

The re-inscription of identity: black affirmation

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, was set at a time when slavery was still an accepted practice. One of the effects of slavery on the slaves was the stripping off of their identities. This was the case because they were not perceived as humans with the privilege of having their own identity. They were dehumanized and objectified as a mere species of animals - one that is treated as property. African-Americans, for instance, were not given individual identities or names. This was portrayed when Paul D mentioned his brothers Paul A and Paul F.

It emphasized how they were treated as interchangeable pieces that can only be differentiated by letters such as exhibits in a courtroom or identical items on a list. This was also portrayed in the scene where the schoolteacher came to claim Sethe back after she escaped. It was shown through his perspective how he sees all the black people in the community as nameless "niggers" only to be differentiated by what they wear. Only when the perspective was shifted to the African-Americans will the readers realize that the girl referred to by the schoolteacher as the "nigger with the flower hat" was Baby Suggs.

The absence of a name signifies a denial of her humanity; the slave masters never call their slaves by names. They were treated as objects that are defined. Everything must be given or bestowed upon them. Morrison points to the fact that the jungle was actually created by the white people, who annihilated the sense of selfhood and humanity in the slaves: "White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood.

. . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread.... The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (Morrison, 198-199) The novel shows two main forms of resistance to slavery. These are escape and murder. Escape was shown as the primary form of resistance. Most of the slaves in the novel resorted to escape or at least attempted to escape when things started to become unbearable for them.

Escape was resorted to when life has become increasingly difficult for them. This however was not easy to do. For instance, Paul D attempted numerous times to escape, but failed almost every time. The only time he succeeded to escape was when he was in prison. In prison, he was kept in a small box on the ground at night only to be let out during the day where he was suffered to work while chained to other prisoners. One night, a powerful rainstorm came lashing down. This was the chance that they needed. The storm facilitated their escape.

“ To escape” means “ to slip or get away as from confinement or restraint; to succeed in avoiding or to elude one’s memory, notice, search, etc. ” (Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, 1992, p. 455). “ Escaping” has also been defined as “ to get free from flight, from prison or other confinement or restraint; to regain one’s liberty, to find release from worries, troubles, or responsibilities; it is the act of getting free from prison or other confinement, from pursuit from a pursuer, etc. ” (Longman’s Modern English Dictionary, 1968, p.

354). Not only Paul D, but Sethe as well, both escaped from the confinements of slavery. In psychology, escape has been often resorted to as a means to avoid aversive stimulus or conditions, commonly referred to as escape conditioning. In psychoanalysis, escape conditioning is a form of aversive conditioning where unpleasant or painful stimuli are avoided (Bateman and Holmes, 1995; Marthe, 1968). It occurs when an aversive stimulus is presented and the subject responds by leaving the stimulus situation.

In laboratory experiments, escape conditioning is most typically tested with animals such as rats which are placed in a box wherein they receive a jolt or a shock when they come into contact with one of the box's walls. In a sense, the experience of the African-Americans under slavery is similar to the compulsive need of a laboratory specimen seeking to avoid further painful or aversive stimuli (Bateman and Holmes, 1995). In the novel, Sethe displays elements of escape conditioning when she feels a horrifying shock when she becomes aware that the Schoolteacher and his nephews have come after her and her sons.

The other form of resistance to slavery shown in the book is murder. When Paul D was sold to a new master, he attempted to kill the latter because of the abuses done to him. In fact, that was the reason why he was sent to prison in the first place. Another instance of this as shown in the book was when Sethe killed her own child. When Sethe's master came after Sethe and her children, Sethe ran into the shed where she and her children were hiding. When she got there, Sethe killed her own baby girl Beloved and tried to kill her other children - Howard, Buglar, and Denver - as well.

Even though this sounds horrific, Sethe's motive was that she would much rather kill her children rather than have them go back to being slaves. She only managed to wound Buglar and Howard. Sethe tried to throw Denver against a wall, but Stamp Paid stepped in and managed to save Denver's life. Schoolteacher's behavior indicates one of the ways the black were dehumanized by the whites. They were treated like dispensable objects, and even worse than animals.

For instance, Sixo was beaten up not simply because he stole something, but also because he tried to edge into the position of the Definer. Since Sixo was smart, and had such a good command of language and logic, the Schoolteacher felt it was necessary to beat him up since his intelligence posed as a threat to the white man's control of speech. Sethe and her children lead a difficult life under Schoolteacher and decided to escape on the Underground Railroad. Sethe sent three of her children ahead on the Railroad, and stayed behind to wait for Halle.

She eventually joined her children. Her tedious journey included walking pass a row of young black boys, who were hung by their necks in a row. One of those black boys was most likely Paul A. Sethe continues to address her dead baby child Beloved in her mind. She keeps rationalizing and repeating to herself everything she had to go through and suffer through to get to her children. More important than losing her milk, or the beatings that she got from the Schoolteacher's nephew, was the painful instance when Sethe overheard the Schoolteacher talking about her.

He made a distinction between Sethe's human and non-human characteristics. If anything, in the past Sethe may have felt they were being

objectified, but to actually hear Schoolteacher speak of them as human and at the same time not human, shook her to the very core. It jarred her into realizing that these whites will never see them as equals, that they will always be objects to use and manipulate. This experience triggered the growing unease and conflict within Sethe, and signifies what she must have felt right before she murdered her baby.

After hearing the Schoolteacher speak of her that, she was overcome with terror at the thought of allowing her children to lead a lifetime of dehumanizing treatment. How Sethe affirms herself in the murderous act. Despite the fact that she killed beloved and attempted to kill her other 3 children, Sethe still firmly believes that she did the right thing. In her mind, her children were better off dead rather than have them go back to a life of slavery under Schoolteacher. In an oddly twisted way, Sethe's love for her children was so much that she could no longer distinguish where the world ended and where she began.

She felt that as their mother, she had should have complete control over their fate, and in fact, she felt that as their mother, she had to step in so that she may control their fate - even if it meant killing them. Quite obviously, the fate she wanted for her children was one that did not involve slavery. She wanted to guarantee her children's safety - even if it meant killing them. Thus, for her, she was protecting her children, protecting the only thing she has that is pure and worth saving as mentioned in the book: " Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind.

Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. And though she and others lived through and got over

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it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best things she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing -- the part of her that was clean. "(Morrison, 251) Unfortunately, despite this protective motivation, Sethe's act effectively denies her daughter the chance to live. In effect, she appropriates on her own her daughter's yet unrealized subjectivity.

Sethe's act has been defined as limited by its reaction to a commodifying ideology: " It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmic space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of roles" (Bhabha, 44). It is difficult for the reader to assume a moral high ground in this situation and to criticize Sethe's action as " playing god. " There was nothing god-like at all about Sethe and her conditions.

Before she killed Beloved, the novel described in graphic detail the suffering that Sethe and her people went through. Beyond the physical suffering, what was truly deplorable was the mental and emotional suffering Sethe went through - of knowing and feeling in every bone in their body that other human beings did not treat them as human beings simply because of the color of their skin. She mistakes her own identity with her motherhood, and thus, in a way, reenacts the violence of the white masters against her.

Sethe feels she has no power over her own self because the white people had crossed all the boundaries and not only taken everything she possessed physically, but everything she had dreamed as well: "' Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,' she said, 'and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks. '"(Morrison, 89) It is obvious

that the “whitefolks” are “bad luck”, that is, for the black slaves they were the instruments of destiny itself, though the power have over their lives.

Thus, when Sethe kills her infant daughter, she obviously acts, although out of love, as a white master would. Bhabha's theory of the colonial subject represents both the colonized and the colonizer in defining that colonial subject position as shifting rather than fixed. In the creation of a colonial subjecthood, the positions of master and slave not only define each other, but can shift into an inversion of roles (Mohanty, 1995). Sethe does not hold much hope in the world changing, and abhors the thought of her children being treated as animals.

She couldn't bear the thought of her children enduring the animal-like slavery that her people were reduced to, and felt thus that she was justified in wanting them dead. Slavery was all about the whites "laying claim" on the African-Americans, and this concept of ownership Sethe decided to take upon her own hands with regard to her children. Since the whites did not make any distinction among the African-Americans, with the latter being forced to ignore the distinction between one's self and others since they were all lumped together as objects, Sethe used this same mindset when she killed Beloved.

In Sethe's mind, taking Beloved's life was as if she took her own. It is a possessive love that is, admittedly, dangerous, but it is not entirely evil. It is fuelled by desperation. An examination of Freud's Oedipus complex may help to understand Sethe's feelings towards her children, particularly Beloved. The intricate web of attachment between the mother and daughter often makes self-identification among both the mother and the daughter difficult

to grasp (Bowlby, 1999). The mother's need for primal love causes her to become overly attached to her daughter, defining the daughter as an extension of herself, and not as a separate individual.

As result, the mother projects her unfulfilled aspirations and expectations onto her daughter, which inhibits the daughter from forming her own unique identity (Bettelheim, 1983; Rieff, 1979). In Sethe's case, this inhibition is not merely an inhibition on Beloved from forming her own identity - she effectively prevents Beloved from having her own identity to begin with by killing her. Clearly, Sethe's unfulfilled aspiration is a life free from slavery, and this aspiration she transfers upon her children.

The motivation is certainly not evil, but in hoping for a better life for her daughter, Sethe deprives Beloved of the chance to live, of the form her own unique identity. The Oedipus complex as exemplified in Freud's teachings finds support in Bhabha's theory of the colonial subject wherein Sethe appropriates on her own her daughter's yet unrealized subjectivity (Mohanty, 1995). Sethe didn't want her daughter to be whipped, and to be worked to the ground. She especially did not want her daughter's characteristics to be listed and broken down into human and non-human traits.

Sethe's love for her children makes it difficult for her to acknowledge or recognize her own self and her own self-worth outside of her relationship to others, and particularly outside her role as a mother. This is something that Sethe cannot be entirely blamed for. The culture of slavery she had been born into precisely refused to acknowledge an individual's own self and self-respect. In treating the blacks as animals, the whites have effectively

purged many of them of the ability to view themselves as individuals deserving of respect.

How Denver discovers herself out of 124 when she leaves the house and becomes a part of the community Denver, Sethe's child, has clear memories about the time when she used to attend school. When Denver was only 7, she walked away from home and found herself in the home of Lady Jones, a mulatto woman who taught reading, writing, and math to black children. Denver's year of schooling ended when Nelson Lord asked her "the question" and right after, when Denver asked her mother Sethe "the question," Denver became deaf.

She failed to hear her mother's answer, or anything else for that matter, for two years. She only regained her hearing when she heard the baby ghost crawling up the stairs. After this, Denver realized what her mother had done. This made her fear the possibility of the reoccurrence of what happened that tragic day. "All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again.

I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too. " (Morrison, 205) One day, Denver finally decided that she had to go for help. Beloved is destroying her mother; they are all "locked in a love that wore everybody out," and Denver is afraid for her mother's life.

She finds the courage to leave the yard of 124 for the first time since she was seven, and she makes her way to Lady Jones. Sethe was consumed by her attention for Beloved. " Beloved . . . never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. . . . When Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (Morrison, 240). The one time Denver had ventured away from 124 was that year when she was seven years old and had found Lady Jones. She ventures out of the 124 yard again after regaining her hearing and looks for Lady Jones again.

The mulatto woman remembers Denver, and tries to help her in her own way. In the weeks that followed, Denver kept finding baskets with food in them, and little scraps of paper bearing the senders' names. She returns the baskets and gives her thanks to the senders. This allows Denver to get gradually get to know the black community in Cincinnati - a world outside the 124. As her world expands, Denver transforms from being a shy, clumsy girl to flourish into a strong, independent young woman. She is driven by her resolve to save her mother Sethe and to take care of her.

Denver's relationship with her mothers bares elements of Freud's Oedipal complex theory (Isbister, 1965). According to psychoanalytical theory, a female never completely relinquishes her pre-oedipal attachment to her mother, and these unresolved feelings surface not only in adolescence but also in adulthood. Through mothering, the adult female re-enters what is called the oedipal triangle, which is the attachment she experiences with her father and mother during childhood, but instead of being the child, she now becomes the mother (Lawler, 2000; Wyatt, 1993; Pigman, 1995).

In Denver's case, the attachment she experiences with Sethe has resulted in an evolution of their relationship wherein Denver assumes the role of the mother, the protector, of Sethe. For the first time in her life, Denver also begins to understand her mother's actions and the impact of their past. The community who secures Sethe's release from the past and exorcises Beloved In the novel, we see how Sethe takes her first shaky steps towards recognizing her own sense of self. " Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

"(Morrison, 95) It starts to develop when she runs away from the Sweet Home plantation. During the 28 days of freedom she experienced after she fled, Sethe felt exhilarated. For the first time in her life, she was allowed to be selfish. For the first time, her life was her own to live. More than anything, she felt that her children were truly her own, because in the plantation they were all " owned" collectively. Sethe's community both perpetuates the legacy of slavery and plays an important role in the process of the development of her own sense of subjectivity.

" Sethe had had twenty-eight days... of unslaved life... Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what they had done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better... All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day... Bit by bit... along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another'

(Morrison, 95). Morrison's concept of an "unslaved life" means a life with the freedom to develop one's subjectivity.

This process is closely connected to inclusion in and participation with one's community (Knapp, 1989). Even though Sethe freed herself, she cannot claim ownership of that freed self alone. The people around her in the community play an important role in teaching her how to be herself because prior to her freedom, Sethe had learned, through coercion, the lessons of invisibility, silence, and submission. Unfortunately, the community displays warped codes of morality, and eventually led to their collective desertion of Sethe at a time when she needs them the most.

The feast at Baby Suggs' was taken as a sign of pride, and the day after the party, the community waits, and even hopes, for Sethe's downfall. "Somehow the members of the black community imagine that Baby Suggs has not suffered in slavery as they have suffered, and this ignorance of their mutual history makes mutual trust impossible" (Scruggs, 103). This attitude of the community displays their collective unconscious. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious represents what has been described as the "psychic inheritance" (Jung, 2006). It is the collection of our experiences as a species, a kind of knowledge we are born with.

Since we can never be directly conscious of it, it influences all of our experiences and behaviors, particularly the emotional ones, but we only know about it indirectly, by looking at the influences (Jung, 2006; Knapp, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992). The African-American's colonial past of slavery is a collective experience with a deeply rooted impact that they may not all be directly conscious of in terms of how it affects how they view themselves and

their own community. It becomes manifest in their behavior, and from their behavior can one only really trace the influences of their colonial past.

The jealousy, or envy, of the community, lead to the withdrawal of the community's support from Sethe. Their silence during the appearance of the Schoolteacher at 124, which resulted in Sethe's murder of her daughter, and the way they ostracized Sethe afterwards, indicated the community's need to see a successful blackfamily's downfall. Yet it is this jealousy which indirectly causes Sethe to perform the act for which they themselves, the community, could not allow itself to morally forgive her for a long time. The community however eventually shows a sense of guilt with what happened to Sethe and her family.

They participate in exorcising Beloved, indicating that the tragedy of Beloved's death was not just theresponsibilityof Sethe and the whites who came to get her, but of the entire black community. After all, the black community must have known that the Schoolteacher and his nephews were coming for Sethe and her children, but they took no steps to warn her. Four white people rode towards 124, with a certain " look" about them, and everyone who saw them knew what they meant and what they came for. Yet the community did not do anything, driven perhaps by what Stamp believed was jealousy of Baby Suggs and from the feast weeks before.

The 28 days of freedom Sethe experienced were followed by 18 years of disapproval by the community, and she lived a static and " solitary life" (Morrison, 173). Sethe herself describes this lonely existence as " unlivable" (Morrison, 173). When she decided to kill her child and thus protect Beloved from the " unlivable" life of slavery, Sethe herself returns to a life in which

she is unable to learn to claim her freed self. Beloved returned in the flesh, and it actually became therapeutic for Sethe who had been ostracized by the community for 18 long years for what she had done to her daughter.

Sethe was struck with guilt for having killed Beloved, and looked for ways to make up for it by welcoming the “ resurrection” of Beloved. In this way, Sethe chose to dwell in the past, and Beloved became the symbol that effectively removed Sethe’s link with the murder of her child. The decision to exorcise Beloved was something that the entire community practically participated in. Sethe’s reliance on Beloved has prevented her from moving on and leaving her past behind. An exorcism of Beloved meant an exorcism of the past – a much-needed step to make room for Sethe’s own self-realization.

Exorcism then was an especially communal act, and the exorcism of Beloved makes a strong statement. She represents the legacy of slavery that had marked the blacks' past, and it is something that the entire community must contend with (Scruggs, 1992). Sethe, long after Beloved's death, constantly relives and rehashes her life of slavery, perhaps to justify to herself again and again why she killed her own child. This self-inflicted torture of reliving her past causes Sethe to almost kill the oppressor – not the Schoolteacher, but Mr. Bodwin who merely happens to be white as well.

Sethe needed to face her past and to step outside the confines of her terrible history. Beloved returns to 124 for the same reason she came to haunt Sethe – to force her mother to confront her past. Sethe cannot break through the confines of her past without finding some resolution in her relationship with her daughter. Sethe was incapable of personal growth for 18 long years

because she refused to face her own commodification and its deep implications. Jung's theory of the personal unconscious includes anything which is not presently conscious, but can be (Jung, 2006).

The personal unconscious is like most people's understanding of the unconscious in that it includes both memories that are easily brought to mind and those that have been suppressed for some reason (Hayman, 1999). In this case, Sethe's suppression of her colonial past was dominated by her own guilt in murdering her own daughter. Freud's concept of rationalization provides for the cognitive distortion of fact to make an event or an impulse less threatening. People do this often on a fairly conscious level when we provide ourselves with excuses.

These defenses or justifications may be seen as a combination of denial or repression with various kinds of rationalizations. Defenses are lies which take us further and further away from the truth and ultimately, from reality. At a certain point, Freud points out, the ego can no longer take care of the id's demands, or pay attention to the superego's (Freud, 1963). The anxieties come rushing back, and the person who harbors these defenses and justifications eventually break down or deteriorate (Gay, 1988; Jones, 1961).

In Sethe's case, her rationalization of her daughter's murder and her denial of the colonial forces in her life continued to block the development of her own subjectivity. Beloved's physical presence and the ensuing relationship between her and Sethe eventually forces the latter to acknowledge the internalized colonization that she had for the longest time denied. To enjoy total freedom, Sethe needed to claim freedom within her own mind by

dealing with the past not as a burden, which must be beaten back by all means, but as a factor which constitutes the present.

). This was something Sethe had to conquer. She kept asking herself " Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something? " (Morrison, 38) This shows that there is no sense of self as there is no sense of future, but only of past for the former slave who has learned only how to be dependant Accepting her past as playing a pivotal role in shaping who she has become at present is important for Sethe's self-identity. This is something she purposely avoided. " To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay.

The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one" (Morrison, 42) Self-concept provides for the total of a being's knowledge and understanding of her self (Freud, 1963; Rieff, 1979; Pigman, 1995). This makes it necessary for Sethe to stop resorting to denial, of fending off awareness of an unpleasant truth or of a reality that is a threat to her ego, as defined by Freud (1963; Rieff, 1979), but to take stock of the reality behind what she did and what prompted her to do it.

Only then could she literally quite let go of the ghosts of her peace and enjoy total freedom. The gender conflict which comes to a resolution In an argument with Paul D, Sethe said that all man wrong women. In the colonial economy, the slavery of a black woman represented the connection between the economy of pleasure and desire, and the economy of domination and power (Wyatt, 1993). Sethe, as the black female slave, represented this difference as racial and sexual " other. " This is exemplified in Sethe's rape by the Schoolteacher's nephews.

"I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast, the other holding me down, their book-readingteacherwatching and writing it up. I don't want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness, not to speak of love. ' But her brain was not interested in the future" (Morrison, 70). The Schoolteacher observes Sethe's rape and makes it a discursive act. He exploits Sethe as a racial and sexual other in order to rewrite her identity as something less than human - more of a beast rather than a human being.

Sethe then experiences this dehumanization of herself and her body by the Schoolteacher and his nephews. Sethe's personhood, as it has been allowed to exist under slavery, is further reduced to animality. Among female African-American slaves, thus, there was not just the "fetish of colonial discourse" (Bhabha, 78) but sexual fetish to contend with as well. Pursuant to the object relations theory - an adaptation of psychoanalytic theory - the psychological life of the human being is created in and through relations with other human beings, through "good object relations.

" Unlike Freudian and Lacanian theories, however, object relations theory, the "gendering" of the subject has little to do with one's awareness of sexuality and reproduction at early stages of development (in other words, when one is a child). It involves the internalization of any inequities in the value assigned to one's gender, as well as the associated imbalance of power (Wyatt, 1993; Chodorow, 1978). In Sethe's case, this imbalance of power was present in two levels - fetish of colonial discourse, and the sexual fetish displayed against female black slaves.

This "gendering" is something that she carries with her even when she is freed and can be seen in her attitude towards her children. Ideally, Sethe's concern for her child's well being should not involve overinvestment in the child as a mere extension of her own self. She needs both material and emotional support from other adults who are able to both nurture her and reinforce her own sense of autonomy (Patterson and Watkins, 1996). Unfortunately, given the harsh realities of the life and conditions under slavery, Sethe hardly had the opportunity or the good fortune of being exposed to such an environment or "good object relations."

"The dehumanization of African-Americans, and the dehumanization of African-American women during that period made it difficult for even women themselves to break away from the roles that society had forced them into (Chodorow, 1978). Despite the gender conflict displayed in Morrison's book however, the last chapter indicates the potential and possibility for harmonization, as Paul D returns to 124 after he hears that Beloved is finally gone. This is the first time he returned to the place where he escaped from, and this very act symbolizes that it is finally time for Paul D to stop running.

When Paul D and Sethe are reunited, Paul D reassures Sethe that they will build a new future for themselves together, telling Sethe to take care of herself as she is her own best thing. Paul D tells Sethe he plans to move in and that he will take care of her at night, while Denver was away. As he shows Sethe, she herself and not her children is her best possession: "You your best thing" "Me? Me?" (Morrison, 273) In this, we see how Paul D affirms not just Sethe as a woman, but as an individual, separate and distinct from her daughter, Beloved. WORKS CITED LIST

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