Self-Recovery and Development in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Introduction

In her fifth novel *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison attempts to weave together a mother-daughter plot and a traumatic history of America: slavery. The mother Sethe, who kills her baby daughter to protect her from any tentacles of slavery, is suffering from guilty feelings and struggling to establish her "new" self. Sethe's other daughter Denver also is struggling with the sense of loneliness and searching for her own "self." The story centers on the recovery of the mother's "self" and the development of the daughter. As many critics have remarked, however, an epigraph of this novel—"sixty-million or more"—shows that it is dedicated to those who suffered or died under the peculiar institution of slavery.[1] Added to this, the incarnation of Sethe's dead daughter Beloved makes it impossible for readers to read this novel as a simple mother-daughter story. This advent of Beloved becomes a trigger to lead Sethe's healing process and Denver's development.

Previous studies mainly have discussed the incarnation of Beloved as an appearance of a spokesperson on behalf of the "sixty-million or more,"[2] but

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few critics have mentioned the reason why Beloved appears as "a fully dressed woman" (*Beloved* 60). What is the purpose in describing "a fully dressed" Beloved in this scene? Moreover, what is important to note here is that this clothing issue applies to not only the story of Beloved but also the one of Sethe and Denver; throughout this story, they effectively wear their clothes. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore this novel from this new perspective: clothes.[3]

In analyzing the descriptions of clothes in her novel, it is noteworthy that Morrison states in her essay *Playing in the Dark* (1992):

> *The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility.* [. . .] Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the "clean slate" variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity *not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes*, as it were. *The new setting would provide new raiments of self.* (Morrison 34, emphases are mine)

Here, we should notice that she explains how America had been launched in the New world, by using the metaphor: "clothes." The phrase: "not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes" reminds us of the description of the *Beloved*'s characters' clothes. Moreover, it is obvious that the last sentence offers us a suggestive image of Beloved's incarnation.

Added to this essay, Morrison's comments in an interview with Paul Gilroy will make it clearer that the clothes motif in her novel should not be overlooked as a narrative tool. About aiming to treat "slavery" in literature, she says:

> 'Slavery wasn't in the literature at all. Part of that, I think, is because, on moving from bondage into freedom which has been our goal, we got away from slavery and also from the slaves, there's a difference. *We have to re-inhabit those people*.' (Gilroy 179, emphases are mine)

Here, obviously, she regards the way to treat slavery in literature as a problematic issue; however, we must draw attention to the last sentence. As has already been pointed out, the word "re-inhabit" can be resolved into "re-in-habit," that is to say, wear the clothes again (Ara 145). Seen in this light, it is clear that Morrison aims to "re-inhabit" African American characters including Beloved "in new clothes," not just installing them as mere characters in her novel. Indeed, throughout this story, each character wears "new clothes" in breaking out of their own world and launching into a new world they had never experienced.

1. Beloved as "a fully dressed woman"

Let us consider the incarnation of Beloved first. Regarding Beloved, many critics have thoroughly discussed the presence itself, represented by Jean Wyatt's "Who is Beloved?"[4] Also, in an interview, Morrison mentions Beloved as "her [Sethe's] child returned to her from the dead" and "a survivor from the true, factual slave ship" (Darling 247). Therefore, as a large number of critics point out, it is appropriate to interpret Beloved as an embodiment of "sixty-million or more" including the baby whom Sethe killed.[5] Then, we need to investigate the reason why she has to appear as "a fully dressed woman."

The scene of Beloved's incarnation is described thus:

> *A fully dressed woman walked out of the water.* She barely gained the dry back of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in *her straw hat.* [. . .] By late afternoon when the carnival was over, [. . .] the woman had fallen asleep again. The rays of the sun struck her full in the face, so that when Sethe, Denver and Paul D rounded the curve in the road all they saw was *a black dress, two unlaced shoes below it,* [. . .] . (60-61, emphases are mine)

The first sentence, indicating the revival of Beloved, has been interpreted that Beloved is a person who went through and suffered "the middle passage," or it represents a new birth, since the word "the water" associates with the sea or the amniotic fluid (Ara 136-37). As the interpretation suggests, Beloved here is described as if she were a new-born child: "She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands" (61). Also, we must not forget that Beloved suddenly appears from somewhere like a different world: "Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by" (60).[6] Nevertheless, the important point here for us is what she is wearing. From this scene, we see that she is wearing "a straw hat," "a black dress" and "two unlaced shoes" ; however, later in the story, Sethe's friend Paul D, who is in attendance and one of the witnesses of Beloved's appearance, wonders at "the newness of her [Beloved's] shoes" (63) and portrays the scene in words thus: "When we got back, there she was—'sleep on a stump.

Silk dress. Brand-new shoes. Black as oil" (277, emphases are mine). What is apparent in Paul D's words is that Beloved has not only a brand new skin, but also brand-new and fine quality raiment.

As suggested above, Beloved makes her first appearance as "a fully dressed woman" ; however, at the end of the story, she appears thus: "It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, *naked* and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun" (308, emphasis mine). This scene, which I shall discuss in detail later, is one of the significant scenes, since the community of Bluestone Road gathers together in 124 and is united for the first time since Sethe's killing her baby. Then expelling Beloved and saving Sethe, the community achieves the revival of their bonds. After Beloved's disappearance from 124, furthermore, "naked woman with fish for hair" (315) is frequently seen at the stream in back of 124. It is no wonder that this "naked woman" is "naked" (308) Beloved.[7] Then her body at last vanishes, completely:

> Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. [. . .] By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. (324)

Thus, she disappears from the real world; namely, she returns to the post-death world. Here, we should recall Morrison's argument concerning "The flight from the Old World to the New" (Morrison 34). Beloved revives in the "new" real world from the post-death world in new clothes to see Sethe; that is to say, "not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes" (Morrison 34). Then, as I shall discuss it in detail below, after showing the

possibilities of self-recovery for Sethe, she returns to the post-death world.

2. Sethe's "self" recovery and her raiment

As for Sethe and her raiment, what impresses us first is a scene, in which Sethe, a then slave, having escaped from Sweet Home and barely arriving at 124, has put on "a gray cotton dress" (109-10) given to her by her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, as follows:

> Then, while waiting for another pan of heated water, she [Baby Suggs] sat next to her [Sethe] and stitched gray cotton. [. . .] Tearing sheets, stitching the gray cotton, she [Baby Suggs] supervised the woman in the bonnet who tended the baby. . .Sethe could put on the gray cotton dress her mother-in-law had started stitching together the night before. Finally she lay back and cradled the crawling-already? girl in her arms. (109-10)

When arriving at 124, Sethe is described thus: "too ugly-looking to wake them [Sethe's children] in the night" (109); and Baby Suggs, as the quotation above shows, is "tearing sheets, stitching the gray cotton" and making a new dress for her. When beginning a new life in a new place 124, Sethe changes from the ragged clothes into the brand-new clothes; it is obvious that Sethe's figure in this scene is a person, "in new clothes" (Morrison 34), who not only succeeds in escaping from her salve status but also takes a step into a new world: freedom.

Twenty-eight days later, however, everything collapses because Sethe murders her baby daughter. During the twenty-eight days, she has had an

"unslaved life" (111), claimed "ownership of that freed self" (112) and attended Baby Suggs's "the Clearing" of a community gathering. For her, the days are "Days of healing. . . Days of company" (111); but she loses those days and faces Baby Suggs's death. After the death of the mother-in-law, for Sethe, "eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" (204) begin; in fact, the community has no revival of "the Clearing" and the bond is severed.

Our next concern is to demonstrate what Sethe is wearing when going to carnival with Paul D and Denver. It is important to note that this scene is the day not only of "being her first social outing in eighteen years" (56) but also of re-encountering Beloved. Let us look at the text in detail:

> Sethe was badly dressed for the heat, but this being her first social outing in eighteen years, *she felt obliged to wear her one good dress*, heavy as it was, and a hat. Certainly a hat. She didn't want to meet Lady Jones or Ella with her head wrapped like she was going to work. The dress, a good-wool castoff, was a Christmas present Baby Suggs from Miss Bodwin, the whitewoman who loved her. (56, emphases are mine)

Though it is hot, Sethe chooses the best dress suitable for her social outing in a long time. Here, obviously, she is deeply conscious of others' gaze toward her, and she wears a hat to avoid her wrapped head being seen by her acquaintances. We should notice here that Sethe, who once was a slave and did not have even the right to choose her own clothing, could have been conscious of her own appearance and chosen her clothes on her own.[8] Also,

what is significant is that the "eighteen years" indicates the years since Beloved's death. It is surely no accident that Sethe, going to a carnival with "new clothes" for the first time in eighteen years after her daughter's death, finally achieves a reunion with the daughter who has revived with a "new dress." Moreover, her outing with a good dress is obvious as can be seen in a sign of change in her "self." After wearing new clothes and reuniting with Beloved, Sethe starts facing the past she so far has never touched and carrying out the process of self-recovery.

To achieve her self-recovery, Sethe should recognize her "self" not only as a mother but also, before anything else, as a human being. As Morrison states: "She's [Sethe's] always thought of herself as a mother, as her role" (Darling 251). Sethe is a woman who survives to fulfill her responsibilities toward her children, as a mother. Nevertheless, her affection toward her children in this novel is often mentioned as "an excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender to that commitment" (Darling 252); especially, her affection toward Beloved after her revival is, as it were, a fixation, and it is depicted as a "risky" (54) affection, as a word "click" (206-207) suggests. However, after becoming convinced Beloved is the daughter whom she murdered eighteen years ago, Sethe devotes herself to being in a subservient state to Beloved. Additionally, she claims her rights to have Beloved thus: "She [Beloved] is mine" (241). Also, Beloved's claim is thus: "You [Sethe] are mine" (255). Though their claims are nothing but "a repetition of abhorrent character of slavery" (Udono174), the most important problem here is that Sethe is incapable of perceiving it.[9] To support the fact, it is worth noting that in a conversation between Sethe and Paul D, he warns Sethe: "Your love is too thick" (193), but Sethe answers him: "Thin love ain't love at all"

(194). It is obvious that her affection toward her children, that is, "a selfish desire for possession, an egotistic and destructive affection" (Ōkoso 199), has become one of the factors in preventing her "self" from recovering, and at the same time preventing her "new" self from establishing.

Saving Sethe's life, which we will see in detail in the next chapter, is achieved by the community's bond, the revival of "the Clearing" and the banishment of Beloved. As for Sethe's "self," however, it is not recovered even in the later scene. Rather, in the scene, she is lying down, with her "expressionless" (319) face, on the bed Baby Suggs used in her dying. Here, it is noteworthy that Sethe has never worn her new clothes until this scene. Interestingly, however, in the scene, Paul D, who returns to 124, sees Sethe in "a quilt of merry colors" (319); firstly, Sethe tells him thus: "She [Beloved] was my best thing." (321) and "Denver. She's still with me, my Denver" (320). From these words, it will be clear that though Sethe understands Beloved's disappearance, she attempts to shift direction toward Denver, in other words, depend on Denver next. That is to say, Sethe is still stubbornly persistent in possessing or controlling her children; however, consequently, Paul D's words lead her to a feeling of release from all dependence and a full-recovery of her "self." His words— "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." (321)—make Sethe firstly and fully understand that she has a right to live her own life for her "self," as her last words shows: "Me? Me?" (321). As a result, we can say that in this scene, Sethe wearing "a quilt of merry colors" (319) will make a step into a new world of her true life with Paul D.

3. Denver's development and her clothes

Denver is the only daughter who does not leave Sethe.[10] As the following passage shows: "the job Sethe had of keeping her [Denver] from the past" (51), Sethe desperately tries to prevent Denver from delving into her past and protect her. Nevertheless, as is mentioned, "Sethe's deep maternal affection might bother Denver's development" (Yoshida 176-77); she, as a result, has confined Denver into her own world, that is, in which she can centrally control. Thusly considered, we can say that Denver's development will be achieved just when she releases herself from her mother's world. Then, let us consider how Denver confronts her mother and makes a step toward independence. In this chapter, we will discover the process of finding her "self," in accordance with her clothes.

First of all, we have to concentrate on the environment in which Denver has grown up. For her, whose mother murdered a child and raised her, cultivating a friendly relationship in the community is not easy. In Lady Jones' house-school, at age of seven, she is asked her mother's past by her classmate Nelson Lord: "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (123). Though he asks her from "just curiosity" (121), his words become a trigger for quitting school and communicating with others. Moreover, at the same time, her two brothers leave home, and her grandmother Baby Suggs, who is the only person she can believe, dies. Nonetheless, Sethe strictly forbids her to go out and touch the food that the community people prepare (201-202, 247); it is then that the connection between them and the community, which has never been strong, has been totally severed.

Under these difficult circumstances, Denver's sense of isolation becomes

deeper, especially after Paul D visits 124. The following passage describes how Denver, at age of eighteen, is tormented by a strong feeling of loneliness:

> During the first days after Paul D moved in, Denver stayed in her emerald closet as long as she could, lonely as a mountain and almost as big, thinking everybody had somebody but her; thinking even a ghost's company was denied her. (123)

After Paul D's arrival, she begins to cry: "Denver was shaking now and sobbing so she could not speak. The tears she had not shed for nine years" (17). Nevertheless, Sethe seems not to care about Denver and says to her: "What is the matter with you? I never knew you to behave this way" (17). Here, Denver feels as if there were no place for her in a 124 in which Paul D has moved: "There was nowhere else gracefully to go" (15). More sadly, her monologue makes it clear that she thinks Paul D's voice is her father's (245)[11]; but she never tells anybody about what she is thinking. While there is a phrase: "Sethe understood Denver." (117), there is another phrase: "Solitude had made her [Denver] secretive—self-manipulated" (117). It reveals an irreconcilable relationship of the daughter-mother; while Sethe is unaware of the daughter's struggles, Denver hides what she is thinking.

Next, we should turn our attention to Denver and her clothes. To begin with, it is necessary to see the scene of going to the carnival, as I noted in the previous chapter. Denver has been out only twice since she quit going to Lady Jones' house-school: Baby Suggs's funeral and the carnival (242-43). In spite of this mere outing for her, she has no concern for what she is wearing:

"Denver was not doing anything to make this trip a pleasure" (56), while her mother is extremely anxious about her appearance. Rather, she reluctantly agrees with the outing itself: "She agreed to go—sullenly" (56). Then she enjoys a transient happiness because of Beloved's sudden appearance; later, she recognizes that "she was not the main reason for Beloved's return" (88-89); finally, she decides that she will never leave 124 with Sethe and Beloved, and she devotes herself wholly to protect them (242).

As Valerie Smith points out, Denver's monologue shows her complicated feelings toward her mother, even being seized with fear.[12] Denver, who knows her mother's past, has a dream of having her head cut off by her mother every night (243); and she notices that her mother looks at her like she is "a stranger" (243). Also, she believes that her father Halle will come for her some day; and she remembers and follows her grandmother Baby Suggs's lesson: "That I should always listen to my body and love it" (247). At this stage, however, she has not come to change this situation on her own. Significantly, as I shall discuss it in detail below, her progress has been shown by description of the clothes.

In 124, a closed space of three women, Sethe and Beloved gradually begin to exchange clothes (282), to the point they cannot be distinguished, and finally start to have a quarrel (283)[13]: then Denver comes to feel a sense of danger. Furthermore, "the pain was unbearable when they ran low on food" (285). Here, for the first time Denver watches "the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade" and notices her all attention to everything about Beloved; at the same time, she recognizes a change in the way her clothes fit her:

> *She [Denver] also saw the sleeves of her own carnival shirtwaist cover her fingers; hems that once showed her ankles now swept the floor. She saw themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out.* Then Sethe spit up something she had not eaten and it rocked Denver like gunshot. The job she started out with protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved. (285-86, emphasis mine)

The scene quoted above is noteworthy as one in which Denver looks at herself objectively for the first time. Here, we should recall Denver on the carnival day: "Denver was not doing anything to make this trip a pleasure" (56). Though she has no concern for her clothes in the carnival scene, she is well aware of not only her mother's appearance but also her own in the scene quoted above. Here, Denver finally recognizes what has happened to them; as the last sentence of the quotation shows, she determines to protect her mother from her sister. Later in this novel, her awareness becomes a trigger to save her mother and to revive the community bond. Then she attempts to free herself from 124 into the outside world: "She [Denver] would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (286).

The scene of Denver's first leaving 124 is described below:

> The weather was warm; the day beautiful. It was April and everything alive was tentative. *Denver wrapped her hair and her shoulders. In the brightest of the carnival dresses and wearing a*

> *stranger's shoes*, she stood on the porch of 124 ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch. (286, emphases are mine)

As quoted above, Denver changes her clothes from "not fitting" to "the brightest carnival dress." In other words, here, she is "born again in new clothes" (Morrison 34). Then she finally succeeds in taking a step into the world outside 124, with a Baby Suggs's word: ". . . go on out the yard. Go on" (288).

While walking outside 124, Denver realizes her own growth for the first time and is shocked: "how small the big things were" (289). Taking a plunge into outside, she undertakes a task to connect 124 women with the world outside 124 (Udono 196). After asking Lady Jones for help, Denver finds a sack of white beans on the tree stump at the edge of the yard (292); another time, a meat is found there (293). Indeed, the community people have always cared "whether she [Denver] ate" (294). Moreover, she starts to receive an education at Lady Jones' house. As the sentence: "Once upon a time she had known more and wanted to." (119) shows, in the light of her natural curiosity, here, she tries to regain her lost past by this re-education at Lady Jones' house. As Peterson argues: "Two mothering women from her past enable Denver to leave home and go into the outside world: Baby Suggs and Lady Jones" (Peterson 42), getting their supports, she gradually revives the community bonds.

At coming to realize that "her presence in that house had no influence on what either woman did," Denver finally decides "to stop relying on kindness to leave something on the stump" and to "hire herself out

somewhere" (296). By visiting Janey Wagon, the rumor about 124 and the women has been spread among the Bluestone community. Then, we find the scene of expelling Beloved; namely, the revival of Baby Suggs's "the Clearing." The community people unites: "thirty women made up that company and walked slowly, slowly toward 124" (303); Sethe, who sees the sight, clearly remembers the Clearing: "it was as though the Clearing had come to her. . ." (308). It is certain that Denver's action restarts the communities' bond and the revival of the Clearing.

Later, on his way to work, Paul D encounters Denver. Here, we can find Denver's change: "she was the *first* to smile." (313, emphasis mine). Moreover, what impresses us is not only that she gives a smile to Paul D but also she changes her clothes. In this scene, she wears new clothes: a "shirtwaist." Moreover, she tells Paul D that she might go to Oberlin (314). As many critics point out, this conversation between Denver and Paul D implies that she will enter a college and be "the new African American woman teacher" (Krumholz 119). Thus, this new "shirtwaist" signifies that she will make a step into a new world.

In this novel, Denver as "the daughter of hope" (Rushdy 48) is given a woman's image, which is clearly different from Sethe. As previously mentioned, although "she finds herself imprisoned within her mother's time" (Wyatt 224), Denver succeeds in becoming aware of the fetters, namely, her mother's thick protection, and freeing herself wearing a new raiment, being "born again in new clothes" (Morrison 34) into the new world she had never seen.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this essay, Sethe, Beloved and Denver wear new clothes when making a new step in their life. Beloved succeeds in being "born again in new clothes" (Morrison 34). As for Sethe, the clothing motif is used as an indication of her release from bondage and the past. Finally, Denver, who wears new raiments and launch into the outside world, succeeds in releasing herself from her mother's protection, seeking the relationships with the Bluestone community, receiving an education, and being independent. Indeed, they all effectively use the clothing motif, as it were, a narrative tool, to find release from the world where they have been confined, to establish their new "self," and to achieve being "born again" (Morrison 34).

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper was orally presented at the 2016 Fall meeting of the Kyushu American Literature Society at Fukuoka University.

[1] Many critics have mentioned this epigraph. For example, see Udono 167-68 or Nitta185.

[2] See (Smith 68).

[3] Among rare exceptions, Mary Jane Lupton analyzes *Comedy: American Style* (1933) by Jassie Fauset, and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, and Morrison's forth novel: *Tar Baby* (1981) from this perspective. In this essay, she points out that the characters of the three works effectively use their clothes as a sign of their race or gender and a means of changing their self.

[4] See Wyatt 218.

[5] See Smith 7 and Krumholz 115.

[6] This scene has often been interpreted with Bakhtin's carnival theory, since

Beloved's incarnation happens when Sethe goes to a carnival. For details, see Fujihira 236 and Corey 38.

[7] Udono points out that this "a naked woman" does not mean Beloved's vanishment. (Udono 192).

[8] Lee Hall, who analyzes the clothes in America from pre-founding era to 20th century, points out: "The slave owners, clinging at all costs to their privileges of fortune and leisure, controlled all aspects of slaves' lives, including their clothing" (Hall 87).

[9] Also, see (Wyatt 222).

[10] Denver has two brothers, Howard and Buglar, besides Beloved. The brothers ran away from home and do not come back in the story (3).

[11] In the novel, the fact of Halle's death is not clear; however, it is clear that he was affected with madness or insanity. Paul D mentions as follows: "All I knew was that something broke him. . . . Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face" (81-82).

[12] Smith points out as follows: "Denver expresses her fear of her mother and her yearning to be rescued by her father—anxieties that, for the most part, she had been afraid to speak" (Smith 72).

[13] At this point, "a quarrel" means "A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe" (283).

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