



Mother-love in Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract— This paper attempts to explore the experiences of black mothers and their relation with their children, who are the victims of slavery and racism. Through the examination of *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), it mirrors the pathetic condition of African slaves. Both the novels are filled with many female characters but here the attention is paid to maternal figures i. e. Sethe, the enslaved mother in *Beloved* and Minha Mae, the enslaved mother in *A Mercy*. Reflecting the societal forces used by Southern white men to emasculate Southern black voice, it shows how miserable the lives of black women, especially, the lives of black mothers, who are crippled by the chains of slavery and discrimination in America. Applying narrative inquiry approach, this paper demonstrates mother child bonds in Morrison's narratives. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to make an in-depth analysis of the mother-child relationship depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. By narrating events, experiences, and conditions which make the black women's lives pathetic, this paper argues that whatever these women think, feel, and perform, is an outcome of slavery. The comparative analysis of *Beloved* and *A Mercy* challenges distorted views commonly associated with the black mother and extends the notions of mothering which are prescribed and practiced in dominant cultures.

Keywords— Mother-love, slavery, racism, discrimination, enslavement

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is one of the renowned writers who represent the lives of black women, especially, the lives of black mothers. Through her powerful vocabulary, she paints the social ills of the enslavement of Africans in America. As a reformer, she depicts America in the bleak era of slavery. By exploring the burning issues meaningfully, she narrates the pain and suffering of African slaves. Her works are filled with situations where black women, especially the black mothers are put to the test. The inevitable difficulties and obstacles black mothers have been confronted with in the upbringing of their children are certainly a key theme in her works.

Beloved is a complicated narrative, which deals with female experiences of maternity and gender oppression. It does not follow a chronological order. The plot moves from present to past. The author uses the

techniques of flashbacks, stream of consciousness, and memoirs. The novel is based on the true story of the escaped slave mother Margaret Garner, who, rather than return to slavery, tried to kill herself and her children. In *Beloved*, Morrison narrates the alternative story of the historical Garner in her fictional character Sethe, a fugitive escaped from the fictional plantation Sweet Home in Kentucky. One of the major settings in *Beloved* is 124 Blue Stone Road because the story both begins and ends at the same location. There are other settings such as- the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, the prison camp in Georgia, the banks of the Ohio River and Cherokee village. Similarly, the plot of the novel *A Mercy* is also complex. It is built on the techniques of flashbacks and memoirs. *A Mercy* depicts the life and circumstances of a slave mother, Minha Mae, who works for D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner and a businessman.

II. ANALYSIS

The novel, *Beloved* deals with the era of slavery. It narrates the story of a black slave woman named Sethe, who commits infanticide in the past and suffers its consequences in the present. Sethe lives and works at Sweet Home, a plantation in Kentucky, where she is sold at the age of thirteen. And then she marries to a slave named Halle Suggs with whom she has four children, two sons and two daughters. When she becomes unable to tolerate the inhumane treatment of the white master at Sweet Home, Sethe runs away from the plantation. In conversation with Paul D, Sethe describes the events leading up to her escape from Sweet Home. She sends her children ahead, including her nursing baby, when Schoolteacher's nephews suck the milk out of her breasts, similar to the treatment of a cow. As she narrates, ". . . they took my milk" (18). It shows that the climax of the horrors Sethe experiences in slavery is not the beating, but rather the theft of her breast milk. Finally, she takes refuge in her mother-in-law, Baby Sugg's house at 124 Bluestone Road in Ohio.

In order to prevent her children from being owned and being controlled by white masters and losing the right to be a real person, Sethe adopts the most abnormal, extreme and fearful conduct, infanticide. When she knows about the white master's search for her in Ohio, Sethe swiftly takes her children to the woodshed and decides to kill them all and then commit suicide. She is caught after she has cut off her two-year old baby girl's throat. And she is imprisoned for seven years for infanticide. Reflecting on Sethe's act of infanticide, Jean Wyatt opines that her action is a slave mother's protection of her children from being slaves. In her work "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", she asserts, "While celebrating the courage and determination that Sethe draws from this attachment [to her children], Morrison's narrative also dramatizes the problems of Sethe's maternal subjectivity, which is so embedded in her children that it allows her to take the life of one of them" (476). Wyatt argues that Morrison reveals Sethe's crime of infanticide half way through the novel for the readers to understand the circumstances which forced her to commit to the deed.

The climax of the novel is extremely a violent moment. Sethe tries to murder her own children to protect them against the horrors of slavery. She only has time to kill her daughter, Beloved before she is caught. She indulges in such a heart wrenching act just to liberate her children from life threatening consequences of slavery. Focusing on the mother's boundless love to her children, Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos in her work "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation" describes:

Sethe's initial bonding with her children has occurred at the ironically named Sweet Home, where slaves are allowed to marry and have families. These bonds resurge with terrifying strength as Sethe attempts to return the babies to perhaps a collective mother body, to devour them back into the security of womb/tomb death much as a mother cat will eat her babies as the ultimate act of protection. (71)

Demetrakopoulos reveals that Sethe, as a loving, caring, and self sacrificing mother, takes an unexpected action to protect her offspring. She succeeds on killing her first-born daughter named Beloved by applying an unconventional way for her security. By highlighting how slavery contributes to the destruction of one's identity, Morrison points at the destructive forces. She exposes the violence of white people indirectly, through the indication of murder of her own child by the mother. Demetrakopoulos further writes, "For Sethe the children are better off dead, their fantasy futures protected from the heinous reality of slavery"(71). With the help of her creative writing, Morrison narrates the story of an enslaved black woman who faces the most terrible consequences of slavery i. e. killing her child. Later she gets punished for her wrong deed. Everyone humiliates her. She is ill-treated in the society and her mother-love is questioned for her cruel action.

Sethe does not want her daughter to face the horrific effects of chattel slavery and to see her to be a slave, so she kills her. As she says, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (201). Killing one's own child is the gruesome act. But Sethe indulges herself in such a heinous act to protect her children from oppression. Though she is guilty of doing injustice by killing her child, she feels she has done the right thing. Regarding Sethe's reaction to the situation, Renee Gardner in her work "Subverting Patriarchy with Vulnerability: Dismantling the Motherhood Mandate in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", claims that Sethe's killing, understood as an ultimate act of agency, is motivated by her willingness to be a good protective mother. In embracing the good mother-role she "loses her sense of motherhood - her ability to see herself as a good mother . . ." (209). Gardner's analysis shows maternity as a complex site. Morrison presents maternal love as dangerous, devouring, and destructive. In this light, motherhood is understood as a site of conflict since the female body is exploited through one of the most profound experiences of their lives. To rescue the lives of her children from the ghost and horrors of slavery, the slave mother, Sethe has to make the tragic rough choice. Her harsh treatment to her children comes out of her blind love and self devotion as a mother.

Denver, Sethe's youngest daughter also faces many difficulties during her stay in prison with her mother. Sethe never reveals her past to Denver which makes Denver lose her faith upon her. Denver spends her childhood in dilemma. She fears of being killed by her mother. As Denver says, "I spent all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me..." (255). In fact, Denver wants to be away from her mother, Sethe. Though she lives along with her mother in 124 Bluestone, Denver never speaks with her. Denver knows the reality and believes her mother to be blamed for the heinous act. All these things disturb Sethe's mentality.

Beloved, the spirit of the murdered girl, also intends to be close with her mother, Sethe. She (*Beloved*) tells her plans to Denver. As she expresses, "She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (93). Sethe considers *Beloved* not as a spirit but as a living being. Denver also gets closer to the ghost of her dead sister *Beloved* and feels her family is responsible for her sister's death. As she narrates, "*Beloved* is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (252). Concerning ghost's presence in the story, Marsha J. Darling in her work "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison" says that Morrison uses the ghost as a narrative device and "the purpose of making her real is to make history possible and making memory real" (249). Darling considers that Morrison's use of ghost as a narrative device is a strategy to reflect past memory. When Sethe suffers due to the presence of *Beloved*, Denver rescues her. She supports her physically as well as mentally. The female characters presented in *Beloved* have been subjected to a more or less defective relationship to their mothers, and perhaps consequently to their children. The reasons and consequences of such a troubled but none the less intense almost excessive bond are mirrored in the novel's main character Sethe.

In *Beloved*, Morrison allows us to hear the mother's story, the mother's language, and the mother's history of maternal love. She reflects maternal love and the distortion of maternal love through the representation of mother-daughter relationship. Morrison explores the complexity of maternal emotions by introducing the system of slavery in which the slave holders cruelly detach children from their mothers; the maternal love is deformed, distorted and violated. Building upon African American women's experiences of and perspectives on maternal responsibilities, Morrison develops a view of African American woman's situation in relation to maternal behavior which is completely different from the maternal acts prescribed and practiced in dominant cultures.

Morrison's *A Mercy* revolves around the slave mother, Minha Mae and her daughter Florens. Minha Mae initially belongs to D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. When Jacob goes to D'Ortega's plantation to receive his payment, D'Ortega compels Jacob to take a slave as payment. But Jacob is hesitant because he thinks slaves are not goods. Finally, he agrees and looks at the slaves. After surveying a line of more than twenty slaves, Jacob chooses a woman, Minha Mae, who has two children - a daughter and a son. To his shock, she offers her daughter Florens and begs, "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take my daughter. Not me" (20). Minha Mae's experience shows the confining contradictions imposed on black women/mothers during slavery. She does not have opportunity to explain her actions.

When the woman wishes her own daughter, Florens to be taken away, Jacob gets surprised. He cannot understand her real concern, which is born out of a mother's fear and helplessness. He thinks that the daughter is an "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away" (34). A little later he readily accepts the deal because he thinks Florens as a good companion for his wife Rebekka's loneliness. In this way, Florens meets Lina and Sorrow, and stays as a servant in Jacob's house.

Morrison's description of D'Ortega's property discloses the horrors and dread of slavery in a magnificent home. D'Ortega has a huge farmhouse where slave trade is carried out successfully. He does not miss any opportunity to supply slaves. The slaves, who stay there, have difficult lives. Florens recalls about her life in D'Ortega's tobacco plantation under the cruelty of his family. She describes her life there spending her days, "picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds", and "nights on the floor of the cookhouse" with her mother, Minha Mae" (5).

Sethe, in *Beloved* indulges herself in the act of infanticide of her child whereas Minha Mae, in *A Mercy* offers her daughter to a tradesman, Jacob. These instances expose how maternal love is difficult to understand. The mothers have no choice. Sethe kills her daughter to save her from the torments of slavery. And Minha Mae does this to push her daughter to a lesser degree of evil in an attempt to save her from higher degree of oppression and sexual harassment. The invisible bond between the characters in the novels lies in their interaction as mothers and supporters.

Like Sethe, in *Beloved*, Minha Mae in *A Mercy*, justifies her maternal concern to her daughter. But there is a difference between the two confessions. Sethe leaves all hope and desire to be forgiven whereas Minha Mae is still confident of her justifications. She thinks that if she tells her daughter, Florens the truth of the possible horrible

consequences of her staying with her mother, she will be convinced. She presents her argument and explains to her that "you [Florens] wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senohr's eye" (166). Minha Mae desires to keep Florens with herself. But she is afraid of Florens' security when she sees the lust for her daughter in the master's eyes. She does not like her daughter to face the challenges of slavery and lead the same life as a helpless woman as she herself has experienced. She tells her: "One chance, I thought. There is no protection, but there is difference" (166). She wishes to have difference in the life of her daughter and wants to unshackle her from oppression and sexual abuse. As the mother explains:

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. (166-67).

Minha Mae convinces her daughter Florens that due to Jacob's kindhearted nature he accepted her request and takes her (Florens) away from D'Ortega's plantation. She believes Jacob a human child and merciful to his servants. Minha Mae also tells her daughter that Jacob has bestowed his mercy on Florens.

Minha Mae sees in Jacob the only chance for Florens to escape from D'Ortega. As a loving mother, she makes efforts to secure a better future for her daughter Florens. She experiences the dilemma that many mothers faced in slavery. Relating the black mother's situation under slavery, bell hooks in her work *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, explains, "In the midst of a brutal racist system, which did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist the system" (44). hooks clarifies the fact that the slave mother, Minha Mae, rather than thinking of her own safety decides to protect her daughter. She tries her best to prevent her daughter's rape by D'Ortega.

Like *Beloved*, *A Mercy* also portrays Minha Mae, a responsible mother, who chooses to distance herself from her daughter to provide a better life for her. As an experienced woman she reads the mentality of Jacob and requests him to accept her daughter instead of money. Florens keeps this all within her heart, which she reveals later in life and expresses through her behavior with her rivals. She is about eight years when she is exchanged for money to Jacob. She cannot understand her mother's

notion of not offering the son as a slave. As she remembers the event with innocent sorrow:

Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minah mae begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due. (8)

When Minha Mae requests Jacob Vaark, he agrees on her request and Florens is taken by him out of mercy. As Florens' mother tells her, "it was not a miracle-It was a mercy"(167). It is difficult indeed for a little girl of seven years like Florens to understand her mother's words.

Florens' pain and emotions are clearly reflected in the novel. As a young girl she only knows the decision of her mother. She expresses this thing in her words saying, ". . . mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose . . . holding the little boy's hand" (8). Later in life it becomes difficult for Florens to maintain a good relationship with others as she is obsessed with her mother offering her rather than her brother. Reflecting on Minha Mae's action, Amanda Putnam in her work "Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*" states, Florens' mother is "begging to save her infant son (who will likely die without her care) as well as providing a life-altering opportunity for her daughter, this mother gives away her own chance of living a better life so that both her children will survive" (31). Putnam states that instead of accepting the chance of living a better life, the mother, Minha Mae gives priority to her children. She decides to protect both of them; therefore, she makes a request to Jacob to take her daughter away.

The novel *A Mercy* ends with Minha Mae telling why she gives her daughter up and offers her to Jacob Vaark. In the last chapter, Minha Mae addresses her daughter and says to her that the act she has done out of her maternal love is aiming to shield her from the eyes and lust of D'Ortega and his sons. She claims that, "Breasts provide pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming too irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see" (189). Like D'Ortega's plantation, Jacob's farm is not a burial chamber to Florens and other slaves. At Jacob's farm, they are humanly treated and live like sisters under the protection of kind master. It is not only Florens who lives there at the mercy of Jacob Vaark, there are other slaves too.

As a woman sexually abused by her master, Florens' mother, Minha mae understands that the woman in slavery has no protection, and "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (193). When she sees that the tall man, Jacob Vaark, sees Florens "as a human child" (195), she decides to give him her child because there "was no animal" in his heart (191). Florens never understands her mother's deep attachment to her and never treats this 'separation' as a mercy. She is tortured by the agony of abandonment all over her life.

III. CONCLUSION

The novels, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, are very similar in many ways. Firstly, both the works are written by the same writer Toni Morrison. Secondly, both of them are historic fictions that evoke the history of slavery and portray black women'/mothers' predicaments. *A Mercy* is considered a prelude to *Beloved* because it narrates the period before slavery. Thirdly, both the novels are written with the techniques of memoirs and flashbacks and the stories are narrated by the characters themselves. Fourthly, both the fictions share the same themes like: slavery, mother-love, abandonment, alienation, racism, and gender disparity. The narratives show that under the harsh circumstances of slave life, the two slave mothers, Sethe and Minha Mae perform heroic deeds to rescue the lives of their children from chattel slavery, violence and sexual abuse. The protagonists Sethe and Minha Mae are both black females and brave mothers, who have been oppressed by the dehumanized effects of slavery.

To conclude, a selfless mother-child bond can be seen very clearly in *Beloved* as well as in *A Mercy*. The mothers, Sethe and Minha Mae indulge in the act against their will and wish just to liberate their daughters from slavery and sexual abuse. But the daughters Beloved and Florens cannot understand the feelings of their mothers. Though this leads to the separation, they are psychologically attached to their mothers, who regret for their act. In this way, Morrison clarifies that mother-love is multifaced and maternity is a complex site for black women.

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