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A Study of the Significance of Communion in Toni Morrison's Novel

Beloved

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Abstract

The term 'communion' means sharing of thoughts and feelings. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines communion as a close relationship with someone in which feelings and thoughts are exchanged. Communion is a recognizable theme in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. *Beloved* is set in the era of Reconstruction and explores the psychological state of African Americans and their struggles to rebuild themselves after the trauma of slavery. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison shows communion as a remedy to recover from one's past traumatic

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life. Most of the characters in *Beloved* are slaves or ex-slaves struggling to reconcile with their past. This paper aims to study how communion helps the characters to remember and share their past and how their close relationship with mutual understanding makes recovery possible. This paper also presents characters who encourage communion and discourage it. Through her novel *Beloved*, Morrison conveys the message that communion leads to a better life.

Keywords: Communion, Psychological State, Trauma, Recovery, Mutual Understanding, Togetherness, Dehumanization, Solidarity.

Life is a journey in which people carry their burdens according to their situation. Once in a while we need to stop, put down the burden of life and rest. Only then we become refreshed to pick up the burden once more and continue our journey. Communion facilitates everyone an opportunity to put down the burden of life and regain the strength. Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize winner African American novelist gives true testimony to the black people's traumatic past in her novel *Beloved*. She highlights the importance of mutual understanding and communion among the black people, a remedy to relieve from the racial and psychological trauma. *Beloved* is a novel about Seth, a former slave woman who suffers from a traumatic past of murdering her baby to escape from the horrors of slavery and her future recovery through a life of communion. It is an investigation of love in all its forms. Though violence and terror pervades throughout the novel, communion is an important theme. Most of the characters in the novel are suffering from different kinds of alienation and frustration due to the trauma they have experienced in their past life of slavery. The novel highlights the importance of communion which makes one's recovery possible. *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner of Ohio who attempted to kill her children rather than return them to slavery. She succeeded in killing one child. Based on that historical story, in the novel Seth kills her girl child, whom Morrison transforms into the figure of *Beloved*.

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The principal character of *Beloved* is Seth, a former slave who worked on the plantation ironically named Sweet Home in Kentucky. Seth had a miserable life on the plantation in Sweet home where she worked as a slave. But it was also a platform for her to love and appreciate her slave companions. The life in Sweet Home was better for the slaves when it was managed by Mr. Garner and his wife being good natured and kind. Seth's mother in law Baby Suggs also was a slave in Sweet home and compared to Seth, she had a better time on the plantation. Baby Suggs once tells Denver that what she feared most in her life of slavery was beaten by the whites in front of her children which would make them crazy. But she never had such an experience in Sweet home and Halle, her son never witnessed it. Her words reflect irony because later Halle would become insane when he witness his wife's dehumanization on the plantation.

Marriage was not common among slaves but Seth was allowed to choose her partner. Seth's and Halle's marriage take place in the beautiful pastoral setting of Sweet Home. Seth shares her desire with Mrs. Garner to have a wedding dress. But Mrs. Garner only laughs because slave marriages had no meaning. As Tess Chackalakal suggests "a slave-marriage could be dissolved at any time, by sale or gift" (2). However Seth manages to have a wedding dress in secret. For her it was a symbol of their communion and she believed it would give their union some significance. The other Sweet home slaves also join with their celebration with a feast of corn. The slaves in Sweet home experience a togetherness which was possible for them on plantation.

When Garner dies, his brother- in- law, the school teacher takes up the responsibility of Sweet Home plantation and his negative attitude towards the slaves is revealed through flash backs. When Paul D arrives at 124, Seth shares her painful memories associated with school teacher and his nephews and shows him the scar on her back shaped like a chock cherry tree. Paul D consoles her and shares his bitter experiences too. Amid all the indignation he faced,

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one thing he could not endure was the school teacher's attitude towards slaves as mere commodities. One day Paul D overhears the school teacher talking, "He would have to trade this here one for \$900 if he could get it and set out to secure the breeding one, her foal and the other one, if he found him" (Beloved 227). These words reveal his attitude towards slaves and as Brax puts it, "considering the blacks as an insufficiently advanced race, school teacher equates them with animals, especially with domestic animals, dogs, cattle and stud horses that should be beaten over " a certain limit"(259). Instead of solidarity it creates hostility in Paul D's mind. Thus sharing between Paul D and Seth was an opportunity for them to remember and share their past traumatic memories associated with school teacher.

When Paul D asks details about her child's death, Seth gets disturbed but when he compels her, she shares the incident. When Paul D argues what she did was wrong she tells him that she loved her children more than herself and wanted to keep them in a safe place. As Sandra Cox justifies in her essay, "Seth sees her own trauma – the theft of milk, the impotence and insanity of her husband, the inevitable loss of her children in her daughter's future. Ultimately her decision to murder the Already-Crawling-Girl is a consequence of that identification" (101). Paul D knows the capacity of Seth to love and care others which he himself had experienced in Sweet Home. But initially he could not justify Seth' act and tells her, "Your love is too thick"(Beloved 165). He also accuses her for acting like an animal by saying, "You got two feet, Seth not four" (Beloved165). Hearing these words from Paul D was really an insult for Seth. Though Paul D initially could not understand Seth, later he shows empathy towards her and their communion was helpful for Seth to regain her strength.

Beloved's presence in 124 helps Seth to remember her most traumatic past, the events related to her child's death. Beloved shows her love towards Seth and seeks for her mother's attention which was denied for her. According to Schliephake, Beloved sticks on to Seth and attaches herself to her in a way that no one could enter into her life and even caring for herself.

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Seth in turn tries to pay costs for the murder, feels a sense of guilt which leads to her complete surrender to the needs of Beloved (379). Seth was forced to clarify why she killed her, how it was for her security sake, moreover how it was an act of affection towards her beloved daughter. Though the love between Seth and Beloved is unhealthy and untenable their communion leads to Seth's recovery because it is only through Beloved she was able to reconcile with her most traumatic past.

Beloved also becomes as a channel to reunite Seth and her Denver. Denver had a negative image of her mother in her mind and she never tried to think from her perspective. Like the community in Cincinnati which kept a distance from her after the murder, Denver also kept a distance from her. With the arrival of Beloved Denver's attitude towards her mother began to change. As Priborkin says, "Indeed, when Denver with Beloved's help, learns to perceive her birth story from her mother's perspective, she also becomes aware of her mother's mental and emotional states (237). Denver started to narrate her story of birth in a way, "Feeling how it must have felt to her mother" (Beloved78). Then it was easy for Denver to empathize with her mother and have a life of communion with her.

Denver was left alone in her home without any companions to love and share her feelings. When Beloved comes to 124, Denver develops a deep love for her that becomes much possessive in the process. She entertains her with stories, dances with her, sniffs her sugary breath when she sleeps. She craves for Beloved's attention and began to see her as an essential part of her life. The relationship between Beloved and Denver is not healthy. But their communion leads to Denver's personality development and her reconnection with people in the community. Denver starts to think from others' perspective and learns the importance of love and support.

Denver owes his very life to a white girl without whom she would not have born alive. It was Amy Denver, a white indentured servant girl who was also in the process of running

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away from slavery. She helps Seth to give birth Denver, keeping her own life at risk. Just before starting the labour pain, Amy massages Seth's swollen feet and singing a lullaby to give relief from her pain. As Eckard puts it, "Amy serves in the traditional role of *doula*, a woman who supports and nurtures the mother through the difficulties of child birth, post partum and lactation" (67). Even in the midst of her sufferings Amy understands the need of Seth and shows compassion. To cherish her memory forever Seth names her child Denver. It shows that an act of love and communion is likely to be remembered forever.

Stamp Paid also believes in the notion of mutual love and communion among black people. He supports the black community in Cincinnati, being a member of underground railroad during the years of slavery and admired and respected by them. It is he who helps Seth and Denver in their escape from Sweet Home. His concern and understanding is clear when he justifies Seth by saying, "She love those children. She was trying to out hurt the hurter"(Beloved 234). Seth's suffering was very well known to him and it was easy for him to empathize with her and help her.

Lady Jones a black teacher who runs a school for under privileged black children near 124 Blue stone Road also support Seth and her family She teaches Denver while she was young and shows her love and compassion for Seth who becomes an outcast in the black community after the murder. The under ground agent Ella also comes to Seth's help when she hears her plight. Since she cannot do anything alone she gathers a group of thirty black women in support of Seth. They assemble at 124 and when they engage in singing and praying, Beloved vanishes from 124. This helps Seth to regain her strength to continue her life peacefully. The ghost of the past is disappeared only when the black people work together.

Toni Morrison is successful in demonstrating the importance of communion in her novel *Beloved*. It presents characters promoting as well as discouraging communion. Estrangement and hostility created by slavery and the people who encourage such institution are a threat to

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harmonious life and togetherness. Though the African Americans depicted in the novel are with a traumatic past of slavery they try to cultivate mutual understanding and togetherness among the black people in their community. Only through their oneness and affinity their psychological and physical trauma is recovered. Through the novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison imparts a message that nobody can live as an island in this life journey and only through communion we can unburden our loads of life and regain the strength to lead a more fruitful life.

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