

BELOVED: SHOWING THE DEHUMANIZING EFFECT OF SLAVERY ON SETHE

Bülent Cercis TANRITANIR*
Özcan AKŞAK**

Abstract : Black literature in the United States portrays experience and history of African Americans. In *Beloved* Morrison shows the physical and psychological effects slavery has on an African American women.

In *Beloved* Morrison takes a real life event from African American history and gives special importance to the horrors and tortures of slavery to remind the reader about the past.

Beloved is based on a real life story of the slave Margaret Garner. On Jan. 28, 1856, Garner killed her two-year old daughter and attempted to kill her other two children just because she didn't want her children to be send to the plantation where they worked.

Morrison thinks that the horrible issues related to slavery are avoided and forgotten in the traditional slave narratives; therefore, Morrison wants to emphasize the painful and forgotten aspects of slavery. Morrison's novels force its reader to recognize the existence and conditions of slavery in a nation that would prefer to forget that such a crime was ever committed. This paper intends to show that Morrison focuses on the brutal and dehumanizing aspects of slavery in order to effect the reader and the community in such a way that slave history should not be forgotten.

Key Words : Black literature, Morrison, slavery, *Beloved*

Black literature gained momentum in the nineteenth century and most printed black literature consisted of slave narratives. These narratives showed true stories of slaves' escapes to free states or countries. These stories were mainly published by white abolitionists to educate whites about the evils of slavery. Toni Morrison is a black African American novelist of 20 th. century whose novels show and record the history of African American going back to the early time of 19 th. century. Harriet Jacobson's and Frederick Turner's diaries could be regarded as the most notable having this mission.

Toni Morrison has written a historical trilogy *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*. *Beloved* deals with the ills of slavery, *Jazz* continues this exploration into the 1920s, and *Paradise* extends the examination of history into the 1970s. In this respect Morrison's novels have been a major contribution to black literature in the historical process.

* Y.Doç.Dr. Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı ABD.

** Okutman, Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, Yabancı Diller Eğitimi ABD.

Henderson notes that Morrison is among the writers who tried to show what happened to African Americans in the past and tries to show what has been forgotten or is being silenced:

Yet, in many respects, these writers were limited in their efforts to fully depict the physical and psychological suffering of African American people...Toni Morrison seeks to signify on those silences imposed by publishers and editors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, Williams and Morrison extend the efforts of their predecessors by developing creative responses to those calls centered on the wounds of the African American body.¹

In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison intended to show the reader what happened to slaves working in an institutionalized slave system. In *Beloved* the slaves working on Sweet Home experience violence, brutality, and are treated like animals. In the novel, the character who is mostly affected of slavery's severe conditions is Sethe. Sethe gets tortured, raped and mistreated. As a result, Sethe attempts to run away from Sweet Home and later she is driven to kill her two-year-old baby.

Morrison shows us what it means to live as a slave and what destructions have been brought to lives of slaves in this work. In *Beloved*, Morrison sheds light the painful past of African Americans and reveals the buried experiences for a better understanding of African American history. *Beloved* is a real life story, an event from African American history where special importance has been given to the horrors and tortures of slavery has been given in order to remind the reader about the past. In *Beloved* Morrison reinvents the past and wants the reader not to forget what happened in African American history:

Morrison's critically acclaimed novel Beloved probes the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery, by way of what she has called "rememory" -- deliberately reconstructing what has been forgotten.²

Morrison tries to represent the history of African Americans from her own perspective drawing attention to what slavery can do to individuals and their families:

¹ Henderson, Carol E. *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002.p. 12

² Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press, 1998 p. 115

Beloved represents a working out of subjectivity through the representation of history, a history so brutal and dehumanizing that it is unrepresentable, a depiction of community, which is often torn apart by the circumstances of slavery, and a construction of identity.³

Morrison believes that African American history is distorted and romanticized. Spargo cites Morrison's ideas about African American history:

*We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.*⁴

Also in Holden-Kirwan's article it is stated that in an interview with Bonnie Angelo of Time magazine, Toni Morrison discussed the desire of the American nation to repress the memory of slavery. According to Morrison, the enslavement of Africans and African Americans in the United States is something that the characters in *Beloved* don't want to remember. In the article Morrison notes that, "I [Morrison] don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember"⁵. Because of this unwillingness to remember, Morrison's novels lead its reader to remember the conditions of slavery in a nation preferring to forget that a crime like slavery was ever committed.

The novel is set twelve years after the end of the American Civil War. There are nine slaves that work on Sweet Home: Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs and her grown son Halle, and other five slaves. Although all the slaves on Sweet Home are affected by slavery, in the first place, it is Sethe that has to endure and suffer the most pain. Sethe got raped and whipped by schoolteacher's nephews and she was treated in such a cruel way that she ultimately was driven to kill her two year old daughter.

Sethe's story is based on the real life story of the slave *Margaret Garner*. On Jan. 28, 1856, Garner killed her two-year-old daughter rather than have her sent back to slavery due to the fugitive slave law. Garner was later found guilty

³ Fuston-White, Jeanna. "From the Seen to the Told": The Construction of Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". *African American Review* 36 (2002): 461-473.

⁴ Spargo, R. Clifton. "Trauma and the Specters of Enslavement in Morrison's *Beloved*." *Mosaic* (Winnipeg) 35 (2002):113-119.

⁵ Holden-Kirwan, Jeniffer L. "Looking into the Self that is No Self: An Examination fo Subjectivity in *Beloved*", *African American Review* 32 (1998): p. 445

and sent back to the plantation she fled in Mississippi. Since the event is a real life event, it provides good evidence and a good occasion for Morrison to base her novel on.

The story of the novel begins when Paul D, a former slave in Sweet Home, comes to visit Sethe after many years. Sethe and Paul D have not seen each other for eighteen years during which they have tried to bury and suppress their memories of enslavement and its effects. We get information about the past events when Paul D and Sethe talk about their commonly shared past on Sweet Home.

The owners of Sweet Home are Mr. and Mrs. Garner. In general the Garners represent a milder form of white supremacy. The Garners treated their slaves with respect. They asked their slaves for their ideas and allowed them to use rifles for hunting. The slaves on Sweet Home did not have legal or social rights, but the Garners allow them many privileges, "Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces"⁶. Sweet Home was a good place for the slaves when the plantation was run by Mr. and Mrs. Garner. However after Mr. Garner's death, Mrs. Garner invites the schoolteacher and his two nephews to live with her and manage the farm.

Schoolteacher is an educated person but he is very cruel. Schoolteacher uses all the means of conventional slavery on the slaves of the plantation. He introduces whipping, torture, humiliation and he dehumanizes slaves. In *Beloved* schoolteacher is a representative of white supremacy. Changes on Sweet Home started with schoolteacher's disapproval of the way the slaves ate and the way they rested: "He complained they ate too much, rested too much, talked too much, which was certainly true compared to him, because schoolteacher ate little, spoke less and rested not at all"⁷. Schoolteacher's attitude on the slaves is going to have incalculable effects on Sethe as the story in the novel unfolds. His violence in Sweet Home leads to rebellion, madness, and to death of slaves:

*In Beloved, Schoolteacher is clearly the primary representative and agent of the system of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy in the era of slavery. His interpellations of Sethe, Paul D, Sixo, and Halle lead to rebellion, madness, and death*⁸.

As the result of schoolteacher's cruel attitude, the slaves on Sweet Home decide to run away. Sethe is pregnant and she had sent her two-year-old

⁶ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage International, 2004 p. 259

⁷ Ibid, p. 259

⁸ Keizer, Arlene R. "Beloved: Ideologies in Conflict, Improvised Subjects." *African American Review* 33 (1999): 105-123.

daughter and her two older sons ahead with some of the other slaves, when her husband Halle does not arrive to meet them at the place where they decided to meet. Sethe decides to stay behind to look for Halle, but she was caught by schoolteacher's nephews who held her down and raped her and sucked milk from her breasts.

Later schoolteacher discovers that Sethe told Mrs. Garner about this incident. He orders his nephews to whip Sethe. The whipping of Sethe opens the skin of her back. "Schoolteacher's nephew represents a dismissal by whites of the dehumanizing qualities of slavery"⁹. When Sethe is raped, schoolteacher observed how her body is exploited. His misuse of slaves will lead to the tragedy of Sethe and her family. Suero Elliott notes that the abuse and the cruel treatment of Sethe's body is definitely used not only to show the cruelty of schoolteacher, but also his pervasive inclinations:

For Sethe, the fetishization of her body by the white schoolteacher and his nephews causes psychic fragmentation that continues to thwart the development of her subjectivity after she leaves slavery. Sethe's personhood, as it has been allowed to exist under slavery, is reduced further to animality.¹⁰

The scars on Sethe's back are so many that they resemble the trunk of a tree with its branches. Sethe bear scars on her back because she was whipped due to her try of escape. Amy Denver, a white girl that helped Sethe when she was running away from Sweet Home, calls the tree a chokecherry tree. The tree image indicates that she has been wiped so much that the scar looks like a tree with its crowded branches. However when Sethe talks with Paul D, she mentions the scars on her back, but she does not talk about the pain she had to endure." But that's what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves"¹¹.

In the novel, we see that what mostly affected Sethe was not the pain and dehumanization she had to feel, but for her the stolen milk was important. At the time Sethe got whipped she was pregnant and that is why she had milk in her breasts. In the novel Sethe did not mention or talk about the pain she had to endure, but she mainly focused on the milk that had been taken from her which is vital to feed her baby:

⁹ Fuston-White, Jeanna. "From the Seen to the Told": The Construction of Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *African American Review* 36 (2002): p. 461

¹⁰ Suero Elliott, Mary Jane. "Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *MELUS* (2000):p, 185

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 18

*They used cowhide on you?
And they took my milk.
They beat you and you were pregnant?
And they took my milk!*¹²

She expresses her deep grief, as follows:

*Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby*¹³.

The effect of taking Sethe's milk is mentioned by Sethe many times. Bonnet notes that taking Sethe's milk from her is the violation of the bond between mother and child. The effect of slavery of slavery does not only cause physical pain to Sethe but also violates the feelings to her children:

*The robbing of Sethe's milk, which is so often evoked in the narrative and referred to as what she owns and as her children's very life, is thus the materialization of the fundamental perversity of the institution which kills the slaves' selves by severing the bonds between mother and child*¹⁴.

Sethe's milk has become a symbol of love and devotion she has for her children. Then, sacrificing one of her children signifies a tragic twist in her disposition, so much so that she loses her ties with her natural self and becomes emptied of her vitality, like the tree shape on her back she will be drained off her life-force. The following description of Sethe show that because of her mistreatment Sethe has physically and spiritually come on the brink of exhaustion. Sethe's vitality as a result of rape and wiping has gradually disappeared:

*The schoolteacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight.*¹⁵

¹² Ibid, p. 20

¹³ Ibid, p. 236

¹⁴ Bonnet, Michael. "To Take the Sin out of Slicing Trees ...": The Law of the Tree in 'Beloved' ". *African American Review* 31 (1997): p. 49

¹⁵ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage International, 2004, p. 11

After Sethe is mistreated, she runs away from Sweet Home. On the way she gives birth to her daughter Denver. Sethe reached her mother in law's home with her newborn infant and is relieved to be reunited with her other three children. After a short period, Schoolteacher, one of his nephews, the sheriff, and a slave catcher arrive to bring Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home.

When schoolteacher arrives to take Sethe back, Sethe takes her children quickly into a shed and attempts to murder them, rather than allowing them to live their lives in slavery like her. Both her mother in law and Stamp Paid stood in the yard behind the house, frozen in terror. She killed her two-year-old daughter. She would have cut her daughter's throat, and also attempted to kill Denver, if Stamp Paid had not caught the baby as Sethe swung her against the wall. The two boys were also severely beaten on their heads with a shovel. The last scene of this horrible incident is depicted as follows: "Two were lying open-eyed in saw dust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one-- ..."¹⁶

The act of killing her own child is at first not easy to understand and to be justified; however, the circumstances in which Sethe had to live and the brutality that she had endured as a slave on Sweet Home have driven her to commit infanticide which is perhaps one of the worst things a mother can do to her child. However, Sethe's fear of slavery and its effect was so terrible that she did not want her children to experience the same difficulties. Fuston-White stated that it was not Sethe that killed her child, but it was the effect of slavery that caused Sethe to commit the crime: "It was not madness, but the reality of slavery, that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality, as well as its compassion"¹⁷.

After this horrible event, Howard and Buglar were nursed back to health by their grandmother. Sethe was sent to jail to await her trial for the murder. Since Denver was still a suckling infant, she went to jail with her mother. The Bodwins, a family in the novel who support the abolition of slavery, used their influence they had in Cincinnati to ensure Sethe's imprisonment, rather than the death sentence and they were successful.

After her imprisonment, Sethe and Denver return to Baby Suggs' home, on 124 Bluestone Road. Life after Sethe's imprisonment is also difficult for her. Because she has to confront social isolation, her past memories make life harder for her, and she feels guilty. In Sethe's new environment, because they don't approve of Sethe's infanticide. For them Sethe's act was wrong. Later when Paul D comes to live with them, Sethe mentions "For twelve years, long before

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 176

¹⁷ Fuston-White, Jeanna. "From the Seen to the Told": The Construction of Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *African American Review* 36 (2002): p. 461

Grandma Baby died there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends”¹⁸.

A great part of Sethe’s main problems after escape from Sweet are related to her past memories. Sethe’s past greatly influence her daily life. Her conversation with Paul D indicates that she has suffered much and that she is still suffering from the pain that is caused by her past. We can see that for Sethe the present is mostly a struggle, because the memories at Sweet Home were too painful for her to recall consciously. Now Sethe’s life merely consists of, *keeping the past at bay*. “To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay”¹⁹. Sethe constantly struggles to forget her past and the pain it causes her. She gradually gets exhausted from living in the present and life becomes unbearable for her. She mentions this at the beginning of the novel when she is talking with Paul D. “I will never run from another thing on this earth ... No more running—from nothing”²⁰.

In 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe finds that the spirit of her killed daughter moves around in the house. However, when Paul D comes to stay with Sethe and Denver, he manages to send the spirit out of the house. After some time, when Sethe, Paul D, and Denver come home they see a girl in front of their house. She looks very young and behaves like a baby. She does not walk like a person of her age, but much younger. Her speech is impaired, and she does not full control over her bodily functions. This young girl seems to represent an infant. She says that her name is Beloved. This girl symbolically represents Sethe’s dead daughter.

Sethe feels guilty of killing her daughter. She constantly feels the desire to tell Beloved about the reason she has killed her and her feeling of regret. Sethe knows that she has had to pay a very high price to protect her child, “I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: It cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much...”²¹ Sethe intends to explain her reason of her horrible act to Beloved, “How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she’ll understand, because she understands everything already”²².

Her feelings as a mother are so intense that she even desired to get together with her daughter into the grave, but she mentions that she could not do this, because she had to look after her remaining children Burglar and Howard

¹⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage International, 2004 p. 14

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 51

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 18

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 18

²² *Ibid*, p. 236

and also because of her husband Halle. In the following excerpt we can see how hard it was for Sethe to be separated by her only daughter:

*When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Burglar and Howard and Denver didn't need me, because my mind was homeless then. I couldn't lay down with you then.*²³

Sethe states also that to live in peace is impossible after killing her daughter. We can see that the regret and disappointment and the memories of killing her daughter have ever since haunted her: "No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back then"²⁴.

However, by taking the life of her daughter, she intended to save her daughter from slavery's horrors and brutalities. She says that by killing her daughter she has put her in a safe and secure place. "I stopped him, she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe"²⁵.

Sethe's relation with Paul D also is affected by her past. Sethe and Paul D had built a relation in which they shared a mutual past and a close connection to unite their lives. However, Sethe's memories become an obstacle to her relation as well. Sethe thinks that before a love relation, she has other responsibilities. Her love relation with Paul D has to come in the last place. "I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love"²⁶.

In the novel, we can also see that besides the pain and suffering of her killed child and of her own physical mistreatment, Sethe also has bad memories with her mother. "Sethe is haunted by the knowledge that her mother was hanged"²⁷. When Sethe and Denver talk, Denver asks about Sethe's mother, but Sethe does not know much to say to Denver about her mother. The following conversation shows that the past of their ancestors have also been painful. It is as if death and cruelty passed on like something routine to Sethe. From the lines below, we learn that Sethe's mother had been hung and she never knew why it happened to her:

²³ Ibid, p. 241

²⁴ Ibid, p. 241

²⁵ Ibid, p. 193

²⁶ Ibid, p. 83

²⁷ Koolish, Lynda. "To Be Loved and Cry Shame": A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *MELUS* 26 (2001): p. 183

*What happened to her?
Hung. By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether
she
had a circle and a cross or not, ...”
Why they hang your ma’am? Denver asked.”
I never found out. It was a lot of them.²⁸*

Sethe’s husband Halle also got ruined as a result of slavery. In the novel it is implied that Halle went mad after had had seen what happened to his wife Sethe. The helplessness of Halle over the situation of Sethe has had such an affect on him that he lost his mind. Paul D describes Halle’s situation as follows when he saw him with butter all over his face:

*I broke him, Sethe. Paul D looked up at her and sighed. You may
as well know it all. Last time I saw him he was sitting by the
churn. He had butter all over his face²⁹.*

In *Beloved*, Morrison intends to show the reader what happens to individuals in an institutionalized slave system in which African Americans had to live in the past. Narrating the story of Sethe, Morrison focuses on the dehumanizing effect of slavery by emphasizing sufferings of slaves. The novel shows us what happened to Sethe, her family and other slaves working on the plantation. We saw that Sethe was mistreated and raped. After she tried to escape from the plantation, she killed her baby and attempted to kill the rest of her children. Her husband went mad and other slaves had unfortunate lives. After killing her baby, Sethe continued to suffer. She felt regretful and pain had to live an isolated life for a long time in the black community. At the end of the novel Sethe became mentally and spiritually exhausted and had no energy left to live a meaningful life. As a conclusion, it is very obvious in the novel that slavery threatens the psychology and spiritual world of individuals and causes horrific and brutal consequences.

²⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage International, 2004 p. 73

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 82

Özet : Amerikadaki zenci edebiyatı, Afrika kökenli Amerikalıların deneyimlerini ve tarihlerini göz önüne serer. Morrison, *Beloved* romanında köleliğin Afrika kökenli amerikalı bir kadının üzerindeki fiziksel ve psikolojik etkilerini gözler önüne serer.

Morrison, *Beloved* romanında Afrika kökenli amerikalıların tarihinden gerçek bir yaşam öyküsü alır ve geçmişteki köleliğin acılarını ve işkenceleri anlatılmaya özel bir önem verir. *Beloved*, Margaret Garner adlı bir kölenin gerçek yaşam öyküsüne dayanır. 28 Ocak 1856’ de Garner iki yaşındaki kızını öldürür ve diğer iki çocuğunu da öldürmeye teşebbüs eder, çünkü çocuklarının çalıştıkları çiftliğe geri götürülmelerini istememektedir.

Morrison, kölelik ile ilgili korkunç olayların geleneksel kölelik yazınlarında anlatılmasından kaçınıldığını ve unutulduğunu düşünmektedir, bundan dolayı Morrison kölelikle ilgili acı ve unutulmuş yönleri vurgulamak istemektedir. Morrison’un romanları okuyucusunu, işlenen cinayetlerin unutulmasını yeğleyen bir ulus içinde, kölelik varlığının ve şartlarının farkında olunmasına zorlamaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, Morrison’un köleliğin vahşi ve insan dışı yönlerine odaklanarak okuyucuyu ve toplumu kölelik tarihinin unutulmaması yönünde etkilemek olduğunu göstermektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Zenci Edebiyatı, Morrison, kölecilik, *Beloved*

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