



A STUDY OF SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN TONY MORRISON'S "BELOVED"



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Abstract :

Sociological perspectives are broad assumption about society and social behaviour. Sociologists today employ three primary theoretical perspectives: the symbolic interactionist perspective, the functionalist perspective, and the conflict perspective. Each perspective has its focus on a particular aspect. African American literature traces its beginnings to the later half of the 18th century when the African American population was still an enslaved one. Literature, whether autobiography, fiction or journalism was a key weapon in combating slavery during the era. Literature spoke for millions of African Americans who did not have a voice. Without the contributions of black authors such as

Douglass, Brown, Jacobs and others, the unjust realities of slavery might well have been kept in silence. Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* centres on Sethe Suggs, proud and beautiful woman, who escaped from slavery and kills her own daughter to save her from the torments of it, but is haunted by heritage. It unearths the historical realities of horrifying experiences during Middle Passage, Slavery, Emancipation and its aftermath.

Keywords :

Slavery, emancipation, infanticide, Socio-Psychology, Conflict Perspective, Self-identify

Research Paper :

Introduction :

African American history and literature are basically connected. African American literature, as a genre:

testified against captors", bore witness to the urge to be free and literature, (and) embraced the European Enlightenment's dream of reason and the American Enlightenment's dream of civil liberty. (XXX VII)

The growing body of work meant that the African was indeed human and should not be enslaved. In their work, African American writers confronted difficult conflicts regarding black identity, black art, and the political role of culture. Toni Morrison, in the preface of her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* she says:

Struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce and enforce hidden signs, of racial, superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which by no means marginal or already or completely known and knowable in my work. (XI)

Morrison decenters the whiteness and its domination over blackness in America. She opines that whiteness always sees people as dead, impotent or, under complete control but this is lacking very important part of black people and their construction of social realities.

Beloved was a very mysterious book which really made the reader look beyond the text. It smolders at the inequities that blackmen and women still face. Morrison talks about her book in *The Pain of Being Black* :

I was trying to make it personal experience. The book was not about the institution. Slavery with the capital S.H. was about these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're trying to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another – that was incredible to me. (48).

Morrison's novel *Beloved* explores the more oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. It explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation that continues to haunt those characters who are former slaves even in freedom. Sethe's action of infanticide illuminates the perverse force of the institution of slavery : under slavery, a mother best expresses her love for her children by murdering them to protect them from the more gradual destruction brought by slavery.

Morrison's *Beloved* tells the story of an emancipated woman slave named Sethe who was an escaped slave and mother of four a few years after the Civil War in Kentucky. Her apparent good fortune at successfully escaping to Cincinnati while pregnant and giving birth in the flight and finding refuge at her mother-in-law's spirituality nourishing home vanishes 28 days later. The sight of a hat belonging to a cruel white owner who has tracked her down sends her and four children into a woodshed where Sethe kills them rather than let them suffer in the torment of slavery. After killing the 'Beloved', her third child, she is stopped by a friend who has just rushed in as she is swinging the infant by her heels to smash her head. The main action of the story revolves around the return of the murdered child twenty years later, and addresses them such as justice, morality, and slavery. After some time in jail, Sethe returns to a home haunted for years by the children's ghosts and after an exorcist attempt the child appears in the flesh as a teenager she should have been, intent on making her mother pay for having taken her life. *Beloved* is an absolutely amazing work in American literature.

In *Beloved*, Morrison explores themes of love, family, and self-possession in a world where slavery has only recently become a thing of the past. One of the primary themes of *Beloved* is the issue of the race and slavery. Much of the novel focuses on a community of ex-slaves and how they manage to get on track with their lives. Crucially, in *Beloved*, we learn about the history and legacy of slavery from Sethe's, Paul D's Stamp Paid's and Baby Suggs' point of view.

In the novel we find that Sethe is a victim of both sexist and racist oppression. She is a runaway slave mother who is brutally treated by white men, the school teacher and his nephew. Morrison explores a black women's self-conscious protest to the dual oppression. It is not only the sexual exploitation that Sethe feels oppressed by, but the humiliation of her nurturing abilities as a mother. Sethe revolves around how one can be a mother, a wife, a daughter and a woman, while a slave. Sethe made the decision about, whom to choose among the slaves who lived with her in Sweet Home, as her partner. She made her choice and she believed that, in Sweet Home the enslaved people are allowed to live as humans. But as time progresses, she begins to realize that the freedom that she thinks she has at Sweet Home is indeed an illusion.

Perspectives illustrated through *Beloved*

For the convenience of analysis, the characters in this novel may be categorized into three, each category illustrating a perspective. Economic dialecticism or determinism and class theory runs as under current throughout the novel, a class to rule and a class to be ruled. The masters are of two types – benevolent and cruel. The first group comprises master like Mr. Garner. The second group comprises The School Teacher; The former illustrates, the functionalist theory and the latter, the conflict theory. The Sweet Home under Garner and the Sweet Home under the rule of School Teacher are two different entities.

The Functionalist Perspective

The first master, Mr. Garner was in charge of the farm called "Sweet Home" Mr. Garner gives his slaves as much freedom as he sees fit. Garner's policy of containment allowed Sethe and other slaves to

exercise a limited self-hood. He is presented as an enlightened slaver who allowed his slaves certain choice in an environment when choices were no-existent.

The choices of buying liberty to a mother, handling guns even learning to read and moving freely inside the property provide the semblance of a limited freedom. He possesses the individuals and extracts their labour, but he does not physically maltreat them. "His plantation did not promise any freedom to his slaves, but it definitely holds out a promise of a well-fed and secure existence. Baby Suggs admits before the Bodwins that she had not lived in a place better than the Garner's plantation." (179). Sethe is able to escape the tragedy of being separated from her children so long Garner is there. Sethe could enjoy Buglar's and Howard's childhood, their running up and rolling down the patches. She has had the "amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that "Somebody" son who had fathered everyone of her children". (29). Under the original master Mr. Garner the slaves were treated like humans. They were encouraged to think for themselves and make their own decisions. His treatment of slaves develops mutual love and affection, which strengthens the stability of the social system in which both are parts. The master slave relationship enhances each to discharge their function with devotion. The master gets faithfulness as the response from their slaves. Society according to functionalist is a well-knit system, a self-regulating and self-maintaining social system that provides basic needs to its members, ensures social order and safety to all individuals. If these functions are discharged, the society will remain in balance or equilibrium. Each section is ideally interrelated with the other. Every component of society is significant not because it is an indispensable part of an entity, society but because of the function it discharges. It becomes indispensable only because of its function to stabilize a balanced uncontroversial society, a society rid of controversy. This is the functionalist's interpretation of a stable social system as Elber W. Stewart presents it.

"In one version of racial stereotyping black were pictured as complacent, accepting their status and loving their white owners". (167).

Marxism / conflict perspective

The novel presents yet another type of master – The School Teacher. The inter relation between the slaves and the master explicate conflict theory. The master enjoys the toil of the slave community. The tense relationship between these two classes is constantly felt.

M. Haralambos says:

The proletariat is exploited by the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie use them for their own benefit and harm the interests of the proletariat in the process (64).

Paul D and Sethe, two former slaves have experienced the worst slavery has to offer. Under their new master, they are relegated to a position among animals. They are seen as beasts of burden rather than equals. Paul D and the other slaves are stripped of their free will and their manhood. The school teacher treats them as though they were animals without emotions.

The atmosphere changes under the School teacher and his two nephews. Sethe and other slaves realize that definitions belong to definers... as they are gradually deprived of their guns, game and food and are reduced to a state when pilfering becomes not only their right but also their obligation. (234).

In the novel *Beloved* Morrison explicitly says about the animal desire of the white master's nephews' whose brutality and obscenity towards Sethe is unacceptable. To her great grief the school teacher's nephew forcefully takes away the milk without any consideration for the new born baby. This turns out to be an unforgettable and painful experience in her life. She is the victim. Sethe finds that there are no possibilities of being brought out of slavery. Being woman and slave she faced the double jeopardy. The School Teacher and his nephews' steal Sethe's milk and put her pregnant stomach in a hole, in the ground and lash her back. In this scene of seeing Sethe suffering with pain and humility, her husband Halle becomes insane.

Harriot Jacobs, a slave woman who was freed, exposed the mind and feelings of a slave woman in her book, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, 1862. The husband of a slave has no power to protect her. (37) "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Super added to the burden common to all, they have wrongs and sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own" (79). The social system is such that the niggers cannot rise against their master. The only way to show the resentment is to escape from the place of work. When Sethe understands that the school teacher, who is in charge of her fate does not regard them as human beings, she wanted to escape from Sweet Home. She understands when she is controlled by other person, she is not free to be. She determines that she and her children will be free to determine their own identity, only they go away from Sweet Home. According to Gisbert P. in *Fundamentals of Sociology*.

A slave is regarded as a living something not some one, when he is owned by another man...the right to use and dispose of the object in any way that the owner likes. (389).

Here are two examples-(i) two classes bound together and work for the welfare of the whole society (ii) one class exploiting the other and thereby shattering the social system. This conflict perspective focuses on the process of tension, disagreements, competition and opposing viewpoints on goals and values.

Interactionist Perspective

This perspective tries to understand the process of action between individuals. It does not consider human action as a response to social system. It focuses on social behaviour of our daily life. This perspective later developed as theory in Socio-Psychology as it emphasized the importance of understanding the social world from the view point of individuals who acted within it. It tries to understand how people create and interpret the situation they personally experience. Sethe develops a dangerous maternal passion that results in the murder of one daughter and the estrangement of the surviving daughter from the Black community: Sethe's deep longing for explanation of the past action and for forgiveness, wake into being the ghost of her murdered daughter Beloved.

Not all people are as lucky as Sethe to have people in their lives that help to overcome obstacles. With the help of Amy Denver, Baby Suggs, Paul D and others along her journey, Sethe is able to overcome the impossible and move on from her past with a life of love and acceptance. Sethe is relieved of her painful agony of escaping Sweet Home as well as dealing with pregnancy with the help of young Amy Denver and Baby Suggs. In the face of Beloved's escalating malevolence and her mother's submissiveness, Denver is forced to step outside the world of 124. Filled with a sense of duty, purpose and courage, she enlists the help of the community and cares for her increasingly self – involved mother and sister. Denver plays the most significant role in Sethe's healing. Putting her trust in other people is the only way Sethe is able to relieve herself of her haunted past and suffering body. Morrison demonstrates that to overcome the scars of slavery, one must place themselves in the hands of those that love them, rather than face the powerful memories. At the very end of the novel when Paul D approaches the house for the second time, he attempts to understand Sethe. The ending is a powerful moment in which the two reconcile and join hands. The emotional image of two damaged souls holding hands is a powerful symbol of togetherness. Paul D makes a moving attempt to imagine being in Sethe's place not to judge or pity her but to understand and comfort her as her equal. Sociologists use interactionist perspective to concentrate on minute personal aspects of everyday life, this study unfolds the details of social process. Inter action occurs either verbally or non-verbally; it is intelligible to the groups it is meant for.

The cruelty and exploitation that the niggers are subjected to is pictured in this novel. These perspectives help in analysing the stable social system set up by Mr. Garner, conflicting tense social system by The School Teacher and the contrasting interactions of Sethe and Baby Suggs, to exploitation and insults.

Beloved is a saga of grit and courage, a chronicle of fundamental contradictions which always define a civilization; the subtext of survival instruct, subconscious urge towards domesticity and belonging, and the basic human need to grab emotional and physical sustenance wherever and howsoever possible is also evident in the structure of the novel – but what becomes most significantly transparent is the moving combination of the strength and constraints of a woman who is basically a mother, and happens to be a black slave in a society which is bifurcated by dominant racial hatred into two sections – the rules and the ruled, the master and the slave, at a turbulent of the American history.

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