaten, coerced into sexual acts, and controlled by someone of privilege.

One of the first moments in which Morrison uses language related to animals to describe a scene of abuse and powerlessness occurs when Sethe partakes in a sexual act with the engraver in order to have the name "Beloved" written on her daughter's head stone. The narrator describes the scene once saying, "she thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new," (pg. 5). This graphic scene was extremely disturbing for me to read, indicating it was a passage worth noting. Here, a key aspect of the scene is the nature of the son and the engraver who both

contribute to the dehumanization of Sethe. By describing the son as, “looking on,” Morrison creates a sense of spectatorship, as if Sethe was an interesting object to gaze upon. Furthermore, the engraver is said contain an amount of “anger” and an “appetite.” This image immediately evoked a dynamic of predator and prey, as the words “anger” and “appetite” indicate a sort of animalistic, instinctual need for satiation. The juxtaposition of the engraver’s “old” face yet “new” appetite emphasizes the instinctual nature of his need for sexual gratification. It’s as if despite his age, the act of asserting himself upon Sethe ignites feelings of youth and power. Lastly, the word “rutting” in this context contains significant meaning. I decided to look up the definition of this word and its connotations. I found that “rutting” has another meaning and often refers to the sexual acts of farm animals, mainly deer. This term is repeated later in this section as the narrator says, “Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver’s son was not enough,” (pg. 5). The repetition of this word refers to the way in which the engraver and his son treat Sethe as non-human. Instead, she is an object with little importance to them, similar to an animal. This can be connected back to Mulvey when thinking about the object of the gaze and the performer of the action.

Another instance in which animalistic language is used to describe a scene of abuse when Sethe recalls slaves being forced into wearing bits generally used on farm animals. The narrator says, “She already knew about it, had seen it time after time in the place before Sweet Home. Men, boys, girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back.

Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye,” (pg. 84). This instance is one more of many examples in which Morrison uses animalistic language to emphasize the dehumanization of slaves. The terms “wildness” and the picture of one’s lips being “yanked back” evoke images of a horse being tamed. Generally, this is called “breaking” a horse and often involves using a bit to tame the wild creature. The practice is based upon removing the independence and power of the horse in order to serve its master. The same practice is being used here on people as means of control. Ultimately, Morrison seems to be using both this scene and that which Sethe is at Beloved’s gravestone to depict the way in which African Americans were treated as though they were animals. The language here is not only rooted in referenced to animals, but also to the body and the lack of power. Both of these scenes depict an act being committed against the will of the recipient. The language is centered upon the body and contains notions of forced penetration, whether the mouth or other areas of the body. This constant referral to animals throughout the text furthers the central theme which is the deep-rooted pain that is a result of years of torture and abuse. It highlights the lack of agency had amongst slaves and the cruel practices held by their owners who often performed violent acts centered upon penetration and disfiguration of the body.

The life of Sethe in this novel is dismissed, trivialized and misread. “Innocent victims” is the apt description of these two characters. Both of them are innocent and cruel predators such as “Slavery” and

“Racism” readily coerce them. They are the Morrison’s exploited black women. The problems faced by black women were due to the highly prevalent racism and slavery before the American Civil War.

Morrison, in *Beloved*, addresses the issue of slavery and wants people to be able to feel at a personal level what it means to be a slave and what slavery did to people. Sethe of *Beloved* is a black woman of extraordinary power, is the heroine of this novel who is willing to sacrifice not only to gain her own emancipation, but also to prevent her children from falling under the yoke of forced enslavement. Sethe kills her own daughter to free herself from the bonds of slavery. She perceives slavery as hell and has de-rooted the ability and willingness of the slaves to survive in an awful environment. Sethe is a fugitive slave. Though she is freed from the bonds, she could not live a productive life due to the damage that slavery has already done to her mind. When Sethe becomes pregnant, the nephews of the Schoolteacher rape her. The Schoolteacher is the brother of Mrs. Garner. Mrs. Garner has to give away all her slaves for the debts she owes him. Though the Garners treat their slaves a lot better than the other white masters do, they could not be in control until the end. Schoolteacher is totally the opposite of the Garner family. He operates the plantation and treats the slaves differently from Mr. Garner. It becomes a very agonizing situation for the slaves. They feel dehumanized by him, so Sethe and Halle make plans to flee from the plantation in order to be free. Before their escape, Halle and Sethe have secretly planned to meet at the barn. However, the nephews of Schoolteacher track Sethe, catch her and sexually abuse her:

... they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby.

Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because Ma’am was in

the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left.

Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what

it was like to be without milk that belongs to you. (BD 236)

This is the kind of trauma; blacks were undergoing during slavery. Moreover, for young black girls the trauma was sexual and it endangered their lives emotionally. When Sethe tells Mrs. Garner what has happened to her, she sympathizes with her, though she could do nothing to protect her. When the Schoolteacher knows what she has done, he takes Sethe and whips her over her back so badly that her skin is burnt and loses sensation. Through all these torments, Sethe survives, preserves her sanity, but is psychically damaged enough to be living in bonds even after she is freed later.

Beloved transforms her co-characters. Morrison redesigns the presentation of psychological trauma in literature through *Beloved*. As both a symbolic and physical manifestation of their fragmented, dissociated selves, *Beloved* releases Sethe and Denver to process their traumatic pasts. Sethe is traumatized by both slavery and motherhood and her consequential actions, namely *Beloved*’s murder, also traumatize Denver. Morrison highlights the effects of this trauma through a loss of time, linguistic slips, and the characters’ preoccupation with the oral stage. *Beloved* makes an ambiguous appearance midway through the novel, mirroring and

building upon this trauma. As the novel progresses, she increasingly resembles Sethe. In this, *Beloved* necessitates Denver's transition into the role of caretaker, allowing Sethe to escape the struggles and trauma she associates with motherhood. *Beloved's* embodiment of Sethe and Denver's traumatization allows them to move beyond the moratorium forced upon them by slavery and murder. While *Beloved* never fully establishes herself as an individual, her role as the physical embodiment of Sethe and Denver's broken selves provides a figure to carry the burdens of Morrison's main characters so they can truly begin their adult lives.

Conclusion

The discussion on Tony Morrison's novels construes that slavery deprived black Africans of their human dignity. The inhuman treatment on plantations motivates the African-American, Toni Morrison writer to express her anger and frustration through her novels. Inspired by the hardships,

dehumanization and the cruelties reserved for African-American female slaves, Morrison published *Beloved* to denounce the evil of slavery. This paper lets readers to see the extent to which Sethe is degraded, exploited and devastated. Sethe is in quest for ways and means to escape from Slavery. Her infanticide shows that female characters have suffered much from Slavery, which leaves sequels, traumas and flashbacks for the rest of their lives. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals hard living conditions of the slaves and their subservient relationships with their masters.

Thus, the emancipated women of Toni Morrison are the next generation girls. Morrison's victims and exploited women give birth to the emancipated generation. Though emancipated, they went through the missions of empowering themselves. The failed mission and the incomplete metamorphosis of Morrison's women are because of the forgotten ancestral values and cultural heritage by this generation.

Works Cited:

- Bonnet, Michael. "To Take the Sin out of Slicing Trees ...": The Law of the Tree in 'Beloved'. *African American Review* 31 (1997): p. 49
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. The John Hopkins University Press. 1995. Print.
- Fuston-White, Jeanna. "From the Seen to the Told": The Construction of Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *African American Review* 36 (2002): 461-473.
- Moglen, Helene. "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *Cultural Critique*, No. 24, 1993, pp. 17-40.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage Books, 2004. Print.
- _____. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage Books, 2007. Print.
- Schapiro, Barbara. "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1991, pp. 194-210.

- Watson, Reginald. "Derogatory Images of Sex: The Black Woman and Her Plight in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, 2009, pp. 93-108.
- Wyatt, Jean. "The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." PMLA, vol. 108, no. 3, 1993, pp. 474-488.