

## Racial Dehumanization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract

This paper entitled "Racial Dehumanization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" presents how the black people tied into the snare of slavery and racial discrimination. Black people suffered a lot under the dominance of slavery. But women are the main victims of slavery. Toni Morrison expresses her views through the main character Sethe, who is the victim of slavery in the novel. Through her sufferings Morrison depicts that how people faced the life of suppression and depression under the domination of slavery. She focuses mainly on horrors of slavery and racial discrimination, their psychological and social effects on the blacks over the ages. It revises the past which is a dark reality in the form of slavery, subjugation of women, the destruction of cultural identity of the African-Americans and various other cruelties. This paper tries to light on the issues, problems and woes of slaves due to racial discrimination.

**KEYWORDS:** Racial Discrimination, Slavery, Sexism, Suppression, Subjugation, Dehumanization

African- American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. African- Americans also referred to as Black Americans or Afro- Americans, is an ethnic group of citizens or residents of the United States with total or partial ancestry from any native populations of Sub- Saharan Africa. Many African- American authors have written stories, poems and essays influenced by their experiences as African- Americans. African- American literature is a major genre in American literature. The African- American literature mainly deals with the themes of society, African- American culture, racial discrimination, slavery and social equality. According to Nirmal Bajaj:

The African- American fiction primarily deals with the exploitation of the black's particularly sexual exploitation of the black women, loyalty to the race of the black over that of the country very often prevails because the Afro- Americans in the nineteenth century remained deprived of the basic principles of liberty, equality and justice enshrined in the American constitution. The oppressive and hostile white American culture forces the blacks to search for dignity and identity to develop unified self. (6)

Among the famous African- American writers, Toni Morrison had a peculiar style in her writings. She is among the pioneer of the contemporary black writers who have refined African-American writing in many ways. In her work, she deeply focuses on racial discrimination which has a dominant role in African- American. Toni Morrison uses racial discrimination as the implacable continuation of a historical phenomenon. Racial discrimination and slavery embody the supreme type of evil in Toni Morrison's

works. Black women only victimized by racial discrimination, sexism and classism, not only from the white world but also from their own men. Being aware of these facts, Toni Morrison aims to portray the experiences of black women in her novels. Morrison expresses her knowledge about black life creating fictional characters.

Racial discrimination consists of prejudice based on social perceptions of biological differences between people. It often takes the form of social actions, practices or beliefs, or political systems that consider different races to be ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities or qualities. Racism and racial discrimination are often used to describe discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis, independent of whether these differences are described as racial.

In the novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison presents the pain of blacks. *Beloved* dramatizes a haunting amalgam of the past and present experiences of an escaped female Sethe. Through flashbacks to past tragedies and psychological sufferings, the novel explores the hardships endured by Sethe and her family during the Reconstruction era. It is Morrison's goal to demonstrate that collectivism is the first step in eradicating the racial oppression and class exploitation of African people. Women have no freedom. They were raped in the centrality of race. Morrison's novel tells about the emphatic and white's domination in the society. The characters are defined by the racial barriers formed by the surrounding white society. The dominant white society violates, denies and sets the rules for the black communities to suffer from confusion and anxiety. African-American people are oppressed both because of their dark skin and their poverty clearly proves that race is a later justification for the enslavement of African-Americans. Kavitha Arya says, "Morrison is successful in documenting slavery and its aftermath. She dexterously shows how slavery was always slavery on whether Sweet Home or any other plantation. The conditions of slavery were qualitatively indistinguishable whether the slave had a good master or bad master (87).

The social life confronts the blacks in a mixed society of blacks and whites. Being a minority, white dominates the blacks and so they accepted their fate. They appeared to be hanging on the very edge of life. In *Beloved* Sethe experienced such a cruel racial discrimination. Not only Sethe but also most of the characters experienced the cruelty of whites. Sethe lived in a gray and white house on Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati. She "didn't have a number then" (*Beloved* 3). Women were the labourers in the field with the men. It also meant that the women were deprived of houses, of being householders. Blacks were not allowed to possess anything, neither relationships nor any belongings. The male protagonists also struggle in the hands of racist white masters. In front of slavery, the women and men are treated equally, and they are commonly called as slaves. Paul D suffers from the brutality of slavery physically and emotionally. Halle, Sethe's husband also suffers as a slave. He works for five years for his crippled mother "usually he worked Saturdays and Sundays to pay off Baby Suggs' freedom" (*Beloved* 71).

The novel *Beloved* revolves around the death of Sethe's infant daughter Beloved, who mysteriously reappears as a sensuous young woman. Beloved's spirit comes back to claim Sethe's love. Sethe struggled to keep Beloved gaining full possession of her present

and to throw off the long, dark, legacy the period of the 1870s by looking back to the mid- nineteenth century when black “men and women were moved around like checkers” (*Beloved* 27). They were “hanged, rented out, loaned out, bought up, ran off, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (*Beloved* 27). Their life choices were severely limited had freedom was an unimaginable dream for them. Sethe was depressed by the action of white people in the name of racial discrimination. The black people were treated as the prey for the whites. Usha Puri says, “Sethe’s experience is treated with many ironic overtones that point to certain paradoxes and many fundamental complexities of her quest to freedom” (172).

The whites’ superiority through verbal or physical means, both results the subjugation of the blacks. Sethe’s encounter with evil begins in Sweet Home. The atrocities and mental trauma Sethe faces in the Sweet Home is “a total subjugation of a race which was made a victim coercion, sexism and racism, practical successful to obliterate their individuality” (Gaur 52). The school teacher exploited Sethe’s sexuality in a violent and brutal manner. His nephews attacked her and treated her as an animal. They degraded the blacks at Sweet Home.

The school teacher measures the body parts of the blacks and studies them. This action of physical measurement becomes a form of oppression, as they subjugate the slaves into biological specimens. He also directs his nephews to categorization divides the black and the white community and they labels black people as an inferior creatures. Sethe ultimately defines the school teacher’s authority resulting in the murder of her own child, Beloved. By murdering the child she feels that “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (*Beloved* 251). She has tried to save her children from the terrible experience of being a slave in the name of racial discrimination. Another who loves her children so deeply doesn’t want her children to experience the cruelties. So she tries to kill them. She feels that this is the only way to prevent her children from brutality.

Morrison presents how the women struggled to live and how they faced the problems during slavery. Barbara Schapiro says that, “For Morrison’s characters, African Americans in a racist, slave society, there is no reliable other to recognize and affirm their existence. The mother, the child’s first vital other, is made unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so self with which to confer recognition” (194). Sethe’s mother Ella is also a victim of racial discrimination. She has delivered various times but Sethe is the only one she has kept with her. Being a slave, her mother has to work all the time and has no time even to take care of her daughter Sethe. These women have faced the problems of race, class and gender which pushed them towards the margin. Through the novel *Beloved* one can comprehend how difficult it is to be a slave at the hands of slave- holder.

The novel *Beloved* shows the damaging effects of racial discrimination on the black community. Toni Morrison’s novels are meant to celebrate sense of black womanhood and to create awareness for the honour and dignity of black women in the society. Differentiating people by pointing their colour, lack of education, subjugation of women and no freedom for women are the main reasons for slavery. The black victim stands in the vicious circle of prejudice, which creates the racially determined terror, the

shadow that constantly accompanies the black existence. Fear, pain, dehumanization and the feeling of worthlessness are omnipresent in the lives of black people.

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