Destruction of Identity in Tony Morrison’s “Beloved”

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Abstract

Tony Morrison’s ‘Beloved’ explores the physical, emotional and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, a devastation that continues to haunt the character Seth. She is an African-American female, who takes her daughter’s life to save her from shackles of slavery. It is a novel about slavery and about the history of race based oppression. The most dangerous of slavery’s effect is its impact on the former slave’s senses of self. The novel contains the multiple examples of self-alienation. ‘Beloved’ is the story of Seth’s quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness. She struggles with the haunting memory for her slavery and the retribution from Beloved, the ghost of her dead daughter whom she has murdered in order to protect her from the living death of slavery. The entire novel hinges on the death of Beloved who mysteriously comes back as a sensuous young woman in order to claim her mother’s love.

Key words: Slavery, Self-Alienation, Oppression Racism, Quest for freedom

Beloved Toni Morrison’s famous story published in the year written 1987, represents the downtrodden people. In this novel, as in Tar Baby, home can be focussed as the destruction of identity. In this novel Morrison, recover from slavery means to recover the home that has been unfortunately lost. In Beloved home is to say the black female body. Due to the legacy of slavery, which is interwoven throughout the whole story, emphasis on the body reveals that the female body itself becomes the physical place. Sethe’s body full of scars is unsuitable to live in because it is not a place where identity can be recognized in a positive way. Until Sethe can open her to speak about her memories and recall her story, she cannot recover her identity and her body remains crippled and thus her identity remains wounded. What I try to imply here is the fact that for Sethe, telling her story full of horrific experiences enables her to reclaim her identity and recover from slavery.

Taking place in Cincinnati, Sethe, the main protagonist, after escaping from Kentucky plantation, attempts to kill her children to prevent them from being put into slavery. She succeeds in murdering only one of her four children.

Sethe sees Schoolteacher, a man currently managing Sweet Home, who treats and abuses the slaves as animals, coming to take Sethe’s children to Sweet Home. This event condemns Sethe to be rejected by the
society. Sethe then finds a place of refuge within four walls in her house at 124 Bluestone Road, where she completely separates and isolates with her daughter Denver from the community.

The cruelty that led Sethe to commit this act of murder can be understood by two heart-stopping moments in Sethe’s life. The first incident takes place early in her life when as mentioned above, Sethe is put on the animal side of the list of features according to Schoolteacher’s education. While teaching his nephews, Sethe overhears Schoolteacher’s lesson, when he draws a thick line between an animal and a human being. To provide his students with more obvious example, he classifies Sethe as a representative of the animal. After this humiliation, Sethe begins to trust in the words of Baby Suggs. This, however, is double-edged. Sethe’s estimation of white folks, in general, is not fair. They do not only do harm to her, but Sethe also receives help from them. As far as Amy is concerned, it was her, who gives birth to Denver when Sethe is escaping from the plantation.

As can be seen from the example, black community, especially black women have greatly suffered from slavery. The humiliation and hardships they have faced have left them with psychic and bodily impacts. Dehumanization takes place when much later in Sethe’s life, she is pregnant with Denver. Sethe’s journey of suffering seems to be never-ending. Since he cannot protect her, he starts to feel emasculated, and therefore abandons her.

The novel is largely about the horrors of slavery. But the erosion of the self emerges as a central theme. Even after characters escape slavery, they are haunted by the effects of the violence and dehumanizing brutality. Paul D loses his ability to have any real feelings for anyone. The most dangerous of slavery’s effects is its negative impact on the former slaves’ senses of self, and the novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation. Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else. Slaveas were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real ‘man’, and he frequently wonders that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else. Slaveas were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real ‘man’, and he frequently wonders that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else. Slaveas were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real ‘man’, and he frequently wonders that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else. Slaveas were told they were subhuman and were traded as commodities whose worth could be expressed in dollars. Consequently, Paul is very insecure about whether or not he could possibly be a real ‘man’, and he frequently wonders.

Therefore, when speaking about Sethe’s destruction of identity, it should be emphasized that “as a direct result of enslavement, every slave created her identity based on the definition provided by white people. The members of the black community also perceive each other according to white community’s definition. Hence, the black community, rather than using their own opinions to the horrible act Sethe has committed, they interpreted her action through the opinions of their white masters. After the infanticide, the people from her community who could best understand her deed because of their common experience reject her completely. According to the community Sethe used to be a member of, is Sethe’s deed unforgivable, that is why she has been excluded and rejected from the society. Her isolation among the four walls of 124 Bluestone Road can be understood as a place of redemption where Sethe is able to some extent defines her identity. She also limits her life to the premises of the house and at this point she is able to see a way to
search for her true identity. Sethe’s deep longing for explanation of the past action, and for forgiveness, wake into being the ghost of her murdered daughter Beloved.

Beloved demonstrates the extent to which individuals need the support of their communities to survive.

Paul D is a restless wanderer, who is not capable of settling down in one place. This shows his up rootedness and his continuous search for identity. His identity is shaped by his early mentioned experience of being sold off, by his escape from Brandywine to whom he was sold by Schoolteacher and by ending up in a prison with forty-six prisoners. Their cells were no bigger than a box where at night they had to endure sexual abuse, and during the day they were chained together. His every attempt to flee has been unsuccessful, and gradually, Paul D’s heart shuts down. When he comes across Setheand her house, he feels that he finds someone with whom he can identify. Sethe is the person he can share some of his burden with.

Paul D’s body and mind are filled with experiences as a former slave. His heart is full of painful and traumatic memories that he wants to have it locked for good in his tobacco tin, which he carries around his neck, in a place where his heart should be. This tin has represented his sad heart since Sweet Home. The tin is not just an obstacle in accepting and moving from his past, but also plays an important role in his relationship with Sethe.

Paul D seems to negotiate with his past through the symbol of tobacco tin. His negotiation is performed in a way that he does not allow himself to hold on to all various pieces of his past, yet not to think about the pieces or feel any pain associated with these pieces. Through this tobacco tin, one learns that Paul D has clearly made a conscious effort to control and shape his past and his present, and wants to have every past memory that is meaningful for him repressed. To provide an example, Paul D’s tobacco tin has been opened, and it can be seen how much the tobacco tin serves as a way of conscious control for him. In fact, nobody can repress past nor present. However, since Paul D’s arrival, it is evident that he appears to be slowly unlocking, and his past begins to leak out of his guarded tin. It seems that whenever Paul D comes in contact with Sethe, or with a part of Sethe’s past, a piece of his past opens, whether he intends it or not. Whether or not Paul D intentionally wants his past to be released or not is something that it cannot be learnt from the novel. However, it can be observed that once Paul D arrives to visit Sethe, his past begins to leak of his tobacco tin, and his eventual opening or recognition of the pain associated with his past, brings Paul D a strong sense of failure.

Another example in which Paul D’s relationship with his past is affected by being in contact with Sethe occurs when he has a sexual intercourse with Beloved. During this scene, Paul D is forced by Beloved to have a sex. Again, after this act, Paul D’s tin begins to open. As stated in the previous chapter, Beloved can serve as a symbol of painful past, as well as living representation of Sethe’s past. Fundamentally, Beloved can serve as a substantial culmination of all the pain Sethe’s past, and therefore forces him to face the haunting memories and pain of his own past. Sexual intercourse with Beloved causes a shift in his life, and causes him to lose control of his suppression of his past.

As much as Sethe and Beloved to experience moments of unspoken mother-daughter joy, Beloved’s destructive purpose is evidenced several times throughout the novel. For example, Sethe enjoys a moment of respite, imagining the soothing hands of deceased Baby Suggs, massaging her neck, a moment turns to alarm when she is choked — by the hands of Beloved. The definite example of the novel’s mythological interpretation of Beloved as a supernatural symbol of slavery’s destructive heritage is revealed. Sethe merits our sympathy. She has been pushed to the limits of human tolerance and has reacted to it instinctively,
trying all the while to protect her children. The system has put her in a situation where protecting her children means murdering them. Extraordinary situations call for extraordinary responses which cannot and should not be judged from the viewpoint of ordinary behaviour. Her rough choice is motivated by an inner compassion, which is manifested in the only channel of action available to her. It cannot be condemned. Her choice is dilemma her motherhood, and her tainted liberation later on, compel the reader to condemn the system of slavery, which can have such effect on human lives. Beloved is not only an indictment of the past, it is also a resurrection of history in the fictional mode which reminds us that the institution of slavery has continued to grip the psyche of the people till today, who want to exorcise it while keeping their historical consciousness alive. Within this context of resolving a historical trauma, Beloved suggestively puts forth a mother’s resolute, unqualified and unflinching love her children.

Works cited: