

ALL PERVASIVE PRESENCE OF MOTHERHOOD IN “BELOVED”

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Abstract

Toni Morrison, the Nobel Laureate American writer is famous for her sensitive topics, vivid and expressive dialogues and vital sparks of her characters. Among all her novels, the most celebrated is her fifth – *Beloved*. Among the various emotional and practical areas that *Beloved* explores, Motherhood is the strongest. Its emotional intensity dominates and overwhelms every other aspect in the entire novel.

The concept of Motherhood is examined from different perspectives in the novel. In this paper there will be an explanation of the juxtaposition of two mothers Baby Suggs and Sethe and their points of view regarding motherhood. It will be described how the role of the past and the presence of supernatural in 124 Bluestone have their effect on Sethe’s mind. A psychological analysis of Sethe’s concept of Motherhood, her unfulfilled desires, sense of guilt and endless love for her children will also be given. The paper will focus how the oppression of slavery had its impact on conventional motherhood and will refer to the effects of Fugitive Law of 1850. In this context it will refer to Margaret Garner, on whose life the novel *Beloved* is based and it will be linked and compared to another novel *Sula*. An explanation of Morrison’s point of view will be given regarding the treatment of motherhood in this novel. On the whole the paper will try to give all possible explanations and interpretations of motherhood as presented by the author in her novel *Beloved*.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Motherhood, Margaret Garner, slavery, *Sula*

“I have but four, the treasures of my soul,
They lay like doves around my heart;
I tremble lest some cruel hand
Should tear my house hold wreaths apart.

My baby girl, with childish glance,
Looks curious in my anxious eye,
She little knows that for her sake
Deep shadows round my spirit lie.

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And thou my babe, my darling one,
My last, my loved, my precious child,
Oh! When I think upon thy doom
My heart grows faint and then throbs wild.”

(Harper, F. *The Slave Mother-A Tale of The Ohio*¹. *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. Philadelphia. 1975.)

Mother, a single word from where the world of a child begins, blooms, a word that cares, that loves, that scolds, that gives solace, a word Toni Morrison has given manifestation to its fullest splendor, in her celebrated novel *Beloved*.

Toni Morrison, the late 20th century famous American writer has explored different aspects of motherhood in many of her novels. Motherhood and maternal experiences have been largely defined and analysed in literature for a long time, but mostly from the patriarchal perspective. Patriarchy has always objectified maternal and disregarded female subjectivity. Even early feminine theorists have neglected maternal subjectivity as Maureen Reddy points it out “feminism was largely a daughter’s critique” which viewed mother and motherhood with suspicion (Reddy, Maureen. *Motherhood, knowledge and power*. p-81). However Toni Morrison has scrutinized these dynamics closely and explains how they affect motherhood.

In 1974 she became involved in one of the most important projects of her career – the editorship of *The Black Book*. It was a documentation of the Afro-American experience in America, over times she had heard the stories of the slaved mothers who killed their children from the clutches of slavery. But while researching for *The Black Book* she found a newspaper article depicting the actual heart wrecking incident of Margaret Garner. Around 1850s a fugitive slave woman Garner escaped from Kentucky. In order to resist her family’s return to slavery she killed one of her three children and would have killed all of them if she had not been stopped. She was caught by the pro slavery authorities outside of Cincinnati. She was so struck by the intensity of that incident that she filed the information away for a decade before working on it. That sensitive incident was the kernel from which *Beloved* emerged in 1987.

Beloved is the story of a slave mother Sethe set in 1873 roughly a decade after Emancipation Proclamation² ended slavery. Sethe escaped from Kentucky to Ohio carrying her youngest daughter in her womb. She already sent her other three children ahead of her. On her way she gave birth to Denver. But the most tragic part of the novel is that she had to kill her child ‘crawling already’ to save her from slavery. She went to jail for the destruction of property³. She started to live in 124 Bluestone haunted by the ‘sad’ baby ghost. However it is only after the arrival of *Beloved* in the novel the motherhood of Sethe got a different dimension and was re-scrutinized.

Toni Morrison has turned her imaginative power and woven together the new fragments of Garner episode into a new creation and explored the complexities of a slave mother and her situation around. Sethe was the victim of the Fugitive Law⁴. *Beloved* is a story of traumatic experiences of violated motherhood, womanhood and dehumanizing impact of slavery on family and individual psyche. The trauma of slavery haunts Sethe even in the free society. Slavery goes to the extent of dehumanization which treats human beings as animals. Her slave master only values her as a breeder of more slaves. Sethe could never forget her milk was stolen which she had kept only for her babies. She could never forget the humiliation and oppression made by the schoolteacher and his nephews. The violation of motherhood had driven Halley to the point of insanity. Infanticide is a delicate issue that has always carried a mark of taboo in every culture and society. But it is an extreme step of a slave mother in order to prevent her children from the degrading and traumatic conditions of slavery. For an enslaved mother keeping her children with her is an ultimate goal. Thus Sethe’s ultimate attempt is to possess her child. She proves that she is the only person who has the right to decide the destiny of her child and no one else. Killing *Beloved* was the deepest manifestation of her love for her. Slavery separates the familiar deforms the sexuality of womanhood and motherhood, distorts the whole concept of family. And Sethe faces everything without the help of the community, without the support of any male guardian, where killing was the only option. Stamp Paid says “She ain’t crazy. She loves those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter” (Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. Page 276).

The maternal in *Beloved* exists on several levels and is subjected to multiple perspectives. The past or history has a great role to play in this context. There is a confrontation with her memory and her past. Her past is there always with her present but *Beloved* forces Sethe to conform to her past in her incompatible roles as a slave and as a mother. *Beloved* herself is Sethe’s ghost of the past. She can’t run away from the frightful experiences of slavery, her stealing of milk, her painful journey from Kentucky to Ohio, and her own act of killing her daughter. She repeatedly says to Paul D that *Beloved* had an easy death, “soft as cream” (Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* 1987, Page 8). She says “I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl” (Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*.1987. Page 19).Her past torments her every time, in her idleness, in her busy hours. She says:

“Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me.”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987, Page 19).

Sethe was living with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs and daughter Denver in 124 Bluestone on the outskirts of Cincinnati. The house was known as haunted, “full of baby’s venom.”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987, Page 3). Its supernatural activities had driven Howard and Buglar out of it. The shattering of the mirror, tiny hand prints on cake, moving of the side board reminds Sethe that her ‘Dearly Beloved’ is still there, “spending every minute with us like it does.”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987, Page 16). Even when for a moment she forgets everything and comes close to Paul D a great tremor in the house makes Sethe believe that she is only Beloved’s and no one else’s.

Sethe was deprived of her own biological mother whom she knew by her ‘cloth hat’ because every other woman was called ‘Ma’am.’ Sethe’s own mother was hung by her masters. As a result she was nursed and raised by another woman Nan, who not only nurtured her but linked her to her maternal history as well. She heard from Nan about the torture and rape that Nan and Sethe’s mother had endured. Sethe was the only offspring she didn’t destroy. Nan tells Sethe:

“She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of a black man. She put her arms around him. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*.1987. Page 74).

Sethe never got the complete right of her mother’s milk. She had to share it with other children. That is why she was so desperate to escape to give her baby daughter the milk she deserved.

Pregnancy and childbirth play a pivotal role in *Beloved*. Pregnant Sethe escaped from Sweet Home and gave birth to Denver. Instead of the customary community of woman present at such births Sethe was attended by an unlikely midwife in the Kentucky forest Amy Denver. She was a thin, strange, white girl going on a journey in the search of ‘velvet’. Amy gave Sethe strength and courage to move on. She ‘mothers’ Sethe, by massaging her swollen feet, giving her comfort and singing a lullaby which she learned from her own mother. She caressed her back. The image of the Chokecherry tree with its blood, pus and raised welts of flesh is a perverse symbol of life and female experience with pain, suffering and fertility fused together. In a dwell between life and death the conversation between Sethe and Amy needs special attention:

““Push!” screamed Amy.

“Pull,” whispered Sethe.”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*.1987. Page 99)

Thus two women white and black were united by the universality of female experience and the urgency of childbirth.

In the novel *Beloved* there is the juxtaposition of two mothers—Sethe and Baby Suggs. They represent the two complete opposite aspect of motherhood. Though they share some common grounds, Sethe is a strong woman, she like Baby Suggs is a victim, of slavery but she fights against it, even at the cost of the life of her ‘Dearly Beloved’. But Baby Suggs who had eight children can’t even remember them. She submits to the oppression. Baby Suggs says, “My first born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you bite that? Eight children and that’s all I remember.”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*.1987. Page 6) and Sethe replies, “That’s all you let yourself remember.”(Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*.1987. Page 6). Thus through these two contrasting characters Morrison presents motherhood from two different angles.

In this context we must refer to *Sula*. In *Sula* there is the minutest psychoanalytical study of motherhood through characters like Eva, Hannah, Nel, Sula. The past reveals the terrifying and disturbing extent of Eva’s maternal sacrifice. Like the child of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* that never grows, the children of Eva grow up ‘stealthily’ with emptiness at the core. Eva mutilates herself in order to acquire economic security for her children. She sacrifices her leg for ten thousand dollars. Plum her son comes back from World War I being addicted to heroin. Eva believes Plum is trying to crawl back into her womb. She puts kerosene on him and sets his bed with fire so that he can die like a man, which reminds us of Sethe’s act of killing Beloved.

Toni Morrison has treated motherhood in the most touching and realistic manner. She once said:

“Parent-child relationships are the most obvious ones. Parents who simply adore their children and really and truly do want the best for them may in fact destroy them”(Bakerman, Jane. *The Seams can’t show: An interview with Toni Morrison, Jane Bakerman*. Conversation with Toni Morrison. Page-42).

Sethe is a mother who is so engrossed in her motherhood that she forgets her entity. Her joys, her pains, her dreams, her desires all move around her children. She lives in a world where she doesn’t have a separate entity. She unifies with her child, where a child is the ‘laugh’ and mother is the ‘laughter’. In her body, soul, in her entire existence she is a supreme mother. Thus the novel is a powerful testimony to the most beautiful of all relationships -a saga of Motherhood.

Notes

1. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a black woman journalist, novelist, poet, essayist, abolitionist, woman's right activist and an outspoken. She wrote the poem in reaction to Garner incident. She thought murder of the child manifested great love of the mother, who believed that slavery was worse than death.
2. Emancipation Proclamation had two executive orders issued by United State's President Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War. The first order was issued on 22nd September 1862 declared the freedom of all slaves in any state of the "Confederate States of America" that didn't return to Union. The second order issued on 1st January, 1863 named ten specific states where it would apply.
3. Children of the slaves where considered to be the property of the masters, who could buy, sell, mortgage or exchange them. The parents had no right on their children.
4. There were two Fugitive laws-1793s and 1850s. The Fugitive law of 1850 was very important in this context. This law was passed by United State Congress on 18th September, 1850. This was one of the most controversial acts. It declared that runaway slaves could be brought back to their masters. The abolitionists nicknamed it the "Blood hound Law" for the dogs that were used to track down runaway slaves.

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