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SLAVERY AND MOTHERHOOD IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Terry Paul CAESAR¹

- ABSTRACT: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is discussed not as a presentation of slavery, but rather of motherhood. Slavery and motherhood are considered convertible terms in order to show how Morrison's narrative functions as a critique to feminist lyric readings of the ties between mother and daughter.
- KEYWORDS: American literature; motherhood; narrative; feminism.

Morrison and the Canon

The award of the 1993 Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison confirms her status as a canonical author in American literature. Her work has already earned a wide degree of critical recognition for its stylistic brilliance and psychological depth, as well as for its debt to William Faulkner (on whom Morrison wrote a Master's thesis) or its participation in specifically Afro-American traditions.

Now, as a Nobel Laureate, Morrison's fiction will likely endure the fate of being too easily read as a testimony to venerable pieties about human dignity and freedom. It is not my intention to provide such a reading here. Instead, I want to focus on Morrison's most celebrated book, *Beloved*, in terms of its dramatization of a single act of violence: infanticide.

Morrison's six novels are full of violence. Part of the price of her canonical status has been the oversimplification of what exact issues are at stake in so much violence. The issues are not merely historical or racial. By focusing on infanticide in one specific novel I hope to demonstrate how certain fundamental concerns of contemporary feminism, such as abortion and child abuse, have shaped the narrative in profound ways. In addition, there seems to me a whole imagination about being a mother, encompassing both its hope and its fears, that can only be represented within the context of slavery.

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Finally, I want to explain *Beloved* as a reading of maternal subjectivity. What is a mother? Does motherhood compel a woman to be divided against herself? What does the representation of a mother as a slave reveal about any mother's status as a subject in her own right? I will draw on contemporary feminist theorists rather than historians of slavery in order to discuss this last question. Morrison's place in the canon of American literature must not be allowed to obscure the disturbing provocations of the feminist text in her work, or to neglect how this text is enriched by the study of her work.

Mothers as Slaves

Speaking of *Beloved* in her recent book, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch writes as follows: "When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing" (1989, p.196). Hirsch suggests, in other words, that Morrison is not merely writing about slavery, or slave mothers. Then in terms of motherhood why write about slavery in the first place? I want to go further and consider motherhood and slavery as in fact convertible terms.

Precisely this equivalence operates in the great text of slavery in American literature, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Readers of the novel will recall, for example, the figure of Cassy, Simon Legree's quadroon mistress of five years, who confesses to Tom that she gave laudanum to her third child, a son by her second white master, in order to spare him from slavery. The process whereby Cassy is, by the end of the novel, restored to her motherhood through being subjected to daughterhood is too complicated to pursue in this paper.² The important thing is how the central reality of parent to child reasserts itself by transforming the model of slave to master.

In the sentimental novel this transformation is wholly good. In an important discussion, Gillian Brown concludes as follows about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Stowe replaces the master-slave relation with the benign proprietorship of mother to child, transferring the ownership of slaves to the mothers of America" (1984, p.518). Implicit in the logic whereby motherhood and slavery can function as substitutes for each other is another logic having to do with mothers and daughters equally being figures of mutual substitution; after all, every mother is, or was, also a daughter. As dramatized in the case of infanticide, this logic, however, is not benign.

2 Cassy is last seen with little Eliza, the daughter of George and Eliza Harris, and we read that "her love seemed to flow more naturally to the little Eliza than to her own daughter; for she was the exact image and body of the child whom she had lost (Stowe, 1981, p.607)." By the girl's example, Cassy is transformed and she becomes a devout Christian. Of course the child she had "lost" was a boy, which only makes the mother's bond with her child more inescapable, as if it has to be fully confirmed by a daughter as self-enclosed and self-perpetuating.

Indeed, in the highly overdetermined context of slavery, Cassy can be comprehended as being enslaved by little Eliza (whose own prototype is Little Eva, herself a mother-daughter). Similarly, so is Sethe by Beloved. In *Beloved*, in many respects an updating of the sentimental novel, it becomes possible to see far more overtly the enactment of certain fears and desires only latent in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If motherhood and slavery are equatable, then a mother can feel she is, exactly, a slave to her daughter, just as a daughter can to her mother. Furthermore, a mother can conceivably kill a child in order to protect her own self-possession, because she feels enslaved by her, and not only because she would save the child from slavery.

In Stowe, of course, such terrible feelings are contained within a selfless conception of motherhood. "Feel too much!" cries Mrs. Shelby early in the novel. "Am I not a woman – a mother" (1981, p.87). There is no dissonance between being a woman and being a mother. Brown puts the symmetry very well:

Stowe's identification of maternal power with God in her model of domestic economy rejects any aspiration to ownership beyond the motherly functions of reproduction and preservation, suggesting an economy without markets and a life devoid of problems caused by masculine desire. (1984, p.518)

In Morrison, however, there are profound differences between being a woman and being a mother. For one thing, there is the question of masculine desire. Sethe is frightened when Paul D asks her to have his baby. Perhaps the central problem, in fact, is the lack of the very selflessness on the part of a mother-to-be that Stowe takes for granted. Sethe responds to Paul D's request by thinking thus: "Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring – again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer." (Morrison, 1987, p.132)

The prominence of Sethe's distinctively maternal subjectivity makes the structural economy of the mother and daughter appear less closed, less insulated from slavery, and more vulnerable to its ravages. Gone is the self-regulating female system of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In *Beloved* being a slave so profoundly contaminates being a mother that the two become virtually inseparable. "Freeing yourself was one thing", reflects Sethe, "claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (p.95). The most important thing she has to free herself from in the novel is her subjection to motherhood itself, in the person of her daughter, Beloved.

Few actual slave mothers appear to have committed infanticide.³ As *Beloved* represents it, the action is horribly exacerbated with despair, fatigue, and confusion over whether the mother in fact kills her child in order to save herself rather than her child. "In Morrison's novel, the economy of slavery circumscribes not only the process of individuation and subject-formation," states Hirsch, "but also heightens and

³ See Genovese (1974), especially p.497, where he notes that maternal murder was an exceptional action, recognized by slaves themselves as murder.

intensifies the experience of motherhood – of connection and separation. It raises questions about what it means to have a self and to give that self away” (1989). The novel becomes an exploration of what it means for Sethe to “own” herself as a function of disowning a daughter.

Daughters as Disruption

What *is* a daughter? Although *Beloved* herself insists that the question is already answered, *Beloved* poses the question in a world where the family is destroyed, and traditional family identities are in ruins. Sethe herself, even as a daughter, is a kind of substitute of a substitute, presented to Mrs. Garner after she had lost Baby Suggs. Moreover, Sethe spoke to her real mother only once and never got to check for the mark by which she might have been able to recognize her after she was hung.

Indeed, Sethe is in effect “thrown” to whites just as she’s told her own mother threw all her own children to their death except Sethe herself. Sethe’s own infanticide is prefigured by that of her own mother. This is one of many repetitions in a novel haunted by patterns, cycles, and symmetries, as if at once to express the need for some conventional form and to disclose its lack. There is Halle, for example, “more like a brother than a husband” (p.25) to Sethe, equally a sort of husband-mother to his own mother (“born” into freedom because of his five years of Sabbath labor), and incoherently an infant-husband when he witnesses the specifically maternal molestation of Sethe (not, I think, without desire to suck from her himself, and so he “breaks”).

What is a daughter? The question is almost a mockery where nature has become deformed. At one point, trying to discuss with Mrs. Garner something the Schoolteacher had said about “characteristics,” Sethe hears still another word, “features,” which Mrs. Garner defines thus for her: “A characteristic is a feature. A thing that’s natural to a thing” (p.195). But in *Beloved* features have been fractured from prototypes that might enable them to be what they normally are. Consequently, many of the interpretative problems of the novel become undecidable – whether the sex between Paul D and *Beloved* is incestuous, or whether Denver rescues Sethe from *Beloved* more as a daughter than a mother. In a text where all naming is arbitrary or accidental, the very name “Grandma Baby” discloses an impossibly infantile senescence everywhere, with generations bled into each other, and the ends and beginnings of life yoked by violence together.

Beloved attempts to intervene with her own violence in order to assert a principle of stability: a daughter is her mother’s own child. But in a world of slavery, the power of naming itself is with the slaveowners. Schoolteacher beats Sixto “to show him that definitions belong to the definers – not the defined” (p.190). Who defines whom is an obsessive question in *Beloved*, and neither mother nor daughter is free to define the

terms of their mutual possession of each other because each has been formed by the outer violence that disrupts their relation. Not even a daughter, it seems, gets to define what a mother is.

Instead, a daughter defines – far more powerfully than a father or a community – what a mother hasn't been. The first words in the novel are not words but “venom.” *Beloved* is, in one sense, a gradual enunciative space in which the words of and for venom come to be spoken. Beloved's feeling for her mother represents the mostly sheerly *excessive* emotion in the book, and although it can be, and is, emplotted, it's never entirely clear precisely what narrative is expressed. If we again compare the sentimental novel, Beloved's claim to her mother would be love. But this is only so when the relation of parent to child has been based on “the fundamental social example of compassion, that is, of the correct moral relation of the strong to the weak” (Fisher, 1985, p.102).⁴ Would Beloved have returned so shriekingly, so spitefully, so incorrectly if she had felt she had been compassionately or morally dealt with by Sethe? Instead, it seems to me, she returns as a daughter who never got to define her love, or even manifest it.

The most we can conclude is that Beloved's narrative can't be separated from Sethe's own blanker, baffled one. At one point, cooking for Paul D, she thinks as follows: “There was no question but that she could do it ... sure enough, she had milk enough for all” (p.100). The novel is saturated by a mother's guilt for not having had enough milk for her children, as well as insufficient life with which to nurture life and perhaps just not enough love. Sethe's *lack* converges with Beloved's need, and in the convergence the two become as inseparable as murder from revenge.

Just so, the story of the greater violence of slavery without is made indistinguishable the violence within. “I guess they rather be killing men than killing women,” reflects Denver about her mother in her monologue, “and there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own” (p.205). The violence within fails to clarify what this “something” might be. Sethe reflects as follows in her own monologue: “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is” (p.203). Suicide? Infanticide? What name can we give such a plan? Whose story authorizes it – a mother's care or a daughter's need?

Or to put the question another way: who has the power to summon the dead back into life? Barbara Johnson has a fascinating essay on the “figure” for abortion in literature. She terms it to be apostrophe, the only one suitable for the conjuring into life and dialogue of something absent, mute, or dead. However, this figure may not be designed for a context in which the questions implicit in the figure are made literal, when a mother speaks of or to her aborted child. “What happens when the lyric speaker assumes responsibility for producing the death in the first place,” writes Johnson, “but

4 Fisher goes on to explain that the importance of the family to the sentimental novel is that it provides the only social model for relations between non-equal members – members, we might say, like children or slaves, who don't have to worry about their lack of definitional power just because some of them have none.

without being sure of the precise degree of human animation that existed in the entity killed?" (1986, p.32). In *Beloved*, on the other hand, we have the opposite question: what happens when the "entity" herself summons herself into being? Can the dead command their own power over the living?

In a lyric such questions might not be so crucial. In a narrative they are. About the abortion poems she treats, Johnson comments at one point: "each of these poems exists, finally, because a child does not" (1986, p.36). In contrast, *Beloved* exists because Beloved exists; the "body" of the text is a materialized individual body. But if no one has apostrophized Beloved back into life (for a murdered child is not the same as an aborted one), then how does she come to be? The question of how the daughter inhabits the life of the mother is the question of how a character can inhabit a text without her own plot, and only the negative of a figure.

Mothers as Pre-Symbolic

Toward the end of the novel Denver is watching Sethe and Beloved yet again. She realizes that both constitute a closed circuit; nothing she does has any influence. When Beloved falls quiet, "Sethe got her going again. Whispering, muttering some justification, some bit of clarifying information to Beloved to explain what it had been like, and why, and how come. It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (p.252). Why does Beloved exist? The answer may be that she has never ceased to exist, at least as something "outside" Sethe. Mother and daughter are here, once again, two parts of the same being, and therefore one could never have apostrophized the other into existence.

On the contrary, mother and daughter demonstrate a conspiratorial oneness that has reached across the grave. No wonder Johnson observes that "there is something about the connection between motherhood and death that refuses to remain comfortably and conventionally figurative" (1986, p.38). Yet, precisely for this reason, what this "something" is proves to be immensely provocative. I want to suggest that it has to do with the origins of human subjectivity, based on the model of a woman's giving birth. Earlier, Denver goes to ask a neighbor for some food, because her mother doesn't feel so good. "Oh, baby," the neighbor replies, "Oh, baby." Then we read thus: "She did not know it then, but it was the word, 'baby,' said softly with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (p.248).

Why is this word an inaugural one? Because it makes possible a narrative for a human being, based on pregnancy rather than autonomy. That is, the narrative is not a masculine one, as represented, for instance, by Paul D, who "wants to put his story next to hers [Sethe]," and who replies to her, after she has said of Beloved, "She was my best thing," as follows: "You are your best thing, Sethe. You are" (p.273). Paul D's logic is the logic of growth, singularity, autonomy. Behind it lies a veritable

metaphysics of human selfhood, evoked, for example, by Kierkegaard's famous dictum: "He who does the work becomes his own father." But this metaphysics has effaced women. Their work is the work of mothers, based on relation – or separation and loss. "Me? Me?" is all Sethe can utter in reply to Paul D.

In *Beloved* what a woman is has become hopelessly lost in what a mother is, and what a mother is has become haplessly entangled in what a child is. Perhaps the most chilling image presented through Denver's eyes is the following: "Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licked her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (p.250). The child is father of the man, in the well-known Wordsworthian formula. But here, since the child is a girl, she is the mother of the mother, with whom she is pregnant. What is a mother in this scene but a prototype to be incorporated rather than a being to be loved?

Hirsch puts the question very directly upon which so much of the novel is based: "What model or definition of subjectivity might be derived from a theory that begins with mothers rather than with children?" (1989, p.197). In *Beloved* to begin with the mother is to discover that one ends where one began: as a baby – fearful, dependent, sated – to one's own baby. In this sense, the "inaugural" moment that Denver was told about is the moment of foreclosure: a mother is convertible into a baby, and what obtains for a woman is to await the conversion.

Much current feminist theory celebrates this moment. It comprises, we are given to understand, a pre-Oedipal, libidinal economy, rich with plenitude and *jouissance*. Consider the following passage from Julia Kristeva, in her celebrated essay, "Stabat Mater":

Women doubtless reproduce among themselves the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers. Complicity in the unspoken, connivance of the inexpressible, of a wink, a tone of voice, a gesture, a tinge, a scent. We are in it, set free of our identification papers and names, on an ocean of preciseness, a computerization of the unnameable. No communication between individuals but connections between atoms, molecules, wisps of words, droplets of sentences. (Moi, 1986, p.180-1)⁵

Such a lyrical evocation could not be more in contrast to Denver's horrified perception of Sethe and Beloved, above.

Much of the reason for this evocation is because the mother-child "dyad" (most intimately experienced if the child is a daughter) is understood by Kristeva to elude

⁵ Compare Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1964), for whom it is not the mother but the child – primordially separate – who undergoes the existential drama: "... the mother enjoys the comforting illusion of feeling that she is a human being *in herself*, a *value*. But this is only an illusion. For she does not really make the baby, it makes herself within her; her flesh engenders flesh only, and she is quite incapable of establishing an existence that will have to establish itself" (p.468). The difference between de Beauvoir and Kristeva, it might be suggested, is the difference between the one whole generation of feminism and the succeeding one.

patriarchal structuring, despite the fact that the relation must partake of the oppressive representation of femininity whereby it is subsumed in maternity. The fact that the Symbolic order recognizes no investment in the mother's relation to her daughter becomes the most compelling reason for women to avow it. Let me cite Kristeva once more, on childbirth: "The body of [the] mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also, one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis ... By giving birth, the woman enter into contact with her own mother; she becomes, she is her own mother. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her own instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond" (Kristeva, 1980, p.239).

Mother as Symbolic

What does *Beloved* enable us to make of such lush lyricizations? Kaja Silverman points out (in a searching discussion to which I am much indebted) that Kristeva herself is not even consistent about them, and can be read, indeed, as surprisingly complicitous with the same symbolic order, beneath which the mother ostensibly luxuriates. Silverman cites another passage from Kristeva, after the child has broken "the auto-erotic circle of pregnancy": "Is it not true ... in order ... to have access to the symbolic-thetic level, which requires castration and object, she [the mother] must tear herself from the daughter-mother symbiosis, renounce the undifferentiated community of women and recognize the father at the same time as the symbolic" (Kristeva, 1980, p.279-80).

Beloved seems to me more consistent. If, in Kristeva, the center of the fantasy to fuse mother and daughter indissolubly together is simultaneously stated and concealed, in Morrison it is deliberately stated and restated. Indeed, Sethe and Beloved eventually enact such a fervent re-possession of each other that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them. For this reason, Sethe could not be further from the Kristevian mother described above, because in giving herself up to the fusion we see how utterly she has been defined by the "symbolic-thetic level" of the institution of slavery. In the novel the Symbolic *is*, literally, slavery, which explains both why a woman would want to revert to an earlier, pre-symbolic condition and why she can't. Slavery has used up or degraded all body relationships, connections, and instinctual drives.

This is why *Beloved* does not indulge in lyric moments of undifferentiation. Instead, such moments are comprehended with horror, and so by the end of the narrative, the black community itself demands that the "symbiosis" between mother and daughter desist. The slippage by which maternal authority has become its lack

in childhood is regarded by the community as intolerable; Sethe and Beloved are taken to be humanly unendurable to each other, even if they refuse to tear themselves away. Motherhood stands reveals as deathly – death-dealing once, and now death-receiving.

“For a baby she throws a powerful spell”, states Denver at the outset of the narrative. “No more powerful than the way I loved her”, replies her mother (p.4). In other words, love is power. Beloved’s return to life opens up the space for Beloved to be able to kill Sethe, because, contrary to the mother, the daughter’s “spell” is more powerful. This is the same reason, it may be, Sethe once killed Beloved. Whether the economy of the mother-daughter symbiosis is more closed, or insulated from slavery, than I have maintained, infanticide has changed nothing. Slavery survives, and reinstitutes itself totally. If infanticide on the part of a slave mother can legitimately be interpreted on one level as an attempt to shatter a self-perpetuating system, the power of this system reappears like a ghost at a deeper level of more personal anguish. At this level, there remains only the terrible dynamic of the mother-daughter bond, in which infanticide gets transformed into matricide, or perhaps better, maternicide.

Beloved consistently reads this bond on the model of slavery. Beloved’s desire for her mother expresses an absolute tyranny, a complete enslavement from which any self-possession by Sethe is ultimately impossible. How could she be free? Even after Beloved is gone, through the efforts of another daughter, Sethe’s refusal to forgive herself (earlier noted by Denver) persists, and haunts her. “It was not a story to pass on,” we read on the last pages of the novel, where “by and by all trace is gone” (p.275). We are left with the question of what narrative could have expressed forgiveness for the act of infanticide. The question is fundamentally the same as how a slave can give a self she never had, or how motherhood can survive slavery.

The most we can say is that motherhood in *Beloved* is divided: a site of both mother and daughter, victim and oppressor. Motherhood can’t be narrated in a single voice, can’t be comprehended in a single act, and can’t be experienced subjectively by a single person only. But, if the notion of the mother as a unitary conception serves the interests of patriarchy, as many feminists have contended, then the self-divided notion dramatized in Morrison gives no consolation. Indeed, patriarchy turns out to be more served by the example of maternal self-division than feminist theory might have expected. The harsh economic relations between master and slave do not give way to a softer female alternative, even when it takes place within a charged domestic space that Harriet Beecher Stowe would hardly recognize.

Conclusion

As a representation of motherhood, *Beloved* joins a distinguished list of novels in American literature, ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* to Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*. What makes Morrison distinctive is the radical nature

of the presentation, fully informed by the discourse of contemporary feminism. By concentrating upon a slave mother's act of infanticide and its consequences, Morrison critiques the notion of motherhood as a liberating bond between mother and child, full of libidinal freedom unappropriable by the symbolic order of society. Instead, motherhood is dramatized as a bondage to a psychic economy for which slavery proves to be a convertible term.

"Her face is my own," reads one of the initial fragments of *Beloved's* monologue, "and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too" (p.210). But her desire is already outside itself. To be both the thing and its reflection is already to experience a unity lost to a relation. *Beloved's* words express what Kristeva refers to as "the mania smitten with Oneness" (Moi, 1986, p.181). Both daughter and mother are smitten. But in *Beloved* the emphasis is on the mania. Oneness has already been killed for the daughter before the narrative begins, and for the mother, by the conclusion, Oneness is lost once more in its own reflection.

CAESAR, T. P. Escravidão e maternidade em *Beloved* de Toni Morrison. *Rev. Let. (São Paulo)*, v.34, p.111-120, 1994.

- RESUMO: O romance *Beloved* de Toni Morrison é discutido não em termos de sua apresentação da escravidão, mas em termos de seu discurso sobre maternidade. Escravidão e maternidade são considerados termos convertíveis a fim de mostrar que a narrativa de Morrison funciona como uma crítica às leituras líricas feministas da ligação entre mãe e filha.
- PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura americana; maternidade; narrativa; feminismo.

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