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Identity issues faced by African-American characters of Toni Morrison’s novels **Beloved** and **Song of Solomon**

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Abstract

This extended essay investigates how Morrison uses the characters in her novels, *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, to portray slavery’s impact on the identity of African Americans and to suggest how a strong and complete identity can be constructed. A comparison of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* reveals, through the characters in the novels, the widespread impact which slavery, both as an institution and a collective memory, has had on the identity of African Americans, whether they are former slaves or descendants of slaves. The accounts of the main characters in *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D, demonstrate the detrimental impact which the institution of slavery has had on the identity of former slaves. The dehumanization which Sethe and Paul D experience as slaves causes them to lose their sense of self-worth and leaves them questioning their existence as humans. An examination of the characters of Sixo and Baby Suggs reveals Morrison’s ideas of how a strong African-American identity is constructed – by defining oneself according to one’s own standards, rejecting the definitions imposed by white owners and uniting with the African-American community. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison demonstrates how slavery and the racism generated by it, distances a family of African-Americans from their heritage. This forgetful attitude of the descendants of slaves towards the slave past results in the incomplete identities of the characters in *Song of Solomon*. However, through Milkman’s transformation from an unconcerned man into a culturally aware African-American Morrison demonstrates that both an understanding of one’s heritage and ancestral past, as well as, uniting with the African-American community is crucial for the development of a complete and coherent identity. In this essay I have relied predominantly on my own personal interpretation of the novels and have also analyzed a variety of secondary sources to support my arguments.

(Word Count: 299)
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Introduction

Slavery’s impact on the identity of African Americans is an integral part of Morrison’s novels, Beloved and Song of Solomon. Through the accounts of different characters in Beloved and Song of Solomon, Morrison portrays several ways in which slavery has affected the identity of African Americans, whether they are former slaves or descendants of slaves. She also illustrates the different approaches used by her African-American characters to construct a strong and coherent identity. This essay will examine how Morrison’s characters are impeded from developing a strong African-American identity and will go on to examine how such an identity can be constructed.

Beloved is set in the 1870s, during the Emancipation and Reconstruction Era, a period after the American Civil War in which millions of slaves were liberated. Through the main characters, Sethe and Paul D, Morrison portrays the severe damage which the institution of slavery had on the identity of former slaves. Slavery has destroyed Paul D and Sethe’s sense of self-worth and left them with a tenuous hold on their own existence. Song of Solomon is set in mid-twentieth century America. In this novel Morrison portrays the extent of slavery’s impact on the identity of African Americans, by sharing how the recollection of slavery and the effects of the racism that it generated, damages the identities of African Americans two to three generations removed from slavery. Even though Beloved and Song of Solomon are set in different time periods, a comparison of these two works demonstrates the pervasive impact of slavery on the identity of African Americans, whether they are former slaves or descendants of slaves.

Morrison includes in her novels how a strong African-American identity can be constructed. Since the two novels are set in different time periods and deal with different types of

\footnote{Peter Kolchin, “Reconstruction (U.S. history).” Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD] (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2007)
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African Americans, different approaches to dealing with identity issues are portrayed. In *Beloved*, Morrison suggests that self-definition is crucial in order for slaves to attain spiritual liberation after they are freed from a life of bondage. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison illustrates that discovering and understanding the slave past plays a fundamental role in the construction of a strong identity for the descendants of slaves.

Although in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* Morrison’s characters are predominantly African Americans, the theme of identity construction in her novels has universal appeal. An examination of the identity issues faced by Morrison’s characters brings out Morrison’s perception of how one can become a complete and whole individual.

**The damaged identity of African Americans**

*Beloved*

*Beloved* begins in 1873, during the Emancipation and Reconstruction Era. According to Gray, this was “a period of radical change and redefinition for emancipated black people.” As slaves they depended completely on their white owners. When freed “they now found themselves without the material or emotional means to cope with freedom.” By “emotional means” Gray refers to the support of a strong identity. The lack of such an identity is the chief obstacle that Sethe and Paul D encounter after escaping from a life of bondage. The roots of this are planted in the institution of slavery. The slave owners’ use of “mind-controlling tactics”, combined with physical violence, as well as the “destruction of family and linguistic groups” taught “dependency in the slave”3. In addition it also obliterated a sense of self-worth in the slaves.

Schoolteacher, a slave owner, fits Keizer description as “the primary representative and agent of

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the system of white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy in the era of slavery‖⁴. Paul D and Sethe’s experiences, under Schoolteacher’s brutal practice of slavery, underscore slavery’s dehumanizing process.

Sethe’s degrading experience of slavery is similar to what Paul D undergoes during his years as a slave. Under Schoolteacher’s oppressive rule Halle goes mad, Sixo is burnt alive, Paul A is dismembered, and the survivors, Sethe and Paul D, lose their selfhood. Schoolteacher catalyses the realisation, in both Sethe and Paul D, that they are regarded as nothing more than animals. At Sweet Home, Sethe experiences the indignity of being measured with a string and being divided in a list comparing her animal and human characteristics, and she suffers the ignominy of having her breasts milked like a cow by two grown men. Sethe realises that she is nothing more than a “property that reproduced itself without cost”⁵. Sethe’s identity as a slave is “carved permanently into her flesh”⁶ – a result of the whipping she receives when she tries to escape from Sweet Home. Sethe’s degrading experiences, in which she is suppressed, raped, and beaten destroys her sense of self-worth, impeding her from developing into a complete individual.

As a slave at Sweet Home, Paul D is denied the identity of a man. Here he experiences the degradation of being treated worse than an animal – having “his own mouth jammed full of iron”⁷, forced to wear an iron bit just like a horse, as well as having his feet shackled and his neck fastened with a three-spoke collar. He is traumatized after witnessing Sixo being roasted alive and is shocked by the realization that Halle has gone mad. The dollar figure expressing Paul D’s

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worth further disgraces him when Schoolteacher decides to sell him. He suffers further
dehumanization as part of a chain gang in Georgia, where he is forced into underground cells and
subject to sexual abuse and forced labour. Years later, Paul D understands that his dehumanizing
experiences have changed him from one of the titular Garner’s men to “something else, and that
something else [is] less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.”8 This chicken is ironically
called “Mister” – an “appellation that Paul D, as a slave is unlikely to hear”9. Garner,
Schoolteacher’s predecessor, practices a gentler form of slavery, calling his slaves “men”.
However, through this, Garner is, just like Schoolteacher, “playing god”10. Paul D realises that
“they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home”11 and that the masculine identity that Garner
has granted his slaves is destroyed with his demise. Keeping in mind that a name is the keynote
of one’s identity, Garner’s system of naming or distinguishing his slaves by only a letter, Paul A,
Paul D and Paul F, demonstrates the further dehumanization of slaves. Similar to Sethe, Paul D is
unable to construct a strong identity because the dehumanization he undergoes as a slave destroys
his sense of self-worth.

Song of Solomon

Set in mid-twentieth century America, Song of Solomon is Morrison’s portrayal of the
struggle of the African-American history and culture for survival in white American mainstream
society. Through Macon Dead, Morrison shows how a generation of African Americans, the
descendants of slaves, have repressed the history of their people: “they would rather consign it to

8 Ibid., p.86.
9 Gray, p.74.
10 Kelizer
obliteration, than let it persist as a humiliating reminder.” She thus awakens her reader to a threatened African-American identity, as part of the legacy of slavery. In Song of Solomon, Morrison presents a group of Deads, a family which are “spiritually maimed if not dead.” The injured psyches of Morrison’s characters, a result of the effects of racism that slavery brought with it, cause them to “limp through life, each in some crucial way incomplete.” Their incompleteness lies in their lack of understanding of their African-American heritage, which, as portrayed in the novel, is the outcome of their adherence “to excessively rigid, materialistic, Western values.” The Deads are alienated from the rest of the African-American community, incapacitating them from developing a strong identity.

Macon Dead is traumatized after witnessing a group of white men murder his father for what they perceive as the undeserved financial success of a black man. Realising that as an African American his father was restrained from acquiring land and success, this episode of his life initiates his ruthless pursuit of wealth. He migrates north to a city in Michigan, marrying Ruth Foster, the only daughter of the city’s first African-American doctor, in order to associate himself with the wealthy, upper-class of African Americans. He becomes a callous landlord, who is only concerned whether the rent is paid by his tenants. When it is not, he dislodges his tenants, just like he unmercifully expels Guitar’s family from the slum he owns. However, by “clutching the keys to his property, he has lost the keys to well-being – his own, his family’s and his community’s.” As financial success becomes the first priority of his life, he loses his humanity. His house becomes a cold and hostile environment. Morrison demonstrates that “if the

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14 Ibid., p.143.
16 Grewal, p.66.
enveloping white world does not emasculate” black men, as in the case of Paul D, “it turns them into Macon Deads, imitators of the most deadening values of white patriarchal society: greed, acquisitiveness and dominion”\textsuperscript{17}.

Ruth Foster Dead, raised to believe in her superiority over other African Americans, is privileged in her youth as the only daughter of the first African-American doctor of the city, a successful but self-hating racist, who especially despises lower-class African Americans. After marrying Macon Dead, even though she leads a privileged lifestyle, she suffers indirectly from the effects of racism, which manifest themselves in Macon Dead’s patriarchal views. Under Macon Dead’s domination, she leads a subdued existence, “stunned into stillness”\textsuperscript{18} and compensating her lack of sexual contact with enigmatic eccentricities, such as her prolonged nursing of Milkman. Her daughters, First Corinthians and Magdalene, also find Macon’s house “more prison than palace”\textsuperscript{19}. The unsympathetic environment they have been raised in, and the fact that they have been restricted to the art of petal-making, has stunted their emotional growth. Furthermore, their class and respectable status has hindered them from experiencing love. Their incompleteness and lifelessness stems from Macon Dead’s oppressive nature, which he adopts, as a result of the racism slavery generated, in his pursuit of wealth and respectability in white patriarchal society.

Milkman’s upbringing in an emotionally dead family consisting of a chauvinistic father, a self-effacing mother and two diffident sisters, causes him to acquire a similar lifelessness. He inherits the materialistic and unsympathetic nature of his father. Unable to develop a connection with his family or the rest of African-American community, Milkman feels alienated and drifts aimlessly through life, with no goals or aspirations. Milkman has no consideration for others, as

\textsuperscript{17} Rubenstein, p.141.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p.10.
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evidenced by his act of suddenly ending his decade-long relationship with Hagar with a simple good-bye note. Milkman does not show his family any consideration either, and his sister Magdalene opens his eyes to this reality by telling him that he has spent all his life peeing on them. His class separates him further from the rest of the African-American community. He is unable to identify with lower-class African Americans and this is evident in his indifferent attitude to the murder of a young African-American, Emmett Till. Milkman’s indifference to this atrocity originates from his lack of understanding of the slave past and the racism it has generated – a result of his father’s suppression of his family’s traumatic past.

Guitar, a working-class African American, has also suffered the loss of a father like Macon Dead, after he is killed in a factory accident due to the carelessness of his white employer. Guitar, unlike Macon Dead, does not suppress his memory of this incident. Instead he deals with his grief by developing a strong hatred for white people and becoming highly sensitive to the multiple injustices experienced by African Americans. Unlike Macon Dead, Guitar maintains a connection with the African-American community. In contrast to Milkman, Guitar is deeply rooted in the African-American community and witnesses the discrimination of African Americans every day. Moreover, his rage and passion for his race is further propelled by stories he has heard from other African Americans of the unpunished atrocities committed by white culprits. By becoming a member of the Seven Days, an organisation which kills innocent white people every time a black person is murdered, Guitar believes that he is making an important contribution to his community by eliminating what he perceives to be the root of all evil. His actions, however, do nothing to benefit his race. Instead they generate further violence. He becomes obsessed with his cause and his anger develops into madness. Guitar’s character highlights another flaw which impedes the development a coherent identity – racism and
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uncontrollable rage. This is what hinders Guitar from making progress for himself, his family and his community.

The reconstruction of a damaged identity

Self-definition in Beloved

Slavery leaves both Sethe and Paul D without the confidence to believe in their existence and develop a sense of worth. The question self-ownership and self-definition, namely identity, becomes their principal challenge. Even after gaining self-ownership, by freeing themselves from a life of slavery, they are unable to liberate themselves spiritually from the burden of their past. Through Baby Suggs and Sixo, Morrison demonstrates that spiritual liberation can be attained through self-definition, and thus a coherent identity can be constructed.

Where slavery destroys Paul D’s self-confidence, it proves to have little impact on his African brother, Sixo, who suffers equally, if not more, under Schoolteacher’s rule. Sixo, a first-generation slave, is able to resist the cruelty Schoolteacher inflicts upon him by, “radically refus[ing] the white man’s definitions”20 and defining himself according to the standards of his African culture. He therefore does not undergo emasculation. According to Keenan, both “Sixo and Halle represent possible revolutionary responses to enslavement on part of the slave man”21. Sixo demonstrates self-definition through his rejection of the English language, a language which degrades him, and also through his adherence to African traditions, such as dancing amongst trees at night. Through Sixo, Morrison portrays the importance of self-definition as it liberates him from the dehumanizing power of his master. Any doubts about Sixo’s spiritual liberation are cleared when he refuses to surrender to Schoolteacher at the expense of his life. In disagreement

20 Keenan, p.127.
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with Keenan, it is my opinion that Halle does not possess Sixo's strength of character. This is especially evident when Halle takes no action to prevent Schoolteacher's nephews from abusing his wife, Sethe. He surrenders to the desires of his masters and through this it is evidenced that Halle does not possess Sixo's sense of liberation and self-definition. Thus, in order for Paul D to attain liberation from the burden of his past, and achieve a complete identity, he must follow Sixo's example and define himself according to his own standards. Unlike Halle, he must reject his slave owner's definitions.

Upon gaining manumission, Baby Suggs constructs a name for herself from her husband's surname and the name he called her by. Baby Suggs's act of rejecting her bill-of-sale name, introduces the beginning of Baby Suggs's spiritual liberation - one which is generated through self-love and admiration for one's body. After having discovered "her own heartbeat"22, Baby Suggs moves to Cincinnati and puts her heart to work, spreading her message of self-love and respect to other African Americans. She becomes an "unchurched preacher"23, holding regular "fixing ceremon[ies]"24 and "open[ing] her great heart to those who could use it"25. Morrison portrays the significance of self-definition for former slaves through Baby Suggs - a woman who even after having "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue"26, and having lost all seven of her children due to slavery, is still able to, not only recover from its degradation, but also extend her heart to all those in need. Thus, the construction of an identity, through self-definition and self-ownership, is essential for the spiritual liberation of former slaves.

22 Ibid., p.166.
23 Ibid., p.102.
25 Ibid., p.102.
26 Ibid., p.102.
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Baby Suggs’s daughter-in-law, Sethe, strives for self-definition after having escaped from a life of slavery. She refuses to “define herself as a breeder of slaves”27, but rather as a mother. Sethe defines herself through her children who she views as “her own property instead of the slaveholder’s”28. Motherly love, however, causes her to murder her baby, since she views this as an act of protecting her children from the cruelty of slavery. As a result, however, she is imprisoned and rejected by the African-American community. This inhibits Sethe from coming to terms with her painful history, as she suppresses any memories of her slave past, instead of sharing them with other former slaves. Thus, both the process of defining oneself according to one’s own standards and the process of uniting with the community, are equally essential for former slaves in order to attain spiritual liberation and a complete identity.

Discovering the past in Song of Solomon

Part II of Song of Solomon is similar to a bildungsroman, through which Morrison portrays Milkman’s transformation from an alienated man into a culturally aware African American with a clear knowledge of his heritage. He attains this knowledge only after leaving his home in the North. It is his journey to the South that catalyses his transformation, since “the southern landscape encodes his past and future: his ancestors, his family history and his identity.”29 Thus, Morrison suggests that both a sense of independence and knowledge of the past are significant in the formation of a strong identity.

After realizing his hatred for his family, Milkman yearns for independence. In an attempt to find the gold which will liberate him from his dependency on his father, he travels south to

27 Grewal, p.97.
28 Ibid., p.97.
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Danville, Pennsylvania. Here Milkman meets Reverend Cooper, who through sharing stories of his murdered grandfather spawns Milkman’s interest in his ancestors. Milkman acquires more knowledge about his ancestors after visiting Circe, the woman who sheltered his father and his aunt after his grandfather was murdered. By telling Milkman about his grandfather’s real name and about his native-American wife, Circe provides Milkman with knowledge which proves to be crucial to Milkman’s understanding of his ancestral past. She also provides Milkman with the directions to the cave in which Milkman hopes to find the gold which will release him from his father’s control. After finding no gold in Hunter’s Cave, Milkman decides to “follow in her [Pilate’s] tracks”\(^{30}\), travelling to Shalimar. In Shalimar Milkman hears a group of children singing the song his Aunt Pilate used to sing. Upon listening carefully to the song and eventually memorizing it, Milkman pieces together his newly-found knowledge about his grandparents and discovers that the song is about his family. It is about Solomon, his great grandfather, who flies away from slavery, abandoning his wife and his children, one of whom is Jake, Milkman’s grandfather. This song serves as a register of historic and cultural memory, which revises for Milkman the very field of his middle-class identifications\(^{31}\). Milkman realises that all his life he has evaded responsibility. This realization comes initially when Milkman sees parallels in his sudden rejection of Hagar and Solomon’s abandonment of his wife.

During his trip, for the first time in his life Milkman feels independent after realizing that “he [is] his own director – relieving himself when he [wants] to, stopping for cold beer when he [is] thirsty, and even in his seventy-five-dollar car the sense of power [is] strong”\(^{32}\). However, upon arriving at Shalimar, his ancestral home town, he ends up in a fight with some other African Americans and is moments away from being murdered by Guitar. In Shalimar, a place which he

\(^{31}\) Grewal, p.61.
hopes to call “home”, he feels “unknown, unloved and [is] damn near killed.”33 Realizing that his urbanism is useless in the South, Milkman discards his tweed suit, dresses in army fatigues and ventures on a hunting trip. Milkman transforms from an urbane, protected boy into a brave, risk-taking man. His quest for gold thus becomes a quest of self-realization.

Central to Milkman’s transformation is his learning to understand others. During his hunting trip with a group of African-American men, for the first time in his life Milkman does not feel like an outsider, and he walks the earth with the hunters “like he [belongs] on it”34. The feeling of camaraderie which Milkman develops on this trip causes him to evaluate his perception of others. After Milkman realizes that his friend Guitar misses life in the South, Milkman feels that “he [understands] Guitar now”35. Milkman accepts the fact that he has treated Hagar despicably, “whom he’d thrown away like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone.”36 With this realization Milkman begins to treat women more respectfully, as evidenced through his mutual relationship with Sweet, a woman he meets in Shalimar. Milkman also begins to understand his parents. Through Milkman’s learning to understand others, Morrison portrays the importance of uniting with the community, as Milkman only achieves this after realizing that he belongs to a group of African Americans.

During his journey in the South Milkman does not discover the “gold buried beneath the dead man in a cave” but discovers “a wealth of knowledge”, “buried beneath the “Dead” name”37. What initially begins as an avaricious quest for gold, turns out to be a spiritual journey through which Milkman not only acquires a cultural and historical knowledge, but also an understanding of himself and the people in his life – all of which is necessary for a strong and

33 Ibid., p.270.
34 Ibid., p.281.
35 Ibid., p.278.
36 Ibid., p.277.
37 Grewal, p.64.
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cohere identity. Milkman’s quest for gold proves not to be futile, as the gold he finds transforms him into a spiritually liberated man.

Conclusion

In her novels, Beloved and Song of Solomon, Morrison demonstrates the extensive impact that the atrocious and inhumane practice of slavery during nineteenth century America has had on the identity of African Americans. According to Morrison, the institution of slavery not only destroyed the identity of a generation of former slaves, but it also, as a collective memory of a deplorable past, has had destructive repercussions on the identity of African Americans. Slavery’s impact on the identity of former slaves is portrayed through Sethe and Paul D, who, as a result of the dehumanization and degradation they experience as slaves, are unable to develop a strong identity after escaping from a life of slavery because of their lack of a sense of self-worth and their inability to believe in their own existence. Morrison highlights a conjoint solution for those coming out of life of slavery. She suggests, through Baby Suggs and Sixo, that defining oneself according to one’s own standards, by rejecting those standards imposed by the slave owners and uniting with the African-American community are pivotal in the construction of a complete African-American identity. In Song of Solomon, Morrison demonstrates that the incomplete identities of the African-American characters in the Dead Family are a result of the negative consequences of slavery which manifest themselves in the forgetful attitude of the characters towards their ancestral past. Morrison shows that the Dead family’s lack of understanding of their past threatens their identity as African Americans and impedes them from developing a strong identity. Thus, as portrayed through Milkman’s transformation, in order to
construct such an identity, an understanding of one’s heritage is central and uniting with the African-American community is necessary.

A study of Morrison’s novels suggests areas for further exploration within the theme of identity construction. These include exploring the destructive impact which the loss of identity has on African-American families, as evidenced through Sethe and Milkman’s disintegrated and dysfunctional families, and exploring further psychological impacts on African-Americans, as portrayed by Morrison’s characters, Halle and Hagar, both of whom suffer severely from mental instability as a consequence of slavery. An exploration of the character of Pilate may also provide another example of the ways in which a strong identity can be constructed.

Despite the fact that Morrison’s novels concentrate on African Americans, her novels have a widespread appeal, one of the reasons being that the identity issues and solutions to these issues, addressed in Morrison’s novels, can be applied to other ethnic minority groups. Moreover, through portraying what hinders the development of a complete and coherent identity and how such an identity can be constructed, Morrison communicates an all-encompassing message through which she demonstrates what it means to be human – pointing out in both Beloved and Song of Solomon that having a strong identity is essential for our healthy existence.
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