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Toni Morrison's Beloved: The Dissonance between White American Liberalism and the Lived Experiences of African Americans.

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a critique of white American liberalism in the post-Civil War period. While the Reconstruction era (1865-1877) witnessed the abolition of slavery and the extension of citizenship and voting rights to people of color, white American liberalism has failed to follow through and realize these rights. In *Beloved*, Morrison exposes this failure, indicating that there has been a dissonance within white American liberal values and that this dissonance serves to reinforce White Supremacy. This article seeks to explore this dissonance within the American white liberal values through the analysis of the lived experiences of Morrison's characters in *Beloved*. When African Americans show resistance against the dehumanization they face in America, white liberals drop all the pretence of civilization, become beasts, and wreak havoc in the lives of African Americans. In *Beloved*, Morrison suggests that American ideals such as freedom and social justice are rights white Americans never intend to grant to African Americans. White slaveholders of Sweet Home

plantation, under the veil of the apparently noble abolitionist ideals, exploit their slaves to the limit and subject them to the worst inhumane treatment. Mr. Garner's abolitionist ideals are no better than slogans used to maintain his ironclad grip of Sweet Home slaves. In the same way, Schoolteacher who hunts down Sethe and her children in the free North to return them to slavery pretends that he does so to rescue them from the supposed cannibal life they lead.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Beloved, White American Liberalism, African Americans, White Supremacy, Freedom, Social Justice.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is more than just a historical novel. Set in the aftermath of the Civil War in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1873, the novel is as a powerful critique of White American liberalism. It questions white American liberalism and its commitment to the liberation of all people regardless of their race, color, religion or country of origin. Furthermore, it reveals the dissonance of white American liberal movement which conceals a great deal of sophistry and bigotry within its core. Through the lens of African American lived experiences, Morrison dismantles the liberal discourse in America, indicating that the promise of social justice, freedom and equality in America has always failed to create a decent life for African Americans. Though the abolition of slavery was a significant legal achievement in America's history, Morrison's writings demonstrate that real social justice has always remained an unattainable dream for African Americans. In *Beloved*, the traumatic experiences that characters such as Sethe, Halle, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Sixo, and Denver go through in their journey for freedom are evident of the hollowness of the ideals of white American liberalism. While white American liberals claim to embrace liberal values, they, in a fashion inconsistent with their liberal values, deprive African Americans of a many rights and drop all the pretence once their white privilege is at stake. Noel A. Cazenave rightly observes that "overtly racist attitudes and practices are incongruent with highly touted democratic and egalitarian ideals and thus pose a conundrum for the color-blind pretensions of highly racialized democracies" (6). Cazenave goes on to argue that "such dissonance between societal ideals and actual beliefs and behavior is typically resolved through the intense denial of the existence of systemic racism" (6).

The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) constituted a remarkable period in America's history. It witnessed crucial political, legal, and social changes that aimed to mitigate the impacts of slavery. During this period, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Reconstruction Amendments were ratified to the constitution of the United States. These Amendments aimed to abolish slavery, address citizenship rights, and prohibit discrimination in voting rights of American citizens on the basis of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (Jordan 393). W.E.B. Du Bois considered the epoch of Reconstruction as a "brief moment in the sun" (Douglas 50) for Black Americans, while historian Eric Foner described the Reconstruction amendments as a "Second Founding" that fundamentally reshaped the nation by acknowledging the full citizenship of Black people in the Constitution. "The curtain is now lifted. The dismal death cloud of slavery has passed away. Today we are free American citizens. We have ourselves, we have a country, and we have a future in common with other men", said Fredrick Douglass (61). However, this brief moment in the sun did not last for a long time. It was just twelve years following the end of the Civil War that the Redemption movement loomed out, changing the political landscape dramatically. The democratic Redeemers snatched these hard-won achievements from African Americas and launched a political crusade to redeem the South from the allegedly corrupt Republicans. In 1866, Confederate Veterans founded the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist organization that sought to combat Reconstruction and limit Blacks' political and civic power. The democratic Redeemers' political coalition brought about nearly a century of systematic white supremacist hegemony. The racist Jim Crow laws which started during the Reconstruction era and remained till 1965 formed a codified system of social domination. It heinously legalized the racial segregation and disfranchisement of African Americans, considering them worthless creatures that should be kept out of white social and political life. The Jim Crow laws affected virtually every aspect of life, dictating the separation of drinking fountains, bathrooms, schools, buses, libraries, trains and restaurants. Even the boarding stairs on railroads were divided, "one side of the railing for white passengers, the other for colored, so the soles of their shoes would not touch the same stair" (Wilkerson 5). Signs of "White Only" and "Colored" were seen in almost every corner of the American South. This racial apartheid system dominated the American South for almost seven decades beginning in 1890s.

For almost three quarters of a century, African Americans participated in nonviolent resistance and grassroots protests. Their struggle culminated in the Civil Rights Movement (1954 to 1968) which aimed to end the legalized racial segregation and disenfranchisement in the country. The movement succeeded to achieve a number of remarkable legislative gains. The most important legal achievement was the nullification of laws that legalized racial segregation and discrimination by the Supreme Court in 1954. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex or origin, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which secures voting rights for African Americans were also remarkable achievements in the struggle of African Americans for freedom and social justice. Nevertheless, racial inequalities continued to wreak havoc in the lives of African American community and other racial minorities in the post-civil rights era. That is, white American liberalism failed to create social justice and peaceful coexistence among the different racial groups. African American community and other racial minorities were/ are still experiencing racism, subjugation and marginalization in spite of the professed liberal values (liberty, equality, freedom of speech, egalitarianism, and social justice).

In complicity with the ideology of White Supremacy, the white American liberalism has allowed and developed laws which maintain the white privilege and perpetuate the deprivation of other racial minorities, especially African Americans. The liberal values that America prides itself on are not meant to really create social justice for all Americans. Rather, these liberal values are no better than slogans designed to anesthetize or numb the awareness of racial minorities about America's reality and convince them that they live in a utopian world where social justice, freedom and equality prevail. In his book *Racism Without Racist*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies this color-blind racism. He holds that the rhetoric of color-blind racism which is "the current and dominant racial ideology in the United States, constructs a social reality for people of color in its practices, which are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial" (3). He goes on to say that race and racism are ingrained in all of our social interactions and behaviors that uphold white privilege, and that this discourse on race promotes a racial hierarchy that upholds white privilege and supremacy. Further he adds:

> Instead of relying on name calling (niggers, spics, chinks), color-blind racism otherizes softly ("these people are human, too"); instead of proclaiming that God placed minorities in the world in a servile position, it suggests they are behind because they do not work hard enough; instead of viewing interracial marriage as wrong on a straight racial basis, it regards it as "problematic" because of concerns over the children, location, or the extra burden it places on couples. (3)

In the same vein, Hochschild argues that "liberal democracy and racism in the United States are historically, even inherently, reinforcing; American society as we know it exists only because of its foundation in racially based slavery, and it thrives only because racial discrimination continues" (5).

Morrison's *Beloved* questions white American liberalism, the abolition of slavery and the American promise of creating social justice for people of all colors. It exposes the power structures that continue to disadvantage people of color even in the post-Civil War era. In this paper, we will analyze *Beloved* through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework that examines how racial hierarchical structures are embedded within the social, legal and political systems of America, and how these hierarchical structures work to disadvantage African Americans and relegate them to the periphery. The dissonance in white liberal values, the dichotomy of White Supremacy over Black Inferiority, and the character's struggle for agency and resistance in the novel all resonate with CRT's core tenets.

Critical Race Theory:

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a critical framework and intellectual movement which examines race and racism through the lens of social structures, legal systems, and power dynamics. "The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado and Stefancic 3) . CRT has its beginnings in the 1970s with the early works of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman who were unhappy with the slow progress of racial reform in the United States (4). The central project of CRT is to question the status quo in America where whites are privileged and Blacks are marginalized (50). CRT seeks to tackle the social disparities between whites and

Blacks (Ladson-Billings & Tate 57). Laurence Parker says that CRT "relies on various strands of social criticism and seeks to push a social justice agenda into the legal and public discourse on race (and gender and social class as well)" (519-520). The movement takes up many of the same topics as traditional discourses on ethnic studies and civil rights, but it does so from a wider angle that takes into account factors such as economics, history, context, group and individual interest, as well as sentiments and unconscious thought processes (Delgado and Stefancic 3).There are six major tenets of Critical Race Theory: (1) the concept that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the notion of interest convergence or material determinism; (3) the social construction thesis; (4) the concept of storytelling and counter-storytelling or notion of a unique voice of color; (5) whiteness as property; and (6) criticism of liberalism.

Firstly, the ordinariness of racism "means that racism is difficult to cure or address. Color-blind, or "formal," conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination" (Delgado and Stefancic 8). The general mindset of majority culture propagates and supports the ideas of "meritocracy" and "color-blindness". Each of these two ideas contributes to the marginalization of specific groups of people, primarily people of color. Meritocratic discourse and color-blindness have two main purposes: Firstly, color-blindness provides legitimacy to racism's demand for an "other" in order to survive and continue to have an impact on society. Insofar as the oppressors—the status quo—use the "others" (the oppressed) to further their elite control and assert their neutrality, then racism and white supremacy are not abnormal. Secondly, meritocracy gives the empowered whites a feeling of clear conscience. They hold onto their power and only give it up when they have nothing to lose. When they do decide to share some of their influence, they are met with admiration and platitudes.

Secondly, the idea of interest convergence means that the whites allow and promote laws and values that converge with their own interests only. Derrick A. Bell argued that "the interests of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of Whites" (Bell, *Brown v Board* 523). White people will only pursue racial justice if it benefits them in some way. Put another way, alignment—rather than altruism—is the key to interest convergence. We cannot expect people in positions of power to take

altruistic steps towards social justice. Rather, civil rights advocates need to find ways to bring the interest of the dominant group into line with those of disadvantaged and marginalized groups. DeCuir and Dixson contended that "early civil rights legislation provided only basic rights to African Americans, rights that had been enjoyed by white individuals for centuries. These civil rights gains were in effect superficial "opportunities" because they were basic tenets of U.S. democracy" (28).

Thirdly, According to the thesis of social construction, race is a byproduct of social interactions and relations. Races are categories that society creates, manipulates, or abandons when it suits. Race has been defined as a sociopolitical construct in which racial groups are not biologically distinct; and these racial groups experience "different conditions of domination or oppression" (Helms 181). Races are neither objective, inherent, or fixed, and they have nothing to do with biological or genetic reality (Delgado and Stefancic 9). Because of arbitrary genetic disparities in skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and lip size, humans have created social categories and organizations that mainly rely on these genetic distinctions. These distinctions have been used to establish a racial hierarchy and a White Supremacy.

Fourthly, the importance of storytelling lies in its powerful, persuasive and elucidating ability to dismantle beliefs that are commonly considered to be true and unalterable. The counter-storytelling "analyzes the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado and Stefancic xiv). There is that great African proverb — that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". This is exactly what Toni Morrison does in her *Beloved*. She passes a story that was not a story to pass on. She rewrites the history of African American through counter storytelling. These counter-stories can fulfill at least four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical purposes: (1) they can foster a sense of community among those on the periphery of society by giving educational theory and practice a human and familiar face; (2) they can question the wisdom of those at the center of society by offering a framework for understanding and challenging conventional belief systems; (3) they can provide new windows into the lives of those on the periphery of society by highlighting opportunities beyond their current circumstances and proving that they are

not alone in their situation; and (4) they can impart to others the idea that by fusing elements of both the story and the current reality one can create a richer world.

Fifthly, whiteness as property challenges whiteness as property and exposes how it initially crystallized as a form of racial identity, and then evolved into a form of property acknowledged and protected by American law. According to Cheryl Harris "whiteness–the right to white identity . . . is property if by 'property' one means all of a person's legal rights" (Harris 1726). He argues that the right to exclude others who are deemed to be "not white" is a central principle of Whiteness as an identity. The concept of Whiteness is mainly premised on the ideology of White Supremacy rather than mere difference of race or ethnicity. "The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded" (1736). Jamel K. Donnor maintains that "through force, coercion, consent, custom, and jurisprudential edifice, white skin and Whiteness have become exclusive forms of private property" making Whiteness a "racialized system of meaning and domination composed of ideological adherents and material components" (Donner 199). In essence, Whiteness, akin to traditional material possessions, gains its value predominantly through exclusivity. This is because the boundaries it establishes serve to "enforce or reorder existing regimes of power" (Harris 1730).

Finally, the critique of liberalism questions the principles of white liberalism on which America was founded. Liberalism as a framework of addressing racial issues through the policies of color blindness, the neutrality of law and incremental change has failed to create meaningful change in the lives of African Americans (Delgado and Stefancic). Delgado and Stefancic argued that "if racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures as deeply as many crits believe, then the "ordinary business" of society—the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on to do the world's work—will keep minorities in subordinate positions" (27). They go further to contend that "only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to ameliorate misery (27-28). Despite liberalism's avowed commitment to the creation equality between races, it actually hinders the radical reforms essential for realizing genuine racial equality. In spite of the superficial presence of neutrality, the legal system has consistently operated to the detriment of

people of color, and it persists to do so. People of color face a higher likelihood of conviction, extended sentences, arbitrary arrests, and unjust deprivation of both liberty and property.

Having discussed above the political, historical and theoretical background for our argument, we now navigate through the issue of the dissonance between the professed white American liberal values and the dire circumstances of African American in the post-slavery era as depicted in Morrison' *Beloved*. In this article, we build our argument on the premise that white American liberal values that call for freedom, democracy, equality and human rights are not only insufficient or incompetent to address the vicious tribulation African Americans are caught in within the context of the white supremacist ideology, but also complicit in the reinforcement of White Supremacy and the perpetuation of Black inferiority through the illusive liberal rhetoric that distracts racial minorities in America from the dire circumstances the live in.

Beloved: Dissonance in White Liberal Values:

Toni Morrison has devoted her literary career to the exploration of the lived experiences of African Americans in the racist American society. In *Beloved*, she examines the problem of slavery and its lasting effects on the lives of African Americans. Morrison's elaborate portrayal of the devastating effects of slavery indicates that the abolition of slavery is insufficient for addressing the deep-seated racism and racial disparities that persist in the post-slavery America. She cleverly examines the post-slavery era, juxtaposing the ideals of white American liberalism with the dire realities of formerly enslaved African Americans. Morrison's narrative suggests that there is a dissonance between the professed values of white liberalism—emphasizing freedom, equality, and democracy—and the undercurrent agendas of White Supremacy. It further intimates that the white American liberalism has been complicit in the reinforcement of White Supremacy. The seemingly liberal and democratic ideals seem to be no better than a facade used to deflect attention from the lamentable suffering and ongoing exploitation of African Americans. Morrison's depiction of the circumstances of African Americans in the post-slavery era begs the question whether whites' behaviors and attitudes towards Blacks have really matured and evolved to fully align with the ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy for all.

Before we delve into the complexities of *Beloved in* the context of white American liberalism, it is necessary to know the historical event that triggered Morrison's story. The story of *Beloved* was inspired by the real-life story of Margaret Garner, who, along with her husband and his parents as well as their four children, escaped slavery in Kentucky in 1856, seeking refuge and freedom in Cincinnati, Ohio. Unfortunately, their quest for freedom took a tragic turn as the slave catchers, acting under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Act, apprehended the family. In a frigid night and in a soul-chilling moment, Garner cuts the throat of her two-year old daughter (and tries to kill the others) rather than return to what Weisenburger calls "the seething hell of American slavery" (124). Garner had intended to kill all her children and then herself but the federal marshal intervened and stopped her. She was immediately sent to jail for trial. Building on Margaret Garner's tragic story, Morrison extends the story, placing it in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1873. Set in 1873, almost eight years after the abolition of slavery, the novel shows the involvement of white supremacists in the chase, torture and persecution of runaway slaves in the post-slavery era and challenges the core principles of traditional white liberalism.

In *Beloved*, Mr. Garner, Mrs. Garner and Schoolteacher can be seen as white liberals. Their attitudes towards Black characters in the novel exemplify Critical Race Theory's concepts (ordinariness of racism, interest of convergence, the social construction of race, critique of liberalism, etc.) where white characters maintain control over Black lives and deny them agency. The dire conditions in which the slaves of Sweet Home live reflect the inconsistencies between the declared white liberal values and the lived experiences of African Americans. The irony embedded in naming the plantation "Sweet Home" is a critique on the contradiction between the idyllic connotations of the name and the brutality of life within its confines. Despite the ostensibly benevolent name, Sweet Home becomes a hellish place for the Black slaves. Mr. Garner always brags of being a liberal slaveholder in front of his neighbors, strangers, peddlers or whomsoever he meets. He tries to adopt a superficially liberal attitude towards his slaves, accusing other slave-owners of treating their slaves as boys no matter what their age or attitude is. Contrary to other slaves on other plantations, Mr. Garner's slaves are men to the hilt. He tells other slave-owners "Y'all got boys," . . . "Young boys, old boys, picky boys,

stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one" (Morrison, *Beloved* 12). The addressee disagrees with Mr. Garner's view of his slaves, telling him that "Ain't no nigger men" and that "[He] wouldn't have no nigger men round [his] wife" (12).Here, the answer of Mr. Garner' interlocutor reminds Mr. Garner of his alleged white supremacy and leads him say in response "Neither would I" (12). Look how Mr. Garner's racist bigotry surfaces the moment he becomes cognizant of his white identity and how he contradicts himself at the same moment.

The marginal spaces of freedom white American liberals give to African Americans are always motivated by selfish white interests. Though Mr. Garner's men are allowed "to buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted" (Morrison, *Beloved*147), they are allowed to do so within the boundaries of his property and if they deviate "one step of that ground they were trespassers among the human race" (147-148). Mr. Garner strives to make sure that he has complete control over his slaves' world: "he acted like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with" (139). Contrary to his liberal beliefs, Mr. Garner does not allow his slaves to leave Sweet Home without his company because he fears "the danger of men- bred slaves on the loose" (166). While the broader society seems to support liberal moves such as the abolition of slavery, the reality tells a different story. Under Mr. Garner's liberal rule, slaves at Sweet home are deprived of the basic freedoms such as the ability walk around alone. Mr. Garner's order serves as an example of how the seemingly benevolent initiatives of white abolitionists are often infused with self-interest, and a desire to maintain the existing power structures. Again, Mr. Garner's decision to permit Halle to purchase the freedom of his mother, Baby Suggs, is driven neither by his generosity or compassion nor by his liberal beliefs. Instead, his decision stems from self-interest. That is, he seeks to exploit Halle's labor for years in exchange for granting freedom to an old woman who can no longer be of any benefit to him. Halle sacrifices for his old mother in the hope that she might spend the remaining days of her life in freedom. His mother's freedom means a lot for him. Baby Suggs accepts the deal to make her son happy, though she wonders: "What for? What does a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?" (Morrison, *Beloved* 166). However, when she steps foot on free ground "she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that

Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world" (166). Having once been enslaved, Baby Suggs now understands the meaning of freedom and the profound sense of liberation that comes with it. She is astounded that Halle, who has never experienced freedom in the same way she has, seems to grasp its meaning. Morrison's portrayal of Baby Suggs' experience with freedom underscores the need to liberate all those wretched people who have been suffering under the yoke of the racist ideologies of White Supremacy.

White liberal abolitionists intervene in the most personal relationships of African Americans and disrupt any opportunity that may yield them a moment of happiness. When Halle and Sethe decide to get married, "[the Garners] said it was alright for [them] to be husband and wife and that was it (Morrison, *Beloved* 70), but they do not allow them to hold a wedding ceremony. The Garner's intervention in Sethe's and Halle's marriage suggests that even the most personal choices, such as the choice to marry, are subject to the approval and control of the white class. This lack of autonomy affects the most personal relationships of African Americans and restricts their ability to celebrate significant life events in a manner of their choice. Said differently, marriage is a deeply personal and sanctified institution, yet the Garners reduce Halle and Sethe's union to a mere acknowledgment of their marital status without giving any importance to the cultural and emotional aspects that a wedding ceremony holds.

White Supremacy and the Stereotyping of Africans:

Schoolteacher in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a master of weaving a weird form of fairness that ultimately wreaks havoc on the lives of his slaves. On the death of Mr. Garner, Schoolteacher takes the charge of manning Sweet Home plantation. He establishes a set of seemingly fair rules Sweet home slaves. But these rules are tailored to benefit him. He frames his slaves as transgressors within a designed system breaking the rules of which would lead to punishment. Schoolteachers' system justifies his cruel treatment of his slaves and reinforces the idea that his slaves are responsible for their mistreatment. He defines the personalities of his slaves and expects them to be treated according to his definition.

Although Schoolteacher pretends to be a fair and disciplined white liberal, his attitude towards Sweet Home slaves is marked by hatred, violence and racism. Under his rule, the Sweet Home slaves are stripped of their dignity and humanity and treated as if they were subhumans or animals. This cruel treatment leads to appalling traumatic experiences that leave an indelible impact on the bodies and psyches of Sweet Home slaves. For him, the Sweet Home slaves represent ". . . the ultimate zero degree category of an ostensibly "*primal*" human nature whose differentiation from a lurking bestiality was dangerously imprecise and uncertain, so uncertain as to call for a question mark to be placed with respect to the humanity of this zero-degree category" (Wynter 222). Thus, he deliberately projects animal-like characteristics onto Sethe's character in order to "legitimate his racist ideology of white supremacy, so that . . . the debasement of the Black slaves to an animal-like state becomes a necessary precondition for the construction of his own humanity and self-image" (Harting 37). As a writer of history, Schoolteacher takes notes and collects information about the lives and behaviors of his enslaved people, reducing their intricate experiences to dehumanizing stereotypes. Schoolteacher indiscriminately applies his racist ideology to both Black women and Black men. His racist categorization of people constitutes a prelude to a series of violent acts against Sweet Home slaves. Once Sethe hears Schoolteacher ask his pupils "'Which one are you doing?'" and one of them answers "'Sethe'" (Morrison, *Beloved* 228), in response. On hearing her name, Sethe stops to listen to what is being said about her. She hears Schoolteacher define her personality. He indoctrinates his nephews on how to differentiate between her human and animal characteristics: "I told you to put her human characteristics on the lift; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (228). Similarly, Sixo, "the wild man" (13) is objectified by Schoolteacher's racist definition of African slaves. Once, he eats a shoat and engages in a conversation with Schoolteacher, positing that, being part of Schoolteacher's property, his act of eating the shoat is a way of improving that property and thus optimizing its productivity. Sixo's answer is acknowledged as "clever, but schoolteacher beats him anyway to show him that definitions belong to definers- not the defined" (225).

The Sweet Home slaves' attempt to flee the cruelty of Schoolteacher toward the North is an indictment on the hypocrisy of white liberalism. Right after their escape attempt to freedom, all Sweet Home slaves face

tragic consequences: Sethe is whipped, her milk is stolen and she later murders her own daughter; Sixo is burnt alive; Halle goes crazy; Paul D is unable to speak because of the iron bit in his mouth; and Denver leads a life of trauma and isolation. In fact, Sweet Home slaves' attempt to escape is a kind resistance to a racist system that supposedly liberates but actually oppresses, subjugates and denies the humanity of Blackness. Slaves are forced to flee at night like criminals fleeing a just society. They are hunted like animals, stripped of their humanity and treated like property. This brutality is in sharp contrast to the values of the liberal American society. White liberals are ready to flagrantly violate the core principles of white American liberalism when they feel that their White Supremacy is threatened.

Schoolteacher's definition of Sweet Home slaves degrades, debases and dehumanizes their humanity, reducing them to a state of quasi-bestiality in order to justify his racist attitudes and the use of violence against them. Arlene R. Keiser maintains that Schoolteacher's ideology represents White Supremacy and that his "system operates by dismemberment, dividing the bodies and minds of the slaves into separate parts and evaluating them through the use of "scientific" techniques" (107). The brutality of Schoolteacher fractures any semblance of emotional stability and creates an atmosphere of apprehension and trepidation in the slaves' lives. His violent acts linger in the slaves' memories like anything and disturb their minds for ages. After eighteen years, Sethe still remembers the brutal way in which she was objectified by Schoolteacher when she tells Paul D "those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. . . . Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (Morrison, *Beloved* 19-20).

Morrison shows white American liberals as willfully blind to the heinous atrocities inflicted on African Americans. The slave owners, in their unchecked power, subject their slaves to a spectrum of oppressions and when these slaves dare to resist or run away, they are relentlessly hunted down as though they were animals to be beaten up or killed. These white liberals believe that they have the right to control the lives of Black people whom they regretfully fail to recognize as fully human. Following Beloved's murder, Morrison's narrative voice unveils the view of Schoolteacher who leaves Baby Suggs' house with the impression that his runaway

slaves are "the damnedest bunch of coons" who clutch onto the "so-called" freedom. In Schoolteacher's eyes, the catastrophic consequences these "coons" face are "all testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (Morrison, *Beloved* 177). The narrator intimates that Schoolteacher, as a definer and owner of the narrative, sees all those freedom-seeking fugitive slaves as savages who need protection from what he deems a cannibal life. Schoolteacher is not ready to admit that the grievous consequences that fugitive slaves undergo are direct results of the Fugitive Salve Act which required slaves to be caught and returned to their masters, even if they were in a free state. In the same way, Schoolteacher's nephew, the one who nurses Sethe while his brother holds her down, cannot understand why Sethe commits infanticide because the sufferings of Black people remain invisible to the white oppressors or the "definer". Being amazed by Sethe's reaction, he asks the sheriff, "What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? (176). The nephew reduces Sethe's reaction to a response to a whipping because, "not being a slave, he cannot grasp the meaning of Sethe's action, as perhaps that meaning may never be grasped through forgotten agony and "official" versions of history" (Lee 580).

Black Agency and Resistance:

Beloved does not simply present a picture of passive victims. While it unquestionably depicts the harsh reality of slavery and its aftereffects on African Americans, it also brilliantly highlights the characters' agency, struggle and resistance. Even though Sethe committed infanticide, it was a desperate act of love and resistance motivated by a deep awareness of the cruel reality of slavery. According to Stamp Paid, Sethe's act of infanticide stems from profound maternal love. In killing her daughter, Sethe tries to shield her daughter from the dehumanizing and merciless clutches of slavery and thus "out-hurt the hurters" (Morrison, *Beloved* 276). She wants to secure her daughter's safety, to send her to a place where Schoolteacher's hands can never reach. Capturing Sethe's thoughts the moment she kills her child, Morrison writes:

> And if she thought anything, it was No, No.Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.

(*Beloved* 192)

The above-cited quote carries considerable significance as it presents Sethe's profound affinity with her daughter whose precious, fine, and beautiful parts are part and parcel of her own being. Sethe loves her children dearly and she is no longer ready to lose them to the dreadful abyss of slavery again. Therefore, by killing her daughter, she tries to push her through the "veil" to a space beyond the confines of slavery where "nobody . . . would list her daughter's animal characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (Morrison, *Beloved* 298). Jeanna Fuston-White relevantly argues that "it was not madness, but the reality of slavery, that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality, as well as its compassion" (464). Here, the veil represents the line separating life from death; passing through it denotes a transition from a state of pain to a realm of eternal peace. The tragic death of Beloved testifies to the hollowness of American liberalism and the cruelty of the Fugitive Slave Law which legalized the forced return of runaway slaves, stripping them of their humanity, dignity, and right to freedom. Sethe's unthinkable decision gives rise to profound moral and ethical questions. It challenges readers to ponder the extremity of her choice and to struggle with the concept of whether such a desperate act can ever be justified.

Similarly, Denver's journey towards self-acceptance and Paul D's gradual healing demonstrate the agency of Black people in reclaiming their lives and identities. Confined to the attic and haunted by Beloved's ghost, Denver's initially embodies the psychological trauma inflicted by slavery. Her final embrace of her own identity and her slow but steady reintegration into the community, however, show her courage and resistance. She decides to carve out her own route forward after escaping the confines of the past. At the end of the novel, Paul D tells Sethe, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison, *Beloved* 322). Paul D acknowledges the hardship of their shared history, stating they suffered more than anyone. Despite the extremely overwhelming past, Paul D urges Sethe to focus on building a "tomorrow". Having escaped physical chains but still struggling with the psychological scars of slavery, Paul D wants connect with Sethe and his community. Paul D's search for selfhood and his eventual decision to stay and face his past showcase his resistance against the system of slavery and its malignant consequences. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, participates in a type of spiritual resistance. She holds gatherings in the Clearing where she

inspires people to love who they are, appreciate their bodies, and discover their humanity. She beckoned her people, wooed them, exhorted them to love themselves fiercely by uprooting the pernicious seeds of inferiority implanted deep within their souls. Baby Suggs creates an environment of spiritual and emotional liberty in the face of a culture that dehumanizes, debases and degrades them. She says, "Let the children come . . . Let your mothers hear you laugh. . . . Let the grown men come . . . Let your wives and children see you dance… finally she called women to her. Cry she told them. For living and dead, Just Cry" (103). She goes on to say:

> Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not 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.… stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! … This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that need to be loved. … The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. … For this is the prize. (103-104)

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is as a critique of the dissonance between the professed American liberal values and the harsh realities of America's history. All the liberal values America prides itself on seem to be no better than a mask behind which white Americans hide their brutal cruelty. In order to maintain their privileges and hegemony, white Americans developed the values of white liberalism to hypnotize and/or anesthetize the marginalized racial groups. Said differently, the professed American values of freedom, equality and justice are meant not to really bring about social justice. Rather, these values are used cleverly to reinforce White Supremacy and divert African Americans' attention away from social injustice in America. Morrison discloses these inconsistencies in the rhetoric of white liberalism throughout her narrative. In a moment of reminiscence, Denver conjures up the following conversation between her grandmother, Baby Suggs, and her mother, Sethe, which clearly captures this dissonance:

"Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did.

"They got me out of jail," Sethe once told Baby Suggs.

"They also put you in it," she answered.

"They drove you 'cross the river."

"On my son's back."

"They gave you this house."

"Nobody gave me nothing."

"I got a job from them."

"He got a cook from them, girl."

"Oh, some of them do all right by us."

"And every time it's a surprise, ain't it?"

"You didn't used to talk this way."

"Don't box with me. There's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. (Morrison, *Beloved* 287).

Baby Suggs seems to understand the exploitative nature of white Americans who seek to advance their own interests and reinforce their power in every action they take. For Baby Suggs, the behavior of white people is unpredictable and, therefore, it is unwise to believe their superficial humanity under which hides vicious hypocrites. Baby Suggs' words suggest that the seemingly benevolent actions of white people are no better than a scheme to control the lives of people of color, and sabotage every opportunity that may create racial equality. They have tailored laws, values and principles to serve their interests, reinforce their White Supremacy, and perpetuate the inferiority of other races.

Though Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a story of suffering, there is a glimmer of hope nested within its narrative. The novel's characters struggle to free themselves from the cruel clutches of slavery and transcend beyond their wounds. At the end of the novel, Sethe and Paul D leave their traumatic past behind and strive to move forward and live life. Sethe's harrowing yet defiant act of infanticide stands as a testament to her

unwavering resistance against her daughter's return to a life of enslavement. In the same way, Denver embarks on a journey of self-discovery, asserting her identity in a world that seeks to erase and dehumanize her. The collective escape of the slaves from Sweet Home further exemplifies resistance. It constitutes a united effort to fight against the oppressive system of slavery and the power structures that stands behind it.

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