

# Psychological Agonies In Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Study

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**Abstract:** Toni Morrison, the famous Nobel Laureate for literature in 1993, usually unveils the tragic past of the Negro slaves in most of her works. The novel *Beloved* is a vivid document of the darkest chapter in the history of the New World dealing with those white, civilized but uncultured slave-owners. All the slaves are brutally stripped away from their voices, language and narrative in a way that their sense of self almost diminished. They try to repress their bad memories and in the process lose their true identity. Throughout the novel, the horrors of slavery hang over the characters and one can easily notice from their interactions and recollections of all their past struggles. The victims in the novel represent horrors that have gone unmentioned in American history.

**Index Terms:** cruelty, inhuman, memories, psychological, pain, slaves, trauma

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, published in 1987, is unique in many respects. This critically acclaimed masterpiece is beyond all shade of doubt to win her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. This novel holds up a faithful mirror to all the physical and psychological horrors of the institution of slavery. The magnificent piece, written by the author in a mood of righteous indignation is subdued by a sense of sobriety and restraint. The author with her matchless creative imagination has woven historical facts into a magnificent novel. It reads like a prolonged meditation on a devastatingly tragic subject and in the present article an attempt has been made to portray all the diabolical treatment meted out to the innocent black slaves by the hostile and inhuman whites. The whole dehumanized drama of the darkest period of the new continent that continued for three centuries has been unveiled beautifully by her through the present work. The motto of this supreme genius is to present the hoary African culture, the traditions of their ancestors, the ethos of their race and finally to protect their racial identity. She is a formidable champion of her racial integrity and wisdom largely preserved in their folklore. She has created a new consciousness for her community and taught them to respect their own racial status and identity. She has successfully educated her community in the right direction especially during a point of time when they felt proud of being derogatively addressed as mulattoes. The psychological sufferings, indescribable agonies, the physical torture beyond human endurance and more have been vividly described by her. This rare genius has thoroughly imbibed the all-embracing spirit of the collective suffering of those nameless victims and translated their harrowing experiences into knowledge. She has equally exhorted the African American readers in particular to dwell on the horrors perpetuated by white slave-owners. During Antebellum period, particularly in the years after the War of 1812 to 1815 and before the Civil War from 1861 to 1865, and following the circulation of the great Emancipation Act, the slave-narratives were expelled. The action of the story began in 1873 exactly eighteen years after the civil war came to an end. Although the great Emancipation Act was promulgated in practice, it was ineffectual and the people were trying to forget the nightmarish period of slavery. In Kentucky, there was a plantation named 'Sweet Home' owned by Mr. Garner and his wife. Mr. Garner was very kind, treated his slaves as men and his slaves in return loved him, but the slave-master somewhere within him was not inclined to

leave them to freedom. All this happened thirty years before 1873. Paul D and his two brothers, Paul A and Paul F, Sixo and Sethe were slaves at 'Sweet Home' when Baby Suggs, an elderly slave woman, joined them with her only son, Halle just aged 14. Baby Suggs was crippled but gentle. Compared to all the other plantations, the 'Sweet Home' was a miniature-Eden or Paradise and richly worthy of its name. Their master was so loving and kind that the inmates of 'Sweet Home' regarded him as their god. The other slave owners used to feel jealous of Mr. Garner. But unfortunately for the slaves of Sweet Home, Mr. Garner passed away and his wife found it difficult to manage the plantation. As a result, she brought her husband's brother-in-law, popularly known as schoolteacher as the in-charge of 'Sweet Home'. The ill-fated slaves were hereafter heavily scarred and treated worse than animals. All of them had different horrifying experiences of slavery and their narratives were distinct from each other. Hence they made every effort to escape from the plantation. Above all, Schoolteacher was perhaps the cruelest character without an iota of kindness that Morrison had ever created. He was indeed a reminiscent of Hitler, an embodiment of horror and the greatest sadist under the canopy of Heavens. All the slaves were stripped away from their voices, language and narrative in a way that their sense of self almost diminished. They tried to repress these bad memories and in the process lost their true identity. Actually all throughout the novel the horrors of slavery hung over the characters and one could easily notice from their interactions and recollections of all their past struggles. His deeds of wickedness had no end as Sixo was burnt alive, Paul A hanged, Paul D tortured by all kinds of imaginable devices and Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, was abused physically, mentally and psychologically. Morrison has paid attention on the psychological repercussions of rape and abuse through the character of Sethe in *Beloved*. She was stripped away from her voice, language and narrative in a way that her sense of self almost diminished. A famous critic, Robin E. Field has captivated on the author's representation of these psychological traumas as "Such is the case with Sethe, the most prominent of the novel's many sufferers, who bears the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back" (3). Just like all the others, Sethe too tried to romanticize her pain and portrayed the same as a turning point in her life. She even tried to beautify all the pain inflicted on her by interpreting the scars on her back as in the shape of 'Choke-cherry tree'. Besides, Schoolteacher mentally tortured and humiliated her by

encouraging his nephews to suck milk from her breasts during her pregnancy, after getting married to Halle. As he watched the humiliating sight of stealing milk from the loft, helplessly ran away from Sweet Home and never returned again. Thereafter her life became a complete tragedy. Just like everything else, the author tries to express that human endurance too has its own limits. Once it becomes unbearable or beyond the level of endurance, the spirit in man rebels. At this point of the novel, the very human spirit is squeezed and squashed to nothingness through the barbarous treatment of the slaves. Just against the same background, Sethe, runs away to escape from unbearable agonies of slavery. She gets pregnant for the fourth time and about to deliver her baby at any moment before being ferried to the other side of the Ohio River. Fortunately for her, Amy Denver, a young white lady and an indentured worker helps Sethe in delivering the baby during the hour of great distress. In return the mother names the baby, Amy Denver, in the honor of that white lady. Then Stamp Paid, another co-worker, ferries both the mother and her new born baby to the other side of the Ohio safely and Sethe becomes a free woman for a short period of time. Sethe enjoys her so called freedom only for twenty eight days till School teacher along with the slave catchers makes his appearance at Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law's house where her two sons, Howard, Buglar and daughter, Beloved, are seen with their grandmother. It becomes the moment of crisis for the mother and she is rather "trying to put her babies where they would be safe". She instinctively feels that she would rather kill her children than send them back to the veritable hell of slavery. In a fit of madness, she loses her sense of judgment and maternal instinct. Finally the mother's psychological fear dominates over her love for the child. She commits the most heinous and sinful act of infanticide. She slashes the throat of two year old daughter, Beloved and the poor baby instantaneously dies in a pool of blood. "Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape," and that is the mentality that drives her to seek such protection for her daughter. According to the famous critic, Pamela E Barnett, Sethe's actions can be analyzed as, "For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and "dirtied" by whites; even dying at the hands of one's mother is subordinate to rape" (419) Baby Suggs and others at that moment try to prevent her from killing the other three children. The reader at this moment feels pity for the unfortunate child and the infanticide-mother, but the author manages to draw one's attention on the mind-boggling acts of cruelties carried out by Schoolteacher. Ultimately he becomes responsible for the most ghastly deed of Sethe's killing her own baby. The author has succeeded in her endeavor to impress the reader about the inhuman attitude of slave-owners towards the slaves. Schoolteacher gets shocked at the ghastly sight and goes back. The mother after serving a brief term of imprisonment gets released and Denver happens to accompany her during that time. The reader then gets introduced to thirty-eight years old Sethe as the novel opens in 124, a haunted house in Cincinnati. They completely believe that it is haunted by the ghost of Beloved as many objects in the house get thrown around the room. The destructive memories of Beloved's death have psychological impact on Denver and as a result she becomes shy, friendless and housebound. Similarly both her brothers, Howard and Buglar run away from home at the age of thirteen. Their

grandmother, Baby Suggs too dies eight years before the novel opens. Paul D once arrives at Sethe's home in Cincinnati and tries to dismiss all superstitions from their mind. He tries to help the family forget the bitter past, and forces out the spirit by exorcising. He too seems successful at the beginning as he convinces Denver to leave the house for the first time in years to go to a fair. But on the way back, they encounter a young woman sitting in front of the house. As the house is exorcised, Beloved enters the house as a young maiden of twenty, eighteen years after her death. She has a strange appearance as she comes straight away from a body of water near their house. Paul D initially gets suspicious and warns Sethe, but she is charmed by the young woman and ignores him. The author tries to bring home the point that as the haunting ends with the act of exorcism, Beloved arrives and behaves as a twenty year old child. She has no lines in her palms and her feet and clothing show no signs of hard travelling. She calls herself "Beloved" and her name is taken after the engraving on Sethe's murdered baby's tombstone. The spirit of Beloved after coming out of the grave is determined to take revenge on her mother and begins to create disorder in the house as an ill-tempered child. The reader also gets to know about the common belief among the Africans that when spirits of the dead visit the living, they come in the form of babies. Actually before Beloved's arrival, Denver is her mother's only source of love and support. Denver too gets psychologically affected due to several reasons as their social isolation and her mother's refusal to acknowledge the murder. Denver constructs an exaggerated version of Sethe. Thus neither the mother nor Denver learns how to appropriately express their love for one another. On the other hand Denver's affection surfaces as a greedy need for Sethe's recognition. Both the mother and daughter experience a psychological split, simultaneously embodying their able and traumatized selves. After the act of exorcism, Denver begins to love her company as her sister when it appears in flesh and blood form. In fact Denver is the first one to recognize Beloved as her murdered sister's ghost as they shift to 124. Unfortunately this companionship continues only for a short period of time and Beloved starts to act like a vengeful spirit. While Sethe is under an illusion that her murdered daughter is living under the same roof with Denver, Beloved in reality is taking vengeance in all possible ways. Beloved represents the power of the past to intrude into the present. She serves as the catalyst for change in Sethe and the community towards reintegration of their selves. She also implies that the contemporary African Americans have lost touch with their ancestors. She is rather introduced as a prelude to the excruciating torture inflicted on the slaves by the slave-owners. At this point, a famous critic Schapiro aptly says: The major characters in the novel are all working out of a deep loss to the self, a profound narcissistic wound that from a breakdown and distortion of the earliest relations between self and other. In the case of Beloved, the intense desire for recognition evolves into enraged narcissistic omnipotence and a terrifying, tyrannical domination. (197) The author feels that it is not enough to sympathize with the characters in distress. She further appeals to the reader to actively participate and identify oneself with the experiences of the victims of the novel. She draws the reader's attention to the main causes by delving deep into the roots that have driven the mother to the extreme act of infanticide. The mother is in-fact plagued by her sense of guilt brought on by her slave background and the act

of murdering of her baby daughter. In a way Beloved too symbolizes Sethe's sense of guilt. Her internal conflict to find herself after slavery and the death of her child, keeps the focus on most of the conflict within her head and not on how it affects the community. It is aptly described by Shelby Larrick as, "Because of her guilt, Sethe cannot see past the pain that Beloved is causing her, and those around her. She focuses entirely on her child returned, and the opportunity to correct her mistakes. Sethe's actions show her selfishness and her need to seek approval from Beloved." She has led a restless, disturbed and traumatic life throughout her life and earlier while living with the spirit form of Beloved and later with the flesh and blood form of Beloved. Beloved in her final attempt tries to suffocate her mother but fails due to timely rescue by Denver. She then leaves their house for good. The excruciating physical and psychological sufferings that she passes through at Sweet-Home, after it has come into the charge of School teacher may be regarded as the first part of her life as a slave. Whereas her act of infanticide, jail-term as a punishment, release, entrance of the ghost of Beloved, haunting her house, causing a lot of psychological agonies and finally Beloved's leaving the home for good, may be regarded as the second part of Sethe's life filled with mental sufferings. The reader in the end finds a strong sense of hope, sincerity, harmony and love when Paul D joins both the mother and daughter. Just when Sethe is seen torn between the past and the present and ultimately has a bleak chance to rebuild her sense of self, He infuses a strong sense of hope in her by lending his hand of love and confidence. His last words bear an honest ring of love and sincerity. The author has described the same beautifully as "He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are'. His holding fingers are holding hers. 'Me? Me?' (100) . The above touchy words calm the reader by offering an open ending and Sethe regains a new sense of confidence and hope to rebuild her life. Morrison with the help of highly poetic language, striking novel images, modern technique and superb characterization evokes infinite variety of characters to fullness of life. The reader never doubts the reality of what the author reports. On the other hand she is likely to mould a reader's sense of the world. Her techniques of remembering and employing symbolism add a dynamic dimension to the novel and act like a bridge between the past and the present. Here the past and the present constantly modify each other. The tortured and tormented memory of the slaves acts as a painful reminder of their past sufferings. They try to forget their past as far as they can but memories have their own way of escaping themselves into the present. At this point it is apt to quote the words of Jane Smiley, "Just as Sethe recognizes Beloved toward the end of the novel, and knows at once that she has known all along who she is, the reader is shocked at the sufferings of the black characters and the brutality of the whites, but knows at once that every torture and cruelty is not only plausible but also representative of man other horrors that go unmentioned in the novel and have gone unmentioned in American history." The novel Beloved may be taken as the epitaph on tombstone of all those slaves that died during the Middle Passage and after. There cannot be a more enduring tribute to the innocent dead than this immortal monument of Beloved.

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