

## Reclaiming Identity through the Community: A Study of

### Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *a Mercy*

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#### Abstract:

In her works, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison considers both pre-slavery and post-slavery African-American community in which people suffer physically and psychologically from the dominant culture; especially women, who learn to heal themselves with sharing stories of their traumatic life. Female solidarity also empowers the female protagonists to establish their own identity. Wrath and violence are steady motifs throughout the novels, and Morrison exposes the dangers of manhood that relies on violence and oppression. Slavery, class and gender inequity, betrayal, and brutality are described through the lives of the novel's characters.

**Key Words:** Identity, Feminine Vulnerability, Culture, Racial and Gender Discrimination

*Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison's fifth novel, was set during the reconstruction era in 1873. It is the story of the emancipated slave woman, Sethe, who kills her daughter and tries to kill her other three children when a posse tries to return them to slavery. The dead daughter, Beloved, returns years later to haunt their house. Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, escaped from the slavery in Kentucky and attempted to murder all her children and succeeded in killing her baby girl when the slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. Morrison paints a dark and powerful portrait of the dehumanizing effects of slavery in this novel.

In *A Mercy* (2009), through her storytelling devices, Morrison succeed in transporting the reader to the past of slavery in 1680's in America where slave trade flourished as any other business, oppression, class difference and racism. She decides to go back to the times when slavery was deprived of its racial context by showing similarities between white indentured servants and black slaves.

In this novel, *A Mercy*, Morrison brings together representatives of all the major racial categories in the New World—African, Native American, Anglo and Mulatto. The book also features white and Native American characters who are working in servitude.

For the former slaves, the past is a burden that they desperately and fully try to forget. Yet for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, memories of the past are inescapable. They continue to haunt her, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape; that worse than death is the fact that "anybody white could take your whole self . . . [and] dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (Morrison 2004, p. 251). Pamela E. Barnett (1997) analyzes Sethe's actions as such, "For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed,

or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and “dirtied” by whites; even dying at the hands of one’s mother is subordinate to rape” (p. 419).

The Cincinnati community of former slaves is indirectly responsible for Sethe’s infanticide. Kristina K. Groover (1999) theorizes that here “the community fails to perform its role” (p. 71). Although some of the others saw schoolteacher and his posse “nobody ran on ahead” to warn Sethe and Baby Suggs of the imminent danger (Morrison 2004, p. 157). Spite, malice and jealousy prevented them from alerting Sethe. Melissa Walker (1991) says it is “the collaboration of the black community with the conditions of slavery that led to the murder” (p. 37).

At the heart of *Beloved* are Denver’s and Sethe’s journeys toward self-definition and a newly constructed sense of self. The baby girl, who has come again eighteen years later, is the actual characterization of Sethe’s psychological torments. She embodies Sethe’s “quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness” (Bell 1992, p. 8). *Beloved* does act as a catalyst for the liberation of Sethe and Denver from their years of isolation and of incomplete or distorted identity. Ralph D. Story discusses “Sethe’s inner quest . . . for completeness; her destiny was to fulfil her promises as a mother: to love, to cherish, to protect, to teach and to give” (2002, p. 22). Sethe refuses to accept oppressive ways of living that do not allow her to love her children freely. Sethe with a fierce desire gives her children all that had been denied to her—mother’s milk, freedom and love. In her role as mother, she loves, and thereby provides an example of resistance to oppression.

*Beloved* is not only a ghost of Sethe’s killed daughter, but also a symbol of the link between the present and the past. Therefore, through the recreation of the maternal bond, Sethe searches for her self-affirmation. It is not until *Beloved*’s physical arrival that Sethe is finally allowed to “re-examine her story with regard to sacrifice, resistance, and mother love” (Kella 2000, p. 129).

Only by knowing her history, Denver is able to take action to save her life, as well as Sethe’s. It is an ancestral spirit, a voice of history—her Grandmother’s, which indicts her for not knowing her history and prompts her to take action, “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that?” (Morrison 2004, p. 244) April Lidinsky notes that “countering Denver’s caution to act through stories of her family’s resistance to slaveholders, Baby Suggs inspires her to reach the community beyond the porch of 124” (1994, p. 210).

When Denver sees her mother “spit up something she had not eaten,” she leaves 124 to look for help and then work to support her mother, her sister and herself. She is encouraged by Baby Suggs spirit, which directs Denver to “go on out the yard. Go on,” it is the “rememory of Baby Suggs that finally transforms isolation into a quest for help” (Lidinsky 1994, p. 210). Denver must go into the world to find some, and so begins to bring her haunted family back into its community and into time. Missy Dehn Kubitschek (1991) points out that “Denver feels her potential to become a mother while simultaneously affirming her status as daughter” (pp. 171-172). Denver’s new identity is an ideal blend of self-interest, personal responsibility toward Sethe, and a relationship with the greater black community. Groover summarizes this act as Denver’s “rite of passage into womanhood” (1999, p. 74). It can also be viewed as a voyage into adulthood and self-recognition in the eyes of the community. In other words, Denver provides a

developmental model of a person who escaped the threat of total alienation and became aware of her place in the social structure.

When the women of the town hear that Sethe's murdered baby has returned, they overcome their long time disgust and decide to save Sethe from Beloved's life-threatening abuse, "the past [was] something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (Morrison 2004, p. 256). Doreathe Drummond Mbalia (1991) comments on the unity and communal bonds inherent in this gesture; "Once the enemy is identified, once it is out in the open, the community struggles collectively against that which divides them" (p. 91). Now, instead of thinking of Sethe as the monster, the community changes its allegiance; "By perceiving Beloved as a demon whipping Sethe, the community projects its guilt for having whipped her themselves for eighteen years" (Winsbro 1993, p. 152). Moreover, it is significant that the community is involved in the exorcism because Beloved represents the pain of slavery they all suffer in some way. Her story is the story of a whole community, a small narrative that overflows into a larger narrative. The women share the feelings function as a self-help group to fight back the trouble. Amy Binder sees the road to social change in "subjective negotiations of a sense of individual self and identification with a group that aim together at forming collective identity" (qtd. in Kella 2000, p. 37). The ghost's supernatural presence provides the community with a convenient scapegoat and an opportunity to atone for its past mistake, "Beloved acts as a supernatural agent—experienced as daughter, sister, witch, or demon-child—who engages others in a seemingly external but actually internal struggle resulting in rebirth, renewal, [and] resurrection" (Winsbro 1993, p. 153). Sethe's *journey inside* in search of her own identity could not have taken place without the community's reassessment.

Thirty-strong women come together in a communal effort of their own; they march to the house and perform a collective exorcism:

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison 2004, p. 261)

This baptism by sound marks Sethe's rebirth into her new life and ignites a long-dormant tribal memory, thereby "joining her with her ancient heritage" (Kubitschek 1991, p. 174). Beloved disappears without a trace; by exorcising Beloved, the community exorcises the past, opening the way for the old harmony, inspired and nurtured by Baby Suggs (Winsbro 1993, p. 153). Sethe cannot heal herself; she needs the collective power of the community. Mbalia noted, "It is only through the collective will and the action of the people that Beloved, the enemy, dies" (1991, p. 91). Sethe now has an opportunity to redefine her identity on the basis of her cultural heritage. Despondent at Beloved's departure, Sethe resigns herself to death; fully convinced that Beloved was "best thing" (Morrison 2004, p. 272). Sethe suffers from losing her child again and ends up a broken woman. She continues to deny herself the truth of her own self worth. "When you kill the ancestor," Morrison said, "you kill yourself" (Morrison 1984, p. 344). Taking leave of history, the novel leaves the slave mother to her own moment, to herself—whoever she was.

There is hope at the novel's end when Paul D re-enters, as a Baby Suggs like figure, to wash Sethe, as Baby did when she had first arrived, and to call her to claim, to accept and to love herself. Paul D illustrates the qualities of the Africana man by participating in Sethe's healing (Hudson-Weems 1993, p. 123). He tells her, "You your own best thing, Sethe. You are" (Morrison 2004, p. 273). Paul D "wants to put his story next to hers" and he tells Sethe, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (p. 273). He helps her to see that her best thing was not wholly outside or inside herself, but in "her ability to remember, articulate, and live out that desire and loss in and alongside other stories as incomplete, as lonely, and as potentially loving again as hers" (Moreland 1997, p. 175). Healing allows Sethe to see that she is worthy of love—Paul D's and her own. Sethe and Paul D look back to embrace their individual and communal history and move into a future where love is a real possibility. Walker notes that "Sethe and Paul D have finally come to terms with the past and have moved into the possibility of a future together" (1991, p. 45).

With Denver out in the world, Paul D by her side, the ghost chased out of her life, and the community of women ready to accept her back into their fold, Sethe's life holds more possibilities than it ever has and offers a more "liberating vision of motherhood" (Kubitschek 1991, p. 165). Between Paul D's and Denver's compassionate nurturing, she may also fulfil her life-long need to be mothered. In fact, as Winsbro (1993) points out Sethe "regains a chance, under Denver and Paul D's care, for a resurrected life of her own" (p. 140). All of them have a chance to leave the past behind and start again by focusing on the future. They are agents in each other's healing, and their relationship is intertwined with the community that surrounds them (Hudson-Weems 1993, p. 120).

Morrison posits that the black community as a whole must attempt to heal from the trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage by remembering and mourning their past. Forgetting or repressing will allow for the painful memories to intrude upon their lives, just as *Beloved* took human form to invade Sethe's life. *Beloved* concludes with emphasis on the importance of communal participation in the processes of emotional and spiritual healing and stability. It delineates "the intrinsic value of collectivism to the African community" and risks of "isolation" both for the individual and "for the race" (Mbalia 1991, pp. 88-90).

*Beloved* means death, memory, forgiveness, and punishment to Sethe, a new life for Denver, and a consolidation with the community. In *Beloved*, "the protagonist moves from a life of fragmentation and isolation to a (re)vision of wholeness and sense of community through an acceptance of his/her African-based heritage" (Wilentz 1992, p. 60). This transformation from isolation to communal re-entry is essential for the survival of black Americans.

*A Mercy* gives voice to a remarkable group of characters: Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch farmer, landowner, trader, and lender; his wife, Rebekka, newly arrived from England through his funding an arranged marriage; their servant woman, the Native American Lina, whose tribe has been wiped out by smallpox; Florens, the slave girl whom he reluctantly accepts as payment for a bad loan; the permanently shipwrecked Sorrow, daughter of a sea captain killed in a storm off the coast of the Carolinas; and Willard and Scully, two white male indentured servants. These characters take turns narrating the story, and their voices carry the physical and emotional scars of the struggles of their lives. Especially as each of the women characters tells her story, her awareness of her devaluation becomes a condemnation

of that devaluation. All these mixed-race characters are bereft of their roots, struggling for a place in this new world.

Each character has peculiar experiences and distinct world views, but they become interconnected as they depend on each other to survive in the wilderness. Their class and racial difference are minimized because there is a “focus on building community” as they try to create a pleasant environment for them to live in (Hooks 1993, p. 154).

*A Mercy* explores the repercussions of an enslaved mother’s desperate act; she offers her seven-year-old daughter to a stranger in payment for her master’s debt while opting to keep her baby boy, with the hope that her daughter will have a better life. Jacob Vaark accepts Florens at the behest of a woman she calls “a minha mae” (Portuguese for “my mother”), who kneels before him, begging, “Please, Senhor, Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (Morrison 2008, p. 24). His acceptance of Florens, although “flesh was not his commodity,” becomes the single act of mercy to which the book’s title refers (Morrison 2008, p. 20). The maternal sacrifice of a “minha mae” is on the order of the panicked mother, Sethe’s desperate act, in *Beloved* of taking her daughter’s life rather than allowing her to be remanded to slavery. The poignancy here is much softer, and yet it gets elevated by Morrison’s terse theological critique: “It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human” (Morrison 2008, pp. 164-165).

Like Sethe’s unfathomable sacrifice and *Beloved*’s inability to comprehend her mother’s extreme method of protection, Florens cannot perceive a minha mae’s aim to place her with a master that she intuits will not sexually enslave her. The narrative opens with Florens’ flawed interpretation of that betrayal and ends with the mother’s explanation of it. The rejection is a wound which stunts the psyche of the young Florens, leading her to give dominion of herself to another, “to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing: to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing” (Morrison 2008, p. 165). Florens interprets her mother’s action as abandonment and is left emotionally vulnerable and desperate for love.

*A Mercy* reveals what lies beneath the surface of slavery. But at its heart it is the ambivalent, disturbing story of a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her, and of a daughter who may never exorcise that abandonment. Florens is a symbol of the African Diaspora insofar as her painful status as orphan mirrors the conditions of collective displacement.

Jacob and Rebekka initially attempt to live harmoniously with the land. But in addition to farming, Jacob increases his wealth by lending money. Rebekka questions her God as she loses one baby after another to the harsh realities of the New World but Jacob tries to compensate the death of his five-year-old daughter with the presence of Florens around his wife.

Rebekka knows that even as a white woman, her prospects are limited to “servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest” (Morrison 2008, pp. 75-76). Lina, Sorrow, and Florens who are servants, know that if both their master and mistress die, “three unmastered women . . . out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone” (Morrison 2008, p. 56). Lina tells Florens, “We never shape the world . . . The world shapes us” (p. 69). Like women all

over the world, irrespective of colour or creed, these women are also like putty in the hands of men who can take advantage of them any time. As long as they can count on each other, they are able to endure the difficulties of trying to run a farm by themselves and compensate for their vulnerability of being women in a sexist society. As the narrator comments: “Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay” (Morrison 2008, p. 96).

At Jacob’s untimely death, Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow, and Florens become “unmastered women” (Morrison 2008, p. 56) forming an isolated female community that harks back to Morrison’s literary convention of configuring domiciles that are female-headed and exclusively female-inhabited.

As Mistress also lies, delirious, Lina has no choice but to send Florens out to find the blacksmith who can save Mistress’ life. Florens’ journey is a rescue mission—her mistress is sick and asks her to track down a man who might help—but it’s personal, too, because she is desperately in love with the man she seeks. Florens is imbued with a great desire to find her true love. Her journey in search of the blacksmith, and her love, is ironically a self-awakening journey. Lina has hopes that they will be together after he saves Mistress. The blacksmith will never send her away in the way that Florens’ mother did.

When Florens says “I am adoring you” and blacksmith replies “and a slave to that too” (Morrison 2008, p. 139), blacksmith is blaming Florens for her subordination to slavery and to romantic love. Florens’ desire and search for love are natural longings indicative of the human experience that all seek, but they are unattainable and doomed in a cultural environment that is based on the enslavement of others. The blacksmith’s rejection of Florens stems from both his contempt for her blind devotion and his fear that too close an approximation to her enslavement jeopardizes his own liberty. He rejects her, saying, “You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind” (Morrison 2008, p. 139).

For Florens, Blacksmith acts as a catalyst for an identity crisis in terms of her race and what constitutes it. Her words to a free Negro could have been directed to all who enslaved her: “You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be” (Morrison 2008, p. 155). Florens’ passionate love for a man turns into a wild streak when rejected by the Blacksmith. She confesses, “I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps . . . but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth” (p. 1).

In *A Mercy*, Morrison points out the power that stories have for community and identity building. The women heal themselves through confronting and sharing stories of their pasts. *A Mercy* reveals to her readers the “improvised” nature of race, religion, and individual identities through the improvised nature of Jacob Vaark’s family.

Morrison’s story stands as a clear reminder of all the elements that went into the building of a nation. Now in The United States, different peoples and colours live from around the world, and in some states even the white population is in a minority.

*Beloved* and *A Mercy* are fine illustrations of the journey to self-reliance on a *communal* as well as *individual* level. The novels portray successful development of the “black identity” in times when a black person is denied it. During the struggle for self-definition, the protagonists of the novels learn to *self-possess* their own *selves*, and overcome the conviction of being someone else’s *possession*.

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