

THE PATTERN OF SEVERED MOTHER- DAUGHTER BOND IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND *A MERCY*

Manuela López Ramírez
IES. Alto Palencia

Abstract

In *Beloved* and *A Mercy* Toni Morrison revisits the mother-daughter plot, focusing on the feminine. She explores the female black slave's appalling oppression through the traumatic separation of a slave mother from her daughter, which destroys the emotional ties between them and causes terrible effects on both their psyches. Morrison describes her heroines' identity journey from "desertion" to wholeness. The black female slave's unspeakable ordeal unveils her humanity and courage, convulsing the patriarchal slave system.

Keywords: myth, bond, slavery, maternity, self-definition.

Resumen

En *Beloved* y *A Mercy* Toni Morrison revisita el argumento de la madre e hija, centrando su atención en lo femenino. Ella explora la atroz opresión de la esclava negra a través de la traumática separación entre la madre esclava y su hija, que destruye los vínculos emocionales que las unen y causa terribles efectos en sus psiques. Morrison narra el viaje de identidad de sus heroínas desde el "abandono" a la integridad emocional. El auténtico calvario de la esclava negra desvela su humanidad y coraje, convulsionando el sistema patriarcal de la esclavitud.

Palabras clave: mito, vínculo, esclavitud, maternidad, autodefinition.

[...] writers [...] like Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison—began to explore the possibility of [...] reconnecting to the feminine archetype buried deep within the human psyche in order to resurrect a way of seeing and feeling which offers the promise of healing and life to an ailing world. (Pessoni 1995:439)

In *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison writes mother-daughter stories, focusing on the feminine and emphasizing women's roles. Thus Morrison translates into her novels how the analysis on the female's experience, her oppression, in patriarchal culture cannot exist without taking into account her "role as mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers" (Hirsch 1981:202). It is no wonder mothering is a central aspect of Morrison's stories since the experience and institution of motherhood is key to the female self. In fact, as Adrienne Rich reminds us,

The childless woman' and the 'mother' are a false polarity, which served the institutions both of motherhood and heterosexuality [...]. We are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both. (1986:250, 253)¹

Under patriarchy, females are usually defined as mothers, while their identity as individuals is disregarded. Consequently, slave mothers' reaction to separation is silenced because it is not relevant. Theirs is "an untold maternal experience", [which] "urges feminists to shift their political allegiance back from father to mother, even as it urges us to sympathize with our mothers' position in patriarchy" (Hirsch 1988:200). Morrison tries to show both mother's and daughter's stories, while highlighting the mother's absence in her daughter's life as a consequence of the slavery system. Her metaphor of maternity establishes "an alternative to the metaphor of paternity common in white/male historical discourse" (Henderson 1999:94). On this article, I will focus on two of the main aspects of the mother-daughter relationship: the pattern of severed mother-daughter bond and their search for self-definition.

In both novels Morrison depicts a consuming maternal presence:

Mothering becomes a central trope in the novel [*Beloved*] [...]. The slave mother persevered to create identity, both personal and familial; in her image—on her body—were inscribed the twin imperatives to survive and to create new meaning. (Mohanty 2000:online)

Morrison is truly concerned with the building of families and asserts the matrilinear. The mother figure takes center stage whereas the father plays a secondary role. In *Beloved*, as Carl Jung remarks, the Demeter-Persephone myth "exists on the plane of mother-daughter experience, which is alien to man and shuts him off [...]" (203).² The only thing we know about Sethe's father is that she is

¹ Rich says that Morrison mostly explores a female world, "distinctly separate from the larger world of male concerns, but in which women held a paramount importance for each others' lives" (1986:233).

² Jung adds, "in the formation of the Demeter/Kore myth the feminine influence so far outweighed the masculine that the latter had practically no significance. The man's role in the Demeter myth is really only that of seducer or conqueror" (1959:184). Richard P. Sugg (1992) argues that "Jane Ellen Harrison concurs that the Demeter/Kore (Persephone) celebrations at the

named after him. As Nan told her, her mother had thrown away all those other children she had had from the white crew that had raped her repeatedly during the Middle Passage. However, she kept her, the only child conceived with love. On the other hand, Florens's mother does not know who her daughter's father is because when she was raped, it was too dark to see anything. Morrison emphasizes the double role of men in relationship to motherhood. Under slavery men, mainly whites, can exert their violent patriarchal domination over the defenseless ethnic woman by sexually abusing or raping her as in Sethe's and Florens's mother, which results in maternity. And yet, Morrison also deals with men's "fathering" role: Paul D's paternal attitude towards Denver and Beloved or Jacob's adoption of female orphans.

As we can see in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, the feelings related to motherhood and family are constantly foiled by slavery. The effects of enslavement on the family unit are horrifying. First, the patriarchal system of slavery distorts the concept of maternity, since blacks are treated as animals and exploited economically. Slave black women are regarded as breeders, not mothers, and their children can be sold away so that the white owner can make more profit. Female slaves represent a valuable chattel for slaveholders because they can both reproduce and work. Thus, as Barbara Omolade claims, the black woman slave becomes "a fragmented commodity", valuable as labor force, source of sexual pleasure and profitable in her reproductive capacity (365).

Blacks cannot have a proper family since, as chattel, they do not have any right to be raised or grow up with their kin. Slaveholders prevented emotional ties to be formed to lower blacks' confidence and moral so that they became more obedient. Denying love and sundering family bonds, slavery dramatically tramples upon blacks' humanity. Even though, during their enslavement, black families were systematically broken up and all their members dispersed, both *Beloved* and *A Mercy* focus, especially, on the mother-daughter detachment. As Freud stresses in his three late essays on female sexuality, the pre-oedipal attachment to the mother is very important for both boys and girls (Hirsch 1981:205). However, as Nancy Chodorow states, while boys can use their masculinity to differentiate themselves from the engulfing maternal presence, girls are subjugated to the emotional bond with their mothers. They feel confused about their identity because they share the same gender and, consequently, mothers tend to see a reflection of themselves in their daughters (1974:48). Both Chodorow and Jane Flax have shown that the continuity and lack of separation in the mother-daughter relationship have enormous

end of September were 'almost uncontaminated by Olympian [patriarchal] usage,' deriving from pre-Hellenic practices in Thrace and Crete" (369). Teresa Washington also claims that, in the Yoruba cosmology, the father and father figures are dead in regard to the mother-daughter relationship, in which "the father is necessarily relegated to the outside" (online).

implications in the female self, shaping her personality.³ A girl maintains her identification with her mother, or surrogate mother, and does not “completely reject her mother in favour of men, but continues her relationship of dependence upon and attachment to her” (1974:52) throughout her childhood and into puberty. Consequently, her life “always involve[s] other sorts of equally deep and primary relationships [...] a girl imposes the sort of object-relations she has internalized in her preoedipal and later (i.e. Oedipal) relationship with her mother” (1974:53). The mother-daughter bond, as Jung writes, is really powerful:

The psyche pre-existent to consciousness [...] participates in the maternal psyche on the one hand, while on the other it reaches across to the daughter’s psyche [...] every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forward into her daughter. (188)

As Terry P. Caesar says, in *Beloved*, “mother and daughter are [...] two parts of the same being [...] a conspiratorial oneness that has reached across the grave” (116). After the death of her daughter, *Beloved*, Sethe incorporates her as an intrinsic part of her own being, as she is part of hers: “Her face [Sethe’s] is my own”. Slavery creates a sickly mother-daughter symbiosis, in which “infanticide gets transformed into matricide” (119). Likewise, in *A Mercy*, Lina, in her role as a surrogate mother, describes Florens as a “quiet, timid version of [her]self”.

In both novels, Morrison enhances the perversity of an institution, slavery, that shatters slaves’ identities by breaking the mother-child bond. The mother-daughter relationship is disrupted by the outer violence that surrounds them. The consequences of their separation are devastating. The slave mother’s absence seriously hinders the infant’s subjectivity formation, especially that of girls, who are unable to unfold their selves. The psychological repercussions of the lack of maternal nourishment and love are appalling.⁴ In *Beloved*, there are different mother-daughter couples: Sethe and her mother and Sethe and her two daughters. Two of which, Sethe with her mother and with *Beloved*, follow the mother-daughter severing pattern. Sethe feels that her mother abandoned her, as does *Beloved*. Morrison says that Sethe “is impacted by the feeling of abandonment” (Carabí 1993:107). In *A Mercy*, there are some mother-daughter couples, too. However, it is in Florens’s relationship with her mother that Morrison addresses the feeling of desertion. Sethe and Florens have a similar type of emotional connection to their black slave mothers. Being only a child, Florens experiences a traumatic separation from her mother, who, like Sethe’s, is captured in Africa and brought to America as a slave. She gives her daughter up to a stranger, a white farmer called Jacob Vaark,

³ See Flax (1978).

⁴ Rich stresses that, in patriarchy, few women can feel mothered enough so they may seek mothers all their lives (1986:242-43).

in the hope that her life might be better. However, “[...] what is ‘a mercy’ to Florens’s mother is experienced by the girl as an act of abandonment” (Kakutani 2008:online). Her feeling of desertion resonates all throughout the narrative.

As slaves, neither Sethe nor Florens has a normal parental relationship, not even before they were separated from their families. Sethe hardly knew her mother, not even her name. The only thing Sethe can recall about her is that one day she took her behind the smoke house and showed her her ignominious brand, which becomes their sole connection. Likewise, Florens’s “loss” of her also nameless slave mother has, psychologically, crippled her.⁵ As Steve Monk asserts, she compares herself to “a weak calf abandon[ed] by the herd” or to a “turtle without shell”, or even develops the belief that there is a monster inside her, which show how Florens feels about herself as a consequence of being given away. She also believes that her mother preferred the baby boy. As a result of her resentment, Florens reckons herself an orphan. When the Widow Ealing inquires about her family, the black girl says that she does not know who her father is and that her mother is dead. Both Sethe and Florens are helpless and abandoned “orphans”.

In her stories, Morrison emphasizes how the mother-daughter bonds, under slavery, are not limited to biological connections. In fact, traditional forms of childcare and parenting are impossible and those infants who can find surrogate mothers, who can look after them, are really fortunate.⁶ Andrea O’Reilly contends that, in Morrison’s novels, “[o]ther women, while not mothers themselves, are ship and safe harbor to children through the practice of othermothering” (2004:41). The “othermother” helps young women cope with the loss of their biological mothers. In *Beloved*, female slaves, like Sethe’s mother, are forced to work in the field, while other black women “wet nurse” white babies and, after them, the other black females’ babies. Nan, the crippled black slave, feeds Sethe and becomes her surrogate mother when she was a baby. On the other hand, in *A Mercy*, from the moment Jacob brings Florens to the farm, Lina, a Native American servant, becomes Florens’s surrogate mother, embracing her as if she were her own daughter: she takes the child so “completely under her wing” (96). The Indian female thinks that Florens suffers from the loss of a mother, as she does from the desire to be one: “Mother hunger—to be one or have one—both of them were reeling from that longing which [...] remained alive, traveling the bone” (63). Lina, an orphan herself who yearns for family ties, wants to protect the little girl from a corrupted world—where women of all kinds, especially servants, are the main victims—, which is symbolized by the pair of rabbit skin shoes she makes for the

⁵ Florens’s mother is addressed as that, and sometimes as “*minha mãe*”, as slaves used some of the language of their Portuguese owners.

⁶ Rich writes that, in patriarchy, “For centuries, daughters have been strengthened and energized by nonbiological mothers” (1986:252).

child, since Florens cannot walk barefoot. She has “the feet of a Portuguese lady”. Florens’s feeling of abandonment and resentment towards her mother is reflected in her favorite tale about an eagle which, “unlike” her mother, is “fierce, protecting her borning young” (62). When, at the end of the story, the wounded eagle falls and falls, Florens anxiously inquires:

“And the eggs?’ she asks.
 ‘They hatch alone’, says Lina
 ‘Do they live?’ Florens’ whispering is urgent.
 ‘We have’, says Lina”. (62-3)⁷

The terrible sundering of the bond between the black slave mother and her daughter is expressed through its ultimate expression, nursing. As a child, Sethe was denied her mother’s milk and, later, the nephews of Schoolteacher, her slaveholder, stole her daughter’s. Sethe’s milk stands for her maternal role, but also for the disruption of motherhood during slavery: “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” (200). Nursing is so important for Sethe that the theft of her milk is worse than a rape. They violate what is most sacred for her, her maternity, since they “cruelly mock the maternal associations of nursing by treating Sethe as an animal to be milked” (Barnett 1998:80).⁸ On the other hand, the urge to feed her baby girl gives Sethe the courage and determination to flee the farm. In *A Mercy*, Morrison also deals with nursing. Florens’s feelings of desertion are inextricably entangled with jealousy towards her baby brother, who was still breast-feeding when she was sold. That is why, ever since her relinquishment, Florens is afraid of lactating mothers: “Mother nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand” (8). Florens can only see her mother’s love for “her baby boy”, since they are united by the special bond that nursing creates between mother and infant, which excludes her.

In *Beloved*, Sethe, notwithstanding her familiarity with the slavery system, feels emotionally hurt by the fact that her mother was not there for her. She comments about her: “She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn’t even sleep in the same cabin most nights” (60-61). The repercussions of being bereft of maternal care are terrible for her:

⁷ The eagle story depicts how mothers would do anything for their young, but it also suggests that they cannot really protect them as a result of their own vulnerable position.

⁸ As Arlene Keizer claims, “Her mother’s abandonment of her and the fact that Sethe never got enough milk when she was being nursed are the tragedies at the very base of Sethe’s life” (2004:online).

Sethe is denied daughterhood [...]. Deprived of a mother [...] Sethe can never be a daughter and thus never achieve subjectivity through daughterhood; furthermore, the absence of the maternal look as a child continues to deprive Sethe of subjectivity as an adult [...]. (Holden-Kirwan 1998: online)

Moreover, Sethe wonders why her mother was executed. She knows that the usual reason for a plantation owner to hang a slave, and thus lose a valuable piece of property, was to serve as a deterrent for those who could be tempted to escape. Therefore, Sethe assumes unconsciously that her mother was killed for running away. She believes her mother deserted her and that is why she experiences anger, bitterness and sorrow when she recalls her fate. As a result of her mother's loss, Sethe feels incomplete and seeks fulfillment in her own family, counteracting her own motherlessness by trying to be a great mother for her own children. Consequently, she becomes obsessively subjected to her offspring's needs, "replac[ing] her individual identity with her maternal role" (Fitzgerald 1998:117). Thus, ironically, she sees herself in terms of her nurturing function, just as slavery does (qtd. in Fleenor 1983:83).⁹

The mother-daughter bond is also terribly sundered in Sethe's relationship with her baby daughter, Beloved. Hence, as Horvitz contends, "This cycle of mother-daughter fusion, loss, betrayal, and recovery between Sethe and her mother plays itself out again in the present relationship between Sethe and Beloved" (1998:62). Nevertheless, Sethe can be set as an example of how "motherhood is a site of empowerment for black women" (O'Reilly 2004:1).¹⁰ When Sethe becomes a mother, she builds a strong determination to protect and take care of her babies. To save Beloved from slavery, she kills her and, thus, *Beloved* becomes "a horror story of maternity".¹¹ There is no more terrible crime than that committed against one's own progeny. Sethe steals her daughter's life and, because of this, the past haunts her. Guilt is her curse after the infanticide: the "insatiable guilt [she] levels against herself" (Morey 1998:online). First, the baby ghost haunts Sethe and her family for eighteen years until Paul D exorcises it from 124. Then the curse becomes flesh in Beloved, her "reincarnated" daughter and the embodiment of the legacy of slavery, who tortures Sethe for her infanticide, "a primal crime that is really the whole history of slavery" (Hogle 2003:221). Sethe's guilty conscience makes her the victim of the revenant who, in her neediness, only desires to possess her mother completely and take her to "the other side". In her efforts to expiate her crime, Sethe

⁹ Keenan argues that Sethe's maternal subjectivity is figured in this defiant claim to her own definition of motherhood as the part of herself which exceeded the bound of slavery, which refused its limits and thus her own means of self-inscription (1998:125).

¹⁰ Sorrow also feels empowered by her status as a mother. That is why she experiences a radical transformation and changes her name to Complete.

¹¹ These are Ellen Moers' words.

faces self-destruction. During the ritual of possession, both mother and ghost daughter live in a sort of pre-Oedipal space. In fact, Beloved is psychologically a pre-oedipal child, who “does not differentiate itself from its mother but, rather, experiences a sense of oneness with her [...]” (Chodorow 1974:46). Consequently, her attachment to and dependence upon her mother is really all-consuming. That is why, in her hunger for love, the revenant devours Sethe, robbing her identity because, as a spirit, she does not have any. Mother and daughter reverse their roles. The revenant practically eats her mother’s life up and Sethe just “sat around like a rag doll, broke down” (243).

Neither Sethe nor Florens can understand their mother’s actions, which have a harrowing impact on their lives. Florens is incapable of showing emotion, of crying: “I never cry. Even when the woman steals my cloak and shoes and I am freezing on the boat no tears come” (69). Ever since her *minha mãe*’s loss, the obsessive and painful image of her holding the little boy’s hand has always accompanied her. In Florens’s dreams, her mother wants to tell her something but, out of her deep and smoldering resentment, she does not want to listen to her and looks away: Florens is not ready to hear what she has to say. However, the most terrible result of the little black girl’s separation from her mother is her consuming need of affection. Ever since her arrival at the farm, Florens’s constant attempts to please Jacob’s household women are a reflection of her lack of self-confidence and fear of not being loved, or even worse, abandoned. She shows her eagerness for approval and affection: “she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval” (61). Florens has “a hole in her heart and an abiding need for love and approval” (Kakutani 2008:online). Like Beloved, she is “a love-disabled girl” (44). Her emotional neediness ends up in her compulsive and sickly love for the blacksmith, who becomes an obsession for her. Florens’s greedy love is unquenchable: “A bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience” (60).¹² As the blacksmith realizes, Florens suffers from emotional enslavement.

The sickness of Florens’s love manifests blatantly when she finally meets the blacksmith after her long and exhausting journey. She has to stay in his cabin while he rides to Mistress alone. When Florens learns that she cannot go along because of a child—a foundling called Malaik—, she is aware that this has happened to her twice before. First, her mother “abandoned” her because of her baby brother. Secondly, a little screaming girl, who was hiding behind her mother, pointed at her. In these two dangerous situations, she finally got expelled. Florens feels acutely anxious at the thought of the blacksmith wanting to keep the boy, fearing that the infant, and not her, might be his future. Florens longs to stay with him forever and tries to convince herself that she is:

¹² Lina believes that the black girl would have been perfect for the blacksmith, “if only she had not been crippled with worship of him” (63).

not the one to throw out. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. No one handles my backside. No one whinnies like sheep or goat because I drop in fear and weakness. No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly [...]. I can never not have you have me. (136-7)

Florens's feeling of abandonment emerges even more forcefully when she sleeps on the blacksmith's cot and dreams that she is kneeling in soft grass at the edge of a blue lake. When Florens leans over, she cannot see her reflection. Subconsciously, she knows that her unhealthy obsession for the blacksmith hinders her chances for self-affirmation and self-creation. Florens cannot be the master of her own destiny until she can have a more balanced relationship with a man. At this point of the story, Florens can only think that Malaik is going to steal her loved one, as the baby boy did before with her mother. Hence, she sees her mother standing next to her, and her little brother is Malaik. Florens is helpless. Her feet are still too soft. When Florens cannot find Sir's boots, the bits of metal on the floor cut them, symbolizing that she is still unready to cope with the harsh reality of life.

Morrison uses Edenic imagery extensively in *A Mercy*. Florens and the blacksmith are the Eve and Adam of this story. When the black girl steps through the cabin, she watches a garden snake crawling until it dies in the sunlight, an omen which foretells evil and death, but also hints at the awakened self, its rebirth. Thus Morrison plays with the complex symbolism of the serpent, its dual expression of good and evil. She revises its role as a source of evil in the myth of Adam and Eve of patriarchal cultures and, at the same time, recovers its profound and powerful ancient meaning of regeneration.¹³ Morrison also rewrites her Eve, who is not a foolish, sinful and gullible woman, but a young female who must awaken from her emotional and psychological numbness, which impairs her identity development, and start a process of self-possession and self-affirmation. Evil, as well as Florens's expergefaction, happens just after the snake's appearance.¹⁴ The black girl's deep sense of maternal loss makes her perceive the little boy as a threat. She senses Malaik's hate: "He wants my leaving. This cannot happen. I feel the clutch inside. This expel can never happen again" (137). Florens even thinks that he has some kind of power that she can only counteract by taking his doll away from him. She reacts fiercely and forcibly to the "menace". In *Beloved* Morrison also uses Edenic

¹³ The snake is, in fact, associated with the blacksmith more than with Florens. The blacksmith is a healer and the serpent's divine aspect and habitat, the earth, connects it with the afterlife and immortality, as well as with healing properties; the snake is part of the modern symbol of medicine. Moreover, the black man's handiwork has evil connotations. The gate he forges for Vaark's new house is decorated with copper snakes. In *Beloved*, Morrison also uses the symbolism of the snake. Sethe is compared to a serpent when she is about to meet Amy: "like a snake. All jaws and hungry" (31).

¹⁴ As an omen, a garden snake, which crawls up to the door saddle to die, had already appeared at the beginning of the story.

imagery in Mr. Garner's Sweet Home, an ironic and false Eden for slaves from which Sethe, the indomitable Eve, escapes. Besides, according to Carolyn M. Jones, Sethe, as victim and victimizer, "reenact[s] the myth of Cain" (online). The mark of Cain sets her apart from personal identity and from community, since she refuses to acknowledge the implications of her infanticide and to mourn her child properly. However, at the end of the novel, Morrison depicts how Sethe finally "finds the true meaning of her name. She is no longer Cain, the exile, but is both Set, crucified by the tree on her back [...] and Seth, the son who carries on the line of Adam and Eve" (online).

In *Home* Florens is scared of being free. She is a slave in her heart. When the blacksmith leaves the farm once he finishes his work, Florens starts roaming in the forest behind the new house, searching for him. Then she sees a stag and realizes that she can do anything she wants. However, she does not like the feeling, she thinks: "I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you" (70). Florens has renounced freedom and her chances to become a full human being so as to be the blacksmith's lover. Her words confirm it: "You alone *own* me" (141; stressed added). For the black girl, he is her "shaper" and her world. This way Florens does not accept the responsibility that comes with being free: "No need to choose" (71). She cannot find her face because, as the blacksmith accuses her, she has become "a slave by choice."

Morrison does not romanticize the mother figure and does not portray her according to the stereotypes associated with the black mother. In fact, *Beloved* expresses anxiety and ambiguity about motherhood. As Claude Cohen-Safir points out, Freud "connected the uncanny with recurrent images of sexuality and femininity, all linked to the central Mother image" (2001:105). That might explain why the mother figure is seen as both the one who loves and the one who can destroy (Christian 1999:213). Both males and females actually maintain an uneasy relationship to her, which reappears in all images of women:

Before we know where the self ends and the world begins, the mother-woman is experienced as global, all-embracing, all-powerful. Embodying in her very being the world's body and our own, the mother becomes culturally confirmed as the realm of the flesh, and is made the bearer of our ambivalence toward it. Furthermore, because the mother is invariably female, women experience that ambivalence more intimately. (Kahane 1983:243)

Maternity, especially in Sethe's bond with her daughter-ghost, threatens to annihilate the mother's identity. Morrison has argued that Margaret Garner's story made her realize that motherhood could mean complete feminine selflessness, and that she created *Beloved*, the revenant, to express this idea (Naylor 1994:208).¹⁵ The

¹⁵ As Alfred Bendixen suggests about one of Wilkins's stories, "motherhood may require self-sacrifice to the point of sacrifice of self" (1986:249).

act of mercy of Florens's mother also exemplifies the maternal capacity for self-sacrifice and abnegation.

In *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, the mother-daughter separation is associated with some of the appalling horrors black slaves, especially women, have to suffer during their enslavement, sexual abuse and rape, which are generated by the ruthless oedipalized slave system. Slavery, as an artificial patriarchal family, is the source of black slaves' economic and sexual oppression, and its father figure, usually despotic, is the white slaveholder. As J. Brooks Bouson states, in the institution of slavery, sexual exploitation is justified by associating black women with illicit sexuality, considering them libidinous creatures. They become stereotyped images of Jezebel and Mammy, whose excessive fleshly appetites seem to explain their increased fertility (2004:93). Pamela Barnett connects Sethe's infanticide, foreshadowed by those of her own mother, with the depiction of and allusions to rape. Sethe kills her child so that a white man will never "dirty" her. Behind her crime is the idea that any kind of torture women may experience under slavery "is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and 'dirtied' by whites" (1998:75). Sethe is protecting her beloved baby from the fact that, as a slave, her "private" body parts can become "commodified, public, and un-'own'-ed by the self" (Lee 1994:online). Likewise, in *A Mercy*, Florens's mother discloses, in the last pages of the novel, why she was so eager to give her daughter away. In her story, she repeats again and again, as a sort of guilty chant: "There is no protection" (163). Even if Florens' mother "watched [her daughter] like a hawk", as in the eagle story, she could not protect her from men. In her "confession", she explains how easily black women slaves were raped: "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (163). Like Sethe's mother, Florens's had been sexually assaulted. She knows that she cannot protect her daughter from *Senhor's* predacious sexual behavior. That is why, when Jacob suggests taking both mother and daughter in payment for her owner's debt, the slave mother begs him to accept her child since she knows that *Senhor* will not let her go, and Jacob does not seem to see them as chattel. As a mother, she only wishes to provide her daughter with a chance for a better life, even if that means to let her go.

In both novels, Morrison deals with one of the most terrible consequences of the African American slaves' separation from their families and ancestors, the loss of their cultural identity and heritage. They forget the language of their childhood, their songs, their music. All the blacks' native tongues are wiped out. As Julia Kristeva contends in her concept of a preverbal "maternal semiotic, a pre-oedipal language preceding", this way the infant's formal language acquisition is problematized (1986:178). In *Beloved* Sethe knew her mother tongue when she was a child, but now she does not recall any of it: "she [Sethe] recognizes that she has been robbed of mothering and her first language—in short, her birthright. This knowledge has *not just drifted away*, it has been taken from her by the slave system"

(Keizer 1999:online). However, when she is telling Beloved about her past, she cannot really call to mind the language, but she remembers what it meant. Nan had told her about her mother's ordeal during the Middle Passage. Sethe has lost her heritage, except for her vague memories of some African songs and dances that, now and then, come to her mind. As when she is going to give birth to Denver, her unborn child's movements remind her of her mother's African antelope dancing: "As she bears the next generation her matrilineal line, Sethe keeps her mother's African antelope dancing alive: she links the pulses of her unchained, vigorously moving mother and her energetic, womb-kicking daughter forever" (Horvitz 1998:61). In the same way, in *A Mercy*, Florens is raised among Catholic Portuguese. When she is sold to Jacob, she cannot understand or talk to anyone on the farm: "At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a *minha mãe* and me" (6). Nor does Florens know which her religious beliefs could be. She feels that she cannot turn to pagan spirits for protection, as Lina does, or to Christian prayers or communion, as Mistress or Sir do. None of them seems to apply to her. Florens's feelings of abandonment are inextricably interwoven with the terrible rootlessness that means to be separated from your family and the only world she had known until then.

Both mother and daughter must overcome their ordeals to achieve true selfhood. They have to undergo, in the Jungian sense, a process of individuation, a complete transformation of their identities that will lead them to full self-realization. Thus, as Washington contends, "these women [...] navigate through a charged space that alternately symbolizes death and destruction, on the one hand, and creative and spiritual development, on the other hand" (online). In fact, *Beloved* is the story of Sethe's "quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness" (Bell 2004: 53): her *Bildungsroman* in search of self-definition. On her identity journey she awakens to a true black female consciousness: "Sethe's black awareness and rejection of white perceptions and inscriptions of herself, her children, and other slaves as nonhuman [...] are synthesized with her black feminist sense of self-sufficiency" (Bell 2004:54-5). Sethe's getaway from Sweet Home is compared with a birth: she dies as a slave to be born as a free woman. Amy, the white girl, is her savior. Fleeing from the farm is her first important achievement. Thus she takes control of her destiny, which has at its core the defiance of the oppressive patriarchal system. Sethe manages to save all her children from slavery without man's help. At 124 she realizes that escaping from enslavement is not everything, she still has to vindicate her freed self. However, after a short period of authentic freedom, Sethe commits infanticide and experiences the horrors of hell in jail with her daughter, Denver, and, once released from prison, she has to buy her murdered baby's name on the gravestone with sex. From this time on, Sethe just tries to survive: "Her deprivation had been not having any dreams of her own at all" (20). Hence, her happy twenty-eight days of community life are followed by eighteen years of ostracism and solitude.

Sethe's search for self-affirmation can only be achieved through a communal exorcism that can break Beloved's spell over her. As Ann Sonser has shown, the women gathered to exorcise the ghost are the midwives who attend to a birth that they can claim as theirs: "Ironically, the 'undead' is required to give life, that is, to seduce, consume, and, ultimately, begin the reintegration necessary for the lost African self" (2001:102). Their chants act as a sort of baptism that allows Sethe to renew herself:

This sound [...] destroys the cycle of darkness and shame in which Sethe is entrapped [...]. Archetypally counteracting the possessive force of Beloved, the sound breaks the bars of enslaving language, and provides new ground upon which to build a meaningful language, a story. Sethe is left with the broad expanse of the deep waters of her psyche sounded and open to her. She now must make sense of her thoughts and memories, give them a rhythm and tide, so that she may be whole again—not empty. (Cowan-Barbetti 1998:online)

Sethe reenacts her infanticide when she attacks Mr. Bodwin, whom she mistakes for Schoolteacher, with an ice pick. Now, however, the target of her violence is the oppressor, "the 'real' ghost of patriarchal ownership" (Askeland 1999:174), instead of her own kin. Reliving the ill-fated and atrocious event is a deeply healing experience for both Sethe and the community. According to D. Scot Hinson:

This ritual reexperiencing of trauma, witnessed by the entire community, indeed, sanctioned by the community, constitutes the violence to end all violence, the ritual sacrifice that can restore harmony within the community and difference within the narrative. This reenactment of the original trauma allows Sethe to escape from the pattern of repetition and to reclaim her life from Beloved, who instantly and miraculously vanishes. (2001:161)

Sethe's act has a cathartic liberating effect. The black females' chants and reenacting the trauma of infanticide seem to have finally healed her. And yet, at the end of the book, she is still haunted by her "complicity" with the whites. Sethe feels ashamed for having made the ink used by Schoolteacher to write down her "animal" characteristics. Besides, her life, until then, has revolved around her maternal role and she needs Paul D to remind her that she is her best thing. To achieve complete wholeness, Sethe must start to value her own self.

Like Sethe's, Florens's journey towards emotional self-definition is a tortuous one. At the beginning of the story, her inability to cope with the hardships of a slave's life is symbolized by the fact that she cannot walk barefoot. From an early age she begs for shoes. That is why Lina says that her "feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires" (4). The Indian woman already knows that Florens is not fit for the calamities that a female servant, like her, has to suffer. Florens's transition from girlhood into womanhood starts when she meets the blacksmith, but the identity

journey west through the forest marks the definite milestone in her personal growth. Mistress sends Florens to find the black man when she comes down with smallpox, so he can cure her. In Gothic literature, the maiden's trip through the forest is a rite-of-passage type of experience. Both young women, Sethe and Florens, have to confront dangers and fears, the threat of the wilderness ("the subconscious") beyond any human civilization. In fact, Florens's journey has numerous symbolic elements, which express the state of the immature feminine psyche. When Florens begins her trip, she is an inexperienced innocent girl, who resents her mother's "abandonment". She gets lost and faces her fears in the middle of the forest, such as snakes, which stand for the dangers girls cope with in life. They signal some sort of initiation, the spiritual trial maidens face. Snakes, in their association with transformation, represent the potential for growth.¹⁶ Morrison completes the symbolism with the sudden snow that complicates Florens's journey, which is connected with the emotional paralysis females can experience at this stage of their psychological development. Her fears prevail, since her passage to adulthood has just started. The snow may also be clearly linked, through its color white and connection to the water element, to a new beginning, a rebirth, thus emphasizing the maiden's process of individuation. The material expression of Florens's leaving behind her childhood is the abandoned rabbit skin shoes Lina had made for her, which lie under the sleigh "lonely, empty like two patient coffins" (63), while she is in a process of maturation wearing her master's boots. However, Florens does not still have shoes she can call her own: she is not yet a freed self.¹⁷

Florens's journey in search of the blacksmith changes her. The girl herself can feel it:

Inside I am shrinking. I climb the streambed under watching trees and now I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. (115)

On her trip, Florens confronts the racist world that surrounds her. At the Widow Ealing's house, she suffers a traumatic experience at the hands of some fanatic religious people, who believe the young woman might be the Black Man's minion and examine her as if she were an animal. As Amy helps Sethe run away, Jane, the white girl from the Presbyterian community, helps Florens. Hence, when she cannot see her reflection and wonders where her face is, it is Daughter Jane who tells her not to be scared, that she will find it. In both novels, women's bonding and

¹⁶ As snakes grow, many of them shed their skin through sloughing. They are symbols of transformation. As Jung (1967: 676) says, "The snake symbolizes the numen of the transformative act as well as the transformative substance itself" (676).

¹⁷ Florens's act of wearing her master's boots has an ambiguous meaning. On the one hand, it signals her empowerment, as she becomes a patriarchal representative but, on the other hand, she cannot achieve this power on her own.

inter-racial sisterhood are emphasized, since females empathize with each other's ordeals in patriarchy. As Bernard Bell points out about *Beloved*, "The metaphors of personal and communal wholeness in the text heighten the psychological realism of its womanist themes of black kinship, motherhood, sisterhood, and love" (2004:56).

Florens's encounter with the religious fanatics makes her feel and understand how racism affects people. In her individuation process, the black girl undergoes self-awareness and self-introspection. She realizes how some people see her as a demon or a monster. Florens engages in critical reflectivity, which enables her to assess her own self through her interactions with others. She wonders if her mother abandoned her because of "the inside dark [...] small, feathered and toothy" (115). The girl cannot blame her situation on her color, but she ponders whether the rejection she has experienced is the result of her evil character. For the first time, Florens assumes that her tribulations might not have been other people's fault, her mother's: they might have been about her own destructive self. Identity awareness empowers the young woman and makes her fearless. Besides, Florens embraces her race, which she shares with the man she loves. However, at this point in the story, the maiden's self is defined in terms of her relationship with the blacksmith. She rests on him, whom she regards as her "life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me" (157). The warping effects of Florens's psychological baggage hinder her capability to knock down the psychological barriers on her path to self-sufficiency and self-definition. The "desertion" she endured as a little girl has marked her with deep emotional wounds and she feels an irrational distress at the possibility of repudiation. After her abusive handling of Malaik, the blacksmith, whom Florens thought would be her "saver", rejects her and sends her back to Rebekka. Then she experiences again the dying inside, the "animality", she had felt before when her mother gave her away and when she was examined as a devil's sycophant: "Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch" (142). Florens has a violent reaction and attacks the blacksmith with a hammer. The black man, who plays Hades's role leading Florens to her psychological hell, helps her rise from the underworld, from her spiritual death.¹⁸ He urges her to start her process of self-affirmation: "Own yourself, woman" (141). The blacksmith will be, as Lina says, "the man who will bring her to womanhood" (51). Both Sethe and Florens are abandoned by the men they love. As the blacksmith sends Florens away, Halle's emotional shock at watching how Sethe is "milk-raped" breaks him, so he never joins her at Baby's house.

Overcoming rejection is Florens's ultimate step on her passage into adulthood. When Florens comes back from the black man's cabin, she has changed from a docile creature into a "feral" one. Repudiation has triggered the black girl's

¹⁸ Like Hades, the blacksmith initiates the young woman into her sexuality.

aggressive behavior. As the indenture servants observe, she has become “untouchable”. Florens feels that there is “a withering inside [...] that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild” (160), which the black girl has to overbear. Until now, in her catharsis, Florens has developed a new insight into her position in the world. As Monk points out, she is no longer boneless and “her way is clear”, in contrast to the “pathless night” she wondered on at the beginning of the story (5-6). She must now deal with her traumatic past. Her telling for the blacksmith on the walls of the room where Jacob died has healing effects on her. Through her written story, Florens can discharge the painful emotions associated with her repressed traumatic memories. She can bring them back into consciousness and re-experience them. Her tale on the walls gives her the tears she has never had. Crying cleanses her mind of suppressed negative sentiments, which can at last be released and relieved: a healing mechanism of coping with agonizing early-unresolved experiences. Her words are no longer just for the blacksmith to read, she also wants them to fly, and they will when Lina’s fire purges the house that has become horror.¹⁹ The ultimate purification rite is the burning of the unfinished mansion, which buries with it Jacob’s capitalist dreams and Florens’s traumatic past. Finally, the black girl can claim ownership of her freed self: “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (161).

At the end of the story, Florens “does end up owning herself” (Gates 2008). The black girl, “as her name portends, blossoms with possibility” (Stave and Tally 2011: 4). Florens is ready now to listen to what her mother has been trying to tell her. However, first, she has something important to say: “Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (161). Florens has learnt harsh life lessons and she is no longer a tender child. She has worked out her unresolved feelings towards her mother and has become an independent and strong woman. In the last chapter, Florens’s mother is finally given voice. Out of guilt and desire for reconciliation, she has haunted her daughter to make her understand that she gave her up so as to protect her. As Adrienne Rich writes, under patriarchy, “the institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children” (1986:223). This is even truer of black mothers who cope with the appalling conditions of slavery. Both Sethe and Florens’s mother feel terribly guilty because enslavement makes them take inconceivable decisions regarding their daughters and, as a result, they spend their lives trying to find understanding and forgiveness from them. The confession of Florens’s mother ends up with words of love for her daughter, words that Florens can finally comprehend: “to be given

¹⁹ Her story, consequence of the horrors of slavery, is written in that same room where Jacob died, and in the house that embodies his capitalist aspirations based on the slave trade.

dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (167).

In conclusion, in *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, Toni Morrison challenges preconceived notions and stereotypes of the black woman as well as conventional and romanticized portrayals of motherhoods. She depicts the female slave's oppression through the devastating effects of the mother-daughter separation, which has dreadful consequences for their subjectivities, since "certain features of the mother-daughter relationship are internalized universally as basic elements of feminine ego structure" (Chodorow 1974:44): Sethe's possessive maternal love, Beloved's needy devotion towards her mother and Florens's obsessive love for the blacksmith. Only by reintegrating and accepting both the mother and daughter can they develop complete selves. Sethe and Florens come finally to terms with their mothers, a paramount step into true wholeness. Motherhood can also be a tool of empowerment for black women, who defy the patriarchal oppression of the slavery system by pursuing their love for their children and struggling for their protection and survival, thus refusing to become powerless victims. Morrison describes, through Sethe and Florens, the black slave woman's journey from "abandonment" to self-definition. In *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, the female slave evinces her humanity and strength, shaking the foundations of the patriarchal institution of slavery.

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Author's contact: lopez.ramirez.manuela@gmail.com