

Critical Study of Mother-Daughter Relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to discuss the mother-daughter relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. The paper mainly focuses on convolution in the lives of female characters and how it affects their relationship with their daughters. Female characters of these novels were physically and emotionally maltreated by the traumatic experiences of their past life which were mostly correlated to the social issues like gender, class and race faced by Afro-Americans. The "Black" mothers of Afro-America were the "tough" mothers who shaped their daughters to confront the challenges of a racist environment thus preparing them to struggle with all types of situations in life. Yet there are some Black mothers who helplessly killed their daughters in an attempt to safeguard them.

KEYWORDS

Trauma; Humiliation; Aggression; Endure.

Introduction:

Drawing on the Womanist movement, the paper attempts critical study to recognize and discover the mother-daughter relationship in contemporary women's fiction. The mother-daughter relationship is a prime focus in Womanism. In respect to the women who helped to nurture their community and in the fight against racism and sexism we can find a variety of mother characters who have emerged in the writing of Toni Morrison. Like many Afro-American Women, Toni Morrison found that the feminist movement was not sufficient to deal with issues of their black community. According to her, the sufferings of Afro-American women are

totally different in comparison to Whites. Their novels include characters who feel proud to be Afro-American. Throughout her writings, Toni Morrison is interested in presenting the struggle of women who suffered from oppression due to race and gender.

Mother -Daughter relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*:

Toni Morrison is a distinctive contemporary Afro-American female author who won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. She has written many great novels like *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *God Help the Child* etc. Major themes in Toni Morrison's novels are colonialism, jazz, racial discrimination, sexual abuse,

slavery and aspects of motherhood. Toni Morrison makes her novels alluring by portraying the characters with vivid style of narration. She discussed motherhood associated with the act of resistance which turned into essential for the Afro-Americans in their fight for liberty. In her works, we can find that mothers prepared their daughters to fight against the brutalism of their white masters and to get recognition in their community.

To provide a framework to the subjugating motherhood, it is essential to know the background behind this harsh treatment. The White society considers Blacks as minors, due to their race. Therefore, the slaves were compelled to work in their fields and factories. Punishments which included whipping, branding and mutilation were common. The slaves were treated as creatures as if they had no dignity and emotions. The women were also hegemonized and they had to endure sexual abuse, violent torture and rapes and the same was expected from her children.

In *Beloved*, the killing of the baby girl is to save her from experiencing a life of servitude that is disfigured by the mother's misconceived concept of motherhood, as a result of this inseparable relationship turns into a devastating and dangerous one. The mother's act of killing her baby girl is a re-echo of cyclic pain in the mind of the mother which creates a feeling of sin and grief. This muddled traumatic recollection tortures the young girl, who was deprived of her mother's love and care only for being born with a black complexion. Even she creates false sexual allegations against her white teacher only to gain the love and affection of her black mother. It is observed that in *Beloved*, Morrison depicted the pathetic conundrum faced by Sethe, a mother who performs an act of killing her baby girl. Throughout the novel Sethe, she is never taken care of by her mother. So, the growth of a girl which is a

proud moment for any mother does not induce any excitement in Sethe.

Being lost, at an early age, her mother, Sethe was brought as a black slave to the Sweet Home Plantation. There, she marries Halle Suggs, with whom she has four kids. Sethe flees the plantation because she cannot stand the white masters' cruel treatment of her. At last, she seeks safety at the home of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, at 124 Bluestone Road. She is plagued by the infanticide she committed there. Sethe is seen as an outcast after serving seven years in prison. Denver abandons Sethe along with her daughter and two boys.

Women faced the most terrible consequences of slavery. "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women..." As a result of killing her child, Sethe experiences psychological anguish. She lost her mother before she could speak, and slavery caused her to reject providing for her child's needs. She also demonstrates her attempt to rewrite her history by killing her child. She was left alone while her mother was hung.

Sethe is punished not only by the law but also by society. Everyone makes fun of her. She is forced to commit such a heinous act due to her treatment at the plantation and her desire as a mother to protect her child from slavery. All of Sethe's hardships continue to plague her. Only Paul D is able to fully comprehend Sethe's suffering as her mother. Sethe was horrified by the terrible consequences of slavery, and she wished for her daughter to be free of slavery because she did not want her to experience the same fate as her. The most heinous crime is murdering one's own child. However, Sethe indulges in this in order to free her son from servitude. Even though she believes she did the right thing, killing her child was an injustice.

Denver, the daughter of Sethe, was born and raised in the same prison as her mother. Denver is criticised by the entire

society. Denver starts to lose faith in Seth since she never tells her about her history. She lives in constant terror of her mother killing her for the remainder of her childhood. Sethe terrifies her. Denver resides at 124 Bluestone with her mother, but she never communicates with Sethe. She believes her mother is responsible for the act because she saw the slaughter. Denver's actions are upsetting Sethe. Denver consciously seeks to distance herself from Sethe in order to further alienate her mother. She feels her family is to blame for her sister's death as a result of growing closer to her deceased sister.

Beloved wants to possess her mother, Sethe. Her plans are told to Denver, "She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have". Beloved appears from water mysteriously. "She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands." Sethe considers Beloved not as a spirit but as a living being. Morrison presents Beloved, as "gothically monstrous". As a result of being released from her past, Sethe feels relieved. Sethe is plagued by the guilt of killing Beloved. The appearance of the Beloved's spirit reflects her emotional state. Sethe gives over to the Beloved. She makes an unwise deal with her Beloved because she lacks confidence, endangering her health. To quote Morrison "Guilt and the past must not be avoided. They must be taken up and possessed".

Beloved makes an effort to choke Sethe. While soothing her mother's wounded neck, she chokes her to death. Even though it hurts, Sethe sacrifices everything she has in the hopes that Beloved will forgive her for the murder she committed when she was a young child. Denver harbors resentments in his heart while Beloved torments her mother with his presence. Despite the fact that Sethe is aware of Denver's isolation, she never tells Denver anything about her

history. She barely shares a little of her past. This leads to a gap in the relationship between Sethe and Denver and thus makes Denver "secretive." She keeps Beloved as a secret. Denver, however, grows to love her mother as Sethe struggles under the influence of Beloved. Her mother is saved by Denver. She serves as a conduit between Sethe and the neighbourhood. Denver will ultimately be able to assist Sethe when Beloved fully takes possession of her mother.

Denver and Beloved are both extremely possessive. Beloved creates Sethe to be an integral part of her. Denver's nature is found to have a similar possession, although it is directed at "her ghost sibling". In Beloved and her mother's company, Denver feels "marginalized." Denver and Beloved appear to be hostile, but Sethe's act of infanticide surpasses their hostility.

Mother -Daughter relationship in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*:

A Mercy tells the story of Florens, a slave girl who confesses that her mother decided to sell her in order to satisfy her master's debt. The tale explores the pain and suffering of motherhood and is set in the early 1680s. Here was the younger sibling. Spared merely because he was a boy, who might go on to support the family financially. After her father passed away, the mother was thrust into an unstable and lonely environment where she had to work hard to make ends meet.

Like in many of Toni Morrison's previous books, motherhood plays a significant role in this one. The other female characters in the novel, such as Sorrow, Lina, Rebecca, and Florens, also show and reflect maternal instincts. The traumatic separation of a slave woman from her daughter is the subject of the book, along with the psychological effects it has on both of them. As they strive to

convey their "untold maternal memories" in a harsh patriarchal society, the women feel inner conflict and agony.

"To be a female in this world is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below." In a racist culture, the novel shows how the complex, nuanced relationships caused by the slave trade leads to the strained mother-daughter bond.

The crass and violent ways in which Black women express themselves are how their anguish is revealed. They fight against the atrocities of slavery and work to protect their young daughters from the predatory white eyes. The young Afro-American girl Florens in the book has been torn apart from her mother at a very young age. When the plantation owner Ortega sold her to yet another slave master, Jacob Vaark, to whom he owed a sizable debt, she was reduced to a simple commodity in the slave trade. The first victim of the slave trade was Florens' mother, and subsequently, it was the daughter who was seen obediently clinging to her mother. In this situation, Florens was treated like a commodity and was traded for something else. Vaark was implored and pleaded with by the mother to leave her and take her daughter.

The Dutch merchant, Vaark, agreed to the terms of the sale and took Florens with him to care for his ailing wife and to satiate his sexual urge. As the lives of the slaves continue to be disrupted within their isolating and failing relationships, slavery is shown here as a repeating subject.

Morrison challenges the common and accepted stereotypes of Black women as good moms, tolerant spouses, or promiscuous sexual partners. In these books, mothers are exempted from any such biological ties. Morrison provides accurate information about women who experienced physical and mental abuse as well as harassment, challenges, and exploitation in the white hegemonic

culture. One discovers all kinds of unpleasant reverberations of unmarried women who lived with the painful reminders of their unlawful and immoral connections in such a twisted society, mostly when their offspring remained illegal, illegitimate, unrecognized, or as a memory of a rape or a forced relationship.

Black women were characterized as the huge, overweight "black mammy," who solely cared about her kids. They became ethical and unselfish female role models because they desired to enhance the lives and circumstances of their children. By pushing the daughters to the front, mothers like Eva, Sethe, and Harriet tried to protect their kids from the drudgery of the slave life. However, they were frequently the agonizing victims of a chauvinistic society's brutality. Toni Morrison reiterates the powerlessness of the Black woman in a hegemonic culture through the mother in her book *A Mercy*.

Because they were created solely to gratify the carnal needs of their white overlords, Black moms in this situation were the targets of masculine persecution. Although the mothers were powerless to ease their daughters' suffering and concerns, they made an effort to shield their offspring from the harsh eyes of the white masters. According to Carl Jung, this continued to be viewed negatively and to cause ongoing suffering in mother-daughter relationships.

Conclusion:

It was worthwhile to study the most talented contemporary African-American women writer, Toni Morrison in order to better understand the African-American mother-daughter relationship, which serves as the lens through which the racial histories of African Americans are revised. In this essay, three novels were used to explore the theme of the representation of African American motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship: *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy*

(2009).

Both the novels deal with the relationships between mothers and daughters. Morrison address motherhood and the moral conundrum it creates in the lives of African American women through the mother-daughter relationship in both of their works, which deal with mother-daughter relationships. The emotional complexity of ethnic women as mothers and daughters is depicted by these three

women authors in the unique social and historical situations. Additionally, the works cover a range of cultural experiences and historical eras. These tales also show women caught between their mother, who represents their past, and their daughter, who represents their future. They chart the growth of the self and identity for both the mother and the daughter.

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