

# The Unspoken Truth about the African Slavery through Morrison's Beloved

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**Abstract:** Slavery began as an institution when the whites desired maximizing profits by exploiting the African labour. Eric Williams points out that, "The enslavement of the Africans had everything to do with the cheapness of labour, the oppression was for economic reasons and race differences exacerbated the oppression." Williams points out that racial differences made it easier to justify and rationalize the Negro's slavery ugliness, poverty and slavery. As a result to this black people soon ceased to exist as humans in the eyes of the white masters. Morrison in *Beloved* has shown the physical and psychological effects of slavery on African men and women. She has taken a real life event from the history of African Americans and has shown us the horrors and tortures of slavery as a reminder of the past. Psychologically, whiteness was always associated with beauty, superiority and culture and blackness with ugliness and poverty.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Beloved, Trauma, Tortures, African Americans, Slavery, Morrison.

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*"If I thought, had any idea, that I'd ever be a slave again, I'd take a gun an' jus' end it all right away. Because you're nothing but a dog. You're not a thing but a dog."*

—Fountain Hughes, age 101, Baltimore, Maryland (former slave)

## I. INTRODUCTION

The intent of this paper is to show how Morrison focuses on the barbaric and profane aspects of slavery in order to affect the reader and the community in such a way that slave history should never be forgotten. The nature of this research paper is to know what happened to the African Americans in the past and tried to bring forward using Morrison's novel *Beloved* what has been forgotten. Her novel forces readers to recognize the existence and dehumanizing conditions of slavery in a nation that would prefer to forget that such a brutal system ever existed. The paper involves research about the barbaric system of slavery in context to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The contribution of this paper is to remind this new generation of what all the people of Africa had to undergo that time and through this novel we can see how even after years of being free of slavery physically one is never able to free oneself of the emotional and mental scars.

*"Beloved helped us think about U.S. history in an entirely different way, and Morrison's specificity—including her elegantly crafted characters—helped change the abstractness of the portrayal of slavery.... It became possible to humanize slavery, to remember that the system of slavery did not destroy the humanity of those whom it enslaved."*  
- Angela Davis

## II. MAIN IDEA

What is Slavery? According to Wikipedia, **Slavery** is any system in which principles of property law are applied to people, allowing individuals to own, buy and sell other individuals, as a de jure form of property. A slave is unable to withdraw unilaterally from such an arrangement and works without remuneration.

Through the 17th and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries African people were kidnapped from their continent, they were then forced to work as slaves in the colonies of the 'New World', America. They were exploited, used as indentured servants and laborers in the production of crops such as tobacco and cotton. By mid-19th century, America's expansion and the

abolition movement caused a great debate over slavery, the Union freed the nation's four million slaves, but still the practice of slavery continued to influence the history of America, from the Reconstruction period to the 'civil rights movement' that emerged a century after emancipation.

Slavery's main cause was racial discrimination. Racism is a product of capitalism. Capitalism divides society into classes. The class that owns and controls the production and its means is the dominant class; its ultimate objective is to convince the others that their rule is 'just'. The justification the whites have been giving for the slavery is that, they wanted to civilize all those races which were below them. Racism is like a myth it's manmade and it works on the belief that white skin brings with it cultural superiority – whites being more intelligent and wise just because they are white. Slavery began when the whites in America brought the first Africans in chains and then used them as labors. Racism, Classism and Sexism show the oppressive conditions in which the Africans lived in America.

*Joel Kovel says that, "The white people dehumanized the slave by reducing their human selves to a body and made the slave quantifiable, thereby absorbing him into a rising world market of productive exchange. All that was left to blacks was their African soul which too was taken away by imposing white values on them."*

The blacks started fostering these feelings of inferiority because of this cultural breakdown. They lost themselves. Slave owners did everything they could to make their slaves completely dependent on them, and there was a system of restrictive and oppressive codes that governed life among slaves. They were not allowed to learn to read and write, and their behavior and movement was restricted. Their identity and their bodies were exploited. They got worse treatment than animals. Most slaves didn't even know their actual names.

*In Beloved, Stamp Paid reflects that "White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood."*

*"Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces" – Beloved*

The idea that the blacks were 'submissive and promiscuous' originated when the first Englishmen went to Africa to buy slaves. They misrepresented and misinterpreted the black practice according to their tribal cultural traditions and tropical climate, as lewdness. The black women often worked bent over, with the hems of their skirts tucked into the waistband, and because circumstances of their labour under slavery in America decreed, further gave birth to the promiscuous image assigned to them.

Their state of dress and posture was in sharp contrast to the modesty that the white men expected from their 'respectable' white women, who, according to puritanical norms, had to adorn themselves with layers of clothing to prevent their legs from being exposed to public view. "The slave woman's body . . . commanded no such respect." It was an ever present target for the hypocritical masters who celebrated the white women's purity while sexually abusing and dehumanizing the black slave women.

Many of the white masters took sexual liberties with slave women; the black woman was an indispensable commodity to these masters. Miscegenation was a very popular practice during the days of slavery. White planters saw a lot of profit in it. The children who were born out of this kind of sordid union would be the sole property of the white man and could be used for further exploitations justified as economic interests. The black slave woman was also seen as a wanton creature; easily available for sexual gratification therefore she became a victim of sexual oppression including rape and lynching. The black woman were denied the rights of motherhood, their babies were just another source of profit for the white masters. This stigma attached to the black woman by the whites ironically received the sanction of the black man, because the whites could exploit the black women according to their will, the black men saw them as 'loose'. These women suffered not only outside but also in their own community.

These were systems of psychological restrictions that affected the lives of the blacks.

In **Black Boy** (1945), Richard Wright laments, "My days and nights were one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension, and anxiety. I wondered how long I could bear it".

The whites were aware of having brought, among themselves, a group of people who had every reason to rebel. In Virginia, in the late 1600s and the start of 1700s, they adopted laws which condemned "Negroes" to be punished more

severely than the whites or other races for similar offences, they were known as “being SAVAGES and reckoned as goods and chattels”. As the slave number kept on increasing, the laws became more severe against the blacks, while they “specifically acquitted the white master who accidentally beat his slave to death”. Virginians could easily repress the black slaves by denying them opportunities or rights and subjecting them to any kind of brutal punishments, without any fear of the law.

Furthermore, in a land where any man had the need and also the right to bear arms for his own protection, the blacks were denied this as well. It was just an explicit denotation of purpose that was to keep the black in his place. In 1681, Virginia had prohibited all kinds of interracial liaisons.

In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, we experience the American slavery through those who lived as objects of exchange. The slaves have no family; they are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates as slave marriages had no legal basis, their children and their families. It is their past- they have lost a huge part of themselves and their personal lives. Therefore, there is always a tension between what is to be remembered and what is forgotten. For most Afro-Americans, it is the striving to reconcile one’s ancestral cultural African past, however remote or mythic or spiritual it is, with one’s American identity which is the present.

Morrison in her novel has constructed history through the acts and consciousness of African American slaves, than through the perspective of the dominant white classes. She uses the trope of memory-rememory to revise this genre of slave narratives, which thereby makes the slave experience more accessible to contemporary readers.

Her text is challenging the Western notions of time that informs the people of American history through the point of view of whites and the slave narratives. It engages with the physical, material and psychological consequences of slavery.

Henderson says that, ‘Morrison is among the writers who tried to show what happened to African Americans in the past and tries to show what has been forgotten or is being silenced:’

*“Yet, in many respects, these writers were limited in their efforts to fully depict the physical and psychological suffering of African American people...Toni Morrison seeks to signify on those silences imposed by publishers and editors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, Williams and Morrison extend the efforts of their predecessors by developing creative responses to those calls centered on the wounds of the African American body.”*[1]

Morrison’s novel *Beloved* exposed what was unsaid in these narratives, the psychic, personal subtexts that lie beneath the historical facts of Americans have been uncovered.

In Holden-Kirwan’s article it is stated that in an interview with Bonnie Angelo of Time magazine, Toni Morrison has discussed the desire of the American nation to repress the memory of slavery. According to Morrison, the enslavement of Africans and African Americans in the United States is something that the characters in *Beloved* don’t want to remember.

*“It is Toni Morrison’s ambition to create a form of storytelling, that will keep alive the struggle to remember, the need to forget, and the inability to forget”*

Arnold Rampersad, in his discussion of W.E.B Dubois’ *The Souls of Black folk* has described the recovery of African history as a national and also a personal necessity. Repression of historical past of the African Americans is as psychologically damaging as was their oppression and personal trauma.

Morrison thinks that the horrible issues which are related to slavery are avoided and forgotten in the traditional slave narratives because of that, she wants to emphasize on the painful and forgotten aspects of slavery. Her novel has reconstructed slave history in such a way that it cannot be appropriated by objective or scientific concepts of knowledge and history.

*“It is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember. I mean its national amnesia.” – Toni Morrison [2]*

Through *Beloved*, Morrison intends to show the reader what had happened to the slaves who worked in an institutionalized system of slavery. In *Beloved*, the slaves who worked at Sweet Home experienced violence, brutality, and were treated like animals. In the novel, the character who is affected the most of the severe conditions of slavery is Sethe. She gets tortured, raped and mistreated. As a result, she later attempts to run away from Sweet Home and thereafter is also driven to kill her two-year-old baby. Morrison shows us in this work what it actually means to be a slave and what

physical and psychological destructions have been brought to lives of slaves. In *Beloved*, she sheds light on the painful past of African Americans and reveals the buried experiences to give us a better understanding of African American history. *Beloved* is a real life story, an event from the history of African Americans where special importance has been given to the horrors and tortures of slavery to remind the reader about the past. In *Beloved* Morrison has reinvented the past and wants the reader to not forget what happened in African American history, and to transfer the stories of these people for all generations to hear:

*“Morrison’s critically acclaimed novel Beloved probes the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery, by way of what she has called “rememory” - deliberately reconstructing what has been forgotten.”*[3]

Morrison has tried to represent the history of African Americans from her own perspective by drawing attention to what slavery can do to the slaves individually and their families:

*Beloved* represents a working out of subjectivity through the representation of history, a history so brutal and dehumanizing that it is un-representable, a depiction of community, which is often torn apart by the circumstances of slavery, and a construction of identity.[4]

Morrison believes that the history of African Americans has been distorted and romanticized. Spargo in his work has cited that Morrison’s ideas about the Afro - American history:

*“We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it’s romanticized. This culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.”*[5]

*Beloved*, is set after the American Civil War ended, during the period of Reconstruction. A great deal of random violence was let loose upon the Africans, to both the slaves who were freed by Emancipation and others who had been given or who had bought their freedom earlier. In the novel there are flashbacks to a distant period, when Slavery was still a growing concern in the South and the seeds of the brutal and calamitous events of the novel were sown. The setting of the novel is divided: the countryside of Cincinnati, where the central characters have ended up, and the slave holding plantation in Kentucky, ironically named Sweet Home, from which they fled eighteen years before the novel opens.

Morrison shows the horrors of slavery, and unmask its aftermath on the African Americans. The story is perfect for all those who have not experienced nor could imagined what it was to be an African American in America in the 1860’s. *Beloved* gives a gateway to the understanding of the trials and tribulations of the modern African Americans. The Novel has in it many things that are very striking and most of which have to deal with the treatment of the slaves. The book as a whole is quite disturbing, and shows to what lengths the African Americans were willing to go to avoid enslavement of themselves or their children.

*Beloved* is based on a real life story of the slave Margaret Garner. On Jan. 28, 1856, Garner killed her two-year old daughter and attempted to kill her other two children just because she didn’t want her children to be send to the plantation where they worked.

*“Beloved was written in the palace of Art, its ways with history are like those of Nostromo or For’s Fifth Queen series, its verbal texture is as rich as that of Mrs. Dalloway, and Morrison is thereby heir to more problems than she perhaps knows. No matter. This is a major book.”*[6]

By telling the story of Sethe, Morrison is focusing on the dehumanizing effects that slavery had on individuals, by emphasizing the sufferings of the slaves. This novel shows us what happened with Sethe, her family and the other slaves who were working on the plantation. We see that Sethe was mistreated and raped. After escaping from the plantation, she killed her baby and attempted to kill the rest of her children. Her husband went mad and all other slaves had very unfortunate lives and brutal ends. After killing her baby, Sethe continued to suffer “The past has kept her mentally and emotionally enslaved despite eighteen years of freedom.” She felt regret and pain and had lost almost all her senses of feeling, she couldn’t see colours, had to live an isolated life for a long time as she was ostracized by her black community. In the end Sethe became mentally and spiritually exhausted and had no energy left to live a meaningful life. It is very obvious in the novel that slavery threatens the psychological and spiritual world of individuals and causes horrific and traumatic consequences.

There are many instances in the book where we can see what all these slaves had to suffer, and the kinds of lives they lived:

The fact that the slaves were treated like animals had no names and where a traded and sold like cattle is very well depicted in this novel. It is shocking to read the living conditions, and punishments that the slaves where put through. Particularly, the living conditions at the work camp in Georgia these men were put in 'little cubbie holes' in a trench in the ground, when it rained "They squatted in the muddy water, slept above it and peed in it[7]" It's all very unpleasant to read. Another really disturbing was at the same camp the "breakfast". The white men considered these African Americans to be worse than animals, yet they still made them perform oral sex on them.

The schoolteacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight.[8]

In *Beloved*, the Schoolteacher is clearly the primary representative and agent of the system of the so-called "white-supremacist" and capitalist patriarchy in the era of slavery. His interpellations of Sethe, Paul D, Sixo, and Halle lead to rebellion, madness, death and permanent mental and physical scars.[9]

The schoolteacher disapproved of the way the slaves ate or the way they rested or did anything, "*He complained they ate too much, rested too much, talked too much, which was certainly true compared to him, because schoolteacher ate little, spoke less and rested not at all*"[10]

*"Schoolteacher's nephew represents a dismissal by whites of the dehumanizing qualities of slavery"*[11]

For Sethe, the fetishisation of her body by the white schoolteacher and his nephews, her mammary rape and the brutal beating which caused the choke-cherry tree on her back, causes psychic fragmentation that continuously thwarted the development of her subjectivity even after eighteen years of her leaving slavery. .... Sethe's personhood, as it has been allowed to exist under slavery, is reduced further to animality.[12]

*"They used cowhide on you? And they took my milk. They beat you and you were pregnant? And they took my milk!"*[13] Sethe expresses her deep grief,

*Nobody will ever get my milk,  
no more except my own children.*

*I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby.*[14]

The robbing of Sethe's milk, which is often evoked in this narrative, refers to as what she owns and as her children's very life, this thus can be known as the materialization of the fundamental perversity and denial of the motherhood to a black slave woman. This institution kills the slaves' selves by severing the bonds between a mother and a child.[15]

*"Two were lying open-eyed in saw dust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one-- ..."*[16]

The act of killing her own baby is not very easy to understand at first and almost impossible to be justified; though, the circumstances in which Sethe had to live and all the brutality that she endured being a slave woman at Sweet Home drove her to commit infanticide which is perhaps the of the worst things a mother can do to her child. For, Sethe however the fear of slavery and its effects were so terrible that she did not want her children to experience the same difficulties and live in the same brutality.[17]

Sethe intends to explain her reason of her horrible act to *Beloved*,

*"How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already."*[18]

Fuston-White stated that it was not Sethe that killed her child, but it was the effect of slavery that caused Sethe to commit the crime:

*"It was not madness, but the reality of slavery, that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality, as well as its compassion"*[19]

*"I stopped him, she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe"[20]*

Sethe constantly struggles to forget her past and the pain it causes her.

*"I will never run from another thing on this earth ... No more running—from nothing"[21]*

*"I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: It cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much..."[22]*

What Halle had to witness was the mammary rape of his wife, the brutality with which the schoolteacher's nephews handled Sethe and its extremities, it made him mad, he lost himself in the guilt and self suffering.

*"Paul D looked up at her and sighed. You may as well know it all. Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face."[23]*

Paul D; spent eighteen years wandering, in all this time learning to forget, and not know what he once felt He stopped feeling after he left Sweet Home. It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister the cock, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time reached 124, Bluestone Road, nothing in this world could pry it open.

When the slaves tried to escape they were sold like Paul F, shot dead like Paul A, burnt and brutalized and raped like Sixo and Sethe. Sethe manages to escape but not till her mammary rape which is symbolic of denial of motherhood and brutal thrashing showcasing the complete ruthlessness of Slavery as a system.

Slavery is a very degrading and an extremely horrible way to live, and living in chains and without freedom is not living as a human should. It meant complete dependency on the masters and no identity of self. This system degraded the African Americans from humans, to that of animals. They weren't given any respect, or proper care. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows this to us in a very clear way, giving us not one or two but many incidents which show the dehumanizing of blacks by the whites.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this research paper we can see how Morrison's novel *Beloved*, has a lot of important points about the system of slavery and it brings forward many things that are not well known in the history. This book helps to show the roots of African Americans and how till today their lives are affected. This helps the reader to understand the history of African Americans and how they relate to their past. It also brings to light many cruelties inherent in slavery and the effects this had on an entire race of people and their development. Through *Beloved* we can see the dehumanizing effects of Slavery on individuals even long after they were free.

As a novelist she has set her fiction in the key periods of the U.S. history of blacks. Morrison has dedicated her entire literary career to ensuring that the black experience under slavery should be neither left to interpretation solely as dictated by the whites, nor to a history that is purely academic and subjective, that records only the hard impersonal facts. She has succeeded at doing this by placing her characters in the positions that the White American society had designed for the blacks also revealing their lives as how they endured, coped with or reacted to, the effects of the racism that had its birth in the institution of slavery.

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