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English

Motherhood and the Heritage of Slavery
in
Toni Morrison's Novels *Sula* and *Beloved*

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INTRODUCTION

This essay will focus on motherhood and the effects of slavery in the lives of mothers in two novels by Toni Morrison, *Sula* and *Beloved*. The emphasis of this study will be on how Morrison portrays single mothers whose lives are influenced by slavery. The essay will compare and contrast the situations of the mothers, Eva and Sethe, in the two novels. It will also focus on these mothers' relationships with their children and it will examine how their actions influence their children both when they are young and as adults. This essay will employ a feminist approach.

The first chapter will provide an historical background of slavery. Chapter two will integrate analyses on motherhood and slavery. Chapter three will focus on Sethe who is the sole provider of her family and will elucidate the way in which she interacts with her children. Focus will also be on the female character Eva whose situation resembles that of Sethe. The fourth chapter of the essay will analyze the similarities in the fates of these women, making a comparison between mothering in *Sula* and *Beloved*.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Peter Kolchin states that during the eighteenth century, slavery “became entrenched as a pervasive – and in many colonies central – component of the social order, the dark underside of the American dream” (Kolchin 4). Slavery in America originated with Dutch shippers selling African slaves to the colonists, but as MacQueen states, when importing slaves was no longer allowed in 1808 the South started “breeding” its own slaves (MacQueen 49-50). Lundén and Srigley argue that this so called “peculiar institution” of slavery was partly “justified” by white supremacists and their view of slaves as inferior to them because of their race (Lundén & Srigley 164). Lundén and Srigley explain the Southern attitude regarding the importance of keeping slavery alive during the 1800’s:

The argument was economic, but it also had a moral and a social aspect: the Negro, so it went, was intellectually and morally inferior; therefore he needed the care and the guidance made available by the institution of slavery – in fact, without such a system of control, society would disintegrate. (Lundén & Srigley 165)

Kolchin points out that the treatment the slaves experienced working in the fields was horrendous. Punishments such as whipping, mutilation of the body and branding were common, as if slaves were animals (Kolchin 4). According to Kolchin Africans were not viewed as humans with emotions and dignity; being treated in such a gruesome way clearly leaves emotional scars that will never heal. Slaves were held, or rather enslaved, on a permanent basis and the children of a female slave would inherit their mother’s rank (Kolchin 12-13). There was much to fear for women who were enslaved, because they witnessed their lovers being taken away and were violated through sexual abuse and rape. Moreover, when they became pregnant their children were exposed to a similar fate, a fact, that Morrison’s novels also depict. While Kolchin points out that there were consensual sexual relations

between white men and black women, he nevertheless emphasizes that the sexual exploitation of female slaves was an apparent part of everyday life during the era of slavery: "...slaves who had sex with whites did so against their will, whether the victims of outright rape or of the powerlessness that made resistance to advances futile and the use of force in such advances unnecessary" (Kolchin 124-125). Kolchin quotes Harriet Jacobs, a former slave, who points out that: "I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect" (Kolchin 125). Adrienne Rich also explains how rape was even encouraged by white plantation owners and their sons could violate the black women; their bodies, mind and soul in order to produce mulatto slaves as they were "considered more valuable" (Rich 35). Without control and as a result of their lack of freedom black women had to believe in something, and this was most often their children. Rich explains a similar abomination of mistreating the female body:

Neither the "pure" nor the "lascivious" woman, neither the so-called mistress nor the slave woman, neither the woman praised for reducing herself to a brood animal nor the woman scorned and penalized as an "old maid" or a "dyke," has had any real autonomy or selfhood to gain from subversion of the female body (and hence of the female mind).
(Rich 35)

One of the aspects of slavery which resulted in negative effects on the slaves' self-image was the fact that they were sold. Slaves were regarded as not being human; they were products with a price. As Betty Wood points out: "...the word *slave* meant a piece of conveyable property, a chattel, with no legal rights or social status whatsoever" (Wood 9). Kolchin also describes the life of a typical slave in the South as follows:

Antebellum slave relations were marked by a dualism inherent in slavery: slaves were at the same time both objects and subjects, human

property held for the purpose of enriching the masters and individuals with lives of their own. But this dualism was especially pronounced in the antebellum South because conditions there accentuated personal relations between master and slave to an extent rarely seen in other slave-owning societies. Slavery served mercenary goals in the South, as it did elsewhere, but it did far more than that; to most masters; slavery represented a civilization or way of life that ordered their very existence. (Kolchin 111)

Paternalism as depicted in Morrison's two novels limits women in the same way as it limited the slaves. Kolchin, in focusing on this aspect, argues that as a result of paternalism; closely controlling the slaves' personal lives, the Africans and African-Americans experienced limitations similar to those of a child (Kolchin 119).

2. MOTHERHOOD

In *Sula* and *Beloved* mothers are not depicted as flawless, but they show unconditional love for their children, often in quite provocative ways. Morrison's authorship elucidates the conditions of motherhood showing how black women's existence is warped by the severe conditions of slavery. This study argues that in order to understand Morrison's depictions of motherhood, we need to understand the severity of slavery and the shadows that it has left in the consciousness of the mothers depicted in the two novels.

In the two novels studied here it becomes apparent how in a patriarchal society a woman can feel guilty when choosing interests, career and self-development before motherhood. That sacrifices have to be made by a mother is obvious and natural, but equality in a relationship means shared responsibility and with that the sacrifices are less on both parts. This essay argues that although motherhood can be a wonderful experience many women fear it because of the domestication of the mother and the responsibility that ultimately lies on the mother. Domestication refers to how the female is positioned in the home and how the nurturing of the child as well as domestic chores has now become her sphere and duty. This is exactly the situation for the mothers in Morrison's two novels. The expectations placed on the mother by the patriarchal society; norms concerning gender roles and the stereotypical view of how a mother should and should not behave, are almost impossible to attain. Elaine Showalter examines the situation of mothers and points out that "children are the compensation for feminine surrender" and that "...childbirth is not a victory; it is an acceptance of the compensations of giving in and giving up" (Showalter 305-306). Both the positive and negative aspects of motherhood reach yet another dimension when we understand the effects of slavery on black mothers, as depicted by Morrison, and the struggles they must face in raising their children. Households of former slave-families where the

mother is the central figure are fairly common in Morrison's novels, the reason being that the fathers are frequently absent as a consequence of the heritage of slavery. In those cases where the men were in fact still a part of the household they still did not have the main role in the house since they had no more legal rights than their wives and also because they could at any time leave. As a consequence the history of the women's past when the men were sold or ran away has left deep scars in the psyche of these women.

As mentioned previously, a paternalistic society where households are run by females is a recurring aspect of Morrison's novels. Black men can leave, and are used to being "sent away" as a result of slavery, but in Morrison's novels the black mother is caged in her role and in a sense does not have any freedom since she simply cannot leave. Therefore, both economic as well as emotional problems appear in such shattered families. In *Sula*, after the collapse of Eva Peace's marriage to BoyBoy such problems arise. Dayle B. DeLancey argues that as a result of the absence of the father, motherlove becomes economically and mentally lethal: "When Eva's husband of five years, BoyBoy, leaves her to raise the three children on her own...we see at once the financial and emotional pressure that childrearing places upon disadvantaged African-American mothers" (DeLancey 15). Desiree Lewis also examines what she terms a "syndrome" that plagues many black families when the father "is reduced to being a 'cowboy' father who only calls...when he can. His social and psychological condition is lowered. She provides a home...while he keeps away" (Lewis 41). Such are the facts influencing Eva's mothering in *Sula*. The pressures that both mothers experience, although portrayed in different time periods, in the novels result in self-sacrifice and humiliation, often the result of the men being absent. The task of being a black mother who tries to teach her children to be proud of who they are is warped by the memory of the utter humiliation suffered when white men sold her as a slave, using her as a piece of meat. Furthermore, Eva having to mutilate herself in order to support her family and thus becoming

deviant is Morrison's critique of the consequences of slavery.

This study argues that for black mothers the fact of living in a patriarchal environment is not the main problem, though it obviously is a great aspect of raising their children. It is, instead slavery's impact and society's racism, that is a consequence of the heritage of slavery, that are by far the largest obstacles. A mother who raises children in a racist society with this historical legacy could be judged as insane, or that is at least how the mothers' behaviour in *Sula* and *Beloved* is judged by those around them.

The strain on mothers in Toni Morrison's novels is best revealed in their mothering, mainly in the way they express their love. DeLancey can be quoted in this respect when she describes what she regards as the trinity of motherlove: "...a trinity of motherlove's lethal possibilities: motherlove as a destructive force that 'kills' by burdening a mother in the realm of the material, motherlove that 'kills' by burdening a mother in the realm of the emotional, and motherlove that – quite simply and literally – kills" (DeLancey 15). This study claims that what is revealed in Morrison's novels is in fact the result of slavery; fathers leave because absence is what they were forced to experience during slavery and as a consequence the mother becomes the sole provider, facing emotional and financial difficulties. With this in mind Morrison's novels reveal how protecting their children leads to drastic measures.

Wood points out that one significant factor during slavery was the fact that white slave-owners rationalised the use of slaves as a workforce (Wood 7). Thus, when the mothers in *Sula* and *Beloved* distance themselves and their families from whites, it can be regarded as a consequence of the history of exploitation experienced during slavery, but it also functions as a shield to protect their identity as black people. However, as DeLancey argues, it is at the same time important to mention that groups in society turn against those they consider to be abnormal in their actions. Consequently Sethe and Eva are viewed as acting in a disgraceful manner not appropriate to a mother and therefore both Sethe and Eva are isolated within their

community (DeLancey 17).

The family appears to be an important focus in Morrison's novels and it is the heritage of slavery and the knowledge mothers share that is depicted in the mothering of Eva and Sethe in the two novels examined here. The mother plays an essential role in Toni Morrison's authorship. The mother is not only an individual, but she represents, symbolically, the mother of all black people and she knows what her children have experienced and what they have to cope with in their everyday lives. Morrison also shares the knowledge of slavery and racism which her novels show particularly in connection with motherhood. Bettye J. Parker interviewed Morrison, asking "...if her female characters were prototypic of present Black women?" to which Morrison answered: "There is something inside us that makes us different from other people. It is not like men and it is not like white women" (Bell, Parker & Guy-Sheftall 255). The black mothers in the two novels analysed in this essay face problems that a white mother simply does not endure. When the two mothers take the responsibility as sole providers of their families, they face a racist society with the pressure of bringing up your people, thus being a black mother is an exceptionally difficult "duty." Morrison feels it to be important to emphasise her African heritage in depictions of the role of a mother since for a black mother culture and ethnicity are important in the way that she educates her children.

Although this essay examines motherhood in two of Morrison's novels an important aspect of Morrison's novels is the fact that within the community there is diversity as well. As Renita Weems also points out: "Morrison pays tribute to those women who are doing everything in life but what they are suppose to be doing: creative women- like so many of us and our mamas- without outlets for their creativity" (Smith 97). Morrison chooses to write about the things she knows and has personally experienced.

3. THE MOTHERS IN *SULA* AND *BELOVED*

Morrison's two works are filled with situations where mothers are put to the test; where their obligations as sole providers, demand in the upbringing of their children and the way in which they make use of their power are constantly being supervised and questioned by the community and society. This essay argues that some of what these women think, feel and act can be regarded as an outcome of slavery.

3.1 Sethe

Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. *Beloved* was written in 1987 and is Morrison's fifth novel and is also one of her most acclaimed works. In this novel Morrison portrays a single woman, who raises her children with the memories of slavery constantly present. In *Beloved* the author explores the mother-child bond, presenting depictions of the supernatural where the reader witnesses a dead infant return to life. Sethe is a mother who has experienced terrible events. One of the cruelest is described as follows:

Sethe: 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. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.

Paul.D: They used cowhide on you?

Sethe: And they took my milk.

Paul.D: They beat you and you was pregnant?

Sethe: And they took my milk! (*Beloved* 16-17)

Sethe is a woman of tremendous, inner strength who has survived the brutality which was a common aspect of slavery. As a result of having experienced the evils of slavery her greatest

fear is that her children will suffer this as well. Moreover, in *Beloved*, as in *Sula*, the responsibility for raising their children lies with the mother as a result of the absence of the men.

During slavery, fathers were separated from mothers and when they worked in the fields they were not allowed to communicate or show each other affection. Women and even young girls were forced to give birth to as many children as possible in order for the slave-owners to obtain more slaves. Children were also separated from their parents, moreover mothers often had to take care of the slave-owners' children. Fathers were used to not taking care of their children and did not have any obligations towards their women. Consequently, fathers' emotional lives were disturbed and they were unable to return to the way their lives were before slavery, so the women had to manage on their own. Sethe's own mother was a victim of the degradation brought about by slavery:

Sethe: Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin.

She said, This is your ma'am. This, and she pointed.... Yes, Ma'am, I said. But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too, I said. Mark the mark on me too.

Did she? asked Denver.

Sethe: She slapped my face.

Denver: What for?

Sethe: I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own.... (*Beloved* 61)

Such "branding" was common in the lives of the slaves and it not only left a physical scar but also damaged the psyche. This method of torture ensured that the slaves knew "their place" and kept behaving like the "products" their slave owners regard them as being. As a result of cruel treatment mothers, for example, would enter into motherhood with broken spirits and

shattered perceptions of self. Mothers in *Sula* and *Beloved* not only have to bring up their young daughters and teach them about the obstacles that they might face because of their gender, but they also have to prepare their children for the injustices of racism. Sethe, although she is a mother who displays inner strength, nevertheless becomes immobilized. Adrienne Rich, in her analysis of the dilemma of the mother who brings up her children without support from their father, argues as follows:

The black mother has been charged by both white and black males with the “castration” of her sons through her so-called matriarchal domination of the family, as breadwinner, decision-maker, and rearer of children in one. Needless to say, her “power” as “matriarch” is drastically limited by the bonds of racism, sexism, and poverty. What is misread as power here is really survival-strength, guts, the determination that her children’s lives shall come to something even if it means driving them, or sacrificing her own pride in order to feed and clothe them. (Rich 204)

Sethe does absolutely everything she can for her children; she even takes the life of her baby-girl so that she would not have to experience the same cruelty of slavery her mother did. As a result of this deed, Sethe becomes an outcast in her community because she even sacrifices her pride for her child’s sake. The novel reveals how she sells her body in order to be able to afford the name “Beloved” engraved on her child’s tombstone. Barbara Hill Rigney contends that Sethe “...trades ten minutes of sex for a single inscription, ‘the one word that mattered’, on her daughter’s tombstone, thus almost literally translating her body into the written word” (Hill Rigney 26). This essay argues that as a result of slavery and the abuse that she experiences in captivity Sethe is unable to value or see her own body as

something precious and consequently she “chooses” to sell her body instead of stealing the money or obtaining it in another way. Sethe’s love for her children is limitless:

Too thick, he said. 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 you mine, I also mean I’m yours. I wouldn’t draw breath without my children. (*Beloved* 203)

When Morrison depicts the heinous act of a mother killing her own child, she reveals the complexity of motherhood. Morrison narrates events from the mother’s point of view, without sentimentality allowing us to see the varying facets of motherhood. It is brutal to kill your child, but one has to look at the reasons for Sethe’s decision and one has to examine the circumstances under which she did it. The narrative elucidates how motherhood can be an awful experience. A narrow view of the role of a mother can be futile; moreover a mother who acts outside society’s “conventions” is considered a bad mother who is questioned because of her behaviour. Although the power to give and to take life is in Sethe’s hands the alternatives that she is presented with are not possible as viable options. Therefore motherlove, as mentioned previously in the essay, does not involve having power but can be regarded as powerlessness. This argument does not encourage behaviour such as Sethe’s but merely argues that a change of attitudes is needed. As Rich also points out; “...instead of recognizing the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood, society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological” (Rich 263).

When Beloved is dead and Sethe’s sons are absent, she connects in a special way with her remaining daughter, their bond is solid until Beloved reappears. For a considerable period it is just mother and daughter and the ghost, and when Paul. D enters their house the daughter fears that that bond between her and her mother will be broken. Not having a father to turn to has left negative traces in the girl’s interaction with male figures. In her examination of this

phenomenon, E. Mavis Hetherington states that studies “found that adolescent girls from father-absent homes were uncomfortable and insecure with men and boys” (Chodorow 138). This essay holds that a biological father might not be the only alternative, having a male role model who is closely connected to the children is important.

Morrison’s narrative depicts mother-daughter relations and highlights the importance of feeling connected. There is nothing as intimate as the knowledge shared by mothers and daughters, it is the knowledge of obstacles and possibilities, of physical, mental and emotional changes, of communion and individuality and of secrets, hopes and dreams. In this respect Rich argues that “mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other [sic]” (Rich 220). In *Beloved* there are certain things that the mother has difficulty sharing with her daughter. Morrison does not depict a perfect bond between mother and daughter, but instead presents the reader with the tension between Sethe and Denver. Although Sethe does not always communicate with Denver, the daughter still feels her mother’s emotions as something very subtle, almost supernatural.

When the murdered Beloved “returns from the dead” and her mother finally realises who the ghost is, she is filled with incredible joy and shame at the same time. In order to compensate for her inadequacies to her firstborn daughter, Denver is neglected by her mother and her loneliness is more apparent than before, moreover the former bond between mother and daughter is broken. As a result of the re-established relationship between herself and Beloved, Sethe experiences changes in her daily life like, for example, being late for work. She attempts to make up for lost time and begins to spoil her daughters, in particular Beloved. Morrison’s narrative reveals how this turns into disaster. Sethe herself re-experiences her childhood, or rather the way she would have wanted it to be. Chodorow, in examining a

similar mother/child bond argues that “mothering...involves a double identification for women, both as mother *and* as child....Women have capacities for primary identification with their child through regression to primary love and empathy” (Chodorow 204). Sethe’s ambition to provide her daughters with everything she herself never had does more damage than good. In analyzing the interaction between Sethe and her daughters this essay claims that slavery destroyed Sethe’s possibilities to have a normal relationship with anyone. She became the sole provider of the family when her husband left as a result of slavery. With the fear of having her children taken away constantly present, the relationship Sethe has with her daughter Denver, is filled with stress and anxiety. Her memories of Beloved, even before her return, are filled with guilt.

Sethe and Beloved’s stories, intertwined, reveal the ghastly reality of slavery. Because of what black slaves have experienced, and black people cope with to this day, on a daily basis, their history, culture and spiritual values become a vital part of their lives. This paper argues that in Morrison’s works, the figure of the African mother is central. In *Beloved*, the female character; Baby Suggs, for example, symbolises the African mother in all her glory. She preaches to the black community of Cincinnati, but is actually a mother figure to all black people. Baby Suggs can be seen as representing God or Christ, but by showing her vulnerability at times, her human side appears. Similarly, Sethe also functions as the Great Mother, but only in certain circumstances. As Hill Rigney points out:

...the Great Mother, the giver of both life and wisdom, who is *nommo*, the creative potential and the sacred aspect of nature itself. But only in freedom can Sethe celebrate her love for her children, her sense of herself as Great Mother: ‘It felt good. Good and right. I was big...and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. (Hill Rigney 68-69)

Despite the wonder at times of feeling like the Great Mother Sethe's life is full of tragedy. Losing a child must be the worst thing a parent can experience and when this special bond is broken one can only hope that it remains there in spirit. After Beloved is murdered by Sethe her life literally turns grey: "every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (*Beloved* 39).

Although Sethe truly loves her children, her anger and bitterness at times shines through in that her domestic role and the institution of motherhood with all its norms, as defined by a patriarchal society, keeps her trapped as a woman and a mother. This entrapment clearly limits her and her powerlessness becomes evident. In this respect Rich also points out that: "the power-relations between mother and child are often simply a reflection of power-relations in patriarchal society....Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel-narrow but deep-for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them" (Rich 38). In *Beloved*, Morrison shows the torment of slavery and its memories which affect everything Sethe does and most certainly affects how she raises her children. Moreover, we are shown the importance of history and why it is a vital part of black people's lives. Slavery has left its scars, in particular in the mentality of black mothers.

3.2 Eva

Morrison portrays mothers whose roles can be seen as extremely ambiguous. In *Sula*, 1973, we are shown differences and similarities from one generation to another. The focus of the novel revolves around the friendship of two girls and their relationship to their mothers. Most of the women characters in the novel are single mothers. For example, Eva's husband leaves when their children are small and Hannah's husband dies. This analysis focuses on Eva

mainly because the way she interacts, or does not interact with her children, does not seem coherent.

Eva, like Sethe, is the sole provider of her family after her husband leaves and she is exposed to more responsibilities than she ever anticipated. For Eva, finding work, maintaining work, being financially stable, is not easy. Eva has to take her children into consideration in all her decisions and she must perceive how they might be affected by the choices she makes. DeLancey explains Eva's situation in the following way:

...the very existence of her children bars Eva from most jobs, as they are too young to be left alone during standard working hours. This has a markedly negative emotional effect upon Eva, a woman whose pride is highlighted throughout the novel. She misses her family, but cannot use them as a resource because she is too proud to go home to them with half-starved children in tow. (DeLancey 15)

This essay argues that Eva's pride is an attempt to regain a sense of selfworth in the aftermath of slavery. Yet again the heritage of slavery can be blamed when the man of the house abandons his family. Eva's process of maintaining a sense of pride is almost like a wall around her and it originates in the fact of being abandoned and left to tend for the family on her own. Despite the significance of having pride in herself as a woman and as a mother, her pride is, ironically, sacrificed in the name of motherhood, since Eva is forced to beg to be able to feed her family, and as DeLancey also claims, it is motherlove that murders her pride (DeLancey).

Hill Rigney comments on the power of the namer of the child, in this case the mother: "To name is to have power over the individual named...and the namer in *Sula* is Eva, whose power is symbolic of her function as the...mother to destroy as well as to create life" (Hill Rigney 93). The mother in *Sula* destroys life when she sets fire to her son Plum; one could

ask if she creates a new life in heaven for him where he does not have to suffer. In naming her child, Eva also decides when that name is no longer to be used. Eva lets her pride vanish in exchange for the restoration of that of her son:

It was such a carryin' on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it....Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more....a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (*Sula* 71-72)

Eva, like Sethe, goes to extremes, in order to “save” her child and she faces the black community’s rejection, and thereby loses her pride. Because of her deep love for him she chooses to set her child free and sets fire to him. Because of the heritage of slavery Eva becomes demoralised by witnessing the deterioration of her son for whom she worked so hard to build a new life and new possibilities. She realizes that he must, at least die with some dignity; in a patriarchal and racist society, he must die a man.

Morrison’s narrative reveals how, despite the absence of men in the mother’s lives, sexuality and the temptation of being with men is an aspect in the Peace family: “It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters” (*Sula* 41). Eva influences her daughter,

Hannah, in her behaviour towards men. This essay argues that Hannah's sexual behaviour is in fact an attempt to gain the love she never receives from her mother. However, Hannah's behaviour is seen as promiscuous by the black community; that "the apple does not fall far from the tree." Although Hannah and Sula do not care what the black community thinks of them, this essay argues that proud Eva, with a closer connection to the heritage of slavery, believes that it is more important to show respect to the black community of the Bottom. However, Eva does not let her respect for the black community interfere with her doing everything for her children, even if it involves the most brutal deeds.

Even though Eva tries to make everything in the household work, and partly because of it, Eva's relationship with her children is strained and her bond with her daughter is not satisfying. In a conversation between mother and daughter the effects of slavery on Hannah's self-image are noticeable. Hannah asks her mother if she ever loved her children and Eva's reply reveals her anger:

...You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you?

Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of

maggots if I hadn't." To which Hannah replies: "I didn't mean that,

Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else.

Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?"

Eva responds by saying: "Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895.

Just 'cause you good it good now you think it was always this good?

1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies.

Stepping tall, ain't you?... (*Sula* 68)

Later in their conversation we see how stressed and imprisoned Eva felt in the early days of raising her children:

Hannah: “But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn’t thinkin’ ’bout...”

Eva: “No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin’ and me watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleepin’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ’bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?” (*Sula* 69)

DeLancey argues that this lack of energy and time influences Eva’s interaction with her children: “Eva’s motherlove has taken on a double-edged destructiveness: it drives her to sacrifice herself in order to maintain her children economically, and in so doing absents her from them so that their love for her is diminished” (DeLancey 17). This essay argues that a construction of identity occurs in all human beings, whether repressed or explored and developed, and that it becomes a major issue concerning how people value themselves. How the development of a child begins is further explained by Nancy Chodorow who contends that:

The character of the infant’s early relation to its mother profoundly affects its sense of self, its later object-relationships, and its feelings about its mother and about women in general. The continuity of care enables the infant to develop a self- a sense that “I am.” The quality of any particular relationship, however, affects the infant’s personality and self-identity. The experience of self concerns *who* “I am” and not simply *that* “I am”. (Chodorow 77-78)

With this in mind this paper emphasises the importance of a sense of self. Morrison's maternal characters repeatedly bear witness to the burden of slavery and its oppression; memories of slavery, involving the impact on how black people are viewed even after slavery as well as a fear of going back to such conditions. As Linden Peach points out: "...the behaviours of individuals within the black community are made complex and problematic by its unnatural relationship to an engulfing white society" (Peach 43). Vashti Crutcher Lewis also comments on how Eva's family members are viewed by both black and white people in the Bottoms:

Sula and Shadrack represent black sons and daughters of America who would be more at home in Africa. In traditional African cultures, they would be neither pariahs or mysteries, since both represent tradition and a profound rootedness in African cosmology. To the people of the Bottoms, Sula is an enigma and Shadrack is a downright shame.

(Crutcher Lewis 92)

Eva's strong opinions on how a woman and a mother should behave stems from the combination of trying to deal with the institution of motherhood and at the same time maintaining a decent relation with the black community. In a discussion with Sula, Eva expresses her opinions as follows:

Eva: "...When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

Sula: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

Eva: "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."

Sula: "You did."

Eva: "Not by choice."

Sula: “Mamma did.”

Eva: “Not by choice, I said. It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need...I’m a tell you what you need”. (*Sula* 92)

This conversation could be an example of the difference in age between Eva and Sula. Eva grows up not taking anything for granted and she feels that Sula is selfish when she does not appreciate family support and tries to develop herself. In addition to this Eva is upset and jealous of Sula who has opportunities that she never had. Sula chooses not to have a man in her life and does not have to face the humiliation of being abandoned or having to care for an entire family alone. Yet another explanation for Eva’s behaviour towards Sula could be her showing power she lacks in a patriarchal, racist society. In furthering this essay’s standpoint Rich could be quoted: “Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel – narrow but deep – for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them” (Rich 38). The so-called “powerless responsibility” that women endure takes its toll on both mother and child, in this case the grandchild. Rich develops this argument further:

Love and anger *can* exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with the fear that we are not ‘loving’; grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. (Rich 52)

This essay argues that because of dealing with the torment of slavery and racism and the pressure of being a good mother Eva fails in her relationships with her children and grandchildren.

In addition, Eva experiences something close to what Lynn Sukenick refers to as “matrophobia.” This is, as Rich also puts it: “...the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood

but of *becoming one's mother*....Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her” (Rich 235). Rich argues that “where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with her completely” (Rich 235). This essay holds that this phenomenon explains the connection Eva and Hannah have. Hannah is terrified that she will one day be a replica of her mother and as a coping mechanism simplifies her mother’s behaviour and the complexity that is Eva. For Eva the fear of being Hannah’s mother and doing right by her would have been made easier if she had had their father with her making the difficult decisions and Eva would not have felt her children’s disappointment directed at her alone.

Communication between mothers and daughters in *Sula* is almost non-existent. As Marianne Hirsch points out: “Sula’s family, although more communicative, succeeds no better in bridging the distance between the lives and the perspectives of the three generations” (Hirsch 180). Eva fails to communicate with her children, but her love and sacrifice for them is undeniable. For example, her self-mutilation in order to receive insurance money to support her family. Her relieving her child’s pain, when she sets him on fire to alleviate his painful memories of the war and his drug addiction and finally when she throws herself from a window into the fire in an attempt to save her daughter, Hannah. Eva becomes a bitter woman who feels alone; she is disappointed at the ingratitude of her children and the fact that no one seems to understand the sacrifices she has made for them. At the same time, ambiguously, Eva constantly surrounds herself with people and children; continuing her nurturing ways. The role of the nurturing mother has become integrated in Eva’s inner core and she literally becomes a slave to everyone and everything despite everyone thinking that she is highly respected and is the image of how a strong mother ought to be.

This paper argues that mother and daughter, or even in this case grandmother and granddaughter, the grandmother functioning as a mother figure, share many traits. Although Eva and Sula's relationship is damaged and they seem very different from one another, certain aspects connect them. As Hirsch argues:

Her first act in the novel repeats Eva's gesture of self-mutilation in the service of survival and her denial of her powerlessness. Threatened by some boys on the way home from school, Sula takes a knife and slices off part of her finger, frightening the boys with "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" This act is Sula's own moment of self-recognition, of her affiliation with Eva and the world of her maternal ancestors. (Hirsch 182)

Eva's missing leg and Sula's special birthmark are also connected as both aspects represent something that distinguishes them from other women and consequently, Sula, as Hirsch points out:

...is forced to recognize the vulnerability she shares with Eva, a vulnerability her act of self-injury, like Eva's, can only disguise but cannot change. It is this recognition which causes Sula's continued and determined rebellion against a traditional womanhood defined for her by maternity and enslavement to the family. (Hirsch 182)

For Sula, the enslavement she experiences in the family, the situation of domestication symbolizes slavery in general. Both Eva and Sula are responsible for taking someone's life, but all similarity ends there. Eva's act of taking her son's life is out of compassion while Sula's deed seems irrational. Eva simply does what she feels is necessary to alleviate her son's suffering.

The idea of motherhood is governed by expectations from patriarchal society. There is a narrow conception of how a mother should be, of how she should express mothering and how she is supposed to perceive her role as a mother. Added to this, the women in Morrison's novels bear the burden of history and the heritage of slavery and oppression.

4. COMPARISON OF THE MOTHERS

In *Sula* and *Beloved* there are many similarities between depictions of the mothers, Sethe and Eva. One similarity that is apparent is that they can be regarded as symbols of the Great mother, who is the namer of her child. However, Sethe in *Beloved* can also be seen as symbolic of the African mother who is fundamental in depictions of motherhood in Morrison's novels. With the power to create and destroy life both Sethe and Eva make the cruel decision to end their children's lives. Morrison depicts these acts in a brutal manner in order to convey the seriousness of the situation and to convey the frustration that arises as a result of racism and the heritage of slavery. This essay argues that Morrison reveals the side of motherhood most authors would be reluctant to portray. The reader is given insight into the lives of characters where everything is not black and white, but instead where the ambiguity and complexity of the situation of mothers are exposed. Traditionally, mothers have been portrayed in the idealised way society has viewed the mother, throughout history. In *Beloved* and *Sula* Sethe and Eva are depicted as human beings with flaws and emotions of anger, bitterness and powerlessness. Morrison depicts, without sentimentality, mothers who kill their own children and thus, she creates an image of the mother which is taboo.

The mother-daughter bond depicted by Morrison is the focus of both *Sula* and *Beloved*, since Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, run away early in the novel. Similarly, Eva takes her son Plum's life early in the novel *Sula*. The focus in both works is thus on daughters and granddaughters and their interaction with their mothers and grandmothers. Morrison's narratives make the bond more visible to the reader in depictions of females as the main characters. Eva's daughter Hannah feels alienated from her mother and Denver feels neglected by Sethe. The heritage of slavery itself plays a major role in this rift between mothers and daughters in descriptions of mothers who fend for themselves, struggling with

dark memories and feelings of inferiority. In order to cope with such pressures Eva and Sethe put their own lives in abeyance and focus on trying to live up to their society's expectations of the perfect mother. They come across as strong, proud women who let nothing influence them. On the contrary, although there is no denying that these mothers are strong because they are able to overcome many trials and tribulations, they are worn out and cut off emotionally.

For Sethe, life has been about trying to escape the heritage of slavery and the recollections she has as well as keeping her children from having to endure its horrors. DeLancey comments on the matter in the following way: "Sethe is forced to go without dreams, without rest, without escape from the truth of her life, as we see when she is loath to 'permit herself' to faint during the difficult birth of her daughter Denver" (DeLancey 18). Eva, through her fostering ways never obtains such relief either. In the end it is this inability to escape and constantly having to worry that cause Eva and Sethe to react with such brutality.

Another similarity between Sethe and Eva is that they see themselves as saving their children by taking their lives. Sethe, who has been ravished, marked and sold like an animal stands firm in her opinion that there is no way that her child, Beloved, will experience the extremes of slavery. For Eva, setting fire to her son, Plum, saves him from dying like "a simple drug addict" and instead allows him to die like a man. According to DeLancey: "Indeed, his heroin addiction so debilitates Plum that he regresses to a childlike state, and so his murder is truly an infanticide" (DeLancey 16). Eva's mercy killing of Plum is an act of infanticide in the same way as Sethe's act of infanticide is a mercy killing.

Since they are abandoned by their husbands Eva and Sethe share the hard task of being single mothers. Being a mother is difficult enough, but not having a partner to help and support in the up-bringing of children makes this even more problematical. Being black women further complicates matters and Morrison's novels elucidate the problems Eva and

Sethe experience as a result of the colour of their skin. However, the complications that they encounter in their dealings with white society are exacerbated when they are also forced to deal with the harsh judgment and accusations of the black community. Being a perfect mother is even more important in the eyes of the black community as a result of their traditionally held ideas regarding the stereotypes of perfect motherhood. Perfection is not always applicable to the mothers in *Sula* and *Beloved*. Eva is considered a misfit because she sacrifices her leg and Sethe becomes an outcast when she commits infanticide. The ex-slaves in Sethe's community are horrified by what they regard as her taking God's will into her own hands and others are merely disgusted. DeLancey argues that it is "indicative of a depth of love that slavery and acts of racial violence have made hazardous for African-Americans" (DeLancey 17).

Mothers in Morrison's narratives are depicted as having their own sexuality, but at times, the sexual encounters in the novels are expressions of the characters' need to feel close to someone in their search for security, rather than sexual desire. Sethe attempts this intimacy with Paul D. and she tries to enjoy her body that was abused before by men when she was a slave. Sethe also tries to escape, as mentioned previously, by trying to connect to a man but it is difficult since she has been betrayed by her lover before. Eva's sexual life is more limited but her flirtations and charisma keep men fascinated. However, another explanation might be applicable to Eva's sexual behaviour. She does not care about establishing emotional bonds with certain men. Instead she attains satisfaction from building up their self-esteem and as Lewis also argues this is an expression of "black women's mothering in black men's attainment of masculinity" (Lewis 42). This is also an underlying reason for Sethe's behaviour. Eva and Sethe, as an effect of the experience of slavery are not able to trust that their lover will not betray them and thus it is easier to not take things for granted and to keep emotional and sexual experience at a minimum.

Morrison's style and the topics she depicts make *Sula* and *Beloved* similar as well as the author's portrayals of strong, single mothers who, on an everyday basis, contend with obstacles they encounter as a result of their race and their gender. DeLancey examines this aspect explaining why African-American women display motherlove in a manner that could be perceived negatively:

Perhaps it is that because African-American women have traditionally been exposed to life at its harshest....In the case of the escaped slave and the turn-of-the-century rural African-America, life was not carefree; neither, then, was motherlove. For Eva and Sethe, it is the fact that life is not carefree - that reality is so terribly bleak - that makes motherlove take on deadly proportions. (DeLancey 17)

Morrison's novels depict how the heritage of slavery and the experience of oppression affect women like Sethe and Eva and how the effects of these experiences influence their relationships with their daughters. Her novels focus on women like Sethe and Eva's everyday battle against racism and how this makes their children view and value themselves.

CONCLUSION

This essay has examined how Toni Morrison portrays the mothers in *Sula* and *Beloved* and how slavery affects motherhood. It has argued that Morrison depicts mother figures in a specific manner. The emphasis has been on single mothers who exist with the heritage of slavery constantly present in their lives. The essay has analyzed how the mothers' behaviour influences their children. It has also elucidated aspects of power and powerlessness as well as the consequences of motherlove.

The first chapter provides an historical background and focuses on slavery, especially the treatment of slaves. The second chapter examines motherhood in connection to slavery. It highlights how a paternalistic society limits mothers in their mothering. The third chapter analyses the two mothers Sethe and Eva. Section 3.1 focuses on Sethe and section 3.2 on Eva. The fourth chapter compares the mothers in the two novels, revealing aspects of motherhood, slavery, paternalism and racism which link them.

This essay has shown that the history of black people expresses itself through their spirituality, culture and love for their family where the mother is central and vital. However, the study has also questioned the myth of the strong, black mother the community loves and looks up to. This essay has pointed out that the mothers raise their children on their own because of the fathers' absence and also that these mothers are subjected to racism and at times a complicated relationship with their own community because of their history where slavery leaves emotional scars.

To conclude, this essay argues that Morrison's approach shows the complexity of their roles as mothers in individuals who are tormented by memories of slavery and racism. Furthermore the way in which Morrison depicts black mothers' interaction with their children,

especially the daughters, anticipates that they will meet the same obstacles as those facing their mothers.

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