



## “It was me doing it”: A Psychoanalytic Study of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Mamona\*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Since its publication, Sethe’s conflicted personality and her act of killing her own daughter in Toni Morrison’s widely acclaimed novel Beloved has remained a very serious matter of concern leaving readers, researchers, and critics alike in a state of shock. The present study is an attempt to probe into the psyche of Sethe in order to unveil certain psychological facts behind her complicated behavior which led her to kill her own child and pushed her further into a state of unimaginable sufferings thereby. In order to examine her thought process and the reasons behind an imbalance in her personality, this paper took insights from Sigmund Freud’s Theory of Personality and Cathy Caruth’s Theory of Trauma. The findings of the study revealed that the traumatized events of her past and an inconsistency in the three elements of her psyche (id, ego and super-ego) resulted in Sethe’s abnormal and unstable sense of self. However, the paper also detailed the ways in which Sethe’s acknowledgement with her traumatic past by employing different coping strategies helped her in developing a stable personality.*

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**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, personality, inconsistency, trauma, defenses

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### Introduction

Psychoanalysis and particularly, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic approach holds a significant place in literature. Psychoanalysis provides both the reader and the critic opportunity to analyze the characters in literature by delving deeper into their psyche and finding out the main cause of their inappropriate or abnormal behavior. Specifically, Freud gives importance to the role of unconscious and repressed emotions in our present behavior, as he claims: “Psychoanalyst aims and achieves nothing more than the discovery of the unconscious in mental life” (cited in Pervin, 1984, p. 71). In this sense, psychoanalysis can help readers and researchers to comprehend why a character does or did something wrong and unacceptable. The present study is intended to explore certain psychological facts behind the conflicting behavior of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. For this purpose Freud’s Theory of

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\* M.Phil.Scholar, Department of English, Babaudin Zakariya University Multan (Email Address: mamona905@gmail.com)

Personality and Caruth's theory of Trauma have been employed. Freud's theory divides the human psyche into three parts; id, ego and superego.

If someone experiences a clash between these three parts of psyche, it becomes difficult for a person to form a stable personality.

Likewise, Caruth's (1996) concept of trauma has been defined as something which continues to haunt the survivor in the form of "repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (p. 91). Sethe—the protagonist of Toni Morrison's highly praised novel *Beloved*—also experiences an ongoing battle/conflict in her mind. Published in 1987, *Beloved* is Toni Morrison's much-admired novel. It chronicles the experiences of black people in America which Morrison insists on not forgetting. The novel under review won The Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 because of its realistic depiction of the lives of blacks during and after slavery. It is set during the Reconstruction era in 1873 and focuses on the power of history and memory. All the former slaves in the story seem unable to forget the horrible incidents of their lives. Particularly, Sethe, the central character of the novel and focus of my study faces serious difficulties in forgetting the memories of her life as a slave which keep on haunting her in the form of the ghost of her own daughter, Beloved. Beloved (now in the form of a ghost) is the same girl who had been murdered by Sethe eighteen years earlier because she wanted to save her child from the atrocities of slavery. An actual account which was published in an article in 1855 formed the basis for this novel. This report was about a former slave girl, Margaret Garner, who preferred killing her daughter over returning to slavery.

### **Literature Review**

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* holds a multifarious thematic variety and diversity of meanings. Particularly, the depth, complexity, and ambiguity in the characters of this novel have aroused a significant amount of debates and discussions among the literary critics and researchers. Among the common themes of this novel which have been dealt with by the researchers is the threatening impact of slavery on the minds of its characters. Kamlesh and Singh's (2013) study deals with the issue of Sethe's murder of her daughter. They argue that Morrison explores the issue of Sethe's killing her child by reading her psyche (p. 263). Their study reveals how the past incidents of slavery on Sethe's mind forced her to become a "fretful mother" who had to kill her own daughter in order to save her from slavery. Likewise, Larrick's (2007) research explains the grave consequences of Sethe's actions on the

lives of people around her. However she maintains: "While Sethe has made those in her life victims of psychological repression, she is also a victim herself" (Larrick, 2007, p. 6). Besides, Schapiro (1991) also discusses the worst impacts of slavery on people's psyche. She states that the horror which the novel exposes and the worst act of violence of slavery "is not physical death but psychic death" (p. 195). These researches discussed above relate to the concept of trauma as theorized by Cathy Caruth which forms the basis of the present research as well. In her understanding of trauma, she asserts that it is a wound that "inflects not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Therefore, before a detailed analysis of how trauma affects Sethe, it seems necessary to first explain what 'Trauma' is. Terr (1990) defines it as "a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows" assaulting the person from outside (p. 8). In Erikson's (1991) account, such an intense emotional blow or stress "may produce disordered feelings or behavior" (p. 184).

Another argument which has been raised by the researchers is the difficulties involved in the formation of one's "self". For instance, Cox's (2007) study reveals that Beloved is suffering from 'separation anxiety'. Her research indicates that although Beloved comes back physically as a full grown woman, in actuality, she resembles a toddler who is in the process of psychological development. Her study further exposes that due to the absence of a father-figure in her life—which is necessary for a girl's normal sexual development and the formation of self—Beloved was left in the pre-oedipal stage which resulted in her extreme desire of a unification with her mother. Apart from that, Ali (2013) talks about the gender issues in Morrison's novels, *Beloved* and *Sula*. In her study she highlights the importance of gender in the formation of 'self'. She argues that institution of slavery deprives women of their self or womanhood (Ali, 2013, p. 1423). Additionally, Ghosh (2012) maintains that Toni Morrison's novel attempts to "retell the unspoken stories" which the contemporary narratives have failed to illustrate. He is of the view that Morrison insists on considering the past not as burden, rather taking it as a heritage which must be remembered in order to forget it. Moreover, some studies have tried to highlight the ambiguities in the character of Beloved. While dealing with the issue of Beloved's identity, Booster (2007) draws multiple interpretations. She interprets the character of Beloved as the manifestation of Sethe's guilt; psychological frustration that Denver felt; and the buried anguish that the entire black community felt after the horrible experiences of slavery (p.1). Koolish's (2001) thesis also details the

similar issue. She argues that Morrison leaves the question of Beloved's identity so vague and unclear that the readers and characters are left confused and unable to reach at any conclusion about her identity (p. 171).

Furthermore, Steadman's (2007) study attempts to explain Beloved's identity by exploring the binaries in her character depending on her interaction with other characters in the novel. In an attempt to define Beloved, he states that she is "an accurate depiction of a human life, for she is incredibly complex" (p. 6). A recent psychoanalytic study has been conducted by Al-Dmour (2019) which analyzes Morrison's novel from various angles. For instance, arguing about Sethe's complicated behavior in the light of Freud's concepts, he states that the reason behind Sethe's devastated personality is her "repressed unconscious". Apart from that, he also elaborates the character of Beloved by taking insights from Carl Jung's theory of Electra complex. This concept states that a girl unconsciously searches for her father's love in which she considers her mother as a rival. Al-Dmour is of the view that because Paul D is attracted to Sethe, he serves as a father-figure for Beloved. Therefore, Beloved seeks revenge from her mother by wanting to have relationship with Paul D.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study is a textual analysis using a psychoanalytic lens. Following the method of qualitative research, certain events, words, phrases and sentences from Morrison's novel *Beloved* have been purposefully selected. Besides, the present paper has taken insights from Sigmund Freud's 'Theory of Personality' and Cathy Caruth's theory of Trauma for an in depth psychoanalysis of the character of Sethe. What follows is an overview of theoretical concepts afore-mentioned.

#### ***Caruth's Theory of Trauma***

For an in-depth analysis of how trauma affects the character of Sethe in *Beloved*, the present study takes insights from the concept of Trauma as theorized by Cathy Caruth—the most influential figure in contemporary theories on Trauma. In her understanding of trauma, she has drawn on Sigmund Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*. Caruth (2001) translates this term as "belatedness" (p. 2). However, it has also been translated as "deferred action" (Masson, 2001, p. 3). She describes it as an "unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events which are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive

phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 91). In other words, that violent or traumatic event is not remembered as something which happened in the past, rather it becomes a part of survivor’s present as well. She claims that this ‘belated’ experience of trauma or uncontrolled memories can collapse the traumatized individual’s sense of “time, self and the world” (p. 4).

### ***Freud’s Theory of Personality***

Freud’s theory of personality consists of three distinct parts of the psyche namely id, ego and super-ego. The disruption in these parts of the psyche results in an unstable personality development. A brief overview of these terms has been given below.

#### *The ‘id’*

According to Freud, id refers to that part of our psyche which “contains the passions”. While drawing an analogy to elaborate a close relationship between the id and the ego, Freud compares the id to a horse and the ego to its rider “who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse” (Freud, 1923, p. 25). It operates entirely at the unconscious level and demands immediate satisfaction of desires regardless of the concept of good or bad. The ‘id’ has come from the Latin word for ‘it’ and contains those aspects of our personality which are instinctive and are present at the time of birth (Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992, p. 88).

#### *The ‘ego’*

Freud (1923) defines the ego as “that part of id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” (p. 25). It is the intellectual and problem solving part of our psyche. Governed by reason, its job is to create balance between the demands of ‘id’ and the ‘superego’. Hjelle and Ziegler (1992) explain it in this way that the ‘ego’ is the decision making component of the psyche which seeks to express and satisfy the desires of the ‘id’ in accordance to the restrictions imposed by the outside world (p. 88). It is partly conscious and partly unconscious. In Freud’s account, when an individual confronts serious anxiety and emotional disturbance, the ego develops and activates some defense mechanisms. Defenses are the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious (Tyson, 2006, p.

15). The defenses employed in the present study are named as ‘repression’, ‘projection’, ‘rationalization’ and ‘regression’<sup>1</sup>.

### *The ‘super-ego’*

Also called as the ‘ego-ideal’, the super-ego represents “the internal world, of the id” (Freud, 1923, p. 36). According to Freud, it “represents an energetic reaction-formation against the choices” of the id and “its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: ‘You *ought to be*’. Rather, it also comprises the prohibition: ‘You *may not be*’”<sup>2</sup> (p. 34). Hence, the ‘superego’ part of our personality constitutes the internalization of social norms and standards of behavior (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1992, p. 90). Besides, it consists of two subtypes: the conscience and the ego-ideal. The ‘conscience’ results from the feelings of guilt and punishment and the ‘ego-ideal’ develops when a person is rewarded for his/her appropriate behavior (Feist, 1985, p. 27).

### **Data Analysis**

The character of Sethe—the protagonist in Morrison’s novel *Beloved*—calls for an in-depth study of her psyche. Her complicated behavior in the story indicates that she has a disrupted and unstable personality. To be specific, her act of killing her own daughter and boldly claiming that “it was me doing it” (Morrison, 2004, p. 162) leaves everyone in a state of shock. However, what forced her to murder her own daughter requires a detailed and careful insight into the past experiences of Sethe’s life. As psychoanalytic theory states that our present behavior is the direct result of our past experiences (Tyson, 2006, p.12), in Sethe’s unconscious also, there are hidden those painful experiences which she suffered at the hands of white masters during the time of slavery. Her present life and her consciousness are thus influenced by the fears and unresolved conflicts of her past what Caruth (1996) terms as “repeated flashbacks”. She is an ex-slave woman in the novel for whom life as a slave girl at Sweet Home<sup>3</sup> was not easy to live. As a young girl, she had been sent to Sweet Home where slaves were treated inhumanly by their owners. Although Sethe succeeded in marrying a slave named Halle and bore three children, the treatment she received as a black slave was unbearable. She was raped by the nephews of Schoolteacher<sup>4</sup> who treated her like an animal by heinously stealing her milk with

<sup>1</sup> An elaboration of these terms has been given along with the psychoanalysis of the novel in the section entitled ‘Discussion and Analysis’.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the plantation where Sethe used to work as a slave

<sup>4</sup> The white master at Sweet Home

which Sethe had to feed her daughter Beloved. She told this incident to Paul D<sup>5</sup> in these words: “Those boys came in there and took my milk....Held me down and took it” (Morrison, 2004, p. 16). The Schoolteacher even whipped her so brutally that it left the scars on Sethe’s back for the rest of her life. Not only on her body, this incident of violence left unrecoverable scars on her psyche as well. For this reason, Caruth (1996) asserts that the survivors of trauma have “to live it twice” (p. 7). At first, the trauma affects the body of the survivor. It later comes to haunt in the form of “flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena” (p. 94). In the latter case, it becomes a wound of the mind which in Caruth’s (1996) view is more difficult to cure than the wound of the body. Consequently, what Sethe suffered in the hands of white masters in the past came to haunt her present as well. Therefore, Larrick (2007) also contends that Morrison’s novel revolves around the psychological repercussions of rape and abuse (Larrick, 2007, p. 2). For this reason, when such inhuman treatment became too hard to bear for Sethe, she sent her three children ahead. Later on, she also decided to free herself by running away from the cruel clutches of the white slave holders. But the difficulties she had to face in her way to escape are beyond description. She was pregnant with her fourth child when she ran away from Sweet Home and it was on her way to escape that she gave birth to Denver (her youngest daughter).

Moreover, Sethe could never forget the memory of her mother’s body hanging in front of her eyes which also left a terrible mark on her psyche. In addition, she was raped in front of her husband who could not bear the sight of that incident. As a consequence, he went mad and never returned in her life. Though occasionally Sethe tried to forget her past life, the memories of her early experiences were so threatening that they continued to enter and influence her present life as well. Therefore, psychoanalytic theory also claims that the unconscious does not just passively store the neutral data, rather it continues to actively engage us at the deepest level of our being (Tyson, 2006, p. 13). According to psychoanalytic perceptions, a person grows with a healthy and stable personality if he or she has a good past experience. In contrast to that, if the person has such terrible past experiences like that of slavery as Sethe suffered, they continue to influence his or her remaining life. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that Sethe’s personality became unstable because of her dreadful experiences in the past. Furthermore,

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<sup>5</sup> *Sethe's co-worker at plantation called Sweet Home*

Caruth (1996) gives an explanation of traumatic experience by stating it as “an enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out..., a voice that witnesses a truth” which the traumatized individual cannot fully know (p. 3). Likewise, Sethe could neither fully acknowledge nor forget the horrors of slavery. Hence, her inability to fully know and forget what she experienced in the past left her so helpless that she went on to kill her own daughter as an attempt to save her from the abusive treatment by the slave owners.

However, if it is explored in the light of Freud’s Theory of Personality, Sethe’s murder of her daughter can be considered as the working of her ‘id’. In Freud’s view, when one of our three selves (id, ego and superego) outweighs the other two, we cannot develop with a stable personality. In the case of Sethe also, her id became the most dominant part of her psyche and it was the terrible impulses of her id which urged her to attack her own children in an unbelievable way: “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” (Morrison, 2004, p. 149). Because such a horrible act of murdering her own daughter went against the moral implications of her superego or the expectations of her community, the whole community disapproved of Sethe’s behavior. As a consequence, she was secluded for quite a long time, as Morrison also states: “those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life”<sup>6</sup> (p. 173) and “nobody but nobody visited that house” (p. 184). Thus, here the superego part of Sethe’s psyche is being revealed through the people of her community. Sethe’s friend Ella also condemned her act by saying, “I ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children” (p. 187). For this reason, after the murder of her own daughter, one part of her superego—that is the ‘conscience’—persisted in making Sethe feel guilt for what she had done. As a result, she began to think that she was responsible for ruining everyone’s life in her family including her mother-in-law: “Sethe blamed herself for Baby Suggs’ collapse” (Morrison, p. 90). Her guilt made her feel that the blood of her baby had “soaked her fingers like oil” (p. 5). Hence, with the passage of time, Sethe’s guilty feelings became dangerous for her own personality. For this reason, her ‘ego’ developed a number of defense mechanisms including the ‘repression’ which kept her going. In repression, the unacceptable and threatening thoughts and feelings are driven from conscious mind

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<sup>6</sup> *This incident took place after twenty-eight days of her escape from Sweet Home.*

to the unconscious and the individual tries to avoid the feelings of anxiety and guilt consciously (Zanden, 1985, p. 37). Sethe also tried her best to forget or repress the unpleasant thoughts about her past. However, it is argued that often 'repression' does not provide us relief from those painful emotions. Instead, those unpleasant thoughts related to our past become so powerful that they tend to control our current experiences as well (Tyson, 2006, p. 13). In the similar way, Sethe's attempts to repress her unpleasant experiences failed, thereby denying every possibility for her to move on and look ahead for her future. This can be analyzed from the following lines in the novel: "But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (Morrison, 2004, p. 70).

Day by day, Sethe's desire to seek satisfaction grew so acute that when Beloved returned in the form of a fully grown woman, she made every possible effort to get rid of her guilty feelings. For this reason, Demetrakopoulos (1992) goes on to say that "Sethe's guilt has reincarnated Beloved" (p. 56). Moreover, while commenting on how trauma affects the individuals, Bloom (1999) claims that "human beings will do anything to avoid feeling powerless" (p. 14). In the case of Sethe also, her attempt to avoid feeling powerless and her desire to have peace of mind by seeking forgiveness from Beloved went to such an extreme that it began to negatively affect her own personality as well as the people around her. In fact, the more Sethe tried to fulfill the demands of Beloved, the more helpless she became. To describe it in psychoanalytic terms, the more we surrender to our painful past, the more difficult to forget and spiteful it becomes. Barnett (1997) also asserts it in this way that "Beloved like the repressed, returns against Sethe's will" and when she arrives, she is hungry for more and more love and attention of her mother (p. 420). At this point, it can be argued that Sethe was once again under the control of her 'id'. Freud states that "the id operates the inexorable pleasure principle" (cited in Monte & Robert, 2003, p. 99). This indicates that the id works according to the principle that whatever brings satisfaction to a wishful impulse is good. In the similar way, Sethe's wish to get satisfaction by seeking approval from Beloved was so strong that she became indifferent to the harm Beloved was inflicting upon her. Hence, by making her feel free from her guilt, Beloved became an immediate source of satisfaction for Sethe. This strange satisfaction led her to become too much possessive of Beloved, as she herself claimed it overjoyed: "BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have

to explain a thing” (Morrison, 2004, p. 200). In this sense, Beloved played the role of an object for Sethe which relieved her off the unpleasant and guilty thoughts. But her efforts to make amends for her previous act of killing her daughter seemed never ending because Beloved took full control over Sethe. Morrison described it in the novel in these words that “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (p. 251).

Furthermore, psychoanalysis is also concerned with the changing nature of interpersonal relationships and the interaction with society which play a significant role in the formation of one’s ‘self’ (Ryon, 1999, p. 35). Because Sethe had been alienated from her community, the result of all this was that she lost her ‘self’. The thought of cutting the throat of her daughter by a handsaw with her own hands was not something which could easily be forgotten. Nevertheless, in order to bring her back to a stable personality and to reclaim her ‘self’, Sethe’s ego activated a number of defense mechanisms. In psychoanalytic terms, when one’s own impulses and actions become too painful for a person to acknowledge then that individual’s mind / psyche employs a defense mechanism called ‘projection’. In Zanden’s (1985) view, ‘projection’ is the way of blaming somebody else for one’s own guilty feelings. Such an approach functions as a kind of ‘self-defense’ by making the individual believe that it was started by someone else (p. 37). In a similar way, projection was employed by Sethe’s ego as well when she started believing that it was not she but the whites who were to be blamed for her act of murder. She believed that she had killed her daughter in order to save her from the abuse of slavery: “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty bet all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing” (Morrison, 2004, p. 251). In addition, as Bloom (1999) contends that the “social nature of human beings is grounded in our need to attach to other human beings from cradle to grave” (p. 2), Sethe had to make her act of murder acceptable to others to become a part of her community and reclaim her ‘self’ thereby. For that to happen, her ego developed the mechanism of ‘rationalization’ in which people rationalize by finding a convincing reason for doing something that would otherwise be viewed as unacceptable (Zanden, 1985, p.37). Likewise, Sethe also tried to make her decision rational which in others’ view could not be considered as an appropriate way of behaving at all, as Morrison mentions it in the novel that “ she felt she had to convince that what she had done was right because it came from true love” (p. 251). Therefore, Sethe boldly claimed that “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (p. 164). At another occasion, when Paul D said that

her way of loving was “too thick”, Sethe replied: “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (Morrison, 2004, p. 164). Thus, she did not let anybody blame her for slaughtering her own daughter because she strongly believed that it was an expression of her love that forced her to take the life of her own daughter because she could not give her children into the hands of cruel white masters. However, when all the afore-mentioned defenses did not bring relief to Sethe, she temporarily returned to her former state of mind. In Psychoanalytic terms, such a state also acts as a defense mechanism called ‘regression’. Bloom’s (1999) in her understanding of trauma writes it in this way that “when someone experiences a flashback, they do not remember the experience, they relive it” (p. 6). An evidence of such an experience can be found from Sethe’s words in the novel as well:

What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean even if I don’t think it, even if I die the picture of what I did, or knew or saw is still out there, right in the place where it happened. (Morrison, 2004, p. 36)

This defense works differently from other defenses in that unlike other defenses, there is an opportunity in it for ‘active reversal’ in which an individual acknowledges and works through his or her repressed emotions and experiences. The ‘regression’ operates on the principle that a person will be able to change the effects of past experiences only when he or she will relive that wounding experience. For this reason, ‘regression’ is considered an effective therapeutic tool (Tyson, 2006, p. 16). This concept is also similar to what Freud calls “repetition compulsion”. According to Freud (1920), the traumatized person cannot remember every detail of what happened to him or what he has been trying to repress, yet he is “obliged to *repeat*” those repressed emotions in the present rather than simply “*remembering* it as something in the past”. In other words, for healing to occur, the traumatized individual has to repeat the past compulsively. In the similar way, it can be argued that Beloved did not only bring troubles for Sethe, she also gave her an opportunity to acknowledge and work through her traumatic past. In an attempt to bring relief to her mother, Beloved forced her to remember those things which Sethe kept on avoiding. For instance at one place when Beloved asked her mother about her earrings, Sethe felt relieved while talking about her past with her, as Morrison mentions it: “But as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it” (p. 58). In psychoanalytic terms, such a way of bringing relief to

someone is called healing through “talking cure”<sup>7</sup>. Bloom (1999) argues that “without words, the traumatic past is experienced as being in the ever present ‘Now’” (p. 7). Therefore, by stating that “telling things is a relief”, Breuer claimed that it was possible to relieve his patient of trauma by making her talk about her past experience or give “verbal utterance” to it (cited in Atterton, 2007, p. 567). Beloved’s presence also forced or encouraged Sethe to remember and talk about her past so that she could acknowledge it for healing to occur. In this regard, Rushdy’s (1992) claim about Beloved’s role aptly sums up my point as he affirms it that Beloved is “more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of past that must be remembered to be forgotten” (p. 51). To explain it in terms of Freud’s theory of personality, as Sethe’s ‘ego’ negotiated with her ‘superego’, Beloved began to act as Sethe’s ‘conscience’ which was a part of her superego. Beloved wanted her mother to admit her mistake by making her realize that she had done something really wrong. She demanded a more appropriate way of behaving from her mother:

When once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself—be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best—Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane. (Morrison, 2004, p. 242)

In this sense, Beloved constantly urged her mother to behave according to the demands of her ‘ego-ideal’ for which she would be rewarded. Therefore when Beloved put her mother’s life at risk by raising her guilty feelings, the community’s women came to rescue her from Beloved (Sethe’s guilt): “For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves,...It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (Morrison, 2004, p. 261). To Sethe, this was a sign of forgiveness from her community. At this moment, Mr. Bodwin who was Denver’s employer arrived to give her a lift to work. Once more, his arrival pushed Sethe’s mind into the traumatic situation that she went through eighteen years ago. She began to imagine that the white man had come again with an evil intent of taking her daughter away from her just as the Schoolteacher came with an intention of taking her children in the past. However, Sethe did not attack her own children this time. Instead, she ran toward Mr. Bodwin with an ice-pick but Denver and the women of her community stopped her immediately. Seeing this, Beloved also disappeared because she had fulfilled her mission of making her mother

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<sup>7</sup> *This phrase was coined by Freud’s colleague Josef Breuer in his treatment of a patient Fraulein Anna O (1880-1882).*

do what was morally correct. Hence, Sethe now behaved according to the demands of her 'ego ideal' for which she had been rewarded in the form of forgiveness from her community and Beloved. Therefore, Sethe reunited with her community which was crucial for her in the development of a stable personality, as Freud (1923) also states that "social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal" (p. 37). In this sense, it can be argued that Sethe's three selves (id, ego and superego) began to work in complete harmony. She had paid for her past by attacking the attacker, not her own children and thus proved herself to be a good, loving and caring mother.

### **Findings**

As mentioned earlier, this paper was an attempt to explore the reasons behind the imbalance in the personality of Sethe—the protagonist of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*—in the light of certain Psychoanalytic concepts. For this purpose, I employed Caruth's theory of Trauma and Freud's theory of Personality. While analyzing her character in the light of Caruth's understanding of trauma, it became clear that Sethe's worst experiences as a slave girl in the past contributed a lot in her shattered sense of self. In fact, there was not just one traumatic incident in her life which she was unable to overcome but a long list of horrible events which devastated her personality. The sight of the hanging body of her mother, the inhuman treatment she suffered in the hands of the white masters e.g. stealing milk or raping her in front of her husband, the difficulties she went through while giving birth to a baby girl in her way to escape, all these incidents made her alienated from her 'self'. These unpleasant incidents left such a terrible impact on her psyche that she went on to kill her own daughter considering it the only way to save her from the atrocities of slavery. However, the thought of murdering her daughter with her own hand further contributed in her sufferings as it came to haunt her later in the form of Beloved's ghost, thus affirming Caruth's (1996) claim that the survivors of trauma have "to live it twice" (p. 7). At first, the trauma affects the body of the survivor. It later comes to haunt in the form of "flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena" (p. 94).

Besides, this study also tried to analyze the conflicted personality of Sethe in the light of Freud's theory of Personality. The analysis of her character revealed that an inconsistency in the three elements of her psyche (id, ego and super-ego) as a consequence of traumatized events of her past resulted in Sethe's abnormal and

unstable sense of self. However, this paper also detailed the ways in which Sethe tried to cope with her trauma by employing different strategies or activating different defense mechanisms i.e. 'repression', 'projection', 'rationalization' and 'regression'. An detailed analysis of the character of Sethe with an implication of above-mentioned psychoanalytic concepts revealed how she acknowledged with her traumatic past in order to develop a stable personality endorsing Caruth's (1996) view that "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally an enigma of survival" (p. 60).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, an extensive analysis by entering the mind / psyche of Sethe in the light of Caruth's theory of Trauma and Freud's theory of Personality unveiled certain psychological facts behind her conflicted personality. The application of Caruth's concept of trauma uncovered the worst impact of the past on the present life of Sethe. Likewise, the implication of Freud's theory of personality revealed that in order to develop a stable personality and live a normal and common routine life, the consistency in three parts of one's psyche (id, ego and superego) is essential. If an individual experiences a clash in these three selves, he or she cannot develop a stable personality as it had been observed in the character of Sethe. However, the study also explicated how Sethe coped with her shattered sense of 'self' and overcame her guilty feelings by activating different 'defenses' and eventually formed a stable personality. In addition, this study also maintains that Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* conveys the message of hope to those struggling with their trauma or psychic conflicts and insists that if they want to forget the painful incidents of their past, they need to remember them first. It is only by remembering, facing, and acknowledging those hurtful experiences that they would be able to overcome them and emerge with a positive and stable personality.

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