

The Concept of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

A. Linda Primlyn

African American literature focuses on themes and issues which explore the larger African society, culture, racism, slavery and equality. As an American writer of African ancestry, Toni Morrison has been acknowledged as one of the leading literary figures of modern times and is responsible for getting African American literature a place of pride in World Literature. She regards "blackness" as a theme that has often been neglected by the documented history. She tries to spread her message of "blackness" from one generation to another and to become a part of the Afro-American collective memory. It is felt that a better understanding of the current situation of the black community in the United States cannot be achieved without an awareness of the past. Her novels are emphatic on the interplay between the black women's oppression and the Whites' domination. Peach says "with each novel Morrison has retained the capacity to take us by surprise" (22). Though the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, there is still a feeling of "Blackness" among the whites. This feeling turns the civilized into barbarians by treating human beings as unequal.

The paper presents the problems of freedom and equality which are denied to black people in the United States with particular reference to her novel *Beloved*. The readers get an awareness of reconstructing the past, giving life and independence to the sufferers. The sufferers should be discovered and freed from their bondage and should be taken to a place to live freely. The researcher brings to light the psychological and emotional elements of "Blackness" in the context of African American struggle. The characters are defined by the racial barriers formed by the surrounding white society. The dominant white society violates, denies and sets the rules for the black communities to suffer from confusion and anxiety.

The unrecorded past of the slaves are unveiled through their recollections and their bitter living conditions are depicted to be more important than the acknowledged history. References are from an important period which was characterized by three major events of the American history that takes place between 1854 and 1873-- firstly, the Fugitive Slave Act; Secondly, the American Civil War; finally, the Reconstruction Period. By playing against and through the cultural field of postmodernism the novel creates an aesthetic identity. Each character has been damaged by being black during the plantation era. The daily life of the slaves in the plantations and their persecutions by their masters are more important than those major historical events.

The social life confronts the blacks in a mixed society of blacks and whites. Being a minority, the blacks live a peripheral existence silently accepting their fate, concealed and paralysed while the world of the whites is alive and moving. They appear to be hanging on the very edge of life, hungering after what is lacking, the ownership of property, the enjoyment of comforts and decent living and even little attributes of beauty and charm. The sheer helpless condition of the blacks during and after the Emancipation reveals their strong sense of place too. The place where the protagonist Sethe lived, "didn't have a number then" (B 3). It was a gray and white house on Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati. During slavery, most black women "were not, by and large, domestics in the house" (97), is contrary to the popular impression that they were the labourers in the field with the men. It also "meant that the women were deprived of houses, of being householders"(128). Blacks were not allowed to possess anything, neither relationships nor any belongings whatsoever.

Slaves are considered as property by the plantation owners. Once Halle and Sethe decide themselves on marrying, she enthusiastically asks Mrs. Garner about the wedding ceremony, to which she answers "you are a sweet little child" (B 26). Till then, Sethe does not understand that as slaves, they just have to settle down with someone and increase their owner's wealth. Thus there lies the mockery of the system evolved by the whites for keeping slaves as their property. The white masters will not consider them as persons and their entity as human beings. Even the laws formulated by the whites do not proclaim the humanity of the blacks. The attitude of the slave owners towards the blacks cannot remain untainted by racism and slavery. By referring to the slaves as "niggers," Garner's actions are accepted as more humane, and his view of the blacks does not differ from the rest of the slave owners.

The problem of slavery on the African-American family is also explored as, in order to protect her children from inequality the mother desires to lead her to take drastic and deadly measures by committing a murder. Sethe daughters Denver and Beloved have a questionable sense of "Self" and a fragmented identity. The indetermination of the characters can be seen directly from a postmodernist culture outlook. Sethe and Denver try to rebuild their lives after having escaped from slavery. After the death of Beloved, they live in a house and it is apparently haunted by a young lady who shows up saying that her name is Beloved. Sethe comes to believe that the girl is the daughter whom she murdered by slitting her throat with a handsaw when the child was only two years old. In the climax Denver, the youngest daughter, reaches out and searches for help from the black community. She has no friends and is extremely shy. Like Sethe and Denver, Beloved's identity is heavily influenced by her past and her past is that of the victim of murder. The spirit's unyielding desire causes destruction for everyone in the house.

Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs is dead and Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar ran away by the time they are thirteen because the house is haunted. When Sethe realises that Beloved is actually her long dead daughter, she believes that she had a second chance to be a mother to her. She thinks that Beloved's resurrection gives her an opportunity to make things right. But Sethe is not able to move on with her life, while Beloved is around.

Sethe attempts to create a kind of timeless present in her home, where she hopes the past can no longer hurt Denver or Beloved. Denver too immediately recognises Beloved as the spirit that kept her company as a child. She will do anything to keep Beloved's attention. She enjoys the change that has occurred in her life with Beloved's presence. Some of the mysterious and unspeakable past escapes narration and flow on through this event. Kimberly Chabot Davis says "Postmodern theories need to be modified to accommodate texts like *Beloved* with an overt political agenda of social protest and to recognise these fictions as contributions to a theoretical discourse of contemporary life" (257).

The whites' superiority through verbal or physical means result in the subjugation of the blacks. The idea of racism emphasises the pain and suffering of the slaves. Sethe's encounter with evil begins in Sweet Home and it is personified through the Schoolteacher and his nephews. Sethe is preoccupied by memories of Sweet Home, the plantation in Kentucky where she worked as a slave. Her trauma is unfolded gradually in Sweet Home. Stream of consciousness technique is used to reveal the details of this Plantation where Sethe settles down. The atrocities and mental trauma Sethe faces in Sweet Home is "a total subjugation of a race which was made a victim of coercion, sexism and racism, practiced successful to obliterate their individuality" (Gaur 52). By observing the rape, the Schoolteacher exploits Sethe sexually in a more violent and physical way and documents it. His ability to exert both power and control over her ultimately enables him to reconstruct her identity. The nephews hold her down and attack her like some sort of animal that needs to be captured and subdued. When she protests the way the Schoolteacher has allowed his nephews to milk her, as if she were a cow, he orders them to whip Sethe back into silence. Though her body is literally inscribed with the mark of white male dominance, Sethe ultimately defies the Schoolteacher's authority resulting in the murder of her own child, Beloved. By murdering the child she feels that "no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (B 251).

Fragmentation of Sethe's personality begins with the advent of the Schoolteacher and his nephews. She leaves her husband Halle behind and considers him to be dead because he has failed when she is molested by the Schoolteacher's nephews, and as a husband he has

failed to protect his wife from the harm around. The Whites do not accept the Blacks as being part of their level of living and they think of the Blacks as subordinates. Here, the reader understands both the resulting damage of the experience, and the sadistic character of the Schoolteacher. The Schoolteacher continues to reduce Sethe and the slaves, in general, to animals. He sees himself as a scientist while evaluating the nature of the blacks. This process of categorization divides the black and the white community further apart, as it labels black people as an inferior one. Instead of being considered as humans, they are thought of as animals that need to be observed, examined and understood.

The lasting effects of slavery induce the white characters to acts of violence and feelings of superiority that degrade and dehumanize the blacks. In the end, the whites are essentially degrading themselves in this continuum, revealing the true humanity of the slaves despite the white's persistent efforts to strip them off their humanness. The blacks are regarded as simple-minded farm stock and ideal creatures to experiment on. Though the whites' belief in their own superiority enables them to treat the blacks as innately inferior creatures, Morrison reverses this cycle by presenting the perspectives of the blacks and ultimately, depicts the whites as being inhumane themselves. She talks about the centrality of community voice in her novels: "I am simply trying to recreate something that defines what makes a book 'black'" (qtd. in Davis 427).

The Sweet Home under Garner and the Sweet Home under the rule of the Schoolteacher are different entities. The Schoolteacher appears on the scene after the death of Mr. Garner, in order to help Mrs. Garner to run Sweet Home. After Sweet Home plantation is taken over by the Schoolteacher and his two nephews, Sethe is annihilated. Among the six men of the Sweet Home, Sethe is the only female. Through Sethe, the concept of blackness is explicated. Once Sethe tells Paul D, during his visit after 18 years, about the events that caused her to run from Sweet Home; about sending her sons and daughter North without her; about the white boys who stole her breast milk and then whipped her back raw; about the "white girl," who helped her survive and birth Denver; and about the death of her baby girl, Beloved. They talk about their life as slaves under the kindly Garners, the childless owner of the Sweet Home, and the cruel Schoolteacher, after the death of Mr. Garner.

Sethe recounts her whipping and begins to cry in the kitchen as she reveals to Paul D. She shows the tree of scars, the image of Chokecherry tree on her back, which decorates the dead skin of her back. It keeps alive the suffering of the African-American people. Paul D asks,

'What tree on your back? Is something growing on your back? I don't see nothing growing on your back'.

It's there all the same'.

'Who told you that?'

'White girl. That's what she called it. I've never seen it and never will. But that's what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree, trunk, branches and even leaves tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know.' (B15-16)

As Rafael Perez-Torres says, "Sethe's body is violated: once when its nutrient is stolen, then again when torn open by a whip. Just like the page of Schoolteacher's notebook, Sethe is divided and marked, inscribed with the discourse of slavery and violation" (696). However, Paul D is convinced that Sethe and Denver should move out.

Black women are strong willed and very capable of giving their children a good life or spare them from living a terrible life. Sethe makes an attempt to run for Ohio. She has already sent her three children ahead of her. The six months pregnant slaves walk many miles. Despite the imprint of the chokecherry tree on her back, she is able to deliver Denver with the help of a white girl, Amy Denver. After that she crosses the Ohio River and enters the free state Ohio. Sethe wants her children to be free. She refuses to accept the "silent second class status" (Walker 121). As a mother, she struggles to save her children from a predictable brutal future. Unfortunately after her arrival, she spends only twenty eight days of freedom in the company of her children, mother-in-law and neighbours. The Schoolteacher arrives Ohio. Both Baby Suggs and Sethe see them. The slaves enter into the woodshed; Baby Suggs is standing stock still. Stamp Paid is there in the wood pole with an axe. Sethe's thick mother-love overwhelms her. She wants to kill her children. She does not succeed in killing all but one, her two year old daughter. By murdering she has tried to save her children from the terrible experience of being a slave. She slashes her infant daughter's throat rather than see it in chains.

A mother who loves her children so deeply does not want her children to experience the cruelties. So she kills them. She feels that this is the only way to prevent her children from brutality. When she comes out of the jail she still has some satisfaction: "I stopped him, I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (B 164). In *New York Times* article Morrison said the killing "was absolutely the right thing to do. . . but she had no right to do it" (qtd. in Mervyn Rothstein).

Sethe's mother Ella too has "measured all atrocities . . . killing, kidnapping, raping" (B 256- 58). She is a conductor on the Underground Railroad who escorts Sethe and the infant Denver and brings food and clothing to them. She has spent her whole puberty time in a house where she has been used sexually by both a father and his son. She has delivered various times but has "thrown them all away" because she has been raped by the crew or other whites.

Gaur comments, "Her rejection was caused by hatred and pride--hatred towards a race of exploiters and pride to perpetuate her own racial identity" (51). Sethe is the only one she has kept with her because she is the child of a Blackman. When Denver asks Sethe about her grandmother, Sethe says "My woman? You mean my mother? If she did I don't remember (*B* 60). Sethe has not seen her but a few times out in the fields and once when she is working indigo. Being a slave, her mother has to work all the time and has no time even to take care of her daughter Sethe. She does not even sleep in the same cabin, mostly nights, where Sethe sleeps. Sethe tells of the pathetic plight of her mother as:

Right on her rib was a circle and a cross birth in the skin. She said, this your ma'am. This, and she pointed 'I am the only one got this mark now the rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my fact, you can know by this mark'. Scared me so. (76)

The blacks are suppressed and dominated by the racist whites and their condition is very pitiable. Being slaves they do not have money to buy anything. On their wedding day, Sethe somehow manages to have a wedding dress of stolen scraps of material. The novelist puts it across: "I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe" (*B* 59). The white masters fail to provide blacks their needs. They do not even consider them as human beings. The blacks are identified as "human characteristics on the left, animal ones on the right" (*B* 193), in order to grasp the definition of property. The horror of the feeling gradually sinks into the slaves' psyche enabling them to plan their escape to the magical North.

The researcher focuses on the various traumas a slave woman could undergo before the abolition of slavery during the postmodern America. Longing for freedom and equality are put forth here effectively and the cruelties and abuses of the slaves by the slave owners are brought to light. By presenting the true reality of slavery the researcher seeks a way to come out of the bondage. The tradition of slave narratives and it is confronted.

The male protagonists also struggle in the hands of the white masters. Indeed, black men have been restricted to menial services and women to housekeeping. Education is found unnecessary if not illegal for them. The reason is that they are not considered as conscious beings. Black men and women cannot be considered as humans and it is the reason why there are four black male slaves to run Sweet Home. After his experience in Sweet Home, Paul D suffers as a slave in Georgia. He is one of the forty-six chain gang workers who are living in the ditches. Their heavy labour is that of using a sledgehammer to smash mountain rock. The guards shoot men at will and enforce other horrors. Their work pauses under days of

heavy rain. As the rain continues for a week, the men realise that they are going to be locked in the ditches where they live: "In the boxes the men heard the water rise the trench and looked out for cottonmouths. They squatted in muddy water, slept above it, peed in it" (B 110). Morrison also has made it clear that Paul D has suffered a lot from racial victimization through powerful and significant imagery. He has known helplessness and humiliation as powerful as Sethe's. Considering his brutal history, he is remarkably a good man.

Halle, Sethe's husband works for five years for his crippled mother, Baby Suggs, to emancipate. He has been to Sethe more like a brother than a husband during their six year marriage. "Usually he worked Saturdays and Sundays to pay off Baby Suggs' freedom" (59). They are gradually deprived of their guns, game and food and are reduced to the state of pilfering when pilfering becomes not only the right but also their obligation.

Actually, the white male oppressive ways have seriously undermined the black manhood. Morrison remarks "American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States" (Playing 5). Her tribute to black men and women of the past has made her works particularly poignant to African American readers. G. Lakshminarasaiiah observes that "Her novels demonstrate the vicious genocidal effects of racism"

The concept of racism on the psyche of the African Americans is clearly portrayed rousing the researcher into the recognition of various possibilities. The author is not only conscious of the many ways of portraying the issues of race, but also how the concept of blackness gets entwined with the problems of class and gender. A self-conscious interest and celebration of values, behaviour patterns and beauty of Afro-Americans towards decolonization are also brought to light.

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Dr. A. Linda Primlyn
Assistant Professor of English,
Scott Christian College (Autonomous),
Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India