

**THE M/OTHER STORY IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED:
THE TRAUMA OF MOTHERHOOD/MOTHERLAND
AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY**

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Abstract

Inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* revolves around the story of Sethe, among those of other slave mothers, and her struggle to experience motherhood against the horrors and terrors of slavery and white exploitation. In light of Lacanian theory, this study deals with the traumatic nature of motherhood in the institution of slavery, while exploring the unconventional m(other) portrait drawn by Morrison in her novel. Connectedly, drawing on Stuart Hall's insights about the issues of identity and belonging, this paper also investigates the role of the trauma resulting from lost motherhood in the loss of the African motherland and the molding of the African-American identity.

Keywords: African American identity, motherhood, otherness, slavery, trauma

Introduction

Motherhood, as a universal experience, is generally conceived of as an expression of a strong emotional bond between the mother and her children that secures unshakable feelings of connection, trust, and belonging. However, in African American history, this bond deviates from the conventional understanding of "motherhood", which rather seems to function as a faithful translation of the horrors and terrors of slavery. Based on the real story of a slave mother, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* sheds light on the harsh impacts of slavery on black mothers and their offspring, which have much contributed to shaping the African-American collective memory and consciousness. Regarding Morrison's novel, this paper explores the role played by slavery in shaping the maternal identity of slave mothers, which had in turn influenced the collective identity of African Americans across generations. It starts by investigating the experience of motherhood as an inherited trauma among African American slaves, before studying the role of this trauma in shaping their sense of identity and belonging to their motherland, Africa.

Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, this study explores the ways motherhood is turned into an expression of "otherhood" fostering the emotions of personal estrangement, separation, and insecurity, already imposed by the rule of slavery. The aforementioned legacies of enslavement which seem to mark the



mother-child relationship under its rule, will be pored over predominantly through the experience of the female protagonist as a mother and a daughter. The protagonist's experience will, therefore, serve as a case study enabling an in-depth analysis of the impacts of a broken maternal bond in determining the African-American connection and identification with their ancestral origins, in light of Stuart Hall's theoretical insights.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has proven to be a timeless masterpiece perpetually open to rejuvenation and continuously creating new avenues for research and exploration from diverse critical perspectives. Navigating through recent studies brings to the fore the novel's unique capacities as a historical recorder, a feminist exploration, an ecological narrative, and a subject for psychoanalytic and cultural investigations.

Across the most recent studies, the novel emerges as a powerful historical recorder, functioning as an alternative historiography. This historical function endows the novel with a performative role allowing Morrison to weave a counter-discourse aimed at subverting attempts to misrepresent and distort the history of black people (Abu-Fares, 2021; Qayoom, 2022; Yang, 2023). By drawing from the historical repertoire of the African-American experience, Morrison's narrative vividly captures the experience of slavery through a black lens. The idea of *Beloved* as a historical recorder or a testimony is echoed in Heerak Christian Kim's (2006) comparison of the narrative to a "scripture". This approach is also adopted by John. J Allen (2021) conceives of the novel as a "theological work" informing the African-American collective consciousness.

Similarly, many critics have investigated the intersection between myth and magic as tools to re-invent the African-American reality. Magic, for African-Americans, becomes a means of escapism, of denying the harsh reality of slavery while imposing a plausible alternative. As Abdalhadi Nimer Abdalqader Abu Jweid (2021) affirms the African-American resort to magic "is due to their lack of ability to accept colonialism as reality. Magic, at this point, serves as a vehicle of empowerment. The oppressed people are empowered with magic" (p. 27). Excluded from the linguistic and representative realms monopolized by the white master, the black colonized community found refuge in a blend of myth and magic as alternative means to re-present and re-construct the African-American world (Balfour, 2024; Cullhed, 2022; Jweid, 2021; Lobodziec & Fondo, 2017). Relatedly, Gosh et al. (2021) argue that the harsh and brutal experience undergone by black slaves denied them any speaking position, playing a crucial role in shaping the African-American consciousness. They affirm that "[t]he traumatic crisis of their historical and cultural past made them unspeakable or silent because they did not have any coded weapon (Signifier) like language, what they only have is a decoded weapon (signified) that helped them to develop an idea of higher consciousness, motivations, beliefs and experiences" (p. 838). From another angle, the feminist reading of the novel adds another layer to the narrative as it shifts the focus towards Morrison's depiction of the feminine identity under the institution of slavery while shedding light on the intersection between race and gender.

Alongside the historical dimension, the feminist approach adds a gendered dimension to the novel highlighting black women's struggle and resistance to white exploitation (Ndoulou & Massala, 2024; Parvin & Samira, 2020; Siddika, 2022). In relation to feminism and the feminine portrait in *Beloved*, many critics have

discussed the issue of motherhood as the narrative's main axis. Telling the stories of different mothers, the novel depicts suffering as the common thread between the experiences of black mothers across generations (Zarj & Mousavi, 2022). Besides, in tune with the feminine portrayal in *Beloved*, adopting a psychoanalytical approach, some critics focused on the act of maternal infanticide, while exploring its possible reasons and traumatic consequences (Laufer, 2024). Adding an ecological perspective, the works of Wardi (2021), Yongchao, Valkeakari, and Tremblay focus on the novel's allusion to certain natural elements to underscore the intersection and connection between race and nature. This connection further conveys the significance of "the land" and the natural environment for the black population.

This present work draws inspiration from the aforementioned studies to read the novel through the intersection between psychoanalysis and cultural studies. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the work probes the experience of motherhood under slavery through an investigation of the maternal figure as portrayed by Morrison. Incorporating Stuart Hall's insights on cultural identity, the paper also seeks to explore how the unique experience of motherhood under slavery has significantly contributed to shaping the African-American identity.

Theory and Application

The Otherness of Motherhood in Beloved: The inherited trauma of motherhood in the African American memory

Against the backdrop of slavery, the story of Toni Morrison's female protagonist, Sethe, unfolds to uncover a new unconventional definition of motherhood that seems to deviate from the mainstream conception of the term. Slavery, with its harsh dictates, seems to have much altered "the natural" and usual bond that could exist between a mother and her children to be rather defined in terms of otherness and estrangement. Through Sethe's story and the stories of the different slave mothers in the novel, Morrison shows that motherhood within the institution of slavery is turned into an "intergenerational trauma" that is not merely recurrent across different generations but also resists suppression and repression in the mothers' as well as the offspring's memories. The mother figure in *Beloved* is rather portrayed in terms of otherness, which renders the experience of motherhood shocking and traumatic, further deepening the shocks and traumas of slavery. Significantly, the traumatic nature of motherhood is what marks Sethe's story both as a daughter and later as a mother.

Sethe, the daughter, and the trauma of motherhood

As a slave, Sethe had to endure the "cruelty" of motherhood even before being a mother herself. Since she was a child, Sethe would witness and experience a mother-daughter bond that could be rather defined in terms of otherness, non-belonging, and estrangement. As the only child of a black man, the female protagonist is the only survivor of a crime committed by a mother against her children. Being the outcome of the sexual exploitation imposed by white men, Sethe's siblings would be despised, unacknowledged, and ultimately thrown in the ocean by their mother. Motherhood, in this instance, is not only depicted as a shocking and dehumanizing experience, being the outcome of rape and sexual exploitation but it is also portrayed as a source of shame and disgrace that consumes

the slave mother's memory. In an attempt to "undo" the act of rape and its traumatic legacies, Sethe's mother chooses to get rid of the corporeal evidence of it, which is her "white" children. For her, those babies are not her own and they do not belong to her. They do not define her identity as a mother, but rather as a slave or even an animal whose body is the property of an external owner.

With the pain and shame of being the property of someone else, Sethe's mother is not only forced to give birth to children that she would not acknowledge as her own, but she is also deprived of experiencing and expressing attachment and belonging to the only child she could call "her own". Never "fix[ing] [her] hair or nothing and [not allowed] "to sleep in the same cabin most nights" that Sethe could remember, the nameless mother is treated only as a "sex machine" that "ha[s] to have as many children as [she] can to please whoever owned [her]" without having any emotional connection to them (Morrison, 1987, p. 110).

Being a slave, the mother already knows that the chain of exploitation and suffering would equally tie her offspring, whom she would not be able to free or to protect, or even live with. The helplessness of a mother incapable of protecting that which is supposed to be her own (her body, her children) makes the experience of motherhood a persistent reminder of shame and inability. Relatedly, the inability to choose her sexual partner combined with the inability to "own" her children add more to Sethe's mother's personal estrangement and loss of personal identity as a mother and a human being. Significantly, Sethe's mother is only introduced through her painful story as a slave mother, without a name or any other detail except for being a mother who threw her own children into the sea and could not protect and stay with her daughter. Those are the only memories left in Sethe's mind about her mother which are turned into persistent traumas haunting the former's soul and life.

Sethe, the only child from a black father, the only "legitimate" child in her mother's eyes, experiences the dark side of a "cruel" motherhood not only as she learns about her mother's crime against her own children, but also as she is denied a natural bond with her. At a very early age, the female protagonist inherits her mother's lack of "ownership" over that which is supposed to be hers, developing, hence, what I would call "the complex of ownership". As a little child, Sethe is aware that her mother would not be "hers" all the time, for she could be taken from her unexpectedly at any time. With this knowledge in mind, the ghosts of fear, insecurity, and separation are constantly fed inside and outside Sethe, in a place where she and the other slaves are mere "checkers" waiting for the player's sudden commands (Morrison, 1987, p. 23). The fear of separation was first stimulated inside Sethe when her mother had warned her that she could disappear with no alarming signs while showing her the distinctive mark she had under her breast (a circle and a cross burned into her skin); a shocking revelation that did not only feed the little girl's separation anxiety but also made her aware of the animalistic treatment exercised on her mother.

At a very early age also, Sethe finds herself forced to confront her fears of separation as she sees her mother being hanged in front of her. Early in the novel, again returning to her own history, Sethe recounts the wrongful murder of her mother. In much the same way as the other traumatic incidents dealt with in the text, the violence of Sethe's past effectively taints her relationships with her daughters (Selfridge, 2019, p.70). With the knowledge of her mother's killing of her own children and the memory of seeing her being killed in a cruel way, Sethe,

like the other slaves, could only conceive of motherhood in terms of blood and tears. A mother for Sethe is an unknown distant other who can kill her own children without mercy and who cannot show love for her daughter. Consequently, the mother's love for Sethe is something mysterious and never experienced, which would later shape her identity as a mother. The trauma of motherhood is passed to her not only as a painful recurrent memory but also as an unavoidable destiny ahead of her.

Sethe, the mother, and the "infanticide tradition"

As a mother burdened by the complex of "ownership" and the trauma of separation, Sethe loves and protects her children unusually. Vexed and furious by her mother's helplessness and inability to protect her, Sethe's only anxiety is how to "own" her children and be the only one who has authority over their lives. She realizes, however, that she cannot own them if they are already owned by a white master. After escaping from the plantation, she confesses to Paul D that the only way to experience her love towards her children was to take them out of Sweet Home, because there, "they wasn't *mine* to love" (Emphasis added, Morrison 87). Sethe's confession shows that slavery did not merely cut the physical bond between the mother and her offspring by separating them, but it also prevented the existence of a strong emotional connection between them. The protagonist, however, does not have a ready plan for protecting her children. She rather finds herself the slave of the circumstances imposed on her, designing a unique way for each of her children to be immune against the horrors of being owned by a white man.

Intending to escape with them to a safe place, Sethe manages to take her children out of Sweet Home but fails to keep them all around her in the new place. Except for the girl in her womb and the two boys who had left with Baby Suggs, Sethe realizes that the baby girl in her arms is the most threatened and endangered one. Being overwhelmed by bloody traumatic memories, Sethe's solution to protect her menaced child is to kill her baby, herself. Realizing that her daughter is her "own" victim rather than the victim of white exploitation seems a triumphant yet an extremely painful act for the black mother, who will not be able to surmount the guilt and shame of it later.

Together with killing her own baby, Sethe's motherhood is "blemished" by the act of stealing her milk and whipping her as an animal by white boys in her attempt to escape from Sweet Home. This cruel act did not merely leave perpetual physical scars on Sethe's back, but it also produced bloody wounds deeply engraved in her psyche and identity as a woman and a mother. In this respect, Harold Bloom affirms that "[f]or Sethe, the rape and the stealing of her milk symbolized the taking of her selfhood, her inner being. As a child, she was denied full access to her own mother's milk.

Like her daughter, Beloved, Sethe is starving for mother's milk that is almost always mixed with the blood of slavery" (p.95). The experience of motherhood, in this sense, entails the suffering of personal estrangement and dehumanization. Actually, Morrison's emphasis on the motifs of milk and breast throughout the novel is not simply meant to express the slave mothers' lack of control over their bodies and their milk, but it is mostly meant to convey a lost subjectivity and a robbed motherhood. In this respect, it is possible to refer to Jacques Lacan's postulation that the mother's breast constitutes an object of desire for the child who

wants to own it in an attempt to compensate for his/her inability to own the mother's whole body (Nasio, 1998, p. 94). While being a substitute for the mother herself, the breast functions as a symbol of motherhood and the desire for ownership shared by the mother and her kids.

Significantly, Morrison tells a lot about the black mothers' suffering by alluding to their relation to their breasts, while associating the loss of their motherhood with the loss of their milk which is generally reserved for white children. In this same vein, the slave mother feels burdened by the responsibility yet the inability to preserve her milk, especially in the absence of a male figure who could be relied on to protect her and her children. It is significant, indeed, that after listening to Sethe's painful memory of stealing her milk, Paul D touches her breasts allowing her to "know that the responsibility for [them], at last, was in somebody else's hands" and to feel "relieved of [their] weight" for the first time (Morrison, 1987, p. 18). In this scene, Morrison draws an image of an exhausted mother with her unfulfilled motherhood. Through unleashing this long-repressed memory in Sethe's mind, Paul D helps her feel a little bit relieved and comforted as he seems to share the burden and the weight of this trauma even by the mere act of listening and sympathizing with Sethe.

Nonetheless, the cruel nature of motherhood under the rule of slavery does not merely lie in the harsh and sadistic situations that a woman had to face, but also in the persistent traumatic legacies of these situations. Those legacies render the experience of motherhood more like an inherited tragedy across the different generations of slave mothers. Although she was "lucky" enough not to have children from white men like her mother, Sethe could neither protect her motherhood from them nor could she define her identity, as a mother, away from the cruelty of their exploitation.

Like her mother and all the black slaves, the female protagonist endures the animalistic treatment, rape and sexual exploitation that would become the defining features of her womanhood and motherhood. Like her mother and all the black slaves, Sethe suffers the estrangement and personal loss resulting from the trauma of a robbed humanity and violated motherhood. And like her mother and most slave mothers, Sethe inherits the tradition of infanticide as an expression of love, of motherhood. "[T]hrough infanticide, African mothers fought back against their sexual oppression through what can be called 'love-murder'" (Bloom, 1998, p. 104). As painful as it is, the infanticide tradition, thus, becomes a way of resistance for black mothers through reclaiming the ownership of their offspring's bodies and lives. It is not merely about saving them from white exploitation and abuse, but it is also about exercising a kind of maternal authority over them.

Many years would pass after the infanticide and the stealing of Sethe's milk but they could neither help her to forget and surmount the pain and shame of them, nor could they heal her complex of "ownership" resulting from her loss of her mother, her body and her children. Significantly, Sethe treats her only remaining daughter, Denver, as a property; not allowing her to get out of the house or to mix with anyone. Sethe's obsession with "owning" her kids makes her a (M)Other who is not completely known and who has to be dealt with with caution because of her unexpected and threatening actions. Indeed, with the knowledge of the infanticide in memory, Sethe's remaining children could not help but see her as a source of threat from whom they need to be protected, as Denver claims that:

I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. [...] there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill *her own*. 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. [...]. 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. (Emphasis added, Morrison, 1987, p. 205)

While Sethe's boys chose to escape their house assuming that the outer world could be safer than their mother's prison, Denver remains the slave of her fears, not of separation, but of her mother's over-attachment and destructive "thick love". Affirming that "unless carefree, mother love was a killer" (Morrison, 1987, p. 72), Sethe is aware of the destructive potential of her "thick love" which does not only menace her children but also herself. Because she has never known or experienced a healthy mother-child love, the female protagonist, in fact, is the first victim of her obsessive love and desire to own her children. Morrison's character, indeed, suffers much because of the urge to protect her children from the horrors of slavery that she has suffered firsthand.

Although they are not the direct victims of slavery, Sethe's children are not immune to its long-lasting legacies, which are passed to them through their mother. Although the latter could free them from white ownership, she could not protect them against its horrors, terrors, and traumas. Unintentionally, Sethe turns herself into the only source of fear and anxiety for her children, despite her attempts to guarantee a safe and secure life for them. With the act of the infanticide, the female protagonist becomes feared by her remaining children; pushing her two sons to escape preferring the uncertainty of the outsider world and causing her daughter to live in a constant state of anxiety and alertness. The mother figure, in this sense, is no longer a source of security and comfort but she is portrayed in terms of alienation and otherness, as someone who cannot be trusted and who should be dealt with carefully.

Sethe and the compulsion to pay the cost of maternal love

The cost that Sethe has to pay for the crime she committed exceeds the loss of her children and the perpetual feelings of guilt and shame resulting from it. This mother has to confront her traumas and bloody memories incarnated in a ghost haunting her house and soul. Not enough, this ghost ends by taking the shape of a real human being in flesh and bones trying to own Sethe the way she has been struggling to own her children. Sethe, in this sense, seems doomed to experience her "thick love" as it becomes exercised on her by the baby ghost who wants to compensate for the mother's separation by trying to fuse with her or to "devour" her to use Lacanian lexis. Interpreting Beloved's relation with Sethe in light of Lacanian theory, it is possible to argue that as a mother Sethe is, literally, the victim of her daughter's "death drive".

It is obvious, hence, that Beloved, the baby-like twenty-year-old girl, with her childish behavior, baby skin, and lack of language fluency, is not willing to accept her mother's separation, which makes her develop an urge to return to the initial state of fusion with the mother. Yet, while Lacan states that the child tries to satisfy his/her desire for oneness with the mother through devouring her breast as a

substitute for her lost body, Beloved rather seeks to compensate for her separation from Sethe by attempting to “devour” her whole body. To achieve her reunion with Sethe, Beloved attempts to possess her mother’s body which is hinted at even before her reappearance in her new physical form. As a ghost, indeed, the dead girl seizes the opportunity of Sethe’s prayer to take the form of a white dress with its arm around the woman’s waist. While watching this scene, Denver concludes that “the baby got plans”, which serves as a foreshadowing for Beloved’s physical return and her desire to shackle her mother’s body (p.37).

Returning from the dead, the girl does not only keep on scrutinizing each part of her mother’s body (noticing that she has no earrings since their first encounter, for instance), but she also takes advantage of Sethe’s state of retrospection, while recalling Baby Suggs’s finger massage on her neck, to strangle her “harder, harder” (Morrison, 1987, p. 96). When Denver hurries to rescue her mother, Beloved, quickly, touches the bruises on Sethe’s neck in a soft way and starts kissing them. Commenting on this scene, Pamela E. Barnett writes that “Beloved’s failed matricide takes the form that bears close similarity to an assault by a vampire: she attacks Sethe’s neck in a situation filled with supernatural qualities. During the attack, Beloved is in two places at the same time: she watches Sethe from a distance with Denver, and yet she manages to strangle Sethe’s neck with her fingers” (quoted in Valkeakari, 2005, p. 216). It is made clear from the different scenes referred to above that the dead girl’s main objective behind her return and haunting of Sethe’s house is to own her body or to “devour” it by using both the ghost and the corporeal incarnation of it. She makes her intention plain and clear as she affirms to Denver that Sethe is the main reason behind her return (Morrison, 1987, p. 75).

Subsequently, the girl feels bothered by the presence of Paul D, perceiving him as “the symbolic father, who for Lacan, is the primal other, legislates the separation of the child from its mother and thus introduces a gap between desire and its subject” (Makaryk, 1993, p. 621). Because Paul D’s relation with Sethe is a sensual one through physical intimacy, Beloved sees him as a rival menacing to prevent her from owning her mother’s body and therefore re-gaining her fusion with her.

Consequently, the ghost starts by eliminating Paul D to be the only one who has access and control over Sethe’s body. In her attempt to own and manipulate Sethe’s body through destroying her bond with Paul D, “Beloved the ghost is a reminder of how the phallus of slavery disrupted all bonds when it came down to the black family” (Bloom, 1998, p. 100). In this sense, the ghost does not simply function as the physical incarnation of Sethe’s memory of the infanticide and her lost baby, but it is also an embodiment of all the repressed traumas related to the woman’s past of exploitation and separation.

The ghost, however, seems to be not only taking revenge for Beloved’s death but also for Denver’s imprisonment. Like Denver, Sethe is imprisoned by the ghost; no longer going to work, deprived of her relation with Paul D, and pushed to forget about her remaining daughter to become the ghost’s slave in a state of total fusion and identification. Sethe’s destructive obsession with owning her children, in fact, seems to reach its peak and is overtly expressed with the return of the killed daughter, as it is illustrated through her hysterical repetition of the possessive pronouns “my” and “mine” to refer to her (Morrison, 1987, pp. 200-204). Likewise, evoking Lacan’s mirror stage, the ghost, in its total identification with Sethe,

addresses her as its own self or being, stating “You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you ?” (Morrison, 1987, p. 216). With her return, *Beloved* directs the obsessive desire for ownership toward her mother to let her assume its destructive consequences, by pushing her to die slowly in her house, while being the direct victim of her “thick love”. It is significant, however, that Sethe’s imprisonment by the ghost paves the way for Denver’s liberation to free her mother later. Sethe has to experience the legacies of her obsessive attachment to her children, to unleash the memories related to them and to confront their pain in order to be able to overcome them.

The lost motherhood and the lost motherland

The breaking of the maternal bond by white owners cannot be seen as a coincidence or a random act, for it seems that there is a strong connection between the loss of the mother figure, on the one hand, and the loss of the motherland, on the other. White owners did so much to erase the chapters of black history and the features of the black identity. In addition to forcing black slaves out of their motherland, the white owners wanted to make sure that the former would lose any real or symbolic connection with their African roots to be able to re-mold their identities and re-write their history in a way that proves the claim of white superiority. Because cultural transmission and historical awareness are made possible, basically, through the inheritance of parental traditions and historical narratives, the white owners worked to break and prevent the existence of any bond among the members of the black family, which would ultimately lead to preventing the unity of the black community. Destroying the black original identity and absenting the motherland required two main conditions: the first was to absent the mother, which would pave the way for the second condition of destroying the slave’s sense of ownership and belonging. The overlap between these two conditions would accelerate and facilitate the process of erasing black history, collective identity, and sense of belonging.

The absent (mother) Africa

Mothers could be considered as the guardians of cultural heritage by ensuring the transmission of customs and traditions, in addition to feeding their offspring’s historical consciousness and identity awareness. Significantly, the elimination of black mothers and women in general within the institution of slavery is one of the themes hinted at in Morrison’s novel, which is strongly connected to the erasure of the original African identity. In this sense, the lost motherland combined with the robbed motherhood among the slave community played an essential role and contributed significantly to the loss of any sense of collective identity. In *Beloved*, the lost motherland is replaced by Sweet Home which “wasn’t sweet. And it sure wasn’t home” (Morrison, 1987, p. 14). While introducing this place, the author draws attention to the fact that it lacks the feminine presence with the existence of only one girl surrounded by five men. Being the only female figure makes Sethe an object of desire and discovery for the five men whose sexual desires had been denied and sabotaged by their white owners.

With the absence of women, the five men are forced to direct the potential of their repressed sexuality towards the animals around them, which makes them further internalize the identity assigned to them by their white owners as inferior to

the human race with their similarity to animals. Identifying black slaves in animalistic terms is made clear, especially, in the scene where schoolteacher is teaching the white men about Sethe's human features and animalistic ones. Upon overhearing schoolteacher's words, Sethe is left stupified with the "discovery" that she has animalistic features. This "discovery" is made concrete later with the animalistic treatment exercised on her by the schoolteacher's nephews when they whip her and steal her milk while she is pregnant. Directing and witnessing this scene, schoolteacher does not miss the opportunity to write its details in his agenda to include it as part of the black history that confirms the superiority of his white race.

The white owners, actually, were not content with the erasure of the black history by removing the black slaves from their original land and cutting their ties with it, but they also worked to re-write its chapters to serve as proofs confirming the white claims of supremacy. Re-constructing the black history and identity by the white owners had to go through the process of deconstruction and destruction first. Accordingly, the slave woman was systematically eliminated and absented from the black family because of her undeniable teaching role as a mother especially when it comes to collective customs and traditions. It is not by coincidence, indeed, that Baby Suggs, who had eight children from six fathers, had been, first of all, deprived of her two girls, who "were sold and gone" before having their adult teeth (Morrison, 1987, p.23). In the same vein, it is also possible to refer to Sethe and Halle's lack of "parenting skills", in part because of the absence of the guiding mother and in other parts because of the lack of any sustained parental bond between them and their parents.

Despite his efforts to free his mother and his family, it is significant that Halle could only succeed in buying his mother's freedom while becoming totally helpless and unable to protect his children and his wife. The latter also fails to protect her children from the legacies and traumas of slavery, as has been previously shown. However, Halle's ability to free his mother while failing to free his children who are left to their mother's responsibility further highlights the high significance of the mother figure within the African community despite the white attempts to eliminate her. Nevertheless, her role is mainly directed towards the protection of her children rather than helping them to construe their personal and collective identities as black Africans.

With the destruction of the family bonds and especially with the elimination of the maternal presence within the black community, the white owners could prevent the process of cultural and historical transmission among their slaves. Sethe, whose mother had been hanged while she was a little child, could not remember the language that "her m'am spoke, and which could never come back" (Morrison, 1987, p. 62). Like her mother, the African language for Sethe had been killed without the possibility of being restored. Had her mother not been killed, Sethe could have acquired the original African language and taught it to her offspring and so on. Nevertheless, the white master wanted to make sure that the black slave would not have any link with the motherland as part of the process of cultural devastation and identity destruction. The death of the mother (especially of the first generation) would simply entail the death of the motherland for the African slaves.

“The complex of ownership” and the trauma of non-belonging

The death or the absence of the mother figure not only stopped the process of cultural transmission but also contributed to denying the slaves’ sense of collective identity and communal belonging with its traumatic legacies and persistent complex of “ownership”. In this regard, Neveen Samir (2024) opines that “[i]n the context of trauma, the novel also addresses the problem that, as someone else’s property, ex-slaves have lost authority over their bodies and, in response to the atrocities of slavery, suffer from the fragmentation and loss of their sense of self” (p.10). The separation between the mother and her offspring conditioned the slaves not to love and not to get attached to anything and anyone, because doing so would be very dangerous for the slave who is doomed to lose “anybody [they] knew, let alone loved” (Morrison, 1987, p. 23). While witnessing Sethe’s attachment and devotion to Denver, Paul D remembers how it is “risky [...]. Very risky” for the slave mother to unleash her maternal protective instincts. He ponders that “for a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything just a little bit” (Morrison, 1987, p.45). Monica Udoette (2023) argues that

Paul D is able to understand and verbalize Sethe’s dilemma by concluding that it was dangerous for a slave woman to love anything, especially her children. Paul D thus points out the tension created by the system of slavery and the instinct of the slave woman to protect and nurture her children. Slavery claimed ownership of all its property and ignored the slave mother’s right to determine the future of, mould the character of, and to physically nurture her own children. Sethe instinctively sought to hold on and to love her own children, thus creating the central conflict in the novel. (p. 213)

Love and attachment are not only dangerous but also illegitimate and impossible for the slaves who were driven to internalize the idea that they have nothing and no one of their “own”; they are simply owned but they do not have the right to own. Their only devotion and belonging should be preserved for their white owner who functions as the only reference of identification for them. Relatedly, the black slaves cannot think of themselves or their identities outside the limits preset by their white masters. With the absence of the closest person (the mother), the slave is trained not to feel attachment and belonging except for the white master.

In the absence of the mother figure with her role of cultural transmission, the white owner introduces him/herself as the only identifier and the rule setter in a chess game. Because the mother does not have the right to “own” her children, she is even denied the right to name them, as Bloom affirms that “in most cases, during slavery the black woman had her children taken from her early on, causing many of these mothers to not even bother naming their offspring. These mothers knew that their children were only there to be brought up to be bought out, pawns or checker pieces in a game that only white society could win” (p. 150). The sense of estrangement resulting from the loss of the maternal bond is, therefore, intensified with the loss of a personal or communal identity, because, generally, the slave had to wait for the white master to inscribe a name on him/her that would identify him/her as a property belonging to the owner, as it is the case of the Pauls in Sweet Home.

The shock upon the mother's inability to protect her children is, therefore, turned into a historical trauma of unbelonging to Mother Africa which would become identified as the Other rather than then the Mother/ the Origin for its descendants. With the absence of slave mothers, especially, from the first generation, the slaves' history starts only with their arrival to America. Their only struggle would be how to re-write the chapter related to slavery while ignoring the previous chapters which had taken place in Africa as part of their collective story. Those chapters, indeed, seem to be deeply buried with the death of the first generation of slave mothers who did not have the opportunity to transmit the original language, history, and the defining features of their Africanness. The latter, then, turns into an expression of otherness; a point of departure with no return, while the "white land" becomes the real home that the next slave generations would fight for.

Like the helplessness of the slave mothers to keep their offspring, Mother Africa is helpless to prevent the uprooting of its descendants. "To this Africa, [the black community] can't literally go home again" (Hall, 1990, p. 117). Significantly, Morrison acknowledges since the very beginning of her novel that she will try to tell the story of her ancestors who are not her ancestors because they no longer seem to share her the same home and the same roots. They also do not share with her the same past and traumas because most of them had been murdered before experiencing the horrors of slavery and before being able to tell about the horrors of the "middle passage". She does not have a reliable source to inform her about her ancestral history that had started before the "middle passage" because many of her ancestors could not survive it, while the survivors had been denied the opportunity to pass it to their descendants.

The novel's prologue "I will call them my people which were not my people" reflects the identity crisis suffered by the black slaves who were forced to experience non-ownership and unbelonging towards their motherland and their ancestors. Like Sethe, who tells her personal story in fragments while trying to repress most of her memories, Morrison's story seems to be constructed through a collection of dis-membered historical narratives. Yet, with her acknowledgment that she will speak about her people which was not her people, Morrison seems to admit that her ancestors whose language, culture, and identity had been erased cannot be identified with any exactness and that speaking out the black chapters of their history cannot ensure their restoration and the retrieval of their erased original identity.

Morrison's awareness of the inability to identify the African aboriginal community with any exactness echoes Stuart Hall's assumption that "The original Africa is no longer there [...] and it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered" (Hall, 1990, p. 117); the Africa that had existed before the uprooting of slaves with its history and original identity cannot be retrieved not only because it changed, but mostly because its descendants had been spread to other lands while enduring a systematic process of estrangement and cultural devastation.

The uniting potential of traumatic memories and the construction of the black identity

The sense of estrangement and loss of identity is not merely pored over through the white owner's monopolization of the act of naming and identifying, but

also through the stories of the nameless characters, like Sethe's mother and daughter, who are identified and recognized simply through their shared past of suffering. The trauma of slavery, hence, functions as the real signifier and identifier of the African-American identity. Significantly, Beloved who was killed before being named identifies herself as the representative of the "60 million and more" who had been killed before telling their own story and their own memories from their motherland. In this respect, Bloom states that

Beloved [...] can be seen as symbol of Africa, the motherland and how it, as well as its inhabitants, were habitually raped and exploited [...]. Beloved is also symbolic of lost identity [...]. [Acquiring her name from the epitaph on her tombstone, she], clearly has no identity because she has "merged with the 60 Million and more" who suffered the outrage of enslavement. (pp. 100-101)

Nonetheless, despite her attempt to speak on their behalf, Beloved fails to make their story clear and understood with a highly metaphorical and non-structured language that resembles in its ambiguity the ambiguity of the African language and stories for the new slave generations. In point of fact, those untold stories, which mark "la présence Africaine" in African-American history are not merely lost because of the death of their characters, but also because even those who could survive would choose to repress them and keep their memories at bay.

Relatedly, Hall defines "la présence Africaine" as "the site of the repressed. Apparently silenced beyond memory by the power of the experience of slavery. [...]. Africa, the signified that could not be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspoken, unspeakable "presence" (Hall, 1990, p. 116). Nonetheless, despite its repressed and suppressed original identity and history, Africa is identified by Hall in terms of "presence" or "presence/ absence" because he believes that it underlies the construction of the emerging black African identities; it is a "New Africa [which is] grounded in an 'old' Africa" (Hall, 1990, p. 116). The black identities with African roots like the Afro-Caribbean or the African-American share the experience of slavery with its traumatic legacies despite their displacement in different regions.

Slavery, thus, becomes one of the distinguishing features of the African identity and the major historical event in its collective story. Connectedly, in her reconstruction of the African-American identity, Morrison does not look back too far digging deep into the pre-slavery history of her ancestors, but she rather tries to construct a readable and understandable history from the remnants of the repressed and fragmented narratives that could be transmitted across the different generations. In this sense, Black African identities cannot be defined or identified separately from the experience of slavery which had much contributed to shaping the black African collective consciousness and sense of communal belonging.

Although slavery did much to destroy the existing bonds among the members of the black family/community, it turned into the shared suffering that unites and empowers black African people around the globe. By telling the story of slavery, therefore, the displaced members of the black community evoke the shared suffering of their ancestors as their common cause. Hence, Beloved's return to tell and to force the evocation of the past could be interpreted as an embodiment of Hall's notion of "imaginative rediscovery" of "hidden histories" and "essential

identities” (p. 116). Hall, indeed, insists on the necessity of this act of rediscovery in the construction of new black identities, although it cannot turn the clock back and bring the old Africa. Likewise, despite *Beloved*’s failure in re-telling the story of the “60 million or more” slaves with any exactness, her return is essential for the healing process and for the liberation of Sethe’s daughter, which seems to announce the beginning of a promising future for the next generations.

Conclusion

In her re-writing of the repressed chapters of slavery and re-construction of the African-American identity, Morrison relies predominantly on the unspoken stories of slave mothers and the unique bond that used to (un)exist between them and their offspring. Through fashioning an unconventional and unusual maternal portrait in terms of otherness and alienation, the author could convey the trauma of personal estrangement and unbelonging inherited across the different slave generations, which could, later, turn into a sense of collective estrangement and communal unbelonging. Morrison’s evocation of this long-repressed trauma of a lost maternal and communal bond, even though in fragments and disconnected sections, uncovers the significant role played by this trauma in informing the African-American identity with its collective consciousness and historical awareness. Slavery, indeed, which targeted the African maternal and family bonds to destroy the African community, while reducing it to an animalistic group, is turned into a common cause empowering and uniting the black groups against their oppressors. Hence, what used to be a shameful and unspeakable story is turned into a constitutive part of the African-American identity and an undeniable chapter of its history, once it is voiced and revealed.

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