



## DENVER AS THE CHAMPION OF 'SELF-WORTH' IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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### ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is one of the most famous novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, was her first novel. However, it was the *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, that gained her recognition in America. Later on, it was *Beloved*, her fifth work that won her a Pulitzer Award. Based on a true story, it recaptured the black experience in the days when slavery was rampant in America. The book is dedicated to 60 million and more Africans who died as a result of the Atlantic Slave trade. It has monologues which are fragmentary and these belong to different voices that have endured racism and slavery. From the very beginning of the novel, it focuses on the strength of past experiences that come back to swallow the present and deny a future for the holders of this history. This is clearly seen in Sethe, the mother of Denver, a former slave. She is unable to come to a balanced life that holds her past and her present simultaneously. It affects not just her but her entire family. It becomes a vicious cycle until the appearance of Paul D in her life. Although he disappears again, he resurfaces to help her claim her self-worth. In such abnormal circumstances, Denver grows up and finds her own identity, which makes her growth worth examining. Recognised for giving voice to the black community, especially the black women, Toni Morrison towered in the literary world and left a lasting impact when she passed away in August, 2019.

**Key words:** self-worth, identity, extraordinary, self-realisation, community life.

### 1. Introduction

Toni Morrison, who is among the foremost American novelists, comes from the African-American working class and grew up with a rich cultural heritage. She is also an essayist, editor and Professor emeritus at Princeton University. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 besides other notable awards. She was the first African-American to win the above-mentioned prize and also the eighth woman in the world. The committee praised her for the "visionary force and poetic import, giving life to an essential aspect of American reality"

(<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/summary/>).

### 2. About the Book

*Beloved*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, was written in 1987. The book is based on the experience of a woman named Margaret Garner. She was an African-American slave who escaped from a Kentucky plantation with her family in 1856. However, when their recapture became apparent, she killed her own daughter in an attempt to free her from slavery. Her story, which was published in the American Baptist, was added in *The Black Book*. It was an anthology of the blacks which traced their lives from the time of their slavery to the then times

in the United States. Toni Morrison is the editor of the above-mentioned book.

Taking inspiration from Margaret Garner's story, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* recalls the painful history of the African-American slavery. Morrison "...focuses upon how Africans lost their names through the institution of slavery..." (Beaulieu 171). The characters in the novel get flashbacks of the past and struggle to come out of it. It stunts their growth and threatens to wipe out their very own identity as nonentity. The work becomes important as a postcolonial theme for self-identity as an individual struggles to claim one's self-worth in the face of forces threatening to wipe it out through the institution of slavery.

### 3. Birth of the 'Self'

The characters in *Beloved* lived in a system that denied the construction of the African-American identity through 'self-worth'. As Waugh mentions, "Orientalist discourse thus depended on an absolute distinction being made between the dominant colonizing West and other peoples ...also Africans...in fact everyone who did not conform to the value-laden image of the dominant European self" (Waugh 351). The Africans were being defined by the dominant colonizers as the 'other', which affected them in every aspect of their lives. The given identity was socially conditioned to such an extent that reappraisal became a mammoth task, one that seemed almost impossible. The work is evocative of *Song of Solomon* where the 'Dead' identity was given to Macon's family by a drunk yankee. His father, being a former slave, had to register with the Freedmen's Bureau as the civil war was over. That was when "The white man "had him born in Dunfrie, wherever...that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon'" (Morrison 53). Identities in the world of the 'others' were given by the dominators.

The novel unfolds the story of Sethe and her family, tracing the events from her pre-Civil War days in Sweet Home, Kentucky. The story opens in Cincinnati, Ohio in the year 1873 and flashbacks of the characters piece the story together. On her freedom run to Ohio from Sweet Home where she was a slave, Sethe gives birth to Denver. She arrives

at Cincinnati with her new-born daughter in her arms where she enjoys a blissful 28 days of freedom. However, Mrs Garner's brother-in-law, who was known to the slaves as the schoolteacher, comes for Sethe to take her and her children back to the Sweet Home plantation. On seeing him, she flees with her children to the woodshed and tries to kill them. Only the older of the two daughters die, her throat having been cut with a handsaw. She makes arrangement for the dead baby's headstone to have the carving 'Beloved'. Sethe is taken to jail but a group of white abolitionists help her to regain her freedom. Consequently, she returns to the house at 124, where Baby Suggs has sunk into a deep depression. The community shuns the house, and the family continues to live in isolation. The house is being haunted by a malicious ghost and it is believed to be the daughter whom Sethe had killed. It drives out her two boys. Baby Suggs eventually dies, leaving behind only Denver and her mother as the occupants of the house. Paul D, one of the Sweet Home men, come to 124 and finds only Sethe and her daughter. Upon entering the house, the spirit confronts him but he chases it out. With its disappearance, Paul D and Sethe enter into a relationship. However, this time of love and peace is cut short by the appearance of a woman who calls herself 'Beloved'. Once she enters into their lives, it becomes apparent that she is the reincarnation of the daughter that Sethe had killed to save her from the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Consequently, her guilt allows Beloved to manipulate her. She ends up losing her job and becomes obsessed with her. Paul D, on the other hand, is seduced by Beloved and she becomes pregnant. He leaves the household when he discovers that Sethe had killed her own daughter.

Amidst the chaotic and extraordinary life of Sethe, Denver grows up. She lives with the spirit of the house for eighteen years as her only companion, besides her mother, until Paul D enters her life: "It had been a long time since anybody (good-willed whitewoman, preacher, speaker or newspaperman) sat at their table, their sympathetic voices called liar by the revulsion in their eyes. For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends." (12)

Once he drives out the ghost, she becomes alone: "She missed her brothers...Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had" (19). With the arrival of Beloved into their home, she gets a new companion. Denver initially befriends her, grows happy and industrious but with the progress of events, realizes that she needs to take action to ensure the survival of her family. With this knowledge, she steps onto the outside world.

Throughout the narration, Denver's growth is significantly recorded. Initially, she is brought to us as a young woman of 18 who is filled with insecurity and cannot find a voice or identity beyond her mother and her sister. She is self-absorbed and childish. She is stuck in her mother's world where the past haunts them through the symbolic haunting of the ghost that is believed to be Sethe's murdered baby daughter. Her problem is a misconstrued sense of the 'self'. Due to this concept, she is redundant and unable to face the real world. Even then, she understands the root of the problem:

"I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either...What's she talking 'bout nobody speaks to you?" asked Paul D.

"It's the house. People don't--"

"It's not! It's not the house. It's us! And it's you!"

"Denver!"(14)

Denver's mother Sethe looks for the cause of the problem as something from without while Denver points out that it is from within.

Sharing a residence initially with the baby ghost and then with Paul D adds to Denver's growth and experience. But it is the presence of Beloved that pushes her towards finding her self-worth, which in turn, ensures her survival.

Denver witnesses the life of Paul D, the only man to survive Sweet Home who grows into a being symbolic of the 'self- identity' that leads to 'self-worth': "Trust things and remember things because

the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?"(17)His growth is recorded when the narrator states that "Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep--to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too. Strong women and wise saw him and told him things they only told each other" (17). Thus, his arrival is important, leaving no room for the past ghost to dwell in and take charge of 124 Bluestone Road. A time of love and contentment follows. The baby ghost of 124, on the other hand, is symbolic of the chain that binds an individual from growing and holding onto the true worth of an individual. Not surprisingly, when Paul D enters into the women's lives, the ghost tries to oust him: "A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. "You want to fight, come on!"(18). It is silenced when it is fought back but not without a violent exit.

Gandhi states that "...postcolonial theory inevitably commits itself to a complex project of historical and psychological 'recovery'...the subjects of postcoloniality to live with the gaps and fissures of their condition, and thereby learn to proceed with self-understanding"(Gandhi 8). The arrival of Beloved into the lives of the two women, who embody the historical past, heralds two primary things: Sethe's life slipping into the dark past and living in it while pushing Denver into a second birth. The former's past ensures the departure of Paul D. He discovers the deepest scar in her life, the infanticide that she committed. The blessed time in her life soon comes to an end as it did before when she had just arrived in Ohio and spent 28 blissful days before the school master showed up. In the earlier situation, it was her daughter whose life was lost. In the latter however, it is Sethe herself who enters into a life-threatening, obsessive situation due to the presence of Beloved. When the latter, pushes both the women of 124 Bluestone Road to their limits through her malevolence, the reaction of the two women become poles apart. Sethe is pushed

into submissiveness in such a way that she loses her sense of self-value while Denver sets out to venture beyond her home to find her worth, reconstructing the self from within.

Paul D's appearance and later, that of Beloved heralds two diametrically different things to Denver. The former shows her that it is possible to live again no matter what past baggage one may be carrying. The latter shows her that the past horrors can consume one if it is allowed entrance unabated.

The story sets Denver's birth at a time when her mother's life was headed towards a complete transformation. The timing of her birth becomes symbolic as it is after her birth that her mother enjoys true freedom although only for a while. Later on, it is after Denver's 'second birth' into the outside world from within the confines of 124 Blue Stone that Sethe's freedom is made possible from Beloved, who is symbolic of her destroyed 'self'.

Baby Sugg's freedom is bought by her son which is in deep contrast to Sethe's as she had to run from the plantation under a life-threatening situation. Later on, she buys her freedom from Sweet Home through the death of her young daughter. However, she bows down to her dark past and is completely arrested by it through the symbolic haunting and later on, the manifestation of her dead daughter in the young woman who calls herself 'Beloved'. All of the Sweet Home men perish including Sethe's husband except Paul D. Baby Suggs dies and Sethe's two sons run away unable to face the turbulence of 124 Bluestone Road. All the residents of 124 Bluestone Road had forgotten who they were in the turbulence of life except for Denver. She is the sole survivor and successfully progresses into the community life. The quality of her freedom lasts and helps her to grow because it is one that stems from within, one that is nurtured from the knowledge that an individual's initiative is important for one's own well-being basing on self-value.

#### 4. Conclusion

In circumstances where the past swallowed everything instead of making it a building block to make the foundation stronger for a healthier life, the family gets lost in a thick dark forest. Denver's

mother has a past that consumes her identity and is therefore, unable to help construct her own. Her father gets annihilated by the very system that dehumanizes a person, destroying every chance of gaining self-worth through self-realization. Her grandmother retires from active living, unable to withstand the consequences of enslavement of the existing social structure. Her brothers Howard and Buglar run away, unable to face the dark history manifested in the ghost of 124. Society itself had kept a distance from her family, which become symbolic of loss of identity. Against all odds, Denver uses the materials of their extraordinary life to build up a future for herself and her family. It is through her character that the story of her mother develops into a journey of the rediscovery of the 'self' that carves out a hopeful future. Her mother's story mirrors every African American's historical struggle for an identity which in turn, mirrors every man's struggle for the discovery of self-worth. Her decision saves not just herself but also her mother. Thus, no matter what the past may be and no matter how the past may be out of our control, the present decisions and determinations can help build a future.

What makes Denver among the greatest characters in English Literature is her war-like footing against every destructive force that seeks to cage an individual and erase the value that one is born with. Such forces and struggles, being a part of human history, make her character ever relevant as long as society exists.

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