

Research Article

Performativity And Body Politics: Negotiating Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract. This study aims to explain the construction of gender identity in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* through Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. This novel tells the story of the traumatic experience of slavery that shapes racial identity as well as the social issues, power relations, and extreme violence depicted within it. This study explains how Sethe and other female characters in the novel *Beloved* construct and demonstrate their identities through concrete actions as a form of protest against slavery. Based on Judith Butler's performativity approach, identity is not understood through a fixed biological destiny but rather as a repetition of social practices and norms within society. In the novel *Beloved*, Black women are represented not as a fixed biological essence but as the result of the application of norms in society. In *Beloved*, the Black female body is depicted as a source of oppression and a space of resistance. The system of slavery in *Beloved* not only controls the physical body but also women's subjectivity. Sethe's actions in protecting her child in the novel can be read as an attempt to shake up hegemonic maternal norms. The results of this study indicate that Morrison portrays identity as a political construct and always in the process of becoming. The trauma depicted in the novel is a performative mechanism that shapes the characters' subjectivities. Thus, an analysis of gender performativity in *Beloved* cannot be separated from the intersectional issues of race, history, slavery, and patriarchal culture.

Keywords: Female Body; Gender Identity; Gender Performativity; Patriarchal Culture; Trauma of Slavery.

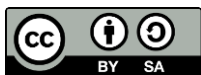
1. Introduction

Beloved is one of the works of American writer Toni Morrison. This novel is a monumental work depicting slavery in the African-American community. The novel is set in the post-Civil War period in America and highlights the psychological, social, and cultural

Impact of the entrenched system of slavery in America. Through this novel, Morrison presents a depiction of slavery that is not only viewed historically but also the wounds that continue to live on in the bodies of its survivors. Bouson (2000) explains that in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison wants to convey slavery as a haunting legacy that resides in the consciousness and bodies of slaves. In another explanation Heffernan (2010) states that *Beloved* describes trauma that refuses to end or cannot simply be forgotten.

In the novel *Beloved*, the female body is the focal point of violence. The body is depicted not only as labor but also as a form of sexual control, which is then reduced to a reproductive organ. Morgan (2004) argues that sexuality was controlled through women's reproductive capacity, which was a form of systematic power; slave bodies were not only exploited as workers, but also as a source of birth for the next generation of slaves. Thus, the author conveys that the body functions as a political tool and power relations. Women's identity, in this context, is not formed naturally but through repetitive and coercive social practices. Wyatt (2004) argues that the essence of the body in *Beloved* shows how the history of racial violence is internalized and materialized in the characters' physical experiences, so that the body

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becomes a living archive of the violence of slavery. The character of Sethe is a depiction of a mother whose identity is shaped by the interconnected pressures of racial and patriarchal norms.

To find answers to these constructs, researchers used the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed biological matter but rather the result of repeated actions, speech, and social norms believed by power structures and widely prevalent in society. Purwani (2021) argues that gender has been constructed in society and is bound by norms that society believes are hereditary rules. Butler posits that gender is produced through continuous performances in everyday life. This research examines the novel *Beloved* as a story of how gender and race are shaped through mechanisms of social discipline.

Sethe's extreme measures to protect her child represent a negotiation of hegemonic maternal norms established through slavery. This not only represents profound trauma but also represents a condition of structural limitations. Morrison, in her novel, presents identity in a becoming position, continually being shaped by traumatic experiences. Based on the background presented by the researcher, this study aims to reveal how body politics and performativity are depicted in the novel *Beloved* and how both shape the negotiation of Black women and the history of slavery in America. Young (2000) added that in the slavery system, black women were politicized and even their bodies were exploited through sexual violence. It is hoped that this study will enrich the references for contemporary feminist literary studies in literary texts.

Research questions

How is body politics represented in *Beloved* through Black women in the context of slavery and post-slavery? How is Judith Butler's gender performativity conceptualized in the identities of the female characters in *Beloved*?

Significance of the study

This research has theoretical and practical significance in the development of literary research. Theoretically, this research expands knowledge of Judith Butler's gender performativity in relation to literary text analysis, specifically in terms of gender and race. This research shows that Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, analyzed using Judith Butler's performativity theory, shows that identity is not fixed but is formed through the repetition of social norms that operate within the historical power of slavery.

Practically, this research is intended for teachers and researchers to use as a reference in literary research and critically examine American literary works that focus on issues of social justice, feminism, and the history of slavery. Furthermore, this research also provides an opportunity for future researchers to integrate performativity theory with other approaches such as trauma studies or critical race theory to deepen the dynamics of literary text identity.

2. Method

Research Design

This research uses an approach derived from Judith Butler's performativity theory. The main object of study is Toni Morrison's novel "*Beloved*," which is analyzed using Judith Butler's performativity theory. This approach will discuss in detail the relationship between body language, trauma, and power in the text.

Samples/Participants

The quotation data is taken from narrative quotations, dialogues, and character descriptions in the novel *Beloved* which represent the practice of exploitation of black women's bodies, the representation of motherhood as a social norm and acts of resistance carried out by the characters in the novel which show negotiations on gender and race.

The primary source of the research is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* whereas secondary sources include theoretical literature and academic studies that support the analysis, including; Judith Butler's *Performativity*, scholarly journal articles that discuss the novel *Beloved* from the perspective of feminism, body politics and race studies as well as books and articles on the history of slavery in the United States to strengthen the historical context of the text.

Instruments

The researcher's role was to read, identify, and analyze the text of a literary work in the form of a novel, namely Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Supporting instruments included: The novel *Beloved* as a primary data source; Books and articles relevant to Judith Butler's study of gender performativity; Supporting literature on body politics feminism and race studies as secondary data.

Data Analysis

The analysis stages were systematically carried out as follows: Close Reading, namely reading the text of the novel "Beloved" to identify relevant sections on body politics and gender performativity. Data Classification, namely grouping relevant items into quotations regarding the body, maternity, trauma, repetition of norms, and resistance. Theoretical Interpretation, namely using analytical techniques based on Judith Butler's concept of performativity. Drawing conclusions by presenting findings on identity in the novel. Through this stage, the researcher attempted to produce a coherent analysis between primary and secondary sources.

3. Result And Discussion

The results of this study indicate that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals that gender identity never existed as a stable biological essence but rather as a performative construction formed through social norms in society, systemic violence, and formed from the traumatic memory of slavery. These findings also affirm Judith Butler's idea of performativity, namely that gender is the result of discursive and social practices that are continuously repeated.

Women's Bodies as Arenas of Regulation and Power

Beloved is a novel that depicts the Black female body as a locus of control within the system of slavery. In this case, Sethe's shop becomes the object of sexual exploitation and violence. In Butler's framework, the body is not a pre-social entity but rather a materiality regulated by norms. Salih (2002) Norms are an action that stabilizes gender. Norms are an action that stabilizes gender. The representation of Sethe's body indicates that the slavery system constructs women's identities through violence.

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears." (Morrison, 2004, p. 19-20)

Then Morrison showed this situation through a continuing narrative in his novel.

"Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still." (Morrison, 2004, p. 19-20)

The quote shows how the body of the female character, Sethe, is reduced to an object of production and ownership. Breast milk, a symbol of motherhood and a source of life, is forcibly taken, so that maternal function here is controlled by the white master. From Butler's perspective, the body is not a neutral entity; it is influenced by the environment and societal views. The violence perpetrated by the white master is not only a form of physical violence but also a regulative practice that produces the identity of Black women as bodies that can be owned and exploited. The scar on Sethe's back, which resembles a tree, becomes a metaphor for torture and evidence of survival. Alexandre (2011) states that the scars on Sethe's body that resemble trees are a depiction of gender violence that has carved a history of violence against black women. In *Beloved* it is showed with this statements:

"It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white." (Morrison, 2004, p. 93)

In line with the related statement, Handerson (2020) stated that the wounds on Sethe's body were the suffering of black women as slaves and had taken root. The wounds on Sethe's back are a record of torture through community practices. Cutter (2022)

Sethe's Subversive Performance as a Mother Within Structural Limitations

Sethe's character in the novel *Beloved* is described by Morrison as a woman who displays maternal attitudes as an arena for negotiation between love and trauma. Sethe is depicted as a mother who loves her child deeply and to protect her child from the same fate as herself, Sethe is even willing to kill her child. Here, Sethe displays a subversive act that shakes norms. In Judith Butler's performativity theory, gender is not something inherent to a person but is

shaped by social norms. Elliot (2012) gender identity is conceptualized as a consequence of repeatedly repeated social practices, not as a static biological attribute.

In general, social norms, mothers are protectors of their children, but in the novel *Beloved*, it is depicted that a slave woman will have a child who is also a slave. Slaves are the property of their masters and their bodies will be controlled by their masters, Fuston (2002) stated that Sethe's action of killing her baby is a form of resistance to the logic of the child being the master's property. Sethe's action of killing her child to avoid being enslaved, according to Butler, is a resignification, namely the repetition of norms with a different meaning. Women's bodies are exploited by the slavery system, leaving them with limited options for protecting their children, leading to brutal resistance. (Gardner, 2016)

"She had to be safe and I put her where she would be... I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe". (Morrison, 2004, pp.236-237)

Sethe remains the best mother in her version even though the way to protect her child is manifested in an extreme way. (Rout et al, 2004) emphasized that Sethe did was not an act of violence but of resistance, an act of rejecting slavery and refusing to control her body.

"They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em. They ain't at Sweet Home. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe". (Morrison, 2004, p. 193)

Sethe's actions were not an emotional outburst but a mother's full awareness of protecting her child. In Morrison's words "wide but not wild". That he did not just see a slave hunter but saw the bleak future of his son if he lived. Sethe continues to carry out the norms as a mother.

Trauma and Past Experiences as Mechanisms of Performative Subjectivity

In the novel *Beloved*, trauma is not depicted as something static but as a memory that continues to cling to Sethe's life. The trauma Sethe experiences then shapes her identity in the present. Morrison shows that Sethe's subjectivity is constructed through the repetition of traumatic memories of slavery that continue to return in narrative form. In Morrison's performativity theory, trauma is meant as something to be remembered and reenacted in consciousness and action. Chaitra & Srinivasalu (2023) which is also supported by the statement Koolish (2021) argue that the trauma of slavery and traumatic memory impact identity, where rights that occurred in the past will continue to live in the mind of the future. The concept of memory presented by Morrison is revealed by Satan in the following statement:

"Some thing go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burn down, it's gone, but the place the picture of it stays and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world." (Morrison, 2004, p. 43)

In the above statement, Sethe demonstrates that memory is not merely an individual mental process but is embedded in social space and dimensions. In Butler's theory (Lloyd, 2007) identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that that are said to be its result and identity is formed through the repetition of norms and practices. This is also the case in *Beloved*, where Morrison conveys that trauma and past experiences can never be resolved. Tokoz (2004) suggests that trauma is a force that connects Sethe's personal experience with the collective trauma of slavery. Morrison metaphorizes trauma (through color, body, and space) so that the wounds of the past remain present and continue to "call" the community to confront its legacy, not to eliminate it completely (Bast, 2011)

The following statements indicate ongoing trauma. Red baby blood and pink gravestone chips are symbolic colors of death:

"It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it. 124 was so full of strong feeling that the air around it vibrated. Denver could see the thing that made it happen, but nobody else could." (Morrison, 2004, p. 4-5).

Thus, the trauma represented in *Beloved* is not simply an individual psychological wound but a historical and discursive mechanism that performatively shapes Sethe's way of understanding herself, while simultaneously reminding us that identity is always in tension between memory, resistance, and the legacy of structural violence.

4. Conclusions

This research shows that gender identity in the novel *Beloved* is constructed through the repetition of social practices shaped by the system of slavery, racial oppression, and power structures. The research is combined with a relevant theory, namely Judith Butler's performativity approach. In revealing Sethe's performance in *Beloved*, Morrison presents the resistance of a female slave in an extreme way, namely killing her own child to escape the

system of slavery like her mother. Sethe, a black woman who often experiences physical and sexual violence and racial oppression, chooses a way out of the rules of maternal norms. For her, motherhood is shown by protecting her child. Society views that maternal norms are reflected by caring for children well, being an obedient mother, but not with Sethe, she tries to get out of those maternal norms. For her, seeing the oppression that her child will experience does not make her a good mother. In this issue, Butler's theory plays an important role in the discussion. That gender is not static but rather repetitive. Gender is unstable and can change at any time and does not have to be in accordance with societal expectations.

Suggestions

Based on the results of this study, there are several suggestions put forward by the author. First, for future researchers, the study of performativity in *Beloved* could be expanded further, incorporating alternative theories such as trauma, Black feminism, or intersectionality theory, thereby enhancing critiques of the interconnectedness of race, gender, and authority within the institution of slavery. Interdisciplinary methodology would facilitate the potential for more nuanced interpretations of identity formation within the narrative.

Second, this study demonstrates that Judith Butler's performativity theoretical framework holds significant relevance in analyzing the fluid and constantly negotiated formation of gender identities. The researcher recommends a literary approach that engages with texts situated within the context of historical oppression, integrating performativity theory to examine the mechanisms by which social norms are perpetuated and contested through the actions of various characters.

Third, within the framework of literary studies, the findings of this study can be effectively integrated into English literature pedagogy, particularly in modules focusing on gender studies or cultural studies. It is hoped that students will be motivated to understand that gender identity is not an inherent and immutable characteristic, but rather a construct formed through repeated and negotiable social practices, as exemplified by the character of Sethe.

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