



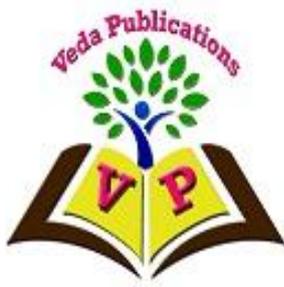
THE IMPACT OF SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVEL: *BELOVED*

Dr.B.Lakshmi

(Associate Professor, Department of English, Rajalakshmi Engineering College, Thandalam, Chennai -602105)

giridharlakshmi135@gmail.com

ABSTRACT



Black women's literature, unexamined and excluded from white-male dominated literary discourse, is now receiving scholarly attention. In the aftermath of civil rights movement, a significant number of African American women writes like Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor and Alice Childress contemplated issues of racial injustice and gender problems through narratives.

Toni Morrison's Novel, *Beloved* portrays successful development of the "black identity" in times when a black person was denied it. Morrison reveals the horror of slavery in explicit detail, elaborating upon the physical and mental abuses suffered by Sethe, Paul D, and the other Sweet Home slaves. *Beloved* not only speaks for the slaves whose voices were silenced, but also contributes to Morrison's critique of the aesthetics that has dominated American culture and its canon of literature.

Keywords: *American Civil War, Racial Discrimination, Dehumanization, Slavery, Black Women*

Citation:

APA Lakshmi, B. (2017) The Impact of Slavery in Toni Morrison's Novel: *Beloved*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 4(1), 63-70.

MLA Lakshmi, B. "The Impact of Slavery in Toni Morrison's Novel: *Beloved*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL* 4.1(2017): 63-70.

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INTRODUCTION

In America, the earliest Africans viewed in the same way as indentured servants from Europe. Unfortunately this similarity did not continue for a long time. By the latter half of the 17th century clear differences existed in the treatment of black and white servants. A 1662 Virginia law assumed Africans would remain servants for life. The awakening of Negroes in America in the early part of this century resulted due to turbulent social experience in the white society. Besides being tortured by racial discrimination, the migrated and settled Negroes in America began to undergo various types of stress and strain in order to survive in a hostile environment, which includes social, political and economic bearing.

TYPES OF SLAVERY

The slaves were of two categories, household and field hands. The household servants worked in the house of their master as butlers, cooks, coachmen, maids and nurses. The field hands have to cultivate the fields, to make houses and to build roads. The white master provided in rows of huts in the estate of, the masters employed overseers to control the gang of slaves.

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The Civil War was between the north, and the south, or confederacy of the newly emergent United States. The southern states, under the president Jefferson Davis, wish to secede, the north, under President Abraham Lincoln, wants to keep the United States intact and also offers liberty to the black employed in the southern plantations, war breaks out between the northern emancipation states and the southern slaves states of America.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

The white man's cunning manipulation of the social situation escaped black man's perception. Though we cannot blame black man totally for this because being a slave himself he was absolutely powerless to question the scheme of things. This granted the white men a lucrative opportunity to exploit the black people in this context; Black men have been systematically and deliberately victimized not only by the racist and classic assumptions but also by scholarly neglect. The media failed to note the cognizance of the powerful effusions of the black people. Morrison quoted in her works the

experiences of exploitation political, racial, sexual and emotional onslaughts meted out to the innocent black people.

Gender discrimination has remained an unwritten social or even a legitimate convention all over the world while sex is the creation of God. Racism started in America when white master of the land brought the African in chain and used their labour to work in their plantation. As a result, black people became slaves' in the white apartheid society because of their complexion; the white men thought that they are superiors on earth.

Some of the most vicious forms of racial discrimination in history are slavery, as well as colonialism, which caused immeasurable suffering to the indigenous peoples worldwide, including those of African descent, who were forcibly subjected to servitude as a result of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. These past practices are among the leading factors contributing to the lasting forms of social exclusion and structures of economic inequality in many parts of the world today.

Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought the first Africans in chains and used their labour to enrich their coffers. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. In an illuminating study of the origin of racism in the united states, Joel Kovel 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, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange (P.18)

Gloria Steinem, in her introduction to *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, states this equation very tersely thus: "Just as male was universal but female was limited, white was universal but black was limited"(P.35). A sense of inferiority and inadequacy was being cultivated by the white domination group to deprive blacks of their genuine potential. Thus, race and gender, that is, 'black' and 'female' were juxtaposed against 'white' and 'male' in the process creating a subjugated microcosm within a dominating microcosm. Racism deprived a group of people of their growth and happiness, so



too sexism. Racism and sexism grew out of the same stultifying atmosphere of prejudice, discrimination and condescension. Discriminations based on the differences of race and colour, sexism, and gender. But in spite of these differences, they create the same kind of negative currents which even today cause great harm. The entire African American community was condemned to endless suffering, yet the black women's condition was much worse than the black man's because 'to be black and female was to be in double jeopardy.'

AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

It is in the era and aftermath of the Civil Rights movement that black cultural consciousness is strongly growing and expanding. The black leader Martin Luther King adopted nonviolent actions to fight against racial oppression. During the 1960s, black people as a category organized struggles. They actively engaged in the political activism, striving for classless reforms and freedom.

In short, Civil Rights movement won political rights for blacks. It brought more opportunities of education, the right to vote, and better jobs for black people. It set stage for the development of black politics in the 1970s and 1980s. This act not only fought perceptions of racial inferiority but also brought changes to the stereotypes of black people. The desire generated by this act to claim black's cultural heritage with their voices is great and strong. It gave black people a voice and established the principle of self-empowerment.

Moreover, the act's provisions against sexism helped promote women's rights movement. It, in turn, brought the black woman's voice from the margin to the centres in American literature. In the aftermath of civil rights movement, a significant number of African American woman writers contemplated issues of racial injustice and gender problems through narratives; to mention only a few of them, such as Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor and Alice Childress. Black women's literature, unexamined and excluded from white-male dominated literary discourse, is now receiving scholarly attention.

INTRODUCTION ABOUT THE NOVEL

Beloved is a contemporary novel with the appeal of a ghost story, a mystery, and a work of historical fiction. It is a complex literary work that also seeks to understand the impact of slavery, both on the psychology of individuals and on the larger patterns of culture and history. Morrison was drawn to the historical account, which brought up questions of what it meant to love and to be a mother in a place and time where life was often devalued. *Beloved* is not just a story to tell for amusement; this is not a story to pass by; this is not a story to tell lightly because once you tell it things will never be the same. But this is also not a story that you will ever fully comprehend. Morrison takes her turn to denounce slavery and long for the freedom on behalf of all slaves. To show the historical truth that collective struggle is the only practical solution for African People, Morrison writes a historical novel, *Beloved*, which explores most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. The novel portrays successful development of the "black identity" in times when a black person was denied it. Morrison reveals the horror of slavery in explicit detail, elaborating upon the physical and mental abuses suffered by Sethe, Paul D, and the other Sweet Home slaves. *Beloved* not only speaks for the slaves whose voices were silenced, but also contributes to Morrison's critique of the aesthetics that has dominated American culture and its canon of literature.

The novel is based on a newspaper clipping about a fugitive slave in Ohio who killed her own infant rather than sees her return to bondage in the South. Morrison found the news clipping in *The Black Book*, which chronicles the life of the Africans through the Civil rights movement. Morrison gets the kernel of her novel from the news article entitled 'A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed her Child', in which the slave mother's mother-in-law states the incident to the newspaper article as:

I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old, and observed that a large bunch on its forehead. I inquire the cause of the injury. She then proceeded to give a detailed account of her attempt to kill her children. She said, that when the officers and



slave - hunters came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and then took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other, - that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all that with regard to herself, she cared but little, but she was unwilling to have her Children suffer as she had done.

The two men and the two other children were in another apartment but her mother-in-law was in the same room. She says that she is the mother of eight children, most of whom have been separated from her; that her husband was once separated from her twenty five years. During which time she did not see him; that could have prevented him to return, as she did not wish him to witness her sufferings, or be exposed to the brutal treatment that he would receive. She states that she has been a faithful servant, and in her old age she would not have attempted to obtain her liberty; but as she became feeble, and less capable of performing labour, her master become more and more exacting and brutal in his treatment she could stand it no longer; that the effort could result only in death.

She witnessed the killing of the child, but said that she neither encouraged nor discouraged her daughter-in-law, the old woman is from sixty to seventy years of age, has been a professor of religion about twenty years, and speaker with much feeling of the time when she shall be delivered from the power of the oppressor, and dwell with the Savoir, 'Where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest ...

With the essence of this news clipping, Morrison concocts the story of *Beloved*. She, however, expands, refines, and shapes it so that *Beloved* picks up where *Tar Baby* leaves off, while mulling over this news article what evidently clicked in Morrison's mind was the fact that conditions of oppression then and now as well as our reactions to them have not qualitatively changed. Morrison's conscious focus on collective rather than individual struggle is clarified

through her repeated assertions that *Beloved* is the story of a group of people rather than a person:

The book was not about the institution of slavery with a capital S. It was about those anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they are willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another - that was incredible to me (Angelo Bonnie P. 48).

Although the novel begins as Sethe's story, it evolves into a story about, "these people who don't know they are in an era of historical interest. They just know they have to get through the day ... and they are trying desperately to be parents, husbands and a mother with children (Mirrian Horn P. 75).

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The impact of slavery on people, thus, involves the way internationalization of oppressor's values can distort all intimate human relationships and even subvert the self. *Beloved* deals with not the only 'reconstructed memory', but also deconstructed history. Set in post - civil war Ohio, this haunting narrative of slavery and its aftermath, traces the life of a young woman, Sethe, who has kept a terrible memory at bay only by shutting down part of her mind the novel deals with Sethe's former life as a slave on Sweet Home Farm, her escape with her children to what seems a safe haven, and the tragic events that follow. Although Sethe physically survives she remains emotionally subjugated, and her desire to give and receive love becomes a destructive force. Morrison also addresses the difficulties faced by former slave in keeping. The horrors of their past submerged within the subconscious. It there are its fruits, where it exists in mild form, will someone tell us what are they may expect from its more objectionable features? But comments are one; Morrison gives not only the searching attention in *Beloved* to the ghostly influence of slavery, racism, and the dead in the racialized, gendered, class-marked life stories of her different characters female, male, black, white but also the attention in this novel to changing relationships among these characters. Dever's attitude toward the story involving Amy Denver suggests its own version of the solitudes and separate confinement described by Morrison in the tradition of American romance:



Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern her, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it (Ann Sintow P. 25).

Very few readers will miss the experimental structure of *Beloved*. It is not a linear tale, told from beginning to end. It is a story encompassing levels of past, from the slave ship to Sweet home, as well as the present. Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present. *Beloved* is, in essence, written in fragments, pieces shattered and left for the readers to place together.

When slavery has torn apart one's heritage, when the past is more real than the present, when the rage of a dead baby can literally rock a house, then the traditional novel is no longer an adequate instrument. And *Beloved* is written in bits and images, smashed like a mirror on the floor and left for the readers to put together. In a novel that is hypnotic, beautiful, and elusive, Morrison portrays the lives of Sethe, and escaped slave and mother, and those around her. Because of the extraordinary, experimental style as well as the intensity of the subject matter, what we learn from them touches at a level deeper than understanding.

SWEET HOME SLAVES

Morrison reveals the horror of slavery in explicit detail, elaborating upon the physical and mental abuses suffered by Sethe, Paul D, and the other Sweet Home slaves. *Beloved* not only speaks for the slaves whose voices were silenced, but also contributes to Morrison's critique of the aesthetics that has dominated American culture and its canon of literature. *Beloved* is a contemporary novel with the appeal of a ghost story, a mystery, and a work of historical fiction. It is a complex literary work that also seeks to understand the impact of slavery, both on the psychology of individuals and on the larger patterns of culture and history. Morrison was drawn to the historical account, which brought up questions of what it meant to love and to be a mother in a place and time where life was often devalued. *Beloved* is not just a story to tell for amusement; this is not a story to pass by; this is not a story to tell lightly because once you tell it things will never be

the same. But this is also not a story that you will ever fully comprehend. Morrison takes her turn to denounce slavery and long for the freedom on behalf of all slaves.

Apparently, Morrison found the experience of black mothers who develop a sense of self after slavery worth writing about. Hence, *Beloved* appears to be a proper illustration of it. Based on a true story of Margaret Garner the action of the novel takes place in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio. After escaping from Kentucky plantation the main character, Sethe, attempts to kill her children to prevent them from being re-enslaved. She succeeds in killing only one of her four children, "the crawling-already girl." This event, in all its brutality, condemns Sethe to being rejected by the society. She then seeks refuge within the walls of her house at 124 Bluestone Road, where she separates herself as well as her daughter, Denver, from the black community.

THE CRUELTY OF DEHUMANIZATION

White supremacy originates primarily in the degradation of black bodies in order to have control over them, which is best done through persuasion that their black bodies are ugly. Therefore, using the device of dehumanizing the body, slavery aimed first and foremost at women. Audre Lorde affirms that, when considering institutionalized slavery, it is essential to understand that more central than liberation alone was African American women's maltreatment (P.70). It was easier to enact cruelty upon women for, apart from being black, they were also most vulnerable in the black society because they were females. This fact encouraged white oppressors to abuse them sexually. In *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle*, Gurleen Grewal theorizes that Morrison's *Beloved* clearly portrays that there is more to the "equality of oppression" since under slavery women were routinely the "subjects of rape, enforced childbirth, and natal alienation from their children" (P.100). The fact that they were "mothers," also enabled, even encouraged, white masters to dehumanize and deprive women on a higher level of degradation than it could be done to slave-men.

Hence, the cruelty of dehumanization that indirectly forced Sethe to commit infanticide can be best illustrated with examples from the novel. There are two crucial moments in Sethe's life when she is



submitted to the dehumanizing forces of the white oppressors. The first clearly distinguishable incident in Sethe's story that marks a turning point in her life and drastically changes her perception of the future, in early in her life, when she is put on the animal side of the list of features according to schoolteacher's education. Sethe overhears the man's lesson, during which he teaches his nephews about the natural features of a human, drawing a thick line between a human being and an animal. He has given the precise exemplification of the difference between the human and animal world, he classifies Sethe as a representative of the animal realm. Not until she actually acknowledges that 'the feature means something naturally assigned to a thing,' can she understand the humiliating classification. She begins to trust in the words of Baby Suggs that "there is no bad luck in the world but white folks," (Beloved.89) seeing no other possibility than to draw a general conclusion about the racism of every single white person. The second attempt gains even more meaning when, much later in her life, Sethe is pregnant with Denver. Sethe's milk is then taken from her to feed the schoolteacher's nephews. As it is indicated, feeding white boys with Sethe's own milk is superimposed over feeding her own children. Only by getting rid of the economic and cultural differences between peoples can the gathering of all the nations be realized. Such is the case with Sethe; the most prominent of the novel's many sufferers, who bear the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back. Her description of this assault is straightforward; she tells Paul D very briefly that one of schoolteacher's nephews beat her while she was pregnant with Denver, injuring her so badly that 'her back skin had been dead for years' (Beloved. 18), the impetus for this beating, however, are more obscurely written. Sethe repeatedly uses the words 'they took my milk' to describe her violation (Beloved. 17). The theft of Sethe's milk is clearly Paining to her, for, as Barbara Schapiro writes, "[s]he feels robbed of her essence, of her most precious substance, which is her maternal milk" (P. 159). Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children, who have travelled to Baby Suggs's house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe

considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself.

Yet this single-minded concentration upon her milk also may be Sethe's way of repressing another pain—a rape by the white boys, left unnarrated in the text, but the trace of which emerges during her subsequent flight to Ohio and in her panicked violence against her children when schoolteacher and the boys arrive at Baby Suggs's house.

Until this point, Sethe has not experienced the sexual violence so commonly inflicted upon enslaved black women. Left unmolested by the plantation owner, Mr. Garner, Sethe is allowed to choose her husband from the six young men at Sweet Home, who also leave her untouched while she decides. In describing their powerful lust for Sethe, Morrison uses the word 'rape,' one of the very few instances the word appears in the novel at all. Significantly, it appears only in order to denote its absence; that is, Morrison notes that Sethe is not raped by the Sweet Home men. The presence of rape, then, need not be accompanied by its linguistic signifier; indeed, the absence of the word may instead be an indication of its occurrence, according to Morrison's methodology.

When she realizes that schoolteacher and his nephews have arrived at Baby Suggs's house to take her and the children back to Sweet Home, she kills her daughter so that no "gang of whites [would invade] her daughter's private parts, [soil] her daughter's thighs" (Beloved. 251). Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape; that worse than death is the fact that "anybody white could take your whole self . . . [and] dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (Beloved. 251).

SETHE'S BAD EXPERIENCE

Sethe of the role of being a mother, and degrades her to the position of a 'breeder,' as she is made use of like an animal in service of feeding a human. The humiliation reaches its peak when Sethe learns that her husband, Halle, is a witness to the situation. Since he cannot protect her, he feels emasculated, and therefore abandons her. Much as Halle's behaviour is then rationalized by Sethe, she



will nevertheless feel disgust for men. This, in consequence, can be a logical explanation of her inability to form a closer relationship with Paul D. As 'the last from the sweet-home men' and the only one who survived, Paul D appears in Sethe's life eighteen years after the event of killing her child and shows readiness to form a relationship with Sethe. In fact, this could give the basis for the substitute of a traditional family, if not for them both, then at least for Denver. Yet, to Sethe's disappointment, Paul D cannot reconcile with the knowledge of Sethe's committing so barbarous an act as murder and following the white masters' example compares her to an animal when he says: 'you have two legs, not four.' This declaration is all the more hurtful and humiliating for Sethe because here Paul D sides with the white oppressors, simply unable to understand the complexity of her actions. Sethe, who has hoped for Paul D's support in her suffering, receives it neither from the black society, nor from Paul D.

Gurleen Grewal, for example, suggests taking Sethe's deed as a heroic act of resistance that revealed in it the whole idea of slavery, and justifies her position 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." The reader is encouraged by Morrison to see Sethe's killing of the child as not an anomaly, but rather as a revision of the stereotype of 'the mammy figure' (Grewal .P. 97- 101). All the more unreasonable then, seems Sethe's exclusion from the black community. The society that has previously heartily welcomed her as its rightful member, they invite her to join their free community once she has escaped from slavery, and seeks shelter in the embrace of Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law. Now she is among 'her people.' Still, it is only for a month that she enjoys the status of a 'black sister.' After the unforgivable infanticide, the people who could best understand her motives because of their common experience reject her: "Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" (Beloved .173). Sethe's infanticide is unpardonable.

After being rejected, Sethe finds a place of desolation within the walls of 124 Bluestone house and succeeds in isolating herself, and Denver, from

the community. Marilyn R. Chandler relates the idea of the house, through which women could 'work out their salvation and define their identities.' Sethe circumscribes life to the house, and as such, is able to see a way to find her true identity. In addition, Sethe has locked herself in the house can force of Beloved. Sethe's subconscious longing for clarification of the past, and simultaneously for forgiveness, brings into being the ghost of her murdered child. According to West African belief, the dead are not finished with the living because the past (the dead), present (the living), and future (the unborn) are coexistent. Deceased ancestors can and do communicate with their descendants, especially if certain rites of the dead have not been performed. Such a world view posits a fluidity and continuity between the past and present.

BELOVED'S CLAIM

It takes eighteen years for the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter, Beloved; to come back in flesh and claim the love she has been denied. Beloved appears as a young woman, but behaves like a child. Being slaughtered by her mother she has never been given a chance to mature, thus, her development was arrested at the point when she was a 'crawling-already baby.' Consequently, her mentality is comparable to that of a child, and she is selfishly demanding. Her infantile egocentricity reveals itself in the nature of her return, namely, she comes back to claim what was taken from her. To borrow a Freudian term, Beloved's "return of the repressed" denotes the comeback of the suffering soul to 'possess' Initially, Beloved's appearance suggests to the main protagonists that she came to 'love and be-loved.' As time goes by, Sethe and Denver make every effort to provide the regained family member with all the love they previously reserved for each other. Beloved's behaviour is often approached through the lens of Oedipal complex that develops into some demonic force, and subsequently leads to Sethe's mental and physical destruction.

In doing so, she gradually loses control over her own life, and progressively ceases to perform the role of a mother. While attempting to make up for the murder, Sethe does not fulfill Beloved's expectations. For in reality, what Beloved seeks is a compensation for being abandoned in the past.



Incapable of perceiving the true intentions behind Beloved's actions, Sethe exists only as if the ghost's possession. At this point in the novel, the ghost appears to be a main threat to her mother's existence. Moreover, the asylum of the haunted house enhances Beloved's drift to 'suck the life out of Sethe.'

Sethe finds comfort in Paul D., who finds her living in a haunted house, with Denver, and a very angry spirit. Paul wants her to leave the house, but she insists on staying, and so he decides to stay with her. Beloved forces herself on Paul D, impregnating herself in the process. Paul, unable to deal with his own guilt, leaves. Sethe devotes herself completely to the ghost of her murdered child-now alive. Denver has jealousy pangs, and sees Beloved's manipulation of her mother. The spirit begins to feed off of Sethe's health, and she falls ill.

Sethe's black awareness and rejection of white perceptions and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other slaves as non-humans are synthesized with her black feminist sense of self-sufficiency. Sethe reconciles gender differences first with her husband, Halle Suggs, and later with Paul D, in heterosexual, endogamous relationship. Although by implication the author blends racial and sexual consciousness, the structure and style of the text foregrounds the ambivalence of slave women about motherhood that violates their personal integrity and that of their family.

CONCLUSION

Morrison's greatness as a novelist, however, lies in her extraordinary power of achieving a harmonious fusion of her social concerns and demands of novel as art form. The ultimate solution of collective struggle to the problem of economic exploitation of the blacks in white America is offered invariably in terms of fictional art. What Morrison has worked out in *Beloved* is an extraordinarily effective Gothic blend of post-modern realism and romance as well as of racial and sexual politics. For the characters of implied author, the scars of racial, sexual, and class oppression are more horrible on the soul as well as those on the body.

Thus, Morrison has brilliantly succeeded in her attempt to make *Beloved* 'unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful.' it is beautiful

narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery, on the power of memorize, and the collective memories kept alive through oral tradition. It is also a story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and keep their history alive. Morrison's self consciousness interest in the celebration of black women's strength, their values and beliefs, stems from desire to correct the wrongs that have been historically levelled against black women. She seeks to celebrate the legends of black women like Baby Suggs and Sethe, and weave their dreams into myths that allow us to recover their past.

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