


African-American Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the African-American identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). The novel emphasizes the painful aspects of slavery such as sexual abuse and violence and explores the effects of the institution of slavery on the African-American character's identity. The paper also addresses what it means to have a name and be free. The slavery institution does not believe in individuality. Naming is significant since it identifies the character. An analysis of the character's identity and name will be studied since the characters have written their own stories and they are historically deprived of their humanity and language, a major constituent of the character's personal and fellow slaves' history. Therefore, the African-American character looks at the past as he/she longs for the sense of self. Moreover, the African slave is prohibited from being himself/herself or from belonging to a family. In this kind of institution, the African-American doubts the essential aspects of his identity, such as his value as an individual and the source of his manhood. Even after emancipation, the character feels that he has no identity, alienated and has no sense of self. After being freed, the characters try to reclaim their identities. The characters rename themselves in a way that they can now become 'definer' not 'defined': specific examples and references will be

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drawn from the narrative. The white founders of the institution of slavery commit acts of raping, an attack on one's freedom, stealing and stripping the slave's belongings and possessions, including his name.

KeyWords: Morrison, *Beloved*, Identity, African-American Novel, Slavery.



1. Morrison and African-American Literature

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is set during the 1870s. *Beloved* focuses on the powers of history and memory. It is called the most technically-sophisticated work by using flashbacks, fragmented narration, and shifting viewpoints. In an interview with Angelo (1989), Morrison says about the novel:

I was trying to make it a personal experience. The book was not about the institution. Slavery with a Capital S. It was about the anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another_ that was incredible time (*Time*, 22 May).

Morrison has been regarded “the premier promoter of African-American literature” (Dan: 2007). Morrison presents the brutal effects of slavery. Morrison attempts to uncover the reality of the African-American past in her work: she makes the reader “journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (“Site” 112). In an interview, Morrison herself acknowledges that she is an “antipostmodernist author of black-topic texts passing them to her black readers” (*Living Memory* 11).

2. The Main Issues in Morrison's *Beloved*

Beloved “examines how social assistance that is contingent upon work and adherence to normative moral standards reinforces African-American marginalization, whereas unconditional social assistance has a greater potential to mitigate it” (Zamalin, 2014, 208). The plot in *Beloved* is about a story of Sethe, an ex-slave who was resettled to the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio with her daughter Denver at 124 Bluestone. The two women are joined by Paul D, one of Sethe's fellow slave's in Kentucky plantation called “Sweet Home”. It's after the Civil War in 1870; although slavery as a legal institution is over, it has only started its haunting of Sethe's house by her deceased baby daughter. Readers never learn the baby's name but in

exchange for sex, Sethe has had a headstone carved for her girl, bearing a single word “Beloved”. Denver has no friends and is extremely shy. Howard and Buglar, Sethe’s other two sons, run away from home by the time they are thirteen. Once leaving the house, and upon returning to it, Paul D, Sethe, and Denver discover a young woman sleeping near the front door of their house. The young woman goes by the name Beloved, and from all appearances she is the embodied spirit of Sethe’s daughter. In the climax of the story, Denver reaches out and searches for help from the black community to get rid of Beloved who begins to be a great trouble in the house.

2.a Morrison’s Beloved and Slavery

In *Beloved*, Morrison explores the effects of slavery on the characters, Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and Paul D, who try to repress and then come to terms with the painful memories of the past. According to Atlas (1999), critics face difficulties in their interpretation of the novel because of its complex design and sensitive subject matter (47). Bell (1992) notes that *Beloved* is an exploration of the “double consciousness” of black Americans (8). Franco (2010) suggests that one reads *Beloved* as a call for reparations, or recompense “for slavery and Jim Crow social oppression and marginalization” (428). Ayadi (2011) states, using Derrida’s deconstruction, that “*Beloved* shows the way African-American identity could be reconstructed through its own cultural heritage and social structure” (263). In the novel, Morrison reflects both the pessimism produced by racism and the optimism that supported African-American people to survive in spite of racism. In her novels, Morrison has a desire to make her reader examine the family values, gender politics and community secrets that shape individual and collective identity.

2.b Morrison’s Characters: Names and Use of Language

The effects of slavery on African-American identity are presented in the characters, their use of language and change of names. The characters have been deprived of their identity, humanity, and language. When they look

at the past, they long for the sense of self-struggle to assert their African-American identity.

From the outset of the novel, Sethe, the protagonist recollects her memories of slavery which are inescapable and continue to haunt her in the spirit of her deceased daughter. The story is written by the voices of people who historically have been denied identity, humanity, and language. *Beloved* focuses on memory and history: Sethe's memories of her daughter's death and her experience at "Sweet Home" are too painful to recall consciously. African slavery in America, says Fullweiler (2000), is "a brutal exploitation, but the paternalism of the planters sometimes instilled a sense of humanity in the exploited slaves" (113). What the slaves' desire most is freedom.

Like all other slaves, Sethe has no identity because the slavery institution believes in no sense of individuality. Therefore, she takes her role as a mother, desiring maternal bonding, to an extreme. Sethe thinks of her children as best parts of herself and she can now create her identity. Through her individual efforts and with the help of Paul D and other slaves, Sethe conceptualizes her identity as different from her children. She seems to be different from the rest of the slave community who avoid and keep themselves away from her because they believe Sethe, like Babby Suggs, is thinking too high of herself. In an incident that confirms the community's view, Sethe prefers to steal food from the restaurant when she works rather than wait on line with the rest of the black community. However, the community helps Sethe to find her identity after her release from being trapped by *Beloved*.

The voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over *Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash* (my italics, *Beloved* 254).

Sethe becomes involved in the African-American community. She is reborn after emancipation and gained a new identity. As a member of this community to whom she belongs, she shares their past history and crossing of the Atlantic.

Sethe also reveals more details about her mother. In one instance, she recalls Nan telling her that she and Sethe's mother "were together from sea" and "taken up many times by the crew" (*Beloved* 74). Nan and Sethe's mother were on the slave ship during the Middle Passage and were both raped by white sailors. The act of raping is an attack on one's freedom; it is an intrusion into the privacy of the character's identity. Another act of aggression against the character's identity is stealing and stripping one's belongings and possessions. Sethe is still preoccupied with the schoolteacher's and his nephew's behavior when they have stolen her breast milk, which is stored for her infant daughter.

After I left you, those boys come in and they took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears... As she [Sethe] raised up from the heart she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts. She straightened up and knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree (*Beloved* 20).

3. Seth and Paul D

When the school teacher finds out that Sethe has reported his and his nephews' misdeeds to Mrs. Garner, he has her whipped severely despite the fact that she is pregnant. During this narrative, Paul D cradles Sethe's breasts and Sethe "relived their weight". The narrator comments: it is the "responsibility of her breasts". In fact, they are symbols of her devotion to her children, but now they are Paul's for a moment. Usually defined by her motherhood, Sethe has a chance to be herself for a moment, whoever that may be. In this act, Paul D acquaints Sethe with her body as a locus of her own desires and not merely a site for the desires of others_ whether those of rapists or those of her children.

Paul D has endured torturous experience in a chain gang in Georgia, where he was sent for trying to kill Bradywine, a slave owner whom he was sold to by schoolteacher. The African-American character is always feeling in agony because he/she doesn't own him/herself. Even those who try to survive think of others' losing their identity and humanity on the hands of the white. That is what happens to Sethe after the experience of *Beloved*. When Paul D comes back to Sethe, who was retreated to Babby Suggs bed to die, Sethe laments, "She [*Beloved*] was best thing." But Paul D replies, "You Your best thing Sethe." Paul D's identity seems to be vanished since he suffers physical and emotional brutality at Sweet Home. One of the means Paul D believes in and uses to repress his painful memories in order to survive isn't to become too attached to anything. Paul D has made a union with Sethe because this act provides him to come to terms with his past.

However, Paul D continues to doubt essential aspects of his identity, such as his value as an individual and the source of his manhood. Paul D considers himself a man in his own right but the schoolteacher proves to him that this claim to mankind is not inherent and it depends on the will of another. After wearing a bit like an animal, a portion of Paul D's identity is shattered. His relationship with Sethe and their bondage of the past form a coherent identity that has participated in putting together the fragments of their past.

4. Seth and her Past

It is Sethe's story and her past experience that is presented throughout the novel. The most striking characterization of Sethe is her motherly instincts. Sethe's past causes her to be a strong influence on the narrative. What Sethe has confronted in Sweet Home makes her take control of all what was happening to her family. Because Sethe is obsessed with the past, she has mistaken Mr. Bodwin for schoolteacher during the exorcism. Instead of repeating the past by running to protect her own children, Sethe does what she wishes she has done before: she directs her violence to attack this mistaken enemy.

Undoubtedly, the novel questions through the eyes of the schoolteacher: what is the difference between a man and an animal? The schoolteacher treats the slaves like farm stock, measuring their body parts and studying them like biological specimens. Once, Sethe overheard him giving a lesson to his nephews about her in whom he instructed them to categorize each of her characteristics as either human or animal. He manifests his cruelty; Sixo, Mr. Garner's slave, is whipped by the schoolteacher when he tells him about his reasoning that breaks the rule. The schoolteacher wants to demonstrate that "definitions belong to the definers" not the defined. The slaves' identities are determined by their white masters. All the slaves in Sweet Home are the property of the Garners. Mr. Garner believes that manhood is in the ability to live to make choices, although he doesn't provide many options for his slaves to choose. Mr. Garner boasts that his slaves are allowed to live as "real men", but Paul D questions how manly they actually are. Paul D thinks that "they [slaves] were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to" (*Beloved* 147).

Paul D feels that he has no identity at all even after his emancipation. That is what slavery has done to these people. Paul D believes that he is alienated and has no sense of self. At one point in the novel, he cannot tell whether screaming he hears is someone else's or his own. According to the slavery institution, slaves are sub humans and they are considered as commodities that can be bought and sold. Paul D's feeling is of insecurity because he is unaware about being a "real man". It always comes to Paul D's mind his value as an individual.

5. The African-American Character in *Beloved*

The novel shows that African-American is like any other man in America. Moreover, it addresses what it means to be free. The question to be raised: Is Babby Suggs truly free when white men are allowed to barge into her yard at any time? Does Paul D own himself and is he free when he isn't allowed to love whatever he wants to love? Thus identity is not just a matter of not belonging to a single master.

Furthermore, when *Beloved* accuses Sethe of leaving her behind and not being nice to her, Sethe seems to be referring to her mother, who left her behind on the slave ship. Each African-American's desire can be read as an element for recognition from the other; a signal of having an identity. However, the slaves are not permitted to be legally married because this matrimonial bond gives one his/herself and be in contact to another. This means that slaves become contracted to each other, where in reality they are already contracted to their owners. Regarding marriage between slaves, the slaves are prevented from any claim of their children because if they are legally married, they can claim their children.

6. Slavery and Its Impact

Slavery exists for the service of the white man, who just cares for his own advantages. Even giving a name seems to be a threat to the system: "He told the story of Paul F, Halle, Paul A, and Paul D" (*Beloved* 30). In his review of Duvall's *Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison* (2000), Storhoff (2011) remarks that it is one of the most important books in which Duvall explores Morrison's "struggle to fashion an unseable identity". The African-American identity is associated with the jungle. The white people believe that "under every dark skin was a jungle" (*Beloved* 234): who is responsible for this jungle?

But it wasn't the jungle blacks bright with them to: this place from the other place. It was the jungle of the white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In through and after life, it spread until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody sill, wore than they wanted to be (234).

Slavery has its impact not only on the African-American characters but also on whites as well.

Bourdeau (2002) remarks that *Beloved* tasks a "tradition that valorizes suffering as the pivotal experience whereby an individual becomes human"

(285). In all his experience, the African-American undergoes continued suffering. He always looks at the past because he longs for the sense of self that history provides. Moreover, the character does not use his native language because since the moment he/she boards the slavery ship, it is forgotten in this new atmosphere where he has to learn the white man's language. The slave's language is a major constituent of his personal and his fellow slaves' history. This takes the character to the memories on the ship crossing the Atlantic.

In the beginning the women are away from men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me I am small I love him because he has a song when he turned around to die I see the teeth he sang through ... there is no breath coming from his mouth and the place where breath should be is a sweat smelling the others don't know he is dead I know his song is gone now I love his pretty little teeth instead (*Beloved* 250).

This is a *Beloved's* stream of consciousness monologue describing the slave's ancestors' memories that are evoked. The speaker loves the man and his song because she understands the African language. Although he is on board this slavery ship, the man's singing releases her internal motives of being human like the other on the same ship which dehumanizes her and treats her as an animal. The man's song evokes the speaker's nostalgia and her African origin and identity.

The African-American character uses language to reflect on what goes around him. The slaves are forced to use English as a means of communication with the white man. However, Sixo, one of Mr. Garner's slaves at Sweet Home, avoids the use of English although others employ it to redefine the world on their own terms. In their attempt to claim their identity after release from slavery, Stamp Paid and Babby Suggs rename themselves in a way that they can now become definer not the defined. Other slaves like Paul D and

his inmates at Georgia prison manipulate the language and try to adjust its meanings so that the white man would be unable to understand what they are saying. This is a means of recollecting their past experience and hoping for their future dreams. Paul D and other inmates sing together about their dreams and memories by “garbing ... [and] tricking the words” (*Beloved* 234).

Powell (2000) emphasizes that Morrison initiates “the possibility of coherence and recognition for the characters in *Beloved* through freedom and alliance with community” (143). The community has a great impact on the individual: achievement and acceptance. The characters need to form an integrated self; they need to form an individual identity within their community. Sethe says: “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (*Beloved* 95). This means that the white community denies the status of the African-American as a human: This results on the negative feeling of the individual’s internal mind, even though one is freed from the external bondage. The construction of one’s identity is very central to the novel. The characters embark upon the process of individuation in which they establish a sense of self and become men and women. The characters feel that they are part of the African-American community.

According to Schapiro (2000), “the self will still be trapped in an inner world that presents a genuine experience of freedom.” Shcapiro also believes that the novel “wrestles with the central problem of recognizing and claiming one’s subjectivity and it shows how this cannot be achieved independently of the social environment” (155). The community plays an essential role in supporting and protecting its members. At the end of the story, it is the community who saves Seth from mistakenly killing Mr. Bodwin.

Moreover, the community gathers at Sethe’s 124 and collectively drives *Beloved* away, releasing Sethe from her past. The community contributes to one’s understanding of identity as an individual. It is slavery that oppresses the African-Americans and denies their being humans. Although some of the slaves are released or escaped, they still feel the devastating consequences of

being held and their attempt to reclaim their individual identities seems to be in doubt. The slaves struggle is to obtain a true sense of self and self-worth.

On the individual level, Baby Suggs helps her African-American community. When she is freed by her son, Sethe's husband, who has worked years of extra labor, she has learnt what it means to own every part of her body and she begins to call other slaves to "love your body." Baby Suggs, this elderly woman, preaches to the black community in Cincinnati in the Clearing.

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs; of flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they don't love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just pick em out ... And O my people! They don't love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them ... No they don't love your mouth. You got to love it ... Love your heart. For this is the prize" (*Beloved* 104-105).

In this preaching, Suggs attempts to assist her former slaves to reclaim themselves, to speak, and express their feelings: she encourages the blacks not only to love their hands, their mouths, and their flesh, but also to love their hearts. The white man never shows any respect to the enslaved African. Suggs also reminds her audience of the torture, torment, and despise practiced by the white man, like chopping their tongues, cutting their hands, and punishing them. Suffering physically and mentally are the results of slavery. Halle loses his mind when he watches powerless the schoolteacher's nephews rape his wife, Sethe, of her breast milk.

Sethe, a devoted mother, always tries to justify her actions to herself, particularly the beheading of her daughter in order not to return her child to the slavery by which she herself been violated. This, says Bourdeau (2002), "suggests that pain may not point the way to redemption but will instead perpetuate the process of violence in which it found its origin" (285). Even in freedom, the African-American family as an institution suffers

fragmentation and destruction. In the stream of consciousness monologue, Sethe says:

“How if I hadn’t killed her, she would have died and that is something I couldn’t bear to happen to her. When I explain it she’ll understand, because she understands everything already. I’ll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, or daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children” (*Beloved* 234).

Sethe has invested her identity in motherhood. Every sacrifice she has made in for her children is because, according to her, her children are extensions of herself as well as she is an extension of them. That is why she blames her murdering of the child on the oppression of slavery.

Sethe constructs the idea that her children are her best parts and it is from that idea she creates her identity. At the end of the novel, Paul D tells Sethe: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (322). This means that one’s identity is crucial to him/her success and happiness in life. Slavery splits a person into fragmented figure. The identity denial becomes a “self that is no self.” Where is the self? The self is located in a word defined by others. The characters suffer and face the challenge of an unmade “self” that is imposed of their recollection and defined by perceptions of language.

Coonradt (2005) remarks that the characters’ lives are “shattered” and so are their painful history remains “fragmented”. Denver plays a crucial role in the narrative; Denver grants Sethe love and compassion, but “Sethe wouldn’t have a story to tell, if not for Amy [Denver]”. In the following monologue, Denver also emphasizes family bonds.

Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk. She was my secret company until Paul D came. I love my mother but I know she killed one of her because of it ... That’s how come me and Beloved could play together. Not talking... Maybe it’s still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I love to tell her. I have to protect her (*Beloved* 242-43).

Then Denver switches to talk about her father: “I always know he was coming” (244). For Denver, her father has an identity although he is dead. During his life, he has been stripped of it but in his death she can give him an identity because he no longer belongs to the slavery. Denver struggles through her life to gain independence. Denver leaves into the town and attempts to find permanent world and possibly to attend college. This is a significant beginning for her in order to achieve independence and self-possession. Denver makes an effort toward an assertion of herself. When she realizes that her mother devotes her energies to Paul D, Denver feels threatened. She treats Paul D coldly much of the time. After Paul D’s departure, Sethe takes Beloved and Denver ice-skating, partly to show that she has not been devastated by Paul D’s departure. Later, Sethe hears Beloved humming a song Sethe made up to sing to her children. Faced with such evidence, Sethe finally recognizes Beloved as her resurrected daughter. Now that her dead child has rejoined her, she decides to discard the past and the future for the “present” of 124. Moreover, Sethe’s attachment to Beloved and her submission to Beloved’s demands oblige Denver to assume her responsibility: reaching out to the community to ask for help.

Beloved perhaps stands for all the transported slaves on the sides of the Atlantic. She is the one who embodies the “collective unconscious” of the oppressed under slavery. Beloved might be seen as a representation of the unfortunate past that is kept confronting Sethe and other African-American characters. Although Sethe becomes paralyzed by the past, Beloved plays a very significant impact on her. Beloved acts as an inspirer to Sethe for enabling her to tell stories from the past, particularly the desertion of her mother and the suffering she has endured at Sweet Home.

Morrison uses monologue by Beloved, Sethe, and Denver to portray the slaves’ loss of identity. In her description of the slave ship transporting the Africans to America, Beloved tells that many of them died of disease or starvation on their voyage to America. In each monologue, the character expresses her fragmented incoherent African-American identity. Certainly,

the three of them, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved confuse their identities. Not only the three characters confuse their identities but also there are others who are lost. Loss is one aspect of disappearance and vanishing. From the opening of the story, the situation at 124 reveals that several family members are lost. The boys, Buglar and Howard, left and Baby Suggs died. The two main characters, Sethe and Denver, have lost several people who were important to them:

124 SPITEFUL. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, who died, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old (*Beloved* 3).

The slavery institution separates families and deprives the characters from living their own lives, leaving them without a sense of self-worth. In their discussion about children, Baby Suggs tells Sethe to be thankful because she has three children left. Baby Suggs has eight: "Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, expect marrying somebody's house into evil" (6).

Furthermore, slavery prevents the African-American people from having an identity. The slaves therefore invent their own means to identify themselves or their children. This is what Sethe's mother has done to her. Sethe tells Beloved about the mother she never really knew. The one memory she has of speaking with her mother, was when the woman showed her a brand on her rib that was a circle around a cross to identify her if anything were to happen:

... Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin she said, 'This is your ma'am. This, and she pointed. 'I am the only one got the mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark' (*Beloved* 72).

Not long after that, the woman was hanged and Sethe was pulled away before she was able to see the brand. This loss of her own family as a small girl motivates her to love her children more than Baby Suggs and Paul D.

Moreover, slavery strips the slaves of their names. Naming is significant since it identifies the character. When Baby Suggs gets her freedom, she asks Mr. Garner why she is called Jenny. Mr. Garner asks her, “Ain’t that your name? What would you call yourself?” Baby Suggs replies, “Nothing ... I don’t call myself nothing” (161). She sees herself with no name and identity like all other slaves. Mr. Garner tells her that the name was on the bill-of-sale given to him by her former master, Mr. Whitelaw of Carolina. “‘Well,’ said Mr. Garner, going pink again, ‘If I was you, I’d stick to Jenny Whitelaw. Babby Suggs ain’t no name for a free Negro’” (162). After she has gained her freedom, Suggs becomes very excited and that is why she begins to ask questions about her name. Suggs becomes a source of emotional and spiritual inspiration to the African-American community. Gardner (2016) emphasizes that Morrison “exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that claims to be invested in the protection of women and children, all the while allowing them to suffer at the hands of laws that invest them with little power, and blaming them for the actions that result from their subordinated status” (210). After Sethe’s murder of Beloved, Baby Suggs stops preaching and retreated to a sickbed to die. She is the motivating power behind Denver’s leaving the house and requesting assistance from the black community.

Benston (1984) points out that “the refusal to be named ... thrust[s] the self beyond received patterns and relationship into a stance of unchanged authority” (153). The house is named 124 in the story. It consists of three digits that highlight the absence of Sethe’s murdered third child. As an institution, slavery shakes and shatters the family structure of the African people who are stripped of the foundation of any identity except their roles as servants to the white people. The institution is aware of the fact that naming is an assertion of independence and having a sense of belonging.

Hayes (2000) asserts that in African-American literature naming always holds a special double significance because of the “dual cultural heritage”. Naming the house becomes the physical representation of the spirits of the “unnamed” women who live in there when alive and when inhabits them still after death. Like Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, an agent of the Underground Railroad, helps Sethe to freedom and later saves Denver’s life. He decides to change his name because he has to pay for his emotional and moral debts for the rest of his life; While a slave, Stamp has been forced to give his wife to his master’s son to sleep with, and that his wife was a gift so terrible that it has freed him forever after of all obligation. For this reason, his feeling of guilt, he has changed his name from Joshua to Stamp Paid. “‘They called me Johsua,’ he said, ‘I am renamed myself’, he said, and ‘I’m going to tell you why I did it’” (*Beloved* 274).

Stamp Paid, a name bestowed by him, creates a new identity. Stamp Paid’s renaming is a sign of strength and self-affirmation, self-actualization of a former slave. He has his own view regarding the need of the black people to work extremely hard because they wish to dissociate themselves from white people’s image of them as a savage, animalistic species. In their entire attempt to protect and emphasize their humanity, Stamp Paid notes, the harder they work, the more bitter and angry they become. Baby Suggs, of whom Stamp Paid was very fond, thinks about her late-life depression, which deeply saddened him. He tries to convince her to continue preaching God’s word, but she claims she has lost all motivation after the white men’s intrusion into her household. This intrusion, an act of interference into the privacy of the individual, is a violation of Sugg’s identity.

Beloved asks Paul D to name her in order to have an identity. In the seduction scene between *Beloved* and Paul D, *Beloved* approaches Paul D and requests him to “touch me on the inside part”. This request seems on the surface as purely sexual. But the reality of the situation is that *Beloved*, like all other African-American characters, looks for an identity, something to be recognized as a human being, not as a commodity. In the same scene,

Beloved continues her speech with Paul D and says to him, “And you have to call me my name” (*Beloved* 137). She reiterates, “*Call me my name ... Please call it. I’ll go if you call it*” (my italics, 137). Beloved wants an acknowledgment by others in order to construct her identity.

Slavery has left horrible consequences on the African-American people. From their painful experiences, slaves try to repress their past memories and not to remember or bring any of these moments into their present life. This dissociation from the past causes a kind of fragmentation of the individual self and a loss of identity. The past is a part of one’s self and of his identity. One’s identity can be formed from these past memories impact and the present. Denial of the past perhaps leads into no identity. One has no right to blame these individuals because they live in a world which is defined by others and they are subjected to suffer and to be stripped of anything that can be associated with identity. It is this racial system of separation and isolation that keeps these African-American people from claiming their identities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Morrison’s *Beloved* stands an example of the African-American experience in the New World. Since their departure from Africa, African-Americans feel deeply the loss of their names, past (history), community and language. One of the major themes in Morrison’s *Beloved* is the African-American identity: it has been hidden in the whites’ dominating inhuman behavior. The novel portrays lives of several ex-slaves and the impact of the slavery institution on their lives. After being freed, the characters try to reclaim their identities. The characters struggle to identify themselves and fulfill an essential self. The impact of slavery is seen in its destruction and separation of the families and its deprivation of the characters’ from living their own lives and having an identity. Finally, the novel ends as if it asks this controversial question: Is it best to literally live with the past or to try to move into the future?

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