

# “Flesh that weeps, laughs”: Unravelling the Mystery of Mother and Daughter Bond in *Beloved*

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Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face;

You are me

You are mine

In America, the black man was not allowed to form or protect his family. As a result, the burden of the family had to be taken up by the black woman; perhaps this explains the apparently matriarchal set up of the community in America. As the mother runs the family, the daughter learns every thing from her mother. The effect of such a bond can be very strong but, in Morrison’s world of fiction this relationship can be destructive as well as positive. Living in the classicist, racist and sexist society, the black slave woman, “sharing her godliness with her female children”<sup>1</sup> faces different kinds of humiliation. Toni Morrison exposes these scars inflicted upon the African-American mothers and their daughters - the ordeals they have suffered, and especially the physical and psychological damage that slavery has caused to the mother child relationship.

Toni Morrison’s fifth novel *Beloved* (1987) presents the awful and haunting effects of slavery on a black mother. *Beloved* is a narrative of the humiliation of a nineteenth century slave mother, “a Media like woman who murders her daughter to save her from a slave master”.<sup>2</sup> The book both thematizes and problematizes the conflict between compulsive forces of a system and maternal instincts. Several questions come to mind while reading *Beloved*; questions like whether the black mother Sethe’s act of infanticide is a triumph of her motherhood which slavery tries to render meaningless for black women and whether “maternal bonds can stunt a woman’s individuation and sense of self”<sup>3</sup> and eventually what are the effects on the mother of the destructive and constructive roles played by the daughters - Beloved and Denver - respectively. Different kinds of mother- daughter relationships as well as other forms of female bonding have been delineated in *Beloved*. These include the relation between the five pairs- Sethe and her mother, Sethe and Baby Suggs, Sethe and Beloved, Sethe and Denver and Denver and Beloved. We find that these characters are linked together to tell the readers how black women survive and keep their history alive by means of striking mutual female bonding.

*Beloved* examines America's past of slavery and is dedicated to the "Sixty Million and More"<sup>4</sup> Africans who died in the Middle Passage on the slave ships to America. Morrison's main aim in writing this novel was to retell a history that is unrecorded and untaught in mainstream education. Morrison has to a great extent relied on oral history, and attempted to replicate the black female slave's voice, her 'unspeakable thoughts unspoken'.

The story is set during an appalling period in America's history: the years of the Civil War and of slavery. After the civil war ended, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, life was still dreadful for black people, whether slaves or freed. The genesis of *Beloved* came when Morrison worked as an editor while on a project; the author came across the story of a slave woman, Margaret Garner, who killed one child and tried to kill three others to keep them from being returned to slavery. The story of Margaret Garner was the basis of *Beloved*. Toni Morrison focuses on the issue of slavery by fictionalising the historical fact that slave mothers sometimes would have killed their children rather than allowing them to become slaves. Like Garner Sethe kills her daughter and attempts to destroy her other children in order to prevent them from being recaptured as fugitives. Morrison says she wrote *Beloved* with the apprehension:

This has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean its national amnesia.<sup>5</sup>

The immediate setting of the novel, as it opens, is 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe resides in a small house with her daughter, Denver. Her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, has recently died and her two sons, Howard and Buglar, have left home unable to live any longer in a ghost haunted house with a mother who seems indifferent to the disturbing presence. Sethe seems locked in memories of her escape from slavery, the failure of her husband, Halle to show up at the planned time of escape, her murder of her daughter, and the Kentucky plantation referred to by its benevolent white slave owner as 'Sweet Home'. One of the Sweet Home men, Paul D, inadvertently arrives on her porch after years of wandering, locked in his own guilt, alienation, and shame from the psychic scars of slavery. Sethe and Paul D become lovers and share their painful past experiences. Unable to tolerate the presence of the ghost (Sethe's murdered daughter Beloved), however, he drives it away, only to be driven away himself by his inability to cope with Sethe's obsession with Beloved. A bond of affection unites the three women Sethe, Denver and Beloved, in which Paul D appears redundant. Eventually however Denver realizes that her mother has become oblivious about her and has begun to devote her attention exclusively to Beloved. As she watches her mother deteriorate physically and mentally in the grips of overwhelming guilt and consuming love, Denver realizes that she must abandon the security of her home to get help for her mother and also to get rid of Beloved once and for all. With the help of the black community, she eventually rescues her mother and Beloved disappears mysteriously.

Sethe is a pivotal character in *Beloved*. The narrative voice of the novel is most often hers as she relives and 'rememories' the awfulness of her life as a slave, a mother, and a daughter. Married at fourteen, Sethe is pregnant with her fourth child by nineteen. The slave women were not recognized by their masters as mothers who could have bonds with their children just like his own mother or wife; she was rather considered only a breeder and worker. The slave owners had no scruples about selling children away from

their mothers. Although Mr. Garner takes pride of the treatment of his male slaves, he nevertheless has the slave-master's agenda of using slave women for the purpose of child bearing. School teacher also values Sethe for her child bearing capabilities.

Sethe determines to kill all her children rather than allow them to be returned to a life of slavery, and manages to kill one daughter, Beloved. The "murder becomes Sethe's act of mother love".<sup>6</sup> The novel is remarkable for its demonstration of the concern that slave mothers had for the welfare of their children - their extreme anguish, tension and helplessness vis-a vis their own children. Sethe remembers that slavery has denied her a relationship with her own mother and she determines to have a nurturing relationship with her own children.

Sethe rarely saw her mother and was brought up by a one-armed woman named Nan, while her mother worked in the fields as a slave. Sethe only recognizes her mother by her cloth hat and by the mark on her chest. Sethe's childish request for a mark of her own is a desperate plea for a recognizable, even if external, bond that would link her with her mother. Caroline Brody suggests that this may also mean the daughter's reckless willingness to bear the mark of the mother's pain.<sup>7</sup> Sethe is presumably a second-generation slave, since she can remember her mother speaking another language (62) and being told of her repeated rapes during the voyage to America. Her memories of her youth are vague, and by the age of thirteen she is sold to Sweet Home, a farm in Kentucky. In the penultimate section of the novel, she complains that "her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere" (272). Thus, the very memory of her mother also involves for Sethe a memory of pain and loss. The fact that Sethe's mother claimed and named her is significant. It is pertinent to note here that Sethe's mother rejected, 'threw away' (63) her unwanted offspring and this reiterates the issue of infanticide which runs through the text.

The relationship between Sethe and her mother is significant in terms of the novel's focus on the complex maternal love which forms the core of the text. We come to know that Sethe was only nursed for a few weeks. The fact that she had been dispossessed of her due continues to sadden her even years afterwards: "There was no nursing milk to call my own. "(200) and, "another woman's tit that never had enough for all." (203). Black women were often wet nurses for the children of their white owners, another example of the appropriation of black bodies by their non-black proprietors. Sethe does not know why her mother was hanged just as Baby Suggs does not know what happened to most of her children. Sethe is stripped of her bearings in what may be part of a conscious 'disremembering.' She asks Beloved: "You disremember everything? I never knew my mother neither" (119), making a subconscious association between active forgetting and the relationship between mothers and daughters.

Sethe mentally reproaches her mother for never having let her be a daughter. A daughter is what she 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) But then how would Sethe have a proper relationship with a mother who had suckled her daughter only for a week or two? She would never allow that to happen to any daughter of hers.

Sethe, in her intense alienation, seems to get irrational to the extent that she fails to concede her mother's helplessness, fails to guess her mother's possible suffering at not being able to nurse her daughter.

Another dimension of the mother - daughter relationship has been explored through Sethe's bond with Baby Suggs. The need for women to reestablish connection with one another is powerfully rendered in Morrison's *Beloved*. It was indeed a crucial factor in that era of slavery because there was an extreme need for physical and mental sanity for survival. Commenting on her effort to explore a relationship between two women, Morrison says:

We read about Ajax and Achilles willing to die for each other, but very little about the friendship of women, and them having respect for each other, like its something new. But black women had always had that, they have always been emotional life supports for each other.<sup>8</sup>

The novel treats the theme of the mother as nurturer and protector through the character of Baby Suggs who emerges to be an iconic mother figure in the context. And the mother daughter bonding between the two is one of love, care and respect. Baby's love and care sustained Sethe through trials and ordeals: "Baby Sugg's long distance love was equal to any skin close love she had known." (95)

When Sethe arrived with her newborn daughter, Denver, tied to her chest after running away from slavery, Baby Suggs welcomed her. Sethe was too exhausted to wake her children in the night. Baby Suggs bathed her, cleaned and oiled, warmed and consoled Sethe and cleaned the eyes of the newborn with its mother's urine. Baby Suggs celebrated Sethe's reunion with the family along with her four grand children. Here we get a complete matrilinear family picture dominated by the grandmother, mother, and her children. It is the care and concern of Baby Suggs that puts new life into the worn out body and mind of her daughter-in-law. She tells Sethe to lay all misery, sorrow and shock of losing her husband, Halle, aside. Before nine years at Sweet Home, Baby had soothed her by "pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice." (86)

The nurturing quality of the mother/ ancestress in Baby Suggs acquires symbolic suggestions. The lesson she learnt and taught everyone was "love you heart." (89) As Sethe learnt female rites from Baby it brought her close to her ancestress. Baby initiated Sethe into the wisdom and beliefs and souls of her people. It is the strong mother figure of Baby that awakens in Sethe the desire to know her past and to love herself as a person in her own right. Baby enhances Sethe's sense of womanhood and their bond is made stronger. Thus, a sort of female solidarity and bonding develops between the mother(-in-law) and the daughter(-in-law) to stand by each other in the face of threats from white slave runners and slave-catchers, the perpetual insecurity and the chronic trauma.

The first twenty-eight happy days Sethe spent in the company of Baby were followed by eighteen years of a solitary life because the community that had loved and respected Baby Suggs stepped back when Sethe killed her own daughter, Beloved. Baby sinks into depression as she cannot reconcile with the fact that white men are still allowed to violate the sanctity and privacy and safety of her home. She painfully realizes at the end that there is nothing for a Negro to do but only to endure the whites. Baby shrinks into death when she experiences American culture's denial of and intention to destroy her daughter-in-law's mothering; and with the annihilation of Sethe's motherhood, her own grandmothering is also obviated. The

institution of slavery denies Sethe her mothering and destroys the natural cycles of maternal bonding - the bonding between grandmother-mother and daughter(s).

However, we can say that Baby Suggs, to some extent, filled the void in Sethe's heart, the void that had been created by the absence of her own mother; it is a void that every daughter wants to fill up with a mother's love and care. Thus, as Sethe is denied a relationship with her own mother, her mother-in-law assumes the position and responsibility of surrogate mother and leaves some sustaining memories for her.

Earlier Amy Denver, a white teenaged woman, meets Sethe and restores her to life by massaging her swollen feet "until she cried salt tears" (82). It is Amy's role as midwife who delivers Sethe's daughter, Denver, that bonds the women together. Sethe's womanhood is nurtured by Amy's strength. The song which Amy sings to comfort Sethe conflates mother-love with mother-pain. The memory of the song and of the way in which her mother used to sing to her suggests the absence of her mother. Yet it is her remembered presence which enables Amy to bond with Sethe, saving her and her child from certain death.

*Beloved* offers positive images of female friendship in which women work together to empower women, much like the women in *Colour Purple* by Alice Walker. Both Amy, Denver and Baby Suggs help heal Sethe in body and spirit during and after Sethe's escape and journey to 124. Denver turns to the female community for literal and emotional sustenance. The female chorus that arrives at 124 at the end of the novel, not only exorcise Beloved's ghost to save Sethe; they also exorcise their hatred and restructure the community to include those whom they previously denounced. The novel enables its African-American readers to live the experience of slavery in their minds and to join in the healing primal sound of the women who come to Sethe's yard. By speaking the horror, Morrison assumes and helps to create the community that can hear it and transform it. The restoration of a sisterhood devoted to inclusion and healing in *Beloved* is somewhat absent in *Sula*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> K. Holloway and D. Stephanie, *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) 26.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Johnson, "Novelists of Memory," *The American Review* 33.1 (1989): 37-38.

<sup>3</sup> Stefanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Harold Bloom (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2007) 70.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (UK: Vintage, 1987) V.

<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Angelo, "The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Daniel Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: UPM, 1994) 120.

<sup>6</sup> Marcia Ann Gillespie, "Toni Morrison," *MS* 17 (1988): 60.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory', and a Clamour for a Kiss," *Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Harold Bloom, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Helen Washington, ed., *Midnight Birds* (New York: Anchor Press, 1980), XVI.