

# “They Took My Milk”: A Psychoanalytic Study of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

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**Abstract—** Although slavery has ended, the African-American people remained the object of oppression, violence, and racism in the white countries, particularly America, which is the setting of the novel. *Beloved*, which was written in 1987 by Toni Morrison, depicts the multiple sorts of oppression that black people have experienced in America by their white oppressors. On the other hand, Fanon argues that black people in white societies are reduced to mere objects and exploited endlessly, therefore, they develop identity crises and wear white masks to win the approval or equal rights and recognition of the white people. However, regardless of their efforts and endeavors, the black people cannot change white man’s perception about them and remain an alien to them. This paper aims at representing the adversities black people encounter in white societies by applying Fanon’s ideas of psychoanalysis to Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. The paper is a psychoanalytic study, where the reasons behind the actions of the characters are explained and analyzed. Sethe, the main character in the novel, is exploited and treated like an animal, therefore she turns into a murderer and kills her own daughter.

**Index Terms—** *Beloved*, adversity, black people, colonization, Fanon, Toni Morrison.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Slavery has no doubt affected the lives of the slaves in multitude ways, among which, the worst is its negative impact on the former slaves’ sense of identity. With African colonialism in the 1650s, slavery and forced labour came to the surface, which were initially brought by the Dutch people (SAHO 2022). Although slavery existed within the African communities themselves previously, the more brutal aspects of the phenomenon only appeared and were practiced by the white slaveholders. Slavery is defined as a state of extreme physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual deprivation (Mahameed 2018). In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays the darkest part of American history and reveals the untold aspects of slavery that largely affected the identity of black people. Through an excellent depiction of her heroine, Sethe, Morrison unfolds the dehumanizing effects of slavery on the slaves and their younger generation. Morrison insists on memory and coins

the term ‘rememory’ in her novel to suggest that the past and brutal memories of slavery continue to haunt the psyche of black people and would not leave them in peace.

In the novel, which is based on a true story, Sethe, a slave mother of four children commits infanticide and kills one of her daughters to save her from the abuse and exploitation she herself had received from her masters. Nearly two decades later, the ghost of the dead daughter returns and haunts their house at 124 Ohio. The ghost complains about the dark and cold corner where she has come from and commences to torture Sethe, her mother secretly. When Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law notices the ghost, she tells Sethe that there is a ghost of a dead one in every household, meaning that every black family has gone through a difficult time and lost some of their beloved ones. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby” (Morrison:2). This symbolically denotes that the consequences of slavery remain in the minds of the Afro-American people and affects their identity and character. Applying Fanon’s theories of psychoanalysis the present paper examines the calamities black people have experienced in America in Morrison’s *Beloved*.

## II. A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF TONI MORRISON’S *BELoved*

*Beloved* tells the story of a black family in America who experiences slavery and otherness in white society. The novel is inspired by an old document that Morrison finds, which narrates the unfortunate life of a slave woman, named Margaret Garner, Sethe in the novel, who escapes from slavery in Kentucky in 1856 and attempts to kill all of her children to save them from slavery. She could only murder her two-year-old daughter before the slave catchers find her in Ohio (Younes 2016). Similar to Fanon’s theory, which argues that black people in white societies are reduced to objects and treated like animals, Sethe and her four children are utterly abused by their masters. Because of the hardships of slavery, Sethe and her four children escape from their slaveholders and live freely for a short while. Before long their master knows about their place and tries to take them back, but before he takes hold of them,

Sethe commits infanticide and kills one of her daughters to save her from the calamities of slavery. Consequently, Sethe is sent to prison for “destruction of property” (McKay et al 1999: 8, as cited in, Yones, 2016). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explains this objecthood of the blacks by presenting the example of a black boy from Martinique who is born as a subject and has the desire to live as a dignified human being. However, the moment he enters the white world, he and his fellow blacks become objects, “nonbeings” (Salama and Alqadi 2022). The black people, reduced to mere objects, resort to wearing white masks to attract the attention of white people and to find a place for themselves. However, their efforts do not come to fruition and the white gaze continues to alienate them further. Fanon reveals the mindset of the black man and speaks on his behalf:

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. (Fanon 1952: 109)

Morrison uses a number of literary techniques in her story to explicate the tragedies of black people in white society. The novel does not follow a linear chronological narrative, the events are rather intertwined between past and present. She deploys stream of consciousness to ensure that the reader obtains a clear perception of the past, and it is also an important means through which a black person in America can retrieve their past and reconstruct new identities. Similar to Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, Morrison in *Beloved* digs deep into the memories to find a cure for her past wounds and to be able to bear her present. Suzan Brison asserts that narrating memories will probably contribute to the healing process or recapturing one’s identity (Brison, 1999). Pierre Janet states that “memory is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story” (Janet 1919, as cited in Brison 1999). Telling the past story of marginalized people is of great significance as, on one hand, it helps them to recapture their past identities and, on the other hand, it offers a true sense of history and reality that are not otherwise available.

Morrison’s worldly recognized novel, *Beloved* is of great interest to postcolonial scholars and critics as it presents the reality of the African-American people, which has been neglected for a very long time because of the powerful whites. The Nobel Prize winner paints a dark, yet powerful portrait of the brutal and inhuman process of slavery. In the novel, the startling experience of slavery haunts the minds of the former slaves to such an extent that they become dysfunctional in their present life (Jinpin, 2012). Not only this, the cruel experience of slavery is passed on to the younger generations and they too have to pay the price of being black in a white society. Morrison coins the term “rememory”, which means a very heightened

imaginative power of the past that represents the past memories in their most accurate ways (Kocabiyik, 2016). Morrison uses it as a tool to express the collective memory of the black people in America who are exploited and racially segregated by white people.

At the beginning of the story, Morrison represents a group of protagonists namely, Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and a more sophisticated character namely Beloved. Beloved is believed to be the ghost of Sethe’s baby girl that comes to haunt the mind of her mother as a sign of guilty conscience. Nearly two decades ago, the mother, Sethe has killed her baby girl to save her from slavery and rape, but when the novel opens Beloved returns to their 124- a house in Ohio, as a young woman who is bruised in her chin. Critics also argue that *Beloved* is the symbol of the sixty million slaves who were exploited and raped in The Atlantic Slave Trade in America (Kocabiyik, 2016). Memory or the rememory, as Morrison puts it, has been greatly focused on by the author and Sethe always thinks about her past and intermingles it with the present. Sethe, at times, takes the readers back to her childhood and the adversities she has experienced because of her black heritage. When she writes about their escape from slavery, Sethe says: “any life but not that one” (Morrison, 1987).

Fanon argues that white people do not think of the blacks as humans and invariably work on accentuating the false belief that Negroes are, physically and psychologically, closer to animals than humans. He says: “*it has been said that the Negro is the link between monkey and man*” (Fanon: 30). Morrison validates this theory in her novel when she depicts the attitude of the schoolteacher at Sweet Home while he and his students study the black race’s characteristics in their science class. After they measure and examine Sethe’s body, as an example of the black race, Sethe overhears the schoolteacher asking the students, his nephews, to write her human characteristics on one side of the paper and her animal characteristics on the other: “*Put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right*” (96). Through this animalization of the black people and their negation, Fanon claims, the white man fights to preserve their position as higher and superior (Partha 1952). As the stereotypical representation of the black man is so prevalent, the black man internalizes these false beliefs in the white discourses and begins to judge the members of their race according to the principles of the white man. (Fanon: 143). When Paul D hears about Sethe’s infanticide, he accuses her of being an animal “you got two feet, Sethe, not four” (Morrison: 82).

The story begins when Paul D, a former slave visits Sethe after many years. Paul D and Sethe used to be friends and worked together in Sweet Home. They have not seen each other for nearly two decades and during this time, they wanted to suppress their past and forget their memories as slaves. As they begin to talk about their commonly shared experience as slaves, the reader is informed about the particulars of the story. There were nine slaves who lived and worked at Sweet Home; Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, Paul D, and other six slaves. Although all of them suffered the calamities of slavery, Sethe’s pain and torture have been the greatest, she was raped and often whipped by the schoolteacher and his nephews. Mr. and Mrs. Garner own Sweet Home and as long as they run it themselves, they are kind and treat the slaves with respect. However,

everything changes when Mr. Garner dies and Mrs. Garner invites the schoolteacher and his two nephews to live with her and manage the farm. The schoolteacher manipulates the slaves and begins to introduce all forms of punishment including torture, whipping, and dehumanization.

Among many tortures Sethe receives from her white owners, the stealing of her milk pains her the most. She expresses her agony to her friend Paul D “they took my milk” (Morrison:8) and swears that she will not allow anyone to steal her milk henceforth. “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” (100). Sethe repeats this incident several times as she cannot forget it, she was dehumanized and treated like an animal. Further, Sethe is disappointed as the milk belongs to her children and, in her perception, nobody has the right to take her children’s milk from her (Tanritanir & Aksak). The robbing of the milk is symbolically significant and can be linked to the thesis’s main claim, which argues that the calamities of the colonization are also passed down to the younger generations. When her milk is robbed, Sethe realizes that she cannot feed her children and thus thinks of committing infanticide. Slavery not only affects the mothers but also causes harm to their children and violates the mother-child bond. Bennet claims that: “The robbing of Sethe’s milk is the materialization of the fundamental perversity of the institution which kills the slaves’ selves by severing the bonds between mother and child” (Bonnet, 1997).

Killing one’s own child is undoubtedly very cruel and no mother would even think about it unless she does not have any other options. However, because she knows what sort of life her children are going to live as slaves, Sethe is not reluctant and takes her four children to a shed to kill them when she knows that the schoolteacher has arrived to take them back. She manages to kill only one of them and in a very intimidating scene, the other children survive albeit with physical scars and psychological injuries.

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother’s swing. (Morrison 75)

Sethe’s sacrifice of her child can be seen as a sign of protest against slavery. Although it is a very painful experience, it might bring about long-term results in the future. As Sethe tells her daughter Denver that “there was no bad luck in the world but white people. They don’t know when to stop” (Morrison: 52). Standing against the white authority, in Fanon’s opinion, is a key step to make changes in the world. When the Algerian revolution began in 1954, Fanon became restless to make a

more direct contribution to the revolution. In his book *Towards African Revolution* (1967), Fanon calls for an enthusiastic and constant contribution to the revolution and argues that there is no hope of a better future if black people do not unite and fight white supremacy with all their energy.

There is not a parcel of my activity that has not had as its objective the unanimously hoped-for emergence of a better world. But what can a man’s enthusiasm and devotion achieve if everyday reality is a tissue of lies, of cowardice, of contempt for man? What good are intentions if their realization is made impossible by the indigence of the heart, the sterility of the mind? (Fanon 1967: 52).

Further, Robert Kennedy, former United States Attorney General, in his famous ‘Ripple of Hope’ speech, states that: “each time a man stands up for an ideal, or strikes out against injustice, or acts to improve the lot of others, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and . . . those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance” (Kennedy, 1966). Sethe’s sacrifice of her beloved child can be seen as a starting point of a revolution that might put an end to racism and slavery.

Thanks to the help of the Bodwin family, a white family in the novel who supports the abolition of slavery, Sethe’s sentence is reduced from death to imprisonment and, when her confinement is finished, she returns to her mother-in-law’s house. (Morrison:82). However, life outside the prison proves to be another nightmare and Sethe faces myriads of calamities on a daily basis; she feels guilty because of her crime, she is isolated in society and no one is ready to communicate with them, and more importantly, her memories of slavery come to haunt her and would not allow her to rest. Because of the painful memories that Sethe had in Sweet Home as a slave, her present life is mainly a struggle. She wants to bury her past and provide a better life for her daughter, Denver. When Paul D visits them after her imprisonment, Sethe tells him that her main concern is to disconnect from her past and keep her daughter safe from it. “As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (Morrison:21).

However, Sethe does not seem to be able to let go of her past and the ghost of her dead daughter Beloved comes and haunts their house at 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe, Paul D, and Denver are surprised to see a young girl in front of their house, she is a young girl but behaves like a child and her speech is inarticulate. She says her name is Beloved and this adds insult to Sethe’s injury. Sethe feels more guilt and genuinely desires to express her true feelings to her Beloved and tell her why she had killed her, but she cannot. She tells Paul D: “I’ll explain to her. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (Morrison :100). She also adds that “I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick” (ibid). Sethe’s character has been completely changed; from a caring mother, she has been made a murderer, because of her surroundings.

This confirms Fanon's viewpoint, where he states that black people's character change as soon as they receive the cruel treatment of their white peers. (Fanon 1952: 143).

The appearance of the ghost of her dead daughter makes it clear to Sethe that she cannot let go of her past and therefore she decides to live with it. When it is too late, Sethe regrets her decision and realizes that she has made a mistake by killing her daughter as the consequences of slavery continue to exist and haunt the psyches of all black men and women. "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. Now sit down and eat with us or leave us be." (Morrison: 7). Here, she confesses that although she had paid a huge price, nothing in her life is ameliorated. In other words, she has forsaken her true self and acted like a monster, by killing her own daughter, yet she is still the same slave. Wearing a mask of a murderer and abandoning her motherly affection have only aggravated her position in society and darkened her life. Fanon's ideas were initially written to address the concerns of black people in Europe and later developed to encompass other issues, such as race, equality, and colonization. Fanon claims that colonization is a total project that does not leave any part of the human person and its reality untouched. Colonization forms and deforms the identity of its colonial subjects and in turn lands them in the 'zone of non-being', which is like a hell for the black people where they are trapped forever. When a human being falls below humanity, Fanon argues, the result is they go below ground, to hell (Gordon, 2007). Further, Fanon states that the white civilization perpetually works to instill the 'fated-to-failure' concept in the mind of black people, and often the latter fall into this false perception and act accordingly (Fanon 1967: 07).

#### CONCLUSION

Although the ruthless processes of colonialism and slavery have ended, their long-term consequences continue to haunt the psyches of black people in their present day. As they are black, they are inevitably seen as inferior, as compared to their white peers, and are abused by white authorities. Sethe cannot forget her past and keeps 'remembering' the painful experiences of slavery, and thus to save the younger generations from these agonizing incidents, at the end of the novel, she says "this is not a story to pass on" (Morrison: 137). *Beloved* is a revolutionary book that continues to criticize the shameful practice of slavery by the western societies and gives voice to the large number of slaves who have been devalued for a long time. The novel also contains some sort of healing for the black people whose confidence have been shattered and calls for a kind of reconciliation and celebration of their black heritage.

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