

## **Debunking Dehumanisation in the Works of Toni Morrison**

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**Abstract:** Dehumanisation is a state of severe physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, akin to living in a hellish environment. This study will look at how white racism's culture sanctioned not only governmental institutions of discrimination, but also a sophisticated code of speech, conduct, and social practises that made white supremacy not just legitimate, but also natural and inevitable.

Toni Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved* (1987), depicts the degrading repercussions of slavery on her heroine's past and memories. Morrison has devoted her creative career in portraying black people's experiences under and as a result of slavery and dehumanisation. Toni Morrison has succeeded in portraying the physical and psychological harm imposed on African Americans by the harsh dehumanisation that was American slavery, according to this study.

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### **Review of Literature:**

Maiese defines dehumanisation as the psychological process of demonising an adversary, rendering them less than human and thus unworthy of humanitarian treatment. It's been used to justify wars, extrajudicial and judicial killings, slavery, property seizure, denial of suffrage and other rights, and attacks on enemies or political opponents.

Physical, emotional and spiritual desolation produced by slavery is portrayed in the works of Toni Morrison. She throws light on the adverse effects of slavery and white oppression that leads to the dehumanisation of the characters involved. The male and female characters are unable to form a sense of identity and are degraded to such an extent that it makes it almost impossible for them to shape a sense of self, especially in her Novel *Beloved*.

Morrison concentrates in *Beloved* on the most visible negative effects of slavery: how former slaves are plagued, even in freedom, by the dehumanisation they undergo. Because of their oppressed social status, Morrison's characters can only have relationships if others in positions of authority allow them to.

When we look into the works of Morrison, the work distribution in society was very much varied in nature. Men were identified through their ability to work hard and provide for their loved ones and people were judged on what they do rather than who they were. The maleness of the man was dependent on the work he did. Women had the responsibility of protecting their male members by allowing them to be masculine enough to drink, abuse and be violent. The men did not have the freedom to choose the responsibilities given to them and were allowed to handle only what was handed over to them forcibly.

The women took up the domestic responsibilities and the managing of children. But the women were also working in the fields. As labourers both men and women were treated badly.

In the works of Toni Morrison the lives of slaves is in a pathetic condition as they are physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually destroyed. And the mindset of slaves does not change even when they have gained their freedom as they are still unable to escape their slave-like mindset. It haunted them through memories and recurring thoughts that were disturbing in nature. Their sense of self-worth and identity was lost. They didn't feel human anymore.

The dehumanising practice included stripping the names of the slaves and their identity and by selling them. Psychologically and physically severe mental and physical torture was meted out to the slaves and all methods were used to force slaves into obedience.

Through the allowance or denial of relationships, Morrison demonstrates in *Beloved* how slavery, the deliberate dehumanisation of African slaves, and the presence of whiteness in society alter her characters' ability to form their own sense of self-identity. The alienation the slaves experience echoes into future generations by disabling any hope of forming relationships after attaining freedom and creates psychological obstacles African Americans must conquer in the future.

In the case of Morrison's characters in *Beloved*, 'the trauma in question is slavery, not [only] as an institution or even an experience, but as a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people' (Eyerman 1).

The experiences slaves are able to draw upon, however, are not capable of fulfilling their need for an identity because their experiences and relationships are limited due to the social and racial groups to which they belong. Both men and women are classified by their relation to each other; men's masculinity and women's femininity is based on who defines it and, in the case of the characters in *Beloved*, it is defined by the slave owners and the society in which they live. Because they are denied mature adult relationships, their psychosocial development is delayed and their capacity to understand themselves in relation to one another and society is inhibited. This is an extension of the cultural trauma produced by slavery because, by denying the basic human right to choose sexual partner for physical, emotional, and reproductive reasons, they are denied the ability to develop on a psychosocial level to achieve an understanding of their own identity.

In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe even though she achieves womanhood was treated worse than an animal. The milk from her chest has been stolen by the boys and it is a life of disgust and humiliation that she leads.

Sethe the female protagonist, has a traumatic memory that controls her whole existence. Sethe's dream of living a life of dignity and having meaningful relationships with those around her is unfulfilled. Sethe believes that children are better off dead than being alive and suffer an animalistic life of submission and it is this fear that makes her dash her baby beloved to the wall and kill the child. She lives with this guilt and the memory keeps haunting her throughout her life. The return of *Beloved*, through the strange girl, reveals how the ghosts of the past haunt not just the individual but the community as well. The daughter Denver, is the one who finally finds a solution at the end of the novel.

The dehumanisation of female slaves, as in the instance of Sethe, the protagonist in *Beloved*, deprives such characters of their femininity by denying them motherhood. Infants born into slavery were routinely separated from their mothers as soon as possible to prevent any emotional bond from developing. Depriving women of their natural need to mother their children made it simpler to degrade them as human beings. Not only did the physical separation of mother and child hinder female slaves from identifying as mothers, but it also prevented them from identifying as mothers and motherhood was not a rightful privilege they owned.

Sethe may be grieving as a black mother as a result of her solitude as a slave, according to Lisa Williams. Many African slaves were affected by West African motherhood rituals, which respected the individual mother while also emphasising that mothering was a social effort.

According to Patricia Hill Collins in her article 'The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships', a woman has no choice but to evaluate her identity based upon motherhood: 'The cult of true womanhood emphasises motherhood as a woman's highest calling. It stresses a motherhood that is confined to the home and children, under the protection of a husband' (Williams 164). When viewing this theory through the lens of slavery, it is apparent that African female slaves had little to no chance to form a mother-identity: "the idea of the cult of true womanhood has been held up to Black women for emulation, [and] racial oppression has denied black families significant resources to support private nuclear family households' (Williams 164). In *Beloved*, dehumanization is seen through the life of the characters who are denied not only nuclear family households, but also the base human instinct to care for their children.

Sethe is separated from her children not just because she puts her own well-being on hold to take them to safety, but also because it is a "direct attack on her as a Black mother." (Williams 164).

She is also robbed of her breast milk, which is the essence of motherhood, in a cruel and inhumane manner. Sethe focuses on her milk and the life-force she is naturally supplied with throughout the tale.

'All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me.' (*Beloved* 19)

While talking about her past with her daughter, Denver, Sethe describes the event: 'After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it.' (*Beloved* 19)

Sethe keeps returning to this recollection because breast milk is the only aspect of parenthood that she believes is secure from white people. Her milk, the substance that would maintain her child's life, is the one thing she genuinely owns, but when the white lads took it from her, they lowered her value as a mother, a human being, and a woman.

Female slaves are not the only ones who were being dehumanised. Male slaves were also denied the right to self-identify as masculine or, for that matter, human. Mr. Garner, the original owner of the Sweet Home farm where Sethe and Paul D lived, treats his male slaves as "men".

'The Garners, it seemed to [Sethe], ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted to know' (*Beloved* 165).

Despite the fact that Mr. Garner's plantation management style appears to be positive, he, too dramatizes the myriad ways in which the white slavocracy uses its power to determine the experience and identity of slaves.

Because they are only given secondary features of masculinity, the slaves are able to feel falsely manly. Mr. Garner gives them the right to carry guns, learn to read, and have sexual agency, but their choices are controlled and limited.

All of these traits are secondary to masculinity since masculinity, like femininity, is a sensation that originates from within. Mr. Garner effectively owns their masculinity and limits their ability to embrace their identity as men by allowing them to act like men through these secondary qualities.

Mr. Garner's ability to label his slaves "men" calls into question their basic sense of manhood. Because the Sweet Home plantation's male slaves need permission to act like men, the process of designating themselves as such is also artificial.

However, the slaves' encounters with masculinity are brief. The men are denied secondary masculine features after Mrs. Garner's brother-in-law, a man the slaves refer to as "schoolteacher," takes charge of Sweet Home.

[Paul D] grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to. (*Beloved* 147)

By taking away their guns, the schoolteacher takes away their ability to hunt for food or defend themselves; by denying them the capacity to learn to read, he ensures their stay at Sweet Home. With every ounce of pride taken from the men of Sweet Home, the schoolteacher's power grows tremendously, as the slaves' grow weaker.

One of the key characters in *Beloved*, Paul D, internalises the cruelty he endures for years, and this dehumanisation changes him into an unemotional man with a shattered identity, despite his inner strength and will to persevere.

After attempting to murder one of his owners, Paul D is sent to a place Morrison describes as similar to a prison: "the ditches; the one thousand feet of earth ' five feet deep, five feet wide, into which wooden boxes had been fitted. A door of bars that you could lift on hinges like a cage opened into three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt' (*Beloved* 125).

Paul D and the other 45 members of the chain gang who were compelled to work with him were subjected to humiliating treatment as well as physical and sexual torture. Years of abuse and suppression have left his memories rusted shut in a smoked tin-heart.

Paul D internalises the bigotry he's been subjected to and becomes so emasculated that he believes he's undeserving of human affection.

Slave dehumanisation in *Beloved* goes beyond the denial of basic human impulses like parenthood or identifying one's own femininity or masculinity, and continues to the classification of slaves as animals. Sethe overhears a schoolteacher during a lesson with his nephews while living at Sweet Home.

When a schoolteacher encourages students to write down the qualities of slaves and sort them into human and animal categories, he is training the students to disregard the slaves' humanity and to use their social and racial group against them.

'No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up.' (*Beloved* 19) Sethe is so disturbed after hearing this lesson that she doesn't tell anyone about it until she's explaining her past acts to her daughter, *Beloved*. By teaching his nephews this 'lesson,' the educator is insuring the future generation's racial sentiments.

The slaves' lives are also heavily influenced by their sexuality. Baby Suggs, the mother of Halle, one of Sweet Home's men, has been the sole female slave on the Sweet Home plantation for many years. There is no one to gratify one of the most basic human desires: sex, until Sethe is brought to the plantation. Slaves are degraded to the point where they believe they are on par with animals, if not lower, and hence believe it is permissible to have sexual intercourse with animals. Denying them access to basic human desires leads them to internalise society's idea that they are less than human.

Toni Morrison's work *Beloved* is about the dehumanisation of African American slaves. Slave views as a subhuman group in society at the time deny them basic human aspirations and make it impossible for them to

have a stable sense of personal identity. They are forced to identify with their social and ethnic group, but by doing so their sense of self is lost.

Thus, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* we see how dehumanisation takes place based on class, gender, sex, race and so on. The vulnerable groups even now are struggling for a dignified existence in many parts of the world and dehumanisation must be avoided as it results in suppression, minoritisation, subjugation, bloodshed and exclusion.

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