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The Horrors of Slavery and Racism as portrayed in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

Toni Morrison’s Beloved was written is 1987, and it talks about a woman’s decision to take the life of her only child to prevent her from suffering from the pain of slavery, racism and marginalization in the society. Sethe lives as a free woman in the society, but she keeps reliving her days as a slave before the Civil War and she believes that she endured enough traumas in her life both as a slave and as a Black woman, something that she does not want her child to go through (Morrison). Therefore, to discuss this topic of slavery and racism, the novelist transforms the country’s history with racism and slavery into a familiar and powerful story about acts of love and violence, cruelty, family relationships, dehumanization and brutality. The characters in the novel include Sethe, Beloved, Paul D, Denver, Halle Suggs, Baby Suggs, Howard, Buglar, Schoolteacher and Mr. Garner, and they all play a significant role in building the storyline and themes in the story. This essay discusses the major horrors of slavery and racism as portrayed in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Slavery and Racism are powerful themes in ‘Beloved’ as they play a role in the lives of all the key characters, and even though the author shifts to talk about other themes of grief, memories of the past, abandonment and motherhood, she does not fail to mention the aspects of slavery and racism.

Sethe’s memories and horrible past

Slavery caused Sethe to commit infanticide just to prevent her child from suffering the way she did. The author focuses on telling a story of a slave woman who chose her independence, and even though she escaped from her master’s house and started a new life elsewhere, she haunted by the experiences and traumas she went through as a slave. Her new home is free from the configurations and settings of slavery, but she believes that she is a mere produce of slavery and these thoughts make her kill her infant child (Beloved) (Morrison). When the author takes her readers through Sethe’s past, she does not just want them to understand why she is being haunted by Beloved, but she also wants them to take a look at how a person’s deeper experiences with slavery would result to trauma and dehumanization. Toni uses Sethe to also talk about the power that slavery possesses, one that destroys a person’s life and their relationship with others (Morrison). Therefore, after talking about Beloved’s death, the author goes on to reveal that Sethe’s horrible memories continue to torment her prompting her to try to kill her surviving children later in the novel because she does not want them to suffer from slavery. After a failed attempt to kill her sons (Howard and Buglar), they leave home because they are afraid of her and would like to give her space to face her grief and painful memory (Morrison). Clearly, the author wants his readers to know that although Sethe was devoted to and loved her children, her experiences from the past and memories were preventing her from being a good mother to her children, and instead of building a good relationship with them, she let her past memories and guilt create a barrier between them.

Living in Denial

Toni portrays Sethe as a character that is not willing to acknowledge the harsh truths about racism and one who would rather kill her children than watch them suffer like she did. Yes, Sethe was once a slave who suffered in the hands of her master but she escaped and started a new life for herself, one that was free from racism and slavery. Sethe could not accept and believe that she was a free woman and the thought of bringing forth children into such a cruel and brutal world forced her to kill her infant child in the past. She continues to live in denial after killing her child, and in the beginning of the novel, the author talks about how she and her 18-year old daughter live in a house alone and with no visitors because the neighbors think it is haunted. Once, when Sethe’s former master shows up in the company of some officers to take back escapees, she attempts to kill her sons so that they are not taken in as slaves (Morrison). Sethe becomes a woman tormented with dreams of killing her infant baby, of her trying to kill her sons and forcing them to run away and she is forced to live in house tormented by the ghost of her dead child, a life that forces her daughter Denver to grow up in a suspicious and isolated environment (Morrison). As the author talks about Sethe’s demons and struggles with her past because of the impact of slavery and racism in her life, she paints her as a paranoid woman who has forced her children to live in a lot of fear and denial throughout their lives. Instead of teaching them how to face the cruelty and brutality in the society, she would rather kill them or sabotage their lives in the name of protecting them.

The suffering of Black characters

Toni Morrison is quite interesting in the way she represents the aspect of racism in the novel, especially how the Blacks and Whites are treated differently in the society. First, the author focuses on the life of a Black woman, her experiences and her general thoughts about living life as a black person. The only life that she has known as a black woman in the novel is that of painful experiences, horrible memories and traumas, and even when she gets the chance to enjoy life as a free woman, she is paranoid about almost everything and would not stop herself from seeing the society as existing through the ‘Black’ and ‘White’ colors. Her racist ideologies deny her the chance to live a free life after escaping from her master’s house, they push her to kill her infant child to save her from the so called pain and later in the novel, she still attempts to kill her two sons when the schoolteacher comes for them (Morrison). Sethe feels that she is justified to kill Beloved, and in her own words, she says, “*If I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her*” not just because of the love she had for her child, but also because she has constantly lived in a society where she has seen the Blacks being mistreated and hurt, and living in a racist society is not something that she wants for her child. Another character who was used to build the theme of racism is Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother in-law. Baby Suggs is another Black woman in the novel who has suffered in the hands of slavery as her children were taken away and sold to an unknown country because of their skin color. She has gone through a lot of horrors in a racist society, and even though her son pays for her freedom to give her a second chance, she is still tormented by pain and traumas and loses herself (Morrison). Baby Suggs dies a lonely woman reminiscing how her family has suffered in the hands of slavery. Therefore, Sethe and Baby Suggs are two key characters that the author uses to talk about how the Blacks and Whites were treated differently in the society. Although much is not said about the Whites, it is clear that the Blacks were often treated as slaves who lived in misery and were often sold to other countries.

Overall, the themes of slavery and racism play a huge role in understanding Toni Morrison’s Beloved. The novel is not as easy to read, but once a reader has understood the meaning and sensation behind its plot and characterization, he/she gets to enjoy a story about slavery and the Black and White relations in American society. Obviously, the author focuses his story of the ghosts of a ruthless past of a Black woman, but while doing that, she presents her readers with a sensational story built on strong Black women characters and other key characters. The novel says a lot about how the Blacks and Whites were treated differently during the slavery period, how the Blacks suffered as a result of the brutality of the Whites and the general impact of racism and slavery on the lives of Black people. Toni Morrison, like many other authors, embraced the book as a social document that she used not just to express her opinions on slavery and racism, but also to retell an old tale in an interesting and compelling manner.

Work Cited

Morrison, Toni. "Beloved. 1987." *New York: Plume* 252 (1988).