

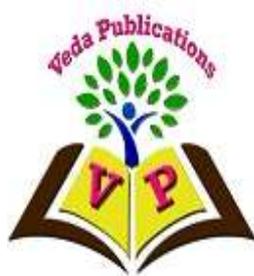


MOTHERHOOD ANNIHILATION WROUGHT BY SLAVERY: AN ELUCIDATION OF TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT



Toni Morrison is a famous contemporary black female author who admirably succeeds in creating a 'penetrating view of black motherhood'. There are several relationships that Morrison links together to show the aftereffects of the civil war from the Afro Americans point of view. The novel *Beloved* deals with the forgotten era of slavery and the sufferings of black slaves. Sethe, the protagonist suffers the most inhumane treatment at the plantation by the white masters. The literature produced after the Civil War concentrate on the lives of African Americans during and after slavery. *Beloved* deals exclusively with the distorted love of a mother for her child under the oppression of slavery. Due to the horror of slavery Sethe's murder of Beloved is renovated into what Morrison controversially considers 'the ultimate gesture of a loving mother', whose action proclaims, to kill her children is preferable to having them. She perceives the situation as not only that of banality of evil or racial problem, but also a conspiracy by the ideological structure both racial and patriarchal. This paper tries to elucidate the quest of a mother's suffering to resist the brutality of slavery and the pathos of black slaves.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Slavery, Woman, Suffering, Infanticide.*

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Toni Morrison, a foremost contemporary novelist, narrates the African-American experience and commendably succeeds in creating a clear view on the 'penetrating view of black motherhood'. Ever expanding on the theme of telling stories unspeakable, her most famous book *Beloved* was written in memory of the millions of lives lost during slavery. The plot revolves around an ex-slave Sethe who would rather kill her own children than risk that they be re-enslaved. The ghost of Sethe's dead child tries to remain close to her mother and inflicts havoc.

While Black women in America under the control of Whites they have been slandered as gold diggers, nymphomaniacs and prostitutes. But the women at that time had a great bond. In *Beloved*, the female bonding and the multiple layer of meaning in their relationship makes the story emotionally appealing and as Schapiro observes, it is a story that "...penetrates perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery" (194).

Sethe is the female protagonist in *Beloved*. She lost her mother at a very early age and she too is a slave. She was brought to the Sweet Home Plantation as a slave where she marries Halle Suggs and bears four children from him. She as a slave suffers a lot due to inhumane treatment at the plantation by the white masters. She is thrashed hardheartedly and milked like a cow. She was not even considered as a woman. The whites, "...sucked her lactating breasts" (109). This incident disturbs Sethe to a great extent and so she decides to run away from the plantation. She congregates all her courage and flees to take refuge in the house of her mother-in-law at 124 Bluestone Road. She is soon traced and was forced to be back as a slave. On finding no hopes for freedom Sethe takes the most horrific step of killing her own daughter to show resistance towards slavery. She is imprisoned for seven years for her crime and later secluded by the community and declared an outcast.

Motherhood poses a problematic challenge to Sethe and has debilitating consequences on her psyche. Love exhibits itself through sadistic tendencies. So, between Sethe and Beloved, a true state of love exists. It is imperative to see why

Sethe's decision for the child might have seemed the best under the prevailing circumstance. One can understand that the cruelty of killing her own child or freeing Beloved from slavery is because of the torture Sethe suffered from the masters.

Sethe is aware about the existing circumstance where the black women are forced to offer themselves to their masters in a sexual subordination very queasy. She observes the situation as not only that of banality of evil or racial problem, but also a conspiracy by the white people's ideological structure which may reflect both racial and patriarchal. The Black woman suffers because of both political and sexual oppression by the whites. Sethe resists the existing situation of slavery by having a plan of separating mother and child for good, as well as exploiting the child sexually. Considering all the horrifying experience she had encountered, she retrieves Beloved from the life of slavery, which is a choice of a new direction.

Sethe is a mother who from her childhood itself found her own mother severed by slavery. She does not even develop a separate entity or identity before she was separated from her mother. She feels it too difficult to identify the boundary between her and another. As a result she "didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (164). This means that she has not matured into an individual with an identity. Consequently, Sethe is still in her pre-oedipal symbiotic stage when its monstrous superego is in control of how she relates with her mother and immediate environment. This is also the root cause of Sethe's inability to be away from her daughter, and consequently responsible for the intense love she has for her daughter. Hence, her love becomes the result of the omnipotence of the un-separable mother as Paul D confirms this inseparability of the mother and child when he says "...a suckling can't be away from its mother for long" (16). Because of this closeness, love, or symbiotic relationship with her baby, Sethe considers the appropriation or expropriation of her milk as defilement. When she tells of the experience, of the whites forcing her to be milked like an animal; "her eyes rolled out tears" (17). The repetition of "And they took my milk" (17) indicates how deeply painful this act of defilement is to her, much so because she considers 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.

So, when the slave masters come to take Beloved, it is part of Sethe and maternal role that are threatened, and she has no choice, but to fight for freedom, as she has no space for compromised or 'thin' love. The abundant love she showered on her baby was the reason which affected her psyche of her and made to loose or destruct her own motherhood. 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. And when the African American women were said to have been freed from slavery, they understood freedom from slavery to mean not only the absence of whimsical masters and endless work but regaining the power to love anything you chose they choose. "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" (Otten 181).

But the freedom Sethe achieves to 'freely' love her daughter is also potentially calamitous. It leads Sethe to commit infanticide, and she believes Beloved would come back for her to explain why she had to such a thing and what she did as well as hear beloved say "I forgive you" (234). This is why she does not really feel any kind of 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 lost identity as a daughter and assert herself as the possessive and powerful good mother.

Another important dimension of Sethe's love for her daughter, Beloved is because of the transformation. In such a situation, the projection of parts of the self, results in the object perceived as having the characteristics of the projected part of the self, which also results in identification. Sethe is presented as projecting all "the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful" (163) onto her children. Her instincts are those of a protective mother and she does not want anything to hurt them and therefore; she "collected every bit of life she had made..., and carried, pushed, dragged them through

the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (163).

One of the aims of projective identification in the trial to getting rid of an unwanted part of the self is a greedy possession and control of the object, which turns out also to be part of Sethe's problem. Because of the fact that she identifies herself in her beloved daughter, Sethe, finds the next time her child's security is threatened, attacks the source of the threat, the white man himself, instead of the child for whom she wants to protect. This is an attempt to forget and possibly undo the past.

The other reason for the act of Sethe was so much better than the anger that ruled when Sethe did or thought anything that excluded her. She could bear the hours – "nine or ten of them each day but one – when Sethe was gone" (100). Because Beloved is still psychically a pre-oedipal infant, she does not have an autonomous sense of self, but rather experiences the loss as an existential crisis. Her excessive dependence results in disintegrating tendency of life, as well as to the symbiosis of mother and infant. In this phenomenon, the child does not yet recognize its separateness from the world, and in particular the primary caregiver: she says of the woman on the ship: "I am not separate from her" (210). She continues to abolish separateness, which started when "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes..." (57) Until later when she says; "in the night I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter it belongs to me she is the laugh I am the laugher I see her face which is mine" (212)

But the freedom Sethe achieves to 'freely' love her daughter is also potentially calamitous. 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" (234). 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



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Because of the fact that she identifies herself in her beloved daughter, Sethe, the next time her child's security is threatened, attacks the source of the threat, the white man himself, instead of the child for whom she wants to protect. This is an attempt to forget and possibly undo the past and to protect the future parents from not losing their motherhood. Therefore, in the final scene, she attacks Mr. Bodkin, to annihilate the slave master and preserve forever the daughter she cannot bear to lose again.

The American slave system denied mothers the ownership of their children. Beloved is born into slavery and that is why their relationship is warped by the shadow of slavery. Nevertheless, Sethe desires freedom for her baby and this desire is achievable by the killing of Beloved to prevent her from slavery. Having entered into the Free State herself, she cannot allow her daughter to go back into slavery. Beloved however has returned to exact restitution from Sethe.

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