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Motherhood in *Beloved*

M. Mareeswari

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Sri Kaleeswari College,
Sivakasi.

Morrison is an outstanding feminist figure in American Modern Literature. All her novels indicate a complete understanding of her character's individual response to the dilemmas posed by racial and sexual identity. The central theme of Morrison's novels deals with the black women characters who are raised from their poor, down trodden and most humiliating position to a new sense of awareness of freedom, liberty and equality in their society. The novel pictures the physical and psychological effects of slavery not only upon women but also the community as a whole. Through the characterisation of Sethe, she brings out the full human meaning and implications of the slave experience. Sethe reflects the harsh reality of being a black mother. Morrison probes deeper into the psychological effects of missing mother-infant bond and unearths the psychological damage of slavery to the mother-child relationship. The novel points out love as the solution to overcome Sethe's trauma of killing her daughter and her wounds of slavery. The love and acceptance of Paul D and the assistance of the white indentured servant Amy Denver are other representations of love that are crucial to Sethe's possibilities to become a whole individual. Love can also be regarded as the cure to heal the post-slavery racial conflicts. Sethe and *Beloved* are also to be regarded as symbolic representations and rescuers of the African-Americans from the wounds of slavery. Toni Morrison has made her female protagonists speak not only for themselves but for their whole lot.

Motherhood is the most powerful, beautiful and spiritual component of a woman's life. Morrison populates her novels with typical mother figures who search to attain some sense of individuality and self-worth in a world which denies them these values. *Beloved* is based on an actual incident that Morrison came across in a news clipping and offers a realistic picture of the black life. She found it while editing a collection of articles and images called *The Black Book* in 1974. On the tenth page of *The Black Book* was a copy of a news article entitled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child", which narrated the incident of a slave woman Margaret Garner, a Kentucky slave. In 1850, she attempted to kill her children because she did not want them to suffer as she had in her life. Morrison chose to write on this theme, probably because of a feeling that the living conditions of blacks especially of women were still equally oppressive even at the time of writing the novel. The mother's act was an act of love and courage though it was criminal in the eyes of the law. The novel revolves around this incident and its consequent effect upon the mother whose heart is at times filled with a sense of guilt and remorse. It makes the past unspeakable. The mother who kills the child in the novel is Sethe and her mother-in-law is Baby Suggs. Morrison has invested the

narrative with something of the folklore and Biblical allusions which add layers of meaning to the narrative.

Sethe, the protagonist, was born in the South to an African mother she never knew. She is a prey to both sexual and racial exploitation. Sethe's name is borrowed from the Egyptian God Seth, half-man, half-bird and very clearly suggests her nature that wishes to roam in an unrestricted atmosphere. She has a bitter childhood, with the surrogate mother beating her and branding her also as a slave.

Sethe has little remembrance of her mother but she never forgets the isolation, experienced by her as a slave in South Carolina where her mother had been a slave. As a child, Sethe is not loved by her mother. She is nursed by Nan, the slave nanny and her mother's friend. Sethe's mother has to do a lot of heavy work in the field as a slave. She is a frightened child who is afraid to love. She does not know the power of love and has no experience of love. Later Sethe's mother is hanged with the other slaves, but Sethe does not know the reason for this. "Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she, now?" (B 116). With her question, Sethe leaves this tale unanswered. Sethe's creation of herself begins after witnessing her mother's death and after her coming to a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet Home. When she is thirteen, she is sold to the Garners who own Sweet Home and practice a comparatively benevolent kind of slavery.

As a young woman, Sethe finds herself the property of the Garners. Mr. Garner's views for the slaves who worked for him is that they must think of themselves as decent human beings. Garner behaves with them in a polite and fair way. "The Garners, [...] ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted" (B 80). *Beloved* circles around all these complexities and hints at the different fates of a group of slaves who once lived in this plantation in Kentucky named 'Sweet Home' – of course neither 'sweet' nor 'home'. Among them are an old woman called Baby Suggs, her son Halle, Paul A, Paul D, Paul F, Sixo and the one young woman, Sethe.

Sethe chooses to marry Halle Suggs, son of Baby Suggs. Halle makes an agreement with Mr. Garner that he would work seven days a week for five years and arrange a place for his mother to live when the day of her freedom came. Sethe and Halle have two sons, Howard and Buglar, as well as a baby daughter. When she leaves Sweet Home, Sethe is pregnant with a fourth child. Sethe feels herself lucky for having Mr. Garner as her owner because she is not forced to do work in the fields. Sethe has some affection for Baby Suggs at Sweet Home.

After the eventual death of the proprietor, Mr. Garner, the widowed Mrs. Garner asks her sadistic, vehemently racist brother-in-law to help her run the farm. He is known to the slaves as schoolteacher and his oppressive presence makes life on the plantation even more unbearable than it had been before. The new master is very cruel. Sethe is not only beaten with a whip by the schoolteacher but also raped by his nephews. The slaves decide to run.

Schoolteacher and his nephews anticipate the slaves' escape, however, and capture Paul D and Sixo. During the escape, Paul A gets caught and is hanged. Sixo gets caught and is burnt alive. Paul F is taken away and sold. Paul D gets caught and is sold in chains with a bit in his mouth. Paul D sees Sethe for what he believes will be the last time. She is still intent on running, having already sent her children ahead to her mother-in-law Baby Suggs's house in Cincinnati. Invigorated by the recent capture, schoolteacher's nephews seize Sethe in the barn and violate her, stealing the milk her body is storing for her infant daughter. This cruel experience described as follows:

After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on them. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. The boys found out I told on them. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. They used cowhide on you?

And they took my milk.

They beat you and you was pregnant?

And they took my milk! (B10)

The whip marks on Sethe's body look like a "chokecherry tree". She is a slave woman mercilessly cheated by the white men, the schoolteacher and his nephews. She has to bear brutal humiliation as well as the exploitation of her mothering abilities, for example, the stealing of her milk. When Paul D sees the horrible condition of her back turned to pulp by constant whipping and asks her whether they were beating her by the lash of cowhide, her repeated answer is that they stole her milk as if beating is nothing when compared to her biological function of feeding her own child. Living in a slave-house, Sethe experiences physical and sexual exploitation of a terrible magnitude. So, she kills her daughter Beloved to save her from future disgrace. This part of the novel is the most moving one.

In *Beloved*, the female and male slave narrator's voice cries out in agony at the treatment meted out to slaves in society, but the female cry is heard more poignantly. The pathos of women caught in the web of a society rooted in slavery and racial and sexual exploitation is heart-rending.

When schoolteacher finds out that Sethe has reported his nephews' misdeeds to Mrs. Garner, he has her whipped severely, despite the fact that she is pregnant. When all the torture and exploitation become intolerable, she decides to flee from Sweet Home. Sethe gives her three children to Baby Suggs and runs away. Sethe's miraculous escape in spite of profound suffering and murderous assault on her body is evidence to her strength. She reaches the river at night, and feels that her baby is going to be born. Sethe lies in the grass and supposes that she would die there. But a young white woman, Amy Denver, hears her groans and she stops to see what is wrong with her. Finding her bloody stumps of feet, the stage of her pregnancy, and her bloody back, Amy half carries Sethe to an old barn, mumbling all the way. Her feet are swollen from the long walk. Amy Denver, nurses her back to health. Amy later helps Sethe to deliver her baby in a boat and Sethe names her second daughter

Denver after the girl who helped her. Sethe receives further help from Stamp Paid, who rows her across the Ohio River to Baby Suggs house. Baby Suggs cleans Sethe up before allowing her to see her three older children.

Sethe spends twenty-eight wonderful days in Cincinnati, where Baby Suggs serves as an unofficial preacher to the black community. On the last day, however, schoolteacher comes for Sethe to take her and her children back to Sweet Home. Rather than surrender her children to a life of dehumanizing slavery, she flees with them to the woodshed and tries to kill them. When they discover Sethe's sons, Howard and Buglar bleeding at her feet, her baby's head nearly severed and her attempt to kill the other infant, Schoolteacher concedes his economic loss. He believes that Sethe would be useless as a slave to him because she has turned insensible due to his nephew having beaten her wildly.

The Schoolteacher reflects slavery's treatment of African-Americans as animals. "Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white Schoolteacher" (B 151). 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 achieved by the killing of Beloved. 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. It is also through Denver that the community that eventually saves Sethe from Beloved gets involved in the family's affairs. The community which had had nothing to do with Sethe's family since the murderous rage of Sethe understand why she did what she did, but felt that she overreacted to the situation. Ella who is a member of the community:

Understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated. (B 145)

Irrespective of the understanding of the community even in the unacceptability of what Sethe had done, the community appears more uncomfortable with Beloved's presence, which is arguably the presence of evil among men. As a ghost, Beloved's presence does not elicit so much revulsion. But to Ella, a member of the community, it is unacceptable: But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion. (B 145)

But the fact is that Beloved is on a revenge mission and her destructive tendencies are as a result of her not being able to identify with her mother as a whole object. In other words, her 'introjections' of her mother is not complete, which is why she still lingers in that position that is usually characterized by violence and destructiveness. The type of love Beloved exhibits in the narrative is understandably of the destructive type. It is deleterious, pernicious, disastrous, ruinous, hideous and above all deadly. Beloved both idealizes as well as demonizes her mother because of the 'doubling' problem associated with the paranoid-schizoid position in which Beloved still finds herself. She is all loving and all abandoning.

Racism is one of the broad fields in *Beloved* under which Blacks are ill-treated in the hands of the white masters. It destroys community cohesion and creates division in the society. Racism consists of ideologies and practices that seek to justify or cause the unequal distribution of privileges, rights or goods amongst or otherwise exhibit can take the form of social actions or political systems that or inferior to each other, based on inheritable traits, abilities or qualities. It may also hold that members of different races should be treated differently.

The idea of racism emphasises the pain and suffering of the slaves. Sethe's confrontation with evil begins in Sweet Home and it is expelled through the schoolteacher and his nephews. The Sweet Home under Garner and the Sweet Home under the rule of the Schoolteacher are different entities. Sethe is the only female. Through Sethe, the concept of blackness is explicated. Sethe is brutally treated and raped. The Stream of consciousness technique is used to reveal the atrocities and mental trauma Sethe faces in Sweet Home.

Not only women but also the male protagonists struggle in the hands of the white masters. Black men and women were not considered as humans. There are four black male slaves to run Sweet Home. One of them is Paul D, who suffers as a slave in Georgia after his experience in Sweet Home. He also makes an attempt to flee from Sweet Home but he is caught and sold to Brandywine, the man he has tried to kill. The murder attempt leads him to imprisonment. Morrison has made it very clear that Paul D has also suffered a lot from racial victimization. Halle, Sethe's husband is another victim who works for five years for his crippled mother, Baby Suggs, to emancipate. "Usually he worked Saturdays and Sundays to pay off Baby Suggs freedom" (B 35). Even though they work hard they are not able to reap anything as a reward.

Paul D returns to Sethe after eighteen years. Sethe narrates about the events that caused her to run from Sweet Home; about her sons, about the boys who has stolen her breast milk, about the birth of Denver and about the death of her baby girl, Beloved. They recapitulate their lives as slaves under the kindly Garners and under the cruel schoolteacher.

Sethe recounts her whipping and begins to cry in the kitchen as she reveals to Paul D. The tree of scars, the image of chokecherry tree on her back, which decorates the dead skin of her back. It keeps alive the suffering of the African-American people. Paul D asks,

What tree on your back? It something growing on your back? I don't see nothing growing on your back. A chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago could have cherries too now for all I know. (B 10)

Denver seeks the help of the women who are all around. The woman marches together to the house and perform a collective exorcism: 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 deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (B 48).

At the end Beloved disappears. Again Sethe suffers from losing her child and ends up a broken woman. There is hope at the novel's end, when Paul D re-enters, he tells her, "You your own best thing, Sethe you are", "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (B 148)

Motherhood posture a problematic challenge to African American women under the slave regime. The situation, which did not allow mothers the opportunity and freedom to nurture their children or perform their biological role as caregivers and mothers to their children, and especially their female children, had very debilitating consequences on the psyche of the women. Since many African American women writers preoccupy themselves with the bringing back to life the 'dead girl' whose society has willed out of existence, and who male writers have chosen to bury and discard from literary creation, motherhood continues to occupy a distinctively prominent place in the African American literature by women. In the novel, Beloved's mother (Sethe) undergoes a torturous journey (symbolic) in order to reconstruct the meaning of her life as a woman and mother. This symbolic journey interrogates both morality and convention, and the ideological structures of racism, which implicated the woman. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel by a woman, about women, which mobilizes the narrative form of heroism in the African American fictional world.

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