

Slavery and The Burden of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Assistant Professor Ms.K.Vaisnavi¹, Ms. Ancilin Fernando²,

Ms. M. Manoranjani³, Ms. Shreeja Shreekumar Pillai⁴

Department of English

Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies

Abstract- Toni Morrison, a revolutionary figure in Afro-American literature, has played a significant role in creating an African-American narrative by focusing solely on the dreadful situations of her race in America's white-dominated society. This paper focuses on her critically acclaimed novel *Beloved*, which delves deeply into the tragic fate of slaves, particularly slave mothers, and the traumas that slavery brought to motherhood, describing it through the primary characters of Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and *Beloved*. Slavery has been traditionally widespread in Africa and still continues today in some countries. Many African-Americans still hold a good deal of resentment toward white people because of the torture of their ancestors, who were slaves, suffered, and were humiliated. This study gives an understanding of how crucial being a mother is, but it also offers a glimpse into the world where mothers go through immense agony, suffering, and sexual exploitation to protect their children from the same fate, even if it might not have been ethically acceptable.

Index Terms: Slavery, Motherhood, Dehumanization, Memory, Trauma, Freedom, Identity, Infanticide, Survival, Racism, Love and Protection, Oppression, Resistance, Black Community.

I. INTRODUCTION

An actual incident that happened in Kentucky, America, in the middle of the 1800s served as the inspiration for the novel's plot. Margaret Garner, an African American woman who escaped slavery in 1856 by traveling across the Ohio River in the bitterly cold winter. When she was tracked down by her owner in Cincinnati, where she had arrived with her children and mother-in-law, she was captured by the slave owners under fugitive law. Sethe attempted to kill her four children in order to save them from being enslaved and returned to the plantation; however, she was only able to kill her three-year-old daughter, whose name was *Beloved*.

The novel is set in a small village in Ohio, where Sethe, Paul D, and Denver live at 124 Bluestone Stone Road. The protagonist, Sethe, was living and working at Sweet Home plantation as a slave. She was exploited and severely punished by her slave owners. She decided to escape from Sweet Home and never go back to slavery.

The study reveals the unspeakable physical and emotional suffering that Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law) endured at Sweet Home at the hands of white masters. The first line of the novel, "124 was spiteful, full of baby's venom," foreshadows the awaiting horrors and odd occurrences of the novel to the

readers. The ghost of Sethe's deceased daughter, whom Sethe killed herself, haunts the house where they live. When Paul D, a former slave from Sweet Home (the plantation house), comes to live with them, he exorcises the spirit from the house, but what follows is something unbelievable: the spirit of the deceased child comes back in the form of a young girl whose name happens to be Beloved, taken from the gravestone.

The novel highlights the emotional effects of enslavement, but at the same time it shows the consequences of slavery on the psyche of the characters, particularly Sethe. She is a Black woman and protagonist of this novel who is willing to sacrifice anything to prevent her children from falling under the system of slavery. At the age of 13, Sethe arrives at Sweet Home, an idyllic plantation in Kentucky run by Garner, an unusually humane master, and his wife Lillian. During this period, Sethe chose Halle Suggs to be her mate, and they got married at her age of 18. Sethe mentions the fact about her mother, who was a slave too, who worked in the indigo field from dawn to nightfall. Her mother was hanged alive along with other slaves.

After the death of Garner, his wife gives the full control of the plantation over to her brother-in-law, the schoolteacher, who proves to be a brutal master. He beats and abuses his slaves and also takes notes on them and studies them like animals. Slaves were seen as significant economic assets, and their hard work was required for the production of crops and other products. Owners were compelled to squeeze as much work out of them as possible, even if it meant setting them to inhumane circumstances. Slaves were kept under control by the threat of punishment, which included caning, whipping, and even murder. This created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, making it impossible for slaves to speak out against their masters.

The schoolteacher taught his pupils that slaves were more animal than human and had his pupils categorize his slave's characteristics as either animalistic or human. This kind of treatment has damaged a slave's ability to find their own identity since slavery in general was dehumanizing due to the fact that one human being owned another just because of their race. Most slave owners constantly beat their slaves with no regard for their emotions or well-being.

Sixo is one amongst the Sweet Home. He is remembered for walking thirty miles to meet a woman he loves. When Sixo steals a small pig from Sweet Home, he gets confronted by the schoolteacher. The callous master whips him to teach "definition belonged to definers, not to the defined." After his unsuccessful escape attempt from Sweet Home, he is deemed crazy and burned alive in a tree.

As the result of Schoolteacher's cruel behavior, the slaves on Sweet Home, including Sethe, decide to run away from the plantation. Unfortunately, they were caught by their master and his nephews. They captured Sethe, raped her and sucked her milk from her breast when she was pregnant with her fourth child, Denver. The brutal whipping of Sethe opens the skin of her back, and the scars resemble the image of a chokecherry tree.

Through the novel *Beloved*, one can assume that slavery seriously hurt slaves' feelings and emotions. Slaves were considered like beasts or worse, as things that slave owners could buy and sell as they wanted. This was hurting for slaves, knowing that they lost their identity. Schoolteachers and slave masters like him did not regard slaves as human but instead believed that they were sub-human, with human-like and animal-like qualities. This is even the frightful treatment slaves were forced to endure. Not only did the terrible treatment leave physical scars, but also very deep emotional scars. Morrison also reflects the ill-treatment and the tortures that happened in the plantation house

for the Black people who were often locked in little boxes in the ground at night and were subject to sexual harassment and chain gang work throughout the daytime.

“A door of bars that you could lift on hinges like a cage opened into three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt. Two feet of it over his head; three feet of open trench in front of him with anything that crawled or scurried welcome to share that gave calling itself quarters. And there were forty-five more.”(Beloved 125)

Morrison dedicates this novel to “sixty million and more,” the estimated number of blacks who died in slavery. The slaves are motherless, fatherless, and deprived of their mates, their children, and their kin. It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or terrorism but as a matter of everyday legal policy.

Motherhood was a tremendous challenge for Black women, especially under the slave system. In *Beloved*, the slave culture physically and emotionally separates mothers from their children. Women are distinguished from men for one simple reason: they are capable of bearing children. Significant books on the sociological, psychological, and even clinical elements of motherhood have appeared in the recent decade, many of which are written by women who are mothers themselves and understand the strength of the maternal connection.

The novel illustrates how motherhood and the bond between enslaved women and their children were distorted and influenced by slavery. For slaves, becoming a mother was a deadly situation. It was perceived to be a barrier to escape and no protection against sexual abuse. For this reason, many slave women opted for abortion, infanticide, or getting away. Slave mothers were not given the opportunity or freedom to care for their children or fulfill their innate responsibility as caretakers because of the conditions.

Morrison explores the actual fact that slave mothers usually weren't allowed to look after or nurse their children and shows the damage it does to the mother-child relationships. She demonstrates this with three episodes within the novel. i) Sethe's relationship with her own mother; ii) Baby Suggs' relationship with her children; iii) Sethe's relationship with Denver and Beloved.

Sethe does not enjoy the joys of motherhood, either as a child or as a mother. She is fed milk as a baby—not from her own mother, but from Nan, another slave woman, who uses the little milk that remains after nursing white babies. Sethe's mother is also a slave woman who is compelled to work in the fields in order to support the white capitalist society's financial growth. So Sethe doesn't have any pleasant recollections of her early years or of her mother's recognition. They didn't even slept in the same room. It was considered a Black woman's luck if she survived a few months with her child. However, many of these slave women engaged in acts of resistance to assert their power as mothers, revealing the negative impact on relations between parents and children. The pitiful status of a Black mother-daughter connection is obvious from Sethe's mother's speech, in which she teaches Sethe to recognize her by the burnt scar found in her rib (a cross inside a circle).

“I'm the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happened to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.” (B 72)

Sethe has no idea what this mark means to her as a child, and she also attempts to find a clear connection and resemblance between herself and her mother without understanding the shame and anguish that underlie it. Sethe naively requests the same type of mark so that she can be recognized in the event that she disappears. After many years, she receives marks on her back for trying to flee Sweet Home as she begs.

‘Yes ma’am, I said ‘But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me too, I said. ‘Mark me on too, she chuckled....’ She slapped my face.” “I didn’t understand it then. Not till I had a mark on my own”. (B 73).

Children of slave mothers were usually breastfed and raised by older women in their society who had passed their prime for reproduction. Sethe is also forced to live a life devoid of her mother’s affection and care. Nan shares her mother’s story to Sethe about how the male crew members of a ship headed for Africa repeatedly raped and impregnated them.

After surviving the horrors of slavery, she sets out to free herself and her children from the hands of Sweet Home. Her three children are secretly sent to Baby Suggs’ home. She travels from Kentucky to Cincinnati on foot. After overcoming numerous obstacles, she gives birth to her fourth child during her escape to Baby Suggs’ home. Sethe starts to develop a deep affection for her four children after becoming a mother. She is shown as a woman who lives alone with her second daughter, Denver, and has been cut off from her neighborhood. She is a fugitive slave who has the courage to provide herself and her children with a secure environment and future.

Sethe later experiences maternal love from Baby Suggs, who heals the physical and psychological wounds of Sethe. Baby Suggs cleanses and bathes Sethe and gives special care to Sethe’s worn-out and swollen feet. She feels happy and complete when she spends her time with her children outside the plantation house. She could care for, pamper, and love them only after their escape from Sweet Home. Sethe is certain that her children will not be raised by a nanny. She is not going to allow her children to consume the milk that remains after feeding the hungry children of white households. Her affirmation demonstrates that she is a perfect mother who understands her children’s physical, emotional, and psychological needs.

The character Baby Suggs’ ten years of slave life were healed by Halle, who worked day and night and bought freedom for her from Sweet Home Plantation. Though the mother and son did not spend much time together, their bond remains strong. She acts as a mother figure and supporting force for Sethe and her children. She also faced abuse and mistreatment at the hands of white men. She complains that Black motherhood is a loss and sin. She cries out because all her thirteen children were taken away from her and sold into slavery, and no one heard her pain except the god.

In African slavery, slave children are considered as a self-sustaining crop to their white masters. They can be bought and sold, not the mother’s affection and care. Baby Suggs didn’t want to escape, like Sethe, because she was already in her 60s and she was able to be with her son Halle. So she was able to tolerate all the pain and suffering for the little family that she had left in the plantation. Although Halle was the sole reason she stayed, he was also the reason she got freedom. He worked hard on extra Sundays so that she could experience happiness and liberty in the world.

Baby Suggs’ role in her community is not only as a preacher but also as a mother. She encourages her people to embrace their bodies, which they have abused as a result of humiliation from white society. They are considered black, unattractive, animalistic, inhuman, and tiny, and are seen as objects. They hate their own flesh and blood, which is a fundamental component of their identity and character. Her speech to all of the

liberated slaves in her village gives them a fresh perspective on themselves and rejuvenates their bodies, thoughts, and spirits.

Sethe was not able to connect with her real mother as a result she does not know how to bond with her own children, despite her desire to do so. Sethe feels that her maternity is robbed when the cruel masters steal her milk. Milk symbolizes the foundation of a mother's love. The experience of having her milk stolen traumatizes her, which shatters the mother-child attachment. She also believes that a mother's love cannot be categorized as thick or thin. A mother is always committed to her children and loves them wholeheartedly. Her pure motherly love is shown when she murders her dearest daughter with her own hands. The schoolteacher and his nephews came to Ohio to capture Sethe and her children and take them back to slavery. However, Sethe took a risk and tried to murder her children, killing her third child by slitting her throat with a handsaw. Sethe believes that taking her child's life is better than allowing them to live in servitude. The actual murderer of *Beloved* is not Sethe, but the existence of slavery. Sethe believes that the children would be better off dead, shielding their idealized future from the horrible reality of slavery.

Sethe's act contends that it is preferable to die in the cradle or womb than to live one's entire life soul-dead, acting as a puppet, and following the path of someone else's life and demands. The murder of her daughter may appear strange and terrible to those who have never experienced slavery. The truth is that murder draws attention to the historical fact that some Black women strangled their infants during slavery instead of allowing them to be handed up for slavery's dehumanization and destruction. Her monologue is mostly about her longing to be the mother she never was for her deceased daughter, *Beloved*.

Beloved's return to 124 Bluestone House after 19 years urges Sethe to take a protective action for her daughter. When she is with *Beloved*, she becomes trapped in the past. She focuses her efforts on explaining to *Beloved* why she reacted the way she did when Schoolteacher arrived. *Beloved* helps and encourages Sethe to share the stories she never shares—stories of her own individual sense of rejection. The mother-daughter bond becomes reliant, almost parasitic, and ends with Sethe's deterioration. Even in death, *Beloved* is unable to tolerate being parted from her mother.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a painful examination of the harsh realities of slavery, particularly how they intertwine with the experience of motherhood. Morrison exposes the brutality, dehumanization, and relentless destruction of family and identity that enslaved people had to face through Sethe's story. The work does not only tell the facts of slavery; it also portrays its emotional and psychological repercussions, particularly how it keeps haunting those who survive it. For Sethe, being a slave mother means always fearing that her children may be taken away, assaulted, or murdered. Her choice to murder her own daughter rather than see her taken back to slavery exemplifies the unthinkable decisions made by enslaved mothers—where love and protection take forms that violate morality. Ultimately, *Beloved* is a powerful reflection on how the misery of slavery persists even after one achieves physical freedom. By focusing the story around motherhood, Morrison compels us to face the psychological toll of slavery and the unwavering determination needed to restore one's humanity. The novel serves

as a testament to the resilience of those who experienced slavery as well as the generations that are still bearing its effects.

REFERENCES

- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, London, 2010.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. State University of New York Press, 2004.
- “Reflection of Motherhood and Slavery in Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved.’” *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education (JASRAE)*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2020.
- <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1149&context=shureview>
- <https://www.strandmagazine.co.uk/single-post/it-s-called-beloved-for-a-reason-toni-morrison-s-masterpiece>