

## SLAVERY'S DESTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Dr. Shikha Agarwal

Assistant Professor, SKIT Engineering College, Jaipur

### Abstract

*Beloved* is the most celebrated novel of Toni Morrison. The paper investigates how identity is affected by slavery in the novel. Identity is something which tells about a person. Identity can be as a citizen, as an employee or as a member of the community. By and large identity is the benchmark of a person. Weinreich gives the definition “A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between the past and how one aspires to be in the future”; this allows for definitions of aspects of identity, such as: “One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity”. (Weinreich, 1986). Identity can be constructive or destructive. Slavery is something which tries to snatch away one's identity in a hideous way. *Beloved* explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves, even post freedom. The most dangerous effects of slavery is its negative impact on the former slaves' sense of self, and the novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation. Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's. Slaves were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul D is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real “man,” and he frequently wonders about his value as a person.

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Identity is something which tells about a person. Identity can be as a citizen, as an employee or as member of the community. By and large identity is the bench mark of a person. Weinreich says “A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future”. (Weinreich); this allows for exploration of various aspects of identity. “One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity”, (Weinreich). Identity can be constructive or destructive. Slavery is something which tries to snatch away one's identity in a hideous way. A slave loses its identity and becomes the property of the owner. Slavery is a legal or economic system in which principles of property law are applied to humans allowing them to be classified as property,[1] to be owned, bought and sold accordingly, and they cannot withdraw unilaterally from the arrangement. While a person is enslaved, the

owner is entitled to the productivity of the slave's labour, without any remuneration Toni Morrison uses fiction to manifest how slavery is responsible for the destruction of identity.

*Beloved* explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt those characters who were slaves formerly even after they are free. The most dangerous of slavery's effects is its negative impact on the slaves' senses of self that alienates the slave further. The novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation. Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's. Slaves were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul D is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real "man," and he frequently wonders about his value as a person.

Sethe, also, was treated as a subhuman. She once walked in while a school teacher was giving his pupils a lesson on her "animal characteristics." She, too, seems to be alienated from herself and is filled with self-loathing. However, she sees her children as complete beings, unlike herself. Yet her children also have volatile, unstable identities. Denver conflates her identity with Beloved's, and Beloved feels herself actually beginning to physically disintegrate. Slavery has also limited Baby Suggs's self-conception by shattering her family and denying her the opportunity to be a true wife, sister, daughter, or loving mother.

As a result of their inability to believe in their own existence, both Baby Suggs and Paul D become depressed and tired. Baby Suggs's fatigue is spiritual, while Paul D's is emotional. While a slave, Paul D developed self-defeating coping strategies to protect himself from the emotional pain he was forced to endure. Any feelings he had were locked away in the rusted "tobacco tin" of his heart, and he concluded that one should love nothing too intensely. Other slaves—Jackson Till, Aunt Phyllis, and Halle—become insane and thus suffer complete loss of the self. Sethe fears that she, too, will end her days in madness. Indeed, she does prove to be mad when she kills her own daughter. Yet Sethe's act of infanticide illuminates the perverse forces of the institution of slavery: under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them and thus protecting them from the more gradual destruction wrought by slavery.

Stamp Paid muses that slavery's negative consequences are not limited to the slaves: he notes that slavery causes the whites to become "changed and altered . . . made . . . bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be." (*Beloved*, 57) The insidious effects of the institution affect not only the identities of its black victims but those of the whites who perpetrate it and the collective identity of Americans. Where slavery exists, everyone suffers loss of humanity and compassion. For this reason, Morrison suggests that our nation's identity, like the novel's characters, must be healed. America's future depends on its understanding of the past: just as Sethe must come to terms with her past before she can secure a future with Denver and Paul D. Thus, before we can address slavery's legacy in the contemporary problems of racial discrimination and discord, we must confront the dark and hidden corners of our history. Crucially, in *Beloved*, we learn about the history and legacy of slavery not from school teacher's or even from the Bodwins' point of view but rather from Sethe's, Paul D's, Stamp Paid's, and Baby Suggs's. Morrison writes history with the voices of a people historically denied the power of language, and *Beloved* recuperates a history that had been lost—either due to willed forgetfulness (as in Sethe's repression of her memories) or to forced silence (as in the case of Paul D's iron bit).

When Sixo turns school teacher's reasoning around to justify having broken the rules, school teacher whips him to demonstrate that "definitions belong to the definers," not to the defined. The slaves eventually come to realize the illegitimacy of many of the white definitions. Mr. Garner, for example, claims to have allowed his slaves to live as "real men," but Paul D questions just how manly they actually are. So, Paul D too finally comes to realize with bitter irony the fallacy of the name "Sweet Home." Although Sixo eventually reacts to the hypocrisy of the rhetoric of slavery by abandoning English altogether, other characters use English to redefine the world on their own terms. Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, for example, rename themselves. *Beloved* may be read as Morrison's effort to transform those who have always been the defined by definers.

While slaves, the characters manipulate language and transcend its standard limits. Their command of language allows them to adjust its meanings and to make themselves indecipherable to the white slave owners who watch them. For example, Paul D and the Georgia prison inmates sing together about their dreams and memories by "garbling... [and] tricking the words." (Ed. Tyrone Williams, enotes)

The title of the novel alludes to what is ultimately the product of a linguistic misunderstanding. At her daughter's funeral, Sethe interpreted the minister's address to the "Dearly Beloved" as referring to the *dead* rather than the living. All literature is indebted to this "slippery," shifting quality of language: the power of metaphor, simile, metonymy, irony, and wordplay all result from the ability of words to attach and detach themselves from various possible meanings.

Paul D describes his heart as a "tin tobacco box." After his traumatizing experiences at Sweet Home and, especially, at the prison camp in Alfred, Georgia, he locks away his feelings and memories in this "box," which has, by the time Paul D arrives at 124, "rusted" over completely. By alienating himself from his emotions, Paul D hopes to preserve himself from further psychological damage. In order to secure this protection, however, Paul D sacrifices much of his humanity by foregoing feeling and gives up much of his selfhood by repressing his memories. Although Paul D is convinced that nothing can pry the lid of his box open, his strange, dreamlike sexual encounter with Beloved—perhaps a symbol of an encounter with his past—causes the box to burst and his heart to once again glow red.

The use of Beloved as the symbol of bondage has implications for several of the novel's characters and most importantly for Sethe. In her monologues and her interactions with Beloved, Sethe struggles to justify the death of her daughter as an act to free the child from slavery's inheritance as much as it was to free herself from its legacy.

"I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her". (*Beloved*, 52)

As much as Sethe and Beloved do experience moments of unspoken mother-daughter joy, Beloved's destructive purpose is evidenced several times throughout the novel. In one example, Sethe enjoys a moment of respite, imagining the soothing hands of her deceased mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, massaging her neck, a moment that turns to alarm when she is choked - by the hands of Beloved.

“For eighteen years she had lived in a house full of touches from the other side. And the thumbs that pressed her nape were the same”. (*Beloved*, 12)

The definitive example of the novel’s mythological interpretation of *Beloved* as a supernatural symbol of slavery’s destructive heritage is revealed in the final chapter. The conclusion is prefaced by the consensus of the community to forgive Sethe’s crime, to “turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around and build a further case for abolishing slavery”. (*Beloved*, 35)

As Sethe prepares to finally part with the ghost of slavery that has haunted her for so many years, *Beloved* is revealed as wearing “vines of hair twisted all over her head”. The imagery is symbolic of the mythical Medusa who could turn anyone that looked upon her to stone. She represents to Sethe the final chance to leave the bonds of slavery and meet the wholeness of community, a deliverance that she had denied by her chosen isolation for so many years but which had been within her grasp from the very beginning.

*Beloved* begins in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe, a former slave, has been living with her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, lived with them until her death eight years earlier. Just before Baby Suggs’s death, Sethe’s two sons, Howard and Buglar, ran away. Sethe believes they fled because of the malevolent presence of an abusive ghost that has haunted their house at 124 Bluestone Road for years. Denver, however, likes the ghost, which everyone believes to be the spirit of her dead sister.

On the day the novel begins, Paul D, whom Sethe has not seen since they worked together on Mr. Garner’s Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky approximately twenty years earlier, stops by Sethe’s house. His presence resurrects memories that have lain buried in Sethe’s mind for almost two decades. From this point on, the story unfolds on two temporal planes. The present in Cincinnati constitutes one plane, while a series of events that took place around twenty years earlier, mostly in Kentucky, constitutes the other. This latter plane is accessed and described through the fragmented flashbacks of the major characters. From these fragmented memories, the following story begins to emerge: Sethe, the protagonist, was born in the South to an African mother she never knew. When she is thirteen, she is sold to the Garners, who own Sweet Home and practice a comparatively benevolent kind of slavery. There, the other slaves, who are all men, lust after her but never touch her. Their names are Sixo, Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, and Halle. Sethe chooses to marry Halle, apparently in part because he has proven generous enough to buy his mother’s freedom by hiring himself out on the weekends. Together, Sethe and Halle have two sons, Howard and Buglar, as well as a baby daughter whose name we never learn. When she leaves Sweet Home, Sethe is also pregnant with a fourth child. After the eventual death of the proprietor, Mr. Garner, the widowed Mrs. Garner asks her sadistic, vehemently racist brother-in-law to help her run the farm. He is known to the slaves as school teacher, and his oppressive presence makes life on the plantation even more unbearable than it had been before. The slaves decide to run.

School teacher and his nephews anticipate the slaves’ escape, however, and capture Paul D and Sixo. Schoolteacher kills Sixo and brings Paul D back to Sweet Home, where Paul D sees Sethe for what he believes will be the last time. She is still intent on running, having already sent her children ahead to her mother-in-law Baby Suggs’s house in Cincinnati. Invigorated by the recent capture, schoolteacher’s nephews seize Sethe in the barn and violate her, stealing the milk her body is storing for her infant daughter.

Unbeknownst to Sethe, Halle is watching the event from a loft above her, where he lies frozen with horror. Afterward, Halle goes mad: Paul D sees him sitting by a churn with butter slathered all over his face. Paul D, meanwhile, is forced to suffer the indignity of wearing an iron bit in his mouth.

When School teacher finds out that Sethe has reported his and his nephews' misdeeds to Mrs. Garner, he has her whipped severely, despite the fact that she is pregnant. Swollen and scarred, Sethe nevertheless runs away, but along the way she collapses from exhaustion in a forest. A white girl, Amy Denver, finds her and nurses her back to health. When Amy later helps Sethe deliver her baby in a boat, Sethe names this second daughter Denver after the girl who helped her. Sethe receives further help from Stamp Paid, who rows her across the Ohio River to Baby Suggs's house. Baby Suggs cleans Sethe up before allowing her to see her three older children.

Sethe spends twenty-eight wonderful days in Cincinnati, where Baby Suggs serves as an unofficial preacher to the black community. On the last day, however, School teacher comes for Sethe to take her and her children back to Sweet Home. Rather than surrender her children to a life of dehumanizing slavery, she flees with them to the woodshed and tries to kill them. Only the third child, her older daughter, dies, her throat having been cut with a handsaw by Sethe. Sethe later arranges for the baby's headstone to be carved with the word "Beloved." The sheriff takes Sethe and Denver to jail, but a group of white abolitionists, led by the Bodwins, fights for her release. Sethe returns to the house at 124, where Baby Suggs has sunk into a deep depression. The community shuns the house, and the family continues to live in isolation.

Meanwhile, Paul D has endured torturous experiences in a chain gang in Georgia, where he was sent after trying to kill Brandywine, a slave owner to whom he was sold by School teacher. His traumatic experiences have caused him to lock away his memories, emotions, and ability to love in the "tin tobacco box" of his heart. One day, a fortuitous rainstorm allows Paul D and the other chain gang members to escape. He travels northward by following the blossoming spring flowers. Years later, he ends up on Sethe's porch in Cincinnati.

Paul D becomes Sethe's lover, staying for a time despite friction between him and the two young girls. Beloved despises him, and she tries to divide Sethe from Paul D. Paul D eventually leaves when he learns that Sethe had murdered her own child. Sethe, on discovering Beloved's identity, believes she has been given a second chance. She tries to make amends for the past, but the girl's needs are devouring. The ghost does not forgive Sethe for her actions. Beloved settles into the house like a parasite, growing ever stronger as Sethe grows weaker. Sethe's insanity begins to unravel, and Beloved only grows more demanding. Denver is forced to go to the community for help.

A group of women, led by Ella, a former agent of the Underground Railroad, go to 124 to exorcise Beloved's ghost. The ghost is forced to leave, but Sethe's spirit has been nearly broken. Paul D returns to her, vowing to help Sethe heal herself. Denver, Paul D, and Sethe will build a new life, one in which they learn to deal with their painful past while focusing on the future.

Beloved is a haunting and dark novel, full of gothic elements and acts of terrible violence. The ghost represents the power of the legacy of slavery, which continues to trouble Sethe eighteen years after she

won her freedom. *Beloved* is the spirit of the dead baby returned but she is also an embodiment of all suffering under slavery; her memory extends back to the slave ships that first carried blacks to the Americas. The question of the rightness of Sethe's terrible act is a difficult one, moreover, it is a question that the novel does not attempt to answer in a definitive way. Morrison is more concerned that we understand why Sethe did what she did, as well as the ways that her decision has haunted her ever since. The novel effectively conveys the brutality and dehumanization that occurred under slavery, putting Sethe's act in context without necessarily condemning it or excusing it.

The structure is fragmentary, closely tied to the consciousness of each character and weaving suddenly between past and future. More time is spent describing past events than the action of the current moment, reinforcing the idea of the past lingering and shaping life in the present. The novel is often repetitive, telling the same stories of the past again and again, giving more information with each repetition. All of the characters of the novel, former slaves and the children of former slaves, suffer a troubled relationship with their own past. Their relationships to their past often makes it impossible for them to live in the present or plan for the future, and slavery has damaged the ways they can experience love and think about their own worth as human beings. This is the destruction of identities caused by slavery that Morrison projects through *Beloved*.

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