

Traumatic Experience of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. Amutha Arockia Mary P.R

Assistant Professor of English

Auxilium College (Autonomous), Vellore-632006

Abstract

The experience and expression of motherhood and the voice of the 'mute' mothers reverberating in Black Writing is an obvious phenomenon in Toni Morrison. One of the major themes to be considered in Beloved is mother-daughter relationship. Deconstruction and reconstruction of the mother image, the unexpressed emotions and traumatic experience of being a slave mother, a burden and pressure of forcing life and survival in a mother's body, the bond and exchange of painful memories between mother and daughter is well- expressed in the alternate fictional canon of Toni Morrison. Mother-daughter bonding and bondage suffuses Morrison's text. Morrison's novel Beloved flourishes with the essence of motherhood. The memories of Sethe, have an in-depth maternal feelings. The love, which leads to a murderous love of a mother, her fear to save her children from slavery, her grief for her lost children dominates the novels.

Feminist literary critics, those who are keen on psychoanalytic theories, involved in the more generalized feminist critique of motherhood as both as an institution and experience. Both of which being theoretical obstacles, especially the position of the mother in dominant theories of language, as highlighted by French feminist thought and the practical constraints on a mother's time, energy, and creative powers have been considered. The experience and expression of motherhood and the voice of the 'mute' mothers recuperated in the most recent fiction from repudiation of the mother, in various ways, by both nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women writers. Some have seen a movement across the historical terrain of novel writing in particular that anticipates the pattern of second-wave feminism. Feminist critics like Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert traces the female literary history, questions the imitative literary fore-fathers image and the absence of the fore-mothers, they recommend the need of sisterhood and female sub-culture to be the subtheme of feminist criticism to position the feminist critic as daughter, anxiously trying to sort out her relations to her (literary) fore-

mothers and suffering, like most feminist daughters, from deeply unresolved feelings about mothers and motherhood.

Elaine Showalter explains that a 'Female Culture', "means a conscious acceptance of the relationships between women, as mothers, daughters, sisters and friends, their sexuality, marriage motherhood, their ideas about female body etc., as the positive ingredients of woman's existence." (Showalter 131) The female culture challenge the masculine economy of representation and hegemonic dominance especially in case of Black Feminist writing by introducing black women, the triply invisible persons, and place them in center stage.


"The simple act of telling a woman's story from a woman's point of view is a revolutionary act"(Christ 8). Telling a story from a woman's point of view is not merely to establish rhetorical approach to their lives but also to learn to value everything about being a woman.

Women can exercise free and complete control over the bodies that they can make radical choices to prove that they are not victims, of sexist husbands and lovers. Besides sexuality, motherhood, marriage, abortion, relationships with husbands and children are also some of the major subjects. Certain characters such as mother, grandmother, sisterhood were portrayed as 'the guardian of the generations' Carole Boyce Davies calls them "mother-healers" 'daughters' seem to acknowledge "what these mother passed on would take you anywhere in the world you wanted to go" (Washington 161).

Deconstruction and reconstruction of the mother image, the unexpressed emotions and traumatic experience of being a slave mother, a burden and pressure of forcing life and survival in a mother's body, the bond and exchange of painful memories between mother and daughter is well expressed in the fictional canon of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker Gloria Naylor and Ntozoke Shange.

Considered one of the foremost figures in contemporary American fiction, Morrison has won international acclaim including the Nobel Prize for works in which she examines the role of race in American society. Using unconventional narrative structures, poetic language, myth, and folklore, Morrison addresses such issues as black victimization, the emotional and social effects of racial and sexual oppression, and the difficulties African Americans face in trying to achieve a sense of identity in a society dominated by white racist cultural values.

Morrison published her fifth novel, *Beloved* in 1987. Morrison traces the history of slavery in the novel *Beloved* and delineates the psychological and emotional effects of slavery. Set in the twelve years after the end of the Civil War, *Beloved* focuses on Sethe, a former slave who had escaped with her four children from a Kentucky plantation known as Sweet Home in 1855. The traumatic events of her past—which include an attempted suicide and her decision to murder her eldest daughter in an attempt to save her once and for all from bondage—are narrated in discontinuous flashbacks. Having been released from prison through the aid of abolitionists, Sethe lives with her youngest daughter, Denver, in an isolated farmhouse near Cincinnati, Ohio, and believes that the ghost of her deceased daughter, "Beloved," haunts the house. The novel opens with the unannounced arrival of Paul D., a former slave from the Sweet Home plantation. His attempts to form a sexual relationship with Sethe, however, are thwarted by a mysterious woman named Beloved, whom Sethe and Denver believe to be an incarnation of Sethe's dead child. Although rumored to be a ghost, Beloved becomes Paul D.'s lover as well as a close friend to Denver. Beloved's memories of her past, however, suggest that she is not a ghost, but someone who has suffered the rigors of a transatlantic crossing aboard a slave ship and the trauma of watching her mother throw herself overboard. While Beloved, who considers Sethe her long-lost mother, initially shows spite and anger towards Sethe, she is gradually appeased by Sethe and Denver's attempts at reconciliation. The novel closes with Beloved's apparent departure.



The plot of *Beloved* is complex and circuitous, as the narrative is shaped through flashbacks, memories, and its stream-of-consciousness structure. Its readers do not learn the story in a linear fashion; however, a sequential order does exist between its fragments.

One of the major themes to be considered in *Beloved* is mother-daughter relationship. Morrison's novel *Beloved* flourishes with the essence of motherhood. The memories of Sethe, have an in-depth maternal feeling. The love, which leads to a murderous love of a mother, her fear to save her children from slavery, her grief for her lost children dominates the novels.

Mother-daughter bonding and bondage suffuses Morrison's text. Sethe remembers her nameless mother, simply as an image, a woman in a field with a stooped back in a cloth hat. This is

mainly how she remembers her mother, simply as an image, a woman in a field with a stooped back in a cloth hat. Sethe did not know why, when her mother was hanged. Probably Ma'am (reference in the text for Sethe's mother) was caught trying to escape from the plantation, but the daughter born in bondage refuses to believe her mother could have run. It would mean that she left Sethe behind, emphasizing in this generation the continuous pattern of severed mother-daughter relationships. In other words, her memories of Ma'am are buried not only because their relationship was vague but it is inextricably woven with feelings of painful abandonment. If Sethe remembers her mother, she must also remember that she believes her mother deserted her.

As Sethe tells this story to Denver and Beloved, she becomes frightened: recollecting the memories of her mother and being a mother haunts her. Sethe has forgotten the words of her mother's language; they continue to exist inside her as feelings and images that repeatedly emerge as a code that she relies on without realizing it. This code stored as memories, holds animated, such as the one of her mother dancing juba, as well as the most painful fact of Sethe's life: her mother's absence.

Sethe is shocked as she continues to find meaning in a code she thought she no longer understood. She remembers that she felt the dancing feet of her dead mother, as she was about to give birth to Denver. Pregnant and thinking she is going to die because her swollen feet cannot take another step, she wants to stop walking; every time she does so, the movement of her unborn child causes her such pain that she feels she is being rammed by an antelope. Sethe wonders why an antelope, since she cannot remember having ever seen one, it is because the image of the antelope is really an image of Ma'am dancing. Sethe's antelope kicking baby and her antelope dancing mother are one and the same. Stored in childhood but only now unlocked, the link between the unborn Denver's kicks and the dead ma'am's kicks as she danced the antelope erupts in Sethe's memory. As she bears the next generation in her matrilineal line, Sethe keeps her mother's African antelope dancing alive: she links the pulses of her unchained, vigorously moving mother and her energetic, womb-kicking daughter forever.

Sethe further recollects the memories of her mother as she was told by her, that she was named after her father the only child her mother did not kill and allowed to survive. Significantly, Sethe is flooded with these memories in response to questions from her own daughter, Beloved, who wants to know everything in Sethe's memory and actually feeds and fattens on these stones. What Beloved demands is that Sethe reveal memory and story about her life before Sweet Home, memory about her African speaking, branded mother and her life right after Sweet Home when she cut Beloved's throat. In other words, because they share identities, the ghost-child's Fascination lies in the "joined" union between Sethe's mother and herself. Sethe's memory is being pried wide open by Beloved's presence? She forces Sethe to listen to her own voice and to remember her own mother.

This cycle of mother-daughter fusion, loss, betrayal, and recovery between Sethe and her mother plays itself out again in the present relationship between Sethe and Beloved. Beloved transforms from a lonely, affectionate girl into a possessive, demanding tyrant, and her ruthlessness almost kills Sethe. Sethe is as haunted by the girl's presence as she was by her absence because possession of any kind involving human beings is destructive. These "possessive" attachments raise the important moral dilemma underlying Sethe's act; either Sethe must be held accountable for Beloved's death or the institution of slavery alone killed the child.

Sethe gives Beloved story after story of her love and devotion to her. She tells her how nothing was more important than getting her milk to her, how she waved flies away from her in the grape arbor, how it pained her to see her baby bitten by a mosquito, and how she would trade her own life for Beloved's. Sethe tries to impress upon her how slavery made it impossible for her to be the mother she wished to be.

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For Sethe her children are her "best thing," yet they have all been ruined. The murdered Beloved torments Sethe. Howard and Buglar have left home, and Denver is so afraid of the world that it is only starvation that forces her off the front porch. Sethe begs the ruling Beloved not only for forgiveness but also for the return, of her "self". But Beloved does not care, what is even most striking here is that Beloved responds to Sethe's entreaties not only in the language of the murdered daughter but also in the tortured language of the "woman from the sea." (Sethe's mother). Beloved existence is experienced with multiple identities.

Morrison's ghost moving beyond human barriers, communicates the death-like Middle Passage suffered by Sethe's mother. She, Sethe's mother the woman "from the sea." Although at different times Sethe, her mother, and her daughter all live with the agonizing feeling that they have been betrayed by their mothers, perhaps most heartbreaking is the image of mother-daughter separation evoked when Beloved insists that a Sethe, voluntarily and without being pushed, went into the sea.

The agony stems from the child's assumption that she is being deliberately abandoned by her ma'am. A little girl stands on an enormous ship not understanding why her mother jumps overboard. Beloved lost her mother when she "went into the sea instead of smiling at [her]." (*Beloved* 64) And Sethe's mother wants an unidentified, lost woman on the ship, probably her ma'am, to know how urgently she tries "to help her but the clouds are in the way." (*Beloved* 65) This Beloved, Sethe's mother, wants desperately either to save her own mother or die with her, but she loses her again "because of the noisy clouds of smoke." (*Beloved* 276) There was a riot on the ship and the noisy clouds of smoke were caused by guards' gunfire, which prevented the daughter from reaching her mother.

Beloved is characterized by mothers losing their children 'Sethe's mother in-law barely glanced at the last of her eight children "because it wasn't worth the trouble." Sethe's own mother, hanged when Sethe was a small child, had not been allowed to nurse her. But Sethe defines herself as mother in defiance of the near-impossibility of that role.

The power of Beloved's rage is directly linked to the power of Sethe's love. Sethe's love for Beloved is indeed a murderous love. The destructive love is also projected woman which suggests one perspective on the strain of destructive parental love in Morrison's novels.

For Sethe motherhood is her strength and weakness. Sethe is haunted with both the memories of being a daughter and a mother. Sethe's "murderous – love" is the expression and representation of psycho-depressions of helpless mothers who want to construct a free-generation. Her success and failure of being a daughter and mother reveals the untold story of black women.

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