



# A Psychoanalytic Perspective in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* with a Reference to the Protagonist Sethe

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## Abstract

*Sethe's conflicted personality and her act of killing her own daughter in Toni Morrison's widely acclaimed novel Beloved has remained a very serious matter of concern leaving readers, researchers and critics alike in a state of shock. It is an attempt to probe into the psyche of Sethe in order to unveil certain psychological facts behind her complicated behaviour which led her to kill her own child and pushed her further into a state of unimaginable sufferings thereby. In order to example her thought process and the reasons behind an imbalance in her personality this paper took insights from Sigmund Freud's theory of personality in the three elements of her psyche resulted in Sethe's abnormal and unstable sense of self. However, the paper also detailed the ways in which Sethe' acknowledgement with her past by employing different coping strategies helped her in developing a stable personality.*

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, personality, immediately, assumption, violence, slavery.

*Beloved* artificially combines a haunting amalgam of the past and the present experience of slavery. The novel is a series of flash backs and it is divided into three parts. Inspired by the story of a runaway slave who attempted to kill her own children rather than have them returned to slavery, Toni Morrison's novel explores the psychological and physical violence caused by slavery and its devastating impact on the successive generation *Beloved* is specifically Sethe's story. It is also the story of all the slaves of the sweet home plantation of Kentucky, Baby Suggs, Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo.

Toni Morrison's narration and portrayal of the character of Sethe in the novel is analyzed to make possible assumption on the personality. The analysis of the character is carried out through the various aspects and incidents from the novel.

Psychoanalytic theory provides a framework to study personality development and organization. It explains how unconscious processes, instincts and early experiences influence human behavior and therapy practices within psychoanalysis. Through this perspective, individuals are viewed as driven by instinctual needs and hidden desires, many of which are beyond conscious control. From this viewpoint,



human behavior is considered largely determined by unconscious forces and biological as well as social factors, leaving limited space for the concept of free will.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, identifies three key elements that shape personality. the Id, the Ego, and the superego. They were together to create complex human behaviours. According to Freud when a child is born they are born only with 'Id' but later as the child grows it develops 'Ego' because of the 'Super Ego' that is formed in the unconscious of the child because of the society and culture in which the child lives in.

According to Freudian theory anything that a person says or thinks has to be from the Ego of a person's that is after a outcome of the conflict of the Id and Super Ego. This study would be an outcome from the psyche of the author. Since the author has her super Ego and Id just like every other person in this world. One can assume that the same can be applied to the common psyche of the entire humans.

The Id is considered the only element of personality that exists from birth. This part of the mind is entirely unconscious and is responsible for basic instincts and primitive forms of behavior. Freud explained that the Id generates all psychic energy, making it the central driving force of personality. Governed by the pleasure principle, the Id constantly seeks immediate satisfaction of desires, drives and needs. When these demands are not met quickly, feelings of anxiety or inner tension may arise.

For instance, hunger or thirst usually triggers an instant urge to eat or drink. The Id plays a vital role in early life since it ensures that an infants needs are fulfilled. If the child feels hunger or discomfort, they instinctively cry until their needs are demands instantly is not always realistic or possible. If human behavior were controlled solely by the pleasure principle, people might act impulsively, even seizing what belongs to others, which would disrupt social harmony and be deemed unacceptable. Freud observed that the Id reduces such tension by creating mental images of desired objects through the primary

process, giving temporary relief until real satisfaction is achieved.

The Ego, on the other hand, is the personality system that manages reality. Freud suggested that the Ego develops out of the Id, functioning to ensure that the Id's impulses are expressed in ways that are acceptable within the external world .The Ego functions across three levels of the mind - the conscious, the preconscious and unconscious. Operating under the reality principle, it seeks to satisfy the Id's desires in rational and socially acceptable manner rather than through impulsive actions.

The Ego functions across three dimensions of the mind. the unconscious, the preconscious and the unconscious .It works on the basis of the reality principle, aiming, to fulfill the Id's demands in ways that are both realistic and socially acceptable. The reality principle carefully evaluates possible consequences of actions before allowing them or rejecting them. In most situations the Id's impulses can only be gratified through patience and postponed satisfaction. The Ego eventually permits such actions, but only at the right moment and under suitable conditions. It also reduces the inner conflict caused by the Id's urges through the secondary process in which it attempts to locate a real- world object that corresponds to the imagined object created by the Id's primary process. Thus the Ego acts as a mediator maintaining balance between the Id, the super Ego and reality ensuring stability of consciousness.

The final element of personality to emerge is the Super Ego. It represents the moral framework within us, reflecting the values standards, and sense of right and wrong. The Super Ego provides guidelines for making judgments. According to Freud, the Super Ego begins to emerge at around age of five. This study is to concentrate on the inner mind of the protagonist. The conflict in the mind of protagonist is very important. The main problem is the background of the character and the past experiences that make all sorts of things. Therefore the research would construct itself around the conflict between id and



the super ego. "BELOVED, she is my daughter. She is mine. See she come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain If I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her".

"She was n't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. too little to talk much even" . In the quoted passage the protagonist Sethe, a former slave whose love for her children and hatred of slavery causes her to commit an unthinkable act in order to keep her children free from a life of bondage. No doubt that what was done by Sethe could be wrong in the eyes of a moralist. But she did it because she was surrounded by the most immoral and unjust world where justice and self-respect could not be restored accepted ways of injustice and self-destruction. The protagonist argues that a mother must and would do anything to ensure the welfare of her children, even it means prostituting herself like the "Saturday girls" who sells their bodies in the slaughter house yard. Here the opposing forces in conflict according to psychology are the id and the super ego. The super ego of Sethe character is revealed in these lines and explains how much she suffered in her life. "They beat you and you was pregnant? And they took my milk!"

Before she could escape from the plantation, the two white boys, the school teacher's nephews sucked out her breast milk and lashed her with rawhide whips. Although she was terrible pain from the whipping, Sethe ran away from the sweet home at that night. This incident remembers that Sethe Ego's mind slightly changed into super ego. She thinks that her children will not face these kind of slave experience in their future. "I am not dead-I am not",

*Beloved* is a combination of adult body and infant perceptions used to describe her experience on the other side where death is a "dead man on my faces and daylight comes through the cracks". The strongest emotion left to her love for Sethe, whom she observes chewing and swallowing. The depiction of the

watery division between the Earth and after the life fails to separate Sethe from her daughter. Sethe's mind is fully filled with love of beloved. Unconsciously she feels in love with beloved and she tries to see her face here unconscious plays vital role. "I drank your blood...You are min".

The three merge in the final lines, blessed by milk, smile and blood. The benediction like a classic admires charm is uttered three times the Super Ego plays vital role because each of them wants to expose their love with on another. The relationship between mother and daughter, sisters and relationship are with Sethe and Denver. Everyone wants to be as mine. Through unconscious they reveal their inner ideas because they long for love and care from their loved ones. This makes clear; they are ready to sacrifice their wishes. Denver wants to become close with beloved and she wishes to see her faces whereas Sethe wants to see the smile, they feel happy when she finds again.

Slavery is presented as a pattern. The owners of slaves believe that they should show their superiority over the slaves and justify their actions. The damage that every black inherits at the hands of the slave master forces to kill babies to avoid children turning slaves

Sethe's psychological journey thus reflects both the individual and collective struggle of former slaves. Morrison's novel powerfully asserts that slavery's legacy is not only historical but also deeply psychological, shaping memory, Identity and the human capacity for healing.

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