

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A mirror to black lives

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Abstract

The research paper is written to understand the lives of Blacks that history had witnessed. The slave trade and human brutality is seen with special reference to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). Toni Morrison portrays the dehumanizing effects of slavery on the past and memory of her heroine Sethe. The research paper also highlights the Human Rights which were completely ignored when it came to the Blacks. They were treated as Privileges, only whites could afford.

Keywords: slave trade, human rights violation, brutality black lives

Introduction

Research Paper

Human Rights are basic rights given to everyone by virtue of being born as human. These rights are entitlements free from any kind of discrimination. They are inherent for every human being irrespective of their color, religion, cast, creed or gender. To make sure that these laws are followed in the best possible way, United Nation has formed a comprehensive body that functions based on the laws framed for the proper functioning of any society. However, much before the Human Rights came into existence, world was struggling as it faced discrimination on every step. One of the basic Human Right is Right to Life, which is mentioned in Article 2 of European Convention of Human Rights. In the turbulent past of human kind, the people were devoid of this basic right as slavery was a common practice. People were enslaved, because they were born with black skin color. Slave narratives are important not only for the fact that they enrich and diversify African American literature, but also because they reveal the complexities of the dialogue between Whites and Blacks. The Africa-American experience started when colonists bought twenty black people from "a Dutch Man of Warre" (Trotter, 2001^[9], p. 58), in Virginia, 1619. White prejudice started to emerge as the introduction of racial laws became viable. In 1664, officials of Maryland ordered: "that all Negroes or other Slaves... shall serve Durante Vita and all children born of any Negro or other slaves shall be slaves as their fathers were for the term of their lives". (Holt & Brown, 2000, p. 89). The state of Virginia, given the fact that they had brought people who had every reason to be defiant, endorsed in the late 1600s and early 1700s laws castigating the Blacks to be punished more severely than others for "being a brutish sort of people and reckoned as goods and chattels" (Morgan, 2000, p. 106)^[5]. With these inhuman laws Virginians did not spare any chance to oppress the black slaves by denying them even basic rights and inflicting upon them severe punishments.

Even in present era, the black skin color is somehow representative of something inferior or something one cannot be proud of. Currently when the entire world is battling against COVID-19 pandemic, humanity is losing its grip. In a recent incident in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a

police officer killed a black man named George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The incident came like a wake-up call for not only Black Americans but every suppressed person round the world. Soon all black Americans came out on streets to raise their voices against such brutality.

When importing slaves became unlawful in 1808, resources had already been in danger of drying up. However, the trafficking of slaves continued, and slaveholders and influential people were benefitting from its continuation. But with these restraints on importing slaves, coupled with the growing demand for the black labor, there came the need for female slaves, who were valued for their reproductive potential. Thus, the slave owner wished "to turn every young black woman into a brood mare". (White, 1999, p. 72)^[12]. This tendency for reproduction turned slaves into commodities valued only as merchandise. In the process, much pressure was exerted on mothers and children in slavery, some preferred to stay with an implied consent for sexual submission. Accordingly, in the slave community, women became the focus of familial relationships, and in such a community there came the "supremacy of the mother-child bond over all other relationships". (White, 1999, p. 275)^[12]. Female slaves were compelled, psychologically and physically, to experience the severe mental and physical pain of slavery. White masters used all psychological and physical means to force slaves into obedience, and in the case of black females, this had the added dimension of sexual submission.

The obsession with white skin is very common even in Asian countries who are born with brown skin. This criterion of associating a class or status with skin color is very common in the history of humans and is still very prevalent.

While African Americans have been part of American life, participating in, and contributing to, American culture, the American history of slavery had been consciously consigned to oblivion. Toni Morrison, one of the most significant voices of her race and age, observes that "We were seldom invited to participate in the discourse, even when we were its topic." (*Beloved*, p. 111). As people who did not write their history, African Americans have always felt the need for a sense of knowing their past in order to find a viable association with the present and future. Morrison

understands her mission to be recovering and reconstructing the experiences of these people “*Because if we do not know. what our past is ... if we Third-World women in American do not know it, then, it is not known by anybody at all. And somebody has to tell somebody something.*” (Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 59).

The practice of slavery and its effect on humanity is very aptly depicted in the novel *Beloved* written by Toni Morrison. Morrison was the first black American novelist, to join the editorial team of a reputed publishing house named Random House in New York City. Morrison wrote *Beloved* in 1987. The novel is set after the American Civil War (1861-65). It took inspiration from the life of Margaret Garner, an African-American, who escaped from slavery by crossing Ohio river in 1856 and reached Ohio, which was a free state. During the time of slavery, blacks would not understand their self-worth, lack a sense of self, and a sense of individuality. Slavery was basically an exercise to dehumanize human beings and it aimed at crushing the individuality, language, families, cultures and traditions of certain tribes. Afro-Americans were enslaved and they were made to move like objects. Sometimes they were treated worse than animals. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* through the characters namely Sethe and Paul D depicts the inhuman effect of slavery on them and it also shows how the history haunted them as they struggled to get over their past. In this regard Barbara Schapiro wrote about the novel *Beloved* in one of her essays, “*the worst atrocity of slavery, the real horror the novel exposes, is not physical death but psychic death*” (156). To highlight slavery, Morrison introduces *Beloved*, the baby ghost. *Beloved* is the dead daughter of Sethe. Physically *Beloved* appears to be of the age Sethe’s daughter would be if she would have been alive i.e. 19 or 20 years old. But mentally she acts of an age when Sethe’s daughter died. Sethe is the protagonist of Morrison’s novel that begins in the year 1873 after the Civil War in Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe has been enslaved in the past and now lives with her 18 year old daughter Denver. Eighteen years have passed since Sethe escaped from Slavery. After her escape to Cincinnati with her four children, Sethe was eventually chased by her old master. Rather than having children return slavery, she attempted to kill all of them, succeeding only in killing her baby girl. She lived with her remaining children and her mother-in-law. The ghost of the dead baby began to haunt their house, causing to perpetrate Sethe’s suffering. She was still haunted by the pain of the past. A girl named *Beloved* came to visit the family, and it gradually became clear that she was the ghost of the dead baby. *Beloved* lives with Sethe, proving to be powerful and malicious. On discovering *Beloved*’s identity, Sethe believed that she had been given a second chance. Sethe tried to make amends for the past, but the girl’s needs were devouring. The ghost did not forgive Sethe for the actions. A group of women came to force the ghost to leave, but Sethe is almost destroyed. As a slave narrative, *Beloved* is written with the evident purpose of revealing that the black is a human capable of reasoning and judgment. Slave narratives usually speak for the majority who cannot narrate their own stories, due to the fact blacks have not been given the opportunity to receive education. As one former slave woman wrote: “*We were no more than dogs. If they caught us with a piece of paper in our pockets, they’d whip us. They were afraid we’d learn to read and write, but I never got the chance.*” (Ward and Burns, p. 9). Sethe, in Morrison’s

Beloved, is not only deprived of the opportunity to receive education but also the right to be a human being, playing her natural role of mothering. Sethe’s complex life under slavery makes her believe that children are better off dead; better forced to come to the conviction that, it is better to die in the cradle than to live a degrading life of submission. As one may notice, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the slavery experience in the life of almost all her characters acts as a devouring past: Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, is a practical example of the brutality of the past, the slave system, suffering from sexual abuse and lack of normal maternal affection. Commenting on Baby Suggs’ tragic stance in slavery life, Stamp Paid, one of the minor characters of *Beloved*, remarks:

‘Sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life... five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his...to lose him too; to acquire a daughter...see.. that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of... free Negroes. and then have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a baby Suggs, holy’. (*Beloved*,p. 177).

Sethe also understands that “*her brain wan not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.*” (*Beloved*, p. 70). An inescapable force in Sethe’s life, the past has exerted a tremendous impact upon her present to the extent that has cannot envision any sense of the future. In order to shun herself from these traumatic memories and thoughts, Sethe has not only to forget them, but also to cope with her realistic life and individual traumas, Sethe’s journey from slavery to freedom starts with her awareness of the necessity to rid her children in the first place from slavery life. As Sethe is reunited with her other three children in freedom, she radiates with her new-found freedom:

I was big; Paul D, and deep and wide and when I restricted out my arms all my life could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I could not love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. (*Beloved*,p. 162).

Toni Morrison has skillfully delved into how the traumatic collective past of the Blacks and the heroine’s own memory leads to distorted experience of motherhood. However, the heroine succeeds in overcoming these haunting experiences through growing awareness and forbearance. Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, points out the necessity of new beginnings and faith that the Blacks should maintain in order to live as free people. Thus, Morrison has succeeded in showing African American how to exercise the ghosts of slavery and the horrible communal past. Through Sethe’s sense of hope towards the end of the novel, Morrison has given African American hope for the future. In doing so, Morrison has brought the individuals and the community together; she has revealed that Blacks and Whites have successfully achieved a sense of cooperation. And the same kind of situation still exists for the blacks.

They are still made feel that they are inferior, they are still treated badly, they are still looked down upon and yet we believe that we live in a democratic system where all humans are treated equally without any discrimination.

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