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Toni Morrison's

*Beloved- Ghost of Slavery*

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## Introduction

The first time I read *Beloved*, Morrison's way of writing caught my attention. It was interesting to turn the page and see what will be happening next. The novel is written as a dream. Upon re-reading the foreword, I realized that Morrison wants the reader to be kidnapped thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment. The first step into a shared experience with the book's population, just as the characters were snatched from one place to another without preparation or defence. Morrison tells us that it was important to name the house but not the way "Sweet home" or other plantations were named. There would be no adjectives suggesting cosiness or grandeur or the laying claim to an instant aristocratic past. Only numbers here to identify the house, while simultaneously separating it from a street or city-marking its difference from the houses of other blacks in the neighbourhood. Former slaves would take pride in having an address of their own allowing it a hint of superiority. Yet a house that has literally a personality which we call "haunted" when that personality is blatant. Morrison hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control, in trying to make the slave experience intimate. It would be persuasive throughout that order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead. To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way. Toni

Morrison got the Pulitzer prize for her novel *Beloved* (1987). She got the idea from a newspaper clipping in the black book. They summarized the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who had escaped slavery and was arrested for killing one of her children. Consequently trying to kill the others rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation. She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the fugitive slave laws, which mandated the return of escapades to their owners. Her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of the Abolitionists as well as newspapers. She was certainly single-minded and judging by her comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom. Morrison thought the story to be

fascinating but little left to imagination. So, she decided to invent her thoughts plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence. However not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's place. My thesis statement is that Morrison wants the reader to feel the powerlessness of being black during these times by her way of writing.

Toni Morrison has published over 20 novels some of which include the titles: *Song of Solomon*, *The bluest eyes*, *Sula*, *Jazz* and *Paradise love*. In 1998, the Swedish Academy, awarded Morrison the Nobel Prize in literature for her achievements in literature with the motivation: Who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.....She has Afro-American literature as a speciality. As the motivation emphasizes, the theme of slavery plays a significant role in Morrison's authorship. Another prominent feature of her works is her exploration of sisterhood matters. The theme of slavery and sisterhood are also very much present in *Beloved*. Morrison's own words about what message the novel wants to give is the following: "Perhaps nowhere do we see more clearly the commodification of the body in slavery than in the instance of Sethe's milk, which rightfully belongs to her children, but is forcibly taken from her by schoolteacher's nephews while he watches and records in his book. "*(Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative, 68)*. In my essay,

I have divided my analysis into two chapters. In the first chapter, I will present the protagonist's relationship with Beloved's ghost. By doing this I will show how Beloved's ghost psychologically is eating her mother up from inside, accusing her from taking her life when she was only two years old. In the second chapter, I will discuss the relationship between Paul D and the protagonist Sethe. Admittedly how Paul D as a man is coping with his feeling of guilt and terrible memories in another way. Perhaps as the story moves on together, they can go forward and let the past be the past with a brighter future. Certainly there will be voices that say that it was not the past, but the girl that came as a ghost was the

past. There she was blaming her mother, Sethe for killing her all those years ago. Now she was here to deal with what had happened.

## Chapter One- Sethe Together with Beloved

In this chapter, I will show how Morrison demonstrates how focusing on the past can be all consuming and destructive. In the book, Margaret Garner is characterized by Sethe. The protagonist Sethe, nearly loses her identity and life through her obsession with Beloved's ghost and her past. After she committed the terrible crime several years ago, she lives with her other daughter, Denver alone in their house 124. "Foregrounding of the Afro-American feminine self is manifest as a naming of self and the world. The named self then attains agency as a subject rather than object and thus the black woman can liberate her sensibility from the dominating, denying other, which had heretofore been both Euro-Americans and Afro-American male authors." (*Black Women's writing: Crossing the Boundaries*, 129). The way Morrison is writing is a way for Sethe to better cope with her guilt due to the fact that Morrison is writing as it was a dream. She goes in and out from events, and feelings.

The main characters of the novel are haunted by their personal histories and by the history of their people. Therefore, "Beloved's ghost" may represent the physical manifestation of history, signifying how the past can invade the present. Sethe's guilt of having killed her baby girl links them together and as a result, Sethe and Beloved's ghost become unseparable. Both Sethe and Beloved are stuck in the past because of Beloved's death and Sethe's feeling of guilt, having committed the murder and despair of losing a child. Furthermore, Beloved has come back as a ghost to take revenge on Sethe.

We know that the protagonist Sethe, takes care of her children as a slave during the Civil War and is a strong character. Her children's father is a black man called "*Halle*". She has been fortunate enough, not having been raped by any white landlord. During these extremely tough times slaves had to have children with their white landlords. Later, the children were then taken away as slaves. So after the Civil War the aftermath was extremely difficult. Obviously as every other woman in her situation, she has extremely bad conscious because of her action towards her baby. Besides, one can say it is deep down in every woman to protect

her child, although she is accompanied with all women in the world. She does not know about it then. Consequently, she can see her baby girl's fingernails color (red, pink and orange) in her house everywhere. Some color of the blood of her neck. As a result, she cannot be free from her feeling of guilt. It haunts her day and night hence, she is being punished for her crime. Because it is so terrible and horrid that it cannot be expressed in words. Beloved gets thicker and thicker and eats a lot of sweets all the time. She has a yearning for sweets, which is also a metaphore that she lacks the love of her mother. "Beloved's" desire for sugar is matched only by her cravings for the sweetness of motherlove. Her hunger for food and affection soon merge as she develops a cannibalistic appetite and begins to devour Sethe metaphorically. As Lynden Preach puts it "The aggression of Beloved is characterised through the fantasy of cannibalism. The bigger Beloved got the smaller Sethe became", (*Psychoanalysis and Discourse in Beloved by Linden Preach*, 117). Beloved cannot take her eyes off her mother: "Sethe has licked, tasted, eaten Beloved's eyes". (57) Beloved draws her sustenance from Sethe and grows plumper by the day while her mother becomes physically and emotionally emaciated.

"Beloved "ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it and the older woman yielded it up with a murmur. Beloved has come back as a ghost to make her mother Sethe face the truth, and remember why she killed Beloved all those years ago. Finally let go of it and get on with her life better than before. Eventhough her mother did it as a prevention for not letting her daughter be caught by white landlords. Because it is after the Civil War, black people had been living under terrible conditions. Moreover, one can see the murder as a metaphore of all horrors and inhumanity, slavery had brought black people. Beloved's ghost is not nice to her mother and it could be considered as a metaphore of the cruelty of war and slavery. Morrison doesn't really describe all horrors black people had to live under instead there is these actions to tell us. Sethe becoming thinner is for instance a metaphore of the cruelty she is facing.

Beloved's ghost is turning fatter which is a metaphore of white people melesting their family and making Sethe killing her own daughter. Beloved's ghost's cannibalistic tendency almost wanting to eat her own mother is a metaphore of the cruelty of white people with black people. They were treated worse than animals and Beloved's ghost wanting to eat up her mother wants to tell us how terrible it was. We are not told in words but in actions and in metaphores. Powerlessness is the opposite of taking action and all her life she has been powerless. Murdering her child is a sign of powerlessness, although she did it as an action it has led to bad conscious, which has led to this powerlessness. Beloved's unspeakable past, when she is brutally killed and taken away from her family is due to the horrible time with slavery. The act provides a means to express what is otherwise inexpressible, what

Morrison terms "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199) not simply in terms of the individual psyche but in terms of history. While sugar conjures up a set of gendred associations, it simultaneously invokes the history of slavery. Sugar being one of the main products of slave plantations in the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>- centuries. The name of the farm where Beloved is born, Sweet Home, acts as a reminder of this and the knowledge that many slaves were bred to work on sugar plantations reveals a painful irony in the line: "It was as though sweet things were what she was born for" (125).

As Emma Parker observes "In contrast an awareness of the racial history of sugar suggests that as a hysterical syptom, Beloved's ghost's craving for sweetness is not only a parodic expression of her personal bitterness, but also a representation of a more general African American need for reparation, articulated through the substance deeply implicated in the enslavement of race." (*History and Hysteria in Morrison's Beloved* by Emma parker, vol.47) However the only way for them to get out of their hysteric episode is by the collectivity. Only collective action leads to freedom. In the end of the novel it is the collective action by women of the community that brings change and makes healing possible. As they are all partly culpable for Beloved's death: following Sethe's escape from Sweet Home, they failed



to warn Baby Suggs that the schoolteacher was coming to recapture Sethe and her children.

Moreover it is significant that the community is involved in exorcism, Beloved represents the pain of slavery and they all suffer in some way.

As Freeman argues “Morrison's Sethe appears to combine the roles of Isis and Seth, turning the bloodletting into a formidable power. When she cuts Beloved's throat, she seizes the power to change the course of events and refuses to remain the material upon, which events unfold according to another's plan. Aligned with the god who dismembers, whose violent action precedes renewal, Sethe fights before she mourns. Her daughter may be the figure who lies in pieces and whose history must be mourned, but it is the schoolteacher who embodies Osiris's power and whose world must be fought. He is the one whom Sethe confronts and attacks by placing Beloved out of his reach.”(*The Bleeding of America* by Dana Medoro,163).

Denver's loneliness produces a metaphoric hunger, a longing for the taste of life. When she manages to get a job in the village it is a fulfilment that is important for her survival. It can be seen as a fulfilment for all black people after slavery, since black people after what has happened to them must go on. Between the two sisters there is a difference, Beloved swells while Denver goes unnoticed. Denver is afraid that Beloved will eat up their mother. It can be considered as a metaphore of the results of the Civil War. To survive you had to get out working, not stay at home with your memories and bad conscious, it is vital to get out there seeing other people and not live in the past.

All the characters see Beloved's ghost, presumably it is because they all have a sense of collective guilt. They didn't manage to stop Sethe when the schoolteacher approached to their house Sweet Home 124. Her husband Halle, saw the awful act from the roof of the barn. In other words, he is also suffering eventhough he is not there anymore. He sits by the milk shed and smears butter over his face. These actions these characters do signify the pain and privation they feel. It cannot be articulated in any other way. In the context of the novel, such pain is clearly a social and not an isolated

phenomenon: when Paul D decides that Sethe is crazy. Stamp Paid responds, Yeah well, ain't we all. It can be that his absence, provoke with Sethe and Denver, this ghost "Beloved". He has just disappeared and Denver is missing her father and Sethe is missing her husband. They are all seeing this ghost. As a result it signifies that they are all suffering from their collective guilt. Consequently it has to be a collective saviour from all women in the village who before punished Sethe for her crime. They never payed her a visit or talked to her anymore, so she and Denver has to live very isolated in their house. When Sethe stopped working she withdrew from all people in the village and only stayed at home. It is hard in the end to live such a lonely life. The novel also describes the importance with people in our surroundings and that we cannot solve our problems all alone. Also the precious interior, the loved self, whatever vocabulary you ascribe to it is suppressed or displaced and put some place else. Beloved's ghost is a narrative that employs the body as text to speak the unspeakable. When Beloved grows and Sethe gets thinner it's because they have suffered so much from slavery and they need to express themselves so they do it through their bodies. For Morrison's characters there is no complete recovery from hysteria only a potential for healing, that involves learning to confront grief instead being governed by it. Be able to possess the past, without becoming possessed.

## Chapter Two- Paul D and Sethe

When Sethe asks Paul D if he can tell her about what has happened to him since he has escaped from slavery. His comment is that he is not sure that he can say it right. He points to the inadequacy of words, what he has to say is the fact that it is unspeakable. Morrison wants to tell us about the immense horrors of slavery and she does it in this unspeakable way, because actions say more than words. Paul D is the future, intelligent and perceptive he recognizes the danger in Beloved's presence. However he is unable to do anything about it. Moreover, all he can do is to challenge Sethe's vision of herself and her children. Finally, after Beloved's ghost leaves you sense that Paul D will provide a healing for Sethe again offering her a possibility of a brighter future and helping her to love herself. Consequently, Sethe begins to regain her life by discovering that she has a future. Paul D tells her, "Sethe me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." (229).

Sethe can learn to let go of the terrible history that has defined her through the healing love of Paul D, Denver and the black community. Through the future she creates with her family, she may discover that she can define herself. As mentioned before, Paul D has more facility with his terrible memories. He has the possibility to open and close his memory boxes whenever he wants. Unlike Sethe who has to live with her memories all the time which makes her more vulnerable. Furthermore Paul D's way of dealing with his past is more common among men than women. Usually men do not stay at home taking care of children, they are more often out hunting or working. They have learnt to cut off grief for instance while working. However Sethe has to stay at home all the time and deal with her memories. Besides, Sethe the central female character of the novel, does not have this power to control, or even walk away from her past. Obviously, she is brutally confronted by it over and over again. As a result the isolation she suffers in her community is a constant reminder what she did. Certainly, the scars on her back will live with her as scars of her tragic past forever.

Yet, these kinds of reminders perhaps are bearable for Sethe, since she can even tolerate the presence of the ghost of her baby girl living in her home, forcing its way into her life. However, both Denver and Paul D enter her home as horrible harbingers of memory. For instance, Paul D carries with him some joyful memories of the past, but also painful ones, even new ones. First, he tells Sethe of the fate of her husband Halle of him seeing what happened to her and consequently going insane with the knowledge of it. Second, Beloved brings an even more hurtful past with her as the reincarnation, the human form of Sethe's baby girl, for with her, Beloved's ghost also carries guilt. Next my analyse would be that there is a collective sense of guilt. Consequently, it is only the community together with Denver and Paul D who can save her from her culpability of the crime.

The way Morrison is writing is a way for Sethe to better cope with her guilt, due to the fact that it is written as it was a dream. She wants to forget, nevertheless her memory remains and she can never forget. Morrison forms the past in the shape of Beloved, a figure bloated and pregnant with history and "*rememories*". Beloved's ghost enters Sethe's world to haunt her, to propel her, to force her to ressurect those memories she stores in the recesses of her heart and mind. Beloved's ghost makes Sethe acknowledge the past to realize that what tragedies occurred in her life will not fade away or lay down until they receive proper burial.

Sethe must remember, probe and reconcile with her past, although Beloved's ghost confronts her with overwhelming and vivid memories which Sethe must deal with. Moreover, since Beloved is "swallowing her whole" Sethe becomes consumed by them, Admittedly, as Beloved's ghost grows, Sethe slowly dies. Obviously, not until Beloved's ghost is harnessed, Sethe will dwindle under her power. While, Beloved symbolizing all the pain of days past, needs to be resolved, placed in a realm that allows Sethe to move on and live. Thus, her past cannot go on haunting forever. As a result, Paul D is there for Sethe to begin a new life. Furthermore, a great deal of Beloved's ghost involves possession and the role of memory.

Morrison writes that “Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present.” (256). Consequently, this sentence raises the following question: Can you remember the past without its taking “possession” of you—indeed inflicting pain on you? Perhaps more fundamentally are we a product of our experiences/actions, painful though they may be? If the human brain can purge itself of past experiences, then this question would be resolved. It is obvious that certain experiences are so insignificant that they remain isolated and forgotten. However, it is evident that certain traumatic and perpetually re-enforced experiences do indeed live on into the present, taking “possession of us (i.e. influencing the way we think/act). Like ghosts, these experiences/actions haunts us daily just as Beloved’s ghost haunts Sethe. Victims of slavery were and in some cases are possessed by the past (as Sethe so clearly is). As in the novel *Beloved*, coping with past demons remains an important personal human dilemma also in real life.

Admittedly, as Sethe has committed the terrible crime, she was afraid of white men taking her baby, it was in some kind of self-defence. On the one hand she did it as it was the right thing to do. Consequently, she was convinced of that. On the other hand, Stamp Paid felt guilt as he did not confront the white owner while having relation’s with his wife. Accordingly, he did the opposite, nothing. As a result, there are different kind of guilt. For example, Stamp Paid felt guilt since he did nothing and Sethe felt guilt due to the fact that she confronted injustice in her own way.

Besides, the men, Paul D and Stamp Paid, cannot understand her sense of guilt. In other words, both Paul D and Stamp Paid have attachment to her, while they cannot understand what motivates her actions. However humor is there to help them communicate and understand each other better. Fortunately, sometimes one can use humor as a way of dealing with pain. Admittedly, Paul D and Stamp Paid made a joke out of Sethe’s attempt of murdering the white man who came to the house. Humor can sometimes make the pain and the confusion of the situation into a better understanding. Actually, the way Morrison writes,

makes it more comprehensive. According to Lidinsky “Beloved also enacts the ritual of sparagmos implied in the Osiris legend and emphasizes that certain spaces and absences cannot be filled”(*The Bleeding of America by Dana Medoro*, 160).

You are getting under the skin of the narrator and into Seth’s subconscious. Morrison describes the difference in gender and writing as it was a dream. In that way it is more easy to understand her bad conscious. When she describes Paul D and his role together with Sethe he has a totally different role in coping with his feeling of guilt however together they can make the future.

## Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to discover whether Morrison is writing for the reader to feel sympathy with Sethe or to think that she did so wrong killing her baby that she should suffer all her life. Therefore she writes the novel as if it was a dream. Consequently in that way, the reader gets under the skin of Sethe and you understand the way she acted. Chapter one illustrates the relationship the narrator has with Beloved's ghost and shows how guilt can eat us up. Chapter two proves that men are not dealing with their feelings of guilt in the same way as women. That is why the couple is ultimate when you want to move on with your life. In conclusion Sethe has to learn the hard way that she is the most important person in her life. Because slavery and the Civil War were two immensely huge disasters, therefore Community has to take responsibility for Sethe being free from guilt. However, when Beloved's ghost comes around she has to deal with her feelings to the surface and Paul D is there to help her. Before the narrator just repressed all feelings of guilt, Morrison wants to show that all by herself the narrator has difficult coping with her life together with Denver, her daughter.

However when Paul D comes around she begins to see herself from another perspective and can start dealing with her life. To sum up, men more often use jokes, and are stronger while women stay more alone with their sentiments. However Morrison wants to describe that love between a man and a woman often can do miracle. In brief, when Sethe says that she has nobody now when Beloved's ghost has left. Naturally, Paul D says to her some memorable words that "she has herself". In other words, Sethe had to learn the hard way that she is the most important person in her life. In conclusion the war and slavery taught everybody a lesson and Sethe showed us the way.

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