

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

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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel about motherhood and mothering. Specifically, it is an interesting story about a slave woman as a mother. The events of the novel are set in the first half of the nineteenth century when the slave population in the United States has increased significantly. It also narrates 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 and the good fortune of bearing his four children and planning the future for herself and her family, options that few other slaves possessed. Because of her owners and their relatively compassionate views toward their slaves, Sethe, a courageous and daring woman, dared to imagine a future in which her children could escape the bondage of slavery.

*Beloved* is an adjective used by one and all. Yet, in the novel *Beloved* (1987), Morrison explores the essence of naming the lost, murdered daughter of Sethe, the protagonist and slave woman of iron eyes and backbone to match. The terrible ordeals borne by mothers during slavery come alive through the narratives in *Beloved*. The novel also deals with lives of black as was lived during plantation era. Morrison bestows dignity to blacks who were all called men by the plantation owner Mr. Garner, who prided himself in doing so, when majority of plantation owners considered their slaves as property. All men are named alike, Paul, with the variation of last initial, e.g. Paul D. Garner, Paul A. Garner and Paul F. Garner.

It is essential to understand mockery of the system evolved by the whites for keeping slaves as their property, unmindful of Afro-Americans as persons and their entity as human beings. As Charles Scruggs aptly remarks, "Naming is an existential act that manifests a vital community whose space is fluid protean". It is apparent that the laws formulated by whites did not proclaim humanity of the blacks.

The novel primarily concerns with the awful, lingering effects of slavery especially on black mothers. The story was stimulated by a contemporary newspaper clipping telling of a Kentucky runaway slave, Margaret Garner, who tried to kill her children at the home of her mother-in-law in Cincinnati, rather than have them go back to slavery as noted in the Newsweek by Clemmons. The story commands utmost attention by taking into its fold are the issues an Afro-American writer must envisage. As the novel unfolds, the first sentence evokes sense of mystery "124 WAS SPITEFUL, full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and daughter Denver were its only victims." (P. 3)

Motherhood posed a problematic challenge to African American women under the slave regime. The situation, which did not allow mothers the opportunity and freedom to nurture their children or perform their biological role as caregivers and mothers to their children, and especially their female children, had very debilitating consequences on the psyche of the women.

According to Carole Boyce Davies, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the most deliberate problematizing's of motherhood that I have encountered.... In the novel, *Beloved*'s (Sethe) undergoes a torturous journey (symbolic) in order to reconstruct the meaning of her life as a woman and a mother. This symbolic journey interrogates both morality and conventions, and the ideological structures of racism, which implicated the woman. 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 are really destroyed."

The entire helpless condition of blacks during and after the emancipation reveals their strong sense of place. Be it as a house in *Beloved*, "the place where Sethe lived didn't have a number then it was a gray and white house on Bluestone road on the outskirts of Cincinnati. During Slavery most black women were

not domestics in the house, contrary to popular impressions, rather they were labourers in the fields with the men. It also represents that the women were deprived of houses, of being householders." Naturally, these circumstances led Morrison's women strongly attached to the houses even those that seem cursed.

Morrison in "*Beloved*" evinces the redemption of the house, the origins of community and the integration of the individual within the community's life sustaining body. The two fingers of the mother in the novel naturally arrest our attention. Baby Suggs celebrates Sethe's reunion with the family along with her four grandchildren. She is deeply interested in the strength of blacks in surviving, not only surviving but in the wholeness of entire people, male and female. Halle had brought freedom for his mother after five long years of hard work. She lived sixty years a slave and ten years free. These were her last words before she died. But when she was freed, she reached the outskirts of Cincinnati. Baby Suggs had been a beacon of light to the entire community.

It is ennobling law through her experience of slave life. She had attained a deep understanding of travels of the blacks. After emancipation, she wanted to build a strong community of blacks. Because slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, kidneys, womb and tongue, she had nothing left to make a living with her heart – which she put to work at once. She was the best loved and sought after among her people. Thus, Baby Suggs attains becoming from the state of being. Her nobility of heart is described as, "Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it." (P.87)

Thus, the nurturing quality of the mother in Baby Suggs is symbolically portrayed. The lesson she learnt and taught to all men, women and children was love your heart (P.89)

The men were asked to dance before their wives and children, women were asked to cry and children were told to laugh, so that their mothers listen them laugh. Baby Suggs asked ceremoniously to all her people to love their own selves, as the white don't love them, in parts or as a whole. Therefore, "You got to love it. This is the flesh I am talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feel that need to rest and dance, backs that need support, shoulders that need arms, strong arms I am telling you. And O My people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your love your neck unmoored and straight. So love your neck, put hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up." (P.88-89) Thus, a sort of defense mechanism was developed among black as white slave catchers to catch the runaway slaves perpetually haunted them. So, exactly twenty eight days after the arrival of Sethe at 124 Bluestone Road, Baby Suggs faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse.

The picture totally changes at 124 after nine years when "Baby Suggs, holy proved herself a liar, dismissed her great heart and lay in the keeping room bed roused once in a while by a craving for color and not for another thing." (P.89) The mystery of these changes lies in a shocking, indescribable agonizing experience wherein those white things have taken all.

As a result of a terrible happening..... 124 shut down and put with the venom of its ghost. No more lamps all night long or neighbours dropping by. No conversations after supper. No watched barefoot children playing in the shoes of strangers. There was no grace imaginary or real. The long cherished dream of a happy reunion comes to a halt. The shock proves too deep for Baby Suggs who lead a life suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead; she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it. Her past had intolerable like her present. She had eight children. Every one of them gone away from her four taken and four chased. It is after eighteen years; Paul D. Garner visits Sethe and learns about Baby Suggs death. She died as soft as cream. The baby ghost of Sethe's daughter "*Beloved*" haunted the house. After Sweet Home plantation was taken over by school teacher.

There were six men at the Sweet Home and Sethe was the only female. When she sent her children from Kentucky to Halle's mother near Cincinnati, Ohio, on wagon, along with Ella and other women. Sethe said as: "I had milk, I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl". (P.9)

The dialogue charged with mother love, frantic eagerness and expectancy to see and suckle the baby oozes out of every syllable. As the blacks were not allowed to possess anything, neither relationship nor any belongings. Morrison is one the finest artist who evokes atmosphere, builds up ethos and readers feel it, perceive it and dread it, at the time. The innermost thoughts are unfolded and we peep into the mind of Baby Sugg's in the following way as:

"She accustomed to the knowledge that nobody prayed for her- but this free floating repulsion was new. It wasn't white folks-- that much she could tell— so it must be colored ones. And then she knew, her friends and neighbor were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended by excess" (p.138).

When the school teacher arrived both Baby Suggs and Sethe saw them. The slave enters in the wood stock still. It is clear that Sethe's thick mother- love overwhelmed her. She wanted to kill all her children. She did not succeed in killing all but one, her two year daughter "*Beloved*". Sethe's sheer courage to survive through slavery and getting out of it without Halle, her husband was feat. How she loved her children, She renders to Paul D. after eighteen years as:

"Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got me out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew anything about before. When I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. Look I loved them more after I got here. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon..... (p.162)".

It is clear that for Sethe Paul D. is the man who could walk into a house and the women cry. After talking about her mother love again and again the subject would remain one. After her agonizing experiences of slavery at Sweet Home as: "It was simple, she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized the school teacher's hat, she heard wings. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of that were previous and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them. Over there, outside this place, where they would be safe". (p.163)

The white school teacher whom Sethe faced looked him dead in the eye, She had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally they were none. It was Sethe who tells Paul D. about her thick love and how she strove to be her guard as far as her motherly love was concerned about the safety of her loved ones in the following dialogue: "Yeah it didn't work, did it? Did it work? He asked "It worked" She said. "Away from what I know is terrible. I did that". (p. 165.) This above dialogue represents what Morrison wants to be able to write highly marked, black language with black characters steeped in black cultures. The novel raises many questions about Denver's loneliness when Paul D. enters 124 as well as when Beloved possesses Sethe.

Morrison creates a world of bygone era, yet, alive in every bit of piece. The image of chokecherry tree on the back of Sethe and the countless such black 'song of many thousands gone' keep alive the sufferings of Afro-American people. She also believed that by working with narrow limits instead of broad ones, she might be able to do something deep. The depth she is speaking is the depth of the human heart, Sethe's heart, which in its misery contains the misery of the race.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe is a woman who becomes sexual object for both white and black society. The images of nature, rape and animalistic behavior and treatment dominate this neo-slave narrative about a vengeful baby ghost, who in the form of a young teenage woman, comes back to haunt Sethe, the mother who cut her throat. Beloved is a monumental work written to honor the sixty million or more Africans who were lost on the slave ships voyages during the dreaded Middle Passage. This tribute is vividly

symbolized when Beloved returns to life via pond, an appropriate image of rebirth and renewal.

Milk and water imagery is prevalent representing not only the death that occurred during the Middle Passage, but also the loss of black motherhood. During slavery, the black woman was seen as either only vagina or womb, objects that were there for sexual gratification or material gain. Her body was used to an assembly line to mass produce more slaves for the plantations.

In *Beloved*, each woman, starting with Sethe, has to deal with having her milk spoiled by the demeaning forces of slavery. Milk is mixed with blood as black women fight back against their oppression through the act of infanticide choosing to take the lives of their own children rather than let them be material possessions for the masters. Thus, throughout *Beloved*, nature is corrupted, disrupted by rape perpetrated by the white phallus of slavery. Such oppression sets the stage for murdered youth and dysfunctional family relationships in the black community.

It is no wonder that the natural images of black motherhood and manhood are turned upside down in this work. For, Sethe, the rape and the stealing of her milk symbolized the taking of her self-hood, her inner being. As a child, she was denied full access to her own mother's milk. Like her daughter Beloved, Sethe is starving for mother's milk that is almost always mixed with the blood slavery. According to Barbara Schapiro "Sethe was emotionally starved as a baby, she was denied a significant nurturing relationship. That relationship is associated with one's being or essence, if she has no nursing milk to call her own, she feels without a self to call her own. Thus, she is ravaged as an infant, robbed of her milk by the white social structure".

So, in "*Beloved*" the rape and exploitation of both the black woman and man set the stage for the unnatural and animalistic behavior that dominates the work. The black woman's sexual organ becomes the one commodity or object of value for the slave master, her reproductive abilities are manipulated and warped as a dollar value is placed on her vagina.

According to Marsha Jean Darling "The novel's central themes revolve around the following questions: - What are the entitlements and boundaries of mother's love? Why is the precious interior, the loved self, whatever it is, suppressed or displaced and put someplace in the children, in the lover, in the man? And why do the same women who surrender so much of themselves possess so strongly, even to the point of acting in ways that compromise their in- earnest attempt to love?"

Such questions are never completely answered as the plight of the black woman is addressed in Morrison's *Beloved*. Yet, one cannot help but to question and feel disgusted when it becomes clear that bonding between mother and child, man and woman are tainted and forever made dysfunctional whenever the white phallus of slavery imposes itself. The institution of slavery and its sexual oppression of both the black man and woman drove Sethe's mother, Baby Suggs, Ella and other black women to go beyond acceptable boundaries of mother love. It is the white phallus of slavery that drives Sethe to murder her baby. It is the white phallus that drove many mothers to commit infanticide both on and off the slave ships. Many would choose death either themselves or their children. Like the cows that had no chance around the black males on Sweet Home, Sethe milked, treated and whipped like an animal. The whipping bought about a scar on Sethe's back which is symbolic of her hardships to grow beyond her rape. Sethe is unable to feel the kisses because her back skin has been dead for years.

The ghost – child makes one more attempt to scare away Paul D. directly confronts the unseen entity, it leaves the scene, but only temporarily, which allows time for Paul. D. and Sethe to consummate their sexual desires.

According to Wyatt "Morrison links *Beloved* to the sixty million and more by joining her spirit to the body of a woman who died on one of the slave ships, *Beloved* was a link and a reminder of how black women were not only hunted down but exploited sexually".

According to Horvitz, "Beloved is an inter- generational, inter- continental, female ghost – child who teaches Sethe that memories and stories about her matrilineal ancestry are life- giving". It is through these memories that Sethe is reminded of her own nameless mother who, along with other black mothers, were victimized and forced into unspeakable degradation and sexual exploitation in slavery. Sethe's mother, whose name is never mentioned is an example of how sexual exploitation and the treatment of black woman as only tools for reproduction drove them to desperate acts of retaliation. Sethe is raised by another woman named Nan who tells the story about Sethe's mother. The story told reveals a woman who, after numerous rapes, had many children black and white, however, Sethe's mother throws away all of her children except the black one- Sethe. It appears that infanticide becomes the black woman tools against her oppressive rapists.

Sethe's mother is like many nameless faces lost on the Middle Passages, but she fights to have a name carried on through Sethe. Sethe's mother chooses to keep Sethe because her father was a black, and as far the whites who repeatedly raped her. Treated like an animal, she, in a sense, acts like an animal by brutally destroying her offspring, however, she regains control and freedom by taking back lives that would soon be enslaved. Nan also describes how both she and Sethe's mother were taken up many times by the crew

and raped repeatedly, a common practice on the slave ship. Such a painful memories a Sethe's Nan and Sethe's mother are powerful examples of how, through infanticide, African mothers fought back against their sexual oppression through what can be called "love murder"

In "Beloved" the black women are all bonded in their exploitation, mother's milk is the only means of nurturing and continuing stability and hope for the future. Sethe's mother, before being killed, lifted her breast to show her daughter the marks of circle and cross branded into her. This brand of slavery is symbolic of how a black woman's life – giving breasts were constantly violated and her milk spoiled by rape and exploitation. When Sethe sees the mark and asks for one like it, her mother slaps her because she did not want Sethe to carry the same burdens that have plagued her life. In fact, Sethe's mother, like the ghost *Beloved*, is symbolic of Africa and the sixty million or more lost on the Middle Passage. It is her strength that teaches Sethe, to respect and to remember the importance of motherhood and unity.

So, by work's end it is appropriate that a community of women come together to exorcise that demon ghost. Their unity and power of prayer are powerful tools, symbols that castrate the evil effects of slavery's white phallus. Ironically, both young and old breasts, long dried of mother's milk, came together to nurse Sethe back to sanity. These women help to cleanse and nourish not only Sethe but also her other daughter, Denver. So despite their victimization, these mothers are able to bring about constant renewal, rebirth, and cleansing, a function which is a fitting end considering the many instances of sexual exploitation and animalistic treatment that these victimized women had to endure.

Thus, Toni Morrison has convincingly and successfully depicted the predicament of motherhood, slavery and exploitation of black women in her world famous novel "*Beloved*".

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