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# **A Sense of Self and Identity Concealed in Hierarchy and Dependency in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved***

## **Dr. A. Madhusudhana Rao**

*Professor, Department of English  
Siddharth Institute of Engineering & Technology (Autonomous), Puttur*

## **Dr. S. Kishore**

*Associate Professor, Department of English  
Siddharth Institute of Engineering & Technology (Autonomous), Puttur*

## **R. Ida Esther**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Siddharth Institute of Engineering & Technology (Autonomous), Puttur*

## **Shaik Rizwan**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Siddharth Institute of Engineering & Technology (Autonomous), Puttur*

## **Abstract**

*Toni Morrison’s Beloved depicts the characters deeply affected by trauma of slavery resulting in emotional and psychological dependency. Emergence of the self in the modern sense refers to releasing it from hierarchy and dependency. Through social interactions, the ego develops to be responsible for oneself and for upholding its own image. William James, a psychologist, claimed that the self is fundamentally a social construction that develops by social experiences. “Selfhood” is shaped by life events and interactions with individuals. Self awareness brings in joy, contentment, fulfilment and freedom. The nature of the self has been a subject of discussion in both the East and the West since antiquity, and it still is. The philosophical treatises known as the Upanishads, which were written in India between 1500 and 600 BC, examine the nature of selfhood.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Self, Hierarch, Dependency.

The struggle of the African-American people to free themselves from the traumatizing social and psychological impact of the dominant ideologies and culture has shaped their social development through the writings of the African American people, particularly through the writings of Autobiography. Because literature examines the way ideas, values, and feelings function in the social condition, The voices of struggle and triumph were heard in poetry, oral and slave narratives of the time. These narratives not only conveyed the beliefs and sentiments of the majority of African Americans, but also painted a vivid and graphic representation of the lives of slaves in the

United States. They provided a voice for the majority of Black people and represented a distinct body of work that suggested a way of life and thought in the society. These narratives were often against slavery and were harsh assessments of American slave society.

During the 18th century and 19th, Slave Narratives were largely written in the form of Protest Literature, with Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass discussing their personal experiences through Slave Narratives. The first African American poet, Phillis Wheatley, published his Book of Poems in 1784. Subsequently, writers and activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington discussed the conditions of Black life in America in the 20th century, and it is clear that these writers felt an urgent need for African American literature and its criticism to play an essential role in the liberation of Black life.

At the beginning of the 1930s, African-American writers began to gain recognition for their work. Richard Wright's *Native Son* was a major success, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* followed shortly thereafter. This marked a shift in the White society's attitude towards African-American literature, as it was no longer as marginalized as it had been in the past. Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s saw an influx of writers from the African-American community, as well as a more vibrant urban Black culture, which was instrumental in the formation of the Civil Rights movement. Despite this growth in visibility, African-American literature still had a long way to go before it was accepted by the academic and popular literary worlds.

The violence, abuse and deprivation experienced by African-American women had a profound effect on them and, according to Linda Brent's autobiography, slavery was particularly distressing for women, as they were subjected to injustices and suffering that were unique to them. Despite this, the situation of African-American women remained largely marginalized and was rarely discussed in the public sphere. Her condition remained a closely guarded secret, and the autobiography published in the eighteenth century was rarely concerned with her situation. According to Laura and Stacey, "Black women, through their fictions imagine and create a space for both the subversion of oppressive sociopolitical structures and the possibility for liberatory self-determination. Black women's radical subjectivity shatters the boundaries of geopolitical spaces that traditionally have been defined through citizenship and creates alternative social imaginaries that represent a space where home and belongingness may be attained and self-determination realized." (Third Wave Feminism 529).

Toni Morrison, was born on February 18, 1931, to George and Ramah Willis Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. Her mother was a housewife, and her father was a shipyard welder. They had both moved from the South to escape racism and to find better opportunities for themselves and their children. The Woffords taught their children to appreciate black literary culture by singing and reading African folklore to them at an early age. She graduated from Howard University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1953. Morrison went on to continue her education at Cornell, writing her thesis on suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf and receiving her M.A. in 1955. Morrison began teaching English at Texas Southern University in Houston later that year. In 1957, however, she decided to return to Washington, D.C. to accept an English faculty position at Howard University.

Morrison secured her place as an important black novelist, the book winning the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. Her fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), made the bestseller list, and then six years later *Beloved* was released. Although nominated for the 1987 National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Beloved* was awarded neither, and, in response, 49 black writers published a protest letter in a New York Times advertisement. In 1988, however, *Beloved* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In 1989, Morrison became the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University, a position she continued to hold.

Beloved is a novel that explores the damages of slavery on all aspects of human life, especially motherhood. Mothers have an important role in every child's life and if the mother is absent from everyday life of a child that can be very painful and leave serious consequences. When talking about motherhood in the novel, Morrison “devotes special attention to women-only households and single mother families, which are often the consequence of males’ desertion” (Lopez Ramirez 109).

Many enslaved women were forced to have sexual relations with several men, thus having children who have different fathers. This led to a lack of love between many mothers and children since they found it severely hard to love children who were conceived without love, especially children conceived by white slave owners. Also, most mother-child relationships were ruined because of rough life conditions. Morrison pays special attention to this problem in her novel – Sethe did not know her mother because she was hanged, Baby Suggs had different opinions when it came to her children, and Sethe as a mother to Denver and Beloved shows what mothers are capable of. All those terrible life conditions left an impact on their lives, even years after they became free. The beginnings of slavery were connected to economy as the main reason for turning Africans into slaves was gaining profit from their hard work. Later in the novel, when Sethe grows up and is a mother herself, she is so traumatized by her experience of slavery that she would rather kill all of her children than subject them to the horrors of slavery: “I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher” (Morrison 163). Her acts are thus rather monstrous than motherly, yet, on the other hand, they can be seen as the acts of love since the only thing she wants for her children is to be safe and not to go through everything she had to endure: “Sethe was not a bad mother; she was a slave mother who, when faced with an attack upon her motherhood, decided to empower herself by taking the life she gave.

She willingly chooses to deconstruct the traditional role of mother by committing the crime of ‘love murder’” (Watson, “The Power of the ‘Milk’” 161). Morrison takes her reader back to the history. She focuses on the historical realism of African American people. The novel confronts racism and most disturbing part of African American history and slavery. Torture, murder, humiliation, suppression, and cruelty are the major issues of the novel. The critic Karla Holloway, who considers Beloved to be a spiritual, explains that this “post-emancipation community” has been “nearly spiritually incapacitated by the trauma of slavery.” (Holloway, 516)

Not only history and slavery, Morrison is also careful to weave together a love story to ghost story by comparing mother’s love to magic. The novel embodies both the suffering and guilt of the past and the power and beauty as well. There is a need to realize the past fully in order to have a better future with all the possibilities. The novel, therefore, stands for the historical past as a living presence.

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