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An Insight into Morrison's *Beloved* as a Work of Time/Space

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Abstract

Movements in space forward a journey; it may be a conflict with the test of time. When Afro-Americans were forcibly taken as slaves to the colonies of America; a journey of such kind called the infamous Atlantic passage had begun. Toni Morrison has given special efforts in remapping the events of African American cultural, social and historical movements from time to time. *Beloved* tells the heart-rending story of a mother-daughter relation and the violent means of resistance they adopted to defend their children by their passionate abhorrence of slavery. This paper deals chiefly with the womanhood especially mother-daughter relation that has never been subdued under the bitter circumstances of tenacity, resistance and insistence aroused as an outcome of the historical, political and social movements.

Keywords

Motherhood; Slavery; Cultural Ethos.

America now the land of world's greatest happening in economy, culture, media, education, technology and scientific Expeditions was once a land of brutality severed through, slavery, an old form of today's human trade. The famous emancipation proclamation and the greatest civil war abolished slavery but the society is not one hundred percent immune from its holocaust effect. In a multi-cultural society like America where people from different races live together, still there is a clear demarcation between whites and blacks. This is a basic hypocrisy of America as it projects an image as the land of free championing for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Afro-Americans are tagged as "mulatto" just after slavery era and then to colored "nigger" and now "black".

Toni Morrison one of the strongest literary figures in America always focuses on recapping the events that has a direct link with Afro-American society. *Beloved* won her Pulitzer Prize and it tells us the story of two periods- Slavery and Reconstruction. The story unfolds through the insight of a woman in whose consciousness the reverse moment of time from present (reconstruction) to past (slavery) is enacted and this is purely psychological. The aftermath of slavery has a devastating effect on women more than on men. During those times, men were physically assaulted. Women on the other hand were not just physically assaulted but raped and forced pregnancy was common.

The main dilemma of these women after slavery was about their children who were all born without any identity. Anyway, their mothers had no right on them and they will all be the legal properties of slave owners. The popular ideology about women cult also accelerates the denial of motherhood to black women. In 19th century white women and black women were differentiated on separate ideologies. A white woman was revered as a virgin. While a black

woman was scorned as a whore. A white mother was worshipped on a pedestal as a “Madonna” and at the same time a slave mother was auctioned on a block as a breeder. But few are there who created history by asserting their subjectivity through their womanhood. Sojourner Truth and Margaret Garner are pioneers who bravely resisted this.

In 1851, Sojourner Truth, former slave, preacher, orator, abolitionist and a mother deconstructed the dominant ideology of normative femininity and foregrounded her own subjectivity as a black woman. History tells us that a man once accused sojourner truth of being a man in disguise; in response she bared her breast asking the same question “ain’t I a woman” (Gilbert 253)?

Margaret Garner went so far as to kill her children rather than witness their growth into adulthood under the brutal circumstances of slavery. These are countless acts of heroism carried out by slave mothers who have been documented.

Sethe in *Beloved* is one such protagonist who offers a strong resistance against the objectification of Afro-American womanhood and the denial of their right to motherhood. Sethe is a black slave who lost her mother at a very early age. She is brought to the Sweet Home Plantation as a slave, where she marries Halle Suggs and bears four children through him. She suffers inhuman treatment at the plantation by white masters. She is whipped mercilessly and milked like a cow. The whites sucked dry her lactating breast. This incident traumatizes Sethe to an extent that she decides to run away from the plantations. She gathers all her courage and escapes to take refuge in the house of her mother in law at 124 Blue Stone Road. She is soon traced and finding no hopes of freedom, she takes the most horrific step of killing her own daughter to show resistance against slavery, and she is declared an outcast by her community. Her two sons escape the situation, but Baby Suggs eventually dies and her second daughter Denver withdraws herself from her mother. The story of Sethe is loosely based on Margaret Garner’s life, who escaped from her

owner from Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. But when caught by the owners she loses all hopes of freedom and kills one of her daughters with the butcher's knife.

Morrison has developed this story with the background of mother-daughter relation. More than concentrating on the hardships of slavery she focuses on mother's love and the dynamics of self-sacrifice among black womanhood. In the conversation with Gloria Naylor while still writing *Beloved* Morrison Commented; "a woman loved something other than herself so much" (Taylor-Guthrie 207).

Sethe's decision to murder her daughter cannot be debated on the basis of sin or morality. It has larger historical reality and dimensions of maternal nurturance, preservation and protection. Afro-American Society condemned Sethe's actions and they declared her as a pariah. Motherhood is a natural instinct to every woman. As far as African American women are concerned motherhood is not mere a pedestal worship. It has larger responsibilities and is grounded on socio-political and cultural ethos. Out of her love, Sethe seeks to foster in her children a loved sense of self and through the infanticide protect them from harm and deliver them to safety.

Slavery was a period in which African American women were denied motherhood. These women were commodified them as mere objects and their children were the properties of monetary values owned by slave owners. In the words of Barbara Hill Rigney "the disintegration of family, the denial of a mothers' right to love her daughter...is perhaps the greatest horrors of slavery" (Hill 68).

Beloved gives voice to those women who refuse to contribute future slaves but determined to break her silence and speak as mother. Sethe claims through her act of infanticide that she has freed her daughter from the chains of slavery. She believes that death is preferable to slavery and as a mother she would rather see her children buried in their graves than watch them grow up

in slavery.

However Sethe's extreme measure of love is accused as thick love when Paul D says "there could have been some other way". Sethe is right to ask "What way"? And he has no response. In the split second it took to make the decision there was no other way. As Sethe says "(L)ove is or it ain't. Thin love ain't (L)ove at all" (*Beloved* 164). Throughout the novel there are descriptions of Sethe's maternal nurturance. Few fond memories Sethe hold about children shows her love for them. When white men had brutally taken Sethe's breast milk she cried for the loss of babies' nursing milk. "They use cowhide on you?" "And they took my milk." "They beat you and you was pregnant" (*Beloved* 17)? Here Sethe's pathetic situation as a mother is revealed.

In fact Sethe has kept the metaphor of milk as an example to reflect her excessive love towards beloved when she returns as spirit I will tell beloved about that she will understand. "She my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and get it to her even after they stole it"... (*Beloved* 200). When Sethe resolved to feed the children with her remaining milk it reflects her outrageous act to defy the prohibition against black motherhood.

Slave mothers are not allowed to feed their children even if it is permitted they can feed the babies only after white babies have suckled. Sethe as a mother knows the importance of nurturance to her children. It helps to develop psychological well-being in the children. Mother's love boosts self-love in them thereby they can resist any attempt to degrade them. Stephanie argues that in much of women's writing "milk is the symbol of mother's love" (*The Nursing Mother and Feminine Metaphysics* 439).

Sethe's love for her children has no familial background. Being prodigy of a slave woman her mother line connection is ruptured through the brutality of slavery. Sethe's remembrance about her mother was the sight of her working in paddy fields. She was identified by the particularity of hat she wore in paddy field. An eight year old girl had taken care of her and was fed by someone.

But Sethe has retained the memory of her mother's violent reaction when she requested to tattoo her body as like the slave owners had done to her. Sethe requested her mother "Mark me too", and her mother's violent reaction signifies the disconnection and un-identification she craves for her daughter from the destiny of slavery. The same spirit has driven Sethe to infanticide her daughter Beloved; like the name echoes, she is dearest to Sethe. But what Sethe has done to her daughter cannot be perceived through normal mother-daughter relation.

The potentialities of motherhood in black women have deviant routes of love, spirituality and safeguard. It cannot be ideologically diagnosed on the basis of dominant sketches of motherhood as "Madonna". When Sethe claims her daughter's responsibility and protection, Morrison's observes it something as an unusual act and not permitted in slave women "an unheard of outrageous claim for slave women to make..." (Taylor – Guthrie 252).

Sethe is claiming the right and responsibility to say what happens to her children. Motherhood is central to the life of black women than any role of womanhood. To define this motherhood against the dominant ideology cannot be easily attained by a black woman. In the words of Paul D "more important that what Sethe had done was what she claimed it scared him" (*Beloved* 164). Nurturance, protection and preservation are the expression of her mother's love. By protecting her daughter from not falling into the destiny of slavery she preserves her identity as a black woman and protects her daughter's life.

Sethe has lost her confidence as a mother when she is being condemned by the society and her daughter Denver. At this stage her motherhood falls into conflict. And this conflict appears as the spirit of her daughter Beloved. According to Freud repressed memory is the seat of a person's willful forgetfulness and it may cause psychological reactions. But finally when she is supported by the society and her daughter's acceptance relieved Sethe from the conflict and once again her motherhood is restored. Morrison once again

stresses the fact that an African American is not just an individual but she or he is a community. The solidarity of community and the acceptance of individual spirit are essential for their well-being and spiritual satisfaction and this is carried out by their age old traditions of motherhood.

Altogether *Beloved* is a creation of time. It represents the period of slavery and its aftermath but the emotion it conveys to its readers will reach beyond time and space. Motherhood is cultural specific but the practice of infanticide is not customized in African culture. Preserving the life of children from vulnerable and hostile situation is the foremost in Afro-American community. The term preserving life could not be limited to its phraseology. The word preservation in the context of Afro-American woman's life take its extreme level because this women out of their love towards children goes to any extent to preserve their lives.

As always said that true love is dangerous at times because it has no boundaries and physical existence becomes no matter for its survival. Infanticide of her daughter was not based on Sethe's religious faith or cultural mores but thrust upon her by the circumstance of time and also a mother's dedication to safeguard her baby by not throwing her to the brutality of era.

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