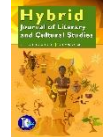




Mothering and female victimization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)



Review article



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 2021

© 2021 The Author(s). This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-NC-SA) license.

Article Information

Submitted: 15th February 2021

Accepted: 4th April 2021

Published: 29th May 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ISSN 2707-2150 (Online)

ISSN 2707-2169 (Print)

To read the paper online, please



Elisabeth M. N. Ayuk Etang

Department of English and Cultural Studies, University of Buea - Cameroon

Email: Miafoueli@yahoo.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-2345-6789>

Abstract

This study sought to demonstrate the effects of traumatic and systematic racism that exacerbate the ambiguities of mothering as highlighted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The study is structured into two sections. It is built on a retrospective slavery saga of the Black woman in the United States who struggles to empower herself as she grapples with the quagmirish and nightmarish situation of slavery and motherhood. The study argues that, slavery, characterized by rape, torture and systemic racism stifle the black woman's individuality as a mother, and deprives her of her full potentials of mothering. The study therefore analyses, interprets and examines the challenges of mothering in *Beloved*. Guided by the concept of *motherism* and the tenets of gender discourse, the study reveals that the Black woman is committed to performing her reproductive role, but run-through infanticide as protective measures to her offspring.

Keywords: child-raising, gender, infanticide, mothering, race, slavery



How to Cite:

Ayuk-Etang, E. N. M. (2021). Mothering and Female Victimization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3(2). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/hybrid-literary/article/view/627>



Public Interest Statement

This study argues that, slavery, characterized by rape, torture and systemic racism stifle the black woman's individuality as a mother, and deprives her of her full potentials of mothering. The system also ascribed the woman as slave breeders to enlarge the masters's territory, which eventually push her to commit infanticide. Thus, mothering in that society is built on the ambivalence of joy and pain.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, is a retrospection of the antebellum slavery in the United States of America (USA). A representation of slaves experiences in America. This paper gives an overview of the victimization of the black, slave woman, amidst her reproductive role. A role which is supposed to be celebrated, but contrarily, devalues her motherhood and reduced her to a slave breeder to enlarge the slave master's plantation. (Davis, 1981). However, the black woman's love for her progenies push her to do 'extraordinary things' to protect her children's dignity and sanity from systemic racism and slavery. Loucynda Jesen in 'Searching the silence: Finding black women's resistance to slavery in antebellum US history' explains that slave women destroyed their children and unborn children to resist slave breeding thus; 'abortion and infanticide, can be analyzed as resistance against slaveholders' methods of breeding, and therefore against the system of slavery and oppression itself' (2006, p.136). Jesen's historical survey identifies infanticide and abortion as some of the extraordinary things the black woman practiced during slavery. These acts, though considered as 'mercy killing' by the practitioners, demonstrate a sense of guilt which questions their mothering ability. Notwithstanding, black women 'didn't want to contribute to a system that oppress them' (Jesen 2006, p.145). The woman usually carries her burden alone in the African American context, whereby the father figure is occasionally absent. However, even when present, his role is passive – mark of irresponsibility and systemic gender emasculation. The absence of the father might be in two folds; by faith or by design. That is because the male slaves begot many children on the plantation, either with their wives or imposed partners or other wives. Hannah Jones, an ex-slave, whose narrative is registered in *Lay my burden down* explain how the 'breeding was done; which in order words is a justification of the lack of commitment of the father figure.

when dey were to raise certain kind of breed of chillun or certain color,
dey just mix us up to suit that taste, and tell the nigger this is your wide

[sic] or this is your husband, and dey take each other...and raise big families to the white folks liking. (quoted from Jesen 2006, p.147)

These marriages or relationships were unpredictable because of the separation of families and instability of the male slaves' residence. Morrison's historicity of slavery from the perspective of the mother is a celebration of the scars on the psyche of the Black woman. This paper explores the effects of rape, torture, traumatic and systematic racism that exacerbate the ambiguities of mothering as highlighted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The study argues that, victimization, systemic racism as well as the passivity (absence) of the 'father figure' burdened the black woman as a mother, and deprives her of her full potentials of mothering. Thus, mothering in that society is built on the ambivalence of joy and pain. However, the slave women in *Beloved* are nurturers and care-givers of their families and children despite the torture and torments they experience; which are due to their own shortcomings as seen through Sethe and Baby Suggs. Guided by the concepts of *motherism* and the tenets of gender discourse, this paper discusses the culture of gendering as a social construct and how this construct makes child raising in the slavery era challenging. To better articulate this thesis, the study is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the culture of gendering as presented by Morrison in *Beloved*. The second part discusses the contexts and challenges of mothering in the novel.

The Culture of Gendering and Mothering

This section examines issues of gendering in Morrison's *Beloved*. Amy G. Mazur and Gary Goetz in *Politics, gender, and concepts: Theory and methodology* see gender as 'the process of bringing out and making explicit hidden biases and assumptions in standard conceptualization' (2008, p.7). By this claim, it is most likely that gendering is a promoter of difference among sexes. Gendering defines and fixes what masculinity and femininity stand for and how they function in time and space. The outcome of difference is conditioned by which gender is at the centre, pushing the other to the periphery. Morrison's *Beloved* narrates the plight of Black mothers in their femininity space that is constructed by capitalist slave masculinity. In the novel, the Black mother is the breadwinner – a masculine trait as per gender division of labour in 'the world' in which she finds herself. She combines this productive role with that role of child-rearing (reproductive role). These two roles were challenging and her mother status was unpredictable.

Mothering, in this study, is considered the processes of motherhood which is not limited to biology, but includes nurturing, care-giving and even grooming.

Mothering as well as motherhood can be surmounted under the broad termed *motherism*, coined by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu in 1995. According to her, ‘motherism denotes motherhood, nature and culture’ (1995, p.110). In *Motherism: An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, Acholonu states that, motherhood is an important institution which is ‘central to African metaphysics’ (1995, p.110), thus it defines the place of the African woman. Some scholars disagree with Acholonu’s principles of motherism, because ‘it alienates not only women who cannot bear children but also women who choose not to be mothers’ (Azuah 2005, p.130). However, Acholonu holds strong to her ideas when she argues that a *motherist* could be a woman or man, it has no sex barriers because the core of motherism is partnership, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding and patience (1995, p.112). She further elucidates that *motherism* is a multidimensional concept which involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with nature at all levels of human endeavour (1995, p.113). This definition fits into the framework of this study, because it is built on the strength of the woman in building and sustaining her family with or without the man. Thus, it denotes the superiority of a mother through her life giving, life affirming and nurturing ability. Although, Acholonu’s principles are central to the African woman, the black woman in Morrison’s *Beloved* is metaphorically an extension of the African woman – who is both a victim of her race and systemic slavery. *Beloved* is a defamiliarization of Black mothers in the era of slavery in America who are struggling to make sense of their lives in a violent and irrational world. The narrative voice in the text makes Morrison more of an iconoclast as she sniffs her metaphors from verbal icons to cultural artefacts (Greenblatt 1980) which is built on the community’s oral traditions. Morrison’s *Beloved* is built on memory and history which exposes the plight of Black Mothers in their femininity space that is constructed by capitalist slave masculinity. Madhumita Purkayasha in ‘Rememory as a strategy of subversive representation: A feminist reading of Morrison’s *Beloved*’ explains that Morrison ‘reinvented memory as a rememory and conceives the term as a narrative tool for counter hegemonic storytelling and multi-perspectival discourse’ (quoted from Etim 2020, p.5). However, Eyoh Etim interprets Morrison’s ‘rememory’ as a ‘strategy for reading a text from the viewpoint of memory and history’ (2020, p. 5). The term ‘rememory’ was coined by Morrison in her novel *Beloved* which is assumed to be a ‘good psychological and narrative tool which provides outlet and an effective use of self-discovery through re-living and memory’ (Etim 2020). The novel, *Beloved*, captures the memory and history, self-discovery and the experiences of the Black slave woman in the antebellum South of America. Swagata Biwas in ‘Toni Morrison’s *beloved*: A reconstruction of the slave narrative genre’ argues that, ‘Morrison in her

text (*Beloved*) has rendered 'speakable' what was historically 'unspeakable' and unimaginable' (2016, p.708).

During slavery, the attribution of gender roles was different for Black men and women – they were all bonds people and were therefore property to the white master. Yet, as the novel interprets, the patriarchal system is constructed in the homes with women being at the centre stage. This disparity of power at home and power out of home only enforces Morrison's portrayal of a chaotic world where these Black mothers must survive. Sethe reconciles her gender roles with that of her husband, Halle Suggs, and eventually with that of Paul D ('second husband'). Sethe's experience reveals the cruelty of being a Black woman, Black mother and a black slave woman in America. Sethe becomes the breadwinner as she works in a restaurant and this helps her to take care of her children. Morrison, in the novel, interpolates the individual struggle of a Black mother with the collective struggles of Black mothers in the United States. Baby Suggs is another case in time who works alone to feed her community and even at this, she is subject to all forms of insult; she is described thus, 'Too much they thought. Where does she get it all Baby Suggs, holy...? And loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone' (1987, p.136). Baby Suggs becomes a blend of awe and surprises and this is seen in the tone of the speaker who, different from others venerates this matriarch who is making things happen. Morrison presents this mother as a hard-working woman who works for the commonwealth. Baby Suggs signifies Black communal life which she champions in the novel and a mother of her community. Despite the hardship and negative statements on her person as a woman, Baby Suggs is resilient and that earns her the respect that the speaker in the quote above makes.

Sethe is a victim of systemic injustice of the Black personhood. Amid the dehumanizing slave ideology, she, as a symbol of Black mothering, continues to represent hope for Black people with her message of love. She is the source of motivation and admiration in her community. In the novel, she nurtures people like Paul D, a man captured in Georgia as a runaway and he undergoes untold punishment in prison. Paul D, in this case, enters the face of objectification in his life; treated like an animal though he remains conscious of the fact that he is a human being. His secret humanity is only revealed when he meets Sethe in Cincinnati where she ends up nurturing him.

Morrison handles mothering from the perspective of care to others; the idea of being a shield to anyone in need. *Beloved* (the ghost child) wears out Sethe meanwhile Denver sees the need to rescue her mother from vilification. Barbara Offut Mathieson in 'Memory and mother love in Morrison's *beloved*' contends that 'Denver rediscovers what is perhaps the most successful strategy for adult development; she replaces the

solitary maternal bond with a larger community of adults and opens herself to an empathetic network of fellows' (1990, p.15). The strategy for adult development which Denver soon realizes rescues Sethe, her mother, as she now integrates into the family. To achieve this, she looked for a job which exposes her to a different community away from her home. This outward move walks Denver into the path of self-discovery and self-realisation which makes her different from her mother Sethe. This is because Sethe's 'mercy killing' (committed infanticide) of her daughter Beloved, tormented and ruined her life and her status as a good mother. Denver's self-realisation of Sethe's situation push her to work harder and pull her closer to her mother with the father's role combined.

Beloved in every way is a novel about Black women and Black mothers playing their role to better transform and adapt to a hostile, brutal and effacing era in the United States to a more accommodating and welcoming place. Denver champions this vision in the novel as her maturity contrasts that of Beloved's childishness and Sethe's failure. Also, these women's effort to rescue Sethe from Beloved is worth applauding. Sethe's tormentor – Beloved, leads her to the point of losing her dignity and identity. In other to redeem her, the women in the community send Beloved into some kind of exile. Though one may interrogate the exiling of a child as also some kind of violence orchestrated by the Black mother on the child, the focus of this study is to show that these mothers care for one another and do protect and rescue one of theirs amidst certain challenges. The exiling of Beloved brings back some serenity in the community and in Sethe's psyche. As such, Barbara Schapiro in 'The bonds of love and the boundaries of self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*' submits that: 'the free, autonomous self, *Beloved* teaches, is an inherently social life, rooted in relationships and dependent at its core on the vital bond of mutual recognition' (1991, p.209). From the quote, one realizes that social cohesion is what the Black mother dreams of in the novel as she faces a world of violence and racial bias. Her goal is to restore sanity and order in a disorderly constructed nation. This view is very much revealed in the character and teachings of Baby Suggs. In one of her teachings to the Black folks she says:

'here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them and kiss them. Touch others with

them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. (1987, p.88)

Though this message is a serious message of love, it also reveals the oppression and ill-treatment that Blacks experience in the United States. It resonates images of torture and pain ‘flay’, ‘tie’, chop-off etc. Mumia Abu-Jamal in *Have Black Lives ever Mattered* argues that ‘for Blacks, much that never makes it to the newspapers – or, if so, only in a distorted form – still leaves scars in the mind, evidence of traumas sustained from simply existing as a Black person in the United States of America’ (2017, p. 2). Abul-Jamal holds that Black people’s lives have never mattered in the United States. This justifies Suggs claims that White people never love Black people. Her sermon-like tone in the quote shows how hopeless racism and slavery has left the Black person. But as a mother, she instils the hope of love, which is the centrality of her message to her children and her community. She, in an indirect language, restates the evil of white systemic racism which emanates from the Black Code that objectifies the Black person. Without recourses to hate speech, this mother teaches her children to love each other and know that their lives matter. In every sense, the Black Lives Matter ideology is born in this kind of teachings. To her, Black children should not wait for White people to tell them that they matter. This teaching elaborates the sense of living in a community which in Morrison’s view is central to identity and gender construction. Her tone is emphatic as she cautions her ‘people’ to be careful because their skin colour is misrepresented and so they are virtually seen as not existing. Wilma King in ‘Suffer with them till death, Slave women and their children in Nineteen Century America’ confirms that ‘slave women and their children were considered chattel instead of persons (quoted from Jesen 2006, p.145). Morrison’s ideology in *Beloved* is centred on the collective and not the individual. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison validates:

The book was not about the institution – slavery with a capital S. It was about those anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a living, what they are willing to risk, however long last, to relate to one another – that was incredible to me. (Quoted from Holden-Kirwan 1998, p. 415)

Of course, in this vision, Morrison exposes the hurdles of gender divides in the slave period and how the Black mother battles with the institution. By creating a character, a matriarch like Baby Suggs, Morrison places the spirit of Black resistance in the hands

of the Black mother and Black woman. Therefore, Black women activist like Rosa Parks can trace their genealogy from this fictional Baby Suggs.

Beloved is an evolution of a racist culture through a continuum of historical patterns in a racial society that continue to make white people feel superior in the United States. The high rate of white supremacist group activism and the killing of Black people in the Donald Trump era as president only shows that the United States continues to be hostile to Black people. Of course, as Morrison reveals in the novel, this violence plays on the Black woman/mother's reproductive experience as she is the slave till date, she continues to suffer a kind of triple devaluation to use bell hooks' phrase. In the novel, four men go out to recapture Sethe, the runaway slave and her children. These men find her in a barn in the process of killing her children to save them 'from suffering the life of slavery' (Jensen 2006, p. 141). Sethe represents everything that the White woman is not; her body and desire to save her children is unimaginable in the white world. It is obvious that the failure to understand this mother's act, will be interpreted as insane or inhumane. But what is clear is that this mother is reacting to her times and in every way, she is reacting to protecting herself and her race as a mother.

The Challenges of Mothering

This section argues that mothering has become a problem because racism, slavery and patriarchal societal structures have hindered parents to spend quality time with their children. It further reveals that this inhibition on child-rearing is a major cause for society's dysfunction and violence. Therefore, this section demonstrates that, in Morrison's *Beloved*, Child rearing in a harsh and hostile environment (under slavery) is difficult and puzzling because the act of raising children is a condition by racial and gender differences. Sara Ruddick in *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace* discusses what she sees as the mothering practice. She thinks that there is a distinction between the practice and the biology as well as birth when discussing the idea of mothering. She holds that, mothering practice is, at least, potentially gender-free which means that both men and women can be viewed in the practice. However, the society in *Beloved* restricts and burdens the woman to this task of mothering.

Morrison's *Beloved* reveals that to be a black woman in the antebellum slave America was precarious because of the binaries that govern this narrative world. Jessica Benjamin in *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of dominion*, referring to the Self and Other binaries states that, to exist for oneself, one has to exist for another (1990, p.53). Benjamin in the first place makes us see that this binary is ephemeral as none can exist independently. Basing that society has been so

much entrenched into this absurd binary, Benjamin advocates the need for living together and respecting people with their rights. To do so, one requires an interrelationship of the social and psychic worlds – the context or setting and the mind. In Morrison's *Beloved*, children are deprived of their mothers rendering the idea of mothering fluid. Schapiro submits that:

For Morrison's characters, African Americans in a racist slave society there is no reliable 'other' to recognize and affirm their existence. The mother, the child's first vital other, is made unreliable and unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition. (1991, p.194)

Morrison, according to Schapiro, blurs and erases the binaries when it comes to the task of taking care of children. Along with other relational roles, mothering in Morrison's novel is denied the Black mother. The mother is trapped in continuous slavery and child breeding for the slave owner that she is not able to recognize her children. Sethe's trauma begins when she is brutally cut off from her mother and this is sanctioned by the institutions of slavery. In the narratives, Sethe sees her mother and where she is raised by other women like Nan at Sweet Home. Nan becomes a symbol of motherhood as she cooks and cares for slave children whom she does not give birth to. Though Nan, like Sethe's mother, represents the symbol of mothering in a hostile society of slavery in the United States of America, they also symbolize resistance – the resistance to slavery, racial and gender injustice. Their resistance is seen in the killing of their children to refuse them from being raised as slaves. As mentioned earlier, Jensen thinks infanticide was the women's strategy to curb slave breeding, and resistance to the system (2006, p.136). In this case, slavery becomes challenging to mothering, because slavery depended on 'natural reproduction' and 'this practiced undermined slaves' roles as mothers, demeaning them to the label of breeders (Jensen 2006, p.138).

However, the 'free' slave woman in the novel prides herself and feels recognized only by her children. Sethe whose 'best thing was her children' (1987, p. 308) gets maternal impulses and views her children as part of her. Michael Mock in 'Spitting out the seed: Ownership of mother, child, breast, milk, and voice in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*' submits that 'this essential maternal instinct is connected when viewed in the context of slavery. For a slave cannot own. Not her individuality. Not her children. Not her milk. Nothing is sacred for those enslaved' (1996, p. 117). From Mock's

argument, the slave mother has no personality, dignity, integrity and so, and is not supposed to own even the children she gives birth to. In this case, the situation of mothering becomes a strategy to expose the devalued nature of the Black mother. Wilma King in 'Suffer with them till death: Slave women and their children in Nineteenth Century America' laments on the victimization of slave women and their progeny. She actually confirms that the slave women own nothing, this is because 'the American slaveholder viewed motherhood as an asset, and they encouraged reproduction for pecuniary reasons alone' (Jensen 2006, p.144). King further explains that the slave women and their children were nonentity, consequently, slave women were 'unable to control their fertility or make decisions concerning their own bodies' (Jensen 2006, p.144). It should be noted that, not being able to make decisions concerning their bodies, means they don't own their body, even their milk. Sethe's challenges of motherhood and mothering in *Beloved* fits squarely in King's depiction of the slave woman in America

More so, Morrison probes into the lives of the Black people to trace back the emotional and psychic scars of slavery on their subconscious in *Beloved*. The condition of being enslaved, the agony of the incompatibility of establishing one's status as a human being, have deep effects on the inner mind of the individual. The repercussions of the past are so intense and profound that though one gets freedom in the external world, the subconscious is still trapped in the traumatic experience of slavery and violence. Halle watches Schoolteacher's sons forcefully squeezed and sucked Sethe's breast milk. This does great damage to his self-esteem because being enslaved, he does not have the right to save or rescue his wife. Slavery, in *Beloved*, as an institution, comes between Black husbands and wives, as well as between Black mothers and children, as a result, destroying the family bond. Halle escapes slavery, as a fugitive, he is unable to go back to his family due to the traumatic and violent slavery experience. He is traumatized, and becomes an absentee father, leaving the duty to raise their children entirely on Sethe. His psyche is destroyed especially the day he sees Schoolteacher's nephews abuse his wife.

Sethe is also traumatized by Schoolteacher's rapist nephew who dehumanized her. She felt more terrible about her stolen breast milk than the scars on her back. However, she remains committed to raising her children alone. While sitting with Paul D, Sethe recounts the Sweet Home experience in these words: 'After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs Garner on them, Schoolteacher made one open my back, and when it closed it made a tree, it grown there still' (1987, p.23). In the quote, Sethe depicts the misery of a Black woman/mother. The tone is that of anger and

helplessness, suggesting that she is helpless in the face of slavery. The scar on her back denotes torture and pain. Sethe's possessive pronoun 'my' when talking about her milk is suggestive of the fact that what these white ruffians took from her is so precious. And since breast milk is to feed babies, Morrison sees these white children depriving the black children from their food and the mother. The fact that her milk is taken by force is also an illustration of the vulnerability of the Black mother who does not own her body. It should be noted that, these same white children that the black woman nurtures grow up to disrespect her. Though Sethe is angry with the boys' attitude of forcing and sucking her breast, the white 'master' sees her as an object that can be used indiscriminately. The boys did not only forcefully suck her breast, but they brutally mutilated her back on the instructions of Schoolteacher. The tearing of her back, growing in her symbolizes the pain of slavery and the scars of being a mother in a system where she cannot control her body and even own her children. Biwas reaction to such act on Sethe pronounces that, 'to maintain her wholeness becomes impossible for Sethe when she becomes the target of Schoolteacher's ethnographic research and his nephews' plaything – thus, relegated to a racial being and sexualized object' (2016, p.709).

The effects of slavery on the Black mother and the struggles she faces in raising her children remain traumatic as seen in *Beloved*. The task of mothering, as Morrison reveals is more difficult for those mothers who want to bring up the children with the African heritage in mind. These women educate their children that they have a home that is somewhere. As a result, the creed is held strong when the mothers commit abortion or infanticide as a redemptive measure. It stands for saving the children from the pains of being a slave and the violence therein. Sethe decides to kill her daughter physically instead of allowing her to suffer in the world of slavery. She says 'if I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to explain' (1987, p. 200). Sethe's action is linked to that of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who attempted to kill all her four children rather than returning to her slave master when caught. Unfortunately, one of the children, Mary survived. Mrs Garner had actually declared her intention of infanticide to a number of persons as a fugitive slave if she is caught, rather than crossing back the river (qtd from Jesen 2006, p.148). Morrison uses her artistic muse to recapitulates Margaret Garner's story as well as other black women slave experiences through Sethe in *Beloved*. Killing the child is not only a redemptive and deliverance act on the child, but it frees the mother from guilt. Here death is seen from two angles: death to be freed and the ignoble death in slavery. The Black mother action presupposes the liberation of her progeny from the ignoble death and incarceration from the slave masters and the system. It is on that note that Sethe

says for her child to live as a slave is something she cannot withstand. In killing the child, she loses her, but it resonates a feeling of self-fulfilment because she thinks it is safer and more honourable for the child. She again says that 'I took and put my babies where they'd be safe' (1987, p.193). The children's safety becomes the principal focus of the black mother. She is ready to sacrifice her all in her ability to save and raise her children.

To conclude, *Beloved*, one of Morrison's interpretation of the Black past, invigorates and celebrates the Black mother and the role she has played in the raising of Black children in hostile America. The paper reveals that as Morrison celebrates this silenced past of Black mothers, *Beloved* very much signals the process of gendering and racism that continue to divide the United States of America with the Black mother marginalized in both structures. Because of her peripheral space, the Black mother has to grapple with the joy and pain of raising her children. The paper further established the victimization of the black woman as a mother, her experiences and the challenges of mothering during the period of systemic slavery in America. Thus, infanticide otherwise known as 'mercy killing' was an alternative used by the black mother (Sethe) to combat systemic and cyclical slavery at the time. Morrison's call is therefore for the Black mother today to understand her historicity as the slave's descendant, celebrate this past and not be ashamed or ignorant about it. It is only through this that her own 'me too' can begin to make sense as it is built in her history and her essence as a Black mother in America.

Funding: This research received neither internal nor external funding.

Acknowledgments: I want to acknowledge the support of Professor Bill Ndi for his invaluable contributions to my research endeavors.

Conflicts of Interest: There was no conflict of interest declared by the author.

Author Biography:

Elisabeth N.M Ayuk-Etang is a Cameroonian of English expression. Senior Lecturer and Chair of the Department of English, University of Buea, Cameroon. She holds a PhD in Black Women's Writings and Ecofeminism from the University of Yaounde 1. She has published extensively in peer reviewed journals and authored book chapters on the status of the Black Woman. She is a recipient of several awards, amongst which are the African Women Development Fund (AWDF, 2019), CODESRIA's Higher Education policy Initiative (HEPI 2019), University of Michigan African Presidential Scholar (UMAPS) 2015 fellowship.

References

- Abu-Jamal, M. (2017). *Have black lives ever mattered?* San Francisco: City Light Books/Open Media Series.
- Azuah, U. N. (2005). The emerging lesbian voice in Nigerian feminist literature. In F. Veit-Wild, & D. Naguschewski, *Body, sexuality, gender: versions and subversions in African literature* (pp. 129-143). Amsterdam: Roodopi.
- Benjamin, J. (1990). *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of dominion*. London: Virago.
- Biswas, S. (2016). Toni Morrison's *beloved*: A reconstruction of the slave narrative genre. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 704-712.
- Davis, A. (1981). *Women, race and class*. New York: Routledge.
- Etim, E. (2020). Herstory versus history: A motherist rememory in Akachi Ezeigbo's *the last ones* and Chimamanda N Achebe's *half of a yellow sun*. *Congent arts and humanities*, 1-12.
- Greenblatt, S. (1980). *Renaissance self-fashioning: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Chicago: Cornell University Press.
- Holden-Kirwan, J. (1998). Looking into the self that is no self: An examination of subjectivity in *beloved* in a 1989 interview with Bonnie Angelo. *African American Review*, 415-426.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Jesen, L. (2006). *Searching the silence: Finding black women's resistance to slavery in antebellum US history*. Portland: Portlandland State University McNair Scholars.
- Mathieson, B. O. (1990). Memory and mother love in Morrison's *beloved*. *American Imago*, 1-21.
- Mazur, A., & Goetz, G. (2008). *Politics, gender, and concepts: Theory and methodology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mock, M. L. (1996). Spitting out the seed: Ownership of mother, child, breasts, milk, and voice in Toni Morrison's *beloved*. *College Literature Journal*, 117-126.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. London: Vintage.
- Ruddick, S. (1989). *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Schapiro, B. (1991). The bonds of love and the boundaries of self in Toni Morrison's *beloved*. *Contemporary Literature*, 194-210.