

An Examination of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

During the nineteenth century, there was a rise in the popularity of black literature, with a large portion of it being focused on slave narratives. These narratives detailed the actual experiences of slaves who managed to escape to free states or countries. It was predominantly white abolitionists who published these stories, aiming to enlighten white readers about the horrors of slavery. Toni Morrison, a black African American novelist from the twentieth century, also delved into the history of African Americans, reaching back to the early nineteenth century. Notable examples of this mission include the diaries of Harriet Jacobson and Frederick Turner.

Keywords

Trauma, Oppression, Freedom

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Toni Morrison's historical trilogy, consisting of the novels *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, delves into different periods of history. *Beloved* addresses the cruelties of slavery, while *Jazz* carries this exploration into the 1920s. Furthermore, *Paradise* extends the examination of history into the 1970s. As a result, Morrison's novels have been a significant contribution to the progression of black literature within the historical context.

Morrison's *Beloved* aims to reveal the plight of slaves within an organized institution. The enslaved individuals on Sweet Home plantation endure incredible violence, brutality, and dehumanization. The character most impacted by the harsh realities of slavery is Sethe, who suffers torture, rape, and mistreatment. In her desperate attempt to escape Sweet Home, Sethe ultimately commits the tragic act of killing her own two-year-old child.

In her work, Morrison vividly depicts the experiences of slaves and the destruction they faced, providing insight into the painful history of African Americans. *Beloved* serves as a real-life account, emphasizing the crucial significance of remembering the horrifying injustices and hardships of slavery in order to gain a deeper understanding of African American history.

Morrison's novel *Beloved* revolves around the haunting presence of the ghost of *Beloved* and her mother's quest for liberation from both slavery and the oppression of white slave owners. Likewise, Derrida's book *Specters of Marx* delves into the realm of specters and phantoms, with the intention of rescuing Europeans from the clutches of globalization and transitional capitalism. This thought-provoking and controversial work employs critical and psychoanalytic approaches and is noteworthy in its belief that deconstruction is actually an intensification of Marx's legacy. Derrida successfully showcases the importance of ghosts as a respectable avenue of inquiry. In fact, his objective is to revive the specter of communism within the framework of liberal democracy. A phantom, as defined by Derrida, represents the presence of a

deceased body and spirit that infiltrates everyday life in a traumatic manner, unveiling hidden and often shameful secrets of the past. Similar to *Beloved*, this ghostly narrative aims to rectify past injustices and deliver a message that has gone unnoticed.

The psychological impact of slavery on black women and men and their loss of independence and control is a central theme in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The story takes place in 1873 and follows Sethe and her daughter Denver in their rural Cincinnati community. Despite their freedom, they continue to suffer from the psychological scars inflicted by years of slavery.

Sethe and her daughter Denver are actually excluded from society due to Sethe's past and her pride. Sethe escaped from slavery 18 years ago with Denver from the cruel farm known as "Sweet Home," where the white schoolmaster and his nephew subjected her to abuse, both due to their cruel nature and the prevailing culture. Throughout history, slaves have faced brutality, torture, and even rape from their owners. This cruelty stems from the human tendency to exercise power when it is possessed, often driving individuals to madness. When individuals hold absolute power, they are prone to becoming absolutely crazy and exerting this power over others, as seen in the behavior of slave owners. Derrida envisions a world free from corruption and the exercise of power by the privileged.

Morrison emphasizes that excluding white individuals from society will not solve the issue of domination. Even if a society is solely composed of black individuals, a group will always arise that seeks to rule and dominate others. This is an inherent conflict between stronger and weaker individuals. However, Derrida advocates for a world without leaders or dominant entities, where the concept of ruling is eliminated.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* delves deeply into the themes of slavery and freedom as defining aspects of one's identity, with the harmony between the past and present being of utmost

importance. Sethe longs to improve her present and future circumstances due to the troubling nature of her past. Sethe's past encompasses the history she endured eighteen years ago, which continues to haunt her. Her memory encompasses specific events and symbolism that hold personal significance for her. Sethe's recollection of the past is constantly disrupted by a longing for completeness and a desire to reconcile her true self with her virtual self.

Beloved is a historical novel that draws inspiration from the true story of escaped slave Margaret Garner. Morrison's intention is to shed light on the societal impact of slavery in the United States. Similarly, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida reflects on the historical significance of Marxism and aims to address the flaws of globalization and capitalism. In *Specters of Derrida*, Derrida contemplates both the past and the future.

In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the social and imaginary lines illustrate the entire fictive space within the interior. Although Cincinnati Airport is now situated in Kentucky, across the Ohio River, Cincinnati remains the central setting for the story. Individuals from various locations now commute daily between different places by ferry, allowing them to reflect on what Cincinnati was like in the years preceding the Civil War, which is the time period depicted in *Beloved*. The Ohio River serves as a physical boundary between states with different stances on slavery, separating a free state from a slave state.

Kentucky and Ohio are essentially the same, with no fundamental distinction between them. Although there are physical boundaries separating the two states, in terms of social and imaginative context, they exist freely. The Ohio River holds a mystical significance as a border between these states. When a slave manages to escape and cross this river, they may potentially attain freedom unless they are captured by other states that permit slavery.

Beloved is a novel that pays tribute to the sixty million and more enslaved individuals. While some masters in the book acknowledge the physical presence of black bodies, they fail to truly understand the human experiences that those bodies embody in that particular time and place. Whether these experiences are personal or collective, the impact of the struggles faced by these sixty million and more individuals profoundly affects the consciousness of the world's masters. According to Morrison, this lack of understanding extends beyond the historical context of slavery. She suggests that just as the United States faces challenges such as immigration, the War on Terror, homeland security, homelessness, ports, and other issues, there is also a vulnerability to being "invaded" by unfamiliar and unsettling elements, much like Europeans experienced with the arrival of the ten plagues as described by Derrida. These plagues symbolize the potential pitfalls of globalization, which can infiltrate societies at any given moment.

In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts the ghosts of the millions of African American ancestors who were brought to the US as slaves, haunting her imagination just as Derrida's *Specters of Marx* haunts him. Morrison's writing explicitly opposes

slavery and the dominance of those in power. *Beloved* delves into the immense suffering experienced by countless slaves throughout history. The novel effectively examines the intersection of race and gender, highlighting both similarities and distinctions. The novel centers around two distinct groups: blacks and whites.

The main character, Sethe, faces a challenge in assimilating into the dominant white culture because it seeks to redefine an important moment of rebellion by reducing it to a stereotype of black masculinity and femininity. The situation becomes particularly harsh when the schoolmaster's nephew degrades Sethe by nursing from her breast. This act diminishes both the black father and mother, as Sethe's husband witnesses this scene but is powerless to intervene. The portrayal highlights the indignity of slavery, witnessed by both Sethe's husband and child, and represents a union of self and other.

The depiction of Sethe's rape emphasizes the underlying racism within the white community, while the portrayal of lovemaking reinforces the devaluation of black individuals. The rape scene highlights the oppressive nature of a mother figure, specifically targeting a pregnant black woman. This deviates from the traditional narrative, as the sexual act is not perpetrated by the black biological father, but by two white individuals, Halle and the witness known as the nephew. This act of violence is dehumanizing and treats Sethe as if she were an animal. Halle, as the black father of Sethe's children, can only passively observe, symbolizing his symbolic castration and assuming the role of a child witness.

Beloved, a novel by Morrison, is set during the time of the US Civil War, a conflict between states that supported slavery and those that were against it. This internal war was marked by the absence of familial bonds and a disturbing motto centered around killing loved ones. The story revolves around a community consisting of white slave owners and African American slaves, who rely on one another for economic and cultural reasons. The white individuals in the novel bring the African slaves to America, treating them as property on their plantations where various types of slaves, such as those working in the fields or in the houses, live in cramped and unhygienic slave cabins. These living conditions are cruel, dehumanizing, and deprive the slaves of basic human necessities.

Living in a slave cabin brings numerous problems, including death. Slave owners engage in acts of violence, such as killing and raping the wives, oppressing their children, and sometimes even raping, whipping, and torturing their daughters. Derrida notes that this sort of atrocious treatment mirrors the violence that humans have inflicted on animals through industrial, mechanical, chemical, and genetic means over the last two centuries. The inhuman oppression faced by slaves and their confinement to slave cabins represents a failed attempt to create harmony, not unlike today's war against terror and illegal immigrants. Additionally, the slave owners' occasional decision to lynch without proper judgment only serves

to destroy their own valuable property.

Currently, the African American community is experiencing a breakdown in its social and familial bonds, which is severely impacting the overall structure of the community. This self-destruction can be attributed to the actions of enslavers, colonizers, and imperialist conquerors, who bear responsibility for perpetuating this destructive cycle. One concrete illustration of this can be seen in the war between the US and Iraq, where the US's treatment of Iraq was harsh and cruel, all in the name of peace, harmony, and democracy. In the novel *Beloved*, the relationship between African Americans and slavery serves as a central theme.

The characters in this novel, including ex-slaves and their descendants, are haunted by their past memories. Slavery has damaged their perception of normal life, love, and their worth as human beings. The novel intertwines the past and present, with the present memories of slavery being tormented by the occurrences of the past. Morrison spends a lot of time describing the past, making the novel repetitive in its descriptions.

This repetition hinders the characters from moving on and making plans for the future. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D are trying to escape their painful past and create a future filled with freedom and happiness. Sethe experiences a short period of freedom in Cincinnati, but the slave characters in the novel always crave freedom. Slavery and freedom are seen as two opposite extremes. Sethe and Denver ultimately choose to live in isolation at 124, after being freed by white abolitionists. This freedom, however, is not permanent. Humans always believe that the grass is greener on the other side, but true peace and happiness come from serving humanity without being held captive. The black community in the novel is active, but the other side (white society) is ghostly and distant.

In *Beloved*, Morrison aims to illustrate the impact of slavery on individuals within an institutionalized system. Through the story of Sethe, the novel emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of slavery and the suffering endured by slaves. Sethe herself experiences mistreatment and assault, eventually leading her to kill her own baby and attempt to harm her other children in an effort to shield them from the horrors of slavery. Her husband becomes mentally unstable, and the other slaves endure similarly unfortunate lives. Sethe's actions haunt her, leading to feelings of regret and a life of isolation within the black community.

She becomes physically and emotionally drained, unable to find meaning or fulfillment in her existence. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates the psychological and spiritual dangers of slavery and the devastating consequences it engenders. Later in the novel, Denver ponders Sethe's motives and believes that *Beloved*, as a "thing," may eventually leave. Here, the novel employs powerful irony, as Sethe views *Beloved* as her only pure and precious possession, even though she ultimately sees her as a corpse. Sethe believes that by killing *Beloved*, she has also killed a part of herself, yet she hopes that she and her children are now free from the curse of slavery.

References

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