

Remembering the Forgotten: A Postcolonial Reading on Black Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the postcolonial aspects of black slavery Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Beloved* is Morrison's novel based on an infanticide true story. However, it is not just a novel depicting a personal tragedy of a black mother kills her own daughter. *Beloved* is concerned about a human calamity, the sadness of black slavery under capitalism, imperialism, colonialism and postcolonialism. Therefore, this research is divided into six parts. The first part is an introduction. The second part tells the origin of the story, an infanticide story. The third and fourth parts explain black slavery: black people are mere human commodities for the white and the black families are totally dysfunctional. The fifth part shows black people's searching for dignity by establishing their own black community. The final part is the conclusion. Through a postcolonial reading on *Beloved* helps readers to know Morrison's concern on humanity and black people.

Keywords: postcolonialism, black slavery, commodity, infanticide

記取遺忘的記憶： 以後殖民觀點來閱讀東妮莫里生的 摯愛中的黑奴問題

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摘要

本篇研究旨在利用後殖民觀點來閱讀東妮莫里生的摯愛中的黑奴問題。摯愛是莫里生以一宗真實的殺嬰案為背景的小說。然而這部小說不僅在述說一位黑人母親殺死自己的女兒的悲劇。摯愛關切的是人類的悲劇：在資本主義帝國主義殖民主義與後殖民時期所產生的黑奴問題。因此，本研究共分成六個部份。第一部分為導論；第二部分則介紹故事來源與真實的殺嬰案。第三、四部分用來探討黑奴問題：黑奴淪為商品與黑人家庭功能與價值的喪失。第五部分則了解黑人如何藉由建立自己的社群來尋求尊嚴。最後一部分則為結論。

關鍵字: 後殖民主義、黑奴、商品、殺嬰。

I. Introduction

Morrison applies a thrilling sad story to bring forth the matter of humanity against slavery. *Beloved* is centered on Sethe, a woman in her mid-thirty's, her daughter, Denver, her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and a later intruder, the ghost Beloved. As Marilyn Sanders Mobley points out, there are a "series of interior monologues that become a dialogue among the three central female characters" and the major part of the novel (24). Through these female characters' interior monologues, Morrison seems to present a postcolonial subject.¹¹⁵ Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson explain that "Postcolonial criticism in general draws attention to questions of identity for individual human subjects, including the critics themselves, in relation to broader national histories and destinies" (194). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, being regarded as a 'Third-World Woman,' tries to find the right positions both for herself and for the voices of the marginalized 'Third-World' and 'Third-World Women.'" Spivak sees the oppressed and the silenced women cannot speak for themselves and unable to achieve self legitimation under the violence of imperialism. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison also presents the inhumane physical and sexual violence imposed on the oppressed black people by American imperialism and capitalism. In the following passages, the original story of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* will be illustrated. Next, the way that the American white dominator treats black slaves as commodity and how they destroy black family values are also discussed. Finally, we can see how the black people, especially Baby Suggs, endeavor to build a decolonized black community and to teach her people to search for human dignity. Spivak's postcolonialism can be observed in Toni Morrison's her black women—how to walk out of their miserable past to establish their own new community outside the violence of the white dominator, and how to recognize their own color by looking at themselves with dignity and self-esteem.

II. The origin of the story: from infanticide to ghost Story

Toni Morrison, one of the great storyteller of African American stories, after *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, receives another great triumph by her fifth novel, *Beloved*, for her talented technique of story-telling. Nellie Y. McKay explains that Toni Morrison was raised with black songs and folklores at home. Morrison's maternal grandparents, John Solomon and Ardelia Willis, influenced her a lot: her grandfather was a violinist and her grandmother loved to tell stories of ghosts and magic. Morrison's mother was a choir singer, while her father was a story-telling father who told her numerous folktales of the black community. What she learned from both her parents and grandparents becomes the elements for her writings in later days (2-3). *Beloved* turns out to be contained with both the ghost story and the black slavery.

Through an interview, Morrison mentions that her motivation of writing *Beloved* is inspired by two true stories, one comes from a newspaper report about a thirty-year-old black mother and the other is about a picture of a girl about eighteen:

One was a newspaper clipping about a woman named Margaret Garner in 1851. It said that the Abolitionists made a great deal out of her case because she had escaped from Kentucky, I think, with her four children. She lived in a little neighborhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill two others. She hit them in the head with a shovel and they were wounded, but they didn't die. And there was a smaller one that she had at her breast. The interesting thing, in addition to that, was the interview that she gave. She was a young woman. In the inked pictures of her she seemed a very quiet, very serene-looking woman and everyone who interviewed her remarked about her serenity and tranquility. She said, "I will not let

¹¹⁵ The reference of postcolonial subject refers to Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 188-97.

those children live how I lived.” She had run off into a little woodshed right outside her house to kill them because she had been caught as a fugitive. And she had made up her mind that they would not suffer the way she had and it was better for them to die. And her mother-in-law was in the house at the same time and she said, “I watched her and I neither encouraged her nor discouraged her.” They put her in a jail for a while and I’m not even sure what the denouement is of her story. But that moment, that decision was a piece, a tail of something that was always around, and it didn’t get clear for me until I was thinking of another story that I had read in a book that Camille Billops published, a collection of pictures by Van der Zee, called the Harlem Book of the Dead. (Furman 68)

The picture that catches Morrison’s attention is an eighteen-year-old girl lying dead in a coffin. According to Van der Zee’s narration, the girl was shot in a party and she would not state the real situation to the examiner. Later, the truth was learned that it was done by her jealous lover but she, out of love, kept silence in order to save some time for him to run away. Both stories share identical themes, love and killing someone because of love. Morrison’s *Beloved*, though partly different, basically is a combination of these two stories: a thirty-year-old black mother kills her daughter out of love and after eighteen years, the incarnation of the dead daughter’s ghost comes back. However, Morrison not only is concerned about love, but also about slavery in American society. It is a conflict between humanity and reality—American capitalism. Morrison tends to question the identity and individual values of the black by presenting a denied history of black slavery that has been alienated and forgotten under the pressure of American imperialism.

III. Black slavery: human as commodity

Slavery is a vicious product of capitalism; under slavery, blacks are considered as commodities, a kind of possession or merchandise which is tradable or exchangeable. “Beloved,” the title for the book and the ghost within the novel, as Margaret Atwood indicates, “is a keynote for the whole book: in the world of slavery and poverty, where human beings are merchandise, everything has its price and price is tyrannical” (6). In other words, the black in American society before the abolition of slavery are tradable properties, and the price is controlled by the white, the dominator. For example, Baby Suggs, a former slave, has a miserable story under slavery. She is bought from Carolina by Mr. Garner, the white farmer who owns Sweet Home. Mr. Garner calls her Jenny Whitlow because it is a name on her “sales ticket” (*Beloved* 167). Baby Suggs cannot see her husband so she refuses to change her name into Jenny Whitlow because “Baby Suggs” is the only connection between her and her husband. Although she insists that her name is Baby Suggs named by her husband, the white owner never calls her by this name. Moreover, since she has been sold from one boss to another, her “eight children had six fathers” and most of them were also sold: “her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye” (*Beloved* 28). She has to sell her body to “a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, however, the child was “traded for lumber in the spring of the next year” (*Beloved* 28). Finally, there is only one son she keeps: however, Baby Suggs can hardly see the only son around because Halle has to hire himself out on weekends in order to make money to buy her mother’s freedom: “A twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change” (*Beloved* 13). Labors of black slaves can be sold, and so can bodies of black female. Baby Suggs sold her body to keep her child, and similarly, Sethe sells hers to exchange a word, “Beloved,” on her daughter’s tombstone: “Ten minutes, [the engraver] said. You got ten minutes I’ll do it for free” (*Beloved* 5). This filthy bargain shows the conflicts between humanity and reality, and Sethe has to consider the trade carefully in order to fulfill her maternal love:

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten “Dearly” too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surly) engraved on her

baby's head stone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that matted. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. (*Beloved* 5)

In slavery community, mother image is ruined. There are no mothers, but commodities.

IV. Black slavery: dysfunctional family value

According to Baby Suggs's experience, obviously, under slavery black family is dysfunctional. Atwood criticized it:

it is seen as one of the most viciously antifamily institutions human beings have ever devised. The slaves are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, their kin, It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of everyday legal policy. (7)

Compared with Baby Suggs, Sethe, Suggs's daughter-in-law seems to be luckier because "she had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that 'somebody' son who had fathered every one of her children" (*Beloved* 28). As a matter of fact, Sethe has followed the same step and fallen into same unsolved situation as well. Sethe was a daughter of an African American slave mother who could not perform her mother role. As Sethe recalls:

I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. ... She must of nursed me two or three weeks—that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. ... She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. (*Beloved* 72)

The image of her mother is not a nursing mother figure; actually all those slave children were nursed by the Nan in the farm. Her memory about her is a working slave woman with a mark of slave: "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" (*Beloved* 72). Her mother pointed at the mark and told her: "This is your ma'am. This," and "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 my by this mark" (*Beloved* 72). The burnt mark points out that the black woman's right as a mother has been deprived and Sethe's maternal love and family life are taken away, too. Therefore, Sethe dreams of a well-preserved family. She chooses Baby Suggs's filial son to be her husband and dreams of a wedding ceremony to start her marriage. However, from Mrs. Garner, she realizes that all she has to do for marriage is to ask for their owner's permission (*Beloved* 31). Moreover, a calamitous result is that her mother-figure, as well as her dreamed family life, is corrupted by slavery.

Since Sethe, Halle, and other slaves in Sweet Home have been abused by Schoolteacher and his nephews after the death of Mr. Garner, Sethe arranges her children's escaping journey to their grandma. Sethe wishes to be a protective mother. Although she was pregnant with the fourth child, she tries to flee to her children because her breasts are full with milk and she will store it for her children. Nevertheless, Sethe has been treated as a saleable livestock by Schoolteacher. She tries to store her milk for her daughter but Schoolteacher and his nephews steal it from her body. They use cowhide to beat her and take her milk just like treating a cow (*Beloved* 19-20). Milk from the mother is a very important element for showing maternal love, and Sethe has an obsession about milk because she never had enough milk from her mother:

Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight

and holler for it, and to have so little left. I'll tell *Beloved* about that; she'll understand. She my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it; after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horse. (*Beloved* 236-37)

Providing milk for her own children is a mother nature, but Sethe is no mother in Sweet Home. Jan Furman comments on Sethe's mother-image that "Sethe, like her mother, Baby Suggs, and all slave women, can never be wife and mother. She is biologically female, and she is a breeder, but she is exempt from all ideological considerations as woman. She is no more than a cow or goat subject to 'milking' like any other beast" (74). As Roger Sale denotes, stealing milk from a mother is one of the horrible images of the slavery concentration (12). Being a slave, she has been beaten as an animal though she is pregnant, and she has no right to preserve her milk for her children. However, even animals can protect their offspring, but "milk-stealing" shows that Sethe is incapable of being a mother-figure under slavery. Therefore, when schoolteacher and his nephew come to Bluestone to seize Sethe and her children, Sethe uses an extreme way to stop them—she would rather kill her children than let them be taken back to be slaves like her. Furman explains that Sethe's infanticide as a way to maintain her motherly role: "Sethe resists this nonhuman suborder by proving herself capable of thinking for herself and by insisting upon the right to determine her own and her children's fates in life and in death" (74). The mother-image of Sethe is corrupted by slavery system, and she has been forced to change her role from a loving mother to an infanticide. In other words, both mother-image and family function are distorted by slavery.

V. Baby Suggs's black community: searching for black dignity

Since personal and family values become invalid, Morrison suggests an effective community for black people to recapture their dignity. In *Beloved*, two contrary communities for the black have been discussed: Sweet Home and Baby Suggs's black community in Cincinnati. Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D and have been stayed in Mr. Garner's "Sweet Home." However, as Denver says: "How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (*Beloved* 16). Paul D agrees with Denver's observation by replying: "True, true.... It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (*Beloved* 16). For slaves, Sweet Home is like a concentration dominated by the white owner, and slaves are not considered as human beings but commodity (or property). Aoi Mori denotes: "In *Beloved*, the name of the plantation, Sweet Home, indicates that white masters have a control over naming, disregarding the lives and identity of slaves" (45). Sweet Home is nothing but a place to show the white master, Mr. Garner's manipulation and his hierarchical benevolence. Being put a bit on the mouth and sold to Georgia as chained-slaves by Schoolteacher, Paul D realizes that "the slaves did not possess freedom as human beings even when the former master was alive, because even then their lives were capriciously conditional depending on Garner" (Mori 45). Whether in Sweet Home or in Georgia as a chained-slave, there are no differences for Paul D and other slaves because they cannot possess human dignity.

Baby Suggs tries to procure dignity and humanity for the black in the Clearing. After she had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" by being a slave, Baby Suggs decides to play the role as a preacher who teaches Negroes to show their emotion, and to love themselves (*Beloved* 102). Baby Suggs' community is an earthly paradise for free Negroes and run-away slaves; in other words, they are free to be themselves and to be treated as humans instead of the white master's tradable commodities. Sethe recollects that it is the best 28 days in her life seeing Baby Suggs preaching in the Clearing, and it is also her first time seeing her kinds showing their true emotions:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the

Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (*Beloved* 103)

Baby Suggs teaches her black friends to love their bodies even though they are not loved by the white:

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out [*sic*]. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that wither. *You* got to love it, *You!* (*Beloved* 103-4)

Their bodies are not objects to be abused by the white, and they are worthwhile to be loved. It has been a long time that black slaves are taught and forbidden to love themselves. Baby Suggs spends a whole lifetime to realize her identity and individual value, and she wants to help her people to love themselves more. Denver remembers what Baby Suggs's sadness that:

Grandma Baby said people look down on her because she had eight children with different men. Coloredpeople and whitepeople both look down on her for that. Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. (*Beloved* 247)

Baby Suggs teaches her granddaughter: "That [she] should always listen to [her] body and love it" (*Beloved* 247). Black people are also humans and they share equal rights with the white to be their own masters and to love their bodies.

VI. Conclusion

In the end of the novel, Morrison repeats the sentence, "This is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 324). On the surface, she wants to stop the sad memory about a slave mother's infanticide. However, 'silence' between the black is like the bit on Paul D's mouth which forbids the slaves to claim their human rights and to tell their sadness. As a matter of fact, Morrison intends to pass on the story to prevent the vicious event. Mori comments on Sethe's infanticide as the only alternative under the threat of slavery:

Morrison describes how slavery restricted the behaviors and consciousness of mothers who were quite often deprived of the right of mothering. Sethe's lack of communication with her own mother drives her into an extremely protective and, at the same time, deranged motherhood. The only way for a run-away slave mother to save her children from the brutally uncivilized institution of slavery is to terminate her children's lives by her own hand before they are recaptured.... Slave mothers, whose maternal integrity frequently violated, attempted to protect their children by any means necessary and expressed their love toward their children in an extraordinary way, as seen in Sethe's infanticide. (107-8)

Margaret Garner's infanticide in 1851 is a calamity before emancipation. Slavery, which ruins human and family values, is an inhumane policy created by imperialism and capitalism. Morrison adapts Margaret Garner's tragedy and creates Sethe's infanticide to attack the brutality of slavery. Roger Sale states: "It is Toni Morrison's ambition to create a form, and a storytelling, that keeps alive the struggle to remember, the need to forget, and the inability to forget" (15). The repeating line in the end of the novel, "It was not a story to pass on. . . . It was not a story to pass on. . . . It is not a story to pass on," shows Morrison's concern and her ironic reminder (*Beloved* 323-4). It is a lesson to pass

on, but humane calamities to stop. The denied humanity and the black slavery under imperialism have to be remembered in order to assert the black identity from the past, the present and the future, and help to establish individual value.

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