

Black Identity, The Supernatural and the Spiritual Elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison (1931), a Nobel laureate, has attained a central place in the American literary world. Black identity, the supernatural and spiritual elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the underlying theme of paper. Through the account of her novels, she shows several ways in which slavery, one of the most oppressive period in the black history has affected the identity of Afro-American. *Beloved* a novel is called as an unambiguous work of literature. It describes the circumstances of the slave mother and it also puts forth the religious and supernatural and spiritual points of the Afro-Americans at the time. Slavery was a great issue at that time and brought attention to the readers. The novel has supernatural elements like ghosts. An invisible being inside the house brings chaos in the house and causes Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar to runaway. *Beloved* the central character a girl seems to be another ghost. Critics always saw *Beloved* as the incarnation of Sethe's murdered daughter. Sethe's has been absolved of her crime, as she has served time in the penitentiary. In Toni Morrison's fictions one can clearly see that the commitment to ethnocentricity, collective experience advocated by Black Aesthetic Theory. The present paper will analysis Black identity, the supernatural and spiritual elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Key notes: Black, *Beloved*, ghosts, supernatural, spiritual.

I. INTRODUCTION

Black identity, the super natural and spiritual elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has always been the main focused in this paper. Through, the account of her novels, she shows several ways in which slavery, the most oppressive period in the black history, has affected the identity of Afro-American. Her novels chronicle the lives of Afro-Americans and explore the impact of socio-historic forces pitted against them. *Beloved* politically displays Sethe's story of infanticide which is claimed by Mr Bodwin to "build a further case for abolishing slavery"(307). The killing of the baby and Sethe's escape had taken place in 1955, actually ten years before the 13th Amendment to the US constitution that forbid the slavery and uncontrolled servitude. Toni Morrison has related the background of the novel in the forward on *Beloved*.

The Afro-American's had a difficulty in establishing their own culture during the period of slavery, Toni Morrison believes that the black culture has been built on the horrors of the past and it is this history that has fashioned contemporary black culture in a positive way. Through her use of linguistic devices, Toni Morrison has represented the black culture, its imagery and symbolic features and the theme of interracial relations. She has illustrated black culture as resilient, vibrant, and independent and determined. As part of black culture the black women stand as the pillars of strength within that community as guardians and healers. Many of the characters are torn apart due to the slave traders splitting up families and selling them as slaves. Together, they share a sense of history of suffering and an urge to heal and become whole again. In positioning the black culture as a whole, Toni Morrison also explores interracial relation in the novel During the after slavery relations between black and white cultures were "hars". In Toni Morrison's novel one can clearly see that the commitment to ethnocentricity, collective experience of Black people and revolutionary change advocated by Black Aesthetic Theory. The relationship between the two cultures is based on the idea of exclusion and lack of tolerance for the other. All black people have suffered horrific experiences at the hands of white people. The paper will analyse Toni Morrison's *Beloved* with regard to Black Identity, the supernatural and spiritual elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

The Supernatural and Spiritual elements in Beloved:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), is set in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. Through flashbacks to past tragedies and deeply symbolic delineations of continued emotional and psychological suffering, the novel explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman and her family during the reconstruction era. The novel depicts supernatural elements like ghosts. There seems to be a presence of an invisible being inside the house. This ghost seems to be the baby's ghosts whom Sethe had earlier murdered. Another ghost in the human disguise is *Beloved*. *Beloved* seems to be the reincarnate of Sethe's dead child. As Sethe encounters her, outside her house, the reader comes across her childlike behavior. Her walk in unsteady and strangely she remember the song that Sethe had sung to her when she was a child. Her skin is fresh and she has no control over her bodily functions. Almost all the main characters such as Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver and Paul D believe in the presence of the ghost when the present residence. Baby Suggs asserts: "we lucky this ghost in a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back here? Of yours? (6). It's clear that superstitions are embedded in the specific nature. According to Baby Suggs death is a normal thing for the black people. Majority of the black people and their relatives were killed during that time. The first place depicted to be haunted by ghost in the novel is 124, Bluestone Road. Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar cannot stand the terror caused by the ghost, so they flee. The horror they face by the ghost is mentioned below:"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children..."(1). Toni Morrison has depicted a scene in which two tiny handprints appear on a cake but with an absence of a child. Further all the things in the house move by themselves. It is apparent from the text that the ghost wants to punish her. The ghost doesn't want to be forgotten by anyone, so it reappears, as expressed by Sethe:" Some things go. Pass on. Some things just say. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forged" (35). Further in the play the name Sweet Home is contrasted with its situation. One would confuse the place Sweet Home as a joyful

and a happy place but the place is haunted in a way as it is full of horror and scary acts. After the death of Mr. Garner, Mrs. Garner had employed Schoolteacher who abuses the slave and treats them like animals.

As Sethe is raped by the Schoolteacher's nephews; she becomes preoccupied with the incident. She puts forth her children's needs before her own. Toni Morrison has expressed the abnormality of a human being in her novel. It is mentioned in the novel, "All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their things and waiting for the new girl." (13) Schoolteacher's arrival at Sweet Home is another horrendous act. Sethe resists the Schoolteacher's authority by murdering her own offspring: "...Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one..." (185). Apart from the grotesque and unnatural events, the novel has some religious and supernatural allusions also. *Beloved* has some allusions to *The Bible* also. On the first page of *Beloved* the reader comes across this optimistic prophetic epigraph from Romans 9:25, which seems to forecast an improved further of the black slaves: I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, who was not beloved. (1) But Toni Morrison's use of Biblical allusions is unclear. According to Dubin Edelberg in *American Literature* Toni Morrison's others works like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* are, "characters with Biblical names[who seem to] live their namesakes' lives in reverse". (223) In *Beloved* Sethe is associated with Biblical Sethe, the third son of Adam and Eve. According to Cynthia Dubin Edelberg in *American Literature* Toni Morrison believes that, "the Bible is the wrong book for Blacks." (223) The opening epigraph entails that the Blacks were not formerly God's people. Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs becomes "an unchurched preacher." (120) Baby Suggs is called 'holly' by Toni Morrison. Although what she advocates in the Clearing is her won gospel, "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure". (103) She has given a message to the former slaves, "that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine." (103)

There is no description of Sethe and Denver's visit to a church in the novel or reading *The Bible*. The character of *Beloved* has been taken under interpretation by many critics. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy in *Beloved: A Casebook* describes her character from a psychological angle, "more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried." (41) She is also looked at from the religious point of view and parallels to Jesus Christ are also found. Christ died on the cross for the sins of mankind and was resurrected. Critics always saw *Beloved* as the incarnation of the murdered daughter of Sethe. *Beloved* first appearance in the novel is when Paul D arrives at 124, Bluestone Road and exorcises the baby ghost: "With a table and loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame". (45) she appears again a few days later, "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water." (60) This implies something strange and unnatural about her. She has no recollection of her past life and only thing she can recall in standing on a bridge which is treated as a metaphor as the transition between life and death. On a religious metaphorical level there is proof that Toni Morrison has made it implicit earlier, might have proposed Sethe to have a God-like quality. Sethe is given the feminine form of the Biblical name Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, who had been created to be like God. He is their third son after Cain and Abel and the one who prospers and becomes the father of mankind. On the contrary Sethe's life is completely opposite to her Biblical namesake. Her losses all her children except for one and her place in the society is of the lowest section. She has committed an appalling crime and has lost her faith in God completely. It can also be argued that Toni Morrison has selected to give her the name to entail that she is more than a common woman; not only does her case provide a strong political argument for the eradication of the slavery, but she also sacrifices her own daughter to save the rest of the family from slavery, that can serve as an example for freeing her racial group. Sethe serves as the chosen one, an expression that hints to Jesus Christ. Jesus was the only surviving child when Herod had ordered the killing of infants of Bethlehem, like Sethe served as the only child her mother did not kill.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison here shows that Sethe will not be able to search her identity without the help of community. She now has an opportunity to redefine her identity on the basis of her cultural heritage and a new transformation from isolation into communal re-entry. Like the Sweet Home's tree and Paul D's sapling, the symbol of wholeness, Sethe finds herself an identity. Toni Morrison seems to suggest Sethe's contribution to merge both Christian and African values and religion. *Beloved* can be understood from a psychological or religious angle and both can offer pleasing clarifications to the role of *Beloved* and how Sethe can be reconciled and mythological metaphors are multifaceted and unclear and she alters the conventional male images to feminist-focused description which seem to give an option that is suitable for Afro-American, especially the women. This paper is discussed Black identity, the supernatural and the spiritual elements in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* various aspects.

References

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