

RESEARCH ARTICLE

JUSTIFYING THE Paradoxical nature of MOTHERING IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

The standard of the ideal mother (being meek and gentle, produce and nurture children etc.), as defined by American culture was often difficult for many women, particularly Black American women to achieve because of their familial set up and financial condition. Sometimes these women had to act both as the 'mother figure' as well as the 'father figure' due to lack of strong male figure or poverty. The social realities faced by these women often forced them to live a different life style than the one accepted and enforced by society's ideals; for which they had been misjudged by all. Authors such as Toni Morrison, questions this conflict, demonstrating that mothers who do not meet these ideals can still be effective and productive. We can relate it to the mother figures in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) and *Sula* (1974), who made violent choices sometimes not easily understandable by all at first glance. But a close examination of these characters reveals that it is a way of protesting against their decades of suffering against racial and sexual exploration, emotional humiliation. Some mother figures like Sethe in *Beloved* even commit infanticide to protect their children from a dark, painful and horrific future of slavery and also asserting their motherhood in an extra ordinary way. By choosing death to their children, these mothers claim their motherhood in ways that are challenging to understand – and their maternal love in this way puts a paradoxical question regarding mother's right to take the life of the children.

Key Words: slavery, racial oppression, motherhood, paradox

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INTRODUCTION

Given American obsessions with male mythologies, the writers of American fiction seem to challenge the basic assumptions of American culture. Specially the Black female writers create and challenge ideals in representing the mother. While on the one hand,

we see recurring use of the Good mother of mythology, and virtues associated with the life principle (birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance, etc.), on the other hand we also see dark and mysterious mothers performing negative roles associated with the Earth

Mother. This paper seeks to question the ideals of motherhood and maternity in Black American fiction with special reference to the central mother figure in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and to see if the roles of mother can be analyzed in altruistic terms alone or as something that is determined by the social conditions prevailing at a given moment.

Considerable research has been done in the novels written by black women writers. Writers like Betty Overton (1970), Elwanda Ingram (1980), Karen Gaston (1981), deals with the theme of self discovery in the novels of African-American women writers. On the other hand, Sandra waters Holt (1989), Eunsook Koo (1993), and Claudia Tate (1995) has discussed issues of racial conflict, class and gender using feminist literary theories. Moreover, writers such as Robert Nelson and Lori Stephens (2003), Lea Johanna D. Friedly (2007), Christian J. Faxnum O' Leary (2008) and Mr. Deborah and Andrea Wolf (2010) have talked about issues relating both racial and theoretical concepts. Andrea O' Reilly (2004), and Gloria Thomas Pillow (2010), examine motherhood as a patriarchal institution and define the responsibility of a mother dividing it into four interrelated tasks: preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing and healing. Pillow mainly talks about the psychological issues involved in the African-American woman's ability to mother her children in a healthy environment. Almost all the issues of motherhood and mothering have been thus addressed by numerous writers. But the issues of the paradoxical nature of mothering along with the dismantling of stereotyped mother have hardly been addressed in these works. So this paper will deal with these two aspects of motherhood.

METHODOLOGY

The proposed research paper draws from three different critical theories: Marxist theories, Cultural theories and gender theories to examine different aspects of motherhood.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Before making an analysis of the paradoxical nature of mothering in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* and *Sula* it will be reasonable to look into the actual fate of the slave mother since *Beloved* and *Sula* are slave narratives. Motherhood was defined differently for

African- American slaves. It was about an economic system rather than emotional attachment. Nakano Evelyn Glenn has rightly asserted in "Social construction of Mothering: A thematic overview" in *Mothering* that:

Historically African American women were excluded from the dominant cult of domesticity, because they were incorporated into the United States largely to take advantage of their labour, there was little interest in preserving family life or encouraging the cultural and economic development of people of color; people of color were treated as individual units of labor, rather than as members of family units. (Glenn: 5)

Motherhood for slave women was often the result of sexual exploration. In short, the origins of motherhood for many slave women had nothing to do with choices. Toni Morrison through the character of Sethe's mother, Sethe nicely presented how slave women were treated as commodities rather than as individual beings. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses the mother figures Baby Suggs and Sethe's mother to represent the brutal past history of slaves and in Sethe; a combination of past and present.

Sethe's decision of killing her daughter can be treated as a direct influence on her mother's as well as her own horrible experiences of slavery. Adriene Rich in *Of Women Born* writes:

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other – beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival- a knowledge that in subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two like bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other (Rich:220)

Sethe's mother's life exhibits the horrid conditions of slavery. Her mother was a rebel in the sense that she could not tolerate the injustice, which is evidenced by the fact that she was hanging with many others. Prior to the hanging, Sethe's mother shows Sethe her slave marking, explaining-"If

something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." (72)

Sethe's mother is warning Sethe that her death will not be of natural causes, because she is willing to fight her master, fight slavery, even if it results in her death. Sethe's mother is hanged and left in the tree as an example to warn other slaves that rebellious action will not be tolerated; Sethe explained to Paul D: "By the time they cut her down, nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least at all me and I did look." (72)

Sethe's mother did not have time to look after Sethe. Sethe recalls that her biological mother—"must have nursed me two or three weeks---Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was."(73)

It's not that Sethe's mother in unwilling to nurture her baby, but she was not permitted to do so. Sethe is, therefore, physically raised more by Nan, another slave, than by her own mother. But she is highly influenced by her mother's work and rebellious action. In fact Andrea O' Reilly suggests that –

The daughter's eventual maternal subjectivity is determined less by the way she was mothered and more by how she perceived her own mother. A daughter acquires the selfhood needed to mother only by recognizing selfhood in her own mother (Reilly: 104)

It is from Nan, Sethe was aware of the history of her own birth. Nan explains to Sethe how she and Sethe's mother were repeatedly raped by the crew, and then later by other whites. Sethe's mother did not value the lives of the babies conceived out of rape, so she consciously refused motherhood at a time when she could refuse nothing else. But she kept Sethe, as her father was a black man whom she loved: Nan informs her:

Telling you. I am telling you. Small girl Sethe, -----

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 (73)

Sethe's mother, her behavior, her words, death, all profoundly affect Sethe, perhaps more than Nan's other mothering because of the emblematic nature of her 'mothering. Whether consciously or unconsciously Sethe's mother does what actual slave- mothers would have done in such situations. Barbara Turnage has rightly observed in "The Global Self-Esteem of an African-American Adolescent Female and Her Relationship with Her Mother" that

The relationship between these African-American young women and their mothers instilled in them the knowledge that they are competent and lovable. Based on their trust in their mothers, these young women believed, when confronted with difficult situations, that they could rely on their mothers' assistance. Thus, as they grow into black womanhood, they grow with the knowledge that they can accomplish their goals and that they are worthy of love and respect. (Turnage: 184)

Sethe also relied on her mother growing into a woman who could comprehend the potential of choice in a world in which no choice is given to African- American Women and late in the novel she used choice as a defense mechanism.

In order to understand Sethe's dilemma, we will have to realize the weird social set up of contemporary America, where slaves are treated as animals. Sethe's fate is able to focus simultaneously on various traumas a slave woman was to under-go before the elimination of slavery in America. As a slave woman in sweet home (under Garnar and school teacher) Sethe had to face intolerable physical violence and mental trauma symbolic of the total subjugation of a race which was made a victim of sexism and racism, practiced successfully to demolish their individuality. The sweet home under Garner, though, did not promise any freedom to Sethe but it differently held out a promise of a well fed and secure existence. But the school teacher treated Sethe and other slaves as animals. He does not differentiate between a slave and other animals, as evident in the following lines, spoken to chastise the nephew who had bitten a black woman bitterly.

"Just think –what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education.----- Suppose

you beat the hounds past that point that way, Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else." (176)

Sexual violation on the part of the Black woman is very common in slavery. The same happened to Sethe when the school teacher ordered his nephews to suckle her breasts to collect material for his pseudo- scientific study to prove the sub humanity of blacks. The mother's milk, the very symbol of maternal love and nurturance is thus stolen from Sethe by the mossy- toothed nephew of the school teacher while she was held down by the other nephew. This brutal act represents the ultimate violation of her maternal love. Her milk, which was wrested from her breasts against her will symbolizes not only the invasion of her body, but also Sethe's unfulfilled desire or failure as a mother to nurture and love her baby. She remembered what it feels like for a baby not to have her own mother's milk or to have milk that is left over.

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 that it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have no fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. I'll tell Beloved about that; She'll understand. She my daughter. The one I manage to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it. (236)

This oblique reference to *Beloved* shows her unfulfilled desire to nurture her. That is why, when Sethe realizes that her murdered daughter has returned in the flesh from "the time less place", she tries to make up her broken promise of maternal love by attempting to fulfill Beloved's insatiable desires. Sethe plays with her, decorates the house with flowers, and makes the food that Beloved wants. Sethe tries to explain the reasons why she did what she did, in away rationalizing her act of infanticide. "Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (236). Now she is ready to "give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears (286). Sethe's

spontaneous reaction at the approaching of the school teacher and the sheriff towards the house, shows her deep concern for her children. She does not want to surrender her children to the cruelty perpetuated in her,

---- When she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, No No, Nono, No no no. simple. She just flew collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and, carried, pushed, dragged, them through the veil, out, away, over their where no one could hear them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (192).

Thus, it is very much distinct that the mother here is only concerned about the safety and security of her child.

It is quite pathetic on the part of Sethe to preserve the memory of her daughter *Beloved*, after eighteen years of her death. Sethe is running away from her dark past physically, but on emotional and psychological level, she is still haunted by the horrors of her past.

Her day consists of beating back the past, keeping it at bay, yet still dwelling within it. Sethe once told Denver;

Some things go, pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my memory. You know some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it is not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the places the picture of it – stays, and not just in my re memory but out there in the world. (35-36)

There are so many shocking scenes in *Beloved* through which Morrison indicates Sethe's heart-breaking response to the trauma of motherhood under slavery and in particular, *Beloved's* death. Sethe does not apprehend color. It is as if the death

of her child has worn out the entire colour of her life. Sethe does not even miss its absence.

Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it-----Deliberate, because the last colour she remembered was the pink chip in the headstone of her baby girl-- ----Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarks in colour. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips and that was the last of it.(39)

Sethe's inability to acknowledge colour reflects how the scene of murdering of her child is embedded in her psyche.

Her deep feeling indicates how desperately she longed for her lost daughter Beloved whom she could not provide maternal love she needed. O'Reilly correctly assert in *Toni Morrison and motherhood*

The infanticide is not----- an isolated event and thus must be read in the context of Sethe's earlier mothering at sweet home and the time she spends with her children at 124-----Prior to the sight at school teachers hat, Sethe behaves in the way expected of mothers: she loves her children and strives to ensure their well being and safety. (Reilly: 155)

Thus Sethe's act of killing her child is justified. She wanted to save her daughter from the horrific life she experienced under slavery.

CONCLUSION

Though apparently Sethe cannot be termed as a benevolent mother for committing infanticide, it is her intense and sensitive love for her children which acted as a driving force for the same. When she sees the school teacher and the sheriff coming towards the house, she immediately visualizes the dark future of the children and she protests in a strange way. Sethe's subhuman act of murdering her child cannot be explained with traditional interpretation, and common viewpoints regarding motherhood. In normal circumstances, the child's needs are more valued than the mother and the mother is supposed to protect the child in any harsh conditions.

Apparently, in Sethe's case we see the opposite scenario. Mother being alive, killed the child. But, as Sharon Hays in *The cultural contradiction of Motherhood* observes:

Every mother's ideas about mothering are shaped by a complex map of her class position, race, ethnic heritage, religious background, political beliefs, sexual preferences, physical abilities and disabilities, citizenship status, participation in various subcultures, place of residence, work place environment, formal education, the techniques her own parents used to raise her- and more.(Hays:76)

Therefore, we have enough reason to consider Sethe's act of infanticide as the positive aspect of mothering and to justify the paradoxical nature of mothering at the same time.

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