



Motherhood under Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

Slave narratives are the genre of literature that came into being through the success of some literate African Americans in escaping from slavery to freedom.

Motherhood was a difficult challenge to African American women specifically under the slave system. The situation did not allow slave mothers the opportunity and freedom to take care of their children or carry out their biological role as caregivers. Instead, it results a mother killing her own child which is an act that threatens the natural order of the world.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is discussed not as a presentation of slavery, but rather of motherhood. Slavery and motherhood are considered convertible terms that shows how Morrison's narrative functions as a critique to feminist readings of the ties between mother and children.



This study tries to focus on motherhood and the effects of slavery in the lives of mothers through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. A brief historical background of slavery will be provided at the beginning. Focus will also be on analyzing motherhood as well as understanding Sethe who is the sole provider of her family and clarifying the way in which she interacts with her children.

1.1 Toni Morrison's Biography:

Toni Morrison was born in 1931 Ohio. Because of Southern racism her parents move up North. Morrison was capable of growing up in a place that would not scare her with racial discrimination. She spent her childhood in the Midwest and loved reading. She enjoyed reading works from Jane Austen to Tolstoy. Morrison's father, George, sang her songs and told her folktales of the black community. In 1949 she entered Howard University in Washington, D.C. Morrison continued her studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York (Dreifus: 1).

During 1955-57 Morrison was an instructor in English at Texas Southern University, in Houston, and taught in the English department at Howard. In 1964 she moved to Syracuse, New York, and became an editor for Random House. She



edited books by black authors such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayle Jones. She also continued to teach at the State University of New York. In 1984 she was appointed to an Albert Schweitzer chair at the University of New York at Albany, where she gave guidance to young writers during their two-year fellowships.

While Morrison was teaching at Howard University and caring for her children, she wrote *The Bluest Eye* (1943), which depicts the total destruction at the end of the novel. The novel's main character, Pecola Breedlove, is a black girl who believes everything would be fine if she had beautiful blue eyes. *Sula* (1973) is about two black women friends who grow up in the community of Medallion, Ohio. It follows the lives of Sula and Nel and how their relationship with each other and their community changes over time. The novel won the National Book Critics Award. (Ibid.)

The publication of *Song of Solomon* (1973) placed Morrison into an international spotlight. "It was the main selection of the Book-of-the-month Club and the first novel by a black writer to be chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1949" (Peterson: 462). After the success of *Song of Solomon* Morrison bought a four-story house near Nyack. In 1988 Morrison was named Robert Goheen Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University.



Beloved (1987) illustrates the issues of slavery and infanticide. It was inspired by the true story of a black American slave woman named Margaret Garner, who killed her baby after the notorious 1870s Fugitive Slave Act in order to save her child from the slavery that she was successful in escaping.

In 1988 Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for Literature for the novel *Beloved* and at that time she was the first African-American writer, male or female, to be awarded such an award, "the significance of Toni Morrison winning the prize is simply that she is recognized internationally as an outstanding fine writer" (Peterson: 463).

1.2 Black women writers and the depiction of slave women:

Slave system caused a problematic challenge to black women writers. As an effect of this unforgotten past, in the 1980s, many novels by women writers were emerged investigating aspects of mothers' lives. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* deals with both the suffering and the creativity of slave mothers. The novelist dedicates this novel to "sixty million and more," the estimated number of blacks who died in slavery.



Many essays and books written by black women suggest that the creativity and strength of slave women enabled them to function in creative ways during the years they spent in slavery, and that the creativity of black women enabled them to make significant contributions to American culture after slavery. Gloria Wade-Gayles remarks, “mothers in Black women’s fiction are strong and devoted ... they are rarely affectionate” (Quoted in Collins: 127).

Alice Walker, in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, suggests that black women in the South were particularly creative, both before and after slavery. She calls them “artists” who found within themselves a spirituality that allowed them to paint, to write, to sing, to compose music, and to write novels. She admits: "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival the survival whole of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppressions the insanities the loyalties and the triumphs of black women” (O’Brien: 200).

Patricia Hill Collins, in her thorough investigation of the lives of black women both before and after slavery, suggests that the society and culture which slaves had known in West Africa enabled them to endure many of the attempts of their white owners to break their spirits and their bodies: “Enslaved Africans were property, and they resisted the dehumanizing



effects of slavery by recreating African notions of family as extended kin units” (Collins: 49).

The depiction of the struggling slave women continues to appear in the fictional writing of other black writers including Lucy Delany. In Delany’s *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom*, (which is an Autobiography), Lucy also narrates her mother’s fight for her own and her children’s freedom after their father was sold down South.

It is worth recalling that the bodies of slaves, male and female, were considered chattel, property used for the purposes of increasing the wealth of white slave owners by their physical work in the cotton, indigo, or rice fields of the South. As a result of this exploitation of slave bodies, there was no question as to their human rights, to the limits of suffering a human body can endure, and to the distortion of the psyches of male and female slaves. The bodies of women, in particular, were objectified, because their offspring would provide additional slave bodies for the increase of wealth for their slave owners. There was little consideration for the lives of slave mothers, their care during or after pregnancy, and the general well-being of their health.



1.3 Historical Background

In order to understand Morrison's depictions of motherhood, we need to understand the cruelty of slavery and the shadows that it has left in the consciousness of the mothers. Going back through history, slavery in America originated with the Dutch shippers selling African slaves to the colonists, but as MacQueen asserts, importing slaves was no longer permitted in 1808 in which the South started to "breed" its own slaves (MacQueen: 50).

Kolchin points out that the treatment the slaves experienced working in the fields was unbearable. Punishments such as beating and injury of the body were common, as if slaves were animals (Kolchin: 4). According to Kolchin Africans were not viewed as humans with emotions and dignity; being treated in such a horrible way clearly leaves emotional scars that will never heal. Slaves were held, or rather enslaved, on a permanent basis and the children of a female slave would inherit their mother's rank (Kolchin: 12-13). There was much to fear for women who were enslaved, because they witnessed their lovers being taken away and were violated through sexual abuse and rape. Moreover, when they became pregnant their children were exposed to a similar fate, a fact, that Morrison's novels also depict. While Kolchin points out that there were



consensual sexual relations between white men and black women, he nevertheless emphasizes that the sexual exploitation of female slaves was an apparent part of everyday life during the era of slavery: "...slaves who had sex with whites did so against their will, whether the victims of outright rape or of the powerlessness that made resistance to advances futile and the use of force in such advances unnecessary" (Ibid., 124-125).

One of the aspects of slavery which resulted in negative effects on the slaves' self-image was the fact that they were sold. Slaves were regarded as not being human; they were products with a price. As Betty Wood points out: "...the word slave meant a piece of conveyable property, a chattel, with no legal rights or social status whatsoever" (Quoted in Kolchin : 129).

According to Dolan Hubbard, the novel *Beloved* is centered on "the historical fact that there were black women during slavery who terminated their babies' lives rather than allow them to be offered up to the destruction of slavery" (Hubbard: 137). In a "Conversation" with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison explains that *Beloved* was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who attempted the murder of her four children- successfully killing only her baby daughter-when she was caught as a fugitive: "She had made up her mind that they



would not suffer the way that she had and it was better for them to die" (Ibid., 584).

2.1 The slave women as a mother:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel about motherhood and mothering. Specifically, it is a book about the slave woman as mother. The events of the novel, set in the first half of the nineteenth century when the slave population in the United States had increased significantly, narrate the fortunes and misfortunes of Sethe, an African slave confined to a plantation in Kentucky named Sweet Home. The owners of the plantation were a childless couple named the Garners. Sethe, unlike most African slave women, had a measure of control over her future on this plantation. She had the option of selecting one of the five slave men on this plantation as her husband an options that few other slaves possessed. Sethe selected Halle Suggs to be her mate. They got married while she was 18, and bears him three children: Haword, Bulgar and Denver.

After the death of Garner (the owner of the farm), his wife turns control of the plantation over to her brother-in-law, the school master, who shows to be a brutal manager. The situation



has been described by the writer to reveal the intolerable case of their lives. She narrates:

There had been four of them who belonged to the farm, Sethe the only female. Mrs. Garner, crying like a baby, had sold his brother to pay off the debts that surfaced the minute she was widowed. Then school- teacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight.(Morrison: 9)

As a result, the harmony of the farm was destroyed by the cruel behaviour of the schoolteacher who forced the slaves to desperate measures of flight and rebellion. Therefore, Sethe, tries to reveal the tragic situation of torture, horror and bad memories for trying to escape the plantation. She revealed to Paul D (Paul D., Paul A, are slaves who lived in the same farm) the terrible events that caused her to run away from Sweet Home, then she surrendered her sons and daughter to a woman in a wagon because she was worried about the family's future under the schoolmaster's reign. Her description of the physical attack was straightforward; she told Paul D very briefly the violence and cruelty of those white people especially the two white boys--the schoolmaster's nephews who beat her while she was pregnant with Denver injuring her so badly that her back skin had been dead for years. She refers to the situation as follows:



Those boys came in there and took my milk, that's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it.... School-teacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. They used cowhide on me and they took my milk they beat me and I was pregnant. And they took my milk. (Morrison: 17)

She repeatedly used the words “they took my milk” to describe her violation. Sethe, the most outstanding character who suffers a lot and bears the physical scars of slavery's terrible violence upon her back, was still continuing to wander the past to Paul D. In this sense, she recalled that she reported to Mrs. Garner that schoolmaster's nephew attacked her while he watched the act of violence.

Sethe, a courageous and daring woman, dared to imagine a future in which her children could escape the bondage of slavery even through the cruelest way which is death. According to her, death is a kinder alternative than rape; that "anybody white could take your whole self... and dirty you, dirty you so bad you could not like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forget who you were and couldn't think it up" (Morrison: 252). She had killed her own child with a handsaw. The group of four wounded Buglar and Howard threatened to bash Denver's brain. Stamp paid, a former slave who ferries Sethe and Denver across the Ohio River, tried to take Beloved's corpse from the mother's clinging hands and give



Denver to her. A mother is expected to create life, not destroy it, but with Sethe's case, she was insane and out of control at that moment when she imagined that her child might face the same physical attack in future. Thus, she prefers to put an end to this situation.

On the other hand, one may notice that she was very worried about the feeling of Beloved, her murdered child. She stated "Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now" (Morrison: 170). But later on, it seems to us that Sethe tries to justify her deed by saying or declaring that "If I had not killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (ibid., 175). As a matter of fact, a mixture of motherhood images exists in Sethe's internal monologue. Being the victim of slavery, Sethe often thought about her daughter and had lived with her daughter's ghost for years.

Toni Morrison depicted this problematic love relations not only in *Beloved*, but also in the rest of her novels. This type of love motivated Cholly Breedlove to rape his daughter in her *The Bluest Eyes*, and Eva Peace to burn her son rather than allow him to live a life that refuted him in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Margaret's dangerous love for her son, Michael in *Tar Baby*, encouraged her to cause pain on the child by sticking pins in him and burning him with cigarettes (Habbard: 138).



In *Beloved* Sethe is produced as knowing little of her parents. She knows that her mother had worked in the rice fields of South Carolina until she was forced to move to another plantation. An unexpected encounter on her way to Sweet Home allowed Sethe to meet her mother, during which time, her mother showed her a mark under her left breast, a mark that would identify her in the event that her mother were hanged or burned. The mark, which signified the indignity of slavery in its dehumanizing effects, haunted Sethe all her life, and, as a girl of nine years on her way to Sweet Home to work for the Garners, Sethe witnessed the killings of a large group of slaves and believed that she perceived the mark on a woman who was hanged and burned and who resembled what she remembered of her mother's body. The horror of that event was always at the back of Sethe's mind, and the psychological theories of the twentieth century would suggest that, for Sethe, the mother was associated with death. Old Nan, who had come to America on the same slave ship as Sethe's mother, tells Sethe the story of her birth. Nan tells her that Sethe was the only child that her mother did not throw overboard, and she tells her that Sethe was given her name because that name was her father's name. The air of mystery surrounding her birth and the search in Sethe's mind for her origins cause Sethe to contemplate her



existence, and this search for origins prepares Sethe for her attempts to accept the “Other” in her life—the white folks who have little concern about her origins but who wish to plan her future for their own good. Sethe, whose behavior demonstrated her will to succeed, capitalized on the fact that the Garner plantation was a relatively small one, where there were only five male slaves and two female slaves. She constructed for herself a life in which she did not evade her duties, but she continued to define herself as an individual, a faithful worker on the Garner plantation, but also as a woman who looked toward a future with her husband and her children.

In this novel Morrison portrays a single woman, who raises her children with the memories of slavery constantly present. In *Beloved* the author explores the mother-child bond, presenting depictions of the supernatural where the reader witnesses a dead infant return to life. Sethe is a mother who has experienced terrible events.

Motherhood, under the slave system, witnessed a nightmarish days faced by African American women. The circumstance, which did not let mothers rise up their children as usual but instead it let them accomplish infanticide. Patricia Collins alludes to this unusual circumstance of mothers and daughters in African American society when she argues “Black



daughters raised by mothers grappling with hostile environment have to come to terms with their feelings about the difference between the idealized versions of maternal love extant in popular culture and the strict and often troubled mothers in their lives.” (Collins: 127). Sethe does absolutely everything she can for her children; she even takes the life of her baby-girl so that she would not have to experience the same cruelty of slavery her mother did. As a result of this deed, Sethe becomes an outcast in her community because she even sacrifices her pride for her child’s sake. Elaine Showalter examines the situation of mothers and points out that “children are the compensation for feminine surrender” and that “...childbirth is not a victory; it is an acceptance of the compensations of giving in and giving up” (Showalter: 305-306). Both the positive and negative aspects of motherhood reach another dimension when one understands the effects of slavery on black mothers, as depicted by Morrison, and the struggles they must face in raising their children where fathers are frequently absent as a consequence of the heritage of slavery. In those cases where the men were in fact still a part of the household they still did not have the main role in the house since they had no more legal rights than their wives and also because they could at any time leave. As a consequence the



history of the women's past when the men were sold or ran away has left deep scars in the psyche of these women. Sethe, although she is a mother who displays inner strength, nevertheless becomes immobilized. Adrienne Rich, in her analysis of the dilemma of the mother who brings up her children without support from their father, argues as follows:

The black mother has been charged by both white and black males with the "castration" of her sons through her so-called matriarchal domination of the family, as breadwinner, decision-maker, and rearer of children in one. Needless to say, her "power" as "matriarch" is drastically limited by the bonds of racism, sexism, and poverty. What is misread as power here is really survival-strength, guts, the determination that her children's lives shall come to something even if it means driving them, or sacrificing her own pride in order to feed and clothe them. (Rich: 204)

In the novel, *Beloved's* mother (Sethe) experiences a mournful journey in order to rebuild the meaning of her life as woman and mother. Throughout this symbolic journey under the effect of racism, Morrison brings back the dead in the novel to establish that "the living embodiment of Sethe's mother love and the painful past of enslavement she represents, never is really destroyed" (Davies: 137). The result is creating a new type of love which is killing the baby by the mother. Carole Boyce Davies describes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as "one of



the most deliberate problematizings of motherhood that I have encountered...’ (Ibid.,135).

2.2 The mother-daughter relationship: a challenging love relation

Beloved is about a love relationship gone wrong between mother and daughter as an effect of the slave system. The condition which denied the women the opportunity of expressing love and only served to alienate them from their children. Susan Willis states, "The tragedy of a woman's alienation is its effect on her as mother. Her emotions split, she showers tenderness and love on her employer's child, and rains violence and disdain on her own" (265) The type of love relationship between mother and daughter in this novel is unusual and complicated, a trait that exists in Toni Morrison's art. She has been qualified with creating characters with dual and moral uncertainties. In an interview, she calls her fictional characters "the combination of virtue and flaw, of good intentions gone awry, of wickedness cleansed and people made whole again. If you judge them all by the best that they have done, they are wonderful. If you judge them by the worst that they have done, they are terrible" (O'Brien : 123).



Beloved is born into slavery and that is why their relationship is gone wrong by the shadow of slavery. However, Sethe desires freedom for her baby and this desire is achievable by the killing of Beloved to prevent her from slavery. Hence, her love becomes the result of the power of the un-separable mother.

It is the same reason of 'thick love' that "the milk would be there and I would be there with it", and Paul D seems to confirm this inseparability of the mother and child when he says "...a suckling can't be away from its mother for long" (Morrison: 16). Because of this closeness and love relationship with her baby, Sethe considers the stealing of her milk as defilation. When she tells of the experience, of forcefully being milked like an animal; "her eyes rolled out tears" (17). The repetition of "And they took my milk" (17) indicates how intensely painful this act of defilation is to her, much so because the milk belongs to her daughter who is not separate from herself. Her role and function as a mother is threatened, and must be resisted. Paul D recognizes that; "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (45).

Therefore, when the slave masters come to take Beloved, Sethe's maternal role is threatened, and she has no choice, but



to fight for freedom, as she has no space for compromised or 'thin' love. Freedom for her is achievable through death of part of her, and this explains the infanticide in *Beloved*. Love for Sethe "becomes a testament of freedom" (Otten: 658) and a survival strategy. McKenzie notes that a reader of *Beloved* is enabled to "consider enslavement from a new perspective of how black people were able to endure, to survive, when they did not own their bodies, their children or anything but their own minds" (Ibid., 229). And when they were said to have been freed from slavery, they understood freedom from slavery to mean not only the absence of masters and endless work but regaining the power to "love anything you chose". "Both Sethe and Paul D understood how slavery inhibited their ability to have "a big love" whether for children, for friends, or for each other" (Collins: 181).

But the freedom Sethe achieves to 'freely' love her daughter is also potentially tragic. Otten notes that "a mother's freedom to love her child is exceedingly dangerous – it is potentially self-consumptive, capable of producing what Barbara Schapiro calls an "intimacy of destructive rage...incited by feelings of love" " (658). It leads Sethe to commit infanticide, and she believes Beloved would come back for her to explain why she had to do what she did as well as hear Beloved say "I forgive



you”. This is why she does not really acknowledge guilt for her action, but rather makes desperate efforts to earn Beloved’s understanding. Therefore, all her investment in mothering is both an attempt to make up for her own loss as a daughter and assert herself as the possessive and powerful good mother. This is what obsessively revives the suppressed memory in her despite her desperate efforts to remove the memory of the bleeding child she had held in her arms and her relaxing in her new glory of present love. Otten reflects, “instead of memory reviving the past, then, it is the resurrected past – the actual presence of Beloved – that slowly summons memory in its wake” (585). But this re-memory is significant because it signals the triumph of love over time and death.

CONCLUSION

As a representation of motherhood, *Beloved* joins a distinguished list of novels in African American literature. Morrison portrays the image of mother in *Beloved* and how



slavery affects motherhood and as a result how the mother's behavior influences their children. The way in which Morrison depicts black mother's interaction with their children, especially the daughters, anticipates that they will meet the same obstacles as those facing their mothers.

In *Beloved* Sethe can be seen as symbolic of the African mother who is fundamental in depictions of motherhood in Morrison's novels. With the power to create and destroy life, Sethe makes the cruel decision to end their children's lives. Morrison depicts these acts in a cruel manner in order to convey the seriousness of the situation and to convey the frustration that arises as a result of racism and the heritage of slavery.

Morrison reveals the side of motherhood most authors would be unwilling to portray. The reader is given insight into the lives of characters where everything is not black and white, but instead where the ambiguity and complexity of the situation of mothers are exposed. Traditionally, mothers have been portrayed in the idealized way society has viewed the mother, throughout history. In *Beloved* Sethe is depicted as human being with flaws and emotions of anger, bitterness and powerlessness. Morrison depicts, without sentimentality, mothers who kill their own children and thus, she creates a new



image of the loving mother which acts harshly under the slave system.

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