

## The Guardian Angel and the Guiding Spirit against Patriarchy and Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* portrayed the black people's suffering during the slavery period after the Civil War. African Americans were struggling to manifest their stability and culture during the time of slavery and they were ill treated in the society. Women are triply oppressed under the burden of patriarchy and slavery. They are trying to manifest the subjective consciousness by struggling hard to cope with their free and individual self. Issues of family, identity and possession are explored by Morrison in a world where slavery is obvious. The characters struggle to "rememory" or "disremember" the wounds caused by slavery and they try to find healing in their own way. The character Beloved stands as a guiding spirit and guardian angel against the burden of patriarchy and slavery and recollect their subjective consciousness and rise above the circumstances to truly exhibit their awakening through their self-realization. The psychological implications of trauma, hysteria and the spiritual healing through love and self-consciousness leading to self-revelation in the characters through the power of supernatural elements through Beloved. The spiritual guidance of Beloved has become the healing power for other characters to identify their role in society and it acts as an aid to collective struggle of the black community in times of slavery.

### Keywords

Subjective Consciousness - Sexuality - Reward and Burden of Gender - Obsessive Mother-daughter Relationship - Spiritual Guidance - Guardian Angel - Destructive and Protective Nature of Beloved - Sisterhood - Awakening - Empowerment - Infanticide

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* portrayed the black culture during the dehumanising period in the slavery period immediately after the Civil War. It was the time when African Americans were struggling hard to settle their stability and culture during the time of slavery as they were ill treated. "*Morrison believes that black culture has been built on the horrors of the past and it is this history that has shaped contemporary black culture in a positive way.*" Her representation of black women in the novel is more vibrant, hard-wearing, independent and determined.

It portrays the people's survival, escapism and healing power in times of slavery by recollecting "*a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive*" (Morey, 2). The "rememory" as Morrison calls it exhibits the strong strength of characters from brutal slavery with strong conviction. Sethe, the protagonist is the embodiment of such will power in every situation she faces. "*Morrison communicates an unforgettable sense of the strength, terror and devastation that is part of the black community, whilst skilfully portraying the unalterable*

*connections between spiritual and physical life” (Morey, 1093).*

Patton on the traditional and well known belief in West Africa states that children who die badly can return to life as a “spirit-child.... said to die early only to be reborn again and again to the same mother. This child is not necessarily an ancestor but rather a sort of ghost. The child who returns is “the unnamed victims of the middle passage”. According to the tradition of Ogbanje, Beloved comes back to life not only to torture her mother but to heal her wounds of her life. She is “...set on claiming retribution from Sethe for her murder (Patton 121). Patton further comments that “Though the parent is initially in control, as the situation worsens, she cedes authority to the child, who then enslaves the parent”. Beloved controls her mother, Sethe completely though supernaturally but she is healing and soothing spirit exhibiting the demanding love for the mother. Ogbanje are “stunted ancestors - they do not reach ancestor status because their lives are cut short..”(Patton, 121). Analyzing this notion in Beloved, she stands as a “protective , benevolent and instructive” figure.

The linguistic device songs especially chain gang songs exhibit the inner strength of the individual to escape from slavery. Slaves use songs as a way to pass down stories but also to help them maintain a sense of inner strength. Morrison “shows how song defines and affirms slave “personhood” in a world where slave humanity is constantly challenged and denied” (Capuano, 1). It exhibits the characters positive outlook of life. “It chronicles her characters' endurance and ability to survive during and after these periods of physical brutality and

*psychological abuse” that they experienced during slavery (Capuano, 2). To escape a torture, singing is an essential part of the characters' lives as food, sleep and shelter. “It is the singing of the women that help exorcise the ghost of Beloved and enable Sethe to break free as if she has been baptized” (Beloved, 308)*

Sethe began to regain her life by discovering that she has a future. Paul D told her, “Sethe....me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”(Beloved, 27). Through the healing love of Paul D, Denver and the black community, Sethe can learn to let go of the terrible history that has defined her. She might discover that she could define herself through the future she creates with her family.

The characters struggle to “rememory” or “disremember” the wounds caused by slavery and they try to find healing in their own way. For example, Sethe explains how she struggles with the past:

*“It's so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. . . . But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (Beloved, 36).* The other characters helped her to escape from slavery and later they tried to loosen the binds of Sethe's past. One of the women in town wants to help Sethe exorcise the ghost of Beloved because she “didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” because “the past was something to leave behind” (Beloved, 302).

Black women characters represent the pillars of inner strength within the community as protectors and healers. They

are the healers when the world is falling apart around them and they bind everything intact. Many dejected characters are split from families and sold as slaves in the slave market. They heal each other by forming bonds which help them to survive and empower each other amidst the atrocities of slavery and the sense of sisterhood.

Sethe, the survivor of slavery and other women characters who supported her from the time of slavery, escaping from slavery, child's birth to her life at the end of the novel. Women are supernaturally powerful and empowered. Married to Halle at the age of 13, she undergoes the brutal charge of her husband and in attempt to escape, she sends her children to Ohio on the underground railroad planning to follow them later.

The bitter memory of boys holding her down and taking her breast milk, the brutal lashing afterward; her flight and Denver's birth; all is soothed by Baby Suggs when Sethe at last reaches Cincinnati. When the overseer comes to reclaim her and her children under the Fugitive Slave Law, Sethe cuts the throat of her oldest daughter and attempts to kill the others, and is condemned to hang. She gains release and returns to the house at 124 Bluestone Road. After the death of Baby Suggs, she lives in solitude with Denver and the ghost of her murdered infant daughter, Beloved. The arrival of Paul D eighteen years later presages the ghost's departure and Sethe's emotional healing as their narratives interweave and they make their stories one.

Beloved focuses on women who bear the burden of entire culture. Rafael Perez-Torres feels that "*a sense of self emerges from experiences of exploitation, marginalization, and denial.*" The barriers

and burdens placed on the women are the focus of their lives. The ghost of the past, Beloved as Sethe calls her is Sethe's guilt of her past murder of her own child and it acts like a dragon darting out of darkness making her remember the past. Sethe and Denver's inner strength is shown when how they grow beyond these barriers. The inner struggles that posed on women after slavery heal with time and memory. While Morrison's other novels deal more with the outward appearance and struggle and damages inner character, *Beloved* deals more with the internal struggles of Sethe who how tries to rebuild her life with the consolation from Beloved and support from Denver and Paul D. Familial relationships in the novel are torn by the rigidity of slavery where children are separated from parents. Sethe's mother is not with her because of slavery which ultimately leads her to loss of self.

Hysteria, a type of neurosis disease is most common in women due to depression and it was common in European and American societies during the slave period due to oppression. Emma Parker in "History and Hysteria in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" analyses "hysteria as a psychic disorder. It is a product of a traumatic event from consciousness". Beloved exhibits hysterical behaviour with her demanding love from her mother. Sethe confirms her hysteric behaviour through attacking white liberal man, Edward Bodwin. It serves as a cure to the past traumatic memories of Sethe and the disappearance of Beloved.

Women are under the burden of patriarchy and slavery. They are trying to manifest the subjective consciousness by struggling hard to cope with their free and individual self. Issues of family, identity and possession are explored by Morrison

in a world where slavery is obvious. As Sethe points out that freeing oneself is different from claiming ownership of that freed self. People are objectified in the slave market. The brutality of slavery has two effects on motherhood: some women lost their children or they were separated and some wanted to save the children by brutally murdering them. Sethe Suggs wanted to safeguard her children against slavery. Her motherly instinct in her personality wanted to save her children from the shackles of slavery bringing devastating effect on them. The impacts of slavery affects the family more as the men are absent from the families. Morrison repeatedly presents those houses which are run by women alone. Sethe, by the end of the novel presents herself to the power as well as desire of Beloved. They shared recognition between the self and the other. In each other, they find the power and the desire of each other. This power unites her with the motherly love with Beloved. Toni Morrison presents such a powerful mother, Sethe through the chaos of slavery existed in black culture.

Theme in connection to women has been redefined by Morrison through Sethe that is *"how women negotiate or mediate between their nurturing compulsion to love the other, the thing that's bigger or better than they are in their lives — husband, children, work — and the other part, which is the individual separate self that has separate obligations."* (Beloved) In the institution of slavery, motherhood had rescued her from the sense of guilt, madness and melancholy. She took refuge in love for her children, Beloved and Denver. She tentatively and excitedly acknowledged the ego that Paul D returns to nurture – *"Me? Me?"*. The struggle to live in an inhuman system of slavery that

breeds children causes inhuman choices. Motherhood for women like Sethe's Ma'am, *"some children must be discarded, flung overboard or crudely aborted"*. For Ella, nature mercifully quenches the light within the *"white hairy thing"*, the freakish offspring of a monstrous multiple sexual assault. For Baby Suggs, slavery itself gobbles up offspring, selling some and chasing others with dogs and lashes. Sethe had to survive with inner strength to flee toward the spiritual all-mother who encourages her to find the grace to love herself.

Sethe is *"iron-willed woman"* even when she was haunted by the ghost and the memories of slave life. When she had a physical brutality of schoolteacher's nephews, she asserts her humanity through her determination to reach freedom and to give her children a free life. Her escape from Sweet Home demonstrates her will power to overcome all impossible circumstances and portrays her extreme measures that she takes her children from becoming slaves. Her ambiguous relationship with her mother, as one of her children and the only surviving children allowed to live was Sethe, made her internal struggle and she was unsure of even whether her mother was hanged because of the suspicion of escaping from the plantation abandoning Sethe. She made sure that she never wanted to leave her children too like that. For Sethe, it is easier to lose her daughter to death than it is for her to see Beloved suffer in this world. It did not seem right to live in a world where they were nameless and faceless to white society. Morrison describes this state as being *"dismembered and unaccounted for"* (Morrison 1987: 323).

*"Ever since he showed that newspaper clipping to Paul D and learned*

that he moved out of 124 that very day, Stamp felt uneasy....He had insisted on privacy during the revelation at the slaughter yard – now he wondered whom he was protecting.” (Beloved, 199). When Stamp held out the newspaper clipping, it reveals the truth behind the killing of Sethe’s child.

“Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and solitary life.” (Beloved 204). Babby Suggs had lived twenty eight days of happy days with Sethe. After her demise, she felt lonely in 124 with Denver. The house was haunted and nobody wanted to take a visit and her two sons fled. “Anybody feeling sorry for her, anybody wandering by to peep in and see how she was getting on (including Paul D) would discover that the woman junk heaped for the third time because she loved her children – that woman was sailing happily on a frozen creek.” (Beloved, 205) Because everyone around her always seems to want to know what she’s doing and how her life is going, Sethe wanted to show them that she is happy. She did not want anyone to feel sorry for her, so even if she really was not happy, she wanted everyone around her to think that she is so that they won’t talk about her. It shows her revealing mental strength and hiding her inner struggle to the society.

For Morrison’s women, “Sexuality is the reward and burden of their gender. She describes Paul D’s effect on females in the following way: “Strong women and wise saw him and told him things they only told each other: that way past the Change of Life, desire in them had suddenly become enormous, greedy, more savage than when they were fifteen, and that it embarrassed them and made them sad; that secretly they longed to die — to be quit of it — that

sleep was more precious to them than any waking day.” Post slave era women were well deserved except the indiscriminate breeding, unsatisfactory mates and children sold before mothers could return home to wave goodbye. Women felt that revival of their desires after the menopause.

Ma’am is an elusive role model whom Sethe never fully knew is excluded from this life cycle of virginity, puberty, loss of virginity, childbearing, menopause and death. The artificiality of the slave lifestyle bears with it the power to deprive them of this life cycle at any stage. The situation shared with men is when they hang from the trees of Sweet Home. Suffering of procreation for women is linked to witnessing the children being forced into the slave milieu and knowing well that children will have no choice but to go on producing man power slave roles to work in plantations. Women were considered to be stock breeding man power to work under white master as Garner considers them.

The bittersweet love between Sethe and her lost little girl forms the crux, the burden that overloads the scarred back, already laden with its metaphoric chokecherry tree. Sethe, the equivalent of Homer’s amazon, remains in control in most situations — enough to stun Here Boy, set his broken legs, and force his eye back into the socket. The likelihood that any female could survive sexual abuse, lashing, thirst, hunger, and childbirth, yet continue to form milk in her breasts, defies scientific evidence. The fact that Sethe accomplishes all this and more, is Morrison’s tribute to her determination. Obsessed by the chokecherry tree, Sethe refuses to vacate the house that enslaves her to the nightmare of her dead infant. She wrestles the embodiment of her guilt

to a truce so strong, so enduring that a second buggy in the yard resurrects the image of deadly spite that thwarted schoolteacher 18 years earlier.

It is fitting that a woman strong enough to crawl through woods so that she could give birth in a canoe would spawn a girl as resolute and resourceful as Denver. Although Denver is more inward and more manipulative than her confrontational mother, she recognizes the moment when Sethe is no longer mistress of the house, when the next generation must venture down the plank road to pursue food, solace, and steady work. Even more determined than Denver is Beloved, the whirlwind force that belabors a household for 18 years, exiles two strong brothers, and edges her forthright mother to the brink of madness. Such a threesome does honor to Baby Suggs, the matriarch, whose love sheltered an entire black neighborhood and whose memory comforts and sustains them all.

There is a sense of the sisterhood still found in African American culture today as the women in the community band together to exercise the ghost of Beloved from Sethe's house. It is this camaraderie that helps Sethe heal as an individual and strengthens the black community. In contrast, Paul D and Beloved clash because Beloved sees this male presence as a threat as does her sister, Denver. Both Beloved and Denver want their mother to themselves, furthering the idea that black women stick together while black men are seen as untrustworthy. Paul D does not like Beloved either because he feels isolated from the bond that the women share. However, he lets Beloved seduce him, thereby proving to Sethe and Denver that men cannot be trusted.

Paul D experiences the spirit and physical being of Beloved. His first encounter of her spirit is when he is invited into 124, and feels her spirit about the house. (*"Girl, what kind of evil you got in there?"*) His first instinct of Beloved is directly evil, which the nature of her spirit is. Also once he starts to seduce Sethe in the kitchen, Beloved rouses the spirit of the house which causes Paul D to scream and curse her out of the house. Paul D began to advance to Sethe which made Beloved more furious and ruckus and his encounter with the ghost of Beloved and his challenge against the spirit prompted her to take human form. With this transformation, the unraveling of unfortunate events commences and develops throughout all the characters, with Beloved as the catalyst.

Beloved is a spirit and her view of tangible world is elusive and harder that she tries to hold and control it but seems to slip out of reality of death. Her deliberately expresses her wish to be a part of Sethe's world through her monologue *"She's mine leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing."* (Beloved, 124). The interference of supernatural world into human world appears through her reincarnation of real baby again *"A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to*

*crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all.”(Beloved, 132).* When Sethe sees her for the first time, she has the water breaking<sup>c</sup> sensation, as she has to urinate immensely. *“And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. She said, “Oh, excuse me,” and ran around to the back of 124.”* This immediate connection between the two characters is the start of an elaborate, loving, and selfish relationship.

Beloved exhibits a strong desire of captivity in Sethe and she would throw tantrum. Her mannerisms, speech and attitude towards everyone reflect the characteristics of an immature young child. Her physical characteristics that reflect the actions of an infant and even an animal amuse Denver and Sethe. *“She gnawed a cane stick to flax and kept the strings in her mouth long after the syrup had been sucked away.”(Beloved, 66)*

She is in the facade of an innocent baby in the eyes of Paul D but her evil lies in the way she distorts into a character of complex identity coloured by her Vulnerable character with Denver and Sethe but Sethe recognizes her original composition exclusively meant for her children alone. Her true identity reveals through her emotionally unstable and bipolar personality when she did not respond to the advances of Paul D and Denver but her true intentions are only with Sethe is revealed through *“She is the laugh I am the laughter I see her face which is mine”*(Beloved, 251). The conflicts are produced within all characters such as Denver, Ella, Paul D, Stamp Paid and Sothe through her selfish nature to drain the life out of Sethe. *“Don't tell me*

*what to do. Don't you never never tell me what to do. She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have.”(Beloved, 8)*

Beloved is a universal symbol of loneliness. Her dual persona has crippled man relationships in the characters. The mother-daughter relationship that she longed for fulfilled Sethe's loneliness temporarily despite of her painful past. Denver's loneliness is also filled with the presence of her friend and little sister. Her character grows as she could associate with Beloved. Paul D's loneliness was much affected even more by the coming of Beloved. With her return, he lost hope in everything he had aspired for and his heart had been healed by Sethe.

Beloved's suffering in the slave ship is symbolic of slavery and longingness in all the slaves for their freedom and motherland. Slavery and “captivity” is symbolized through Beloved's return and her soliloquy illustrates the slave ship journey across the Atlantic, a part of “alternate world”. Deepest desire for freedom from captivity of the millions of slaves and physical and emotional hurt is expressed through Beloved's yearning to see the light in her mother's love(Sethe). The bizarre memories and images recounted by Beloved are actually illustrations of the historical aspects of slavery, such as the conditions in the slave ship. *“the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing”*(Beloved, 29).

Beloved's moral center lies in selfish, narrow-minded, skewed by ultimate goals of youth and obsessive love for her

mother, Sethe. It creates a dynamic and parasitic character that only strives for the poisonous mutual love of mother and daughter. It builds an appealing distinctiveness. She disregards the fact that Sethe “didn’t want her”, overcomes the negative aspects and builds a strong mother-daughter relationship. Her growth slowly becomes a parasitic lover who feeds off the energy and life of her mother and look out for selfish desires as she must be exorcised out of 124.

Beloved’s identity as destructive force, animal-like stranger to the residents of 124 inflicted the most of the characters by hurting them and not physically benefitted any of the fellow characters on a long term scale. They all mutually agree on trying to exorcise Beloved from 124. She affects all the surrounding characters and even the townsfolk throughout her stay at the house. The haunting of Beloved’s supernatural spirit is projected as a destructive nature first witnessed by Howard and Buglar by throwing the household items with strange noises. Sethe’s sons are frightened by the presence of Beloved as they become aware of Beloved’s murder by Sethe and eventually run in fear to meet the same fate.

Denver being lonely and dependent character holds on to the spirit of Beloved to feel her self-esteem. She clings on to Beloved to experience the fully independent, young black woman. She is bit obsessed with Beloved when Sethe steals away the attention and care that duly she receives. Denver is hurt as a true friend and loving sister when she could care less for her. (*“Don’t tell me what to do. Don’t you never never tell me what to do. She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have.”* (Beloved, 89)

Beloved represents the destructive power on secondary characters like Stamp Paid and Ella. Beloved’s reckless actions are due to the resentment of Sethe for killing her child. Paid felt the evil presence of the ghost, Beloved and dares not to enter the house. Ella’s relationship in perspective with Beloved creates a parallel with the theme of moral ambiguity: a relationship between people can transform and distort because of a wavering moral values. Beloved’s role in the novel connects the human world with supernatural world.

The trinity relationship between Beloved, Sethe and Denver is broken by her destructive force. She destroyed the potential family due to her stubborn nature but her intentions are fair. Her motives are selfish that contradicts her purely innocent nature. Her maturity lies in the growth and betterment of other character by helping them in realizing their true identities.

The conflict between the human world and supernatural world is clearly brought out through the townsfolk’s plan to expel Beloved from their lives. The resolution of Ella to exorcise Beloved through many other black women is the raise of human world and power through awakening of their identities. Those in the town no longer feel Beloved’s presence; especially Paul D, as he returns to 124 to nurse her back to health. The townsfolk try to forget about her, and realize that her presence was a symbol of universal loneliness and suffering. Eventually many of the townsfolk cannot truly say Beloved was ever really “there”.

*“Two paces onto the creek, she lost her balance and landed on her behind”.* This sentence is a representation of Sethe’s life. The two paces are Beloved and Paul D, both who come into her life and bring



her happiness. However, she is unable to balance her love to please the both of them. The landing on her behind serves as her returning to the feelings she once felt – loneliness and desire for affection - before Beloved and Paul D entered her life.

In an interview, Morrison states that “All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored; no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, no in the United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace...so it’s like a whole nation that is under the sea. A nameless violent extermination... with Beloved, I am trying to insert this memory that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature. Not only to write about a woman who did what Sethe did, but to have the ghost of the daughter return as a remnant of a period that was unspoken. It was a silence within the race. So it’s a kind of healing experience. There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back and deal with them. Memory has a dual function. On the one hand, to remember painful periods generates suffering. But on the other hand, remembering has a healing quality; suffering provides information and ultimately offers self-knowledge.” (<https://belovedcriticaledition.wordpress.com/background/>)

## Conclusion

Beloved’s presence is the rebirth for Sethe to grow more stronger, to be a wiser woman against the trauma in the black community. The ghost of Beloved is the outward representation of Sethe’s inward retrospective. Awakening the ability to be individuals and feeling truly empowered

after shaking the ghost of a dehumanizing history in the black society is brought out to the true essence. Self awareness is attained through the women’s denial in the society. Feeling of community living, sisterhood and familial bonds helped Sethe to overcome the trauma of the past. Beloved is the guardian angel for Sethe and she exhibited true power through supernatural ways. Sethe undoubtedly recovered from the trauma of the past through her guidance.

The true spirit of womanhood is brought out in Sethe through her relationship with Beloved. Beloved is truly enduring daughter who through creative and destructive means empower women like Sethe and Denver. She lashes out to men who subjugate women under the patriarchy system. Being a slave to her love for her mother and craving for relationships in the novel, she raises women from the dominance of slavery. She becomes an adorable spirit who wants to transform herself into human to dive deep into the love of her mother. She is the guardian angel and the guiding spirit who interests everyone to relish the character of Sethe and other characters as well.

The spiritual guidance rendered by Beloved to other characters in the novel through supernatural elements strengthened the bonding of mother-daughter relationship. The guardian angel is destructive as well as protective as she awakens herself with the power to awaken other characters through self-realization. Women empowerment is exemplified through sisterhood comfort rendered by Beloved.

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