

## THE SELF-ALIENATION AND DESTRUCTION OF IDENTITY: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* from the viewpoints. postcolonial perspective of Edward Said. By deconstructing the archetype of slavery, Morrison challenges white stereotypes of enslaved individuals and explores their feelings of self-alienation and identity deconstruction. This postcolonial analysis also situates the novel within the historical and political realities of African Americans in the United States. Sethe's character reveals the double oppression black women suffer and their contradictory experiences. In addition, the narrative structure and fragmented language of "Beloved" reflect the fractured experiences of enslaved African people, challenging traditional historical narratives dominated by white perspectives Morrison highlighted the intergenerational trauma caused by slavery and the ongoing systemic oppression and racism faced by African Americans. Analyzing the novel through Said's postcolonial lens also illuminates the intersectional constructions of power, culture, and identity and reveals the continuing impact of colonialism.

**Keywords:** "Beloved", Edward Said, identity, postcolonial theory, self-alienation.



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### Introduction

Postcolonial analysis of a novel like *Beloved* (1987) can deepen understanding of the novel and its themes by placing it within the context of African American history and political realities in the United States. Postcolonial theory holds that colonialism, as the practice of political and economic control by one country over another, can have lasting effects on colonized peoples even after formal independence. In the case of *Beloved*, postcolonial analysis will focus on the lasting impact of slavery on African Americans the enduring systemic oppression and racism they face.

The novel delves into the ongoing trauma of slavery, the lost identity and culture of enslaved African people, and the ongoing intergenerational trauma within enslaved families. Postcolonial Inquiry will examine how the lasting effects of slavery continue to impact the lives of African Americans in the United States today. In addition to the theme of slavery, postcolonial analysis will examine the power structures of race, gender, and class in the novel.

### Literature Review

The review of related literature of the present study is divided into three main parts. The first part will discuss a number of articles which have analyzed *Beloved* through a postcolonial lens; then, the researcher will present some sources related to postcolonialism as this study's main methodology, and finally, Edward Said's main contributions to postcolonialism will be reviewed briefly.

### **On *Beloved***

"Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (2000) was written by Elliott explores the issue of postcolonial experiences in domestic contexts, particularly through the lens of gender and commodified subjectivity in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The paper argues that *Beloved* can be read as a postcolonial narrative, as it reflects the legacy of slavery in the American context and the enduring effects of colonialism. Specifically, the paper focuses on how Morrison's portrayal of the female characters, especially the protagonist Sethe, embodies the commodification of subjectivity in a postcolonial era.

Along with this article, commodity prejudice denotes to the objectification and commodification of one's experience and identity for the advantage of prevailing culture. This showed in the novel through how the experiences of the feminine characters are formed and inaccurate by the bequests of slavery and colonialism, leading to their objectification and subjugation. Sethe in specific is depicted as a victim of the commercialization of subjectivity, as she is forced to challenge past dilemma and the ways in which her experiences have been commercialized and oppressed by others.

The article illustrates that Morrison's representation of Sethe serves as a criticism of the postcolonial condition and focuses on the complications tackled by individuals as they recuperate their subjectivity and struggle the forces that seek to exploit them. Additionally, Elliott shows that the novel offers an exceptional outlook on post-colonialism by focusing on the experience of domestic space, which is often ignored in postcolonial discourse. By examining the domestic realm and the ways in which larger historical and cultural forces form domestic spaces and relations. This article presents a new view on post-colonialism and its lasting effect.

*Beloved in Search of Identity: An Analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved**" is a detailed explanation of Toni Morrison's novel, built on the theory of Joodaki and Vajdi (2014) by Homi K. Bhabha. analysis. *Beloved* is based on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. This article reveals the multifarious themes of identity and self-search in the narrative of *Beloved*. The author begins by discussing the significance of Bhabha's theory in understanding the themes of identity and cultural hybridity in the novel. They claim that Bhabha's concept of "third space" provides a valuable framework for understanding the characters' difficulties in defining themselves amid historical trauma and cultural repression..

The duality of magic and memory in the narrative recurrence construction of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (2021) by Cuved is also an in-depth exploration of the use of narrative recurrence in *Beloved*. Through an investigation of perceptions of magic and memory, Cuved claims that the construction of the novel is constructed on contrasts that serve to strengthen themes of narrative repetition and the construction of personal and cultural identities. This article initiates by discussing the significance of magic and memory in *Beloved*. Characters are given the prospect to access and cope with past distressing events, and this memory is the basis of their personal and cultural identities. The two ideas are closely connected, as characters use magic to access their memories and contribute in their history.

Juweide views repetition as means to produce significance and emphasizing themes, in addition to a way to reinvent the rhythm of the oral narrative tradition. The dual structure of magic and memory is mirrored in the use of repetition, with the narrative repeating certain events and themes to probe yawning into the sensitive conditions of the characters and to reinforce themes of identity and trauma. The article ends by showing how the novel's structure influences on readers. Jewade claims that by submerging readers in the recurring rhythms of the characters' lives, Morrison produces a sense of sympathy and association with the characters, inspiring readers to contend with the painful

history of slavery and its impact on African American cultural identity lasting impact.

### **On Postcolonial Theory**

In "Can Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak as a significant scholar in the postcolonial field has challenged "the legacy of colonialism and the impression of the Western supremacy over the third world countries. She has stated that the place of relegated subalterns, primarily women, regardless of intervening the colonial regulation, has not surpassed its prearranged impact" (p. 287).

Bill Ashcroft et al. (1995) also argue that European colonialism is a topic that is closely linked to postcolonial studies. Thus, it is essential that this colonization issue be taken into consideration, as the term "postcolonial" is becoming increasingly vague in its application to explain a startling range of cultural, financial, and political practices in recent years, raising the possibility that it may lose all of its persuasive meaning (p. 2). In addition, they have stated that the term "postcolonial" still indicates both the significant consequences of colonization and the vast array of unrecognized solutions to it that exist around the world.(pp. 2-3)..

*Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) is another important book by Fanon in which he discusses his own interpretations by presenting a historical evaluation of the impacts of racism on human beings' mental state as the consequence of colonization. *Black Skin, White Masks* refers to the several ways through which identity, largely blackness, is formed. Fanon declared that whites will always enforce a sensation of humility on black people, and by doing so, they make the black people be surrounded in a minor status within a colonial pyramid.

The Location of Culture (1994) by Homi K. Bhabha is among the major key works of post-colonialism. This book shows that colonialism had an important global effect on culture and identity in addition to being an economic, military, or political phenomenon. Bhabha has been heavily involved in matters of identity and social action.. He has also provided his readers with an operative theory of cultural hybridity. Also, he has employed concepts such as mimicry, gap, and hybridity to imply that cultural production is always most prolific where it is most indecisive.

### **On Edward Said**

The majority of Edward Said's fame comes from the 1978 publication of *Orientalism*, a book that completely changed the course of Middle Eastern Studies. This is the rationale behind the use of this book in this study. *Orientalism* which includes Said's critical perspectives, is about several eras and periods from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, through the imperialist European development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the outcomes of World War II and American authority. Said (1978) remarked in this book that orientalism made imperialism reproduce the Islamic Arab world archetypal stereotypes and beliefs (idleness, sensuality, dishonesty, ferocity, and lack of astuteness) (p. 364). *Orientalism* is chiefly about the issue of orientalism as the origin of the cunning cultural descriptions through which the Western world sees the East.

*Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a follow-up to *Orientalism* (1978), tackles the same historical period, from the end of the eighteenth century to the current. Imperialism and culture can be seen as a way to delay the development of orientalism since they look for situations in which the native people respond and converse.

. In Said's opinion (1993), opposed with *Orientalism* in which he was only preoccupied with European and American authors and politics, in this case, he has studied the subject of "resistance" that occurred in response to 'imperialism' and developed into "nationalism" (p. 64).

A significant other study on post-colonialism is *Reflections on Exile and Other Articles* (1996), as a remarkably wide-ranging collection of fifty literary and cultural articles by Edward Said. Said was himself an exiled researcher stuck in two different cultures (Arabic and American) which are

extremely different from each other. He never thought of them as his home; yet, instead of opposition and bereavement, he attained an advanced status and wrote about this issue in this book. He thought that most people are primarily conscious of one culture, one place, and one home; exiles are aware of no less than two, and this exposure leads to a realization of synchronized scopes (p. 186).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The article uses Said's postcolonial concepts to analyze the themes of self-alienation and identity disintegration in *Beloved*. The aim of this study is to explore how the horrors of slavery affect the novel's protagonists and cause them to lose their self-confidence. The study shows how Morrison depicts the psychological impact of racism, colonialism and slavery on people through the characters in the book. Said's theories of Orientalism, cultural imperialism, and colonial discourse provide a framework for analyzing the novel and examining the relationship of these concepts to the characters' experiences. Furthermore, this article aims to contribute to postcolonial discourse by providing a deeper understanding of how Morrison's work can be read through Said's theory. Additionally, the study seeks to illuminate the continued relevance of postcolonial theory in examining issues of race, identity, and power dynamics.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is an significance as it tries to realize the difficulties of social and personal struggles challenged by the characters in and outside of postcolonial circumstances. The author uses Said's postcolonial method, which stresses on the power dynamics that happen when a dominant culture colonizes a person or place. By applying Said's theories to Morrison's work, the paper provides a critical analysis of how the characters in the novel experience self-alienation and how the dominant culture contributed to the destruction of their identities. It also depicts how the history of slavery and colonization continue to impact the African-American identity and its formation in the present day.

### **Methods**

This study is a qualitative investigation conducted in a library using a descriptive-critical approach and content analysis. The critical approach involves looking at how the novel tackles the problem of colonialism from a postcolonial perspective. For around thirty years, postcolonialism and colonialism have both been essential to historical and cultural studies (Dirlik, 2002, p. 429). It is argued that writing back to the center through active participation "in a process of questioning and travesty" colonial ideas is the main goal of postcolonial literature (McLeod, 2007, p. 25). As said by O'Reilly (2001) illustrates:

"when a critic examines a postcolonial text, s/he is conscious that some significant subjects are "the use of indigenous cultural traditions, the appropriation of English, and the impact (whether cultural, psychological or political) of colonialism and its aftermath" (p. 61).

According to Eagleton (1996), postcolonial literature heralds the beginning of a new age in developing nations where various liberation activities are taking place, in addition to emphasizing the removal of colonial laws and the creation of a multiethnic identity. (p. 205). "Postcolonial literature is often about the difficulties and effects of the decolonization of a country, chiefly questions linked with the political and cultural autonomy of formerly subjugated people, and themes such as racism and colonialism" (Makaryk, 1993, p. 155). It refers to the role of literature in reinforcing or weakening what postcolonial critic Edward Said (1993) refers to as cultural imperialism.

This approach chiefly focuses on how *Beloved* stresses the influence of historical procedures, such as oppression and colonialism on the lives of the novel's black character. Eagleton (1996) asserts that postcolonial literature stresses the dismantling of colonial laws and the emergence of a multiethnic

identity, as well as signaling the start of a new period in developing countries where diverse liberation efforts are underway.

This theory is resonated in the novel through the representation of black characters, particularly Sethe as the leading role, along with other black women. The novel exemplifies the experiences of being "othered" and demoted by the white society. The representation of black identity fortifies Said's theory of the West's othering of those who are different from them concerning race and culture. In fact, the novel's depiction of Sethe, her community, and her efforts can be viewed as a way in which Toni Morrison deconstructs the binary between the West and the East.

## Results and Discussion

### Colonialism and its Aftermath

In this section, I intend to examine the unresolved effects of colonialism on the African-American community depicted in *Beloved*, drawing on Said's definition of colonialism as the domination and subjugation of one culture by another. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison portrays the devastating and lasting effects of colonialism on African-American people, specifically through the characters Sethe and her daughter, Denver.

Sethe's experiences as a slave and her subsequent escape illustrate the ways in which colonialism disrupted African-American culture and left lasting scars. Sethe's inability to express herself through language is limited by her inability to read and write, a result of white slave owners' attempts to keep the slaves from gaining knowledge and education. Her experience of physical and sexual violence at the hands of her white slave owners portrays the way in which African-American bodies were subjugated and objectified by the white colonizers.

Furthermore, the legacy of slavery and colonialism is passed down to Sethe's daughter, Denver, who is isolated from the larger society and struggles to form connections with others. The trauma of colonialism is evident in Denver's struggle to define herself and her identity in a society that has historically denied her agency. As it is noticed in the following extract, Denver recalls what Sethe once told her about the everlasting nature of the past. Based upon Sethe's viewpoint regarding time, past traumas persist to recreate themselves forever, thus it is imaginable to blunder into someone else's doomed memory:

". . . [I]f you go there—you who was never there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there, waiting for you . . . [E]ven though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you." (Morrison, 1987, p. 36)

Through *Beloved*, Morrison highlights the ongoing trauma and effects of colonialism on the African-American community, which continue to this day. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the need to confront the legacy of colonialism and work toward healing and reconciliation.

### Othering and Marginalization

Now I seek to analyze the ways in which the white characters in *Beloved* "other" the African-American characters, marginalizing their experiences and denying them their humanity. To achieve this goal, I will benefit from Said's concept of Orientalism as a lens through which to view this process. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the white characters frequently marginalize and "other" the African-American characters, revealing the ways in which white society preserves colonialist attitudes through Edward Said's concept of Orientalism.

Through Orientalism, Said suggests that Western cultures create and perpetuate a distorted and reductionist vision of non-Western cultures in order to establish their own superiority. This is evident in the way that the white characters in *Beloved* interact with the African-American characters.

For instance, in the character of Stamp paid, the white culture's idea of other cultures is reflected as he struggles with his own identity as a former slave and decides to contribute to the underground railroad.

In the novel, many white characters, including white slave owners and abolitionists, view African Americans through the lens of Orientalism. They reduce their experiences and perspectives to one-dimensional stereotypes of subservience, sexuality, and physical strength, ignoring their multifaceted humanity. For example, the character of Schoolteacher is driven by the desire to control and reduce African Americans to a purely economic value. He views Sethe and his children as livestock, evaluating them based on their physical attributes and dehumanizing them in order to maintain his dominance. This issue is noticed in the following quote: "schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined" (Morrison, 1987, p. 190).

Moreover, the white abolitionists, despite their intentions to help the African-American slaves, often reinforce Orientalist attitudes by viewing themselves as "saviors" of the African-American community. They are portrayed as taking a paternalistic approach towards the enslaved individuals, viewing them as childlike and in need of guidance and protection. In sum, through Said's concept of Orientalism, the white characters in *Beloved* are shown to marginalize and "other" the African-American characters, reducing them to stereotypes and supporting the cultural hierarchy established during the era of colonialism.

### **Trauma and Memory**

It is also important to discuss how the traumatic experiences of the African-American characters in *Beloved* are tied to their collective history of slavery. This novel explores the generational trauma that results from the oppression and violence that African-American people experienced during the era of slavery. *Beloved* primarily focuses on the experiences of Sethe, a former slave, and her daughter Denver, who both have been traumatized by their experiences as African-American women in a society that views them as inferior. In one part, Sethe says:

"It's so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. . . . But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world". (Morrison, 1987, pp. 35-36)

As noticed, Sethe's trauma is particularly tied to her experience as a slave on the Sweet Home plantation and the violent act of infanticide that she commits in order to protect her children from experiencing the same kind of brutality that she has endured. Through Sethe's story, Morrison illustrates how the personal traumas of African-American characters in the novel are manifestations of the trauma inflicted upon them by the institution of slavery. Sethe's ability to express herself is limited by her inability to read and write. This is reflective of the ways in which the educational and cultural tools of oppression were used to disable and silence African-American people as a way of maintaining their subjugation.

Additionally, Sethe's trauma continues to be passed on to subsequent generations, as seen in Denver's isolation and struggles to form connections with others. The long-term legacy of slavery is exemplified by the character of Beloved, who embodies the lost lives of enslaved African Americans. Their presence and effect on families assist as a reminder of the meanness and harassment agonized by generations of African Americans, focusing on the permanent effects on their lives. Generally, *Beloved* shows how the trauma of its African American characters is related to their collective history of slavery.

## Hybrid Identities and Cultural Resistance

This issue seeks to show how the African-American characters in *The Favorite* progress hybrid identities that face the racial binaries forced by white society. Said's notions on the significance of cultural confrontation in resisting colonialism are therefore very important. His concept of cultural resistance underscores the significance of marginalized groups in creating new meanings and value systems that contest the dominant narratives of those in power.

*Beloved* explores the experience of African Americans struggling to maintain their cultural identity in the shadow of slavery and its legacy. Through the character of Sethe, Morrison shows the ways in which African Americans create hybrid identities that resist the racial binaries imposed on them by the white society. Sethe's decision to kill her own child is an act of cultural resistance because it challenges the white narrative of black womanhood as inherently maternal and nurturing.

Sethe's violent act expresses her refusal to be defined by the expectations of her oppressors. This is the reason why her house is described in the following way,

"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughters Denver were its only victims" (Morrison, 1987, p. 89).

Similarly, the character of *Beloved* represents the hybridity of African-American culture. As a ghost who returns to haunt her mother, *Beloved* embodies the complex mix of historical trauma and cultural creativity that characterizes African-American experience. Her presence challenges the dominant narrative of history and identity that denies the humanity of African Americans and ignores their contributions to culture.

Finally, the character of Denver illustrates the transformational power of cultural resistance. Denver is able to escape the confines of her mother's trauma by acceptance her African heritage and producing a new narrative by herself. She rejects the racial binaries forced by her, making a hybrid identity that mixtures both African and American. Generally, Morrison's *Beloved* proves that cultural resistance is a vigorous tool in challenging the legacy of racism and colonialism. Through the development of hybrid identities, African-American characters in the novel create new meanings and value systems that challenge the status quo and assert their humanity.

## Conclusion

In summary, *Beloved* is a well-known book that centers on African-American women's lives in the United States. The novel probes the themes of marginalization and relegation through the persona of Sethe. Using Edward Said's thesis of Orientalism, it is also possible to interpret Morrison's book as a critique of the Orientalist viewpoints held by the West on African-American experiences, especially as they relate to the marginalized and undervalued in society. Therefore, *Beloved* challenges these dominant notions by distancing itself from the Orientalist framework and offering Sethe a new narrative voice

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