

## **Deconstructing Motherhood: Reading the Black Mother, Sethe in *Beloved***

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### **Abstract**

The subjectivities of motherhood are deep secured in the narrative of *Beloved*. The narrative questions the subjectivity of motherhood, the centrality of motherhood, and the role of motherhood. Sethe is shown to have been questioned her motherhood several times in *Beloved*, giving way to Morrison to shape and reshape the figure of Sethe, portrayed as contradictory to the role of a traditional mother (one of a nourishment giver). The chapter will justify the question of motherly joys, to put it otherwise, the joys of motherhood. I would like to see the status of a black mother in Morrison's *Beloved*. The story behind Morrison writing of memory and history because both plays incredibly in the interwoven narrative of the encounter of a slave, who commits infanticide, to give her child a new birth, that is free from the terrible atrocities and circumstances of a captivated life. Therefore, Morrison's treatment of motherhood through Sethe is a journey which has been deconstructed by numerous parameters of a sexist and racist society, which is delved in the chapter very carefully.

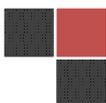
**Keywords:** motherhood, slave narrative, history, memory.

“It was / This is not a story to pass on”  
Morrison (323-324)

This afore said sentence is written thrice at the end of the novel, *Beloved* (1987). Morrison identifies history and its bitter remembrance through the painful incident of infanticide and unpleasant motherhood. *Beloved* is one of Morrison’s most celebrated novels that won many acclamations and accolades. It is one of the most significant novels of the post- slavery period, which recounts the past days of misery. *Beloved*, deals with the recollection of memory, the memory of slavery and its effects, which the sixty million or more could not survive. The centrality of memory is embedded deep within the fabric of the novel. Morrison treats the subject of memory through the process of recollection. Morrison essentially makes use of slave narrative from the point of view of a slave. She in all her novels made a clear portrait of the menaces of slavery and its effects on individuals in the post slavery era.

Morrison writes about the “interior lives” of the slaves “to fill in the blanks” that was kept untouched in the slave narratives when the narrators refused to cover “proceedings too terrible to relate” (Morrison 193, 191). Uncovering painful history would invite the processes of history to take a walk back into the dark past and this would result into the exploration of the burden of the past, the things that are lost and the self that was buried long back and has lost its relevance in the present days. There is always seen in Morrison’s texts a hunger to expose the not so glorious but so painful past by recalling memory. She reconstructs history through her narratives by creating strong characters like Sethe. *Beloved* is the retelling of the historical past. Morrison shifts to the slave narrative believing, this could help her to unveil and unleash the fathoms of history that took a toll upon thousands and thousands of her ancestors and brothers and sisters. Therefore, reading *Beloved* is to invest time into the process of transformation as the reader is convinced “into active participation in the non-narrative, non-literary experience of the text, which makes it difficult for [him] to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of the data.” (Morrison 387)

Marianne Hirsch writes about *Beloved* in her book, *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), “When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing” (Hirsch 196). In the American novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Cassy who was the mistress of Simon Legree’s quadroon for five years, confessed to Tom that she gave a tincture of opium (laudanum) to her third child (a son by her second white master), in order to save him from the tantrums of slavery. Slavery has taken away all the joys of motherhood and leaves her infertile, this infertility is the infertility of the soul, mind and body (where all the three abstracts are connected to form a whole). The centrality of the mother daughter relationship gets a new shape altogether in Morrison’s novels. The mother is both at the same time the preserver and the destroyer, the creator and the destructor, the abstract and the concrete. Morrison believed that motherhood for a black woman was a political act on her part, through which she could establish herself in the society. Morrison was of the opinion that prosperity of the community was in the hands of the mothers, because through them a new generation will come into existence. This coming into generation marks the passage of traditional black values from one generation to the other. Infants are the biggest gift a mother can ever possess. In addition, the mother and her child’s relationship is the most pristine and valued emotional bond that one could ever imagine.



Sethe, the mother figure in Morrison's *Beloved*, tells in the opening of the novel that she is living every moment but she is not alive. There is a desperation in her words where she wants her child to take rebirth:

“Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of dead, she could’nt get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present- intolerable- and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy her for pondering color.” (Morrison 4)

These words clearly show Sethe's realization, and her reckless cry to gain freedom from the menacing tool of slavery. She wants to attain selfhood, completeness, and above all wants to attain motherhood in the fullest sense of the term. She wants to be a mother, a caregiver, a nourishing mother, a teacher to her children, a protector. Nevertheless, for Sethe it was impossible because of her colour, and this was “intolerable” to her. There is pain, anguish in the words of Sethe. Morrison in an interview with Gloria Naylor addressed this state of anguish for every coloured woman. She asserts:

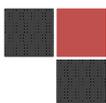
Now what made those stories connect, I can't explain, but I do know that, in both instances, something seemed clear to me. A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied (Gloria 207).

The concept of disintegration develops exactly at the point when a mother's role is violated, her motherhood is denied, and all these are the result of breeding violence. The ground is however crucial, since Sethe is robbed of her femininity. She loses her children (the two of her boys escapes), *Beloved* is killed, and her superior white master (the schoolteacher) robs her milk from her breast: “I had milk,” she said. “I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar” (Morrison 19).

Sethe is concerned about the nourishment of her baby. She feels every pain (labor pain to put it otherwise) from the very first day of her pregnancy. There is an immense will in her to keep the source of nourishment for her baby right with her. The exasperation in losing the only source of nourishment, that was available with her for her baby, she becomes disintegrated. The sense of loss and defoliation further reverberates:

“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 em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.” (Morrison 19) Sethe adds again, “And they took my milk.” (Morrison 20)

Robbing of her milk is actually taking away from her the most possessed motherhood. Here plays the concept of sexed bodies, bodies of individuals looked upon as a consumable product. In addition, sex becomes a mere performance. There is no ‘jouissance’ (delight or pleasure) in the performance, but the whole process is like a mechanical process. Historians and sociologists pointed out that, black women's bodies did not belong to them, and as a result, her reproductive ability is constantly negated and abused. Their masters sexually victimize them and this phenomenon does not allow the

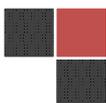


blacks to enjoy their selfhood. Sethe is not only robbed of her milk but of her motherhood and most importantly, her womanhood. Even black men are robbed of their manhood; they could only retain themselves as humans. Their behavior, identity, culture, will and wish are reorganized according to their master's will.

Sethe is the representation of historical character of Margaret Garner. The threat to her motherhood, made Margaret to kill her daughter. She even attempted to kill her other two children and then herself by a butcher's knife. However, she was unable to accomplish the whole deed. However, one of her children died, and she was happy that at least she could save the life of one of her children. The narratives of slavery bring into focus the master and slave dilemma that hampers the psyche of both black men and women, to the point of dysfunction and disorientation of relationships. "Deconstruction" is a concept propounded by Jacques Derrida in his discussion of language and a resistance to its centered logocentric meaning. Derrida goes further in explaining deconstruction by his use of the word "différance", a term coined by Derrida explaining that the meaning of a language is under constant change (a ceaseless flow of variety and change) (Watson 2). The main goal of deconstruction is to find "aporias" or self-contradictory meanings in discourses of language. Moreover, deconstructing the aporia of motherhood in Morrison's *Beloved* is actually reading between the lines of the narrative. It actually gives a new realm to analyze the truth of motherhood and the symbolism of the body in African American narrative. The black body is an object of male gaze; she is objectified and her position is narrowed down to machines for reproduction. Morrison deconstructs motherhood by violating the moral and ethical roles of a mother. The loss of motherhood is making Sethe lose her child-bearing ability and killing her child is like detaching the umbilical cord that connects a mother and her child. Sethe is not only killing her child but also killing her own self, taking away from her the ability to conceive. The journey of a mother from the day she conceives to the day of her delivery is a transition of a woman to a mother that gives the sense of selfhood. Nevertheless, for the black woman this journey is not a celebrated one, and after giving birth, she finally gets to see her position in a world full of horrors, which is the horrors of slavery. The black woman notices herself being shaped and reshaped during her lifetime. She is never the master of herself.

There are many masters to control her. Her master determines the way in which it should be acted out. This is the eventual destruction of motherhood. The sanctity of the mother's womb was made impure by the lustful gaze and the greed to control sexuality. These women bodies are canonized sexed bodies; controlled and driven by patriarchal desire. Sethe is a slave mother, who chooses voluntarily to deconstruct the traditional role of a protective mother. She violates the role of a conventional mother and becomes a destroyer of her child, in order to free her from enslavement. Morrison unknowingly gives power to matriarchy. Sethe is the matriarch who has control over her own womanhood, her motherhood that helps her to enjoy her satisfying selfhood. This is primarily because she kills her child and gains power, with this accumulated power she is able to preserve her womanhood (individuality) which many could not even think of doing. Her act was a selfless struggle to gain selfhood. She became Lady Margaret and justifies her unconventional motherhood. Paul D tries to gain control over Sethe's sexuality by holding her breasts in his hands, the breasts that lactated for the spirit of *Beloved*. Sethe tells Paul D the story of her rape and her milk being robbed off:

"I had milk," she said. "I was pregnant with Denver, but I had milk for my baby



girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar" (Morrison 19).

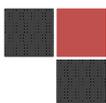
Paul D learnt from Sethe that how she was brutally raped and her milk was taken away by the schoolteacher. She was beaten after she had disclosed the horrible deed. She was beaten by a cow skin whip. The wound is deep, that made an image of a chokecherry tree on her back:

"A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves." (Morrison 18) Paul D felt the brutality of the incident and "his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree" (Morrison 20). Sethe felt Paul D who was holding her breast from behind; "As she raised up from the heat she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts" (Morrison 20). Holding her breast symbolizes the control that he wants to exert upon Sethe like the white men. It could be interpreted as the control over Sethe's sexuality. A black woman is controlled and kept under tremendous power that checks her growth, threatens her being and holds her back from her flow.

Sethe finds comfort in the way Paul D holds her breasts with his hands. There is a satisfaction in her that the "responsibility of her breasts were at last in somebody else's hands" (Morrison 21). Soon after Paul D receives the smells of stolen milk, Paul D becomes petrified of the image of the dead child. Paul D's courage sinks and he removes his hand from Sethe's breasts. We find his deprivation of virility, his emasculation. Paul D shifts himself from kissing the leaves of the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back to finding the image to look like a clump of scars: "And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl." And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years." (Morrison 21)

A threat to Paul D's manhood was noticed when he had an unsuccessful sex with Sethe. His insecurities increase and he makes his relationship with Sethe difficult, fails completely to understand her painful life. Many critics have found his denial of the beauty of the chokecherry tree symbolic of his masked manhood, his deviation from a responsible man to a fragile and weak black man, reshaped by the white man's crime. Paul D imposes his own lack of self onto Sethe, comprehending the black man's burden of slavery. Sethe murdered womanhood, motherhood, and Sethe committing infanticide actually takes away from him the strength to hold his manhood. He becomes impotent, spiteful, and harbors resentment.

Sethe's motherhood is reshaped and killed; Paul D's manhood also runs through several instances of reshaping and finally is killed. Pregnancy and birth, with all other painful associations with it, symbolize the bond of sisterhood that every woman shares with one another. Morrison glorifies the concept of sisterhood along with motherhood. During labour pain, Sethe runs through the woods to give birth to Denver. She was going through the painful hours of her life, the pain associated with giving birth (procreation). She meets Amy Denver, a white girl, who helped her to give birth and comforted her during her need. This is the bond (between women irrespective of colour) that Morrison glorifies, which is the bond of sisterhood. Women in the African American society were



treated like animals. In *Beloved*, Sethe was milked like a cow and was beaten up by a cow skin whip like a mule. The mother's womb was treated as a machine. These are the dehumanizing effects of slavery. The story of Denver's birth is equally interesting. Interesting in the way, how she gains freedom with her birth and this freedom is because of her mother Sethe. We get to know the story of Denver's birth from the episode where both Denver and *Beloved* play in the attic, and *Beloved* asks Denver's story. This episode is very symbolical. Through the birth of Denver, both Denver and Sethe got meaning in their lives, they attained themselves. Hirsch stated that according to her, "Morrison allows the daughters to find themselves in the mother's story so that Denver might develop into the mature, self-reliant, caring, and community-oriented woman she becomes at the end of the novel" (Hirsch 101). Just like the way Sethe found herself from the story of her mother, and the reason why *Beloved* returns after her death to her mother. This is the strength of womanhood, which Morrison focuses upon and is carried forward through the matriarchal structure. Sethe who saw the mother being killed and knew her through the mark on her body. She derives strength from matriarchy. Baby Suggs, who is Sethe's mother in law in her Sweet Home household, is like her guardian mother, since she has no one from her maternal side. Hirsch noted that, "Baby Suggs, the freed mother who lost all of her own children, can offer Sethe an alternate to the maternal care she could have had from her own mother" (Hirsch 102). Sethe and Denver accepts *Beloved* as a member of their family. She was playing hide and seek:

"Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on."

The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did.

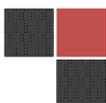
"Grandma Baby must be stopping it," said Denver. She was ten and still mad at Baby Suggs for dying.

Sethe opened her eyes. "I doubt that," she said.

"Then why don't it come?" "You forgetting how little it is," said her mother. "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even." (Morrison 4)

Morrison tries to show the belief of the African Americans on the spirits. This is actually a belief in the past. In other words, Morrison shows that these women and specially Denver is re-remembering the past that enthralled her, the past struggle that her mother and her ancestors had put on. Barbara Hill Rigney puts it, "The spirit world is everywhere - in the houses, in the trees, in the rivers, manifested in hellish light or in hands that reach out to caress or to strangle - and it represents, finally, the ultimate Black revolution against slavery: the insistence on the link with Africa, the insistence on a myth beyond history and on an identity that is both racial and individual..." (Rigney 229).

The ghost of the baby is symbolic manifestation of the spirit of slavery. The startling reiteration is to draw focus upon memory and re-memory, and retelling of the painful history that took away happiness from the African Americans. Barbara Hill Rigney writes, "the disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter, Morrison reiterates, is also part of the horror of the black experience under slavery" (Rigney 230). Morrison's use of language is benevolent. Her use of simplistic

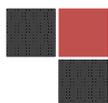


tone gives a sense of awe as she blends history with spirituality in the words of Beloved. Through Beloved's words Morrison takes us to the oblivion, enralls, and engages us by awakening the senses. In Beloved, we find all the characters traumatized and tormented by their experience of slavery. Sethe becomes voiceless, Baby Suggs loses her colour and Beloved loses her life as an effect of slavery. Denver though was not a victim of slavery but she could not help accepting its many predicaments. Denver enjoys partial bliss of motherhood from Sethe. This is because of Sethe's earlier deed and her burden of slavery that never permitted her to be a devoted mother. It is with Beloved, Denver comes closer to her mother. Eventually Denver gets herself free from the encompassing black society. In addition, it is because of Beloved that Sethe receives a family, though it was a momentary experience for Sethe, yet Sethe feels the pleasure of unison with Beloved and Denver. This is where Sethe as a woman becomes complete and enjoys her painful motherhood. Beloved gives Sethe a family. Morrison presents the love trio (mother and her daughters) which helps each one of them to grow in their unchecked manner. They develop a familial bond. Moreover, Denver who is always afraid of her mother if she kills her is comforted with Beloved's presence. Beloved fills the void that is created in Denver for Sethe with absolute love for the surreal. Sethe throughout the novel sacrifices her own desires for her family. She sacrifices her motherhood by killing her own daughter to save her from slavery and its associated pains. Sethe's loss of motherhood is symbolic of the unrequited love she bore for her children. Morrison throws much light upon the mother daughter relationship and open up spaces for a slave to narrate her struggle of history, her sacrifice and her determination to stand up erect even after numerous blows.

The end of the novel is however incisive and penetrating:

It was not a story to pass on. Therefore, they forget her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative- looked at too long- shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but do not, because they know things will never be the same if they do. This is not a story to pass on. (Morrison 324)

One cannot agree more with Morrison after re-reading the above lines penned by the victim herself. Morrison's transformation from "It was not a story to pass on" to "It is not a story to pass on" is interestingly insightful. There is a sharp address to the African American folk, not to forget the gory past. At the same time, Morrison clearly states that the African Americans must not carry the sense of the loss with them in the future that will hamper their present. Thereby, telling to relive, remake and re-remember the history with the intention to de-objectify them in the racist and sexist society. Morrison instils in the readers a sense of happiness at the end of the novel; by reading the novel as a recapitulation of the painful history, there is also a triumph at the end in the way, Sethe strives to re-live her life once she thought it to be meaningless. Therefore, Sethe and the other characters of the novel relive the horrors of the past and take an oath to recreate the horrors. Just like the memories of Sethe and Paul D could not be passed on, the way Beloved could not come back to life again, but had to in the form of a baby ghost, the way Denver wanted to enter the world but could not enter, yet had to. Moreover, the way Sethe could not kill her children but had to kill. The story of Beloved "is not a story to pass on", but it has to pass on. Beloved is all about the African



experience in America and how slavery paralyzed their existence. They had become animals in the hands of the white men:

“Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there. Beloved comes back to reclaim retribution. She is the symbolic representation of the millions who could not survive the life’s struggle and accepted death. As Morrison says, it is about “the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it” (E. Washington 58).

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