

LETHAL LOVE AND HAUNTED HOUSES: THE MATERNAL PROBLEMATIC IN TONI MORRISON

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A black woman in Ohio, in the mid-nineteenth century, slashes the throat of her infant daughter, and lets her bleed to death. On a slave ship, during the Middle Passage, a black mother throws all her children overboard, sparing only one. In 1921, as a young man lies dreaming in a drug-induced stupor, his mother pours kerosene on his body, sets his bed on fire, and leaves him to die. In the 1960s, another mother allows her twins to suffocate to death in the back of her Cadillac.

Who are all these murderous mothers, and why do they commit such acts of violence against their own children? All of them are characters from the novels of Toni Morrison, and all are guilty of killing their offspring, the most callous and unnatural act of which a woman could be thought capable.

Or, so conventional wisdom would have us believe; for is motherhood not the sacred vocation for all women, the shrine at which every woman must dedicate her life? In the familiar discourse of patriarchy, maternity is projected as woman's biological destiny, as well as her assigned role in society. At different historical moments, across different cultures, this idealization of motherhood has been variously deployed, to reaffirm the patriarchal framework. "There have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented," declares Ann Dally (Dally 17). In her study of motherhood in French society, Elisabeth Badinter insists that women were often indifferent towards their maternal duties, until the institutionalization of childhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought about the sanctification of motherhood. The increasing impersonality of a technological society made it imperative to deify motherhood as "a repository of society's idealism". This 'ideology of motherhood', as Marianne Hirsch calls it, or the 'institution' of motherhood as Adrienne Rich describes it, invests the maternal with sacred overtones. Myths of motherhood, embodied in figures like the Virgin

Mary, the African Great Mother, or Durga the mother goddess, are activated to support this deification. As an idea, the maternal readily lends itself to figurative uses, in concepts such as the motherland, mother tongue, mother nature, and so on.

Recognizing that such deification can also function as a reification of 'woman' in the abstract, feminist discourse challenges these formulaic oversimplifications. Elaine Tuttle Hansen detects three stages in the feminist questioning of patriarchal narratives of motherhood. The first is a stage of repudiation, where the maternal ideal is rejected as limiting and false. Taking their cue from Simone de Beauvoir, feminists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone pursue this line of argument. This is followed by a second phase, during which theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Juliet Mitchell and the so-called French Feminists, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, valorize motherhood as empowering for women. In the currently inconclusive third stage, feminists seek recuperative strategies that would avoid earlier, reductive formulations of the maternal. Judith Butler, for example, challenges traditional distinctions between 'gender', 'sex' and 'sexuality'; Sara Ruddick imagines mothering as a practice that may be performed by men as well as women. Susan Rubin Suleiman explores the relationship between motherhood and creativity. Black feminists like Alice Walker and Barbara Christian, and postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, draw attention to the heterogeneity of women's experiences, especially in terms of their varying cultural locations. Resistance to hegemonic constructions of motherhood thus emerges as a common goal for feminists from widely divergent backgrounds. In the discourse of feminism, the space of the maternal accommodates contrary elements such as victimhood and empowerment, submission and

authority, creativity and destructiveness. The idea of motherhood contains within it both repressive and emancipatory potential.

Where in this framework do Toni Morrison's 'aberrant', murderous mothers find their place? Dismantling the universalizing myths of motherhood, Morrison's narratives present instead the tormented choices women must make at specific moments, when history and (role). At the same time, the child's need for mother-love forms a vital subtext in several of the novels.

The *Bluest Eye* (1970), for example, dramatizes the contrast between the myth of the 'perfect' white mother in the Dick-Jane primer and Pauline Breedlove's denial of the mother-daughter bond with Pecola. After she is raped by her father, Pecola's attempt to link her physical pain with the image of her mother's face looming above her establishes a subconscious sense of her mother's abdication of responsibility. In *Sula* (1973), the eponymous protagonist's lack of a moral 'centre' seems related to her shock at overhearing her mother say, "I love Sula. I just don't like her." Hannah's suicide is triggered by Eva's acknowledgement of her failure to love her children on account of the difficult circumstances in which she had to raise them. The same novel, however, projects mother-love as potentially emasculating, and eventually destructive. Trying to explain why she burnt her son Sweet Plum to death, Eva Peace complains: "he wanted to crawl back into my womb and well ... I ain't got the room no more" (S 71). In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Ruth's reluctance to wean her son Milkman carries similar associations of retardation of the child's growth to maturity. As a maternal ancestor figure with magical powers, Pilate provides a contrast. In *Jazz* (1992), Joe's unfulfilled longing for a sign of acknowledgement from his mother leaves him with a permanent sense of loss, which he describes as "the inside nothing he travelled with" (37). The women who seek refuge at the so-called Convent in *Paradise* (1998) embody some unconventional versions of the maternal. Guilty of inadvertently suffocating her twin babies to death, Mavis escapes a vicious home for fear of being murdered by her own children. Denied the security of mother-love and deserted by her sister at the age of five, Seneca is brought up in foster homes and subjected to sexual abuse by a rich lesbian. The women at the Convent are no saints; but some of them, especially Mavis and Consolata, have a capacity for love and

nurture. This quality expresses itself not only in the physical and emotional support they offer to each new fugitive, but also in the spectral infant voices audible in the Convent, making it appear a place that children would presumably find hospitable.

The idea of the maternal is clearly one of Morrison's major preoccupations, but representations of motherhood in her novels defy easy analysis on account of their range and complexity. Traversing the fractured space of the maternal, Morrison's mothers come up against a range of contradictions central to the crisis of feminism: identity and otherness, freedom and responsibility, nature and culture, individualism and collectivity, love and anger, silence and speech, creation and destruction. These contradictions are nowhere more apparent in Morrison's oeuvre, than perhaps in *Beloved*, the novel selected for detailed analysis in this essay.

Published in 1987, and set in the post-Civil War Ohio of the 1870s, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe, a black woman haunted by the ghost of the baby daughter she had killed, to save the child from re-enslavement. In a narrative that moves back and forth between past and present, we piece together the main events of Sethe's life. We learn that, as the only child of a black father, Sethe is spared the fate of all her other siblings, drowned by their mother on board a slave ship. We are told of the apparently idyllic conditions at Sweet Home, the plantation owned by the Garner family, before the arrival of Schoolteacher, whose brutality drives the slaves to attempt escape. Sethe's story includes the death of her mother on the slave plantation; her marriage to Halle; a whipping which leaves a scar on her back in the shape of a chokecherry tree; the act akin to rape in which the white slave-owners take her milk; her subsequent escape; and the birth of her child Denver while she is on the run. Assisted in childbirth by a 'whitegirl' named Amy, Sethe later takes refuge with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, whose son has bought her freedom by working "five years of Sundays".ⁱⁱ Facing recapture, Sethe desperately tries to kill all her children to save them from re-enslavement. She succeeds in killing only the infant who is later referred to as *Beloved*, after the tombstone erected in her memory. After a period of imprisonment, Sethe returns to live at the house called '124', haunted now by *Beloved's* ghost. Her sons, Howard and Buglar, are frightened away by this ghost, who

becomes a member of what is now an all-female household.

Into this household comes Paul D., once Sethe's fellow-slave, whose presence compels Sethe to remember - or rather, 'rememory' - the past that she has tried to repress. Paul D. finds it equally hard to confront the story of his own sufferings as a slave. His heart is compared to a sealed tobacco tin. Jealous and possessive, the ghost of Beloved reappears as a young woman, bent on seducing Paul D., as a double act of revenge on, and control over, her mother. Trapped in this mutually destructive relationship with her daughter, Sethe is rescued by the community of black women. Her other daughter, Denver, succeeds in exorcising the ghost after Sethe attacks Mr. Bodwin in the mistaken belief that he is Schoolteacher, come to enslave the daughter she had once killed.

Other characters - mothers and daughters - complicate the double narrative of Sethe and Paul D. Baby Suggs, the black ancestor figure with prophetic overtones, exercises great influence as a preacher. Referred to as "Baby Suggs, holy", she combines the sacred with the secular in her role as preacher with special magical powers. She belongs to the long line of powerful matriarchal figures in Toni Morrison's fiction, which includes Eva Peace in *Sula* and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*. At one point, she antagonizes the community by her act of presumption when she lays out a lavish feast in celebration of Sethe's return. She then withdraws from active life, retiring into a world of silence, only the two coloured patches on her quilt signalling her desire for a life more imaginatively fulfilling. Baby Suggs' decline has been taken to represent the silencing of the African Great Mother by the discourse of slavery, or the subjugation of blacks in America. However, she continues to exert a powerful influence even after her death. Sethe and Denver sense her ghostly presence when they revisit the spot where she used to preach. Later, Denver hears her grandmother's voice urging her to break out of her sense of bondage. Baby Suggs' posthumous agency thus triggers Denver's awakening, indicating a need to confront and interpret the past in ways that enhance survival in an altered present.

Sethe's mother, the slave who kills her children because they are products of sexual violation by white men, cannot nurse her daughter because of the rigours of slavery. This loss of maternal care

perhaps explains Sethe's desperation to get her milk to her children when separated from them during their attempted escape. In economic terms, Sethe's mother demonstrates the dependence of white households on the denial of family rights to blacks. Morrison uses the trope of maternity to highlight the grotesque denial of human rights within slavery. Sethe does not know her mother's name, but she remembers her by the mark on her body, a circle and a cross that denote her identity: "'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead.'" (BV 61). Marks, as Barbara Hill Rigney points out, are not individualizing tokens but symbols of participation in a greater entity (Rigney 3941). For Sethe, this maternal absence signifies separation from her black cultural heritage, just as the speech of her foster mother Nan embodies a trace of her lost mother tongue. "What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message in that was and had been there all along" (BV 62).

Perhaps the most baffling figure is Beloved herself. A multiple figuration, she represents not only Sethe's dead baby, but also the collective sorrow of the "Sixty Million and more" who perished, unnamed and unremembered, during the Middle Passage. Twice marked, by tombgraver's chisel and handsaw, Beloved reappears as the word made flesh, representing the persistence of personal and collective memory in the face of dominant discourses that seek their erasure.ⁱⁱⁱ She represents the reality of experience as well as its textuality, its openness to interpretation. A supernatural entity, she is both a demon to be exorcised, and a healing force compelling other characters to confront repressed problems. The appearance of Beloved acts as a catalyst that enables Sethe's liberation from her bondage to guilt about the past through a process of atonement, while forcing Paul D. to face his 'blocked' emotions. The process is not easy. Paul D. must commit an act akin to incest with the daughter of the woman he loves. Sethe must nurture the ghost of the daughter she has killed, dwindling into a shadow of her former self, while Beloved flourishes, pregnant, presumably, with Paul D.'s child. Psychoanalytical critics interpret Beloved as an exemplar of the pre-Oedipal, the return of the repressed, or as a trace of a psychic racial memory; while reader-response criticism places her in the category of the stubborn, or that which defies explanation.^{iv} More story than

character, African mythological pre-text as well as Western ghost, *Beloved's* resistance to complete explanation signals the multiplicity of levels at which her text must be read.

If *Beloved* signifies the presence of the past, hope for the future finds a locus in Denver, the other daughter, who suggests the possibility of adapting the legacy of the past to the demands of the present. Trapped in a haunted house and unable to relate to the community outside her home, Denver at first withdraws into a silence that must be broken, for her to function as an effective agent of change. The turning point comes with her decision to educate herself and look for work. "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (BV 252). Denver's response to the written word is epiphanic, embodying the possibility of writing into history the repressed narratives of black suffering. What makes such narrativization possible is made from the mixture of the milk and blood that Denver drank at the moment of her sister's death, signifying the conjunction of love and violence that is her mother's legacy. It is Denver who rescues Sethe from the ghost of *Beloved*, before setting out on a quest for connection with the larger world outside her community.

The desire to rewrite history haunts this violent narrative of mother-daughter relationships, the fragmented stories of the various characters creating an alternative to official versions of history. Sethe's murder of her child is based on a real-life incident. In 1850, Margaret Garner, a runaway slave from Kentucky, tried to kill her children when facing recapture in Ohio. The epigraph dedicates the novel to the victims who died in the Middle Passage.

As a trace of the past, *Beloved* straddles both public and private domains. Though set in post-abolition days, the narrative suggests that the persistence of racism has made freedom a perilous proposition for blacks in America. This freedom has a gendered dimension. Despite changed historical circumstances and increased availability of choices, Morrison feels that the female weakness for voluntary self-sacrifice remains a stumbling block in the path to freedom. In an interview with Gail Caldwell, speaking of women's vulnerability to "displacing themselves into something other than themselves", she says, "now in the modern and contemporary world, women had a lot of

choices and didn't have to do that anymore. But nevertheless, there's still an enormous amount of misery and self-sabotage, and we're still shooting ourselves in the foot."v Elsewhere, discussing *Beloved* with Marsha Darling, Morrison says: "This story is about, among other things, the tension between being yourself, one's own *Beloved*, and being a mother... It seemed that slavery presented an ideal situation to discuss the problem. That was the situation in which Black women were denied motherhood, so they would be interested in it."vi Gender, especially as figured in the maternal dimension, is thus central to the novel's conception, though complicated by issues of class and race, the interlocking grids of oppression to which black women are often subjected. Amy Denver, the 'whitegirl' who assists at Sethe's childbirth, demonstrates the pervasiveness of women's oppression across the barriers of race, as well as the emancipatory potential of female bonding.

In terms of Hansen's three-part account of feminist responses to the ideology of motherhood, Morrison's novel clearly does not correspond to the first, repudiatory phase. Sethe's murder of her daughter is not a rejection of the maternal role, but an excessive, distorted reaffirmation of the mother-right that slavery has denied her.vii While white feminists such as Beauvoir, Friedan and Millet regard the ideology of motherhood and the institution of the family as restrictive and oppressive, Sethe, denied access to those very institutions on account of her race, class and gender, resorts to violent means to reclaim the mother-child symbiosis.

However, *Beloved* also does not conform to the second phase of feminist theory, which celebrates the maternal as empowering for women. As Tess Cosslett points out, childbirth in Morrison's novel is not idealized, but instead, represented as a painful experience.viii Morrison's portrayal of the darker side of mother-love suggests, without entirely condoning, the extreme form such 'thick' love can take. Commenting on Sethe's murder of her baby, Morrison says, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, . . . but it's also the thing you have no right to do" (Rothstein 17). Motherhood does not liberate Sethe. It limits her self-image and her capacity for agency. According to Carole Boyce Davies, Sethe's heroic response to enslavement paradoxically becomes the kind of mother-love that society enforces on women (Davies 54).

The rhetoric of the text indicates that the mother-daughter symbiosis, though possibly a powerful alternative to man-woman relationships, can actually stifle psychological growth if carried to an extreme. To survive, Sethe must retrieve a sense of self not confined to the maternal role alone. Unlike Denver, she is not used to the idea of "having a self to look out for and preserve" (BV 252). When Paul D. assures her, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are," she exclaims in disbelief: "Me? Me?" (BV 273).

In its rejection of formulae, its recognition of women's diversity and its search for recuperative models, *Beloved* seems more attuned to the third phase of feminist revisions of the maternal. In place of maternity as biology, the text posits another alternative - mothering as love, connectedness, communication and nurture, a role not confined to women alone, as Paul D.'s caring attitude to Sethe reminds us. As Morrison points out, stereotyped gender-roles were discarded under the pressures of slavery. Instead of being treated as weaker than men, women "were required to do physical labour in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance/female subordination. . . Black women are both ship and safe harbour."^{ix} The all-female household at 124 challenges the idea of the nuclear male-headed family, a model central to psychoanalytical narratives. Later, Paul, Sethe and Denver form a temporary home that defies the usual definition of the family as biologically connected social unit. To an extent, Paul D. carries the visionary weight of the novel, because in his sensitive, nurturing role, he presents an alternative to traditional constructions of masculinity. His story, in paralleling Sethe's, establishes the persuasiveness of the after-effects of slavery, even as it highlights the gendered differences that leave him free to wander, while Sethe remains trapped in her maternal and domestic obligations. The difference, Morrison suggests, is not necessarily innate. Paul D. can adopt the role of caregiver, and Denver can leave home as the female adventurer setting out to explore the world. Morrison's revisions of traditional models of the family reveal that she is not a radical feminist. Her egalitarian ethic envisages a situation of harmonious cooperation rather than a simple reversal of gendered power structures. Paul D. is also the agent of Sethe's self-renewal, making her conscious of the possibilities inherent

in acquiring a subjectivity independent of the maternal role.

Marianne Hirsch points out that most mother/daughter narratives are written from the daughterly perspective, denying voice and subjectivity to the mother. *Beloved*, for Hirsch, represents an important departure from this pattern, being primarily a mother's story, in which mother and daughter are actually able to speak to each other, even if it is from across the grave (Hirsch 3, 1978). But Morrison's novel remains ambivalent about the value of motherhood. It also suggests the dangers of a love based on extreme possessiveness, implying the need for women to develop a subjectivity not confined to maternity alone. Yet, Morrison also valorizes motherhood, using the trope of motherhood to speak of the emancipatory potential of the creative process. In her Nobel Lecture (1993), she says, "Word-work is sublime . . . because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference." x To speak of word-work and the generation of meaning is to remind us that the mothers we speak of here are literary representations, embedded in larger textual structures. It also establishes a link between the idea of the maternal and the possibility of writing. The writer of *Beloved* is a black woman, keeping racial memory alive through storytelling, but also thinking back through her literary foremothers in the process made famous by Virginia Woolf, a white literary model. For Morrison is strategically positioned between the two seemingly antagonistic worlds of marginalized black culture and American mainstream academia. To get a full sense of the ambivalence of the maternal idea in *Beloved*, it is essential to understand this fundamental doubleness of its author's location. The murderous mothers in Morrison's novels are, after all, fictions constructed out of specific cultural and personal anxieties. As the narrator in *The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood's latest novel, exclaims: "What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves - our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies"(Atwood 94). Fabrications, projections of our own angst, we make them up, these mothers, and our (mis)readings of the maternal often reflect our own concealed agendas. For in the 'making up' of meaning, there is history, there is the writer, but there is also the reader, who must receive, and

interpret, the complex maternal text. Underlying this process whereby meaning is fabricated, is the trope of maternity as creativity, invoked often by women writers, and reinforced by the sense of a female literary tradition.

The force of this figuration animates a story told by Morrison in her Nobel Lecture (1993). An old woman, blind, wise and alone, is approached by a group of young people sceptical of her powers. Standing before her, one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead" (NL 10). The young people await her answer, knowing she is blind, and cannot see what is in their hands. After a long silence, the old woman answers: "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands" (NL 11).

Her answer shifts the ground of the question from knowledge to responsibility, "from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised" (NL 12). For Morrison, the bird represents language, which for her is a system and a living thing, but also agency, an act with consequences. For the young people, this is a grave responsibility: the future of language is in their hands.

But then, there is another twist to the story. Suppose nothing is in their hands? What if their question to the old woman is prompted by a genuine desire to understand the meaning of life and death? "Make up a story," they urge her; ". . . tell us what only language can: how to see without pictures" (NL 27-8). But the old woman remains silent. Tired of asking questions, the children begin a story of their own, about a wagonload of slaves on their last journey, who encounter unexpected kindness from a young boy and girl at the inn which is their last stop but one. When the young people fall silent, the old woman speaks at last. " 'Finally', she says. 'I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done -together'" (NL 30).

Together, the old woman and the young people have brought into being a narrative, signaling the possibility of meaning. A new entity has been born. In my reading, the bird thus imagined into being is the text. The old woman is the writer, the one who knows but does not tell. And who are the youngsters, the questioners, makers of new

narratives? Budding writers perhaps, but also readers, who hold in their hands the burden of interpretation, the text that is at once so precious and so fragile. In each reading, the story is retold, the bird reborn, the future given new shape. For the feminist reader, this is both a challenge and a daunting responsibility.

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Notes

'_Morrison, *Sula* 57. Hereafter cited as S. " Toni Morrison, *Beloved* 11. Hereafter cited as BV.

"" See, for example, Keenan, who says: "Beloved, as both text and figure in the text, becomes in the course of the narrative a complex metaphor for black America's relationship with its enslaved past" (48).

"" For a reading of *Beloved* as the return of Sethe's repressed memory, see, for example, Henderson 74. For an interpretation based on reader-response theory, see Phelan.

" Morrison, quoted in Gail Caldwell, "Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*"

(1987), Guthrie 241.

"" Morrison, interviewed by Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison" (1988), Guthrie 254.

"" See Guth 587.

"" According to Cosslett, Sethe's escape, her rescue of her children and her giving birth to them, are evidence of agency, but her "mothering instincts are not innate, and her `natural' birth is in no way her choice" (45).

'X See Rosemarie K. Lester, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," Hessian Radio Network, Frankfurt (1988), [rept. in](#) McKay 49.

x Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature* 22. Hereafter cited as *NL*.