

(M)Other, Re-owned/Dis-owned Body in: Tony Morrison's *Beloved* and Sherwood Anderson's "Mother" in Winesburg, Ohio

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Abstract. The present paper studies Tony Morrison's *Beloved* and Sherwood Anderson's short story, "Mother", in *Winesburg Ohio* which are the narrations of the disruption of the possession of body, the body to which child belongs as a part of mother's body. Like her own body which becomes traumatic being possessed and owned, the child becomes problematic being possessed and threatened by being dis-possessed. The child is possessed and owned by her. The mothers, in these two stories, who feel threatened by dispossession of body- including child as an independent physical part of their body- by father in "Mother"'s case, and by white male dominant society in *Beloved*'s case, commit crime; in *Beloved*, infanticide and in "Mother", mariticide.

Keywords: Body, Disowned, Renowned, Traumatic Possession, Infanticide, Mariticide.

1. Introduction

Tony Morrison's *Beloved* and Sherwood Anderson's short story, "Mother", in *Winesburg Ohio* narrate the disruption of the sense of body possession. Like her own body which becomes traumatic being possessed and owned, the child becomes problematic being possessed and threatened by being dis-owned.

2. Discussion

The award of the 1993 Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison confirms her status as a canonical author in American literature, and *Beloved* is one of her distinguished works which dramatizes infanticide, as an act of violence.

Beloved is the narrative of motherhood, more than of slavery, it is the presentation of motherhood more than of slavery. Hirsch suggests that Morrison is not merely writing about slavery, or slave mothers. Motherhood in *Beloved* is what can be the focus of feminists' attention than a subject of race or history of slavery, because it is about hopes and fears of a mother within slavery context, and the type of those fears and hopes differ.

Being a slave mother compels a mother to feel divided against/within herself. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch writes: "When Sethe tries to explain to *Beloved* why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children's lives, no voice in their upbringing". The problem in question, in *Beloved*, is not master-slave relation, but mother-daughter relation, but motherhood has been substituted by slavery, in *Beloved* the mother commits infanticide. But does she want to escape motherhood or save her daughter's future from slavery?

Motherhood, in many respects, is a kind of slavery to children; therefore being mother threatens self-possession. In *Beloved* being a woman is different from being a mother. Sethe is frightened when Paul D asks her to have his baby. Perhaps the central problem is the lack of selflessness on the mother side. Sethe answers Paul D's request thinking that "Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring – again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me, unless carefree mother-love was a killer." (1987, 132) The prominence of Sethe's maternal subjectivity confirms priority of motherhood over slavery, but vulnerable to slavery's ravages.

Few actual slave mothers commit infanticide. As *Beloved* narrates, the action is the result of despair, and confuses the reader to determine whether Sethe kills her daughter to save herself or her child. Motherhood in

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Beloved seems to restrict being an independent subject, it is the matter of separation from individuation, and it is not the connection between mother and daughter but separation from self. That is why Sethe resists being divided in herself and commits infanticide in order to remain an independent self.

As the name of the novel poses daughter for Sethe means beloved, but she becomes beloved after she is destroyed. Sethe herself only once spoke to her mother before she was hung; Sethe as a daughter was not satisfied being a daughter to a mother, therefore it is not possible for her to treat like a mother, she is slave, she is black, and she is devoid of feelings which are natural. She has been thrown to white community and told that her mother threw all her children to death except her. Sethe's natural feelings have been destroyed.

The parental and matrimonial relations have been destroyed by slavery in *Beloved*, therefore characters are after substituting the lost relations by naming themselves, or feeling parental or sibling relations compensated in matrimonial relations. For example there is Halle "more like a brother than husband" (25). The characters in *Beloved* lack their natural characteristics as Mrs. Garner defines "A characteristic is a feature. A thing that is natural to a thing" (195). But in *Beloved* the characters are not even prototypes, so they lack any natural features. When man is devoid of natural features he unconsciously will strive to substitute what he lacks, to satisfy his natural needs. In *Beloved's* case the natural relations, in which mother-child, and particularly mother-daughter is the dominant feature, it is the sense of belonging and protection for a child, and owning and protecting for a mother that matters, but for a mother who herself has not belonged to a mother and was not protected, it would be complicated to own and protect. In Sethe's case, she will resist being divided and having to protect, she will project her sense of not belonging to her daughter by taking revenge from her mother, and suppressing her sense of belonging feeling, by embodying her own fears and desperate helplessness in her daughter. She does not protect because she was not protected, she commits infanticide because her natural feeling of being a daughter has been killed, she was never a daughter to a mother, therefore she does not want to let another one live that experience at her expense. Therefore infanticide in *Beloved* is the externalized internal violence, which is projected by infanticide instead of suicide.

By infanticide Sethe wants to regain her childhood dream of belonging to a mother and taking revenge from her, she obtains childhood by killing motherhood. Kristeva writes on childbirth "The body of [the] mother is always the same Master-Mother of instinctual drive, a ruler over psychosis, a subject of biology, but also, one toward which women aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis ... By giving birth, the woman enter into contact with her own mother; she becomes, she is her own mother".

Second phase of the story is the fusion of mother and daughter. Sethe and *Beloved* repossess each other, while the first phase of the story dealt with dispossession. The center of fusion and unity of mother and daughter is death. In Lacanian terminology death is the ultimate unity, the Real Order through which subject obtains unity. Sethe killed *Beloved* to resist slavery which is Symbolic Order. Motherhood became death dealing concept. Sethe has to go through double submission to Symbolic Order, because on the one hand motherhood is what splits her from within. As mentioned before the violence within Sethe is contradictory feelings about not belonging to a mother and resisting motherhood; on the other hand slavery is Symbolic Order which drains her, her mother, and generations of slave mothers from their natural feelings. Therefore Sethe killed *Beloved* to go back to pre-Symbolic unity with herself, and she resisted being divided against herself. She resisted re-dispossession of her body by a child, the body which had not been possessed by mother, sees her child as Other, therefore concept of mother becomes mOther, who commits infanticide, because she sees her child as Other, the Other that prevents her from becoming self, and in turn it is Other for her child not mother but mOther.

"For a baby she throws a powerful spell", states Denver at the outset of the narrative. "No more powerful than the way I loved her", replies her mother (p.4). In other words, love is power. *Beloved's* return to life opens up the space for *Beloved* to be able to kill Sethe, because, contrary to the mother, the daughter's "spell" is more powerful. This is the same reason, it may be, Sethe once killed *Beloved*. Slavery survives, and re-structures itself. If infanticide on the part of a slave mother can legitimately be interpreted on one level as an attempt to shatter a self-perpetuating system, the power of this system reappears like a ghost at a deeper level of more personal anguish. At this level, there remains only the terrible dynamic of the mother-daughter bond,

in which infanticide gets transformed into matricide, or perhaps better, maternicide. Beloved consistently reads this bond on the model of slavery. Beloved's desire for her mother expresses an absolute tyranny, a complete enslavement from which any self-possession by Sethe is ultimately impossible. How could she be free? Even after Beloved is gone, through the efforts of another daughter, Sethe's refusal to forgive herself persists, and haunts her. "It was not a story to pass on", we read on the last pages of the novel, where "by and by all trace is gone" (275). Morrison leaves us with the question of what narrative could have expressed forgiveness for the act of infanticide or how a slave can give a self she never had, or how motherhood can survive slavery. The most we can say is that motherhood in Beloved is divided: a site of both mother and daughter, victim and oppressor. Motherhood in Beloved is motherhood of a slave mother who is Other of Symbolic Order, slavery, and is divided in itself which resists dispossession of herself by daughter, and also resists Symbolic Order.

The pattern of an anxiety dream, with all its distortions and complicated expression in both "Mother" and Beloved present indirect expressions of social criticism. Infanticide in Beloved and mariticide thought in "Mother" are both the result of yearning for release from being owned and to achieve liberty by being disowned.

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) wrote his most famous novel, *Winesburg Ohio*, a collection of interrelated short stories, which were published in 1919. According to *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*², the formal achievement of *Winesburg Ohio* lays in "its articulation of individual tales to a loose but coherent structure" (1422). The lives of a number of people living in the town of Winesburg are observed by the naïve adolescent George Willard, a reporter for the local newspaper, and "their stories contribute to his understanding of life and to his preparation for a career as a writer" (1422). The book ends when his mother dies and he leaves Winesburg. With the help of the narrator, whose vision is larger than George's, the reader can see how the lives of the characters have been profoundly distorted by the frustration and suppression of so many of their desires. Anderson calls these characters "grotesque", but the intention of *Winesburg, Ohio* is to show that life in all American small towns is grotesque in the same way.

"Mother", among other stories, in which Elizabeth Willard is the mother of the narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio*, George Willard, prays approaching her death "I will take any blow that may befall if but this my boy be allowed to express something for us both" (1426). To be able to express something is being released from loneliness and frustration, and mother prays for her son, a piece of herself, not for the family, including the father, with whom she does not want to share George.

Elizabeth, a forty-five woman, "suffering from some obscure disease had taken the fire out of her figure" (1426), inheritor and daughter of a hotel owner. The "disorderly old hotel, with faded wall-papers and the ragged carpets" (1426). Her husband, Tom Willard, "a slender, graceful man with square shoulders, a quick military step, and a black mustache, trained to turn sharply up at the ends, tried to put the wife out of his mind" (1427) whom Elizabeth sees as a "the presence of the ghostly figure, moving slowly through the halls" and he sees "the old house and the woman who lived there with him as things defeated and done for. The hotel in which he had begun life so hopefully was now a mere ghost of what a hotel should be" (1427). Everybody and everything has lost their liveliness and remind each other of frustration and death.

Elizabeth personifies death as her husband, Tom, the ghostly figure moving at home. Her lust for death preoccupies her mind and she thinks that death is a living thing. She is an alienated character who is lustful for death, for her, death in life as presence of ghost, soothes her frustration of loneliness. "Between Elizabeth and her one son George there was a deep unexpressed bond of sympathy, based on a girlhood dream that had long ago died" (1427). Her girlhood dream was urban adventures "she startled the town by putting on men's clothes and riding a bicycle down Main Street" (1430). A great restlessness was in her and it expressed itself in two ways, two dreams she had, "first there was an uneasy desire for change, for some big definite movement to her life" (1430).

The first dream was mocked by moving theatrical members, guest at her father's hotel, laughing and telling "It's not like that. It's as dull and uninteresting as this here. Nothing comes of it" (1430). The dream of

² All the quotations of Mother, have been quoted from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th edition, vol. D. Ed. By Mary Loeffelholz. W.W. Norton & Company, N.K. 2007

change is demolished by the traveling men, and later by Tom Willard, "Always they seemed to understand and sympathize with her, they took hold of her hand and she thought that something unexpressed in herself came forth and became a part of an unexpressed something in them." (1430)

Secondly, something unexpressed in Elizabeth is her suppressed desire which never fulfilled. Elizabeth, later, after marrying Tom and having son, George, projects her unfulfilled desire on her son, and he is her object of desire, by whom she wants to express the unexpressed and unfulfilled desire, "between Elizabeth and her one son George there was a deep unexpressed bond of sympathy, based on a girlhood dream that had long ago died, in the boyish figure she had yearned to see something half forgotten that had once been a part of herself recreated" (1427).

The struggle Elizabeth sees -sitting by a window in the evenings- between a baker and a grey cat is like the internal struggle of Elizabeth with Tom over George, whom has killed her dreams and demolishing her desires, henceforth she does not want to share her objectified desire with Tom. Elizabeth thinks that "within him (George) there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself" (1429). Elizabeth hates Tom, the killer of her girlhood desire, she prays and she determines to act and to kill the murderer of her own desires whom has changed her vital life into "perfectly still, listless, dark and silent" (1428). She thinks George has desires which are threatened by Tom. The unexpressed desire has "strengthened the secret bond that existed between them" (1429).

Elizabeth and Tom, George's parents have the same opinions about his future Tom tells George "you've got to wake up. You're not a fool and you're not a woman. You're Tom Willard's son and you'll wake up. I'm not afraid. If being a newspaper man had put the notion of becoming a writer into your mind that's all right. Only I guess you'll have to wake up to do that too" (1429). Elizabeth also tells "I suppose you had better wake up. You will go to the city and make money? It will better for you, to be a business man" (1431). Both parents want George's success, but Elizabeth has internalized the fear of failure and attributed it to Tom, "a definite determination had come into the mind of the defeated wife of the Winesburg Hotel keeper. The determination was the result of long years of quiet and rather ineffectual thinking" (1429). Silence, years of quiet and ineffectual thinking is the result of second expression of her restlessness, "When that came she felt for a time released and happy. She did not blame who walked with her and later she did not blame Tom Willard. . . . When she sobbed put her hand upon the face of the man and had always the same thought. She wondered why he did not sob also" (1430).

Both being suppressed by Tom, and not being able to express herself in an artistic way that she once dreamed, and also always being left sobbing, in a silent and quiet house are the result of Tom's ignorance of her existence and presence. These two reasons impel Elizabeth to consider George as her own, and her object of desire which was suppressed by Tom.

The strongest feature of motherhood is possession and not sharing, in Elizabeth's case. She decides to commit mariticide, to kill her husband to avoid her son, as a part of her body, to be possessed and disowned by man, as once her body was possessed by him, and the only achievement was silence and sobbing, and becoming unexpressed forever. She does not want to let him possess her embodied, projected desire, to disown her of her object of desire. This illusion impels her to think of evading Tom, to avoid being disowned of George.

She sees Tom as a walking ghost, "ghostly worn-out figure" which is her illusory imagination of Tom being the herald of death, which is going to destroy George's life, and silence him forever. Motherhood means possession and protection for her, and she does not want to share George with Tom, and therefore to think of killing and avoiding the threat, because silence and death-fear are what he has brought for her once and Elizabeth is afraid that the same thing would happen to her son. She decides to act because "silence becomes unbearable to the woman" (1429). She tells, "I will act. There is something threatening my boy and I will ward it off" (1430). Anderson explains "The fact that the conversation between Tom Willard and his son had been rather quiet and natural, as though an understanding existed between them, maddened her. Although for years she had hated her husband, her hatred had always before been a quite impersonal thing. He had been merely a part of something else that she hated" (1430). For her Tom "has chosen to be the voice of evil and I will kill him. When I have killed him something will snap within myself and I will die also. It

will be a release for all of us”(1430). The thought of matricide is avoided when George says “something father said makes it sure that I shall have to go away” (1431). Going out means expressing the unexpressed dream, for Elizabeth, therefore “she wanted to cry out with joy” but she cannot, since “the expression of joy had become impossible to her” (1431). She is happy because her son will express himself, his ability to express himself means re-owning part of her body, George. Expressivity means existence for her, and since she had been suppressed she thought of matricide. Elizabeth’s mind is obsessed with matricide because she blames her husband to change her from mother to Other.

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4. References

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