

Marginal Voices in the Writing of Toni Morrison with Special Reference to *Beloved*

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Abstract—The novel *Beloved* is one of Toni Morrison's greatest masterpieces. This Pulitzer Prize-winning work is based on a true event, portraying the life of a woman named Margaret Garner. The story recounts how, in an attempt to escape the horrors of slavery, she took the life of her own newborn child. The novel also illustrates how the agonies and trauma of slavery continue to impact an individual's present life, even after gaining freedom. While the story is primarily set in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, it frequently moves into 'flashbacks' (the past), depicting the protagonist Sethe's painful journey through enslavement. Sethe lives with her daughter, Denver, in a house located at '124 Bluestone Road.' One day, Paul D arrives—a man who was with Sethe during her days of bondage. His arrival resurfaces memories of her past. A major turning point occurs when a young woman arrives at Sethe's house and identifies herself as 'Beloved.' Sethe is stunned to hear this name because it was the same word she had engraved on her deceased daughter's tombstone. Gradually, Sethe becomes convinced that this young woman is the reincarnation of her dead daughter. Initially, Sethe is overjoyed; however, Beloved's demands soon become excessive, and she begins to drain Sethe's life and energy. Ultimately, the house transforms into a psychological battlefield where the protagonist struggles to reckon with her past actions and seeks forgiveness from her daughter.

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison was one of the most famous Afro-American novelists. She is the first Afro-American novelist who won the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1993. Her novels depict the problem of slavery, struggles of Black Americans living in white society ridden with racial and social discrimination. She mainly gives voice to her female protagonists in her writings, who faces double invisibility, first from the white society and feminist movements in the terms of race and secondly from the black male in the terms of

gender in their own society like in very first novel *The Bluest Eye*, protagonist of this novel Pecola Breedlove faced discrimination and oppression both from white society and their own Black society people.

II. MEANING OF MARGINALIZATION

Marginalization is a social process by which individuals or a group of people are ignored. It means it is a process in which something or someone is pushed to the edge and accorded lesser importance. Since long, people have been sidelined on the basis of caste, religion, class and colour. Such marginalized groups have little control over their lives and are subject to the risk of exclusion. Marginalized people don't have any rights, power and voice. It can also be said that people who are sitting in the centre don't give the marginalized an opportunity to come at the centre of society. It is a social phenomenon where a minority is looked down as less important and thus excluded from the centre. Marginalization takes place at different levels in the society like discrimination faced by people on the basis of caste in India. Women have always been marginalized in every society since time immemorial and when it comes to marginalization, this topic is incomplete without discussing the Blacks, who always faced discrimination and marginalization in the name of colour. It is also important to discuss about Black women who faced double marginalization from both the white society and also from the black men of their own society.

When it comes to marginalization and discrimination it is inevitable to discuss the marginalization of the Dalit's in India. The Dalit community had faced marginalization because of their lower caste and Black faced discrimination just because of their colour. So,

in this way, it can be said that the Black people felt discrimination and marginalization not only in the white society, but in every sphere

III. THEME OF MARGINALIZATION IN BELOVED

Nature is always symbolized by women. Like their male counterparts, they consistently make contributions to the advancement of the family, community, and nation. Even if they make an active contribution to society's advancement on a par with men, they nevertheless do not have the same standing as men in it. One group that does not enjoy equal rights or opportunities to advance in society is the Black community in America. Even before and after America gained its independence, their situation did not significantly improve. Afro-American literature has played a significant part in American literature since the 19th century. The state of the black community, as well as the oppression that black people experience at work and in society at large, was extremely strikingly and dramatically depicted by black writers. Black women were frequently the targets of injustice and cruelty. They experienced double invisibility as a result of their gender and colour. In the 19th century, there were many black female writers who attempted to integrate black women into society by writing about their experiences of oppression and inferiority. Major authors of the 19th century, such as Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Maya Angelo, and Toni Morrison, addressed black women's predicament by critically and imaginatively addressing the dual invisibility of American black women in their works.

Toni Morrison depicts the problem of slavery, oppression and marginalization of Blacks in her writings and her one of the most famous works, *Beloved*, deals with the problem of Blacks. *Beloved*, published in 1987 is a Nobel prize-winning novel by Toni Morrison. This story narrates the traumatic past experiences of the African American slaves who run away from their master's house. Set during the American civil war, the novel tells the story of a dysfunctional family of formerly enslaved people. The inspiration for this novel first came to Morrison when she read a newspaper article titled "*A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed Her Child*" in 1856. The

newspaper article was initially published in the American Baptist and reproduced in *The Black Book*. Margaret Garner was a slave woman who run away from their master's house. When their Master returned to capture her under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, when U.S. marshals broke into the cabin where she and her husband had barricaded themselves, she attempted to kill her children—and had already killed her youngest daughter—in hopes of sparing them from being slaves. This news inspired her so much that she decided to write a novel on the journey of slave Margaret Garner.

She presents the traumatic journey of Margaret Garner becoming a slave, how she runaway from slavery and the aftermath of slavery. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, a year after its publication and was a finalist for the 1987 National Book Award. A survey of, *The New York Times* titled, "What is the best work of American fiction of the last 28 years?" On May 21, 2006, ranked "*Beloved*" as the best work of American fiction from 1981 to 2006. This novel was so famous that in 1998, a movie was made with the same name

IV. SETTING AND NARRATION OF THE NOVEL

The narration of this novel is mainly the third-person omniscient but sometimes changes to first-person. The novel is situated between the past and present lives of fugitive slaves, who are haunted by their painful and horrific past experiences in slavery. *Beloved* is set in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio. At that time the Civil War had ended and the main characters of the novel, Sethe and Denver, lived in a house in the city named 124, Bluestone Road. However, novel settings include Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky and several flashbacks to a prison camp in Alfred, Georgia. Flashback scenes take place approximately eighteen years earlier, after Sethe had run away from Sweet Home and travelled north to Ohio. At the time of Sethe's escape around 1855, slavery was still legal in the southern parts of the United States but in the present day of the novel, slavery is no longer legal. As the narrative moves

between flashbacks, it appears to create a separation between the past and the present day in the novel. Yet *Beloved* narrative form creates a sense of continuity

that shows how the legacy of slavery lives on even after slavery was abolished.

V. MARGINALIZED FEMALE CHARACTERS IN BELOVED

The novel, *Beloved*, is about slavery and the hardships in life of enslaved people. Morrison's novel always deals with the problems of marginalization, racial hatred and how Blacks were treated by racist White society masters. Slavery affected and oppressed the lives of blacks. Through *Beloved*, Morrison tries to explain how slavery affected the lives of blacks. Slaves did not have any rights neither for themselves nor their children. This pain and trauma are so painful and tragic for them that even after escaping from slavery, their past sufferings affect their present life. *Beloved* is also primarily about the lives of two former slaves, Sethe and Paul D, how they fall prey to slavery and how they are haunted by the past events of their enslaved lives, after they succeed in escaping slavery.

The novel *Beloved* not only tells the truth and suffering of some of the novel's characters who faced the dire consequences of slavery but Morrison through *Beloved* sheds light on the lives of the millions of black African-Americans who lived as slaves in the 19th century and had lost his life in business and whose stories have never come to the fore till date. This also shows up in the novel's epigraph, when Morrison writes in the epigraph,

Sixty million and more.

In this epigraph, by sixty million, Morrison refers to the estimated number of blacks who died during the Atlantic slave trade. This Atlantic slave trade involved the transportation of enslaved African people, mainly to the Americas. Sixty million is not the exact number of black slaves who died in this slave trade and the last two words of the epigraph "and more" means that the number of slaves who died in the slave trade was much higher but was never counted and life of slaves who survived in this slave trade was worse. For black Africans on slave ships, the journey to America was a journey of horror and death. For most slaves, the separation from their villages and families was still fresh, and they were now thrust into a world with no place for kindness and humanity. Upon boarding the

ship, they were stripped of their belongings, bound with iron chains, and sent below decks, where they were forced to travel for several months. Living below deck was a nightmare in itself for those slaves. To the slave traders, black slaves were freighters, and the slave traders didn't care about their health or their humanity, they just wanted to get as many captives as possible, and that's why the deck was designed in such a way that more and more slaves could be accommodated. The slave decks were so small that they could not even stretch their legs properly, were not offered food and were made to live in insensitive conditions. Slaves were so cramped that death from suffocation, malnutrition, and disease was routine, as well as arbitrary torture and executions by drivers. Proximity, filth and fear drove many people to insanity and much committed suicide.

The novel also deals with the problem of enslavement, and how life in slavery is worse than death. How slaves are treated by their owners. The novel portrays Sethe, Paul D, Sixo, Baby Suggs and many other Blacks who faced the dreadful consequences of slavery. They are full of misery, grief and pain. In the early part of the novel Baby Suggs said, "Not a House in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Morrison, *Beloved*,⁶) Here in this phase, Baby Suggs doesn't refer to a city like Ohio where they live but she said "country". It is clear from this mention that the pain and suffering of blacks is not limited to just one city or state of America, but this pain is in the whole country, where the slave trade was prevalent. When Paul D questions how Baby Suggs died. He says to Sethe,

Was it hard? I hope she didn't die hard?" to which Sethe replies "Soft as a cream. Being alive was the hard part. (8)

Sethe not only refers to Baby Suggs but all the slave who suffered for a long time. Slaves who are alive faced more pain, more suffering and more trauma than slaves who died. Two of the characters in this novel, Sethe and Paul D are also presented by Morrison in *Beloved* and are significant and symbolic. Through *Beloved*, Morrison seeks to explain what it means to be a woman and a mother, and what it means to be a man when the basic elements of human life such as freedom, reciprocity, humanity, and the expression of

emotion and thought are taken away. Toni Morrison also tries to answer the question of what it means to be a mother and slave. The thoughts and works, actions and emotions of slaves are influenced and haunted by the horrific experiences of enslavement. They have neither right over their own bodies nor over their children. At one point in the novel, when the nephew of the Schoolteacher rapes Sethe and steals Sethe's milk. This incident was very traumatic and painful for Sethe. She said: "I did it was took from me, they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby." (237)

Symbolically stealing Sethe's milk is like breaking the development of the children and Sethe's motherhood. It also literally suggests that slaves have no rights, even over their own milk, which is meant for their children. Later in this novel when Beloved (Sethe considers Beloved as her dead child) comes into her home, Beloved behaved just like a small child and she was desperately thirsty. When Paul D sees Beloved drinking water cup after cup, he was amazed. Paul D exclaimed in amazement and said: "Mighty thirsty look like". Denver also explains Beloved's greed for her mother's love from her own perspective. She said: "it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural."(247). This thirst for water emblematically represents the thirst of Beloved's own mother's milk and love which had been stolen in childhood by the nephews of the schoolteacher. Beloved was not only the victim of not getting her own mother's milk. Sethe is also another character, who had to be deprived of his mother's milk due to slavery. Sethe's mother also could not give milk and her love to Sethe. She was also a prey to the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Sethe gets milk from a woman named Nan. She tells about Nan that: Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too...The Little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or non. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk... (236) For this reason, she understood the milk and love of Beloved very well because she did not get the milk and love of her own mother.

Another similarity is seen between Sethe's mother and Sethe. Sethe's mother was also a victim of slavery and physical and mental abuse by the slave owners. Sethe's mother was raped by the slave owner several times

while Sethe's mother and Nan were on that slave ship. "They both were taken up many times by the crew". (75). And Sethe suffered mental and physical trauma at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher's nephew raped Sethe in front of the him.

The novel also shows another relationship between Sethe and Sethe's mother, and, Sethe and Beloved. At one point in the novel, when Sethe's mother shows Sethe her body mark (the mark of slavery) that if she dies and anything happens to her, she can easily identify him through this mark."This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark."(73) In the innocence of her age and her affection for her mother, she quickly replies: "Mark the mark on me too" (73) but immediately her mother slapped her. Due to the innocence of her age, she did not know the meaning of the mark. The mark is the mark of slavery that was inflicted by the slave owner on him during his years of slavery. That mark also means that slave owners do not consider slaves as humans but as a commodity and their property, and Sethe's mother did not want her daughter to be the property of slave owners. Sethe was beaten several times by slave owners during his period of slavery, and the beatings left him with marks that looked like tree. When Amy Denver saw the back of Sethe, she was horrified:

Come here, Jesus. it's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. Your Bach got a whole tree on it."(93)

This shows how badly Sethe was beaten by the slave owners. Like her mother, Sethe also loves her daughter. She did not want to see her bound in the shackles of slavery. Because of her own traumatic experiences during the time of slavery, that the life of slaves was worse than the life of animals. He firmly believed that death is easier than life of slavery. She explains that:" If I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen her."(236) So, to "protect" her daughter, she kills her. It is not very easy to understand and justify the murder of a Sethe's own child. But when we look at Sethe's characters and the horrific incidents in his past, it can be justified. Sethe had faced terrible and painful experiences in her slave life. She was tortured both physically and mentally by the slave owners. She

didn't want her children to be victims of these tortures. She had no way to save his children from the slavery, expected death.

VI. MARGINALIZED MALE CHARACTERS IN BELOVED

The novel also reveals the painful and dehumanizing effects of slavery on the male characters. Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, Halle and Sixo were all members of the slave house, Sweet Home and victims of the horrific experience of slavery. In Sweet Home, their condition was worse than animals.

Paul D is one of the central male characters in this novel who experiences the brutalizing effects of slavery. He experiences trauma not only in the slave house but also when, he gets caught by the Chain Gang, where his condition was worse than animals. The name of the slave master in, Sweet Home was Schoolteacher, who treated him worse than animals. Slave owners punished enslaved people for not working fast, for being late to work, for disobeying authority, and mostly for running away from the slave house. The methods of torture and punishment of the slaves were also brutal such as flogging, mutilation of body parts, imprisonment and being sold away to the cruller slave owners. At one point in the novel, when Paul D and other enslaved members try to escape from the Sweet home, they are caught by the slave owners, who are then flogged. After this, the slave owner put an iron bit on the mouth of Paul D. This iron bit was used for animals. It is a flat piece of iron that goes into the mouth and is so effectively held down by the tongue, that nothing can be swallowed, not even saliva and this punishment was so painful for Paul D that he cried. Paul D's second experience, when caught by Chain Gang, was more painful and brutal. In, Sweet Home, Schoolteacher just put a bit of iron in Paul D's mouth, but the chain gang master: (Put) the rope that connected his neck to the axle of a buckboard allowed, and, later on, when they fastened the iron around his ankle and clamped the wrists as well. (125)

Among the slaves of Sweet Home who experienced the degrading impacts of slavery was Sixo. When Sixo and the Schoolteacher argue at one point in the book, Sixo is proven to be correct and wins the discussion, but the Schoolteacher beats Sixo" to show him that

definitions belonged to the definers, not the defined."(225) This was a tactic used by the schoolteacher to assert his authority over the slaves, even when they were in the right. Schoolteacher hanged Sixo to a tree and burned him alive as he attempted to flee Sweet Home. Paul A and Paul F, among other individuals from Sweet Home, were hung. Halle was Sethe's husband. He was the most gentle, hardworking and loving character not only for Sethe and other slaves but also for his former slave masters Mr. and Mrs. Garner. He loves his mother, Baby Suggs, so much that he worked hard for five years to buy his mother's freedom. Due to his love for his family, he went to buy his family's freedom, but when the Schoolteacher refused his request to sell it back to his family, as well as Sethe's rape and violation at the hands of the Schoolteacher's nephews. Seeing the violation, his dream of seeing his family free was shattered and he could not bear the trauma and eventually went mad.

VII. CONCLUSION

Black women have always been marginalized in America. The social system, race, culture, colour and patriarchal society really affected the lives of black women. The Novel *Beloved* is the best examples of racial and colour discrimination against women in both white and patriarchal societies. In this novel, Toni Morrison successfully portrays the internalized frustration and marginalization of black women. In *Beloved*, Morrison represents black women, particularly in the context of motherhood in the horrific experiences of slavery and finding their place in society while facing the painful and horrific consequences of slavery, by mingling the history and magical elements in this novel. In this novel, black women faced tyranny into slavery by white masters and second, a sense of alienation from their own black community. Slavery affected the lives of millions of blacks, and the plight of black women was even worse. Slavery and traumatic experiences for black women were indelible marks like an inscription that cannot be erased. For Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, her past life as a slave is an indelible mark that she will never be able to erase. Morrison, through *Beloved*, shed light on the condition of black women in the context of slavery and how slavery affected the lives of enslaved

women to such an extent that they were willing to kill their children to save them from slavery.

To conclude the contribution of Toni Morrison to the Black Feminism cause has been quite significant. The novel *Beloved* can be seen as writings that outline the position particularly in their own community and society at large. The elements of race and gender play a crucial role in the understanding of this novel. The violence in the name of love, the dehumanization of human is quite instrumental in assessing the position of black female. Thus, this novel depicts the black feminist concern and demands for emancipation of women from binaries like race, class, gender, and colour.

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