

Search for Identity and Self-Realization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

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Abstract:

This paper aims at exploring the search for identity and the ways in which Toni Morrison has systematically recast the image and reconstructed the identity of African American women in her novel *Beloved*. She employs different means such as pure black writing, love and myth by which she re-opens new doors for the African American women to achieve and reconstruct their identities in the community of slavery. Drawing upon womanist and postmodern theories of identity construction, and incommensurability, this paper argues that African American femininity is relationally constructed. In essence, black women's relationships with their children (especially their daughters), their men, and the White community of brutal slavery define who they are, determine how they perceive themselves, and, largely, dictate their capacity for success and survival. Though many scholars contend that Morrison's *Beloved* situates individual and collective memory as the vehicle by which such self-identification is achieved. It maintains that it is not until African American women and African American men are able to put their stories together and to identify new ways of seeing and relating to the other can they create any real sense of self-worth. Many scholars support this assessment as Morrison offers it through a reconstruction of personal and community histories and ancestral reclamation whereby the entire characters move on a continuum from a repressive slave perspective to an open, accepting, free perspective of self and environment. Therefore, (re)memory alone is not sufficient. There must be collaboration to weave the pieces, the fragments of the past into a tapestry that might provide warmth and security for the future.

Toni Morrison, the first African-American writer to win the Noble Prize for Literature, has published six novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992).

This paper aims at exploring the search for identity and the ways in which Toni Morrison has systematically recast the image and reconstructed the identity of African American women in her novel *Beloved*. The theme of self-realization and searching for black identity in the white community is a very important one as Satya Mohanty claims that:

“We cannot really claim ourselves morally or politically until we have reconstructed our collective identity, reexamined our dead and disremembered. The project is not simply one of adding to one's ancestral line, for it involves fundamental discoveries about what ancestry is... ”¹

Such a theme of self-realization goes even further in the writings of the African American writers. It takes a wide space and importance in different genres of black literature.

As Raymond Williams argues, Literature is part of "a whole social process, which, as it is lived, is not only process but is an active history, made up of the realities of formation and of struggle."² Toni Morrison's contemporary fiction self-consciously takes its place in the continuum of sociopolitical struggle that has historically characterized African American experience.

Morrison's novel *Beloved* probes the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery, by way of what she has called “re-memory” deliberately reconstructing what has been forgotten. *Beloved* is set after the Civil War and emancipation, during the period of national history known as Reconstruction (1870-90). Much of the characters' pain occurs as they reconstruct themselves, their families, and their communities after the devastation of slavery. They cannot put slavery behind them by a simple act of will. As the novel opens, the past literally haunts the present. *Beloved* continues the earlier novels' exploration of themes such as the black community, motherhood, and the relationship between man and woman. Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent novelists who portrays such a theme. She transcends both her racial identity and gender. Morrison is a serious scholar committed to the cause of African-American people, and at the same time, she is a unique creative writer. Morrison's parents firmly believed that “black people were the humans of the globe.”³ From her father, a shipyard worker, who was a stickler for excellence, Morrison drew a biased perspective on whites as he believed that all African people were morally superior to Europeans. She admits that “my father was a racist. As

a child in Georgia, he received a shocking impression of adult white people, and for the rest of his life felt he was justified in despising all whites, and that were not justified in despising him."⁴ Her parents nurtured, however, in her a positive self-image. But her mother was highly optimistic in her belief that the future would bring better race relations.

What Morrison said in 1976 of Gayl Jones' first novel, *Corregidora*, is most applicable to her own work: what "accounts for the success" is "the weight of history working itself out in life of one, two, three people: I mean a large idea, brought down small, and at home, which gives it a universality and a particularity which makes it extraordinary."⁵ In a sensational case, Margaret Garner, a runaway slave killed her daughter rather than allow her to be returned to slavery. Garner tried, not for attempting to kill her child, but for the real crime of stealing property (herself and her children) from her master. *Beloved* is about the gaps which must be filled in and interpreted by the reader. Oral quality in Morrison's fiction is deliberate and demanding participatory reading. Her language she says "has holes and spaces so that the reader can come and feel the experience.

Writing for blacks has always been a political act. The blacks always believed that the creation of art could play a significant role in their dubious political status. Gates points out the "first predictions of renaissance of black literature and art"⁶, made by William Stanley Braithwaite in 1901. Why this search for identity becomes a central motif for all Black American writers is because, for forty years ago, they were treated as second class citizens of America, victims of racism and apartheid until the Civil Rights Movement changed things for them. Their forefathers were once forcibly brought from Africa to America and forced to work as slaves. In fact slavery can be said to represent a perfect mechanisms through which individual lives were controlled. This research for identity is a natural outcome towards constructing a self-contained picture of themselves against all odds thrown up by the society. African American literature has made a significant contribution in helping to fight racist stereotypes and working towards racist reform and equality. Black writers are today reopening questions regarding history and their representation in the writing of Whites. Their writings defy the dominant culture's negative definition of them. One of those black writers is Toni Morrison who wishes to write truly black literature and incorporate in her work all the important aspects of black tradition using the oral tradition, jazz, and response patterns. During the 19th century, a movement of what is called Black Feminism had emerged which can be defined as a body of literature produced by black women, which evolved during the period of military campaigns and emancipation demonstrations of that century. Black

feminist criticism has taken upon itself, in the face of all obstacles of a racist and sexist society, has been able to erect. There is a community of black women who have written and written well. They have worked in gaining recognition for the quality of writing itself and the respect for its principle subject, that is, the lives and consciousness of black women. Black women's literature is also an element of black literature as a whole, where the recognized voices have been male.

It is possible to say that most of black women's writings focus on the inhuman system of the peculiar institution where the economics of slavery was executed highly in human terms. The condition of woman during slavery was dehumanized. She was reduced to a chattel object that could be used according to the will and pleasure of the white master. She was stripped of her moral and religious beliefs. She was denied access to her African culture, language and family system.

The Gothic story of Sethe's loving and losing Beloved is thematically and emotionally emblematic of the historical struggle for survival with self-respect and love of black families that has been passed on orally and spiritually from generation to generation. Nelhe states that "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. Sethe's sixty year old mother in law tells her "you lucky you got three left. I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me four taken, four chased, and all. I expect worrying somebody's house into evil."⁷ Sethe tells her daughter the horror story of her mother as passed on to her by Nan, the one-armed slave wet nurse and cook who became her surrogate mother. Sethe was nursed only for two or three weeks by her mother, a field slave branded with a circle and cross under her breast before she was turned over to Nan, who along with Sethe's mother had been raped many times by crew members during the middle passage. The children born of the union with the white crew, Sethe's mother threw away. "Without names she threw them." Nan tells Sethe in a pidgin tongue that implicitly shows the ancestral life-bestowing powers on naming rituals, Nan further tells Sethe "you she gave the name of the black man she put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around, never, never."⁸ Conceived with a black man in love rather a white master, through rape, Sethe named after her father is the only child her mother allowed to survive.

Mother-daughter bonding and bondage suffuses Morrison's text. Sethe's nameless mother is among the African slaves who experienced the middle passage and, late in the text, she related the ordeal through a coded message from the ship revealing that she too is a Beloved, who, like Sethe, has been cruelly separated from her mother. This cycle of mother-daughter

loss, perceived abandonment, betrayal and recovery is inherent in and characterizes each mother-daughter relationship in the novel. Ella, in the novel, is another black woman who bears a mulatto child conceived out of rape by a white master; she was regularly abused sexually while in puberty by her master and his son. The lowest yet, she considers sex disgusting and love a serious disability. She remembered having delivered, 'but would not nurse hairy white thing fathered by the lowest yet.' Barbara Omolade writes that to the master the slave woman was a 'fragmented commodity' she says:

"Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and her muscle were pressed into field labor when she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family...her vagina used for his sexual pleasure, was the gate way to the womb, which was his place of capital investment."⁹

Sethe's act of killing her daughter comes immediately after running away from the Sweet Home after her milk stolen and her back bruised. She kills her daughter because she does not want her to return to slavery and nobody would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. Sethe's maternal subjectivity is figured in the defiant claim to her own definition of motherhood, motherhood being not a state she finds herself subjected to for someone else's economic advantage but, rather, the part of herself which exceeds the bonds of slavery. The mother-child relationship is certainly crucial in the development of female self, but the novel demonstrates how powerful social and economic forces, affect that central relationship and female development as a whole during slavery. Morrison pictures the image of the tragic nature of the slave's life. Stephane M. Camp notes that "enslavement means cultural alienation, reduction to the status of property, the ever-present threat of sale, denial of the fruits of one's labor and subjugation to the force, power, and will of another human being". Even the relationship between African American women and African American men had been devastated by the institution of slavery, for it devastated the very concept of such relationship that depends on family and parenthood. Almost all of the novel's relationships are created within such community of slavery and, as a result, they are extremely complicated. Morrison wants to show that choices are always present. However, within the institution of slavery, there were very few, if any, these free choices that slaves could make must be of tragic side effects as what Sethe did to her daughter to free her from facing like her mother's tragic fate. Sethe decided to take the life of her daughter. She saw that the only way to end, not only the physical abuses, but the psychological and spiritual atrocities of slavery, is via murdering her daughter.

Though Sethe's relationship with her daughter Beloved, for many scholars, leads the narrative and surely builds up its crisis, it is clear that Sethe's relationship with the men in her life shapes her world view and, largely, defines how she sees and determines her sense of self-worth. Halle's and Sethe's six-year marriage is indeed a marvel not only because of its duration but because they enjoyed the true sense of their marriage and parenthood that was completely missing in the community of slavery. Morrison's *Beloved* stresses the need for African American slaves to rebuild and define their values about themselves through different means like writing and love to picture past and open up new windows for the future. She believes that the true love is able to free their souls especially in the frame of black love as it has the ability to break the shackles of slavery. Sethe's relationship with Paul D. proves to be an opportunity to interpret the painful past and clarify their personal sufferings. Morrison, through the power of love, tries to reshape the slave past and make the reconciliation of African American slaves possible. She stresses the fact that love makes survival possible. *Beloved* signifies the interest in the possibility of future of possible liberation from the gloomy past in which black women and men were considered objects rather than subjects. Morrison tries to shed light on the subject of discovering oneself in the community of denial and slavery throughout the process of gathering the broken pieces of oneself in a new shape.

Searching for black identity in white society is conveyed to us through a series of grotesque images. We are told of Beloved's murder and that Denver had drunken her blood along with her mother's milk. Denver realizes that she has no self "she can feel her thickness thinning dissolving into nothing. She grabs the hair at her temples to get enough to uproot it and halt the melting for a while... she does not move to open the door because there is no world out there."¹⁰ Beloved, too, finds herself melting, surrealistically, disintegrating as she surprises herself by pulling out one of her own teeth:

"Beloved looked at the teeth and thought this is it next would be her arms, her hand and her toe. Pieces of her would drop, may be one at a time, may be all at once. Or on those mornings, before Denver woke up and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult, keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips, when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she would wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams exploding and being swallowed. When her tooth comes out ...an odd fragment. Last in the row ... she thought it was starting."¹¹

Morrison uses different strategies in order to achieve her target of reflecting profoundly the deep suffering of African- American women in the institution of slavery. Such kind of strategies are meant to shed reflect the self- realization by adopting the slavery as a matter of life for the African American people. One prominent strategy is the use of the myth which has been contentious subject in African-American literary criticism. Susan Blake notices that “myth and folklore can transform the acceptance of blackness as identity into the acceptance of blackness as limitation”.¹² This is a moot point in Morrison criticism for, as Katherine B. Payant points out. Morrison has been frequently accused of placing limitations on her women characters, ‘of not allowing her women to “fly”’.¹³

For Morrison, gender is not separable from racial identity. It seems that such characters’ limitation is meant to reflect the tied identity of the black women character. While their arguments are for liberation and racial gender oppression, both race and gender are always seen as liberating points from which to construct a language or create a literature that is political in forms as well as subject matter. As Morrison consciously writes the black test, she also defines herself as a writer because she is a woman. We aim at studying the significance of Morrison's writings from a feminist perspective. Morrison, through her characters like Sethe, counters the white patriarchal perspective that has dominated the western ideology. Her novels function in the same way as the ghost of *Beloved* does, to haunt and torment the guilty conscience in the need of absolution and redemption, for each of her work Morrison lauders one American ideal after another.

To conclude, this paper has examined the theme of search for lost identity and self-definition in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Morrison believes that self-discovery is also repositioning of blacks in history, culture, and black community to restore their culture in their language. We have also not overlooked the fact that Morrison is a black woman writer, her writings have also to overcome the hegemony of black male writings which had so far occupied the black society. As Morrison says in one of her interviews that "as a black and a woman I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were available to people who were neither".¹⁴ Morrison's *Beloved* draws our attention to the psychological dilemma and turmoil experienced by Sethe in the context of slavery. *Beloved* is a historical manifestation of black women exploited by white man.

Morrison's *Beloved* is a beautiful narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery on the power of re-memory and the collective memories

kept alive through the oral tradition. Morrison's *Beloved* transforms what has been a kind of significant absence in the narrative of American cultural history; the exploitation and denial of black cultural heritage and raise it up into a powerful presence. Through this novel, Morrison shows self-conscious interest in the celebration of black woman's strength, their ideas and beliefs to correct the wrongs that have been historically used against black people. Morrison aims at celebrating the legends of black women into myths that allow them to recover their tragic past of slavery. This process of self-discovery and rememory form an integral part of Toni Morrison's writing. In fact, this quest for identity is true of the entire African-American literature of the twentieth century.

Notes:

- 1- Satya Mohanty (Satya Mohanty, "The epistemic status of cultural identity: On *Beloved* and the postcolonial condition," *cultural critique*,xxIV(spring, 1993),67.
- 2- Williams, *Marxism and literature*, 201.
- 3- Kukum Sangare,"Political of the Possible,"*cultured critique*, VII(Fall, 1987)
- 4- Quoted in Nelhe, Y.Mckyand Henry Louis Gates ed. *Nortons Anthology of African Literature* (New company,1997), York
- 5- Toni Morrison "slow walk of trees, *New York Times Magazine*. July 4.1976, 152.
- 6- Henry Louis Gates (jr), *Figures in Black: word, sings and 'racial' self* (New York: Oxford university Press, 1987) p.14.
- 7- Morrison *Beloved*
- 8- *Ibid*.
- 9- Susan L, Blake, 'Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison', *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 123, 126.
- 10-Katherine B. Payant, *Becoming and Bonding: Contemporary Feminism and Popular Fiction by American Women Writers* (London and Westport, 1993), p.202.
- 11- (Barbara Omolade, "Heart of Darkness," *Desire: The politics of Sexuality* ed. Snitow s. Stansell and s. Thomson London: Virago, 1984) 365
- 12-Morrison *Beloved*
- 13-*Ibid*.
- 14-Henry L. Gates, ed: *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. (New York. Fred A. Knopf, 1987).

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البحث عن الهوية وتحقيق الذات في رواية الحبيبة لتوني موريسون

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الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث الى استكشاف الهوية والطرق التي بواسطتها حاولت الروائية الأمريكية توني موريسون القاء واعداد تشكيل الهوية للمرأة الأمريكية من أصول أفريقية في روايتها الحبيبة. فقد وضفت عدة وسائل مثل الكتابة والحب والأسطورة الأمر الذي أعاد فتح الأبواب للنساء الأمريكيات من أصول أفريقية لتحقيق واعداد بناء هوياتهن في المجتمع الذي تسوده العبودية. وبالاعتماد على النظريات مثل نظرية ما بعد الحداثة ونظرية المرأة في تكوين الهوية واللامساواة فان البحث يناقش بان انوثة النساء الأمريكيات من اصول افريقية قد تكونت نسبيا. باختصار هي علاقة النساء السود مع الاطفال (و بالأخص البنات) والرجال والمجتمع الابيض ذات العبودية المتوحشة الذي بدوره عرف عن من يكونوا وكيفية فهم انفسهن وتعليمهن كيفية النجاح والبقاء. وبالرغم من ان العديد من الباحثين افترضوا ان رواية (الحبيبة) لتوني موريسون قد استخدمت الذاكرة التراكمية لشخصيه كوسيلة يمكن بواسطتها الوصول الى هوية الذات. فقد أكدت هذه الدراسة على عدم امكانية ذلك ما لم يتمكن النساء والرجال الأمريكيين من الأصول الأفريقية ان يضعوا قصصهم سوية ويشخصوا طرقا جديده في النظر والتواصل مع الاخرين حتى يستطيعوا تكوين معنا حقيقيا لقيمة الذات. حظى هذا التقييم تأييد العديد من العلماء حيث عرضته موريسون من خلال اعادة تشكيل التاريخ الشخصي والتاريخ المجتمعي مع الإصلاح الممتد الى الأسلاف والذي بواسطة تتحرك كل الشخصيات بشكل متصل من منظور العبد المظلوم الى منظور الذات الحر المقبول. لذلك فان اعادة الذاكرة ليس كافيا. فيجب ان يكون هناك تعاونا لحبك الاجزاء وبقايا الماضي في شكل نسيجي يمكن ان يوفر الدفاء والحنان للمستقبل.