

The Loss of Identity Through Abuse in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Abstract

Whilst it is estimated that domestic violence can occur in one quarter of all marriages,¹ it can vary in form, perpetrator, and victim. This form of abuse is often wrongly perceived as purely violence from a man directed towards a woman, often his wife, or as any behaviour by a parent that results in injury to a child.² This is also the case in literature, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Often not the primary focus of novels, and not always occurring in the stereotypical sense of physical violence between man and woman, it often goes unnoticed or misunderstood, despite being vitally important to the plot of the texts. There is often a change in self that the characters undergo that is caused by the domestic oppression that they are battling. Throughout the course of the abuse, whether mental or physical, the oppressed loses sight of themselves and their true identity. Victims often change to resemble a person that the perpetrator wishes for them to become, just as Sethe's identity is altered by *Beloved*. Only when the oppression is defeated, whether that be by fight or flight, can the victim's identity be reclaimed. The exploration of the patterns of *Beloved*'s abuse of Sethe, in comparison to those of real domestic abuse reveals, shows how Sethe loses her identity.

Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, is often viewed as a pivotal text about racism and motherhood; however, thematically it is much more nuanced. A key way that Morrison explores identity is through *Beloved*'s oppression of Sethe. The theme of domestic oppression, despite being obvious and taking place throughout the entire course of the novel, often goes unrecognised, as it is an unusual case of the oppressed being the mother, Sethe, and the oppressor being the daughter, *Beloved*.

Whilst this case seems unusual, parental abuse is more common than it would seem. A clinical study reported a child angry at his mother for spanking him, and in return pushed her down and began to kick her face repeatedly.³ This example of behaviour is relevant to *Beloved* as *Beloved* is punishing her mother for doing wrong to her, despite the abuse not being entirely physical. Extensive research has discovered that for many mothers, 'finding a way to protect children from [...] living with [...] violence may not be straightforward.'⁴ To protect *Beloved* from becoming a slave - and being abused herself - Sethe took drastic measures to protect her child from a life of slavery and violence. Due to Sethe's 'failure' as a mother, *Beloved* never had the chance to form her own identity and become her own person. In the oppression of Sethe, *Beloved* is attempting – somewhat successfully - to

¹ Olivia Salcido, 'Immigrant Women and Domestic Violence: Common Experiences in Different Countries', *Gender and Society*, 16.6 (2002), 898 – 920 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/089124302237894>> [31/10/17] (p. 899).

² James Garbarino, *Understanding Abusive Families*, (Lexington: D C Heath, 1980), p. 5.

³ Richard J. Gelles, *Intimate Violence in Families*, 3rd edn (London: Sage Publications, 1997). p. 109.

⁴ Lorraine Radford and Marianne Hester, *Mothering Through Domestic Violence*, (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), p. 42.

reclaim that which was taken away from her: her mother, and her life. 'Beloved is making her pay for it'⁵ by taking Sethe's identity away to establish her own. One of the most interesting parts of the relationship between mother and daughter in this novel is that Sethe does not realise that she is being abused. She unknowingly allows herself to be oppressed by Beloved as she is 'trying to make up for the handsaw'⁶ that she took to her child's throat. Despite Sethe's blissful ignorance, other characters such as Denver realise Beloved's motives, like how an abuse victim may not realise the extent of the abuse but others are able to see the problems.

Identity can be destroyed and built back up through the ways that others treat us. Throughout the novel, the ability to lose sight of oneself is displayed when Sethe states that it is possible for someone to 'dirty you so bad you forget who you were and couldn't think it up'⁷ and is described crying 'because she has no self'.⁸ It is crucial to remember that when *Beloved* was first published, Morrison did not intend slavery to be the focus of the novel; rather, she wanted to write about 'self-murder' and to explore why 'we self-sabotage ourselves'.⁹ Morrison as an author is concerned with how one can experience loss of identity, and why that loss occurs.

Through Beloved's abuse, the novel tracks Sethe's change in character and identity from a strong, maternal figure to a frightened caretaker for Beloved, catering to her every whim. At the beginning of the novel Sethe refuses to let anyone see a weak side of her, even during painful memories involving her children, in which she simply 'smiled, so they would think the brightness in her eyes was love alone'.¹⁰ However, during Beloved's persistent oppression, Sethe's identity starts to gradually fade. We see a shift in Sethe's strong, independent character from as early in the novel as Beloved's arrival, as she quickly becomes obsessed with Beloved's needs and abandons her own. Here Beloved is already tricking Sethe into taking care of her, as she believes that Beloved can 'barely walk without holding onto something'¹¹ despite being 'strong as a bull'.¹² Beloved becomes so demanding that despite being a hardworking character, Sethe begins to go to work 'later and later each day until the predictable happened',¹³ abandoning her sense of self-worth and her motivation to work for more time with her daughter. At the climax of the novel, Sethe becomes fearful of Beloved, crying and pleading for forgiveness, her eyes which were once full of life become 'bright but dead, alert but vacant'.¹⁴ The once strong independent character has lost her identity, becoming only truly 'happy when Beloved was'.¹⁵

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (London: Vintage, 2007) p. 295.

⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 295.

⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 295.

⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 145.

⁹ Veena Deo, 'Studies in M(othering): Unpacking the "Wicked Thing" in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Beloved*', in *Toni Morrison on Mothers and Motherhood*, ed. by Lee Baxter and Martha Satz (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2017), pp. 69-87 (p.70).

¹⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 110.

¹¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 67.

¹² Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 67.

¹³ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 282.

¹⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 285.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 286.

Whilst Sethe's identity fades throughout the abuse, Beloved's only grows stronger - the abuser gains control over the victim by removing their identity, with Beloved being seen as a 'succubus figure who [...] drains [...] Sethe of her vitality.'¹⁶ As Beloved was murdered before being able to form her own identity and her own self, she oppresses Sethe's identity, forming her into a submissive, weak willed shell of her former self through guilt, isolating her from her loved ones and giving constant demands: 'Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire'.¹⁷ Through the oppression of Sethe, Beloved steals her identity, imitating her mother, talking the way she does and laughing her laugh.¹⁸ Sethe's identity is lost and claimed by Beloved, who then begins to spiral out of control with this new-found confidence and strength that once belonged to her mother. The change in Beloved's identity takes one drastic step further at the end of the novel, where we see her take on the form of a pregnant woman – perhaps an identity taken on by her to feign fragility and innocence, whereas the townsfolk see her as a 'devil child'.¹⁹ As stated earlier, this is similar to how it is possible for an abuser to be seen as perfect by the victim, but evil to outsiders in the relationship. Beloved's identity takes on many forms throughout the novel, with other characters and other readers reading her differently throughout. This is because she was never able to form her own identity, stealing Sethe's identity allows for her to gain that which she never had the chance to have, a mother and a self.

At the final section of the novel, we see Sethe free of Beloved's haunting, relieved of the oppression and domestic abuse with help from the town. She wants nothing more than a little space by the window and rest²⁰ whilst she recovers from the trauma Beloved put her through. Distraught by Beloved's leaving, it appears at first read that Sethe is descending into madness having lost her identity and her child all over again. This is representative of the state of mind that abuse victims are often left with after being freed of oppression, a mindset of post traumatic condition which renders them discredited and invisible.²¹ However, she begins to realise her self-worth with the help of Paul D, repeating with disbelief that she is the 'best thing',²² not Beloved. This is the beginning of Sethe's recovery of her identity, and her acceptance that she has self-worth, a step towards her identity being reclaimed.

¹⁶ Silje Gjerde, *The Good Mother: Motherhood as Identity and Resistance in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood* (The University of Bergen, 2008) <<http://bora.uib.no/bitstream/handle/1956/2898/38606038.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>> [accessed 26 November 2017] (p. 61).

¹⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 283.

¹⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 283.

¹⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 308.

²⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 321.

²¹ Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery [electronic resource] : The Aftermath of Violence--From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 1997), ProQuest Ebook Central, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ntuuk/detail.action?docID=927821>> p. 15.

²² Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 322.

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