



## Slavery and Freedom as identities in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

The essay scrutinizes the norms of slavery and freedom in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Focusing mainly on different difficulties confronted by the protagonist and some other characters of the novel *Beloved* the essay explores the social and cultural atmosphere of their world especially in the US in the late nineteenth century. It argues the African American relationship between the slaves and the slave owners, between the whites and the blacks and Derrida's view in the *Specters of Marx* on ghost, slavery, freedom, and worldwide is quite important. In deeper ways, it displays two important identities of human existence slavery and freedom as the main approach of the ages.

**Keywords:** slavery, freedom, ghost, identity, race, oppression

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* narrates the story of Sethe, an African American slave, and her community as they are trying to invent and live their lives after slavery. To protect her children from being apprehended and drawn back to the slave plantation by the Schoolteacher and his troop, Sethe tries to kill them. She kills her two-year old daughter who remains unnamed and returns like a specter with a name from her tombstone, the name of an appellation, Beloved, to claim the life of which she has so violently been deprived. In *Beloved*, Beloved haunts the novel all the time just like the specter of Marx haunts the Europeans Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. In this essay my aim is to examine the two human existences and to connect it with Derrida's view on it. Derrida thinks *time is out of joint* (96) and we have to set it right.

Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel dominated by the ghost of Beloved and her mother to become freed from the grab of slavery and from the oppression of the white slave owners. Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is a book of specters and phantoms and the aim of this book is to save the Europeans from the grab of globalization and transitional capitalism. *Specters of Marx* is a critical, psychoanalytic and is one of the most controversial works of the recent days. Derrida claims that deconstruction is all along a radicalization of Marx's legacy and his rehabilitation of ghosts as a respectable enquiry proved to be extraordinarily fertile. Derrida actually wants to restore the ghost of communism for liberal democracy. A phantom is the presence of a dead body and spirit into a real life in its traumatic form to reveal something secret or hidden or usually shameful secrets to bring into light or it may be the unspeakable secret of the past generations. Like Morrison's *Beloved* the aim of this ghost story is to right the wrong or to deliver a message which is unheeded.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* the characters are psychologically affected by the hardship of the slavery done by the white slaves owners to rob black women and men

and their subjectivity and agency. The novel began in 1873 when Sethe and her daughter Denver live in 124, a house in the community of the rural area of Cincinnati. Here Sethe and her daughter Denver continue to experience the psychological trauma of the past years after slavery. Actually Sethe and her daughter Denver are ostracized from the society because of Sethe's past and pride. It has been eighteen years since Sethe escaped from slavery with her daughter Denver at "Sweet Home." The owner of the farm "Sweet Home" is a white schoolmaster who is cruel by nature and also by the dominant culture and brutalizes Sethe by his nephew when this guy takes notes on his scientific study of the blacks. In every age slaves are brutalized, tortured and sometimes raped by their owners. I think when human being possesses power he tries to exercise this and becomes crazy. If s/he gets absolute power s/he becomes absolutely crazy and exerts this power on others. So, the slave owners are doing that. Derrida imagines a world without corruption and without exercising power of the elite.

According to Colin Davis, "Derrida's specter is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence and making established certainties vacillate" (1). Actually Derrida's *Specters of Marx* will not reveal some secrets to us or shameful or otherwise, rather it will open to us the experience or an important message like the ghost of Beloved what we think we know.

Sethe and Denver live in an isolated house at 124, Bluestone Road that is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter whom Sethe killed eighteen years before. So, in this house Sethe is in a state of madness. I think this is a kind of mental torture which a mother feels after doing any wrong to her children. It's killing so it is much bitterer than that of a normal crime. Doreen Fowler quotes from Barbara Schapiro, that Sethe and Denver are experiencing "psychic death, the denial of one's being as a human subject" (13).

The novel outlines the process by which Sethe, Denver and other African American slaves relieve themselves from the

grab of the effects of slavery and claim “ownership of [a] freed self” (95). In the last of the novel when Beloved is being exorcised by a group of women we see,

“Sethe is running away from her, running and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running, into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there” (309).

In this scene, I think Sethe’s running symbolizes something. She and Denver would like to be free. They want to take the taste of freedom. They wish to join with others where lies absolute freedom. So, Morrison thinks about freedom from slavery and Derrida thinks about a society where there will have no slavery.

Now for becoming free, Sethe with her children, Paul D, shackled in a brace, and other characters also who are experiencing the bitter taste of slavery are looking for their ways of coming back into the community and trying to become a part of the prevailing society. So, they are in search of their own free identity. Fowler quotes from Teresa de Lauretis where she says, “social identity is a process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation” (13). For developing a social self a person needs to develop his/her relationship with others and this is a dilemma of the slaves of all the ages. For example we can cite the name of Denver: “it was very difficult for Denver to tell who was who” (286). Morrison’s fiction here is about the dilemma of problem of domination of the whites by pressing steam roller over the black community. For example we can say that when Schoolteacher embargoed to all the slaves and say no new money will come to the plantation and therefore there will be no cash to buy out of slavery (Kreyling, 123). And Morrison further points out that the problem of domination is not possible excluding the white from the society and even if we form a society only by the black. There will have ruling and dominating group because this is a war between the stronger and weaker self. Stronger entity will always rule and dominate the weaker entity. But Derrida argues in favour of a world where there will have no leader, bourgeois individual agent, ruling or something like that.

Morrison’s novel *Beloved* explores the contemporary debate about the identification of the self within a community. According to Fowler “the notion of that identification with others promotes a separate identity is paradoxical” (13-14). In the conclusion of the novel we see Sethe and Beloved become “locked in a love that wore everybody out” (286). So, it is also difficult for an individual to maintain whole identity including gender, ethnic and other boundaries at the same time making an ally with others. For example, for a person of black colour is it possible to protect his identity and solidarity at the same time comparing with a white? So, it is very difficult to identify one from one’s entity to another. Derrida also thinks that we should not mingle ourselves in a war within the community.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a major and complex exploration of slavery and freedom as identities where equilibrium between the past and present is very important. Sethe would like to do her present and future better because her past is problematic. Past is the history which Sethe faced

eighteen years before. She is always haunted by her cruel past. Her memory is also accommodates those facts which are particular and symbolic to her. Sethe’s memory is always ruptured by the nostalgia for wholeness and a yearning for the self identity between the real and the virtual self. *Beloved* is a historical novel based on an event of a fugitive slave Margaret Garner. Morrison here speaking about a past event and her aim is to focus the condition of the society of the US regarding slavery. In the same way in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida thinks about the past event of Marxism and would like to eradicate the shortcoming of globalization and capitalism. In *Specters of Derrida*, we see his thinking about the past and the future. Colin Davis argues,

“For Derrida, the ghost’s secret is not a puzzle to be solved, it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (1).

In *Beloved* we see the beating and lynching of the black slaves, the sexual abuse of the women slaves and the torture of the heroine, Sethe as a slave. Sethe kills her daughter and tries to kill other three children but she still thinks them as the parts of her body. Sethe does not like to allow her children to be returned to slavery. Rejected by her master one time Sethe was saved from the curse of hanging and her three children also saved in this time staying at 124. Here we can analyze the mental state of Sethe; she would rather die than be a slave again. She is actually the selfless victim of a dominating influence. She wants to relieve herself from the black claws of slavery even if this means that she has to give up on life. In Derrida’s specter he does not support slavery and he is also against the black claw of inhuman atrocity.

The entire interior fictive space in *Beloved* is depicted by the social and imaginary lines. Cincinnati Airport is now in Kentucky, across the Ohio River. Cincinnati is the primary location of Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. Many of the people of different places now cross over Cincinnati and back every day from Cincinnati on the ferry. Now they have a chance to think of the place of Cincinnati going a few decades ago just before to the Civil War in the time of *Beloved*. The Ohio River is the barrier between a free state and a slave state. There is no ontological difference between Kentucky and Ohio because in the imaginary sense there are physical lines but socially and phantasmatically they are free. Ohio River is a magical border between the two states. And if a slave escaped and get across the river s/he may suddenly be free if s/he is not captured by the other slave states.

Miller says, “I claim that the fantastically brilliant, moving and dense verbal texture of *Beloved* allows the reader to understand what may be a universal structure of all communities including the ‘world-wide’ community being brought into existence by globalization” (29). In this novel, we see Morrison is criticizing current world order regarding the presentation of slave and slave owners. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida also criticizes the new dogmatism and new world order. Freud calls the work of Derrida as the triumphant state of mourning work. Michael Kreyling quoted from Yet Patterson that “we know next to nothing about the individual personalities of slaves or of the way they felt about one another. The data are just not there...” (117).

*Beloved* is dedicated to “Sixty millions and more” slaves. Many masters in *Beloved* record the presence of some black physical bodies but they fail to comprehend the human experience in their bodies on that time and place. The experiences may be individual or collective but the experiences of the sixty millions and more shake the consciousness of the masters of the world. From Morrison’s point of view we see that the problem of immigration, War on terror, homeland security, homeless citizens, ports, and other things of the US can be invaded any time by the uncanny others likewise the Europeans like the sixty millions and more can also be invaded by the ten plagues recommended by Derrida, which are the shortcomings of globalization, any time. In *Beloved* we see the ghosts of those sixty millions and more African American forefathers and foremothers whom the white people brought to the US as slaves are haunting the imagination of Morrison like the haunting of Derrida in the *Specters of Marx*. So, Morrison’s writing is against the slavery and the mastery of the masters of the world. Actually *Beloved* explores the collective pain of millions of slaves in slave history.

Race and gender identities are balanced in the novel *Beloved* by the sameness and differences. There are two types of people here in this novel we see. They are the blacks and the whites. And another thing is that masculine and feminine identities are also balanced here. Fowler says, “In *Beloved* the father figure models this balance of difference within relationship to induct a child into a world of socially defined identities” (15). For example when Paul D puts his story next to Sethe he risks his mail difference. In Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* there is no racial conflict.

One time Sethe reported the misdeeds of the schoolmaster and his nephew to Mrs. Garner, the widowed of Mr. Garner the original owner of Sweet home, and severely whipped though she was pregnant. In this scene we see Sethe runs away and being pregnant she feels exhausted and goes in a forest nearby where by the nursing of a white woman Amy Denver she delivers her daughter and feels better by the nursing of Amy. Amy is a white woman who helps Sethe in the time of delivery. Actually Amy here crosses the racial boundary and the boundary of slavery. She risks her white identity. Again Paul D helps Sethe crossing the boundary of black and white. So, here Amy and Paul D model are a mix of difference and similarity in the heterogeneous community of male and female others. In both cases Amy and Paul D brings the death into life from the near death. So, Amy’s wish to do triangulate the relationship between Sethe, Denver, and Amy the mother child relationship to a new angle of black and white others. This is a very nice combination of the black and the white.

The heroine, Sethe, obstacles the instant of acculturation, because of the leading white culture tries to refigure a moment of revolution as a black male and female in a totalizing identification. It becomes very severe when the nephew of schoolmaster sucks the milk from the breast of Sethe. This is a kind of degradation of the black father and mother because Sethe’s husband only witnesses the scenery and he has nothing to do. It is a very bad image in the state of slavery which is witnessed by Sethe’s husband and her child. It is an image of self-other union.

The scene of Sethe’s mammary rape illustrates the primal scene of a white racist, and the scene of love making degrades the image of black devaluation. The mammary rape outlines the primal scene of a mother figure which is a

kind of oppression on a pregnant black woman. There are some deviations here one of them is the rape or the sexual act that is not performed by the black biological father figure rather it is done by the two white son figures that means the nephew and the witness are the schoolteacher and Halle. This sexual act is actually very bitter and inhumane and it dehumanizes Sethe. The nephew of schoolmaster behaves with Sethe as if she were an animal. And here Halle, the black father of Sethe’s children is forced to see the action without having any activities. He actually has been symbolically castrated. His role is like a child witness. So, this is the condition of the slave society we can comprehend from the description of the novel. It is very pathetic here why the schoolteacher is not having a role of father figure protesting the criminal activities.

The prison camp experience in *Beloved* utterly expresses the depressed and miserable condition of the earth. According to Fowler,

“The prisoners who seem to be dissolving into the earth experience the source in the non-ego, drive and death they also materialize a resurrection as they erupt through the earth like ‘zombies’”(20).

#### **Fowler further says Morrison teaches us**

“to see that the desire to return to an original precultural condition, which is also a desire for integration with one another, plays a role in the boundary making process: that is that in mixing is a stage on the way a new mixing or new social identity”(20).

In connection to prison we can say the experience of Paul D who was a slave of “Sweet Home” with Sethe. Like Sethe he is also haunted by the past he witnessed during the Civil War. He suffered unspeakable miseries on that time for becoming free from the atrocities of the slave owners. He has dark memories regarding his imprisonment as a black slave. He worked with a chained gang in the day and was kept like a prisoner at night in the ground and in a box also. Morrison’s *Beloved* happened in the time of US Civil War. The Civil War was fought between slave states and free states. It was an internal war where brotherhood, son father relation is not addressed and the motto of this war was who can kill his nearest and dearest one. This was a community made up of the symbiosis of white slave owners and the African American slaves, each of them depend on others, economically and culturally. In this novel, we see the white people bring the African slaves to America like a white plantation slave holder where different types of hundred of slaves, field slaves, house slaves live in slave cabins. Living in slave cabin is unhealthy, inhumane and are being deprived from various types of human facilities. Actually to live in a slave cabin must create some problems including death also. Here the slave owners kill and rape the wives, oppressed their children, and sometimes their daughters are also raped, whipped and tortured. Derrida says, everybody knows what type of terrible picture they could give to the industrial, mechanical, chemical and normal and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries. This type of inhuman oppression on the slaves and keeping them in a slave cabin is a type of unsuccessful attempt to make a harmony like the war of today against the terror and illegal immigrants. And sometimes the slave owner’s decision of lynching without

proper judgment is a kind of destruction of their own valuable property.

Now a days the riven of community structure and the bond of families happened by the African American community is a kind of self destruction which is affecting the structure of the community in a great scale. And actually the enslavers, colonizers, and imperialist conquerors are responsible for this type of self destruction. For example, we can cite the war of US against Iraq. Actually the US behavior against Iraq was very cruel in the name of peace, harmony, and democracy. And African American relationship regarding the slavery is the main subject of *Beloved*. According to J. Hillis Miller:

“At a smaller level still is the relation of each of the characters to the family group, and finally, the relation of each character to himself or herself. Both these final two versions of this fractal pattern of self similarity must include another inside/outside relation, namely the relation of the African American community as a whole to the “other side” the unseen other world of the dead that in Morrison’s vision impinges with physical presence and even violence on this world”(31)

In the *Specters of Marx* Derrida says against this type of communal conflict within the community.

So, as a moral human being everybody should have the ethics of understanding the behavior of every individual in the community. In the case of Sethe we see killing her daughter for the sake of slavery she crosses the limit of her ethic. Miller says, “Sethe’s decision to cut her baby daughter’s throat with a handsaw can get her to safety on the other side that is to kill the best part of herself” (31). The schoolteacher shoot Sixo like a dog, or a horse or like another animal but Sixo does important and valuable works for the farm. So, it’s a moral degradation of the schoolmaster. Killing a slave is like killing an animal and it’s very trivial to the slave owners. This is terrorism and an autocracy or not liberal democracy which affects Toni Morrison very much. The same thing happens when Sethe confronts the schoolmaster killing her daughter and taking her in her arms. In a similar way the behavior of Islamic “terrorist” suicide bombers only make sense if we take into account their belief that they will become holy martyrs and go straight to a glorious life in heaven, just as the behavior of George W. Bush and his companions only make senses in the content of their belief that the end of the world is at near and that only the Christian faithful will be saved.

In the *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues in favour of liberal democracy which becomes the ideal of human history where never has violence, famine, inequality, economic oppression, exclusion that will affect human society or humanity in the earth. Derrida thinks of an imaginary society where no men, women and children have been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth. In chapter three of *Specters of Marx* we see there are ten plagues of the global and capital system which Derrida thinks about and imagines a “New International” (105). One of the plagues is inter-ethnic war which we can connect with the conflict of black slaves with the white slave owners in Morrison’s *Beloved*. This type of inter ethnic war is very severe in *Beloved*. Derrida’s “New International” is a call for them to ally themselves in new, concrete and real way.

The most important character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is

the Beloved herself who is the ghost of the dead baby of Sethe. The central event of *Beloved* is Sethe’s murder of her baby daughter. Sethe does this for becoming freed her daughter, under the Fugitive Slave Laws, by the posse from the Kentucky plantation, “Sweet Home.” And the murdered daughter of Sethe comes at 124 as a ghost we see later. Here the ghost represents the power of legacy under slavery. The memory and the ghost of her dead baby are haunting her even after eighteen years she won her freedom. The appearance of the ghost at first is not so clear but in course of time it becomes clear that it is the spirit of the dead baby of Sethe. She has come back to life. The ghost is very malicious and destructive though at first it becomes not so. By the end of the novel we see the ghost’s image especially her presence in 124 at Bluestone Road is deeply destructive for the people. *Beloved* settles in the house at 124 like a parasite and is becoming stronger day by day but Sethe is becoming weaker every day. According to Jeffery Andrew Weinstock,

“*Beloved* is about the ‘feeling in’ of anything. It is instead about loss, emptiness and about emptying. It is about recovery. It is precisely about first recovering or experiencing from slavery or for extreme freedom” (84).

When Sethe understands that the ghost is the dead daughter of her; she thinks she has been given a second chance to repentant. In Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* the ghost represents something abstract. It’s not the presence of some spooky or uncanny being of human image rather it is the thinking of Marx prevailing in the existing society.

According to James Berger “Morrison introduces historical trauma into the narrative through the figure of the returning and embodied ghost” (415). In this novel ghost is the embodiment of total suffering under the chain of slavery. *Beloved*’s return as a physical body as her existence is symbolic to the social, personal and familial traumas of American race relations. In every ages ghost will come again and again and will go back if the world order is not right. I think “ghost” is a symbolic word which represents the threatening for the evil force.

All the characters here including former slaves and the children of former slaves are haunted by the past memories of their own. Sometimes slavery damages the way of their thinking concerning normal life and love and their attitude towards present and future and own worth as human beings. This is a novel interweaving the past and present. Present memories of slavery and brutality are being tortured by the occurring of the past and Morrison has given more times describing the past. So, the novel is often repetitive in description, depicting, lingering and shaping the repetitive ideas of the past sometimes trouble them to survive with present and to make plan for the future. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D now try to escape from their painful past and vows to have future full of freedom and enjoyment.

Sethe gets only twenty eight wonderful days as freedom in Cincinnati. This is her test of freedom. But the slave characters of the novel always want freedom. Actually freedom is the taste of human life. Slavery and freedom are two opposite poles of the existence. Then Sethe and Denver had to adopt imprisonment but by a group of white abolitionists they became free and came back to 124 in Cincinnati and continue to live there in isolation. Now, this is a kind of freedom but this freedom is not eternal or

permanent. Because human being always thinks that the other side of the fence is always beautiful and all the peace and happiness are there but real peace and happiness lie in serving the humanity without captivity.

In his *Specters of Marx* Derrida says that techno-capital system depends of faith and he thinks in the time of working when complicated mechanical engines work we do not understand the functioning of the machines and in the same way we do not understand the functioning of an email message if the other side does not respond properly; we get the message that connection terminated. Same thing happens in Morrison's *Beloved* that the black community is active but the other side is ghostly and phantasmatic. Gyyatri Chakravorty Spivak says according to the strictest Marxian sense,

“the reproductive body of woman has now been ‘socialized’ computed into average abstract labor and thus released into what I call the spectrality of reason a specter that haunts the merely empirical, dislocating it from itself. According to Marx this is the specter that must haunt the daily life of the class conscious worker, the future socialist; so that s/he can dislocate him/herself into the counterintuitive average part subject (agent) of labor, recognize that in the every day, *esspukt*” (67-68).

Here, we see woman's body is reproductive and in the modern times it has been socialized. According to Marx, we have to have an effort by which capitalism can be wrenched into socialism and have to take another initiative so that labour power can be converted into commodity. And this effort of the specter must haunt the class conscious day worker.

Derrida speaks about immunity and auto-immunity which we observe in the behavior of Sethe. Actually “immune” is a social term used for clergy and sometimes it is used as a biological term. But Derrida thinks that this is the characteristic of every community. Every community tries to keep itself pure and uncontaminated even by attacking the invaders. Immunity and auto-immunity dominate the character of Sethe in relation to Beloved and her other children. Sethe actually wants safety, purity, indemnity, immunity, and freedom from harm for her children and for herself. She wants this according to her own willingness, presumption and wish without considering the factor related to life. To her, the life of herself and her children are beyond the price. So, she wishes to survive for the best self. But on the other hand she wants freedom anyhow even by sacrificing life. She thinks true freedom lies in the life of the afterworld. When Sethe kills her daughter probably she thinks that her daughter will gain a better life afterward which we can consider from the religious point of view that she has a strong belief about the life of the afterward. That is the place of true safety. She can take suicide or she can sacrifice herself and even the self of her children for true freedom. Miller points out that

“Sethe repeatedly says in justifying her act to herself, to Paul D, and to Beloved, that her children are the best part of her, the only pure and clean part, her ‘best thing’ her life beyond life. Therefore, she must kill them when their purity and cleanness are endangered, “she just flew”(35).

Sethe thinks to herself when she is getting ready to try to explain her act to Paul D

“collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away over there where no one could hurt them, over there outside the place, where they would be safe” (163).

Denver imagines Sethe's reason a little bit later in the novel and she thinks Beloved might leave: “the best thing she was, was her children, white might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing the part of her that was clean” (251). So, here Beloved is considered as a “thing” and it is a powerful irony used by the novelist. Sethe thinks Beloved is her best thing, she is the only clean part of her, she is cadaver. She thinks, by killing Beloved she has killed her own self but thinks herself and her children free from the curse of slavery.

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