

GENDER AND RACE IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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Abstract

Genders, as per the prevailing concept, are what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behavior conceived. Gender is of significance in the definition of the self. I have settled the work of Toni Morrison to explore the specific ways in which the black woman suffers. The paper aims to examine the issue of gender identity and the double oppression, faced by Black women and the ways in which they can break free of this oppression as portrayed in her novel 'Beloved'. It is the historical and psychological study of black people to establish an independent and free self. It instances the subjugation of the black woman by the constraints of tradition and the patriarchal institutions. It further demonstrates how women are bonded in attempts to tackle this oppression. The framework of this analysis is feminist theory. This article is significant for its special focus on the work of a black woman, her own cultural background, her representation of female characters and their relation with one another and with male characters.

Keywords: *Gender, feminine, black woman, racism, alienation and slavery.*

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Genders, as per the prevailing concept, are what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behavior conceived. It is of significance in the definition of the self. It is a cultural construct. Gender is examined with special reference to feminism in this article. Feminism is a social movement that recognizes and criticizes male domination at the same time.

The present article aims to examine the issue of gender identity and racism, faced by Black women and the ways in which they can break free of such issues as portrayed in her fifth novel *Beloved* (1987). My reading of Toni Morrison, for this article, examines the representation of black women and the mental stigma they harbored in their lives simply because of being a Black in the hands of whites and men.

Morrison's *Beloved* explores the plight of black women in the white dominated American society. The novel depicts the Afro-American women as victims of both gender and racial discrimination. *Beloved* typically documents their lives as a struggle to claim back their sense of self, which they have either lost or not yet had. It exposes the inhumanities of the slavery system in America practiced during that time. The novel is a fractured history as it consists of fragments of memory narrating in a flash back technique. Morrison resorts to historical facts and details to enable her readers to be aware of the rich and complex cultural heritage of the Afro-American society and the status and the position of the women in it. As Harold Bloom pointed out, her purpose is

not to convince white readers of the slave's humanity, but to address black readers inviting us to return to the very part of our past that many have repressed, forgotten or ignored. (38)

The novel is set at the backdrop of the American civil war i.e. the time before and after the abolishment of slavery. It attempts to seek solution to the racial oppression and class exploitation suffered by African people. The burden that the black woman bears will be critically examined in this article.

The issue of gender identity and the racial discrimination that the black women face is starkly represented in the novel. By using fragmented narrative and stream of consciousness technique, Morrison portrays the draconian and inhuman facets of slavery and its psychological impacts. The tragedy of the black women is that the only way to break free from this never ending cycle of oppression and discrimination seems to be death itself. The fate of the eldest daughter of Sethe, who we only know by her posthumous name, Beloved, is the embodiment of the deprivation of identity and the means to gain it. The lives of women have been manipulated by the system of patriarchy in all cultures and countries and as such the journey of these women towards freedom is not only haunted with patriarchy but also with other forms of oppression too poverty, social isolation, racism, and slavery. The characters in the novel have to fight back to this world so alien to them on their path to self-exploration and the claiming of an identity that is respected. However, 'the revolt of women is not received and perceived in good gesture by this male-oriented and dominated norm and structure of the society.' (Bala 104) Morrison delves deep into the lives of the blacks in order to trace back the emotional and psychological impact of slavery on their subconscious. Slavery enslaves the mental psyche of a person annihilating one's land, culture and tradition. Ultimately, the repercussions of their past experiences as a slave are so profound and intense that even when they are freed as slaves, they are prevented from the realization and true expression of the free self as their subconscious is still trapped in the past traumatic world. For instance, Sethe remarks, 'Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.' (Morrison 95)

Beloved is set in Cincinnati in 1873, eight years after the end of the American Civil War. Time neither healed nor lessened the pain and effects of slavery. Instead, the characters of the novel *Beloved* are formed and deformed by their traumatic experiences in slavery. The former slaves - Paul D, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, and Ella have been mortally humiliated in countless ways about which the reader comes to know from different angles. So, we travel back and forth across the scene of slavery such that the narrated circumstances begin to crystallize into

a tight verbal net from which no feeling or emotion can slip through unfelt. The pains of the characters and the humiliations they go through become our pain and humiliation too.

Gender in Beloved

In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts gender differences between male and female slaves. She underscores 'the particularly brutal form of double oppression suffered by black women on account of their race and gender.' (Chakravarty 178) The novel is based on the story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her daughter in a desperate bid to save her from the misery and indignity of slavery sometime in January 1856. It is a story of a black woman - Sethe, a slave who escapes the brutality of slave masters at her work place at Sweet Home, Kentucky to freedom at Cincinnati. After relaxing in freedom for twenty-eight days at her mother-in-law's home at Cincinnati, Schoolmaster, former her slave master arrives to arrest her. Sethe, disappointed by the act of her slave master, resolves to kill her children to protect them from the evil world and the harrowing experience of slavery reminding us of Margaret Garner. Luckily or fortunately, she manages to kill her eldest daughter only with a handsaw. Later, she is jailed for the same but abolitionists fight for her release.

Sethe's earlier experiences as a slave at Sweet Home, the plantation where she worked, depict gender differences between male and female slaves. She is seen as a breeder there by Schoolteacher. Though she is a slave, she is still valued for her fertility by Schoolteacher and thus she is tracked down all the way to Cincinnati to reproduce more slaves. Children of every black people as represented in the novel by Morrison were being raised as property of slave masters and to do the work that is desperately needed in whites' family. Black female slaves were considered as breeders and as such they were bought to reproduce more slaves. For instance, Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs has eight children with six different men. The narrator says,

Her two girls, neither of whom had
Their adult teeth were sold and gone
And she had not been able to wave good bye. (Morrison 29)

The issues of gender roles depict slavery's destruction of people's identity and its dehumanizing nature. Africans were reduced into mere property to be replicated like fixed assets.

Baby Suggs representing every black woman slave is treated like a cow that births to eight calves from six different bulls to be owned by the farmer. The slave masters have completely lost their human side and treated their slaves without an iota of humanity and sympathy. Whereas the male slaves were mostly limited to working in the fields, the female slaves were subjected to both household chores and plantation work.

Whether they were women or men – the punishment they have varied; they could be beat both, rape one, so that women could receive dual punishment, but the requirements were the same, the physical work requirements,

Said Toni Morrison in an interview observing the problem and position of black women in the contemporary American society. (qtd. Bala 110) The oppression of the black women was two pronged, they were subjected to both racial and gender discrimination.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's mother always worked in the fields. Sethe hardly saw her. By the time she woke up, her mother was already setting out for the fields. They would work under the light of bright moon. On Sundays, 'she could sleep like a stick.' (Morrison 75). However, this could not satisfy the demands of her master and thus she had to satisfy the sexual desires of white men. She had no right to deny the sexual urge of whites that even on her way to America; the seamen impregnated her and gave birth to colored children. She was often raped by the crew many times. But when she bore children, she loved Sethe most. She says,

She threw them away but you
 The one from the crew she threw away
 One on the island
 Without names, she threw them
 You she gave the name of the black man
 She put her arms around him. (Morrison 78)

Women slaves were subjected to physical abuses and atrocities to humiliate them and equally same is the fate and predicament of the men slaves also. The worst humiliation that a slave is subjected to is to watch their wives and daughters being abused sexually, helplessly. Baby Suggs being a female slave is compelled to fulfill sexual desire of her master to keep her

third born with her. On one hand, Mr. Garner of Sweet Home plantation is not only interested in assisting slave women but in meeting his sexual urge. (Morrison 29). On the other hand, Schoolteacher repeatedly steals Sethe's baby's milk in the stable. She claims, 'they held me down and took it, milk that belonged to my baby' (Morrison 172). The milking scene is performed in the presence of Halle, Sethe's husband. The white men emasculate men slaves as they take away their traditional role of protecting their wives. Though, she knows how much her husband loves her, she murmurs,

They took my milk
 And he saw it
 And didn't come
 If he is alive
 And he saw that, he would not
 Step foot at my door,
 Not Halle. (Morrison 85)

These last few words of Sethe suggesting sexual abuse hurt Halle irrevocably making him run mad after witnessing such harrowing experience. The trauma of slavery does not end with Sethe or Baby Suggs, another female slave Ella is locked up in a room and two white men - father and son abuse her. The two treats her inhumanely for a year in turns (Morrison 146). Toni Morrison in this novel attempts to suggest that the system of slavery destroys the identity of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Halle runs mad as a husband but Schoolteacher also loses his status as a human being. In a bizarre incident of Ella where the two slave masters abuse their powers, they both lose their identity and humanity.

Race in Beloved:

Morrison depicts her Afro-American characters in such a way that their sexual identities are necessarily shaped by patriarchal society promoting not only sexism but racism and classicism too. There are two equally forceful elements which constitutes Beloved: racial discrimination and sense of alienation. Morrison presents these elements as two sides of the same coin as the cause of racial discrimination has always resulted in the sense of alienation. The plot

of the novel moves around the deplorable condition of racial discrimination resulting in the alienation of the blacks.

Through the evil sights of Kentucky plantations, Morrison represents the cruel and inhumane situation of the system of slavery practiced in some parts of America. The position of Sethe is one of the representative lives of black slave women throughout the continent of America. The life of slave women was drowned in emotional and physical hardships. The very alienated position of Sethe represents the alienation of all the black women. Almost all the black characters in the novel have become the victim of alienation. Small children were separated from their slave mothers who were sent out to work in the fields by slave masters and left in the care of older and weak women.

Due to the bitter racial discrimination prevailing in the American society, Morrison designs her novel with the sense of alienation of blacks. Not only men but even the white women discriminates the role of black women as Morrison quoted in an interview,

White women generally define black women's role as the most repressed because they are both black and female, and these two categories invite a kind of repression that is pernicious. (qtd. Bala 106)

The story moves around the alienated position of black slaves. Through the character of Sethe, Morrison reveals about the long rooted brutality of slave masters over the black slaves. She is not only physically and emotionally alienated from children, her husband Halle, her mother and her society but also most requisitely from herself. Her husband is separated from her when they escaped from the Sweet Home plantation. She kills her eldest daughter and makes her physically distant from her due to the brutality of the system of slavery scaring her two sons away. Society boycotted and physically alienated Sethe from the society for committing the unforgivable crime by killing her child. Her emotional alienation is more torturous as she is alienated from the love of a mother. In spite of her motherly love, she has a strong belief that killing will help her protect them from the destructive life of slavery due to lack of knowledge and experience of the proper way to show love. Yet, when Beloved appears in the novel, Sethe goes crazy and does everything to satisfy her emotional hunger of love as she misses her. It can be said that the ghost of Beloved too is emotionally alienated as she too feels the injustice of

being killed by her own mother instead of getting motherly love and care. Consequently, she comes to be compensated from Sethe to be away from her emotional alienation.

Not only Sethe but all the characters of black people in the novel represent about how they were separated from their families and became the victim of the destructive system of slavery. They were concerned about how to be less victimized by their slave masters and to stay from them. Therefore, their whole life was grasped by the inhumane behavior of their slave masters.

One of the major concerns in *Beloved* by Morrison is to depict the position of alienation of all black people by focusing on their position and about how the blacks are forced to live in alienating position and never having to meet their family members and friends. Morrison also focuses on how black people being the extreme victim of their slave masters' inhuman behaviors sexually, physically, mentally and emotionally are always forced to drown in the ocean of racial discrimination throughout their life. The black slaves were compelled to work vigorously while their slave masters sucked their blood. They were not exploited only as slaves but also as the potential breeder of new property. For instance, children of black people also belonged to their slave-owner. The black slaves were not only labeled as commodities to be sold and bought but they were also treated as animals. For instance, Schoolteacher and his nephew fail to see them as a human being. The scene where Schoolteacher's nephew sucking Sethe's breast can be read as the best example of such inhumane behavior of slave masters.

The experience of slavery is starkly manifested throughout the novel. The economic condition of black people is poor as well as the social, political and practical situation are not in their favor as they are blacks. As a result, they always drowned in the vast ocean of debt and they were not in the position to establish their own black identity in the American society. Due to the color of their skin, they are shunned from getting the actual vision of outer world making them completely alienated from their family, society and other different aspects which are essential for living. The vicious circle of slavery entangles the Blacks, crushing all hopes and aspirations.

Indeed, Morrison's voice is powerful in the history of literature due to her 'assessment of black experience, particularly black female experience within the fabric of black community.' (Sahukar 9) She has dealt a powerful blow to two of the most severe forms of oppression faced

by the Afro-American in general and the Black women in particular. Throughout the novel, she has been careful enough ‘not to make all the whites awful and all the blacks wonderful.’ (Snitow 34) She clearly shows that oppressions are not assigned to only one class or community in *Beloved*. The issue of racial discrimination has always been concomitant with the alienation of the people and further dehumanization of the same. The indignities that the black people suffered and the inhumane trauma that they went through has been brought forth by Morrison and it is hoped that her attempts to let the world hear the subdued cries of these people has delivered justice to them to some extent.

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