

SLAVE MENTALITY AND MOTHERHOOD IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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In her Pulitzer-Prize winning novel Toni Morrison reflects on the slave past and its effect on future generations, in the process she raises questions concerning female identity, mentality, motherhood, memory, and trauma among others. The experience of the world slave women had cannot be compared to the one of their white counterparts and men as a whole. Due to this fact since the publication of the novel this silent perspective has remained an interesting topic of discussion. We shall continue this discussion by tracing the effects of slavery on the human psyche and by examining motherhood in connection to the loss of self and to the female body. The relevance of the themes of the work continues to resonate with 21st – century society and offer new possibilities for understanding the world.

Key words: slavery, Toni Morrison, motherhood, (re)memory, female body, neo-slave narratives, maternal subjectivity

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is said to have completely changed the literary scene in the United States as it opened the door for a whole generation of ambitious African-American writers. The author had achieved critical attention in the 1970s and early 1980s but not on such a scope as she would reach with the publication of her seminal work *Beloved* in 1987. The novel, which relates the story of a runaway slave in the aftermath of the Civil War through the use of flashbacks, became an instant success in literary and popular circles, and was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Written in the style of magical realism, the work explores themes of loss, violence, choice, memory, gender, race, and time among others at the peak of the 19th century. One African-American mother tries to survive, save her children, and rediscover her identity at a time when the slave woman/mother was seen as a non-human. The purpose of this article is to analyze the life and stories of women during slavery, how their way of thought and actions were presupposed by the period, as well as to add one more layer through the examination of motherhood and

the hard choices mothers are required to make. Further exploration of the functions and utilization of the female body in the narrative structure shall uncover areas of female existence and sexuality. Finally, the fact that the work mirrors and reimagines the slave narrative genre for a new age and from a new perspective also proves interesting from a critical point of view.

In the early 70s, Toni Morrison helps in compiling and editing a collection of pictures, newspaper clippings, and stories about the life of African-Americans in the US, called *The Black Book*. Although she is not explicitly stated as an editor, her contribution is immense, going as far as being called an originator. The stories of common African-Americans struggling to survive and find a concrete place on the American soil appear in the book. One of those stories tells us about the tragic occurrences in Margaret Garner's life, a slave who killed her child rather than letting it be taken back into slavery. Ten years later, this unspeakable act would become the basis for Morrison's career-defining novel, *Beloved*. Notwithstanding the novel's inspiration from real history, the author didn't fully implement the story as it happened but breathed new life into an old event from a postmodern stand. In an interview with Marsha Darling from 1988 she says: "I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life... recording her life as lived would not interest me" (Darling 1994: 248). The author did not see herself as a historian but as a writer in need of creative space where she could imagine a new historiography. Even though she reimagined a real, cruel story, at the end of the novel she offered her main heroine, Sethe, a second chance and a future. Margaret Garner did not have the same luck because after killing her child, although she was never tried for it, she was imprisoned for running away, and later "again engulfed [sic] in the abyss of slavery" (May 1999: 34). It must also be mentioned that she never regretted her actions. Mrs. Garner, when asked about it, firmly stated that the child was hers and it was the right thing to do (May 1999: 35). Sethe differs from her in many ways and the disparity stems from the possibility of healing through (re)memory, and love offered in the novel. History cannot be changed, but it can be remembered, re-experienced, and accepted. Toni Morrison believes in the power of history and its ability to further life and strengthen the connection to one's community.

Beloved is written in the style of the slave narratives from the 19th century which were finding new audiences and rising in popularity in the 60s and 70s. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* had been recently rediscovered due to the efforts of Third Wave feminism.

Therefore, the genre was a talking point in the African-American community. The accounts given in slave narratives reveal the harsh conditions under which slaves lived as well as their attempts to escape and find freedom in a world that can only offer them cruelty. The last decades of the 20th century saw an emergence of a new literary genre that can be viewed as a new interpretation of the slave narrative, the neo-slave narrative. According to Valerie Smith, the neo-slave narrative is a modern story about the escape from bondage that incorporates elements from the oral tradition and it can be set during slavery or it may cover the period after it, evaluating its consequences and effect (Smith 2007: 189). It has become a very popular medium for African-American writers because they attempt to use it as a way to reconsider issues connected to the core of identity building for the African-American people. Those issues include the repercussions of slavery on future generations, memory, gender, the body, the power of orality, morality, freedom, mentality, etc. Toni Morrison had the opportunity to discuss all of these topics in her novel *Beloved*, one of the prime examples of a neo-slave narrative. She had the education, imagination, and the help of new developments in psychoanalysis and other theoretical works in the *post-* era to reassess the slave past for future generations. She dedicated the novel to “sixty million and more” (Morrison 2007: v) who lost their lives during the prolonged centuries of misfortune. And as Ashraf Rushdy claims, the neo-slave narratives are able to reevaluate the tradition that romanticizes slavery by excluding the first-hand accounts as not academic (Rushdy 1999: 6). Authors want to reassert the pertinence of the first-hand experience and to find the traces that still haunt current generations. Toni Morrison strives to represent a picture of the plight and hardship of a whole community through the scars on Sethe’s body, the immobility of Baby Suggs, the painful memories in Paul D’s psyche, as well as through *unspeakable* acts and the return of the ghost.

The discussion of neo-slave narratives directs us towards the question of gender since Toni Morrison’s focal character is female and the plot of the novel depends on the experiences of this heroine. African-American women during slavery were affected by the world around them differently than men and their white counterparts. Therefore, their mentality would differ and would be dependent on their surroundings and the roles they were required to take. In her influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, Hortense Spillers discusses the state of female slaves and their maternity as she attempts to show that their right to motherhood and femininity was non-existent and,

because of that, gender either had a different significance, or lack of one. She says that “the quintessential slave is not a male, but a female” (Spillers 1997: 394) because the slave woman performed hard physical labor, as well as domestic tasks and the part of being a breeder of new workers. Female slaves almost certainly did not receive preferential treatment because of their sex and their breeding capabilities. They were treated regardless of gender. In the novel, Sethe recalls her time in captivity as “after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses. But I wasn’t too nasty to cook their food or take care of Mrs. Garner” (Morrison 2007: 236-7). Sethe is equated with an animal but even on that scale she holds a certain position in the hierarchy which puts her below horses. The double standard becomes evident quickly from the given excerpt, Sethe is dirty and non-human according to the white society, but apparently she is clean enough to do the servants’ work. This kind of treatment was usual for women during slavery and the main heroine is not the exception to the rule, she is one of many exploited at the hands of an unjust system. She is denied the traditional Western definition of gender because the system of slavery erased her domestic and public sphere, as well as her claim to her offspring. There is a number of critical works problematizing gender attribution when analyzing *Beloved* due to the fact that the novel accurately reflects *unspoken* historical truths. Venetria Patton suggests that the only thing that differentiated male from female slaves was the ability to give birth (Patton 2000: 8). Moreover, the female was denied her right/rite to motherhood which affects identity formation and leads us to the conclusion that women during slavery were not seen as either women or mothers: a statement reiterated in the works by Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, and Angela Davis¹ in a variety of forms. An exploration of the consequent mentality of denial and lack coupled with the forceful claim over motherhood would give way into the understanding of identity and the literary and cultural significance of *Beloved*.

Sethe’s slave mentality is best represented when it affects her as a mother and lover. Slave mentality is the effect of slavery on the human psyche, in most cases it leads to a deep-rooted devaluation of self. Sethe does not value herself because selfhood for her acquires a lesser position than motherhood. She is ready to sacrifice her identity for her children.

¹ Davis, Angela. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 3, #4, 1971, pp. 2-15.

hooks, bell. *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.

Besides that, years of deprivation and racism have damaged her psyche and assuredness in her self-worth. The only way she can grow psychologically is through facing the past and attempting to heal through love, thus she would find a better future and ascension. We shall analyze the evolution of her mentality through the bodily representation of trauma and womanhood, her motherhood, and the power of healing. In 1976, Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" appeared in English and provided new ideas of how to write as a woman. She claims in it that

women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse... such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax... [they] will go right up to the impossible. (Cixous 1976: 886)

Toni Morrison has achieved both requisites that Cixous poses. She has managed to situate the female body as a carrier of life and death, and has constructed a narrative which mirrors the unspeakable nature of slavery, full of incoherence, ellipses, challenges aimed at temporality, and the division between past, present, and future. Talking about the body and its representation, we encounter it first when Sethe exchanges sex for an engraving on Beloved's headstone. "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" (Morrison 2007: 7). Defiling Sethe's body is equal to the defiling of the whole community. The representation of the female flesh as a commodity or merchandise, how Sethe is willing to sell it for her daughter, and its metaphorical meaning reveals the way the author has managed to invent the new language Cixous is talking about. The author successfully documents the female experience through the bodily experience.

Furthermore, the author presents us with other events where the maternal body is self-defining for the main heroine. Sethe's back is maimed through beating and the scars have supposedly acquired the form of a tree. After Sethe has her daughter Denver, her breasts are full of milk and she says that "those boys came in there and took my milk" (Morrison 2007: 19), referring to her slave owners claiming and stealing her breast milk. She complained about it and would not let them, consequently they decided to beat her up and split the skin on her back, leaving the tangles of the branches of a tree. Her body is taken over by the slave holders and she has an obligation to herself to return it into her own control. She can achieve that through the power of her body to preserve and create life. On

the topic of Sethe's motherhood, Elizabeth Beaulieu stipulates that "at every turn we are reminded of Sethe's nurturing properties" (Beaulieu 1993: 9). We are made aware of them through the frequent attention aimed at Sethe's breasts, back, blood, milk, and other bodily fluids. They signify her incessant strive to feed and care for her children, as well as the torture she was subjected to in Sweet Home. Later in the novel, she claims that she made the "ink" (Morrison 2007: 320) which is reminiscent of the white ink Hélène Cixous writes about and symbolizes her inherent capacity for nurturance and love as well as creative freedom. When you are able to claim your body and kin, then you are free. Michele Mock suggests that Sethe passes knowledge onto Denver through nourishing her with blood and milk (Mock 1996: 123). Freedom for Sethe then would be the opportunity to achieve this caring and to be able to surrender one's body and being to one's children. This is due to the fact that the period of being away from slavery for Sethe is equated to a time of motherhood.

The most demanding test of her resilience and bodily strength happens during her journey to freedom when she gives birth in a boat in the wilderness. Denver is born due to her mother's unyielding determination to give life with the help of a white servant girl called Amy. The scene is presented explicitly in the novel. Images of blood and water pervade the narrative. "And the strong hands went to work a fourth time, none too soon, for river water, seeping through any hole it chose, was spreading over Sethe's hips" (Morrison 2007: 99). The water seems to help the process of birth and it signifies fluidity. It appears in the narrative in other places, too, and it certainly depicts another aspect of the body. Fluidity and liquid encompass the whole scene and affect the perception of the reader. Denver exists because of the fearlessness of two "lawless outlaws" (Morrison 2007: 100) who, faced with punishment and jail, perform a deed that positions life over the law. Carol Poston argues that childbirth is a rare topic in literary works and when it actually occurs one of the problems that arises is that it is recounted in a language that belongs to men. Due to this, a lot of women readers cannot relate with the characters and feel a distance between the real experience and the fictional one. According to her, the way childbirth has been represented has always been as not fully human (Poston 1978: 20). The scene we are presented with in *Beloved* leaves a lot to the imagination of the reader, so in a way it manages to subvert the existing discourse about childbirth. It is structured in such a way that the readers could fill in the text with their own ideas and through their own personal experience. The importance and centrality of this scene cannot be questioned and Linda Wagner-Martin goes as far as to

state that “Sethe’s giving birth become[s] talismanic for this woman-centered narrative” (Wagner-Martin 2014: 70). Its pertinence lies in the manner in which it changes the expectations a reader has for a story as well as the perspective from which unspoken things were previously fleshed out. Positioning childbirth in the center of the novel allows the author to break with pre-existing taboos and euphemisms used for its description. Amy’s help in the process remains ambiguous but it leads us to the conclusion that in a time of high danger humanity and female connection can override/write racism and hate.

Morrison’s use of the body points us in the direction of the overarching topic of the novel, motherhood, because the body is always presented in connection with the woman-mother. Since the middle of the 70s feminists have been very much interested in discussing motherhood and mother-daughter relationships from a psychoanalytical point of view. Their ultimate goal was to re-write and enrich the existing texts by eminent thinkers, mainly Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan. *Beloved* comes in the aftermath of a century of “books, articles in scholarly journals, essays in popular magazines, novels, poems and plays, films and television scenarios, discussion groups at national and international conferences” (Hirsch 1981: 201) aimed at shedding light on the subliminal bond between mothers and daughters, as well as motherhood as a whole. The novel breaks new ground by representing *excessive* mothering in the harshest conditions. By excessive mothering we would mean the full surrender of self on the part of the mother for her children. While being enslaved, Sethe did not have a right over her kin and that remained problematic in her psyche because it emerged as an inability to nurture and to possess. Even though she earns her freedom, she internalizes slavery and the lack of choice, so she would later try and compensate for the past boundaries. When the white slave owner comes to take her and her family back into slavery, she decides to kill her children and herself rather than go. She manages to kill only her infant daughter, Beloved, who is two years old at the time. Ridden with guilt, Sethe is not regretful and says “I’ll explain to her even though I don’t have to. 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” (Morrison 2007: 236). The act is committed due to Sethe’s past experience and her inability to imagine a better fate for her daughter in the future. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos calls it “the ultimate act of protection” and compares Sethe to a cat who would eat her babies to protect them from danger (Demetrakopoulos 1992: 53). The prospects of the foreseeable future prove to be worse than death and she chooses a questionable act of protection. A lot has been written about right,

responsibility, and judgment as connected to this unspeakable act. But in the manner in which it is represented, the judgment whether Sethe had the right to do it rests solely in Beloved's hands. Nobody else is allowed to criticize and condemn Sethe besides the person affected by her decision. Toni Morrison achieves this reckoning by having the ghost of Beloved return, haunt the house and later torture, physically and psychologically, Sethe.

Shortly after Beloved dies, Baby Suggs passes away as well, and Sethe's sons leave for a new town because they cannot live with the actions of their mother and the presence of the ghost in the house. Sethe is left alone with Denver and the spirit of Beloved. Each survives on their own until a man, Paul D, from Sethe's old plantation, arrives on their doorstep. Paul D attempts to evict the ghost and, seemingly, he succeeds until one day a young girl turns up, claiming to be called Beloved. Sethe recognizes in her the lost child and out of guilt she is ready to do anything for her. "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (Morrison 2007: 283). Beloved drains Sethe out of her existence and self after she takes everything else due to her all-consuming and insatiable hunger for attention and nurture. "She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk" (Morrison 2007: 283). As much as Sethe is trying to overcompensate for her unspeakable act, so is Beloved more ravenous and covetous. At some point from metaphorical it becomes literal – when Beloved eats, Sethe loses weight. It reaches a point where you cannot distinguish the daughter from the mother. According to Jean Wyatt, the text represents literally the nursing baby's fantasy of greed, the way it wants everything out of the mother (Wyatt 1993: 482). In other words, the novel dramatizes the early stages of development of the baby in the body and mind of a young girl when the baby wants everything from the mother and cannot be refused. Jane Lazzare talks about these early stages during her own child rearing in her book *The Mother Knot*, and describes her baby's instincts as "as he drew milk out of me, my inner self seemed to shrink into a very small knot... frightened that he would claim my life completely, I desperately tried to cling to my boundaries" (Lazzare 1997: 28). The mother figure in Jane Lazzare's work is fixed on retaining her own self and limits, while Sethe is prepared to give it all for atonement, an act determined by her mentality which in itself is defined by slavery. Due to Sethe's unrelenting mother instinct, her individuation is threatened and almost lost. Paul D is the one that brings her peace and assures her of her worth as a human being and a woman, not only as a mother. At the end of the novel, she is able to overturn her preexisting notions and to create

the so called maternal subjectivity through which she manages to put selfhood over motherhood.

The murder of *Beloved* has also been analyzed on a larger scale as the symbol of the death of all African-Americans since their forceful arrival on the new continent. According to Claudine Raynard, the infanticide in the book “parallels a people’s history constructed on the nonbeing and the animal nature at the core of the practice of slavery” (Raynard 2014: 73). Sethe’s refusal to remember what has happened in Sweet Home mirrors the attempt of all future generations to avoid speaking about this terrible time. But there is also another aspect of this problem because it would be hard to remember the past since, according to Toni Morrison, when *Beloved* was being written, there was no place where you can go and “recollect the absences of slaves” (Morrison 2008). Therefore, she wrote the book through which people could think about the ones that have disappeared in the past and about their roots. *Beloved*’s haunting of her mother can also be seen as the past haunting the whole African-American community. However, the presence of the ghost helps us to track the character’s strife for psychological healing and wholeness. At the end of the novel, we are told “this is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 2007: 324). But as painful as it is, the only way to move forward and envision a brighter future is through coming to terms with the horrors of slavery. The slave mentality could be changed for the better with the help of acceptance and memory. Carolyn Denard puts it succinctly in the following way,

[blacks] must bring slavery, the starting point of their injustice back to life, must come to terms with that past, must mourn for those lost ancestors, must finally face the horror and the grief on a personal level before they can let go of the ghost of slavery and move forward into the future with hope and wholeness. (Denard 1993: 224)

Toni Morrison’s most famous novel *Beloved* is almost ubiquitously recognized as a literary masterpiece. With its focus on memory, slavery, and motherhood among other pertinent problems, coupled with its complex lyrical narrative, the novel has earned itself an honorable place in the American canon. It speaks with the voice of the whole African-American community. In the current article, we concentrated the analysis on the effects of slavery on the psyche, especially when it affects women and mothers. The author has exemplified these quandaries by crafting a work around the female body, its functions and its utilization during motherhood. The path to subjectivity is fraught with difficulties and hardship, remembering is the only way to find peace and healing.

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РЕЦЕНЗИИ



