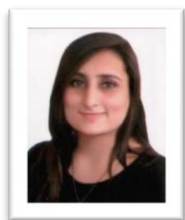


# Contextualizing Master and Slave Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*



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## Abstract

Master and Slave Consciousness is a common phrase from Hegel's phenomenology of spirits. In this essay Hegel delineates into the Self-consciousness of Master and Slave elucidating the interdependence of both in order to attain recognition. Master Consciousness values freedom over life. He believes that without freedom life is not worth preserving whereas the slave believes that freedom is worthless if one's life is lost. Therefore, each takes a different type of consciousness, later becoming submissive to the former and in the process becomes an independent self-consciousness. The applicability of the aforementioned philosophy of Hegel can be traced correspondingly in various Afro American novels which deals with the master-slave relationship. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the influential novels that paints a sombre picture of Master slave hierarchy. In Morrison's *Beloved* the protagonist Seth is a former slave who gains autonomy when she recognizes herself in the object of her creation, subduing the fear of death and taking control of her own life. She develops an independent self-consciousness of her own thereby denying the outside force to exert control or power over her.

**Keywords:** Self Consciousness, Master Slave Dialects, Ownership, Subjugation, Freedom, Marginalized, Self-Identification.

## Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most acknowledged African American novelists born in Lorain Ohio (U.S) as Chloe Anthony Wofford. She is widely recognized for her politically charged and richly expressive depiction of working-class Black Americans and has left an indelible impression on the literary world through her writings. She has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for her Magnum opus *Beloved*.

Morrison's *Beloved* touches the different aspects of Black culture and unveils the horrifying reality of Slavery and the unnerving attitude of the Masters towards slaves. The novel depicts the atrocious nature and the dehumanizing attitude of Slave owners. The slaves are merely treated as a living possession denied of any sense of their individual identity. The novel explicates both the mental and physical trauma experienced by the Slaves and the damaging effect it lays on the survivors. The narrative is constructed around an ex-slave Seth whose character is based on a real-life incident inspired by the story of an African American slave Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery from Kentucky. Seth also escapes from the life of slavery but her true freedom was attained when she experiences a sense of recognition and self-conception. She distinguishes between freedom and ownership but shows that one must be free to have ownership of one's self.

"Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95, *Beloved*)

The above statement illustrates the broken sentience or consciousness of the slaves unable to generate a self- understanding due to the earlier disparaging status. In order to develop a better understanding of the submerged mind of Seth and other slaves, we need to make a close reading of the text in the light of Master and Slave theory established by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Georg Hegel in his philosophical work entitled 'The Phenomenology of Spirits' makes a clear distinction between the consciousness of the Master and the Slaves. Hegel formulates that the two individual consciousness exist only in relation to the other and is therefore interdependent. Consciousness

according to Hegel is the essence of being human, the personification of human self- understanding.

Man is a social animal and thereby seeks approval from the other being, someone who is rational and worthy of being recognized and recognize. Hegel believes that solipsism, self-preoccupation and mere self- proclamation is insufficient for a coherent self-conception. Hegel says that self-consciousness exists only in being acknowledged and thereby arises the concept of recognition. Both Master and Slave not only see the other but they see themselves through the other. Master stands for the recognized desire and his economical function is that he owns everything without working. The second is the servant who owns nothing but does everything. Self-consciousness thereby, is not an essence in the human beings, it is implanted from the outside says Hegel. Master seeks recognition from Slaves as the sole authority but refuses to recognize Slaves in return. The Master after gaining recognition begins to subjugate and dismiss the other consciousness in order to exercise control and authority which further leads to the ownership of Slaves by Masters as a living possession.

Slave on the other hand through this struggle, between master and slave consciousness recognizes life as temporary, as fleeting and comes to term with his mortal self and sees the world not as something to be dominated or mastered but as a place where he can express his mind and his thoughts. The self-conception of a Slave then, is higher than the Master's as he recognizes himself through his labour and his objects of creation, unlike Master whose self -proclamation seems superficial and shallow. The concept can well be applied on Morrison's *Beloved*. Seth after her terrifying and unsettling experience at Sweet Home tries to find solace at her new home addressed as House 124. She develops a sense of identity acknowledging herself with her children and community. But her past keeps haunting her through her memories. And her fear comes face to face when the Schoolmaster returns to claim his ownership of Seth and her children. All her past encounters and events rush back making her insecure and vulnerable.

Seth after escaping from the Sweet Home develops a false sense of Freedom. She associates her consciousness, the essence of her being, with her house, her community and her family. She recounts her escape to Freedom: "I did it. I got us all out...only thing I did on my own... I birthed them and I got them out...I did that. Me having to look out. Me using my own head." (*Beloved*, 190)

This motionless tautology (repetition) of "I am, I am" signifies Seth's self-ownership in Freedom. Seth is finally able to do something, "the only thing she ever did on her own" giving her power and a sense of accomplishment. And soon after that she begins to associate herself with her new house and her new community, which gave her a sense of ownership. But eventually she comprehends and realizes that it's not the ownership of things that defines one's true freedom but one's true self. For

Seth the freedom was not the escape from the slavery but to gain a control of her own life and to be able to associate with her creative force and the object of her creation. Freedom to her was to be able to express her feelings of love and care towards her children and to claim her right to her children which was denied to her as a slave. She says of her children: "maybe I couldn't love them properly in Kentucky because they were not mine to love." (*Beloved*, 190).

Her children were her best thing she claimed and it was her love for her children that provides her with such enormous strength and courage. She refuses to accept oppressive ways of living that do not allow her to love her children freely. Determined to protect her children from the hell of eternal slavery, she took drastic measures to keep them away from such humiliation, the love that made her so strong also becomes her weakness. The life at Sweet Home has made her vulnerable to the extent that she chose to kill her children instead of sending them off to the life of slavery. Seth believed Death to be a generous and kinder alternative to slavery. She didn't want her children to be subjected to the kind of torture she herself has gone through. This horrifying and disturbing act of infanticide which is perhaps the worst thing that a mother can do to her child is enough to show the disparaging and humiliating life of slaves. This act of killing her daughter by Seth when the Schoolmaster arrives to claim his right on Seth's child leaves him in shock and disbelief. The horrors of the slavery were still fresh in Seth's mind and when the Master returns, she refuses to recognize Master's Consciousness as the sole authority and gains an autonomy through taking control of her life. However, if one of the two should die, the achievement of Self Consciousness fails. The School Master also realizes that they should not kill one another. A dead person cannot recognize anyone. And if there are no more slaves there will be no more Masters. Here, again we witness a shift in Master's Consciousness who turns out to be the slaves of his own desires. Authority for Hegel is a status that is freely conferred by the other. He asserts that being free is a matter of adhering to norms of one's own choosing and being recognized as such by the person one recognizes in turn.

The most dissonant reality of the slavery is that it renders the right to live as humans. The dehumanization of Slaves extends beyond the denial of their basic human desires such as motherhood and identification of their feminine and masculine self to that of their treatment as animals. The School teacher at Sweet Home abuses his slaves and measures them with rulers and keeps a list of their human and animal characteristics. Seth belonged to the marginalized group and therefore was denied the freedom to live on her own accord. She was even denied the right to her own body and was mistreated, raped and beaten like an animal. She was denied her identity as a female and as a mother. She is humiliated to the position of a breeder when she was used like an animal for feeding a human being. Seth feels robbed of her identity and loses fundamental essence of a mother. Through Morrison's writing we

can see how Slavery degraded African Americans from humans to animals.

"Animals are in possession of themselves, their soul is in possession of their body. But they have no right to their life because they do not will it." (Hegel on 'The Rights of Property', Sec 48)

Hegel believes in the will to power. He believes that a person is responsible for his condition to an extent. Though he was well aware of the fact that Slavery is forcefully imposed and Master rules with fear whereas a slave obeys and follows the command of the Master due to fear, the fear of Lord and the fear of Death, the ultimate Lord. Hegel makes a remark that in order to free oneself in true sense the person needs to subdue the fear of death. Hegel was of the opinion that a person can only be subjugated by instilling fear of death in him. Hegel asserts that authority is something that is freely conferred and not something that can be forced. The slaves give authority to the master thereby relinquishing their own claim to the authority. But once the slave comes to the final realization, he gains an absolute knowledge of his creative force. He begins to see himself reflected in the products that he has created and realizes that it is he who has created the world around him and is therefore no longer alienated from his labour and achieves Self Consciousness. At the end Hegel makes an observation that 'while the master-slave dialectic begins with a conception of consciousness that sought to dominate the natural world it ends with a disciplined conception of consciousness that is able to shape the world according to its will.'

In the novel also we observe how when Seth subdues the fear of death, the whole ideology of Master and Slave consciousness turns topsy-turvy. The moment Seth begins to value her freedom over her life she gains an absolute power and sovereignty over her Masters rendering them helpless and without control. But soon after murdering her daughter Seth is ostracized from the society, from her new found freedom and identity. She again falls into the pitfalls of ambiguity and precariousness. After the infanticide, the people from her community who could have best understood her deed because of their common experience, rejected her completely. Seth then finds refuge in the four walls of her house at 124 Bluestone Road where she completely isolates herself along with her daughter Denver from the society. Seth has to pay a high price of her individuality. Her past keeps haunting her in the form of her deceased daughter. Here, again we witness the influence of the Master consciousness over that of slaves. The need for recognition and approval was so strong even among the survivors of slavery that they rejected one of their own rendering no room for commiseration. Even after the abolishment of slavery, black people were still making their judgements through the eyes and measures of those who enslaved them. They called it

an act of madness but Seth calls it an act of resistance, an act of protecting her children. She says: "I stopped him... I took and put my babies where they would be safe". (Morrison: 193).

Seth's idea of motherhood and family is a defiant answer to the brutal demolition of maternal and familial relations by Slave owners. DrGurleenGrewal further justifies Seth's position as a mother considering her deed as a heroic act of defiance through the statement: "If the master could subject the slave children in bondage to a 'social death', the mother could release them through physical death" (Grewal 101).

#### **Aim of the Study**

Every living being on this planet is a slave to something. We are slaves to our own desires and aspiration. Through this research paper I intend to comprehend the thought process of the person in power i.e.; Master and the one who remains powerless i.e.; Slave.

#### **Conclusion**

The true freedom, I believe was attained by Seth as well as by the entire community living in Ohio at the end of the novel when they come to rescue Seth and Denver. A mutual recognition of the entire community was necessary to develop a sense of self love. Paul D a former slave and companion of Seth from Sweet Home makes her realize her self-worth. Morrison stresses on the combined force of the society who could have healed each other emotionally and spiritually as did Baby Suggs. Beloved as a Novel trace the successful development of slaves from being dependent to that of self-sufficiency. The struggle for freedom and self-conception was much more arduous for African Slaves as they were doubly marginalized. Morrison in the novel delineates on how essential it was for the slaves to break away from the conviction of being someone else's possession and to take control of their own lives and thoughts in order to be free.

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