

THE PLIGHT OF A SLAVE WOMAN AND THE IMPACT OF SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Manohar M, Assistant Professor, Chinmaya Independent College, Chokkahali, Kolar, Karnataka

Abstract:

African American writers are notable mainly for their distinctive portrayal of characters in a realistic manner. Slavery is one of the main discussed issues in it. Many slave narrative writers also depicted the mental trauma of slaves and their predicaments under the cruel administration of white owners; A Few prominent slave narrative writers were Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup, etc. In all of their oeuvre, the brutality of Servitude could be noticed and even in Tony Morrison's novel "Beloved".

This article aims to explore the white owner's harsh treatment on black slaves and the intense agony of oppressed people. The horror of slavery makes a young mother Sethe to murder her own child. The article not only focuses on the victims of slavery but also lights on the plight of a slave woman even after the American Civil Rights Movement. The author is successfully able to portray the life of an African slave victim under the rule of white owners.

Keywords: *Servitude, Paranormal activity, Oeuvre.*

Preamble

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, essayist, editor, teacher and professor emeritus at Princeton University. She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved* (1987). In the novel "Beloved", the author portrayed the plight of a slave woman and her never-ending woes even after the freedom from Servitude.

In the 17th century, there was a great rift between the black servants and the white owners in Africa due to the practice of Slavery. According to the law of Virginia in 1662, the black folk were restricted to remain as servants throughout their lifetime. This law irked black people who protested against the Supremacy of white society. Their demand was to abolish the practice of Slavery which was detrimental to their whole community. The Black people were treated in an ill-manner by the white owners. In brief, Servitude was a mental and physical abuse to the native blacks.

Racial discrimination

The Black slaves were feckless and timid due to the authoritative ways of white men. They failed to interrogate the white people about their ill-treatment. The complexion of blacks had reduced their confidence level and they decided to do hard labor throughout their life without having any logical perception. Racial discrimination had made native Africans as the victims of slavery. The inferiority complex of Black people was the main reason for white people to rule and administrate.

In this novel, Toni Morrison has specified the inhuman activities of white owners on black slaves and its impact on their social and economic conditions. Apart from this, White owners of the land not only occupied the lands illegally but also took control of black people as their slaves by bonding them. Racial discrimination made black people feeble both physically and mentally. Many slaves tried to escape from slavery but only a few were succeeded in the process. In this novel, Sethe who was also a slave woman manages to escape from slavery along with her children. Overall, Racial discrimination had become a foundation stone for the white people to establish their dominance on the black people in all possible ways.

Types of Slavery

Household and Field hands were the two categories of Slavery. First category slaves used to work in the house of their owner's house whereas field hands job was to toil on the farmland of white owners from morning to late evening. White owners had a big estate and they segregated slaves based on their physical strength. If slaves were thin and fragile, they were sent to perform household chores whereas other slaves were sent to carry out strenuous work in farmlands depending upon their physical strength. In spite of hectic work, there were no proper dwelling places for black slaves to take rest; even white owners had not given any shelter for them.

The main work of slaves was to perform diligent activities which require very much strength. It was mandatory for them to work incessantly from morning to evening without a single day of the holiday. This sort of exertion of their routine work made them consider as inferior to white people. Joel Kovel opines on the barbaric treatment of white owners on black slaves and the dehumanization of slaves. For white people, black people were like working tools to earn money.

First reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange (Kovel, Joel, P.18).

Slavery made black people as mechanical tools as they lost their confidence in leading liberated life. Apart from this, racial discrimination is one of the main reasons for the adversity of black people who remained as the puppets in the hands of white owners.

The Resistance of black people against Servitude

Due to the impact of the American Civil Rights Movement, Unity and Leadership had grown in the community of black people. Martin Luther King followed the non-violence method of protest to oppose racial discrimination. After the 1960s, black people started their own political parties to fight against slavery and to obtain all sorts of liberty. In addition to this, the movement brought noteworthy reforms in the life of black people which extended ample chances of employment, literacy and the right to vote to elect their desirable leader. It played a vital role in the development of black people's propaganda and strategy of their political parties in the 1970s and 1980s. The main purpose of black politics is for the active participation to eradicate racial discrimination from its root level. From these political parties, black people were able to raise their suppressed voice at their parliament.

The Civil movement had deeply influenced even African-American writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, etc. The writer's deep concern and empathic attitude on the eradication of slavery can be noticed in their oeuvre. In this viewpoint, African American literature is gradually receiving scholarly heed for its unique narrative style.

The novel of Morrison focuses on the caressing mother and her endless woes even after liberated life; Sethe's motherly feelings and the influence of the spirit of dead daughter are the highlights of the novel. As the mother did not want her daughter to be a slave girl, she killed her little baby by name Beloved. This distinctly shows the apprehension of the mother about protecting the interests of her family members. Her sole intention was to get rid of slavery and to lead a comfortable life. For her, Slavery was like the worst nightmare.

The novel is mainly laudable for its way of the interpretation of liberation from slavery through the character of Sethe, a slave victim. It is an enriching experience for African readers to know about the safe escape of Sethe from Slavery. The slave victim's action of seclusion from slavery serves as an example and inspiration for the other bonded servants to get rid of slavery just like the former.

The character of Sethe has been portrayed as a highly courageous woman. It is inspired by the real incident of a woman from Ohio who slays her tender infant to safeguard from slavery. The same incidence has been incorporated by the author to realistically exhibit the plight of slave victims and their reticent expression to slavery. The book was not about the institution slavery with a capital S. It was about those

anonymous people called slaves What they do to keep on, how they make a living, what they are willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another - that was incredible to me (Angelo Bonnie P. 48).

The aforesaid opinion of Bonnie reflects the subordinate life of slaves under the cruel administration of the white owners. The critic even surprised by the silence of slaves towards the dominating system of slavery. In their painful life, slaves failed to recognize their true identity and they even lacked awareness about their existence. Throughout the novel, the dreadful face of slavery has been illustrated in the life of Sethe. The story of the novel was adapted from the real-life incident of Margaret Garner, an American slave who managed to escape from the mighty clutches of servitude in Kentucky in 1856.

In this perspective, Servitude has become detrimental to African American slaves due to the white owner's lack of empathy for black slaves. The Slave owner's inhuman actions demeaned the level of the slaves to that of animals. They didn't have any least regard to their loyal workers' exertion. This factor caused a great fissure between them. The life of slaves was at stake because of the domineering nature of their owners.

Life of Sethe after the liberation

Servitude is the main theme of the novel which is also the main concerned point in the African American literature in general. The novel deals with the oppressed community of black people which is set after the American Civil War. The heart-wrenching story unveils agony of the slave victim and how her extreme decision of killing her own child haunts her in the 124 house. In a surrealistic manner, the author depicts the plight of the slave woman even after her life as a liberated woman. In the first part of the novel, the 124 house of Sethe gets haunted by the spirit of a young child. 124 word spiteful. (Morrison, Toni, p.30)

The spirit's paranormal activities also exhibit the inner turmoil of the slave victim who had the feeling of guilt for infanticide. By knowing about the strange happenings in the home, Paul arrives there to witness it as the spirit of a child had created intense fear among the householders in the woodshed. "The house is roaring with the voices of the oppressed, the people of the broken necks of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (Morrison, Toni, p.181).

It reveals the predicaments of the slave victim mother and her pain of womb in the form of the voice of the dead child. These strange incidents evidently showcase the unhealed wounds of slavery and the pathetic condition of the slave victim. From the character of Sethe, the author endeavors to inspire all African slave victims to come out of the bondage of slavery. In this aspect, Sethe's character acts as the representative of African slave victims and as the symbol of liberty.

Despite her escape, Sethe's mind is filled with many unfortunate incidents of her past days as a slave woman. She recalls her painful days after the delivery of her baby. To obtain the breast milk from the pregnant woman, the school teacher's nephews aggressively attacked her and got it forcefully. It is one of the brutal incidents of the cruel white owners and it greatly perturbed her tranquility of mind. This heinous act violates the general rights of human beings and it is a blameworthy action on the humanitarian grounds. Eventually, she struggles to get rid of the psychological and emotional bondage of slavery.

Beloved's claims of motherly affection

After 18 years of the death of Beloved, she returns in flesh and claims the affection of her mother. At her young age itself, she was killed by her mother and this made her remain as an immature girl with childish behavior. Her frivolous activities itself depict her as a young child inwardly but a matured girl physically. She suddenly appeared as a spirit in Sethe's house not to perturb but pervade love with an intention of its reciprocation from her mother. Apart from this, she wanted to know the concealed reason for her murder. Still, Sethe fails to comprehend the real wish of the dead daughter. She misinterpreted the arrival of Beloved as an omen by considering as a ghost that was detrimental to her life. She even speculated about the retaliation of spirit to avenge her tragic death. In this way, the guilt of Sethe has made

her think in many ways.

Conclusion

Albeit many slaves were able to come out of the hellish slavery, the veiled agony remained in the heart and mind of the people. In the case of Sethe also, it happened the same thing. Due to the impact of the Civil rights movement, Sethe along with her children began a new life in the sweet home comfortably. But their happiness of liberation was not retained for a long time as their sweet home was actually a haunted place. The dreadful appearance of Beloved is the evidence of suppressed feelings of the slave victim.

Tony Morrison has portrayed the inward feelings of mother and her mental trauma for the guilty of murdering a young child in a surrealistic manner. The author named the novel as Beloved which implies the affection of the mother on her newborn infant. The title could be mainly assumed in two ways. Sethe never wanted to see her young child as inferior to the slave owners. On the other hand, she considered death as greater than the slavery and that's why she killed the newborn baby which shows the deep concern of the mother. Overall, the impact of slavery has altered the lifestyle of African American people not only psychologically but also in their social life in many aspects.

Works Cited

1. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Pan, 1987.
2. Kovel, Joel. *White Racism: A Psycho History*. New York: Grove Press, 1984.
3. Bonnie, Angelo. "The Pain of Being Black: An Interview." *Time*. 22 May 1989.