

The Infanticide in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

A Mother's Desperate Cry

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Abstract

This thesis explores Toni Morrison's ability to put into words the most dreadful and spiteful situation of the infanticide narrated in *Beloved*. Morrison's skilled usage of words arouses to induce the reader to be empathetic with the main character of the novel –Sethe–, as well as confronting her past actions. The goal of this essay is first, to ponder the miseries a slave had to go through throughout their life, and the diverse types of love represented in the novel: thin, healthy and thick love. What is more, to confront whether love is a right for those enslaved or not. Secondly, the picturing of motherhood in *Beloved* is going to be analysed, under a female slave's point of view. Finally, the issue of ownership is going to be depicted with the aim of resolving on the limits of the rights of a parent and the issue of the infanticide as a desperate cry of a mother trying to save her children from a life in slavery. Toni Morrison brings up more than a moral dilemma.

Keywords: motherhood, ownership, infanticide, moral dilemma, slavery.

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1. Introduction

The capture and trade of people with slavery purposes has historically been recorded as a fundamental part of the human society. Ancient civilizations such as Rome, China, Egypt or Greece used to be strong advocates of slavery. Indeed, there are currently places in the world where these actions are still applied and used for the profit of some (*New World Encyclopedia*) regarding slave traders, around 1400, Spaniards and Portuguese started to bring Africans to the new world (Blasingame 11). A vast number of people were obliged to leave their own culture, society and countries behind to become enslaved. Today, we can sadly affirm that slavery contributed to the good development of Europe and the US as dominant nations of the world (Ganaah 2). Before the Thirteenth Amendment of The American Constitution passed putting an end to slavery, 404 years of human trade and bondage went by. As a result, it left nearly 12 generations of blacks who survived and lived as enslaved people in America (Blasingame 11).

To such a degree it is sometimes difficult to know if the information we have about those times resembles sufficiently the reality of these people. Over the last decades scholars have started studying the different existing slave narratives to understand the history of America from another perspective, the one of the proper slaves or their descendants. According to Morrison “the history is written by the conquerors” (Youtube video). Therefore, it is difficult to gain a real understanding of to what extent it was atrocious the situation of slavery in America. Consequently, we have to consider all the sources we have in our hand. There is a wide spring of different information to be considered such as the analysis of political, philosophical and literary records –autobiographies, diaries, letters, slave narratives– as well as oral testimonies, songs and rituals that provide information of the atrocities that took place in the world’s history (Scott). At any rate, there is a prevalent dominancy of written history records from a white perspective. However, we can rely on slave narratives to consider a new perspective of what slavery was and meant for the world's history, as we need to know both sides of the story.

A large number of slave narratives such as *the Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano (1789), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) or *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861) give perspective on the continuous struggles Afro-Americans went through, as well as how slaves were totally dehumanized and humiliated. The authors of the novels try to portrait the life of the characters by touching different matters, which are just the day-to-day of slaves. Some of the themes discussed are torture, physical and psychological abuse and violence; women's sexual abuse and motherhood; the loss of one's identity; religion, or the natural will to escape and slavery abolition. The issue of motherhood, for those who suffered from slavery, is especially represented in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, “a hybridized text--part ghost story, part historical novel, part slave narrative, part love story” (Malmgren 96) in which the story of a slave mother who kills her own baby to prevent her the future suffering of becoming a slave woman is told.

As recalled by Morrison in the foreword of the book, this terrible infanticide is inspired in Margaret Garner's tragic life story. Terrible had to be the atrocities Margaret Garner lived, which led her to kill her own daughter with the intention to save her from a predestined life of slavery (XI). Considering how dreadful this event is, the work of Morrison has been throughout the years a reason of study and admiration for scholars because of how she manages to transmit and tell such story. Undoubtedly, motherhood is one of the central topics in *Beloved*. Hence, the goal of the current paper is to analyse how this great novel transmits the meaning of motherhood for a woman who lives in slavery. In the same way, we will face the moral dilemma which opens up in relation to the murder of a defenceless baby.

2. Historical context: The sufferings of being a slave in the New World.

It is recognisable that many of the slave narratives start by advising the reader how hard and difficult to believe the stories they are about to read in the following pages of the

book are, as they disgust the basic human dignity. Harriet Jacobs states in the preface of her book that:

Reader be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. (1)

Slavery, a terrible passage of the American history, meant possession of others in a complete way. Slaves had no word to say and were supposed to obey every command as they were told. On that account, masters used to subdue slaves to suffer different kinds of tortures and abuses. Reflecting on the physical, psychological and sexual abuse, the clearest demonstration was that of a complete control over the bodies and minds of the Africans. As Blasingame recalls, masters totally dehumanized—especially because of their non-whiteness—and humiliated slaves (15). Dealing with all that pressure while also being tortured is without hesitation traumatising, and along the slave narratives, we can find various examples of slave sufferings. To start with, slavery obliged Africans to deny their own culture and origin as they were fiercely uprooted from their idiosyncrasy. According to Olaudah Equiano (1789), children were kidnapped and brought to another country. In one of the passages of Equiano's biography in the boat on the way to Barbados, he describes how white's customs were incredibly shocking and scary. He had never seen the sea, ships or white people before and everything was unknown to him, which made it certainly frightening. In the second chapter, he points out the disastrous conditions in which they travelled in the ship because of the vast number of people that were on board, and the heat that suffocated them.

This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (Equiano 58)

As it has been stated before, slaves had to face different kinds of violence. Hence, it is natural to think about where all this violence came from and if it was only one sided. In fact, the truth is that not only slaves were afraid, but also slave owners feared the reaction of the enslaved. On one side, slaves were completely terrified when they saw the torture methods their masters applied on other slaves as well as themselves. At same time, the psychological abuse was patent in their daily life. The brutality taken against slaves by the slaveholders is shown in slaves narratives with the selling of the enslaved, the flogging and whipping, and when being sexually assaulted by their masters.

These overseers are indeed for the most part persons of the worst character of any denomination of men in the West Indies. Unfortunately, many humane gentlemen, by not residing on their estates, are obliged to leave the management of them in the hands of these human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner on the most trifling occasions, and altogether treat them in every respect like brutes. (Equiano 10)

But a fact to be considered is how the masters also feared their slaves. That fear came from different revolts, and from a bigger presence of slaves in the plantations than that of white people (Ferguso 79). With this in mind, masters were mindful of how slaves could harm them, slaveholders were aware of their vulnerability. That is, a legal enforcement was necessary to apply more control over slaves and “restrict their freedom” (Ganaah 4). Besides, following this situation it was important for them to show them who was in charge. Slave owner’s way of manifesting it was by these overly violent reactions. Adding to the fact that the executions methods they used, frightened the rest of the enslaved people. Additionally, masters did not want Africans to learn how to read. By virtue of avoiding slaves from learning to read, several laws even punished teaching black people how to read and write. Slave owners were frightened of new revolutionary ideas getting into their minds if they were educated, as being literate gave them power. After the Stono Rebellion, the South Carolina General Assembly prohibited slaves from learning how to read (Rasmussen 1).

Best enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause a slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any*" slave as a scribe to any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money. (qtd. in Rasmussen 1)

Slave's children were very unprotected, and the love of their mothers was helpless. Their mothers had to leave them during the long hours of work, and they were deprived from nurturance. One instance could be when Sethe explains how she did not even know who her mother was: “of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? [O]r was it Louisiana?) [S]he remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother, who was pointed out to her by the eight year-old child who watched over the young ones—pointed out as the one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field” (Morrison 15). By reading slave narratives, we can recognize how slaves seemed to be unfeeling people and not allowed to love at all. Masters unscrupulously used to divide families apart, as the only thing they used to see in Africans was a way to do business. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Shelby tells Haley –the slave trader– that he “would rather not sell” one of the sons of his slaves, as he believes that taking away a son from his mother is inhuman (Beecher Stowe 6). Haley instead, considers that even though it is “unpleasant”, the business is all that matters.

Slave traders used slave women as more than servants, and as Equiano points out in his biography: “it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them” (77). They used to rape them and abuse them. Furthermore, according to Blasingame, “the slave culture encouraged such behaviour, and it was profitable to the slave owners for female slaves to procreate” (18). In fact, they were also interested in any advantage they could get from selling their descendants. If women in general have been awfully treated during history and had no rights, no one would ever imagine the horrific situation in which an enslaved woman lived. As Linda, the protagonist of *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* expresses: “when they told me my new-born baby

was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women” (Jacob 73) due to sexual harassment. In other words, as Dr. Flint said to Linda “she was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything; that she was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his” (17). An example of a representative character of a master who used to sexually abuse slave women is Legree in *Uncle Tom's cabin*. His slaves used to be raped and even murdered. One such representation is this scene in the book: “when Legree scolded and stormed, Emmeline was terrified; but when he laid his hand on her, and spoke as he now did, she felt as if she had rather he would strike her. The expression of his eyes made her soul sick= and her flesh creep” (Jacob 397).

As well as in the example mentioned before, an important aspect covered in many of the slave narratives is motherhood. *Beloved* of Toni Morrison is a great representation of that. The protagonist of the novel, Sethe, could not handle the idea of their children suffering what slavery was. Those were the terrible things she had to go through that when “the Schoolteacher” came looking for her and her children, she decided to kill them. That way she could avoid the enslavement of her offspring. Given that, she considered that “whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (Morrison 125), her children. Sethe knew that her children were going to be tortured, raped and obliged to work hard jobs in extremely bad conditions. Toni Morrison succeeds to transmit Sethe’s traumatized mind in her writing style.

3. The embodiment of language

Consequently, with the information addressed in the previous point, not only slavery in a historical context is shown within slave narratives, but also the sufferings of slaves and the consequences of the perpetual abuse by their masters. After going through such situations, it is awaited to deal with heavily affected minds. The novel *Beloved* and its writing style is representative of such traumatized minds. As the author explains in an

interview, the language used in that literary work is not complex, but the words are “buried” in a way that gives the reader a feeling of disorientation and gloom. In any case, “what is absent speaks as loudly as what is recorded” (Papa 76).

Certain situations and experiences in life are difficult to be told. According to Wyatt, trying to put such affairs into words triggers a disruption of the language in *Beloved* in order to express sufferings and desires (474). The “ghost” of *Beloved* portrays the needs of a dead infant who continuously seeks for her mother’s attention. Moreover, the character of *Beloved* represents the murdered, tortured and dead slaves of the American history (Malmgren 96). Who is then *Beloved*? *Beloved* is the ghost of the nursing baby killed by Sethe, who made “124 WAS (be) SPITEFUL. Full of a baby’s venom” (3), and, who after Paul D’s exorcism of the ghost, comes back to life in the body of a nineteen year old with the intention of never being forgotten. Morrison makes the reader confront *Beloved* in the closest way, in which meat and “flesh” (qtd. in Wyatt 480) are tangible. Another example is how Sethe’s body is described, as she is not sure of her body being able to stand on its own. “There’s nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First, her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (Morrison 321).

The language in the novel embodies the character of *Beloved* and connects the reader with it in the most chaotic but still measured way, conveying a great understanding even when the reader may feel abandoned among the lines. Due to the fact that the reader learns about the characters throughout their description in the novel, the language that Morrison uses for *Beloved* to express herself, combining “pronoun positions and abolition of punctuation” (Wyatt 474) gives the reader a feeling of disorientation and craziness. “Where your diamonds?” *Beloved* searched Sethe’s face. (...) “Tell me,” said *Beloved*, smiling wide happy smile. “Tell me your diamonds.” (Morrison 69). *Beloved*’s character is abstract and depends on how the reader chooses to understand it. Bearing in mind the ghostly part of the story, as an abstract representation of Sethe's traumatized unconsciousness in which her guilt is exteriorized,

the appearance of the palpable woman –Beloved– could be understood as another slave woman who managed to escape from her master.

Poorly fed, thought Sethe, and younger than her clothes suggested—good lace at the throat, and a rich woman’s hat. Her skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under her hat. “You from around here?” Sethe asked her. (...) her hands, soft and new. (...) Probably one of those West Virginia girls looking for something to beat a life of tobacco and sorghum. (Morrison 62)

However, some of the perceived information about Beloved makes the reader believe she is in fact the reincarnation of the baby’s ghost. “What might your name be? asked Paul D. “Beloved” she said” (Morrison 62), corresponding with the name printed on the baby’s tombstone. The reader may therefore feel disoriented in how to interpret Beloved as a character. It symbolizes Sethe's dreadful mind’s restraint, the pain of the people and “the truth of an unspeakable past” (Papa 78). Consequently, the reader is required to repeatedly decide whether Beloved is just a woman or the proper reincarnation of Sethe’s murdered child. That can be proved when Beloved talks about some old earrings that belonged to Sethe when she was in Kentucky –“Tell me your diamonds.” (Morrison 69)– that she had long ago. Additionally, Beloved has a scar on her neck, which resembles the wound Sethe's baby had, and she knows a lullaby Sethe used to sing to her children, “a song no one else could possibly know” (Malmgren 98). Therefore, the supernatural has been used by the author aiming to transmit the memory of “these historical events” (Morrison 43), symbolizing the past chasing the present, as well as the complicated thoughts derived from such traumatized minds.

Morrison's writing builds a story through a number of different incidents told by Sethe in a –usually– stream of consciousness, “each piece internally fragmented” (Morrison 44). This broken narrative conveys the apprehension of the characters’ life, especially Sethe’s, who is, along most of the book, unable to speak about the incident with her children. She realizes how Beloved enjoys bringing her to the past, “the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it

pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything was painful or lost.” (Morrison 69) In any case, much of the story cannot be told by Sethe, due to a traumatic block that prevents her from talking about her attempt to kill her children and herself. So, subsequently an omniscient narrator fills the gaps of the story she cannot explain.

When she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison 192)

Slavery wounds are alive in the novel narrated in an undoubtedly “epic manner” (Fadem 49) promoting a “heroic” perception of Sethe’s character derived from life experiences she had to overcome and the extraordinary love she professes for her children. Slightly covered by history, Morrison induces the reader to face reality as purely and primitively as language allows. Therefore, the lack of metaphors confronts past and present without embellishing the story. However, when Sethe refers to the last flogging she suffered before leaving Sweet Home and the wounds it left on her back, she describes it like a “beautiful image” (Wyatt 478) of a:

tree on my (her) back (...) That’s what she called it. I’ve never seen it and never will. But that’s what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know. (Morrison 18)

By embroidering such an atrocity in this poetic manner, Morrison puts distance “perhaps, to Amy’s position of onlooker after the event but not to Sethe’s subjective experience of pain” (Wyatt 478). Yet, this tree which still grows on Sethe’s back is the ensemble of the scars that will remain forever on her body and soul. Scars that reflect the physical, but more importantly, the psychological damage derived from her life experience. Which concurrently, represents in a bigger scale the “Sixty Million and More” people who Morrison recalls to have been destroyed by slavery at the beginning of the novel dedicating it to them, a historical event which will endure forever, tattooed

on people's skin, and in the history of the United States of America. Showing how decisions we make and happenings in life will live alongside us, and that we will not be able to escape from them.

Torture and emotional abuse derive on psychological trauma and can be diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As the American Psychiatric Association specifies, these traumatic events entail “death, serious injury or threat to one's physical integrity” (qtd. in Anderson et al. 16). There is no doubt that the psychological trauma of enslavement was a reality. Following that fact, the life of slaves was full of those tragic experiences. Cathy Caruth explains that in fact, trauma is more than a “simple illness of a wounded psyche” but the “story of a wound that cries out” (17). What is more, post slavery traumatic stress syndrome is being suggested to be currently manifested in the mental health of African American as a consequence of a genetic heritage (4). Accordingly, Schreiber considers that the body of the characters in *Beloved* represent the heritor of the transmitted personal trauma “from one generation to another” (2). Elaine Scarry (qtd. in Blasingame 2012) indicates how people with a trauma become speechless and that “the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self-disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject” (Blasingame 23).

4. Types of love

The basis of slavery is to have absolute power over others without taking notice of the human condition that unites them –slaves and masters–. Malmgren states that given the dehumanizing conditions, slavery “reduced people to animals” (102) entailing the loss of one's identity. According to Malmgren, Morrison's novel can also be considered “a love story, exploring what it means to be ‘be-loved’” (100). Therefore, a range of types of love can be identified in Morrison’s masterpiece. As suggested in Wyatt’s essay, after Paul D’s arrival, Sethe begins to feel safer to start facing her ghosts and feel “the hurt of her back” (479). The love of Paul D is like a breeze of fresh air and Sethe seems

to be prepared to give herself an opportunity to enjoy the little things in life. The character of Paul D is like her shelter, and even if it is difficult for her to speak about her past, she finds the courage to partially tell him what she has been through. Moreover, we could consider that as an example of healthy love. As Paul D explains: “she (Sethe) is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.” (Morrison 321). Hence, the healthiness of the love between Sethe and Paul D in their life represents the overcoming, the “healing”. Bearing in mind that *Beloved* is toxic for Sethe and obliges her to live in the past, the struggle of getting rid of the ghost(s) –*Beloved*– is therefore promoted by this relationship.

Once Paul D starts to spend time with Sethe, the “ghost” of *Beloved* starts to fade away, to be forgotten. In their storytelling, we learn a bit more about the past they shared and the stories of their lives. Along these conversations, the reader can consequently get an idea of what love was for those under-chains. When Sethe speaks about her experience and feelings with Paul D, the latter reflects on the love a slave is allowed to feel. Slaves had to love little and carefully, since they were deprived of all family relations. According to Paul D, they had to love softly:

Listening to the doves in Alfred, Georgia, and having neither the right nor the permission to enjoy it because in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon—everything belonged to the men who had the guns. Little men, some of them, big men too, each one of whom he could snap like a twig if he wanted to. Men who knew their manhood lay in their guns and were not even embarrassed by the knowledge that without gunshot fox would laugh at them. And these “men” who made even vixen laugh could, if you let them, stop you from hearing doves or loving moonlight. **So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept.** Stole shy glances at her between the trees at chain-up. Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. **Anything bigger wouldn’t do. A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open** in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom. (Morrison 191) (My emphasise)

Controlled in every possible way, as explained in Malmgren's essay (102), slaves were deprived of humanity and "the relation between Self and Other, master and slave" consequently subjected slaves to an animal condition. This fact implies that involving oneself emotionally in relationships was not an option for those under chains. Thus, slavery used to separate entire families, no matter the age or condition of the members. Is love a right? As Sethe explains to Paul D: "Look like I loved em more after I got here" (Morrison 124). "Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (Morrison 190). The most distinguished relationship of the novel nevertheless is the one between mother and daughter and vice versa, as well as the strong bond between them. When Sethe saw that she had no right either over her life or over that of her children in Sweet Home –under the School Teacher's command– she had the courage of a mother to escape and save her children. Even in the worst of the situations, when death "didn't seem such a bad idea, all in all, in view of the step she would not have to take" (Morrison 37), she managed to survive. Inevitably, even if she was destroyed, she could not bear to see her children suffer. "The thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on—an hour? a day? a day and a night?—in her lifeless body grieved her so she made the groan that made the person walking on a path not ten yards away halt and stand right still" (Morrison 37) and continued her way to 124. The kind of love a mother feels for her children is, according to Paul D, too "thick" and extreme. Hence, a type of love that made Sethe fight to overcome every adversity she had to face on the way to save her children, but the same type of thick love which made her take the hardest determination: to commit an infanticide. "Mother love is also a killer" (qtd. in Malmgren 101).

This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began.

Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him. "**Your love is too thick,**" he said" (Morrison 193) (My emphasise)

5. Motherhood

Women are thoroughly portrayed in Morrison's novel. In the novel, the vast majority of the main characters are women. We can observe through the pages the kind of relationship they have between them: from grandmother-granddaughter, to mother-daughter, along with other relationships between the women in the village. Undoubtedly, Morrison wanted to give importance to female figures in a slavery sphere that other literary works refused to give to it before. As we have previously considered, maternal relations are the basis of Morrison's *Beloved*, and the “madness of mothering within slavery’s system (...) placed upon female slaves to bear children without the freedom and rights to mother” (Papa 78). In the very first lines of the novel, Morrison situates a mother –Sethe– and her daughter –Denver– coexisting in a diseased environment. “124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of baby's venom. (...) For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims” (Morrison 3).

5.1. Female connections: mother-daughter and vice versa

Denver, Sethe’s only remaining child, is represented as an exemplary girl who suffers and misses the presence of her grandmother. After her sister's infanticide, she did not speak for a while, and the trauma she developed stopped her from developing in a usual tempo at her age. Nevertheless, once she was able to speak again, she is still unable to put the infanticide into words. Thus, Denver's consciousness does not allow her to face their past. Yet, she has visions and dreams of her mother. The repetition of such episodes is an unconscious appeal to face this unspeakable incident, which is blocked by her mother –Sethe–. Conclusively, Sethe's sufferings are directly linked to that of her daughter. While the former keeps those events hidden, Denver needs to talk about them. In fact, her silence and emotional block could be understood as the opposite: an immense need for words that would help Denver understand the past of her family (Wyatt 483). Denver’s life is tied to supernatural understanding, she is “a girl who had lived all her life in a house peopled by the living activity of the dead” (Morrison 35). As

they live alone, Denver spends a lot of time on her own, but still, she shares her visions and dreams about her mother:

Maybe the white dress holding its arm around her mother's waist was in pain. If so, it could mean the baby ghost had plans. When she opened the door, Sethe was just leaving the keeping room. "I saw a white dress holding on to you," Denver said. "White? Maybe it was my bedding dress. Describe it to me. (Morrison 42).

Denver's dreams seem to be imaginary representations of certain moments in her mother's life about which she tries to learn about. This connection between daughter and mother, like a process of "wisdom sharing", is a desperate attempt to learn about Sethe's past and heal. As Michael Barber notes, the story builds up by connecting the pieces of "fragmented information" within an overlapping of past incidents in the main characters' life (349).

With Beloved's arrival, things change in 124. Sethe's maternal instinct arises and she wants to protect and take care of her. At the same time, Denver, eager to share time with someone else, focuses on tending Beloved. "Sethe looked at her daughter (Denver) and thought, yes, she has been lonesome. Very lonesome" (Morrison 65). As it has been considered by Papa, with Beloved's reincarnation, Sethe has a new opportunity to claim her motherhood, the one that was taken away from her as a result of her slave condition (83). Denver, Beloved and Sethe share "intimate moments of domesticity" by creating a storytelling environment where Sethe tells them her life account. Papa refers to this storytelling as a mother-love alignment. In these conversations, Sethe reminisces "her own mother, whom she barely remembers" (88). Here, women connections with female ancestors are alive as well as when Denver accounts on her grandmother, Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs, as the oldest woman of the family, represents a balancing power figure for Sethe and Denver, as well as a healing source. She was a slave all her life until Halle—her son and Sethe's husband—unslaved her. She was a wise and resilient woman who shared her wisdom and knowledge with other slaves. Michael Barber proposes this sharing of information between generations to be memories "embedded in the memory" of following generations. In other words, Denver's unconsciousness inherits previous generational memories (353). Thus, a collective consciousness between female

ancestors is created, helping the reader to build the story and understand black slave female's legacy.

5.2. Nursing as a unifying thread

The description of Sethe's body and mind are strongly connected to the characteristics of a maternal body, as well as to those instincts of a mother. Sethe refers to her own body when she can finally be free with her children as: "deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between" (Morrison 190). The previous example is a reference to a woman's body as prepared to nurse, love and protect her children. Besides, one of Sethe's obsessions on her way to 124 is her responsibility of nursing her baby girl, who should be in a great need of food. The mother instinct is constantly palpable and reflected on Morrison's writing. Here, we see nursing as a figure of mother-daughter fusion.

As previously mentioned, enslaved mothers were banned from practising any mother duties with their own children. Slave women were used to produce more slaves, and masters did not allow them to nurse them on their own. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, different references to nursing are made. To start with, Sethe's milk is stolen by the Schoolteacher's nephews. This violent and cruel act symbolizes a "mammary rape" (Fadem 56). The most important thing for Sethe is managing to nurse her baby, and this horrendous, soul-destroying action is one of the most traumatizing factors in the story. As Michele Mock illustrated, this is so "psychologically abhorrent to Sethe" as well as physically disturbing that an evocation to highlight Sethe's body is made to "signal to the swollen milk ducts which spurt milk to the nipple's surface in a flooding physical release, triggered by a brief tug to the nipple" (123). It symbolizes the lowest and most degrading action to a woman, as it is an aberrance to a mother-baby connection. The reader is empathetic to a mother's feeling. Indeed, Morrison builds "nursing as a figure of mother-daughter fusion" (Wyatt 481). Therefore, this mammary rape resembles vampires sucking the life out of a human being. Hence, the schoolteacher's nephews are, in a way, stealing life, as the milk carried by Sethe is the baby's food. As Wyatt points out, a solid consideration is given to the nurturing process of a mother to her children.

“She had milk enough for all” (Beloved 118), emphasizing nursing as the sustain of life (Wyatt 476). The former is consequently linked to the characteristics of a woman's body, especially during and after pregnancy. Despite Sethe's feelings, this unifying thread that nursing serves, is not forever. In any case, in the novel we can see how “her (Sethe's) bond with them remains so strong that she continues to think of it as a nursing connection” (Wyatt 476). Thus, she considers her children a part of her body avoiding to cut the cord which joins a mother and her offspring.

5.3. The strong physical presence of motherhood

As previously stated, Morrison emphasizes on the characteristics of a maternal body. The portrayal of the Sethe's maternal body provides a strong physical presence because of her parental instinct for protection and the description of her body in the novel. Due to the baby's needs, the necessities of the baby reinforces the responsibilities of a mother. Even though, the character of Beloved comes back to life in the body of a 19 year old girl, she still behaves as a child who requires a lot of attention from her mother. We see how different intimate situations develop, for example the grooming ritual, when Sethe takes care of her children. As Schapiro states, “a baby's frustrated needs” refer not only to the physical needs, but the emotional ones as well. Accordingly, the physical and psychic demands get mixed and tangled (195). By that, Morrison gets to convey the psychological needs of a baby and a mother by means of “flesh” and “meat”, with the characteristics of a mother's body strongly emphasized.

Further to my previous comments, the slave system did not consider the nursing process as a right for slaves. In this respect, in Morrison's *Beloved*, the inner necessities of a baby (Beloved) are to some extent exaggerated. As a result, the “emotional hunger” and egocentric behaviour of Beloved as well as Sethe's necessity for balancing out for the years without her develops into a vast codependent relationship between them. Sethe's impossibility of cutting the cord is shown by her feeling of considering her children almost a part of her body and as her own property.

6. “You are mine”: the issue of ownership

As Wyatt states, the absence of restraints in the relationships between mother and daughter derives from the issue of ownership and it is portrayed as toxic, depraved as well as unhealthy (482). Terry Paul Caesar suggests that the immoderate obsession Beloved shows for Sethe in the novel is greatly represented (115) by Beloved's demands for love and attention. This need is likewise directly fed by Sethe's eagerness of compelling older displeased motherhood wishes, illustrated by Sethe's obsession to compensate the lost years with her daughter –Beloved–. This compulsive preoccupation makes Sethe and Beloved “become as inseparable as murder from revenge” (Caesar 115).

Sethe, desirous to overprotect her children as a result of her own life experiences, wants to prevent them from living a life like hers. In Morrison's *Beloved* there is a great mother-to-daughter mutual dependency obsession. We can find a certain irony to all this, as slavery made people lose their One-Self and the power of deciding over their lives. In this sense, Sethe projects her power and control over her children. As a slave, Sethe was not able to decide over her future, but now she can decide for her children's fate as she feels they belong to her. The former seems to be a bit paradoxical as it is exactly what slavery was, people ownership. With that, Morrison takes human relationships to an extreme level, showing in an indirect way how harmful it is to impose control over others. That is, without differentiating or respecting the limits of the One-Self. When Sethe talks about his daughter's death with Paul D, she says: “She left me. (...) She was my best thing” Paul D then says: “You your best thing Sethe. You are” (Morrison 322). In this respect, the loss of One-Self is seen, as Sethe is traumatized by her life experience and lack of decision over her persona. For Sethe herself it is no longer important, but she focuses all her passion in protecting her children instead as it is shown in the following quotation:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The

best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. (Morrison 295)

I have previously mentioned the questionable matter of love and its barriers. When considering the maternal type of love between Sethe and her daughters, there is a two-sided loss of themselves by their mutual obsession. Beloved's call for attention “claims Sethe for hers” (Fadem 65) and nothing seems to be enough for her. “Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. If the hen had only two eggs, she both” (Morrison 282).

The dialogues between Sethe and Beloved show a desire of ownership. Furthermore, Beloved considers Sethe of her own: “now I (Beloved) found her in this house. She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling. I will not lose her again. She is mine” (254). Morrison goes even further by picturing both of them as the same person, considering Beloved as a proper extension of Sethe's own body. According to Wyatt, in this ownership obsession, the preoedipal phase is exemplified as Sethe and Beloved are attached by a strong bond with each other. Here one of Freud's child development phases in which “a mother is an extension of the self” is represented. Besides, it is shown how the baby –Beloved– requires the total attention of her mother (481). In this sense, Beloved does not accept Sethe's relationship with Paul D, nor the care given to Denver. This is linked to Sethe's healing process due to the relationship between Paul D and Sethe, deriving in the ghost's exorcification leading to Beloved's disappearance. Indeed, Beloved felt she was about to vanish:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed. When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting. (Morrison 157)

As shown by Wyatt, Sethe is so “embedded in her children” (476) that she considers to end her children’s lives a right of her own choice. As Sethe says “I (she) took and put my (her) baby's where they'd be safe” (194). As a matter of fact, she ends up taking the most dreadful determination. When the Schoolteacher found 124 and arrived looking for Sethe and her children, as he considered them of his property, Sethe felt unhopeful and aimed for the most drastic and dreadful resolution (192).

Throughout her life, Sethe and the rest of the slave women were not allowed to love or meant to have the right of a family. Morrison achieves to make the reader take a stance in Sethe’s place and understand her. As previously stated, the appalling sufferings in Sethe’s life as a slave psychologically determine her future decisions. Due to her slave condition and traumatized mind, she hopelessly resolves murdering her children. It is extremely hard and painful to confront such situation as an infanticide. When Sethe finally manages to explain “the unspeakable” (235), and to put into words such a terrible incident in her life, she accomplishes to demonstrate how she could not bear her children to suffer a life such as the one she had to go through under her master's commands (Morrison 174). On the contrary, the women of the village raise the issue of the infanticide and how “what's fair ain't necessarily right. You can't just up and kill your children. No, and the children can't just up and kill the mama.” (301). Therefore, are Sethe's actions right or understable in any way?

This moral dilemma is the “ghost” that haunts Sethe, literally and figuratively, along the novel. The ghost Sethe's family, the women in the village and the reader have to face. As Wyatt suggests, the tragedy in *Beloved* is comparable to Antigone, conducting to an irreversible end: death (55) or Medea, who choses “to defy unethical state laws, is in her betrayal of this maternal absolute” (57). Indeed, Morrison opens the book with a house full of “baby's venom” (3) and deals with the hard moral dilemma of what Sethe's actions mean. The day Sethe killed her own child, time stopped. Madness did not guide her actions, but her grief. The pain and fear for the Schoolteacher, who had humiliated and tortured her. She knew the Schoolteacher’s intentions, and how her children would have to live a life under chains as she did. The text conveys to transmit

how Sethe's "thick" love for her children caused her to murder her own child, and drives the reader to an understanding of Sethe's reasons to commit such an atrocity. Finding consensus on the question whether this infanticide is justified or not, it is something that is never going to be attained. Therefore, I believe it is a personal and subjective task for the reader to wonder about the legitimacy of Beloved's murder. Besides, the essence of Morrison's masterpiece is to make people confront the realities of slavery and reconsider how abominable the imposed power of their masters was. The same horrors that led a mother –Sethe– kill "her best thing" (Morrison 295), driven by her love towards her: Be-loved.

7. Conclusion

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the consequences of slavery as well as the slave narratives that give information from a black's perspective. However, the slave narratives found under a woman's perspective are the least. In any case, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a call to reflection over the American history beyond the realities of slavery which are pictured under a woman's perspective, highlighting the relevancy of motherhood. The main character of the novel, Sethe, is pictured with simple language, but accomplishing to convey her scarred mind. Morrison, skilfully managing the language of her work arouses the reader to empathize with Sethe. In that sense, in *Beloved* the sufferings of the characters are represented with the scars that remain in Sethe's psyche and body. What is more, the deaths of the "Sixty Million and more" (Morrison's dedication in the novel) people assassinated by slaveholders and human traders are also present along *Beloved's* lines. The ghosts of her past besides the ghost of her murdered baby materialize in the body of a nineteen-year-old woman: Beloved. She is portrayed with a childish character, and Morrison makes the reader confront her and all of Sethe's ghosts concurrent with her. With that purpose, the reader has to embrace the ghost story part of the novel to understand the complexity of it.

How can someone with such a troubled past continue with their life? The embodiment of language, which makes of extraordinary relevance the representation of a woman's body, highlights the qualities of a mother's. Thus, the connection between mother and daughter are pictured in an extreme way due to the strong dependency Beloved has over her mother. The obsession over each other becomes toxic and the issue of ownership a main theme in the novel. Such control over others is the basis of slavery, and it is at the same time projected in Sethe's ownership over her own children. As a result, this leads us to the main question of the novel: to what extent is it legitimate to kill your own baby to avoid them from the awful atrocities of slavery?

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