

Beloved: an inspiration for black females

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



African Americans as a whole have been oppressed and wrongfully treated for centuries simply because their skin color was different from that of Caucasians, who are of European origin, and therefore were deemed inferior to the white race. Throughout their time period of oppression, African Americans were forced into slavery and were treated like animals by Caucasians. African American men were forced to do strenuous manual labor, such as working in plantation fields from dawn to dusk in the extreme heat with little to no time for breaks.

The women, on the other hand, were expected to take care of household duties and care for the children of the plantation owners while also having to endure rape and other physical abuse to satisfy their masters. In the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the main character Sethe escapes slavery with her daughter and attempts to begin a new life but is traumatized by her memories of slavery that refuse to be ignored. During the time that the novel was published and upon reading the novel, it became an anthem to women. It inspired them to find their voices and stand up for black female identity and equality in society.

About the Author

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, with her birth given name as Chloe Anthony Wofford. Her family lived in a "semi-integrated area where racial discrimination was a constant threat" (Alexander 1).

Although Morrison faced discrimination growing up, her family continued to have "intense love and appreciation for black culture" (Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors 1). Morrison was so fascinated by her background that she

decided to pursue her education in a well known black institution, Howard University, where she majored in English (Alexander 1).

Two years later, Morrison went to Cornell University to receive her M. A. in English then taught at Texas Southern University for two years and went back to Howard University as a professor (Alexander 1). After teaching for several years, Morrison went on to become a fiction editor at Random House in 1965, where she would primarily edit fiction and novels by other African American authors (Alexander 1). Soon after working as an editor, she went to teach writing at the State University of New York in 1984 then left in 1989 to join the Princeton University faculty and finally retired in 2006 (Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors 1).

In 1987, Toni Morrison published one of her most famous novels, *Beloved*, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for it (Alexander 1). Five years later, Morrison was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama and became the first African American woman in history to win a Nobel Prize in Literature (Alexander 1). Morrison also went on to be awarded the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters after being chosen by the National Endowment for the Humanities (Alexander 1).

As an African American female in the 1900's who was publishing novels exposing the torments of slavery and other forms of oppression, Toni Morrison gained lots of attention and helped spread awareness to the issues she wrote about. The primary theme all her novels have in common is the "African American experience in an unjust society where her characters

struggle to find themselves and their cultural identity” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Trauma and Ghosts

The main antagonist in *Beloved* - other than the slave owners who would often horribly mistreat the slaves on their plantation - is not so much a person but more the past and the emotions associated with specific events. According to Peter Ramos, “ghosts arise from and point toward some violent, unjust, unfinished history” (Ramos 49). This theory is prevalent in many cultures even today because it was instilled into people centuries ago from old folklore that people would come back as ghosts to take care of unfinished personal business. In the novel, however, Sethe’s trauma and experiences as a slave continue to haunt her in her present-day life, and her past remains an “open wound” (Ramos 49). The stereotypical form of hauntings is in the form of ghosts or spirits, but it’s often overlooked how a person’s repressions can also be the cause for their undoing.

Throughout the novel, the reincarnated spirit of Sethe’s baby “introduces the important element of distance” (Ramos 50). Since the majority of Sethe’s trauma occurred on the plantation she lived on, it’s reasonable to assume that she’d be free of all that pain once she escaped and be relieved.

However, the manifestation, known as *Beloved*, represented her pain that followed her even after she was free because she didn’t know how to handle the emotions she repressed for so long.

Beloved also enters Sethe’s life to take control of her, act like a parasite that feeds off of her joyful emotions, and poisons her with toxic memories of the

past to keep her in a state of submission. Since Sethe is no longer in control, “the dead make the demands” because Sethe, an ex-slave, never developed a voice of her own to be able to speak up for herself (Ramos 52).

Sethe’s choice to end her baby’s life demonstrated to the American people “just how encompassing the institution, and its attendant policies actually were” if a mother believed that death was a better option than life as a slave (Ramos 53). Trauma is demonstrated through the sexual assaults that Sethe and other women were forced to endure, like “ten minutes for seven letters” to get a carving on her baby’s gravestone (Morrison 5).

The plantation she lived on as a slave also continues to haunt her because the students “took her milk” and violated her mentally and physically while also building a barrier between Sethe and her husband because he witnessed the crime while it was being committed but couldn’t do anything (Morrison 19). With all this and no one to open up to about it, Sethe is forced to deal with her trauma on her own and by doing so, allows the pain to manifest and grow.

Authenticated Ghost Stories

The main ghost used throughout the novel, *Beloved*, demonstrates the necessity of community to defeat a common evil. Denver, Sethe’s daughter, realized that the longer *Beloved* stayed at the house with them, the more weakened and powerless Sethe became. Denver described the situation by saying, “the bigger *Beloved* got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter *Beloved*’s eyes, the more those eyes that used to never look back away became slits of sleeplessness” (Morrison 295). Denver’s point of view

demonstrates how Beloved acted as a parasite toward Sethe and was physically and mentally draining.

When Sethe first moved to the town, she was very isolated and had no interest in interacting with anyone else in the community. The uneasy feeling in the house they moved into, and the violent presence is real because “ 124 Bluestone Road is indeed visited by an authentic ghost” (Duval 92). After Denver reached out to the women in the community to get help for her mother, the women she asked had no issue pausing their lives to help another woman in need.

Once the women joined together to run Beloved out of town, their unity allowed them to discard of her evil and violent manifestation that took hold of Sethe, and the ghost of 124 finally settled when Sethe killed her white abuser (Duval 92). The unity of women in this scenario demonstrates how much individual power women possess and how that power is magnified once they come together, while also igniting the same strength and courage within real-world female readers.

Black Lives Matter Movement

The Black Lives Matter movement is a global organization that was created with the intent to liberate oppressed people of color. Members of the movement believe themselves to be a “ collective of liberators who believe in an inclusive and spacious movement” (Black Lives Matter). Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi were the black female organizers who “ created a black-centered political will and movement building project” later called the Black Lives Matter movement (Black Lives Matter).

The project was initially created in response to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, which enraged black people throughout the nation. The movement is seen as an “ ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter).

According to the Black Lives Matter organization, they want to bring attention to the “ affirmation of Black folks’ humanity and our contributions to this society” over the years and how they don’t deserve the hatred and disrespect some people face in their day to day lives (Black Lives Matter). The members also realized how the majority of movements are centered around men and wanted to have this particular movement centered around women since not only are the founders female but also because black females have been more oppressed in history than other races, so the focus of the movement gives them a higher level of importance.

The focus of this project is not only based on race but also on queer, heterosexual, and transgender individuals of color who would otherwise be labeled as outcasts in society. Law enforcement brutality has also become more of an issue in black communities recently, and one of the project goals is to put an end to that violence. While there are more issues regarding race and other factors, the primary purpose of the Black Lives Matter members is to “ support the development of new Black leaders, as well as create a network where Black people feel empowered to determine our destinies in our communities” (Black Lives Matter).

Given that the main character in *Beloved* is a female and the author, Toni Morrison, was an influential female activist, the morals of the organization were heavily influenced by Morrison's writing.

Two of the Black Lives Matter organization founders, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza, are both writers who were influenced by Morrison. Since Morrison's novel details unjust societies involving African Americans, the large portion of African Americans who had access to the novel related to different scenes throughout it either by personal experiences or from stories they heard from valued individuals. Both the movement and the novel focus on empowering women and are centered around them.

The Black Lives Matter movement has also impacted the lives of students. Wil Gafney is a black female educator whose main goal for her students is to decenter from "the white male scholarly voice that masquerades as normative or neutral" (Gafney 204). This gave more reason for the Black Lives Matter movement to spread and become more prominent because the whole goal of the organization is to have the African American race more recognized for their accomplishments. Through Gafney's teachings, her main goal is to "unmask whiteness in biblical scholarship and interpretation" (Gaffney 206).

As a Black Lives Matter advocate and an African American woman herself, Gafney acquired her voice through the murders of unarmed African Americans. The unarmed citizens, like Trayvon Martin, caused African American advocates to join the Black Lives Matter movement in hopes of making those murders be the last that occur to innocent people. That being

said, this movement relates to the novel *Beloved* because Sethe had to murder her innocent child, and she hoped that that would be the last time she'd ever have to do that again.

Black Feminism

In the 1990s, Toni Morrison “ generated important new studies for her work” that included racial, cultural, and gender issues (Goldstein 133). Throughout history, African American women have experienced “ oppression and liberation” more than men or any other race (Goldstein 133). Ever since the early 1600s, African Americans were deemed inferior to Caucasians for living differently. They were not as organized and did not have a system of government like their conquerors did. African American culture was also different since their religion was based on a form of voodoo and not Christianity. Even in their culture, women were not equal to men. Women would have to do household duties and were not allowed to perform any activities the men did.

In the novel *Beloved*, Sethe and other ex-slaves attempt to repress their painful experiences of slavery on the plantation of Sweet Home while also “ trying not to remember what they end up remembering fully” (Goldstein 136). This is similar to how women from the late 1800s and early 1900s would attempt to repress their past because of how little freedoms they had. During this time, the form of government that African Americans had was run entirely by men, and women had no voice to express their political views or have an opinion outside of their immediate family if anything.

Women especially were subjected to tending to their husband's every need, which is similar to Sethe's situation in *Beloved* since she's the head of the household in her position and is required to take care of her daughter and anyone else who tags along. When Sethe escaped the plantation, she was pregnant with Denver and had to take charge of her motherly duties even as a wanted slave on the run. Sethe's situation is very similar to what many African American mothers had to face since they were often left to fend for themselves when their families were torn apart, and their husbands were sold to different owners.

In Goldstein's article, he also portrays the character *Beloved* from another point of view that most people would typically tend to overlook after reading the novel for the first time. One of his theories is that *Beloved* is not a reincarnated form of Sethe's dead child, but instead a real person who "a slave owner kept in his home and sexually abused until she killed him and escaped" (Goldstein 137). Women who agree with this theory view *Beloved* as a huge inspiration because of her extreme courage and bravery.

She was such a strong-willed individual, given that she was an African American woman who fought extremely hard for her freedom. *Beloved's* courage throughout the novel is similar to other women's situations in the late 1800s when African American men were first gaining the right to vote. Women still did not have this ability and had to fight for their right to vote for decades up until the early 1900s when the 19th Amendment passed and gave women the right to vote.

Goldstein also gives another perspective of *Beloved*, where she “ forces Sethe, her family, and her community to remember their experiences and to improve themselves” (Goldstein 138). This perspective of *Beloved* could be yet another inspiration to African American women to not only face their trauma but also to come out stronger in the end. Women nowadays enjoy improving themselves and their lifestyles, and upon reading *Beloved* could become more inspired to do so by seeing the success of other women even if the situations may differ.

Due to the wave of inspiration women experience after reading the novel, they have created organizations to help others and also bring awareness to specific issues, like the Black Lives Matter movement. Overall, the different perspectives that women are shown brings comfort to all kinds of women because the views are so malleable and can be inspirational to anyone.

Reimagining Slavery in the Twenty-First Century

Not only did *Beloved* inspire many people nationwide, but it also ignited debates about the “ nature and legacy of black enslavement, countering the erasure of slavery from collective (white) American memory” (Nehl 55).

During the time that slavery took place, many African Americans would get ignored when they would attempt to speak up about their traumas because people believed they weren’t truthful. African Americans, in general, did not have a good reputation simply because they were different from what every Caucasian was accustomed to.

Beloved discussed the “ dehumanizing nature of chattel slavery and the devastating impact of its history on later generations of African Americans”

(Nehl 55). When America was colonized by England, the native people were considered inferior because their culture was unique and never before seen by the eyes of newcomers. Their beliefs and religions were rejected and they were forced to convert to Christianity. If this form of oppression were to occur nowadays, there would be numerous riots and protests for the people to be set free from their religious confinement.

There are now laws and amendments set in place so this type of mass racial oppression never gets to the point of slavery again. However, there are still forms of slavery that exist today but are not necessarily called by the same title. For example, in the past couple of years, African Americans have been accused of numerous crimes even when they were innocent. Due to the false accusations, many have had to suffer the consequences for a crime they didn't commit. Now while that is not the case for some people who did commit a crime, many are still sentenced to prison for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and have to suffer the harsh treatments of prison life for several years.

While *Beloved* is a fictional novel, it depicts very real and ongoing issues throughout society. For example, slavery in the novel is defined as the act of owning another person. Today, however, slavery can be seen through “atrocities like human trafficking, capture in war, debt bondage, forced marriage, the use of the child soldier, and sex-trafficking” (Goyal 51). Human trafficking is seen quite often throughout the U. S. and other countries with imminent cartel threats.

This presence of cartel groups is similar to Sethe's situation in the novel in that both instances give off a sort of haunting nature and cause people to live in a constant state of fear. Slavery is also demonstrated in the real world through child soldiers. In many foreign countries, terrorists use children as a disguise and force them to acquire the trust of the opponents so they can trick them into a trap.

In *Beloved*, since Sethe's daughter died at a young age, she gives off the feeling that she's trustworthy when she's reincarnated so she can enter the family unit and be welcomed with open arms, while in reality, she plans to grow herself by being a parasite to others. That being said, even though *Beloved* is fiction, it portrays different aspects of real-world issues that were present at the same time it was written and still to this day.

Overall, due to the background of Toni Morrison, the real story incorporated in the novel, and the time it was written, it became an anthem for black women and their aspiration for equality by demonstrating how they can take control of their lives and mold them to be what they want. Toni Morrison's writing inspired many people to not only take charge of their lives but also to become better versions of themselves, so regardless of where the future may take society, there are always going to be those individuals who want to make a change for the better.