

GENERATIONAL REPERCUSSION AND THE EFFECTS OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL TRAUMA CAUSED BY SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

V. GuruDev Rajan

M.A., SLET., M.Phil., Ph.D

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Arumugam Pillai Seethai Ammal

College Tiruppattur

vgurudevrajan@gmail.com

Abstract

Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison talks about slavery and the trauma caused by the slavery. Sethe is the black slave who kills her own daughter to safeguard her from the trauma and psychological depression she had undergone from slavery. The story appeals the audience emotionally with the introduction of supernatural element in to the story.

"...penetrates perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery" (Schapira 194)

Key Words: *slavery, emotional and psychic consequences, supernatural element, psychological depression, Trauma, Repercussion, Generational*

Toni Morrison was born in a small town Lorain Ohio, her father George was a shipyard welder. The European immigrants and Southern blacks from North settled in Lorain. They came to the Lorain town seeking freedom, education, and work in mills. Morrison's father too worked in a mill, who was racially disturbed, which Morrison herself says:

People assume that a racist is a white person that doesn't like black people, but to me the term simply means a person who believes that his race is superior to another race. My father in that sense really felt that all black people were better than all white people because their position was a moral one. (Douglas Century, Toni Morrison, 1994)

Morrison had a sister and two younger brothers. She read European, Russian and English literature, which influenced her a lot. She realised as a black girl:

Those books were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio, but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway – they spoke directly to me out of their own specificity

She never wanted to become a writer, she initially wished to become only a dancer but the terrifying stories of her parents , which she absorbed throughout her childhood became an important part of her life when she turned as a writer. Only at Howard University Morrison changed her name from Chloe to Toni Morrison. In the Howard University, she

joined the university theatrical company, the Howard players. As a Howard player, she performed as a group before black audiences. Through this, she came to understand racism. She also began to realise the sufferings of her parents and her ancestors.

Toni Morrison took to writing after her failure in her marriage. To get away her depression she started to write. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* though was not successful commercially it was well received by John Leonard as 'one of the best and bravest book in America' in New York Times. The novel made her an authority on black cultural issues. For the next few years, she published several articles, book reviews in New York Times.

When Morrison published her *I Beloved* in the year 1987, it was awarded Pulitzer Prize on March 31st 1988. The novel presents the brutality of slavery. It talks about the general repercussion and effects of mental and physical trauma caused by slavery. The story moves after two characters, Sethe and her daughter Denver.

Both Sethe and Denver had escaped from slavery and they rebuild their lives in the house they inhabit at 124 Bluestone. The house is regularly hunted by ghost. As a result friends fail to turn to Denver. She suffers mental trauma. It is not only Denver who suffers from mental trauma, her brothers, Howard and Buglar, out of fear of the ghost and the mental trauma they run away from home when they are thirteen. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother in law also dies.

Paul D one of the slave from the Sweet Home plantation arrives at 124. He even succeeds the family to a carnival, but soon he suffers from physical trauma from the ghost. The ghost forces Paul D out of the home and makes him stay in the shed outside. It even occupies him completely and forces him to have sex with her. As a result Paul D is overwhelmed with guilt. He later comes to know from Sethe that she had killed oldest daughter, though she tried to kill all but she succeeded in killing her oldest daughter only. Paul D leaves the house for good after the mental trauma.

Sethe is also not spared from physical and mental trauma. When Sethe realises her murder, she feels guilty. The ghost gets angry and gives hellish tantrums to Sethe. The ghost, *Beloved* grows bigger and bigger while Sethe greatly suffers from the sense of guilt.

Sexual trauma is another major concern of Toni Morrison. Through this concern she brings out the effects of mental and physical trauma Caused by sexual assault to the slaves in America. Through these trauma caused by sex she brings the past and constructs the present. According to her sex is a powerful magnet but used as an instrument for exploitation in unequal societies. Morrison believes that female sexuality is designed by male desire and the trauma caused in the domestic life. Morrison relates sexual assault to power. Sethe's mother was raped by white men many times. Stamp's wife was forced to be mistress to her white master because they have absolute power over these women.

Toni Morrison has lined her story based on the true story Margaret Garner. She escaped from her owner Kentucky in 1956, but was caught. Later she lost hope and killed her own daughter using the butcher's knife. The background of slavery in the novel brings out the repercussion and the effects of mental and physical trauma caused by slavery. The slave blacks have suffered a lot at the hands of the white, the worst trauma caused to black women is that they were denied motherhood. It is for this reason Sethe in the novel killed her own daughter.

The physical trauma has caused Psychological disturbances to the characters which forces the characters to commit infanticide. Sethe commits infanticide by killing her own daughter. It is caused as she undergoes physiological disturbances when she is caught after her escape from slavery. Paul D initially blames Sethe later accepts Sethe's act of infanticide as an act to safeguard her daughter from the trauma of slavery.

The other characters who suffer from psychological trauma is Denver. She is the victim of child abuse in the novel. She spent her early life in prison with her mother. She undergoes mental trauma from the society for the act of her mother. As a result, she grows rest of her life as a psychologically scared child. "I spent all of my outside self-loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me...(255)

The psychological trauma caused to Sethe has damaged the mother- child relationship in *Beloved*. It is the fear of slavery and exploitation that forced Sethe to kill her own daughter. Her past experiences with the Plantation owners and school teachers has caused psychological trauma which she recounts to Paul D as memories declares Sethe as a helpless mother who wished to do away with her child to avoid the mental and physical trauma caused by slavery. "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe"(201)

Though the novel talks about the slave life and the physical and mental traumas caused to the characters by the slavery the supernaturalism takes a prominent place in the novel. "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom" The ghost in *Beloved* projects the frustration, psychological trauma of the disturbed psychic of the characters.

Bibliography

Primary Source

Morrison, Toni, *Beloved*, London : Picador, 1987.

Secondary Sources

Bakerman, Jane S.(Jan1981). "Failures of Love : Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison." *American Literature*.

Beya, Abdennebi Ben. (2010). "The Question of Reading Traumatic Testimony: Jone's Corregidora and Morrison's *Beloved*." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*.

Carmean, Karen.(1993). *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*. New York: Whitestone Publishing Company.

Davis, Angela(1987). *Women, Race and Class*. New York : Random House.

Davis, Kimberly Chabot.(Spring 1995) " Postmodern Blackness: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and

the End of History." *Twentieth Century Literature* 44.1.

Middleton, David(2000). *Toni Morrison's Fiction : Contemporary Criticism* . New York: Garland Publishing.

Schapira, Barbara, (1991). "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" *Contemporary Literature* 32:2.