

# The Influence of Slavery on Women's Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2020

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:427070>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-05-13**



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Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Mihaela Šmehil

**Utjecaj ropstva na ženske odnose u Toni Morrisonovom romanu  
Beloved**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2020.

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Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost  
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Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

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Osijek, 2020.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
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**The Influence of Slavery on Women's Relationships in Toni  
Morrison's *Beloved***

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

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Scientific field: philology  
Scientific branch: English studies

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U Osijeku, 23. 09. 2020.

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which Morrison presents how slavery greatly influenced the forming of relationships between the characters, especially the female characters in the novel. Morrison reconceptualizes American history in such a way, that she tells the story from a slave's point of view, not of the white social classes. She also presents her view on female agency in the novel. Through her main character Sethe, she shows deep insight into a slave's psychological and physical state, and how it is a struggle to maintain or build a healthy relationship with loved ones. Sethe must overcome her past trauma so she could live a normal life. The aim of this paper is to present the consequences of slavery on the relationships between female characters in the novel, more specifically, the relationship between the main character Sethe and her daughter Denver, between Sethe and the ghost girl Beloved, and between Sethe and her lover Paul D. In order to examine the whites' treatment of slaves, the paper also explores the beginnings of exploitation of African Americans in the United States, especially in the South, where Catholic slave owners justified their actions through the Bible.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, slavery, relationships, female agency

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## Introduction

The African American society is marked by the legacy of slavery that has left such a big imprint on American society that the quest for democratic equality remains unreachable. The racial problems of the past continue to the present. The sharp contrast of the American ideals and values, on the one hand, and the continuing second-class status of African Americans, on the other, make evident that race is still a problem that lingers in contemporary America. Despite the significant legal and political transformation that shaped American race relations, equal participation of African Americans in the economic, political, and cultural life remains a dream. In many cities across the United States, and especially in the rural areas of the Old South, race relations remind us of the period of American slavery, in which the Catholic slave owners justified their deeds by referring to the Bible. According to the story of Noah's curse upon the descendants of Ham and Canaan in the Book of Genesis, slavery was justified. The racial discrimination and victimization committed by these slave owners and their pro-slavery society is portrayed by Toni Morrison, an African American women writer, who shows a deep insight into the problems of African Americans, and as a woman, boldly presents the feminist consciousness in her literary work. This paper focuses on her novel *Beloved* in which she shows how the impact of slavery affected the African American sense of identity and resulted in their difficulty of establishing and maintaining any kind of intimate relationship. The aim of this paper is to present the consequences of slavery on the relationships between the female characters in the novel, more specifically, the relationship between Sethe and her daughter Denver, between Sethe and the ghost girl Beloved, and between Sethe and her lover Paul D.

The first chapter provides insight into the dehumanization of African Americans in slavery, their racial discrimination and victimization, and the white slave owners' justification of slavery through religion. The second chapter provides Morrison's representation of slavery in *Beloved* and her view on female agency in time of slavery as well as the African American Women's denied dominion over their identity and their difficulty in building relationships because of slavery. The focus will be on the relationship between Sethe and her daughter Denver, depicting the obstacles in their relationship, the relationship between Sethe and the girl Beloved who suddenly appeared in Sethe's life, making her remember the slavery days again, and the relationship between Sethe and her lover Paul D, trying to overcome Sethe's problem with emotional bonding. The paper concludes by highlighting the main idea of the paper which is how slavery impacted on female characters connecting with others.

## **1. The Dehumanization of African Americans in Slavery**

Dehumanization is defined as a process of depriving a person or group of people of human qualities, personality, or dignity (“dehumanization”). In other words, dehumanization is a process through which someone is perceived as being non-human. The United States has a long history of dehumanization of African Americans through severe human rights violations and the deprivation of the greatest right given to man, freedom. The market was hungry for a free labour force, and the slave traders were longing for some good profit. The Catholic slave owners claimed that their deeds were justified by referring to the Bible itself.

### **1.1. Racial Discrimination and Victimization**

Torn away from their homeland, family, friends and a peaceful life, black people struggled to survive the inhuman conditions they were daily facing. Rape, daily beatings, exhaustive work on plantations, starvation, and disease are just some of the horrors experienced by African Americans in slavery. The so-called “Slave Codes” contributed to the expansion of slavery, especially in the South. The Slave Codes were laws concerned mostly with the rights and duties of a free person towards enslaved people. The laws varied from state to state, but their philosophy was the same: “slaves are not people but property and that laws should protect the ownership of such property and should also protect whites against any dangers that might arise from the presence of large numbers of slaves” (Franklin and Higginbotham 137-138). According to these laws, a slave could not attack a white person, not even in self-defence, but killing a slave, even deliberately, was rarely considered as murder (138). Concerning rape, if a female slave was raped by her master, it was not considered a crime, but if someone other than the master committed it, it was considered a crime, but only because it was a violation of someone’s property (138). Smith explains that the black women’s “existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the “real world” of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown” (20). Regarding politics, slaves had “no standing in the courts: they could not be a party to a lawsuit; they could not offer testimony, except against another slave or a free black; and their legally defined “irresponsibility” meant that their oaths were not binding” (138). Ownership of property was generally forbidden for slaves, so they could make no contracts (138). Slaves belonged entirely to their masters and could not take a single step without their permission. By law, “slaves could not leave their master’s plantation without authorization, and any white person finding them outside without permission could capture them and turn them over to public officials” (138). These are just some of the regulations that guaranteed

African Americans a complete loss of control over their lives. They were victims of an unfair and cruel system known as the Constitution of the United States.

The domestic slave trade played a big part in the transport of slaves. Whether they travelled by water or land, they were usually transported in chains (Franklin and Higginbotham 132). According to Franklin and Higginbotham, slave traders were ubiquitous: “They could be found on plantations, in general stores and taverns, and at county fairs, turning up wherever they heard of the possibility of slaves being sold. When estates were to be probated or liquidated, slave traders sought out the individuals involved and pressed them for any available slaves” (132-133). The authors also claim that “newspapers were instrumental to the slave trade. Through advertisements and the posting of information, newspapers served a key middleman role between seller and purchaser” (132). The market prices for slaves varied and eventually rose as the demand for slaves increased:

In the early nineteenth century, the price for “prime field hands” was modest, ranging from \$350 in Virginia to about \$500 in Louisiana. Later, as the demand for slaves increased in the Lower South, prices rose in both the Upper and Lower South, reaching a high point in 1836. In 1860 prime field hands sold for \$1,000 in Virginia and \$1,800 in New Orleans. (Franklin and Higginbotham 135)

Even in countries where free status for black people prevailed, they went through economic discrimination and social ostracism (Franklin and Higginbotham 106). Free blacks were denied access to equal education, suffrage, admission to state militias and opportunities for certain types of employment (160). They were constantly living in fear. The price for “freedom” was high:

They were troubled by nuisance regulations, insulting language, and racist caricatures in a variety of cultural forms. They were harassed in public, and their neighbourhoods were attacked by rioting mobs. They lived under constant scrutiny, in a fishbowl of sorts, and therefore they believed that their actions had potentially momentous consequences, not only for themselves and their communities but also for the ultimate fate of their still enslaved brethren. (Franklin and Higginbotham 160)

## **1.2. Justification of the Treatment of Slaves Through Religion**

In the time of American slavery, in order to manage to balance their religious beliefs with the cruel system slavery carried, slaveholders justified their deeds by referring to the Bible:

<sup>18</sup> And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan. <sup>19</sup> These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the

whole earth overspread. <sup>20</sup> And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: <sup>21</sup> And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. <sup>22</sup> And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. <sup>23</sup> And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. <sup>24</sup> And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. <sup>25</sup> And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. <sup>26</sup> And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. <sup>27</sup> God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. (Genesis 9:20-27)

In Genesis 9:20-27, the story of Noah's curse upon the descendants of Ham and Canaan was used by some Christians to defend the institution of slavery (Haynes 65). For the Southern proslavery intellectuals, the curse of the descendants of Ham and Canaan to be "servants of servants" was definite proof that the enslavement of African Americans was God's will (Haynes 67). As Haynes explains, the white Bible readers that marked Ham and his African descendants as deprived of honour, and because of that, fit for slavery (67).

The story of Noah's curse was not the only written source that was used as a Biblical defence of slavery. According to Larry R. Morrison, two more sources were used as the basic argument for slavery. The second major defence of slavery was the justification found in Mosaic law, the argument of divine sanction (18). In Leviticus is said:

<sup>44</sup> "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. <sup>45</sup> You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. <sup>46</sup> You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly. (Leviticus 25:44-46)

Because of this record it was claimed that God had tolerated, even ordered the practice of holding slaves (Morrison 18).

The third written record that was used among the Christian slaveholders was the Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon, also known as the Pauline Mandate which describes how Philemon's slave Onesimus fled to Rome where he was converted by St. Paul and sent back to Philemon because he was a fugitive slave and property of his master (Morrison 19). As Morrison in his journal explains: "These three scriptural passages can be seen as the foundation for the Biblical defence of slavery. They were the basic argument; they were used most frequently and often in conjunction with each

other” (20). These three passages, together with many other similar passages, built together a wall around Southern slavery.

## **2. Representation of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

Like Krumholz in her work explains, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* "reconceptualizes American history" (395) in such a way, that she reconstructs history through the acts and consciousness of African American slaves rather than through the point of view of the white social classes. Morrison creates a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and historical or national processes (395). Sethe's personal trauma, her individual "rememory" can be reflected on a national or historical level. Morrison "delves into the stories and souls of black folk to tap the resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing" (396). *Beloved's* narrative, which is concerned with remembering old wounds and painful memories, is permeated with the "paradigms of master and slave, coloniser and colonised, power and powerlessness, which have dominated the lives, identities and relationships of all the novel's black characters" (Lucas 39).

### **2.1. Morrison's View on Female Agency**

Toni Morrison was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature 1993. The main domain in her works is reviving the narratives of African American history, especially from a female point of view. According to Bertilsson, Literature which is concerned with enslavement mainly contains autobiographical retellings of supporters of the abolitionist movement (2). Baillie claims that these writings often presented the enslaved African American life from an outside perspective because they wanted to get abolitionists support without offending their readers (qtd. in Bertilsson 2). However, "through her fiction, Morrison provides a literary aesthetic through which she unmask[s] African American history in her recovery and reconstruction of African American women's experiences" (Bertilsson 2). Being black in America was hard. Being a black woman was even harder. To overcome the difficulties they faced, they had to maintain common sense and stick together: "It is not unexpected that black women refer to the bond among each other as sisterhood" (Banaj 2). Arlinda Banaj writes that "female agency, the ability of a woman to act for herself, the capacity of a woman to make the choice to act, is prevalent in [Morrison's] works" (2). This agency is defined as "the ability to act on the world on one's own behalf or the extent to which one is empowered to act by the various ideological frameworks within which one operates" (qtd. in Banaj 2). This means that black women cannot accept seeing themselves only as victims but have to find the ability to overcome their emotional pain.

### 2.1.1. Denied Dominion Over Their Own Identity

According to Banaj “to be a woman can never be defined on its own. Rather, because society defines only man, and by default, woman as being non-man, or “Other,” woman cannot exist without man, whereas man exists on his own” (3). This idea of women has always been present in the past. Morrison often demonstrates this idea through her characters thus, her female characters often surrender their agency in marriage (3). For Morrison, the relationship between man and woman can be seen as “that of master and slave, as in the eyes of the master, who controls the slave, the basis of the slave’s identity is to identify with the master to whom she belongs. Thus being “Other” places woman in a state of involuntary submission” in which it is essential that “the woman recognizes this, and how she chooses to reconfigure herself differs upon her circumstances” (3-4). Morrison has stated that being financially dependent on someone is damaging, and in her fiction, we see that “once a woman becomes financially independent, she loses her need for a man” (4), but in other cases “her female characters need to reconfigure themselves, overcome emotional trauma by healing, outside of their relationships with men” (4).

In her foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison discusses the limited options available to African American women and describes their position in the past:

I think now it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what “free” could possibly mean to women. In the eighties, the debate was still roiling: equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions, schools . . . and choice without stigma. To marry or not. To have children or not. Inevitably these thoughts led me to the different history of black women in this country—a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but “having” them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was as out of the question as freedom. Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal. (xvii)

Their right to be a mother is taken away from them like the right for freedom. In contrast to men, “whose experiences focused on hard labour, the continuous replenishment of the plantation owner’s workforce was the duty of women. As women were forced into procreative sexual relations, they began childbearing at the age of 20 and had children at intervals spanning two and a half years at least until the age of 35” (qtd. in Bertilsson 8). It was the love for her children that has given Sethe the strength to free herself and her children from slavery: ““You had that baby, did you? Never thought you’d make it.” He chuckled. “Running off pregnant.” “Had to. Couldn’t be no waiting”” (Morrison 8). The lengths she takes to protect her children prove what a fierce and

loving mother she is. In her work, Kristin Sue Daniel claims that an individual's identity is "complex and includes personal, social, role, and moral components" (4). Sethe's circumstances cause her "personal, social, and moral identities to be undeveloped or malformed, contributing to [her] role identities taking over" (4). These role identities refer to being a mother and a wife. Sethe has embraced her role as a mother, while having been denied the role of a sister, daughter, and a wife (9-10). She relies on her role because "by taking on a role identity, persons adopt self-meanings and expectations to accompany the roles" (qtd. in Daniel 10). Sethe's life is defined by her role because she has not been allowed to develop a strong individual identity or self-value (10).

Trauma plays a big role in shaping a person's character. The trauma of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse Sethe had experienced, has had a strong impact on her identity:

Throughout her enslavement, and the rest of her life, the horrors Sethe is subjected to are terrible, especially compared to her time enslaved by the Garners when slavery doesn't seem so bad. Overall, Sethe suffers much distress as a result of being a slave but her identity develops in an interesting and unusual way because of what she encounters. Whereas trauma can affect people in a negative way, Sethe is made strong by the trauma she endures.

Her experiences as a slave make Sethe into a girl with "iron eyes and a backbone to match" (Morrison 10). (Daniel 17)

According to Daniel, in *Beloved* "society has declared that Sethe, as a slave woman, can be used physically and sexually at the whim of Schoolteacher and his two young students. Only Sethe's body and the work it can do has worth; thus, this society has no concern for Sethe as a woman or as an individual" (7). Schoolteacher and the boys took Sethe's only right she had as a mother and a woman, her milk for her baby: "'They used cowhide on you?' 'And they took my milk.' 'They beat you and you was pregnant?'" "And they took my milk!" (Morrison 17). With this act they took her dignity and the opportunity as a mother to feed her own child. Sethe had problems in shaping her identity as a person and as a mother because of the lack of her parent's love. Thanks to the lack of traditional family in her life due to slavery, Sethe "didn't know where the world stopped, and she began" (Morrison 164).

The experiences as a slave did not just shape Sethe's personality, but her moral identity too. She refuses to accept the morals of the society, and because she has had "little or no contact with individuals or groups that behave in more ethical ways than slave society," she has no positive role to look up to (Daniel 11). She knew that slavery was wrong, and she knew that she had to do everything in her power to save her children from slavery. Sethe was aware that death was the only escape for her children from the hands of slavery: "'They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em.'" "Maybe there's worse." "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know



what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that”” (Morrison 165). Daniel explains that:

Her moral identity is formed by and subject to her role and her role demands that she protect her children from slavery. Therefore, it becomes necessary that she kill her children to keep them free, whether or not murder is a justifiable means to that end. The strength of her resistance and the power her role has over her morality are certainly based in the trauma she has suffered and society’s influence. (Daniel 12)

### **2.1.2. African American Women’s Difficulty in Building Relationships Due to Slavery**

The importance of race and gender plays a big role in the lives of African American women, and Toni Morrison examines this through the lives of her characters in *Beloved* (Banaj 1). Through her female characters, Morrison shows that this double marginalization “has a negative effect in the women’s ability to form successful relationships” (1). Different kinds of relationships in *Beloved* help to shape a female character’s sense of self (5). Without these relationships, without human connection, women would not be able to heal emotionally. Female slaves experienced much abuse and subjugation (Daniel 15), no wonder they had problems in establishing any kind of relationship: “They stumbled blindly through their lives, creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope” (qtd. in Daniel 15). Morrison had the courage to write about a female slave’s experience, a mother’s experience (Daniel 14).

#### **2.1.2.1. The Relationship Between Sethe and the Ghost Girl Beloved**

Morrison considers her female protagonist as a heroine, even though slavery made her do unimaginable things that a mother would not do. Sethe could not save herself from the chains of slavery, but she decided that she will save her children in order to ensure them a bright and safe future. She became a strong woman and mother, whose “sole mission is to protect her children” (Daniel 16). As Bertilsson explains

Seeing that Sethe values her children’s safety above all, to which Schoolteacher is a great threat, his arrival is what motivates her to leave her husband behind and engage in this quest. Sethe’s position as nurturing mother and therefore protector of her children is thus what compels her to take charge and become a courageous woman. Against all odds, she rebels against slavery by being able to imagine a better life for them and claim it by running. (Bertilsson 17)

Still, this thick love Sethe has for her children led to “a terrible action, the consequences of which are devastating” (16). Escaping with her children from the plantation where they were being held as slaves almost proved successful, but they were eventually discovered and found. Cornered, Sethe did not find any other solution but to take her children’s life in order to protect them from returning to the horrors of slavery. She managed to kill one of her children, her youngest daughter and by “committing infanticide and the consequences of her actions traumatize Sethe in a way that slavery did not” (16). The name of her dead daughter remains unknown, yet she is referred to as Beloved. Beloved appears as a ghost in the home of Sethe and Denver and makes them incapable of forgetting the past: ““We have a ghost in here,” [. . .] “So I hear,” he said. “But sad, your mama said. Not evil.” “No sir,” said Denver, “not evil. But not sad either.” “What then?” “Rebuked. Lonely and rebuked ““(Morrison 13). Paul D’s arrival at their house makes the ghost jealous and mad, but he manages to drive the ghost out of the house: ““Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” [. . .] “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!”” (Morrison 18). The act of the ghost leaving the house symbolizes Sethe letting go of her past and her guilt (Daniel 45). Sethe’s and Denver’s life finally became happier and more relaxed, they were having quite a good time with Paul D in their lives: “Denver had come around, so to speak; Sethe was laughing; he had a promise of steady work, 124 was cleared up from spirits. It had begun to look like a life” (Morrison 66). They were finally looking like a real family, when Beloved reappeared in their lives.

On their way home, Sethe, Denver and Paul D see a woman in front of their house, wondering who she was:

By late afternoon when the carnival was over, and the Negroes were hitching rides home if they were lucky—walking if they were not—the woman had fallen asleep again. The rays of the sun struck her full in the face, so that when Sethe, Denver and Paul D rounded the curve in the road all they saw was a black dress, two unlaced shoes below it, and Here Boy nowhere in sight. “Look,” said Denver. “What is that?” (Morrison 50-51)

When Paul D took the dead baby’s place in Sethe’s life, and banned her spirit from the house, the spirit manifested itself physically as a girl called Beloved (Daniel 45). Sethe recognizes her as her dead child’s reincarnation, and thinks she “needs no longer feel paralysed by the nagging sense of failure and culpability, if Beloved has indeed forgiven her, then she can afford to remember all the pain of the past” (Lucas 42). Sethe is happy and amazed that her daughter returned and changes dramatically because of that. She is happy she can explain her actions to Beloved, and that from now on they could live as a happy family. But that is far from the truth, because “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison 34). Beloved entering Sethe’s life again, and Sethe trying to

justify her past actions, makes her suffer much more than the trauma she had experienced. Beloved will not forgive Sethe, no matter how much she tried to make things good again: “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (Morrison 251). Beloved first appears at the doorstep and stays. Then she “monopolizes Sethe’s time and attention, leaving nothing for Denver and nothing for Sethe” (Daniel 48). Sethe tries to redeem herself in all possible ways:

But once Sethe had seen the scar, the tip of which Denver had been looking at whenever Beloved undressed—the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin—once Sethe saw it, fingered it and closed her eyes for a long time, the two of them cut Denver out of the games. The cooking games, the sewing games, the hair and dressing-up games. Games her mother loved so well she took to going to work later and later each day until the predictable happened: Sawyer told her not to come back. And instead of looking for another job, Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. (Morrison 239-240)

Without a job, Sethe cannot take care for her family, and by “denying [her] the power to support herself, Beloved initially attacks Sethe’s spirit of independence. She sends her into a stupor” (Daniel 49). According to Lucas, Sethe’s relationship with Beloved is an “actualised embodiment of the ultimately destructive and life-sapping idealisation or fantasy construction of an all-encompassing motherhood” (43), which can be seen from the text:

Beloved sat around, ate, went from bed to bed. Sometimes she screamed, “Rain! Rain!” and clawed her throat until rubies of blood opened there, made brighter by her midnight skin. Then Sethe shouted, “No!” and knocked over chairs to get to her and wipe the jewels away. Other times Beloved curled up on the floor, her wrists between her knees, and stayed there for hours. Or she would go to the creek, stick her feet in the water and whoosh it up her legs. Afterward she would go to Sethe, run her fingers over the woman’s teeth while tears slid from her wide black eyes. Then it seemed to Denver the thing was done: Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. (Morrison 250)

Beloved's existence in Sethe's life is a punishment for Sethe, and Beloved is slowly, but surely taking Sethe's life away. But her punishment encourages Denver into action. She cannot watch her mother suffer anymore and she finds the strength to seek help in the black community. Denver and the community save Sethe's life by banning Beloved from her house. Sethe can finally begin to heal:

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. (Morrison 274)

#### **2.1.2.2. The Relationship Between Sethe and Her Daughter Denver**

The relationship between Sethe and her daughter Denver has many obstacles, which resulted from Sethe's incapability to show Denver her maternal love. In order to understand why Sethe was so distanced from her daughter, her early life experiences must be mentioned. Sethe was a woman who managed to escape slavery, but the trauma she had experienced left her with a big memory loss: "She remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was" (Morrison 62). She did not even know where she was born, "Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?" (30). Daniel writes: "Her lack of memory suggests that nothing struck her as memorable because abuse and injustice were a usual part of life for slaves" (17). She grew up without a mother and a father, but she has some memory on her mother, which has an "incredible impact on Sethe's identity as a woman and a mother" (Daniel 18). Sethe remembers her mother showing her a mark underneath one of her breasts. The mark was "a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" (Morrison 61). After showing her the mark, Sethe's remembers her words: "This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (61). After that, Sethe did not see her mother again. A fellow slave called Nan told Sethe about how she was the only child her mother loved and gave a name, the rest she threw away:

What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along. Holding the damp white sheets against her chest, she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. Nighttime. Nan holding her with

her good arm, waving the stump of the other in the air. "Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe," and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. (Morrison 62)

Sethe remembers she was hanged, but she "never found out "(61) why. Daniel appeals that it is "possible that Sethe has suppressed her knowledge of why her mother was hanged" (19) because "the knowledge that Sethe's mother probably abandoned her is traumatizing" (19). Most likely, Sethe repressed the memories that were too hard for a young girl to bear, "Her early memories, her memories of her mother especially, are repressed because of they are rife with horror, abandonment, and shame" (19). At a very young age Sethe learns how slavery is brutal, especially towards mothers:

I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. 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. (Morrison 15)

The slavery system has made Sethe afraid to love her child completely. Sethe is living in her past and she cannot move on with her life, and in this way, she leads her daughter to ruin. Sethe distances herself and her daughter from the community, "Sethe further fixates on the past by never mingling with the Black community, by protecting the only child who stays with her, her daughter Denver, from the past without seeming ever to think of the girl's future or need for community. When we first enter the home, only Sethe and Denver inhabit it, and it is claustrophobic indeed" (qtd. in Daniel 44). Denver blames Sethe for destroying her childhood: "'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.'" [. . .] "It's us! And it's you!" (Morrison 14). Sethe's living in the past and being overprotective over her daughter made their relationship anxious, full of rage and emptiness, "Sethe's and Denver's relationship embodies both the strengths and the costs to black motherhood deriving from slavery" (qtd. in Daniel 43). Sethe eventually realised how the isolation had a negative effect on Denver when she "looked at her daughter and thought, Yes, she has been lonesome. Very lonesome" (Morrison 55). Not being aware of her actions, Sethe has made Denver become "the object of [her] fierce desire to mother and to protect, and to make good

where she had once failed” (41). When Paul D mentions to Sethe that she has not allowed Denver to grow as an adult person, she defensively answered him:

“I don’t care what she is. Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What’s that supposed to mean? In my heart it don’t mean a thing.” “It means she has to take it if she acts up. You can’t protect her every minute. What’s going to happen when you die?” “Nothing! I’ll protect her while I’m live and I’ll protect her when I ain’t” [ . . . ] “Maybe I should leave things the way they are.” (Morrison 45)

Sethe must learn “to forgive herself to be the mother Denver needs, the matriarch of the house with a story to pass on” (Banaj 87).

After *Beloved* has terrorized and occupied Sethe’s life, Denver seeks for help in the black community. She finds a job, so she could provide food for her mother. She switches the roles with her mother and acts like an adult, “Denver actually midwives two female souls into the toils of adult individuation – her mother Sethe’s as well as her own” (qtd. in Daniel 50). Denver becomes a saviour to her mother, just like Sethe was once her saviour. Denver’s ability to overcome the trauma of slavery and its effects on her, as well as the way she has grown up into a brave young woman, makes clear that Sethe has succeeded as a mother (Daniel 50).

### **2.1.2.3. The Relationship Between Sethe and Her Lover Paul D**

Slavery and its consequences left a big mark on Sethe, resulting in Sethe closing in on herself. She had not experienced love since her husband Halle, with whom she had four children. Closed up in her house with her daughter Denver, Sethe did not have intentions of finding real love again. With the arrival of Paul D, a former friend from the plantation where they had worked eighteen years ago, Sethe is offered what can be considered a last chance for happiness. He is a part of her past, but he can offer her a future. A future Sethe desperately needs. Her life begins to change immediately after he came into her life again, “Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (Morrison 17). She opened up to him, telling him about her past. “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). Paul D slowly starts to realize how empty her life has been: “Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that” (39). Sethe finds it difficult to indulge in her feelings and asks herself “would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?” (38). Daniel states that

Paul D “convinces her that she can have a better life, make a better life, and that she can remember, mourn, and heal because he understands and is there to support her. Finally, it seems that Sethe has paid the price and can move on” (45).

Paul D has brought “a few months of the sun splashed life that the shadows holding hands on the road promised her; tentative greetings from other colored people in Paul D’s company; a bed life for herself” (Morrison 173). He was encouraging her to forgive herself, to let her past be, and to move on with her life. When he left the house because of Beloved because he saw how bad she affected Sethe, she asked herself if “that was the pattern. Every eighteen or twenty years her unlivable life would be interrupted by a shortlived glory?” (173). Even though he does not trust Beloved, he comes back to Sethe because he wants to take care for her and be there for her, “Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I’m a take care of you, you hear? Starting now” (272). By caring for Sethe “physically, Paul D begins to heal her emotionally... Paul D exhibits traits of friendship and love and, in so doing, calls into question gender stereotypes of men as insensitive” (Banaj 65).

According to Banaj, it is only after Sethe realizes that “she can talk to him as she can talk to a female friend that Sethe finally opens up and cries to him in lament” (65), “[Beloved] left me ... She was my best thing” (Morrison 272). He comforts her physically and tells her she “[is] her best thing” (273). “Paul D exhibits traits of friendship and love and, in so doing, calls into question gender stereotypes of men as insensitive” (Banaj 65). He tells her that they “got more yesterday than anybody,” and that they “need some kind of tomorrow” (273). He wants to build a life together with Sethe. As a man in Sethe’s life he plays a “crucial role in Sethe’s ability to recognize herself as subject. Although it is the neighbourhood women who chase Beloved away, it is Paul D who helps Sethe heal from her emotional and physical pain” (Banaj 67). In order to make the romantic relationship with Paul D work, Sethe needs to change herself, and this she must do on her own.

## Conclusion

The African American society is marked by the legacy of slavery that has left such a big imprint on American society that the quest for democratic equality remains unreachable. Their battle for justice from the past continues to the present. Equality of African Americans in every aspect of life remains unreachable to this day, even though racial relations have been significantly transformed. The racial discrimination and victimization committed by the slave owners and their pro-slavery society is portrayed by Toni Morrison, an African American female writer, who shows a deep insight into the problems of the African Americans. Morrison's novels particularly focus on issues concerning African American women. In her novel *Beloved*, she depicts how African American women had problems in building and maintaining relationships due to slavery. In the life of her main character Sethe, slavery left a big scar. We got an insight into Sethe's psychological state, and how it played a big role in creating her relationships with others. Morrison presented the main obstacles in Sethe's relationship with her daughter Denver, with the ghost girl Beloved and with her lover Paul D. She focused on the trauma Sethe experienced and how it led her to indifference and fear to love again. She had to find a way to forgive herself for her past actions so she could heal emotionally and move on with her life.



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