

Infanticide and Mother- Daughter Relationship in Toni Morrison's **Beloved**

* Dr. (Mrs) Monika Gupta

Reader, Dept. of English

H.N.B.Garhwal University, Srinagar

(Garhwal) Uttarakhand, 246174-India

e-mail- monikagupta94@rediffmail.com

Beloved (1987) is Morrison's most sensitive novel till date. It deals with the forgotten era of slavery and the pathos of black slaves. The most striking element is the heart wrenching story of a black female slave, Sethe, who kills her own daughter to protect her from the horror of slavery. Morrison has always excelled in creating her female characters. Her novels show a deep sense of bonding between the female characters. In Beloved, the female bonding and the multiple layer of meaning in their relationship makes the story emotionally appealing and it is the story that, "...penetrates perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery" (Schapiro 194). The story touches the social, psychological, philosophical and supernatural element of human life.

Sethe is the heroine of the story. She is a black slave who lost her mother at a very early age. She was brought to the Sweet Home Plantation as a slave where she marries Halle Suggs and bears four children from him. She suffers the most inhumane treatment at the plantation by the white masters. She is whipped mercilessly and milked like a cow. The whites, "...sucked her lactating breasts" (Peach 109). This incident traumatizes Sethe to an extent that she decides to run away from the plantation. She gathers all her courage and escapes to take refuge in the house of her mother-in-law at 124 Bluestone Road. She is soon traced and finding no hopes for freedom takes the most horrific step of killing her own daughter to show resistance towards slavery. She is imprisoned for seven years for her crime and later secluded by the community and declared an outcast. Her own family deserts her. Her two sons escape the situation, Baby Suggs eventually dies and her daughter Denver withdraws herself from her mother.

The story of *Sethe* is a true story of Margaret Garner, a slave who in January 1856 escaped from her owner of 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. But Morrison has beautifully developed this true story with the background of slavery. The slave women have always suffered a lot at the hand of both black and white men. They were robbed of every possession – even their motherhood. Mothering and motherhood were denied, as black women were regarded as breeding stock only. Since the rights offered to the black women were negligible therefore she did not stand at the position of a decision maker. *Sethe* was not supposed to love her children. That is why *Sethe's* act of destroying her own creation becomes the subject of controversies. Whether a mother has a right to stop the heartbeats of her child or is it a crime to put an innocent life to end? Such questions resonate in the entire story. American public considered Margaret Garner and other slave mothers who killed their children, criminal. There have been numerous examples in the American history where mothers have killed their infants to remove the extra burden on them. For instance, Mary Montgomery escaped the plantation with her child but when she found it difficult to escape with a baby in tow, she left, “her sucking infant behind to die” (Drew 49). Infanticide was a punishable offence and *Sethe* and her real life counterpart had to face harsh consequences of the crime.

Economic reasons more than any others had led to the killing of infants in the slavery era and have continued to exert an unfortunate influence even down to our own day. The African - American setup is the example where economic factors led to the sorrowful phase of the Black community. Infanticide, shown in the novel is of many forms. It is not just a murder in literal sense but also murdering an infant mentally or psychologically by curbing the desires and rights. *Beloved* is a documentation of all such infanticides, the most pathetic, being the murder of *Beloved* by her mother by cutting her throat. Apart from these instances it is shown that *Sethe's* mother also committed infanticide when she threw her children at birth, “without names” (Morrison 78). Another instance of infanticide is when Ella, another black slave admits that she too killed the children born from her white masters. The author has given different views on infanticide

through the mouth of the characters. Sethe asserts that she, "... couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of 'em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (200). Baby Suggs could not frame any judgment and silenced her views to such an extent that it eventually led to her death. Paul D initially accuses Sethe for her rough choice but later accepts the situation considering her circumstances.

Infanticide has always been the background of the slave age. It sometimes showed resistance and sometimes mercy killing. But child abuse and especially girl child faced the most terrible consequences of slavery. In the words of Linda Brent, "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women..." (405). Denver is also a victim of child abuse. The initial years of her childhood are spent in prison along with her mother. She is mocked by the society for the crime committed by her mother. Her mother never reveals her past to Denver which makes Denver lose faith in Sethe. The rest of her childhood is spent in fear of being killed by her mother. She is a psychologically scared child. Denver speaks for herself, "I spent all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me..." (255). She waited for a miracle to happen, so, she could be away from Sethe.

Sethe is declared culprit by law and even by the society. But what compels her to take such cruel action is the fear of slavery and exploitation for her daughter. The owners of the Plantations, schoolteachers and his nephews violate her motherhood by stealing her milk from her bosom. All these incidents constitute Sethe's past and they are reconstructed in the novel through the discourses of Sethe and Paul D, co-victim of slavery. Memory forms a most important part in Morrison's novels. "For memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people" (Middleton 159). Though Paul D realizes Sethe's pain as a mother he knows that she was "...not a normal woman" (50). Sethe's story is debatable on two grounds. On one side it is the "maternal loss" (Matus 109) where the plight of the helpless mother under slavery is revealed. On the other hand it crosses the limits of maternal violence. Infanticide committed by Sethe is analyzed under these two terms. "The narrative enacts a circling or repetition around the

traumatic events” (Matus 112). Infanticide in Beloved is analyzed with close reference to Sethe and her daughters as it is the most affected relationship.

Slavery has done a psychological damage to a mother-child relationship. Morrison has shown many angles of mother-daughter relationship in the novel. The first relation is that of Sethe and Beloved. It is the most unique relationship. Here a mother is the killer of her own blood. Sethe had enough reasons to prove that her act was just not crime but a mercy killing. She was perplexed with the horrific side of slavery and could not bear her daughter in a similar condition as hers. Therefore, she decides to free her from the impious birth of being black. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (201). Though the act of infanticide is the most monstrous act for a mother to even think of but Sethe was too reluctant to turn towards slavery again with her children. As a mother Sethe’s act can never be justified. She attempted the most unnatural thing. Killing was not the only alternative. She could have killed the slave owner, or even herself. The supernatural existence of Beloved proves that Sethe’s act was guilty of the murder and was to be condemned. Therefore, Sethe becomes the monstrous women in the novel with a streak of madness in her nature.

Beloved, is the mirror which reveals the past of the character that comes in contact with her. She comes back to possess Sethe. She tells Denver about her plans that, “She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have” (93). This obsession for her mother makes Beloved’s identity mysterious. Her appearance and disappearance add an element of supernaturalism to the painful story of Sethe. She appears mysteriously from water. “She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands” (63). The reappearance of Beloved from water is symbolic in the sense that it depicts the entire process of child birth. It is like emergence of new born baby from the fluid of the mother’s womb. Sethe takes Beloved as a living being and not as a ghost. It is Morrison who presents Beloved, “gothically monstrous” (Matus 119) so that Sethe feels calm after relieving herself from the burden of the past. Beloved is in true sense the ghost of past which is trying to find its place in the present. Just as her appearance was sudden, her

disappearance left a lot of unanswered questions. In the end she appears as a naked pregnant lady which according to the community ladies, exploded in air.

Sethe shares a similar relation with her other daughter Denver. She is the eye witness of the bloodshed of her sister. She also drank her mother milk mixed with Beloved's blood. She is the only permanent member of 124 Bluestone apart from Sethe. Both of them share an unspoken relationship. Denver blames her mother for killing her sister. She isolates herself from the community and from her mother. Her alienation leads to her attachment with Beloved when she takes her for her dead sister. Her act of drinking the milk of her mother mixed with the blood of Beloved symbolizes that Sethe and her family made the death of Beloved their life and her blood their nourishment. "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk"(252). Beloved is determined to wage a war against her mother. Denver on the other hand keeps the grudges in her heart. But her love for her mother gradually grows when she sees her mother suffering under the tantrums of Beloved. Denver comes to rescue her mother. She is a link between Sethe and the community. Sethe understood Denver's solitude but never disclosed the past to her. She only reveals the half truth. "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered"(53). This silence in the mother - daughter relationship widened the gulf and made Denver "secretive"(121). She lived in the secret company of Beloved until she actually appeared in flesh.

Beloved and Denver have an intensely possessive nature. Beloved makes Sethe her important part. She wants complete attention of Sethe. She fixes her eyes on Sethe. At this part of the novel Sethe and Beloved are viewed as one soul. A similar possession is seen in the nature of Denver but towards, "her ghost sibling" (Matus 118). The growing intimacy of Beloved and Sethe gives threat to the security of Denver and she feels "marginalized" (Matus 118) in their company. In Beloved, both the daughters appear to be aggressive but the maternal violence of Sethe overshadows their aggression. In the end there is also a role reversal seen in the character of Denver. She hates her mother in the beginning. She seeks the company of Beloved and wants to protect her sister from her

mother. But later she becomes sympathetic towards Sethe and wishes to protect her from the ghost of Beloved. This is the growth in the character of Denver where she is able to frame her own opinions about life.

Guilt is the most integral part of the healing process. It follows crime. Guilt may be internal or exposed but crime is always accompanied by the feeling of guilt. This guilt is what Beloved stands for as for as Sethe is concerned. Sethe's rash act of killing her daughter gave a huge blow to the psychological state of Sethe. She never wanted to speak of her past but arrival of Paul D and then Beloved confirms her belief that Beloved was her own daughter whom she killed. This guilty self makes Sethe surrender fully to the demands of Beloved. She feels intensely insecure in the presence of Beloved and offers her the best at the cost of her job, house and health. Sethe's guilt, frames Beloved as the dead infant. She keeps on justifying the infanticide to Beloved. The ultimate note of Morrison seems that, "Guilt and the past must not be avoided. They must be taken up and possessed" (Carmean 91).

The slave women were never designated for being mothers. They were considered only as the breeder. "Their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows" (Davis 7). Sethe's mother-in-law does not even recall the faces of her eight children. Similarly, Sethe was never nursed by her mother. But Sethe's attempt to be a good mother hinted at the dangerous consequences of mother love. Even Paul D recognizes that mother-love for a slave is too risky. To quote: "Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children. She had settled on to love (56). When Paul D accuses Sethe of having "thick love"(202) she replies that, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all"(202). This means that Sethe has a very desperate and obsessive kind of nature. It cannot be called the unselfish motherly instinct. Sethe's relation with her daughter Beloved is selfish. She used Beloved as a scapegoat to show resistance to the institution of slavery. This fear of getting revealed haunts her psychologically. Beloved appears as a girl in flesh from the water to avenge her death, "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (308). Sethe and Beloved share

an intense relationship which breaks the bond of time, space, culture, community etc. She believes that death is nothing but continuations of life in another form. Both share a common feeling of being haunted. Sethe commits an evil and Beloved becomes evil. And their union creates the mystery that is most horrific in the story.

Infanticide puts Sethe's motherhood at stake but a closer evaluation of the real life situation of black slaves in general and females in particular, leave no other option other than death or suicide. Most of the females had this suicidal tendency to escape from brutality. Slaves were treated no better than animals. Morrison's female characters have a shade of grey in their personality. For example Sethe's attempt to kill makes her a merciless lady. Paul D remarks that, "...you got two feet, Sethe, not four" (202). Similarly the eccentric character of Beloved shows that she is the embodiment of evil. Beloved tries to seduce Paul D. She tries to strangle Sethe and makes Denver a mere puppet in her hand. Beloved is an extremist in the sense that on one hand she nearly chokes Sethe to death and at the very next moment she soothes Sethe's bruised neck with her soft fingers. Beloved's highly dominating and demanding nature causes enough pain to Sethe. She gives up everything she had, to please Beloved so that her crime is forgiven. A similar wildness is also seen in the character of Denver. She blames her mother for the infanticide and mentally proves to be a torture to Sethe. Denver's alienation from her family increases Sethe's isolation and Denver plans this deliberately so that her mother realizes the pain of being killed. However, Denver proves to be a great help to Sethe in the end when she realizes that Beloved has totally possessed her mother.

The psychic trauma of infantile abandonment is also seen in Sethe. Slavery broke the bonds of Sethe with her mother before she could even speak. This denial of parental claim exaggerates Sethe's role as a mother and she consider her sole responsibility towards the well being of her child. Her act of infanticide also reveals her attempt to reconstruct her own past where her mother was hanged and she was left all by herself. She confesses, "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am [Sethe's mother] is," (250). Sethe's own experiences of life and the cultural preaching of the blacks made her believe that life as a female slave was worse than death.

For the blacks, “death was anything but forgetfulness” (4). This hatred for the present birth and hope of a better life in the new birth makes Sethe confident on her decision of infanticide.

Sethe’s crime, if considered morally, is highly condemnable. It is unapproved by any religion or community to commit infanticide. Even Sethe realizes this when the community rejects her. Baby Suggs, who is the moral preacher, could not react to the incident and succumbed to death. Sethe knew that she was to be blamed for the death of Baby Suggs. At the social level Sethe is declared an outcast who tries to be a rebel by breaking the set of norms of the society. This develops a communication barrier between the community on one side and Sethe’s household on another. Denver is also the victim of the feeling of alienation. But Sethe needs the support of the community to overcome her guilt. “In Beloved life is hell, but togetherness, shared experiences and brotherly/sisterly love helps the characters to survive, if not to forge better lives for themselves” (Mbalia 91). In the end of the story the entire community joins to drive Beloved away of the Bluestone Road. Morrison proposes solidarity as the only viable solution to the problems of the black community. Infanticide is also criticized politically when Sethe is sentenced to seven years imprisonment for the act.

Supernaturalism is the prominent element of Beloved. The first line of the novel draws the attention towards the mysterious world. It says, “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (3). Morrison’s prime concern is to develop the unique culture of Africa so that the ghost stories introduced appear real and alluring. The hostile environment of America and the white community adds to the haunted environment of the novel. The ghost tales are common to the blacks as death for them is no longer the issue of fear. Baby Suggs admits that her own dead children must be, “...worrying somebody’s house into evil” (6). Therefore the character of Beloved and even her presence as a ghost in Sethe’s house appears justified to the modern readers. “Morrison’s clan is a complex of values and mythologies” (Holloway 160). Morrison has also projected supernaturalism as the consequence of disturbed psychic state of a person. Frustration and suppression often leads to the formation of an imaginary world and imaginary characters. This is another

angle of justifying the element of supernaturalism. Morrison connects the two worlds of living and dead through *Sethe* and *Beloved*. The black community is also well equipped with the methods of separating the physical and the supernatural world. This is how the community is able to drive *Beloved* to her right place.

Sethe seems to be out of focus. Without the guidance of a mother, she has missed out on the actual mother-daughter relationships. Circumstances of sexual exploitation seem to have marred her psychologically and the base animal like nature of a human being seems to have overtaken her personality. *Sethe* seems to be ridden with a problem of the mind. No mother however cruel can resort to killing her own child. Even if she feared that her daughter would be a future victim of abuse, she could have given her child away to someone she knew. *Sethe* stopped thinking beyond a point and terror and fear have made her act in such a manner. Though she feels she has done the right thing she is guilty of doing injustice by killing her child.

Morrison does not aim at giving the judgment on the act of *Sethe*. It is left to the readers to analyse her decision. Infanticide was condemned by the society but *Sethe* is forgiven in the end by the same the society. Since solidarity is the proposed solution to the humiliations suffered by the blacks, therefore, the crime of *Sethe* cannot be viewed as an isolated decision. The community is also directly and indirectly involved in the execution of the infanticide. That is why the community also shares the burden of guilt along with *Sethe*. But it is not forgetting of the past that the author propagates it is actually living the past to overcome it.

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