

Dissecting the Prominence of Motherhood in the slave-owning world with reference to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*

Mother-daughter relationship is always special because the daughters always carry a special bond with their mothers. A woman becomes completed by attaining the phase of motherhood. But in the African-American context, the motherhood is always feared if she bears a girl child. Slavery has created a deep scar into the psyche of the mothers and makes their life tremble. In the Indian context, the mothers always worry about the harmonious life of their daughters; they aim to give good education and suitable bridegroom but the African-American mothers, it is entirely different. Frightened about the evil effects of slavery and its scar, they bother more to raise their daughters amidst the racial slur. In *Beloved* Sethe murders her daughter *Beloved* in order to protect her from the white men and in *God Help the Child*, Bride's mother Sweetness pretends that she hates her daughter. Slavery created the worst situation for the mothers to behave so and eventually they feel guilt about their act.

Key Words: mother, daughter, slavery, Sethe and Sweetness.

Slavery and racism are the vital themes in African-American Literature. Even though it has ended in 1865, the memories of slavery remain alive through the works of the native writers and became an unavoidable theme in the genre of African-American Literature. It has emerged from the slave narratives from seventeenth century and in the current times, exhibiting all the evils under slavery, thus became a representation of picturizing the pains of the people undergone because of it. So, this literature does not classify humans into various categories, rather it depicts the whole black community under the status of race.

Women writers contribute a significant part in this literature. They vividly presented the damaged psyche of the women during slavery. One among them is the Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, Toni Morrison. She is well-known for her exquisite themes which always revolve around her own people and thus became the voice of black Americans. Her novels mostly explored the crushing experiences of women under the dominant white masters. This research paper aims to portray the importance of mother

hood amidst slavery and their role in upbringing their off springs out of it with reference to *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*.

The world still blooms because of mothers and the term Mother Earth signify the importance of mother. Morrison has explored various aspects of motherhood in her novels. Mostly, the role of mother has been viewed and analysed in a patriarchal perspective because the patriarchal system always disregards motherhood and women. But Morrison's novels unveil those ideals by patriarchy and sheds light on the problematics of motherhood and the underlying factors beneath it.

Beloved was published in 1987 and *God Help the Child* was published in 2015; even though there is a great deal of difference of time between these novels, the portrayal of mothers is the same because even the world changes, but the mothers remain the same. In *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe murders her daughter Beloved to protect her from her masters and in *God Help the Child*, Sweetness, the mother of Bride intentionally hates her daughter in order to make her face the racial environment and thus Bride emerged as an important icon in her own cosmetics field without bothering her black color.

Beloved is a novel based on the real history of Margaret Garner, who has murdered her daughter in order to save her from the racial air. Based on that Morrison has imbibed the same theme in the novel picturizing the emotional wound of a mother, in committing the horrendous act of murdering her own daughter. Sethe works in a plantation named Sweet Home in Kentucky under Mr. Garner as the slave owner. He treats her well and his wife, Mrs. Garner too maintains a fine relationship with her. But after the death of Mr. Garner, the entire atmosphere in the plantation got diffused.

The School Teacher became the owner of the plantation and his nephews behaved in a worst way to Sethe. They view a woman as a source of pleasure and hurt her in various ways and the intentionally destroyed maternal systems disrupt them. When she is pregnant with Denver, they stole her milk, which is meant for Beloved. This creates a severe damage to her and her complaint to the slave owner is of no use. Her husband Halle went mad on witnessing this. She escapes from the plantation with other slaves and settled in 124, Bluestone Road, Cincinnati.

Smelled by Sethe's stay in Cincinnati, the School Teacher bereaved with her and fear-filled Sethe slashed her daughter with a knife. This shocks her community and they held Sethe with a distance. The impact of slavery has compelled her to murder her own daughter, which is even impossible to imagine as Morrison states "Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (*Beloved* 66). Her helpless situation has enabled

her to do so. Like all the mothers she always dreamed of raising her daughter in a good way. But the sight of her slave owner makes her terrible and she does not want her daughter to suffer the physical damages like her. She thought that instead of living in that cursed world, it is better to be dead and thus remain free from the racial clutches and so murders Beloved. Andrea O'Reilly remarks that "if your children literally do not belong to you, what does it mean to be a mother" (*Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A politics of the Heart* 86). The misery of Sethe is the acute misery of the whole African-American mothers, who still endures the effect of colorism and racism in the modern era.

After her act on Beloved, Sethe cannot forget the memories about her daughter and feels to Paul D that she is "soft as cream" (*Beloved* 8). Infanticide has always been seen as an act of crime in the 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" (Soumee Bhattacharya, *All Pervasive Presence of Motherhood in Beloved* 3). Even Sethe's mother was taken over by her slave owners. Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law of Sethe remained as a slave for sixty years and got paid freedom through her son Halle. Motherhood is really tough and it proved even tougher to the African-American mothers.

In the 2015 novel *God Help the Child*, Morrison reminisces the same motherhood as in *Beloved*, where Sweetness does not commit infanticide like Sethe in *Beloved*, but indulges in the neglect of her daughter in which she provides the base to form identity in the society. Adrienne Rich views the role of mother-daughter relation as: "the cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with changes than the flow of energy between two biologically like bodies" (*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* 225).

The importance of a mother is depicted in the first part of the novel by giving prominence to Sweetness as the novel starts with the following quote with the regret of her as: "It's not my fault. So you can't blame me" (*God Help the Child* 5). Many researches have been done on Sweetness' neglect of Bride; examining the reasons behind that will enable to unmask the engulfed pain beyond her rejection as she regrets as: "I had to protect her. She didn't know the world... she couldn't know how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her" (*God Help the Child* 41). In order to safeguard Bride from the insults based on color, she behaved rudely with her daughter.

The whole world is skin privileged portraying the white as beautiful and black as ugly. Beauty is only skin depth; the inner character makes a person beautiful rather than the color. Sweetness felt worse on witnessing a group of boys mocking at a black girl; by insulting her, they feel proud of themselves. The black girl was helpless during that time and Sweetness too was watching from a window, annoyed about her helpless situation to do the needful for that girl. She feels: "I wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges" (*God Help the Child* 43). She really loves Bride and hopes that in future, her daughter will understand about her.

Because of Sweetness' tough upbringing, Bride became an entrepreneur of a cosmetic company named Sylvia, Inc and launched a cosmetic product named YOU, GIRL. She turned her blackness as beauty by transforming her entire self. She started to wear white clothes which makes everyone to stun at her beauty. She changes her name from Lula Ann Bridewell to Bride as an indication of change and decided not to confront about her blackness. When her boyfriend named Booker Starbern leaves her, she does not regret for that and eventually went in search of him and finally found him and decided to wedlock with him. Sweetness' tough upbringing makes Bride to fight for survival in the world amidst all the evils. If she has not done like that Bride will surely become a victim of color discrimination like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*.

In fact, Sweetness feels proud of her daughters' development because she "did the best for her under the circumstances" (*God Help the Child* 177). Even her husband Louise abandoned her, as a single mother she has raised and made her daughter to emerge as a successful icon in the world. Her pain can be understood if one analyses in the parental point of view as she herself accepts that "you are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent" (*God Help the Child* 178). The back-breaking effort of a mother can only realised during the phase of parenthood.

Motherhood is always been a challenging factor to African-American women. The slave regime does not allow them to nurture even their biological role, depriving of it. Morrison's novels give prominence to motherhood and mothering and these two novels imbibed the same. Sethe became the situational slave when the School Teacher approached her and so she has committed infanticide. The terrible act could have been avoided by Sethe, if it is a boy because women are at the peak of molestation in all over the world.

Sweetness' hatred makes Bride to shine amidst her troubles and also, she builds confidence and identity out of it.

Every mother survives for the sake of their own offspring; both Sethe and Sweetness' act is done for the betterment of their daughters. Morrison accepts that "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" (Jane Bakerman, *The Seams can't show: An Interview with Toni Morrison* 42) and the same was followed by Sethe and Sweetness. Education will make independent physically, but mental freedom can be obtained if a woman boldly faces any type of hard ships, she come across.

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