



FRETFUL MOTHERING IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel about fretful mothering within mother-daughter relationship in African-American community in which black slave people suffer physically and psychologically at the hands of white; especially women, who able to heal themselves with sharing stories. Morrison analyses that love is not for black women in terms of her relation with class, race and gender. Oppression and violence are constant theme throughout the novels of Morrison. Slavery, class and gender inequity, betrayal and brutality are explored through the lives of the novel's characters. A key intention is to discover black women's attitude as mothers and their experiences of motherhood from a feminist perspective.

Key Words: Fretful, Mothering, Relationship, Love, Oppression, Slavery, Class, Race and Gender Inequity, Motherhood.

Article Info:

Article Received:01/12/2013

Revised on:18/12/2013

Accepted for Publication:19/12/2013

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison told after receiving the Pulitzer Prize: "motherhood is not history. It is a timeless, a historical force with all the glories and limitations that pure nature imposes, even when colored, camouflaged by its many cultural versions." (2) Mothering is a sacred act for a woman to take. It is the most powerful, beautiful and spiritual component of woman's life. A matchless relationship between the mother and child is called motherhood. One has to give one's life for child development. Motherhood takes different names relying on the society that is practicing it. Motherhood has

been opined by many in different aspects and presented in different ways. All religions, Hindu, Islam, Christian, and Judaic, give very important place to motherhood. Elizabeth Bourque Johnson describes mothering: "Mothering is a job, a kind of work. The word mother also indicate a relationship or a title or a way of caring, but primarily a mother is a worker, a person who takes responsibility for the care and development of a child." (22)

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel especially about fretful mothering of Sethe. *Beloved* highlights the cruel and barbaric effects of oppression on black women in a racist

society and how oppressive circumstances, like social inequality, abusive behaviors, love relationships, surrogate mothers and mother–daughter relationships, can affect the lives of black women. Morrison clears the position of black slave women in an interview with Nellie Y. Mackay, She says: “Black women are mothers and laborers, mother and worker and the history of black women in the states is an extremely painful and unattractive one Whether slaves were women or men – the punishment they have varied: they could be both, rape one, so that women could receive punishment but the requirements were the same, the physical work requirements.”

FRETFUL MOTHERING

The aim of this paper is to study fretful mothering within mother–daughter relationships in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *Beloved* presents a sensible picture of slavery. Love is not for slave women. Slave women are like prostitutes for their male owners. Slave women were not allowed to get married. Although to give birth a child was encouraged because it produced new slaves. Slave women were important not only for their labor, but also for their reproductive ability. They could not get medical care and a proper good diet for good health. That’s why the death rate was very high among the slaves. One slave woman had to nurse the infants of European-American slaveholders on the plantation. Slave mothers were a product as breeders, and laborers, Slave mothers were not able to make an attachment with their children due to heavy work and separation. Slave women were used as a sex toy by the masters. Slave women were used to breed slave and to fulfill the lust of slave holders, to nurse their children and to work hard in the fields.

Sethe is the example of a fretful mother who can do everything in order to protect her children from disaster. The differences between

mother and child in Sethe’s story are shocking because of slavery. Sethe has a little knowledge of her mother but she never forgets the isolation, experienced by her as a slave in South Carolina where her mother had been a slave. Critics believe that children make images of themselves based on their meetings with the other people in their lives and in the formulation of various narratives about them in that part of the mind termed the “imaginary.” Sethe’s creation of herself began after witnessing her mother’s death and after her coming to a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet Home. Sethe, as a young woman, finds herself the property of the Garners’. Mr. Garner’s views for the slaves who worked for him that they must think of themselves as men, decent human beings. Garner behaves with them in a polite and fair way. Sethe has some affection for Baby Suggs at Sweet Home. Sethe choose Halle as a husband. Sethe feels herself lucky for having Mr. Garner as her owner because she has not forced to do work in the fields. In order to purchase freedom for his mother, Baby Suggs, Halle makes an agreement with Mr. Garner that he would work seven days a week for five years and arrange a place for her mother to live when the day of her freedom come. Obioma Nnaemeka suggests, In *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature* (1997), that “victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways” (3). Harriet Jacobs, ex-slave, disclosed her feeling in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. (1862) She was born as a slave and at an early age, sold to Dr. James Norcom who physically and psychologically abused her for many years. She had many children, some of whom became slaves like her, and she did not remember when her children were loved by her.

By this example, it is clear that slavery has not only affected Sethe’s life but also other female

slaves' life. Slave could not enjoy human life, love, work; the reason is that they regarded as a beast of burden, not a human being.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is inspired by the real story of a slave woman, Margaret Garner that published in newspaper. In the novel Sethe is also sold into slavery at a young age to the Garner family as a slave. In the story Sethe, a female ex-slave, gets psychic damage by the horrible memory of slavery. Sethe's infanticide controls her present and future. During the slavery when Sethe is fed up from oppression and exploitation of her new brutal master, Sethe decides to flee. Sethe's owner seizes her before her escape and steals her breast milk. Sethe's fear of her come back to slavery makes her mad and in her madness she kills her own daughter, *Beloved*. Thus there is a strong biological connection between mother and daughter.

Beloved, is a stunning portrayal of the relations between mothers and daughters. Sethe, the central character of the novel *Beloved*, is prey of both sexual and racial exploitation. As a child Sethe never loved by her mother. She is nursed by Nan, the slave nanny and her mother's friend. Sethe's mother has to do a lot of heavy work in the field as a slave. Sethe never forget the moment when she has seen the slave mark upon her mother's breast, the cross in the circle burned into the skin, by which she identify her mother if the need should ever come. (*Beloved* 61) Later Sethe's mother is hanged with the other slaves. Sethe was sold to Mr. Garner at a very young age. She comes to Sweet Home and took the place of Baby Suggs. There were total five male slaves but Sethe choose, Halle Suggs, son of Baby Suggs. When Sethe's master Mr. Garner has died his wife, Mrs. Garner, has to sell the plantation to Mr. Garner's brother, the school teacher, to pay debts. The new master is very cruel. Sethe is not only beaten with whip by the school teacher but also raped by his nephews.

The whip marks on Sethe's body are look like a "chokecherry tree". She is a slave women mercilessly cheated by white men, the school teacher and his nephews. She has to bear brutal humiliation as well as the exploitation of her mothering abilities i.e. the stealing of her milk. When all the torture and exploitation become intolerable, she decides to flee from the Sweet Home all alone and pregnant .Sethe gives her three children to Baby Suggs and runs away. Sethe's miraculous escape in spite of profound suffering and murderous assault on her body is evidence to her strength. She reaches the river at night, and feels that her baby is going to be born. Sethe lie in the grass and suppose that she would die there. But a young woman, Amy Denver, heard her groans; she stop to see what is wrong with her. Finding her bloody stumps of feet, the stage of her pregnancy, and her bloody back, Amy half carried Sethe to the lean-to of an old barn, mumbling all the way, "You goin" to die here." She said, "You got a chokecherry tree on your back (*Beloved* 79)." Her feet are swollen from the long walk. Amy Denver, the white girl, helps Sethe in giving birth to Denver and reaches 124 Bluestone. Only twenty-eight days has been passed freely. Sethe and her four children are too precious for the school teacher and he does not want them to let go easily. The school teacher traces them and comes to take Sethe back to Sweet Home. Sethe picks up throat of a knife and cuts the throat of her daughter in order to save her from the slavery. The school teacher is frightened with the sight and run away from there. Sethe does not spend much time in jail but she spends most of her life paying for the murder. Murder is for her an act of mother love, which she enlightens, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe." (*Beloved* 163) Society has blamed Sethe and the ghost of her daughter comes back to haunt her. Her lover, Paul D, gives his views on Sethe's mothering: "Your love is too thick. Your gone

you don't know where. One girl is dead; the other won't leave the yard". (*Beloved* 164-5) Even Ella, Sethe's close friend, also criticizes her after this incident: "I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children." (*Beloved* 187) Baby Suggs believes that the baby daughter shows her anger. Baby Suggs explained to Denver that "the ghost was after Sethe and Baby Suggs too for not doing anything to stop it". (*Beloved* 209) Brown-Guillory writes: "Research suggests that [the] mother-daughter dyad experiences a love/hate relationship, often because the mother tries painstakingly to convey knowledge about how to survive in a racist, sexist, and classist world while the daughter rejects her mother's experiences as invalid in changing social times" (2).

Sethe is like the fish without water. Sethe's story shows the emotional and psychological outcome of slavery. It shows how slavery crushed the mother and child bonding. A mother is so poor that she cannot give her own breast milk to a child. Sethe is so much deprived of the outer world and her family that she has no self-recognition. Sethe is not treated as human beings, rather as animals. Sethe is completely lost in slavery. Sethe suffers the humiliation when the school master describes her animal characteristics. Love is not for Sethe because she is a slave. In all of Baby Suggs' life as well as Sethe's own "men and women were moved around like checkers... the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers because the pieces included her children." (*Beloved* 23) Her past always restraint her to talk as it is full of incidents like murder, slavery, and raping. Sethe does not continue a new life after freedom but only traps herself in her past. Every slaves, around her, live a life that is full of humiliation. Paul D has been locked in a ditch. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother in law, tells Sethe, "I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all." (*Beloved*

5) Baby Suggs's life is also full of exploitation. Baby Suggs manages to keep her son Halle. Her two girls are sold off as infants and Baby Suggs never gets any chance to say goodbye to her children. She sells herself her third child after finding herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did.

Baby Suggs' and Sethe's example is just to show the exploitation and ruthlessness of slavery. Slavery presents the controlled and drained of emotions and feelings. Slaves are handled as commodities. They are bought and sold like the animals. A slave's life is deprived of all the individuality. Mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters are separated mercilessly by the slave masters. In *Mother Daughter Revolution* (1994), Debold, Wilson, and Malave write that "the well-worn paths into patriarchy lead to treachery between mothers and daughters and among women across lines of race, class, and sexual orientation" (36).

Sethe is never loved by anyone as a child. She is a frightened child who is afraid to love. She does not know the power of love and has no experience of love, "Pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating with the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil," (*Beloved* 5) and finds no reason to analyze love. Sethe does not know how to express her love for her daughter, Denver. Furthermore, Sethe controls Denver's freedom in order to save her. Sethe does not want Denver to face the cruel world that she has. Unluckily her strictness hurts Denver. Sethe takes care Denver like a strict slave master in fact she does not know what the right environment for Denver is. Denver was never allowed to search new world. Sethe's dearth of love forbids her to love her daughter. Slavery has disabled Sethe's mothering, Sethe tells, "Would it be alright to ahead and feel? Go head and count on something?" (*Beloved* 38)

Mother-child relationship is the strongest relationships in the novel. In the novel Sethe makes struggle to become a perfect mother. Sethe has to do so much hard work on the plantation that's why she cannot raise her own child. When she with her children flees from Sweet Home, she is failed to love and nurture her children because she has no experiences of child caring. Sethe explains herself as a good mother. Her oldest daughter comes back as a ghost in order to take her revenge. Her two sons leave her after Baby Suggs dies. Denver, her younger daughter fears her as she is capable of killing again.

Sethe is an emotional person but the slavery has snatched the ability to make emotional relationship with someone. Sethe is too weak to maintain healthy relationship with people who deserve to have loving relationship with Sethe. Paul D returns to Sethe's life for a loving relationship. He always loves her and respects her to be a woman. Sethe longs for his company. Even Sethe makes a sexual relationship with him but Sethe does not know how to maintain this for long time. Ultimately Sethe chases Paul D out of her house

Furthermore, the return of *Beloved* makes Sethe able to give herself some relief from the pain of killing her own child. "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped us from getting there, but they didn't stop you from getting here. Ha,ha." (*Beloved* 202, 203)

When Sethe feels that her daughter, *Beloved*, has come back to her life. Sethe wants to give her time to *Beloved*. Sethe loses her job, but she has no regret. Sethe's efforts are an attempt to escape from her past. Sethe's health deteriorates to stop eating to feed *Beloved* a sufficient amount of food, "The hungrier they got the weaker." (*Beloved* 239) Sethe gives her complete time to *Beloved*. "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, *Beloved* invented

desire." (*Beloved* 240) Sethe thinks that *Beloved* will forgive her but *Beloved* turns mean-spirited. Sethe makes so many attempts to make her understand that she killed her babies only to save from humiliation. With the help of so many stories Sethe tries to make *Beloved* understand that her children are her "best thing." Sethe explains that her breast milk was more important for her children and how she escaped from the Sweet home. Sethe gives her explanation to *Beloved* that it was slavery that made impossible for her to become a good mother.

A twentieth-century psychoanalyst and literary critic, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) thought that a true understanding of the relationship between mothers and children could be detected by exploring what he termed the "existential break" between the child and the mother in the early life of the child. Although Lacan's ideas are on Freudian thought, he differed from Freud in this way: at birth, a child experiences a psychologically traumatic break with the mother that transcends the physiological break with the mother.

CONCLUSIONS

Morrison presents Sethe's story with the voices of those people who historically have been oppressed. Morrison explains the murder of the baby-child by Sethe by reading her psyche. She kills her daughter to save her from the same slavery she had. However, the murder keeps her mentally and emotionally disturbed even after eighteen years of freedom. Morrison analyses the experiences, desires, disappointments, and choices of Sethe as a complicated mother who is determined, forceful, and dedicated. Morrison creates a character who, despite her lack of nurturing ability, loves her daughters fiercely and she makes decisions that she hopes will guarantee them a positive future. However, her relentless demand for the respect of her position as their

mother clouds the true motives behind her mothering acts. Morrison describes an African-American mother who is as complex in her thoughts and actions as any other mother character might be. Mothers, who are already marginalized by gender, could remove the stigmas that accompany being a female parent. However, the job of mothering is as intricately important as it shapes human lives. Mothers do not usually have the opportunity to critically examine how race, social status, community support, the past, and male partners affect mothering, especially the mothering of daughters.

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