CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF “BELOVED”
4.0. Preliminaries

_Beloved_ is Toni Morrison's fifth novel. Published in 1987 as Morrison was enjoying increasing popularity and success, _Beloved_ became a best seller and received the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Its reception by critics was overwhelming, and the book is widely considered Morrison's greatest novel.

Set in 1873 just after the American Civil War (1861–1865), _Beloved_ is based on the story of the African-American slave, Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in 1856 in Kentucky by fleeing to Ohio, a free state. A posse arrived to retrieve her and her children under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave-owners the right to pursue slaves across state borders. Sethe killed her two-year-old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured.

_Beloved_ contains Morrison’s most extraordinary and spell-binding womanist remembrances of things past. Alice Walker (1983) in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” suggests that ‘womanist’ connotes a black feminist. She said that a woman who among other things, is audaciously committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. And it is because of the silences in the slave narratives due to authorial compromises to white and to self-masking from a
painful past, Morrison sees her role as a writer as bearing witness to the interior life of people who did not write their history and to filling in the blanks that the slave narrative left.

4.1. Plot Construction

The book begins in 1873, in the aftermath of slavery and the Civil War. The story begins just before Paul D comes to stay with Sethe and Denver at 124. Much of the information that weaves the story together, however, is told with the memories of these three characters. This summary is in chronological order to make it easier to understand.

In 1848, Baby Suggs left Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and was driven to Cincinnati, Ohio, after her son, Halle, purchased her freedom from Mr. Garner, the plantation owner. Sethe arrived at Sweet Home as Baby Suggs' replacement. A year after her arrival, she married Halle and bore him three children: two sons and a daughter, over the next few years at Sweet.

Mr. Garner died and his wife became ill; she asked a schoolteacher to run Sweet Home. The schoolteacher treated the slaves like animals and abused them, and they all planned to run away. Sethe sent her children to Ohio and stayed to wait for Halle, because he was not where they agreed to meet when they planned to run. In the days she spent
waiting for Halle, the schoolteacher and his nephews took Sethe, who was six months pregnant with her fourth child, to the barn and nursed the milk from her breasts. Sethe was beaten the next day, and that night she ran away alone.

As she tries to walk to Ohio, a white girl finds Sethe and helps her to the Ohio River where Sethe has her baby, Denver. The next day, Sethe and Denver make it to Baby Suggs at 124 and are reunited with Sethe's other children. Twenty-eight days after her arrival at 124, the schoolteacher shows up to take them back to Sweet Home. Sethe, fearing her children are to be sold into slavery, snaps, killing her first daughter with a saw and injuring her sons before anyone can stop her. She goes to jail and takes Denver with her. When she gets out of jail, she prostitutes herself for a headstone for the baby's grave that reads only, "Beloved." The baby's ghost makes itself a constant presence at 124 and Sethe's sons run away, while Baby Suggs lies in bed waiting to die. No one in the community will have anything more to do with 124 or the people in it, so when Baby Suggs dies in 1865, Sethe and Denver are alone until Paul D shows up in 1873.

Paul D scares away the ghost of 124 and he, Sethe, and Denver begin a new life together, until Beloved shows up at 124. No one has any idea who she is or from where she came. Sethe and Denver take her in.
Beloved becomes instantly attached to Sethe. Denver becomes intensely devoted to Beloved because she thinks she is her baby sister's ghost come to life to keep her company. Beloved breaks Paul D down, seducing him against his will. He leaves after Stamp Paid informs him of the murder of Sethe's daughter. When Paul D leaves, Sethe begins to believe that Beloved is her reincarnated daughter because of coincidental connections between Beloved and the baby ghost.

Beloved and Sethe become interested only in one another. Later, they become angry and violent with each other because Beloved thinks Sethe abandoned her; she begins to dominate Sethe with her anger. Sethe starts to waste away as Beloved's pregnant stomach grows, and Denver is forced to seek help for her mother outside of 124. Denver gets a job with the Bodwins, the white folks who rented 124 to Baby Suggs. As Denver waits on the porch for Bodwin to pick her up, a group of colored women come to 124 to rescue Sethe from Beloved, the ghost haunting 124. Beloved and Sethe step onto the porch to see what is going on, and when Sethe sees Mr. Bodwin, she tries to kill him, believing the schoolteacher has returned. Beloved runs away because she thinks Mr. Bodwin is the white man that has come back for her, and Sethe has abandoned her again. With Beloved gone, Sethe gives up on life because she has lost
her child, the best part of herself, again. Paul D comes back to 124 to help Denver take care of Sethe. Time passes and Beloved is forgotten.

4.2. Analysis of *Beloved*

4.2.1. Analysis of *Beloved* with reference to the Theme of Motherhood

*Beloved* is a novel that speaks about several issues. It reflects the harsh reality of being a black mother and voices the positions of daughters, grandmothers, fathers, male friends, neighbours, community and the mother herself. Sethe's actions are measured and weighed against numerous atrocities, destructions, and possible responses to them. The text therefore deliberately centres on the historical fact that there were black women during slavery who suffocated their babies rather than allow them to be offered up to destruction by slavery. In other words, the spectre of Beloved, the living embodiment of Sethe's mother love and painful past of enslavement which she represents is never really destroyed. That past is allowed to dissolve into mythology and history of the community. Read as Morrison's bringing to life of the dead girl, then she will manifest herself elsewhere.
Morrison draws the attention of people to the crucial position of black women in the U.S. In an interview with Nellie Y. McKay (1983), she said that she thinks black women are in a very special position regarding black feminism as an advantageous one, white women generally define black women's role as the most repressed because they are both black and female, and these two categories invite a kind of repression that is pernicious. But in an interesting way, black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending, because they have always been both mothers and labourers, mother and worker. The history of black women in the states is an extremely painful and unattractive one but there are parts of that history that were conducive to doing more rather than less, in the days of slavery. We think of slave women as women in the house, but they were not, most of them worked in the fields along with the men. They were required to do physical labour in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance/female subordination. When they were in the field collecting cotton or doing whatever the owner or slaves did not care. Whether they were women or men-the punishment they have varied: they could beat both, rape one, so that women could receive punishment but the requirements were the same, the physical work requirements.
What Morrison does in *Beloved* is that she unearths at the excavation site “the silenced voice” of the black slave woman, whose story more often has been told by the black male narrator whose focus was primarily upon his journey to wholeness. The women who appear are not mere fixtures; through them, the horrors of slavery are unravelled. The structure of the novel foregrounds the ambivalences of slave women about motherhood which violates their personal integrity and that of their family. Foregrounding the theme of motherhood, Morrison divides the text into twenty-eight unnumbered, mini-sections, the usual number of days in a woman’s monthly menstrual cycle.

*Beloved* develops the idea that maternal bonds can harm a woman’s sense of self. The book both thematizes and problematizes the conflict between history, culture and maternal instincts. Morrison said in a national broadcast after receiving the Pultizer Prize: “motherhood is not history. It is timeless, a historical force with all the glories and limitations that pure nature imposes even coloured, camouflaged by its many cultural versions.”

With *Beloved*, Morrison probes deeper into the psychological effects of missing mother-infant bond and unearths the psychological damage of slavery to the mother-child relationship. Hortense Spillers (2000) points out that for African-Americans, motherhood as female
blood site is outraged, is denied at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of human and social enactment and a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father’s banished name and body and the captor father’s mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her out of the traditional symbolic of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject.

*Beloved* provides an insight into the structure and working of the plutocracy that denied a woman her basic human and political rights. In committing her brutal act, Sethe believed she was sparing the child from the “unspeakable” fate to which most female slaves were heiress. The slave women were not recognized as mothers having bonds with their children but considered only “breeders” and workers. Their slave owners had no scruples about selling children away from their mothers. The infant children could be sold away from them like calves and cows.

*Beloved* is characterized by mothers losing their children. Sethe’s mother-in-law barely glanced at last of her eight children because it was not worth the trouble. Baby Suggs asks Sethe to be thankful to have all her children with her, and also of the fact that all her children had been fathered by the same man. Sethe’s own mother was hanged when Sethe
was a small child, and she had not been allowed to nurse Sethe. Even eighteen years after her escape, Paul D recognized that Sethe’s mother love is risky.

In the community of former slaves, there is Ella who spent her puberty locked in a house and shared by a father and son whom she called “the lowest yet”. Ella had “been beaten every way but down… and she had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing fathered by the lowest yet.” Ella's rejection of enforced motherhood is echoed in Sethe's faint memory of her own mother’s life, a woman she hardly knew, the only sign of recognition she could recall being the brand in her flesh. The woman's story stretches back to the horrors she experienced during the “Middle Passage.” She and the woman Nan bore children to the crew on the ship and to other white men but threw them all away keeping only Sethe, the child she conceived by the black man she loved.

Ella and Sethe's mother do exercise choice of some sort, one that provokes in Sethe a wave of anger and shame she cannot comprehend. Thus Sethe's definition of motherhood is a defiant answer to slavery's brutal destruction of maternal connections. It was to avoid a future in slavery for her children that led Sethe to plan an escape and to get her milk to her baby. She went ahead with the other children that made her attempt it alone. She experiences having her milk stolen from her by the
nephews of her slave master as the ultimate brutality, even worse than
the savage beating she received just before escaping.

When Beloved comes back to pass judgment on Sethe, and Sethe
realizes that Beloved is the ghost of her third child, she wants
desperately to make her understand that she tried to kill her babies so
that they would be protected from captivity forever. Sethe assumes that
Beloved will forgive her but the latter does not do so. Beloved becomes
mean-spirited and exploits her mother's pain. Sethe gives Beloved story
after story of her love and devotion to her. She tells her how nothing was
more important than getting her milk to her, how she waved flies away
from her in the grape arbour, how it pained her to see her baby bitten by
a mosquito, and how she would trade her own life for Beloved. Sethe
tries to impress upon her how slavery made it impossible for her to be
the mother she wanted to be.

Morrison interweaves racial and sexual consciousness in *Beloved.*
The structure and style of the text foregrounds the ambivalence of slave
women about motherhood that violates their personal integrity and that
of their family. It shows their desire to be complete individuals. To
conclude, one can say that Beloved is a ghost story that frames
embedded narratives of the impact of slavery, racism and sexism on the
capacity for love, faith and community of black families, especially the
black women, during slavery and Reconstruction period.

4.2.2. Analysis of Feminist Features in *Beloved*

The feminist qualities that Morrison advocates through Sethe’s portrayal are the traditional beauty, strength, resistance and integrity of black women. She is sensitive to feminist concerns and includes all those elements of black female experience in her text which are of compelling significance to a woman. In her interview with Rosemarie K. Lester (1988), Morrison expresses her views on an extremely painful and unattractive history of black women in the States where black women have always been both mother and labourer, mother and worker and have worked in the fields along with men.

Morrison uses a beautiful metaphor to emphasize that black women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending. Sethe is an embodiment of that image.

*Beloved* is a beautiful narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery, on the power of memory and the collective memories kept alive through oral tradition. It is also the story of the genesis of a culture and of a people who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and to keep their history alive. Morrison’s self-conscious interest in the celebration of black women’s strength, their
values and beliefs stems from a desire to correct the wrongs that have been historically leveled against black women. She seeks to celebrate the legends of black women like Baby Suggs and Sethe and weave their dreams into myths that allow us to recover their past.

Morrison’s portrayal of Beloved as a sensual woman with otherworldly aura provides us an insight into the author’s vision. Had it been possible for black Slave Woman like Sethe to live with her family with dignity and self-respect in the America of 1850s, Sethe would not have committed this hideous crime, which was the mutilation of Sethe’s vibrant mother love. Morrison’s use of supernatural and folk belief in Spirit and Living-dead confirms the fact that she draws on traditional African folklore and mysticism has an integral place in her work. Morrison’s interest in mysticism and the supernatural is exhibited in her portrayal of Beloved.

*Beloved* becomes the symbol by which African people are to measure the devastating effect of isolation. Isolation literally tears apart the family. The personification of isolation and all things inherent in it, including selfish individualism, greed and destruction, *Beloved* succeeds in dividing 124 from the rest of the American community. Denver’s isolation in life, 124’s isolation in the community, and Beloved’s isolation in death - all serve to further divide the African community and,
as a consequence, leave it vulnerable to the oppression and exploitation of the slave society. It is she who drives Howard and Burglar from home and separates Paul D., Sethe and Denver just when their three shadows hold hands and just when they erect bonds with the African community.

In *Beloved* gender oppression is not a visible problem that exists between African men and women, but is one that exists within the context of an economic relationship between master and slave and race is only a later justification for the oppression of the African people. Clearly, then Morrison’s choice of setting is germane in crystallizing the nature of the African’s oppression, for the economic source of both race and gender oppression is unobscured in slavery.

Like gender oppression, race oppression is examined as a consequence of the economic exploitation of African people. According to Eric Williams (1944), the economic demands of the budding capitalist nations led to the slave trade and slavery. And out of the need to justify the enslavement of human beings, these nations institutionalized racism. He rightly feels that slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery. Morrison seems in agreement with Williams’s views. The very fact that African people today are oppressed equally because of the colour of their skin and their poverty clearly
proves that race is a later justification for the enslavement of African people.

In *Beloved*, Morrison shows that unity is the only way by which African people can survive. It is only when the African, through self or forced isolation, exists outside the collective that the struggle appears endless and the burden unbearable. Morrison, in her novel, reinforces her theme of one people, one struggle, and one solution in several ways. First, she begins each chapter in the novel in the present, and then returns to the past in order to bridge the gap between occurrences of the past and those of the present. Second, the beginnings are often structured in such a way that they seem more like middles thereby emphasizing the fact that oppression for the African exists as one uninterrupted continuum. Another skilful structural device that Morrison uses to reflect the unchanging status of African people is the repetition of key words, phrases or sentences.

Morrison further shows that Africans all over the world are one people, having the same history and sharing the same plight since they are seen as one by those outside the African nation, no matter what their class status might be. Clearly, she wants African people to see themselves as one people, undivided by their class status. The novel reiterates its theme of solidarity by simply reminding the reader chapter
after chapter that collective struggle is the only practical way to alleviate the oppression African people have been experiencing.

The ultimate solution of collective struggle to the problem of economic exploitation of the blacks in white America is offered invariably in terms of fictional art. What Morrison has worked out in Beloved is an extraordinarily effective Gothic blend of postmodern realism and romance as well as of racial and sexual politics. For the characters of the novel as well as the implied author, the scars of racial, sexual and class oppression are more horrible on the soul than those on the body.

4.2.3. Comparative Analysis of Beloved and Sula

Sethe and Sula are both victims and victimizers. Sethe is the beloved slave who is remarked as an animal when Schoolteacher’s odious nephew drink her breast milk while Schoolteacher remarks, writes down her reactions, using the ink that Sethe herself made. They then mark the experience on her body, whipping her and creating a chokeberry tree on her back. Sethe’s mark limits her. It is the sign of her slavery, and with the return of Beloved, it traps her in 124 Bluestone. Sula, with her rose birthmark, is denied identity by her mother, and she murders a childhood friend, throwing him accidentally into the Ohio
River. Yet Sula, in contrast to Sethe, claims absolute freedom, which is symbolized by her mark.

Understanding and transcending the mark has to do with coming to terms with the past. Memory is a special and essential category for Toni Morrison. The process of mourning is a special and essential kind of memory, because it creates a hermeneutic link between the self and the other. Deborah E. McDowell (1988) said that the process of mourning and remembering leads to intimacy with the self, which is all that makes intimacy with the others possible. Yet both Sethe and Sula forsake this intimacy. Sethe, alone at the grave of the child she murdered, trades ten minutes of sex for seven letters: Beloved. Later, at the funeral of Baby Suggs, Sethe refuses to accept the support of the community, and members of the community, in turn, abandon her. Sethe feels that she has no self, except in the role of mother.

Sula, a rejected child who becomes a woman who refuses to be defined by anyone except herself, sits apart as Chicken is mourned and, later, dies alone. Both women deny themselves and are denied a sense of self and a place in community. Sula finds her uncentred and unbounded existence is one exile, and she seeks boundaries in herself, in the community of Medallion, and in her friend Nel; Sethe finds that
motherhood is not an affirmation of her identity but another manifestation of her mark.

When Paul D, the man whose compassion is his blessedness, stands behind Sethe, holding her breasts and kissing the chokeberry tree on her back, he is affirming Sethe’s whole self, though the course of the novel is run before Sethe herself can make this affirmation. Sethe’s sense of her identity comes from denying the chokeberry tree, which is completely dead to feeling, and from affirming her breasts, her role as mother, having milk enough for all. The victim becomes victimizer as she, having enjoyed twenty-eight days of freedom, sees Schoolteacher coming to take her and children back to Sweet Home plantation. A terrified Sethe takes her children to the coal shed at the back of 124 Bluestone Road and cuts the throat of her almost crawling baby girl. The lessons of Sweet Home and the murder are what Sethe avoids. She, thus, traps herself in time and in space, in a house haunted by her baby’s ghost, keeping the past at bay and losing the future, not having any dreams of her own.

If Sethe is a woman trying to find herself, Sula Peace, at first, seems to be a complete self. Her birthmark seems to confirm this wholeness and difference, distinguishing her from other girls.
As Sula develops, the birthmark on her eye changes. When she is growing up the rose develops a stem, and as Sula grows older, the mark grows darker. Her mark is interpreted in various, mostly negative, ways throughout the novel: Nel’s children think of the mark as a scary black thing and Jude, Nel’s Husband, who gets angry when Sula will not participate in the “milkwarm commiseration” he needs to feel like a man, thinks that Sula has a copperhead over her eye. The community, indicting the evil Sula for every accident that befalls it, recognizes the mark as the sign of a murderer. They cleared up for everybody the meaning of the birthmark over her eye; it was not a stemmed rose, or a snake, it was Hannah’s (Sula’s mother) ashes marking her from the very beginning. Nel thinks that the mark gives Sula’s glance a suggestion of startled pleasure. Only Shadrack recognizes the mark as a sign of Sula’s developing self. He thinks she had a tadpole over her eye.

For Morrison, the mark must not be passed on, for it always carries possibility; it is not just a sign of alienation but also one of latent beauty and wholeness. When Sethe accepts her mark, she finds the true meaning of her name. Sethe’s chokeberry tree connects her to her mother, marked with a cross, and the group of African slaves who were all marked in that way. Thus, the mark becomes a sign of community, identity, and wholeness, and Sethe, the chosen child, has to remember the stories and
witness her people’s history and her own. The tree also becomes a symbol of Sethe’s own power. Sethe’s act, however brutal, signals individual defiance to the oppression of slavery and the beginnings of claiming and defining the self, of breaking the physical and psychological boundaries of oppression. Like the trees at Sweet Home and like Paul D’s sapling, however, Sethe finally bends and, thus, survives – even prevails.

In contrast, Sula’s mark is that of a self who is absolutely unbounded and free. The mark as rose and snake signifies the beauty and danger of Sula’s kind of freedom. Ultimately, it symbolizes her absolute refusal to see life.

Sula, alone, as Morrison says, is a warning. Balanced after death, however, with the loving and stable power of Nel, who takes on the task of mourning and memory, the mark becomes tadpole and not snake. That is, it signals the development of the self and creates the compassion – the ability to be self but also to see with the other – that is the basis of true community.

Like Sethe, Sula is both a victim and a victimizer, becoming both at the age of twelve, when her identity is forming. Sula experiences two things that create her radical self. First, Sula overhears her mother say that she loves Sula but does not like her. After this incident, Sula and her
friend Nel go to the river and there encounter a friend, Chicken Little. While swinging him around, Sula accidentally throws him into the river.

At Chicken’s funeral, we realize that something is wrong in this community. As Reverend Deal preaches, the members of the community mourn not for the dead child, but for themselves. The image of individuals mourning only for themselves is intensified in Nel. She stands even more removed from the mourning process because she, afraid of being caught, separates herself from Sula and casts herself as the innocent victim. Though Nel will reconcile with Sula after the funeral, during the ritual, she leaves Sula completely alone for the first time.

When Sula was alone she simply cried. But, her tears neither heal the great pain that she has experienced nor do they signify mourning for Chicken Little. The rejection by her mother and the death of Chicken, the events that Sula cannot rememorize, make Sula what she is.

Morrison in her interview with Bill Moyers (1990) has said that Sula and Nel make up one whole person: Sula is ship, the “New World Black Woman,” and Nel safe harbour, the “Traditional Black Woman”. Neither is complete alone.


4.3. Conclusion

Among all works of Toni Morrison, *Beloved* does stand out as an unforgettable creation, which celebrates life of Afro-American through slavery with women at the centre. For long, no reader can forget the haunted house 124 on Bluestone Road with Sethe, Denver, Beloved and Baby Suggs. The charged images, poetic language, interspersed with several narratives to top it with strong bond of mother love leave a deep impression on the reader’s mind.

*Beloved* contributes to black American history which is being recovered and written. The novel both remembers the victimization of ex-slaves and asserts the healing wholeness in their communal lives. Morrison uses the conception of history derived from call and response patterns and the communal nature of art that is an important part of Black American tradition.

Toni Morrison shows us in *Beloved* as well as *Sula* that we are bound together through story and through action.

The novel may be interpreted on many levels. It suggests such themes as women’s isolation, women’s responsibility to the community and family. It also contains different point of views presenting it as a feminist novel.
The next chapter will present the third novel of Toni Morrison “The Song of Solomon”. The researcher will deal with the similarities and differences of the said novel with other three novels which have been studied earlier.