



# The Achievers Journal

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## Going Home or Going in Exile: The Conception of Home in TM's Dichotomy North-South Reflected in *Beloved*

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### Abstract

*While reading Toni Morrison's works, geography and history are defining factors that foreground the writer's fictional and critical writings. The spatial and temporal settings play a significant role in the portrayal of the painful horrors that alienate the human condition of the African American community. Morrison's choice and design of locales uncovers the unknown realities of the past that divided the American society through time. This paper on *Beloved* explores Morrison's depiction of home for the black slaves who are torn between space and time in a land that seeks to deny them. In this paper, we argue that both the South and the North in Morrison's *Beloved* are initially idealized as home for the deprived slaves despite the socio-cultural and political threat that demeans the slave community. The migrations from the South to the 'free' North to experience a new life are only an act of survival that does not sever the freed slave from his socio-cultural and psychological belongingness to the Southern land where he saw himself born and grow to adulthood.*

**Keywords:** home, the South, the North, cultural disconnectedness, slave/ry, freedom

*Beloved's* narrative is dominated by locations that indicate multiple identities through which blacks went from bondage to freedom. The spatial landscape is characterized by domestic as well as public spaces, rivers, prisons, plantations, mountains, churches, etc. These locations facilitate efficiently the narrated incidents to fit into the environment and occur adequately: there is a



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historical and cultural aspect that they bear and which connects characters to the realities of their roots.

In *Beloved*, nostalgia is a recurring leitmotif that affects almost all the main characters. “The longing to return to a lost place,” (4) as John J. Su (2005) suggests, is at the heart of the former slaves who feel that something is still missing to obtain a complete home that would provide them full humanity. Characters are psychologically restless in the actions they take. The permanent memories about Sweet Home make Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D sick. The longing for the place as a lost home creates instability in their lives. Although they have left the place for long, they still feel connected to it as a lost home no matter the painful horrors they endured at the time they were living there as slaves.

The presence of nostalgia for the place in the narrative brings out the characters’ past in a way to attempt to get response to the current challenges they face. Though the agony of slavery was over by the time they reached Cincinnati, Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D experience new challenges that they seek to overcome hardly in the alleged ‘free’ North. Sethe’s agitated existence is partly due to the loss of home: *Beloved*’s ghost has been cast away; yet Sethe is far to secure a peaceful home where she would feel socially and culturally integrated. The ostracization she endures with her daughter Denver by the Cincinnati neighbors exacerbates her identity as an outsider. Rejected by the neighborhood that she expects to heal the wounds she underwent in Sweet Home, Sethe fails to accommodate with the pressing demands of the present which seeks to harden her state of cultural and social isolation. This lack of connectedness with the present weakens Sethe’s existence. She is dejected to see that she neither belongs to Cincinnati—the North (present) nor to Sweet Home—the South (past) which expelled her; and this rejection creates in her mind a feeling of homelessness and displaced identity.



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Unsatisfied with the double-sided reception of Cincinnati, Paul D and Sethe undertake a reminiscential journey toward the South to contemplate the lost beauties of Sweet Home plantations. Sweet Home is an old place very significant for Sethe and Paul D: they lived there together on Garner's plantations before the two escaped to Cincinnati. Initially, Sweet Home is idealized as a paradise for the slaves under the moderate treatment of Mr. Garner and his wife. But behind the Garners' generosity, there is an impending future that will destroy the lives of the deprived slaves. At the start of *Beloved*, the paradisaic perception of Sweet Home is overshadowed by Sethe's anecdotes of the painful agony she endured in 124 Bluestone where she actually lives in the literal present of the narration. In her memories, images of Sweet Home flow constantly bringing her back to the place she once loved:

Suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forget her memory for that. (Morrison 6)

Sethe cannot forget the inhuman treatments that made 'hell' the life of the defenseless slaves. She is no longer subject to the tragic treatment she lived in Sweet Home. However, the beautiful trees of the place haunt her. She wishes she was there once again to enjoy its wonderful landscape. Sethe is so passionate with the past beauties of Sweet Home that she develops less concern for her



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runaway sons eighteen years ago. The reader experiences a sort of absurdity in Sethe's existence: How is she so elated with the land that debased and denied her and her fellow black companions?

Sethe has developed an uncommonly secondary sense of life: it is strange that she becomes infatuated with the beauty of the trees of Sweet Home plantations—the place that negated her cultural and physical existence. The condition that fuses the horrifying atrocities of Sweet Home and its plantations' 'beauty' into an appreciated place underlies Sethe's perpetual connection to the South no matter the tragic past she experienced there. By the time she attempted to murder her children pretending to assure them 'protection', Sethe's psychology has completely changed. Sethe is no longer the woman she was before schoolteacher's intrusion into 124. Her present idea of the world is fuzzy. She is unable to identify the place where she belongs and tries hard to hide the repressed horrors that she permanently bears into her inner self. In Robert Barley's view (2013), "she is frustrated by the perpetual ostracization that the black community of Cincinnati has imposed over her and her daughter Denver since the murder of Beloved" (89). She cannot understand the rudeness and oppression of the new community to which she is supposed to belong. Under the oppressive burden of this social retribution, she feels overtaken to have a place in Cincinnati and decides to escape to the South (Sweet Home) where she expects to get moral relief. Being now rejected by people of the same past and racial background, Sethe is heartbroken and feels deeply hated to belong to Cincinnati. She considers her fellow blacks as wicked as her former white oppressor Schoolteacher and comes up with a pessimistic sentiment toward the black community. Most importantly, for the protagonist's existence, Sweet Home has something beyond Cincinnati and something more essential in her being: even if she acknowledges Cincinnati for the appeasing refuge it granted her and her children, she knew this place through the pain of exile. Cincinnati is not her dedicated literal home. Though Sweet Home has been harsh against her, it is still her birthplace. Before she experienced Cincinnati's life as a fugitive slave, Sethe lived in Sweet Home as home resident of the South. Sethe herself was born and grew in Sweet Home. She



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married Halle in Sweet Home and all her children except Denver were born in Sweet Home. The nostalgia for home which still disturbs the woman psychologically can be understood in this way. 124 has given her a new start in life but does not grant her what a woman would really need to be considered as a mother in a home (family). Lonien (2009) observes that

Sweet Home is the only “home” she has ever known, and as such it serves as the place of origin in which she locates her sense of identity. It also serves as the locus of a common past for Sethe, Baby Suggs and Paul D, and therefore is a vital point of reference in their common journey towards a retrieval of traumatic memory. When Paul D points out the irony in the naming of Sweet Home and thereby gently criticizes Sethe’s own nostalgia for the place, Sethe counters by claiming Sweet Home as their common ground, the place that they remember as home whether they want it or not. (Lonien 39)

Admittedly, the narrative develops a certain connectedness of Sethe to the lost “sweet home”; her misunderstanding with Paul D about the place exemplifies, “‘She’s right, Sethe. It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home.’ He shook his head. ‘But it’s where we were,’ said Sethe. ‘All together. Comes back whether we want it or not’” (Morrison 15). Lost in her isolated cell, Sethe recognizes Sweet Home as the place where they “were” and hopes that soon or later they will go back there one day “whether [they] want it or not”. Sethe makes the right choice of Sweet Home over Cincinnati; and this choice is meditated. The choice of Sweet Home invigorates her and positions the woman at the center of the past and present. In the literal present, she lives Cincinnati; yet psychologically, she still keeps an eye and heart on Sweet Home (past). There are numerous reasons for this everlasting longing of the South. At Sethe and Halle’s marriage, Mrs. Garner gave



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the married couple a pair of golden earrings. By the time Baby Suggs has become too old and thereby less fit for labor, the Garners accept to free the old mother thanks to her son's extra work. They also permit her to leave freely Sweet Home for Ohio to get a comfortable retirement. Sethe cannot forget these philanthropic initiatives of the Garners which had transformed Sweet Home from a slave land into a home in which slaves felt comfortable. That's why Sweet Home remains unforgettable place deeply engraved in her memory.

While Sethe feels uncomfortable with life in Cincinnati, Paul D is too proud of the North that he found a relieving place to the depersonalization he endured in the South. After he had run away from Alfred Prison, he decided to flee to North as a stay in the South would jeopardize his life. His long and exploratory voyage brings him into Sethe's home in Cincinnati, Ohio. But beside the positive acknowledgement he has toward the North which welcomed him, Paul D is also psychologically connected to the lost South. And this umbilical link to the place plagues him on his way to freedom. An ambivalent feeling to leave or remain in the South agitates him constantly. The narrator reveals Paul's pain to go away from the land he knew it was his home:

After some days out from Alfred, he [Paul D] could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal, weak with the weight of its own stars, he made himself not love it. Its graveyards and low-lying rivers. Or just a house—solitary under a chinaberry tree; maybe a mule tethered and the light hitting its hide just so. Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it. (Morrison 283)



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Paul D's anxiety fictionalizes the pain of home loss that slaves faced when they were uprooted both geographically and culturally from their original home. It also fictionalizes the geographical instability they suffered when they had to move from one place to another in a land that was unfamiliar to them. Slavery left blacks culturally barren. Treated like commodities, slaves produced what they could not get advantage of. The unpaid labor and the permanent cruelty they received as reward brought them to question the meaning of humanity and their social status. The question of belongingness to the land and to the society preoccupied the rest of their lives. When they saw that the society rejected them, they tried "not to love the place" which in fact they loved but did not have an occasion to manifest it. Fallen into total dilemma, Paul D hates the land that alienates him. But, suffering from a forced hate rather than a natural one, his anger turns into a love-and-hate grief. The grand and impressive "beauty of the land that was not his" but for which he believes he would have had a share torments him; this admired beauty of the lost land is at the center of his endless dilemma. Paul D tries hard to forget the lost Sweet Home; in his musings, he strives "hard not to love it" but he fails to join his present home-exile of Cincinnati to the lost home in the South. Troubling memories hurt Paul D whenever he reflects on the lost Sweet Home and his friends that he lost and can never meet again. That he tries "not to love" the place where he grew and which, in his inner feelings, he truly loves makes him sick. Michael Jones (2010) holds that "the denied love of Sweet Home has rendered Paul D paranoid" and as a result "he seeks to escape into Sethe's love" (44). Like Sethe, the geographical relocation to Cincinnati does not heal Paul D's broken heart due to the cultural disentanglement he is forced to endure.

Morrison's setting design is very important in the representation of issues of selfhood. Carolyn Jones (1998) opines that "with the act of writing, of reclaiming the landscape through memory and imagination, Morrison suggests partially and almost inclusively how the South functions both as a site for disjunction and for reunion with the self" (39). The geographical voyage that Paul D embarks on through a land he loves yet which denies him belongingness weakens him. Sweet



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Home repudiates Paul D's affiliation to the land; yet it is "the only land he knows to be called home" (Lonien 52). The trip he undertakes from Alfred Prison's escape to Sethe's home in Cincinnati is a symbolical journey that took slaves from bondage to freedom, yet which did not bring an answer to their cultural deracination. Paul D feels happy by the time he crosses Ohio River just as Sethe was when she crossed it under help of Amy Denver. At first, the crossing of Ohio River in the life of a Southern slave is a metaphorical expression of the ascension of slaves from bondage to freedom. As he crosses the River, Paul D makes a step further in his existence. At Sethe's home when the ghost has definitively vacated 124, he glorifies life and even starts thinking about a new life. But beside the glorification of a new existence in the North with Sethe, he is still haunted by the best days he lived in Sweet Home under the kind treatment of Mr. Garner. Like Sethe, Sweet Home represents an important site in the definition of his being.

Morrison's discourse on the South centers principally on the impossibility for home in a foreign land. Baby Suggs experienced slave life in Sweet Home long before Sethe and Paul D. The inhospitality of the place has created a vacuum that can never be filled up. In her sorrowful recollections of her dehumanized soul and body, she realizes that her "self was not self" (147) as it was under control of external forces. She has left Sweet Home due to its racist oppression but still questions the role of color in a cosmopolitan society like America. Once Mr. Garner released her forever, Baby Suggs immediately went to retire in Cincinnati (North). She has been seriously destroyed by the South and could not feel morally secure to remain there though freed. She expects to begin a true living because, in her reflections, she is convinced she has never existed. She sees the North as an answer to her past trials and tribulations. Unfortunately, like Sethe, she is partly disappointed, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 100). Slavery is banned in her new home; but the class-consciousness mindset of the community and the racial discrimination demoralize the old mother. She is worried to see the same evil of racism in Ohio though it is not as radical as it is in the South. Due to this racial ideology



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present in Cincinnati (North), Baby Suggs remains psychologically homeless and continues her journey on the quest for a true home. She is embarrassed to consider whether Cincinnati is really a free home or a transitional domicile toward a true home. The South has ruined her past; and the North she was expecting to heal the wounds she carries in her heart breaks the hopes for future after schoolteacher's intrusion into her compound. She accepts that Cincinnati is nonviolent but she never feels she is home, "It's better here, but I'm not [home]" (Morrison 148). Baby Suggs has deep psychological scars that have alienated profoundly her existence: all her eight children were ripped away, having no right to say a word and more aching rendering her a childless, solitary and unassisted mother in her advanced age. In her slave life, she had become a sexual toy of her masters before she arrived in Mr. Garner's estate; beyond all, the profanation of her domicile by schoolteacher—an act that prompted Sethe to murder her progeny—pierced Baby Suggs's heart and soul. For the old mother, neither the North nor the South is adequately enough to provide her an assuring home. For a broken heart like her, no place in the world can provide her an efficient physical home before she secures a veritable home within her shattered self. Both Sweet Home and Cincinnati are vague shadows of home.

Under the spatial setting of Sweet Home and Cincinnati which respectively portray the South and the North in *Beloved*, Morrison indicates that outside home is always strange. The settled former slaves who reached the allegedly Northern 'free' states could never experience freedom in its holistic dimensions. That they were rid of the pain of slavery was not enough to be wholly integrated. The cultural dimension continued to widen the gap between the whites and blacks. In addition, the hegemonic ideology of the white dominant culture hardened the enfranchisement they had acquired. Through the permanent psychological restlessness that features Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D, the writer clearly shows that an individual's cultural legacy is irreplaceable and inalienable: the slaves have been treated generously by Mr. Garner and his wife for many years; yet they still feel uneasy within the boundaries of his realm. Even when they move to Cincinnati,



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they are still haunted by the loss of the South which did not really merit to be called a home as it ruined their existence; but so long as it is the only place they knew since birth, despite its duality, they feel nostalgic to return back.

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