

Infanticide Uncondemned:

Reflections on Trauma in Morrison's *Beloved*

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## Abstract

This essay sets out to prove how the story of infanticide in Morrison's *Beloved* was not condemned by community and how the communal response implicitly ratified the murderous mother's remorselessness. I refute the main character's maternal love as a driving force for the killing and claim that the chronic trauma of slavery has left her incapable of having any feelings, which affects her loving her children and leaves her unable to feel remorse for the murder she committed. I also argue that the community response ratified her reaction, as most of them shared similar traumas and a collective mutuality and responsibility for the murder.

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## Introduction

My first encounter with Toni Morrison's work was when I read *Tar baby* and *Song of Solomon* which approximately coincided with when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1993. Morrison's voice and how her words painted a poetic scene fascinated me. I was also intrigued, as the subject of slavery was far differently presented from the novels I usually read at the time. When I 17 years later again savoured Morrison's work in the novel *Sula* I became interested in learning more about her work. So I chose to write my essay about a novel that was new to me, namely the one that won 1988's Pulitzer Prize in the fiction category: *Beloved*.

With the brutal history of African Americans and all traumas in mind it was easy for me to understand most of the characters' emotional responses and reactions in *Beloved*. Even the reaction of the main character Sethe was understandable as she felt forced to kill her own children when she thought she was being recaptured by the slave-master. However, the way she later on was portrayed to handle her own act of infanticide, how she was given no feelings of remorse, was inexplicable to me at first. My claim is that the story of infanticide in the novel *Beloved* was not condemned by neither the black nor the white community because they all suffered by similar emotional repressions due to chronic traumas. I will prove my claim by showing how maternal love was replaced by an obligation, and how this non-existing maternal love is evidence of the murderer not regretting her act of infanticide. Furthermore I claim that the communal response implicitly ratified her remorselessness as they all felt responsible for the murder.

In a true postmodern style Morrison addressed several different themes in this American novel, for example the cruelties the slaves suffered in their everyday lives,

emotional repression, myths and ghosts, maternal love and infanticide. As a reader one was provided with an insight and an apprehension of the devastation that chronic stress can cause. By focusing on the effects of traumatized families Morrison also touches upon something that is current and relevant in psychology debates today, namely Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Being exposed to a psychological and/or physical trauma can cause this anxiety disorder with symptoms such as recurrent flashbacks and memories of the trauma and as an emotional numbing with a decreased responsiveness in the ability to feel, or even an inability to feel.

The postmodern structure of *Beloved* was an effective tool for Morrison to dilatorily and mercilessly tell the story of a traumatized African American family living with memory's treacherous flashbacks of the atrocities of slavery. Morrison did not use a chronological timeline as a narrative strategy instead she built a mosaic image, piece by piece. By using this narrative strategy the story at first came across as haphazardly told, however it grew to be an effective vehicle to display the irrational and fast roller-coaster ride the characters were forced to take in order to emotionally come to terms with their past.

This essay is divided into two chapters, where the first chapter focuses on mother's love, or rather what I claim to be the lack of maternal love replaced by the force of maternal obligation. This chapter also discusses how the murdering mother Sethe did not regret committing infanticide and briefly investigates if the symptoms of chronic trauma could be the cause of this callousness. In the second chapter, I will shift focus to the family's and community's reaction. First, I will look at the family's response and fears, and then continue with an exploration of the community's response to the act of infanticide. I will conclude the second chapter by proving that the communal response could be seen as a ratification of the infanticide.

## Chapter one : Mother Love or Obligation

Throughout the story of *Beloved* the primal emotion of mother love was ever present and used as the main driving force, urging the main character Sethe forward. Sethe survived barbaric rape, whippings, a traumatic escape and childbirth with one main focus intact: to reunite with her children, to provide for them. When she had a chance to save her children from slavery, to have them escape, she sent them away in advance. Sethe reflected on how others had become mentally insane under similar circumstances in the following passage “other people went crazy, why couldn’t she?[...]But her children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio” (Morrison, 83-84) and by adding that last sentence the maternal drive was given extra validity. The sentence symbolised how maternal love hindered her from letting go of her mental strengths, hindered her from going insane. No matter what circumstances Sethe was subdued to she felt forced to continue to live, to not give up, because her innate love for her children was urging her to.

The maternal love described and utilised in the story was an inherent primal feeling, but I argue that it should be seen as a responsibility spell. Because Sethe was being emotionally turned off, a subject I will return to later on in this chapter, it was not love at all, it was an obligation that made her reunite with and provide for her children. As Furman put it in her book *Toni Morrison’s Fiction* when discussing Sethe’s maternal and mental status: “For Sethe, the duties of motherhood [were] not dissolved by mental disarrangements” (75). Furman too was referring to the maternal love as a duty, an obligation, which hindered Sethe from going completely insane.

Maternal love was also the rationale for the runaway Sethe to commit infanticide. When she thought she and her children were about to be recaptured by their sadistic slave owner she reacted instinctively, as she saw the threat approaching she

“[c]ollected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and true” (Morrison, 192) and felt forced to kill them all including herself. The proposed reason for this deed was maternal love, as Sethe did not want anyone in her family to have to feel what she had been forced to feel as a slave (239). According to Furman “[t]his concept of love and safety as motivation for infanticide is a familiar inversion of conventional thinking in Morrison’s work” (69). Sethe’s determination and the clarity with which this decision was taken was left undisputed as she in a dialogue with her old friend, Paul D, claimed that she “was not going back there. [...] Any life but not that one.” (Morrison, 50).

As I argued in the second paragraph of this chapter I found no evidence of that Sethe loved her children. In the essay “*Beloved* or the Shifting Shapes of Memory” Raynaud observed how “Morrison use[d] paroxysmic behavior (infanticide) – translated as excessive mother love” (46) as rationale for murdering the children. I disagree with Raynaud, as I argue that it was not excessive mother love that killed the girl, on the contrary it was the absence of love that killed her. Morrison provided us with explanations to this lack of love, for example how family members were handled like pawns in a game of chess (28-29), how they were advised by their own people not to love (108) or at least to “protect [them]selves and lov[e] small” (191). Later on in this chapter I will show that chronic stress can explain how the emotional numbing was a survival tool, to prevent insanity, as slavery forced the black population to shut down emotionally to survive the atrocities white men and women subdued them to.

This cautiousness in loving could also be interpreted as something learnt, or perhaps even inherited. Sethe’s mother-in-law explained how “the nastiness of life” (28) made her choose not to love her children. When Sethe was a child she was told how her own mother threw all the babies away, all but her (75). Continuously through the novel Sethe was carrying a deep love for her husband, Halle. He was someone she truly loved and when she

learnt about his insanity she felt she was crumbling to pieces (81, 114), but because of the obligation towards her children, or the alleged innate and primal mother love, she was obliged to carry on. This emotional response to the husband's insanity was contradictory to her response when killing her own child, or even when her two sons left her out of fear. She never felt she was falling apart due to heart-ache caused by the love for her children and this could be seen as additional evidence of how numbness had replaced maternal love.

The novel's epigraph is a quote from the letter of Romans in the New Testament and serves as an example of how the existence of mother's love could be questioned

I will call them my people,  
which were not my people;  
and her beloved,  
which was not beloved.

In its full context this quote usually is interpreted as a the salvation of the heathens and it explains how they should be included in God's congregation. In other words by extending a hand to everyone all are supposedly welcome to his kingdom to be a part of the chosen people (Stiftelsen Biblicum). Contrary to this contextualised interpretation I believe Morrison intended something different as the quote is taken out of its context. I argue that the epigraph should be interpreted verbatim and shows how the murdered baby Beloved was never loved, or allowed to be loved, consequently, I also argue that because she was called Beloved, she was not.

The murder victim's generic name proved the absent maternal love as well. When reading *Beloved* it felt strange that a two-year old child was left nameless, as if Morrison kept the murdered baby nameless and almost anonymous and therefore also unloved. Beloved was referred to as "crawling-already? baby" (Morrison, 110) or by the opening words of the minister at the burial, "Dearly beloved" (5), which partly became the



inscription of her tombstone “Beloved”. In a story told to Sethe by her wet nurse, there was a description of how her mother too had discarded babies:

The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. (74)

This extract revealed how Sethe’s mother did not name the children conceived through unconsensual sex, however she named Sethe as Sethe was conceived by a man which the mother had chosen herself. In this perspective one was tempted to wonder if there perhaps was an even stronger reason for Beloved to be left unnamed and unloved, could perhaps Beloved be a result of unconsensual sex?

Through *Beloved* the reader gets a glimpse of the devastation that chronic stress can cause and by focusing on these effects Morrison also touched upon something current and relevant in society today. Psychologists and psychiatrists are studying what influences Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has on, for example, soldiers in war, sexual crime victims or children living in abusive homes. Recently there have also been a vivid debate on whether the systematic ethno-cultural trauma the slaves were subdued to have left scars in the African American identity so deep they actually are causing many of the problems we see in society today (Eyerman, 2001). I suggest that chronic stress eventually caused Sethe’s inability to feel and inability to love her children. Her emotions were turned off so Sethe could survive everyday-life, to prevent insanity. Additional support can be found in the book *Toni Morrison’s Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination* where Marks approached the problem at an even higher level when claiming that not only Beloved was unloved but the whole community felt unloved (64). I agree with Marks and I suggest that this was symptomatic throughout the community because all were afflicted by the anxiety disorder and all were experiencing the symptoms and consequences of emotional numbing.

The matter of Sethe's guilt was left undisputed, but what was puzzling and contradictory to me, when first reading *Beloved*, was how there were no signs of remorse. Sethe repeatedly rationalised her own deed by explaining how it "had to be done quick" so Beloved would be safe (Morrison, 236) and how it was the only alternative she could find (226). She even deceived herself into believing that the ghost of Beloved was not angry at her (214) for slashing Beloved's throat and explained that "if [she] hadn't killed her [Beloved] would have died" (236), which in itself is a contradiction in terms. Early in the novel, Sethe talked about how the cost of running was too much (18), which indicated that she would not have run if it would have happened again. I drew the conclusion that she would have killed again and that is not a sign of regret. She thought about "the perfect death of her 'crawling-already? baby'" (116), which indicated that the planned murders, even though not all completed, did not make her feel remorseful. At one point Sethe actually apologised for her daughter Denver's behaviour (54) which was a bit surprising as she nowhere in the story did apologise for her own behaviour, for murdering one of her own in front of the others. Sethe's determination to avoid having to return to slavery was established with the sentence "Sethe had refused – and still refused" (296). The sentence implied that she did not regret her action, as she had refused; by committing murder, and the fact that she still refused was evidence of how she would murder again, if needed.

When reading the novel I found Sethe to be a traumatised woman who was strongly driven by the innate force mother's love has, or rather by the obligation of being a mother and by the hurt from her lost love, her husband. The horrors of slavery had eventually made her unable to love her children and incapable to feel. Therefore, because she was incapable to feel she also was unable to feel remorse. In the words of Marks "[t]he murder [was] 'successful' on many levels. It [kept] Sethe and her children from having to return to

slavery "(41). I conclude that Sethe did not remorse committing the infanticide and under the circumstances it was to be seen as a successful deed, where the ends justified the means.

## Chapter two : Pride and Ratification

Chapter one was concluded by showing how the main character Sethe did not feel remorse. In this chapter I will continue to prove my claim by showing how Sethe's family and the community around her indirectly and inexplicitly ratified the infanticide by not condemning the murder but by condemning pride instead. First I will investigate how Sethe's closest family and friends reacted to her pride and to the murder and then I will continue by discussing how the rest of the community reacted to her.

Sethe's mother in law, Baby Suggs, was condemned for being proud and was herself condemning Sethe's pride. Baby Suggs' freedom had been bought by her son Halle and it was a freedom she did not want (Morrison, 166) or saw any use for, because by being freed she also was separated from the one child she still had within reach, namely Halle. When Sethe and her children moved in with Baby Suggs after their escape from the slave farm Baby Suggs was exhilarated to have regained parts of her family. She was so happy she decided to hold a feast to which the whole community was invited. However, the feast offended the community and "[h]er friends and neighbours were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (163). Pride and excess was not seen upon kindly and Baby Suggs and her newly found family were condemned because of her pride. Nevertheless, she was not angry with her community, she understood how they were disapproving of her and how they therefore felt offended. Baby Suggs herself disapproved of Sethe's pride. She envied Sethe for being blessed with several years of marriage to one man, Halle, and she also envied Sethe for being fortunate enough to have him fathering all of the children. Baby Suggs thought it questionable that Sethe took this luck for granted and jealously thought that "[a] bigger fool never lived" (28), especially since Sethe seemed to think she was beyond slavery and the misery of it. That foolishness and sense of pride was

what Baby Suggs felt compelled to condemn, just as the rest of the community had condemned her pride.

Throughout the story Sethe's surviving children tried to handle the fear of living with their murderous mother, especially Denver, Sethe's 18 year old daughter, who was an infant at the time of the murder, expressed this fear. When she thought "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (242) she described the duality of having to cope with her love for and distrust towards her own mother. Denver tried to handle the imminent fear of being efficiently beheaded, just as her sister had been. This fear was brusquely addressed when Denver thought "I spent all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me, loving her even when she braided my head at night" (245). Denver also struggled to protect the rest of the family from the potential threat that she thought Sethe might oppose (243).

One member of community who did at first blame Sethe was Stamp Paid, however he did not blame her for the infanticide. Several years after Baby Suggs died he, as her best friend, was trying to make sense of how the infanticide indirectly caused her death as "he believed then that shame put [Baby Suggs] in the bed" (208), but slowly he realised that the "blood spill in her backyard" (208) was not the cause. He remembered how she neither condemned nor approved Sethe's choice (212) and that she even questioned what would have happened if Sethe had not done what she did (211). Stamp Paid realised that "[t]he whitefolks had tired her out at last" (212). It did not matter whether death was direct, as in a whipping or hanging, or even an infanticide committed by a desperate mother, or whether death was indirect, as it was in Baby Suggs case. Ultimately the toll of slavery was death.

Paul D was the only member in the community who questioned Sethe's actions and refuted her explanations to the murder. He was her long-time friend and a new found lover who thought that "this here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw[...]:more

important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed” (193). In “Remodeling the Model Home in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Beloved*” Askeland argues that Sethe saw “her action as claiming a domain over herself” (171) and this was probably what was problematic as Paul D did not see how the right to one’s own freedom automatically made it right to decide whether ones children should be living or dead. Did freedom of body automatically include the body of your children? Paul D questioned the murder by claiming that “[t]here could have been another way” (Morrison, 194), a way that would have prevented Sethe and her family from being recaptured, an alternative that could have avoided the beheading of a child and traumatizing three children. However, as Askeland observes “[n]ot even Paul D [could] tell her what ‘better’ options she may have had” (170) but that did not prevent him from reminding her that she had “two feet” (Morrison, 194). By condemning her and furthermore insult her by reminding her she was a two legged human being and not a critter, he offended her in the same manner as the slave owners had (228) done earlier. It was an insult Sethe resented and what caused them to part ways.

The community’s response to the murder was not condemning. Through Ella, who was working with the Underground Railroad and who had helped Sethe reach freedom, we were given an understanding of how the community reasoned regarding Sethe murdering her own daughter. Ella “understood Sethe’s rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected” (Morrison, 301-302). This was a bit contradictory, as Ella did reciprocate Sethe’s emotional response, namely rage, but not Sethe’s reaction, the fact that Sethe did murder her own child. This was even more contradictory as Ella herself had murdered her own child when “[s]he had delivered, but would not nurse” (305). Perhaps there was a difference in the non-active, passive manner Ella committed murder compared to the active method Sethe used to kill her daughter, with a hand-saw. Or maybe it was the fact that Ella’s baby was conceived through rape, by a white

man, which perhaps made it less horrible or easier to understand. However, Ella did not judge degrees of wrongness and she did not condemn the murder. Ella condemned the fact that she thought Sethe reacted pridefully. This communal response, through the eyes of Ella, was a understandable reaction when considering the emptiness within, the emotional dullness imposed by the trauma of slavery and the fact that everyone in the community had suffered similar chronic physical and psychological damages.

As argued earlier in this chapter, Stamp Paid stopped blaming Sethe for causing Baby Suggs' death and eventually he ratified the infanticide. He changed his mind when realising that racism and slavery caused both Baby Suggs' death and the murder of the baby Beloved and he no longer blamed Sethe, but rather understood why she reacted the way she did. When he also tried to convince Paul D that "She ain't crazy[...]She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (276) he implicitly ratified the murder. It was hard to pinpoint if and when Paul D stopped condemning Sethe. He forgave her and chose to return to her and "put his story next to hers" (322).

The abolitionists' point of view were spoken through the white man Edward Bodwin, who marvelled at the fact that they "managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around and build a further case for abolishing slavery" (307) and as a result the white community did not condemn the murder, instead they used the extraordinary case as a excuse to prove their cause. Consequently they too ratified Sethe's deed.

Community, through the eyes of Ella, did not condemn the murder as they all shared the trauma of slavery. In "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*" Lawrence suggest that "[i]ndividual and community survival are thus inseparable; the trial of one body are, in some form, the trials of everybody" (241). I agree with Lawrence and would like to extend the shared trials to also include a shared conscience. They were all suffering from a guilty conscience as they chose not to react nor warn Sethe when the slave

master arrived, because they were too occupied with resenting Baby Suggs' excess during the celebration feast the day before (Morrison, 163). A guilty conscience made them collectively responsible for the fact that the murder happened in the first place and thereby they were indirect accomplices and to soothe their consciences they also ratified the murder.

Finally, by killing her child Sethe denied slavery more victims to oppress. The question Askeland answered was "did she have the right to the bodies of her children? She [saw] her action as claiming a domain over herself" (171). If the action was a claim of ownership over Sethe's own self, then I saw the infanticide more as an act of commodification, extended to commodify Sethe's own children. Was that not what she was trying to escape, the commodification and oppression of slavery? That was exactly what Paul D was implying before they parted, that she was not life-stock and should not act as a tradable commodity. I agree with Trudier Harris when she in her essay "*Beloved: Woman, Thy Name Is Demon*" argued on the complexity of the matter:

Killing a child is certainly antithetical to the basic roots of our society, but Morrison forces us to ask again and again what we might have done under the circumstances. And she succeeds in making Sethe so simply human [...]that we cannot easily condemn her act even when we clearly do not condone it. (144)

Nevertheless, contrary to what Marks argues when stating that "*Beloved* reevaluates the kind of love that can see murder as its greatest form of resistance" (64) I claim that Morrison achieved to commodify Sethe's children, when she had Sethe murder her own child, no matter if the resistance was done in the name of freedom or of maternal love.



## Conclusion

This essay has set out to prove my claim of how the story of infanticide in Morrison's *Beloved* was not condemned by community and how the communal response implicitly ratified the murderous mother's remorselessness.

I started chapter one by exploring how maternal love was used as the driving force and rationale for killing a child, but I refuted Sethe's maternal love and redefined it as a responsibility and obligation of motherhood. By establishing how Morrison continuously readdressed trauma through several of the characters in *Beloved* and how the emotional dullness was actively used as a survival tool among them I showed how the trauma of slavery had emotionally damaged Sethe and forced her to turn her emotions off. Then I explored the subject of the murder victim's generic name and how the portrayal of an unloved child was achieved by anonymity. Finally I established that the systematic and chronic trauma had left Sethe with the inability to feel and therefore she was unable to feel neither love for her children nor remorse about committing infanticide.

Chapter two focused on how Sethe's family reacted by condemning pride, expressing jealousy and how they lived in fear of the murderer. Interestingly there was only one man who refuted the rationale behind the murder, otherwise the rest of the community understood Sethe's actions. The closest family friend, Stamp Paid, did blame Sethe for indirectly causing the death of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. He eventually realised how slavery was the killer, not Sethe, and thereby he rationalised the infanticide and also ratified it. A closer look at the community response to the murder showed how pride was condemned and not, as expected, the infanticide. All had suffered by, and shared, similar traumas and this mutuality implied the collective as accomplices and therefore the community also collectively chose to ratify the murder.

I concluded the second chapter by briefly touching upon how complex the ethical dilemma of infanticide was. Morrison has given us food for thought as we unwillingly were forced to form and reform our opinions of the matter.

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