



The Characteristics and Growth of the Black Women Embodied in *Beloved*

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Abstract

Beloved is a great novel that typifies the vantage of Toni Morrison, the first African American woman writer who won the Nobel Prize. In this novel, Toni Morrison reveals great and indelible contribution to the African American literature. It is Toni Morrison that makes the scholars of the American critical circle pay much attention to the interior world of the black women. In her fictional world, Toni Morrison reflected miseries, abnormalities and distortions of the black women's feeling and mind under the oppressions of racism and sexism. As one of the important figures of *Beloved*, all kinds of the description of the black women contributes a lot to the success of the image-shaping. As for the structure of this paper, it divides into four parts: Brief introduction to the novel, the characteristics and growth of the black women, and the final conclusion. This paper mainly attempts to discuss the characteristics and growth of the black women in the novel. By analyzing the changes of the black women in the novel, it will show you a special and unique realistic perspective.

Key words: *Beloved*; Toni Morrison; Black women

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1. INTRODUCTION

Beloved is a famous novel by Toni Morrison, an American author who has won the Nobel Prize. And she is also an editor and professor, who helped promote Black literature and authors when she worked as an editor for Random House in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the twentieth century, Toni Morrison is recognized as one of the most crucial African American writers. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed black characters; among the best known are her novels *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. This story describes a slave who found freedom but killed her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery. Another important novel is *Song of Solomon*, a tale about materialism and brotherhood. Morrison is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Beloved was a finalist for the 1987 National Book Award. At the same time, it gained the 1988's Pulitzer Prize of the Fiction. It was also made into a movie to tell the story to more and more people with the same name in the novel. The story begins with Margaret who is an African-American slave and has escaped slavery in Kentucky late January 1856 by fleeing to Ohio, a free state at the end of American Civil War. In the novel, the protagonist Sethe is also a slave who escapes slavery, running to Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe murders her daughter who is only two years old in order to let her daughter avoid of the slavery life and taken back to Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation from which Sethe recently fled. A woman presumed to be her daughter, called *Beloved*, returns years later to haunt Sethe's home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. The story opens with an introduction to the ghost: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."¹

Despite that typical topic of the black women was

¹ Clinton, Davis, 1998, p.3.

mainly focused on the novels of Toni Morrison, she didn't think her job which was regarded as feminist. When the interviewer asked her why distance oneself from feminism in 1998. Interview, and she replied:

In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book—leaving the endings open for reinterpretation and a little ambiguity.²

She went on to state that she thought it couldn't be accepted by some readers at once, who may feel that she was involved in writing some kind of feminist tract. She didn't subscribe to patriarchy, and she didn't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. She thought it was a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things. Critics, however, have referred to her body of work as exemplifying characteristics of postmodern feminism by altering Euro-American dichotomies by rewriting a history written by mainstream historians and by her use of shifting narration in *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BLACK WOMEN

From the novel *Beloved*, there are some changes of the black women's characteristics. And these characteristics indicate the changes of these black women's thoughts and behaviors, especially Baby Suggs, the mother Sethe and the young daughter Denver.

2.1 A Failed Fighter-Baby Suggs

Baby Suggs is that person you go to with all of your deep, scary problems—the kind of problems you can't tell your parents or even your best friend. She wants to get the attention of other people because she can't belong to any churches. Although she puts her real heart to others as much as possible, her heart still gets the harm when other people appear. Notice all those words of un? They seem to be the key to Baby Suggs character. The reason people like going to Baby Suggs with their issues is because she lives outside of the institutions that define type, daily life—especially religious institutions. She's not opposed to them; she just includes everyone and everything so much that no religious institution could ever keep her.

When warm weather came, Baby Suggs started to follow people there who owned black skin including some women and children. However, they regarded this situation as the normal one that they were inclined to let her understand the silent place of the heart, even the end of the road. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she would wait for people to tell the truth as more people went through that place.

Even Baby's house which is actually the Bodwins' seems to be the town-like: It sits on the border between the town and the woods, which means Baby Suggs gets to live at a distance from all the social rules and standards that dictate town-living. You know, the stuff that defines high school and sometimes life after high school: gossiping, stares, rumors, cliques. She's above all of that talk was low and to the point—for Baby Suggs, holy, doesn't approve of extra.

The house of 124 seemed to be filled with between the pleasure and confusion. It liked that Baby Suggs had lived there and felt among the happiness, sadness, surprise, horror so on and forth. The light might be bathed in the whole house all the time that many strangers stopped here to sit and feel because kids played with their shoes. People left the information in this place in order to help the people who were certain to have a rest to need them. Way different than the 124 that greets us at the beginning of the book, right? That's the power of Baby Suggs. She can make a lonely house on the outskirts of town the place to be.

Baby Suggs had some major stuff going on even before she ever got to 124. And it's that Baby Suggs who reappears after Sethe's act—the Baby Suggs whom the Garners name Jenny. That Baby Suggs is beyond depressed—after all, what else are you supposed to feel when you're born into slavery and have no clue where all except one your children are? Even though her life at Sweet Home likes a marked improvement compared to the other places in her past. It looks like that she hasn't existed in this house with more sadness. Sound familiar? Yep—that desolated center is a lot like the description of the Clearing, only this desolated center is inside of Baby Suggs, and it's definitely not a cheery place. But it's also one of those qualities that allow Baby Suggs to be who she is once she does get to 124: non-judgmental, all-inclusive, all-loving. She has the capacity to open her heart up to anyone since she pretty much has no ego and no family around her until Sethe comes.

2.2 An Indomitable Struggler-Sethe

The whole book is named after *Beloved*. But just because you have something named after you don't mean you're the only star. Is Grey's Anatomy only about Meredith Grey? And after all, Sethe's the one who birthed, named, and killed *Beloved*. In other words, she lives by the time-honored parental credo that parents can bring her to the fact and they also can take measures to let her leave this world. Plus, the book does begin with her perspective. Don't get us wrong—we don't condone baby killing. It's not even something we can joke about. It's just that if you were to rethink things from Sethe's perspective and what her situation was like a fugitive slave running from abusive white people, you might change your tune. You might just get to the point where you seriously reevaluate what maternal love means and who gets to define the limits of maternal love.

² Romero, Channette, 2005, p.11.

Is there a fate worse than death? To Sethe, that's not even the question to ask. The question to ask is what the immediate danger is there? And, on that day in the shed, there was no way that she was going to subject her children to what she had gone through at Sweet Home.

To Sethe, maternal love isn't something that has ethical limits or something to philosophize about especially if you're a man. It's immediate, raw, and urgent. It's action. And it definitely isn't for lightweights. If you want the nitty-gritty on why Sethe is the way she is, then you've got to consider her relationship with her mother, which was pretty much non-existent.

In fact, the only clear memory Sethe has of her mother alive is when her mother—a field slave—pulls her behind a shed to show Sethe a mark branded near her breast. Why? So that Sethe will be able to distinguish her body from that of all the other slaves. Couple that memory with the fact that another slave Nan nursed Sethe as a baby, and you have a mother-daughter relationship that's beyond dysfunctional. That's why Sethe's so obsessed about nursing her own kids. As she points out, Nan has to nurse white babies and me too because Ma'am is in the rice. It seems that there are obvious differences between the white and the black. In other words, Sethe never gets the chance to bond with her mother. It means that she never has the chance to be a real daughter to anyone. And how can you be a good, loving, caring mother to a daughter if you never had the experience of having a mother or being a daughter? Sethe never consciously asks herself that question, but it's a question that hovers over the whole novel just like *Beloved* hovers over 124.

Even though Sethe never gets to experience the whole mother-daughter thing, she still ends up a lot more like her mother than she means to. Her mother only kept one child—Sethe—because Sethe's father was a black man whom her mother chose. The other kids her mother had? They were thrown away because their dads, we're left to assume, were either white men or men who raped her mother—or both. So they may have had different reasons, but both Sethe and her mother end up as baby-killers. And that's a scary bond to have. And that brings us to Sethe's super-obsessive relationship with *Beloved*. When Sethe gets the chance to love *Beloved*, she's not just trying to undo her murder of *Beloved*. She's also taking the opportunity to become a different kind of mother to *Beloved*.

2.3 A Hopeful Nature Woman-Denver

If you think *Beloved* has the right to some serious griping, wait until you read about Denver. Sure, Denver's ahead of *Beloved* on a couple of counts: Sethe never killed Denver and no one questions that Denver's still an actual living human being. But living at 124 with Sethe, and then with Paul D, and then with *Beloved*—it hasn't been easy on Denver either. Denver's a lot like the lonely kid who gets bullied on the school bus. Oh, except that Denver doesn't

go to school. She doesn't even leave the house, really. Unfortunately, people tend to avoid you if your mom killed a baby. It's hard not to feel some sympathy for Denver. Even though she's Sethe's remaining child, you don't get the sense that there's been much joy in her life or that Sethe thinks much about her.

Denver's relationship with Sethe isn't just about feeling lonely and forgotten. This girl has to have some concerns, right? After all, Sethe did try to kill her once, too. Plus, Denver's childhood was full of her older brothers like the die-witch stories about Sethe. So Denver is kind of in a weird space vis-à-vis her mother: She needs her attention and love, but she also wants to guard against her; she understands that Sethe's love is the kind that can kill. And Denver doesn't just want to protect herself from Sethe. She also makes it clear that she's going to be the one to protect *Beloved* too. In her head, she's *Beloved's* rock: It's all on her, now, but *Beloved* can count about her. Don't love Sethe too much. It's possible for Sethe to think that killing the baby maybe the right behavior. She has to tell *Beloved* and protects her. That's one determined young lady.

And finally, when she discovers that *Beloved* and Sethe are truly in the co-dependent relationship from Hell, she braves the outside world—a place she hasn't gone to in years—in order to find a job and support her mother and *Beloved*.

3. THE GROWTH OF THE BLACK WOMEN

As the development of the novel and society, black women begin to learn more things to change the thoughts. And with the influence of slavery and the development of identity, the growth of the black women shows in a variety of aspects.

3.1 The Influence of Slavery

Toni Morrison doesn't hold back when talking about slavery. In *Beloved*, we get all sides. For starters, there's the outright brutality and abuse of the system. That's the part we can all agree on. Then there are the grey areas. *Beloved* is full of that place: A white slave owner who treats his slaves as real men; a fugitive slave who kills her daughter so her daughter won't be caught by slave catchers; a handful of white people who go above and beyond to help of fugitive slaves. Is there room for moral fuzziness on the topic of slavery? In *Beloved* there sure is.

Toni Morrison struggled when writing *Beloved* with the natural that anxiety should disappear and revive. The characters in *Beloved* feel this dual need, especially Sethe, who wants to forget what she did but knows she cannot, who longs to have with her again the daughter she killed to save from slavery. Nicole M. Coonradt in the *Beloved* and Amy Denver And Human Need-Bridges To Understanding In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* tells that as her characters' lives are shattered as a result of their

slave experience, so too are their stories. By piecing them together, a clearer, more complete version of their painful history emerges. All the characters in this work are influenced by slavery, and we see its effects through Morrison's retrieved history; by examining the actions of the characters and relationships among the characters—especially the mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and her daughters—we are shown how to remember the sordid past of slavery and how to heal.

3.2 The Development of Identity

As an African American author, Toni Morrison is acutely aware of the pain that is intertwined with the history of her history. She articulates the debilitating physical and psychological strain that slavery, prejudices, and discrimination placed upon countless African Americans with incredible detail. One of her most powerful statements, however, comes in just one sentence near the end of *Beloved*. It is a truth that all African Americans know, one that was born out of slavery, one that still burns people today: The truth that every white person needs to prepare themselves for the whole things in the mind.

This inability to identify a true home comes with negative consequences. Nancy Jesser stated that because slavery, colonization, and racism penetrated every moment in U.S. history, there is a sense in which all homes are to paraphrase Baby Suggs, haunted by a Negro's grief. This is true of 124, which is haunted by *Beloved's* ghost. She cracks mirror, puts her hand prints in cakes, and hurls furniture around the house in a wild rage. Additionally, the name of the house signifies grief because, for much of the book, there are four people around the house: Sethe, Denver, Paul D. and *Beloved* in both her ghost form and her physical form.

However, there are times when one of these four is physically or mentally absent or distant from the others. Obviously, *Beloved's* ghost is present early in the novel because her body no longer exists. Denver escapes to the emerald room in the woods behind 124 and turns it into a sanctuary that is closed off from the hurt of the hurt world. Paul D. departs after Stamp Paid informs him that Sethe committed infanticide. Sethe herself is weakened by the parasitic *Beloved*. She becomes limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out and is unable to care what the next day might bring. Sweet Home is also infected with African American grief. At first glance, the name seems painfully ironic. It appeared to be a sweet home for slaves when the Garners owned it. Later on, when the Bodwins are setting Baby Suggs up in her new house, Mr. Garner asks her about her experience to show off to the siblings. She recounts how she never went hungry, never went cold, was not beaten, and was granted her freedom.

Upon a more painstaking examination of Sweet Home, we find that the name is actually doubly ironic. Jesser's article shows that the place is not a true home for the

slaves even when Mr. Garner is the master because it does not value their humanity. It values only their labor. As soon as they step off the property, the slaves are trespassers among the human race. Also, when Mr. Garner decrees that he must accompany slaves who leave the property, he does so not because of possible legal troubles, but because of the danger of letting slaves who are called men on the loose. This emphasizes the fact that Garner is only raising his slaves like men because it benefits Sweet Home. The slaves' manhood is nothing more than a creation of the slave owner. It does not give them any benefits outside of Sweet Home. In addition, when slaves do leave Sweet Home, Mr. Garner's physical presence reminds them of their submissive status. He may be kinder and more humane than Schoolteacher, but he is still their owner.

CONCLUSION

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison portrays the picture of the black women including Sethe, baby, their youngest daughter Denver and so on. The main aspect is from the differences of the three generations of the mother, the dead daughter and Denver. These three generations happen to change imperceptibly in the life like the change of the mother's thoughts that she gradually gets a clear understanding of the reality. This process seems like the change and also looks like the growth. At last, they learn to find the real identity with the hope of the good future. In American history, there are more and more people who step forward bravely to fight against racial discrimination by the women movements so that they can win their real human rights and the significant social value. Especially the black women have expected that they can get equal treatment and they try their best to make progress in improving the unfair situations. There are nearly seven percent black women of the population of the whole American, however, they couldn't get the true realization and acceptance of other Whites, and even the part of society.

Today maybe society's stubborn myths continue to do tremendous damage to Black women. They often seep into their inner psyches and become permanently internalized, battering them from within even if they're able, for a time, to wriggle free and live the truth. Stereotypes based on race, gender, and social class that make it hard to trust oneself and to trust others who look or behave like you do. They set confusing parameters on who you think you are, and what you believe you should or can become. They often dictate what you expect, what seems real, and what seems possible. Until present time, most of the black women can't identify with the circumstances of the blacks and black women in the modern society. And it seems like that they won't cease the effort to aspire and protect their rights.

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