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## THE STUDY OF SEXISM AND RACISM IN THE TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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**Abstract:** Black women have displayed their strength and willpower to fight for their rights and survived till the end in the great depression. The Black Arts Movement founded in Harlem by writer Amiri Baraka can be seen as artistic branch of the Black Arts Movement, and it inspired black people to establish publishing house, magazine, and art institution. Other well-known writers who were involved with this movement included Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, Larry Neale, Etheridge Knight, Ted Joans, Ahmos Zu-Bolton, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor. Literature, drama, and music of Blacks served as defensive mechanism through which “creative artists could confirm their identity while articulating their own unique impression of social reality.”(Hurston 78).

**Introduction:** Black women’s writing is shaped by history which involves reconstruction and the development of the character’s individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race. African American women writers share a collective legacy of racist and sexist domination in addition to awareness of historical continuities. Initially Black feminist writing used the form of the autobiography to explore the evils of a patriarchal family, and slave-holding society. After Emancipation, these writings represented the sufferings of African American women and African American community in a sexist, and classist society. Later, Black feminism manifested itself in the tradition of Colored Women’s Clubs.

The Black African American Women writers have been victimized not only by racist, and sexist but also by the class exploitation. They were also victims of scholars who are preoccupied in the notion of blacks as marginalized and black literature as inferior literature and their literary works start with the crisis of their identity. Race, Class, Gender, and Identity have indeed been themes in black women’s writing over the years. Toni Morrison belongs to the group of writers who have tried to trace the development of black women’s image from its infantile stage of invisibility to its present stage of self-definition, and struggled to discover their self-identity, searching for freedom from their traditional roles. The major themes of the black fiction are the exploitation of the blacks, especially, the exploitation of the black women, search for identity, and struggle against the racism. It is the quest for identity that is predominant in almost all the black literature. The theme of oppression has been one of the greatest concerns of Black fiction. With the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970s, the major shift has been from race to gender.

Racism, as a distinct phenomenon of the American social and political scene was clearly rooted in the period of history wherein the first Africans were brought to America as cheap labour by force, to work for them. African brought to America on slave ships under inhuman conditions, these alien being treated by the white race.

“Since the beginning of the seventeenth century,

Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African ‘species of men’, as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master ‘the arts and sciences’. If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave.”(Gates 8)

Africans were brought to America on slave ships under inhuman conditions and treated almost like aliens. A systematically brutal method of subjugation was employed to break and re-shape the psychology, culture of these noble people into a more placid and docile form. White American owners and overseers saw these people as property and as machinery to work without demur, and in the process began to corrupt the very soul of these lost people. The black community has contradictory notions about gender roles and black women’s work.

Toni Morrison’s novels represent the plight of African American women and what is more painful is that their own men joining hands with other non-African American oppressors. The oppressive world portrayed by Morrison shows the loss of identity of African American people and the quest for their identity, and in this world women remain more exploited and oppressed. To survive in this world the protagonists of her novels violate the rules of oppressive system and recover the human potential denied to blacks. Hernton’s tribute to black woman in her epic struggle against racism and sexism in which she says:

“Finally, after nearly four centuries of oppression, having been raped, murdered, lynched, spit upon, pushed through back doors, denied human respect, thought of and treated as sluts and mummies and Negresses, fit only to breed and suckle babies, to wash and cook and scrub and sweat, after having been sexually depersonalized and taken bodily for the having, the Negro women of the modern era are just beginning to be recognized as human beings, as sexual creates clothed in their own personal skins, as American citizens with public rights and duties, private longings and desires, like any other citizens of their public.”(166) *Beloved’s* main character, Sethe, kills her daughter and tries to kill her other three children when a posse arrives

in Ohio to return them to Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from which Sethe recently fled. A woman presumed to be her daughter, called Beloved, returns years later to haunt Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati. The story opens with an introduction to the ghost: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." (Schupiro, p.194-210) The book concerns the story of Sethe and her daughter Denver after their escape from slavery. Their home in Cincinnati is haunted by a revenant, whom they believe to be the ghost of Sethe's daughter. Because of the haunting—which often involves objects being thrown around the room—Sethe's youngest daughter Denver is shy, friendless, and housebound, and her sons, Howard and Buglar, have run away from home by age 13. Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe's husband Halle, dies in her bed soon afterward.

Paul D, one of the slaves from Sweet Home, the plantation where Baby Suggs, Sethe, Halle, and several other slaves once worked, arrives at Sethe's home and tries to bring a sense of reality into the house. In attempting to make the family forget the past, he forces out the spirit. He seems successful at first; he even brings housebound Denver out of the house for the first time in years. But on the way back, they encounter a young woman sitting in front of the house. She calls herself Beloved. Paul D is suspicious and warns Sethe, but she's charmed by the young woman and ignores him. Gradually, Paul D. is forced out of Sethe's home by a supernatural presence.

When made to sleep outside in a shed, Paul D is cornered by Beloved. While they have sex, his mind is filled with horrific memories from his past. Overwhelmed with guilt, Paul D tries to tell Sethe about it but cannot, and instead says he wants her pregnant. Sethe is elated, and Paul D resists Beloved and her influence over him. But when he tells friends at work about his plans to start a new family, they react fearfully. Stamp Paid reveals the reason for the community's rejection of Sethe.

When Paul D asks Sethe about it, she tells him what happened: After escaping from Sweet Home and reaching her waiting children at her mother-in-law's home, Sethe was found by her master, who attempted to reclaim her and her children. Sethe grabbed her children, ran into the toolshed, and tried to kill them all. She succeeded only in killing her eldest daughter by running a saw along her neck. Sethe claims that she was "trying to put my babies where they would be safe". The revelation is too much for Paul D and he leaves. Without him, sense of reality and time moving forward disappears.

Sethe comes to believe that Beloved is the 2-year-old daughter she murdered, whose tombstone reads only "Beloved". Sethe begins to spend carelessly and spoil Beloved out of guilt. Beloved becomes angry and more demanding, throwing tantrums when she doesn't get her way. Beloved's presence consumes Sethe's life to the point where she becomes depleted and sacrifices her

own need for eating, while Beloved grows bigger and bigger. In the novel's climax, youngest daughter Denver reaches out and searches for help from the black community and some of the village women arrive at the house to exorcise Beloved. At the same time, a white man comes into view, the same man that helped Halle's mother, Baby Suggs, by offering her the house as a place to stay after Halle bought her from their owner. He has come for Denver, who asked him for a job. She got the job and he is picking her up on his way home, but Denver has not shared this information. Sethe, unaware of the situation, attacks the white man with an ice pick and is brought down by the village women; in the meantime, Beloved disappears from the home. While Sethe is confused and has a "rememory" of her master coming again, Beloved disappears. The novel resolves with Denver becoming a working member of the community and Paul D returning to Sethe and pledging his love.

Besides Sethe, Morrison presents Paul D in the first chapter and indicates he is a troubled man. One of Paul D's problems has to do with his manhood. Lacking access to a culture that provided him with rituals of transition from boyhood to adulthood and living under a system of slavery, Paul D was deprived of properly growing into manhood. As a result, he lacks certainty and dignity. He feels that he is not truly an individual, for he still sees himself as a slave. The third main character of the novel, Denver, is also introduced in this section. Denver is Sethe's youngest daughter. The two of them live in the haunted house by themselves. It is clear that Denver feels very lonely. She misses her brothers who have run away and resents that Paul D has driven the ghost away, for it has been company for her. It is also clear that Denver is jealous about Paul's presence, for he takes Sethe away from her.

According to Moglen (1993), "Beloved's story is a story of personal and collective loss: the deprivation of home, abandonment by an enslaved mother, the erasure of a disinherited father, the alienation of her body in rape and of her mind in the shattering of the mirror of identity" (p. 23). Because Morrison based her novel off of factually documented events in the life of Margaret Garner, the reader is able to see racial issues on a deeper level. Not only do we see the issue of slavery the manifests itself in flashbacks of Sweet Home, but we also see just how much this history affected the lives of the people living at 124 through the ghost of Beloved and stories from both Sethe and Denver. According to Berger (1996), "The accounts in the novel of life at Sweet Home and of Sethe's and Paul D's escapes from slavery lead unswervingly toward Beloved's death; likewise, the events the follow the murder remain charged with its horror and cannot be interpreted apart from it" (p. 409). Many analyses have been done on this novel and the depiction that Morrison is able to develop through the way that she writes. "Beloved's narrative spirals around, is ordered by, a traumatic event whose model is historical" (Berger, p. 409).

Morrison creates the character of Sethe in this light for the mere reason that she is trying to address the race issue present in the United States. By writing the character this way, she is acknowledging the fact that most white Americans believe all black families live similar to the way of Sethe and her family, and are therefore stereotyping. It is the belief of white people during this era that most black families do have single mothers, males who abandon the family, and one or more illegitimate children. The single mother is manifested in Sethe, the male abandonment is the result of Howard and Buglar leaving 124, and the illegitimate child shows itself in *Beloved*. Segregation occurs because of ideas like these, and because white parents instill a sort of fear of the black race in their children. Also, there is the overlying issue of white superiority from the slave days, and the idea of ownership. "Schoolteacher, the slave-master who inherits Sweet Home along with Sethe, Paul D, and Halle, beats one of his blacks "to show him that definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined" (Moglen, p. 190). Morrison also addresses this race issue in *Beloved* when talking about the schoolteacher and the sheriff's arrival in Baby Suggs' yard.

In a perfect Foucauldian constellation, the schoolteacher joins with the sheriff-knowledge with power, legal ownership with legal coercion-to enter the property of a free black woman in a free state. For Baby Suggs, the revelation or unveiling in this scene is that "they came in my yard" (179). This trespass means that no African American, slave or free, can genuinely own property or live as a subject in a society that gives overriding value to property rights. Even in a free state and after slavery, the former owners, under the auspices of law and science, can still regard the African American as object, property, and specimen. (Berger, p. 410).

Although this part of the plot gives us a glimpse into the relationship between white and black, I don't think it necessarily causes us to reflect on how the schoolteacher and the sheriff treat the family at 124. This happens again during the flashbacks of Sweet Home, but the reader is still never forced to analyze the relationship. Although it might cause us to stop for a moment and look at the situation, we are left thinking about how that's the way things were done in that era, and we don't spend much time considering that things may be just as bad in terms of racial relationships today. Morrison tries to exemplify this idea through the recurring appearance of the baby ghost throughout the story. The repeated returns of the murdered child's ghost in the North during Reconstruction suggest that racial violence will inevitably return at any time and in any place as long as the systemic nature of racism is not addressed. (Berger, p. 411).

The oppressive world portrayed by Morrison shows the loss of identity of African American people and the quest for their identity and this world women remain more exploited and oppressed. To survive in this world

the protagonist of her novels must violate the rules of oppressive system and recover the human potential denied to blacks. Morrison says: "I have never met yet a boring black person. All you have to do is scratch the surface and you will see. And that is because the way they look at life."(67) Because of the experiences of slavery, most slaves repressed these memories in an attempt to forget the past. This repression and dissociation from the past causes a fragmentation of the self and a loss of true identity. Sethe, Paul D. and Denver all experience this loss of self, which could only be remedied by the acceptance of the past and the memory of their original identities. "Beloved serves to remind these characters of their repressed memories, eventually causing the reintegration of their selves".(Koolish, p.169-195)

"Slavery splits a person into a fragmented figure".(Fulton) The identity, consisting of painful memories and unspeakable past, denied and kept at bay, becomes a "self that is no self." To heal and humanize, one must constitute it in a language, reorganize the painful events and retell the painful memories. As a result of suffering, the "self" becomes subject to a violent practice of making and unmaking, once acknowledged by an audience becomes real. Sethe, Paul D, and Baby Suggs who all fall short of such realization, are unable to remake their selves by trying to keep their pasts at bay. The 'self' is located in a word, defined by others. The power lies in the audience, or more precisely, in the word – once the word changes, so does the identity. All of the characters in *Beloved* face the challenge of an unmade self, composed of their "rememories" and defined by perceptions and language. The barrier that keeps them from remaking of the self is the desire for an "uncomplicated past" and the fear that remembering will lead them to "a place they couldn't get back from."(Boundreau,p.447-465)

*Beloved* and Sethe are both very much emotionally impaired as a result of Sethe's previous enslavement. Slavery creates a situation where a mother is separated from her child, which has devastating consequences for both parties. Often, mothers do not know themselves to be anything except a mother, [source needed] so when they are unable to provide maternal care for their children, or their children are taken away from them, they feel a lost sense of self. Similarly, when a child is separated from his or her mother, he or she loses the familial identity associated with mother-child relationships. Sethe was never able to see her mother's true face (because her smile was distorted from having spent too much time "with the bit") so she was not able to connect with her own mother, and therefore does not know how to connect to her own children, even though she longs to. Furthermore, the earliest need a child has is related to the mother: the baby needs milk from the mother. "Sethe is traumatized by the experience of having her milk stolen because it means she cannot form the symbolic bond between herself and her

daughter.”(Schapiro, p.194-210)

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