

**Sexuality and Oppression in Toni Morrison's Beloved**

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**Abstract**

The paper aims at the portrayal of sexuality and oppression in Toni Morrison's Beloved. Sexual imagery has dominated black literature for quite some time, and when it comes to black male and female relationships, the images have appeared subtly pornographic. In Toni Morrison's Beloved there are both positive and negative sexual references related to the black woman and her plight. In Beloved Morrison used images of nature, animalistic description, and rape to exemplify how the black woman was exploited sexually during and after slavery.

**Key words:** sexuality, racism, black literature, oppression, slavery.

**Introduction**

African American women have a history of being sexually exploited in the days of slavery, as well as in their own subsequent communities. Sexual harassment and exploitation are still a problem, and by addressing this issue, Morrison aims, in Beloved (1987), to shed light on what has been and still is a taboo in the African American society.

Sexual imagery has dominated black literature for quite some time, and when it comes to black male and female relationships, the images have appeared subtly pornographic. In Toni Morrison's Beloved there are both positive and negative sexual references related to the black woman and her plight. In Beloved Morrison used images of nature, animalistic description, and rape to exemplify how

the black woman was exploited sexually during and after slavery. In *Beloved*, nature is used to represent the black woman and her relationships. The animal imagery is dominant through the treatment of the black woman and men. Rape is also another dominant motif, since the black woman's body is constantly violated by the white phallus of slavery and then by the black phallus of an insecure man.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe is a woman who becomes a sexual object for both white and black society. The imagery of nature, rape and animalist behavior and treatment dominate this neo-slave, narrative about a vengeful baby ghost, who, in the form of a young teenage woman, comes back to haunt Sethe, the mother who cut her throat. *Beloved* is a work written to honor the sixty million or more Africans who were lost on the slave ship voyages during the dreaded middle passage.

The traces of sexuality and oppression in *Beloved* most often appear in one or two sentences that reveal the existence of the trauma, "Nan tells how she and Sethe's mother 'were taken up many times by the crew' during their passage" (62). The next sentences reveal that Sethe's mother had a child as a result of being "taken up," confirming that these words signify rape. Sethe's mother and Nan were repeatedly used for the sexual gratification of the crew; Sethe's mother was so much disgusted by the horrible experience that she abandoned the resultant child. Morrison wrote about the complete objectification of a slave woman's body by the white men who enjoyed "playing checkers" with slaves, as Baby Suggs had called it, moving people around as if they were objects. In *Beloved*, Sethe discovered that the white Schoolteacher treated a black woman as a piece of property. She was not a mother, only the breeder of more slaves. Sethe began to understand her marginalized status; she was not valued as a woman because of her black skin signified darkness and evil. Her function in society was to serve the white man only and her body was for use and sexual abuse.

Such is the case with Sethe; the most prominent of the novel's many sufferers, who bear the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back. Her description of this assault is straightforward; she tells Paul D very succinctly that one of schoolteacher's nephews beat her while she was pregnant with Denver, injuring her so badly that "her back skin had been dead for years" (18). The impetus for this beating, however, is more obscurely written. Sethe repeatedly uses the words "they took my milk" to describe her violation (17). Of the act itself, we learn only the fact that the two teenaged white boys hold her down and suck her breast milk. Sethe's husband Halle witnesses the events while hidden in the barn loft, and according to Paul D, "[i]t broke him" (Morrison 69). The theft of Sethe's milk is clearly

traumatizing to her. Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children, who have traveled to Baby Suggs's house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself. Yet this single-minded concentration upon her milk also may be Sethe's way of repressing another trauma a rape by the white boys, left un-narrated in the text, but the trace of which emerges during her subsequent flight to Ohio and in her panicked violence against her children when schoolteacher and the boys arrive at Baby Suggs's house.

Such oppression sets the stage for murdered the youth and dysfunctional family relationships in the black community. Sethe killed her child to save him from the possession of the Schoolteacher. Her two sons had run away when she grabbed the axe to try to kill all of her children. Sethe suffers eternal plight when Beloved, her dead child reappears as a ghost, she quits her job to stay with her day and night, not realizing that the person she thinks is Beloved is an incubus come back to haunt and torture Sethe. Sethe tries to justify her attempts to kill her children at the end of the novel. She wants Beloved to understand why she took this monstrous act. Sethe articulates her inner trauma thus:

*That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. (251)*

*Beloved* is loaded with the images of rape, murder and sexual abuses. Morrison depicts the ideals of the white oppressor, murder, rape, sexual assaults were common incidents and all the Black women struggled to face the powerful forces. There are horrifying sexual scenes in the novel. Morrison depicts the heartrending episode of the breast milk of Sethe. The nephews of Schoolteacher stole Sethe's breast milk much as they might have done to a pregnant cow. Elila is locked up and repeatedly raped by father and son for a year by saying, "You couldn't think up . . what them two done to me" (119). Ella labels her sexual assaults an abomination, and uses them as a benchmark against which she measures other abusive behavior. Sethe's husband suffers mental disintegration as he witnesses the rape of his wife notwithstanding the horror of the forced suckling. Sethe is often

sexually used by the crew.

Paul D, like Sethe, is another survivor of sweet home, the plantation where most of the black men were named Paul, all of them symbolically castrated. In fact, they were only men when their master declared them as such. Otherwise Paul D along with other sweet home men was bereft of any legitimate manhood. Indeed, in a very graphic example of sex, the narrator reveals that because of a shortage of women, the black men engaged in having sex with claves. These acts of bestiality are vivid reminders of how black men, made impotent by the white masters, are expected to act like animals in the eyes of white society.

*"And so they were: Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man. All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl- the one who took Baby Sugg's place after Halle bought her with five years of Sundays" (11)*

The new girl of course was Sethe, who eventually winds up marrying Halle. Before this happens, though, the young black men would dream of raping the young girl named Sethe. These lines by Morrison are again reminiscent of how the white slave master set up an environment conducive to sexuality.

Paul D's second experience of sexual assault is not at the hands of white men; instead, it is committed by Beloved, a black woman. Beloved possesses the preternatural power to command Paul D's actions: she forces him first out of Sethe's bed and then out of the house entirely, leaving him to sleep in the shed behind it. She then comes to the shed and demands that he has sex with her, saying, "You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name" (117). Paul D finds himself unable to refuse her, even though he "was convinced he didn't want to" have intercourse (126). These couplings do not represent the fulfillment of a shameful, but insatiable desire for the girl on the part of Paul D; rather, they are an unstoppable event that fills him with "repulsion and personal shame" (264). These nocturnal assaults are incomprehensible to him during the daytime: "how [had he] come to be a rag doll – picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter" (Morrison 126); and he considers the possibility that Beloved "was not a girl, but something in disguise" (127).

### Conclusion

Thus, the sexuality and oppression in *Beloved* lies not in the depth of their portrayal, but in the cumulative trauma they reveal. Morrison's task in this novel is not to document every type of atrocity perpetrated upon black people during slavery. Instead,

she meditates upon how this community and one couple in particular Sethe and Paul D will be able to heal their deep psychic wounds. *Beloved* functions as a trauma-recovery novel both through its revelation of profound sexual trauma and in its tracing of a path to recovery, for Sethe and Paul D specifically, and the black community more generally. Sethe's rape, whether actual or metaphorical, sets in motion the horrific events from which she still has not recovered as the novel opens; similarly, Paul D's rapes, along with the other terrible violence he has endured, have kept him from forming a life in the present, as he is constantly battling his traumatic past. In figuring rape as the traumatic event from which this couple must recover, Morrison further demonstrates how the black community as a whole may heal from the violence and brutality of slavery and Middle Passage.

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