

## Morrison'un 'Beloved' Adlı Eserinde Kölelik ve Annelik Çıkmazı

### *Morrison's: Beloved on the Edge of a Clash between Slavery and Motherhood*

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**Abstract:** In the preface of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963, 18), Sartre describes how oppressed peoples, who have no other chance, vent their frustration and anger on each other: "If this suppressed fury fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves". What is implied here may be likened to a snake struggling to swallow its own tail out of despair. Toni Morrison's well-known work *Beloved* (1987) in this respect represents such an anger against the oppressor concluding in her infanticide. In fact, the act of murder, in itself, is evil. However, it shouldn't be ignored that in her situation tragedy stems from her "thick" love for her children. It is a love strong enough to kill her child but within a mood of mercy, than to watch her live a life of abuse and slavery. Therefore, in Sethe's case her hatred against the oppressor turns into a paradox when she kills her most beloved one. There is no doubt that taking a human life is murder, but how the concept of murder is to be understood within this context is the primary goal of this article.

**Keywords:** Slavery, infanticide, memory, oppression, paradoxical-love

**Özet:** Fanon'un *Yeryüzünün Lanetlileri* (1963, 18) adlı eserinin ön sözünde Sartre sömürülen insanların başka seçenekleri kalmadığında öfke ve çaresizliklerini kendilerine yansıttıklarını ifade eder: "öfkelerini itirazını göstermesine engel olunmuş bir muhalefet çıkış yolu bulamadığında bir hortum gibi kabarıp kendi kendini yutar". Bu tepki, çaresizlikten kendi kuyruğunu yutmaya çalışan bir yılan imgesine benzetilebilir. Toni Morrison'un *Beloved* isimli eseri böylesi bir duygunun engellenmesiyle çıkış yolu olarak kişinin kendi çocuğunun katline nasıl başvurabildiğini anlatır. Can almak, aslında, başlı başına yeterince bir caniliktir. Ancak Sethe'nin durumunda gözden kaçırılmaması gereken temel nokta onun trajediyi bir çıkış yolu olarak sahiplenmesinin, çocuklarına duyduğu yoğun sevginin bir tezahürü olduğu gerçeğidir. Ondaki sevgi kendi çocuğunun canını almaya yetecek kadar büyük ve çocuğunu sonsuz ıstırap ve kölelikten kurtaracak merhamet timsali kararlı bir bilincin eylemidir. Bu yüzden Sethe'nin zalimlere karşı öfkesi, biricliğinin canını "merhametle" aldığı zaman bir paradoksu da beraberinde getirir. Bir can almanın cinayet olduğu şüphe götürmez bir gerçektir; ancak, canilerin ellerinde sürekli eziyet çekmesinden önce çocuğunun ölümünü tek çare olarak gören Sethe'nin bu eyleminin ne kadar cinayet olarak değerlendirilebileceği bu makalenin temel izleğini oluşturmaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Kölelik, çocuk katli, hafıza, zulüm, paradoksal sevgi

*If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt*

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*for me – it's nothing else but colour. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, "I am not that." So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me* (Bakerman, 1978, 56-60).

*Beloved* centres around an unforgettable story including a lot of gothic elements and scenes of terrible violence. Morrison seems to have made the structure of the novel fragmentary to make it visible that the story is woven between past/present and future. Past events are explained to a larger extent than the action of the present, strengthening the idea of the traumatic past prolonging the trauma in the present. The novel, therefore, tells the similar stories of the past over and over, giving more thorough information with each repetition. Why Morrison used fragments seems to be related with the fact that slavery has always been a shadowy memory for all Afro-American people who suffer from a troubled relationship to their own past as the children of slaves of the past, which shape their present as a result. Accordingly, all the characters in *Beloved*, including former slaves and the children of former slaves, undergo similar sufferings that shape both their present and future. Their traumatic memories inherited from generation to generation make their life always vulnerable as in a domino-reaction. Therefore, it is almost impossible for them to live for the present or plan for the future because the trauma of the slavery they suffer from is always doubled with their lingering memories.

On the surface, the story seems to be centring around the relationship between a mother Sethe, her daughter Denver, and another female figure *Beloved*. In the story the reader learn that Sethe once killed a baby of hers not to let her grow up in slavery like she had to, or starve because she had no milk to feed her. The reader also learn that although Sethe wanted to save her baby from the unreliable world she would have faced, she wanted to resist the oppressor. However, as she could not resist the oppressor, she finally chose to kill her children as the only solution. Therefore, the story seems to be telling a simple story about Sethe a former slave, who lives with her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver in 124 Bluestone that is a place very close to Cincinnati, Ohio where they are excluded from the community for Sethe's past. It is also explained that eighteen years have passed since she escaped from slavery at a farm called Sweet Home which was a farm run by a cruel man known as Schoolteacher who allowed his nephews to abuse Sethe while he was carrying out his scientific studies on blacks. We are also informed that Sethe fled from this farm while she was pregnant and therefore, gave birth to a baby along the way with the help of a white woman called Amy. Her husband, who was supposed to accompany her, however, did not show up. After her escape to Cincinnati with her four children, Sethe could enjoy only twenty-eight days of freedom before she was tracked down and caught by her old master.

Not to let her children be taken back to slavery, Sethe tried to kill all of them, succeeded, however, only in killing one baby girl. She was, then, rejected and accordingly emancipated by her master who thought that she would no more serve him deservedly. She, therefore, had a chance to raise her remaining three children at 124. However, an abusive ghost of the dead baby with its malevolent presence both in Sethe's dreams and house gave no chance for peace and happiness in her life. Her two sons, Howard and Buglar are, therefore, explained to have run away from the fear of this unwelcomed ghost.

The ghost of the dead baby, coming back to life at the age that the baby would have been had it lived, represents the power of slavery inherited continually and which in this context continues to trouble Sethe eighteen years after she had her freedom. Undoubtedly, in *Beloved* the reality of slavery is put in the foreground with the help of what Morrison shows the brutality

occurring under slavery. Therefore, Sethe's killing her daughter cannot be what Morrison is primarily concerned about in this novel. In order to convey the idea of dehumanization under slavery, her killing Beloved serves only as a tool. Her act of murder should, therefore, be regarded in this context.

Shortly after the publication of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison comments in an interview that Sethe's murder of Beloved "*was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it...It was the only thing to do, but it was the wrong thing to do*" (Bonnie, 2003, 2). Does Morrison's comment prove the moral ambiguity of the infanticide? Terry Otten argues: "*Yes, it was right but wrong, and wrong but right. However, the most important thing is that it was the only thing to do*" (1989, 84). Sethe had no choice. If there is anything wrong, it must be either, in Paul D's words, her "*too thick*" love or the inhumane institution of slavery. However, as seen in Sethe's answer to Paul D "*Thin love ain't love at all*" (Morrison, 1987, 164). In other words, there is no such thing for Sethe as "*thin*" love. Her love is not "*too*" thick but "*so*" thick that she would kill her own child rather than seeing the baby live as a slave. The concept of motherhood within *Beloved* is an overwhelming love that conquers all; that is why, "*the most extreme case of someone avoiding enslavement comes from the main character of the novel when she attempts to kill her children*" (Otten, 1989, 85). She even killed one of them. Yet, the question whether she was right or wrong about her murder act against the white man's oppression is the primary question requiring to be replied.

To understand Sethe's case and interpret her behaviour, the age the novel displays should be taken into consideration because her act of murder can never be understood through a consideration of a binary opposition such as evil versus goodness. It should, therefore, be regarded as a result of some traumatic experiences leading to an understanding that as Sartre argues the oppressed peoples, who have no other chance, may vent their frustration on each other. Like a mirror *Beloved* reflects some of those traumatic events experienced under slavery for decades. Therefore, the importance of *Beloved* is not only that it is a work of Morrison's pure literary talents but that it is based upon some historical events. For instance, Paul D's confinement in Alabama and ideas such as the bit and the legislature described are all based on history. In the story, Morrison flashbacks to several years before and during the American Civil War (1861-1865) including even the years of slavery for her characters. Likewise, the climactic event of the novel that is Sethe's murder of *Beloved* is based on an actual historical event occurred in 1856 when Margaret Garner murdered her children to prevent them from being recaptured and taken back into slavery (Barker, 2004, 179). In this sense, Morrison's *Beloved* can be seen as the reworking of fact into fiction with a very emotional central message concerning the entire concept of slavery. Therefore, history of slavery with its all mishaps is woven throughout the novel. In other words, Morrison reveals the horrors of slavery.

The slavery she depicts is what really occurred throughout the centuries in many of the plantations. Living in chains and without freedom was not living as human should. They were continually exploited and accordingly dehumanized. As represented within the novel, slavery degraded African Americans from humans, to that of animals. They were not treated with any respect, or proper care. According to Braudel: "*most enslaved persons brought to the America ended up in Caribbean or South America where tropical disease took a large toll on their population and required large numbers of replacements*". Later, Braudel adds that "*the African slaves had something of a natural immunity to yellow fever and malaria, but the fact that they were severely malnourished, overworked, and poorly housed attributed to their perishing of disease*" (qtd in Holloway, 1990, 516-525). In this regard, as Holloway argues: "*Beloved held not only her own history, but those of "sixty million and more"* and "*Beloved is not only Sethe's*

dead daughter returned, but the return of all the faces, all the drowned, but remembered, faces of mothers and their children who have lost their being because of the force of Euro-American slave-history". Holloway adds, "Living itself" is suspended in this story because of the simultaneous presence of the past" (1990, 521-523). Therefore, he suggests that "Sethe's, Denver's and Beloved's voices blend and merge as text and lose the distinction of discourse as they narrate" in order to show that of time and space are now collapsed, irrelevant in their shared monologue (1990, 520). Furthermore, Morrison herself, in one of her interviews summarises this issue as follows:

*Q: You've said that you didn't like the idea of writing about slavery. Yet, Beloved, your most celebrated book, is set in slavery and its aftermath.*

*A: I had this terrible reluctance about dwelling on that era. Then I realized I didn't know anything about it, really. And I was overwhelmed by how long it was. Suddenly the time -300- years began to drown me. Three hundred years - think about that. Now, that is not a war, that's generation after generation. And they were expendable. True, they had the status of good horses, and nobody wanted to kill their stock. And, of course, they had the advantage of reproducing without the cost.*

*Q: Beloved is dedicated to the 60 million who died as a result of slavery.*

*A staggering number - is this proved historically?*

*A: Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million. There were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo - that's a wide river - saying, "We could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies." That is like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships.*

*Slave trade was like cocaine now - even though it was against the law, that didn't stop anybody. Imagine getting 1,000 dollars for a human being. That is a lot of money. There are fortunes in this country that were made that way.*

*I thought this got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it is national amnesia (Bonnie, 2003, 3).*

In light of all these, it is needless to say that in *Beloved*, Morrison reveals that the violence within African American Communities is originally imposed from outside by white oppressors. Through the different voices and memories in this novel, including of Sethe's mother, a survivor of the slave-ship crossing, the novel works as a document providing the reader with a picture of harsh conditions experienced by the slaves who suffered a lot for a few centuries both physically and psychologically. They were motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, and all their identities. In such a world systemized by the bloodiest institution man has ever created, people suddenly vanished and were never seen again, not through accident or terrorism, but as a matter of colonial policies. As seen in the following engraving entitled *The Africans of the slave bark "Wildfire" brought into Key West on April 30, 1860*, (Library of Congress, 1886) which appeared in *Harpers Weekly* on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, 1860, the Atlantic slave trade resulted in the obligatory spreading of millions of Africans to the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe, including Britain:

It has been estimated, for example, that over five million slaves were transported from West Africa to the United States. “*Authoritative sources*” Melady remarks, “*state that during the centuries of slave trade, around fifteen million Negroes died en route to the auction blocks*” (1962, 43). Actually, the figures representing the total losses to the African population vary. However, on every other continent from the fifteenth century onwards, the population showed regular and sometimes extravagant expected boosts in the calculations; while Africa’s population growth was excised. Rodney gives the following estimates of world population (in millions) according to the continents as such:

	1650	1750	1850	1900
Africa	100	100	100	120
Europe	103	144	274	423
Asia	257	437	656	857

Although Rodney underlines that “*none of the figures are really precise*”, (1982, 147) it is however significant that they indicate a consensus among researchers on population that the African continent was in a continual stagnation for two centuries, whereas the other continents were growing at a normal pace. In this respect, the primary causative factor for this stagnation was explicitly the slave trade. Morrison in *Beloved*, therefore, touches upon the dreadful consequences of slavery in some of the most striking accounts of slavery that readers may encounter anywhere. She expands the boundaries of the traditional slave narrative to explore the far-reaching damage of the institution of slavery resulting in Sethe’s infanticide. Confronting the reader with the consequences of slavery, Morrison tells a story picturing a conflict a mother experiences when she finds herself on the edge of a clash between motherhood and slavery. Sethe’s choice of killing her daughter is, therefore, explained with such a background of harsh oppression. In the novel, it is prominently foregrounded that there is no such thing as a family, the slaves cannot be married nor are they allowed to be ‘mothers’ or ‘fathers’ to their children even though there is Mr. Garner’s little help about Sethe and Halle’s getting married. Hence, the concepts of slavery and motherhood are contrasted to let the reader judge discreetly on Sethe’s traumatic action.

In terms of slavery and its bad effects on people, the oppression people experience in that community is explicitly represented through two different rulers of the Sweet Home: the first one is Mr. Garner, and the other is Schoolteacher. Whoever the ruler or whatever the situation is, it is for certain that both are typical oppressors treating the human beings as if they were their properties. Hence, it is useless to seek for the better one as long as they claim that they are the ‘owners’. Although the two men have different styles, they share the same sense of chattel slavery. The community is bought, managed and brought together by Garner, and it is he who provides its name. Yet, it should not be ignored that

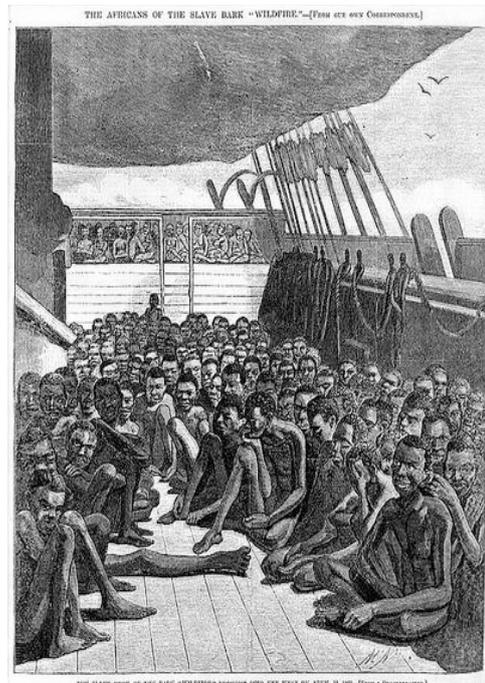


Fig. 1. Library of Congress, 1886.

like Baby Suggs's sale name, this name is merely a label too. Actually, the name Sweet Home implies ironically innocence and it accordingly suggests a utopian community. However, for the slaves it is still less than that as Garner's "*enlightened*" slavery possesses the individuals, asks for their labour, and directs their movements, but doesn't savage or starve them. Sweet Home is for Baby Suggs a "*marked improvement*" (Morrison, 1987, 139) over the physically damaging that wrenched most of the life from her.

On behalf of Mr. Garner the farm is a model of good "*ownership*". His policy of ruling allows the slaves to exercise some selfhood, (as stated above, for example, Sethe's marriage) but by allowing this restricted humanity, Garner's model farm places his slaves in a false position of community. He presents himself to the other white Kentuckians and to the white Bodwins as an enlightened slaver. In fact, he is proud of this manhood: They are "*men every one. He bought em thataway, raised em thataway*" (Morrison, 1987, 10-11). By regarding his slaves like that, the manhood of his slaves sets him apart from the other owners and makes Sweet Home a most valuable farm: "*Mr. Garner acted like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with*" (Morrison, 1987, 139). Yet, the fact about the price of that fun is all left to his toys to pay. Through the slaves he gains more and better work. Although the men of Sweet Home are allowed to "*invent*" and "*defy*", act without permission, "*buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to*", they are allowed to do so only as Garner's property and within the bounds of his property: "*One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race*" (Morrison, 1987, 125). What is bitterly represented within the novel is that this lesson is so painfully learned by the slaves of Sweet Home. Despite the particular method of ownership that Garner employs, Paul D and Sethe learn that this kind of manhood lay in the hands of the "*definers*". The reason why Garner names them men results from the fact that it serves his purpose. At this point, to understand Garner's implicit oppression on his slaves, Halle's situation, when he wants to buy the freedom of his mother, should be considered. He, in this sense, "*learns to work within the Garner system and buys his mother out, and though he does what is necessary*" (Jesser, 2008, 3), in the final analysis he also understands that Garner, even though it is "*soft*", speaks the same language as Schoolteacher. Therefore, his dialogue with Sethe is quite helpful to understand the real intentions of the white oppressors. Halle tells Sethe, "*It don't matter Sethe. What they say is the same. Loud or Soft*" (Morrison, 1987, 195).

The changeover between the masters is very crucial in an understanding of how the concept of slavery functions in the fake Sweet Home. The shift between management and accordingly oppressing styles is marked by Sixo's justification for stealing a pig. When schoolteacher starts giving a restricted diet to the slaves, Sixo suffering from malnutrition, steals a pig to eat. However, after he is caught, in his discussion with Schoolteacher his argument sounds quite reasonable because he is Schoolteacher's property, eating the pig, then, means improving that property. Sixo's answer is naturally acknowledged as "*clever*", but its authority is denied: "*...Yet, still schoolteacher beats him to show him that definitions belonged to the definer but not the defined*" (Morrison, 1987, 190). As the definition maker the oppressing master, in this regard, can be only the one who owns the definition and who accordingly, through his whimsical distortion of the term, defines the "*characteristics*". Therefore, when Sethe comes across the Schoolteacher's one of the lessons where he imposes the ideas of properties on his students, she realises that as a sample for Schoolteacher's explanation she is not only misidentified but also dehumanized. What he teaches his students (nephews) is all about as a slave Sethe's human and animal characteristics. In his speech, the most important thing requiring to be focused on is his definition of the word "*characteristic*" as he defines it as "*a thing that's natural to a thing*"

(Morrison, 1987, 195). Schoolteacher describes some properties as “*natural*” and attributes them to human bodies. And the experiment his students perform on Sethe presents the reader a Sethe “*as the udder they drink from and the sexual body they work their pleasures on*” (Jesser, 2008, 4). In other words, she can, characteristically, be anything like a play-dough at any moment for the schoolboys as long as they own the right to define anything as their fantasies demand.

What is prominent about Schoolteacher's lessons is that they let his students dehumanize all those black people by turning them into animals. Therefore, it is needless to state that in this community under Schoolteacher's lessons the new oppressors - the white students - learn how to oppress the blacks. In this community blacks become properties because of their predefined roles. As soon as the definitions are founded on what is “*natural to a thing*” then, as Jesser (2006) argues they are not transformable or escapable anymore. Hence, it means that there is no possibility of getting rid of slavery anymore (Jesser, 2006, 5). The only left choice of escape is either to leave the boundaries of Sweet Home or to vent their frustration and anger on each other as Sartre explains. At this point, within the restricted possibilities of choice Sethe's traumatic act of murder occurs. Her final and dreadful decision shows only an explosion of the following striking questions: What if the oppressor comes and reclaims 'his property' only after a certain period of happiness? What can a mother -anguished with many years of torture and unhappiness- do? Who may blame her for her disrupted but motherly love based act?

On this account, her infanticide of her baby -Beloved- actually implies that having been adjusted as an “*animal*” to be benefited from and accordingly dehumanized as a means of sexual object by the oppressors, Sethe feels forced to kill her baby not to let her become an udder to feed the oppressors' lustful desires. Her experiences as a slave increase her hopefulness to an extent which at last overwhelm her loving tenderness and conclude in her infanticide. Her desire not to let them become the properties of some oppressors in this respect turns into a paradoxical desire to murder them which seems to be the only way to save them. Absence of them becomes their paradoxical salvation. The focal point of the story, thus, requires an extra attention to be drawn onto the mishaps of the slavery rather than an interpretation of her murder act as savage.

When Sethe crosses over to freedom after her escape from Sweet Home, the possibilities of love are transformed because it is a new world she has never dreamed of. Before she arrived at 124 Bluestone, the connections between mother and the children had been under threat. It is because of this when she sees her children at 124 Bluestone she says: “*I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?*” (Morrison, 1987, 162).

It is needless to say that no matter where Sethe was, she was naturally going to love her children. She, therefore, loved her children in Kentucky too, but this time, the overwhelming happiness of her is nothing more than the sign of freedom. It is because of this, a while later her sense of freedom is represented through her confirmation of Paul D's definition of freedom: “*He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose -not to need permission for desire- well now, that was freedom*” (Morrison, 1987, 162). When she had loved Halle at Sweet Home, the reality was different, hence was her sense of freedom; “*she had been given permission to love him*”. Moreover, “*she had loved her children because she had been allowed to raise them*” (Jesser, 2006, 5). As for Baby Suggs the situation is not much dif-

ferent because freedom as the place in which love is possible becomes her inspiration to preach. The clearing provides a place for “*every black man, woman, and child who could make it through*” to love themselves and each other in a way not sustainable in the restricted world of white America (Morrison, 1987, 87). That kind of preaching can be taken as a reaction to her old ways. In this regard, Baby Suggs “*reclaims her family relationship and reclaims her relationships to her God and to her place in the community*” (Jesser, 2006, 5). It is for certain that no escape was possible at Sweet Home when they were oppressed to move within the bounds of their master’s directions.

To sum up, much of the evil represented in this novel is directed towards the powerlessness and dehumanization of black women in a hierarchical society in which whites come first, men second, and black women last. Within the context of this novel the concepts of love and slavery are represented through a continual clash. What is skilfully clarified, in this regard, is that it is difficult to achieve love under slavery because slavery associates blackness with every form of evil and ugliness, and “*the power of the white man in determining that the black man’s soul is not equal to that of the white man*” (Conner, 2000, 44). Sethe’s only choice was to kill Beloved because she didn’t want her own children to have to go through what she did. Therefore, when Schoolteacher came to take her back to his farm, she reacted in the only way that she knew would keep her children from having to go back there. This is the only reality she had in her mind. She and her children were going to have to live the life of a slave once again and that was more than she could bear. She didn’t want her children to have taste of freedom and then have it taken away from them. What is clear and prominent in this novel is the fact that too many unknowns lie present in the lives of those mothers. Thus, before judging her murder act as savage, one must consider both her situation and motherly love a second time. Sethe was living in a time completely different from the one all we know in a modern world. She and other slaves experienced things both physically and mentally that no modern person could ever imagine; her identity was stolen and she was whipped by a chokecherry tree to concretize idea of her being a property labeled as any animal. However, in spite of all the sufferings and traumatic past and even if the story presents a paradoxical extremity of love, Baby Suggs as the spiritual leader of *Beloved* explains the moral of the book, which is ‘love’:

*“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. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them 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, you!”* (Morrison, 1987, 88).

Undoubtedly, taking a human’s life is a murder. One can kill for hate and the other one for ‘professional service’, but here in this context for Sethe the reason to kill is the ultimate act of protection. Love is something strong enough to go to extremes for; killing one’s child out of pure love is a paradoxical extremity of this. Therefore, in light of Sartre’s assertion Sethe as an abused ‘Other’, who fails to find an outlet and accordingly has no other chance, vents her frustration and anger on her own child-Beloved. In other words, her hatred against the oppressor turns into a paradoxical “*thick*” love for her children when she kills the most beloved one. She feels forced to kill her child in order to keep her from getting into the hands of the inhumane.

On this account, although the tragedy in *Beloved* seems to be related with Sethe as an infanticide, it is actually the white man's oppression that causes such a 'thick paradoxical-love tragedy'.

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