“Your love is too thick.”: Beloved and the Heart of Maternal Darkness

Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

Beloved, Toni Morrison

Breathe. Let go. And remind yourself that this very moment is the only one you know you have for sure.

Oprah Winfrey

Continuing the literary tradition of her previous novels, Morrison has explored the deep-rooted supremacist ideology of slavery and its “essentialist discursive repertoires that defined the African-American slave as the racial “Other” (Bouson, 131), in her fifth novel Beloved. The novel also argues for a need to extend the long-forgotten cultural memories of African-American society, which is stimulated by a longing to share the shame and trauma of slavery. Morrison’s female characters are endowed with the knowledge of their vulnerable position in which the slave culture has placed them: “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work kill or maim you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (251).

Morrison’s Beloved constructes a resurrected female slave’s speech. Sethe, the main protagonist of this novel is an incarnation of matriarchal strength and decides to lead her life on her own conditions, unconcerned about any other identity that she is supposed to value as a woman. Her identity is fractured by the historical trauma of slavery, but still she is conscious of her palce in the society and lives with an increasing realization of her status as a chattel slave. She knows that her female body is valued for its reproductive capacities, hence proven by her slave master’s constant attempt to capture her with her children. But her real impetus lies in her decision to ensure her children’s survival at any cost. She stakes her ‘self’, risks her life and leaves her husband in order to exercise her authority and rights on her children in her maternal capacity as the only person who can understand and fulfil their needs.
Morrison delineates a character that knows her absolute potential as a mother and dominates the existing ideologies of white culture by her instinctual powers.

The present chapter is an endeavour to recognize the maternal powers of a slave woman who has challenged the powers of the ruling society and threatens her master as an opponent in the sexual challenge. Though she is subjected to the most brutal and elemental form of physical abuse - rape - her master cannot succeed in his fundamental purpose of suppressing her struggle towards her freedom. The central tension in the novel springs from a slave mother’s traumatic abuse in the hands of a slave owner - the Schoolteacher. Sethe’s rare and defiant attitude is described in her act of infanticide. It is one of the best self-devised methods to nurture the family bonds despite the master’s effort to sever them. Her concept of ‘self’ revolves around her sole motive to keep her children unslaved.

Morrison shifts her readers’ attention to the functioning of possessive love and pain that moves around the mother-daughter relationship. Sethe’s deed in her decision of resistance is pictured as a heroic act that constitutes everyday experiences of slave women. Through Sethe’s act, which lies at centre of the story, the readers are given an insight into the psychological pain of slavery which leaves deep scars on the wounded self of a slave woman – cum- mother. She is not ready to succumb to the structures of white hegemonic power and smashes in the face of the slave catcher by slitting her daughter’s throat. She will prefer her daughter to rest in a grave, rather than leave her to suffer in a social grave for her entire life. If the previous chapter focuses upon the causes and consequences of a female’s detachment from motherline, the present study startles its readers with an emphasis on the psychological effects of this loss, manifested in the characters of Sethe and Beloved - the mother and daughter. The daring acts of resistance challenge the traditional discourse and usually accepted norms of mothering in a society. However, such display of a mother’s power distresses the readers, yet the exercise of maternal supremacies is rendered important to perform the obligatory tasks of motherhood. This also supports Morrison’s theory of mothering according to which, a serious physical and emotional damage may happen in the absence of the knowledge of maternal power. Sethe’s stance as a mother situates her in the center of the maxim that African-American motherhood
permits mothers “to develop a belief in their own empowerment [while] providing a basis for self-realization” (Jenkins, 206).

The current chapter is also based on a critical analysis of slave women Sethe, Ella and Baby Suggs, who display individual powers in their maternal role. The functions of ‘othermothering’ and ‘community mothering’, which form the back bone of a strong communal network are also exemplified through the extended services of Baby Suggs to her own people. To teach the freed slaves that they should love their black bodies, Baby Suggs has devised a new zone for ‘homeplace’ that is beyond the closed confines of four walls and functions under the patterns of extended social network. The moral responsibility of mothers should be read against the backdrop of a larger historical truth of slavery signified in the text. Morrison affirms that black mother is empowered to claim her maternal rights, which are intrinsic and instinctual to a woman and thus, devise a new model of empowerment through their exercise of maternal powers.

The chapter also examines the complex structure of maternal bonds and its exploiting and devouring influences on a woman’s self-perception. The fabric of this heart-rending tale is woven around the incident of infanticide as its central theme and also brings forth clashes and conflicts between the slave culture and maternal drives. A major part of the novel revolves around the development of astonishing twists and turns that interweave the intricate maternal emotions of its protagonist Sethe. The theme of motherhood is pictured in its most disturbing form in Beloved. It demonstrates those ways in which personal interchange did more to heal and bind former slaves than did public, formulaic self-representations (Fultz, 33).

The plethora of narratives about slaves written during slavery corroborates the notion that it has been comparatively easier for slaves to discuss their physical experiences in bondage. But very few slaves exhibit the courage to expose their true psychological bruises. A reading of Beloved provides a new insight into the revisionist process of nineteenth century slave narratives. The book foregrounds the opposition between slave mother’s natural rights and a slaveholder’s legal and economic claims (Fultz, 34). The text configures deep agonizing memories of slave women’s experiences as mothers. Beloved gives voice to the unspeakable pain of
many slave women by bringing to surface their unseen and unrevealed sorrow as mothers. But each mother has her own ways to respond or articulate her experiences of slavery. Some bear its burden silently, whereas some thwart their master’s command defiantly.

*Beloved* locates expressions of maternal desire at the center of its story. It is something which precisely finds submissive expression during slavery, and in later narratives of emancipation emerging from it. The book is an attempt by the writer to delve deep into the consciousness of its main character Sethe through her relations with the other major characters Paul D., Baby Suggs, Beloved and Denver. Through this interplay, the book uncovers some tough issues to examine, which are reduced to impossible explorations in response to the absence of independence and choices that define slavery. Though the characters are physically free from bondage, they are mentally enslaved by appalling memories and traumatic experiences of slavery. Their former experiences bind them to perceive their character and subjectivity as it is formed by someone else’s gaze and perception. Thus, their associations are with feelings of loss, humiliation, uncertainty and inhumanity.

*Beloved* posits certain problematic dimensions of mother-child relationship in a slave society. Marianne Hirsch rightly argues that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* “has opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction” (Fultz, 32). The writer has artistically transformed the historical fact into a fictional artifact. Commenting on this, Morrison once said, “I had a few important things,” Morrison says, but “the rest was novel writing” (Fultz, 32). Taking the case of Margaret Garner, a run-away slave, she invents the character of Sethe Suggs. In January 1856, Margaret Garner, her husband, their four children, and her husband’s parents crossed the frozen Ohio River, exhibiting their daring and courage to gain their freedom. They had joined nine other fugitives from Kentucky. The Garners made their way to the home of a relative, who was also an ex-slave. Their refuge was still insecure, so they planned to move to a safer place. But unfortunately, their plans could not be executed and they were caught by the U.S. marshals. They made all possible attempts to flee for their freedom but foreseeing their inexorable fate of slavery, Margaret decided to save her children from the dreadful life of slavery. The first thing that she could think in order to save her daughter to be saved first among them was to slit her throat with a butcher’s
knife. She struck her two sons with a shovel, but was controlled and caught before she could hurt them and herself.

The significance of the story of Margaret Garner and her children is not restricted to its historical significance but transgresses the socio-cultural boundaries and reaches a universal plane by exemplifying many cross-cultural maternal figures in history, beginning from the character of Devki in Hindu mythology to Sethe in *Beloved*, and also stretching its contemporary relevance to characters like Jashoda in *The Breast Stories* by Mahashweta Devi where all these women characters are chained in patriarchal structure. Margaret’s story is apt for an analysis of more than one relation in the novel because it also builds a platform to study other mother-child relations in the novel, such as of Sethe and her mother and Sethe and her own daughter. If we talk about Sethe and her mother, we infer that the story of Margaret Garner unravels the long-held practice of infanticide among slave women. But any act can be justified only with a detailed study of the situations that force an individual to take a particular action and in the same manner, Sethe’s action, its causes and consequences can also be examined after all these analyses.

Sethe’s character is important not only as a mother that lives in remorse and pain after the death of her daughter Beloved, but the truth that she has lived as an unmothered child is equally significant and important because both as a daughter and mother, she exhibits clear influences of her mother’s personality in her behavior as a woman and a slave mother. As a child, she begins the journey of her life by stepping into a world where there is no man who can be called her ‘father’. He is a figure who exists only in the stories narrated by Nan, the old woman who takes care of her while her mother is out for work and also after she dies. Though a description of her childhood reflects her mother’s defiant and submissive personality, it also explains her reasons for leaving Sethe as an uncared child.

An explanation of the truth of Sethe and her mother’s separation is possible after analysing the hostile circumstances under which her mother gives birth to Sethe, raises her, and afterwards lives without her due to adverse socio-cultural conditions controlling the society. Her mother throws away all her children who are born after her repeated rape by the white men of the crew on that ship which she boards while
she is brought back from America. It is Sethe, the only child whom she does not throw because she is fathered by a black man with whom she willingly involves in a physical relationship. She is a child born out of love and fathered by a black man, so her mother gives her the right to live after she is born.

Sethe remembers the stories about her mother and her birth; stories that tear apart her any and every association with her own identity. Nan, her maid tells her about her birth and her mother.

Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. She threw them all away but you. Without names she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never.Never. Telling you I am telling you, small girl Sethe. (74)

Sethe has no fond memories of her mother’s articulations of love. The reason lies in the socio-political domination that never gives freedom to female sexuality. The logic can be supported with the fact that slave women were never addressed as mothers, but only as breeders due to their degraded positions. They were an unpaid tool to serve economic interests that helped in creating an increased number of slaves for white masters. To add to the cash value of a slave owner’s human stock, they were coerced to breed slave children to replenish the population. If a black woman lived for few months with her child, it was her fortune. But many a time these slave women engaged in various acts of resistance to claim their authority as mothers, reflecting its bitter impact on parent-child relationships.

Children of slave mothers were often fed and raised by older women of their community who are past their child bearing age. They were taken care of by them when their mothers went to work in fields. As Patricia Hill Collins has observed, “[m]othering in West African community was not a privatized nurturing ‘occupation’ reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men”(1993:45). Nan-Sethe’s nurse reminds us of a ‘mammy’, whose job is to feed children of white families and serve their families. Due to West-African cultural practices of ‘community mothering’ and ‘other mothering’, there are many mothers to a daughter and many daughters to a black mother. Sethe is also brought up by one such woman. She serves as an ‘othermother’
for the children of her community. This kind of practice is defined as “an acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal” (James, 45).

As a slave woman, Sethe’s mother is always out in the fields because she is forced to labour for the economic growth of the white capitalistic society. Sethe has no fond memories of her mother’s recognition, nor any fond associations with her childhood times. She remembers her mother not by her name or any other identity but primarily by a headgear and by a “circle and a cross burnt right in the skin” (73). The mother thus makes herself known to the daughter by cruel hieroglyphics on her body (Fultz, 37). In Toni Morrison and the Womanist Discourse (1999), Mori argues that her mother’s exploitation is symbolized by a circle and a cross branded on her rib. Mori continues and observes:

Although the circle at first indicates the enslavement and physical burden inflicted upon her body, she reverses the negative representation and uses it as a crucial identification by which a daughter will remember her. Although she is executed, Sethe’s mother possesses the fortitude to protect her daughter, repelling the confinement inscribed on her body. (136)

Sethe’s innocence gives birth to a desire in her to be the same like her mother. She understands that the mark is separating her mother from the other ladies. She expresses her wish to bear the same in order to be recognized as her mother’s daughter. She shares the thought with her mother and remembers the whole incident throughout her life, which shares with her daughters later in her life.

She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. 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. I’m the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happened to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.’ (72)

As a child, she is unable to decode any meaning from this mark and she tries to figure a noticeable identification and similarity between her mother and herself without realizing the trauma and humiliation behind it. Her innocence convinces her that this
is the mark of her mother’s individuality, and the same mark on her body will emphatically fix her bond with her mother. Willingly, she says:

‘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.’ Sethe chuckled…. “She slapped my face.” “I din’t understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own”. (73)

Sethe cannot apprehend her mother’s concern behind her slap. This articulation of anger is actually a manifestation of her mother’s helplessness, wrapped in her concern for her daughter’s security in a racist and sexist world which she will later face. When Sethe tries to contact her mother, she is pointed to a figure, “who was pointed out to her by an eight year old child who watched over the young ones-pointed out as the one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field…What she saw was a cloth hat as opposed to a straw one” (31). Sethe is born and brought up in an environment where she is denied any socialization process. It is clearly conveyed through the historical and cultural consciousness of the characters in the story. What remains in her memory as an image of her mother is the faded picture of a fabric head cover and a spot notched in flesh. After her mother is burnt to death, she desperately tries to look for the stigma. She is shocked to discover the truth of her birth. It can be assumed that after this painful revelation, she gains the requisite courage to confront her reality as the daughter of a slave woman.

Sethe grows up without her mother’s care and bliss. She forcibly bears a life which is deprived of love and attention. She is introduced as a woman who has been isolated from her community and lives alone with her second daughter Denver. When her story is revealed through the course of the novel, we learn that she is a run-away slave who has dared to build a secure future for her children and herself. But her happiness is short-lived because she had to kill her younger daughter when her master comes to recapture her. She suffers an imprisonment for the period of eighteen years and comes back to her sons Howard and Buglar, daughter Denver and mother-in-law Baby Suggs after this long period. Her miseries and wounds are never healed because she finds nobody to whom she can look for emotional or moral support. Her
trauma remains deep seated in her heart and she submits herself to isolation for her remaining life with Denver.

The absence of love since childhood creates in her a vacuum, a void that can only be filled by the presence of a person who can emotionally support her and associate with her to heal her wounded self. Her relations with Denver and Beloved are also significant for a critical study. They unveil a significant aspect of her personality where she assumes herself as a daughter, and shares the blurred memoirs of her mother with her two daughters. The pain, void and yearning to be loved as a child is reflected in her realistic answers to her daughters’ innocent questions. It proves that she lurks a desire to share her painful past with somebody to whom she can look upon as her maternal model. The dialogue between Sethe and Denver states the simple and innocent questions put up by Denver. It also reveals the child’s innocent understanding of a mother-daughter relationship. She asks:

“Your woman she never fix up your hair”?

“My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don’t remember. I din’t see her but a few times in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning she was gone. If the moon was light they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks- that’s the way the others did. Then I sucked from another woman whose job it was”. (72)

Though Sethe grows up without much influence of her mother, she unknowingly inherits from her the courage and spirit to fight against oppression. She possesses the same undaunted spirit that her mother exhibited while resisting her master by committing infanticide. Her act expresses her silent resilience and shifts her from the domain of a marginalized to an acting character.

Anglo-American feminist writer Naomi Lowinsky defines “motherline” in her book *The Motherline: Every Woman’s Journey to Find her Female Roots*, and writes that

When a woman today comes to understand her life story as a story from the Motherline, she gains female authority in a number of ways. First, her
Motherline grounds her in her feminine nature as she struggles with the many options now open to women. Second, she claims carnal knowledge of her own body, its blood mysteries and their power. Third, as she makes the journey back to female roots, she will encounter struggles with similar difficulties in different historical times....Fourth, she uncovers her connections to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient worldview, which holds that the body and the soul are one and all life is interconnected. And finally, she reclaims her female perspective, from which to consider how men are similar, and how they are different. (13)

In African-American culture, an attempt to trace one’s own ‘motherline’ constructs the path to reconnect and strengthen one’s association with one’s own heritage. According to various theories propounded by eminent critics of Black feminist writings, each successive generation should be gifted its own reservoirs of tradition and culture to preserve and bear their validity and authority. In black community, women are also entrusted with the responsibility to instill the spirit of African culture in their children. They are considered, in the words of Karla Holloway, “the progenitors, the assurance of the line...as carriers of the voice [black women], carry wisdom-mother wit. They teach the children to survive and remember” (1987: 123).

In contrast to the above mentioned points, it is noteworthy that the physical loss of a mother experienced by Sethe at the age of twelve leave her with conflicts and confusions due to the absence of any appreciative thoughts about her mother. It results in a loneliness that enveloped her childhood in a slave community. She lives with her mother in South California, but her journey of self-recognition begins after she witnesses her mother’s death and later shifts to Kentucky. Sethe’s knowledge about her own childhood, her disruptions with her motherline and the lack of knowledge about her ancestral heritage fragment her self-perception and wreck the formulation of her own identity.

Survival in a racist culture is not only difficult but almost impossible for black children who grow in a society and culture that deems them inferior and unworthy. Their mother’s love and care inculcates in them a sense of invulnerability and defense, empowering them to stand against the dominating practices which are
governing their lives. Patricia Hills Collins emphasizes that these children inherit their cultural values and ancestral knowledge at home and it is here that they are taught to ascertain the dictating policies of white imperialist society. For Sethe, as a child, it becomes tough to acquire and learn any mode of resistance because she has not seen any safe place such as a home in her vicinity and surroundings. Her understanding of her ancestral generations is hollow and she does not have any revered memories that can root her in one’s own, so-called, African culture.

There are certain questions which are related to this maternal discourse, which can also be taken for an analysis to study Sethe’s stance as a mother. Firstly, it is important to note that she is a slave mother who lives in a racially dominated society and therefore, she is deprived of the basic maternal rights to raise her children. Secondly, she has suffered intense humiliation and dehumanization at the hands of the Schoolteacher and his nephews during her attempt to flee from the ironically named ‘Sweet Home’ (her slave master’s home), which is actually a place that breeds hatred and contempt for black people who are their slaves. Her identity is brutally crushed by her rape and the shameful listing of her “Human” and “Animalistic” features by the two nephews under the supervision of her master. Her mind is haunted by the trauma of physical abuse, coupled with the psychological aftermaths of this sadistic obsession of her master to describe his slaves as animals. She is unable to comprehend any meaning of this inhuman and misanthropic behaviour. After a series of painful incidents which begins from her rape to her imprisonment of eighteen years, her life sees a ray of hope with the return of her daughter Beloved. It is actually the ghost of her daughter that is presented before the readers in flesh and spirit form. Its presence kindles her yearning to be loved as a daughter, once she gets another chance to live with her younger daughter.

In the words of Andrea O’Reilley, “The historical trauma of motherline loss is represented through the character of Beloved, while the psychological trauma of this loss is conveyed through the character of Sethe” (85). The portrayal of Sethe and her daughters depicts a strong bond which is unshakeable and unbreakable under the torments of a racist society. She reclaims those severed bonds of mother and daughter which are forcefully trampled, but not dead under the socio-cultural forces of white hegemonic society. Above all, she acts as a mother to both the daughters and tries to
do everything that is possible for them, irrespective of any impositions or restrictions that limit her actions as a mother. She changes her self-perception as an enslaved woman and develops and formulates her understanding as a mother who will decidedly and determinedly regain and enliven the old fractured bonds of maternity.

Sethe’s resolution to entitle herself to all those identities to which she is authorized as a mother, empowers her to deny the status of a breeder or a female worker whose body is weakened by the incapacitating labour of physical toil. She is determined to be a “mother” and decides to shower her love and affection on her children. She willingly forgets and denies that in her position as a slave woman, she has no right over her children and they are the property of her master. With a firm determination, she experiences all joy and vigour of her maternal body and perceives herself as a loving and daring mother. When she flees from 124, she decides to send her two sons and a daughter with Baby Suggs in the hope of meeting them again, after she reaches her mother-in-law’s house. Her decision foregrounds her stern decision to achieve freedom for herself and her children, which can be done by claiming her subjectivity through her desires, hopes, ambitions and unrelenting spirit to combat her fears. Once she has begun associating herself with her daughter, she embarks on a new journey to name and structure herself as a mother.

In other words, Sethe unconsciously constructs her maternal identity and claims her rights on her children. She starts valuing her body in a very unconventional and inappropriate manner, almost unexpected from a slave woman. Her awareness about the Schoolteacher’s listing of slave’s characteristics enrages her. She lives with that anguish and agony to her individual risk for a long time. When the Schoolteacher returns to take possession of his slaves (Sethe and her children), she forgets her identity and relates herself to her children by sacrificing her existence for her children’s security. She closes a part of herself; in doing so she murders her own existence as a woman. As Simon de Beauvoir also writes in The Second Sex, “It is in maternity that women fulfils her psychological destiny; it is her natural ‘calling’, since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species” (501).

Sethe cannot comprehend that her black skin denotes gloom and malice which has already darkened her life. Her destiny situates her in a world where she is looked
upon as a demeaned woman and a devalued mother, whose status can solely be decoded as a slave. Motherhood teaches her the language to retaliate and refute her masters. She reaches Baby Suggs’ house and tastes the fruit of unrestricted motherhood (but only for 28 days), after she has successfully escaped from the Sweet Home. Her strong inclination to protect and love her offsprings increases when she realizes that for the first time she can exercise her rights as a mother, and that too, independently and authoritatively. Her happiness and delight are clearly reflected in her expression. Morrison beautifully crafts the sentiments of a mother who has tasted this immensely pleasurable, yet short-lived freedom. She writes:

Look like I loved ‘em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love ‘em in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?”….He knew exactly what she meant: to go to place where you could love anything you chose— not to need permission for desire—well now that was freedom…..”So when I got here, even before they let me get out of bed, I stitched her[ the oldest daughter] a little something from the piece of cloth Baby Suggs had. Well, all I’m saying is that it’s a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn’t let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out. (162-3)

The regendering of violence and displacement of ownership, and not least, the short experience of freedom to love “properly”, are some factors that define Sethe as a “Good Mother” and enable her to see infanticide as not only a defending, but also as a morally right act. “It worked”, she said…”They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em” (164-5). Death is the only safe haven which is beyond the control of the Schoolteacher. Due to the decision to commit infanticide, she can also be defined as a frantic “Good Mother”, who strongly believes that her children’s grave is the most secured place on this earth.

Lucie Fultz in her article “Images of Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s Beloved” writes that Sethe’s relations with her children differ markedly in many ways because:
Baby Suggs reminds her that “Sethe has had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage” to one man “who fathered every one of her children”. Second, she has found ways to maintain close relationships with her children for two important reasons: because of her fierce attachment to them and because of the respect of level Garners has accorded to the slaves on his farm (23).

Sethe is determined that her children will not be nursed by any nanny. She will not let her children feed on the milk that is left after feeding the hungry children of white families. Her affirmation proves that she fulfils her claim to be a perfect mother who knows how to cater to all the physical, emotional and psychological needs of her children. While talking to Paul D., Sethe announces herself as a mother because she believes that she is the only person who knows, understands and can meet her children’s demands.

The brutal rape of Sethe by the two nephews of the Schoolteacher symbolizes the commoditization of slave mothering. *Beloved* truly represents this theme in the incident in which Sethe’s maternity is robbed when the two nephews beastily nurse her. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos argues that in much of women’s writing, “milk is the symbol for the essence of mother love” (439). As a slave woman is seldom allowed to feed her babies, Sethe resorts to her rights by asserting that only her children can nurse on her milk. She also prepares herself to explain the relationship between nursing milk and mother-love:

Nobody will ever get my milk except my own children. I never had to give it to anybody else- and the one time I di d it was took from me- the held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse white babies and me too because Ma’ am was in the rice. The little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is like to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left, I’ll tell Beloved about that; she’ll understand. She my daughter. The one I managed to get milk for and get it to her even after they stole it…. (200)

The inhuman treatment of the nephews crush a woman’s spirit, but fail to weaken a mother’s tenacity to milk her children. She continues to describe her
maternal love metaphorically as “milk”, and emphasizes on her physical bond with her children when she consciously announces the condition for her maternal completeness by informing that, “sure enough, she had enough milk for all” (100).

The drops of milk on her dress also symbolize her maternity and love which cannot be veiled under physical covers. This image can be interpreted as an indication of Sethe’s attempt to assert her subjectivity as a mother that is past any subjugation. She bares the secrets of a mother’s milk and her maternal affliction in her discourse:

Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he’d see the drops of it on the front of my dress…All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn’t have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it. (19)

Slave culture vehemently denied any basic rights to black children. Sethe’s discourse on her knowledge of her children’s basic needs justify her active mothering and her resolution to milk her children so that they are not deprived of any maternal care and attention. The word “nurse” suggests and covers all the dimensions of mother-love to Sethe. The above lines also convey the message that according to Sethe, the Schoolmaster would first see the drops of milk on her dress, if he is successful in catching her. And he would understand that she is determined to take it to her daughter, which evidences her open declaration that all other identities are buried under the mark made by the drops of milk.

Sethe is emotionally dead after her maternity is dishonoured and defiled. Figuratively, the stolen milk also signifies the deprived state of a slave mother who is denied the most elementary right to feed her children. She tells Paul D. about “the two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on [her] breast and the other one holding [her] down, their book-reading-teacher watching and writing it up” (70), and the
later beating which “opened up [her] back” (17). She emphasizes that it is not the physical assault, but an attack on her maternity, signified through her stolen milk that bruises her self.

“They used cowhide on you?”
“And they took my milk.”
“They beat you and you was pregnant?”
“And they took my milk.” (17)

Susanne Gannon and Babette Muller-Rockstroh theorize in their essay that “The source of the milk, the nurturing breast, becomes a metaphor and symbol for love, life, and mothering in a more general sense” (52). In the above discourse also, Sethe is symbolically emphasizing on her maternal love and mothering. She is not so shocked at their animalistic behaviour because she is brutally tormented by the fact that they have snatched away from her the rights to love her children. She locates her body in a newly constructed socio-political space that allows her to be a mother.

The text resonates with the accounts and acceptances of Sethe’s maternal love. When she is reminded of her days at Sweet Home, she is overwhelmed even with a slight thought of loving her children. She remembers her sons and says: “That’s the way I used to see them in my dreams, laughing, their short fat legs running up the hill” (192); and of Beloved: “I wanted to pick you up in my arms and I wanted to look at you sleeping too. Didn’t know which; you had the sweetest face” (192). She opens her wounds to share the pain with Paul D., and tries to release the burden of separation by reliving the memories of that time which she has spent with her children:

[Buglar] got up on the well, right on it. I flew. Snatched him just in time. So when I knew we’d be….smoking and I couldn’t see after him well, I got a rope and tied it around his ankle….I didn’t like the look of it, but what else could I do. It’s hard, you know what I mean? By yourself and no woman to help you get through. (160)

Some critics have also noted that sometimes it appears in Sethe’s discussion with Paul D. that she attempts to deliver the depths and heights of her strong commitment as a mother to protect and stand by her children; no matter even if they
are grown up. She is not ready to listen anything against her daughter Denver. When he charges Denver of her rude behaviour with him, Sethe defends her child in the most appropriate manner by assuming all blame, and pushes the world and its concerns aside in her concern for her daughter. For an extensive understanding of this maternal promise, I am citing a dialogue which is a self-explanatory answer given by a possessive and loving mother for her child’s rude behavior:

“Excuse me, but I can’t hear a word against her. I’ll chastise her. You leave her alone”. …

“Why you think you have to take up for her? Apologize for her? She’s grown.”

“I don’t care what she is. Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older. But grown? What’s that suppose to mean? In my heart it don’t mean a thing.”

“It means she has to take it if she acts up. You can’t protect her every minute. What’s going to happen when you die?”

“Nothing. I’ll protect her when I ain’t.”

“Oh well. I’m through…”

“That’s the way it is Paul D. I can’t explain it to you no better than that, but that’s the way it is. If I have to choose- well, it’s not even a choice.” (45)

Sethe’s dialogue is the verbal account of her passionate devoutness and promise to her children’s needs. She assures Paul D and promises herself that she will always be present for her children whenever they will need her support and presence, irrespective of the circumstances. Expressions of warm, compassionate and an all-embracing love are unveiled in all those instances that she shares with Paul D. On her reunion with her children and after her escape from Sweet Home:

Sethe lay in bed under, around, over, among but especially with them all. The little girl dribbled clear spit into her face, and Sethe’s laugh of delight was so loud the crawling already? Baby blinked. Buglar and Howard played with her ugly feet…She kept kissing them. She kissed the backs of their necks, the top of their heads and the center of their palms. (93)
The above description gives the last stroke to her deep-seated and long-craved desire to touch her children and feel the divine pleasure and bliss as a mother. Physically and emotionally, Sethe gratifies her deep hunger to love her children. It is a moment of celebration for a mother who is victorious in her sweeping act of insolence and unleashes herself and her children from the chains of slavery, although this joy and happiness lasts for a short period of twenty-eight days only.

But in spite of all these existing situations and supportive statements, an important question that demands serious investigation is—does a slave mother have any right to love her children with such concentration? Does the slave society provide such maternal rights to a mother to love a child with deadly, strong and possessive affection? Who gives her the liberty to blind her vision and bind her identity as a mother? Is it this blind folded love for her children which risks Sethe’s self and pushes her to the verge of an archetypal ‘outraged mother’ who is forced to commit infanticide? These questions can be properly analyzed and answered by examining Sethe’s love, which is “too thick” according to Paul D.

Another significant feature is Sethe’s defiant and rebellious attitude towards all constrictions and restrictions imposed by the white society, which forces her to take such outrageous steps and also strengthens her emotionally and morally to love her children so possessively. The scene of a mother’s union with her children is full of with intense passion and love in a mother-child bond. Morrison’s art of writing has painted a picture with dark hues of love against the grim of socio-political conditions. Sethe restores and defines her authority by her decision and explanation to Paul D.:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to…I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that…Me having to look out. Me using my own head….it was,” Sethe continues, “a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. (162)

Such revival of body, soul and spirit fills her life with immense joy and she wishes to seek fulfilment in her maternal tasks that finally transport her to the realm of maternal bliss to experience the divine bliss of being a mother. Her undaunted
spirit and courage reminds us of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, where the protagonist interprets her maternal love as all powerful and resisting. When she learns that she will be sent with her young children to plantation for slavery, she decides that her consciousness will not let her children suffer the similar humiliation and shame that she has suffered, but she will fight for their new life to mend and liberate it from any kind of atrocities of slavery. She says, “I had a woman’s pride, and a mother’s love for my children; and I resolved that out of darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had determined will. There is might in each” (85).

Both the mothers fight for their freedom for the sake of their children’s life. Harriet says: “[It] was for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom”(89). In Sethe’s case, it is her utmost concern for her unborn child that gives her an unknown and mysterious strength to run for life despite all despair and resignation: “[I]t didn’t seem such a bad idea [to die], all in all…but the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on- an hour? A day and a night in her lifeless body” (31).

O’ Reilley recognizes the struggles of both the mothers (Jacobs and Celie), and argues what Jacobs also says that, “[slavery] is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.” “Superadded to the burden common to all,” Jacobs writes, “they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own’ (77). Women’s desire and determination for freedom is just acute when they reflect upon their daughter’s lives as slaves (O’ Reilley, 132). Jacobs further notes: “I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt” (90) and “I thought of what I had suffered in slavery, at her age and my heart was like a tiger’s when a hunter tries to seize her young” (199).

Jacobs’ dialogue is a direct indication of the burdens inflicted on a female body under slavery. Explicitly, she mentions that though a woman is marginalized in a patriarchal society, the conditions for a black woman become worse through a lethal combination of race, sex and gender. Her avowal that slavery is far more terrible for women echoes Baby Suggs’ words who discloses the truth of what can be the worst
bad luck in the world. She says, “There is no hard luck in the world except white men’ (198). Sethe also gives a similar explanation to Beloved:

No undreamable dreams about whether the….bubbling- hot- girls in the colored- school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. She might have to work the slaughterous yard, but not her daughter. And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of this paper. No. Oh no. (251)

We can also draw a parallel between Sethe’s and Jacobs’ love. Sethe asserts, “I wouldn’t draw a breath without my children” (203) and Jacobs writes, “I loved them better than my life” (92). Both the mothers share a common consent that death is preferable and tolerable than slavery. They are ready to see their children in graves, rather than watch them spend their entire life in a social grave. Jacobs says, “I would rather see them killed than have given them up to power” (80) and Sethe explains, “[I]f I hadn’t killed her she would have died and this is something I could not bear to happen” (200).

We are also reminded of the character of Celie in The Color Purple by Alice Walker. She is not a biological mother, but a surrogate mother to her younger sister Nettie, whom she helps to flee from the clutches of their step-father to protect her from his sexual abuse and assaults. Her resolution protects Nettie’s life as Sethe and Harriet Jacobs’ efforts shield their children from dismays of slavery. In Women, Race and Class (1981), Angela Davis examines the ways in which racial ideologies of white and black motherhood influence radical representations of maternal heroism in nineteenth century women (133). Davis examines the character of Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. She argues that Stowe presents Eliza as “white motherhood incarnate” to accommodate a smooth transference of the sensibilities of a white woman to the readers of this story. She writes:

It may have been Stowe’s hope that the white women reader of her novel would discover themselves in Eliza. They could admire her superior Christian morality; her unaltering maternal instincts, her gentleness and
fragility- for these were the very qualities white women were being taught to cultivate in themselves. (27)

Davis’ critical evaluation of Eliza’s character gives a deep insight into an enlightening perspective of Sethe’s character also. Both the mothers are firmly protective for their children in spite of all detestation and hatred they bear. Sethe also decides to fight against all odds and, “she would give that milk to her baby girl even if she had to swim” (83). But there exists a large difference in the silent, yet visible declaration of these characters. Sethe’s decision does not lie in religion, nor is it divinely inspired, but is born from her abhorrence for slavery.

However if Sethe’s motherlove gives her the courage to resist vindictive social forces, her love also instigates her to use a handsaw against her elder daughter’s throat. She does not permit the Schoolteacher and his nephews to succeed in their spiteful intentions. The nephews dig a grave for her unborn child and use a cowhide on her back. She tells Paul D., “They dug a stomach for my hole as they would not hurt the baby” (239). She stoops to the level of those nephews when she commits infanticide. She arranges a safe haven for her child in the grave and denies a death-in-life to her daughter.

When Sethe recognizes the Schoolteacher’s hat, she tells that

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

“Your love is too thick,” [Paul D. replied]…

“Too thick?” she said….“Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.” (164)

Sethe’s answer is a remarkable response to Paul D., who categorizes her love as “thick love”. According to her, as a mother, she recognizes no borders for maternal love and obeys no condition for a mother to love her children. In her understanding, a mother’s love cannot be demarcated as ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ love. A mother will always love her children with full intensity and strong devotion, irrespective of her conditions. But Paul D. reminds her of her real status and absolute tyranny of the
racist ideology, which is responsible for altering the mothering conditions of slave mothers. Black mothers are not raised to the same level as white mothers because they live with their demeaned status and positions as breeders. Untimely and early detachment of slave children from mothers reduces the capacity of slave mothers to maintain the required attachment to their children, which leaves them in a grave situation where it becomes difficult for them to decide whether they should love their offsprings or not.

Paul D. accuses Sethe of her “thick love”. “Not even trying, he had become the kind of a man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner” (17). Nevertheless, he finds faults with her for her undue love and care for her children. Sethe’s extreme love can be contrasted with Paul D.’s moderate love, according to whom, her love is “too thick”, so it pushes her to the verge of insanity that is manifest in her decision to commit infanticide. But here as a reader, we agree as well as disagree with Paul D.’s judgement. Sethe’s act should be read in the context of her own mothering, her own childhood and also in her response to her fears and concerns for her daughter who, she knows, will suffer death each and every day in the hands of her master.

When Sethe is at 124 with her children, her behaviour confirms the standard and regular customary conduct of a mother. If she would not have exhibited her courage, she would not have been able to bring Denver to this world. For her, death is preferred to slavery. When Paul D. suggests Sethe, “There could have been a way. Some other way” (164), she throws a hard question, “What way?” and Paul D. is left speechless, with no answers to the question of an unsafe and insecure life that her daughter will be given. During fractions of seconds, she is forced to decide because there is no other way for a mother to protect her daughter, and she also says, “[L]ove is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (164). She defends her “thick love” later during a discourse, and throws a line of rhetoric to Paul D., to which he has no answer:

Too thick, he said. My love was too thick. What he know about it? Who in the world is he willing to die for? Would he give his privates to a stranger in
return for a carving? Some other way, he said. There must have been some other way. Let Schoolteacher haul us away. I guess, to measure it behind before he tore it up? I wouldn’t draw breath without my children. (203)

This affirmative discourse is noticeable because Sethe not only defines herself but also reflects upon all the “wrongs, sufferings and mortifications” (77), as Harriet Jacobs says, peculiarly about slave women. Sethe draws our attention to the plight and powerlessness of a slave woman who has to trade her body in return for a small carving on her daughter’s grave. She tries to measure the depths of her unconditional “thick love” and her physical and emotional assaults that she experiences as a slave woman and a black mother. But her breath-taking resolution to not let herself live without her children helps her in exercising certain basic rights and the basic freedom as a female after giving birth to her youngest daughter on the wrong side of the river Ohio in the most disparaging conditions. It is her motherlove that helps her to complete the terrible task to run for her children, reserve milk for her Beloved, and meet her sons Buglar and Howard. Sethe’s question that “who in the world is he willing to die for?”(203), implies that she would have died for her daughter if she had no other children to live for. She is successful in slitting the throat of her younger daughter because the slave catchers stop her before her second daughter can meet the same fate. This proves that Sethe’s life and death are both children-centered. She asserts her subjectivity and fulfils all the requisite dimensions of a mother and her love, which is purely regardless of her existence as a woman. Sethe subdues any and all desires, passions and emotions of a woman and lives to survive solely as a mother to both her daughters.

The nineteenth century cult of moral motherhood said that women were born with a maternal instinct, which rendered motherhood natural to them (O’Reilley,135). Sethe accords herself with all those rights that educate her to decide the best for her children. For her, “what she had done was right because it came from true love” (252). But, black slave women are excluded from this naturally defined law when they are termed as breeders and not as mothers. In Beloved, Sethe refuses to accept her stance as a slave mother who has to survive without any moral rights and responsibilities as compared to a white mother. The novelist supports her through various events and characters when she writes that Sethe’s claim is “an unheard-of
outrageous claim for a slave woman to make”; for Sethe’s assertion is the right and responsibility to “say something what happens to [her children]”(Taylor- Guthrie 1994:252).

It is also significant to note that during slavery, children were not owned by mothers but by white men who rated and valued them as freely and easily available tools for their economic sustenance and growth. Sethe claims an ownership of her children but this is against the master’s legal claim on them (O’ Reilley, 136). The text resonates with the powerful instances of her repeated and emphatic announcement that “You are mine” and she calls her children “my best thing”-“the parts of that were precious and fine and beautiful” (163,272). She maintains the same relation with her children when the slave master tries to entitle his ownership on her children as objects. For her, they are the best parts that she has earned. What she suggests is primarily the biological mother-child bond; her natural right to gain and exercise her control over her children. But this sense of belongingness and possession is mutual in the text. Sethe says to Beloved, ‘When I call you mine, I also mean I am yours” (203). O’ Reilley comments on this reciprocity and notes that “the belonging of mother and child is constructed and interpreted as ownership because such is the economic, legal and linguistic currency of the text and the slave system it represents” (136). Even Paul D. makes an important and serious observation on Sethe’s claim. “More important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him” (164).

The contemporary feminist critic Jean Wyatt says

While celebrating the courage and determination Sethe draws from this attachment [with her children], Morrison’s narrative also dramatizes the problems of Sethe’s maternal subjectivity, which is so embedded in her children that it both allows her to take the life of one of them and preludes putting that act into words. (476)

And, Carole Boyce Davies also reads Sethe’s mother-love as a political gesture of defiance. Nonetheless, she concludes that this same mother-love is:
Definitely “too-thick”, as Paul D. says, because it too fully accepts the given paradigm of motherhood as exclusive responsibility of the biological mother….A slave mother is not supposed to demonstrate deep love for her children. Sethe defies that. Yet her heroic response to enslavement paradoxically becomes the kind of motherlove which society enforces for women. Sethe shuttles back and forth between enslavements, exchanging one for the other, unable to be freed from both at once. (54)

In a world, in which, to use Patricia Hill Collins’ words, “racial ethnic children’s lives have long been held in low regard” (Forcey 1987: 48-9), mothering for many black women, particularly among the poor, is about ensuring the physical survival of their children and those of a larger black community. Thus, the act of preservation becomes a fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women’s motherwork. In circumstances where a mother lives her own enslavement, it becomes imperative for her to decide that how is it possible for her to secure freedom for her children, especially her daughter. But, because she is left with no route to freedom, she commits infanticide to provide a safe home to her daughter. Sethe says: “[I] carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they could be safe” (163). [My] plan was to take us all to the side other where my own ma’am is”(203).

For slaves, it was:

…dangerous to love anything too much…especially if it were her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew was to love just a little bit, so when they broke its back or shoved it in a croaker sack, well maybe you’d have a little left over for the next one. (45)

It is only Stamp Paid, another run-away slave who belongs to Sweet Home, who supports Sethe’s explanation of her unacceptable act. He tells Paul D., “She ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to outhunt the hunter” (234). She would not have done the same if the Schoolteacher would not have come to catch and enslave her. But ironically, the tragic part is that, Sethe loses a part of her life, though she gains a part of her identity in killing her daughter. Although she outhunts the hunter, she is hunted by her obsessive “thick love”.

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This happens because the object of the Schoolteacher and Sethe’s desire is the same. As mentioned above, her attempt to outlaw the laws of the slave society proves fatal for her children and herself. She realizes this when she is sentenced to 18 years of imprisonment after 28 days of freedom. She does not feel triumphant after slaying her daughter, but feels a sense of achievement after delivering her second daughter Denver. Morrison phrases her commitment to her children as, “an excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender” (Fultz, 40), that is configured in her in the form of a desire to save Beloved from the ills of slavery. To quote O'Reilley again: “the very meaning of a hero and heroism is redefined, making it possible for Sethe to inscribe herself as a subject and celebrate the reproductive feasts of nursing and birth as heroic labor” (134).

A critical reading of the text posits a “dangerous” and “devouring” relationship between the mother and daughter. Both mother and daughter engulf and consume each other within each other’s identity. Beloved says, “I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop’ (210) and Sethe “You are my face; I am you” (216). Meaningfully, the text also explains that “the mother and daughter are locked in a love that wore everybody out” (243). Beloved can be seen as a symbolic representation of the results of broken motherline, to whose significance the book is dedicated. She represents the process of rupture and healing of African-American motherline and represents the “flesh and blood” embodiment of Sethe’s pain and agony.

Through the incidence of this living ghost, the writer has presented a role-reversal that is embodied in the connection between the mother and daughter. Beloved assumes the role of a mother who has come from another geographic world, and Sethe, the mother, becomes the daughter who comes from another side of the physical world- the world of Death. Beloved is also symbolic of the dead spirit of all those mothers and daughters whose love and affection are burnt in the fire of slavery. It is the daughter’s return and her capacity to evoke Sethe’s childhood memories which are already blurred in the mist of slavery. She is empowered to metamorphose Sethe’s emotions to strengthen her to speak the ‘unspeakable’. Beloved is both the slave mother and the flesh and body image of the dead daughter. It is a sequence of mother-daughter damage, relinquishment, unfaithfulness and salvage, which is
intrinsic to the text. In the beginning when Beloved enters the story, she is seen as the flesh and body incarnation of Sethe’s dead daughter. She is given the role of an infant. When she narrates her own story, she tells her mother that she has run away from a slave ship and rescued herself from the water. She comes from the water, the water of the sea, and she owns her previous life by the water of the amniotic sac of Sethe’s womb. Sethe also empties unlimited water on seeing Beloved. “But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there is no stopping now” (51).

Beloved is also linked to Sethe’s biological mother whose story begins and ends as an unnamed character. The presence of a daughter creates a cathartic effect on Sethe’s mind and she is purged of all the unshared emotions of pain and loneliness. Her presence evokes Sethe’s memories of her mother. An absence of love since her childhood creates a vacuum that can be filled only with the presence of a person who can support her in the psychological process of healing her wounded self. Her relation with the returned ghost of her daughter is loaded with nuance-layered meanings that should be studied critically for an understanding of its symbolic significance. The pain, void and yearning to be loved as a child are reflected in her realistic answers to her daughter’s innocent questions. It proves that she lurks a desire to share her painful past with somebody to whom she can look upon as a maternal model. The dialogue between Sethe and Beloved and some simple and innocent questions raised by Beloved reveal the child’s innocent understanding of a mother-daughter relationship.

“Your woman she never fix up your hair”?

“My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don’t remember. I didn’t see her but a few times in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning she was gone. If the moon was light they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks- that’s the way the others did. Then I sucked from another woman whose job it was”. (72)

For the first time Sethe shares her forgotten, but unshared past with her daughters. The distances between her and her mother are repaired psychologically through her association with her daughters. Her painful and lonely childhood is spent
without feeling the warmth of motherly compassion, without looking at her mother’s face closely in the wake of light, without recognizing her mother as a human being in her community, without feeling the bliss of feeding on her mother by being held close to her mother’s body and without the experience of traditional expressions of maternal love such as, playing and story- telling. The pain accumulates to create a hollowness which cannot be filled by any other kind of presence. Sethe discharges her feelings and tells Beloved about the conditions in which her mother had to labour in the fields while leaving her children behind.

I didn't see [my mother] but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks--that's the way the others did. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. Too far from the line-up, I guess. (60-1)

This sense of void gives birth to a desire to be the best mother in the world for her children. Her longing for this long- lost relationship is expressed in her intimate talk with Beloved when she says, “You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one” (240). Sethe has hazy recollections of her mother that are intricately knitted with the moods of painful desertion. “She was remembering something [Mama’s language] she had forgotten she knew”, confesses Sethe (240). Her mama’s language and recollections of “the language which her ma’m spoke… which would never come back” (241), creeped into her conscious mind.

Whatever she resolves to forget is claimed and revived by Beloved. She embarks on a journey to her forgotten past in the process to regain and reclaim her freed self as a daughter who has been long separated from her traditional roots through her disassociation from her motherline. Through this form of psychological process of reconnection and association, Sethe is trying to repair her scarred self under the process of ‘healing’. O’ Reilley writes that
This healing takes place when these children have become adults and centers upon the recovery of displaced selfhood for these individuals who were denied nurturance and cultural bearing in childhood. Specifically, these adults finally acquire self-love and achieve selfhood by being remothered as adults. This remothering is achieved through the way of spiritual or psychic reconnection with a lost mother by way of reclamation of a displaced or lost mother/daughter selfhood. (40)

Thus, Sethe seeks and locates her connections with her lost motherline through her connection with her returned daughter. The daughter’s return is a metaphor for the mother-daughter bond which breaks under the blows of slavery and gets repaired through the process of sharing the untold and unsaid painful stories. Her reconnections to her motherline form a trajectory to the traditional memories of black culture. This pattern of revived association also forms a new cycle of mother-daughter relationship that begins from Sethe’s mother and through her and her daughters, it connects to her own dead mother again.

Towards the end of the novel, it also becomes apparent that Beloved begins to expect and demand complete devotion, love and assimilation from her mother, and begins the process through her all-consuming love. This mother-daughter bond gradually becomes devouring and destructive. Beloved wants full and complete attention from her mother “And it was Beloved who made demands. Anything she wanted, she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire. She wanted Sethe’s company for hours.”(283). Once she is aware of Beloved’s reality, she is ready to offer any possible explanation to justify her decision to commit infanticide so that she can be sure that this time Beloved will not leave her. She speaks and assures herself by deciding that

I won’t ever let her go. I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it, she understands everything already. I’ll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. (236)
After losing her job, Sethe stays at home and submits herself to her daughter by offering herself physically and emotionally. She tries to revoke the faded memories of the games played by her mother when Sethe was a child. She spends her time with Beloved in the same manner as she wanted from her mother. It also suggests that her limited knowledge about mothering and motherhood gives her few restricted options to express her love for her daughter. Sethe craves for the same feelings of love to be reciprocated that she gives to her daughter. She entertains her with all “the cooking games, the sewing games, the hair and dressing-up games. Games her mother loved so well she took to gaining to work later and later each day until the predictable happened” (282). But their games are opposed to Baby Suggs’ practice because “unlike Baby Suggs, she cut Denver out completely. Even the song that she used to sing for Denver, she sang for Beloved alone” (282). These days of loving togetherness are short-lived and soon the relationship echoes with complaints and disappointments. “Then the mood changed and the arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe. A reduction of pleasure at some special effort the older woman made” (283). Sethe’s justifications and explanations, although brimming with her concern, cannot satisfy Beloved’s hunger to possess her mother and her love. And, “when once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself—be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best—Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane” (285). Sethe realizes that it is not easy to gain Beloved’s trust and belief and the mother-daughter relationship alters and assumes an unexpected and different form:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (294-5)

It is after her mother’s physical and emotional deterioration that

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making
her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. (295)

It also appears that Sethe wants to repent the loss which she cannot compensate in present times. It seems as if she has accepted Beloved’s charge that “when she cried there was no one” (284). “It was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out” (297). Her explanation tones her valid explanation to kill her daughter:

My plan was to take all to the other side where my own ma’m is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn’t stop you from getting here. Ha ha. You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter who is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma’am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one. (203)

Sethe aches to be a daughter because she sees herself as a displaced daughter. To throw more light on this role of a desired daughter, I take this definition of a daughter from Tar Baby: “I’m just saying what a daughter is. A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her” (171). Sethe and Beloved both miss such interconnection. They do not cherish or value their past or their roots and cultural connections with their traditional memories because they do not care for the quality of mothering they have received from their caretakers. The former cannot embrace the memories which fail to educate her; the latter does not have any memory because of an inevitable fate that she has suffered in the hands of her mother. The above quoted definition of a daughter contradicts the fate of both the characters- Sethe and Beloved- as daughters in the novel.

In spite of all this, Sethe’s reservoir of energy and spirit is derived from her existence that she values as a mother. But her community ostracizes her for her courage and independent spirit when she decides for her daughter’s betterment and then accordingly acts in a heinous manner on the decision, while ignoring the fact that she is living in a society that does not accord such rights and authority to love to a slave mother. The text is replete with many instances and incidents which prove that she maintains the same authorial position till the end that has exhibited at a crucial moment in her life while saving her Beloved. The most striking example is in the
opening pages of the novel when a dark truth of her life is revealed, an event that stamps the dearth of humanity in the face of white society and writes the cruel story of its domination in all spheres of a slave woman’s life. This inhumanity and cruelty is shown at the most basic and lower levels when Sethe bargains her body in return for a small engraving on her daughter’s headstone.

Ten minutes for seven letters. Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life. (41)

The name- Beloved- that she gives to her daughter conveys the appropriate emotions of a mother to the community that cannot understand and appreciate a mother’s courage and ignores its contribution towards helping its individual in facing the challenging conditions. Her people shrink from her. She explains to Paul D. that how difficult it has been for her to raise Denver in an environment where the community extends no support system, and where there are no ‘othernothers’ and ‘community mothers’ to educate a mother about the art of mothering and reveal the secrets of maternal power.

So there wasn’t nobody. To talk to, I mean, who’d know when it was time to chew up a little something and give to ‘em. Is that what makes the teeth come and then solid food?... I wish I’d a known more, but, like I say, there wasn’t nobody to talk to. Women, I mean. So I tried to recollect what I’d seen back where I was before Sweet Home. (160)

But it is also important to note that more than a mother’s determination to be the best mother and outface the heinous laws of a white slave culture, there is also an indirect inclination towards a woman’s act to shield her children from the community that did not support her decision. Bernard W. Bell further comments on Sethe’s situation and argues: “On a socio- psychological level, Beloved is the story of Sethe Suggs’ quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness” (8).

Theories of mothering do not offer any answers to the above mentioned unavoidable and unfavourable circumstances that rupture slave mother-child bonds.
Naturally built in a mother is an inherent ability to love her daughter after constructing an inseparable bond with her own mother, but what happens when the hostile socio-political conditions exempt her from this union? What happens to such unloved daughters? How and from where do they learn to mother and raise their children as mothers? After a critical reading of *Beloved*, we are in a safer position to examine Sethe’s maternal stance and find answers to such questions. It becomes clear that the era of slavery and its inhuman socio-historical conditions have produced many mothers and daughters like Sethe, Nan, Baby Suggs, Ella, Beloved and Denver whose disruptions and broken connections from their motherline leave them in a bereaved condition without any role model to look upon as mother and as daughter.

Separation of a child from its mother at an early age forces their mothers towards economic labour for their masters. As daughters, they are haunted by unanswered inquiries about maternal love. They find it difficult to probe the reasons of abandonment by their mother. Likewise, Sethe lived with memories and experiences of an unloved child who is left to grieve in this world alone. “I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she my Ma’m and nobody’s ma’m would run off and leave her daughter, would she?” (63). The only memories that she can retain belong to her birth-place which is Carolina, maybe, or was it Louisiana, was of the singing and dancing women who spoke in a “code she no longer understood” (63).

O’Reilley brings our attention to this discourse and writes:

*[The] world of cooing women, each of whom was called Ma’am” refers to the ancient motherline. Sethe’s request of her mother ‘Mark me too”, signifies her need for a communal identification and historical community, a connection to the motherline and her foremothers. (89)*

Morrison has emphatically written about Sethe’s experiences of this newly felt association:

*Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have to explain a thing before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I had to*
put her where she be safe. But my love was safe and she back now. I knew she would be. Paul D ran her off and she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh. I bet you Baby Suggs, on the other side, helped. I won’t let her go. I’ll explain to her even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. …I’ll tend her as no mother has ever tended a child, a daughter. (236)

Ella, the first Black woman whom Sethe meets while crossing the Ohio river limits her reactions to verbal violence against her slave holders- a father and son-“who kept her locked in a room for themselves for more than a year”. As she puts it in words: “You couldn’t think up what them two done to me”(302). She labels them as “the lowest yet”(301). Thus, when Ella met Sethe and her day-old child with its “tiny, dirty face poking out of the wool blanket”, she admonished Sethe: “Don’t love nothing” (108). This admonition results from Ella’s having spent puberty “in a house where she was shared by father and son” from whom she acquired a “disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape…Nothing compared to the lowest yet” (301). During this sexual victimization, Ella restricts any attempts to help her husband and free herself because she is aware that her struggle will result in her husband’s death. Moreover, she is very confident that she will finally succeed in uniting with her husband.

Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, is an epitome of a typical slave mother who is left bereaving her children one after the other, but bears her pain silently. As she tells Sethe, “I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all I expect worrying somebody’s house into evil’(5), implying that maybe they are dead and are wreaking revenge as ghosts. “My first born”, even Ella remembers continuing the same talk, “All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember”(5). This statement is loaded with the psychological implications of badly severed bonds between a mother and child. The mother gathers bits and pieces of the memories of her distanced children and weaves and narrates a story to share and lessen the sting and anguish. This is a common mode of expression among slave mothers as in both factual and fictional narratives, we can read and witness how
slaves, especially, slave women strain to trace the memories of their lost children or relatives by rehearsing some physical characteristics or peculiar gestures. Both Sethe and Baby Suggs incarnate the story of a slave mother’s relations with her children:

All of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women have been moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby’s eight children have six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (28)

To mollify the loss of her two daughters who are sold before they have cut their “adult teeth”, Baby Suggs is allowed to keep her son Halle. She is offered a deal to keep her third son if she trades her body with her “straw boss”, but the child is sold nevertheless. Baby is unable to love the child who is born out of that forced relation with the straw boss “and the rest she would not [love]” (28) because she knows that ultimately she will lose them. Though she contends “it was not worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood” (28), she still recalls some characteristic gestures of the eight. The pain of being deprived from the maternal bliss of witnessing her children growing into mature human beings later haunts her till her death:

Seven times she had...held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own- fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn’t know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their head when they walked. Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous’ skin finally take? What was a cleft in Johny’s chin or just a dimple that would change soon his jawbone changed? Four girls and the last time she saw them there were no hair under their arms. Does Ardelia still love the burned bottom of bread? All seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking so hard at the youngest one? (139)

The character of Baby Suggs dramatizes the afflictions and struggles of those black mothers who are caught in the inescapable trap of slavery and its socio-economic clutches which demean their lives and dissolve the filial bonds. Through
Baby Suggs’ interior monologue, Morrison has focused on undermining this heinous system by putting forth the argument for deep and abiding love of all mothers for their offsprings. She hardens herself for her inevitable fate as a slave mother, yet tries to cling to the memories of her children and deconstructs the image of a slave mother by picturing her children’s growth and development. Her images of her children’s looks, their preferences, and their physical growth— all remain in the form of fragments in her mind and contributes towards shaping the truth that a slave mother cannot lose interest in her children soon after they are born, even if they are too shortly stripped off any physical contact with their children in initial days after their birth. There is no severity that has the power to weaken the bond of attachment that naturally exists between a mother and child. Explicating the trauma and sadness of slave mothers through the character of Baby Suggs, Morrison writes:

No question. And no matter, for the sadness was at her center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. (165)

Baby Suggs submerges her pain and trauma and delimits herself, working within the dichotomy between a woman and mother by constructing her concepts and projections of self through her relation with her children and her community people. Buried beneath her grief is the pain of forgetting and suppressing her own identity that is strengthened when she relates herself to her folks.

While enlisting Baby Suggs’ contributions to the society, it is important to note her enriching relation with her people because she has served as a maternal archetype to the individuals of her community— be it men, women or children. Carl Jung also mentions that mother archetypes can occur in an infinite number of ways. He further adds that a person’s first interaction with this archetype appears in his relationship with this woman or the woman who serve in a maternal role: “first in importance are the personal mother and the grandmother, step mother and mother-in-law” (81). It is naturally the biological mother who shapes the notion of a “mother” for the child, but in this he also includes “any woman with whom a relationship
exists— for example a nurse, a governess, or perhaps a remote ancestress” (Jung, 81). Hence, we can say that all women are representative of the idea of “mother”.

Baby Suggs is a ‘community mother’ and also a maternal ideal to Sethe. The desire and need for a maternal role model’s presence in the life of Sethe is fulfilled with caring and affectionate presence of Baby Suggs. As Sethe “wished for Baby Suggs’ fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, ‘Lay ‘em down, Sethe’….Nine years without the voice or fingers of Baby Suggs was too much” (101). It is her presence that makes the place endearing for all strangers and other run-away slaves who live there.

When Sethe is taken to 124, it is a “cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed’ (102). She is given an intimate embrace by her mother-in-law. Morrison weaves her appraisal of Baby’s warm and welcoming motherly embrace for Sethe and observes:

It was in front of that 124 that Sethe climbed off a wagon, her newborn tied to her chest, and felt for the first time the wide arms of her mother-in-law, who had made it to Cincinnati. Who decided that, because slave life had “busted her legs, back, hand, head, eyes, kidneys, womb and tongue”, she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once. (102)

This particular scene redefines a slave woman’s undying capacity to love, to be emotionally alive and render her heart to the communal services even if her body is totally exhausted, which proves that slavery can only exhaust and tire their body but not their souls and spirit that remains untouched and untainted.

Sethe admires this woman who “talked little, but loved big” (103). The strong and skillful hands of Baby “bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, and greased her back” (98). She is counseled and advised by Baby whenever she requires it. Marianne Hirsch has contributed an article in a chapter to the Reading of Ruth, elaborating and providing valuable insights on this pure and selfless maternal attachment of a mother-in-law with a daughter-in-law, as noted in the Biblical “Book of Ruth”. Hirsch
writes that: “Only two possible role models of this love and affection between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law come to my mind as possible- Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the *Book of Ruth* (Kates, 311). Baby Suggs’ teachings are a noticeable input towards her community in Ohio. It is the only safe place created by her to provide a free zone to the unbound slaves to come close and interact with each other. But she never preaches any unreachable bliss or imperceptible charm on earth. Morrison notes:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure. She told that them the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they could not imagine it. (88)


As discussed earlier also, Baby Suggs’ relations to her free slaves’ community is not only of a preacher, but of a mother also. Psychologist Jacques Lacan asserts that for a child it is necessary to identify with her mother’s body to love its own body. She preaches her people to love their body which they abuse after suffering humiliation in the hands of white society. Considered dark, ugly, animalistic, inhuman and small, and treated as chattels, they despise their own flesh which marks their identity and character as an integral part of their physical feature. Her discourse to all the freed slaves of her community rejuvenates their mind, body and soul, filling them with a new self-perception. She says:

Let your wives and your children see you dance….Here, 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 your flesh. They despise. They don’t love your eyes. 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. And o my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, 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. (103-4)

Such sermons also relate to the greatest simple apprehensions of religion to flesh, as it is a slave’s body on which the dark violations of humiliation are carved. Baby Suggs is hoary and physically disabled, yet she rebels to her human frailties to preach her people the secret to love their liberated bodies. Such presentation of slave bodies as texts definitely leads to an explicit relation between Baby’s preaching and the slave bodies that are seen as texts. It also becomes necessary to teach and make them realize the saintliness of one’s own being to nurture the sense of self-worth and self-love.

To elaborate more on Baby Suggs’ sacred contributions to communal peace and harmony, we can note some valuable observations by critics. O’Reilley in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* lists the major functions of black mothers and among those many listed, “preservation” is one of the major functions enlisted by Reilley. She writes: “Morrison in her model of motherwork as empowerment foregrounds the importance of preservation, a dimension of motherhood, most notably with sensitive mothering” (32).

Another critic on motherhood, Sara Ruddick also argues that the first duty of mothers is to protect and preserve their children: “to keep whatever is valuable and vulnerable in the child” (80). According to Ruddick, though maternal love is composed of two other demands—nurturance and training—the first demand of preservative love defines the major concept and part of African mother’s mothering. In a world, in which to use Patricia Hill Collins’s words, “racial ethnic children’s lives have long been held in low regard” (Forcey 1987: 49), mothering for many black women becomes the main source to ensure the psychological survival of their children and community.

After ensuring the best possible means of preservation, it is the next important duty of mothers to arrange resourceful means to nurture their children in order to train them to resist the defacement of racist practices in society. O’Reilley also states that the act of nurturing demands black mothers to immunize their children from racist
ideologies by loving them, so that they may love themselves in a culture that defines them as undeserving or unworthy of love. A mother instills a sense of meaning and respect in her children by nurturing her love, so that they can learn necessary strategies to subvert racist ideologies and fight against imposed racial inferiority. Baby Suggs fulfils both the maternal functions by teaching her people how to love oneself, respect themselves, affirm one’s own existence and reclaim one’s own identity. At 124, she creates a home where these freed slaves are provided a safe sphere to confirm the bonds of oneness and connectedness, which enables them to look at each other as one, bound by the threads of common ancestral heritage.

After an analysis of Baby Suggs’ roles, we cannot ignore that she is the most serious inspiration for Sethe in formulation and determination of a conceptual understanding of maternal roles. She constructs her own subjectivity as a good mother by following her mother-in-law and loves the plentitude of her freedom. Sethe relies on her care to raise her own children. It is Baby Suggs who takes care of her children with full responsibility like her own children. When Sethe moves from Sweet Home as a free slave, Howard, Buglar and Beloved are sent with Baby to go across the river Ohio. She bargains a house in which she is the solitary mama for these children for sixty full days while they are away from their parents Sethe and Halle for the first time. The role and character of Baby Suggs also reminds us of Mrs. Suggs in Sula who takes care of Eva Peace’s three children when she has left them in her custody to make substantial arrangements for their living.

‘Othermothering is accepting the responsibility of a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal” (James, 45). Contrasted and compared to this, community mothers “take care of the community. These women are typically past their child bearing years” (Wane, 112). It is seemingly obvious that the role of Baby Suggs in this novel can model Black mothers as ‘othermothers’, as prevalent in the West-African society. These complementary dimensions of mothering and the practices of ‘community mothering’ and ‘othermothering’ enhance her role in the society. Sandra Mayfield in her article “Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s Beloved: A Psychological Reading” comments that she has earned the title “holy” for her unorthodox religion and her conviction that God wants people to love and care for each other Morrison outlines her efforts and her [w]holy devotion towards her
community, “Baby Suggs offered up to them her great big heart” (88). Her ability to celebrate her dark slave body and educate others to do the same is one of the most sincere and significant contribution to the community that adhers to the practices and established notions of African mothering. It also advocates the maxim and principal idea that the writer wants to establish- ‘Black is Beautiful’. It is the presence of this “uncalled, unrobed, and unannointed preacher” (87) that works a cathartic effect on Sethe’s emotions and permits her to transgress her liminality.

Be it Baby Suggs or Sethe, be it a bereaved mother or a mother who adopts her role as a daughter and shares the tragedy of her destitute childhood with her daughters, it is mostly through oral tradition that these women release their psychological burden. To emphasis the importance of the art of sharing stories, it becomes relevant to quote Sudhir Kakkar:

Many psychologists, for instance, believe that narrative thinking- “story telling”- is not only a successful method of organizing perception, thought, memory and action but, in its natural domain of everyday interpersonal experience, it is the most effective. Other thinkers are convinced that there is no better way to gain an understanding of a society than through its stack of stories, which constitute its dramatic resources. (3)

The stories which are shared by these two characters paint the dark world of slave mothers where there are mothers who silently endure and strongly resist, or daughters who plea and unknowingly desire to relate themselves with their mothers’ marks but are left only with a faint memory of their ‘woman’.

Refiguration of slavery in Morrison’s Beloved evinces the effects of displacement on a slave family in the domain of that limited access that slave children had to their parents. Yet, mothering plays a crucial role in communal sustainability and self-empowerment of black women. While understanding the complexities of this situation, it becomes imperative to consider the importance of ‘community mothering’ in the lives of African people who lead a constrained life under the imperialist practices of a white society. Historically and presently, ‘community mothering’ practices were and are central to the experience of many Black women.
*Beloved* is about the long-lost and displaced self which is attained and acquired through various functions of motherhood, presented through different mother-child relations in the novel. Characters like Eva, Sethe, Baby Suggs and Mrs. Mac Teer struggle to find their identity in a white racist society, where they act as mothers rather than as wives. *Beloved* describes the psychological and cultural disarray of motherline fissures, but with Sethe’s reconnections to her motherline, it also suggests hopeful ways to restore that motherline.

Morrison does not limit the scope of maternal relations to the sphere of black women. As a black feminist writer, her stance is equally important in signifying the revolutionary spirit of female power. She constructs a new space for love and friendship to function outside the constrained domain of culture and race. The sacredness of a female body and its revered powers of reproduction gain representation through the simple theme of the novel—a mother’s determination to not let her daughters suffer the atrocities of slave culture. But as a writer, she fulfils her responsibility of bringing together the humane concerns through her writings in order to prove her apprehensions as an African-American writer. *Beloved* does not confide to the display of maternal and womanly strengths of Sethe and Ella as black women or to the contributions of Nan and Baby Suggs as community mothers, but it also evolves and fosters a new face of mother-daughter relationship in the unexpected and inexplicable bond between Amy Denver and Beloved.

Amy Denver is the white woman whom Sethe meets when she is trying to cross the Ohio river while she is pregnant with her second daughter whom she names Denver after her meeting with this woman. Sethe is running with a back badly mutiliated, breasts abused by the nephews and feet full of sores without recognition. She encounters a woman who acts like a mother, and rescues her to life by providing her with some food and medication on her way to escape at that crucial moment when she thinks that she has nearly arrived to the point of death. Both suffer from the same sorrow: Amy is childless and Sethe is scared of losing her children. But the difference of colour draws a line between their concepts of freedom. Amy can move as she is not bound due to her colour whereas, Sethe has to search for a place even for liminal movement where she can at least breathe as a woman and a mother. Both women are running for their life. But irrespective of the limitations, they also share an immediate
bonding. Amy applies a herbal balm on the mark on Sethe’s back, the mark which looks similar to a ‘chockcherry tree’. This mark is formed after the two nephews use ‘cowhide’ on her back when she tries to run away from their trap. Ironically, by doing this, Morrison has shown a reversed face of white folks where a white woman tries to soothe the scars given by white men. Amy bonds with Sethe in few moments as a woman, forgetting the difference of skin. She follows only the rules of communal help in the face of humanity. It presents one woman’s sensibility towards another woman’s pains inflicted on her by racist patriarchy.

Above all, her most significant contribution shines when she plays the role of a midwife while helping Sethe in delivering her pre-matured daughter. For the first time, Sethe feels the warm presence of a compassionate woman, made irrespective of her colour. If Amy would not have been there, Sethe would not have been able to give birth to her daughter. This kind of exchange of emotions and a fresh understanding between the two confirms the belief that maternal concern is natural to a woman. As a woman, even the writer has delivered an important message which exemplifies the coming together of the two cultures- American and African-American- through love, understanding and extensive life-supporting system. This unique, yet instinctive behaviour cements the ties between the two “throw away people, two lawless outlaws- a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinned hair” (84). It is the existence and role of sane Amy and sensitive Baby Suggs that facilitates and enriches Sethe’s journey to reclaim herself.

The new dimension of mothering becomes evident in a strong connection which is also termed as ‘sisterhood’- a distinct zone to exercise strange bonds of friendship between females. Amy’s character also lays a common picture of female oppression where the difference lies only in the intensity of their suffering. Her presence is also comforting to Sethe because the act of healing her ripped back suggests an association between Sethe’s seen and Amy’s unseen wounds in their role as women. Amy’s role and her relation with Sethe evolve from their positions as two unknown victims to that of a nurse, midwife and finally sisters. Before Morrison, Alice Walker has also exemplified the same quality through the characters of Shug Avry and Celie in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple*. 
In *Beloved*, Morrison has extended the same theme portrayal by presenting a woman’s capacity to lend her heart and enliven the communal experiences by realizing and making others recognize the need of self-love. She continues and remains true to her literary tradition by contributing to such radical themes that make another stroke on the canvas of human relationships, filling the dark and dusky shades of friendship in the dramatization of Nel and Sula’s story in her second novel *Sula*. 
End Notes:

1. According to the black feminist bell hooks, ‘homeplace’ functions as a site of resistance and:

   Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, one’s homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world. (42)

   For hooks, homeplace is not only about black women providing space to their families, but it means the creation of a safe place where, “black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination…[a place where] [they] had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture [their] spirits” (42).

2. Andrea O’Reilley describes ‘good mother’ as one who is chaste, moral, passive, obedient, respectable, controlled, altruistic, selfless and domestic. According to Thomas Miller, a discourse on mothering requires that good mothers “act responsibly and present themselves in a culturally acceptable and recognizable manner” (86).
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