



Literature in Life: Decoding the Muffled Voices (Vol. II)

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Chapter 18



A Study of Psychological Shackles and Self-Discovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals the psychological confusion experienced by Sethe in the situation of slavery. She is the representative of sixty million or more dead and enslaved Africans. Toni Morrison's narration gives importance to the process of self-discovery and re-memory. According to her a strong past controls the future. Through character Sethe, she gives women's experience on slavery through voice and language. This paper deals with the process of self-discovery and recollecting the past with special reference to Toni Morrison's character Sethe.

Keywords: Self-discovery, Rememory, Past and Psychological Confusions.

Self-discovery is the act or process of gaining knowledge or understanding of your abilities, character and feelings. Rememory is the combination of the words, "memory and remembrance". It is the thoughts of the recent or long past. To remember a memory. Afro-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. Among the themes and issues explored in the literature are the role of Afro-Americans within the larger American society, Afro-American culture, racism, slavery and social equality.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals the psychological confusion and sufferings experienced by a black woman Sethe, the protagonist in the situation of slavery. Morrison's narration gives importance to the process of self-discovery and re-memory. "Anything dead coming back to life hurts". (35) Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is based on the theme of Afro-American woman and it gives a clear understanding of black life, society and culture. The novel is set during the Reconstruction era, (which sought full freedom, citizenship and constitutional equality for Afro-Americans) in 1873, *Beloved* centres on the powers of memory and history. For the former slaves, the past is a burden that they hopelessly and wilfully try to forget.

"To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one". (42) Yet for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, memories of slavery are inescapable. They continue to haunt her in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years before, Sethe had murdered her daughter in order to save her from slavery. "So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister". (152)

Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner who likes Sethe, escaped from slavery in Kentucky and murdered her child when slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. Morrison has written Sethe's story with the voices of people who have denied the power of language. From Sethe's experience we learn before a stable future is created, the ghosts of the past should be understood.

Sethe, when she was at the age of 13, she sold to the Garners who owned, 'sweet home' and practice a gentle kind of slavery. There, the other slaves who were all men, deeply long to have sex with her. They were Paul D, Paul A, Paul F and Halle. Through this incident, we came to know that how a woman surrounded by men in her working place undergoes sexual tortures.

Though Sethe was pregnant, she was raped by the Schoolmaster's nephews for she tried to escape from the sweet home. When she complained this to Mrs. Garner, she was whipped by the School master. This shows the male-chauvinistic attitude of the Schoolmaster and his nephews towards the pregnant lady Sethe.

Being a black woman, the protagonist of the novel Sethe suffered a lot. All men except her husband Halle and his friend Paul D tortured her like anything. These sufferings made her depressed and to think about her past even though she got escaped from sweet home. On the whole, we could find the sufferings of womanhood by the male-chauvinists around her.

When Sethe recalls the past memories of hers, she would be seized into a deep depression of those bad days which takes her to the past sufferings made by men. Thus, Sethe recollects the past moments, events and happenings that include infanticide of her daughter Beloved. One's past could control the future of a person. Here Sethe's sufferings brought her to the time frames of the past and future.

Morrison in *Beloved* has given more an identity and

to the characters voices to exhibit the state of African American's story which has never been projected. Through the narration, the author reveals the cruelty and brutality of slavery and its aftermath on the psyche of the ex-slaves. The reader can trace out three stages in the novel. The first stage is the repressing of the traumatic memory of the past through the characters, the second stage is learning how to reconcile with their memory and finally being cleared from all the painful experiences and having a rebirth of identity. That is, "only when memories are remembered can they lose, gradually but never entirely, their traumatic effects" (Berger 415) which would help them to plan for a betterment in future.

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