



Reflection of Motherhood and Slavery in *Toni Morrison's Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's classic work *Beloved* delves into and shows the tragic fate of slaves, particularly slave mothers. Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and Baby Suggs are the primary characters in this work, and they describe the difficulties of being a mother during the slave era. The novel starts with a historical depiction of what it was like to be a mother and a slave at the same time. The study then moves on to examining the interactions between various characters in order to arrive at a conclusion. to show the hardships that slavery brought to parenthood, *Beloved* not only conveys the importance of being a mother, but it also provides insight into the environment in which she lives. To save their children, mothers went through a lot of agony, misery, and sexual exploitation. Even if it wasn't morally appropriate, they all ended up with the same fate.

Key words: slavery, motherhood, sexual exploitation, Beloved, Toni Morrison

Introduction

Toni Morrison's work *Beloved* is an amazing description and exploration of the effects of slavery on all facets of human life, particularly motherhood. Mothers have a crucial part in the lives of all children, and when a mother is gone from a child's daily life, it can be very painful and have major effects.¹ Morrison devotes considerable attention to women-only households and single mother families, which are generally the result of male desertion, when discussing motherhood, in the novel (Lopez Ramirez 109). Many enslaved women were forced to have multiple sexual relationships with different men in order to bear offspring. Since then, many mothers and children have experienced a lack of love in difficult family situations. They found it extremely difficult to love children who were conceived without love, especially children born to white slave owners.

¹Johanna Wising: Motherhood and the Heritage of Slavery In Toni Morrison's Novels *Sula* and *Beloved*, p.6.

In addition, the majority of mother-child connections were damaged as a result of difficult living conditions.²

Sethe did not know her mother because she was hanged. Baby Suggs had different beliefs about her children, and Sethe as a mother to Denver and Beloved shows what mothers are capable of. All of those dreadful circumstances had an impact on their lives, even years after they were set free. This paper will aim to analyse the concept of motherhood in the era of slavery by examining Sethe, Baby Suggs, and their mother-child connections in order to demonstrate the hardships, harsh conditions, and anguish that most mothers faced at the time.

Historical Background of Slavery and Motherhood

Slavery is one of the most important topics in African-American history. The victims of the horrific system, as is well known, were Africans who were sent to America for exploitation and hard work.³ The beginnings of slavery were connected to the economy as it was the main reason for procuring slaves.

Profit was made from the hard work of Africans sold as slaves. "The first dark-skinned slaves in what was to become British North America came in Virginia" in the seventeenth century (Bourne 1). But the majority of slaves lived in the South during the time. Slaves were reliant on their masters. "By the nineteenth century, family chiefs wielded significantly more physical influence over their subjects." They were treated as "slaves" rather than "employees" (Bourne 5). It was illegal for African Americans to write or read. If they did something wrong, they were severely punished. Furthermore, slave masters did not hesitate to use their female slaves to satisfy their sexual demands.⁴

Inferior and seen as animals, slave mothers had the most horrible destiny one could imagine. Being a slave was bad enough on its own, but adding a child to the mix made things even worse. Slave mothers and their children from Africa were not treated as human beings. Families were torn apart and obliterated. Not only were mothers and fathers frequently separated from one another, but also from their children.⁵

It was really difficult to function as a family because of the cruelty of belonging to someone else. Even though some mothers shared slave owners with their children, their lives were far from

²Manuela López Ramírez: The Pattern of Severed Mother-daughter Bond in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*.

³<https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-American/Slavery-in-the-United-States>

⁴<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-ushistory/chapter/slavery-in-the-u-s/>; Bhartiya Stree Shakti: Tackling Violence Against Women: A Study of State Intervention Measures (A comparative study of impact of new laws, crime rate and reporting rate, Change in awareness level)

⁵<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/05/31/barbaric-americas-cruel-history-of-separating-children-from-their-parents/>

ordinary. Mothers were filled with anguish, grief, frustration, sadness, and anxiety on a daily basis. Mothers were unable to properly raise their children because they were not allowed to care for or nurture them. Being pregnant while enslaved was a difficult experience for many slave moms. Carrying a kid is difficult enough on its own, but doing so while working physically-demanding jobs and being assaulted on a daily basis was terrifying and sad. As a result of these circumstances, many children have been born with disabilities.

Prenatal treatment was insufficient. This made mothers' life 10 times more difficult, not to mention the fact that slave owners had no sympathy for them, forcing them to return to work only a few days after giving birth. "Their mothers – already besieged by a barrage of labour demands, with their parental role forcibly subordinated to the economic interests of slaveholders – faced even greater obstacles in meeting their disabled children's needs and protecting them from an institution that objectified and devalued them" as a result of this (Barclay 120). Hard physical labour had repercussions not only for the babies, but also for the mothers. According to Cowling et al., mothers suffered several injuries as a result of slavery, and as a result, they were unable to take their foetuses to term. Moreover, slave owners never cared about the slave women.

"Though they were aware to some extent that really hard labour was not beneficial, they blamed the loss of slave babies on their mothers, who were frequently accused of smothering their newborns," (Jennings 54). Furthermore, enslaved mothers' terror was always present. Every mother wants the best for her child, but it was terrifying to not know if your child would be taken from you or if it would survive the horrific conditions of slavery. As a result, some mothers purposefully avoided having children. Many other parents tried to safeguard their children from the institution of slavery. Sethe is a mother who is so wounded by slavery that she is willing to do unexplainable things to her most loving ones, as exemplified by Morrison in her novel *Beloved*. Even though many readers could not connect to everything the protagonists in the story went through, Morrison does an incredible job of presenting a picture of how things were and evoking the horror of slavery. The slavery regime and harsh prejudice that surrounded African Americans were horrible, and the fact that discrimination against African-Americans still continues in this century, only adds to the sadness.

The Depiction of Sexual Abuse in *Beloved*

"Unconstrained by nineteenth-century mores," Morrison "breaks open the ban on speaking frankly about sexuality and sexual assault" (Montgomery 55). Many of the people in the novel had experienced traumas as a result of their past, which was rife with sexual harassment and assaults. Sethe, the protagonist, is fortunate to have the same father for all four of her children. Nonetheless, she was subjected to a horrific assault while enslaved at the Sweet Home, which had a negative impact on her. As a parent her physical assault exemplifies the difficulties that

slave mothers had to go through since the men "stole my milk," as she puts it (Morrison 17). She was robbed of the one thing that kept her linked to her children— her milk:

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk!”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison 20)

Sethe was unconcerned about the fact that she was being beaten; all she cared about was her milk, which was intended for her offspring. On the one hand, this demonstrates her love for her children and the fact that they were her top priority. On the other hand, she represents all enslaved mothers who toiled and suffered greatly because they were unable to properly nurture or nurse their children. Sethe is willing to go to any length to protect her children, as her murder of her baby, Beloved, demonstrates. She would also do anything for her children, including selling her own body (this is how she engraves Beloved's tombstone). Baby Suggs was raped multiple times and had her children fathered by various men. This has a significant impact on her life because she finds it difficult to connect emotionally with her children. Ella, another heroine who was subjected to this heinous event, refuses to nurse her child because it was created through rape and, as a result, the child dies. These are only a few examples of how women were sexualized and sexually abused throughout slavery. White men had unlimited power over enslaved people, and they could do whatever they wanted to them without fear of retaliation, leaving many women with lasting traumas.

Sethe and Her Mother

Sethe is one of the main characters of *Beloved*. Sethe's character is based on Margaret Garner, a real-life black slave woman who was a victim of white patriarchy (Watson, "The Power of the 'Milk'" 160). Sethe also depicts the tragedy of being a mother and a daughter in the South under slavery. She has no opportunity to form a true mother-daughter bond with her mother, and consequently struggles to do so with her own children.

Separation of Sethe from her mother

Slavery has a number of horrible repercussions, one of which is the separation of children from their mothers, who did not have the opportunity to bond, raise, breastfeed, or form emotional bonds to their children. Similarly, Sethe is estranged from her mother and never has the opportunity to get to know her or live her life with someone who would look after her, love her, and keep her safe. Sethe's only recollection of her mother is of her mother carrying her behind

the smokehouse and showing her the scar beneath her breast. Sethe is drawn to her mother's mark because she wants her mother to recognise her as her daughter.

This demonstrates Sethe's strong need for her mother's presence in her life. Sethe's mother, on the other hand, is hanged instead of being with her. Sethe feels empty and deprived as a result of the loss of the most important person in her life on the one hand, and as though her mother abandoned her on the other, as only slaves who attempted to flee were hanged. Her mother took a route that she believed would lead her to a better place. Sethe, on the other hand, believes she would be able to release her children from slavery by murdering them.

Love and protection Sethe received from her mother

Sethe's mother was so dehumanised by slavery that she rejected all of her children save Sethe: "She tossed them all away except you." "She tossed the one from the crew away on the island... She threw them without names. You were the one who gave the black man's name" (Morrison 62). When women are raped, they experience the following level of pain: Sethe's mother abandoned her children because they reminded her of the rapist who had raped her. Furthermore, the use of the verb "threw" demonstrates and stresses Sethe's mother's lack of love for her other children. There was no link at all between both of them. She only kept Sethe because she adored her father and feared that his death would be tragic. She wanted to safeguard her daughter in this way. She had practically all of the same rights as any other slave mother and had no chance to raise or nurse Sethe on her own, which is crucial for every mother. Milk might be considered symbolically as a mother's milk today or in the past. If there is a present and lasting affection on the part of the mother, then a lack of milk may indicate maternal abandonment" (Mock 119). Sethe's mother, deprived of nursing and milking, handles the struggle and sorrow in a symbolic way. Sethe couldn't understand what was going on when she was a child. What was her mother up to, and what was she doing? When she is an adult and has her own children she begins to comprehend her mother's acts and the magnitude of her mother's love for her.

Sethe as a Mother

Sethe grows up and becomes a mother, later in the novel, and her experience of slavery has left her so traumatised that she would sooner kill all of her children than subject them to the horrors of slavery: "I couldn't allow her or any of them live under the supervision of a schoolteacher." (Morrison 163). Her actions are thus more monstrous than motherly, though they can be seen in another way because the only thing she wants for her children is for them to be safe and not to meet her fate. "Sethe was not a horrible mother; she was a slave mother. Despite everything she had to go through when confronted with a threat to her motherhood, she opted to arm herself by taking action. She freely decides to disrupt the traditional mothering position by killing her children. Sethe's opinions on slavery and motherhood were affected by the occurrence of her mother's hanging. She emphasises breastfeeding because she was denied her mother's nursing, care, and affection. Furthermore, Sethe understands what it's like to be in a situation when you

don't have what you need the most: your life, a mother who loves you and wants to love her children. She wants to provide for them all that she is capable of. She was deprived of her mother's milk and bonds, and she was aware of the voracious void in her stomach. Sethe aspires a better life for her children. She promises that her children will follow in her footsteps. Never have them experience hunger. Despite their paternity, she claims ownership of her children captivity, as well as her own. They'll have their own milk supply. They'll never succeed. They won't have to share, they'll get their own suckle time, and she'll be theirs (Mock 119). Her milk is the only thing she has for her children, so when it is stolen, she is devastated. Rather than being whipped, they dared to steal it. Stealing her milk is a crime committed not only against her but also against the law.

Conclusion

Slavery may have damaged mother-child relationships and caused women to do unfathomable things, but it did not destroy their love for one another. Toni Morrison's characters in *Beloved* brilliantly reflect and highlight how every mother loves for and shows her love for her children in different ways, whether by breaching customary limits to protect them or by separating themselves from their feelings. Because of the cruel system, Sethe chooses on the fate of her children, Baby Suggs is separated from all of her children, and Sethe's mother gets rid of all of her children except Sethe. They all have different ways of dealing with the sorrow, such as Baby Suggs' emotional separation, Sethe's immorality, her boys' rushing away from her, and so on. Despite this, one thing that slavery could not destroy was the intense and passionate mother love depicted in Morrison's *Beloved*.

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