

IMPACT OF SLAVERY ON MOTHER-DAUGHTER RETATIONSHIP IN TONI MORRISON'S “BELOVED”

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Published in 1987, Morrison's 'Beloved' tells a heart-wrenching story about what African slaves had to endure in America. An important feature of this story is the relationship between a mother and her children. Morrison explores the power of a mother's love and how it can be dangerous when mixed with desperation. In this paper I intend to discuss the relationship between a mother and her children and examine the extent to which power politics governs this relationship. I will talk about how much a mother can decide the fate of her children and whether she is justified in doing so. The central event that begins this discourse is Sethe's killing of her own baby. I will explore the reasons that drove her into making such a decision and whether she even had the right to make it.

In the novel we clearly see the torture that Sethe has to go through as a woman slave. But when you examine this closer, most of her sufferings were related to her children. She was beaten and molested when she was pregnant, she had to give birth on a boat and killed her child to save her from slavery. Even when Sethe moves to Ohio, the ghost of Beloved follows her there and continues to torment the family. By virtue of being a slave, Sethe was bound to suffer. However, we see that her children greatly increased her burden. In a way, **Sethe was enslaved by her own children.**

Even though she may have been a slave to her children, Sethe constantly shows that she truly wanted what was best for them. She tells Paul D about her maternal love and describes how it was so wide that it encompassed all of her children.

"I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved them more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love them proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon-there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't

love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?"(190)

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But at the same time, she was scared. She also tells Paul D that she was afraid that she did not have enough milk for all of them. When she was molested as a pregnant woman, she only lamented the loss of her milk.

“Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he’d see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. ... those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it.” (19)

Thus a deep dilemma in Sethe is revealed. She loves her family and yet fears for their future and is afraid that she will not be able to take care of them. Even in reality, African slave children did not have a very high chance of survival. Sometimes they were intentionally killed and sometimes they died out of poor circumstances. Sethe knew about this right from the telling of her own mother’s story. She did not know her mother very well but was told that she was the only child that her mother did not abandon and leave to die. However, the fact remains that there were other children who were killed intentionally. This may have been because they were children that came from rape, but nevertheless, their lives were taken without them having any chance to decide for themselves. But we wonder how far this behaviour is justified. How far do mothers possess the power to decide whether their own child should live or die?

However, we can look at this from the perspectives of the characters in the novel. Each one that the reader encounters has a story of their own and each story is horrifying in its own way. We are told in detail about Sethe’s hardships, but we are also introduced to the lives of the other characters like Baby Suggs, Halle, Paul D and Stamp Paid. Each of them went through their own courses of slavery and emerged in different ways. Baby Suggs was a slave all her life and when she was finally freed through Halle’s hard work, she took to preaching to the other black people. In fact, one of her sermons that she delivers in the woods sums up the idea that all white people had about the slaves.

To her fellow people, Baby Suggs was a living testament. Her life was by no means easy. She suffered just as much as everyone else. Yet she chose to use her suffering to help people and shine as a beacon of hope and faith. She taught them how to love themselves. But the fact that the people actually needed someone like that shows how bad their situation was. Nevertheless, Baby Suggs made a huge impact on everyone and all looked up to her. That is one

of the main reasons why they helped Denver when she desperately needed food to provide for her family. Baby Suggs' story is the only one that the readers are told in which a slave uses her bad experiences to help other people. Still, we cannot ignore that she suffered for her whole life and that is what influenced Halle to work extra for her freedom.

The other characters in the novel suffered as well. Paul D's story is revealed in which he was part of a chained group of prisoners and how much he had to suffer before he could walk free. Halle was driven mad after the sight of the schoolteacher's nephews molesting Sethe. Stamp Paid also was driven mad through his own personal life. So we see that these intense and gruesome events that took place in almost every slave's life must have had an influence on Sethe's decision to kill Beloved.

Nevertheless, Sethe was devastated at the loss of her child. Initially readers are not made aware of her emotional side. She is portrayed as a very steadfast woman who continues to move forward no matter what horrifying things life throws in her way. This is not wrong. Sethe did show remarkable courage and did her best to save all her children. Even her own mother "threw away" many of her children. When the ghost of Beloved is seen to torment the house in the initial stages of the novel, we see that she throws the dog around till its eye falls out of its socket. Sethe puts it back in without flinching. Here we are given a little bit of insight into her character. We see that she is not easily scared by the grotesque. She perseveres with common sense where others might not be able to.

However, we soon see that this does not mean that she is devoid of emotion. When she tells Paul D about her children, we clearly see that she loves them and would do anything for them. When she discovers that Beloved has come back in human form, she is truly happy and will do everything to make sure that Beloved does not leave her again. In fact, we see that in all the slave narratives told in the story, only in Sethe's children are centralized. The other stories focus more on the individuals themselves. Sethe's story is the only one in which she is constantly tormented because of her children and yet never stops trying to protect them.

But this does not stop Beloved from coming back. In a way, the return of Beloved can be seen as a **continuation of the circle of slavery**. Sethe was a slave and was also enslaved by her children. To protect them, she behaved like their master and made a life-or-death decision for Beloved. Then Beloved comes back and enslaves Sethe yet again. Sethe seems to be continuously be trapped by the (crawling already?) baby, whether she is alive or dead. So in terms of who has more power, Beloved seems to be winning. She completely controls her mother when she rises from the dead. She even drives Sethe to insanity.

We see that the dynamics of power between mother and daughter are not only ever present, but they are constantly in a state of flux. Sometimes, both seem to be controlled by the nature of their relationship. For example, when Beloved is seen for the first time, Sethe has to rush to the outhouse because her bladder suddenly becomes full to its maximum capacity. This

can be seen as similar to the amniotic fluid that breaks out of a woman when she goes into labour. Sethe's sudden bladder outburst can be seen as a parallel to a pregnant woman's water breaking. At the same time, we see that Beloved drinks a lot of water in the house. This can be symbolic of a suckling baby who greedily craves a mother's milk. In this situation we see that neither is controlling the other, but both are being controlled by their relationship to each other. However, this particular phase does not last long. It is soon overpowered by Beloved's greed as a baby. Sethe is continuously trying to fill up the gap that has been created by Beloved's death and that proves too much for her to handle, leading to her insanity.

Interestingly, we see that this **mother-daughter relationship also is true with Denver**. Initially, Denver is completely dependent on Sethe, giving her the natural amount of power and assertiveness a mother usually has. Growing up in seclusion, this dependence gets amplified. This is then replaced by joy at Beloved's arrival. Denver is happy to have a sibling figure around. However, when a sibling arrives, sibling rivalry is never far behind. Soon Denver becomes mildly jealous of the way that Beloved is only interested in Sethe. Once she finds out Beloved's true identity, Denver is determined to save her from Sethe. Once again, her opinion changes when she sees that Beloved is taking over Sethe's life. Now Denver tries to protect Sethe. We see that Denver is somewhat pushed around until the moment when she finally decides to assert her independence and take matters into her own hands. Interestingly, she gets her motivation from yet another mother figure, Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs helps Denver realize that she too possesses power and that since Sethe is now mentally sick and Paul D is no longer with them, she needs to start to take care of the family. So now Denver becomes the voice of power in the family and makes decisions regarding its welfare. In patriarchal terms, she becomes the '**man of the house**'. The novel is a discovery of her empowerment just as it is a story of Sethe's trauma.

Another interesting thing is that when Denver talks to Mrs. Jones, she is only truly motivated when Mrs. Jones calls her "baby".

"Denver looked up at her. She did not know it then, but it was the word "baby", said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman." (292)

It is extremely intriguing that Denver's life has such a circular nature. When she was a child, she had no power of her own. Yet outside in the real world, it was only when someone called her "baby" that she truly felt empowered. However, on closer analysis of Denver's character and her role in the story, we see that she does in fact possess a certain amount of power. **It is Denver and not Sethe that takes the initiative to take care of Beloved**. Denver is the one that nurses Beloved back to health. She protects Beloved and later protects Sethe. So we wonder whether she is truly the mother figure in the family. But if that is true, how much power does she really have?

In reality, Denver does not possess as much power as Sethe simply because she is still biologically Sethe's daughter. Also, she did not face the hardships that Sethe did and is less experienced in terms of making big decisions. She only makes one very big decision in the book and that is to look for work. Other than that, she commits to household duties and making sure that her mother is taken care of. She only makes decisions for herself, not for others. We see that even Sethe initially was in a situation similar to Denver. All her decisions were made for her either by her owners or by other men. It was only after having children that she decided to act for herself. The power dynamic took a radical turn after the physical act of giving birth to children. Although it was very difficult for her, Sethe talks about how she was happy that she could finally make decisions for herself. This is something that Denver does not experience.

“I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got them out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, Go on, and Now. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right.” (190)

Notice how the word “**decided**” is a sentence of its own. True power lies with whoever makes the decisions. She takes pride in her independence. Although she acknowledges that she had help, she makes sure that Paul D knows that she made all her decisions on her own and the help was only for enforcing them.

However, we ultimately see that this independence takes its toll on Sethe. Earlier she was proud of her ability to make her own decisions. But later she is grateful that she can pass on her problems to Paul D and let him make the decisions. When she puts the “weight” of her breasts in his hands, it could be symbolic of the burden of motherhood that she has experienced which she is now passing on the Paul D. The story also ends with Paul D coming back to the house after Beloved leaves and promising Sethe that he would “take care of her”. This makes Sethe happy and peaceful. This shows that she actually did have power but this power was more of a burden. She appears strong throughout the book, but at the end her final happiness at Paul D's return to power shows a certain tiredness that was always within her but was exaggerated by Beloved. Also, this further **emphasizes the circularity of slavery**. Even historically, there has been and always will be a struggle for power. In a way, the world functions through a mild concept of

slavery – of rulers and those that are ruled. We must live by certain rules or else suffer consequences. Divergence is punished, even today. Sethe is no different. She struggles against slavery under white men but is never truly free. She is enslaved by her daughter and finally submits to Paul D. She escapes one kind of slavery only to fall prey to another kind.

We now realize that the true discourse here is not so much about power and authority but about decisions. Whether or not Sethe had the right to take Beloved's life, she made that decision and also suffered the consequences. **The power in the novel is mostly self-bestowed. Sethe chooses to kill Beloved. Denver chooses to go and find work. Paul D chooses to come back to Sethe.** The fact remains that there was always a choice. However, ultimately it is not about whether the choices are right or wrong. The novel shows how any decision has its effects and the truly strong people are the ones that can deal with its consequences. The characters are all slaves in their own way. This shows that power politics are ever present and decisions, through freely made, always have consequences.

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