Chapter 6

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"I have brought not a child but suffering into the world and it, suffering, refused to leave me, insisted on coming back, on haunting me permanently. One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once it is delivered moves in for good...

[A] mother is ... marked by pain, she succumbs to it" -

Julia Kristeva“ Stabat Mater”

Beloved (1987) situates childhood in the excruciating pain of the slave-mother. While editing Black Book in 1974, Morrison came across fragments of tales of slave mothers who had killed their children in order to save them from the atrocities of slavery. She discovered a newspaper item which reported the actual incident of a fugitive slave mother, Margaret Garner, who being captured in Ohio by slave catchers killed one of her three children and would have killed the others if not prevented from doing so. The enormity of the act of the mother in choosing to kill her children than
send them back to the brutalities of slavery, forms the germ of Morrison’s *Beloved*. Hortense Spillers observes that for the slaves “loss of the indigenous name/land provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations...” (Spillers 73). Slavery implied dispossession, disenfranchisement and an incalculable loss of dignity and selfhood. The dehumanizing, reductive institution not only subordinated the African-American but ‘silenced’ them and made them ‘invisible’. The ‘unspeakable’ histories of the psychologically traumatized and spiritually incapacitated victims were submerged, ignored or mistrusted by the hegemonic and hierarchical grand narrative of history. Morrison points out the “national amnesia” (Morrison “Pain of Being Black”; 1989,120-22) that permeates in the American consciousness vis-à-vis the history of slavery as something which is unconscionable and unbearable: “I’d written because it is about something the characters don’t want to remember. I don’t want to remember. black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember.” (Morrison, “Pain of Being Black”: 1989,120-22) Dedicated to ‘Sixty Millions and more’ slaves who died in the Middle Passage, *Beloved* seeks to reconstruct an
alternative history, to give voice to the “unspeakable thoughts unspoken” (Beloved 235). Morrison rejects the 19th Century slave narrative as inadequate and incomplete: “over and over, the writers pull the narrative short with a phrase such as ‘but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate’. In shaping the experiences to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things and they ‘forgot’ many other things…” (Morrison 1987;190-191). Morrison takes it upon herself to rip the veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate and to explore the interiority of slave experiences, to penetrate the memories, both individual and collective, to imaginatively resurrect/reconstruct the unarticulated stories.

Within the parameter of slavery, childhood as a category, experience, space, chronological marker, had been thwarted, stolen and violently disjointed. In African American existence slavery necessarily involved loss of children who had “run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized”(23). Without the scaffolding of domesticity, family, roots the relationship between children and their parents, their siblings, ancestors, even their community
became travesties. In William Well Brown’s Clotelle, the slave mother considers suicide preferable to committing her children to slavery. In Zora Neale Hurston’s Moses, Man of the Mountain, slavery is presented as an imprisonment from which freedom is possible only through death. Harriet Jacobs writes in her testimonio, “I would rather see them (her children) killed than have them given up to his (slave owner’s) powers... When I lay down beside my child; I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about” (39).

Morrison sets out in her “literary archaeology” (Morrison; 1987, 192) to transgress the textual, social or ethnic boundaries, employ the heterogeneous mode of storytelling to present the ambivalence of marginality. Through ‘historiographic metafiction’ and ‘rememory’ Morrison traces the loss of childhood under slavery as a major trope in Beloved. Beloved ceases to be a narrative about slavery as an institution but becomes a chronicle of the anonymous people called slaves. Morrison reworks the incident of Margaret Garner in the story of Sethe, by means of using an inset ‘ghost story’ she seeks to provide an articulation to the voice of a preverbal infant
killed by her mother to save her from the atrocities of slavery. In *Conversations* Morrison explains, "A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best parts of her and she would not see them sullied" (584). *Beloved* presents the unnerving paradox of motherhood, that must kill to nurture. Morrison employs the signifiers of childhood and motherhood to foreground the act of historical recovery, of re-owning, re-possessing and renaming the discourse from which they had been brutally excluded.

Morrison uses a double perspective of accusation and hope to look backward in the past and forward toward the future as part of this process of historical recovery; in this process Sethe’s daughters, re-incarnated Beloved who is identified as the slaughtered child and Denver, the charmed child upon whom no harm befalls, act as crucial agencies. The dehumanizing effect of slavery is manifest in the plight of the children who are supposed to be legal property of the slave-owners. Grandmother Baby had eight children but she had never even known them, except for Halle. Sethe’s
husband who had rented himself out on all Sundays in order to buy her freedom. The poignancy of the loss experienced by a mother at never having the privilege of claiming her child as her own is specific to the reality of slavery. Baby Suggs says: “I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, ... My first born. 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” (6).

Sethe refuses such passive acceptance of the exclusion of mother’s role; for Sethe, her children are most valuable, a conviction which justifies her trespassing on their subjectivity and deciding their destiny. In an interview with Elsie B. Washington, Morrison elaborated on the centrality of self-worth to enslaved Africans in America by highlighting the dichotomy between the concepts of ‘price’ and ‘value’.

These people could not live without value. They had prices, but no value in the white world. so they made their own, and they decided what was valuable. It was usually something they were doing for somebody else.

(in Taylor-Guthrie 235)

For Sethe the children are better off dead, because in death their future is at least secured from the heinous reality of
slavery. The rationale being that it is better to die in the cradle than to live a slave all life. Sethe tries to return the children to the safety of the collective mother body, to devour them into the security of womb/tomb. In this, as observed by Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulous, “The child is the adult’s fantasy of the future is central to Sethe’s murder of Beloved” (Demetrakopoulous 54). Sethe killed Beloved, according to Stamp Paid, because she “was trying to outhurt the hurters” and “She loves those children” (Beloved 243). Loving as a slave, according to Paul D, must be loving just a little; loving small is survival strategy, Sethe’s defiance of this uncoded stricture is therefore understood as freedom, freedom to love one’s own children: “He know exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose— not to need permission for desire— well now that was freedom” (Beloved 191)

Garner’s is a recorded case, which may not be the solitary one of the slave mother’s desperate bid to save her child from fate worse than death. Infanticide is referred to repeatedly in the text with reference to Sethe’s mother, Ella. Sethe, the very idea confounds the imagined/imposed value of the African American woman as the Great Mother figure.
However, Morrison cannot look away from the grim reality of childhood in slavery, which could be more deadly than death. Children are commodities to be bartered, bought and sold according to the whims of the master. "... nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included... children" *(Beloved 28)*. The murdered child in Morrison's text refuses to be erased from collective (un)consciousness, she comes back as a baby ghost to haunt 124 Bluestone, driving the brothers Howard and Buglar away, and later being driven out by Paul D, returns re-incarnated as a nineteen year old girl with "new skin, lineless and smooth" *(Beloved 61)*, emerging from the water, hinting at a process of birthing, a child emerging from the fluid of the mother's womb. The metaphor is further extended in the reaction of Sethe in first seeing Beloved; she rushes back of her house to urinate; making water coalesces with the image of water-breaking before childbirth. The connection between the murdered child and the revenant is revealed by Morrison in *Conversations* when she says, "So I just imagined the life of a dead girl which was the girl that Margaret Garner killed, the baby girl that she killed... And I call her Beloved so that I can filter all these confrontations and questions that she has in that situation"
Beloved returns to seek justification of her mother's apparent senseless act as well as to re-establish the symbiotic oneness that was ruptured by murder. Sethe's idea of protecting her children negates the containments imposed by slavery, in which a slave woman even a 'used-to-be' slave woman cannot love her children as her own; Sethe treads on the dangerous terrain of claiming them and yearning to possess that which is forbidden: "For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (Beloved 54).

Again, Sethe the mother has been conditioned by Sethe the child. In this context, one can mention Missy Dehn Kubitschek's emphasis upon the duality of Sethe's subjectivity. Sethe is both mother and daughter. Sethe's maternal identity is inseparable from her identity as daughter: "Beneath Sethe's passionate commitment to motherhood lies an equally passionate desire to be mothered, to be a daughter to her mother" (170). This yearning originates from her own deprivations as a child; she had not been mothered as a child should be; her mother labouring in the rice fields was a distant figure, and Nan, the surrogate mother, did not have enough milk after feeding the white babies: "There was no
nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left” (Beloved 237) It is here that we have a cue to Sethe’s intense reaction – her fury, anger, desperation – at being ‘milked’ by the abusers. Kubitschek emphasizes that it is “this unsatisfied hunger in Sethe (which) conditions her own extremely possessive definition of motherhood (Kubitscek 171) Sethe’s psychological compensation for not being mothered herself during childhood is eventually made by overmothering her own children.

Sethe’s murdering her child can also be seen as a transgenerational phenomenon specific to slavery where the daughter duplicated the mother’s action. As a child she had heard stories from Nan about her own mother killing those children fathered by whites, which overlaps with Ella’s murder of the child born out of her association as sex-slave to white father and son – “The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working” – fills her with such revulsion that she is driven to kill her own flesh and blood. Beloved’s insistent questionings “Tell me your diamonds” lead to Sethe’s unraveling of the past, which she had kept in abeyance: Beloved’s innocuous query whether Sethe’s
mother braided her hair compels articulation of repressed childhood memories. Sethe is not sure of her place of birth "Carolina may be? Or was it Louisiana?" (Beloved 30) – implying a loss of history, continuity, lineage, a waste that is complete and irrevocable. Sethe's mother is a distant figure, one among the many bent-back Ma'ams in the field. Sethe's mother did not braid her hair, nor did she sleep with her, she is remembered by a mark seared beneath her breast. Sethe's mother had prompted an awareness of the specific connotation of the mark, "If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (Beloved 61). Unable to comprehend the agony and humiliation associated with the mark, the child Sethe wants a similar mark on her body. Mark Ledbetter describes this mark as "a welcomed mark of distinction, painful and necessary, where little distinction exists... from the perspective of the enslaver" (Beloved 43).

With the exteriorization of repressed childhood memories, Sethe is also made aware of the forgotten mother's language, signifying a rupture from the mother's womb or 'chora'. The very system denied that a child could be precious, wanted, cared for or protected in the oppressive
and inhuman structure of slavery. The mother-child dyad is negated in slavery, the mother is thwarted from sharing an affirmative relationship with the child; instead of a haven she is a menace, the witch figure of the "Die-Witch" game of Howard and Buglar, the ambiguous figure who should have been trusted implicitly but is feared. Sethe's mother was hanged with several others; as a child she could not understand the reason or perhaps refused to understand. As an adult and in the context of her relationship with her own daughters, Sethe is confronted with a possible treachery on her mother's part: "When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile. I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she now? Leave her in the yard with a one-armed woman?" (Beloved 240). Beloved accuses Sethe of the same treachery, she is unforgiving of her mother's betrayal. As Denver perceives, "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it." (Beloved 295)

W.E. DuBois comments in The Souls of Black Folk:
It is a hard thing to live haunted by the ghost of an untrue dream; to see the wide vision of empire fade into real ashes and dirt; to feel the pang of the conquered, and yet to know that with all the Bad that fell on one black day, something was vanquished that deserved to live, something was killed that in justice had not dared to die (Du Bois 415).

The return of Beloved, therefore is not just a psychological projection, but a physical manifestation as well, the uncanny return of the dead to pervade the life and consciousness of the living, the return of the past to shadow the present. Beloved presents a conflation of several ideas and identities; she is at once Sethe’s daughter, an African lost in the middle passage, the figure of thwarted love, of the entire tragedy of slavery that remains “unspeakable things unspoken”. Beloved’s return to claim her place in the family coincides with Paul D’s going out with Sethe and Denver to the Carnival. She may have returned as an adult, but her presence is marked with associations that suggest. Beloved is inhabiting a space of deferred childhood, a symbiotic stage, her obsession with sweet things and oral fixation indicating a yearning for the mother’s milk that she had been deprived of. Beloved comes
back in the body of a nineteen year old but articulates infantile feeling and desires maternal closeness of a nursing baby. This condition bears the trace of Lacanian "Mirror-stage" in which there is a fundamental disharmony regarding the ego. As Lacan describes it: "The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for all the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality ... and, lastly, to the assumption of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the infant's entire mental development." (Lacan 4) A conflict results at this stage between the child's imagined unity with the mother and the perceived autonomy of his/her subjectivity. Beloved refuses to be separated from Sethe, she comes back to claim the mother love she had been deprived of, her insatiable 'devouring' of her mother can be interpreted as Lacanian 'desire' that goes beyond need. "Desire" according to Lacan, "is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting" (Lacan 287). The infant is absolutely
dependent on the (m)other for nurturance, care and feeding, so that there is a perceived oneness, where needs and desires of the mother and child are mutually fulfilled. Gradually, however, the child starts realizing that the (m)other is a separate entity and therefore a ‘lacking’ subject as the child itself is a ‘lacking’ subject. The child, therefore, yearns for love that goes beyond the objects that satisfy its needs. For Lacan it is the ‘beyond’ that constitutes desire. Beloved seems to illustrate the point. Beloved feeds on her mother’s guilt, she refuses to grant and claim autonomous selfhood to her mother as well as herself: “I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too…” (248). Like a vampire she feeds on her mother: “Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire.” (Beloved 283) Beloved accuses Sethe of abandoning her, deserting her; Sethe’s desperate but ineffective attempts to reason with her, assure her, assuage her grief are pathetic. Years ago she had prostituted herself, selling herself for ten minutes to the engraver so that she could have ‘Beloved’ chiseled on the headstone; she would have laid down with her in her grave if
she had not three other children: “When I put that headstone
up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my
shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Buglar and
Howard and Denver didn’t need me, because my mind was
homeless then. I couldn’t lay down with you then. No matter
how much I wanted to” (241).

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy asserts that each daughter in the
novel represents one way of daughter-love. Beloved accuses
while Denver embraces; Beloved is unforgiving while Denver
is loving; Beloved is “Disremembered and unaccounted for”
while Denver is the source of remembering. Denver led a life
of isolation all her childhood; she had never known her
father; abandoned by brothers and grandmother being dead
she is furthermore segregated by her community, so that
“there were no children willing to circle her in a game or
hang by their knees from her porch railings” (Beloved 12).
Denver’s loneliness wore her out, the only escape is the
‘room’ in the woods which had walls made of fifty inches of
murmuring leaves. The bower-like ‘room’ changes nature
with the changes that take place in Denver, from being a
“little girl’s houseplay” to a space which staved off “the hurt
of the hurt world” (28). This loneliness and alienation is
imposed and unnatural for a child. Her only company is the baby ghost till Paul D drives it out. She forges an immediate bond with Beloved, she guards her zealously and is possessive of her. She becomes an observer of the intense interplay of past and present in the relationship between Sethe and Beloved. She witnesses the sight of Beloved choking her mother in the Clearing and confronts beloved with this knowledge. This transfers her in her memory to her age seven when she had wandered beyond the 124 Bluestone and entered the children’s class of Lady Jones. For a year, she learnt to read and write: “She was so happy she didn’t even know she was being avoided by her classmates – that they made excuses and altered their pace not to walk with her…” (Beloved 120). She could not confront Nelson Lord’s questions, never could confront her mother with the same questions; instead she chose to become deaf and withdraw from the alternative social order that she had embraced outside the maternal symbolic order. At the age of fifteen she is confronted with another challenge, of an intruder devouring her mother, throttling her with attention and surreptiously consuming her. With Beloved’s presence in their lives, Denver is faced with a self-interrogation: “Walking toward
the stream, beyond her green bush house, she lets herself wonder what if Beloved really decoded to choke her mother. Would she let it happen?" (Beloved 104). For the intervening years Denver preferred an ambivalence, an unknowing about Sethe’s murderous expression of mother-love. Denver is scared of her mother and is indecisive in her choice: “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughter, and tender as she is with me, I am scared of her because of it” (Beloved 205). Denver, the daughter of history, who had taken her sister’s blood with her mother’s milk, decides to understand her mother’s story in the context of the wider story of slavery. Denver, standing on the porch and unable to leave it, hears Baby Suggs’ voice: “Know it. and go on out the yard. Go on” (Beloved 288), impelling her to accept the layers of suffering in slavery and move beyond her mother’s history to ‘know’ the stories of her father, her grandmother, her community, Carolina, Sweet Home and the entirety of history. This is necessary to understand the mother’s refusal to permit her children to be treated as animals, to the extent that she can kill them, in order to protect: “And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (Beloved 296). Leaving the
yard of 124 Bluestone Denver walks into Lady Jones'. Lady Jones’ recognition and her softly spoken “Oh, baby... Oh, Baby”, initiates her into maturity. She seeks to mend the breach between 124 Bluestone and the community, caused by Sethe’s sense of betrayal and the community’s righteousness that could not accommodate Sethe’s act of self-determination.

Baby Suggs Holy had in the Clearing initiated free expression of emotions among Black men, women and children. Slave life had busted Baby Suggs’ legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue, after being ‘freed’ she chooses to live by her heart. In the Clearing she invited the black men, women and children to laugh, cry and dance, so that the laughter of the children, dancing of the men and crying of the women all mingled, enmeshed to effect a collective catharsis of their sorrow, loss, happiness, dreams. Baby Suggs insists on loving and reclaiming their heart which can be understood as reclamation of their selves or identities. Baby Suggs’ big heart could not save Sethe and her children; they become victims of the community’s betrayal and covetousness. They could have saved the child from being murdered if they had informed Sethe about Schoolteacher’s coming to village. But they stayed away, angry and envious at
the abundance at the feast held at 124 Bluestone, offended by what they perceived as pride in Baby Suggs and Sethe. Therefore, the blood of the murdered child is not only on Sethe’s hands but it smears the conscience of the community. The exorcism of Beloved thus takes on a communal dimension. Ella along with thirty other women gather near Sethe’s house to exorcise Beloved’s presence suggesting that Beloved symbolizes black women in the contemporaneous and historical communities; Beloved is Sethe’s repressed ‘other’, and also Ella, Vasthi, the child with the red ribbon, the girl who had killed her captor and fled and other such named and unnamed individuals that render the text into a ‘palimpsest’ of several peripheralised existence.

In describing Beloved, Morrison said to Sandra Russel with “hushed intensity”:

The story has lots of questions in it for me. The novel is an attempt to deal with those questions. It was an era I didn’t want to get into – going back into and through grief.(in Nelly McKay 45)

The novel records the struggle between remembering and forgetting the past, between trauma and healing powers of ‘rememory’. The novel also records the re-enactment and re-
configuration of the past in the present as Sethe does with an icepick at the end of the novel, but this time instead of attacking her children, she uses it on Bodwin whom she confuses with Schoolmaster. Mae Henderson argues that this configuration of the past delivers Sethe from the possession of past and exorcises Beloved. "This is not a story to pass on" (324) implies that this is not a story to be just casually glanced through/rejected/ignored thereafter; it may also be a warning that this is not a story to be repeated/duplicated. 'Beloved' – the word that ends the novel, suggests that past leaves its trace – as Linda Hutcheon points out "The past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled... the past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power" (58) To see closure in the novel would be facile interpretation, as Emily Miller Budick reveals, "recovering the missing(child)... reconstructing in the present what was lost in the past, will not. this book insists, restore order and logic to lives that has been interrupted by such loss" (Budick 131).