

**THE REPRESENTATIONS OF DOMESTICITY, MOTHERHOOD AND  
VIOLENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*  
DIYAR ESA MOHAMMED**

**Abstract**

At a time when women around the world were staging a fight against gender discrimination and calling for equal rights with men in their various societies, black American women also tried to make their voices heard. As history holds it, unlike other women especially in the west, their story is different because it was shaped by slavery, which made them not only inferior to men but to women of other races. Coupled with the roles of housekeeping and motherhood assigned to women, thus sidelining them from decision making issues in the society, the African American woman also had to deal with the belittlement, violence and segregation from the white society during and after slavery. In this regard, Tony Morrison like a host of other black writers, took it upon themselves to tell the stories that were often ignored or could not be perfectly told by men or white writers. Though Morrison's *Beloved* is set during slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts the adverse side of motherhood that many writers of the time failed to consider. By attempting to exercise her motherly role in a period of extreme suffering, Sethe loses her identity and in the process also suppresses that of Denver her daughter. This is occasioned by the maternal ties that link Sethe to her children that preclude her individuation and spoil her self-development. Sethe sacrifices her being. Indeed, we see throughout the novel that all her efforts are directed at atoning for her losses as a daughter and re-establish herself as a good black mother based on the society's conceptualizations. My Article investigates how Toni Morrison portray the issue of domesticity, motherhood and violence in their novels *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, during and after the days of slavery. The thesis also will provide the possibilities that lead to the characters emancipation.

**Keywords:** *Motherhood, Domesticity, Racism, Black Feminism, African-American Literature, Violence, Slavery.*

## Introduction

Motherhood is a universally acknowledged theme. Scholars recognize it to be a mother-offspring relationship that involves a strong bond of attachment between two or more human beings. In the contemporary society, men have produced the majority of the world's literature. Some of the literature created by these authors include central issues affecting women and children. In reality, only women themselves can truly be aware of their emotional and social situations although some male writers may appear sympathetic to female issues. We learn from the works of some prominent Victorian writers like Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte that women were mainly restricted to household activities which characterized them as docile, delicate and passive beings as Bloom (2009) puts it. Though all women, the case of the African American woman was different because it was shaped by slavery. As slaves, they were 'secondary beings' to the white women they served. Sofia in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* for instance, describes the mayor's wife as "backward" because she doesn't know how to drive. However she has to be a servant because she is black. As such, the characterization of African American females has been presented in regards to their parental responsibilities, a responsibility that has been imposed on women as the sole source of their identity.

While Morrison observes and acknowledges motherhood as a significant experience for women, the author also does not limit women's role in the community expressly on motherhood nor motherhood to biological maternity. Indeed, Morrison observed mothers solely as human beings that have diverse characteristics and as people that could discern between motherhood and individuality, especially when favorable conditions are present. She presents the women with an added character that if given normal condition will be very helpful to the society, not just as mothers. Baby Suggs preaches to the women in her community trying to help them to recover from their past and love themselves. Denver has the ability to rally the community when Beloved overpowers her mom. Ella on the one hand is presented as a strong woman who organizes underground passages for run-away slaves to freedom. Hence, Morrison in *Beloved* is not only trying to glorify the often ignored part of women's lives in motherhood but trying to add something to the black women which makes them useful to the society.

Culture and history have mythologized and typecast African American maternity because it serves as a way of dealing with a dilemma that the community is unable to solve. The

mythologized images present mothers as matriarchal beings in the society that are strong, caring and altruistic creatures whose identities are completely inseparable from their nurturing capacities (Bloom, 2009, p. 12). However, Morrison subvert these misrepresentations of black women by presenting female characters that are independent, aggressive and determined. In her narrative, Morrison addresses the common prejudices adopted by slave masters. Among these prejudices includes the malevolence of slave owners towards black slaves. Therefore, her representation of motherhood is in divergence with already existing conceptions that are predisposed to romanticizing motherhood. She questions the entire social construct of motherhood, which rejects to perceive a woman's identity and individuality (Bloom, 2009, p. 104). Black women were only seen from one angle which is conceiving, bringing forth children and nurturing them. They were only seen from the perspective of mother and child and wife, ignoring their individuality and the contributions they could give to mankind beyond motherhood. Paul D for years sees Sethe as the mother of her children and a potential wife and doesn't look beyond. When he arrives 124 notwithstanding Sethe's struggles, he still wants her to bear his child which Sethe rejects.

### **Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

The pressure that African American women encounter in the novel results in humiliation and a loss of autonomy. Ultimately, the task of being a good mother is disrupted by the humiliation of slavery, the rape, the rejection and the loss. As Morrison makes it evident in *beloved*, slavery, more than any historical event had the capacity to influence black motherhood. In the novel, mothers exhibit both wild and good characteristics; however, the pressures of slavery reveals the brutal reality of existing during this era. Morrison writes of Sethe 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. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best things 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." (Chapter 26, pg. 251). This tells the story of a woman who is bent on protecting her kids from the hell of slavery. This leads to Sethe taking her own daughter's life to 'keep her safe'. To understand black motherhood during this period, it is pertinent to comprehend the dire conditions that were brought about by slavery. Black females

were charged with the responsibility of taking care of domestic concerns such as household matters and raising children. The community reduced the mother to a state of nothingness where her freedom to escape was simply non-existent. The woman became subject to the tradition of family and motherhood which entirely controlled the life of a woman.

In Morrison's *Beloved*, black women throw away colored children born as a result of rape. These mothers reassess and formulate a new definition of motherhood that is devoid of established patterns of mothering. Thus, black parents successfully resist the oppression and reject the labels given to them by their owners. The relationship between mothers and their offspring is not perfect, but it is flowered in unconditional love that the women sometimes express in provocative ways (Bloom, 2009, p. 168). Morrison's *Beloved* is filled with scenarios where mothers are tested continually in their responsibility as providers and nurturers, as well as in the way society questions their actions and judgments. For instance, Sethe has to undergo suffering that ultimately affects her job of motherhood. She has to experience terrible events as is evident in the following extract from the text: "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak, but her eyes rolled out tears. The boys found out I told on em". (pg. 16-17). Not only does Sethe lose her child's milk she also suffers the consequences of reporting her new masters to Mrs Garner whose brother now manages the farms and the slaves. Though she is pregnant, she is raped and tortured because according to the code under slavery, she had to stay silent because she had not right. Reporting to Mrs Garner calls for more pain from schoolteacher.

Sethe's strength and resilience is evident when she survives a brutal beating while pregnant. The horrors of slavery are quite clear to her, which causes her to develop a resolve to escape to an environment where her children do not have to suffer. While Sethe receives the beating, the definite lack of a male presence to protect her is disheartening. According to Christian Barbara (1997, pg 67) the duty of nurturing children lay exclusively with the mother, because of societal expectations, as well as the absence of male presence in the community. During this period, the men in the community were often involved in the fields and were rarely able to communicate or aid their women. Slave owners pressured women to procreate to increase the numbers of slaves in the commune. To worsen the situation, mothers left their children for long hours to handle the

needs of their owner's children. It is quite understandable how Sethe desperately wanted to remove her children from the terrible conditions of slavery. Sethe recalls the story of her mother who was lynched by white men for being standing up to them. She tells us that her mother despised her master's children which she had to look after. Also Halle watches as Sethe is violated and did nothing to save her. This could be because he felt powerless as a slave and knew the consequences if he did, though this later made him run mad. This shows how vulnerable black women were with nobody to look up to.

In most circumstances, black women entered into motherhood with tormented spirits and broken hearts that crushed opinion of the self. "The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there -- you who never was there -- if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over -- over and done with -- it's going to always be there waiting for you." (Chapter 3, pg. 36). Sethe not only had to endure the difficulties around her, but she also had to raise her daughters in the knowledge that they too would one day face the same injustices as she and her mother had. Although Sethe displays a high level of courage and strength, slavery immobilizes her. African American parents were held responsible for being decision makers, providers, and matriarchs of the family. Nonetheless, the power that seems apparent was non-existence because it reduced and became limited by the bonds of sexism, racial prejudice, and poverty. Sethe is forced to steal food from the restaurant she works in to provide for her family. Without the father of her children or any male provider, she is determined to see her children grow. She even sacrifices all for Beloved who grows fat while Sethe grows thin and sick.

Morrison reveals the complexity of motherhood, which sometimes forced women to commit heinous acts as a means of survival. Although Sethe attempted to provide for her family regularly, she decided to kill her child as a way of freeing her from the world of slavery. Although her evil act was paved with good intentions, the community that had so often dejected her eventually ostracized her because of her decision to end her child's life. From the reader's point of view, it is easy to make judgments about Sethe. Indeed, the act of killing one's child is immoral and unacceptable. However, Sethe's love for her children is undisputed. She says: "My love was too thick. What he know about it?...I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you

mine, I also mean I'm yours. I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (Pg.203). The emphasis that she will not breathe shows the motherly connection she has with her kids. However, as the saying goes: "if you love something so much, let it go", so does she decide to kill her child to save her from slavery. To Sethe, her action is like saving herself because as she says "when I tell you mine, I also mean I'm yours". So her children is her and she is her children. Looking at the murder from the mother's perspective, one can say that Sethe endured the humiliation of being ostracized and cast out by her community as a way of saving her child from future embarrassment. It can be said that Sethe acted in the best interest of her child. Sure, the decision was awful and outside convention, but Morrison makes it clear that motherhood is multifaceted and intricate.

A narrow view of the concept of motherhood, especially during this period was futile. One cannot begin to understand it simply by observing and making judgments. It is pertinent for one to observe the situation and the circumstance under which Sethe made the choice to kill her baby. Moreover, an African American mother that behaves outside the norms of society is questioned and efficiently labeled by her community. Even though Sethe had the power to spare or kill her child, in the real sense, what many see as power is powerlessness in her circumstance. The power relations existing between mother and child are evidence of the struggles of living in a patriarchal community. Although Sethe cares for her children to the best of her ability, her frustration and bitterness reflect in her role as a mother, which was defined by a sexist, patriarchal community. The norms established by men make her feel trapped both in her domestic responsibility and as a mother and as a woman. Because she remains trapped, her ability to control events in her life expose her levels of powerlessness. According to Porter (2005, p. 45), the women's children worsen the state of helplessness among black mothers. Women seem ready to place their lives in danger for their children. They have no subjectivity, which causes them to adjust the way they raise their children. In such a case, the women are not only slaves of the white man, but to motherhood as well, which is evident when beloved re-appears to Sethe as a ghost. Even though she killed the baby herself, she allows the ghost that is clearly an apparition to control her life, even in death. Beloved's appearance creates the opportunity for Beloved to Kill Sethe in the same way that Sethe killed Beloved. On the contrary, where it would seem that black mothers have power over their offspring, it is clear that children have the upper hand. Beloved in her monologue says "I am Beloved, and she is mine"

(pg. 210). She, referring to Sethe her mother which Morrison describes as now behaving like a child and beloved as the mother. The monologue expresses the lack of flexibility in the relationship between mother and child in this society.

### **Domesticity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

In *Beloved*, the homestead carries memories of many violent acts. Interestingly, the spirit of Beloved's ghost highlights the activities- domestic activities- that take place in a historic southern home. The horrors created by slavery have the immense power to affect domesticity for years. Morrison attempts to expose the dread that was characteristic of this period by highlighting the external and internal forces that affect major characters in the novel. Morrison represents the concept of domesticity as fluid and as a pointer to the private worlds of the characters and as an appraisal of their acceptance in their communities. The type of domesticity revealed in the novel also has deep roots in the struggle against the effects of slavery, as well as the fight against domestic labor in regards to the residences of white slave owners. As a theme, Morrison uses domesticity as a means to expose larger social, cultural issues instead of focusing on traditional activities associated with domesticity such as activities in the natural home and kitchen. Morrison says that "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it. Not being in it, she hated it and wanted Beloved to hate it too, although there was no chance of that at all." (Chapter 6, pg. 62). Here, Morrison shows a home divided by interest of what stories should be told in the house. Because of slavery all Sethe ever recounts are stories from Sweet Home which are horrifying. Beloved enjoys these stories and want to hear more because she wants know why her mother killed her while her sister who doesn't understand why these stories are told wants her to hate the story too. While these stories draw beloved closer to Sethe, they seem to push Denver further form her mom causing friction.

In *Beloved*, the author narrates and affirms the importance of community in passing on traumatic experiences that occur in a domestic household. Rather than having an internal situation that fosters growth in its characters, domesticity is viewed as a system, through which the horrors of slavery are perpetuated (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 102). Victims of slavery, particularly the central characters, Sethe and her mother pass on personal issues of turmoil on to their offspring. The

survivors of the slave trade, rape, abuse and poverty very clearly struggle with the side effects of unhealed psychosomatic disorders. As Sethe's children grow up, they learn to model their parents as a way to create their identities. When they model their traumatized mother, the cycle is carried forward to their children and the next generation. In this regard, the home, and the domestic area becomes places in which the characters endure individual suffering, as well as a location where suffering is perpetuated (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 102). In reality, the paternal community during this period already instituted the rule of law; that a woman's place is in the home; even when the home confines and abuses (Spargo, 2002, p. 113). Many of the traumas, inherited or acquired, between both southern men and women, occur within the limits of the home. African American women especially had to endure their lack of power to protect their children from such as oppressive system. It is no wonder that Sethe eventually murders her child to prevent the traumatic cycle from occurring.

In Morrison's narrative, Sethe, after killing her youngest daughter and having her two sons leave the home, moves in with her daughter Denver, in the house that Beloved haunts. The situation is transformed however when Paul D, a freed slave from Sethe's plantation arrives and Beloved reveals herself in an apparition of a teenager (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 136). Because she commits the horrendous act of murdering her child, Sethe's domestic situation is altered entirely. The community that she once identifies with labels her a social pariah. Besides, the same community also stops interacting with Denver for fear of being ostracized. In such a situation, it would be expected that a community that was living in slavery, having experienced the toll of the abuse and pain of slavery, would pool together and offer support to a family undergoing turmoil. Morrison says of Paul D that "She should have known that he would behave like everybody else in town once he knew." (Pg.204). Even the man who claims to love Sethe immediately abandons her the moment he hears about her murder. This only adds to the gloom which has been in the house since the death of Baby Suggs as Morrison says: "Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and solitary life." (pg.204). Twenty-eight days referring to the days Sethe arrived 124. However, the level of rejection that Sethe's family faces forces them to retreat into their home causing them to live in an enduring state of stasis in which the characters cannot escape. The domestic situation becomes a barrier that protects them from the judgment and rejection they receive from the community (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 101).

The constant struggle experienced in the domestic space becomes more apparent in Denver, especially as the narrative carries on. After Beloved returns from the dead, Sethe begins paying too much attention to the ghost, which leaves Denver alone and dejected. As such, Denver must find a way to overcome her phobia of rejection and instead of seeking refuge in a home that has gone haywire; she must leave her household to find comfort. Here, again, Morrison reveals domesticity as a struggle between private and public spheres. On one hand, domesticity shields the characters from communal judgment while on the other; it heightens the conflict within the characters (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 44, 173). Domesticity in this sense is not traditional; rather it is unbalanced, revealing the issue of a deranged, prescribed household (Spargo, 2002, p. 112). African American women frequently find the events of their lives extremely fractured that the inner turmoil they encounter becomes reflected in their domestic practice. Eventually, Denver learns to deal with her mother's past and leaves it behind symbolically and literally, and as she leaves her home, she claims her individual spot in the community, free of association with her mother's actions (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 43). Denver defines her personal view of domesticity instead of allowing herself to remain stuck in a situation that hurts instead of nurturing her. She says: "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. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. 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." (Chapter 21, pg. 205). Morrison's point of view regarding the domestic space focuses on how African American women struggle to endure the traumas associated with slavery and the manner in which they live to tell the tale or perish in their struggles. Like Denver demonstrates in the text.

### **Violence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

Violence is an application of force that results in injury or abuse. It entails causing physical, sexual, mental, emotional and material damage on sufferers. In the African American community, violence is invariably actions of interracial victimization and oppression that manifest themselves in whipping, brutality, killing and branding. Violence against black women is an apparent concern for Toni Morrison. The roots of the violence experienced in the South are

traceable to the unjustified treatment of black African Americans by their slave owners. In this sense, it would appear that black females bore the brunt of the suffering as they doubly had to endure not only torture as the men but also rape by the white slave masters. Additionally, black children struggle with abuse in their domestic households as well as from their community. Consequently, characters in Morrison's *Beloved* are forced to find ways to survive the violence that surrounds them to come out of their marginalized spheres. Sweet Home to Sethe is like a 'hell hole'. Cincinnati on the other hand signifies freedom from the brutality in Sweet Home and Sethe is determined to get out of this hell hole even with the danger that stands on her way. After she is raped by Schoolteacher's nephew, Sethe reports the incident to Mrs Garner whom she said "shades a tear", Schoolteacher brutally beats her up for violating his authority. She also tells the story of her mother who was lynched after she was tortured. Morrison here is telling the story of the slave women who did not only have to suffer child bearing and nurturing but also undergo serious violence.

The theme of violence can best be understood through Sethe. The idea of violence and the brutal assaults that arise from slavery lead to a death of an absolute magnitude- the end of a person's humanity (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 203). After Mr. Graner's death, Mrs. Garner asks schoolteacher her brother to take over the management of Sweet Home plantation. The schoolteacher's oppressive nature makes living on the estate more unbearable, which causes the slaves to devise an escape plan. In one scene, the violence experienced by slaves in these plantations becomes evident. After anticipating the slave's escape, the schoolteacher together with his nephews capture and kill Sixo, while brutally punishing Paul D. before returning him to Sweet Home. To worsen the situation, the schoolteacher, and his cronies violates Sethe in the barn, and steals her baby's milk. The schoolteacher punishes Sethe later on through whipping, despite being aware of her pregnancy. In the novel, Schoolteacher represents the prime agent of the structure of white supremacists and the era of slavery. In many instances, Sethe mentions the violent act of taking her baby's milk. She states: "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it". (p.236). The event primarily takes Sethe's humanity away from her and transforms her into an animal as she later kills here daughter to prove her word that nobody will take her children or her children's milk from her ever. The perversity of the institution of slavery is so dangerous that it manages to sever the bonds between parents and offspring. Morrison here

shows that the consequence of slavery not only exerts physical pain on Sethe who represents the women at the time, but it also infringes her feelings towards her children.

When Sethe commits the most violent act of killing her child, it signifies a major twist in the character's disposition so much so that Sethe completely loses ties with her individuality or self and become devoid of her vitality. Based on the mistreatment she undergoes and tolerates at the hands of her slave owners, Sethe becomes undone, physically and spiritually to the point of exhaustion, and at some point, madness. "...what he (schoolteacher) did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (Morrison, 1991, p. 11). The act of killing Beloved is not understandable in the beginning, however, the conditions in which Sethe had to survive in and the brutality she experienced drove her to commit infanticide. Her fear of the violence becomes so bad that she would rather kill her child than subject her to live in the same terrible conditions. From an analytic perspective, not madness or exhaustion caused Sethe to kill her infant, but the actuality of slavery (Holden-Kirwan 445). Besides dealing with the pain of killing her child, Sethe also struggles with inner turmoil from her past when she recalls her mother's hanging. Such violent events in history signify how routinely violence and death is passed on from generation to generation.

Inspired by the black feminist movement that began in the 1960s, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* reflects the general illustrations of women of color. Morrison intends to expose the reader to the effects of institutionalized slavery on African Americans. Her point of view delves deeply into the issues that African American women encounter in this period. Her representations of motherhood, domesticity, and violence in *Beloved*, paint a perfect picture of repression and disillusionment. While Morrison understands and acknowledges motherhood as an extraordinary experience for women, she does not limit the women's role simply to motherhood. Her writings in this regard have transformed how readers analyze and understand stereotypical representations of black women. By narrating Sethe's story, Morrison focuses on the dehumanizing consequences of slavery, particularly on black motherhood. The effect of the violence and brutality is psychological exhaustion that drives the main character to the brink of a mental disorder. Consequently, slavery threatens the mental and spiritual world of the characters, causing a series of dreadful and terrible consequences.

The theme of violence is manifested throughout the novels, and the reader cannot find it easy to ignore. The recovery of the stolen milk signifies the sustenance of a child's needs. When Sethe's milk is stolen, she tends to feel like she cannot provide for her child which brings her even lower than the fact that she was raped in the first place. Both novels, *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* seem to be hell bent on exposing the problems that the black women went through in the 18th and 19th centuries. Violence has not been used to demonize men. On the contrary, the violence is seen to manifest itself in both males and females alike. For example, Sethe is a mother who loves her child dearly, and she would go to any length to make sure she is okay. However, when schoolteacher becomes the master, the slaves attempt to escape whereby some of them die in the process. Sethe is stopped after she slices the throat of her daughter Beloved who bleeds out and dies. As much as she loved her child, she would rather have her dead than watch her become a slave. This act of violence is triggered by the brutality that was presented by slavery. Sethe remembered the cruel things did to her and knew that she would not let a child of hers go through the same treatment that was handed to her. She says that 'I got a tree on my back and a haunt in my house, and nothing in between but this daughter I am holding in my arms' (Morrison, 2004, p. 18). Additionally, the violent crime committed is followed up by the presence of the dead child as a ghost. Although this is a scary bit for the readers, the novel manages to capture the highlights such as when the ghost puts its prints on the cake that does not make the ghost seem too violent for digestion. The theme of motherhood also blossoms as the reader is made to share in the grief and the regret of a mother who has slain her own.

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## RESUME



**Name Surname:** Diyar Esa Muhammad  
**Place and Date of Birth:** 1/January/1989  
**E-Mail:** diyaresa1989@gmail.com

### EDUCATION:

- ✓ **Bachelor:** 2012, Suleimani University, College of Languages, English Department
- ✓ **Master:** 2016, Istanbul Aydin University, English Language, English Language and Literature Program

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE AND REWARDS

#### PUBLICATIONS/PRESENTATIONS ON THE THESIS:

- Mohammed, Diyar Esa. (2016). ..... *The International Journal Of Media, Culture and Literature.*