

## NAME, THE FEMALE BODY AND IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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*Abstract: Identity represents one of the themes of interest approached by American ethnic writers. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the theme of identity in Toni Morrison's novel 'Beloved', one of the most famous novels written by the African American writer. In her novel, Toni Morrison tackles the problem of identity in the African American community during and after the abolishment of slavery. The paper focuses on two important aspects: the names of the characters in the novel, which represent an important trait in the African American culture and play a definitory role in the shape of their identity and the importance of the female black body in the quest for identity of those whose lives have been changed and influenced by slavery.*

*Keywords: African American, identity, name, body, ethnicity*

### 1. Identity in African American literature

Identity represents a theme of great interest for writers that come from different American ethnic backgrounds, writers like Toni Morrison, one of the most famous African American writers. The history of African-American literature can be divided into four major parts: the oral tradition and the slave narrative, the literature produced during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Right Movement Era. These periods are followed by an increased in the popularity of African-American writers and by the appearance of Modern and Postmodern literary creations. Throughout all these periods, African-American writers were constantly preoccupied with questions related to identity, both personal and collective.

The Africans that came into America as slaves brought along with them their own history and their own traditions. This is valid for their literature as well. During their trials and sufferings as slaves, oral tradition was a way of keeping their history alive, through storytelling, singing, dancing rituals and other elements of folklore. All these can be seen in the works of former slaves and their narrative, such as Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs and William Wells Brown. All these writers manage to present the lives of the slaves in America, using an original style and language. In addition, their writings deal with issues related to the African-American identity in slavery, as well, particularly since their identities are strongly connected to their race and to the colour of their skins.

However, the problem of identity of the African-Americans did not end along with the abolition of slavery. The works of former slaves were the beginning point in the process of shaping an African-American identity. After the abolition of slavery, many black people managed to get an education and to start producing important literary works, like the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar and the author and social activist Sutton E. Griggs. Another important author of this period is the sociologist and historian W.E.B Du Bois and his theory regarding the "double consciousness" of the blacks in America, in *The Souls of the Black Folks*. In this collection of essays, he stands against the idea that racism will eventually fade away, and claims that colour will be one of the most important problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that it

will require hard work to overcome the concept of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 9-10). Through this “double consciousness”, Du Bois argues that the African-American is struggling with an internal conflict, due to being part of a society that oppresses minorities. Du Bois compares the Negro with a “seventh son” who lives in “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (5). Moreover, the Negro has a binary way of looking and understanding his own identity: through his own eyes and through the eyes of the society that judges and sometimes oppresses him (Du Bois 5).

The Harlem Renaissance period is a period of growth and flourishing of the literature produced by the African-Americans who were living in harsh conditions in the Southern part of American, due to the lack of economic possibilities and due to public segregation. At the start of World War I, the blacks living in the south had to move north in order to find better living conditions, where they ended up taking many of the jobs previously held by white men. Therefore, the movement that was also known as the “New Negro Movement” was centered in Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan, New York. This became a central point for the African-American culture, as it contained music (jazz and blues), art, theatre and literature (fiction and poetry).

The migration of the blacks into the north increased with the passage of time, reaching its peak during the World War II. Blacks were leaving behind the racism and segregation in the south and were discovering new opportunities in the north, in great industrial cities like Chicago and New York. This new sense of freedom and independence has led to an empowerment of black communities and these eventually lead to the rising of the Civil Rights Movement. At present, several African-American writers still fight for the rights of African-Americans in their writings. An increased number of female African-American writers have made their voices heard, in the recent times. These authors are remarkable in the African-American culture, as they were considered a double minority: black and female. Some of these writers are Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor and one of the winners of the Literature Nobel Prize, Toni Morrison.

One of the most representative authors in the African-American literature is Toni Morrison. Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford, Morrison was a novelist, essayist and a teacher. She is mostly known for her fight to bring into light the challenges of the African-Americans in the USA and her desire to produce a history of the African-American struggles, presented from an African-American point of the view. One of her most famous and celebrated novels is the novel *Beloved*. It was published in 1987 and it has brought her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 and ultimately, in 1993, the Nobel Prize for Literature.

With its plot set after the end of the American Civil War, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a former slave who is living with her eighteen-year old daughter Denver in their house on 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio. Their home is described from the beginning by the narrator as “spiteful” and “full of baby venom” (Morrison 3). Moreover, the house is also inhabited by the ghost of Sethe’s eldest daughter, a daughter she killed while running away from her former master. Lest her master should catch her and her children and bring them all back into slavery, Sethe makes the disturbing decision to murder them. Sethe does not manage to kill all of them, but she does manage to slash the throat of her two-year old daughter.

In this novel, Morrison deals with problem of identity, specifically the challenges faced by African-Americans during slavery and the period immediately after. By combining elements of Magic Realism with the everyday realities of the post-civil war America, she manages to create stories of relatable characters who struggle to discover and accept their own identities in a changing society. Through Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, Paul D and others,

Morrison tries to rewrite a page of the African-American history, by putting in the spotlight the non-privileged African-American.

## 2. Names and identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Names symbolize one of the most essential ways in which people see themselves as individuals. A name represents something personal and individual, something that is supposed to make a person unique and memorable. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the names of the characters play an important role in their quest for understanding and accepting their own identities. Therefore, the naming and nicknaming of the characters represents one of their most relevant traits and choosing a specific name by some characters can be considered an important step that they take in order to regain and reclaim their own identities.

Concerning the importance of the names of the characters in their quest for identity, Genevieve Fabre points out that for the African-American community names are an important part of their heritage and culture. These names are part of their stories; they are part of the one person's identity: "Names are an essential part of the legacy (of black people), and names have stories which, incongruous, preposterous as they are, must be cared for . . . Blacks receive dead patronyms from whites...names are disguises, jokes or brand names—from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names endure like marks or have secrets they do not easily yield" (108-109). Moreover, when discussing the importance of names in the African community, Toni Morrison points out the great significance she gives to the names of her characters. In an interview for Thomas Le Clair, from March 1981, entitled *The Language Must Not Sweat*, Morrison talks about the importance of the names that Africans received and the importance of those names in the idea of belonging to a certain community and to a specific tribe. She affirms that:

I never knew the real names of my father's friends. Still don't. They used other names. A part of that had to do with cultural orphanage, part of it with the rejection of the name given to them under circumstances not of their choosing. If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. (Le Clair)

For blacks during the slavery period, there were two possibilities regarding their name: they received either names from their mothers or fathers, or, which happened most often, they were named by their white masters. Another particularity for the slavery period is that some of these slaves had different marks on their bodies. These marks are signs of their racial identity and they are present on two of Morrison's characters: Sethe and Sethe's mother.

Sethe's mother is one of the characters that remain unnamed during the entire novel. Sethe has not had much contact with her mother. She did not grow up spending time with her and she called her by the usual, general "ma'am". However, Sethe remembers how one night her mother showed her the scar, which she had on her back. It was a scar shaped like circle and a cross, a sign of her marking by the white masters and in the same time, making her part of a racial community: "Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. 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 this 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'" (Morrison 61).

As a reaction, young Sethe asks her mother to be marked as well, not understanding the real meaning of these scars. As she remembers Sethe's mother slapping her, she affirms: "I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own" (Morrison 61). This is because the scars and the mark were not something to be desired. They stood as proof that

they were slaves and that they were somebody's property. As slaves, they were nothing more than something that white masters owned. They could not have an identity of their own, nor could they exist outside the limits of slavery.

Therefore, Sethe's mother could only be recognized or identified by the marks of suffering on her body. Due to a lack of a proper name, these scars were the only thing left for her. Barbara Hill Rigney in her book entitled *The Voices of Toni Morrison* discussed the marks that are present in Toni Morrison's novels. She affirms that marks like the one of the back of Sethe's mother help distinguish a certain racial identity, as "most are either chosen or inflicted by the condition of blackness itself, by the poverty that has historically accompanied blackness, or by the institution of slavery which "marked" its victims literally and figuratively, physically and psychologically" (40).

Moreover, Rigney goes on and points out that the "verbal equivalent of such marks is the name" and this is mainly because similar to the marks, a name "does not necessarily designate an individual self so much as a segment of community, an identity larger than self" (40). In *Beloved*, characters are named in several ways. There is the case of several slaves, like Paul D, which were named by their white masters and their names are driving them away from their African ancestry. Other characters get to keep the names they have received from their mothers or fathers, like Sethe and Denver and others get to decide their own names. This stands as a sign of a liberating fight against slavery, portrayed by characters like Baby Suggs, who refuses her slave name and Stamp Paid, who decided to rename himself after becoming a free man.

The main character of the story is Sethe, a black woman who was named after a black man. Her mother named her after Sethe's father, the man her mother loved and voluntarily accepted. From Nan, the slave who nursed Sethe at Sweet Home, Sethe finds out that she was the only child kept and named by her mother: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them" (Morrison 62). Therefore, she finds out that she was named after her father, while her other siblings were the result of rape and abuse: "You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe" (Morrison 62).

Thus, Sethe is one of the characters that are not named by white masters, giving her a sense of identity and uniqueness. According to Rigney, Sethe's name could be a representation of blackness and of acceptance into a certain tribe and into the African culture (41). However, in spite of the fact that she was given a sense of identity from the very beginning, Sethe is one of the characters of the novels that seems lost and in search of her identity. Eventually, when at the end she learns how to deal with the trauma of her past and when she accepts the ghost of Beloved, she manages to come to terms with who she is and seems to arrive at the end of the journey of finding herself.

Denver is Sethe's eighteen-year-old daughter, a daughter that was born while Sethe was running north, away from slavery. She is rather lonely and apparently, she has not left the house for a long period. Even though her name suggests the geographical location of the city of Denver, Sethe actually named her daughter after the white woman who helped her give birth while she was fleeing from slavery and towards Baby Suggs' house.

Beloved is actually the name of the daughter that Sethe murdered, fearing they would return into slavery. The baby girl does not actually have a proper name. Her name is given by the seven letter engraved on her tombstone, letters that Sethe paid for with her own body and dignity. Beloved only received a nickname, *Already Crawling Girl*. Beloved's name is actually part of the words said at the beginning at a funeral (Dearly Beloved). Later in life, Sethe goes back to the moment when she paid the price of those seven letters and wonders if

she could or should have done more for her baby girl: "Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too?" (Morrison 5).

Even though Sethe would have wanted to engrave the entire speech the preacher said at the funeral, she decided to engrave the word "beloved" as this "was the one word that mattered" (Morrison 5). Moreover, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock points out that those seven letters mean nothing more for the engraver than "the opportunity to vent his lust", while for Sethe, the baby girl's mother they represent an "expression of love, a value not reducible to a cost per letter" (75). Thus, Beloved is reduced to seven letters and to ten minutes, which represents not only the irony that shows to what a life of a person can be reduced, but also the result of the cruelty and the trauma of the institution of slavery.

The name *Beloved* can be linked to the epigraph of the novel, a verse from the Bible, from Romans 9:25, chosen by Morrison to be at the beginning of this story: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" (Morrison). It seems that Beloved is part of the last verse of the epigraph, mostly because at the same time she is beloved and not beloved by Sethe. Even though and because she loves her child, Sethe chooses to murder her. However, in the end, Beloved ends up without a proper identity, but rather part of those "Sixty million and more" from Morrison's dedication, as she seems to merge with all of those who have suffered the traumas of slavery. In addition, Rigney claims that Beloved's "consciousness is a group consciousness" and that her memory is "a racial memory of the Middle Passage" (41).

In the end, Beloved is one of those sixty million and more who have maybe been forgotten. At the end of the novel, Beloved still remains unnamed and unclaimed for and despite her nickname, she is not loved by anybody, turning this story into a story that should not be retold and passed on:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how cant hey call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away. (Morrison 274)

The black men of the novel are also affected by slavery and they have their own identities distorted by it. The five male slaves from Sweet Home are presented at the beginning of the novel: "And so they were: Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man" (Morrison 11). A bit later in the novel, Stamp Paid introduces himself: "Name's Stamp, he said. Stamp Paid" (Morrison 91).

Paul D is one of the slaves named alphabetically by Mr. Garner, their owner. Therefore, the "D" in his name is just another letter in a list of other male slaves, all deprived of their individuality and uniqueness. According to Cynthia Lyles Scott, "their names do not celebrate accomplishments, personality traits, or family conventions. The designations are solely for the benefit of the slave masters and not the self-identification of the male slaves" (197). These men are only tools and they represent only a mean to an end. As they lack individuality and because they do not possess individual names, they are used only for the benefits of their white masters.

One the other hand, there is Stamp Paid. Stamp Paid is a former slaver, initially named Joshua, who works at the Underground Railroad and who helps Sethe escape from Sweet Home and run to Baby Suggs' house. He changes his name after he gives up his wife to his master's son and thus considers his duty paid and himself to be a free man: "Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive.

Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off" (Morrison 184-185).

However, giving up his wife makes him live in a continual state of self-doubt and self-questioning, wondering if he has done the right thing. This is what motivates him to help others pay their own debts. He is a character who renames himself and therefore he creates a new identity for himself, an identity marked by the same words in his name "Stamp Paid". After giving up his wife, he sees himself as living in a state of "debtlessness" (Morrison 185) in which he tries to help others pay their debts as well and become free as him. Stamp Paid has a self-made identity and his change represents a symbolic act of freedom, which cannot be achieved by many other characters in the novel.

Concerning the issue of naming in the novel, one of the most relevant characters is Baby Suggs. She represents a mother figure for Sethe and for Denver. She is actually Sethe's mother-in-law, Halle's mother. Halle is her youngest son and the only one who was not taken away from her. After their arrival at Sweet Home, Halle offers to buy her freedom from Mr. Garner. Afterwards, she moves in the house on 124 Bluestone Road, where she starts helping her community by providing her own religious services for black people outside the city, in a clearing.

During their drive from Sweet Home to Cincinnati, Baby Suggs and Mr. Garner have a discussion regarding her name, discovering to the readers that her given name was Jenny. However, Baby Suggs does not identify herself with that, as she would rather keep and identify with the name given to her by her husband:

"Mr. Garner," she said, "why you all call me Jenny?"

"Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name? What you call yourself?"

"Nothings" she said. "I don't call myself nothing."

Mr. Garner went red with laughter. "When I took you out of Carolina, Whitlow called you Jenny and Jenny Whitlow is what his bill said. Didn't he call you Jenny?"

"No, sir. If he did I didn't hear it." (Morrison 142)

When discussing her name, she points out that she calls herself "nothing". It would seem that she lacks a clear identity. She seems unable to identify with anything or with a particular family and culture. However, the conversation between her and Mr. Garner continues and shows that she simply refuses to accept the identity given to her by slavery. She refuses to identify herself with the name Jenny Whitlow, a name given to her by a white master. Instead, she decides to keep the name given to her by her husband, a man name Suggs. That name is simply a combination between her husband's name and the way he used to call her: "baby":

"Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny."

"What he call you?"

"Baby." (Morrison 142)

Therefore, Baby Suggs is one of the most independent and self-secure former slaves of the novel. This is also shown not only from her lack of acceptance of a slave name, but also from a scene when the narrators points out the discovery made by Baby Suggs concerning her own body. She realizes that she is the owner of her own body and she is the only one who can claim her body. Moreover, she is the only one who has the power to love or hurt it:

She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, "These hands belong to me. These my hands." Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new:

her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud. (Morrison 141)

Following this realization of the self, Baby Suggs, through her religious meetings in the clearing helps other free slaves understand this great truth: that they are no longer the property of somebody else and that their bodies belong to themselves. Moreover, she also tried to help them understand that it is now their own duty to take care of themselves, to make themselves happy and to achieve freedom not only in their bodies but in their minds as well: "'Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. ... Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!... and the beat and beating heart, love that too'" (Morrison 88).

In the end, Baby Suggs manages to find an answer to her identity questions and she manages to claim a unique identity for herself. In addition, by doing so, she succeeds in enabling Sethe to liberate herself as "bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 95).

### **3. The black female body and identity in *Beloved***

Another way in which identity is expressed by Toni Morrison is *Beloved* is through the black female body. This is relevant particularly for two characters: Sethe and Beloved. In order to recover herself, Sethe has to come to terms with her own body first. The body is seen as a metaphor for self-identity and self-fulfillment and those cannot be achieved by Sethe until she transforms her body from a place of suffering and pain into a place of confront, safety and love. Beloved's body is a body that fails and disintegrated and it represent a metaphor for the traumatic past, a symbol for the individual suffering and the communal suffering of sixty million and more.

The black female body can be seen in Morrison's novel as the place where men write their own narratives, their own stories. Because Sethe has the story of her white abusive master written all over her body, she cannot open up and write her own story. After Paul D.'s arrival at 124 Bluestone Road and after he begins to touch and caress Sethe's body, she starts to open up, she begins remembering her past and she reclaims her body to write her story using her own words. Therefore, in order to analyze the idea of the body as a mean of constructing identity, several aspects need to be analyzed: Sethe's relationship with the Schoolteacher and his nephews, her relationship with Beloved, Sethe's relationship with Paul D., and finally her relationship with the Bluestone community and the African-American community during The Clearing meetings.

Kevin Everod Quashie brings into discussion the relationship that exists between the mind and the body and he defines the concept of "memory body" by pointing out the link that exists between the human body and the memories of the past. He claims that "memory is either a body in full – a literal, material corpus – or is a central attribute of a body, of how a body is constructed, engaged, and identified"(99). He also adds that "as a corporeality, memory not only figures as a psychic component of identity but also is a literal other, an entity whose character and fleshly constitution informs subjectivity"(Quashie 101), meaning that the body can hold on to the most traumatic memories of a person and shorten the border between mind and flesh.

This "memory body" can be brought into discussion for both Sethe and Beloved. As a former slave, Sethe's body is filled with memories of abuse, rape, beatings and sufferings. She was alone, she was unprotected and she was seen merely as an object, as the property of

the master. Beloved possess a body that is so frail that is literary falls apart, and she slowly disintegrated, as she is not able to hold the pieces that make her up together:

Beloved, inserting a thumb in her mouth along with the forefinger, pulled out a back tooth. [...] Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. (Morrison 133)

The presence of her baby daughter's ghost in the house is one of the reasons why Sethe cannot come to terms with her traumatic past and cannot understand and accept her own identity. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia points out that only after the "cause of the separation is clarified, is out in the open, struggled with and struggled against, can African people come together again" (92). Moreover, Beloved's body becomes "a visible, tangible entity of which the community is aware, instead of an amorphous apparition, an oppression of which the community is unconscious" (Mbalia 92). Beloved is an embodiment of the consequences and the trauma of slavery. She is a memory body in constant pain that reminds Sethe and their community of the hurt endured by sixty million other black bodies due to slavery: "All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt" (Morrison 50).

Sethe's body is filled with painful memories that prevent her from recovering her own identity for the clutches of slavery. Sethe has lived on a plantation in Kentucky, along with her husband and several other men. Their previous master, Mr. Garner is described to be good, understand and not violent. However, after his death, a family member took over the plantation, a man known as the Schoolteacher, a man who used his power to abuse and hurt the slaves. There are two important episodes regarding the Schoolteacher.

One of them is when Sethe overhears a conversation between the Schoolteacher and his pupils. She is minding her business when she hears her name mentioned by the Schoolteacher, who instructs his pupils to make up a list of Sethe's human and animal features: "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (Morrison 193). Disturbed by this, she asks Mrs. Garner the definition of "characteristics", to receive the following explanation: "A characteristic is a feature. A thing that's natural to a thing" (Morrison 195). This points out that for the Schoolteacher, Sethe was nothing more than a combination of human and animalistic features, a body that belong to him and that could be objectified in whichever way pleased them.

Another important scene is the scene where the Schoolteacher's nephews follow Sethe to a barn and there they sexually abuse her. Moreover, as she is pregnant, they steal her milk and whip her back. Later on, when she remembers the scene, Sethe says that "they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it was like to be without milk that belongs to you." (Morrison 200).

Stealing her milk is a traumatic deed for Sethe, as her own mother could not feed her. Moreover, she adds that they treated her as if she was an animal (similar to the Schoolteacher's suggestions): "... after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (Morrison 201). More details about the night of her rape are also provided by Paul D, a bit later on: "The pupils must have taken her to the barn for sport right afterward, and when she told Mrs. Garner, they took

down the cowhide. Who in hell or on this earth would have thought that she would cut anyway? They must have believed, what with her belly and her back, that she wasn't going anywhere" (Morrison 228).

Sethe's relationship with Paul D is one of the most relevant relationships in the novel. After Paul D arrives at Sethe's house, she begins to open up about her own past and slowly she comes to accept her own identity. Paul D is the first man that touches Sethe and he is the one who starts a liberation process for her body. Sethe opens up to him and tells him the story of her rape and abuse and also about the tree mark that she has on her back: "After I left you, 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. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. 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 16-17).

After hearing about this traumatic episode, Paul D gets closer to Sethe and starts to caress her scared body: "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" (Morrison 17). This is the first time that Sethe feels like the responsibility and the weight on her shoulders (and breasts) are carried for her by someone else. It is the moment when she starts feeling her body again, even though the skin on her back was long dead:

... his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. [...] he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display [...] and he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands. (Morrison 17-18)

Little by little, Sethe begins to open up about her memories and she starts to rewrite her own story, taking possession of her own body one-step at the time. However, even though her identity becomes to be known and understood by Paul D, in order to validate her own self, Sethe also has to gain the recognition of the Bluestone community. Therefore, it is important to mention the relevance of the meetings held by Baby Suggs in the Clearing, meetings that are attended by Sethe as well.

Baby Suggs creates through these meetings a sort of spiritual community, designed to help other freed slaves come to terms with their own bodies, minds and identities. Baby Suggs puts her own heart at work and "accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it" (Morrison 87). Moreover, she is the one who manages to bring together a great part of the African-American community, as she "holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing" (Morrison 88). There, she encouraged them to pray, smile, laugh, dance and cry: "

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (Morrison 87-88)

This imagined grace is the only grace that they need in order to become better, to become something they are not. Through this, Morrison points out that the black body can become anything; it does not have to remain linked to the memories of the slavery. Baby Suggs points out that they could be anything if they could imagine it first. Therefore, she brings out the problem of the mind in this process of freeing the body: first, one must free its mind and its memory of the consequences of the slavery and then their bodies will be released as well.

The Clearing is for Sethe the place where she can obtain liberty, where she can learn to accept and love her body just as it is, with its past memory and scars and with the hopes of a new future. The importance of the black body is one of the central messages preached by Baby Suggs during these meetings. It is important for them to learn to accept their bodies, to move freely and ultimately to love it:

Here, in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; ... 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. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face... You got to love it, you! (Morrison 88)

It is important to point out that one of the most traumatic events from the past that Sethe has to come to terms with is the murder of her baby daughter, Beloved. As she wanted to set her free from the savagery of slavery, Sethe decides to murder her (along with her other children as well, which she does not succeed). In her mind, she does the right thing by choosing to sacrifice the life of her children in order for them to be free:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing. Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. (Morrison 149)

However, because the Already Crawling Girl was part of her own body and because she murders her with her own hands, Sethe is confronted with the guilt of destroying not only the body of her baby girl but also her own body. In order to put the baby out of misery and to save her from a destiny of suffering, she chooses to kill her and at the same time, she fragments her own identity. Only after she learns to accept her troubled past and her decisions and to accept Beloved's ghost, Sethe becomes whole again and the identity which was once fragmented is put together again.

Sethe's body represents one of the important features of her identity. In order to be comfortable in her own home and with her self-identity, she has to transform her body from a space of abuse, of sufferings caused by slavery into a place of love, acceptance and even pleasure. Focusing on her relationship with Paul D and with the help of his physical touch, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Remembering her past allows her to come to terms with it and finally to set herself free. The identity of the black woman is changed by the abuse of the white master and the body represents one of the most important things that she has to reconquer and reclaim.

Therefore, Toni Morrison uses names and the female body in her novel *Beloved* in order to talk about the problem of identity in the African American community. The characters of the novels, in particular the main one, Sethe, found themselves in a quest for their identities in the context of slavery and its abolishment. The names Morrison chooses for

her characters are representative and important, as they play an important role in the African culture and as they are one of the traits that shape an individual's identity. Moreover, through the exploration of black female bodies, Morrison manages to retell the story of slavery and present it from her own, black and female perspective.

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