CHAPTER - IV

Toni Morrison: Search for Authentic Existence in

Beloved

And before I will be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go to my Lord and be free.¹

Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1988) grows out of the historical context of American slavery and reconstruction. It embodies a response to the Fugitive Slave Law to which Sethe, the chief female protagonist of the novel, falls a prey in 1855. The fugitive slaves were those who had run away from slave masters in the south and found haven in the northern and border states. The Fugitive Slave law, enacted by the Congress, empowered the slave masters to reclaim their property i.e. the runaways. Sethe, a runaway slave, who is the chief female protagonist in Beloved slits her baby’s throat rather than see her sold as a slave when her slave master comes to reclaim her and her children. Sethe is the fictional representation of Margaret Garner, who, in 1851, had escaped with her children from her master in Kentucky to Ohio. When she and her children were about to be reclaimed by the slave master, she tried to kill her children rather than return them to a life of slavery. She succeeded in killing one of the children and was imprisoned for infanticide.

Toni Morrison is not the first black writer to address the issue of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic Uncle Tom’s Cabin also deals with the Fugitive Slave Law. What distinguishes Beloved from Uncle Tom’s Cabin is the freedom of the former from the sentimentality and political propaganda of the latter. The political progress, witnessed since the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, accounts for the deeper psychological penetration
that marks *Beloved*. It deals with infanticide, rape, race, past, supernaturalism, mythology and black oral folk traditions. Though Toni Morrison writes within the literary tradition, initiated by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the intentional tension between *Beloved* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does pose a challenge to Stowe’s moral relativism which is unmasked by the black feminist perspective on African American literature.

In addressing the issue of slavery, Morrison wants people to be able to feel at a personal level what it meant to be a slave and what slavery did to a people. Jonathan Demme, the director of the film, *Beloved*, based on Morrison’s novel, agrees with Toni Morrison that “it is imperative to look back at ...(America’s) tortured racial past without blinking.” He points out: "Beloved looks back at the strife torn America of today. One of the greatest achievements of the book is in making it possible for the reader to encounter emotionally and consider that past...”

After killing her child, Sethe is afflicted by a moral predicament. She tries to gain strength from the belief that by killing her daughter; she had spared the child slavery’s dehumanizing consequences. In this context, she highlights the terror of slavery: “... anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you. Dirty you so bad you could not take yourself any more.” It is a tragic paradox that the infanticide is inspired by maternal love. Historically, it is linked to the reproductive capacity of slave women for whom feigned illness, deliberate and non-deliberate abortion, and self-imposed sterility constituted avenues of resistance to the perpetuation of slavery. At the same time, it is pertinent to mention that “although infanticide was a typical behavior on the part of the slave mothers, it was nevertheless an avenue that was available and used by some.”
Sethe commits infanticide, overwhelmed by her love for her children’s security. She confesses, “I wouldn’t draw breath without my children” and pointedly asks, “nobody’s ma’am could run off and leave her daughter, would she?” Eva in Morrison’s novel, *Sula* offers an inter-textual perspective on Sethe’s rationalization of her crime: As Eva brushes aside the accusation, hurled at her by Hannah for killing Plum, Sethe also refutes Paul D.’s accusation:

“Yea. It didn’t work? Did it work?” he asked.
“It worked,” she said.
“How? Your boys gone you don’t know where. One girl dead, the other won’t leave the yard. How did it work?”
“They ain’t at Sweet Home. School teacher ain’t got ‘em.”
“May be there’s worse.”
“It ain 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.”
“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”

Clearly, Paul D. looks upon the infanticide as brutal and describes Sethe’s love for her children too “thick”. He reflects: “more important than what Sethe had done was what she had claimed.” The dialogue between Paul D. and Sethe contextualizes their conflicting viewpoints:

‘What you did was wrong, Sethe.’
‘I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?’
‘There could have been a way. Some other way.’
‘What way?’
‘You got two feet, Sethe, not four...’

By evoking the bestial imagery, Paul D. hints at Sethe’s inability to realize the absurdity and irrationality of infanticide that is prompted by her persistent concern for “her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing - the part of her that was clean” and her refusal to take her babies back to where “anybody white could take your whole self
for anything that came to mind...” Oprah Winfrey points out that Paul D’s perspective on infanticide and maternal love is a slave’s point of view. She argues, “Because there you have no right to yourself. If you don’t belong to yourself, then anything that anybody chooses to do with you is okay.”

Commenting on infanticide, bell hooks observes that Sethe’s avenue of resistance to slavery is followed by greater anguish:

“Of course Sethe’s attempt to end the historical anguish of the black people only reproduces it in a different form. She conquers the terror through perverse re-enactment, through resistance, using violence as a means of fleeing from a history that is a burden too great to bear.”

Sethe experiences the reproduced historical anguish in the form of her condemnation by the black community, desertion by Paul D, denunciation by Denver, possession by Beloved and personal agony. Giving opinion on people’s indignation in this regard, Oprah Winfrey points out: “People resented Sethe not because of what she did but because there was never a moment of regret. She didn’t crumble, she didn’t fail.” Jonathan Demme makes a similar observation: “Sethe except in very particular circumstances never weeps for herself. This is almost her point.” Sethe vehemently holds on to her conviction that what she did was right for her daughter. Her statement that each of her children is a “life she had made” and that each had “all the parts of her” implies that she owns her children and controls their lives. At this point it is apt to quote Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems who underline the difference between parental ownership of children and the slave master’s ownership of the children of slave women:

"the difference is significant, though, because slavery is concerned primarily with economics and the reduction of human
beings as chattel for the sake of profit. The other is concerned with what is a central aspect of maternal love and may in fact be crucial to what is called instinctive maternity."\textsuperscript{18}

The responses to instinctive maternity, which constitutes the primary impulse behind infanticide by Sethe, pose the question which is the harder choice for a mother: to return her children to slavery or spare them the trauma of slavery by taking their life and also raise the issue of personal freedom in the existential sense. Though Sethe acts with existential accountability for self and being, the limitations of her existential freedom are highlighted by the judgement of the community. The reaction of Paul D., Denver and Beloved also problematize the possibility of Sethe’s achieving existential freedom without meddling with her humanity and violating the child's right to life.

Paul D. is not appreciative of the maternal predicament of Sethe. He observes: “for a used to be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love.”\textsuperscript{19} Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems observe regarding Paul D’s contention:

Here Paul D points to the tension created by the system of slavery and the maternal instinct of the slave woman. Slavery claimed ownership of all of its property, irrespective of age and gender, including the siblings of its female slaves. Simultaneously the slave mother instinctively sought to hold on to her progeny.\textsuperscript{20}

Moreover, the ideological exaltation of motherhood based on instinctive maternity does not hold good in the case of slave women who are categorized as breeders and whose offspring are weaned away from them like calves from cows and sold in the slave market. This aspect of the effect of slavery on women is brought into focus by Angela Davis:

In fact, in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the
growth of the slave labor force. They were “breeders” animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers.21

Angela Davis’s spotlight on the animality, imposed on black women by slavery, offers a commentary on the inherent contradiction between slavery’s claims of ownership of the offspring of slave women and their instinctual clinging to the siblings. This dialectical interplay of forces accentuates the dilemma of motherhood, exemplified by Sethe, the victim of the cultural war against slave females. Thus in the larger context of the black political feminist discourse on race, class and gender, the infanticide, committed by Sethe, assumes the form of resistance to slavery’s onslaught on her motherhood and subjectivity.

Reacting to the sympathetic portrayal of Sethe, Stanley Crouch describes Beloved as “a black face holocaust novel.... designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn’t weaken.”22 Obviously, the anti feminist diatribe of Stanley Crouch is fuelled by a phallocentric, classicist and racist ideology. He overlooks Toni Morrison’s exploration of the humanity of Sethe in the context of the vital issues of race, class and gender. His denunciation of the novel is based on a wilful distortion of the feminist understanding of slavery’s effect on a mother’s love for her daughter and the resultant dilemma.

Sethe’s act of infanticide is an indictment of the atrocities inflicted upon the slave women by the slack masters. It represents her triumph in the face of terror of slavery. This aspect of Sethe's violence against her own child is emphasized by Toni Morrison's response to the question why she wanted to tell this excruciating story. She remarks,
“that however heartbreaking and even conflicting it is to focus on Sethe’s ordeal, this story also bears witness to the monumental truth that the slave owners did not win.”

The racial memory of the terrifying ordeals of slavery that prompt infanticide is caught and held in Sethe’s consciousness. She recalls that her paternal grandmother was raped by a slave master who had later sold her child. Her maternal grandmother was gang raped by a crew enroute to American slavery. Sethe is painfully aware of Ella’s fate who is locked up and repeatedly raped by a father and son duo and that of Stamp Paid’s wife, Vashti who is forced to have sex with the slave master. Commeting upon the method in the sexual violence, let loose by slave masters. Angela Davis observes: “Rape was a terribly efficient method of keeping black women and men alike in check. It was a routine arm of repression.”

Sethe tells Beloved that by killing her, she had tried to protect her from what she knew was “terrible” and that she had actually shielded the baby from the humiliation and despair that killed Baby Suggs, from “what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D. tremble.” She fervently pleads with the ghost of her slain daughter that she had protected her dear child and herself from “undreamable dreams” in which “a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs, and threw her out of the wagon.” It is implied that for Sethe getting flogged, maimed, mutilated and even killed pales into insignificance when compared to getting raped which is the horror of horrors.

The feminist problematization of the horror of rape and infanticide contextualizes the surfacing of Sethe’s painful repressed memories in the wake of Beloved’s return and her desperate attempt at keeping the past at bay as it keeps intruding upon the
present. The power of the past is represented by the ghost. The absence/presence of the slaughtered child is inscribed in '124', the number of the house, hinting at the third missing child who has been haunting the place for eighteen years. Then the ghost becomes flesh and enters into Sethe's house in the guise of a twenty year old woman-child (The age Beloved would have attained had she lived). In the house she becomes her mother's conscience. As the traumatic experience of infanticide is revived by "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" it takes the form of hallucinations and nightmares, to get inserted in Sethe's consciousness and traumatize her. The dead child returns and "feeds on a diet of Sethe's past and serves as the materialization of Sethe's memory."

The feminist deconstruction of infanticide shows that Sethe's refuses to assume responsibility for her baby's death on the plea that infanticide was an expression of her immense love for her daughter. Consequently, she refuses to acknowledge that her act of love and mercy was also a murder. Sethe's refusal stands in the way of Sethe's attaining an authentic existence.

Sethe tends to review her position regarding infanticide after her encounter with the ghost child. She keeps explaining herself to Beloved and dwells upon the unspeakable horrors of slavery with a view to convincing the ghost that she had killed Beloved to spare her the life of a female slave. She begs for Beloved's forgiveness but Beloved does not relent. The horror of infanticide comes to a climax during the exorcism of Beloved by thirty women of the community. Sethe's reliving the horrible moment, when the schoolmaster had come to reclaim her, synchronizes with the arrival of the white Quaker philanthropist, Edward Bodwin at 124 to pick up
Denver for her first day of work. Beloved, pregnant and naked, goes to the porch to confront the women and Sethe, seeing Bodwin coming up the road, thinks that schoolteacher, the slave catcher, has come to take her children. Shouting “No no. No no no.” Sethe charges the intruder with ice pick in hand.

Sethe’s act of violence against what she perceives as her enemy marks her moment of awakening. The altered perspective, implying that instead of killing her baby she should have killed the schoolteacher (the racial enemy), engenders self-realization. It is at this point that her search for wholeness and freedom reaches the climax, and unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Sethe achieves an authentic existence. She is saved from the relentless fury of the revengeful ghost and the crushing burden of the legacy of slavery, represented by it.

Resistance to slavery’s onslaught, signified by infanticide, is transformed into rage against oppression when Sethe tries to kill the white oppressor rather than her child. The paradigm shift in her perception of the adversary is the sign of stirring of black rage against systems of white domination and oppression. bell hooks places black rage in a psychoanalytical context:

> Even though black psychiatrists William Grieve and Price Cobbs could write an entire book called *Black Rage*, they used their Freudian standpoint to convince readers that rage was merely a sign of powerlessness. They named it pathological, explained it away. They did not urge the large culture to see black rage as something other than sickness, to see it as a potentially healthy, potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation ... I understand rage to be necessary aspect of resistance struggle. Rage can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action.30

The stirring of rage enables Sethe to identify the racial enemy. Sethe’s attack on Bodwin is an expression of black rage against oppression and victimization. It is
through the medium of rage that she acquires an authentic existence. Thus rage becomes her positive and constructive response to oppression unlike the suppression of rage that is manifested in the violence against her own child. It acts as a catalyst of the resurrection and replenishment of Sethe's being and consciousness. Its aftermath brings self-knowledge to her.

Besides looking multilaterally at infanticide, Toni Morrison dismantles the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual domains. She presents the problematic of Sethe by drawing upon oral folk culture, myths, mysticism and magic and demonstrates that there exists a possibility of the existence of various levels of consciousness. In this context, Toni Morrison awakens the dormant semantic potentialities of the very name 'Sethe' in order to nullify its conventional meanings and interpretations. Its origin is traced back to the Egyptian mythology and the Bible. Through extrapolation, Toni Morrison offers an ironic commentary on the Biblical mythology that is, often, evoked to justify the enslavement of Blacks and on the part man and part animal/bird figure of Egyptian Sethe that problematizes the 'animalistic' traits, identified in Sethe's nature by the schoolmaster. Though Sethe's association with an animal is symptomatic of her dehumanization, the mythical and mystical perspective on the name 'Sethe'. gives a positive meaning to her comparison with a cow which is generally viewed as the giver and nurturer of life. In terms of fertility, cow is equated with earth. Thus the mythological context of the name raises Sethe to the level of the primordial mother.

The mythical connotations of the name notwithstanding Sethe traverses the long and tiring journey to an authentic existence assisted by Paul D., Amy, Baby Suggs,
Denver and the African-American community. They are instrumental in reclaiming and liberating her from the thrall of the vindictive Beloved. In the process of reclaiming Sethe, Paul D., Amy, Baby Suggs and Denver also acquire an authentic existence through coming to terms with their respective predicaments, confusions and dilemmas and shedding their inhibitions and hesitations. Consequently, they discover themselves.

Paul D.'s tumultuous journey of self-discovery begins with Beloved's return. It marks the surfacing of Paul D.'s painful memories. Despite Paul D's concerted effort to decimate the power of the past; the ghost compels him to revisit the past. Pamela E. Barnett, in this regard, brings to light the sinister designs of Beloved, the female demon:

the character Beloved is not just the ghost of Sethe's dead child. She is a succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen. The succubus figure which is related to the vampire, another sexualized figure that drains a vital fluid, was incorporated into African American folklore in the form of shape-shifting witches who "ride" their terrified victims in the night and Beloved embodies the qualities of that figure as well.31

The supernatural/folkloric perspective shows how Beloved drains Paul D. of semen and gets pregnant which is indicated by the swelling of her body. The enactment of rape by Beloved kindles Paul D.'s nightmarish memories. He views it as an "overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrollable, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."32 Beloved's sexual encounter with Paul D. is in the nature of an intrusive phenomenon. It brings back the traumatic experience. The succubus figure, represented by Beloved, throws into relief the reversal of roles, manifest
in the figuration of a female rapist and a male rape victim. The reversed roles contextualize the shifting of focus from gender to race as the category that accounts for the perpetration of rape in *Beloved*.

Beloved’s assault revives Paul D.’s memory of his sexual violation, associated with “breakfast” that is served to black prisoners in Alfred, Georgia. The prisoners are forced to cater to the vagaries of the prison guards. They announce mockingly, “want some breakfast nigger” and “hungry nigger?” Thus the guards’ appetite is deflected on the black prisoners who are bound to reply, “Yes Sir.” Lee Edelman argues that by forcing the prisoners to express homosexual desire, the guards subject them to symbolic castration. The sexual violence is, at once, racist and homophobic: “white racists (literally) castrate others while homosexuals (figuratively) are castrated themselves.”

Lee Edelman further contends that the breakfast scene, in which homosexuality is imposed on the prisoners, represents the “violent disappropriation of masculine authority that underlines the paranoid relation of black and white in our modern, ‘racially’ polarized, patriarchal formation.”

Paul D’s sexual exploitation by the white guards implies that social/cultural domination of black men by white men takes the shape of sexual violence against them. It represents the fusion of sexual and racial oppression and suggests that when black masculinity fails to find expression, it becomes connotative of emasculation and social impotence. It further signifies that Paul D. is emasculated by passive homosexuality and the humiliation of being forced to express his own desire for being raped. Paul D’s sexual encounter with Beloved is also marked by his own desire to be raped. It is borne out by his confession that he feels humiliated when Beloved
forcibly moves him from Sethe’s bed. He feels further degraded and disgraced by his own uncontrollable “appetite” for her. 36

The encounter with Beloved makes Paul D. undergo once again the sexual punishment that he had suffered at the hands of the white prison guards and relive the horrible experience of having been forced to suck an iron bit after his aborted attempt to escape. Such harrowing experiences are locked up in the tobacco tin which is the substitute of his heart. He does not let anyone have a “whiff of (the tin’s) contents “because such a disclosure would shame him.”37 He has been piling his painful memories “one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he (gets) to 124 nothing in this world (can) pry it open.”38

As Beloved does not belong to “this world”, she traumatizes Paul D. and breaks open the tin box. Valerie Smith puts forth the view that “the act of intercourse with Beloved restores Paul D. to himself, restores his heart to him.”39 Actually Paul D. is raped by Beloved. The rape, in a sense, liberates him from the fetters of a disturbing past and helps him in his journey towards acquiring an authentic existence. But for the nightmarish experience of being seduced by a supernatural being, Paul D. would not have realized the inefficacy of his defense mechanisms and got rid of the burdens of the past. As a result of the seduction by Beloved, Paul D. succeeds in assimilating the traumatic experiences of the past and confronting the pain that has, throughout, been locked up in his heart. The bursting open of the tobacco tin and his crying out, “Red heart, Red heart, Red heart”40 synchronises with his reaching the climax in the sexual encounter with Beloved.

The rape by Beloved and kindling of the memory of sexual violation by the white
guards free Paul D. from the bondage of the past and restores his heart to him. But his psychic healing does not take place because he remains unconvinced of his own virility. Ironically, Paul D. is described as “the last of the Sweet Home men”\textsuperscript{41} by Garner, the slave master who lauds his manhood in order to exploit his productivity. After the death of Garner, Paul D. discovers the hollowness of the appellation. After gaining freedom, he continues asking, “Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a white man who was supposed to know?” He wondered whether Garner was “naming what he saw or creating what he did not.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus doubts, regarding his manhood, keep lingering in his mind.

Because of the gnawing doubts Paul D. attributes his failure to frustrate Beloved’s assault to his inadequacy as a man. He needs Sethe’s help but the shame of asking a woman for help being too great, he starts asserting his masculinity. Instead of confessing: “I am not a man” he tells Sethe that he wants her pregnant with his child: “suddenly it was a solution; a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell.”\textsuperscript{43} He wants to “document his manhood” because he feels that the supernatural rape and the sexual violation by the white guards in Alfred, Georgia has emasculated him.

In Alfred, Georgia, Paul D. and his follow prisoners choose impotence by saying “Yes Sir” to the white guards who violate them. Their meekness is reinforced by Stamp Paid’s submission to the will of the white slave master who rapes his wife and Halle’s mute witnessing of the sexual assault on Sethe. Obviously, Paul D., Stamp and Halle have been emasculated by the white victimizers. The emasculation, brought about by racial victimization, is presented in terms of gender in order to signify the
failure of their manhood. Though he is punished as a black man in a racist ambience, Paul D. describes his sexually passive position in terms of gender. Moreover, his predicament becomes more pronounced when he cannot give expression to the experience of having been raped by a supernatural woman. His shame as a male rape victim is too deep to be acknowledged publicly. Because of this, he cannot participate in the collective effort of the community of women to exorcize Beloved.

The ‘unspeakability’ of the story of his violation by the white guards and Beloved has been confounded by many critics. His sexual encounter with the ghost is not regarded as rape. His catering to white guards’ whims is also considered unrelatable. Valerie Smith describes Paul D. as having “endured the hardship of the chain gang.” Marilyn Sanders Mobley makes a reference to the “atrocities such as working on the chain gang.” Sally Keenan regards the “story of the prison farm” as unspeakable. Mae Henderson, instead of equating the boys’ sexual assault on Sethe with Paul D’s violation by the white guards, places it at par with Paul D’s experience of sucking the horse’s bit in his mouth. Paul D’s rape by Beloved, sexual violation by white guards and the concomitant emasculation are regarded as inexpressible because the two acts and their consequences are not encompassed by contemporary understanding of rape and gender.

Paul D’s sense of emasculation, and powerlessness are best illustrated through “a rooster named Mister” which is the most poignant and potent metaphor for Paul D’s psychological castration and racial impotence. After having been captured, Paul D’s feet are shackled; a three-spoke collar is laced around his neck and a horse’s bit is placed in his mouth. He is tethered to a buckboard and taken to be sold away from
Sweet Home. Enroute, he encounters Mister, whose life he had saved at birth. Prancing proudly, Mister instantly reminds Paul D. of his emasculation. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems bring out the insignificance of Paul D. vis-a-vis the rooster:

"The reference associated with the mere mention of the rooster’s name is absent from any address to Paul D. Biblically, Paul D. denotes small; moreover Paul D. lacks a surname - that is, history and family - and must share his first name with two brothers, implying anonymity."\(^49\) The text informs us “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t... I was something else and that something else was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.\(^50\)

Paul D.’s sense of emasculation, signified by Mister’s encounter with him, does not decimate his determination to achieve self-affirmation. It is highlighted by his repeated efforts to escape slavery and his symbolic resurrection from the wooden grave at Georgia. It occurs during an inundating downpour. The earth, encasing his prison, gets dissolved in muddy waters that seep into the boxes: “The water was above Paul D’s ankles, flowing over the wooden plank he slept on... The mud was up to his thighs and he held on to the bars ... through the mud ... blind, groping...”\(^51\) At this crucial juncture, Paul D, in the manner of Milkman of Song of Solomon, makes a determined bid to survive. Out of nothingness and void, he rises like the phoenix, renames himself and strives to find meaning and fulfilment in life.

The image of the phoenix is also evoked by Toni Morrison in Sula and Song of Solomon. In Sula, fire is the instrument of regeneration and in Song of Solomon, air becomes the harbinger of rebirth. In Beloved earth and water become the nurturing womb and herald the resurrection of Paul D. In the given episode both the destructive and regenerative powers of water work in unison to break the shackles of racial bondage
and replenish Paul D’s resources of resilience. The broken chains and the torrential rain symbolize the ritual of rebirth and purification of the former slave.

The rejuvenated Paul D’s flight from bondage to Ohio is a landmark in his search for authentic existence and self-discovery. The damage done to his psyche by the schoolmaster when he was at “the peak of his strength, taller than tall men, and stronger than most,” and the psychological devastation, caused by the loss of his friends who had constituted his surrogate family and the violation by the white guards at Alfred, Georgia have hardened Paul D’s heart, symbolized by “a tobacco tin, buried in his chest.... its lid rusted shut.” His reunion with Sethe, signifying “a primordial element in his spiritual and psychological quest: his desire for family” salvages him from the mire of degradation.

Danny Glover who plays Paul D. in the film, Beloved, based on the novel, observes that Paul D. discovers himself by breaking free from the past and in the process he saves Sethe as well from annihilation. Danny Glover points out:

Paul D’s main motivation and concern is his overriding love for Sethe. After wandering for eighteen years, he has come in a sense, to be saved, but paradoxically he ends up being a savior too. ...Sethe reminds him of the women he has met along the way, women who have lost their brothers, their fathers, their husbands. So he is willing to embrace this place (Sethe’s house) as somewhere he wants to stay, some place to plant roots. He feels he doesn’t have to wander any more.

Paul D’s cherished desire for the family gets a set back when he rejects Sethe because of the infanticide that she has committed. This, in turn, hampers his personal quest for wholeness and integration. Having failed in achieving wholeness through reunion with Sethe, Paul D. seeks solace in the Church of the Holy Redeemer. The Church, too, does not offer him, what he seeks. Lodged in the cold cellar, he continues
to seek comfort and protection in alcohol. There is complete darkness in the cellar. He commits sacrilege by drinking in front of the cross. Evidently Christianity, to which he is frequently exposed, does not lead him to self-realization. As an anglicized Jesus fails to save Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, so does the Holy Redeemer in the case of Paul D. Like Shadrack in *Sula* and Celie in *The Color Purple*, Paul D. gets disenchanted with Christianity. The Church cellar becomes yet another form of his wooden tomb at Alfred, Georgia, representing his symbolic death.

Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry argue that although the Church is the commanding force for Blacks, Morrison “seems clearly to back little faith in the ability of the traditional institutions of human betterment to generate support and liberation for (Blacks).”56 Paul D’s consciousness of the inadequacy of the white/western/Christian model of the Holy Redeemer bears out the contention of Toni Morrison. It is further reinforced by his erosion of faith in an omnipotent, benevolent God that does not provide explanation of the existence of evil and the suffering of the innocent and just. As a result of it, he realizes that he does not have the right to sit in judgement upon Sethe’s crime in view of her conviction that “Love is or it aint. Thin love ain’t love at all.”57

Having failed to experience redemption in the Church, a disillusioned Paul D. comes out of the dark cellar and meets Stamp Paid, who ferries fugitives across the Ohio river. Stamp Paid’s realization that no one but he is responsible for his redemption and his example of dedicating his life to the service of his ethnic group offer to Paul D an alternative to church. Its strength lies in the spiritual/cultural resources of the African tradition, which Paul D. harnesses for the attainment of psychological wholeness and
existential authenticity in the face of racial oppression of the dominant class. The transformation that Paul D. undergoes prepares the ground for his whole-hearted acceptance of Sethe, which, in turn, helps her to attain salvation.

Paul D.'s sensitivity to her disturbing past is, at once, touching and poignant. He gives solace to her when she bemoans the final exit of Beloved. “She was my best thing”, she tells him, he reassures her, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” Paul D’s washing Sethe’s feet is reminiscent of Baby Suggs ritual of cleaning Sethe when she had arrived in Ohio. Paul D’s therapeutic gestures of tenderness testify to his recognition of Sethe’s role as nourisher and nurturer. At this point, Paul D perceives Sethe, for the first time, from a perspective of authenticity and self-affirmation. He announces, “She is a friend of my mind, she gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gathers them and gives them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.” The textual evidence reveals that culmination of Paul D’s quest for family, wholeness and authentic existence synchronizes with Sethe’s self-recovery and rejuvenation.

Paul D enactment of the ritual of Sethe’s rejuvenation is thematically bound with what is accomplished by Amy and Baby Suggs during Sethe’s flight to freedom. Amy is instrumental in aiding Sethe during her tumultuous journey to self-discovery. After her flight from slavery to freedom on the other side of the river Ohio, Sethe forms her relationship with Amy, the daughter of a former indentured white servant who, like Sethe’s mother, had died, bequeathing bondage and victimization to her daughter. Both are adolescent, poor and runaways. Sethe is bound for Cincinnnati, Ohio where her children live and Amy is travelling to Boston, in search of velvet,
which is symbolic of her yearning for the finer things of life and happiness.

Even though they are both poor, the free Amy has an edge over the fugitive slave, Sethe. Amy’s having no children is attributed to the fact that, unlike Sethe, she, being white, has not been exploited as a producer of labor units. Her rootedness in the western/white culture is represented by her desire to purchase some velvet at Boston, the cultural capital of America. Being a slave woman, Sethe is at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. She is mother of four slave children. Moreover, being alienated from the black African heritage, she has no access to any culture. The American dream has assumed the shape of a tree of scars on her back and freedom has become a plunge into the wilderness. Unlike Amy, she has to conceal her identity. On the other hand, Amy, being white, can travel by day without any pass or permit. Her walking upright despite her ragged position is contrasted with Sethe’s crawling. Amy perceives herself as “Miss Amy Denver” while Sethe is a plain “nigger woman”. It signifies the embedding of their personal/private discourses into the public/racial discourse.

During the tumultuous moment of Denver’s birth, Amy assumes the role of a restorer and reviver of Sethe. She brings the premature baby girl, Denver, into the world. Thus two “throw away people, two lawless outlaws - a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinned hair temporarily slip into each other’s existence. As a mark of gratitude to Amy, Sethe gives the name ‘Denver’ to the child.

In introducing Amy Denver, Morrison chooses to present inter-racial sisterhood that transcends the barrier of race and for a moment the focus shifts from racial tensions to the human bond between the two wayfarers who happen to be destitutes. The coming
together in this episode of the black and the white female characters to add meaning and purpose to each others’ lives is an extension of the theme of black sisterhood, that forms a recurrent motif in black women writing.

The process of renewal and replenishment, initiated by Amy, is carried forward by Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of Sethe. Baby, a former slave woman, who after gaining freedom, seeks occupation and solace in giving advice, passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing and “loving every body like it was her job and hers alone.” She makes available to Sethe the collective experience of the black community. It is she who performs the rite of cleansing Sethe that facilitates her transformation. According to Robert B. Stepto, Baby Suggs “offer(s) the exhilarating prospect of community, protection, progress, learning and religion.” The ritual of rejuvenation, enacted by Baby Suggs, inculcates self-love in Sethe which becomes the precursor of her rebirth and renewal.

Baby Suggs enthuses Sethe to shed her burdens and urges her to love her heart. As a result, Sethe experiences a full lunar mouth “the travels of one whole moon” of hitherto unknown freedom and fulfillment. The symbolism of the lunar cycle, unfolds the panorama of life, death and regeneration. Samuels and Hudson-Weems make a revealing comment: “... Although it ends tragically for Sethe, this twenty-eight day period accords her” days of healing, ease and real talk”... Thus, it brings regeneration and stability, allowing Sethe to exit the orbit of her liminal world of slavery though she is still, legally, a slave; she is fugitive.

Thanks to Baby Suggs, Sethe, for the first time, experiences relatedness through her inclusion in a sisterhood of black women. Sethe ceases to be an outsider as she
comes within the fold of the black community. Her experience, in its totality, represents a giant stride in her journey to wholeness because after freeing herself from the bondage of slavery, she starts claiming and asserting ownership of the freed self.

The intrusion of the schoolteacher on her short-lived freedom brings about her symbolic death and the murder of Beloved. As the violence against Beloved is rooted in the discourse of race, the onus for infanticide is shifted from the individual to the institution of slavery that has spawned it. It reverses the process of Sethe’s purification and regeneration, initiated by Baby Suggs and sets into motion the process of her estrangement from the black community. In the wake of infanticide, the period of Sethe’s twenty eight days of freedom is followed by eighteen years of disapproval and loneliness.

After the secluded eighteen years, Denver plays a significant role in bringing back Sethe into the comforting folds of the African-American community. She aids Sethe in her attempts at self-discovery. She informs the community of Beloved’s physical resurrection and the way she is draining Sethe of vitality. If it was not for Denver’s efforts to reach out to the community, Sethe, like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, would have been destroyed. Denver successfully overcomes many struggles: internal, worldly and household to emerge as woman with a future. Unlike Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, Denver realizes the redemptive powers of the African-American community. By reaching out to the community, she attains freedom: personal, economic and spiritual but most important of all she helps her mother attain an authentic existence.

The African-American community is responsible for the ultimate rescue of Sethe
from dissolution. Like the participation of women in Aunt Jimmy’s funeral in *The Bluest Eye*, the woman in *Beloved* make a collective bid to exorcise Beloved and cleanse 124 of the sinister effect of infanticide that ends Sethe’s ostracism and initiates, once again, her integration into the community.

Sethe’s integration into the community and the exorcism of Beloved, coinciding with Sethe’s experiencing rage and attacking her real adversary, mark the culmination of her quest for authentic existence. Sethe attains authentic existence through reconciliation with the community and Paul D and finally with her own self. Her choosing to attack the enemy illustrates how Sethe has made a notable progress in recognizing the racial adversary. At this moment she forgives herself for killing Beloved and resolves to move on with her life without letting the past haunt and oppress her anymore.

The transformation of Sethe is validated by the emphasis laid by the traditional African philosophy on the intermingling of the spiritual and the physical universes which is as an expression of Toni Morrison’s ethnically oriented feminism. It is a component in the network of drives and impulses i.e. infanticide, Beloved’s re-appearance, her exorcism, kindling of rage, identification of the racial enemy, relinquishment of the past and return of Paul D that bring to culmination Sethe’s quest for authentic existence. The significance of Paul D's return and Beloved's disappearance for Sethe's attainment of an authentic existence is highlighted by the preface to Beloved which forms part of the Biblical book of Hosea. It proclaims reconciliation and hope: “I will call them my people, which were not my people, and her beloved, which was not Beloved.”65
The role played by Paul D, Baby Suggs, Amy and Denver in Sethe’s resurrection has been discussed in the perspective of race and gender. Along with it, the affiliation with black culture and belief in black folksy God, forming the cornerstone of ethnic cultural feminism, are postulated as an alternative to Christianity and white/formalized God. Stamp Paid’s role in the rebirth of Paul D is positioned as a sign of the inadequacy of western/white/Christian theological model for the blacks and the relevance of a viable counter culture for the affirmation of black identity.

The black feminist analysis also takes into consideration the Biblical, mythological, metaphysical, mystical, supernatural and cultural layers of Sethe’s racial discourse and offers a deconstructive critique of her traumatized response to the economic and cultural war against slave women, identification of the racial enemy, rectification of guilt, relinquishment of past and subsequent redemption and resurrection.

It focuses on the racially polarized and paranoid relations between the blacks and the whites, the stirring of rage as a response to the trauma of racism and the role of the female voice in the resistance to slavery and thus offers a restructured and redefined perspective on the public discourse of black female experience during slavery and black resistance to racial oppression.

The black female experience of neo-slavery period, captured by Alice Walker in The Color Purple, is analysed in the fifth chapter. It is characterised by resistance to black male brutality and the urge to fight neo-colonial racial/patriarchal oppression. The black feminist emphasis on the interpenetration of the politics of race, class and gender reveals that The Color Purple subverts some of the crowning African-American misogynist, patriarchal, racial and cultural assumptions. As a result, it crystallizes as a
definitive statement of racist/sexist systems of domination, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal culture, the devaluation of black womanhood, and the black male sexist violence against black females. The black female radicalism and self-determination, represented by Celie finds expression in her quest for authentic existence and identity through knowledge, creativity and love.
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