



A Humanistic Psychological Analysis of
Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison (1931-) is considered one of the most significant black American novelists in modern American literature. She has received several awards that testify to her success. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 and the National Book Foundation Medal in 1996. In her novels, Morrison concentrates on the experiences of the blacks in America, before and after the Civil War. She portrays their experiences of oppression in America by exposing issues such as racism, sexism and feminism. Her works contributed towards shaping "the African-American literary scene" (Blashfield 59). Most of her Protagonists (black female characters) struggle to find their identity. So, Toni Morrison is considered a feminist writer, although she refuses to be classified as feminist.

Toni Morrison joins many other contemporary African American female writers, such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor, in revising the slave narrative and exposing the African American's suffering of slavery. In fact, the re-emergence of the slave narrative in the 1970s and the 1980s is due to the civil rights movements at that time such as the black nationalist movements and the feminist movement that had made it possible for African American writers to tell the truth about the cruel past of slavery.

This study tries to give a new analysis of Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, which won both Pulitzer and Nobel Prize, by using the humanistic psychological theory. The Humanistic Psychological Theory, which arose as a reaction to psychoanalysis and behaviorism, emphasizes that "human nature is not nearly as bad as it has been thought to be" (Maslow, *Toward a Psychology* 4). It suggests that human beings are free to choose and develop their lives, "the individual has within himself the capacity and the tendency to move forward toward maturity", unless there are extremely strong environmental conditions to the contrary (Rogers, *Becoming* 35). Humanistic Psychological Theory focuses on the individual's potential and stresses the importance of growth and self-actualization. The goal of Humanistic Psychological Theory is to "gain better understanding of how the environment affects people and how to bring someone to self-actualization" (MacCulloch 2), therefore the Humanistic Psychological Theory will be applied to Morrison's characters in order to gain better understanding of how Morrison's characters failed or succeeded to develop themselves.

The novel, for African and African-American writers, is considered as "an important vehicle to represent the social context, to expose inequality, racism and social injustice" (Peach 10). *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave who tried to kill her children to prevent them from slavery. In fact, Morrison did not want to register the life of Margaret Garner, but she wanted to "use the tragic episode of child-murder as a starting point and invent another life for her" (Century 75). *Beloved* is set after the Civil War. At that

time, the blacks still lived in suffering, although they theoretically but not practically got their freedom. This period was known as the period of reconstruction. According to Kubitschek, much of the characters' pain occurs as they reconstruct themselves, their families, and their communities after the official abolition of slavery. They cannot put slavery behind them by a simple act of will. The past cannot be exorcized; it demands recognition in the present (115).

Beloved is Morrison's most impressive novel in its complex narrative technique "as it weaves a present out of past events" (Wheeler 247). It tells in flashbacks the memories and the experiences of the characters, "it is predicated upon the history of slavery" (Joyner 79). The novel is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe, the heroine of the novel, a former slave, lives with her mother in law (Baby Suggs) and her daughter, Denver, in the house number 124. Paul D, a former slave and an old friend from the Sweet Home, comes to visit Sethe. Through Sethe and Paul D's speech about their memories and experiences, the readers get the whole story.

Thirty years earlier, Sethe arrives at Sweet Home to replace Baby Suggs whose son, Halle, bought her freedom. Then, Sethe marries Halle and they have four children: Howard, Buglar, Beloved and Denver. When Mr. Garner dies, their good master and the owner of the Sweet Home; Sethe, Halle and the other slaves in the Sweet Home decide to escape from the new cruel owners of the place. At that time, Sethe, who is pregnant now, is whipped and raped by the new owners of the Sweet Home before running away. After her escape, she gives

birth to her fourth child, Denver. Then, Sethe decides to return to Baby Sugg's house. Sethe is very happy to get back to her children, but her happiness does not continue, after seeing her new master near Baby Sugg's yard. Sethe collects her children and decides to kill them to prevent them from the suffering of slavery. She succeeds to kill one of her children, Beloved. She is stopped before killing the others and goes to jail.

When she is released, she lives with her children and Baby Suggs. Two months later, Baby Suggs dies, and her sons have run away from the house because they are afraid of the expected appearance of Beloved's ghost. Then the ghost begins to exploit Sethe and she becomes ill. Finally, Denver, Paul D and Sethe's neighbors join their forces and begin to sing till the ghost of Beloved is gone.

In *Beloved*, "the most painful part of the African American heritage", Morrison attempts to portray the blacks as oppressed people who are not free to choose or develop their lives because of slavery (Kubitschek 116). In fact, the Humanistic Psychological Theory asserts that human beings are free to choose and develop their lives, unless they are deprived of their basic needs. In the novel, Sethe seeks to gain better life; in other words, she tries to achieve her safety and security needs.

According to Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of the Humanistic Psychological Theory, safety and security are considered basic needs in human being's life. Maslow asserts that any person is

motivated by needs and desires that make his life meaningful; and these needs are arranged in an ascending hierarchy of priority; these needs are: physiological needs, safety and security needs, belongingness and love needs, self-esteem needs and self-actualization needs.

In the novel, the blacks do not feel safe either as children or as adults because of slavery. Slavery haunts Morrison's characters even after getting their freedom. It destroys their feelings of safety and security. The need of feeling safe, according to Karen Horney, a humanistic psychologist, is a very important motivation in normal growth toward self-actualization (the full realization of one's potentialities or psychological health). She says:

People can renounce food, money, attention, and affection as long as they are only renouncing satisfaction, but they cannot renounce these things if without them they would feel in danger of destitution or starvation or of being helplessly exposed to hostility, in other words, if they would lose their feelings of safety. (*Neurosis* 73)

Horney points out that the feeling of safety develops in three different paths: moving toward others, moving away from others and moving against others. She adds that some people may take more than a path, in trying to get their needs of safety which help them grow and minimize or avoid their sense of basic anxiety.

At the beginning of her life, Sethe felt safety and security in Sweet Home. Mr. and Mrs. Garner treated Sethe well. In Sweet Home, also, Sethe fell in love with Halle. In other words, she found in Mr. Garner's house a refuge in which she achieved her safety and love needs; the following quotation shows that:

"Halle and me want to be married, Mrs. Garner." "So I heard." She smiled. "He talked to Mr. Garner about it. Are you already expecting?"
"No, ma'am."
"Well, you will be. You know that, don't you?"
"Yes, ma'am."
"Halle's nice, Sethe. He'll be good to you."
"But I mean we want to get married."
"You just said so. And I said all right."
(Morrison 26).

By applying Horney's theory of the development of feeling of safety (which is classified into three trends); Sethe, at that time, was in the trend: moving toward people; she moved toward Halle to feel safety. Horney points out that love plays an important role in solving the problem of safety-needs. She asserts that a person, who takes this trend, "needs such acceptance in whatever form it is available: attention, approval, gratitude, affection, [or] love" to satisfy his/her safety and esteem needs (*Neurosis* 227). Horney suggests that this type of person "measure[s] his value in the currency of love... He is worth as much as he is liked, needed, wanted or accepted" (277).

Thus, in accordance with the Humanistic Psychological Theory which asserts that "relationships offer the best opportunity to be fully functioning, to be in harmony with the self, others, and the environment", Sethe-Halle relationship helps Sethe to move towards her growth (*Personality and Personal* 433). In fact, marriage is considered " a special relationship; it is potentially long-term, it is intensive, and it carries with it the possibility of sustained growth and development" (433).

According to the Humanistic Psychological Theory, Sethe's love of Halle is called "D-love or Deficiency love"; it is based on a deficit need. "It is love out of a need for something we lack, such as self-esteem, sex, or someone to keep us from being lonely" (*Personality Theories* 452). Unlike "Be-love or Bing love"; it is based on "valuing the other person as a person, as an end in himself or herself, without any desire to change or to use the individual in any way"(452). So, Sethe, at that time, cannot be described as a self-actualized person; in other words, she cannot use her potentialities. She depends on the Garners and Halle to satisfy her needs. Maslow explains:

The needs for safety, belongingness, love relations and for respect can be satisfied only by other people, i.e., only from outside the person. This means considerable dependence on the environment...Because of this, the deficiency-motivated man must be more afraid of the environment, since there is always the possibility that it may fail or disappoint him...

In contrast, the self-actualizing individual...is far less dependent, far less beholden, far more autonomous and self-directed. Far from needing other people, growth-motivated people may actually be hampered by them. (*Toward a Psychology* 42)

After the death of Mr. Garner, Sethe's need of safety is frustrated by the new heirs of Sweet House. When personal growth needs are blocked a person may develop "basic anxiety", as Horney points out that basic anxiety develops when "the environment is dreaded as a whole because it is felt to be unreliable, mendacious, unappreciative, unfair, unjust, begrudging and merciless" (*New Ways* 75). Consequently, in *Beloved*, Sethe's anxiety compels her to escape from Sweet Home because of her fear of slavery. In other words, she tries to regain her feeling of safety by escaping. In accordance with Horney's theory of the development of feeling safety, which is classified into three trends, Sethe, follows the second trend, which is called "moving away from people", to satisfy her needs of safety. In fact, since that time, Sethe adapts this trend throughout the rest of the novel.

After escaping or moving away from people, Sethe's anxiety begins to decrease, but unfortunately, when she met her new master (the symbol of slavery), by chance, her anxiety returns and increases again. Sethe's increased anxiety drives her to commit her crime. According to the Humanistic Psychological Theory, which asserts that

some people live in detachment to get their needs of safety, Sethe decides to live in isolation after her releasing from jail. She seeks to get her needs of safety by moving away from people.

In fact, these people, who choose detachment to feel safety, block themselves from searching development, or in other words they block their growth motivation. They "construct a kind of invisible shield around themselves as well as from others, these people restrict personal needs to maintain self-sufficiency" (*Personality and Personal* 141). As a result, they refuse to take part in society, they "fear of the outside world" (Maslow, *Toward a Psychology* 66). Maslow states:

Assured safety permits higher needs and impulses to emerge and to grow towards mastery. To endanger safety, means regression backward to the more basic foundation. What this means is that in the choice between giving up safety or giving up growth, safety will ordinarily win out. Safety needs are prepotent over growth needs. This means an expansion of our basic formula. (*Toward a Psychology* 56).

Indeed, slavery is a great obstacle to Sethe's growth. It hinders her from satisfying her safety needs, and consequently she becomes a neurotic character. According to the Humanistic Psychological Theory "neurosis tends to isolate the individual because it leads away from social functioning and the solving of real-life problems" (*Personality and Personal* 119). In her isolated life, Sethe avoids making ties of

any kind. She evades her neighbors as well as her friends. She, also, avoids making intimate relationships with her children: Howard, Buglar and Denver. As a result, they leave the house except Denver.

Denver, also, at the beginning of the novel, is portrayed as an isolated character. Unlike her mother, Denver does not desert the people, but, she is the one who is deserted because of the crime of her mother. Indeed, Sethe is the main cause of Denver's isolation and suffering. In school, most of Denver's friends avoid and neglect her because of her mother; whereas the others annoy her by their excessive inquiries about her mother's crime; as a result, Denver leaves school. In fact, Denver is deserted by her brothers and friends because of Sethe:

Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother-serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing. None of that had mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now, making Denver long, downright long, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost. (Morrison 12)

With the appearance of the ghost of *Beloved*, Denver's character has changed. In other words, Denver's growth needs of safety, love and esteem are motivated by the appearance of the ghost. Before *Beloved*'s appearance, Denver lived alone and lonely for years. Denver's desire to achieve her safety needs was blocked by her fear of

her mother who may try to kill her like her sister. Denver's need to feel safety, or in other words, to be free from fear and anxiety, is achieved with *Beloved*. In fact, Denver tries to surmount her fears because of *Beloved*. Denver feels certain responsibility towards *Beloved*. So, she tries to get rid of her fear and collect her strength to protect *Beloved*. Denver comments:

Beloved. Waiting for me. Tired from her long journey back. Ready to be taken care of; ready for me to protect her. This time I have to keep my mother away from her. That's hard, but I have to. It's all on me. (Morrison 206)

Although Denver loves *Beloved*, yet, *Beloved* does not care about Denver, she cares only about Sethe, but in a strange way. She wants Sethe just for herself, and then she begins to exploit her. And because of Sethe's sense of guilt towards *Beloved*, *Beloved* was able to get her demands. According to the Humanistic Psychological Theory which asserts that the deprivation of certain basic needs leads to the individual's destructive, violent or frustrated behavior, *Beloved*'s deprivation of satisfying her safety needs leads to her strange behavior. She is a young woman but she behaves like a child, in other words she cannot satisfy her basic needs which help a person to develop him/herself and achieve his/her psychological health and maturity. Maslow comments:

Why is it so hard and painful for some to grow forward? Here we must become more fully

aware of the fixative and aggressive power of ungratified deficiency-needs, of the attractions of safety and security, of the functions of defense and protection against pain, fear, loss and threat, of the need for courage in order to grow ahead. (*Toward a Psychology* 53)

By applying Horney's theory of the development of feeling safety, which is classified into three trends, *Beloved*, in trying to gain her needs of safety, follows the third trend which is called "moving against others", or in other words, she becomes aggressive person. Through her aggressive behavior, *Beloved* tries to hide her fear and weakness. Horney describes such a person as an aggressive person who wants to dominate others and exploit them, "he abhors being helpless toward anything in himself as much as or more than being helpless toward any external factor" (*Neurosis* 214).

Associated with the Humanistic Psychological Theory which suggests that "love is a basic prerequisite [for] healthy development of human being" (*Personality Theories* 453), Denver continues to love *Beloved*, one-sidedly. In fact, Denver-*Beloved* relationship shows how Denver's needs of love motivate her to develop herself, or in other words, help her to achieve her growth.

According to the Humanistic Psychological Theory, after love needs have been satisfied, esteem needs become increasingly important. Thus, Denver, after satisfying her love needs, tries to satisfy her esteem needs. Throughout her caring for *Beloved*, Denver

feels of her importance in her life; in other words, she begins to achieve her psychological health. "Satisfaction of the self-esteem needs generates feelings and attitudes of self-confidence, self-worth, capability, and the sense of being useful and necessary in the world" (*Personality Theories* 453).

Denver begins to appreciate herself, feels self confidence and believes that she can do many things, even improve her social relationship. In other words, she gains her psychological freedom; associated with the humanistic psychological theory which asserts that when a person has some degree of self-esteem, he or she gains the psychological freedom to be creative and to grow as well as to be more generous to other. (Maslow, *Motivation* 22)

Denver begins to realize and use her inner potentialities when *Beloved's* real character shows up as an evil character. Denver is stimulated by her new motivated character to help her mother to get rid of the wicked creature, or the ghost of *Beloved*; "The job she started out with, protecting *Beloved* from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from *Beloved*" (Morrison 243).

Based on a humanistic psychological analysis of Denver's character, it is found that Denver becomes a self-actualizing character. Despite her family's troubles, Denver, by the end of the novel, accepts her family's problems and tries to solve them. First, when they run out of money, she goes looking for work, and interacts with society; second, when she rescues her mother from the wicked ghost; "Unless

Denver got work, there would be no one to save... It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (Morrison 252). In fact, she becomes an independent and responsible young woman. Maslow explains:

I could describe self-actualization as a development of personality which frees the person from the deficiency problems of youth, and from the neurotic (or infantile, or fantasy, or unnecessary, or "unreal") problems of life, so that he is able to face, endure and grapple with the "real" problems of life (the intrinsically and ultimately human problems, the unavoidable, the "existential" problems to which there is no perfect solution). That is, it is not absence of problems but a moving from transitional or unreal problems to real problems. (*Toward a Psychology* 115)

Thus, after the analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* by using the Humanistic Psychological Theory, the study shows how the characters failed or succeeded in developing themselves. In other words, it shows the one who can use her potentialities and the one who cannot. The study concentrates on Morrison's main characters: Sethe and Denver, and it shows how Sethe's deficiency-needs of safety hinder her from development or growth. Sethe cannot achieve her self-actualization needs. She is considered as a deficiency-motivated woman.

On the other side, it shows how Denver attempts and succeeds to overcome her deficiency needs. Denver is the one who succeeds to use

her potentialities, or in other words becomes a self-actualized person. In fact, according to the Humanistic Psychological Theory, the self-actualizing tendency is a person's lifelong process of realizing his/her potentialities, no one ever becomes self-actualized enough to abandon the motive; consequently, man's life is full of challenge excitement.

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