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## **THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY AND (BLACK) MOTHERHOOD: A CASE STUDY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS**

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This paper analyses the institution of slavery in the United States and its effect on black motherhood in Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008). Set in culturally and politically specific conditions, Morrison's novels offer a reflection of the slave past, thus exposing the various patterns of enslavement. While *Beloved* tells a story of a slave mother who murdered her child as a desperate response to the horrors of slavery, *A Mercy* provides personal histories of four women who are not factual, but rather symbolical slaves. The analysis will reveal the strategies such as shared sisterhood and the power of community which proved to be necessary for survival of these women in a society with gender, racial and sexual oppression.

**Key words:** slavery, motherhood, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, America, oppression, race

### **1. Introduction**

Sexism and racism, which shaped the African American identity and consciousness, have their social, political and economic foundations in the institution of slavery. American social structure was largely defined by the racial imperialism that European colonizers brought from the Old World. The institution of slavery began when the first slave had been brought from Africa to Virginia in 1619 and consequently over the next few decades it had been recognized by other states as well. According to David Davis, in the early period of American colonies "there were variations and inconsistencies in social practices, so much that it was only in the eighteenth century that full-fledged societal racism emerged, followed later by a full-fledged ideological justification."(Davis 1999: 58)

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Nevertheless, the economic benefits the American plantation owners saw in the slave trade were vast. Examining the influence of slavery on the African American female sexuality, bell hooks notices how it affected their social status as well as their sense of identity. Black women were subjugated to tremendous everyday torture: they were whipped, raped and branded, sold, bought, separated from their families. hooks argues that particularly rape was meant to be a constant reminder of their sexual vulnerability and whereas "black men were de-humanized solely as a result of not being able to be patriarchs implies that the subjugation of black women was essential to the black male's development of a positive self-concept, an idea that only served to support a sexist social order." (hooks 1982: 20-21) Even though racism was a powerful destructive mechanism, sexism was particularly detrimental to black female slave's existence. Sexual exploitation did not only divest black women of their individuality and sexuality, but it also served as an act of supremacy, from the socio-political aspect. Thus hooks interprets the act of rape as "an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women."(hooks 1982: 27)

By juxtaposing Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy* we can perceive how sexism together with racial determination constituted specific racist discourse and practices. Politics of motherhood is closely associated with black female sexuality and these two forms of black womanhood, as we tend to show, were influenced by male supremacy and southern culture of slavery.

It may not be coincidental that Morrison published *A Mercy* in 2008, the year America elected first black man a president. Justine Tally thus notices that Morrison "locating her story in the past, is inevitably addressing the present."(Tally 2011: 63) Does it mean that the past cannot be forgotten? Indeed, Toni Morrison's novels emphasize the individual power of a black woman and her determination to lead a meaningful life despite the oppressive forces of slavery. *Beloved* and *A Mercy* are postmodern novels that show that the struggle for black women in America is not over and that the burden of slave heritage is something they still have to cope with. The importance of these novels is indeed in the fact that history for African Americans is not yet completed, but the stories she writes, are one of the ways of preserving their historical consciousness and culture.

## **2. The Politics of Motherhood in *Beloved***

After publishing *Beloved* in 1987, neo-slave narrative and a critically acclaimed novel, Toni Morrison continued deconstruct African American history, family and community. In her novels she repeatedly revisits the scenes of the brutality of a slave-based American society. The central event of Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy* is a devastating separation of the enslaved mother and child. Both novels explore the traumatic experiences of mothers and daughters in relation to issues of slavery, identity, dispossession and alienation.

Whereas *A Mercy* is set in the New England colonies in the 1690s, before the slavery was institutionalized, *Beloved* deals with slaves in perpetual struggle before, during and after the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Based on a true story of a slave woman Margaret Garner, *Beloved* is a novel where the intersection of the past and present leads to discovering the unspeakable and unimaginable act the story is built around. However, to disclose the truth behind it and synthesize the fragments of history appears to be problematic. The story itself is one *not to be passed on*<sup>1</sup> (*Beloved*: 322). Thus Morrison creates *re-memory* (remember + memory) as means of recovering and healing force for Sethe, the main protagonist, a mother who committed infanticide rather than allowing slave master to repossess her child. Therefore rememory expresses individual's ability to cope with the burden of the past. Past and present intertwine, reminding the characters that the historical past has perennial consequences. Their memories are fragmented, revealed piece by piece, often uncontrollable. Repressing the memories serves as a temporary solution, and Sethe realizes that the past must be dealt with in order to have untroubled future. She must accept the fact that her life resonates the realities of black motherhood during and after slavery.

Slave mothers were denied of many rights white mothers had as a natural prerogative. Black female slaves were reduced to mere bodies for producing more slaves, and mother – child bonding in this context was not in accordance with the white society rules. Sexual exploitation of black women was a legitimate method of exercising white patriarchal power. Raped and abused, black women were constantly dehumanized and indoctrinated not to have "pleasurable feelings on their own, their bodies not supposed to be like that but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them" (*Beloved*: 247).

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase has a double meaning. On the one hand, it is a story too horrible to be shared, and on the other hand it suggests to the reader not to neglect the story for it is a slave narrative and should be remembered and never again repeated.

Sethe's memories of her mother are vague and tormented by the atrocities of slavery. She finds substitute mother figure in Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, a wise slave woman who has a great gift for inspiring other slaves, and who, like Sethe, has witnessed the destructive forces of enslavement and annihilation of her own motherhood:

*Men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's 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 pieces included her children. Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for the hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her - only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. (Beloved: 28).*

This quotation points out most effectively how the natural and biological bonds between mother and child in slavery are distorted, and mother-child relationship can be ambivalent. In the novel, children grow up without a father figure, and mothers are frequently denied the possibility of motherhood.

An artificial sense of family ties and interior space of black community is created on Sweet Home plantation where Sethe is brought at the age of thirteen. The owner of the plantation, Mr. Garner, allowed his slaves to marry and have families, thus conceptualizing an illusion of a less constraining enslavement politics. bell hooks maintains that "as the displaced Africans assimilated American values, they wanted to have the ecclesiastical and civil ceremonies their masters and mistresses had; they desired public acknowledgement of their union." (hooks: 43) When Sethe chooses Baby Suggs' son Halle to be her husband, she expects a proper wedding to take place. Mrs. Garner mocks her naivety but agrees to participate in creating a paradoxical, intimate moment in which Sethe claims herself as a wife and a mother. These roles will be taken away from her when the new slave master takes over Sweet Home. The Schoolteacher, a new master, represents the brutality of the dominant slavery discourse that considered and treated slaves lower than animals. His sadistic and perverse pleasure to examine the slaves and note down their *animalistic characteristics* is tested against Sethe when his nephews physically and sexually abuse her. In that

moment the symbol of her motherhood, her milk, was stolen from her thus destroying the emotional link with her babies. Mother's milk metaphorically represents the bond between mother and child and its absence leads to disintegration of Sethe's personality, who becomes unable to find identity apart from her mother image. The institution of black motherhood has central place in African-American women community and as such is susceptible to oppressive forces. According to Patricia Hill Collins, motherhood can be "a site where Black women express and learn the power of self definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment." (Collins 2000: 191) Unlike Baby Suggs whose inner strength comes from the acceptance of her constrained freedom and fact that her children are not truly hers, Sethe claims that "her children are her best self, the part of her that was clean" (*Beloved*: 339). In the context of sexual politics where men, slave owners, controlled and disposed of female slaves' bodies and their offspring, motherhood can be the site of the greatest joy and most intense pain. Thus, Sethe's unconditional motherly love will leave her no choice but to escape the violent environment in order to protect her life and lives of her children.

For twenty eight days she experiences freedom and is united with her two sons and two daughters in Ohio. However, when the Schoolteacher finds her and attempts to bring them all back to slavery, Sethe tries to kill all of her children to guard them from harm. She manages to kill only her eldest daughter and the fact that the first child that was killed is a girl is symbolical. Mother can bear all the horrors of slavery but her daughters should not experience family separation, dishonor and inhumanity. Paul D, another slave from Sweet Home plantation, sums up the best Sethe's fundamental need to assume her motherhood when he tells her that her love is *too thick*. Even though they shared a common history and memories from Sweet Home, Paul D cannot seem to fully grasp the excessiveness of mother's love. The infanticide also has a detrimental effect on Baby Suggs who simply, after years of preaching and inspiring others to come to terms with their past and embrace the future, gives up on life completely debilitated.

Moments after witnessing the murder of her granddaughter, she instantly feels the need to protect other children and absurdly gives youngest daughter Denver to Sethe to breast feed her. Denver absorbs mother's milk even though her breast is covered with her sister's blood. Nexus of blood and milk stands as a powerful statement that life and death, slavery and growth, horrible past and possibility of

future are intertwined in the lives of black women and men. Paula Giddings, discussing the history of slavery in America, concludes that: "In the world of the slave mother, there was little room for compassion, because there was no room for weakness." (Giddings 1996: 45) Accordingly, Sethe's infamous act is a crime born of slavery and should not be judged by common law.

### **3. A Mercy: The Heritage of the Dispossessed**

Morrison's excavation of the past lies in her attempt to rip the veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." (Morrison: 9) Terry Otten notes that "it is the 'tough love' of mother for child that finds most powerful expression in Morrison's work; however it is at the same time a force so absolute that it forbids nothing, manifesting itself in startling acts disguised by cruelty." (Otten, 83) Polarities of motherhood and different kind of slavery are examined in her book *A Mercy*. Whereas *Beloved* takes place during the slavery and in the period of Reconstruction, *A Mercy* tells the story of "pre-racial" America. Set in Virginia around 1690, the novel tackles the development toward societal racism. Morrison portrays four women who are struggling to reconstruct stability and their own identities in the era before black slavery was institutionalized. Nevertheless these women are enforced to take journeys away from home and settle in a male dominated world that restricts their individual, social and economic possibilities.

The New World was a promise of equality of opportunity and pursuit of the American Dream, however only white men could enjoy its economic and legal benefits. Jacob Vaark, novel's protagonist, is a Dutch settler in Virginia who orders a bride to be shipped to him in order to complete his vision of home in the New World. Initially a reluctant slave owner, he accepts Angolan girl Florence from a Portuguese planter as a payment for his debt. Florence's mother gives her away hoping for her to find a better home and safety that she cannot offer her. Thus displaced Florence will find herself in Vaark's home serving his wife Rebekka along with other two slave girls: Lina, a Native American and Sorrow whose ethnicity is not specified. These two girls also experienced life's predicaments that left them unable to be independent or make their own life choices. Lina is sold to Jacob after her tribe was decimated by disease. Sorrow is another orphaned girl bereft of hope and home, who finds shelter in Vaark's house. Thus, all women in the novel, suffer from *mother hunger* and as Otten points out are motivated "by an uncompromising need *to have or be one.*" (Otten 2011:87)

Although Jacob Vaark strongly opposes to slave business, all the girls in his house serve as slaves for practical purposes. Each of them is helpless and without clear self-definition. Lina desperately holds on to her native customs and traditions even though her masters try to help her assimilate into religious community of settlers. Florence is traumatized by separation from home and *mother hunger* consumes her entire being. Sorrow doesn't even have a proper name, instead the name is chosen by the old woman who finds her after the shipwreck that left her orphaned.

Although these women are treated as equals rather than property by the Vaarks, it is evident that they mirror the predicaments of African American slaves. Anissa Wardi argues that Sorrow shows markers of black identity and is "symbolic of the trans—Atlantic journey. She nominally embodies the Middle Passage and this marks the 'sorrow' of the Afrikans' displacement and forced habitation of the slave ships" (Wardi 2011:27). Living in time when dialogue between races and sexes was distorted by the patriarchal controls, all women including mistress Rebekka depend on men for security. They form a strong bond, a female community, which helps them cope with the rugged conditions of life. After mistress gets sick, this community is threatened to collapse, and Lina predicts their future:

*[...] three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile (A Mercy: 68).*

Sandra Cox notes that this fragile coalition of women "is living without men and in space that is at least nominally outside concretized racial hierarchies, but it does not prove a viable space in which an intrafeminine community can be therapeutic." (Cox 2011: 98) Therefore these women have to recreate a sense of identity and independency. Sorrow will claim her selfhood through motherhood, consequently naming herself Complete after giving birth. Lina finds solace and companionship in Rebekka, and a surrogate child in orphaned Florence. On the other hand, Florence's hunger for love, any kind of love, seems insatiable. Haunted by abandonment and rejection by her mother, she is enchanted by the local blacksmith who stands for everything she longs for: affection, freedom and independence. Her exaggerated need to be loved makes her a metaphorical slave, a "slave by choice" as blacksmith calls her emotional status. Rejected by mother and later by her lover, Florence subsequently refuses motherhood as a possibility of fulfillment. Rather she accepts her racial identity

as a liberating force; she becomes unified with the blackness and wilderness inside and outside her. She needs no one anymore and she belongs to anyone anymore. Shirley Ann Stave maintains that her rage makes her unable to cohabit with other humans. Her becoming wilderness "speaks to the societal desolation that is the inevitable psychological result of a people who refuse to recognize their shared identity" (Stave: 2011 147).

#### 4. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy* have been characterized by themes of slavery, motherhood, female identity and community. Morrison employs the image of a slave, factual and metaphorical in order to reconstruct politically subversive history of African Americans and ideology of human enslavement. If understood as prequel, could *A Mercy* be the answer to *Beloved*? Could reading it provide a rational understanding of infanticide? If *Beloved* tells us *how*, then *A Mercy* makes us see *why*. Sethe never seems to regret the act of killing her eldest daughter, even though it caused her to be ostracized by the community. She interprets it as her duty as a mother; an act of salvation, an act of mercy. At the end of the novel, Florence's mother makes a confession hoping that her daughter would hear it one day. Life in shackles, even in the figurative sense is a miserable life: "To be given dominion over another is hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (*A Mercy*: 196). Her abandonment of Florence and Sethe's infanticide is indeed an act of *a mercy*, and only one mercy that mother can offer in a destructive, dehumanizing world of slavery.

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