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Trauma, Memory, And Motherhood In Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) is a profound exploration of the enduring trauma of slavery and its intergenerational impact on Black women, families, and communities. Set in post–Civil War Ohio, the novel examines how the haunting memories of enslavement persist through what Morrison terms "rememory," where the past continually intrudes upon the present. This article analyses the intersections of trauma, memory, and motherhood in Beloved, exploring how Morrison redefines freedom, love, and maternal identity within the psychological and historical "afterlife of slavery." The study highlights how Morrison transforms the physical and emotional scars of racial violence into acts of narrative resistance and moral reclamation.

Through the central figure of Sethe, a mother whose act of infanticide embodies both defiance and grief; Morrison exposes the contradictions of motherhood under slavery and the radical dimensions of maternal love. The novel's fragmented structure, spectral imagery, and multiplicity of voices mirror the fractured nature of traumatic memory, while its womanist perspective situates motherhood as a site of both pain and empowerment. Ultimately, Beloved functions as a counter-archive that reclaims silenced histories and converts private anguish into collective remembrance, portraying motherhood not only as a burden but as an enduring act of resistance, survival, and spiritual healing.

Keywords: Trauma; Memory; Motherhood; Toni Morrison; Beloved

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987), a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, explores the lasting scars of slavery on individuals, families, and communities. Set in post–Civil War Ohio, the story follows formerly enslaved Black people whose legal freedom does not erase the psychological, emotional, and social effects of enslavement. Morrison examines how history, memory, and identity intertwine, showing that the trauma of slavery continues long after emancipation, deeply embedded in both body and mind.

At the heart of Beloved is the tension between freedom and self-possession. As Morrison writes, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Beloved 118). This line captures the paradox faced by her characters: physical freedom does not automatically ensure healing, maternal autonomy, or a sense of belonging. Through Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs, Morrison portrays how Black women navigate survival, motherhood, and community while living in a society still haunted by racial oppression.

Morrison's narrative techniques reinforce these themes. Through the concept of rememory, the past intrudes upon the present, showing that history is not just a sequence of events but a force that shapes life and relationships. The novel's non-linear chronology, multiple perspectives, and spectral imagery mirror the fractured experience of trauma, asking readers to confront the ethical responsibility of remembrance. Memory, storytelling, and maternal devotion converge to create a literary space where grief, survival, and identity are explored with profound moral and emotional insight.

Beloved also illustrates what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery," in which limited life opportunities, restricted access to resources, and premature death remain persistent markers of enslavement (Lose Your Mother 6). Morrison refuses to treat slavery as a closed chapter; like the ghost of Beloved herself, the past disrupts the present. Her work seeks to recover "the interior life of people who didn't write it down" and give voice to "the unspeakable things unspoken" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 11). By blending historical fragments with imaginative invention, she constructs a "counter-archive" (Taylor 2022, 104) that fills silences with living voices.

The ghostly child Beloved embodies this imaginative reconstruction, acting as both revenant and testimony, dramatizing personal grief and intergenerational trauma. Morrison explains that she wanted readers to "feel the necessity, but not the comfort" of Sethe's act of infanticide (Conversations with Toni Morrison 96). Freedom without self-possession, necessity without comfort, these paradoxes frame Morrison's portrayal of slavery within modern consciousness.

Central to the novel is Sethe, whose life as enslaved woman and mother exposes the violent contradictions of a system denying Black women even the most basic maternal rights. Reflecting on her own violation, Sethe observes, "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind… Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore" (Beloved 251). Her words illustrate what Hortense Spillers

calls the "ungendering" of Black women under slavery ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 80), reducing them to mere flesh outside their roles as mother, daughter, or wife. Morrison dramatizes this violation in the theft of Sethe's breast milk by Schoolteacher's nephews: "They beat you and you was pregnant?" Paul D asks. "And they took my milk" (Beloved 17). As Jennifer Terry argues, the stealing of a woman's milk desecrates her ability to love her child (247).

Yet Beloved also highlights the radical power of love. Sethe asserts, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (Beloved 164), showing that motherhood can be a space where preservation may demand destruction. Her killing of her infant daughter becomes an act of resistance, refusing to allow her child to be enslaved. Inspired by the historical case of Margaret Garner, Morrison transforms this into "a tragic calculus of survival" (Rushdy, Remembering Generations 119), asking readers to witness ethically without moral consolation.

Memory in Beloved extends beyond the private realm, circulating as a collective inheritance. Morrison uses the term "rememory" to describe the intrusive return of the past: "Someday you be walking down the road… it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (Beloved 43). Trauma is "not fully assimilated as it occurs" but returns belatedly (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 4), and memory in Morrison's novel is communal, place-bound, and embodied. In Sethe's words, "Nothing ever dies" (Beloved 44), emphasizing trauma's persistence across generations. Denver, Beloved, and Baby Suggs each confront this inheritance in distinct ways.

This article examines how Beloved stages the intersections of trauma, memory, and motherhood to critique the ongoing legacy of slavery. Morrison situates Sethe's grief within the broader afterlife of slavery, showing how mothers, daughters, and other mothers develop survival strategies. Maternal devotion is radical and paradoxical, challenging simple binaries of love and violence. Black feminist and womanist frameworks illuminate collective practices of care, ethical responsibility, and intergenerational resilience. Morrison's polyphonic narrative functions as a politics of testimony, where storytelling becomes an act of witnessing. By centering Black women's experiences, Beloved transforms history into haunting, trauma into narrative, and motherhood into a profound act of resistance, showing that survival is both personal and communal, unfinished but morally imperative.

MOTHERHOOD AND SURVIVAL IN BELOVED: SETHE, DENVER, AND BABY SUGGS

In Toni Morrison's Beloved, the interconnected lives of Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs embody both the generational wounds and the resilient spirit of Black womanhood after slavery. Each woman represents a different facet of survival: Sethe bears the scars of enslavement and the haunting weight of her choices; Denver reflects the fragile yet transformative possibility of growth beyond inherited trauma; and Baby Suggs embodies the wisdom of self-love, tempered by the exhaustion of loss. Together, they reveal how slavery's violence extended far beyond chains, stripping identity, corroding motherhood, and isolating community.

Sethe's desperate act of infanticide exposes the extreme limits of maternal love under slavery's brutal conditions, where the only way to protect a child from degradation might be death itself. Denver, growing up in the shadow of this act, begins bound by silence and suspicion but gradually finds the courage to step outward, seeking help and carving her own identity. Baby Suggs, once a preacher of radical self-acceptance in the Clearing, calls her community to love their flesh as an act of defiance in a world that despised it. Yet her later retreat into sorrow shows the heavy toll of cumulative trauma, even freedom cannot undo decades of loss.

Together, these three women reflect Morrison's central vision: the past cannot be erased, but it must be faced. Survival, for them, is not simply endurance, it is the reclamation of memory, the body, and selfhood within the fragile bonds of community.

Sethe In Beloved

Sethe stands at the heart of Toni Morrison's Beloved as its central female protagonist. She is introduced as an enslaved woman from Sweet Home plantation who, in 1873, attempts a desperate escape with her children from Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio. Her flight, however, does not bring the safety she longs for; pursued by her former enslavers—the Sweet Home master and his nephews—Sethe faces the terrifying prospect of her children being recaptured and forced back into slavery. Cornered in a woodshed and seeing no alternative, she resolves to protect them in the only way she believes possible: by taking their lives. In this act of maternal desperation, she succeeds in killing only one—her eighteen-month-old daughter, described hauntingly as "the crawling-already girl" (Beloved 180).

This act of infanticide defines Sethe's fate. Society condemns her as a murderer rather than understanding the circumstances of her choice. Shunned by her community, she retreats into an isolated existence at 124 Bluestone Road with her surviving children. Her decision, while widely denounced, becomes a central point of debate among critics and readers alike. For some, it represents an unspeakable cruelty; for others, it is an act born out of unbearable suffering and a refusal to allow her children to be reduced once more to property.

Sethe's history of suffering is rooted in her years at Sweet Home. The turning point comes after the death of Mr. Garner, the relatively less oppressive plantation owner, when control passes to the Schoolteacher. His brutal worldview strips enslaved people of their humanity. In his teaching to his nephews, he literally catalogues Sethe's characteristics, dividing them into "human" and "animal" traits. Morrison records the lesson: "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (Beloved 158).

This incident is searing for Sethe—it reduces her to an object of study, an example of Black dehumanization. The humiliation she feels is not only personal but emblematic of the way enslaved women were routinely degraded, their identities diminished, and their bodies treated as little more than tools for labor and reproduction.

Her suffering is further compounded by physical violence. While pregnant with Denver, Sethe is brutally assaulted by the nephews of the Schoolteacher, who not only beat her but also steal her breast milk, mocking her very role as a mother: "they took her milk" (Beloved 33). The violation cuts deeper than physical abuse—it robs her of maternal dignity, forcing her to nourish white boys at the expense of her own child. The trauma of this moment eclipses even the act of rape for Sethe, for it represents the annihilation of her motherhood, the one role through which she defines her identity. Barnett observes: "For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed or killed is subordinate to the overreaching horror of being raped and 'dirtied' by whites; even dying at the hands of one's mother is subordinate to rape" (419). This perspective clarifies why Sethe would commit the unthinkable: she refuses to let her children endure the same degradation she has suffered.

Halle, her husband, bears witness to this assault but is powerless to intervene. His inability to protect Sethe devastates him and drives him toward madness, ultimately abandoning his wife and family. This breakdown of Halle's masculinity reinforces the destructive force of slavery on Black families. In its place, Paul D—another former Sweet Home slave—enters Sethe's life eighteen years later. His arrival brings a fragile hope of companionship and stability for Sethe and her daughter Denver. For Denver, Paul D briefly represents a semblance of family life. Yet Paul D's inability to understand Sethe's choices creates further conflict. When confronted with the story of her infanticide, he remarks: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Beloved 316). His words, meant as judgment, wound her deeply, echoing the very language of animalization once used by white oppressors. To Sethe, Paul D fails to grasp the depth of her trauma or the logic behind her desperate act.

Critics have long debated whether Sethe's infanticide should be read as savagery or sacrifice. Piotrowska reminds us that enslaved identity was always mediated through the gaze of white society: "a direct result of enslavement, every slave created his/her identity based on the definition provided by white people" (10). This explains why even within her own Black community, Sethe is judged not on her terms but through inherited frameworks of white morality. Some critics, like Guvleen Grewal, interpret her actions as a form of resistance to slavery's dehumanizing power: "If the master could subject the slave children in bondage to a slow 'social death,' the mother could release them through physical death" (101). Others, like Kristina Groover, describe it as "a desperate act of love" (qtd. in Piotrowska 12). Yet her community does not forgive. What followed her brief period of happiness were "eighteen years of disapproval and solitary life" (Beloved 204).

Her isolation within the haunted house at 124 becomes a metaphor for her internal imprisonment. Sethe withdraws from society, attempting to make sense of her past and to reconstruct an identity shattered by trauma and guilt. Piotrowska notes: "Sethe's having locked herself in the house can be perceived as an attempt to revise the past in order to free herself from the burden of her child murder" (12). In this context, the ghostly presence of Beloved—the daughter she killed—emerges as both punishment and possibility.

In essence, Sethe's story illustrates the enduring scars of enslavement upon identity, motherhood, and community. Her desperate act of infanticide, the haunting of Beloved, and her eventual struggle toward self-reclamation all underscore Morrison's central theme: the past cannot be erased, only confronted.

Denver In Beloved

Denver, the youngest daughter of Sethe and Halle, is a key figure whose story reflects both isolation and growth. She is born during Sethe's escape with the help of a white girl, Amy Denver, after whom she is named. From the beginning, her life is tied to survival, as Sethe recalls that Amy's care was the reason "the baby she birthed on the way survived" (Beloved 31). Denver's survival continues later when Stamp Paid stops Sethe from killing her in the same desperate act that took the life of her older sister.

After Baby Suggs's death and her brothers' flight from 124, Denver grows up in almost complete loneliness. For a short time, she finds comfort in schooling with Lady Jones, but this ends when a boy cruelly reminds her of her family's past: "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went for your baby sister?" (Beloved 207). Shaken by this, Denver withdraws into silence and becomes housebound, carrying the weight of her mother's history.

Her relationship with Sethe is filled with both love and unease. Denver depends on her mother but cannot fully trust her, remembering the day her sister died: "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters" (Beloved 205). This memory leaves her emotionally guarded and bound to the house. The arrival of Beloved changes this, giving Denver companionship and a renewed sense of family. She devotes herself to Beloved, declaring: "I have to protect her" (Beloved 242). But as she watches Beloved drain Sethe's strength, Denver realizes that it is her mother who needs protection.

This realization becomes a turning point. For the first time, she leaves the house to seek help from the community. Morrison captures this moment of courage: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (Beloved 252). By doing so, Denver not only saves Sethe but also begins to shape her own identity based on responsibility and resilience.

Through Denver, Morrison shows how the effects of slavery continue into the lives of the next generation. Denver inherits her mother's trauma but learns to transform it into strength. Unlike Sethe, who remains tied to the past, Denver chooses to face the future: "She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (Beloved 243). Her story becomes one of renewal, showing the power of courage, Community, And Self-Definition.

Baby Suggs in Beloved

Baby Suggs, also called Jenny Whitlow and later known as "Holy," is one of the most important figures in Beloved. She is described as "a sixty-odd-year-old slave woman" and the mother of eight children by six different fathers. Like so many enslaved mothers, she suffers the devastating loss of nearly all her children

to the institution of slavery; only her son Halle remains with her, and it is he who eventually buys her freedom. The small fragments she remembers of her children reveal both her loss and her desperate attempt to preserve memory: "her firstborn loved the burnt bottom of bread" (Beloved 9). These minor details are all she has in place of their lives. Even after gaining freedom, Baby Suggs tries without success to find out what became of them.

Before her emancipation, Baby Suggs is a house slave at Sweet Home, owned by the Garners. On the bill of sale she is named Jenny Whitlow, the name the Garners use for her. Once freed by Halle's labor, Mr. Garner drives her to his friends, the Bodwins, in Ohio. They help her establish a new life, providing work and a home at 124 Bluestone Road. Yet Baby Suggs, shaped by decades of bondage, struggles to make sense of her freedom. She asks, "What for? What does a sixty-odd-year-old slave woman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?" (Beloved 272). These words expose how slavery eroded her sense of self to the point where freedom feels meaningless. Nevertheless, she also comes to realize the profound value of it: "And when she stepped foot on free ground, she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath knew that there was nothing like it in this world" (Beloved 270). Through her, Morrison shows both the psychological scars of slavery and the awakening that comes with even belated freedom.

As an ex-slave, Baby Suggs embraces her body for the first time in her life. She channels this realization into her role as a preacher in the Clearing, an outdoor gathering place where she becomes an unchurched spiritual leader. In the Clearing, she leads the community in crying, dancing, and celebrating life, teaching them to love themselves and their bodies. She tells them:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh… Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either… You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved" (Beloved 170).

Her message is not one of traditional religious salvation but of radical self-love in a society that despises Black bodies. Critics note that Morrison, through Baby Suggs, rejects conventional calls to moral reform. As Andrew observes, "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more… she did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth… Pure" (80). Instead, Baby Suggs insists that reclaiming dignity begins with loving one's flesh, a political and spiritual resistance to a world built on dehumanization.

Yet despite her strength, Baby Suggs carries deep sorrow. She suffers from the accumulated traumas of slavery, especially the loss of her children and the sexual abuse she endured. Cornel West argues in *Race Matters* that white supremacy degraded Black bodies as a means of control, persuading the oppressed that their bodies were ugly (122). Audre Lorde emphasizes that enslaved women suffered doubly, both as Black and as female, making them especially vulnerable to sexual violation (qtd. in Kella 70). Morrison reflects

this in Baby Suggs's life: eight children by six different fathers, most of them lost to sale, rape, or separation. Gurleen Grewal highlights how Beloved "depicts more than equality of oppression since under slavery women were routinely the subject of rape, enforced childbirth, and natal alienation from their children" (100). Through Baby Suggs, Morrison portrays this brutal intersection of race, gender, and exploitation.

Despite her suffering, Baby Suggs provides stability for others. When Sethe arrives at 124 with her children, Baby Suggs pierces her ears so she can wear earrings Mrs. Garner had given her. She even throws a lavish feast, the "blackberry party," to welcome them. The abundance of food, however, sparks envy and resentment among the neighbors, who see her generosity as pride. This moment foreshadows the community's failure to protect Sethe when she later kills her child. After that tragedy, Baby Suggs retreats inward, losing interest in preaching or in her community. Instead, she focuses on colors; lavender, pink, any shade that might soothe her spirit: "Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't" (Beloved 3). Her retreat into colors marks both exhaustion and resignation, a symbolic withdrawal from the world that had already taken so much from her.

By the time Paul D returns to 124 and asks Sethe about her, Baby Suggs has been dead nearly nine years. Sethe recalls her passing tenderly: "Well, long enough to see Baby Suggs, anyway. Where is she?"
"Dead."
"Aw no. When?"
"Eight years now. Almost nine."
"Was it hard? I hope she didn't die hard."
Sethe shook her head. "Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part" (Beloved 11).

Sethe's words capture the essence of Baby Suggs's existence: a life marked by relentless struggle, where even freedom brought little peace. Her death was gentle, but only because life itself had been unbearably harsh.

Ultimately, Baby Suggs represents both resilience and despair. Her sermons in the Clearing stress self-recognition and self-love, crucial for a people denied humanity. Yet her personal story demonstrates how slavery destroys identity to the point where even freedom feels empty. Morrison portrays her as both a prophet of love and a woman broken by loss. As she tells Sethe and Denver near the end: "There was no bad luck in the world but white people" (Beloved 202). This blunt truth reflects her final wisdom, earned through decades of bondage and a short, fragile taste of freedom.

Through Baby Suggs, Morrison shows how memory, body, and community intersect in the aftermath of slavery. Her voice insists that freedom requires more than release from chains, it demands the reclamation of the body, the reconstruction of identity, and the nurturing of self-love within a community. Without these, survival is possible, but wholeness remains elusive.

THE PARADOX OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD UNDER SLAVERY

Motherhood in Beloved is both the most radical act of love and the most devastating site of loss. Morrison insists on portraying enslaved women not only as mothers whose devotion was boundless, but also as women whose maternal rights were systematically denied. In this sense, motherhood becomes a paradox: it is at once life-giving and life-destroying, an act of preservation carried out under conditions that relentlessly sought to annihilate it.

Sethe embodies this paradox most powerfully. Her defining memory is not of her own survival, but of protecting her children against slavery's return: "She was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her head cloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (Beloved 192). This passage shows the immediacy of Sethe's maternal terror and her conviction that death was preferable to bondage.

For Sethe, to kill her daughter is not to destroy her, but to preserve her from the unendurable. Her insistence, "If I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (236), transforms infanticide into maternal devotion. Paul D., unable to accept this logic, condemns her: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (316), accusing her of crossing into animality. Yet Sethe's reply reframes the issue: "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (164). Here Morrison dramatizes the paradoxical truth that mother-love, under slavery, could only manifest in extremes. As Christina Sharpe explains, Black motherhood is lived "in the wake" of slavery, where every act of care anticipates loss (In the Wake 21).

The paradox of motherhood also lies in its denial. Schoolteacher's lesson to his students, "Human characteristics on the left, animal ones on the right" (Beloved 228), codifies what Hortense Spillers has called the "ungendering" of enslaved women, who were reduced to flesh rather than recognized as mothers or wives.

Enslaved women were breeders, their children's commodities. Sethe recalls her own mother, who "threw them all away but me" (74), a chilling reminder of how slavery severed maternal bonds so thoroughly that survival often demanded detachment. Morrison presents such memories as inherited grief, marking the impossibility of conventional kinship.

The paradox intensifies with Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, whose life testifies to maternal loss and transformation. She bore eight children, but only one, Halle, remained in her life. Freed from slavery late in life, she channels her maternal love into community preaching, urging her people: "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it… You got to love it, you!" (Beloved 103–04). Here, maternal love becomes communal survival, transformed from private

devotion into public ethic. Stephanie Li (2021) interprets Baby Suggs's role as embodying Morrison's vision of "other mothering," where maternal labour is redistributed across community networks, offering healing in the wake of systemic loss. Yet Baby Suggs, too, collapses under the weight of grief, retreating to her bed and requesting colours: "Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't" (Beloved 211). Her exhaustion epitomises what Sharpe calls the limits of "wake work": the fatigue of surviving a system that made mother-love unbearable.

Denver, Sethe's daughter, represents another iteration of this paradox. She grows up in the haunted house at 124, carrying the inheritance of her mother's violent love. Her confession, "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters… tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (Beloved 205)—captures the ambivalence of generational survival. Denver's eventual decision to step beyond 124 and seek help from the community reframes maternal love as resilience. As Ayesha Harris notes, "Denver's growth reconfigures Black motherhood as resilience, a balancing of grief with collective survival" (244). Through Denver, Morrison suggests that survival requires reimagining mother-love as communal responsibility, not solitary devotion.

This paradoxical portrayal extends beyond characters to the novel's historical grounding. Beloved's narrative is rooted in the real story of Margaret Garner, the enslaved woman who, when captured in 1856, killed her daughter rather than allow her return to bondage. Contemporary newspapers labelled Garner both "monstrous" and "heroic," a tension Morrison embeds in Sethe's act. As Rushdy observes, Beloved reframes this history into "a calculus of survival" that compels ethical witnessing rather than judgment (Remembering Generations 118).

Recent feminist scholarship continues to expand on Morrison's vision. Nicole Taylor identifies Beloved as a "counter-archive" where maternal grief, silenced in historical records, finds narrative form (Taylor 110). Kimberly Nichele Brown argues that Morrison "refuses to romanticise the maternal" and instead situates it in violence and ambivalence (Writing the Black Maternal Experience, 19). Such interpretations affirm that the paradox of Black motherhood in Beloved is not a tragic exception but a structural condition of slavery.

Eventually, Morrison presents motherhood as radical, paradoxical love. It is Sethe's infanticide, which insists that her daughter will never know slavery. It is Baby Suggs's sermon, urging her people to love their despised flesh. It is Denver's choice to carry her family into the future.

Morrison crystallises this paradox in Sethe's words: "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (194). This "thick love," both destructive and salvific, marks Morrison's most searing contribution to Black feminist and womanist thought. It demonstrates how, under slavery, maternal devotion could simultaneously preserve and imperil, embodying both life and death.

MEMORY, ETHICS, AND THE POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE

Toni Morrison closes his novel with one of the most haunting refrains in American literature: "This is not a story to pass on" (323). This paradoxical sentence at once prohibits and demands remembrance. On one hand, it gestures toward the unspeakable weight of slavery's violence, atrocities so devastating that repetition risks retraumatization. On the other hand, it insists on the ethical obligation to remember, lest erasure permit repetition. Morrison frames remembrance not as a neutral act of history but as an ethical and political practice.

Earlier, Sethe introduces the term "rememory" to describe the intrusive, transpersonal nature of memory under slavery:

"Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (Beloved 43).

Here Morrison redefines memory as communal, embodied, and unavoidable. Sethe's insistence that "nothing ever dies" (44) affirms that trauma persists not only in the psyche but in landscapes, communities, and language. Memory, in this sense, is social inheritance. Morrison dramatizes what Cathy Caruth calls "the endless repetition of its impact" (Unclaimed Experience 4), but she reconfigures repetition into survival rather than despair.

The ghost Beloved herself embodies this politics of remembrance. She is not only Sethe's murdered child but also the collective return of the enslaved dead: "Her face is mine" (255), Sethe recognises, collapsing personal and historical grief. Beloved is at once specter and archive, her presence refusing historical absence. Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation" clarifies Morrison's method: the ghost is both evidence and invention, filling the silences of an impoverished record (Venus in Two Acts 3). Beloved's eventual disappearance, "It was not a story to pass on" (324), suggests that memory must be transformed, not denied. Haunting persists, but it compels ethical reckoning rather than immobilisation.

Morrison also stages remembrance as collective ritual. Baby Suggs's sermon in the Clearing urges her community to reclaim their embodied selves from the ledger of slavery:

"Here… we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (Beloved 103–04).

This is not merely spiritual counsel but an act of political memory, where affirming the body resists commodification. Alice Walker's call in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens to honour the silenced creativity of foremothers finds dramatic embodiment in Baby Suggs's ritual of flesh-love. Layli Maparyan terms such acts "womanist pedagogy": practices that transmit cultural memory and resilience through communal affirmation (59–63). Morrison situates remembrance here not as nostalgia but as survival praxis.

The politics of memory in Beloved resonate with contemporary scholarship. Nicole Taylor (2022) identifies the novel as a "counter-archive," documenting maternal grief excluded from official records. Ayesha Harris (2021) links Morrison's representation of reproductive violence to current crises in Black maternal mortality, arguing that remembrance is necessary to confront ongoing racialised precarity. Stephanie Li (2021) interprets Beloved as intergenerational pedagogy: a story that teaches how to live with trauma without being consumed by it. Such readings affirm that Morrison's ethic of remembrance extends far beyond the nineteenth-century setting of her novel, reaching into present struggles for racial justice and maternal survival.

Yet Morrison warns against commodifying Black suffering. The refrain "This is not a story to pass on" dramatizes the dilemma: to forget risks erasure; to narrate risks spectacle. Saidiya Hartman, in Scenes of Subjection, cautions against "the reiteration of the spectacular" (3) that reproduces violence in its representation. Morrison anticipates this danger, writing against both amnesia and voyeurism. Her novel insists that remembering must be carried as testimony, not consumed as entertainment.

Christina Sharpe's concept of "wake work" is illuminating here. To live in the "wake" of slavery is to navigate a world saturated with its residues while cultivating strategies for survival (In the Wake 18–22). Morrison dramatizes this through Sethe's collapse into the past and Denver's emergence into the future. Denver's decision to "step off the edge of the world" (243) by seeking help from the community illustrates how remembrance, if ethically held, can orient toward collective renewal.

The politics of remembrance are also evident in Paul D.'s final words to Sethe: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (272). This affirmation shifts memory away from total consumption of the self toward self-possession. Having borne unbearable histories, Sethe is called to claim herself as subject rather than remain defined only by grief. Morrison here models what Delores Williams terms survival as resistance. To remember is to endure, but to endure one must also turn remembrance into a ground for life rather than death.

Meanwhile, Morrison transforms memory from passive recollection into ethical practice. Beloved insists that to remember is painful, incomplete, and exhausting, yet necessary. The novel closes with paradox because there is no simple resolution: memory must be carried, but carried with care. Morrison thus reframes remembrance as politics, not an option but a duty, one that sustains survival while guarding against erasure. Her narrative teaches that justice lies in the ongoing labour of ethical remembering: unfinished, collective, and life-preserving.

CRITICAL RECEPTION AND FEMINIST/WOMANIST LEGACY

Since its publication in 1987, Toni Morrison's Beloved has become one of the most celebrated and contested works in American literature. Hailed as both a ghost story and a historical novel, it has been praised for its haunting depiction of slavery's afterlife and its formal innovation. Henry Louis Gates Jr., reviewing it for

The New York Times Book Review in 1987, called it a "cultural haunting," a phrase that has since become central to its critical reception.

Morrison herself defended the presence of the supernatural, insisting that "the presence of the supernatural is not a violation of the real but an enlargement of it" (Conversations with Toni Morrison 12). Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, the novel also stirred controversy when it was excluded from the National Book Award shortlist, prompting forty-eight prominent Black writers to sign an open letter protesting that Morrison had "transformed the American canon." From its earliest reception, therefore, Beloved was understood not merely as fiction but as cultural memory given form.

The feminist and womanist significance of Beloved has remained a central axis of critical discussion. Sethe's defiant declaration, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (164), quickly became one of the most cited lines in Black feminist criticism.

Patricia Hill Collins interprets this moment through her notion of the "ethic of care," arguing that Black women's maternal practices were inherently political, marked by resistance as much as by nurturance (Black Feminist Thought 202).

Hortense Spillers's theorisation of the "ungendered female" (Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe 67–68) has likewise been applied to Sethe, whose maternal act embodies both the tragedy of slavery's distortion of kinship and the resilience of Black women who nevertheless claimed their children as their own. Morrison herself, when asked about Sethe's decision, explained: "I wanted the reader to feel the necessity, but not the comfort, of her choice." This refusal to romanticise or condemn outright sustains the novel's ambivalence, making it fertile ground for feminist and womanist scholarship.

Debates around Sethe's infanticide have dominated critical interpretation. For some readers, her act remains unbearable. Paul D. remarks, "More of us they drowned than there is in this here river" (234), situating her act within the continuum of collective atrocity.

For others, Morrison's depiction of infanticide represents the extremity of mother-love under slavery, an act simultaneously of resistance and of despair. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy describes this as "a tragic calculus of survival in which love itself is criminalised" (Remembering Generations 119).

More recent critics link the novel to contemporary issues: Nicole Fleetwood, in Marking Time (2020), reads Beloved's maternal politics in relation to carceral logics and reproductive justice, noting the persistence of surveillance and constraint over Black motherhood. Jennifer Terry describes Sethe's act as "an ethical rupture that exposes the impossibility of Black maternal autonomy within slavery's order." Such readings affirm that Beloved's ethical provocations remain relevant in twenty-first-century debates about race, gender, and reproductive rights.

Beyond Sethe, critics have located the novel within a broader Black women's literary tradition. Alice Walker's womanist dictum, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens xii), finds narrative embodiment in Baby Suggs's call to her people: "Here… we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (103). Scholars such as Farah Jasmine Griffin situate Beloved as a crucial link in a continuum stretching from Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) to Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing, where haunting mediates intergenerational trauma.

Public reception has likewise underscored the novel's political charge. While Beloved has become a fixture of university curricula, it has also been challenged and banned in school districts across the United States for its depictions of sexual violence and infanticide. Most recently, during the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election, the novel was attacked for being "too explicit," reigniting debates about race, memory, and censorship. Yet such controversies confirm the novel's continued power to unsettle. Morrison herself anticipated this reception: "The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (Playing in the Dark 5). Beloved embodies that program.

Even more than three decades after its publication, Beloved continues to shape discourses around race, gender, history, and literature. Its critical legacy lies not only in its feminist and womanist emphases but also in its insistence that history must be narrated through voices marked by trauma and survival.

Sethe's cry, "Me? Me?" (272), remains unanswered, echoing as a challenge to critics, communities, and readers: How can the stories of slavery be remembered without consuming those who bore them? By refusing closure and demanding ethical engagement, Morrison secures Beloved's place not only in the American canon but also in the ongoing struggles over memory, justice, and freedom.

CONCLUSION

In Beloved, Toni Morrison presents a profoundly intricate and haunting exploration of slavery's enduring impact on individuals, families, and communities. The novel demonstrates that freedom from physical bondage does not automatically restore selfhood, security, or belonging, particularly for Black women who bear the compounded scars of systemic oppression.

Through the intertwined lives of Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs, Morrison illuminates the multifaceted consequences of enslavement and the relentless struggle to reclaim agency, identity, and autonomy in the aftermath of violence. Sethe's life, marked by trauma and acts of radical resistance, embodies the brutal legacy of slavery, where motherhood becomes a site of both immense love and ethically complex survival strategies. Her act of infanticide, which Morrison describes as conveying "necessity, but not the comfort", illustrates the impossible moral calculus imposed on enslaved women. In doing so, the novel forces readers to confront the paradoxes of love, survival, and resistance under conditions of extreme dehumanization.

Denver's trajectory complements Sethe's story, tracing a gradual path from fear and isolation toward self-realization and resilience. Sheltered within the shadow of familial trauma, Denver initially struggles to navigate a world shaped by historical and intergenerational suffering. However, guided by Baby Suggs' teachings about self-love, bodily autonomy, and inner strength, "That I should always listen to my body and love it", she learns to transform vulnerability into agency. Her courageous decision to seek help for Sethe and to engage with the wider community represents a turning point, demonstrating that survival and personal growth are possible even amidst the haunting legacies of slavery.

Denver's journey reflects Morrison's central theme: while the scars of the past are inherited, they can also be confronted, negotiated, and transformed through conscious action, relational support, and moral responsibility. Her emergence highlights the potential for healing across generations when courage and community intersect.

The spectral presence of Beloved intensifies the tension between memory, trauma, and the possibility of renewal. As both revenant and witness, Beloved embodies the collective memory of slavery, insisting that the past cannot be neatly confined or forgotten. Morrison's concept of rememory captures how trauma circulates through families and communities, returning unbidden yet demanding recognition: "Someday you be walking down the road… it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else". The ghostly figure thus becomes a medium through which personal grief intersects with communal and historical memory, compelling Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs—and through them, the reader—to reckon with the weight of history. Each character negotiates this inheritance in her own way: Sethe through acts of radical maternal devotion, Denver through the cultivation of resilience and self-reliance, and Baby Suggs through her role as spiritual guide and moral compass. Collectively, they illustrate the ethical and emotional labor required to transform trauma into consciousness, grief into testimony, and memory into survival.

Moreover, Morrison situates motherhood as both profoundly intimate and ethically charged. Sethe's maternal acts, often paradoxical and morally complex, underscore the intersection of love, protection, and resistance. Through Sethe, the novel interrogates how enslaved women navigated unimaginable constraints, asserting agency over their children's futures in a system designed to deny them such autonomy. Denver's gradual assertion of independence and Baby Suggs' nurturing guidance extend the notion of motherhood beyond the individual, framing it as a relational, communal, and even political act. Morrison thus elevates maternal devotion to a radical practice of care, resilience, and intergenerational responsibility, presenting it as inseparable from the work of cultural memory and ethical witnessing.

Furthermore, Beloved stands as a testament to the transformative power of memory, storytelling, and maternal devotion. It portrays the inseparable intertwining of love and violence, survival and destruction, in the lives of those who endured slavery's brutality. Morrison emphasizes that healing, reclamation of self, and moral agency are ongoing processes, demanding courage, reflection, and relational connection. Through

the intertwined experiences of Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs, the novel demonstrates that even amid profound loss and enduring injustice, resilience, agency, and communal solidarity remain possible.

The narrative affirms that survival is neither complete nor comfortable but morally imperative, and that memory, care, and ethical witnessing are essential practices through which individuals and communities navigate the legacies of historical trauma.

Finally, Beloved is not merely a story of the past; it is an enduring exploration of the human capacity to endure, resist, and regenerate. Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs exemplify the intertwined labor of survival, love, and moral reckoning, revealing that the afterlife of slavery is both haunting and transformative. Morrison's novel insists that remembrance, storytelling, and maternal devotion are acts of defiance, offering insight, empowerment, and hope to readers across generations. Through this literary achievement, she secures a profound ethical, cultural, and historical legacy, demonstrating how literature can bear witness to the unspeakable, reclaim silenced voices, and illuminate pathways toward resilience, dignity, and collective survival.

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