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**THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS IN TONI MORRISON'S  
*BELOVED***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Beloved* a novel by Toni Morrison is called as an unambiguous work of literature. It describes the circumstances of the slave mothers and it also puts forth the religious and spiritual viewpoints of the Afro-Americans at that time. Slavery was a great issue at that time and brought attention to the readers. The novel has supernatural elements like ghosts. An invisible being inside the house brings chaos in the house and causes Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar to run away. This ghost seems to be the baby's ghost whom Sethe had earlier murdered. It appears to be breaking and shaking the things in the house. *Beloved* the central character a girl seems to be another ghost. Sethe is seen from a religious point of view and also draws parallels to Jesus Christ. As Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of mankind and was resurrected. Critics always saw *Beloved* as the incarnation of Sethe's murdered daughter. Sethe has been absolved of her crime, as she has served time in the penitentiary. So according to the law she is forgiven. The ghost of the baby has punished her and continually reminded her of the crime she committed in the past.

**Keywords:** *Beloved*, ghost, novel, Christ, religious.

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*Beloved* politically displays Sethe's story of infanticide which is claimed by Mr Bodwin to "build a further case for abolishing slavery." (307) The killing of the baby and Sethe's escape had taken place in 1955, actually ten years before the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S Constitution that forbid the slavery and uncontrolled servitude. Morrison has related the background of the novel in the forward of *Beloved*. The story of the novel is inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, who had escaped with her children from slavery. She was arrested as she killed one of her children to prevent them from going back to the slave owner. *Beloved* has also described the political importance of Margaret

Garner's case: "She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of the escapees to their owner." (IX)

Although the African- American's had a difficulty in establishing their own culture during the period of slavery, Morrison believes that the black culture has been built on the horrors of the past and it is this history that has fashioned contemporary black culture in a positive way. Through her use of linguistic devices, Morrison has represented the black culture, its imagery and symbolic features and the theme of interracial relations. She has illustrated black culture as resilient, vibrant, independent and

determined. As part of black culture, the black women stand as the pillars of strength within that community as guardians and healers. They represent glue that binds everything together when the whole world is falling apart. Many of the characters are torn apart due to the slave traders splitting up families and selling them as slaves. Together, they share a sense of history of suffering and an urge to heal and become whole again. In positioning the black culture as a whole, Morrison also explores interracial relations in the novel. During and after slavery, relations between black and white cultures were "harsh". The relationship between the two cultures is based on the idea of exclusion and lack of tolerance for the other. All black people have suffered horrific experiences at the hands of the white people.

The novel depicts supernatural elements like ghosts. There seems to be a presence of an invisible being inside the house. This ghost seems to be the baby's ghost whom Sethe had earlier murdered. It appears to be breaking and shaking the things in the house. Another ghost in the human disguise is Beloved. Beloved seems to be the reincarnate of Sethe's dead child. As Sethe encounters her, outside her house, the reader comes across her childlike behavior. Her walk is unsteady and strangely she remembers the song that Sethe had sung to her when she was a child. Her skin is fresh and she has no control over her bodily functions. The following conversation makes it evident for the reader that the girl is Beloved:

Why you call yourself Beloved?

Beloved closed her eyes. "In the dark my name is Beloved."

Denver scooted a little closer. "What's it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?"

"Dark," said Beloved. "I'm small in that place. I'm like this here."

"Were you cold?"

Beloved curled tighter and shook her head, "Hot. Nothing to breath down there and no room to move in." (92)

Almost all the main characters such as Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver and Paul D believe in the presence of

the ghost when Sethe suggests that they move from the present residence. Baby Suggs asserts:

What'd the Point?"asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country ain't pack to its refer with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back here? Or yours?(6)

It's clear that superstitions are embedded in the specific nature. According to Baby Suggs death is a normal thing for the black people. Majority of the black people and their relatives were killed during that time.

The first place depicted to be haunted by ghost in the novel is 124, Bluestone Road. Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar cannot stand the terror caused by the ghost, so they flee. The horror they face by the ghost is mentioned below:

124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children . . . Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old-as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy wait to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in the heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. (1)

Morrison has depicted a scene in which two tiny handprints appear on a cake but with an absence of a child. Further all the things in the house move by themselves. It is apparent from the text that the ghost wants to punish her. The ghost doesn't want to be forgotten by anyone, so it reappears, as expressed by Sethe:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just say. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still here. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place- the memory of it- stays, and not just in my rememory but out there, in the world. (35)

Further in the play the name Sweet Home is contrasted with its situation. One would confuse the

place Sweet Home as a joyful and a happy place but the place is haunted in a way as it is full of horror and scary acts. After the death of Mr. Garner, Mrs. Garner had employed Schoolteacher who abuses the slave and treats them like animals.

As Sethe is raped by the Schoolteacher's nephews; she becomes preoccupied with the incident. She puts forth her children's needs before her own. Morrison has expressed the abnormality of a human being in her novel. It is mentioned in the novel, "All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their things and waiting for the new girl." (13) Schoolteacher's arrival at Sweet Home is another horrendous act. Sethe resists the Schoolteacher's authority by murdering her own offspring:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby towards the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time . . . Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one . . . Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn't fall off; little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry in the arm of the old nigger whose own eyes were nothing but silvers looking down at his feet. (185)

Apart from the grotesque and unnatural events, the novel has some religious and supernatural allusions also. *Beloved* has some allusions to *The Bible* also. On the first page of *Beloved* the reader comes across this optimistic prophetic epigraph from Romans 9:25, which seems to forecast an improved future for the black slaves:

I will call them my people,  
Which were not my people;  
And her beloved,  
who was not beloved. (1)

But Morrison's use of Biblical allusions is unclear. According to Dubin Edelberg in *American Literature*

Morrison's others works like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* are, "characters with Biblical names [who seem to] live their namesakes' lives in reverse." (223) In *Beloved* Sethe is associated with Biblical Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. According to Cynthia Dubin Edelberg in *American Literature* Morrison believes that, "the Bible is the wrong book for Blacks." (223) The opening epigraph entails that the Blacks were not formerly God's people. Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs becomes "an unchurched preacher." (102) Baby Suggs is called 'holy' by Morrison. Although what she advocates in the Clearing is her own gospel, "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure." (103) She has given a message to the former slaves, "that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. " She notifies them that they should be devoted to their flesh as, "yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it." (103) Her most vital message to the slaves is: "Love your heart." (104)

Other characters confirm signs of non believers. Sethe often prays: "Denver saw her mother on knees in prayers, which was not unusual." (35) But she portrays it as she has given up the hope of salvation:

"What were you praying for, Ma'am?  
"Not for anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk." (35)

There is no description of Sethe and Denver's visit to a church in the novel or reading *The Bible*.

The character of *Beloved* has been taken under interpretation by many critics. Ashraf H.A Rushdy in *Beloved: A Casebook* describes her character from a psychological angle, "more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried." (41) She is also looked at from the religious point of view and parallels to Jesus Christ are also found. Christ died on the cross for the sins of mankind and was resurrected. Critics always saw *Beloved* as the incarnation of the murdered daughter of Sethe. *Beloved* first appearance in the novel is when Paul D

arrives at 124, Bluestone Road and exorcises the baby ghost: "With a table and a loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame." (45) She appears again a few days later, "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water." (60) This implies something strange and unnatural about her. She has no recollection of her past life and only thing she can recall is standing on a bridge which is treated as a metaphor as the transition between life and death. Birth is associated with the water and the sight of Beloved's face for the first time reminds Sethe of her giving birth: "Sethe's bladder filled to the capacity." (61) Though it was not easy for Sethe to recognize Beloved as her lost daughter, the reader is clear with the idea of birth. Sethe is the similar age as the slaughtered daughter would have been who calls herself Beloved. Paul D notices that she articulates the letters of the name vigilantly as people, "who [cannot] read but have to memorize the letters of their name." (62) This however indicates that she might have just read the name on the tombstone though never heard the name.

Denver suspects about Beloved existence from the beginning. A scar on her Beloved's throat convinces her when she helps her undress. It brings to one's mind the Jesus disciple Thomas who suspected his lord's identity after resurrection, not until he saw the marks of the nails on his hands. Beloved explains to Denver the description of the place she came from:

"What's it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?"

"Dark," said Beloved. [---]

"Hot. Nothing to breathe and no room to move in." (88)

The best way to support this idea is when she sings the lullaby that Sethe used to sing to her children:

The click had clicked; things were where they ought to be or poised and ready to glide in. "I made that song up," said Sethe. "I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children." (207)

According to Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "Sethe's guilt has recreated Beloved." (56) It is stated by Rushdy in the introduction of this chapter that, "[Beloved] is the

embodiment of the past that must be remembered to be forgotten." (41) Sigmund Freud believes that one has to remember and recreate ones past to overcome traumas. He believes that, "Sethe must 'conjure up' her past-symbolized by Beloved- and confront it as an antagonist. Sethe must learn to regard her problematic past as an 'enemy worthy of [her] mettle, a piece of [her] personality, which was solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for [her] future life have to be derived.'" (92) Beloved's presence accomplishes all these necessities and the relation between her and Sethe can be portrayed as a psychoanalytic process that directed to catharsis and facilitates Sethe to develop into a functioning individual. The religious metaphors are presented to characterize the development and the absolution described in religious terms can be seen as catharsis.

Sethe is loaded with guilt and if Beloved's incarnation is present to pardon Sethe and mitigate her from blame, it must be considered in what way this can be done. According to Christian beliefs, forgiveness is the best way to relieve oneself from the guilt and the blame. Jesus is known to have died for our sins; on the cross he spoke these words; "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:24) One must come clean with his sins and be penitent; not until then you can be pardoned from your sins. Sethe seems to have lost her faith in God in the beginning as stated earlier. She has born her guilt for a long time. She has absolved of her crime as she has served time in the prison. So in the eyes of law she is forgiven. The ghost of the baby seems to have punished her and incessantly reminded of her crime. Sethe continually exists with her memories and "feels bad" (8), whereas it is not clear that she actually feels sorry and confesses her guilt. When Sethe elucidates about her behavior to Paul D, she says, "it's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that." (194) When Sethe concludes that Beloved is her baby daughter; she gives out a sigh of relief: "[Sethe] even looked straight at the shed [where the daughter was killed], smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember now. Thinking, she ain't even mad with me. Not a bit." (214) Sethe understands is that she has been excused, and the

source cause of this feeling is that she eventually believes in Beloved. Here parallel with Jesus can be seen, that if one believes and trusts one will be eventually be forgiven: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you.'"(Luke 5:20)

Beloved desires for Sethe's notice, and she tries to recover her lost childhood. Sethe becomes increasingly obsessed with Beloved and in a monologue she explains: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (248), Beloved here illustrates her conversion from dead to living. Her focal point is also to find Sethe:

I am not dead. I sit in the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing. (252)

Sethe and Beloved voices merge together in a dialogue:

Tell me the truth. Did you come from the other side?

Yes. I was on the other side.

You came because of me?

Yes.

You rememory me?

Yes, I remember you.

You never forgot me?

Your face is mine.

Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now. (254)

However Beloved does not respond to these questions openly. But she asks where "the men without skin" are, the white men who approached to seize them, and Sethe retorts that "she stopped them" at one occasion and that "they won't ever come back."(254) and it ends with the repeated note, "You are mine, You are mine, You are mine."(256) Both of them seem to merge together. Here it is possible to draw parallels to Jesus Christ. Christianity is known to be monotheistic religion as Jesus and God are known to be one, like Beloved and Sethe who coalesce into one identity.

Sethe almost sacrifices everything for Beloved like giving up her work at the restaurant and making new dresses for her. Demetrakopoulos

describes Sethe's total center on Beloved as a brutal "remothering". (56) The sickly and thin Beloved grows bigger and Sethe turns the opposite. Sethe almost reduces herself to nothing in a way to show repentance. Demetrakopoulos portrays the relationship between them as a "psychic incest" (58) and argues that this connection between the mother and the daughter is injurious to the mother's possibilities to go into the community, which is definitely accurate in the case of Sethe, who at this juncture is wholly separated from their society. In the end there is nothing left to eat in the house. Denver is forced to take over and endeavors her way in the society for aid. Thirty women of the black society come to Sethe's aid and rescue her from the ghost that has come back in flesh. Sethe has played her role as a mother in an appropriate way; she attacked the assailant and saved her children. Hence she is forgiven in a way with the help of Beloved.

Beloved's alter ego, the baby who had been killed by Sethe has an important role in the novel. She is a motivator for Sethe to help her flee from the farm: [Sethe] couldn't let her nor any of them live under the Schoolteacher. That was out." (192) She did not want her children to suffer as slaves. The dead baby also serves as the motivator for Sethe as not to fall down during the toughest phases of escape. And most importantly the baby's death is a sacrifice that gives the rest of the family their freedom. Sethe's action of murdering the baby convinces the slave owner of her insanity; as a result he does not want any of them at the farm. Metaphorically it can be seen that she is sacrificed to save her own people, like Jesus Christ was sacrificed to save the mankind.

On a religious metaphorical level there is proof that Morrison has made it implicit earlier, might have proposed Sethe to have a God-like quality. Sethe is given the feminine form of the Biblical name Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, who had been created to be like God. He is their third son after Cain and Abel and the one who prospers and becomes the father of mankind. On the contrary Sethe's life is completely opposite to her Biblical namesake. She loses all her children except for one and her place in the society is of the

lowest section. She has committed an appalling crime and has lost her faith in God completely. It can also be argued that Morrison has selected to give her the name to entail that she is more than an common woman; not only does her case provide a strong political argument for the eradication of the slavery, but she also sacrifices her own daughter to save the rest of the family from slavery, that can serve as an example for freeing her racial group. Sethe serves as the chosen one, an expression that hints to Jesus Christ. Jesus was the only surviving child when Herod had ordered the killing of infants of Bethlehem, like Sethe served as the only child her mother did not kill.

Deborah Ayer Sitter in *African American Review* asserts that, "frequently in Morrison's later works, positive values are associated with specific practices of West African culture: naming traditions, ancestor worship, and acceptance of the supernatural, harmony with nature, and linking of individual wholeness to the rootedness in a community." (19) The tree symbol serves as a link to Sethe. She is the carter of the symbolic tree. The whipping she receives as a punishment for escaping from the plantation result to scars on her back, which resemble a tree. Amy Denver, the girl who helped her describes the scars as:

"It's a tree [-]. A chokeberry tree. See here's the trunk- its red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting of the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom." (93)

Hence it is both a symbol of Sethe's martyrdom and of her importance in the slaves. The tree is treated as an allusion to the Biblical tree of life: "On either side of the river stood a tree of life, which yields twelve crops of fruit, one for each month of the year. The leaves of the tree serve for the healing of nations, and every accursed thing shall disappear." (Revelations 22:2)

In *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, Elaine Showalter claims that, "the gynocritic model constructs the framework to analyze the female experiences in the literature by woman rather than

the male authors." (131) Gynocriticism is a way to learn, "something solid, enduring, and real about the relation of women to the literary culture." (49) Toni Morrison's fictional characters can be examined from the gynocritic view as they confront with the cultural issues of gender, class and race. The black woman is still undermined by the world. Due to the absence of the father from the family, the role of the mother becomes dominating. Morrison has repeatedly presented her novels with houses being run by woman alone. Therefore it is easy to find such families with emotional overlaps and other crises. De Lancey in *Mother Love is a Killer* has pointed out that, "the love of a mother becomes emotionally and psychologically toxic in the absence of the father." (3) Therefore the survival of the black community depends on the motherhood. In the social world of slavery, children had to face various psychological drawbacks. It is symbolically seen in the characters of the novel. The children's unsatisfied needs are highlighted in the novel. The children were denied from their basic right that is the psychological growth. Sethe grows to be an overprotective mother due to lack of love and care which she did not receive from her mother, and therefore takes the life of her daughter. The worst experience of slavery leads her to give a physical death to her death than a psychological one.

With these multiple allusions to both *The Bible* and the African values Morrison seems to suggest Sethe's contribution to merge both Christian and African values and religion. *Beloved* can be understood from a psychological or religious angle and both can offer pleasing clarifications to the role of *Beloved* and how Sethe can be reconciled and forgiven. Morrison's allusions to Biblical mythological metaphors are multifaceted and unclear and she alters the conventional male images to feminist-focused descriptions which seem to give an option that is suitable for African-Americans, especially the women.

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