

The Other Side of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's "Beloved"

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ABSTRACT:

"Motherhood" itself is a form of slavery. In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison opens up the wounds of slavery through the "unimaginable" story of Sethe, a slave mother who liberates her infant from the horrors of slavery by taking away her right to live. Morrison's narrative brings forth the life of a violent mother and a 'devil child' both suffering the consequences of the complexity of motherhood. This paper aims at justifying Sethe's act of infanticide, an unseen act and how it posed a question mark to her "Motherhood".

Keywords: Slavery, Motherhood, Racism, Oppression, Woman Studies.

"Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed and broke my headstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (*Beloved* 104-105).

The events of Morrison's novel are set in the first half of the nineteenth century, where the slave tradition had increased significantly in the United States. The novel narrates a story of a slave-woman confined to a Plantation named Sweet Home at Kentucky.

Sethe, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* broke all virtues of Motherhood and slashed the throat of her one year old infant with a saw. Sethe's maternal instincts are openly questioned for her animalistic act. To the society, she had committed a heinous sin. She was a slave who had lost her mother at an early age and was brought to the Sweet Home Plantation as a slave where she was treated inhumanely. Being a mother with the desire to free her

children from the world of slavery Sethe tried everything. But she failed. Slavery was something that no Black could escape then. The slave women are robbed of their bodies and even their motherhood. Sethe knew that her daughter would not remain hers and would be sold like calves by the masters and milked later on like her. This state of mind forced her to leave aside the socially framed conventions of parenthood. The thought of slavery made her violent; it persuaded her to commit a crime, a crime unheard. No one can imagine what a mother went through while killing her own daughter by her own hands. Sethe was not to blame. It was slavery which killed Beloved. The thought of a life of a slave for her children shook Sethe; she wasn't in a condition to keep her children with her because slavery knew no limits. Morrison, in the backdrop of slavery, shows how a mother freed her child from being treated as an animal. She freed Beloved, her daughter, from a life which was no less than hell

Sethe was aware of what price Beloved would have to pay to slavery. She would live her whole life being raped and tortured by the White masters who would produce as much children they could from her until she dies. Beloved to Sethe, Beloved would stay safe and secure in the coffin then at the hands of the slave owners. There's no fate worse than Slavery. Morrison through the story of Sethe's crime unveils the roots of Slavery and says that it is much more brutal than what we have heard or read. Sethe's story is a true one of Mrs. Margaret Garner. Margaret Garner too had proved herself a violent mother by killing her child to protect it from the Whites. Morrison in the novel highlights mostly the fate of a mother during slavery because women are the one who has been tortured more during slavery. Having a biological feature different from the men made the slave women suffer more. Their body was like a curse to them. The men folks had to live a life of toil, but the women slaves were traded for their body. Their bodies and each part of it were used in every possible way it could be used.

When Paul D told Sethe that there might be another Plantation worse than Sweet Home for her and her children, she angrily responds back:

"It isn't my job to know what's worse. It's to know what is out there and to keep my children away from it! Because I would rather know they are in peace at heaven than living a hell here on Earth!" (*Beloved* 194).

Sethe had prepared herself for the worse, but she knew that she couldn't bear to see her children in it. To her, a quiet and cold coffin would give her child a better life than slavery. At Heaven there would be no Plantation, no masters and no Whites. Her child would happily enjoy the childhood and no slavery could touch her. She did not see what was good or evil, what she could only see was, her child needed to stay safe and lead a normal life. All these thoughts were enough for Sethe to decide an infanticide.

Sethe was a mother first and then a slave. Once Baby Suggs told her about what she remembered of her child:

“My first born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember” (*Beloved* 2).

To this, Seethe replied “That’s all you let yourself remember” (*Beloved* 2).

Seethe had a totally alienated perception of motherhood. What Baby Suggs told her was totally disagreeable as she was not a mother of that kind. Seethe wanted her child to be hers, and only hers. She could not let her child live a life where she could not keep a control as a mother, just like Baby Suggs. The problem was not in fate, but in the choice, in the decisions that they made. Seethe was the only one who took slavery as a real curse. When Paul de Man had asked Seethe whether Baby Suggs died hard, Seethe’s reply shows what slavery had in stock. She said:

“Soft as Cream. Being Alive was the hard part” (*Beloved* 4)

But the death she was speaking about was not of Baby Suggs, but the child. When the dead child returned as a grown up girl, and was asked her name, she replied ‘Beloved’. It was the name inscribed on her tomb by her mother. After the death of Beloved, Seethe had sold away her body in order to afford the name Beloved engraved on her tombstone. Barbara Hill Rigney says, “...trades ten minutes of sex for a single inscription, the one word that mattered on her daughter’s tombstone, thus almost literally translating her body into the written word”. The return of the child killed out of love and protection years before though was a haunting incident for many. Dead of alive, her daughter had become her soul and she lived the rest of her life in pleasing Beloved, fulfilling her wishes and giving her all the love and motherly care she deserved. This undeniably shows how much Seethe loved her child and this irreplaceable love drove her to be selfish.. Though Seethe ended slavery for her child, she herself remained a slave all throughout her life. At first, she was a slave at the hands of slavery and now she was a slave of her guilt. The environment of Sweet Home Plantation for her children where the slave women were milked off their breasts regularly like they were not humans and some herd of cows gave Seethe a nightmare. The men of the Sweet Home Plantation had crossed the limits of humanity when they cowhided on her knowing she was pregnant. They had dug a hole and let Seethe’s baby bump stay there so that it won’t harm the baby which was a future slave to them.

Such was the plight of pregnant women during slavery. The nephews of the Sweet Home Plantation dug a grave for the bulging stomach of Sethe when she was pregnant with Beloved, because they needed more slaves and could not take the risk of hurting the child. Also, she had seen her mother suffer the same fate and it continued and she knew it would continue. But, unlike her mother, she was strong and courageous. To rescue her children from the brutality of life, Sethe tries to kill all three of her children. Being a mother the situation was hard for Sethe to confront her child with a murder motif in her mind. Sethe loved her child the same way a normal mother loves her child. She had all intention to protect her child

from the hurdles of life. What else could she do! She was a Slave and being a slave was no less than a curse. The hell that she had experienced at the Sweet Home Plantation was enough to be the reason for what Sethe had done. She tried every possible way to run away slavery with the help of Paul De Man, but she was unsuccessful. Slavery had become her destiny and life became tougher as time passed. She wanted her children to be free of all the bondages of slavery where no one could hurt or torture them. To this, Paul D said that “Your love is too thick” (*Beloved* 193). At this moment, Sethe spoke her heart out,

“Too thick? Love is or ain’t. Thin love is ain’t love at all” (*Beloved* 194).

Her definition of mothering was unlike other slave mothers. She had made up her mind to free her children from slavery, but when she couldn’t find any way out, she could do nothing but kill. Sethe is indeed a selfish mother who loved her child deeply like every other mother but the only difference she had is that, she was an unconventional mother. I don’t condone murder, but, if we see from Sethe’s perspective, she had freed her child. It’s a mother’s duty to save her child from all odds. She was not going to be like her own mother who left her to be a slave. Sethe is an obsessive mother. This is evident in the act when she wanted Beloved all for herself, before or after death. After long seventeen years, when Beloved returns as a grown up girl, she turns out totally possessive. She needs Sethe for herself and was ready to do anything she could to have Sethe for herself. She did everything she could to make Beloved realize that her mother loved her and she still loves her.

Morrison portrays the lives of slave-mothers, who raised their children with the lullabys and bed time stories of slavery. The slave children were slapped as a identification mark by their mothers. Their nights were not theirs, nor their own children. They were used as children producing machine, whose productions were sold for mere benefits of some powerful master. In other words we can say, Motherhood was on “sale”. In the world of Slavery, man and wives were not always allowed to stay together and share affection. The women and young girls were forced to give birth to as many children as they could till they die. To the slave owners, the more they gave birth, the more slaves they could trade with. The same happened with Sethe, her husband Halle could not stay with her and so she was the sole caretaker of the family and children. She had to manage her family alone and so she did everything she could to protect her children from slavery. Her violent act is a result of all these situations she had confronted in her life.

Towards the end of the novel, Morrison has repeated the lines:

“This is not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 324).

Morrison brought *Beloved* to show that Sethe had a mother in her like all others, but the choice she had made only made her different or to say an unconventional mother. Beloved’s presence in the novel was just to show the real mother in Sethe. The way Sethe loved and

cared for Beloved leaving aside everything reveals the guilt she had been carrying in her heart all those years and as a mother, she would do everything to keep her child happy. The existence of the dead Beloved is an indirect indication of justification of Sethe's act. Sethe's selfish act in disguise shows the life of oppressed mothers during the slavery, the trauma and scary phase of slavery. Motherhood in all its forms- with anger, hatred, selfishness, bitterness, helplessness, obsessiveness and above all shamelessness is boldly packed together in a single Sethe.

The analysis of the other part of motherhood in this paper doesn't encourage violent activities like murder, rather I would put forward my point that the "choice" made by Sethe made all the difference. Motherhood is a term which is encircled by all kinds of conventional expectations by the patriarchal society. The narrow review of a mother, her way of nurturing and mothering has been placed among certain defined rules and regulations. Morrison depicts the brutal act of Sethe in a defensive manner by making Beloved disappear at the end of the novel. Morrison's *Beloved* is not a story of only slavery, but a story of a group of people called slaves, who are deprived of all rights to live a life, family and emotional attachment of their own. Even Morrison seems to part with Sethe as she says in an interview with her publisher, "It was absolutely the right thing to do[...] but [Sethe] had no right to do it. I think if I had seen what she had seen, and knew what was in store, and I felt there was an afterlife-or even if I felt there wasn't- I think I would have done the same thing. But it's also the thing you have no right to do".

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