



The Cultural Discrimination in Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is one of the most recognized African American writers. In her novels, she is able to claim the reputation of providing the voice to the voiceless in times where African Americans were degraded and discriminated against their color. This paper aims to explore the prejudice and racial discrimination in Morrison's *Beloved* [1] from a historical, social, and cultural perspective. The conflict of such deep issues caused the characters in the novels to have psychological trauma that was deeply rooted since the days of slavery. These issues have haunted them during the critical times of the fake freedom that the white Americans claimed to have finally provided. Morrison wrote her novels under the impact of the Civil Rights Movement and her pen was a way of denying the injustice faced by the African Americans.

Keywords: Slavery; African American literature ; Discrimination.

1. Introduction

Slavery and color discrimination are dominant themes in Afro-American literature. They are deeply rooted in the community since they have caused generations after generations to suffer and be unable to cope or stop the racism of the white communities. There are many historical figures in the American legacy who tried to fight it and marched with fists or words. Toni Morrison, the first black woman awarded the Nobel Prize, is considered one of the leading writers who yearned to provide voice to the voiceless through her pen. Through literature, modern readers are able to view a culture and a community through the eyes of the African Americans themselves and thus, are able to understand the entire picture that is the American society.

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First of all, one must understand the times Toni Morrison lived through culturally and historically that inspired her to write her books. The 1940s are a crucial political time period where the African American Civil Rights Movements called for an end of the racial segregations and figures like Martin Luther King marched for equality. There is also the Black is Beautiful Movement which is part of the Black Art Movement, called for a positive outlook of the African American features that were viewed as ugly, unlike the white ideal image that was viewed as beautiful. Despite the positive cultural movements, Morrison never ignored the deeply rooted issues such as slavery and the never ending discrimination that haunted the African American people for centuries until this day.

Born and raised in Ohio, Morrison never fully became aware of the racial divisions until she was a teenager, stating "When I was in first grade, nobody thought I was inferior. I was the only black in the class and the only child who could read" [2] Later on, she began to realize the truth and understand racism and slavery. According to Morrison, her motivation for writing is due to the fact that black men writers at her time were very powerful, racially uplifting and revolutionary. They wrote in a positive way about the beauty of the African Americans and their features. This made her realize that no one is going to remember the times where African Americans themselves did not see beauty in their skin, and to a certain extent, some black people were almost apologetic for their skin color. Their work did not address the raw reality black Americans felt [3].

As a female black writer, she comes from a minority since black male writers are the dominant sex of the African American literary world. In one of her interviews, she refused the critical claim that she is too good to be a black female writer, she was judged differently because of her race. Morrison also states how it was difficult to be considered a successful female writer since her generation lacked successful women writers, thus what she was embarking on was dominated by only men which was discouraging at first [4]. After publishing her novels, she was able to gain respect and recognition for her books and earn her title to become a writer.

2. Beloved

Beloved [1] is one of the most acknowledged novels in African American literature. It uses magical realism and shows ghosts interacting with the living. On the other hand, it stands on a historical ground that mirrors a reality, and also contributes mostly to how the characters lived their lives and the events they faced were not far from the truth. The novel is set in the 1860s unfolding the story of Sethe, an African American slave who ran away from slavery in a Kentucky plantation to a free state. Unfortunately, she is captured under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and thus, is forced with the most gruesome act, killing her daughter Beloved in order to prevent her from being taken away and enslaved.

Morrison states that her novel is based on the real story of Margaret Garner, a woman who killed her own child in order to save her from slavery. In an interview with *The Paris Review* [4] Morrison explains her inspiration Margaret Garner: "I really don't know anything about her. What I knew came from reading two interviews with her. They said, 'Isn't this extraordinary. Here's a woman who escaped into Cincinnati from the horrors of slavery and was not crazy. Though she'd killed her child, she was not foaming at the mouth. She was very calm; she said, I'd do it again.' That was more than enough to fire my imagination."

The novel is very female-centered where it involves mostly the lives of different women interacting in this harsh society. It is a society which does not only belittle women but also, being African American, add to it more heartache and misery. One cannot ignore the fact that the characters are considered strong and are able to stand up on their feet after being kicked down by slavery. What is also admirable about the female characters is the fact that they rely on themselves and not on a male figure to continue to live their lives even after the betrayal of the men they dealt with.

3. The Story of Slavery

According to Krumholz [5], the novel provides a historical perspective “from the consciousness of the African-American slaves rather than through the perspective of the dominant white classes.” Thus, Morrison is providing a new side of history, and this history making “becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader and the author” Krumholz also states how each character’s individual process of remembering the past and “rememory” can be “reproduced on a historical level” [5:395].

Since Morrison uses in the novel accurate events known to be inspired by Margret Garner, she represents a reality of slavery, the horror and the abuse slaves faced led them to unimaginable acts, in Garner’s case, she was forced to kill her own flesh and blood. According to Reinhardt [6: 83], Morrison transformed Margret’s case into *Beloved* by starting a scholarly digging of the case’s events. Thus, through the novel, Margret Garner’s story “has regained a certain familiarity”.

What is fascinating about the case is what Morrison herself discovered through Garner’s case and what it symbolized; the description of the child’s death in the newspaper was stated as:

A destruction of property and not murder. This legal distinction, Morrison understands, sits at the crux of American slavery. On the one hand, it defines the slave as the property of a master depriving her of her right to develop as what Colin Dayan calls a “thinking thing” (2011, 88). On the other hand, it demonstrates how a slave “guilty” of a crime “became a person,” for “the crime proved consciousness, mind, and will” (89). Ironically, then, crime imparted recognition by illustrating the nuanced thought and affective processes of an action, thereby humanizing the slave even if the law held fast to a narrative of property [7:7].

Additionally, what added fuel to the fire at that time was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which gave right to the owners to reclaim their slaves. Unfortunately, Garner was captured under that law and charged for the killing of her child. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 plays a major role in the novel since Sethe, the novel’s protagonist, is forced to kill her own daughter *Beloved* due to the fact that bounty hunters are set to capture her and return her to her plantation. The horrors that she faced in the plantation made her decide to kill her own daughter to save her from the future waiting ahead.

4. The Reflection of Slavery in The Novel

Readers of the novel are able to see firsthand the savagery that African Americans faced in their journeys. Morrison does not speak for her characters but simply imagine them speaking, telling their stories through their

eyes and going through their own minds to show how trauma is reflected in their everyday lives. On one hand, we are able to witness the characters as owned slaves and on the other hand, they are free yet scarred by their past, one that was full of violence, horror, and torture.

One of the main characters in the novel is Sethe, who is not only a female slave but also a mother, and motherhood is considered a heavy burden to the African female slave. This can be seen in Sethe's response when Paul D asks her to have his baby and she states "Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring-again. Having to stay alive just much longer. O Lord, she thought, silver me. Unless carefree, mother love was a killer" [1:132]. Through Sethe, one can have a view of the enslaved mothers and how abnormal their relationship is with their own children.

Slaves are overshadowed by a more violent power that denied them their right for a normal parenthood. Even naming their own children is in the hands of slave owners. Thus, they are owned since birth, and the Schoolteacher, a slave owner, beats one of the slaves in order "... to show him that definitions belong to definers-not the defined" [1:190]. Slaves are denied to have "mutual possession of each other" since each of them has been formed by "an outer violence that disrupts their relation. Not even a daughter, it seems, gets to define what a mother is" [8:115]. Sethe symbolizes the dehumanizing of the slaves, her journey from servitude to freedom and the impact it has on herself "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that free self was another" [1:95]. Throughout the novel, she goes through physical and emotional abuse as a slave. For example, she is defined by Schoolteacher, her owner, as one with "animal characteristics" and not as a human being. She faced constant belittling of her as a human as well as the physical abuse that scarred her image of herself and her self-worth. From a very young age, she was told that slaves are not supposed to have "pleasurable feelings" of their own.

Regardless of what Sethe went through, her desire to escape becomes a reality once she is out of that violent and destructive setting. According to Babbitt [9:5], some critics suggest that autonomy is her real interest in her flee, and indeed she acquires it despite killing her child, leaving her husband Halle without knowing if he'll be with her in the future. To a certain extent, she became obsessed with selfishly wanting to leave slavery so badly that she is willing to sacrifice what she thought her most adored things and she is proud to do so on her own:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to... I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing before. It felt good. Good and right [1:162].

She sacrificed her life, her children's safety as well as leaving her own husband behind just for the sake of freedom and liberty. As a result, readers are not able to understand her act outside her story but only in the context of slavery and the tragedy of it. As a human and a mother, one cannot understand her act or justify it, but once she is looked at through the lens of slavery, she is human who does not know humanity as we do and, does not know justice. Thus, in terms of the tragedy of slavery, we are able to sympathize with her even though she lacks the general "humanness" that we are familiar with [10:282]. During her time in the plantation, she

knew she was unable to love her children because they simply were not hers to love, therefore, she needed to be free with her maternal instinct and her love.

After escaping slavery and murdering her child, we see how she coped with her freedom by isolating herself from her society that she longed to join. The trauma that she went through caused her to be unable to cope with her past. For example, she was forced to barter herself in order to bury her murdered child and have an engraved stone for her. One cannot help but feel sympathetic towards her upon knowing how she engraved only the word Beloved on her child's grave even though to her, her daughter was *Dearly Beloved*. She states, addressing the gravedigger, how she is "sorry to this day I never thought to ask him for the whole thing" [1:137].

Sethe is considered a complex character that tries to forget the past, ignore it and live her life without acknowledging it. It seems as if she is going through a revival from slavery. Her story not only shed the light on what happens during slavery but also the consequences behind it. Her crime of killing made her an isolated person from her community. She also tends to live in the present without contemplating over her past nor her future "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" [1:194].

Additionally, Paul D, one of the slaves who were with Sethe in the plantation, dealt with slavery in a different yet, scarring way. With Sethe, we are able to see slavery and how it touches a female who is also a mother and a wife. While with Paul D, it touches a different side, man tends to have pride that once it's broken, he is no longer a man. Black men are standing idle as they see their families and wives raped and abused, their children enslaved and degraded and there is nothing they can do about it. Throughout learning about his memories of the plantation, he keeps questioning his own manhood which indicates his low perspective of himself as well as the burden of having a low self-esteem.

Paul D symbolizes the African American male slaves and what they go through as men as well as what they are denied to have. He has lost both of his parents and therefore, we are aware of the lack of a father figure in his childhood. As he grows into adulthood, we see that he lacks the company of a woman, which is something that is destructive to any young man and his manhood as well as his self-esteem. Not to have a female presence such as a mother, a sister or a wife creates a broken man with an unfulfilled identity. Additionally, he has gone through horrible experiences such as performing sexual acts to white men which caused him to lose his own self-worth as a man and even as a human being.

What Paul D learned as a slave in the plantation are the pillars of servitude and white power. As a slave, he realizes early on that:

Everything belonged to the men who had guns Little men, some of them, big men too, each one of whom he could snap like a twig if he wanted to. Men who knew that their manhood lay in their guns and were not even embarrassed by the knowledge that without fox would laugh at them. And these "men" who made even vixen laugh could, if you let them, stop you from hearing doves or loving moonlight. So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved

one over the rim of the trench before you slept [1:122].

Slavery caused Paul D to enter a state of depression, insecurity, and melancholy. He reached a severe psychological state of mind in which he is not even aware if the tears streaming down his cheeks and the screams he is hearing are his own or someone else's.

Finally, we have Beloved who is a complicated character since she is seen by Seth as a woman who ran from her slave owner. Yet to the readers, she is clearly suggested by her name, her age, her traits, and the things she knew about Seth, that she is her ghost daughter. To a certain extent, she can also be seen as Seth's crime came to haunt her in a form of a ghost. Seth creates a special bond with Beloved, and through her, Seth's past unfolds in a monologue and readers learn more about Seth's past and childhood. Beloved, on the other hand, describes events that happened to her as a slave which could be seen as symbolic under the theme of slavery.

As readers become aware of Beloved, she starts a monologue about herself surrounded by dead bodies and being chained by "men without skin." Those men shoved bodies into the deep sea and are indicated to be the white owners. Critics interpret Beloved to be a central character that symbolizes slavery on a larger, wider historical scale:

"The novel's central narrative, which depicts a postbellum community of ex-slaves in Cincinnati grappling with the traumatic legacy of slavery as it is embodied in an infant ghost named Beloved, who was murdered by her mother, Sethe, in an effort to save the child from enslavement" [10: 1].

5. Conclusion

Finally, *Beloved* [1] is a novel that fill the gaps when it comes to the history of slavery. Through its unique style of narration as well as the form of flashbacks and the "rememory" it invites readers to an intimate psychological and physical effects of slavery. Through this narrative strategy, readers are able to see the "how" and the "why" of slavery that cannot be found in history books [12:5]. The issues that Morrison presents through her characters are known to be taboo and lost in the Afro-American history that she aims to bring back into the surface very intimately.

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