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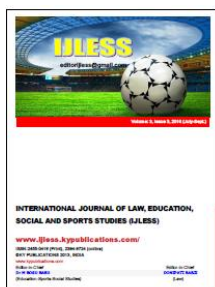
PRAXIS OF THE SELF AND THE COMMUNITY IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* published in the year 1987 talks about the slave past of African Americans, and the way it has moulded collective black consciousness in America. It talks about the need to transform the painful history of slavery for the better, learn to survive, and live whole form it. The novel stresses on the importance of the black community in strengthening the lives of black women. The novel depicts how the identity of black women has been distorted, subjugated, objected, and dehumanized under slavery. It depicts how slavery depersonalized blacks not only on the physical front, but even on the psychological front, leading to death of the psyche. The novelist Morrison's testimony to the inseparable bond between the self and the community that has to be continuously nurtured by an individual. This paper concentrates on Sethe's self, and showcases how it aligns in praxis with the black community of which she becomes a part. It portrays how she is positively influenced by the black community, and discovers a praxis that enlivens her life, like re-birth. Praxis of the self and the community comes into full swing, when women of the black community come together, determined to resurrect Sethe and help Denver.

Key Words: Slavery, Black women, Self, Black community, Praxis, Gender, Race,

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Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* published in the year 1987 talks about the slave past of African Americans, and the way it has moulded collective black consciousness in America. It talks about the need to transform the painful history of slavery for the better and learn to survive, and live whole form it. The novel stresses on the importance of the black community in strengthening the lives of black women. The novel depicts how the identity of black women under slavery has been distorted, subjugated, objected and dehumanized. It depicts how slavery depersonalized them, not only on the physical front, but even on the psychological front, leading to the death of the psyche. The black woman in America is the most traumatized, and marginalized woman owing to oppressive forces of gender, sex, race and class. Marginalized from times of slavery, and muted in the name of culture that has been thrust on to them, black women could rarely speak on behalf of their interests. As stated in the Combahee foundation "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (270). Extricated and dominated by white women, black women never found a way to express their dilemmas and interests that have to be catered to. This unified black women in America, to fight for their rights and helped them develop black feminist consciousness. This awareness has fostered utmost unity amongst black women in the black community in America.

Toni Morrison as an author, is interested in the rights of women in general, more so the rights of African American women in particular. Like Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, she tries to put forth, the unheard voices of black women through her writings. In her most applauded and Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* (1987), Morrison showcases how American history has been a mute spectator to the horrendous enslavement of African Americans, and the obnoxious exploitation of black women, their bodies and being. The after math of slavery, on the lives of African Americans, that finds nearly no mention in American history, finds representation in the novel. As purported by Heinze,

Beloved(1987)is “the projection of repressed collective memory of a violated people” (179).Slavery erased the self and made black women lose their identity altogether. Self is the individual’s complete personality, perception of oneself, and perception of the person by others. The word community means “All people who live in a particular area, country, etc. when talked about as a group” (Oxford 305). The self and the community cannot find fulfillment without one another, as human beings are gregarious, by nature. Stressing on the importance of the black community, Toni Morrison has thoughtfully said:

“The community, the black community . . . it had seemed to me that it was always there, only we called it the ‘neighborhood.’ And there was this life giving very, strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. One lives really, not so much in your house as you do outside of it, within the ‘compounds,’ within the village, or whatever it is.” (qtd in Kella 113-114)

The novel *Beloved*(1987) is Morrison’s testimony to the inseparable bond between the self and the community, that has to be continuously nurtured by any individual. This paper concentrates on Sethe’s self, and showcases how it aligns in praxis with the black community, of which she becomes a part. It showcases how she is positively influenced by the black community, and discovers a pragmatic approach towards it, that enlivens her life, like re-birth.

The novel *Beloved*(1987)is loosely based on the story of Margaret Garner, a black, slave who killed her daughter in a bid to protect her from slavery, at the time of recapture. Set during the reconstruction era, the novel focuses on the history of slavery, particularly concentrating on the lives of black women slave characters. The main focus of the novel is on the women characters and their life experiences as black women in a racist, and classist world. The main women characters of the novel, Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, Denver, Beloved, and many of the other women characters in the novel face problems, for being black and women. The trauma experienced by them under slavery, influences their whole lives and relationships. Morrison in the novel has given the prime female characters, the opportunity to reconstruct their experiences during slavery via re-memory. This in fact is pivotal to see the emergence of the modern African American woman in America, and understand the slave past of blacks.

Toni Morrison like Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor speaks for women who cannot speak for themselves. She writes how women can be a source of strength to themselves and each other. The black characters in Toni Morrison’s novels are physically, emotionally and psychologically abused by the oppressive environment in which they live. The oppressive environment makes them go for choices, that aren’t easily comprehensible by others around them. They are forced to take up violence to avoid further victimization. The violence used by them is not an act of mere ego satisfaction, but is an act of rebellion, resistance and flexibility asking for freedom. The plight of normal black women is manifold as they are subjects of violence within the black community and the white racist society. The violence experienced by the women characters in the novel is a manifestation of the violence thrust on them, by white hegemony. Morrison showcases women characters of different age groups in the novel, to showcase how black women are oppressed at various stages of their life. They are all exposed to violence and oppression right from a young age. They are frequently abused by their own community members: life partners, parents, employers and white slave owners.

“Suspended in time and place, they are women whose life choices are so severely limited that they either kill themselves, or retreat into insanity or are simply defeated in one way or another by the external circumstances of their lives. Very rarely black women emerged victorious during slavery times. Most of these women suffered severe physical abuse, sometimes at the hands of their men, sometimes because of poverty, or child bearing.” (Washington 212)

Slavery as an institution eats out the vitality of people under it, like cancer. The dehumanizing effects of slavery, in breaking the spirit and body of an individual, cannot be side-lined. Indeed, right from the advent of servitude into America from Africa, the institution of slavery itself has been a spirit breaking process for African Americans. “Slave owners controlled Black women’s labour and commodified Black women’s bodies as units of capital. . . . Efforts to control Black women’s sexuality were tied directly to slave owners’ effort to increase the number of children their female slaves produced” (Collins 51). For black women, slavery was not just a back breaking institution, but was even a heart breaking one as “slave owners wanted enslaved Africans to “breed” because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves (Collins 78).

Morrison through the novel shows how a black woman’s womb has been thoroughly exploited, much to her dismay. She bore babies for her white slave master, as well as black mates, but had no right on them. Female slaves

were more valuable than male slaves as they were perceived as baby vending machines producing babies to be slaves for whites, right from their teenage. Morrison through the novel shows how little these young, female, teenage black slaves knew about their own bodies, when they have been exploited. They neither knew about their bodies, nor knew what would happen to the children begotten by them. Baby Suggs, mother-in-law of Sethe bears eight children for six different men. With her children dispersed elsewhere, except for Halle, Baby Suggs understands the plight of black women under slavery and helps women in need. Morrison through the novel reiterates that women need to help each other, for the total upliftment of blacks.

Sethe the protagonist of the novel leads most of her youth under slavery. She comes to Sweet Home as a young slave child, and leads a far better life when compared to other slaves during her times. The atmosphere at Sweet Home makes Sethe dream of a better future for herself, as she is completely unaware of the norms of slavery. The Garners as a mark of civility never ill-treat the slaves at Sweet Home in an obnoxious manner. Baby Suggs makes it sure, that Sethe has a good impression of motherhood. Under the Garners, Sethe views motherhood as a meaningful vocation that is both happy and desirable. She never, ever thinks that as a slave, she cannot dream of a family and children, as a white woman does. She gets a chance to choose Halle as her partner through a marriage like process and begets four children through the same man. She dreams of a happy life for herself and her family. In the case of Baby Suggs, except for Halle, the rest are far away from her, sold away into slavery. Sethe's mother could never give her requisite maternal love, for which she has longed for. Sethe's unnamed mother in the novel addressed as Ma'am succumbs under the cudgels of slavery. Sethe's foster mother Nan apprises her very little, of what a female slave's life can be. The awareness of her position does not deter Sethe from dreaming of having a happy family. Sethe makes it a point that her children get love, care, freedom, mother's milk, and a sense of belonging.

The entire dream like reality of a happy family despite being a slave comes to a standstill, when Sweet Home is taken over by Schoolteacher, a tyrant for a slave master. With his entry, the slaves at Sweet Home are treated worse than animals. Sethe faces utmost torture under the reign of Schoolteacher. One of the cruellest things that happens to Sethe is that she is milked like an animal by the men of Schoolteacher. Years later, Sethe tells Paul D about the incident that psychologically and physically scarred her. She ploddingly tells him:

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. The boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. . . . And they took my milk. . . . And they took my milk." (Morrison *Beloved* 16-17)

Sethe opines that milk is all that she has for her children, which is her very own. She feels utmost disdain for the culprits who steal the food she has for her children. Furthermore, she is physically tortured and her back is left scarred forever, that the wounds leave a tree like mark on her back. Even after it gets healed, the tree like mark constantly reminds her of the terrible incident that has scarred her psyche forever. The incorrigible slavery the slaves experience at Sweet Home under Schoolteacher makes the slaves seek freedom, by running away. Sethe gives birth to Denver on the way to 124 Bluestone Road, where Baby Suggs resides.

Sethe has never known what absolute freedom is. She gets a chance to see and experience it, when she stays at the residence of Baby Suggs at 124 Bluestone Road for 28 full days. She understands that the true essence of life is freedom. After her initial sojourn at 124 Bluestone, life under slavery seems to be the ultimate sabotage one can ever experience. She mingles with other black women of the black community there. She experiences social mobility for the first time, participates in communal activities, and develops an awareness about the difference between a free black, and a black slave under slavery. On the verge of recapture, Sethe decides that her children should never, ever experience slavery like her, and takes the drastic decision of killing her children to free them. In the process, she only succeeds in killing her crawling daughter. The powerlessness in her as a slave mother becomes channelized into maternal possession, and arbitrary dominance. She kills her baby girl *Beloved* in an act of defiance, and protection. The four men who come to capture them are bewildered to see: "two boys bled in the saw dust and . . . a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. . . . swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time . . ." (Morrison *Beloved* 175).

Sethe's act of killing her child is excruciatingly condemned by the black community around. They condemn the act, as the religious black community observes that God alone has the right to give or take life. Sethe defends herself, saying that the act has been essential for them, to be free from slavery. Eighteen years after the incident, she tells Paul

D "I did it. It got us all out . . . I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, I couldn't let her, nor any of em live under Schoolteacher" (Morrison *Beloved* 190-92). As precisely pointed out by Boyce Davies "Sethe's violent action becomes an attempt to hold on to the maternal right and function" (139). Sethe is terribly guilt ridden for having killed Beloved, and misses her throughout her life. The neurosis and psychosis experienced by her, act as harbingers of the spirit of Beloved as a fully grown child, after many years.

Sethe chooses what has to happen to her and her children. As Peterson has rightly put it "What Sethe claims signifies not only her daughter, but also what she claims for her act of infanticide, namely that is an act of pure love" (555). She is imprisoned for the act of killing her child, but it grants them freedom from utmost white tyranny. Sethe has no regrets doing so. Though many a time pinched by her own violence, Sethe defends it at every instance. Eighteen years later, she defends herself before Paul D saying "I did it. I got us all out . . . I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, I couldn't let her nor any of em live under Schoolteacher" (Morrison 1987, 162-63). Having been a mute witness to the ill fate of her mother, husband and other slaves, Sethe believes in making a choice than having no choice at all. Boyce Davies talking about this infanticide has said that "Sethe's violent action becomes an attempt to hold on to the maternal right and function" (139). Sethe tries to offer resistance to the oppressive system through her violence. Though her act is detested by others, it gives her the freedom she has longed for. Though she is imprisoned for her act, and is haunted by the guilt of killing her child throughout her life and misses her, she is no more a slave to whites who have defiled her in every possible way. After killing Beloved, Sethe feels guilty for having killed her. Every day "she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (Morrison *Beloved* 39). Sethe makes the utmost sacrifice of her femininity when she sells herself to an engraver to get the name 'Beloved' engraved on the tombstone of her dead child. Sethe sells "ten minutes of sex for a single inscription, 'the one word that mattered', on her daughter's tombstone, thus almost literally her body into the written word" (Hill Ringed 26) dying inside out.

Morrison through the novel depicts that staying close to one's community despite disparities fortifies an individual. Baby Suggs stays in touch with the black community at 124 Bluestone in all possible ways. She believes that praxis with the community would help her overcome systemic oppression, as the "community provides its members with a strong foundation for resisting the oppressions of systemic and institutional prejudice" (Kella32). Baby Suggs survives despite having faced the severities of racism, sexism and classism, as she is in close contact with the black community around, and as they all share a collective consciousness. As put forth by Ashram H.A. Rushdie in *Beloved* 1987, "memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of memory is that it is impersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers" (qtd in Grewal 103-104). Closeness with the black community makes Sethe aspire and seek freedom, which has been denied to black slaves under systemic oppression. This perception by Sethe depicted in the novel, is a testimony to the positive influence of communal communion.

Morrison through the novel has shown the need to seep in positive influences of the black community and castigate negative impacts. She has unapologetically shown the "dark side of the community" (Payant 200). The black community of which Baby Suggs and Sethe become a part, rejects them, and ostracises them. The black community vehemently condemns Sethe's act of killing her daughter. They turn against them and unknowingly support the systemic oppression of whites. Sethe and Baby Suggs are left aghast after seeing the nonchalance and rejection of the black community around. Sethe loses the little hope for societal privileges, she has mustered after developing social mobility to a certain extent. Baby Suggs moves away from the black community she has nurtured, "giving advice; ... healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone (Morrison *Beloved* 137). The black community ostracises them like culprits and convicts and erodes their morale. "The community fails to perform its role" (Groover71) of a solace giver. A member of the black community fairly acknowledges "Nobody warned them and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, meanness" (Morrison *Beloved* 157). When Schoolteacher's men pounce upon Sethe and her children, none in the black community comes to their rescue. They don't consider the fact that, had they gone to her rescue, she would have never killed her child. The passivity of the black community around leads to the death of the child. As pointed out by Payant "the community members refuse to recognize their complicity in the death of the baby" (200).

After her release from prison, Sethe stays at 124 Bluestone with Denver. Howard and Buglar, Sethe's sons, move away from the place out of fear of their mother, after the death of Baby Suggs. Sethe and Denver are ostracised by the black community, and they never try to get close to it. Except for the few visits of Paul D, they don't have much societal interaction. The arrival of Beloved, the ghost girl further ostracises Sethe from the black community. It indeed puts in a hiatus in the relationship between Sethe and Denver. Sethe is devoured by her own guilt for having slain Beloved's life, and the ravenous demands of Beloved, her presumed ghost child. In due course of time, the house on 124 Bluestone Road turns out to be a sad, brooding place, breeding and diffusing melancholy on the mother daughter duo.

Denver, daughter of Sethe, and granddaughter of Baby Suggs feels ostracised by the black community around. She feels: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either." (Morrison *Beloved* 14). She is looked down upon for being Sethe's daughter. Furthermore, Beloved's presence ostracises her from Sethe altogether. "Denver who thought she knew all about silence, was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out" (Morrison *Beloved* 239). Denver establishes a connection with the blacks in the community to sustain herself, and her family. Denver has no other means of sustenance except for blue collar jobs. Denver makes genuine attempts to free herself of the past by being in contact with the black community. Denver educates herself, earns a living by finding a job with the help of the blacks around. She comes in contact with black women in the community like Mrs. Jones, and comes out of brewing trouble. Unlike Sethe she comes out of the past, and breaks down the self-destructive cycle at 124 Bluestone Road. She channelizes her energies in staying with the black community after having found that "Sethe's self-isolation is unforgivable" (Groover 70). Sethe's numbness makes Denver re-define herself as a daughter and a young black woman. Denver necessitates affirmation of communal identity as she perceives that Sethe is losing herself. She becomes a facilitator and establishes communion with the black community. Morrison through the novel has vouched for the fact, that "subjective negotiations of ... individual self and identification with a group . . . aim together at forming collective identity" (Kella 37).

Morrison through the novel puts forth the view that, to claim one's free self, an individual should participate in thoroughly knowing, approving and being in contact with the society around. The novel harps on the aspect of inclusiveness that should be part of any community despite differences. Toni Morrison through the novel revises "the notion of an autonomous self, emphasizing that freedom and selfhood are dependent upon social relations of equality—upon community" (Kella 141). Sethe slips down from being a mother who cares, as she is pre-occupied with her own guilt, and the demands of Beloved. Denver searches for "other mothers" (O'Reilly 5) in the black community, who can help her. The black women in the community who have changed over a period of time help the mother daughter duo seek salvation, from all the problems faced by them. Further, by showcasing this in the novel, Morrison has vouched for black women who have been the fulcrum of communal identity and unity. She has shown how black women as nurturers are prompted "to go beyond conventional roles and construct new communities on the basis of shared experience" (Maldberg 226). Mrs. Jones, Ella and the other black women in the community come together to the rescue of Sethe and Denver. They find her a job and help her in the exorcism of Beloved.

Toni Morrison's novels reflect that the "individual's free will, freedom of action, thought and full enjoyment of his or her personality should be led by a social consciousness, which takes into consideration other people and society in absolute respect of common values, interests and duty" (Christian 67). Praxis of the community and self, come into full swing, when the black women of the black community come together determined to resurrect Sethe and Denver. The women in the black community come together with no idea of "what they would do once they got there" (Morrison *Beloved* 257), but move along with the "shared belief or a firm understanding of what they are about to do" for "driving off Beloved at 124 Bluestone Road and restoring Sethe's family to a place in the community" (Groover 74-75). When the women reach Sethe's place "they [stop] praying and {move} a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there was no sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (Morrison *Beloved* 259). The women come in contact with "the historical circumstances that have limited their own potential" (Morrison *Beloved* 259). They come together with the zeal to help the women who need their help utmost and succeed in driving away Beloved. For Sethe, the coming together of the black women to her place as an agency of positive change turns out to be birthed. To her, it seems:

as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did, it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock back the pods off Chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison *Beloved* 261)

Sethe's re-birth is not her re-birth alone, but resurrection of women's power and the black community. Morrison by contextualizing the novel in a historical aeon during slavery and after has shown, how it has influenced black women and united them. By the end of the novel, Sethe and Denver possess their long lost selves, and realize that they are not possessed by anyone and that they are their own masters. The black community around comes to their rescue and helps them achieve emotional and psychological stability. The women in the black community foster strong kinship to help Sethe and Denver regain their selves.

Beloved(1987), stays as an important text in the African American canon, even in 2016, as it mirrors the collective black consciousness of the black community right from its inception in America. Above all, it is a testimony to the fortitude of black women like Sethe who have struck aces against odds, to make things even, to emerge as self-reliant individuals on all planes. Toni Morrison through *Beloved*(1987), has put forth the strength and "concentration of female identity" (Davies 138). It harps on the pragmatic approach an individual has to nurture, to be in constant contact with the black community, and strengthen the self as well as the community. Talking about the role of community in Morrison's works, Carolyn Denard has rightly pointed out that "Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression" (172). Morrison has shown such women who nurture and help each other in the novel. Sethe marches onto the path of discovering individual identity, as well as communal identity and successfully discovers them, after a phase of regression. She realizes that her individual self exists "as part of the independent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit" (Groover 52). Sethe understands that only praxis of the self and the community alone can help an individual realize the ultimate aim of human life, it being, leading life whole.

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