**‘Don’t love her too much.**

**I am loving her too much.’ (Morrison, 1987, 255)**

**Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the trauma of motherhood in slave women.**

Slavery as a literary narrative has existed since the 18th Century, and became the first form of African-American literature – the way in which slave experiences could be communicated, often in a diluted form, to the white audiences of America and Europe. For Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that same audience – in 1987, this time – are given anything but a diluted experience of the horror of being a slave woman and mother in the years preceding and following the American Civil War. It is an intrinsically emotional topic; motherhood being, fundamentally, something to which most women choose to relate. Yet, as Sandra Mayfield points out, ‘before Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, not many writers or writings had attempted to recreate the internal life of the mind and the spirit of a slave woman. One might well paraphrase the thought of the contemporary psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva to ask, “What do we know about the discourse of the slave mother?” In other words, what do we know about the minds, the emotions, the psychological forces operating in these slaves?’ (Mayfield, 2012, 3) This is a question Toni Morrison attempts to answer – she does not portray it solely as an emotive horror, but explores the psychological trauma that the combination motherhood and slavery bring. In the female characters of *Beloved* exist a range of responses and reactions to motherhood, in the form of the mothers themselves, but also their daughters. Morrison’s work begs the question: out of the horror of slavery, can motherhood be the rejuvenating force for women? Or does it continue to be part of the destruction? As will be seen, motherhood in the aftermath of slaver is a layered human anguish, and the trauma of this motherhood is portrayed in a difficult – but, in the end, fundamentally hopeful – sense in *Beloved.*

Sethe is the focal image of the mother in *Beloved*. Yet, before analysing her experiences and portrayal, it seems logical to explore the mother figures in Sethe’s life, and what her first-hand understanding of motherhood is. Sethe’s mother embodies the often typical circumstances of the slave woman by being unable, or unwilling, to embrace the role of motherhood, or rejecting to. Instead, Sethe ‘“didn’t see her but a few times out in the fields…She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was.”’ (Morrison, 1987, 72) This is interesting in itself: it indicates that Sethe’s mother was prevented from fulfilling her role as a mother – even if she wanted to – because she was forced to return to work in the fields and another slave woman was assigned the duty of nurturing and nourishing her child. Sethe was though, if anything, lucky (or perhaps anything but, given the horror that ensues in her life) to survive past immediate birth, for her mother ‘“threw them all away but you…You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never.”’ (Morrison, 1987, 74) Sethe’s mother couldn’t bear to keep the product of rape – but Sethe was the fruit of the one consensual relationship she had. This mind-set of infanticide being a preferable option was, according to Marie Mies, common for slave women at the time:

‘As Rhoda Reddock points out, in the long years of slavery the slave women has internalised an anti-motherhood attitude as a form of resistance to the slave system; they continued a kind of birth strike till about the middle of the nineteenth century. When they became pregnant, they used bitter herbs to produce abortions or, when the children were born, ‘many were allowed to die out of the women’s natural dislike for bearing them to see them become slaves, destined to toil all their lives for their master’s enrichment’ (Moreno-Fraginals, 1976, quoted by Reddock, 1984)’ (Mies, 1986, 91)

For Sethe’s mother, it is likely that the children serving as a reminder of her repeated sexual assault was too much to bear – but also, it was saving them from their enslaved destiny, too.

This, of course, holds parallels with Sethe’s killing of Beloved. Her terror of being found by the Schoolteacher – who, under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, was entitled to follow and reclaim Sethe and the children born to her – leads her to ‘out-hurt the hurter’, as Paul D puts it (Morrison, 1987, 276). Sethe even justifies the murder herself, asking: ‘I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?’ (Morrison 194) In the figures of both Sethe and her mother, then, comes a very realistic portrayal of the impossible choice slave mothers were put into. Whilst it is a human response to recoil at the act of infanticide, *Beloved* undoubtedly ‘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)’ (Gupta, 2009, 1) By writing this aspect into a work of literature, Morrison adds the emotional, social and psychological elements to the act: she gives the readership an element of grave understanding to the horror endured by the ‘Sixty Million and more’ (Morrison, 1987) slaves the novel is dedicated to. It is normalised, but not desensitised, in the stories of Sethe and her mother.

So too does Baby Suggs’ experience of motherhood hold comparative value to that of Sethe’s. For Baby, her ‘eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the prices included her children.’ (Morrison, 1987, 28) To protect herself from this ‘nastiness’ – the inhumane and downright trivial way in which slave owners treated their slaves, including children – Baby held her children at an emotional distance: ‘That child she could not love and the rest she would not.’ (Morrison, 1987, 28) If you did love your child, it put yourself and them at the risk of emotional and physical distress, if not torture, over the lack of control you have over your own child’s fate. Sethe, indeed, does the opposite when it comes to Denver, and her obsession with her ‘best thing’ (Morrison, 1987, 321) Beloved – something Paul D remarks on as ‘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.’ (Morrison, 1987, 54) Sethe’s bond with Denver makes her vulnerable to even further trauma, as a child could be gambled away at a whim by a slave owner – whereas Baby Suggs distances herself as a form of self-protection.

In the figures of Sethe’s mother and Baby Suggs, then, comes the picture of the danger and destruction of motherhood for an enslaved woman: both women choose to protect themselves and their children, either through physical removal (Sethe’s mother) or a sheer emotional barrier (Baby Suggs). One of the greatest traumas (second perhaps only to murdering her own child) that Sethe endures as an enslaved woman is, indeed, to do with her role as a mother – it is also, interestingly, one of the traumas she is able to verbalise, shown in this exchange with Paul D:

‘”They use cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!”’ (Morrison, 1987, 20)

This role of the milk is symbolic throughout *Beloved –* including in the other main trauma, the death of Beloved, where Sethe breastfeeds Denver, who ‘took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister.’ (Morrison, 1987, 179) It is, of course, important that Morrison repeatedly uses this image: breastfeeding is one of the key acts of bonding between mother and child, and not having milk renders this act impossible. Paula Gallant Eckard takes this a step further, and argues that ‘it also reaches into deeper, more mythic levels of maternal experience…[being one of] the three blood transformation mysteries once associated with the female body.’ (Eckard 66) On the trauma itself, she says:

‘When Schoolteacher’s nephews attack the pregnant and lactating Sethe, they engage in an act of sexual, racial, and maternal defilement that represents a complete perversion of the third female blood-transformation mystery. Sethe’s maternity offers her no protection from violence, just as it failed to exempt other slave women.’ (Eckard, 2002, 71)

The milk, then, highlights throughout *Beloved* how motherhood in slave women was not considered sacred: a sign of life itself, it is frequently merged with trauma, violence and death instead. There is also, away from maternal symbolism, further significance in Sethe’s milk being stolen, in that it highlights her value as a commodity – the milk was stolen both as punishment, but also to damage her product, her ability to feed her children.

Sylvia Federici, a Marxist feminist theorist who explores how women’s reproductive labour is exploited by capitalist systems, discusses at length in her work *Caliban and the Witch* the relationship between slavery, capitalism, and motherhood. It is interesting how the economic implications of slavery have such a profound emotional and social impact, like the ones witnessed in the characters of *Beloved*’s mothers: ‘A new page opened after 1807, when the slave trade was abolished and the Caribbean and American planters adopted a ‘slave breeding’ policy… Only when the supply of African slaves diminished did the regulation of women’s sexual relations and reproductive powers become more systematic and intense.’ (Federici, 2004, 112) From 1807 onwards, plantation owners needed slave women to have children in order for more slaves to be available: a horrific circle of emotional turmoil for economic and capitalist gain. Sethe, her mother, Baby Suggs and, indeed, all their children become victims to this system and the destruction it breeds and creates. Federici further argues:

‘Even later [than the take-off of capitalism] – down to the present – the state has spared no efforts in its attempt to wrench from women’s hands the control over reproduction, and to determine which children should be born, where, when and in what numbers. Consequently, women have often be forced to procreate against their will, and have experienced alienation from their bodies, their “labour”, and even their children… No one can describe the anguish and desperation suffered by a woman seeing her body turn against herself, as it must occur in the case of an unwanted pregnancy.’ (Federici, 2004, 91)

Whilst this entire argument is, of course, relevant to the relationship between reproduction and capitalism that drove the use of slave women, the final point Federici makes is particularly applicable: one can only begin to imagine the ‘anguish and desperation’ (Federici, 2004, 91) of a slave woman finding her reproductive labour being used to continue to fuel a system of torture and horror.

Yet, Andrea O’Reilly argues ‘how Sethe claims a maternal subjectivity in defiance of the construction of slave mothers as breeders, in order to instill in her children a loved sense of self so that they may be subjects in a culture that commodifies them as objects.’ (O’Reilly, 2004, 127) The former point is certainly true, to some extent with Sethe claiming her role as mother to rescue herself, escape and reunite with her children, and to use that same role when the Schoolteacher attempts to recapture her as a form of protection over her children, no matter the consequences. She does, indeed, battle against what Federici has above described – the role of slave mothers in the cycle of capitalism in the decisions she makes as an active, subjective mother. However, the role of Denver, and whether she has a ‘loved sense of self’, is certainly questionable. Therefore, moving away from Sethe and the mothers themselves there is also a lot to glean about motherhood from the role of the daughters in *Beloved*: Denver, and Beloved herself. Denver spends the majority of the novel as a solitary, tragic figure – she is the other daughter, the one that survived. She is, in many ways, also traumatised by the death of Beloved:

‘All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again… So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too.’ (Morrison, 1987, 242)

Her inability to leave the house, and her outward front of loving Sethe, is all to prevent it happening again: to protect herself. She also projects this protection onto Beloved, in many ways mimicking the act of motherhood – and subverting it – whilst doing so. Whilst Beloved is in her infant stage, ‘Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her laboured breathing and, out of love and a breakneck possessiveness that charged her, hid like a personal blemish Beloved’s incontinence’ (Morrison, 1987, 64) – all actions of a mother to an infant child, and foreshadowing the ‘possessiveness’ that will soon take over Sethe’ and Beloved’s dynamic. Beloved does not give Denver this in return, stating of Sethe: ‘”She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have.”’ (Morrison, 1987, 89) Fundamentally, though, Denver also becomes a maternal figure in saving Sethe: whilst her relationship with her mother is seemingly out of self-protection for the majority of the novel (further highlighting the destructive trauma of slave motherhood), by the end she braves her own life, and that of the African-American community, to fend for her mother trapped in a psychological and supernatural horror with Beloved. She becomes the saviour, embodying the mythic maternal that Eckard discusses: whilst not giving bodily blood, she voices the trauma and acts in a role of outward protection, like a mother should to daughter.

Beloved is, of course, symbolic of the trauma of motherhood that Sethe had to go through: infanticide. There are many different ways to read the character, as a sign of mental illness and mere hallucination, or a supernatural, ghostly figure. This is, of course, subjective to the reader – though, it is worth noting that the African-American community, especially at this time, did heavily believe in spiritual forces. What is certainly true is that, whether Beloved is physically present or not:

As is made apparent in *Beloved*, slavery, more than any other cultural institution or historical event, damaged the African American motherline by denying African people their humanity and history. In her fifth novel Morrison seeks to symbolize this loss in the character of Beloved and to render it psychologically manifest through the character of Sethe. (O’Reilly, 2004, 74)

Her being this allegorical figure, constantly reminding Sethe of her trauma, leads to a highly destructive dependent dynamic between the pair, where mother-daughter is constantly subverted. Towards the end of Part II of the novel comes a strange, free-fall dialogue, where the consciousness of Sethe, Beloved and even Denver all collide into one:

‘Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face; you are me

I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine’ (Morrion, 1987, 255-6)

The final phrase, ‘you are mine’, repeats throughout the novel: in terms of familial relations, it is of course true, but in this context the words become those of destruction and obsessive possession. Sethe and Beloved are barely distinguishable by the end in terms of their subjectivity – only in physical appearance, as Beloved grows in strength to dominate Sethe, does it become wholly clear from the outside looking in that they are different: ‘It was standing next to Sethe…This one was big. She say they was holding hands and Sethe looked like a little girl beside it.’ (Morrision, 1987, 312)

There are, understandably, several psychoanalytic readings of Sethe and Beloved. As Luce Irigaray states: ‘Neither little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity.’ (Irigaray, 2013, 539) In the relationship with Beloved and Sethe we have a complete rendering of personal subjectivity: they become one and the same. It is Denver, with her love of her mother – never given up – that actually regains the identity of both women. Beloved leaves, and Sethe and Denver can create their lives again. Beloved fleeing upon the return of the African-American community into Denver’ and Sethe’s lives is also highly symbolic, as Monika Gupta explains: ‘Infanticide was condemned by the society but Sethe is forgiven in the end by the same the society.’ (Gupta, 2009, 9) Society had its part to play in the initial murder of Beloved, and in the same way it has its role in the banishment of Beloved – whatever she may be. In this secondary action, though, there is hope: if Beloved symbolises the trauma and destruction of slave motherhood, the community coming together to reject her, to overcome her immense power, is a sign of historical understanding of the trauma.

To go back to the initial question posed by Sandra Mayfield: ‘“What do we know about the discourse of the slave mother?” In other words, what do we know about the minds, the emotions, the psychological forces operating in these slaves?’ (Mayfield, 2012, 3) It seems Toni Morrison gives us in *Beloved* a much greater and graver understanding, in a way only an act of personable literature can. She puts us inside the minds of the women featured in this novel, be they mothers or daughters, and highlights the polarising and impossible world of being a mother in the world of American slavery. It seems too simple to call motherhood for the slave woman wholly destructive – whilst Sethe’s fictional trauma is one replicated (perhaps not in the literal dramatic sense, but certainly on similar emotional levels) across the history of African-American slavery, there are certainly presentations in *Beloved* of the rejuvenating character of motherhood, too. At the end, the reader is left with at least some hope for Sethe and Denver, and the African-American, ex-slave community itself: Sethe is finally told that she is her own ‘best thing’, while Paul D begins his quest to love her. Denver, meanwhile, is embracing the African-American community – and with it comes the symbolism of the trauma of slave history, especially that of motherhood, perhaps being accepted. The story is not one ‘to pass on’ (Morrison, 1987, 324) – with one reading of this phrase suggesting that it is not, simply, to be dismissed. Perhaps through Sethe and Denver re-integrating into the community, after the catalyst that was Beloved, there is a symbolic hope that the traumatic history will be told, understood and overcome – just as Beloved herself had to be. It is fitting, then, that the novel ends simply with: ‘Beloved’ (Morrison, 1987, 324).

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