

## **TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*: A CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONALIZED DEHUMANIZATION**

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### **Abstract**

Toni Morrison has presented the realistic picture of African American lives through her novels. She thinks that in the slave narratives so many issues and aspects related to the lives of African Americans are missed out and forgotten. She feels that it is dangerous if one forgets the past or never tries to understand it. She also feels that it is her responsibility to bring out these facts before her readers and make them aware and think about the horrible and terrible conditions of African Americans during slavery. The present paper is an attempt to study that how Toni Morrison has depicted the picture of slavery and its effect on the lives of African Americans in *Beloved*. It also discusses Toni Morrison as a critique of an institutionalized dehumanization in *Beloved*. *Beloved* presents that how the African Americans were dehumanized by the established institutions during slavery.

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### **Keywords:**

slavery, racism, institution, dehumanization

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**Introduction:**

Institutionalization here refers to the process of embedding some conception within social system, or society as a whole. Dehumanization in simple words is an opposite process of humanization. As a phenomenon it negates the entire evolutionary journey of a natural being into a human being. Humanization came along with the structures such as family, society, state, culture, school and rest of such institutions. The human society as a larger structure has still been evolving and to go a long way ahead. Yet the human society has not reached to the point of perfection. The discrimination on the grounds of color, race, religion, caste, gender, language, and province has not come to end. The vulnerable groups at times are still seen to be struggling for dignified existence. Innumerable times the dehumanizing forces have threatened the safety and integrity of human society. As Good and bad forces, are ever at fight, the humanization is in fight with Dehumanization in, amongst, and around human beings. The human history is a testimony to the fact that the very structures raised by human society (family, school, and state) at times if usurped by debased individuals, they may bring them down to pitiable conditions. In every state, the dehumanization of minoritized and marginalized people happened in almost all corners of the world. There are various forms of dehumanization based on the race, class, gender, sex, and so on. As social norms define what humane behavior is, reflexively these same social norms define what human behavior is not, or what is inhumane. “Dehumanization is viewed as a central component to intergroup violence because it is frequently the most important precursor to moral exclusion, the process by which stigmatized groups are placed “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply”” (Goff, 2008, p. 293). Dehumanization is by all means to be avoided as it results in suppression, minoritization, subjection, violence, and exclusion.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Toni Morrison speaks about the story presented in *Beloved*, “There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, in a way, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember” (Darling, 1988, p. 248). She speaks about the importance of remembering the past and how it should be always preserved in your memories. She always tries to give this message to her community people that they can have idea about

their culture through the past only and they should live together in a community. *Beloved* reveals the lives of African Americans, the former slaves, who try to create their lives for themselves through the penetrating personal histories. Toni Morrison tries to represent this fact through the main characters of the novel; Sethe and Paul D. African Americans were marked by the legacy of their individual experiences with American slavery. The protagonists Sethe confronts a question of what it means to be a woman and mother; and Paul D raises a question of what it means to be a man, when the basic elements of freedom and humanity are denied to them. Morrison speaks about such serious issues through her works, which attracts the attention of the reader and makes him think about the humanity denied to the African Americans by the Institutions of the said time. “Though literary critics have described Morrison’s work as transgressive, she prefers to call herself “a saboteur,” an author who continually challenges her reader’s and her own preconceptions about some of the defining issues of American culture: racism, civil rights, slavery, patriarchy” (Langer, 2003, p. 212).

### **Institutionalized Slavery:**

According to Morrison, the work distribution in the society was very different that time. “Men identify with their ability to work and take care of the people they are responsible for. People are what they do rather than who they are” (Ruas, 1981, p. 113). The male members of the society were not getting the jobs or whole time work but part of work and they used to feel lucky to have that part of work. “That is devastating for the maleness of a man” (Ruas, 1981, p. 113). So the women have the domestic burden and also protecting male members from running away by allowing him to perform his male rituals and male rites like drinking, arrogance or violence. The man was not free to choose his responsibilities but only did the works handed over to him. So the women used to look after the household responsibilities and take care of the children. Morrison further says that African American women were also working out in the fields. “Because there was this terrible totalitarian oppression of black men and women as laborers” (Ruas, 1981, p. 114). The women were not allowed to give enough time for household works and never permitted to do anything on their own even by their own men due to the circumstances. “Because women were laborer first, and their labor is what was important” (Ruas, 1981, p. 114). Morrison says that “Now the work has been drained off, and that’s the economy in which we live” (Ruas, 1981, p. 113).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows the mental condition of the characters, who were former slaves. The slavery has devastated them physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This has continued to haunt these characters even after freedom and they are still slaves, not able to come out of that. The negative impact of the slaver has great effect on these African Americans that they have lost their sense of self. Throughout the novel, such examples of self-alienation are found. In the case of Paul D, it is observed that he was not able to understand that the screaming he hears is his own or that is his illusion. African Americans were considered not as humans but traded as commodities. So they were not able to understand their value as a human. The same is experienced by Paul D, who is always afraid of that he could be a human or not. It clearly shows that they were treated never treated as human beings but always treated as animals. In an interview Morrison answers the question that "they had the status of good horses, and nobody wanted to kill their stock. And, of course, they had the advantage of reproducing without cost" (Angelo, 1989, p. 256-57). Slave trade was like cocaine...getting \$1,000 for a human being" (Angelo, 1989, p. 257). "They had prices, but no value in the white world" (Washington, 1987, p. 235). The whites finished their human conscious, treated them as animals and made them totally blunt slaves. Sethe became a mother, which suggests that she is becoming human being and should be treated as a human but she is regarded as an animal. The boys have stolen the milk several times from her chest, which was only for her children. The owners were having that right to treat their slaves in their own ways. So Sethe was also treated as an animal. "The girl *Beloved*'s voice at the end of the novel is wrenching testimony, not just her private suffering but of all the ravages of slavery" (Caldwell, 1987, p. 244).

The slavery has almost stopped their progress towards finding their identity. Sethe's daughter Denver comes under the influence of *Beloved*, which makes her unable to separate herself from the slavery. "As *Beloved*'s hold on Sethe and demand for her undivided attention increases, Denver finds herself marginalised" (Matus, 1998, p. 118). Baby Suggs was not able to be a good wife, sister, daughter or loving mother as she restricted her 'self' that ruined her family and hope of becoming a good wife. Paul D, due to slavery, developed self-defeating approach to save himself from the emotional pains. Finally he formed the conclusion that not to love anything too extremely and locked all the feelings he had in "tobacco tin" of his heart (Morrison, 1997, p. 86). He has also become tired and depressed like Baby Suggs. The only difference is that Paul D's

fatigue is emotional and Baby Suggs's is tiredness is spiritual. They became depressed because of their inability to suppose their existence. Other slaves have also experienced the same kind of sense of loss of self during slavery. Sethe appears as a very different kind of slave who kills her beloved daughter to challenge the institution of slavery. This act of Sethe proves that a mother can reach to any level to save or protect her children from the horror and terror of slavery. But later she also started feeling that she will end her days in madness. While Stamp Paid notes that slavery has destroyed the lives of African Americans as this slavery has given more powers to the whites so they have become more "bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be" (Morrison, 1997, p. 234).

Sethe finds that she is alone on this farm of the white Schoolteacher where she was consider just as an animal and the machine to produce more slaves. She was not able to understand that why Paul D wants her to bear a child. She suspects that he wants to use her body as a marker for establishing a legacy of slavery for his masters. She started interpreting it in such a way that her white masters wanted to use her body as a text upon which they can inscribe a discourse of slavery. She thinks that she will be used a text upon which patriarchy seeks to write. She started thinking that she will be used to produce children and her masters will get more slaves without spending any money. While Paul D tries to move her away from the destructive past towards a new beginning, suggesting a movement beyond the structures of patriarchy and the violence of slavery. "Paul D's cruel reminder to Sethe that she has two feet (human), not four (animal) refers to the brute fact that under slavery black women were listed under the category *Animal*, valued as breeders, not mothers" (Grewal, 2000, p. 113).

Sethe, the central protagonist of *Beloved*, incurs inveterate hatred and a feeling of anger from the women in the community because of her refusal to define herself as a breeder of slaves. In the course of the novel, Morrison redirects this moral outrage to the institution of slavery. She shows readiness to kill her own baby to save the other children from the slavery, when the white masters come to claim Sethe and her children as their property. She finally kills her Beloved, which shows her love for children as she wanted to save them from brutal slavery. Though the community was not happy with this act of Sethe's killing her own child, she appears there as the slave mother who dares to claim her children as her property. As Andrew Levy notes,

“unspeakability” is the challenge Morrison works with, “because the institutionalized parameters of guilt and responsibility do not provide the vocabulary to ‘tell,’ legally or narratively, the anomalies of a slave mother’s infanticide” (Grewal, 2000, p. 97). *Beloved’s* arrival compelled Sethe not only to remember the repressed painful memories of *Beloved’s* death but also about the big loss she had as a mother. “Sethe’s confrontation with her own feelings of abandonment and ‘mother-lack’ develops Morrison’s indictment of slavery as an institution devoted to distorting and truncating maternal subjectivity” (Matus, 1998, p. 109).

### **Institutionalized Racism and Education:**

Morrison in an interview presented her views about racism “I am talking about racism that is taught, institutionalized. Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That’s trauma” (Angelo, 1989, p. 258). African Americans were engaged only in sweating, eating and mating. They were not allowed to think about anything. Like the other slaves Sethe was also treated as an animal on the Sweet Home plantation. And the brutal schoolteacher gives a lesson on her “animal characteristics” to his pupils. In slavery she seems to be alienated but she tries to concentrate on her children and love them as they are everything to her. The novel presents Schoolteacher’s dehumanizing nature and views about slaves. He never allowed his slaves to express and to learn anything. As they were not able to learn or understand anything, the master became the authority to control their minds. He “spent much of his time to observe their behavior and listing their attributes under ‘animal’ and ‘Human’ subcategories” (King, 2003, p. 56). After this kind of study, he exploited and manipulated them in such a way that they never raised their voices against this kind of treatment.

African Americans were legally barred from learning to read and write. The education was made available to them only after the Civil War but many of them could not afford the education. Morrison has observed and rightly pointed out in an interview that “there is a very, very serious problem of education and leadership. But we don’t have the structure for the education we need. Nobody has done it” (Angelo, 1989, p. 258). In *Beloved*, Lady Jones, the light skinned teacher of Denver had the access to the formal education. But instead of using literacy or education for her individual benefit, she used it as a tool for advancing the African American community. Otherwise African Americans were not having any importance or place in that existing society.

Morrison in an interview speaks about the real condition of African Americans, she says, “There is nothing of any consequence in education, in the economy, in city planning, in social policy that does not concern black people” (Angelo, 1989, p. 258). Thus Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* appears as a story of struggle of Sethe, an African American woman, against the institutionalized racism in America. It also speaks about the psychological and physical effects of institutionalized racism in the lives of African Americans.

### **Erasion of Culture:**

African Americans had their own culture but that is destroyed by the whites, when they were brought to America as slaves. Richard Wright in his *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1947) speaks about their culture, as he says, “we had our own civilization in Africa before we were captured and carried off to this land...centuries before the Romans ruled, we lived as men” (13). He also speaks that how they were living in their own communities as human beings and how they have “blasted our lives, disrupted our families, reached down into the personalities of each one of us and destroyed the vary images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in the effort to live” (Wright, 1947, p. 15). Through her novels, Toni Morrison has seriously involved herself in reconstructing, revisioning and revisiting the past. She has shaped the cultural memory of the past and suggested her readers the different ways of relating to the past, present and future. She has challenged cultural domination through her novel presenting what has been deliberately erased from the conventional history. In other words, she tries to constitute a form of cultural memory through her novels.

Toni Morrison speaks about the work culture of the African Americans which has been changed due to slavery. She says, “I mean we’re managing households and other people’s children and two jobs and listening to everybody and at the same time creating, singing, holding, bearing, transferring the culture for generations. We’ve been walking on water for four hundred years” (Moyers, 1989, p. 270). It suggests that how their culture is passed orally from previous generations to the next generations. In *Beloved* Sethe gets the idea about her mother from her mother’s friend. She also remembers how her mother was having a mark on her body suggesting the sign of the culture of the community to which she belonged. Sethe’s love for Beloved also shows that she was not ready to forget the past; even she neglects Denver, who is in present. The

major characters of the novel *Sethe*, Paul D and Baby Suggs also would like to be the part of their community, though others were not ready to accept *Sethe* as the part of the community. Morrison says in an interview that “I felt very strongly identified by my culture, which is to say my race” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 55). And the same is shown through her protagonists of the novel. African Americans were forced to forget their culture, but they knew that they couldn’t live without connecting themselves to their community.

### **Conclusion:**

The harmful consequences of the institutionalized dehumanization of the African Americans have shattered their lives. The history tells us that during the slavery Americans have lost humanity and compassion for the African Americans. Remarkably, in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has presented the history and legacy of slavery through the victims of slavery like *Sethe*, Paul D and others. Thus African Americans were culturally, linguistically and socially marginalized by the whites in America. No mobilization was allowed to these people and castration of these people is done by the whites during slavery. The questions raised by the protagonists are so difficult to answer in all time as they are not literally enslaved after the Civil War, but their memories of the past and formative experiences haunted their thoughts and actions in such a way that it appears to them as someone else’s property.

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