



**Maternity: A Site of Empowerment, Resistance and  
Strength in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

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**Degree Theses 1, 15 Credits**

**EXE400: English for Upper Secondary School Teachers**

**March 2019**

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## Introduction

Through fiction authors may investigate characters' inner lives to create perspectives for those unable to speak for themselves. In relation to the experiences of silenced people, a recreation of subjectivity can provide otherwise disregarded dimensions. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, the connection between women's inner lives and their maternal subjectivity is key to its theme of how maternal experience may be a source of empowerment and resistance in oppressive environments. In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, published in 1987, Morrison presents a revised history of maternal subjectivity under conditions specifically related to slavery.

Historically, the female perspective on motherhood and the voice of mothers have been disregarded in literature as motherhood and maternal experiences have been presented in literature written mostly by men. In fact, throughout history maternity has been defined by religion, art, psychoanalysis, medicine and other fields commonly associated with men (Eckard 1). Further, any form of documentations of African-American women's maternal experiences during slavery and after are scarce. Female slaves left few narratives, diaries or letters, so first-hand information about these women is limited (White 250).

Literature concerning enslavement mainly consists of abolitionist supporters' autobiographical retellings. Such writings often detail the enslaved African-Americans' conditions from an outside perspective because they were created to gain abolitionist support in a manner that would not offend their readers (Baillie 147). In contrast, through her fiction, Morrison provides a literary aesthetic through which she unmask American history in her recovery and reconstruction of African-American women's experiences. According to Morrison, as the autobiographical slave narrative that inspired emancipation could not engage in "issues too terrible to relate", her job was to rip that veil, one being through engaging in slaves' interior lives (Morrison, "Inventing", 91).

This essay argues that Morrison's novel *Beloved* is an examination of the complex topic of motherhood. Motherhood is a term which is frequently misrepresented as having only positive connotations. However, through her tough and intricate female characters, Morrison portrays maternal subjectivity as complex. In some respects, all the mothers in the novel are flawed, but even so, all are attempting to practice autonomy under circumstances far beyond their control. Struggling to take control, these women are changed from toothless subordinates

into determined power-women, even though that transformation complicates their own lives and the lives of people around them.

My inquiry into African-American mothers' experiences during slavery and its aftermath mainly draws on socio-historical and black feminist theories, which will be examined in the first chapter. Chapter one also comprises some historical background of the South and it discusses implications of maternity in this setting. Morrison's novel is mostly set in 1873 in rural Ohio following the Civil War, and the cultural concerns characteristic for the time and place play a vital part in defining African-American women's maternal experiences in the novel. In fact, maternity in 19<sup>th</sup>- century plantation societies imposed a great danger, both physically and psychologically, for African-American enslaved women. The third part of the first chapter will consider how motherhood in the African-American sense can empower mothers and lastly some previous readings of *Beloved* will be presented to put my argument in context.

Chapter two is an analysis of *Beloved*, showing how the mothers of the novel represent the possibility of strength and empowerment under slavery. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first analyses the maternal subjectivity of the protagonist Sethe, while the second looks at the character Baby Suggs. It is my argument that through its focus on the maternal subjectivity of these women, *Beloved* exposes the complex position of motherhood as a consequence of slavery, which may force women to feats of enormous strength and to resist oppression. This chapter will thus examine how African-American women can become empowered from the position of being mothers.

## Chapter 1 – Maternity: A Site of Oppression and Empowerment

The following chapter will first discuss some theoretical understandings of motherhood and strength central to my understanding of the novel *Beloved*. Secondly, it looks at the socio-historical context of the novel, crucial for an appreciation and understanding of its narrative as well as my interpretation of characters' behaviour and speech. Then black feminist theory regarding maternity is presented, important for an understanding of how maternity may empower the African-American woman. Also, the concept of "othermothers" and the nurturing mother will be introduced, concepts central to my reading of the novel. The fourth and final part of this chapter includes a discussion of some previous research of *Beloved*.

### 1.1 Understandings of Motherhood, Strength and Cultural Heritage

American slavery has fascinated numerous scholars for a long time. This vast academic interest can be arranged into two major historiographical strands: gender studies and slavery examined from the slaves' perspectives (West 3). The focus of this part of the chapter will particularly be on these two orientations.

Firstly, one must remember that patriarchy is highly incorporated within motherhood. Feminists write about motherhood as an institution in a patriarchal society where widespread norms and expectations placed on mothers make them conform to and replicate the virtues and ideals of motherhood (Green 127). If one pictures the ideal mother, to see a caring woman with unconditional love for her family who also considers parenting to be the most meaningful aspect of her life is not an unusual image. Motherhood can thus be restrictive and oppressive, as warnings of bad mothers and expectations of good mothers prescribe female behaviour (Green 127). However, even though the pressure to conform to dominant models are real, as the influential feminist Adrienne Rich acknowledged in her book *Of Woman Born*, motherhood is also a potential location for happiness and liberty (Green 126), a theme further discussed in later parts of this chapter. Strategies employed by feminist mothers to resist patriarchal restrictions and practice agency include teaching their children to be conscious of and to challenge forms of oppression, as well as mothering in ways that challenge dominant views (Green 130).

Although feminist theory has taken an interest in maternity it does not, however, consider African-American women's maternal subjectivity. The author bell hooks argues that

feminist theory on motherhood is racially codified, seeing that white middle-class college-educated women claim that motherhood was the “locus of women’s oppression” while, if asked, black women would not respond in a similar fashion (qtd. in O’Reilly 3). African-American women’s struggle against oppression may seem comparable to that of other women. However, as female experiences cannot be generalised, due to how social factors such as age, social class and ethnicity influence their experience of oppression, it is of absolute importance to examine black women’s experiences of maternity.

Moreover, the angle of comprehending slavery from the point of view of the exploited developed in the 70’s when, according to Emily West, revisionist historians engaged in examining “history from below” (3). Studies gave attention to the slaves’ experiences, particularly the cultural life of slave communities. West further states that studies showed that cultural autonomy offered slaves a means to distance themselves psychologically from the hardships of imprisonment and the plantation master. Engagement in African-American cultural aspects thus facilitated a means to maintain psychological well-being.

The trend of focusing on the cultural life of slave communities encompasses what has been referred to as “the positive accomplishments of slaves under slavery”, an approach which has been sorely criticised (West 3). For one, Peter Kolchin, a more recent historian specialising in slavery and labour in the American South, believes that claims of resilience and autonomy of slaves have been overstated, thus shadowing the truth of slavery. Kolchin further argues that revisionist historians “have created an exaggerated picture of strength and cohesion of the slave community” (583-84). A corresponding argument is presented by Natalia Fontes de Oliviera in her previous readings of Morrison’s work. Fontes de Oliviera argues that the portrayal of African-American mothers as mighty, although empowering, tends to romanticise African-American women’s maternal experiences, resulting in a confinement of black women in the role of the exemplary mother. Quoting Carole Boyce Davies, the author writes that although “there has been a need in black cultures to affirm black motherhood and/or to construct an essentialized mother as a strategic response to racist constructs, this affirmation becomes too defining and limiting for women” (69).

In other words, these arguments state that focusing on the strength of the enslaved, in particular females, may romanticise slavery and create stereotypical roles for African-American women. I am uncomfortable with both of these readings because one must make note that stressing resilience and the desire for autonomy does not necessarily mean that this approach is glamorising the system of slavery or that it neglects the abuse and constraints felt

by those enslaved. On the contrary, as West argues, the importance of the terrible hardships are impossible to disregard since they highlight the “desire for freedom within the context of the restraints imposed by slaveholders” (3). Furthermore, a presentation of female subjectivity based on the actual everyday experiences of African-American women provides a more truthful and much needed affirmation of their mothering.

All things considered, cultural background provides insights into female subjectivity. Thus, knowing African-American maternal traditions proves both meaningful and necessary to understand the maternal subjectivity of these women. For one, the prominent literary critic Andrea O’Reilly has written extensively on the complexity of motherhood in her study *Toni Morrison: A Politics of the Heart*, in which she claims that “Anglo-American perspectives were hopelessly inadequate for an understanding of Morrison’s maternal vision” (xi). Her argument makes a distinction between African-American motherhood and that of western cultures. Her central claim is that Morrison rejects the role of mothers depicted by American culture and “defines black motherhood as a site of power” (1).

Correspondingly, the author makes two much-acknowledged statements in her argument, fundamental to my reading of the novel. Firstly, O’Reilly argues that mothers are central and highly valued in African-American culture. Secondly, she states that “it is recognized that mothers and mothering are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African-American people [...]” (4). In other words, in order to understand how motherhood can be a source of power in the context of chattel slavery, one must look more closely into the everyday experiences of enslaved women.

## **1.2 Understanding the Maternal in 19<sup>th</sup> - Century Plantation Societies**

As stated above, an important consideration when exploring slavery is the enslaved women’s personal experiences. Therefore, the focus of this part will be on the experiences of a Southern African-American slave mother, information important for my interpretation of the novel’s mothers.

*Beloved* is a complicated narrative dealing with female experiences of maternity, which have all been impacted by the system of chattel slavery in America. Maternal subjectivity here refers to how the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, child-rearing and motherhood from the mother’s perspective and how these maternal practises change identity, a definition central in this essay. Much of the story takes place in 1873 and the novel’s

fictional town, with its slaveholding past, colours the characters' lives in the novel. It is apparent that the geographical and historical closeness to the South and its history imposes a heavy burden on the African-Americans living there. Morrison herself lived in Ohio until she was 17 and her sense of place in the novel most likely stems from her personal background. In an interview, the author states that Ohio is "an interesting state from the point of view of black people because it is right there by the Ohio River, in the South, and at its Northern tip is Canada" (Morrison and Septo 475).

During the shift to industrialisation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, only the white population in America had a legal right to maintain families and a right to get paid for labour (Collins 49). As the novel is set around the emancipation, the fictional man-made division between legal and natural body, which the law prescribed African-Americans, reduced the enslaved from individuals to a legally constructed mixture of person and property. The bodies of slaves, both men, women and children, were believed to belong to the estate and, like chattel, had the purpose to increase the white slave master's wealth in the agricultural plantations of the South. Subsequently, the slave body was objectified, and no regard was paid to human rights, the limits of the misery a person can endure, or to the torture of the psyche of the enslaved (Mayfield 3).

The objectification of the bodies of the enslaved women was particularly gruesome as their children increased the capital of the slave masters by supplying seemingly infinite additional bodies "free of costs". In his report of the economy of slavery in the antebellum South, William Miller states that "whereas hiring rates for male slaves exceeded those of female slaves 43 per cent to 128 per cent, prices of male slaves ranged between 12 per cent below, or 37 per cent above, those for women" (182). Miller proposes that the inconsistency between hiring rates and the sales price revealed that the value of women came from their reproducing capacity, but also from their invaluable labour as household servants and role in the agriculture crop production such as cotton or tobacco.

The fecundity of women was clearly an economic business with a major impact on maternal experiences. In her comparative writings about motherhood in Southern fiction *Maternal Body and Voice*, Paula Eckard argues that slave mothers' sexuality and ability to bear children made their experience of maternity a wrenching one that rendered them especially vulnerable in the system of slavery (18). Barbara Bush furthers this argument by stating that "enslaved women were stripped of their sex and denied motherhood and mothers had their children taken away as captives" (69). Exploitation of enslaved women's fertility

and bodies included forced sex with white men, miscarriages, child loss and disconnection to children and family through resale or transportation.

Well-known historian and gender studies scholar Deborah White's investigations of female slaves' life experiences provide evidence that much of female experience of enslavement related to childbearing, and child rearing. In contrast to men, whose experiences focused on hard labour, the continuous replenishment of the plantation owner's workforce was the duty of women (Eckard 19). As women were forced into procreative sexual relations, they began childbearing at the age of 20 and had children at intervals spanning two and a half years at least until the age of 35, according to White (251). In fact, females in plantation societies did not have a middle age, as they aged quickly. A woman in that context was either a young woman, forced to combine laborious work with child rearing, or an old woman past her childbearing years (Bush 82). Compared to European women, African-American women stopped bearing children earlier and were thus only capable of bearing children for about fifteen years, in contrast to European mothers' twenty-five years (Bush 82). According to White, slave owners arranged special treatment to extremely prolific, pregnant or nursing women. These females were classified as half-hands indicating that they did not do the same amount of work as full hands. Many pregnant women were, however, overworked, explaining the high miscarriage and infant mortality rates (Eckard 19).

Paula Eckard describes some of the physical hardships mothers of the South endured in terms of childbearing and child rearing. Motherhood was, for many reasons, especially dangerous for the health and welfare of females living in the South (16). As pregnancy represses the immune system to allow foetus development not to be recognised as foreign and rejected, the susceptibility to serious infectious diseases increase. As winters of the region were mild, enabling insects and disease-carrying organisms to survive and spread dysentery, malaria and other fevers endemic to the temperate region. Southern women were twice as likely to die during childbirth than their Northern counterparts, according to Eckard.

Moreover, the risks associated with childbearing were not only threats to the health of the mother, but also to their children's lives. The process of giving birth could be fatal if, for instance, the mother haemorrhaged or convulsed. Maternal deaths in childbirth were not uncommon. Furthermore, the danger of having children was not only physical but also psychological. Women could, for instance, acquire injuries which lessened their quality of life. They could, for example, suffer from tears in the vaginal walls, causing leakage of urine

which would isolate them from social contact (Eckard 16). More importantly, as child mortality - described as the death of children under the age of 14 - was high, one major sorrow women suffered was children dying (17).

### **1.3 African Culture: The Source of African-American Mothers' Empowerment**

As seen in the previous part, motherhood, in the context of plantation societies, was something dangerous and often inflicted considerable pain and sorrow in the lives of female slaves. Motherhood has been acknowledged as a complex site of women's oppression and yet a location for joy, political activism and empowerment in a patriarchal society. For that reason, this part introduces some black feminist theory regarding maternity important for my reading of the novel. This part will depict how motherhood is viewed as a site to acquire status in the community as well as a site of self-expression. Two interlaced concepts introduced here is the African-American maternal practice of nurturing as well as the concept of othermothers. I will argue how Morrison's depiction of African-American female mothers in *Beloved* goes beyond the stereotypical image of women in her portrayal of the complex mothers, as she shows that maternity, however cruel the circumstances, may also be a source of strength.

As in all Pre-industrial agricultural societies, fertility and motherhood were central in African culture. Barbara Bush writes about the experiences of enslaved mothers in the Caribbean, which provide insight into the cultural implications of motherhood and child-rearing in African societies. Bush states that fertility and motherhood were vital in African cultures since these societies centred on antedecence and women could secure proliferation (72). Moreover, in a society where polygyny was common, marriage was not something separating girls from women, but rather the birth of their first child. This indicates that motherhood and child-rearing practices were highly embedded in women's identity. In fact, "Motherhood was the fulfilment of female adulthood and fertility, the African woman's greatest gift" (Bush 72). Mothering was also important for kinship structures in the original cultures. Children, for instance, were taken care of by a number of people including siblings, the extended family and the community, as exemplified in the concept of "it takes a village to raise a child" which originates from African cultures and travelled to America with the

enslaved, according to Bush (76). Mothers were, in other words, highly valued in African-American culture.

In addition, these women could not enjoy being at home and simply enjoy child-rearing practices, but had to contribute economically. Mothers in African-American communities “combined work and family without seeing much conflict between the two” (Collins 49). Women were, consequently, equally important economical providers as men, affording them a position of power in the African-American community. The historical role mothers had in African communities were a central one, distinguishing them from a norm that defines motherhood by dependence on men (Edwards 87). Through these female cultural practices, two separate concepts based on black women’s own experiences and meanings of motherhood have developed. The African-American tradition of motherhood recognises that maternity is a site of importance and value since it is concerned with the essential duty of taking care and ensure the well-being of children.

Nevertheless, Natalia Fontes de Oliveira argues that focusing on the image of the African-American woman as the impeccable mother conditions motherhood as a biological determinant enforced by patriarchy (70). She states that the label mother might be harmful in that it reinforces the idea that women are natural caregivers while men are thinkers (71). Although this may be true, I would argue that Fontes de Oliveira’s claims disregard the socio-historical background of African mothers. Paraphrasing O’Reilly, simply applying a critical white feminist approach to studying African-American maternal subjectivity is not enough. Additionally, as noted, mothering was not an occupation solely performed by the biological mother in African culture, a notion which has been reinforced by the concept of othermothers and community mothers.

In detail, an empowering historical role, deriving from African communal traditions, was that of othermother as well as community mothers. Arlene Edwards describes the definition of the othermother and the community mother in her article “Community Mothering: The Relationship between Mothering and the Community Work of Black Women”. According to Edwards, an othermother is defined as “someone who accepts responsibility for a child not one’s own, in a situation that may or may not be formal” (88). In the setting of slavery, the African-derived practice of othermothering developed because biological parents were often absent due to, for example, labour, move to another plantation or death. In a community where it was common for mothers to become childless and children turned into orphans, others taking care of children instead of the biological parents develop into an essential role.

The community mother, on the other hand, originates from the othermother with the difference that she took care of the community. Edwards states that the community mother stands in contrast to Orleck's inaccurate definition of mothers as "apolitical, isolated with their children in a world of pure emotion, far removed from the welter of politics and social struggle" (87). As opposed to this definition, the community mother became a political activist on behalf of the children of the society according to Edwards (87). The othermother's responsibility for children not her own took on a whole new meaning as she embraced all the people of the community. This female leader "viewed the community as a group of relatives and other friends whose interests should be advanced, and promoted at all times, under all conditions" (Edwards 88). In other words, othermothers allowed their individual endeavours to mirror the needs of the community.

Of course, the biological mother also engages in the empowerment of children, while she is engaged in what O'Reilly calls nurturing (118). In the context of the oppressive environment of chattel slavery, the task of child-rearing involves complex strategies which ensure the safety and successfulness of children. African-American mothers raised children in a society indifferent to the needs of themselves or their children. With this in mind, the concerns for mothers were above all else, according to O'Reilly, how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete" (4). Empowerment can thus translate to mothers taking control and exercising a choice, but also keeping themselves and their children both physically and mentally sane. Emelie West writes about resistance to the oppression of bondage in her book *Chains of Love*. West, whose inquiries lie in slave couples' experiences in the antebellum South, claims that resistance was primarily achieved through the existence of "social space". She specifies that social space is the space between the lives of slaves and plantation masters created mainly through affection between slaves and especially couples (1). She further states that "bonding spouses provided slaves with their primary means of surviving and ultimately resisting the brutal institution under which they lived" (West 1). In their relationships to children and the community, mothers could thus find means to empower themselves through status and exercising choice and being in control, but also through engaging them in political activism which helped them and the people closest to them achieve things they did not believe possible.

With this in mind, African-derived practices such as othermothering or community mothering may have enabled women to cope with the oppressive environment of slavery.

Even though we can never know exactly how much knowledge of the culture of origin survived the middle passage, Bush states that given the amount of survival of other cultural forms, we can assume that attitudes to maternity and motherhood in plant societies were informed by elements of this knowledge (76)

## 1.4 Previous Research

Over the past three decades since its publication, Nobel prize winning Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* has gained a position of cultural prominence. In order to put my interpretation of the novel's theme of motherhood as a site of strength and resistance in slavery into context, some previous research of *Beloved* will be examined. A common theme identified and analysed in Morrison's discourse is that of love. Studies on the topic of mother-love are common and highly relevant to my readings of *Beloved*. From previous readings it is apparent that the topic of mother-love in *Beloved* can be analysed from different angles. Hence that is the general focus of this part.

For example, literary critic Renee Gardner focuses on the contradictions and impossibilities of slave motherhood in *Beloved*. In relation to the novel's narrative of infanticide as a consequence of mother-love, Garner claims that Sethe's killing dismantles the 'motherhood mandate', which conceptualises how patriarchy is highly incorporated within motherhood. Motherhood is among other things understood to conform women's behaviour to dominant constructions. Similarly, Gardner claims that motherhood functions on two levels: "one of which invests a woman with power, the other which strips it from her" (209). Therefore, Gardner claims that Sethe's killing, understood as an ultimate act of agency, is motivated by her willingness to be a good protective mother. However, in embracing the good mother-role she "loses her sense of motherhood - her ability to see herself as a good mother [...]" (209). Gardner's analysis thus identifies maternity as a complex site. Previous readings of *Beloved* have, for instance, focused on motherhood as a site for trauma, loss and grief in the context of slavery (e.g. Schapiro, 1991, Stone, 2015). In this light, motherhood is understood as a site of conflict since the female body is exploited through one of the most profound experiences of their lives.

In addition to Garner, the critic Jean Wyatt recognises the concept of maternity as multifaced. She, however, provides an interesting insight to the empowering concept of

mother-love in the novel. Wyatt states that while celebrating the courage and determination that Sethe draws from this attachment [to her children], Morrison's narrative also dramatizes the problems of Sethe's maternal subjectivity, which is so embedded in her children that it allows her to take the life of one of them [...]" (476). Wyatt proposes that Morrison reveals Sethe's crime of infanticide half way through the novel for the reader to understand the circumstance which forced her to commit to the deed. In fact, "[t]he novel withholds judgment on Sethe's act and persuades the reader to do the same [...]" (478). Thus, Wyatt identifies the ethical implications Morrison presents through the topic of mother-love and the importance of background information for understanding this theme.

Furthermore, slaves' experiences have been examined through the critical lens of, for example, cultural studies, feminism and gender criticism. While such standpoints are highly relevant to this paper, another interesting point to consider, also based on slaves' perspectives, is that of psychological and religious theories as one of the novel's characters, Baby Suggs, is commonly analysed in relation to these themes. Baby Suggs is portrayed as a strong black woman, and a common interpretation of her strength is that it is guided by the Christian ethics of reconciliation and forgiveness. In her article of redemption and holiness in *Beloved*, Emily Griesinger argues that Baby Suggs' spirituality and preaching are proof of her strong Christian beliefs and ultimately what inspires the reconciliation between the inhabitants of 124 blustone road and the community (689-702). Thus, Baby Suggs' portrayal as a strong black woman is claimed to be guided by her Christian morality according to Griesinger. As Morrison's narrative includes religious aspects it would be inadequate to dismiss this discussion. However, according to Harris, the Christian morality that guided previously portraits of strong black females is irrelevant to Baby Suggs in that she approached a traditional concept of blasphemy in her teachings (62). Additionally, some argue that Morrison creates a new religion in her spiritual narrative, a religion of blackness more primal and maternal than Christianity (Griesinger 691). Baby Suggs prayers have been understood as political education theorising the liberation of oppression (691).

This part has touched upon arguments in previous readings of *Beloved*, related to the topic of this essay. In sum, previous research has shown that mother-love can generate issues like losing one's identity or have horrible consequences such as infanticide, yet mother-love cannot be condemned without proper knowledge of its circumstances. It has been shown that mother-love is multifaced and that maternity is a complex site for women.

On the whole, this Chapter has shown how gender studies often examine motherhood as something which prescribes female behaviour and restricts them. Black feminists, however, claim that females' perception of motherhood varies depending on race. Black feminists claim that motherhood may empower women through the African-American cultural practising of nurturing and community- or othermothering. These two matriarchical roles will be the focus of my reading of *Beloved* where I propose that Sethe's and Baby Suggs' maternal subjectivity lays a significant role, as it is a source of empowerment and resistance in their oppressive environments.

## Chapter 2. The Representation of Maternity as Empowering in *Beloved*

As is widely known, *Beloved* is based on the true story of the escaped slave Margaret Garner, who rather than return to slavery tried to kill herself and her children. In the novel, Morrison tells the alternative story of the historical Garner in her fictional character Sethe, a fugitive escaped from the fictional plantation Sweet Home in Kentucky. The novel narrates the fortunes and misfortunes of Sethe and the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road. On the surface, by centering on the tragical act of infanticide, *Beloved* is the story about a mother who steps outside the logical barriers of motherhood. However, through the exploration of the complex inner lives of her characters, Morrison constructs an alternative past that proposes that the truth of the first-hand experience is essential to understand a choice that at first glance might seem mad. Through Morrison's explorations of female experiences in relation to slavery the reader gets an insight into the maternal experiences of black mothers. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first will focus on Sethe's experiences of motherhood and the second on Baby Suggs'.

### **2.1 Sethe as a Nurturing Mother**

In this part, I will explore how Sethe is depicted as a nurturing mother through her engagement in the welfare of her children, her maternal subjectivity and being a good role model.

#### ***2.1.1 Keeping the Children Safe: A Psychological and Physical Endeavour***

Throughout *Beloved*, Sethe's endeavours to keep her children safe are at the centre of the novel, a testament of her engaging in the African-American practice of nurturing. It is my argument that Sethe's maternal position is what encourages her to resist the bonds of slavery and claim her family's freedom.

In an agitated state, after overhearing Schoolteacher dividing her characteristics into human and animal columns, Sethe questions her husband Halle about their future. She learns that they will not be able to buy their boys out and states: "that's when we should have begun to plan [...] but getting away was a money thing to us" (197). Sethe's comment indicates her regret for not taking the situation more seriously. The fact that they did not plan to get out by

any means previously indicates that she only felt a true necessity to get out after she gained the knowledge of the purpose behind Schoolteacher's measurements.

As a young adult, Sethe was moved to Sweet Home, an ironical name given in an attempt to distinguish it from other plantations. The owners of Sweet Home, the Garners, are truly different in that they treat their slaves in a considerably more humane manner than what was common at the time. Mr Garner, certainly animated by the abolitionists' movement, has an unusual attitude towards his subjects. He sees his slaves as men, values their opinions and even lets them carry arms. In this rare household, Sethe is the only female on the farm and has a fundamental domestic role as an assistant to the lady of the house, Mrs Garner. Later on, Sethe even has the opportunity to select her husband between the five Sweet Home slaves, with whom she later raises three children. According to Mayfield, Mr Garner's gentle management of his slaves makes Sethe imagine freedom for herself and her children (1). Given that Sethe claims that getting her family out was a "money business" for her and Halle, I agree with Mayfield's claims that the Garners contribute to her faith in gaining freedom. Therefore, in the light of her previous beliefs, the fact that she is willing to stay put while Mr Garner is alive only highlights the importance of the arrival of Schoolteacher.

Consequently, a critical juncture of the novel is the theft of Sethe's breastmilk. In conversation with Paul D, Sethe describes the events leading up to her escape from Sweet Home. She has sent her children ahead to the house in Cincinnati, including her nursing baby, when Schoolteacher's nephews suck the milk out of her breasts, similar to the treatment of a cow. This scene is shameful enough for Sethe to tell Mrs Garner about the abuse, and risk being punished for it. Bedridden, Mrs Garner helplessly cries when she hears about the rape. After that the nephews unexpectedly punish Sethe. They dig a hole to accommodate her six-month pregnant belly, in order to protect her unborn child, while whipping her back with a leather strap and mangling her feet so she cannot run (17-8). The bodily damages Sethe suffers in that barn are some of the most graphical and vile damages one can imagine on a female body. The fact that Sethe's back is lashed to the point of her almost dying while her pregnant belly is protected, implies that she, like an animal, can be beaten into submission and still be expected to provide for the plantation master. Additionally, Eckard states that the lashing of Sethe symbolises "how the role of enslavement and motherhood ironically and violently came together" (67). Schoolteacher's arrival is a turning point in the novel since his reign imposes a different kind of threat to her children than the management of the Garners. In contrast to the Garners, the evil of Schoolteacher resides in his lack of empathy toward other

human beings, and above all, in his detached pursuit for knowledge, which leads him to justify a belief that slaves are no more than animals.

As Paul D shows concern for Sethe being whipped, she, however, repeats “and they took my milk” (18). In this scene, it is apparent that the apex of the horrors Sethe has experienced in slavery is not the beating, but rather the theft of her breastmilk. Paul D, being male, cannot fully understand the horror of the milk theft. This scene, however, demonstrates the humiliation of being reduced from a human to a breeding tool. As Sethe feels pride of being a mother, the exploitation of her maternal body consequently makes her feel ashamed and angry. What is more, breastfeeding is an intimate act between mother and child. Lactation builds a bond between mother and baby and the milk is additionally the primary nutrition for infants. Thus, the rape results in the theft of the only benefit Sethe is able to provide her children with, which infuriates her. Her role as a mother makes her regard the milk theft as the ultimate offence. The inhuman act that defiles the nurturing instincts fundamental for her children’s survival, as well as the questioning of her and her children’s humanity by relating them to animals, is something Sethe cannot accept. She builds up a rage she cannot overcome, even though many years have passed when she and Paul D discuss the matter.

Thus, what finally forces Sethe to engage in a seemingly hopeless mission for freedom is the arrival and final perception of the true nature of Schoolteacher. Horrified by his dehumanising ways Sethe sends her children away and states: “No notebook for my babies and no measuring strings neither” (198). As she further reflects, “[A]nybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (251). The damage of growing up with Schoolteacher, as opposed to growing up under Mr Garner’s reign, is not only physical but psychological. The real horror, Sethe realises, lies in the psychological shame of feeling less than human. Therefore, in order to avoid having her children experience this, Sethe is forced to imagine freedom and leave. Her escape from the slave plantation Sweet Home to the freedom of Ohio is described by Wyatt as a female quest empowered by a mother’s love to “want their children to be free” (475). Seeing that Sethe values her children’s safety above all, to which Schoolteacher is a great threat, his arrival is what motivates her to leave her husband behind and engage in this quest. Sethe’s position as nurturing mother and therefore protector of her children is thus what compels her to take charge and become a courageous woman. Against all odds, she rebels against slavery by being able to imagine a better life for them and claim it by running.

### 2.1.2 Maternal identity

As shown above, *Beloved* depicts how the African-derived practice of nurturing helps females resist slavery. It does so by portraying Sethe's endeavours to ensure the welfare of her children, and she is forced to become a courageous woman and claim her freedom. In addition, resistance of oppression is demonstrated in *Beloved* through Sethe's maternal subjectivity, which enables her to accomplish nearly impossible feats.

While on the run from Sweet Home to Cincinnati, at one point Sethe cannot go on and lies down in the grass and thinks:

I believe this baby's ma'am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River (...) and it didn't seem such a bad idea, all in all, in view of the steps she would not have to take, but the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on – an hour ? a day? A day and a night? – in her lifeless body grieved her (31).

Sethe does not seem to mind going gently into that dark night when she thinks about the physical agony she must endure when walking. In spite of her willingness to die, and thus allow her tortured body some release, the thought of her child – referred to as the little antelope – dying inside of her allows her to continue her mission to Cincinnati. This passage clearly displays how Sethe takes strength from her role as mother, which ultimately helps her to defeat seemingly impossible obstacles. It demonstrates her refusal to give up even as she is faced with death. For Sethe, her unborn child dying inside her is not a choice, but neither is being captured and returned to Sweet Home. Her only real option is thus to press on, a testament to the strength this character finds in her role as a mother.

Additionally, the imagery used to portray the protagonist says something about her personality. Morrison says Sethe's face is still with iron eyes and a backbone to match (9). The stillness of Sethe's face suggests that she is calm in the face of difficult situations. It also proposes that she has developed a mind frame which helps her fight off harm in the hostile environment she lives in. Furthermore, Sethe is described to have eyes as strong as iron metal, inferring her character as that of a resilient, hard and head-strong female. Moreover, her daughter Denver states that Sethe is a "quiet queenly woman" who never looked away in difficult situations (12). When the ghost in 124 threw the dog into the wall so hard that it

broke two bones and dislocated an eye, Sethe bashed the dog unconscious with a hammer, set its legs and pushed back its eye in his head (12). Based on the imagery used to portray her, Sethe can be understood as a woman within whom a practical calmness and awareness lie. Someone capable and fearless. These traits help Sethe to find strength in her motherhood as all other options fails her.

In Sethe's statement "this baby's ma'am is gonna die", what is most apparent is that she identifies herself as a mother firstly. A woman does not only give birth to her child, but also gives birth to a new identity as a mother. Thus, stepping into motherhood means coming to terms with being the sole person ultimately responsible for someone else's life. Hence, Sethe's comment indicates that she has come to terms with this responsibility. In contrast, Paul D states that "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" (45). In spite of the anguish childrearing in slavery meant, Sethe loves and claims her children as her own and states that "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't no love at all" (164). This part exposes how Sethe claims and loves her children fully, something which ultimately leads to the infanticide. When speaking about her children being reenslaved by Schoolteacher, Sethe says: "she could never let it happen to her own [...] what she had done was right because it came from love" (251). The relational identity of Sethe exposed here, has been criticised in previous readings because of its horrible consequences (e.g. Schapiro, 1991, Wyatt, 1993). Despite that, I propose that this relational identity is as complex as other aspects of maternity and not something that should be condemned without contemplating the whole picture. When Sethe fails to go on for her own sake she finds strength in her love and relational identity to her children. In loving them, she claims them as her own and incorporates a maternal subjectivity which helps her survive. She states that "What I had to go through later I got through because of you" (198).

Moreover, Morrison's presentation of Sethe's journey to freedom is an elaboration on the common heroic male slave fugitive who instead has been replaced by a heroic slave mother common to female slave narratives (Wyatt 475). In contrast to the common self-sacrificing mother heroine, Sethe's deeds should be understood as something beneficial to her. For instance, Sethe states "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up until then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. [...] Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness [...] when I stretch out my arms all my children could get between" (162). This narration shows that Sethe feels pride in saving her children, and she

feels empowered by the fact that she managed it by herself. O'Reilly claims that Sethe's mothering needs not be understood as a self-sacrificing act to give up her own identity, but something which empowers her (74-5). I agree with this and further propose that her willingness to view herself as a mother first can be understood as emerging out of her need to love her children, because that is what African-American mothers do, and Sethe above all else is a mother.

With this in mind, Sethe's ability to see herself as a mother first causes her to claim and love her children in an institution where love should be impossible. *Beloved* highlights resilience in defiance of adversity as a result of motherhood. Sethe not only physically removes herself from oppression, but she also develops independence and pride because of it.

### ***2.1.3 Empowering Daughters***

Rebellion against the autocracy of slavery through mothers who claim their freedom, take charge and feel pride because of it has been demonstrated in *Beloved*. This part will discuss how attempting to care for children's well-fare in the aftermath of slavery might prove a means to empower mothers and children alike.

Morrison's narrative depicts Sethe's attempts to care for her children in various ways. This part suggests that Sethe's mothering exposes her efforts to be a role model in order to empower her daughter. After the arrival of Paul D, Denver asks him how long he is going to hang around and as he considers leaving, she encourages his departure by stating "he knows what he needs" (43). To this, Sethe responds to her daughter by stating "Well you don't [...] and you must not know what you need either" (43). In her comment, Sethe expresses that Denver does not know the importance Paul D's arrival has in Denver's life. Naturally, his relevance in her life can be considered as that of a male who might act as a father figure, or an additional adult up who can assist in supporting the family economically. But seeing that Sethe herself has grown up without parents and with some of the matrifocal notions typical for African original culture, such reasons are certainly important, but not what is most relevant. I would rather propose that the importance Paul D has in Denver's life is that of a partner to her mother.

Sethe knows Denver is lonely, yet she does nothing about the isolation from the community. The fact is that the free slaves and Sethe cannot reconcile, even for the sake of Denver, maybe because Sethe then would have to reconsider her emotional response to the infanticide. Something she will not do. Instead "she returned their disapproval with the potent

pride of the mistreated” (96). Thus, her pride and the ghost in 124 effectively drive away any visitors until Paul D comes along. For this reason, until Paul D’s arrival, Sethe has no way of demonstrating the importance of love and company to teenage Denver. However, Paul D’s company “made the stares of other Negros kind, gentle” (48). After a day at the carnival with him “Denver was swaying with delight” (49), and Sethe notices their shadows holding hands and “decided it was a good sign. A life. Could be” (47). Paul D’s arrival makes Denver happy, but naturally also jealous of sharing her mother. Sethe realises his influence in their life is good and thus begins to imagine a future for them for the first time. Against great odds, Sethe opens her heart to a man. One of the main reasons for her doing so might be because of her daughter’s obvious happiness, a consequence of his arrival.

The bond between a mother and a daughter is special. They share the same experiences of walking through life in female skin and thus share the same fears and sometimes pleasures. Being a mother, Sethe plays the role of the protector, authority and guide to her daughter, but also acts as a role model for her child. As a grown woman who has experienced how unstable relationships can be between lovers and families in an oppressive environment, Sethe, in contrast to giving in to distrust and uncertainty, chooses to act upon the words of her own mother figure’s words in order to become a better self. The preaching of her mother-in-law Baby Suggs claims that freed slaves must love their flesh because no one else will. They need to claim their bodies and let their flesh rest, dance, and be loved: “The only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (88). In other words, one has to be able to imagine such things possible for them to happen.

In the novel, recently freed Sethe remembers the slave owners’ attitude of her not being a human. To affirm her own identity Sethe tries to love herself. As O’Reilly states:

[W]omen growing into a world so hostile to us need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves. But this loving is not simply the old, institutionalized, sacrificial, ‘mother-love’ which men have demanded; we want courageous mothering. [...] The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities (“motherhood” 194)

With this in mind, Sethe puts her own needs first in order for her daughter to take notice that even though she would grow up in a world where her appearance condemns her to be viewed as lesser and a focus of hatred and oppression, she must dare to love herself and be

loved. Correspondingly, as we have seen, affection between couples could act as a psychological barrier between the institution under which they lived, hence, providing a means of survival. Not only does the relationship act as a barrier, but also as a path to remembering and healing. When Paul D enters Sethe's life she states that "Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal [...] and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men were there to catch her if she sank?" (18). As we see, Paul D has a beneficial presence in Sethe's life because his presence makes her dare to try and resolve her traumatic past when he is there.

Altogether, by demonstrating to children that slaves deserve to feel loved as well, mothers' rebel against the conditioning of slavery on the mind. Through Sethe's maternal experiences, *Beloved* depicts a former African-American slave mother's practising of nurturing. Morrison depicts how engaging in nurturing and by being good role models, mothers may empower their daughters in a racist world, and by doing so, also empower themselves.

## **2.2 Baby Suggs as a Community Mother**

We have seen how Sethe exemplifies how mothering and nurturing children may act as a source of empowerment and resistance for women who live under and in the aftermath of slavery. Sethe, contrary to a white feminist perspective, proves that maternity does not necessarily have to be a site of restraint, but rather an asset and a role in which to feel pride. In the novel, a second female of importance for my readings of how maternity can empower women is the character Baby Suggs. This part will demonstrate how Morrison depicts the empowerment of African-American mothers through Baby Suggs' practise of othermothering and community mothering. First, I will discuss mothering through empowering the black society, and then the legacy of the community mother.

### ***2.2.1. Empowering the Black Community***

I would suggest that in the novel, Baby Suggs' empowerment is revealed through her mothering, which is relating to her role as a community mother or othermother. Baby Suggs has had a hard life in slavery and she has endured everyone she ever knew being sold, rented, hanged, run off or bought. What she calls "the nastiness of life" is the specific situation she

has endured when her children were “moved around like checkers” (23). Seeing that African-American women’s well-being and strength were related to relationships with their children, the tale of Baby Suggs offspring being sold demonstrates the mental strength of this character. Baby Suggs, in contrast to Sethe, has not had the luck to be able to engage in the parenting of her own biological children. Nonetheless, in the context of her African-American heritage, she is viewed as a mother all the same through her mothering character. Morrison states that once free “she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honour before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher [...]” (87). From this perspective similar to Sethe’s maternity, the concept of motherhood as common to African-American original culture represents more than a biological mother. Morrison’s statement demonstrates how Baby Suggs takes up the African-American practice of community and othermothering through her preaching. So even though slavery stole her role as a biological mother, Baby Suggs manages to “mother” through her daughter-in-law and the free slaves’ community in Cincinnati from whom she is given the title of holy due to her unorthodox sermons, an indication of her status.

As a community mother, she promotes the interests of the community. So, when Halle pays for her freedom, she establishes a cheerful welcoming home at 124 Bluestone Road where she “loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed her kind” (87) and “when warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing”(87). Baby Suggs strives to take care of the people around her and therefore offers her home as a place where slaves could rest, be advised or feel that someone cared about them. Therefore, she provides physical support but also engages in healing their psychological traumas of slavery through her sermons. Morrison says “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or go and sin no more. She did not tell them that they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure (88). Thus, Baby Suggs’ sermons do not concern restraints and sacredness. Instead, she understands what her black community needs to hear and therefore does not preach about things which they could be measured or restricted by. Instead, she says:

‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love our flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave

empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face, 'cause they don't love that either. *You got to love it, you!*' (88).

As mentioned earlier, the primary lesson of her sermons concern how an unloved people must learn to love themselves. The moving passage reveals the horrible experiences of the enslaved and the complexities the trauma of slavery caused once they gained their freedom. Although the emancipation proclamation gave them their freedom, the black community was not mentally prepared for freedom from the oppression most had suffered all their lives, and do not know how to free themselves from the oppression. The community has been constrained so long and do not need to hear what they should or should not do, or how they should behave. Through her work of healing the community Baby Suggs' gains an esteemed position, a consequence which proves that her care for the welfare for the black community is more important than any entitlements.

Furthermore, Baby Suggs' maternal role as othermother plays a fundamental part in the life of the protagonist, as she helps her daughter-in-law raise her children. For instance, she had the sole responsibility for the growth and welfare of the children when Sethe sent them ahead before she and Halle attempted to escape from Sweet Home and later when she went to prison for two months. Moreover, Baby Suggs tends to Sethe's body once she arrives in Cincinnati with blood flowing from both her back, feet and vagina. Thus, her contributions to Sethe's life take the form of physical support. Additionally, as Mayfield has argued, Baby Suggs' importance in Sethe's life can also be seen on a higher level, as she states that Baby Suggs' prayers are of great importance to her daughter-in-law's mental health. Importantly, it is her teachings of love and cherishing one's body that ultimately help Sethe to claim her children as her own (8). I agree with Mayfield and suggest that Baby Suggs' preaching helps Sethe to heal on a psychological level, but I also propose that actually seeing her mother-in-law living by her words, believing in them and thus gaining a better life because of them, helps her to heal.

In sum, Morrison's narrative identifies Baby Suggs as an othermother and community mother through the esteemed position she gains in the society in Cincinnati due to her work of taking care of the black community and her pursuance of shaping a prosperous black community with inhabitants healthy in both body and mind.

### ***2.2.2 Changing Perspectives: The Legacy of the Othermother***

The previous part defined Baby Suggs as a community mother and othermother: a strong female who puts all her strength into her belief of the importance of a thriving black community and family. She is an unchurched preacher with a congregation of free slaves who rely on her guidance. Yet, after many years of preaching, Baby Suggs stops believing in her own words after Sethe attempts to kill all her children rather than seeing them re-enslaved. I suggest that the death of the othermother in the novel represents the ambiguities experienced by enslaved mothers, exposing the true nature of the community mothers' contribution to the black community.

Baby Suggs withdraws to her deathbed after she “proved herself a liar, dismissed her great heart and lay in the keeping-room bed roused once in a while by craving for colour and not for another thing” (89). Even though, as Griesinger suggests (690), Baby Suggs stands in the moral centre of the novel, Morrison chooses to take her out. Hence one might ask why the author decided to remove this character just when she was needed the most. In order to consider why that may be, questions one ought to ask in relation to Baby Suggs are, as formulated by Harris, “how much can a human being take before she says NO? Or, I give up, I quit. I’ll take my own life? How much loss, suffering and dehumanisation can an individual endure before she breaks?” (58). After Sethe’s horrible killing, Baby Suggs has come to accept that she has let herself be too fortunate. In the light of her life experiences and, most importantly, the infanticide, she claims that her preaching of cherishing others and oneself has been proved to be misguided and is a lie. In her belief that things might go well for her has angered God. Consequently, she felt God mocked her and “felt too ashamed of Him to say so” (177).

Previously, Baby Suggs did not give up, even though plantation labour has left her body “all broken down” from a hip injury and a sluggish mind (147). Nor does she break down when she realises that the only thing she can remember from her seven lost children was one enjoying the burnt bottom of bread, or when she learns that the only child she had the pleasure to know as a grown man, is gone (5). So, when Halle bought her out and gave her the freedom she never knew she needed, as well as his wife and children, she starts to truly live. When her daughter-in-law finally arrives, she hosts a magnificent “celebration of blackberries that put Christmas to shame” for the society of free slaves (137). However, her generosity is not appreciated by her neighbours: “124 rocking with laughter, good will and food for ninety made them angry” (137). Enviously, they question why Baby Suggs knows what to do,

giving advice, loving everyone and doing it like it was her job: “It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity displayed at 124” (137). The black community is offended by her extravagance and out of spite or pride fail to warn her of the plantation master’s arrival. Thus, the betrayal of the people Baby Suggs’ nourished and counselled, in addition to seeing her daughter-in-law kill her grandchild as a consequence of this betrayal, is too much for this human and Baby Suggs lies down to contemplate colours, abstractions that cannot hurt her.

Baby Suggs advises Sethe to “let go of her sword and shield” (88), signifying that Sethe should not act upon the outrage she feels after the systematic dehumanisation and abasement of slavery. According to Harris, the purpose of Baby Suggs’ dying is because she tries to follow her own advice and let go of the anger she feels towards white people. This may be true, but there is more to Baby Suggs dying. *Beloved* is a novel about unfinished traumatic pasts that literally come back to haunt you. It is a novel about contradictions where mothers illogically can kill their own children due to the consequences of slavery. Thus, I propose that Baby Suggs dying may also expose the consequence of slavery through her maternal suffering. As previously mentioned, Gardner claims that motherhood functions on two levels in both providing and disrupting empowerment (209). This is relevant for Baby Suggs who is empowered by engaging in mothering her community, while at the same time vulnerable because of that love. Baby Suggs is strong throughout almost her whole life until the consequences of slavery catch up with her through the betrayal of her love for the community members. No one can be a power-woman in slavery. In contrast to Harris, whose argument suggests that the heroic deeds of the othermother are infinite even beyond death, my claim in this essay is that the othermother, rather than simply influencing others through her living actions, can empower others through changing their perspectives.

Firstly, Baby Suggs’ contribution as community mother makes her highly respected, even after death, as demonstrated by Denver’s conversation with Janey Wagon who criticised Sethe but only has sweet words to say about Baby Suggs and states “Everybody miss her. That was a good woman” (255). Baby Suggs’ is loved by her community because of her role as community mother, something which made them come together to aid her relatives. However, equally important for the community’s engagement is the sense of fellowship and solidarity Baby Suggs’ fostered among the free slaves. Everybody knows Baby Suggs, and many also visited the clearing or 124 when it was a way station. In Baby Suggs’ home they gathered to catch the news, learn to stitch, share a meal, discuss the fate of the black society

and even leave their children (249). Consequently, because of Baby Suggs, the community has a place where they can get to know and help each other and become one unit instead of individuals. Like a great big family, they share meals, news and help each other with childrearing. A community consists of individuals who have something in common, so in the kitchen of 124 or under the trees in the clearing the free slaves in Cincinnati realise the things they have in common and become one people. Therefore, Baby Suggs' administration of the African-American community's security and happiness, may be what made them come together and perform the exorcism, which is ultimately what saves Sethe.

Moreover, as they arrive at 124, all thirty of the community women see themselves as they were when they visited the house before Baby Suggs' started to contemplate colours. "They sat on the porch, ran down to the creek, teased the men, hoisted children on their hips, or if they were the children, straddled the ankles of old men who held their little hands while giving them a horsey ride. Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more" (259). Sethe also thinks about Baby Suggs in relation to the exorcism: "for Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her" (261). The fact that both Sethe and the thirty community women see or think about times they shared with Baby Suggs represents the legacy of Baby Suggs and her ability unite her black community with her guidance. The gift she left behind when she died was thus the memories and knowledge of the importance of a family, and a united community. The legacy of the community mother is thus to help the black people come together as aiding each other both mentally and physically is vital to resist oppression in a racist world.

## Conclusion

It is the argument of this essay that *Beloved*, drawing on traditions related to the standpoint of African-American motherhood, defines maternity as a site which may empower women to feel pride, be strong, help each other and fight back in the environment of slavery. As mentioned in Chapter one, an examination of slavery from an African-American mother's perspective, based on black women's own experiences and meanings of motherhood, recognises that maternal subjectivity varies depending on different factors, one being cultural upbringing. In contrast to the white mother, an African-American mother differs in that her motherhood provides her with status because maternity is deemed a valued position. This essay demonstrates how maternity is complex and how the narrative of *Beloved* represents a reconstruction of African-American women's experiences. In doing so, Morrison challenges the controlling images of black women as being either subjugated or made of steel.

In *Beloved*, Morrison's complicated depiction of motherhood is through the maternal experiences of Sethe and Baby Suggs. In the novel, motherhood clearly imposes both mental and physical threats to the females. In the economy of slavery, the fertility of women was exploited, a fact shaping the maternal experiences of women. Yet, in spite of that, Morrison's narrative is hopeful. Inspired by Andrea O'Reilly's theory on how African-American original culture identifies motherhood as political enterprise concerned with strengthening black children and the black community, this essay proposes that motherhood in *Beloved* may empower African-American women to resist oppression, even in the face of slavery.

As we have seen, both Sethe's and Baby Suggs' mother-and-child bond bear the consequences of slavery, still, both engage in incredible acts of strength. Sethe's determination to be a good mother leads her to imagine and grasp her freedom once she realises the danger the plantation imposes to her children. She cannot imagine anything worse for her children than Schoolteacher's dehumanizing ways, and consequently resists the bonds of slavery by engaging in a quest for their freedom. Furthermore, Sethe's maternal subjectivity makes her relate her own identity to her children, thus connecting her body to their welfare. Acts which hurt her personally therefore also hurt her children, something which infuriates Sethe and empowers her quest even more. Her act of running is not only for her children's sake but also because it makes her feel good because it is an act of agency to be proud of. Morrison thereby demonstrates how a maternal subjectivity can strengthen females to accomplish impossible feats to claim their freedom. *Beloved* also depicts how a mother

practising nurturing and being a good role mother can strengthen children to rebel against the mental condition that springs from being part of an oppressed minority.

Baby Suggs' position as a community mother gives her status and a calling which helps her endure her traumatic past and also helps her community heal, both mentally and physically. Her empowerment comes from being a community mother who helps shape a prosperous black community. The costs of chattel slavery were, however, too great a burden even for this strong woman and her death represents the ambiguities of being a mother in slavery. As this analysis has shown, the gift of the community mother is not her rhetoric, but her willingness to strengthen her black community to fight the trauma of enslavement and dare to love and care for each other and come together. In other words, her fostering a sense of solidarity among the free slaves is her true legacy.

The maternal subjectivity that contributes to the incredible deeds of these two power-women in *Beloved* is opposite to a self-less and all-giving mother who stretches to the point where her subjective choice is prevented. These women's determination to become the best mothers they can derives from their own selfishness rather than a willingness to conform to dominant Western views of motherhood. They take strength from their position as mothers, which helps them survive in a racist world and also empowers the people around them. As we have seen, mother-love and maternity in slavery are complicated. Yet, as demonstrated in this essay, mother-love may also be motivating to help others, and in realising the difference between claiming what is yours and not, daring to run and ultimately choosing between life and death. Being a mother may thus provide the strength needed to resist slavery.

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