

Strange Psychology of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison, the Nobel Laureate of 1993, has been the vociferous voice for the Black Americans. She has revealed the suppressed voice of these depressed people through her writings. It is her novels that compel the white Americans to think over the humanity and impartiality despite of the colour, gender or nationality. Toni Morrison's writings contributed much to improve the pathetic condition of the blacks in America.

*The main motive of writing this paper is to analyze Toni Morrison's characters through psychoanalytical lens. The paper elucidates the sacrifices and a strange mentality of a mother who kills her daughter not because she cannot nurture her or hates her but because she does not like her to live a slave and pathetic life like her. Though Sethe's inhuman deed is heinous crime but the women who live in the same locality support her as they see Sethe's love in that infanticide. Thus Morrison shows the strange psychology of motherhood through *Beloved*.*

Keywords: Psychoanalytic, psychology, vociferous, depressed, motherhood.

Beloved, the most famous and most read novel reveals a strange psychology of a mother Sethe, the protagonist, who kills her own daughter not because she hates the girls or babies but because she did not like to abjure her children in emotional, physical, spiritual and sexual trauma same as she suffered as a slave in Sweet Home. Though to slay her own kids is the toughest work in the world for a mother, but Sethe's repressed or unconscious mind was always full of unbearable psychic torments. These wound were much deeper on her mind rather than body.

"Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my children They held me down and took it.... The little white babies got it first and I got what was left or none I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you, to have to fight and holler for it and to have so little left."¹

Beloved explores the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. The novel is based on a newspaper clipping about



fugitive slave in Ohio who killed her own infant rather than to see her to the bondage in the South.

When Morrison read this story while working on *The Black Book*, she was deeply moved by the humanistic psychological and symbolic nature of this story by its telling reflection of how slavery affected the interior life of the individual and how this one woman was not going to allow the experience to deny her rights of motherhood. Here was a woman, Morrison says, who did a courageous thing. She took the lives of her children into her own hands. This incident proved not only traumatized psyche, repressed thoughts and the horror of slavery in denying the rights of motherhood but also the inability of slavery to deny blacks their own moral code. Morrison wants to know no more about Margaret Garner's life in creating her story. She wants to depend on a shared response to both the horror of slavery and the killing of the child wants to depend on her imagination and shared cultured knowledge to construct the inside life of characters. In an interview with Marsha Darling Morrison remarks.

“I did not do much research on Margaret Garnet other than the obvious stuff; because I wanted to invent her life I got to a point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe

adequately, since I couldn't and nobody else that knew her could, really I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed.”²

The readers are often confused to take the identity of Beloved. Beloved either may be a traumatized woman due to the several years of captivity, the ghost of Sethe's mother or her own murdered daughter. More convincingly Beloved is the slain child, her own daughter, the repressed past, Sethe's own guilt and loss. This is why Beloved can never forgive Sethe but the former slave women can understand it easily in which circumstances Sethe killed her own baby. All her fellow slaves communicate and share their miseries among themselves and come to help Sethe by exorcising the ghost because Beloved is also a ghost in some sense while Sethe wants to talk and love to Beloved's ghost. Another local woman, Ella, also killed her child, although it was not out of love and when she found out about Beloved's presence, “there was also something very personal in her furry. Whatever Sethe had done Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present.”³ It is Ella who collects the women of her locality and brings them to Sethe's house to get rid of the ghost and the chanting of Sethe and Beloved.



Beloved deals with the reconstructed and repressed memory of Sethe and other characters as well. Set in the post Civil war Ohio, this haunting narrative of slavery and its aftermath, traces the life of a young woman, Sethe who has kept a terrible repressed memory in the unconscious part of her mind. The novel deals with the former slave life of Sethe on the Sweet Home Farm, her escape with her children to what seemed a safe heaven and the tragic events that follow. On the socio psychological level *Beloved* is the story of Sethe's unlimited quest for motherhood with the haunting memories of her slave past and the retribution of Beloved, the ghost of the infant daughter whom she has killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery. As in her previous novels, the need for woman to re-establish connections with one another is powerfully rendered in Morrison's *Beloved*. When Sethe arrives with her new born daughter tied to the chest, Baby Suggs welcomes her. Sethe has a powerful culture mentor in Baby Suggs who kindles a desire in her to know her past and to love herself as a person.

One of the most damaging effects of the dual oppression of black women, against which Morrison writes, is murder of one's own child. Sethe does kill her two year old daughter and she does attempt to kill the other three children

before she is stopped. Murder becomes Sethe's act of mother love and shows a different psychology of motherhood. Morrison retains in *Beloved* her concern with a woman's extraordinary capacity for love and sacrifice. She prefers to murder her children rather than see them in bondage.

"I couldn't tell all that go back to where it was, and could not let her nor any of them live under school teacher Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there, outside this place, where they would be safe."⁴

She prefers to murder her daughter, Beloved, rather than see her in slavery. Infanticide, presents one of the avenues of resistance on the part of a slave woman. Although Sethe's murder might be viewed by contemporary standards as limiting the context in which she committed it, it does not diminish her nature. If it were possible for a black slave woman like Sethe to live with her family with dignity and self respect in America of 1850s, she would not commit the hideous crime which was the mutilation of her violent mother love. This concept of love and safety as motivation for infanticide is a familiar



inversion of conventional thinking in Morrison's work. As no one else can, Morrison renders the terrible moment with perfect reason and clarity. Practiced Morrison readers may phrase a note of sorrow for the painful inevitability of things but they never ask. Why? The feeble questions "what she go and do for? On account of beating? Hell he'd been beaten a million times and he was white ... what she go and do that for?"⁵ are left for the sadistic school master slave master and his nephews. The same people take false comfort in easy explanation that Sethe lost her reason because she could not take a little mishandling.

From the grave Beloved yearns to be united with her mother. But in addition to her feelings and desires from the grave, Beloved seems to have become one in death, with the black and angry dead. In the body of Beloved then, individual and collective past and memories seem to have become united and inseparable. Even the beginning of *Beloved* is perhaps the most thrilling for her as she shows how much meaning of her representation of slavery is contained in the two sentences with which the novel opens "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom."⁶ Morrison writes that by beginning with number she allows her characters former slaves to lay claim to an address. It allows her to pull the reader violently in the text.

"(The opening) is abrupt and should appear so. No negative information there. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance, a green plank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching this kidnapping propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet as the sound in the body of the ship itself may have changed."⁷

Morrison treats most of her characters psychologically especially Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver. Once Denver tells her mother, Sethe that "anything dead coming back to life hurts."⁸ Beloved literally proves it as her physical appearance exposes the suppressed memories and when everything is found at sixes and sevens in the room. Morrison presents Beloved in the form of pain and remedy also. As the representation of the repressed past she acts as an unconscious devil stealing away the discretion power of the characters and a psychoanalytic urge, she forcefully reveals suppressed memories and emotions. Thus we



find the traumatic repression in most of the characters as they accept their painful past and horrible memories.

Sethe is the woman whose love for her children has absolutely no limits in spite of slavery which subverts all relationship and kinships. Sethe, like many children born in slavery, had not known her mother. Raised communally by the plantations nurse, she had no right to the scared woman who had briefly and surreptitiously identified herself as Sethe's mother and who was sick and later hanged. At Sweet Home Sethe's children had fared better, they had a mother and a father. The Garners had created the illusion of safety for their slaves. Through diligence and persistence, Sethe managed to mother her children and protected them from environmental dangers, fire, the well, and animals. When Garner dies and school master takes over, the illusion of safe heavens is shattered and "Sethe is forced to face a brutal reality of slavery. Her children don't belong to her. They are property, subject to be sold, traded, raped, beaten, disposed of. In order to make them safe, she and they would have to escape. And they do. First the children run and later she, pregnant with a baby that she delivers in route to freedom."⁹

Sethe remembers her depressed infant age or child hood when she could not get the milk of

her mother and now blames her helpless motherhood when her milk is stolen by the white boys. She feels as if she is robbed or raped every day. For the natural right of motherhood, Sethe escapes to reject the power of slavery. Barefoot, bleeding hungry, exhausted, disoriented, Sethe struggles to reach Ohio not so much to save her own life but the life of her children's mother. Only she has milk enough in her breasts for her two year old, who had gone ahead and for her new born. Sethe knows very well what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you and the milk that is snatched from you to feed the white babies and sometimes nothing is left for your children. She knows that escaping slavery will help her in feeding her own children. When she reaches Ohio, Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, is there to protect her and her children and she begins to claim herself and her children. Like a perfect mother she nurses the baby girl and kisses the boys from top to their heads to the right round bellies. Her mother love is unrestrained:

"It felt good. Good and right. It was big Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. It was that wide. Look like I loved them more after I got here There wasn't nobody in the world I could not love if I wanted to."¹⁰

In *Beloved* Sethe's healing process has been the centre of attraction for the readers and the most important part of the novel to be focused as she reminisces painfully and progressively her repressed past. Sethe's repressed past, like Paul D's tobacco tin, is like a rusted box that is always closed in her mind. This unconsciousness of the mind affects Sethe a lot in taking decision to get rid of this slavery. Though she could not get herself free from the bond of slavery but she is determined to get her children free from this hell at any cost. Ultimately when she realizes that *Beloved* is the reincarnation of her deceased baby, she assumes as if she has got buried treasure:

“A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weight. No smashing with an ex head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp as a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along.”¹¹

The exorcism of the ghost shows the psychology and a fear in the mind of the women of that locality as all of them are the victims of slavery and racism. Though infanticide is a

grave crime but the mothers living in that situation justify Sethe's misdeed. They know that to murder a child is better than to leave him/her in the milieu of slavery. The exorcism of *Beloved* is a purgation ritual, a baptismal cleansing and rebirth and a psychological clearing:

“For Sethe it was as though the clearing had come to her with all its heats and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knocks the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.”¹²

When school teacher his nephew and the sheriff enter Baby Suggs' yard to reclaim Sethe and worse to take her children back into slavery, Sethe revolts. In an instant, she is transported back to the brutal beating she endured in the hours before her escape and to her deepest violation: being sucked by School teacher's nephews being handled as if she were a goat, being robbed of the milk that belonged to her babies. Stirred by memories Sethe resolves that nobody will get her milk except her children.

She carries all her children to the woodshed and tries to put them at safe places where no one would hurt them and make them slaves. They would be safe.

Sethe's memories are Morrison's story in the form of women's repressed and pathetic voice that symbolizes the unconscious pains of the past. Morrison, through this novel, deals with different psychologies of different but traumatizes and repressed women i.e. disturbing power of Beloved, spiritual power of Baby Suggs and voice of Denver, Sethe's daughter, which represents both future and past. Denver becomes Morrison's precursor, the woman who takes the work or responsibility of carrying the story through the generations.

The arrival of School teacher tries to put Sethe and her children back in the Sweet Home which after the death of Garner becomes Slave Home in true sense. However, more than these dangers the greater danger is for motherhood and the safety of the children. And she is capable of defending the lives of the children from Slavery. "I stopped him (School teacher) I took and put my babies where they'd be safe."¹³

Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, too, had out lived an intolerable life. She neither condones nor condemns Sethe. But unlike her daughter-in-law she had learned not to mourn, the eight children she has borne but not been allowed to

keep. Like the others she understood the nastiness of life. She tells Sethe that she should feel lucky in retaining her three children away from slavery.

"You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased and all I expect worrying somebody's house into evil My first born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you bear that? Eight children and that's all I remember."¹⁴

Once Sethe suggests her to change the house but Baby Suggs finds no point in that she tells Sethe there is not a single house in the country that is not full with some dead Negro's grief. They are lucky that ghost is a baby. Sethe sacrifices her personality for her children. She loves the baby ghost. She loves Denver and every child she gave birth. The novel brings the parents children relationship into question. Sethe is the first mother who emerges as a model mother. Otherwise Morrison gives her views about the condition of black children in present times in her interview with Charles Raus. He is aware about the theme of child abuse that runs through all her novels. She feels;

“I have thought that the children are in real danger. Nobody likes them, all children, but particularly black children I feel that my generation has done the children a great disservice. I am talking about the emotional support that is not available to them anymore because adults are acting out their childhood. They are interested in Self-aggrandizement being right and pleasures. Everywhere, everywhere children are the scorned people of the earth.”¹⁵

Beloved exposes how traumatized people survive. They try their best to get rid of the pain and sometimes choose very different or unnatural way but they can never escape from this pain as the pain always stays in their memory constantly. It is really easy to forget the happy moments in the life but the horrible pain leave an indelible impression on the mind of the sufferer. In *Beloved* most of the characters have very fresh painful memories in repressed form or in unconsciousness.

A perfect psychoanalytic approach can be observed in Sethe’s character as it is not the normal psychology to murder her own child. This incident shows in very terrible way how the African Americans were suffering in the worst slavery. If Sethe cuts her child throat it means her mind had been severely damaged.

Speculating this incident through the psychoanalytic lens Morrison makes her readers realize the cruelest slavery forces. That is why Morrison’s readers do not see Sethe as a murderer but as a savior.

The novel counts psychic death more important than physical death. *Beloved*, though died physically, feels much to the psychic death. She is frustrated and appears in the form of a ghost to show her anger and repentance as she was devoid of the pleasures of her childhood. Like everyone *Beloved* also wanted to live and get all pleasures under the id effect but failed. That’s why she appears as a ghost and shows her frustration by creating havoc in Denver’s room. Sethe tries to prove this murder as the deepest mother love and clarifies, “If I had not killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her.”¹⁶

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