

An Analysis of Motherhood Based on Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Abstract: *Beloved* is a one of the representative literary works of Toni Morrison, a well-known African American female writer. It is originated from a piece of real American history under the influence of slavery. The leading character, Sethe, is a black female slave who has excessive and stubborn maternal love. The narration in the novel of Sethe's shocking, fearful infanticide presents an incomprehensible, stubborn, heavy and twisted maternal love to all readers, revealing the miserable adversity of the black community before the abolition of slavery. On the whole, *Beloved* is attempting to challenge the conventional value and the public cognition of maternal love. The paper aims to analyze the motherhood of Sethe from two perspectives, maternal love and views of motherhood, through various angles or dimensions presenting the complexity of motherhood in black communities under specific historical circumstances and social environments.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most well-known and prominent female writers in contemporary American literature. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her works are often presented on behalf of the black women and are full of tragedies. Her *Beloved* is without a doubt one of the significant novels in modern African American literature, with a great number of readers attracted by it. Containing various themes of slavery, feminism and mothering, *Beloved* provides readers with critical commentary and different dimensions to think and reflect either under the background of American history of slavery or in the modern society.

The paper focuses on two aspects of the leading character, Sethe's motherhood, the maternal love and the views of motherhood. Various perspectives are mentioned in order to firmly support and successfully analyze Sethe as a special black mother who has done something that might not be understood by all people, mothers in particular. It should also be noticed that the analysis is supposed to be under the specific historical period because of the different social and cultural backgrounds.

2. About Maternal Love

2.1. Defining Maternal Love

Speaking of maternal love, people commonly take it for granted that this is a kind of natural love of a mother to her children. Generally speaking, maternal love is a particular type of care, guard or protection of women to their children, usually depicted as an emotion of selflessness, sacrifice and greatness. Many people believe that having maternal love is a natural instinct of a woman after she becomes a mother, an action out of biological instincts and affections.

However, there are distinct perspectives held by a number of philosophers asserting that maternal love, differing from public recognitions, might not always be derived from woman's natural instincts (Li, 2013). For instance, Simone de Beauvoir, a well-known 20th-century feminist in France, once described her viewpoint towards maternal love in her sociological work *The Second Sex*. She noted that maternal love is not born out of mothers' natural instincts, but a reaction or a stress response of a mother on account of the surroundings. Harry F. Harlow, a professional British psychologist in the field of comparative psychology, interpreted his understanding of maternal love in American Psychological Association Convention in 1958 based on his series of scientific research on primates. He indicated that there are three variables containing in love: the sense of touch, movement and amusement. The need for affection will be satisfied if the three variables can be provided. Elizabeth Badinter, a renowned feminist writer, also found out through the research of historical materials that maternal love varies in different aspects: mothers' interests and efforts towards their children could be sometimes obvious or sometimes tiny; the level of maternal love and the presenting pattern of it vary as well (Li, 2013).

Apparently, it can be seen in *beloved* that for Sethe, a black woman, her maternal love goes far beyond public cognition, or even it is a type of love that is the least understood one by the public. Sethe's maternal love is a sort of possessing and belonging, a kind of responsibility of ego, and a type of love that is excessively heavy, lost and unpleasant.

2.2. African American's Maternal Love and Its Presenting in Toni Morrison's Work

In African American culture, maternal love or motherhood is valued by black people and is the core of their traditional belief (Li, 2011). Both mothers and maternal love are recognized as the physical and mental protection of children, as well as the empowerment of black people and their culture. Their primary understanding of motherhood is to protect and shelter their children, so as to help them resist the racial and sexual harm, and survive into adulthood.

Consequently, in Toni Morrison's work, she regards black mothers as ships and safe harbors. According to her understanding of motherhood, there are three implications. Firstly, mothers should nurture and protect their children. Secondly, mothers have the responsibility of cultural bearing, in other words, passing down the African American traditional culture from generation to generation. Thirdly, the extended maternal love or a sense of community love has a special duty of empowerment. This particular extended maternal love is able to empower black children who fail to get love from external environments, and who lose ability to love or to be loved. Meanwhile, adults who have trauma and thus unable to forget the past and go on a new life can also be cured through this kind of maternal love.

2.3. Sethe's Twisted Maternal Love

From the literary work, it cannot be denied that Sethe is a common black mother who has the ability to love her children in a normal way. After she and her babies arrived at 124, Sethe lived a harmonious twenty-eight days, and this was the only real happy time for her. Being with her children, having a shelter to live, and trying to make friends with neighbors, etc. All these things seemed to be really ordinary and usual, until the arrival of Schoolteacher. Precisely because of the hunter's coming, Sethe's maternal love turns into a twisted form, full of distortion and stubbornness. As for her, there is nothing harmful allowed to hurt her children from the outside, particularly the slavery life of being owned and being controlled by white masters and losing the right to be a real person. In order to prevent her children from the same experience of her, Sethe adopted the most abnormal, extreme and fearful conduct, infanticide. When hearing Schoolteacher was coming, Sethe sliced the throat of her daughter, and she also tried to kill her other children. This event can be regarded as either a protection of her children from being slaves just like their parents at present (Li and Lin, 2018), or a twisted maternal love, a distorted sense of controlling, mastering and a kind of deprivation of living rights. Is it always correct for parents to prevent their children from being someone they do not want them to be, even their children need to pay the price of their life, once in a lifetime? The answers of this question vary from different types of parents. Compared with contemporary era, there are some parents who are continually persuading their children to do things that they believe are better for their children's future, implanting their unfinished dreams or visions to their kids by justifying themselves with a series of apparent reasons. However, they seldom take into account their kids' interests or thoughts, ignoring the kids' wishes and attempting to turn everything from meaningful into useful. But how to define something as useful to kids? In most cases, kids find it hard to see the true value of "useful" things, but at the same time, kids' nature of exploring and curiousness might be killed in the course of compromise.

3. About Views of Motherhood

3.1. The Identity of a Mother

A large proportion of feminists consider mothers as people who are individuals and have their own identities in the first place (Qu, 2005). As a result, the individuality of mothers should not be taken lightly or even ignored. Mothers are first women themselves, and then the mothers of their children. So, the tag of "mother" might not be very appropriate for any women who have their own child or children. For most women, they really long for being themselves, namely, as women, above all other roles in a family or in the society.

However, this is under the most ideal conditions for the most part. Either in real life or in the literary works, the role of a mother is usually above women's identities or their other roles in the society. Toni Morrison used to share her thoughts about women's self-identification when she was composing novels. She said that a woman tends to love external things more than herself, and this is the part where she is the most noble in (Zhang, 2000). However, sometimes, it is just the most noble thing that hurts a woman the most.

3.2. Sethe as a Mother

Sethe is a mother, who is influenced by her own mother, a slave woman. Sethe's mother, in the literary work, has the capability to choose or refuse motherhood, and even to choose or refuse life for herself. This kind of capability is what makes her as an individual woman first and then a mother, who exceeds the conventional notion of motherhood (Zhou, 2008). Undoubtedly, Sethe's

mother is special and different from others in her actions. She is able to celebrate all things that happen in her life even though she is in her enslaved position. This type of attitude towards life has a profound, far-reaching influence on her daughter Sethe, and on the mothering behaviors and perspectives of Sethe as well. For this reason, Sethe gradually grows into a woman who is able to understand the potential and the value of having choices in a real world, in which choices are not given to African Americans, particularly African American women.

In the literary work, when Sethe's mother asks her daughter to always recognize her through a cross mark on her ribs, she is trying to make something new and fresh, especially for a black woman at that time. As black people, African Americans are regarded as slaves only, but not real people with identities. By using a peculiar mark to identify herself, Sethe's mother is making an attempt to be special, to be unique, to voice her individuality and her identity out, and to claim herself to be a person as well as a black woman. Subsequently, Sethe's mother is regarded as defying the dominant discourse, and is therefore provided with a past she is able to claim, and an identity to which she is able to refer (Zhou, 2008). The history of slavery is recorded in countless females through suffering, and conveys the message of an exhibition of the violence on the male and female slaves (Liang, 2010). But this is revised here by Sethe's conscious narration of the black women's self-cognition. It can be inferred from the work that the things happened on Sethe's mother become the alternatives of black womanhood, which increasingly undermines the definitions of being a mother imposed upon others (Liang, 2010).

3.3. Social Construction of Slavery Motherhood

The role of women and the role of mothers can be transferred in different views upon social, cultural, racial and environmental issues. It can be asserted that the mothers in Toni Morrison's slave-dominated narrative are trying to raise doubts about the laws and rules made by white people, and they are also trying to change the languages, actions and behaviors into acceptable ones used by black women, especially by black mothers for the reason that they are using themselves as examples to tell the stories, and they are able to place any emphasis where they believe is appropriate (Chen, 2019). In most cases, the powerful female characters are trying to convey a message with devotion, self-sacrifice, or even unconditional love. Some writers consider these attributes closely associated with archetypal motherhood (Liu, 2018). However, in Toni Morrison's literary work, this stereotype of motherhood has been challenged without a doubt, both consciously and subconsciously as a result of facing different environmental factors.

Despite of many difficulties surrounding maternity because of the social conditions at that particular stage in history, motherhood in the slave community is always holding much significance for a crucial reason that it brings a unique status to black women. For the majority of time, black women are less likely to identify themselves. They see themselves as slaves, as the minority group, and most importantly, as a special crowd who is capable of giving birth to plenty of children. But most often, they fail to see themselves as individuals. Therefore, being a mother gives them opportunities to identify themselves as people in the first place, and then as other roles or characters in the community or in the society.

Besides, motherhood is usually considered far more important than marriage, especially in a young woman's perception. The superiority of motherhood over marriage is more likely to lay, particularly because of the reason that in black communities, slave marriages are much more fragile than the relationship between a mother and a child. This kind of relationship, unlike a marriage between two black people which could be ended at any time, is more solid and firmer, on account of

the blood relation that could not be changed or removed. Having a child or having children also brings a sense of safety or security for a married black couple, due to the high mobility among black communities. However, even though the husband is sold off, the female slave is still expected to find another strong and vigorous spouse immediately because she is able to continue giving birth to another child. Therefore, it can be concluded that motherhood is really firm and solid either in black communities or in the whole society.

3.4. The Relationship between a Mother and Her Child

After the American Civil War and reconstruction, slavery gradually disappeared in the United States. However, the social status of black people was still really low (Chen, 2019). Because of the segregation policies posed by some southern states to maintain white people's supremacy after the abolishment of slavery, the constant struggle for freedom and equal rights and efforts made in this aspect among black people and in black communities are still continuing (Chen, 2019). Therefore, race or race discrimination always remains a major problem in the United States. As a result, the image of black people in the public place or in the mainstream media controlled by white people has constantly and subconsciously influenced the establishment of confidence in black people. They feel it extremely difficult to find themselves, to feel a sense of self-status or individual identity, and even to pursue a fresh, novel life owing to the lack of courage. On the basis of such a social and cultural background, it is a luxury for black mothers and their daughters to live a happy life together just like their white counterparts. They are not able to lead a normal and happy life as ordinary family members and they even have inner conflicts with each other (He, 2007).

In *Beloved*, it can be found that there are much intense conflicts between Sethe and *Beloved* either when *Beloved* is in the form of a ghost or in the form of the incarnation. There are really horrible and awful memories of the past time between them, which are extremely impossible for them to let go of or to weaken, particularly the unforgettable past about the infanticide event towards *Beloved*.

Here raises a question concerning the relationship between a black mother and her daughter. Why is this kind of relationship so frightening that confrontation, tension, disturbance and even revenge are all included in? The answer might be extremely complicated, but it is impossible to avoid the topic of possessing and belonging.

Toni Morrison once talked about her own feelings towards mother-child relationship, which was affected by the anti-abortion movement happened in the early 1980s (Zhang, 2000). At that time, a vast majority of women was endeavoring to get rid of the identity of being a mother, as well as trying to obtain the right of "no child" freedom. Regarding of this aspect, it can be referred that, for women, there is a more profound root of claiming a child, in other words, the possessing and the belonging of a child. Most women are convinced that they have the total and the absolute authority of deciding the future direction of her child, for the obvious reason that they have made great efforts to be pregnant and to laboriously carry a baby for ten months. They are quite certain about the decision-making power held by themselves, including the possible directions of a child's future and even the right to live, to exist or not in this world.

From this angle of viewing, it is not really difficult for readers to understand Sethe's scary actions, namely, infanticide. The underlying reason is that Sethe, as a black female, has little perception of self-identity and self-cognition (He, 2007). She has an extremely strong belief in "possessing" a child, regarding her baby as a thing without a human being's identity. Because of this sense of "belonging", she deprives her baby of opportunities of living and existing in the real world,

even if the baby might continue to be a slave and conduct a miserable and tragic life in the future.

Under the social and cultural background of slavery, the relationship between mothers and children can be analyzed in a deeper way. What is quite noticeable is that those black women who are slaved by white landlords have no access to freedom (Ye, 2019). Their children stand a greater chance to be slaves as well in the future. As a result, their responsibilities as mothers towards their children are also being robbed of. As mothers of slaves, they give birth to their children, but they are unable to actually "be" the mother of their children, unable to build normal and natural kinship with their children (Yang, 2006), because their children may be taken away by their white landlords at any time in the future. What is worse is that for a large majority of black women's perception, they are not able to be considered as a human being; they are nothing more than a lifeless tool for bearing babies for their white masters.

Due to Sethe's extreme care of her milk, it cannot be easily denied that Sethe's inner heart is secretly shouldering the responsibility of being a mother. Milk is a symbol of nursing and raising babies, and having milk for her child can be seen as a desire or a willing to nurse and raise a child. When her milk is robbed, Sethe became mad and crazy, for the reason that the last connection between she and her child has been cut off (He, 2007), and she is no longer able to raise her child by herself. She is well aware that her milk is a necessity for her baby's survival; hence it is understandable that she exhibits her "animal characteristics" in a crazy way, only to seize her baby's living right back by any kinds of means. It can also be inferred from this perspective that Sethe's maternal love, to some extent, is as normal as other mothers, but much extremer and much stronger.

4. Conclusion

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has illustrated that how Sethe's maternal love has been influenced and even distorted by slavery, depicting maternal love as black women's pain and ruin, at its worst. But on the other hand, it can also be seen as black women's greatest source of strength. Because of her sufferings, Sethe is not a perfect mother, but she is not to be judged or to be sympathized either. She is no more than a great mother who would like to provide the best to her children, merely with some radical and desperate actions that, to some extent, can be indeed understood under certain historical circumstances.

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