
SLAVERY AND INFANTICIDE IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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ABSTRACT:

The novel Beloved tells the story of Sethe who kills her daughter Beloved in a desperate state. Her aim was to save her daughter from slavery. The background of the novel is the story of Margaret Garner who in order to save her children from slavery executed her infant daughter. The Afro-American set up presents the economic factors that led to slavery in that era. Infanticide has always been the backdrop of the slavery era. Economic reasons have led to the killings of the infants at that time. Sethe's role as a mother has been often been praised by many critics. Often Sethe is compared to the biblical figures. It is further revealed in the novel that Sethe's mother was not allowed to be a real mother herself. Her mother performed the same act of killing all the infants, leaving Sethe alone. Sethe believes herself to be a special child of her mother. The situation in which Sethe is placed is also due to the community itself. The Suggs family was itself unaware of Schoolteacher's approach. Beloved returns back to Sethe inflicting her with punishment making her life more miserable.

Keywords: slavery, mother, economic, infanticide, infant.

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Beloved (1987) is a sensitive novel written by Toni Morrison an renown Afro-American author . It deals with the forgotten era of slavery and the pathos of black slaves. The novel tells a wrenching story of a black female slave, Sethe, who kills her own daughter to protect her from the horrors of slavery. Morrison has excelled in creating her female characters. Her novels show a deep sense of bonding between the female characters. In *Beloved* the female bonding and the multiple layer of meaning in their relationship makes the story emotionally appealing and according to Barbara Schapira in *Contemporary Literature* it is the story that, “penetrates perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery.”(194). The story touches the social, psychological, philosophical and supernatural elements of human life. Morrison drew her tale from a particular historical event, namely the choice of a runaway slave Margaret Garner to execute her baby daughter rather than returning her to slavery. Margaret Garner was not only the slave mother to commit infanticide; there have been other documented cases as well. In January 1856, newspapers across Cincinnati and the rest of Ohio broke the story of Margaret Garner, who being unsuccessful in crossing the Ohio River to freedom, ended the life of her infant daughter. Samuel J. May in the article “Margaret Garner and Seven Others” in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved: A Casebook* has observed that the facts of Garner’s confessions were exposed in the *Cincinnati Gazette*: “the mother of the dead child acknowledges that she had killed it, and that her determination was to have killed all her children, and then destroy herself, rather than return to slavery. She and others complain of cruel treatment on the part of their master, and allege that as the cause of their attempted escape.”(28) In other words it was the brutal treatment she had received as a slave that drove her to extreme ends – first an attempted escape, and then, when it did not work – infanticide, to protect her baby from the life that awaited her. A mother killing her baby for the baby’s own welfare is certainly a difficult thought to accept. One might question the woman’s sanity or morality, assuming her to be some kind of insane or evil person. But the *Cincinnati Gazette* article according to Samuel J. May goes on to disclose that, despite her actions, Garner was a woman “of considerable intelligence of manner, and with a good address.”(28)

Infanticide has always been the backdrop of the slave age. Sometimes it showed confrontation and sometimes mercy killing. Morrison has wonderfully developed the true story of Margaret Garner with the background of slavery. The slave woman has endured a lot at the

hands of both black and white men. They were robbed of their every ownership – even their motherhood. The black women were deprived of mothering and motherhood, as they were regarded best for procreation only. Since the rights offered to the black women were insignificant hence she could not pose as a decision maker. Sethe was not supposed to love her that is why the act of killing her own child became the subject of the controversies. Questions regarding Sethe's killing of the child reverberate throughout the entire novel. The Public of America considered Margaret Garner and other slave mothers who killed their children as criminals. There have been several instances in the American history where mothers have killed their infants to save them from the similar misery. For instance Mary Montegory escaped the plantation with her child but found it hard to escape with a baby in pull. According to Benjamin Drew in *Four Fugitive Slave Narrative* she left, "her sucking infant behind to die." (49) Infanticide was a punishable offence and Sethe and her real life counterpart had to face ruthless penalty of the crime.

Economic reasons have led to the killings of the infants in the slavery era and have sustained to put forth an ill-fated influence even down to the present day. The African- American set up is the example where the economic factors led to the distressed phase of the Black community. Infanticide, shown in the novel is in many forms. It is not just a murder in literal sense but also murdering an infant mentally or psychologically by curbing its desires and rights. *Beloved* is a documentation of all such infanticides, the most wretched, and the murder of Beloved by her mother who had cut her throat. Apart from these instances it is revealed that Sethe's mother also committed infanticide when she threw her children at birth, "without names" (78). Another case is when Ella, another black slave admits her crimes of infanticide in order to save her children from the white masters. Morrison has given diverse views of infanticide through the characters in the novel. Sethe asserts that she, ". . . couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of 'em live under schoolteacher. That was out." (200) Baby Suggs could not frame any judgment and silenced her view to such an extent that it finally it led to her death. Paul D blames Sethe for her violent choice but later accepts her considering her circumstances.

Beloved explores the traumatic memories left behind by slavery and infanticide. Most slave narratives are objective rather than subjective, while Sethe urges to claim her children as her own individual property instead of the slave holders. Orlando Patterson theorizes 'social

death' in relation to slavery-devoid of any rights to death to themselves or their families or to property, since they were perceived as property themselves, slaves were considered socially dead. Social death is demonstrated in the novel through the portrayal of the slaves as commodities and animals and through discussion about the prize they would fetch on the market. J. Brooks Bouson in *Quiet as it's kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* observes, "to the slaveholders, the slaves were 'expendable', had the 'status of good horses' and the 'advantage of reproducing without cost.'" (131) The school teacher attempts to pseudo-scientifically analyze the Sweet Home slaves by listing their human and animal features on two columns, and seems to deem their animal rather than human since when he mentions Sethe's unborn child he calls it a foal. Thus, Gurleen Grewal in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle* remarks, "Sethe tries to save her children from being deemed animals, a fate she considers worse than death, by killing her daughter and attempting to kill her other children as well." (97)

Morrison cites an article, titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child" published in the *American Baptist* in 1856 in which Margaret Garner recounts feeling extremely calm and cool when she had committed the murder since she was convinced that a quick death was preferable to the death her children would have suffered if taken back to slavery. Sethe's possible inspiration for such an act is spoken through Margaret Garner. Sethe's 'thick' love and Margaret love are one and same since the latter called her daughter Mary, her beloved "bird", Angelita Dianne Reyes in *Mothering Across Culture: Postcolonial Representations* also believed that "the murder would save her daughter from a life that would be far worse : enslavement." (72) Under the circumstances of slavery and recurring rape, many coloured women committed infanticide. J. Brooks Bouson in *Quiet As It's Kept* remarks, "Morrison's former slave woman disrupt the mechanisms of slavery and miscegenation using infanticide as resistance tactics." (138) The novel presents two other cases of slave mother's resistance to the oppression of the white male apart from Sethe: Elle, one of the workers of the Underground Railroad:

had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by' the lowest yet', a white father and son who had held her in captivity and raped her; the child dies after five days of neglect. (259)

In *Infanticide: Psychosocial and Legal Perspectives on Mothers who kill*, Margaret G. Spinelli argues that infanticide is neither random, nor unpredictable since it is:

deeply embedded in and responsive to the societies in which it occurs. The crime of infanticide, or child murder in the first year of life, is committed by mothers who cannot parent their child under the circumstances dictated by their unique position in place and time. (4)

According to Margaret G. Spinelli the spontaneous character of infanticide is further discussed as, “reflecting a loss of control rather than cool headed calculation.”(14) However J. Brooks Bouson believes that in Morrison’s, “depiction of Sethe and Margaret Garner’s own words their crimes were characterized by cool-headedness rather than by a loss of control. This type of control in Garner was what struck Morrison and determined her to use this slave narrative in a novel as well as Garner’s appropriation of her children which was seen as noble.” (133) Thus in Morrison’s own words the “clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head. I had to deal with this nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder,” (75) Angelita Dianne Reyes in *Mothering Across Culture: Postcolonial Representations* believes that, “Margaret Garner became Sethe and Mary, her daughter, became Beloved.”(69)

Sethe is the heroine of the story. She is a black slave who lost her mother at a very young age. She was brought to the Sweet Home Plantation as a slave where she marries Halle Suggs and bears four children with him. She suffers the most atrocious behavior at the plantation by the white masters. She is whipped pitilessly and milked like a cow. Linden Peach in *Toni Morrison* remarks that the whites “. . . sucked her lactating breasts.” (109) The incident brutally shakes Sethe that she decides to flee from the plantation. She seeks refuge at her mother-in-law’s house at 124 Bluestone Road. She is caught soon and takes the dreadful step of killing her own daughter to show struggle towards slavery. She is imprisoned for seven years for her sin and later isolated from the community and declared as an outcast. She is deserted by her own family. However her two sons escape the ordeal, Baby Suggs dies and her daughter withdraws herself from her mother.

Sethe is, most of all, the mother. In her escape from the plantation, motherhood is emphasized as the strongest motivator, and the most obvious questions to the reader of *Beloved* are how a mother can kill her own child and if this act can be explained and maybe even be justified, by the inhuman system of slavery. Sethe’s role as a loving mother is the topic of many articles on *Beloved*. Liz Lewis, for instance in *Moral ambiguity in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Jazz*, argues that, “*Beloved* reflects how in such a society allowing oneself to love is dangerous

practice doomed to heartache.” (2) The slaves could not afford to love anybody. Motherhood and family life were nothing that could be taken for granted; for the slave families were often divided when family members were sold and the female slaves were systematically abused both by other slaves and the white owners. There are several examples of this in the novel. Sethe’s mother was never allowed to be a real mother as her owner did not allow her to stay with her daughter to love and nurse her, and she was hanged when Sethe was just a few years old. Sethe’s mother-in-law Baby Suggs gave birth to eight children, with six different fathers, and was only allowed to keep the last one, Halle, who is later the father of Sethe’s children and also the one who does extra day’s work to buy Baby Suggs her freedom. Baby Suggs once tells Sethe, “All I can remember of [my first-born] is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember.”(6) The human rights of having a family and forming and entertaining family bonds were generally taken away from the slaves; anything else was a deviation:

Once in Maryland, [Paul D] met four families of slaves who had all been together for a hundred years: great-grands, grands, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, children. [---]He watched them with awe and envy, and each time he discovered large families of black people he made them identify over and over who each was, what relation, who, in fact, belonged to who.[---] Nothing like that had ever been his. (258)

This affected both the slave’s rights to preserve and record their history as families and to form a dream of the future for themselves and their children. All this is what one normally needs to form a self. The most important factor to develop a functioning self is, according to most the established psychological theories, a mother, or at least a good substitute with lasting bonds.

However, Sethe refuses to yield to the system, and she allows herself to be a loving mother. Already as a child she learns that she is different because she is chosen. Her mother gave birth to many children, but Sethe is her mother’s only surviving child, “She threw them all away but you”, her mother’s friend told her. The reason she let her live was that, “She put her hands around Sethe’s father. The others she did not put her arms around.” (74) The other pregnancies were not the result of love. As a young girl, Sethe is described as strong, “the one with iron eyes and backbone to match.”(10) She is protected from abuse from the other men on Sweet Home by Mr. Garner and allowed to form a family with Halle. As the situation on the farm, after Mr.

Garner's death and Schoolteacher's arrival, becomes unbearable she is forced to break free and escape with her children to freedom.

When Paul D, who all his life only has allowed himself "loving small and in secret" (260), complains that Sethe's "love is too thick" and that it is dangerous to love like that, she explains to him that, "love is or love ain't. Thin love is no love at all." (194) She also describes what happened to her motherly love in freedom, "Look like I loved 'em more after I got here, or maybe I couldn't love 'em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love." (190)

According to Abraham Maslow in *Twentieth Century Psychology: Recent Developments*, "there is a connection between an individual's potential of feelings and his/her sense of autonomy." (22) The insecurity during the enslavement diminishes the self and without a self you cannot love. Hence the ability to love shrinks when the insecurity increases as witnessed by Paul D as well. The first metaphor for his love on Sweet Home is the big tree called Brother; in the horrible slave camp in Georgia it shrinks to a little sapling and finally he locks all his love away in a "tobacco tin buried in his chest" (86). After having found freedom and starting to build up a new self and claiming the right to love her children, Liz Lewis defines Sethe's act of killing her daughter as, "a refusal to compromise her right to love her own children." (2) Sethe does not contradict this when she states that she did not have any choice and that she succeeded in what was her job, "to keep them away from what [she knew] is terrible." (194) She refuses to give up and let go of her loved ones.

Mae G. Henderson in *Beloved: A Casebook* makes the point, "that if memory is materialized in the reappearance of Beloved it is maternalized in Sethe's (re)configuration." (91) She gives birth to both her future, in the form of the unnamed baby girl, and to her past, in the symbolical birth of Beloved and later keeps on maternalizing her past in the compensating mother of Beloved. Sethe is only a mother and she can see no other meaning to her life. Stephanie A. Demetropoulos in an article "Maternal Bonds as the Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" from *African American Review* gives his point of view that Morrison in *Beloved* "develops the idea that maternal bonds can stunt or even obviate a woman's individuation or sense of self." (51) It is not until Sethe is relieved from the responsibility of her children, and of her child's death, that she can think of her own self and of being an individual with her own right to exist, being something more than a mother.

Deborah Ayer Sitter in an article “The Making of a Man: Dailogic Reading in *Beloved*” from *African American Review* has asserted that, “*Beloved* is the story of people rather than a person.” (17) This is supported by the novel’s dedication to “Sixty Million and More”, referring as Elizabeth Kella in *Beloved Communities* explains, to the “Africans who died in the Middle Passage, leaving no records behind them.”(115) Consequently, the interpretation of Sethe’s character as a leader and a precursor of the freeing of the African- American slaves does not seem to be too far-fetched. This can be seen both politically and religiously.

Politically in the novel, the story of Sethe’s infanticide is claimed by Mr. Bodwin to “build a further case for abolishing slavery.”(307) According to *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, “Sethe’s escape and the killing of the baby took place in 1855, ten years before the 13th Amendment to the U.S Constitution prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude.”(12) In the foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison relates the background of the novel. Her inspiration as mentioned earlier came partly from the story of Margaret Garner. Morrison also describes the political significance of Margaret Garner’s case, “She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave Laws, which mandated the return of the escapees to their owner.”(9)

On a religious metaphorical level there is evidence that Morrison, as hinted earlier, might have intended Sethe to have a God-like quality. She is given feminine Biblical name Seth, the son of Adam and Eve, who created to be like God. He is their third son after Cain and Abel and the one who prospers and becomes the father of mankind. It can be argued that Sethe’s life in many ways is the opposite of her Biblical namesake’s: she loses all her children except one, her position in society is on its lowest stratum, and she has committed a horrible crime and lost her faith in God. At the same time it can be argued that Morrison chooses to give her this name to imply that she is more than an ordinary woman; not only does her case provide a strong political argument for the abolition of slavery, but she also sacrifices her own daughter to save the rest of her children from enslavement, which could be a metaphor for freeing her ethnic group. Probably it goes without saying that this must be considered to be a religious allusion to God’s sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ to save mankind and give them everlasting life.

As stated earlier, Sethe is the selected one, an expression generally referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus was also the only surviving boy child when Herod ordered the killing of the infants of Bethlehem, as Sethe is the only child her mother let live.

Another reference to Sethe as a God is the similarity of her and her daughters to the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the symbol of Christian perfect love, which has been pointed out by several critics. The relationship between Sethe, Denver and Beloved, with their “distorted version of love”, could be described as the mother, the daughter and the unholy ghost. Liz Lewis proclaims, “The novel clarifies that it is a depraved society which has caused this irreligious, unholy distortion to human love which has led Sethe to her desperate act of love and violence.” (3) The gender change from Seth to Sethe is in line with Morrison’s earlier writing and can also be depicting the history of black women and in that view point it seems reasonable that she gives her female main character divine traits.

The allusion to the Biblical Seth is strengthened by the idea of Sweet Home as some kind of distorted version of Eden. Sweet Home is, as earlier mentioned, the ironic name of the farm where Sethe lived her life in captivity. During the time the plantation was governed by Mr. Garner it was a comparatively good place for the slaves. Mr. Garner treated them as humans-asked them for advice, called them men, allowed Baby Suggs’s son Halle to work extra to buy her freedom; he did not abuse Sethe, or let the slave men do it, and he let her “marry” Halle and keep her children. Like God created men, so did Mr. Garner in Paul D’s reflection:

Garner called and announced them men-But only at Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?” (260) It is not until Mr. Garner dies and Schoolteacher arrives, and becomes the new master and the slave’s lives become unbearable and they start planning to escape

In the novel and in the character of Sethe there are traces not only of Christian religion but also of African. It is quite notable that Seth is the name of an ancient Egyptian god, also called Setekh, Setesh or Set. The description of this Egyptian god in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2009) says that, “Seth embodied the necessary and creative element of violence and disorder within the ordered world.” (15), which is a description which is parallel to the novel’s Sethe, who uses brutality to create a necessary change to the white man’s ordered world.

Deborah Ayer Sitter in an article “The Making of a Man: Dialogic Reading in *Beloved*” from *African American Review* asserts that, “ frequently in Morrison’s later works, positive values are associated with specific practices of West African culture: naming traditions, ancestor worship, acceptance of the supernatural, harmony with nature, and the linking of individual wholeness to the rootedness in a community.” (19) The tree in the novel is an important symbol.

The tree symbol is also like a connection to Sethe who is the carrier of the symbolic tree. The scars on her back, from the whipping she was punished with men trying to escape, are shaped like a tree. At least this is how Amy Denver, the white girl, who helped her to deliver the baby during the escape, describes it:

“It’s a tree [-]. A chokeberry tree. See here’s the trunk – it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom.” (93)

This is both a symbol of Sethe’s martyrdom and of her important position for the slaves. Cynthia Dubin Edelburg in an article “Morrison’s Voices: Formal Education, the Work Ethic and the Bible” from *American Literature* claims that the tree is a strong symbol to Morrison. She gives several examples of important tree symbols in Morrison’s other novels and she also comes to the conclusion that, “Morrison posits a kind of primitivism as an answer.”(236) To Paul D, the memory of the big tree Brother on Sweet Home, and the little sapling in Georgia are strong symbols, almost to be considered as deities. At first he finds it hard to recognize the tree on Sethe’s back:

And the wrought-iron maze [---] was in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home. (25)

In the end he seems to acknowledge the tree when “he is thinking about the iron-wrought back” and he decides to finally settle down “to put his story next to hers.”(122) Just as he once found shelter and hope in the god-like trees on Sweet Home and elsewhere, he now appears to accept Sethe as someone you can be near and trust and talk to if you want. Like the trees earlier in his life have been the representatives of his African-rooted primitive religion this role is now taken over by Sethe, the woman who carries the tree on her back.

At the same time the tree can just as well be an allusion to the Biblical Tree of Life. According to *The New English Bible*, “On either side of the river stood a tree of life, which yields twelve crops of fruit, one for each month of year. The leaves of the tree serve for the healing of the nations, and every accursed thing shall disappear.”(Rev 22.2) Nicole M. Coonrad

in *College Literature* points out that Amy Denver, a white girl who has also escaped from a situation similar to slavery. She is an educated slave and shares Sethe's experience of abuse, starvation and escape. Coonradt argues that, "Amy is the positive bridge between black and white."(169), because she is the only white person in the novel who is without any racism. Her assistance in Sethe's birth during the escape gives hope to a union between black and white. The baby Denver is later named after Amy and thereby becoming the carrier of this hope for racial unity. "The leaves of the tree serve for the healing of the nations, and every accursed thing shall disappear."(Rev 22.2) could well be used as a metaphor for healing racial differences and conflicts. In order to ease Sethe's pain Amy drapes spider webs on her bleeding back "saying it was like stringing a tree for Christmas." (94) Coonradt cites Page, who suggests that this is "a reference to celebrating Christ's birth, the fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy."(78)

With the multitude of allusions to both *The Bible* and to the African religion Morrison seems to suggest that Sethe contributes to merge Christian and African values and religion. Her way to freedom and forgiveness is a symbolic way for African-Americans to find a home in their new country. The ambiguity towards the new country that has been forced on them and the longing to be incorporated is expressed in these words: "Paul D could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his [---] and he tried hard not to love it."(316) If Sethe can be forgiven and like, Paul D and Sethe, find hope "for some kind of tomorrow."(322)

For Sethe, social discrimination is a circumstance that oppresses her ability to mother her children, also. Even though Sethe is limited by race, education, economics and family structure due to her status as a runaway slave woman, it is the African-American community of which she is a member that discriminates against her due to what they see as her unjustifiably proud attitude. This is their judgment of Sethe's raised head and straight back as she is being led to the jail after murdering her oldest daughter and attempting to murder her other three children and commit suicide.

Sethe is blamed for abusing her children. Even Paul D, passes judgment on Sethe's mothering: "Your love is too thick. Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leave the yard."(194) This is Paul D's reaction to Sethe's claims when she attempts to save her children from Schoolteacher's reign, from a life of slavery, did indeed work. Paul D's beliefs here only mirror of those in the society. Sethe is condemned for killing her oldest

daughter, for attempting to kill the other three children, for scaring off her sons, for disabling Denver to exist in the outside world, and for not being sorry enough for her decisive acts.

The situation into which Sethe is placed by the community, that being Suggs family unawareness of Schoolteacher's approach, is a direct result of the community's initial condemnation and jealousy towards Baby Suggs for her family's escape from slavery. However their guilt lasts only for few hours. Their community's excommunication of Sethe begins almost immediately after her fatal act. Their disapproval began that fateful day:

Holding the living child, Sethe walked past [the crowd] in their silence and hers. She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all. (152)

Perhaps the most scathing condemnation indictment of Sethe comes from one woman i.e. Ella who can comprehend Sethe's feelings that lead to infanticide, since she too has committed the same act. Ella who was Sethe's closest friend for those twenty eight days, is Sethe's most verbal critic after the incident: "I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children." (187) Morrison writes about Ella, who has also sacrificed a child in connection with her slave experience, and her reaction to Sethe: "She 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." (256) Adding up, the community further blames Sethe as a result of the dead baby's reaction to her killing. The fact that she chooses to haunt Sethe, to them, is proof that Sethe should be punished. Even Baby Suggs believes that the baby exhibits angry blame in return. Baby Suggs explained to Denver that, "the ghost was after Sethe and Baby Suggs too for not doing anything to stop it." (209)

Baby Suggs's belief about the injustice of the act is one of the reasons that she refuses to continue her Clearing Ministry and withdraws from outside life:

There was no grace--imaginary or real--and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that. Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived. [Baby Suggs]

could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten by both, she went to bed. (180)

Morrison also comments on the transformation in Sethe's existence in before and after accounting:

Years ago- when 124 was alive - she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one, for they would not visit her because of the baby ghost filled the house, and she returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated. (96)

She chose a "knotted, private, walk-on-water life," (97) of which the community further objected to. As a result, according to Morrison, "just about everybody in the town was longing for Sethe to come on difficulty times. Her outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it." (171) Whatever may be the reason for the community's blaming the mother, Sethe's life was transformed because of it. At first consideration, this might seem to be a strange occurrence in a Black Community, because a twentieth century notion of motherhood in America would almost require Sethe be a fiercely independent, self sufficient woman. Still, it must be considered that this narrative takes place during the slave era, a time in which the concepts of working together, forming networks, and "it takes a village to raise a child" all still ring true, especially in the African- American slave community. So, her seeming rejection of the community's aid or simple refusal to admit the need for friendship is taken as offensive. According to Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudsons-Weems in *Toni Morrison* her, "aggregation goes beyond mother-in-law, children, and women friends to the community at large."(118) She actually has neighbors of her own. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudsons-Weems continue:

Morrison emphasizes the significance of place, but goes beyond the mere identification of place to the actual grounding of Sethe in a specific community. Thus Sethe is able to transcend her [slave] marginality through the act of 'groundation,' in short, through her incorporation into a community of women and into a community at large (a neighborhood). She thereby achieves a dimension of identity. (118)

This fact is true, but the dimension is short-lived. This identity is later attacked as a result of Sethe's horrendous act and her seemingly prideful reaction to the act.

Perhaps the most significant circumstance that affects Sethe's mothering is her own negative childhood experience. Sethe's mother was hanged as a slave as punishment for a failed escape attempt or insurrection. So, Sethe never has an opportunity to know her mother. Before her mother's death, the work hours prohibited their interaction. For a short time anyway, Sethe is able to gain some daughterly connection with her mother-in-law in the absence of her own mother. Although Sethe has a mother-daughter relationship with Baby Suggs and is able to rely on her physically and spiritually, her biological mother is never far from her memories after her daughter Beloved returns from the dead.

Sethe's mother is not able to perform work as a mother due to the demands of her masters. Sethe tells her daughters:

I didn't see [my mother] but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks--that's the way the others did. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. Too far from the line-up, I guess. (61)

Sethe's yearning to have known her mother and to have shared even the most elementary times with her results in her desperation to be the best mother she can possibly be. Sethe recalls that Nan, the slave nanny and her mother's friend:

had to nurse white babies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. 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. (200)

The most important moment that Sethe ever has with her mother is when she shows Sethe the slave's mark upon her body, "the cross in the circle burned into the skin under her breast, by which Sethe will be able to identify her if the need should ever come." (61) As a result of her motherless childhood, Sethe wishes to be the woman and the mother who has "milk love enough for all." (100) As Paul D informs Sethe, this kind of love is unhealthy for a former slave woman, who might have anyone or anything taken from her at a moment's notice. She is considered overprotective, over obsessed and too prideful because of her attitude about her mothering.

Even though Sethe lacks a real knowledge of her mother when she was a child, she is still able to claim some information about her from Nan, who was assigned to care for Sethe and the other slave children. Her memory of the past also connects her infanticidal act to that of her mother. Sethe recalls Nan telling her mother's story:

She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him." (62)

Therefore, Sethe is the only child her mother conceived in love or conceived willingly at least. Deborah Hevitz even suggests in "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*" in *Studies in American Fiction*, that, "Beloved is not only the reincarnation of Sethe's dead daughter but she is also the detailed representation of Sethe's mother." (158) Not only is she a representative of Sethe's mother, but she represents much more.

Sethe longs for the relationship she was denied with her mother. Sethe tells Beloved: "You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one." (203) Her obsession with mothering her children is a direct result of her denied role as a daughter, but it includes more than her need to protect her children. She is also obsessed with isolating her children from the community that has condemned her behavior.

Simulating the act of her negative daughterhood experience on her mothering, Sethe's love relationships also became oppressive circumstances in her life and affect her mothering as well. However, at times, these relationships enhance Sethe as a person. First there is her marriage to Halle Suggs, the Sweet Home man she chooses to marry and have four children with. Then, there is Paul D, who Sethe knows from the same plantation, but does not see again until eighteen years after she escapes from slavery with her children. It is truly Halle's weakness on the last day she ever sees him that affects Sethe's mothering for many years to come, but she does not find this out until Paul D brings her the news after eighteen years. Sethe's youngest daughter Denver thoughts reveal information about Halle for the reader: Grandma Baby said "she was always a little scared of my daddy. From the beginning, she said, [her son] was too good for the world. My daddy was an angel man. He could look at you and tell where you hurt and he could fix it

too.”(208) Halle was a healer who could not heal himself. Apparently driven insane as he witnessed Sethe’s abuse at the hands of the Schoolteacher and his nephews, he was not able to follow in their quest for freedom. Seeing the very pregnant Sethe held down and being raped of her breast milk by the Schoolteacher’s nephews is what eventually ruined him. By the time her second lover enters her life, she is an isolated woman who is suspicious of those who do not live in her house. She has not opened herself to any other lover for almost two decades.

In “Morrison’s Womanist Remembrances of Things Past” from *Toni Morrison* by Bernard W. Bell comments on Sethe’s state of being, “on a socio-psychological level, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe Sugg’s quest for freedom and psychological wholeness.”(95) Further Bernard W. Bell argues that, “Sethe battles with the horrible memories from the past and with the present revenge of the infant daughter that she killed in order to save her from the living death of slavery.”(95) Sethe’s search for wholeness definitely includes Paul D, but only under the right circumstances, and those circumstances always include what is right for girls.

The question of whether Sethe’s act of cutting her daughter’s throat is murder or sacrifice is one that has been asked repeatedly over time; but it is evident by *Beloved*’s return from the dead and by her treatment of her mother *Beloved* believes Sethe is guilty of murder, abuse or abandonment at least. In *Moorings and Metaphors*, Karla F.C Holloway critiques Sethe’s story: “In *Beloved*, Morrison has written a tragedy of mother-love denied and has revealed its consequence. Sethe, who has lost one daughter to infanticide and whose sons have run away (afraid of the ghostly presence that haunts their house), is vulnerable to the killing spirit of her dead daughter. It is a tragedy complicated by history.”(180) Sethe repeatedly pays for her decision to kill her children regardless of her intention to save her family from a bad fate. Her act is also a tragedy from which Sethe will eventually have to be saved.

Stephanie J. Shaw comments on the topic in “Mothering under Slavery in the Antebellum South”: “Even when slave women had abortions, refused to conceive, or committed infanticide in order to protect children from a lifetime of slavery, they often did so in [what was considered] the interest of mothering”(249), which often served as the slave’s mother’s last options. In fact, Morrison presents the issue of infanticide with Sethe’s mother throwing babies overboard and Ella starving her baby. Although their actions save the children from living as slaves, their motivations are tainted by their emotions about the circumstances under which the children are conceived. Sethe completely loves the children she plans to kill. Still, she spends most of her life

justifying her actions, for as Deborah Horvitz writes, “Certainly one reason Beloved comes back is to pass judgment on Sethe.”(161) Not only does this seem true, but it would be added that Beloved also returns to inflict punishment on Sethe.

Because Sethe, as the widow she believes herself to be, puts her all personal problems into mothering. When asked by Paul D to have another child, the thought of beginning again as a new mother is exhausting for her. However, once she knows who Beloved is, Sethe automatically begins to nurture her even more intensely, and the two women reclaim each other. After Sethe recognizes Beloved as her daughter, she gladly assumes that “she ain’t even mad with me. Not a bit”(182) for her sacrificial act. Beloved easily reclaims Sethe, at first regardless of the act: Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost”(213). However it is Denver, the daughter who has had Sethe all along, who cannot forget the act regardless of her mother’s love.

Once it is discovered and accepted by both Denver and Sethe that Beloved is really their own, it is not long before Beloved wants all of Sethe’s attention for herself and “Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe”(104). After Sethe loses her job and happily settles in to give Beloved all of her attention, their relationship transforms into “furious arguments. The poker slammed up against the wall, all the shouting and crying that followed that one happy January when they played. [. . .] the more [Beloved] took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children”(241). Sethe soon finds that Beloved’s return “to see her face is not for forgiveness or for erasure of her past act, as she believed it to be” (75). Instead of experiencing joys of their mother-daughter relationship, the results are quite different for the women at 124 Bluestone Road:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (250)

After observing the punishment Beloved continuously inflicted on Sethe, “Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing

her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her.”(250) It is this infuriation that eventually saves Sethe’s life, physically anyway.

Elaine Showalter has examined history from the female aspects in her work, *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. She opines that history is divided into three phases namely feminine, feminist and female. The female phase is the phase of self discovery. “Woman turns to the experience of females as a source autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature.”(139) Showalter supports feminist criticism in the female phase. In *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, Showalter claims that the, “gynocritic model constructs the framework to analyze the female experiences in the literature by woman rather by male authors.” (131) Gynocriticism is a way to learn “something solid, enduring and real about the relation of woman to the literary culture.”(49) It concentrates on the newly visible world of the female culture. Toni Morrison’s fictional characters could be analyzed from gynocritic view point because they confront with cultural issues of gender, class as well as race. The world still undermines the black woman. Slaves were treated as subhuman creatures and they received punishment as mutilation of the corpse. In Lunden’s opinion slavery was an odd institution. According to Lunden, “Whites considered slaves as inferior beings due to their race.”(164) Lives of woman slaves were much worst as compared to male slaves due to several reasons. Firstly husbands of slave woman were taken away or sold by the white masters. Secondly black woman were abused and assaulted by rap. White men kept sexual relations with black woman in order to increase their assets. In *Beloved*, the sufferings of a black mother Suggs are portrayed realistically. Sethe kills her daughter to keep her away from reality. Gender smudging is also due to slavery. Duker observes:

Slavery had emasculated Paul D. It stole his manhood by forbidding him to take decisions. While, motherly sensibilities as well as femininity is taken away from Suggs. She has to adopt the masculine traits to ensure the survival of her family. Due to the former servitude, these two characters take the characteristics of the opposite gender. (110)

After finding Sethe in a shed attempting to kill all her children and succeeding with one. Schoolteacher’s nephew concludes that the reason for her actions is that she “went wild” after getting severely beaten by his cousin. This, however is not the case. Psychoanalytic Criticism seeks evidence of unresolved emotions and conflicts and aims to connect past events with the

present. Using Psychoanalytic Criticism, one can conclude that Sethe attempted to kill her children because subconsciously, she would have wanted that to happen that to her before she lived the life of a slave at Sweet Home. By looking at Sethe's past, the real reason behind the actions in the shed is understood. Psychoanalyzing Sethe's past as a slave at Sweet Home, her drive to stay alive so she could have Denver, and her belief in Beloved's spirit haunting her house, helps in understanding why she tried to kill the children.

In the midst of many oppressive circumstances, Sethe's need for coping strategies is definitely understood. It is obvious that her inner strength is the first one on which she relies. Sethe is an extremely strong woman, made strong by enduring many harsh things in her life. In fact she is ostracized by the African-American community for being strong, independent and proud. Morrison gives one example which provides Sethe's strength to endure anything for her children is her sacrifice of her body for the engraving on her daughter's gravestone. Sethe bargains with her body for seven precious letters:

Ten minutes for seven letters. Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life. (5)

This act of sacrifice, one by which Sethe hopes to make a statement to the community that her past actions have all been for the love of the children, is Sethe's attempt to say how much she loved her dead daughter by providing just the right word, "Beloved". Although Sethe's love for her children is characterized as "too thick"(164) by many, no one refutes the fact that she sacrifices greatly for her children. Her mothering is predicated on her goal to keep her children safe and to keep them free from slavery.

Yet another example of Sethe's dependence on her own strength is the account of Sethe's own escape from "the grips of slavery in order to protect her children from what Morrison describes as School teacher's brutal empire".(196) Sethe is married by fourteen and is a mother by fifteen; but she is older and pregnant with her last child before she has to become superior protector of her children. Twenty-eight days after being a free woman, Sethe is forced to make the ultimate sacrifice as a mother. Although she is jailed as a murderer, her attempt to kill her four children is done so that her children would never know the life of a slave, so they would

never be acquainted with “what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble” (251)

The justification of her act definitely forces her to rely on her strength. Being questioned by others about her act forces Sethe to memorize her past in order to justify her acts. Sethe warns Denver: “Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over--over and done with-it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what.” (36) Mothering is something Sethe takes very seriously. Sethe recognizes the sacrifices of other mothers, like those of those of the Saturday girls who trade with their bodies to support their children by working in the slaughterhouse yards after the men have been paid, and for herself (as a mother and a daughter): “I wouldn’t draw breath without my children. I told Baby Suggs that and she got down on her knees to beg God’s pardon for me. Still it’s so. My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is.”(203)

When viewed from an external gaze, Sethe killing of Beloved is considered illegal and immoral. However Morrison delivers the personal testimony of a desperate mother and allows her to justify it as “safety with a handsaw.”(164) Sethe creates the possibility of a mom-enslaving future, by challenging Schoolteacher’s dehumanizing project: “No notebook for my babies”(198) she declares. As a black mother, she finally claims her ownership of her “mother love” and her children in deliberate madness. Since she regards her motherhood her “best thing”, Sethe can be seen as turning the weapon on herself in the same way that Sula, in another Morrison’s texts, inflicts self-harm sooner than experience it at the hands of a white boy whom she encounters. Kathleen Marks examines Sethe’s actions as apotropaic gestures, which are aimed at warding off, or resisting, a danger, a threat or an imperative. More exactly, apotropaic gestures anticipate, mirror and put into effect that which they seek to avoid.”(45) Sethe’s preventing actions severs Schoolteacher’s ability to harm her, but in this liberating moment she also replaces him as the perpetrator of an innocent other.

Sethe also works hard to nurture her children as well as protect them. After Paul D’s baby request, Sethe “was frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring-again. Having to stay alive just that much longer”to protect and care for her child. “O Lord, she thought deliver me. Unless carefree, mother love was a killer.”(132) Morrison, here echoes renowned clinical psychiatrist D. W.

Winicott's theory on "good enough mothering" D.W Winicott in *African American Review* writes, "Only if there is a good-enough mother does the infant start on a process of development that is personal and real. If not, then the infant becomes a collection of reactions to impingement, and the true self fails to form or becomes hidden behind a false self which complies with and generally wards off the world's knocks." (17) Perhaps Stamp Paid captures the words that best describe Sethe's mothering strength: "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter." (234) Bell in *Toni Morrison* pinpoints the self sufficient strength that Morrison creates in Sethe's character:

Sethe's black awareness and rejection of white perceptions and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other slaves as non-human-marking them by letter, law, and lash as both animals and property-are synthesized with her black feminist sense of self-sufficiency. Although Sethe's racial and sexual consciousness are blended, the structure and style of the text foreground the ambivalence of slave women about motherhood that violates their personal integrity and that of their family. (96)

Morrison does not aim at giving the judgment on the act of Sethe. It is left to the readers to analyze her decision. Infanticide was condemned by the society but Sethe is forgiven in the end by the same society. Since solidarity is the proposed solution to the humiliations suffered by the blacks, therefore, the crime of Sethe cannot be viewed as an isolated decision. The community is also directly and indirectly involved in the execution of the infanticide. That is why the community also shares the burden of guilt along with Sethe. But it is not forgetting of the past that the author propagates it is actually living the past to overcome it.

Sethe's consciousness is always working, always a part of her decisions affect her children, the best things in her life. She is indeed, ambivalent too what would destroy her mothering. As strong as Sethe is, she cannot stop her children from leaving; and her strength is what scares some of them.

In the following passage, Nancy Jesser's in *African American Review* words express the future repercussions of one's negative choices, which characterize the motives for and results of the acts committed by Sethe, acts carried out in the interest of mothering, but also in the interest of living as women:

We are bound, to some degree, to act and make rough choices within the

narratives that we live. The specificity of historical moments allows for and demands certain and, at times, mixed-up choices. None are choices for all time, and none are apocalyptic enough to end the history in which we find ourselves. But, Morrison suggests, we bear a kind of haunting from these choices that in turn haunts the future. (341)

Conclusion: Sethe's choice is made out of desperation and need. She needs to spare her children from a life of slavery, a life she knows at first hand. She has no other choice. She believes that she makes all her decisions in the best interest of her children. Her failed plan leads to a lifetime of regrets. This novel examines how oppressive and complicating circumstances can lead to dilemmas and a need for effective coping strategies to manage the responsibilities of mothering.

The difference here is she brings to light the fact that slavery, its effect on the Black American and these incidents of suppression are not just part of mundane American History but a series of incidents, emotions and inhumane acts which is a part of Afro-American heritage to influence on Morrison's work. As it is Morrison's work is unique by its breaking the linear narrative fashion of history by *Beloved* which as a narrative moves forward and backwards circling and spinning as a different way of storytelling, Paul D's arrival for example plunges the story into the past going through the painful experiences of both of them. The fact is that she has murdered Beloved to save her from the future, she actually raises Denver "keeping her from the past." (190) Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs eight children were all taken away from her. She also never got her mother love and care. Halle was caught escaping and had been hung to death. Therefore Sethe is convinced that fate of a child as a slave is doomed to misery, suffering, death and deprivation. This is the cause of Sethe's infanticide which is in her own thought process is a way of saving her child from a hopeless loveless tortured future as a slave.

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