

Although she comes to harbor both hatred for and feelings of violence against Brownfield, the only time she becomes his adversary instead of his punching bag occur when she fights for and feelings of violence against Brownfield, the only time she becomes his adversary instead of his punching bag occurs when she fights for the future of their girls. Even then she does not blame Brownfield; she blames herself because her “decision to let him be the man of the house for nine years had cost her and him nine years of unrelenting misery” (86). Margaret is defeated in her struggle to see that Brownfield goes to school.

Her single act of assertion threatens and momentarily destroys Brownfield's 'logocentric' view of manhood. It also becomes, to him, an act for which Mem must be made to pay. Consequently, knowing that time and biology will act for him, he awaits his triumph. Two years and two carriages later, Mem's health break and Brownfield is victorious. This is to indicate that Mem's body records every physical and psychic misfortune she undergoes as a wife and a mother and becomes a text to be decoded in given conditions. This encoding takes place against Brownfield's effort to obliterate Mem's identity in all spheres of life. Finally, when he feels betrayed he wants to eliminate every sign of Mem by killing her. But Mem enables herself to avenge it in her own way. There is not doubt that Mem's murder was an act of Brownfield's anger, but at the same time it can be called as a suicide as well from the point of view of Mem's attitude. For she could see her armed husband on the lighted porch of their house, yet, walked calmly towards his pointed gun:

Mem looked up at the porch and called a greeting. It was a cheerful greeting, although she sounded very tired, tired and out for breath. Brownfield began to curse and came and stood on the steps until Mem get within the circle of light. Then he aimed the gun with drunken accuracy right into her face and fired. (122).

In a sense, Mem is 'textualized' in her primarily humane qualities but always attributes of the adorable woman and not man: love, gentleness and generosity and self-sacrificing to the point of self abnegation, which counter balance Brownfield's hatred, violence, selfishness and egotism. Her acts of ambivalent courage when analyzed put her in the realm of an open ended text embodying everything feminine and adorable.

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Through Ether

- Amitava Chakrabarty

Everyday I see you through your call,
And the sculptor in my abyss of inner eye
Curves your figure, your face in soft thermocol
Look! The figurine can speak, can smile and cry.

The sculptor is lucky as he can touch her face
Can ply his finger through her boyish hair,
Can feel the lovelorn throbs above her dress
Which he could willfully untie; but that's not fair!

Through ether only lonely bubbles contact
As we have never met nor ever shall we,
Our hands, our lips, our hearts are miles apart
Two thousand, it's as precise as one can be.

Everyday I shiver of the single thought
You telling me "It's over! I'll call you not.

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Constructing and Reconstructing Individual and Social Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

- B.K. Sharma

Abstract

In all of Toni Morrison's literary outputs there is often a blending of African proverbs and Biblical allusions that function in searching of a character's identity within the troubled context of his or her relationship to community. Her use of such apt narratives makes her an especially prolific writer to explore the way that language can construct the way we understand the world. The emphasis on rootedness in her works functions to reveal what about an individual or communal conception of home cultural or even psychological limits or liberates an individual or community. All of Morrison's novels deal with the question of where a character's original "home" is, what ancestral "roots" are and how such an "origin" form character and personality.

Keywords: Self-affirmation, Oppression, Collective Identity, Individual Recognition

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim but 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.

(Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be regarded as a novel of *individual's quest for self-affirmation*. The personal need to express one's selfhood has its roots in the institution of slavery responsible for the elimination of this selfhood in the first place. Therefore, the individual explores "new" self recognition, an urge traced back to the trauma of past experience. Even though the aftermaths of slavery were felt primarily within the communal boundaries, the white suppression has also affected the individual. Only by affirming personal individuality, is one able to rebuild the sense of rootedness in the community. It appears that in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is the two female protagonists, Sethe and her daughter, Denver, that best represent successfully reconcile with self-value, and recognition in the eyes of the society.

Though ostensibly white racial domination aimed at degrading and abusing *all* black people without exception, it tended to exercise its

cruelty primarily on black women. The cause of black women's distress in the novels of Toni Morrison is effectively related with the effect of the suppression of Black race, which reinforces the black obsession with the psychic scars, existential wounds, and bruises. These preoccupations are of great significance for the agency of 'self-making' and 'self-inventing,' which are essential to the human struggle for mature black selfhood. Nevertheless, as he puts it, "the search for black space (home), black place (roots), and black face (name)" was impeded despite the abolition of slavery. Thus, In the reality where the abolition of slavery existed apparently only in theory, it was still viable for the whites to carry on the practice of slavery and subjugation. *Beloved* appears to be a proper illustration of Toni Morrison's experience of black *mothers* who develop a sense of *self* after slavery. 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 savagery, condemns Sethe to being ostracized by the society. She then seeks shelter 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 ruthlessness of white oppression that indirectly compelled Sethe to commit infanticide can be best demonstrated with examples from the novel. There are two important moments in Sethe's life when she is given in to the ruthless forces of the white oppressors. The first clearly decisive incident in Sethe's story that marks a turning point in her life and completely changes her viewpoint of the future, takes place 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. To supply his students with a more 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 whitefolks" (*Beloved* 1997: 89) seeing no other possibility than to draw a general conclusion about the racism of every single white person (Kella: 2000: 118).

The phenomena of dehumanization 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 denoted, feeding white boys with Sethe's *own* milk, is superimposed over feeding her *own* children. Such bestial endeavor deprives 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 culmination 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 behavior 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 damaging and humiliating for Sethe because here Paul D sides with the white oppressors, simply unable to comprehend the complexity of her actions. Sethe, who was expecting emotional support from Paul D in her in her distress, receives it neither from her own community, nor from Paul D.

To talk about "Sethe's journey" to self-reliance and her reaffirmation in the black society it should be focused that it were not only "the white tormentors who broke her heartstrings." As a direct result of enslavement, every slave created his/her identity based on the definition provided by the white people. Consequently, the members of the black community begin to perceive each other according to the whites' definition of the Black race. Therefore, a significant obstacle to Sethe's self-estimation can be attributed to the actions of the black community which, rather than using their own definition, interpreted Sethe's actions through the definition "borrowed" from their oppressors. Hence, Sethe's killing of her own child can be analyzed at least in two ways, depending on whether the "black" or "white" definition is applied. Some critics consider the act barbaric, while others see it as heroic. Inferring the murder as an act of barbarism suggests agreeing to *be defined* by the slave, whereas calling it heroism, even if controversial, signifies black *self* definition.

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. It takes eighteen years for the ghost of Sethe's slaughtered 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 killed by her mother she has never been given a chance to mature, thus, her growth 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 and possessive. 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" indicates the comeback of the suffering soul to "possess" (Grewal, 1998: 105). Initially, Beloved's appearance suggests to the main protagonists that she came to "love and be-loved." As time passes by, Sethe and Denver leave no stone unturned to provide the regained family member with all the affection they previously reserved for each other. Hard as they try, it becomes perceptible that the feeling of love is not at all altruistic. On the contrary, the notion of "love" is equalized with the idea of "possession." Beloved's behavior is often gazed through the lens of Oedipal complex that develops into some demonic force, and subsequently leads to Sethe's mental and physical disorder. She resigns from her job to be constantly at Beloved's disposal. 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 aspirations. For, in reality, what Beloved seeks is a compensation and reconciliation for being deserted in the past. Incapable of perceiving the true intentions behind Beloved's actions, Sethe is reduced to be a mere shadow and 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."

Toni Morrison's viewpoint of "motherhood" is difficult to be interpreted. On the one hand, a woman is the creator and caretaker of home. On the other, Morrison's maternal love far from being romantic is rather dark, medicinal and mysterious. Thus, the cause of Denver's apprehension to the world outside also has its roots in the rapport between her and her mother. The major aspect of Denver's disability to achieve self-confidence is the lack of established family. Sethe's family was neither normative, nor 'pathological' (because) fatherless. The blame for its deformed structure is on the traumatizing forces of white racism (Kella 2000: 116). Hence, the family as a unit stands on guard of racial solidarity, and arises in opposition to racism. In this manner, it threatens the institution of slavery and is, therefore, the main target for destruction. Although Sethe is willing to create an option for a traditional home for Denver, especially when her two brothers escape, the source of domestic upbringing and familial love does not have its source in her biological mother.

Unarguably, it should be maintained that, it is Beloved's influence upon Sethe that allows her to re-articulate her value and self-definition. Beloved is not only a ghost of Sethe's killed daughter, but also a symbol of the link missing between the present and the past. It is therefore not only through the recreation of the maternal bond that Sethe searches for her self-affirmation. The formulation of the familial affection and Sethe's selfhood is also accomplished through the connection with the *past* obtained thanks to the ghost. Even though Beloved belongs neither to the present nor to the past, she becomes a link between temporaneity

and the times passed. Thus, the factual events from Sethe's and Denver's lives are intergrallt connected with their *history* embodied in *Beloved*. In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays a community that can embrace its member and stand out rock-solid in the struggle against white masters. The same community, paralysed by jealousy and rage, declare Baby Suggs and Sethe their convicts. Instead of protecting its members against the ruthless forces of slavery, it not only loses faith in its own inner conviction, but actually imitates the white oppressors in putting a sentence on a black person. The potential to reconstruct Baby Suggs' and Sethe's eroded black morale gives way to its devastation.

Although it is the black society that rejected Sethe in reaction to her infanticide, the actions of this community must be attributed to the sabotaging agency of whitefolks. The whites' judgment of the black race, greatly influenced the black people's self-perception. Analyzing Sethe's story it seems that the black community learns *meanness* from their masters. Thus, the black society *deliberately* remains grossly apathetic when the white oppressors come to re-enslave Sethe's family. According to Stamp Paid, one of the members of the black community and a close friend to Baby Suggs, "Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing – like, well, like meanness" (*Beloved* 1997: 157). Enraged about Baby Suggs' giving a welcoming party to her daughter-in-law, Sethe, they cannot tolerate such money squandering and warmth with which Baby Suggs wants to show her joy.

Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always center of things? ... Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone... it made the mad... It made them furious (*Beloved* 1997: 137).

The thought of Sethe's "full benefit of Baby Suggs bounty and her big old heart" is intolerable. Baby Suggs' "own people" cannot stand the perspective of a promising future for Sethe under Baby Suggs' roof, possibly because they do not want to be orphaned. It appears then, that the community's greatest sin is in the wrong understanding of Baby Suggs' actions. They accuse her of material privilege while the only thing she wants is to express joy of the family reunion. The African- American community perceives Baby Suggs' joyous expressiveness as a threat to communal identity and a violation of exchange economy in making reciprocity impossible. She simply gave too much and therefore offended them by excess. Still, Morrison is quite critical about the community's agency. The sole factor responsible for maintaining unity and wholeness – mutual recognition of one another – when uncompromising, can have the paradoxical effect. The community's turning back on Sethe and Baby Suggs proves this to be justified.