

**The Good Mother:
Motherhood as Identity and Resistance
in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and
Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood***



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Introduction

This thesis will explore the motherhood of the characters of Sethe from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) and Nnu Ego from Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). My point of departure for this is the trope of the "Good Mother", which I have taken from Lee Alfred Wright's book *Identity, Family, and Folklore in African American Literature* (1995). Here, Wright, in the chapter "The Good Mother Tradition", examines the mother figure from the slave narratives and asserts that this figure has become a trope within African-American literature. The slave mother as she is portrayed in these narratives is a symbol of self-sacrifice as she goes to great lengths to protect her children. Another aspect of the Good Mother¹ is that of infanticide, which can be interpreted as a way of protecting the children from a life of slavery, as an attempt to attack the reproduction system which upheld slavery, and/or as an act of opposition to an oppressive society which abused, killed and separated families (Shaw, "Mothering under Slavery in the Antebellum South", 1994; 308, 313).

Drawing on Wright's definitions of the Good Mother, I will examine the conditions of slavery which contributed to such mother figures, e.g. the valuation of women on the basis of their motherhood, de/"regendering"² and appropriation of ownership over children. Reading these "characteristics" of Good Mothers as not solely confined to circumstances of slavery, I take this term out of the literary genre of slave narratives from whence it originated and locate it also within other types of literature which portray mothering in societies where a racist and/or sexist community or a colonial power shape the way mothers are defined, valued and behave.

Thus, I believe that not only is Sethe, the ex-slave who commits infanticide, a Good Mother,

¹I will refer to Wright's "good-mother" term (Wright 29) as the/a "Good Mother" because it is a trope and refers to a special kind of mothering under specific conditions, not to be confused with the common term of a "good mother" which definition varies with time and historical circumstances and to which all kinds of meanings and qualities can be attributed.

²By my own term "regendering", which will be elaborated on in chapter 1, I mean the establishment of new gender structures in certain communities/societies (e.g. among the African/African-American slaves and among the Nigerians under British colonisation).

but also Nnu Ego, who mothers in a society where old traditions and new ways of life combine to shape both genders and motherhood. In chapter 1, I will conduct a further exploration of the “original” Good Mother figure and the conditions of motherhood under slavery, and explain more thoroughly how I intend to draw on the trope of the Good Mother.

Beloved and The Joys of Motherhood

When it comes to genre, narrative and style, the novels I have chosen as an object of study in this thesis are very different, which is a reason for my choice of a thematic, and not narrative, approach when it comes to the analysis of them. In *Beloved*, Morrison lets the narrative voice slide from character to character and employs psychoanalysis, folklore and myth in the foundation, build-up and execution of the story at hand. The novel functions as a ghost story with gothic elements, as an extension and modernisation of the traditional slave narratives and as a novel engaging in the psychology of human beings under stress and in trauma. *The Joys of Motherhood*, however, is quite different; it has a down-to-earth, prosaic style of narration and it deals with the thoughts and the actions of a traditional Nigerian woman in the last century. The story line is linear (with the exception of a longer flashback at the beginning of the novel), as opposed to *Beloved*, which has multiple flashbacks, often as the result of the associations of the characters.

Though the novels differ in terms of structure and narrative they share some features, as seen for example in the presence of folklore and religious beliefs in both. Furthermore, the protagonists themselves have several things in common; they are both black mothers and Good Mothers, both define themselves first and foremost as mothers, and both learn that they have put their motherhood above their sense of self, which they sacrifice to protect and uphold their children. Tied to the loss of selfhood, both must relate to the fact that they do not have the “sisterhood” which was an ideal among the feminists of the time period in which the

novels were written (see below): Nnu Ego ends her life regretting that she did not have any female friends outside of the family, and Sethe must be redeemed by the community's women in order to "give birth" to herself as a subject, a process that is still unresolved towards the end of *Beloved*. Finally, both protagonists, in my opinion, experience motherhood as a sort of slavery in itself, a bondage from which they can not disentangle, because of love and cultural expectations; however, the very motherhood that enslaves them, becomes a weapon, or a site of resistance to the forces that suppress and dictate both their motherhood and their lives.

Time Period and Theory

Both *Beloved* and *The Joys of Motherhood* were published during the latter part of the period of the "second wave" of feminism in the West which started in the 1960s and lasted throughout the 1980s. The second wave feminists not only engaged in the battle against the so called patriarchal system, by demanding equal pay and equal opportunities, but also called for a restructuring of motherhood, both on practical and theoretical terms. With the "sexual revolution" women claimed control over their bodies and their reproduction rights – connected to this was also a rejection of the parent generation, and especially of the mother, as the idea that women should "give birth" to themselves arose (cf. the work of Adrienne Rich (Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, 1989; 130) and Hélène Cixous). The feminists replaced the mother/daughter relationship with sisterhood, wanting to mark the end of the victimisation of women. The focus was on the daughters of the mothers, not on the mothers themselves. There were, however, attempts to explain and rationalise why the mothers of the new women's movement had not allowed their daughters the lives they themselves had missed, as recounted in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976): "For it was too simple, early in the new twentieth-century wave of feminism, for us to analyze our mothers' oppression, to

understand “rationally” – and correctly – why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us” (224).

Although the new Western feminists needed to distance themselves from previous generations (Hirsch 127), there developed, then, as the quote from Rich’s book cited above illustrates, an expressed need to find the mothers within literature and history and to map and explore their roles and the exploitation of which they had been victims. There was a need for distancing, it might seem, from the physical mothers at home in the kitchens of the feminists’ childhood homes, as representatives of the patriarchal family structure, while the mother as an historical, cultural and artistic idea was a subject to be examined: “... the break from the mother becoming the token of a feminist rejection of female victimization ... the figure of the mother becomes an important object of exploration in relation to the birth of the feminist daughter” (130). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, several authors and theorists attempted to find and re-establish women and mothers in various discourses. Rich recounted the meaning and position of motherhood within numerous fields such as history, religion, psychoanalysis and anthropology (129-130) and the so-called “French feminists” Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray sought to place woman and the mother within psychoanalytic theory, by expanding and challenging it. The “French feminists” contributed not only in drawing attention to women’s position within traditional, “masculine” discourse, but also in redefining womanhood as having an ethics of its own. Here motherhood played an important part as metaphor for female rebirth, i.e. as an image of how woman was to “give birth” to herself – achieve her true potential – without the interference of man.

In the chapters to follow, I will especially make use of and examine some theories and texts by two of these “French feminists”, which I believe play a significant part in understanding the characters’ mothering, and which may shed light on their position as Good Mothers. The texts are those of Kristeva and Irigaray, and I will primarily consider their

notion of identification between mother and child, and the separation from the maternal body. With regards to Kristeva I will mainly examine “Freud and Love” and “Stabat Mater” from *Tales of Love* (1983). “Freud and Love” is a confrontation with Freud’s notion of narcissism and love. Drawing on his concept of “a father in individual prehistory” which occurs before the oedipal stage, Kristeva argues that there occurs a primary identification with the “Imaginary Father” before the fear of castration is established in the child. This Imaginary Father consists of both parents and gives the child love which prepares it for the separation from the maternal body; thus, Kristeva emphasises that love, not just fear, is an important part of the child’s development.

“Stabat Mater” is separated into two “columns”. In the first, Kristeva examines the history, position and meanings of the Virgin Mary, and calls for a reconsideration of what motherhood is and for new expressions of it. In the other column she describes – in a personal, associative style reminiscent of Cixous’ notion of “*écriture féminine*” – her experiences of the birth of her son. In this part of the text she describes motherhood as a “demented *jouissance*” (255), a form of madness in which the senses are blurred, the body alienated and the experiences of the world altered as the mother’s senses are focused solely on the child and her bodily experience of him:

A mother’s identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit, when a woman protects herself from the borderline that severs her body and expatriates it from her child. Lucidity, on the contrary, would restore her as cut in half, alien to its other – and a ground favorable to delirium. But also and for that very reason, motherhood destines us to a demented *jouissance* that is answered, by chance, by the nursling’s laughter in the sunny waters of the ocean. (ibid)

In the column, Kristeva portrays an identification process that occurs through pregnancy and motherhood. This identification is not only between mother and child, but also involves the mother’s mother, an identification which she also examines in “Motherhood According to

Bellini” (1975). Through giving birth, a woman can identify with, and indeed become her own mother: “By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother . . .” (“Motherhood According to Bellini” 239). Though the idea that pregnancy and motherhood allow for such an identification may seem essentialist (is it impossible for men or women with no children or adopted children to identify with their mother, and what about women who never knew their mother?), it can be discussed whether Kristeva in fact means real mothers when talking about the identification with the mother, or about motherhood at all, or whether she is talking about the mother as an idea or an ideal which women may reach an identification with through maternity. If the latter is the case then it would be possible for women who did not know their mothers to “become” their mother through pregnancy. Nevertheless, this does not make the theory less essentialist, in my opinion, simply because this implies that there is a maternal essence to which women naturally aspire or connect with; this may contribute to the consolidating of the idea that there is a natural connection between woman, motherhood and the body/sensuousness, which has been considered a contrast/opposition to the connection between man, logic and reason (tied to Derrida’s notion of logocentrism; Felman, “Women and Madness”, 1975; 3). However, the two protagonists I am concerned with do both see themselves as precisely mothers first and foremost, although, throughout the novels, they both begin to question this definition. I believe the notion of identification between generations features strongly in different ways throughout the novels that I will engage, and so it is this, with regards to Kristeva, I want to take with me and explore in the analyses to follow.

According to Hirsch, a movement can be identified in the two texts/articles by Irigaray which I will employ in my analyses of Sethe and Nnu Ego’s mothering. In “When Our Lips Speak Together” (1977) and “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other” (1979) there is a transition from a break with the mother (“And the One”) to an identification or attachment

with another woman (“When Our Lips”), (Hirsch 136). It seems that Irigaray replaces the mother/daughter relationship with a sisterhood or love between women; this movement corresponds with and illustrates the move from motherhood to sisterhood that occurred in the period of the “second-wave feminism”, as discussed (ibid). In “And the One”, the text which I will primarily concern myself with, the mother/daughter relationship is portrayed, from the point of view of the “I”, the daughter-figure of the text, as stifling to the development of subjectivity for both mother and daughter. Through the image of feeding/nourishing as a symbol of how the mother “pours” her subjectivity into her child, the daughter-figure narrates her process of separation from the maternal body, a process which in turn leaves the mother-figure in an unstable, disintegrating state: “You thaw. You melt” (63). The connection between mother and daughter prior to her separation is one in which there is no real division between them; throughout the text there is a confusion over who is nourished and who is giving nourishment. The text ends with the daughter’s establishment of identity outside the maternal symbiosis and with her hopes that the mother will remain a whole subject without her: “And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive” (67). With regards to Irigaray, it is, as with Kristeva, the notion of mother/child identification that I want to take with me into the study of Sethe and Nnu Ego’s motherhood, along with the need for both mother and child to separate and the “melting” (63) the mother is subject to after this separation.

Objectives

Why then, have I chosen to place these two novels, *Beloved*, which has been the subject of numerous analyses and *The Joys of Motherhood*, which is less discussed, together? As mentioned, both characters are Good Mothers. In my definition of the “Good Mother” as also connoting a state of “colonisation” (see chapter 1 for a further exploration of this), I believe that the juxtaposition of these two novels sheds new light on the concept as it is moved out of its original genre/circumstances and comes to include figures from other literatures and other times and cultures. This allows me, as mentioned, to define not only Sethe, who fits Wright’s “original” portrayal of the Good Mother, but also Nnu Ego as a Good Mother. As I hope is evident from my choice of theory, I believe that the concepts of identification, separation, and “demented *jouissance*” may indeed shed light on the motherhood of the protagonists; furthermore, I believe they might also help explain how the figure of the Good Mother comes to be, how such motherhood is possible. However, I believe that the Good Mother trope – and the “colonisation” that is inherent in it – may challenge and illuminate Western (feminist) theory/readings as it shows how these are often insufficient when it comes to exploring ways of mothering which differ from the modern, Western ones. Motherhood is not a constant, but is rather a product of a certain time and culture and of the power relations within these, a fact which Western theory with its treatment of the mother as a trans-cultural, a-historical concept often ignores, in my opinion. For instance, the notion of having a “room of one’s own” in order to create (an expression coined by Virginia Woolf in the essay by the same name from 1929), is defied by the authorship of Emecheta herself, who raised five children alone while taking an education and writing acclaimed books (this example is discussed by Alice Walker in her collection of texts entitled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose*, 1983). Similarly, the notion of “giving birth to oneself” also seems like a fleeting and ungraspable

concept when compared to the life of the hard-working Nnu Ego (though it seems that this “birth” is something Nnu Ego longs for towards the end of the novel).

Of course, my intent in this thesis is not to use the novels I am concerned with as means of evidence for “proving” the falseness of the theories that I engage – because I do find them highly relevant – but I do want to be aware of the problems one faces in using Western feminist/gender theory on non-Western literature, problems Gayatri Spivak among others, (e.g. in “A Literary Representation of The Subaltern” (1987) has been concerned with. One such problem might be the benevolent attempt made by Western feminists to let so-called “Third World” women or African-American women “speak for themselves”; by doing so, one risks merely to repeat the oppressive structures and discourses which have prevented these groups from speaking in the past. The notion of speaking for someone concerns Shoshana Felman:

What, in a general manner, does “speech in the name of” mean? Is it not a precise repetition of the oppressive gesture of *representation*, by means of which, throughout the history of logos, man has reduced the woman to the status of a silent and subordinate object, to something inherently *spoken for*? To “speak in the name of,” “to speak *for*,” could thus mean, once again, to appropriate and to silence”. (Felman 4, italics in the original)

I sometimes criticise the ideas/theories I engage, especially in relation to *The Joys of Motherhood*, of being essentialist and of not taking into consideration the numerous different ways of mothering, which in turn are tied to historical, economic and social contexts. In connection with this, I would like to point out that it is not the authors of the theories themselves that I necessarily criticise; it is, for instance, doubtful that Kristeva herself would claim that her theory on motherhood is applicable to all times and conditions, and it might be said that there is no reason why any theory should necessarily try to speak for all possible ways of living. However, Kristeva uses expressions such as “a mother is *always* branded by pain...” (Stabat Mater, 241, emphasis added). Furthermore, while the part of “Stabat Mater”

that I concern myself with the most describes Kristeva's personal experiences of her child's birth, it stands side by side (literally, because of the separation of the text into two columns), with the history of the deification of motherhood within Christianity, which Kristeva criticises. As such, it seems that the other column is there to present a different and more real description of motherhood. More important, however, is the fact that Kristeva's theories, as well as traditional psychoanalytic theory (e.g. Freud and Lacan), have come to denote an essence of maternal experience. It is this derivation – or rather, interpretations or generalisations – of the theories that connotes the idea that the concepts of for instance identification and *jouissance* are trans-cultural and a-historical.

With this in mind, I want to “balance” the Western concepts of motherhood not only with the Good Mother tradition, which (as will more thoroughly explored in chapter 1) conveys a very different kind of motherhood, but also with folkloristic and religious beliefs from the respective cultures of the protagonists. With regards to *Beloved*, I will consider readings by Pamela E. Barnett and Barbara Christian, who analyse the succubus figure and the importance of ancestor worship in relation to the novel. When it comes to *The Joys of Motherhood*, I will especially emphasise the importance of Nnu Ego's bond to her *chi*, her personal spirit, which may be read as a stark contrast to the psychoanalytic notion of a mother/child symbiosis.

As the title of this thesis suggests, the main emphasis in my analysis will rest on motherhood as identification and resistance. With “identification” in this connection, I mean not only the mother/child identification which Kristeva and Irigaray are concerned with, but also identification between motherhood and sense of self. This is connected to the mother/child identification, but is also a result of the Good Mother concept, in which a mother is valued and defined according to her motherhood. To Sethe and Nnu Ego, the world's sole definition of them as mothers spurs them into defining themselves solely or primarily as

mothers. This definition is a cause of much of the pain in their lives, but they also draw joy and strength from it, which in turn allow them to establish an opposition to the forces which “colonise” and suppress. Thus, my purpose in this thesis is to examine this paradox of motherhood as source of suffering, joy and resistance, engaging the texts/theories mentioned and the figure of the Good Mother of sacrifice and defiance.

Chapter 1: The Good Mother

Since slavery, there has been a tradition within African American literature, claims Wright in his book *Identity, Family, and Folklore in African American Literature*, of portrayals of mothers sacrificing themselves for their children (28), a tendency which he calls “The Good Mother Tradition”. Wright explores the slave narratives, focusing on Harriet Jacob’s narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), written under the pseudonym Linda Brent, and examines how these convey the different and gendered ways of rebelling against slavery and oppression. Many of the slave narratives by women tell of how mothers have endured humiliation and pain in order to protect their children and that instead of flight, they often chose hiding as a means of escape, so that they could stay close to their children. In male narratives, fighting back or running away is more common – men were often not directly involved in the raising of children, and were also often forcibly removed from their families; without strong family bonds, men fled to pursue their own freedom (Wright 76). As described by Venetria K. Patton in *Women in Chains* (2000), slave children “followed the condition of the mother” (14), an arrangement which ensured their position as slaves even if the father was white. Wright sees these different ways of fighting oppression as a gendered identification issue; women, by staying with their families, value a collective identity (Wright 28), whereas men, by fleeing, might be said to value an individualistic identity. This identification issue, as portrayed through slave narratives, has left its mark on African-American literature and folklore, claims Wright (*ibid*), for instance by the various portrayals of African-American men who leave their families and follow the tradition of flight and abandonment (76). Furthermore, black motherhood has come to denote the Good Mother who sacrifices and denies her own self for the sake of her children, and this has become such a strong theme within African-American literature and folklore that Wright defines it as a trope (28-29). The

tradition has led to not only portrayals of sacrificing mothers, but also of mothers who turn their backs on tradition and abandon their children. An example of the latter can be found in Alice Walker's *Meridian* from 1976 (ibid), in which the protagonist Meridian is highly uncomfortable with the mother role (as is her own mother) and leaves her husband and son to attend college and become an activist in the Civil Rights movement.

What Wright implies, then, based on the slave narratives, is that there is a special kind of motherhood – or a special way of exercising motherhood – which develops under slavery. Using *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as an example, Wright for instance points to the tendency among slave mothers in the narratives to prefer death for their children rather than living in a continued state of slavery:

Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery. ... It seemed to me I would rather see them killed than have them given up to his [the slave owner's] power. ... When I lay down beside my child, I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about, as I daily saw him beat other little ones. (Brent 510, 529, 536)

In *Women in Chains* Patton examines the position of the slave women in the U.S. and the importance of this in the literature of black women, both contemporary slave narratives and modern novels (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved* are two of the works considered). At the crux of the slave women's position and status lies motherhood. Patton begins her book by posing a theory on the degendering of slave women which is an important part of what justified the continuing of slavery. As the slaves to a large part were considered as chattel and not as human beings, the slaveholders recognised their sex, but not their gender, i.e. they saw their sexual difference only in biological terms, not in social terms. Thus, the female slaves were recognised as "breeders" (Patton 1), but had to do the same hard physical labour as did the male slaves; there was no expectation that the slave women should live up to the norms their white mistresses had to follow. In fact, the virtues of womanhood were

considered to be unobtainable for the slave women. For instance, the Africans in pre-colonial times often condoned premarital sex, which contributed to the notion that African and African-American women were promiscuous, which in turn became a contrast to the virtue of chastity that was attributed to white women (20-21). However, in the cultures from which the slaves were taken or bought (the central and western regions of Africa; Congo-Angola, Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone amongst others), sex in general was looked upon as a means for procreation, which again was a duty to the ancestors; barrenness was disastrous (21-22). Presumably lacking the chastity that characterised the “real” women who had to live up to ideals of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (20), the slave women were excluded from womanhood by their presumed innate impurity and of course by the rapes and abuse of which they were frequently victims – abuse which ironically contributed to the notion of promiscuity among them (ibid).

Another part of the degendering of slaves was the frequent separations of slave families. Combined with the fact that the children ultimately belonged to the slave owners and not the parents, a “kinlessness” (12) developed which contributed to upholding the slaveholders’ power. It also helped establish the slaves as property or “chattel” – or as sex and not gender (ibid). The slaves were encouraged to live as families and to live by the moral of their owners, but of course this was impossible within the slave economy, where family members might be sold and where everyone belonged to the master (ibid). Patton supports her arguments on Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papas Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987)³ in much of her analysis of the family relations of African-American slaves. However, she criticises the fact that Spillers does not seem to emphasise that the slaves were only degendered from the slave owners' point of view, and not from the slaves', who probably did see themselves as gendered (Patton 15). In this connection, Patton too brings up *Incidents*

³Hortense Spillers. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”. (*Diacritics* 17.2. (1987). 65-81.

in the Life of a Slave Girl and looks at how the main character, Linda, appeals to the white women readers by illustrating the difference between her mothering and theirs, and by emphasising the “feminine” values of motherhood they have in common (ibid); this, according to Patton, helps build the argument that the slaves did differentiate the genders. She does, however, examine the way that this gendering differs from that of the white community. The slaves’ gendering was naturally influenced by the system of gendering in their “original” homelands in Africa which was in part passed on through the generations and which in turn mingled with the slaves’ experience of USA (23). Looking at the central and western regions of Africa from which, as mentioned above, the majority of slaves came from, one finds that many of the societies had so-called “dual-sex” political systems in which there presumably was a division of labour between the sexes, but no hierarchal arrangement (16).⁴ Some studies claim that men’s and women’s work was not valued differently and that there was an overall de-emphasising of gender, as seen for instance by the lack of gender in pronouns in many African languages, marriages between women and the existence of identical names for women and men (Patton 16-17). The claim that there was no de-valuing of women or their work is disputed, but that gender relations were different in Africa is clear (18). One important aspect of the different types of gendering is the focus on motherhood in Africa. Patton, who is eager to say that the African societies were not matriarchies, claims, however, that they were *matrifocal*, meaning that the mother was a central part of both the family and the society and that the bond between mother and child was extremely important (18). Furthermore, in certain pre-colonial African societies women and mothers had more political power and were more independent than their European counterparts (18). The emphasis on motherhood in Africa collided with the degendering the female slaves underwent in America,

⁴Patton takes the term “dual-sex” term from Kamene Okonjo’s “The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Mid-Western Nigeria”. (*Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. Eds. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1976).

where the mother/child-relationship was often threatened and broken, and where the children were the property of the slave owners, not to be claimed by the parents.

Motherhood was distorted for the female slaves not only in that their children were defined as belonging to someone else, but also in that they frequently had to spend long periods of time away from their children, sometimes nursing their masters' children and taking care of their household. Thus, while the female slaves were performing tasks that in the U.S. were associated with the female gender, such as child care and housework, these tasks were performed in relation to the slave holders' family and took time away from their own family – again the slave women “failed” to act as “real” women. However, the slave society often provided alternative means of child care to compensate for the absence of the parents. Shaw points out that with the biological mother absent, a network amongst the slave women would often help with the child care; grandparents and other elder slaves also cared for the children (Shaw 302-303). This suggests that although there might have been a feeling of “kinlessness” due to the threat to the “nuclear family”, new family structures developed in its place. With the extended “family” of fellow slaves who cared for the children, combined with the threat and reality of family-separation, the alienation from one's children and the definition of them as property, it seems only natural that new definitions of motherhood were formed. The “breeding” of the slaves is a fact that of course also altered the experience of motherhood for the slave women as the children they had were not necessarily wanted and/or were the products of rape or abuse. Of course, many children were welcomed, but as mentioned, the fact that they ultimately belonged to someone else would almost necessarily produce different structures of parenthood and motherhood than those in the white community. Thus, claims Patton, the degendering was not successful from the slaves' point of view; rather the African tradition merged with the American experience and new definitions of gender and a new African-American culture were made (Patton 23).

The “new” genders in the slave communities, combined with the matrifocality in Africa, have led to the theory that slave families and slave culture were matriarchal. However, according to Patton, this idea was dismissed during the 1960s and several scholars have claimed that the slave families were male-centred; a claim which others again, e.g. Deborah G. White, argue de-emphasises the role of the female slaves (24-25).⁵ Drawing on the studies of White and Angela Davis, Patton claims that female slaves frequently had high social positions due to skilled occupations such as midwifery; they were also in charge of the only labour that was not directly related to the slave owner, namely domestic chores in the slave quarters (25-26).⁶ Female slaves had a certain degree of independence because they did not rely on the male slaves to provide for them or their children, but contributed actively to this themselves (26). Despite these facts, however, the slave families can not be defined as matriarchal, because that would mean that the female slaves could actually enforce a real kind of power, which of course was impossible as they were subject to the will of the slave holders. However, as with the African societies, motherhood was important and it is correct to say that the slave community was matrifocal (ibid). Another factor in this might be that motherhood became a sort of currency in relation to the slave holders. Being able to have children, which would increase the property of the slave owner, was a commodity and increased the woman’s value in the eyes of the slave holders. However, the white community also put much emphasis on motherhood; the difference was that the white women were to stay at home and generally gained power in the domestic sphere *only* through motherhood (31), whereas the black women had other important roles in the community alongside the men (32). The matrifocal African-American slave family with the “dual sex” system, where other slaves often cared for the children, is, then, a contrast to the European and American families which

⁵Deborah G. White. “Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South”. (*Journal of Family History* 8.3. (1983). 253.

⁶Angela Davis. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves”. (*The Black Scholar* 3.4. (1971). 7. White, 251-252.

were patriarchal and in which women and men's positions and occupations were separated and had different value. This contrast makes, as Patton too points out, critique of Western feminism, theories of motherhood and of psychoanalysis, seem apt. In a system where the children "followed the condition of the mother" (14) and where they were often mothered by other women as their biological mother did not have time for them, the "Father's law", for instance (the notion of the child being able to enter the symbolic due to the threat of castration by the father), must necessarily connote something different (11). How can the transition into the symbolic for a child being born into a slave family, where the father is absent or powerless and degendered, be the same as for a child born into a patriarchal family? However, Patton seems to contradict herself here; on the one hand she claims that the slaves were not degendered from their own point of view, on the other that the male slaves could not enforce the Father's law because they *were* degendered. What is more likely, and which perhaps lies at the heart of Patton's argument, drawing on her theories on the formation of *new* genders, is that it is not the degendering that challenges Western theories, but the "regendering". It seems likely that in a society and culture where women and men have equal status and perform equally valued tasks, both parties may enforce the Father's law. Critique of psychoanalytic theory may also be posed when it comes to children's development in the slave families, as the separation from the mother must necessarily imply different things for the slave child and for a free child. The free child, according to psychoanalytic theory, must break away from the mother and establish her/himself as an independent subject; the slave child, on the other hand, must break away from the mother and establish her/himself as a slave subject to the slave holders. Shaw points out an interesting dualism when it comes to how the slave mother prepared her children for adulthood. On the one hand, she would help uphold slavery by improving the property of the slave owner through feeding and clothing her children (many of the means for which she often had to provide herself), and through teaching them the work the

slaves were expected to do. On the other hand, however, she helped and showed the children that they could be independent (Shaw 313). By teaching the children not to speak out of line and to work hard, the mothers schooled the children in how to be slaves, but also taught them the qualities that might one day help them achieve freedom: “And even as they performed mothering tasks that reinforced the system of slavery, they also chipped away at institutional assumptions about dependency (cultural, material, and political) and thereby helped to prepare the children for freedom” (ibid).

With the dualism inherent in raising a child that is to become a slave, I return once again to the figure of the Good Mother. As Shaw points out, infanticide and killing are ways through which women could weaken the institution of slavery:

Certainly there remain many questions about the extent to which slave mothers killed their children. Undoubtedly some did, and many did not. Where they did, infanticide sometimes represented a powerful example of women’s opposition to this form of sexual and economic exploitation. But these examples could also reflect that the women possessed such a reverence for humanity and a level of self-determination that they simply decided to prevent a child, whose life they felt responsible for, from growing up in a system in which their owners demonstrated little respect for either. . . . When women engaged, directly and indirectly, in abortions and infanticide, they picked away at one of the bases of the system’s life itself – reproduction. (308, 313)

The Good Mother, however, does not only denote a mother who deliberately aborts or kills, but also a mother who goes to great lengths to provide and protect her children, often at the expense of her own well-being. A term which I believe connotes the same things as does the term “the Good Mother” is mentioned by Patton and coined by Joanne M. Braxton, namely “the outraged mother”: “The archetypal outraged mother travels alone through the darkness to impart a sense of identity and “belongingness” to her child. . . . Implied in all her actions and fueling her heroic ones is abuse of her people and her person” (Patton 36).⁷

⁷Joanne M. Braxton. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition*. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989). 21.

The outraged mother and the Good Mother have, as Wright examines, become tropes to be followed or challenged in African-American literature ever since. Both Sethe from *Beloved* and Linda from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* might be called Good Mothers or outraged mothers; Sethe kills her daughter to rescue her from slavery, and Linda refuses to escape slavery without her children, spending seven years hidden in a small attic to stay close to them.

Is the Good Mother merely a trope and a myth, or does it have a substantial base in real historical events? Infanticide did, as mentioned, occur among the slaves of the U.S. (Shaw 308); combined with the measures mothers took to better the living conditions of their children (e.g. through extra work, fishing, hunting or stealing, 299-300), this might have established the image of the African-American mother as tough, industrious and loving. What was probably more important in establishing the myth/trope within literature, however, are the slave narratives where the first Good Mothers were portrayed. Harriet Jacobs and other female slave narrators were excluded from “true” womanhood and were considered “breeders”, not mothers. In writing about their motherhood in romantic – and to the modern reader, almost rigid and artificial– ways, they wanted to illustrate to their white readers how they too loved their children, thus appealing to the audience to sympathise and to work for the abolishing of slavery. Thus, in conclusion to this exploration of the “original” Good Mother, I believe the origin of the trope of the Good Mother can be found in both real historical events and conditions, and in the way the slave narratives, which portrayed such conditions, were constructed to appeal to the sympathies and understanding of their audience.

Having thus located the Good Mother within African-American history and literature, I would now like to “apply” that figure of self-sacrifice to other realms, because I do believe that the trope of the Good Mother exists not only in African-American literature, but also in literature from other cultures. I grant that the trope is very strong and pervasive in African-

American literature, due to the special historical background which has inevitably shaped an entire people and literature. However, I would like to move the image of the Good Mother out of the specific *historic* background of the slavery of Africans/African-Americans in the U.S. and tie it to a *condition* of mothering under colonisation and stressful circumstances. This ultimately means that I take the Good Mother, defined by Wright as an African-American literary feature, and redefine it as also relating to cultures from which has come literature which portrays mothering in extreme circumstances and under the power of an external force, for instance a colonising power. The reason I include colonisation as a “condition” for being a Good Mother, is that this, though often not as direct and violent as was the power of the slave owners in the U.S., often changes the way gender is defined and also the conditions and definitions of motherhood. Besides colonisation, I believe that Good Mothers are “produced” in situations of general suppression and discrimination, and in living-situations that are seemingly hopeless, such as poverty.⁸ Such circumstances create ways of mothering in which many of the Good Mother “traits” can be located, e.g. regendering, an appropriation of ownership over children, and a valuation of women based on if/how they mother.

In this way, I believe that not only is Sethe a Good Mother, but Nnu Ego, the protagonist from *The Joys of Motherhood*, as well. Nnu Ego raises her seven children in poverty in Nigeria’s capital Lagos under British colonisation, and spends her whole life toiling to keep them alive. Another example of a Good Mother that illustrates the trans-cultural nature of the Good Mother concept is the Indian woman Jashoda from Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Breast-Giver”, translated by Gayatri Spivak in 1987. Jashoda nurses the children of a rich family in order to provide for her family. She eventually dies from having too many children (her pregnancies ensured her milk production) and, ironically, as her

⁸I often use the term “colonisation” to describe the situations of my protagonists. While I do not attempt to simplify the complex reasons for e.g. oppression, discriminating traditions and poverty, I believe that the way these “institutions” affect the characters’ motherhood might be equal or similar to the way a coloniser might enforce power and affect living conditions and motherhood.

breasts were her source of income, from breast cancer. Here I believe poverty and the Indian caste system function as “external” powers, or as “colonisation”, shaping Jashoda’s motherhood and sense of self-worth.

In addition to and connected with tracing the Good Mother, one of my intentions in this thesis is, as indicated in the introduction, to see how motherhood and mother-love constitute a language of resistance and a position of opposition to oppressive forces in the two novels. Both Sethe and Nnu Ego are in a position of what might be called “colonisation”/oppression, and it is my belief that the way they define themselves as mothers becomes a resistance to the powerful (institutions constituted of white slave owners, British colonisers and the communities in which they live) who control their lives and their motherhood. In the case of Sethe, the power of the slave owners and the institution of slavery itself have forcibly affected the shape of her mothering. Her experiences as a slave twist her urge to protect and nurture her children into a seemingly inhumane instinct which allows her to kill her own child. This, in my opinion, is part of what makes her motherhood a position of resistance, ironically as it is shaped by the very forces that oppress her, as she steps into the Good Mother-tradition and finds the ultimate “protection” for her children. Nnu Ego from *The Joys of Motherhood* is pulled by different forces, all of which might be defined as oppressive. She comes from a village where polygamy is common, as well as the tradition of valuing women according to the number of sons they give birth to. Even though Nnu Ego tries to adjust to the rapidly modernising society, she can not rid herself of the norms embedded in her and the community. Her children, on the other hand, as products of a modern, urban upbringing, rapidly “outgrow” their mother. By the end of her life, Nnu Ego finds herself abandoned by her children who value a more modern individualistic life. The feeling of having sacrificed everything for her children and getting nothing in return spurs her lapse into senility, and she dies alone at the side of the road. It seems, however, that she takes her

revenge in the afterlife, by refusing to grant the wishes of young women who pray to her to get pregnant. Nnu Ego's "madness" or dementia, as I see it, is a direct result of her experience of motherhood, which Nnu Ego comes to think of as a prison inhibiting her possibilities. As with Sethe, Nnu Ego's circumstances and condition shape her motherhood, moving from happiness and contentment to discontent and madness. This revised perception of motherhood is what makes her refuse other women children in the afterlife. Hence, motherhood – or more precisely, the madness derived from it – becomes a weapon of opposition and resistance for Sethe and Nnu Ego, so that they may defend and protect both themselves and others.

Chapter 2: *Beloved*

Sethe, the main female protagonist of Morrison's *Beloved*, is an example of the way the Good Mother-figure has become a trope within African-American literature. Her life story is one of pain and physical and psychological abuse which she endures to safeguard her children. The exertions she makes to ensure this lead to her actually killing one of her daughters as she tries to ensure that her children will not be slaves again. In the article "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text" (1991), Mae Henderson quotes "A Conversation" by Gloria Naylor and Morrison (1985), in which Morrison recollects how she found inspiration for the novel (as well as for *Jazz* (1992), it seems to those familiar with the plot of this novel) from a newspaper clipping and from a photograph by James Van Der Zee. The newspaper clipping told the story about the escaped slave woman Margaret Garner who in 1851 killed one of her children in an attempt to prevent them from being taken into slavery. Van Der Zee's photograph portrayed a young girl who, after having been shot by a jealous man, only replied "I'll tell you tomorrow" when asked who had shot her. Most likely she wanted to protect the man who did it. The girl died (Henderson 82-83).⁹ The two stories both, according to Morrison, told of "a woman [who] loved something other than herself so much, she had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself" (83).¹⁰ This notion of placing value outside of oneself seems particularly fitting to describe how Sethe's subjectivity and motherhood are constructed, and is also a part of the Good Mother concept. A Good Mother as she is portrayed in the slave narratives endures hardships and is willing to make great sacrifices because she regards her children as more valuable than herself, and this is what lies at the core of Sethe's motherhood as well. Due to the process of regendering and expropriation of ownership over children that Patton regards as characteristics of the slave

⁹Gloria Naylor /Toni Morrison. "A Conversation". (*The Southern Review* 21 (Summer 1985). 583-584

¹⁰Naylor/Morrison 584.

communities, Sethe sees her subjectivity, individuality, and not least her value as a human being as inextricably tied to her role as a mother. Her motherhood – or her Good Mothering - is, in my opinion, established as opposition and resistance to the power discourse in the novel, particularly personified through schoolteacher who seeks to enslave and dehumanise Sethe and her children. Through her motherhood, Sethe finds a language with which she can answer and talk back to the language of the powerful and she is able to narrate her past through remembrance, which in turn opens up the possibility for her to face this past and leave it behind. Whether she succeeds in this, and whether she manages to take back the value of her life, remains unresolved at the end of the novel, but the possibility and hope lie latent. A great part of Sethe's process of establishing her subjectivity is being able to position herself in relation to her mother and her daughters. In this connection I believe that the Kristevan theory of mother/child identification and separation, and Irigaray's texts on the mother/daughter roles, are particularly useful in shedding light on the relationship between Sethe and her daughters.

In the following, I will begin by locating Sethe in relation to the tradition of the Good Mother, drawing especially on Patton's characteristics of the slave community; I will then examine how Sethe's motherhood is established as an alternative language in the novel, a bodily way for the voiceless, female slave to express herself. Next, I move on to Kristeva's and Irigaray's texts to establish how they may illuminate the connection between Sethe, Denver and Beloved. Towards the end, I present other readings of the character of Beloved, including alternative, "non-Western" readings of *Beloved* which draw on the succubus figure and the importance of ancestral return in analysing the novel. The reading that will dominate the first parts of the chapter is the perhaps most common one of Beloved as Sethe's child returning from the dead. Finally, I return once again to the Good Mother, focusing this time on how motherhood functions as currency and a measure of worth for Sethe, and how it

becomes simultaneously a healing process and a potent danger from which she must extract herself in order to become a subject in her own right.

The Good Mother in *Beloved*

Beloved can be read as a modern (and of course fictional) slave narrative as it deals with many of the issues the traditional narratives are concerned with; the power and violence of slave holders, sexual exploitation of the slaves, the separation of families and the sacrifices of mothers. In line with this latter point, Sethe and other mothers in the novel function as contributions to the tradition of the Good Mother, which I believe has its base both in real historical events and in the slave narratives as genre. Sethe has undergone a great deal of suffering to ensure both her own freedom and her children's, and furthermore, she has committed the most extreme act of the Good Mother, namely infanticide, in order to protect her children from a life in slavery. Sethe and Paul D's community has several of the characteristics Patton attributes to slave communities and motherhood in slavery, which in turn contribute to the establishment of a Good Mother tradition.

As explored in the background chapter, and as examined by Patton, the slaves underwent a process of degendering in the eyes of the slave holders, and "new" gender structures developed in slave communities. The effeminising of the male slaves at Sweet Home is part of Paul D's worst memories from his time in slavery, and is linked to his feeling of being stripped of humanity:

"Mister, he looked so... free. Better than me. ... Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub." ... Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? ... It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself

on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will? (Morrison, *Beloved* 72, 220)

Stamp Paid, the man who helps Sethe after her escape from Sweet Home, is another product of the degendering/regendering process the male slaves went through. Furthermore, like Paul D, who is sexually abused while on the chain gang, Stamp Paid provides a male point of view on the sexual abuse to which the slaves were frequently subject. Having to silently witness his wife Vashti being abused on a regular basis by their white master, Stamp Paid too feels that his status as a man – and the role as protector that was inherent in this – is taken away from him. Unable to do anything about it, Stamp Paid feels the urge to take out his anger on his wife, but instead he changes his name, signalling that he has suffered enough and paid his due. The slaves at Sweet Home are also subject to this type of degendering and dehumanising, as seen through Paul D's comparison of himself and the rooster with the telling name of Mister, and most strikingly through Sethe's observation of schoolteacher's lesson with his nephews, in which they learn about the human and animalistic characteristics of the slaves. This scene in turn becomes a strong motivation for Sethe's actions when it comes to freeing and protecting her children, and is part of what ultimately urges her to commit murder: "And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (251). Thus, the dehumanising the slaves are subject to spurs Sethe into the role of the Good Mother. Her human qualities are further diminished as her value to schoolteacher – aside from her capacity of mixing ink the way he prefers it – first and foremost lies in her role as a producer of new slaves, as a "breeder" as Patton describes it (Patton 1): "...the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left" (Morrison, *Beloved* 149). Another event which marks Sethe and enables her to commit infanticide is the attack she was subject to before the escape from Sweet Home, during which one of schoolteacher's

nephews “nursed” her. This scene not only further underlines Sethe’s animal status with the slave holders – to them, she is a breeder – but it also signifies how Sethe’s personal experience of motherhood is soiled and stolen from her along with her children’s source of nourishment. Furthermore, as Sethe values herself according to her ability to protect her children, the stealing of their food, which she is unable to stop, symbolises the theft and loss of her own sense of self-worth.

Abuse, the robbing of the “masculine” qualities of the male slaves and the sole focusing on female slaves as breeders, established gender systems that diverged from the gender system and definitions of gender that prevailed among white people. This is reflected both within the small slave community at Sweet Home and in the larger community of ex-slaves in 1873. Men are not sole providers and protectors and women are not solely domestic caretakers, but perform tasks outside the home and have jobs that are as physically demanding as those performed by men (e.g. working at a slaughterhouse). Furthermore, a genuine comradeship and a sense of equality between the sexes seem to exist among both slaves and ex-slaves. Despite these factors, however, the matrifocality that Patton claims was a characteristic of slave communities is hard to locate, perhaps due to Sethe being the only woman in the relatively small slave community at Sweet Home and to the narrative focus on the isolated family in 124. Furthermore, the way the (ex-)slaves structure their gender relations is not established as a contrast to the way the white people in the novel (who are relatively few) structure their gender relationships in terms of community and work chores. Although it can not be located in the community, the novel itself, on the other hand, is indeed matrifocal, as motherhood permeates several of the stories in the novel, for instance Baby Suggs’, Ella’s and Sethe’s mother’s. Moreover, Henderson argues that the way Sethe’s life history is placed within “a maternal family history” underlines the importance of motherlines in the slave communities (98); Sethe can only remember her mother and it is her mother she

comes to identify with. Furthermore, Denver – who can also only remember her female relatives among the elder generations – is Sethe’s “heir” after her brothers’ disappearance; it is she, not the older sons, who represents the future for the family (ibid).

Connected to the regendering of female slaves and the structuring of Sethe’s motherhood in *Beloved*, is the matter of ownership over children. Whereas the ownership of children was relocated from the parents to the slave holders so as to create a feeling of “kinlessness” (Patton 12), the knowledge of whom her children really belong to does not influence Sethe in this way. Her urge to protect seems only to increase with this knowledge, an urge which might also be influenced by her having to take care of her children while working; on Sweet Home there are no older people or other women to care for them, as was common on bigger plantations. In fact, Sethe has to learn mothering by herself, as there are no other women on the farm from which she can learn anything (and neither do the men at Sweet Home have any experience): “So there wasn’t nobody. To talk to, I mean, who’d know when it was time to chew up a little something and give it to em” (Morrison, *Beloved* 160). As the sole caretaker of the children, whom she can not look after properly due to her duties, her identity as a mother seems to solidify itself in Sethe. She sees herself as a mother first and foremost; Morrison’s words that Margaret Garner placed her value outside of herself seem no less fitting when it comes to Sethe.

After Sethe manages to escape, she experiences motherhood in freedom (but only for 28 days) and her sense of protection and love develops further as she feels that the children belong to her for the first time:

“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?” ... 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. ... “So when I got here, even before they let me get out of bed, I stitched her [the oldest

daughter] a little something from a piece of cloth Baby Suggs had. Well, all I'm saying is that's a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out." (162-163)

The regendering, the violence and the displacement of ownership – and not least the short experience of the freedom to love “properly” – are all factors that establish Sethe as a Good Mother, and enable her to see killing her children as not only defensible, but morally right (“It worked,” she said. ... “They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em.” 164-165). In death, schoolteacher can not claim the children, and as such Sethe is trying to reclaim them, even if it means they are out of her reach as well. The act of killing marks Sethe as the most desperate kind of Good Mother, who sees death as a better outcome than slavery; infanticide thus becomes an act of defiance for Sethe, a way of fighting back and a way of keeping her children safe as well as reasserting her right to them (Patton 13).

The Ink of the Feminine Language: The Function of Blood, Milk and Scars in *Beloved*

Coming to a peak in the act of infanticide, Good Mothering and motherhood itself seem to become a site or field of opposition in the novel. Henderson reads motherhood as a counter language established by Sethe; a way for her to talk back, as it were. This language of motherhood is set up as an alternative feminine language to the paternal language, personified through schoolteacher. The two alternative languages are perhaps most simply exemplified through the difference between schoolteacher's and Sethe's way of relating to reality; whereas schoolteacher analyses and writes everything down (having control over the conventional means of the use of language), Sethe's path to claiming language lies in story-telling and remembrance (“rememory”, Morrison *Beloved* 36). Here the contrast between the “masculine”, written language which has traditionally been connected to logic and “logos” and the feminine oral language connected to the body is especially clear. According to

Henderson, “Morrison uses the metaphor of maternity to establish an alternative to the metaphor of paternity common in white/male historical discourse. This recurrent structuring metaphor complements and amplifies the images of the female body encoded in the text” (94). Giving birth is one such maternal metaphor which marks Sethe’s transition to subjectivity (ibid). The metaphors of maternity thus shape a new means of expression for the silenced black slave woman Sethe, who is denied the traditional “paternal” ways of expression but who through motherhood can start her process of remembrance which is necessary for her to become an independent subject.

In the article “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity” (1981), Susan Gubar discusses the importance of blood in relation to the manifestations of women’s creativity and the role of the female body in women’s art. Women have always been sculpted, painted and written about, but have to a large extent been denied the use of conventional means of artistic expression. Two prominent metaphors have grown forth with connection to the roles of the sexes in the arts, argues Gubar, namely that of the man – or phallus – as a pen and the woman as a white sheet on which the phallus-pen inscribes (295). Because of these gendered metaphors, and because women experience their bodies’ position in art as shaped by men (idealised, deified and silenced), they also find that the distance between artist and art has diminished as they themselves are the art objects. Thus, the body has become the means through which many women create art, argues Gubar, also because the body is one of the materials that is always available to them:

If ... female creativity has had to express itself within the confines of domesticity ... women could at the least paint their own faces, shape their own bodies, and modulate their own vocal tones to become the glass of fashion and the mold of form. To make up, for such women, means not only making up stories but making up faces. ... the woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object. (297)

Connected to the artistic use of the body, Gubar claims that blood – which is linked to “feminine” conditions such as virginity, menstruation and childbearing – has become an important metaphor for feminine creativity and of the pain it costs women to create when artist and art are the same (296).¹¹ Blood is women’s ink, asserts Gubar, produced when the penis-pen inscribes the feminine sheet; “a literal influence of male authority” (302).

In *Beloved*, both ink and blood are prominent images, both of which can be connected to Gubar’s theory of the female body’s relation to art; furthermore, the ink and the blood can be said to represent a masculine/paternal discourse or language and a feminine/maternal language respectively. Schoolteacher prefers Sethe’s mixture of ink and uses it in teaching his nephews about the slaves’ human characteristics versus their “animal” characteristics; this symbolises not only how the slaves’ skills were turned against them, but also how Sethe’s language is appropriated and twisted to serve the suppressing power. Being the white man in the position of power, schoolteacher holds the power to define and the power of language itself; this is not for the slaves to use at their own leisure. The slaves might try to use logic and reasoning to define and defend themselves, but have no real control, as seen when the slave Sixo tries to defend himself for eating a pig:

“And you telling me that's not stealing?”

“No, sir. It ain't.”

“What is it then?”

“Improving your property, sir.”

“What?”

“Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.”

Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined. (Morrison, *Beloved* 190)

¹¹In the short story which is Gubar’s main concern in the article, “The Blank Page” by Isak Dinesen, sheets stained with virginal blood are exhibited as art. Isak Dinesen [Karen Blixen]. “The Blank Page”. (*Last Tales*. New York: Random House, 1957). 99-105.

Using the metaphors of Gubar's article, it might be said that if the woman's body is a medium of art, schoolteacher "inscribes" his truth on Sethe's body, whip in hand; here, Gubar's claim that blood – women's ink – can be seen as a fruit of the pain women have to endure because of the authority of men (Gubar 302), seems particularly fitting. Symbolically, Sethe bites off a piece of her tongue as schoolteacher whips her; her language is gone, but on her back are the marks and the blood – the "ink" – left by the white, male language keeper. However, though she can not see the marks or wounds herself, they are "translated" by the people she meets; again, the woman's body is painfully transformed into a work of art. The masculine, violent discourse is replaced by "feminine" images as women "read" the blood-ink on Sethe's back; Amy Denver, the white poor girl helping Sethe on her flight from Sweet Home, sees a chokecherry tree and Baby Suggs sees roses. Henderson points out the significance in the fact that Baby Suggs does not say anything when she sees the "roses" on Sethe's back and that she covers her mouth: "The presumption is, of course, that black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history" (Henderson 87). Paul D, on the other hand, sees the scars as a "sculpture... like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (Morrison, *Beloved* 17). These interpretations of the bodily work of art can be said to be gendered; the women see something living and natural, whereas the man sees something symbolic of the culture created by man (Henderson 87).

The scars on Sethe's body function not only as evidence of a masculine language forcing itself on a feminine "slate", but are also linked to the maternal language/discourse which Morrison, according to Henderson, establishes as an alternative to the paternal tradition. Scars are a feature shared by three generations of women, by Sethe's unnamed mother, Sethe herself and Beloved. Though the implications behind them are quite different, the scars are all symbolic of motherly love and function as marks of identification. As a girl at

a big plantation with many slaves, Sethe hardly knows or sees her mother, but is one day pulled aside by her:

“Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, “This is your ma'am. ... If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.” ... “Yes, Ma'am,” I said. “But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,” I said. “Mark the mark on me too.” ... “She slapped by face.” ... “I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own.” (Morrison, *Beloved* 61)

Thus, as the scars on Sethe's back are later transformed into other images by the people who see them, the signs of mutilation and ownership burnt into Sethe's mother's skin become a mark of identification, a means through which Sethe can bond with her mother (an aspect Henderson seemingly overlooks, however, is how the intended identification method fails; after her mother's death, Sethe is unable to recognise her). The slap that Sethe receives for asking to be marked herself can also be said to be a mark of identification as Sethe later, after having been marked (whipped) herself, realises the pain involved in loving your children in an unsafe world. The scars on *Beloved's* throat and the fingerprints on her forehead also function as identification as they help Sethe recognize her daughter. However, the different scars have different origins and meanings; the marks on Sethe's mother and on herself are put there by a dominant white slave owner, whereas *Beloved's* marks were put there by Sethe herself. Henderson thus points out that the scars help Sethe remember and recognise the tradition of infanticide that has marked her family (Henderson 96). As a child she learned that her mother had other children with white men who raped her; these children her mother “threw away” (Morrison, *Beloved* 62). Only Sethe, whom she had with a black man she “put her arms around” (ibid) did she keep. In this connection, Sethe's name is symbolic as it is reminiscent of the Old Testament Hebrew name “Seth”, who was the third son of Adam of Eve, given to them to replace Abel, who was killed by Kain. “Seth” means ‘granted’ or ‘appointed’

(Henderson 96), and Sethe's name might thus signify her status as a saved child, her life being saved by her mother. Sethe also tries to save her children, but as the scars testify, the two women's mother-love take on different forms; where Sethe was saved to life, Beloved was saved from slavery through death. Sethe later questions her own saving, however, as she wonders if her mother tried to run away from the plantation without her when she and her fellow slaves were captured and hanged. If this was the case, it might be said that Sethe's mother establishes herself as a "Bad Mother", or rather that she moved towards the "masculine" tradition of resistance, namely that of running away (Wright 75-76). The contrasting and comparison of the scars on the female bodies of her family enable Sethe to locate herself within a history of sacrifice and infanticide, a history which places also her own mother into the tradition of the Good Mother (a tradition she might renounce, then, as she possibly tried to run away alone).

Henderson believes that the stealing of Sethe's breast milk is symbolic of the expropriation of her language. Watching his nephews "milk" Sethe, schoolteacher writes it down with the ink she has mixed for him; this, argues Henderson, evokes Hélène Cixous' metaphor of the female writing, namely breast milk (89-90). This feminine language - "*écriture féminine*" - is available to women if they claim and surrender to their own bodies and sexuality. *Écriture féminine* is a language of the body, and Cixous uses the metaphor of breast milk - "white ink" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), 881) - as an alternative to the conventional way of writing, which is defined by men, and from which women, according to Cixous, have been barred (879). The alternative language/discourse is, as Henderson also points out, also connected to the theories of Gubar (and Sandra Gilbert) of the pen as a phallic substitute. Schoolteacher uses Sethe's ink to define her, he "inscribes" her back with his whip-"pen", and he steals the white ink of her breast milk: "Appropriating Sethe's "milk" through a process of phallic substitution, schoolteacher uses the pen ... to "re-mark" the slave

woman with the signature of his paternity” (Henderson 90). It is this stealing of the milk that is Sethe’s utmost concern when it comes to all the abuse she suffered during her life on Sweet Home and the flight from it: “They used cowhide on you?” “And they took my milk.” “They beat you and you was pregnant?” “And they took my milk!” (Morrison, *Beloved* 17). The breast milk represents an alternative language, but is also a symbol of Sethe’s future and worth, a symbol, as it were, of her Good Mothering and the sacrifices she makes in order to secure her children. Having sent her children along ahead of her, Sethe’s main concern after the flight from Sweet Home is getting her breast milk to her daughter who is still nursed; this, it seems, besides her last child who is still in the womb, is the only reason she even tries to stay alive. The milk thus becomes a symbol of how Sethe measures her own value by her children, and she is obsessively concerned about having “milk enough for all” (100), meaning not only that she can take care of everyone, but that she has taken back what was stolen from her, namely the ink with which she can establish a language of maternity and resistance.

This alternative language of the white ink culminates in a strong response to the language and power of the paternal language as Sethe kills her daughter and hurts the other children when schoolteacher has found them and comes to Bluestone Road 124 to retrieve them.¹² Sethe steps even further into the tradition of the Good Mother and sets up death as an alternative to slavery. At the same time, it might be said that she, as her mother possibly did, moves into a male tradition of resistance towards the end of the novel, when in her delusion she believes that schoolteacher has come for her children again and she runs towards him (really Denver’s new white employer) with an ice pick. As in the narratives portraying male slaves, she fights back instead of hurting herself or her own. However, this means of defence fails as Denver and the local women stop her – it is not violence, but the power of the

¹²The address gives associations to the “blues” haunting the house. Furthermore, the number might be interpreted as a sign of what has happened on the premises, the first two numerals, 1 and 2, symbolising the eldest children Howard and Buglar, the last, 4, symbolising Denver. The numeral 3 is missing, as is the third child, Beloved.

community that protects Sethe from herself. It is also the women's "exorcism" of Beloved that finally allows – or rather, forces – Sethe to rid herself of her past made flesh.

With the women's exorcism of Beloved through song the notion of the feminine language once again comes into play:

Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer – only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes. ... then Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (258-259; Henderson 99)

As Henderson points out, the biblical allusion is significant (99). Of course, the Bible states that "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1.1) – however, for the women the original entity is sound. This again conjures up allusions to the notion of the semiotic (Henderson 99), namely the phase one is in before one suppresses oedipal impulses and before one acquires language. After learning the father's law and acquiring language one is in the symbolic, the place for logocentric speech. Tied to the semiotic, then, is the "language" of sounds. Kristeva and Cixous regard women to be closer to the semiotic, due to the phallogocentric nature of the symbolic. It seems that to the women gathering in Bluestone Road, the prayer is mostly a necessary means, whereas the hollering, the sound of the beginning, is what is expected to truly expel what they perceive as a ghost/demon child, whose nature is not logical, who perhaps can not be explained in ordinary language: "Shall we pray?" asked the women. "Uh huh," said Ella. "First. Then we got to get down to business" (Morrison, *Beloved* 257). Thus, uttering the original "female" sound, the women finally include Sethe in their language and in their community (when Sethe was arrested years earlier, this "cape of sound" (152) was denied her) and it is through the feminine language that the past can be put to rest. The women, although not condoning Sethe's actions, recognise the reasons for them and manage

to align themselves with her in the history of the suffering of the female slaves. Ella, the woman who leads the group in prayer and holler, manages to see her own neglect towards the child she had because of rape as an act similar to that of Sethe; angered at the thought of her own dead child coming back to “whip her too” (259) she leads the women to the “exorcism”, knowing that a child “can’t just up and kill the mama” (256). At the end of the novel, then, it seems that the Good Mothers of *Beloved* have managed to expel the horrors of the past that unites them, once more accepting Sethe, who committed the most extreme act of Good Mothering, into their midst.

***Beloved* and Kristeva: Identification and Separation**

As commented in the introduction, Julia Kristeva is among the theorists who want to challenge the traditional practitioners and theorists of psychoanalysis, criticising Sigmund Freud, for instance, in his failure to fully analyse motherhood: “The fact remains, as far as the complexities and pitfalls of maternal experience are involved, that Freud offers only a massive *nothing* ...” (“Stabat Mater” 255; emphasis in the original). Kristeva moves away from the phallogocentric focus on the father’s role in establishing the (male) child as a subject (or super-ego) through castration anxiety; in “Freud and Love”, “Stabat Mater” and also in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” (1975, she elaborates on the *mother’s* relation to the child and her part in the child’s separation from her.

Kristeva views the pregnant maternal body as a meeting place between the symbolic and the semiotic. The mother, of course, is subjected to the symbolic law as a “symbolizing, speaking subject” (Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” 238), whereas the child inside her body is in the pre-verbal, semiotic state. The maternal body becomes, then, a “filter” “where “nature” confronts “culture” (ibid). Thus, the mother is in contact with the semiotic, but not only through the contact with the child; she also experiences the semiotic in

relation to her own mother. The woman's experience of pregnancy and birth creates complete identification with her mother:

By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother, they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond. ... *The homosexual-maternal facet* is a whirl of words, a complete absence of meaning and seeing; it is feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes, and fantasied clinging to the maternal body as a screen against the plunge. (239-240; emphasis in the original)

Thus, through the pregnant body, the woman is in contact with –and achieves identification with – both her mother and her child, and a feeling of oneness rises between the three:

Recovered childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks, flash of cells, instants of laughter, smiles in the blackness of dreams, at night, opaque joy that roots me in her bed, my mother's, and projects him, a son, a butterfly soaking up dew from her hand, there, nearby in the night. Alone: she, I, and he. (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 247)

Despite the new contact with her mother, the strongest identification seems to be that between the mother and her child, at least if one takes into consideration the traditional psychoanalytic assumption that the child, prior to the mirror stage and the Imaginary Father (see below) and before being exposed to the paternal law, is unable to regard her/himself as separate from the mother's body. This sense of unity is experienced by the mother as well:

... I hover with feet firmly planted on the ground in order to carry him, sure, stable, ineradicable, while he dances in my neck, flutters with my hair, seeks a smooth shoulder on the right, on the left, slips on the breast, swingles, silver vivid blossom of my belly, and finally flies away on my navel in his dream carried by my hands. My son. Nights of wakefulness, scattered sleep, sweetness of the child, warm mercury in my arms, cajolery, affection, defenceless body, his or mine, sheltered, protected. (246)

This connection between the mother's body and the child is also a feature of *Beloved*. Sethe's body reacts the moment she sees Beloved, filling up with fluid (urine), making Sethe

remember the birth of her daughter; significantly though, it is not Beloved's birth she recalls, but Denver's. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy believes this is because Denver represents the future and hope ("Daughters Signifyin(g) History", 1992; 48); it is the daughter that survives, who must ultimately be remembered. However, at the very beginning of Sethe and Beloved's meeting, the maternal process of identification is activated, giving the impression that Sethe's body has a memory of its own of the child that used to occupy it.

When it comes to connection to the mother, it is indeed through motherhood (and as explored through the scars) that Sethe identifies with her mother and recognises the legacy of infanticide that marks her family. Beloved also, as a baby in a grown body, identifies herself completely with Sethe. In psychoanalytic terms, it does not seem that she has left the mother's body; she is extremely possessive of Sethe, and seemingly does not perceive them as separate individuals:

Beloved drops her hand. "I'm like this."
Denver watches as Beloved bends over, curls up and rocks. Her eyes go to no place; her moaning is so small Denver can hardly hear it.
"You all right? Beloved?"
Beloved focuses her eyes. "Over there. Her face."
Denver looks where Beloved's eyes go; there is nothing but darkness there.
"Whose face? Who is it?"
"Me. It's me." (Morrison, *Beloved*, 124)

Like a toddler, Beloved's speech is very limited; her language is simple and she does not seem to grasp things that are abstract. She is direct in speech and sees things as they appear and not the implications or meanings behind them; for instance, she asks Sethe if she is "finished" with her "eyes" when the latter has been crying (175). In a part of the novel that stands out as three separate monologues by Sethe, Denver and Beloved, narration is staccato and impulsive. Here Beloved's language seems close to both Cixous' feminine language and Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as Beloved still regards herself as one with the maternal

body. The passage thus illustrates both Beloved's connection to the semiotic and how she as a "ghost" is "frozen" in the age she was at the time of her death:

I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing (210)

Towards the end of the monologue-section, the three women's voices fuse together, seemingly completing the process of co-dependency and identification:

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
I will never leave you again
Don't ever leave me again
You will never leave me again
You went in the water
I drank your blood
I brought your milk
...
I waited for you
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (216-217)

After her time in prison, Sethe shuts herself away from the community and does not encourage her other daughter, Denver, to leave it to explore the world. Especially after her sons, Howard and Buglar, run away from the baby ghost haunting the house and from the knowledge of what their mother has done, she becomes over-protective of Denver. Denver, in turn, is jealous of Paul D who disrupts her closeness to her mother and who chases her only friend, the ghost, away. Sheltered from the world, Denver, as well as Beloved, has difficulty in separating herself from her mother. For instance, Sethe refers to her as trying to get into the front of her dress (11). Denver's hide-away place is a groove of trees forming a room – resembling a womb, the organic shelter hides her from the eyes of the world: "In that bower,

closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out*. Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish" (28-29, italics in the original).

In "Freud and Love", Kristeva argues, as observed in the introduction, that there is an initial separation that occurs between the child and the maternal body before the mirror stage and before the Oedipus complex (22). That means that separation and establishment of the super-ego is not only spurred by castration anxiety (which occurs after the Oedipus complex), but by something else. Drawing on Freud's notion of the "father in individual prehistory" which is a primary identification that occurs "previous to any concentration on any object whatsoever"¹³, i.e. before the child identifies itself as a separate being, and before the first sexual desire (26-27), Kristeva poses love as another motivating factor for the move from the maternal body. This love is given the child by the figure called the "Imaginary Father" which is a conglomeration of the father and the mother (because, according to Freud, claims Kristeva, the child is not aware of sexual difference at this stage, (26). The Imaginary Father is also a substitute for the mother's phallic desire for the child. Because the mother moves her possessive love away from the child, the child is able to start its separation from the mother (34). The Imaginary Father is then a figure which is not the potentially castrating father of symbolic law which is what the child experiences after the Oedipus complex, and which is neither the mother who is embedded in her phallic love for the child (Grosz 199). The Imaginary Father motivates the beginning of maternal separation through love and encouragement and also through language; assimilating the speech of the Imaginary Father is important to the establishment of the subject. Thus Kristeva links love and language:

¹³Sigmund Freud. *The Ego and the Id*. 1923. (*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974. Vol 19.) 31.

When the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other – precisely a nonobject, a pattern, a model – I bind myself to him in a primary fusion, communion, unification. An identification. For me to have been capable of such a process, my libido had to be restrained; my thirst to devour had to be deferred and displaced to a level one may well call “psychic,” provided one adds that if there is repression it is quite primal, and that it lets one hold on to the joys of chewing, swallowing, nourishing oneself...with words. In being able to receive the other’s words, to assimilate, repeat, and reproduce them, I become like him: One. A subject of enunciation. Through psychic osmosis/identification. Through love. (“Freud and Love” 26)

Mother-love as it is before the “transferring” of desire away from the child, grows out of a connection between mother and child which is situated in the semiotic, which again is tied to sounds and to the non-verbal. This type of love, then, is not necessarily verbal, and in *Beloved*, love between mother and child is portrayed in just such a way, manifesting itself in ways that are not verbal. Sethe’s urge and obsession about bringing the milk to her children, her “safety with a handsaw” (Morrison, *Beloved* 164), Beloved’s caress of Sethe in the Clearing – none of these actions or manifestations of love are spoken. The non-verbal acts of love might be tied to the specific circumstances in the novel. Knowing, as Paul D knows, that loving something will only make it hurt more when you lose it, has created this non-verbal display of affection among the ex-slaves. In fact, Baby Suggs feels she has to teach the community to love in order for them to be able to truly claim their freedom and to form a protection against the white people who hate 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. They despise it. ... And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. ... This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. ... and the beat and beating heart, love that too. ... love your heart. For this is the prize.” (88-89)

Learning to express love for themselves is vital to the community of ex-slaves and to those who carry slavery with them although they have not experienced it themselves. Thus, love

must be articulated and spoken so that the people in the community can establish themselves as subjects independent of the hatred that faces them, independent of their own past. Similarly, it seems that the unspoken acts of love are the origin of the dangerous relationship that develops between Sethe and Beloved. Sethe, who has been deprived of words and language, resorts to a violent and unspoken response to the paternal power, while Beloved has never assimilated language, and gives her love in the Clearing in a way that nearly chokes Sethe. Words, then, seem to be their possibility for “salvation” and independence, but only Sethe, the living woman of this world, can potentially achieve spoken love through narrating her past in remembrance. In a way, then, Sethe’s acts of mother-love defy Kristeva’s theory that people who love have assimilated speech, as Sethe can be said to have been robbed of language. However, as seen through the community’s need to articulate love and Sethe’s need to narrate, love, words and survival in the (symbolic) world do seem to be dependant on each other.

Kristeva describes motherhood as “demented *jouissance*” (“Stabat Mater” 255), a joyful and yet painful experience: “One does not give birth in pain, one gives birth to pain ...” (241). When the child establishes individuality, separating itself from the mother, it is a painful experience for both mother and child; “it is the pleasure of the damned” (250). Bearing this mixture of emotions and experiences in mind might help illuminate the love-hate relationship that Sethe and Beloved are trapped in. Beloved on the one hand can not help but love her mother above anything and identifies completely with her; at the same time she hates Sethe for killing her, and perhaps also for being unable to separate from her. She has been deprived of the transition into language and of the opportunity to live independently, making choices that are not inseparably tied to her mother’s being. That she has not separated, has not met the Imaginary Father, as it were, can not only be seen in how she identifies with Sethe, but also in the way she craves sweet foods. Her “thirst to devour” (“Freud and Love” 26) has

not been changed into a craving for words, but is still focused on sensuous things.

Furthermore, her hunger for sweets draws the mind to the cloth soaked with sugar water Sethe instructed the people who helped them escape to give Beloved to suckle until she could follow with the breast milk. Beloved's craving for sweets might thus be seen as really being a craving for the mother's milk she was denied; again, the identification with the maternal body and the failure to separate from it is played out.

As separation from the maternal body is so important in order to enter the symbolic and experience love through language, it is, so to speak, necessary to perform a kind of matricide in order to separate oneself from the mother (with the help, according to Kristeva, of the Imaginary Father) and thus achieve love.¹⁴ Seen in connection with the tradition of infanticide of Sethe's family, the notion of matricide from Beloved's point of view might seem like just retaliation. She has been deprived of life and transition into the symbolic, and is unable to love anyone other than her mother. As a result, the grown-up ghost-child's possessiveness and dependence are both consuming and dangerous for the mother Sethe, who in her guilt neglects both her own needs and Denver's when she realises that Beloved is her daughter. What develops is an eerie symbiosis where either matricide or infanticide seems inevitable. Beloved is unable and unwilling to separate from Sethe; at the same time she needs to do so in order to enter the world of words and love. Without the help of an Imaginary Father, Beloved can not as other children enter the symbolic or adulthood (of course, as a ghost made flesh she seems to be mentally "stuck" in the age she was when she died). Hence, since the child can not move on, it seems that it is the mother who will perish, and this process is well under way as the community intervenes and expels Beloved. In this exorcism, it might

¹⁴According to Hirsch, Irigaray in *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, defines Western culture as inherently matricidal, and claims that the mythic matricide, represented by Clytemnestra's murder from Greek mythology, is the "founding moment of civilization under paternal law" (Hirsch's translation; Hirsch 28). Hirsch points out that it is significant that Freud chose the Oedipus-myth as a symbol of maturation as this myth concerns the male child. Other myths may be relevant to locate the story of the daughter and the mother, e.g. the myths of Electra and Antigone (ibid).

be claimed that the community acts as an Imaginary Father, separating mother and child through an act of love. However, this love, as opposed to that of an Imaginary Father, is, as explored previously, not spoken, but is uttered in a pre-verbal “semiotic language”; this further underlines the importance of maternal and feminine presence in the novel.

A Love Too Thick

As explored in the introduction to this chapter, one main issue in *Beloved* is how certain women put their love “outside” of themselves, to their own peril. This is something Paul D observes as he learns of Sethe’s actions when schoolteacher came to retrieve her and her children:

“I stopped him,” she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.”

The roaring in Paul D’s head did not prevent him from hearing the pat she gave to the last word, and it occurred to him that what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety. . . . This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him.

“Your love is too thick,” he said. . . .

“Too thick?” she said. . . . “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.”

“Yeah. It didn’t work, did it? Did it work?” he asked.

“It worked,” she said. (Morrison, *Beloved* 164)

Paul D does not understand what motivated Sethe to kill and hurt her children; by telling her that her love is “too thick”, he places himself outside the tradition of the Good Mother. This is further underlined when he reminds Sethe that she is not an animal: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet” (165). Here, Paul D not only shows a lack of understanding, but might also be said to continue the tradition of degendering discussed previously, in which black women are defined as possessing animal features. Furthermore, as Sethe steps into the long ranks of women who

have gone to desperate measures to protect their children, it is as if he is also calling them animals. However, Paul D has had some “animal” traits of his own, and this he considers after he has confronted Sethe with hers: “Later he would wonder what made him say it. The calves of his youth? or the conviction that he was being observed through the ceiling? How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret straight to her too-thick love” (ibid). By projecting onto Sethe his guilt about his own past – sexually abusing calves because of the lack of women on Sweet Home, and more recently his almost incestuous relationship (another “animal” feature) to Beloved – Paul D manages momentarily to suppress his own anger at himself. However, the “tobacco tin” (113) containing his feelings has been opened by Beloved, and will eventually not allow him to keep his own past at bay.

That Sethe’s love is “too thick”, too strong, and that she puts both herself and her children at risk, might be due to the fact that there is no one else in Sethe’s life but her children after she has isolated herself and been shunned by the community. It is not only Beloved, then, who is made to suffer for the lack of an Imaginary Father – but Sethe too, who has not had anyone on which to project her love (Kristeva calls the one the mother projects her desire to a “Third Party”, “Freud and Love” 34). Paul D entering her life might represent a possibility for this, and his expelling of the baby ghost might symbolise exactly this, but he is scared away by the intensity of her love, and by his own guilt. Sethe then, after the escape where Halle lost his mind, does not have anyone to desire but her children; hence there is no “Imaginary Father” through which Beloved can be established as an individual. Furthermore, Beloved does not truly want to be established as a being separate from her mother – that is not even seen as an alternative by her. She contributes in chasing Paul D off by seducing him, and Paul D himself takes the last step when he moves out after learning the truth about Sethe’s “safety with a handsaw” (Morrison, *Beloved* 164). However, as he returns at the end of the novel, it is he who helps Sethe to realise how she has misplaced her value, and seems to be the

key to her personal rebirth: “Holding her fingers, he enables Sethe to see herself as a subject, as a mother and a subject both. ... Allowing a maternal voice and subjectivity to emerge, she questions, at least for a moment, the hierarchy of motherhood over selfhood on which her life had rested until that moment” (Hirsch 7).

In fact, the presence – or the lack of presence – of men seems to be important when it comes to transitions for both mother and daughters. Paul D allows Sethe to enter, possibly, into selfhood at the end of the novel, and it is also through the meeting with him that she can begin to remember and confront the past. Paul D’s coming is also an occasion of transition for Denver, if a forced one; getting rid of the ghost that haunts Bluestone Road 124, Denver loses her only company save her mother and, feeling excluded from the closeness Sethe and Paul D share, she begins to fathom how lonely she is. The loneliness continues after Sethe discovers who Beloved is and starts ignoring Denver; this, of course combined with her mother’s increasing insanity and the lack of food, spurs Denver on to seek the help of people outside their isolated world.

Though Denver also shows signs of having difficulties in separating from her mother and in establishing her own identity, she is, as opposed to Beloved, able to do so in the end. This of course, is because Denver is allowed to live to adulthood, and because she, as opposed to Beloved, has been introduced to the symbolic. Whereas Beloved still craves her mother’s milk, Denver was given “communion” in the form of solid food by Stamp Paid which might be read as a sign of her imminent transcendence to the community (which, in turn, is postponed with the killing of Beloved):

Scratched, raked and bitten, he maneuvered through and took hold of each berry with fingertips so gentle not a single one was bruised. Late in the afternoon he got back to 124 and put two full buckets down on the porch. When Baby Suggs saw his shredded clothes, bleeding hands, welted face and neck she sat down laughing out loud. ... Paying them no mind he took a berry and put it in the three-week-old Denver’s mouth. The women shrieked. “She’s too little for that, Stamp.”

“Bowels be soup.”

“Sickify her stomach.”

But the baby’s thrilled eyes and smacking lips made them follow suit, sampling one at a time the berries that tasted like church. (136)

Stamp Paid himself believes his blackberries is what kept Denver alive as they were the reason for throwing the party, which made him present at 124 when schoolteacher came. He was then able to rescue Denver before Sethe succeeded in killing her (170).

Beloved and Irigaray: Motherhood, Identity and Roles

In the text “And the One” Irigaray poetically portrays the relationship between a daughter – the “I” – and a mother – the “you”. Irigaray, like Kristeva, stresses the notion of oneness and identification between mother and daughter (Kristeva speaks about children in general in this connection), and the latter’s need to separate herself despite her awareness of the mother’s dependence on her. The daughter-figure of Irigaray’s text feels that she is trapped in the relationship to her mother and that the mother desires their continued union:

You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me. My blood no longer circulates to my feet or my hands, or as far as my head. It is immobilized, thickened by the cold. Obstructed by icy chunks which resist its flow. My blood coagulates, remains in and near my heart.

And I can no longer race toward what I love. And the more I love, the more I become captive, held back by a weightiness that immobilizes me. And I grow angry, I struggle, I scream – I want out of this prison. But what prison? Where am I cloistered? I see nothing confining me. (60)

Beloved is reminiscent of the daughter-figure as she is in the beginning of the text, entrapped as she is in her relationship to her mother. Where the daughter-figure wants to “race” away from her mother, Beloved wants to race from death to Sethe:

I cannot lose her again ... she is going to smile at me ... I cannot find my pretty teeth I see the dark face that is going to smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me ... her face is mine she is not smiling she is

chewing and swallowing I have to have my face (Morrison, *Beloved* 212-213)

Beloved manages to return to life and starts demanding total closeness to Sethe, feeding on her apologies, her stories and the sweets (symbolising breast milk). She, as a child in a grown up body, wants Sethe's nourishment, demanding the union with the mother that Irigaray's daughter-figure resents. The speaker of "And the One" interprets her mother's food as the mother's attempt to assimilate her daughter, to make her stay in the fusion the speaker wants to break out of:

You've prepared something to eat. You bring it to me. You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you. ... I'd like you to remain outside, too. Keep yourself/me outside, too. Don't engulf yourself or me in what flows from you into me. I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one. (61)

Irigaray then interprets, or the narrator interprets, the mother's identification with the child as a nursing which suffocates and which functions as assimilation and annihilation. Read like this, it is not merely Beloved who plays the role of vampire (see below for Pamela E. Barnett's reading of *Beloved* as a succubus) drawing Sethe of the will to live, but also Sethe who willingly feeds her own being to her daughter. Before she identifies Beloved as her daughter, Sethe thinks that she would have been annoyed if Denver had shown the same dependent adoration that Beloved does (Morrison, *Beloved* 57), seemingly oblivious to the fact that Denver in fact *is* dependent of her, afraid to leave the yard and her womb-like shelter. However, Sethe takes pleasure in Beloved's devotion and continues to give her attention and her strength to her returned daughter even after she recognises her.

As Beloved drains Sethe of the vitality her mother willingly gives up, Denver observes that it is as if Beloved has become the mother and Sethe the daughter:

Then it seemed to Denver the thing was done: Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child ... The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (250)

Thus it is Sethe who steps into the role of the child; not a child who receives, but a child who gives, a child who nurses the mother. Because it is Sethe who must now separate from the dangerous mother/daughter union so as not to perish and to establish herself as an independent subject, it is she who now enters the position of Irigaray's daughter-figure. The difference is that Sethe does not want a separation, as she is too consumed by her guilt and her need to make Beloved understand her actions. The speaker of "And the One", on the other hand, longs for this separation:

I want no more of this stuffed, sealed up, immobilized body. No, I want air. And if you lead me back again and again to this blind assimilation of you – but who are you? – if you turn your face from me, giving yourself to me only in an already inanimate form ... I'll turn to my father. I'll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you. For someone who doesn't prepare anything for me to eat. ... He leaves the house, I follow in his steps. Farewell, Mother, I shall never become your likeness. (62)

The speaker here turns to her father in what seems like an "Oedipus/Electra" stage, and goes on to establish her identity and sexuality in relation to him. The father, as I dealt with in relation to Kristeva, functions also as a "Third Party" (Kristeva, "Freud and Love 34) that the mother appeals to and against whom she manages to establish the child as a separate subject in relation to herself (ibid). In 124, however, there is no father, though Denver (in the company of the baby ghost) spends her whole life waiting for him and idealising him. Thus,

as the roles are reversed and Sethe becomes the daughter, Beloved the mother, there is no one for Sethe to turn to in order to enable her to break from her clinging “mother” Beloved. This reversal of roles – or rather a confusion and assimilation of roles – recurs throughout Irigaray’s text; when the mother nurses the daughter, there is some ambiguity about who is fed and who functions as food or nourishment. As quoted above: “You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much ... I’d like to see you while you nurse me; not lose my/your eyes when I open my mouth for you ... Keep yourself/me outside, too” (“And the One” 61). Towards the end of the text, the mixture and merging of roles is addressed explicitly: “Of the two of us, who was the one, who the other?” (65).

As I observed in the introduction, Irigaray’s text “When Our Lips” seemingly replaces the mother/daughter relationship with sisterhood or love between women (reflecting, as Hirsch points out, the second wave feminism’s rejection of the mother and embrace of sisterhood among women, Hirsch 136). In the text, Irigaray criticises the love and dialogue between man and woman, which is hierarchical and which establishes the woman as a mirror of the man:

Now normally or habitually, “I love you” is said to an enigma: an “other”. An other body, an other sex. ... What has become of me? “I love” lies in wait for the other. Has he swallowed me? Spat me out? Taken me or left me? Shut me up or thrown me out? How is he now? No longer (part of) me? When he tells me, “I love you,” does he give me back myself? Or does he give himself in this form? His? Mine? The same? Another? But then what have *I* become? (70; emphasis in the original)

In the love between women, however, there is no need for speech, no need to hurt one another, no need for categorisation – there is wholeness and understanding:

When you say I love you – right here, close to me, to you – you also say I love myself. Neither you nor I need wait for anything to be returned. I owe you nothing, you owe me nothing. This “I love you” is neither a gift nor a debt. ... I love you: body shared, undivided. Neither you nor I severed. There is no need for blood spilt between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us, from us. It is familiar, close. You are quite red, and still so white. Both at once. You don’t lose your candor as you become ardent. You are pure because you have stayed close to the blood. (70)

Blood is important in the relationship between the biological sisters Denver and Beloved as well; when Sethe killed Beloved she nursed Denver immediately afterwards, and Denver is aware that she swallowed her sister’s blood along with her mother’s milk (Morrison, *Beloved* 205). Denver perceives this fact as proof and reason for a special bond between Beloved and herself. As explored previously, blood functions as an alternative (feminine) language in the novel, as seen for instance in the organic interpretations of Sethe’s blood and scars which become a “feminine” response to the paternal power that drew the blood. The scars that take the place of the blood on Sethe’s back – and Beloved’s and Sethe’s mother’s scars – function as a means of identification and bonding between Sethe, her mother and her daughter. Beloved’s blood, in turn, swallowed by Denver, seems to create a similar bond, but this time not through generations, but within a generation:

When I came back to 124, there she was. Beloved. ... This time I have to keep my mother away from her. ... She [Baby Suggs] told me... that I shouldn’t be afraid of the ghost. It wouldn’t harm me because I tasted its blood when Ma’am nursed me. ... But it would never hurt me. I just had to watch out for it because it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural, considering. And I do. Love her. I do. ... She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine. (206, 209)

Denver, not Sethe, is the one who takes care of Beloved when she first arrives, and she must attend to Beloved constantly to get her attention. Their relationship soon develops into something reminiscent of a mother/daughter-relationship:

Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her labored breathing and, out of love and a breakneck possessiveness that charged her, hid like a personal blemish Beloved's incontinence. ... So intent was her nursing, she forgot to eat or visit the emerald closet. ... But sometimes – at moments Denver could neither anticipate nor create – Beloved rested cheek on knuckles and looked at Denver with attention. ... At such times it seemed to be Beloved who needed something – wanted something. Deep down in her wide black eyes, back behind the expressionlessness, was a palm held out for a penny which Denver would gladly give her, if only she knew how or knew enough about her. (54, 118)

However, though Denver does the nourishing, feeding Beloved with attention, it is she who is dependent on Beloved, whereas Beloved merely tolerates Denver. There is no wholeness between them as between the sisters/lovers at the beginning of Irigaray's "When Our Lips", no unity of language or needs. Beloved only wants to possess Sethe, she does not need Denver: "She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have." (76). Thus, again the mother role and daughter role are confused. Denver's craving for her sister is reminiscent of Beloved's craving for Sethe, testifying of her dependence on the sister whose blood she drank: "To go back to the original hunger was impossible. Luckily for Denver, looking was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite; it was breaking through her own skin to a place where hunger hadn't been discovered" (118). Again, appetite, hunger and feeding are images used to describe a relationship of dependence, pointing back to Sethe's breast milk and the blood that Denver drank, and reflecting the mother/daughter relationship where the possibilities of both nourishing and choking lay latent.

Eventually Denver must choose between the two life fluids that merged in her body, between the blood from Beloved and the milk from Sethe, between her living mother and her dead sister. Seeing the destructive forces of Beloved and the effects these have on Sethe,

Denver decides to break her isolation and appeal to the community for help. It seems, then, that Denver must separate from Beloved and break her dependence on her, much like a child that must separate from the mother's body or like Sethe's need to separate herself from her past embodied in Beloved. As Rushdy argues, it is Denver, and not Beloved, who ultimately understands Sethe's apologies and explanations; she manages to reconcile her mother's past and understand it as a part of a communal history (Rushdy 52-53). The girl who is only interested in the present (Morrison, *Beloved* 119) begins to understand the past and realise that she must secure her future. The energy she has spent in keeping Beloved happy, craving her attention and look, is turned to the discovery of a self and the need to uphold that self:

“Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (252). The decision to protect herself and her mother is spurred on by her understanding of the past, both her mother's and the community's, and is what ultimately leads to both personal and communal healing (Rushdy 53). When Denver leaves 124, she has chosen her relationship with her mother in place of the destructive relationship with her sister; however, as she reaches out to the women of the community she establishes a new sisterhood. Sethe in turn is included in this sisterhood as the women perform the “exorcism” of Beloved. Thus it might seem that a new arrangement of family is established, a communal family of women in place of the hierarchal mother/daughter-relationship and, due to Paul D's abandonment of Sethe, in place of the man/woman-relationship. There seems, however, to be hope for this latter relationship, as signified by Paul D's return to 124 and his willingness to create “some kind of tomorrow” with her (Morrison, *Beloved* 273). The mother/daughter relationship is also still there, but has undergone a change; Denver is now the one who takes care of Sethe, taking the place of provider and nurturer. She tells Paul D that she thinks she has lost her mother (266); it seems, however, that it is she who has taken the mother-role upon

herself. Thus, the novel ends with the reversal and confusion of mother-and daughter roles that pervade the female relationships in the novel.

One primary focus in “And the One” is how the mother-figure disintegrates when the daughter leaves her, seemingly losing her identity which is tied to her role as nurturer:

You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In what frame must you contain yourself? And how to let your face show through, beyond all the masks? ... You take off your face of a mother's daughter, of a daughter's mother. You lose your mirror reflection. You thaw. You melt. You flow out of your self. But no one is there to gather you up, and nothing stops this overflow. (63)¹⁵

This “melting” seems similar to Sethe's loss of self as Beloved empties her of life and of stories/memories. However, there is one significant difference which again reflects the alteration and merging of the mother/daughter roles; the mother-figure in “And the One” falls apart because her daughter leaves her, whereas Sethe initially falls apart because her daughter returns and *does not* leave. Hence, it is not the daughter who must separate, leaving the mother to “melt”; it is the mother who must separate, and the daughter who disappears, quite literally in *Beloved*. Thus, the need for the child's departure from the maternal seems still to apply due to the reversal of roles that Denver observes. Sethe is the clinging mother, but also the over-dependent child that must be aided in her separation by an Imaginary Father – the community. Furthermore, Paul D also steps in as Imaginary Father or a Third Party to which Sethe may establish herself as a subject. Hence, opposed to the mother-figure from “And the One”, Sethe does have someone to “gather” her up (ibid). Thus, there does not only seem to be hope, as mentioned above, for sisterhood and the man/woman relationship, but also for motherhood itself; the mother is saved, her melting is stopped, and her future as a whole subject seems possible.

¹⁵Like the mother-figure sees her own mother through the departure of her child, Sethe too “sees” her mother through her daughter (albeit through her return), as explored in relation to the significance of Sethe and Beloved's scars.

Readings of Beloved

That Beloved is Sethe's daughter seems to be the most apparent reading of her appearance. However, other interpretations of her also seem plausible, none of which stands directly in conflict with the main interpretation, and some of which might also be important in terms of the significance of motherhood and an alternative language in the novel. One reading is connected to both the tradition of the Good Mother and to the stories of infanticide permeating *Beloved*. Before Sethe learns to believe that Beloved is her dead daughter, she thinks that she has escaped from white men who exploited her sexually, and that this explains both her irrationality and her distrust in Paul D (Morrison, *Beloved* 119). There are also stories of other women, Ella and Stamp Paid's wife, who were abused by white slave owners. Ella, who left her child conceived in rape to die – much like Sethe's mother, who “threw away” (62) the children she had before Sethe – lets it die not to protect it, but because she can not love it, much as Sethe's mother could not love any of her children but her. As the novel portrays the humanity of the women who chose infanticide either to protect themselves or their children, or simply because they could not endure keeping the children who became a manifestation of their suffering, *Beloved* can be seen as a testimony of the exploitation of black women by white men and the children who had to suffer for it.

Another reading of *Beloved*, which might go hand in hand with the one above, is that she might not be just Sethe's past come alive, but the common past of all African-Americans, a reading which is supported by Morrison's statement that she wanted to write “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” (Henderson 101).¹⁶ As such, *Beloved* functions as a ghost of slavery, haunting the characters that carry the past with them. Henderson argues that Morrison through the novel wants to speak of the personal

¹⁶Toni Morrison. “The Pain of Being Black” (*Time*, May 22, 1989). 120.

aspect of slavery, the individual destinies that the public would like to forget (Henderson 101-102). Indeed, *Beloved* seems to awaken suppressed memories and emotions in a lot of the people. Paul D has his “tobacco tin” of suppressed past forced opened as Beloved seemingly puts some kind of spell on him and seduces him:

“I want you to touch me on the inside part.”

“Go on back in that house and get to bed.” ...

“Call me my name.”

“No.”

“Please call it. I’ll go if you call it.”

“Beloved.” He said it, but she did not go. She moved closer with a footfall he didn’t hear and he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, “Red heart. Red heart,” over and over again. (Morrison, *Beloved* 116-117)

The “red heart” in this connection might be Paul D’s heart, i.e. memories, emotions and past, finally making its way to the surface; it might also, however, be Beloved’s “name” which she makes him say. Here there is a connection drawn up between the suppressed content of Paul D’s tobacco tin and Beloved’s name, signifying that she, perhaps, *is* the suppressed. This interpretation is further strengthened by the voices Stamp Paid hears as he goes near the house where Sethe and her daughters live: “So, in spite of his exhausted marrow, he kept on through the voices and tried once more to knock at the door of 124. This time, although he couldn’t cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring” (181).

Reading *Beloved* as the repressed coming alive as a woman evokes Kristeva and Cixous’ notion of women’s closeness to the unconscious and the semiotic. The ghost-woman Beloved is the embodiment of what nobody in the novel wants to remember, and it seems that like the child who must break from the unconscious and enter the symbolic to be able to live in the world, the characters must also abandon and reject their suppressed “unconscious” in the form of Beloved to be able to move on together as a community. However, as Kristeva

and Cixous see the unconscious not merely as a potential threat to subjectivity, but also as a source of creativity (Cixous) and maternal *jouissance* (Kristeva) the question rises whether Beloved does not have a right to live, or if the unconscious as a discourse does not have a right to live. After all, although the memories of their collective past endanger the community, it seems wrong to abandon these memories altogether as one wants to ensure that such horror never happens again. It is also significant that the meeting with the suppressed in the form of Beloved is so crucial in order for the community to heal itself. Without her, Sethe would have continued her isolated existence “beating back the past” (Morrison, *Beloved* 73), Denver’s loneliness would have endured, Paul D’s tobacco tin would have stayed closed and the community in general would not have recognised their common past as something that can unite them. It is the appearance of Beloved that allows for development both on personal and communal levels, and so her disappearance and the way she is forgotten is described almost with remorse at the end of the novel: “Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed” (274). However, as Pamela E. Barnett argues, though Beloved has disappeared, people can occasionally hear “the rustle of a skirt” (275) or see something familiar in photographs of their close ones; it seems, then, like the unconscious and the repressed, Beloved might surface again at any time (Barnett “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*”, 1997; 420-421, 425).

The Succubus and Ancestral Return

So far in the reading of *Beloved* I have benefited from the dominant readings of the novel, which are largely based in psychoanalysis and other Western theories. However, the novel is embedded in the African-American culture and can be said to utilise African-American beliefs, myths and folklore; these influences on Morrison's part can be equally illuminating when it comes to the reading of the novel. Furthermore, interpretations of the novel based on folklore do not necessarily contradict the more established readings. An example of how African-American beliefs have influenced the novel, can for instance be in the assumption that ghosts are a natural part of life, especially due to the history of slavery that permeate the lives of the characters in the novel:

“We could move,” she [Sethe] suggested once to her mother-in-law.
“What’d be the point?” asked Baby Suggs. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? or yours?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 5)

Barnett is one theorist who explores the mythical and folkloristic aspects of *Beloved* and who utilises African-American folklore in her reading of the novel. In the article “Figurations of Rape” she reads the character of Beloved as a succubus figure who sexually assaults Paul D and drains him of semen (as in the traditional portrayals of a succubus) and Sethe of vitality as she feeds on their nightmares and memories of sexual abuse to make herself swell and grow (418). The succubus is incorporated in African-American folklore in the belief in witches who “rode” their victims when they slept (ibid). Beloved’s life draining power can be seen in the battle between Sethe and Beloved that is played out after Sethe recognises Beloved as her daughter. Beloved mercilessly dismisses her mother’s apologies and explanations and “drains” her of willpower and life as Sethe ignores her own basic needs, focusing only on making Beloved understand her act of killing. As a result of this battle, Sethe becomes thin

and lifeless. Beloved, however, feeds constantly on sweets and, according to Barnett, on Sethe's memories, and swells and appears pregnant (a pregnancy which might and might not be real, given Beloved's presumably half ghost, half human form). This ultimately destructive, exhausting relationship is hinted at from the moment Beloved appears, Barnett claims, when Sethe loses a great amount of fluid in what Barnett calls a "supernatural birthing" (421), simultaneously as Beloved drinks cup after cup of water, symbolically drawing life fluid – birth water – from her mother.

Due to the fact that rape and sexual abuse have a central place in the novel, pervading the memories of Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Ella and Stamp Paid, the reading of Beloved as a witch or as a vampire or succubus which feeds on such memories is relevant, and is also connected to the tradition of infanticide which, through Ella, is also connected to incidents of rape in the novel.¹⁷ Beloved, then, "sucks Sethe dry" (421), nurturing herself on her mother's memories; in relation to the sexual associations connected to the succubus (and the male version incubus) and also the vampire, Barnett also points to Beloved's obvious attraction to Sethe, portrayed in a manner reminiscent of sexual desire (ibid):

... Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. ... she felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. Sethe stirred and looked around. First at Beloved's soft new hand on her shoulder, then into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control. (Morrison, *Beloved* 57-58; Barnett 421-422)

The images of hunger and appetite in connection to sexual desire and the mother/child relationship, evokes, of course, Irigaray's text "And the One" which utilises these images to a great extent: "You put yourself in my mouth ..." (61). In this text,

¹⁷Barnett is also concerned with the occurrences of sexual assault on men and of homosexual rape in the novel (Beloved's assaults on Paul D and his experiences in the chain gang) as an illustration of how black men too, although this has not been widely recognised, experienced sexual abuse by white people. Barnett further believes that by portraying a male rape victim (Paul D) and a woman rapist (Beloved), Morrison focuses on race and not gender when it comes to determining perpetrator and victim in rape (419). Even if Beloved is black, she can be read as the representation and embodiment of memories of white people's assaults on black people (425).

however, this nurturing is feared by the daughter-figure, who feels suffocated; in Barnett's reading of *Beloved*, Beloved attacks Sethe and feeds off her almost like a parasite, making her self grow on the "blood" – the vitality – of her mother. Thus it seems that where Irigaray's daughter-figure fears that mother's milk will suffocate her, in Barnett's reading it is the mother who fears – or in Sethe's case should fear – the act of nurturing as she is in the risk of actually being consumed or eaten by the child.

Another reading of *Beloved* as a supernatural being which is derived from folklore can be found in Barbara Christian's article "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*" (1993). Here, Christian criticises the domination of psychoanalytic readings of *Beloved*, and claims that even though the psychoanalytic influences in *Beloved* are numerous and provide a new layer to the richness of the text, it is crucial to remember the historical and cultural background to the history of the novel, as well as the various other inspirations from which Morrison might have benefited. The reading that Christian offers in the article is based on the African and Caribbean tradition of ancestor worship, which she believes is a strong feature of the novel. Emphasising that psychoanalytic, Marxist and formalist readings of the novel are fruitful, she criticises the disregard of possible African influences in the novel (7). The Middle Passage has an important position in the novel, originating in the story of how Sethe's mother was raped by the crew on board the slave ship, how she abandoned the child she conceived there, and later, the other children she had with white men. Furthermore, *Beloved*'s description of the place she has been before she came to Bluestone Road 124 paints an image resembling images of death (even hell) as well as the conditions on board a slave ship:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears (Morrison, *Beloved* 210)

The description links *Beloved* to the African slaves who were brought to America and reminds the reader that she is not just the embodiment of one family's tragic outcome, but of an entire people and its past. This connection between *Beloved* and the African-American people and the importance of the Middle Passage in the novel, makes the Middle Passage a kind of bridge; it places the novel on the stretch between two continents and two worlds. Furthermore, it was during the Middle Passage, metaphorically speaking, that the various peoples of Africa had to come together and find a way to become one people in "The New World" (Christian/McDowell/McKay "A Conversation on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", 1999; 211).

Partly due to Morrison's extensive studies of other cultures and myths (205-206), Christian believes that African culture and folklore play a considerable part in the novel. Emphasising that a reading based on African influence does not necessarily clash with the established Western readings – in fact, Morrison seems to purposely mix the use of African-Caribbean tradition and Western psychology (Christian, "Fixing Methodologies" 10) – Christian goes on to describe ancestral worship or, rather, the belief in ancestors' spirits and the way this is an important feature of the novel. In the Caribbean there was a belief that if ancestral spirits are not fed consistently (through a ritual of "libation"), or if they have not resolved large conflicts, especially concerning the way they died, they might return as newborn children (9-10). This description, of course, fits very well with the reading of

Beloved as the return of the baby Sethe killed; she has an insatiable hunger, demanding to be fed, and even though she is a young woman and not a baby, she is described as having soft skin and childlike features, as the spirits returned in human form that Christian writes about. She also behaves like a two-year old, and is unable to regard herself as separate from her mother (10).

As shown by Morrison's use of both the psychoanalytic notion of the mother/child connection and certain African-Caribbean/African-American folkloristic beliefs, such as ancestor return, there is not necessarily a incompatibility between so-called "Western" and "non-Western" readings of *Beloved*. Western theory and psychology doubtlessly shed light on the novel, but as Christian and Barnett show, it is not only fruitful, but necessary to look at the specific historic and cultural background the novel is embedded in, as it can hardly be any doubt that Morrison has indeed benefited from these as well. Where certain of the theories I have explored often fail to recognize all the various factors that may influence motherhood, Morrison is an example of the opposite. She utilises psychoanalytic theories, but she combines them with the historic and cultural background of the characters and manages to mediate between modern psychology and the impact myths, religion and folklore have on the human psyche. Thus, although my critique of Western theory when it comes to acknowledging the impact of historic and social settings is more specific when it comes to *The Joys of Motherhood*, I believe the critique exists implicitly in *Beloved* as well, as seen for instance in the importance of regendering and children as property in the novel. The Good Mother is a product of such situations where this occur, but that, of course, does not mean that modern and/or Western theory of e.g. psychoanalysis can not be useful in analysing the structuring of this (part cultural, part literary) trope, for instance when it comes to shedding light on the mother/child relationship which might influence the Good Mother acts of self-sacrifice and protection.

The Value of a Mother

Ancestor worship is also important when it comes to the theme of remembrance which is ever-present in the novel. The belief in ancestor spirits (and Christian stresses, as does one of her sources, John Mbiti, that the West-Africans did not *worship* their ancestors) entails that people who die do not disappear as long as someone remembers them (“Fixing Methodologies” 11).¹⁸ This goes hand in hand with the importance of remembrance as a healing process and as a way of confronting the past, making the ancestors – the past – let go of the people in the present so that they can truly live in the present. Connected to this process of remembering is the fact that Africans traditionally did not view time as linear (13), which is of course also a part of the belief in the return of people after dying; the use of the term “passing” instead of dying is still common among African-Americans, claims Christian, as a reminder of how West-Africans did not consider death as final (11). This opens up for an interesting question with regards to the phrase repeated, with a slight alternation, at the end of *Beloved*; “It was not a story to pass on.... It was not a story to pass on.... This is not a story to pass on” (274-275). Does the narrator mean that the story should not be conveyed any further, or that it is a story that should not die?¹⁹ With regards to the novel’s theme of balancing between confronting the past and banishing it – or rather; to confront the past *in order to* banish it – both readings seem to exist simultaneously; one must remember the past, but not let it define the future.

As a result of circular time in the West-African societies, babies had a special position, argues Christian, as they embodied and sustained both the past and the present, and because they became the future (“Fixing Methodologies” 13). Also, it was the children who were to

¹⁸John Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophies*. (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970).

¹⁹ Karla F.C. Holloway, in “Beloved: A Spiritual” (1990) supports this latter interpretation of the phrase; she points to the repetition of the phrase as a typical narrative device in black women literature, and sees the phrase as a directive and a response to those who “would diminish the experience she [Morrison] voices back into presence” (69), i.e. the experiences of black women. Holloway believes the novel challenges the Western valuations of time and events (67-68).

remember their ancestors, and with this, Christian claims, mothers became important as they were the ones giving birth to those who would secure the future by remembering the past. The mothers thus became a kind of “bulwark” (14) against death, i.e. the death that was the result if there was no one to remember one. Thus, women as mothers were highly valued, but of course, as Christian points out, this became a “double-edged sword” to women who could not conceive or who were unable to mother their children (ibid).²⁰ This privileging of mothers coincides, of course, with the argument Patton makes that certain pre-colonial societies in Africa were matrifocal, often giving political and social right to mothers in a higher degree than to other women.

In light of the mother’s value and of the children’s role as those who remember, Christian believes that another horror was added to slavery:

In *Beloved*, Morrison not only explores the psychic horror of those who can no longer call their ancestors’ names, but also the dilemma of the mother who knows her children will be born into and live in the realm of those who *cannot* call their ancestors’ names. Sethe’s killing of her already-crawling baby is not only the killing of that individual baby, but the collective anguish African women must have experienced when they realized their children were cut off forever from their “living dead” who would never be called upon, remembered, or fed. (14)

The superior status of women who are mothers over those who are not, sheds light on Sethe’s actions – the killing of her children is the removal of what defines her, even according to herself, and of what assures her being remembered in the future. It seems then, that Sethe renounces her motherhood and that she refuses to be a bulwark against a death which she now welcomes; she does not want the past or herself to be remembered by the children who must carry that past with them. Sethe also knows that motherhood is what gives her worth in the eyes of the slave owners:

²⁰The status connected with motherhood and the dishonour of not being able to conceive or mother are both central themes in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

The three (now four – because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one – the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she'd gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew ... He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewling old man, but who'd tend her? Because the woman – something was wrong with her. She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success. (Morrison, *Beloved* 149-150)

Thus, Sethe's infanticide may have various implications and meanings; it is an act of maternal protection because she wants to shield her children from the cruelties of slavery and it is a renunciation of motherhood as her only attributed value. This latter interpretation signifies how motherhood functions as currency, as a way to "buy" a more valued position within the system of slavery.²¹ By killing her children, Sethe takes away schoolteacher's desire to keep her so that she will produce more children. By showing him how he has – or in his view, how his nephew has – driven her to madness, her asset of motherhood is no longer valued. Thus, by killing the thing that defines her, it is not only her children that she protects, but also herself. Sethe knows her worth as a slave (as does Paul D), and destroys it. By extension, her act might also be interpreted as an act of resistance to the valuing of mothers over childless women that stems from African culture (and has been a feature in many Western cultures). There is, then, an interesting similarity between the West-African tradition of valuing women who are mothers and the slave owners' interest in the slave woman as a producer of new slaves – both societies use motherhood as a currency for women and measure women's worth accordingly.

²¹ In "A Conversation on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Christian points to the many images in relation to currency in *Beloved* (217); Paul D. knows "his worth" in dollars (Morrison, *Beloved* 226), Denver imagines that she must give *Beloved* a "penny" when she constantly has to keep her preoccupied (118), a boy has a birthmark like a nickel (120), etc. Christian believes these images underline the economic factor of slavery as well as the role of possessiveness within love relationships (Christian/ McDowell/ McKay", 217).

At the core of Sethe's "safety with a handsaw" (Morrison, *Beloved* 164), then, is resistance; resistance against a system that appropriates her children, against a power and a past that can come "into her yard" (262) at any time, and against, it seems, a motherhood that engulfs her, defines her, is inseparable from her:

Simple: 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 headcloth 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. (163)

As examined in the beginning of this chapter, this infanticide and the resistance and reclaiming it signifies is part of what marks Sethe as a Good Mother; "regendered", robbed of control over her children and her life, she protects her children and herself in the only way she can think of, and at the same time she attacks the reproduction system that enables a brutal system to continue. Thus I arrive at what I believe to be the crux of the motherhood of Sethe (and of Nnu Ego from *The Joys of Motherhood*, as will be discussed in the next chapter); her motherhood is her identity, but it is also part of what makes her feel enslaved, as it is her mother-love which leads her to incriminating herself by killing, and by extension erasing her notion of self worth. However, it is also her motherhood which gives her the strength to fight back against the external, white, paternal threat and which makes her want to live:

"I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. ... I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. 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." (162; emphasis in the original)

Thus, motherhood is a source of grief for Sethe, from which she must extricate herself in order to become an independent subject. It seems, however, that this process is reached through her motherhood which gives her the strength to endure the extreme hardships she is the victim of. Hence, although motherhood for Sethe represents the pain of the past embodied in *Beloved*, it also becomes a healing process as it is through motherhood Sethe is forced to be independent and strong, which in turn potentially and finally might enable her to think about “some kind of tomorrow” (273).

Chapter 3: *The Joys of Motherhood*

The Joys of Motherhood is set in the first part of the last century, partly in a tribal community, but mostly in the rapidly modernising city of Lagos, which was then the capital of Nigeria, still largely under British control. The protagonist, Nnu Ego, is a woman unable to combine her traditional beliefs in the roles of women and mothers with the new urban society which urges and forces her to reconsider these beliefs. During the course of the novel, Nnu Ego goes through various life situations, and in all of these her degree of happiness, social worth and personal self-worth is connected and directly influenced by her role as a mother. Leaving behind a comfortable childhood life with her loving and protecting father, a wealthy chief, for a marriage during which she does not conceive and consequently becomes both unhappy and a disgrace to her husband and family, she is finally sent to Lagos to marry an Ibuza man named Nnaife. Here, she rapidly gives birth to nine children, seven of whom live through childhood. Despite finally accomplishing her only ambition of having children who grow up to be successful people, she finds herself at the end of her life abandoned by her family, disillusioned and demented. With age, Nnu Ego's perceptions of motherhood change from a perspective where she tries to kill herself when her first child dies in what appears to be cot death into one where she is relieved when her last child dies at birth. Her feelings change from bitterness and grief over her supposed barrenness to a feeling that motherhood is outright slavery.

The Joys of Motherhood, as explored in the introduction to this thesis, contrasts *Beloved* in many ways. Where *Beloved* has a complex structuring, seems loaded with meaning and opens for numerous readings, *The Joys of Motherhood* is meticulous in describing everyday events in a manner which is prosaic and almost dry, which makes it a difficult book to approach. Like its main protagonist Nnu Ego, however, the novel is only seemingly

prosaic; concerned with describing the hard life of a Nigerian mother, the novel manages to convey the inner life of Nnu Ego, her conflicting feelings about her role as a mother, and the changes to which Nigeria is subject with respect to power and gender structures. Like Sethe, Nnu Ego is a Good Mother. However, where Sethe might be said to take up the position of the Good Mother by actively opposing the oppressive powers through the act of killing her child, Nnu Ego seemingly fulfils a more passive definition of the Good Mother through her lifelong toil and self-erasure for the sake of her many children. Nevertheless, the ending of the novel presents Nnu Ego in the afterlife as actively defying the forces by which she has felt enslaved.

In the following, I will explore how Nnu Ego's process of disillusionment in relation to her motherhood comes to pass, focusing on how she fits into the "Good Mother" concept and how she relates to this. I will also examine how motherhood functions as a site of opposition to the role by which Nnu Ego feels confined. As with Sethe, I believe that identification, and also the notion of "demented *jouissance*", are important parts of the construction of Nnu Ego's motherhood. I will examine how and to what degree these concepts are put into play and how they, and Nnu Ego's motherhood, can be illuminated by psychoanalytic theory while at the same time being structured differently from it. Finally, I will look at the Western victimising of the so called "Third World" women and see how motherhood – and Good Mothering – can also be perceived as a position of strength and a source of resistance.

Regendering, Power Structures and the Good Mother

In the chapter on the Good Mother I explored the gender systems in the African-American slave culture and also examined how Patton described many of the African cultures from which the slaves were taken or bought as having a dual sex policy and as being matrifocal. Patton draws on studies which assert that West-African societies did not differentiate between genders, and did not regard the labour of men and women as having different value (a claim, which, as I observed in the chapter in question, is disputed). In the Nigeria portrayed by Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood*, one can see both the remnants of these traditions and the influences of foreign power, religion and culture. As with the slaves taken to America, new gender systems and new power structures seem to have been established in the meeting between old traditions and new impulses. This meeting is at the core of the novel and also at the heart of Nnu Ego's experience of her own status as a mother and her act of mothering itself. In Iboza, which norms Nnaife and Nnu Ego to a great extent follow, a man's purpose for marrying (the marriages are mostly arranged) is to have many children, and a woman's purpose is to become a mother, thus increasing their status and value in society. Children provide insurance of being provided for in the future and are at the heart of the relationship between women and men and are firmly tied to Nnu Ego's definition and valuation of herself. Thus, the matrifocality that Patton argues was a strong feature of West-African culture in pre-colonial times seems still to be present in Nigeria of the early 1900s. However, though being a mother seemingly gives a woman more power within the family and in the smaller communities, a woman has no real power; again the difference between a matriarchal society and a matrifocal one is relevant and striking. Furthermore, the mother/child bond does not seem to be revered in the same degree it seems it might have been in pre-colonial times; the most important relationship (as it is portrayed in the novel) is that between a man and his community. The family is nevertheless the most important factor in this relationship, as the

number of wives and children reflect and influence a man's status. This, coupled with the fact that a woman is mainly defined as a mother or as a potential mother, and that she has more power if she has children, marks the Nigerian society as a matrifocal one.

With regards to the gender system, a development has clearly taken place in the novel as compared to the pre-colonial, non-hierarchical cultures Patton describes. There is a clear hierarchy between men and women, and also within the family there are various power hierarchies in play; men are more powerful than women, boys are more powerful than girls, the head-wife is more powerful than her co-wives, and wives with sons have more power than the ones with no children or just girls.²² Among the poor in Lagos, both women and men work to provide for the family. Among the British, however, the women stay at home. Taking this as a signal for how things should be in a modern society, Nnu Ego tries to adapt to this after the death of her firstborn son, but she also reflects on women's changing role in the urban society:

She might not have any money to supplement her husband's income, but were they not in a white man's world where it was the duty of the father to provide for his family? In Iboya, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role. Nnu Ego told herself that the life she had indulged in with the baby Ngozi had been very risky: she had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Iboya in a town like Lagos that she lost her child. This time she was going to play it according to the new rules. (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 81)

Nnu Ego is quickly forced, however, to continue playing by the "old rules" as Nnaife loses his job and can no longer provide for them. She ends up being the main provider for the family through her small business of selling fire wood and trinkets (although Nnaife earns a great deal of money when he is more or less kidnapped to fight for the British in World War

²²Though the parents naturally have power over their children when they grow up, the oldest male child has potential power over his mother as he will grow up to be the head of the family after his father's death. This marks the relationship between Nnu Ego and her eldest son Oshia: "Please stay and be my joy, be my father, and my brother, and my husband – no, I have a husband ..." (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 104).

Two). Thus, although Nnu Ego continuously tries to change, the norms embedded in her from Ibuza, combined with the hardships of living in Lagos, prevent her from changing her situation – however, they force her to consider her role as a mother and woman and change her perceptions of these.

In the “white man’s world” (ibid) the father is the provider of the family; however, the patriarchal structure or men’s power seem to be stronger in the traditional Nigerian families, even if the woman does contribute economically to the family. Nnaife’s thoughts about his British employers’ relationship to each other reflect his own views of the hierarchy between the sexes:

Women were all the same, Nnaife thought ... If the master was intelligent, as it was said all white men were, then why did he not show a little of it, and tell his wife to keep quiet? What kind of an intelligent man could not keep his wife quiet, instead of laughing stupidly over a newspaper? (42)

Thus, it seems that the lack of hierarchal gender systems that Patton describes is not present among the traditional Nigerians. There are also other factors tied to gender hierarchies that diverge from the pre-colonial societies portrayed by Patton; there is dishonour in premarital sex (as seen when Nnu Ego’s father Agbadi receives palm wine as a compliment for keeping Nnu Ego a virgin before her first marriage) and there are no same-sex marriages. Even if the men are the ones holding the power, there is a general recognition that all individuals are important to the structure of society; furthermore, it is pointed out early in the novel that the people of Nigeria are all connected through a common responsibility for the life of the individual:

... you are simply not allowed to commit suicide in peace, because everyone is responsible for the other person. Foreigners may call us a nation of busybodies, but to us, an individual’s life belongs to the community and not just to him or her. So a person has no right to take it while another member of the community looks on. He must interfere, he must stop it happening. (60)

This is the only point in the novel at which the narrator seems to actively involve or include her/himself in the story, and as such, the importance of the community seems to be even further underlined. The passage might also serve as an illumination of why it is so important for the characters to fill their assigned role in society; there is evidently a strong feeling of need not only to get ahead with your own family, but also to partake in society as a whole. This, combined with the responsibility people allegedly feel for the individual, might explain the crowd's reaction to Nnu Ego's suicide attempt at the bridge and why it is customary to let outsiders judge in family conflicts.²³

Thus, as the importance of fulfilling the role one is assigned signifies, gendering and gender hierarchies are very much present in both Ibuza and Lagos, the two communities described in the novel. With the British colonisation, however, there are changes being made to these gender systems, which I believe parallel the way slavery altered the gendering of the African-American slaves, hence supporting my argument that the Good Mother is a feature of a condition of colonisation, not of a specific place or time. This regendering can be traced in Nnu Ego's reflections on the women's place within the "white man's world" quoted above, but is perhaps most visible in the description and development of Nnaife. A strong foil to Nnu Ego's father Agbadi, her first husband Amatokwu and his own brother, Nnaife is initially a disappointment to Nnu Ego:

Nnu Ego ... was just falling asleep with a full stomach when in walked a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to this side and then to that. ... His hair, unlike that of men at home in Ibuza, was not closely shaved; he left a lot of it on his head, like that of a woman mourning for her husband ... Why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman! (42)

²³One reaction at the bridge being: "I don't know what our people are becoming; as soon as they step near the coast they think they own themselves and forget the tradition of our fathers" (62). The quote conveys the valuing of the community in the old tribal society and how this changes with the urban environment in which an individualistic lifestyle is valued.

Nnu Ego starts comparing Nnaife to a woman the moment she meets him, and this is to become a point of debate and argument between them. Nnu Ego, unable as always to put aside her Ibizan values, holds up her father and first husband as epitomes of masculinity and often despises Nnaife for behaving, in her eyes, unmanly. When accusing Nnaife of unmanliness, Nnu Ego reveals how she has one set of standards for herself and one set for Nnaife when it comes to adapting to the urban life:

After a few mouthfuls Nnaife looked up. "You stare at me as if you don't want me to eat the food you cooked. You know a wife is not allowed to do that."
"That applies in Ibuza, not here," Nnu Ego said.
"Well, whether we're in Ibuza or not, I am still your husband and still a man. You should not sit there staring at me."
"A man, huh? Some man." ... "If you had dared come to my father's compound to ask for me, my brothers would have thrown you out. ...
If things had worked out the way they should have done, I wouldn't have left the house of Amatokwu to come and live with a man who washes women's underwear. A man indeed!" (48-49)

It is seemingly a common feeling among the women of Lagos that the men have lost their manhood, according to the old values, and this fact is blamed on how the men's greed for money makes them blind to their own loss of masculinity and their slave-like status:

"You want a husband who has time to ask you if you wish to eat rice, or drink corn pap with honey? Forget it. Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is money, shining white man's money." ...
"They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought." ... "Are we not all slaves to the white men, in a way?" asked Nnu Ego in a strained voice. "If they permit us to eat, then we will eat. If they say we will not, then where will we get the food?" (51, 117)

Nnaife's unstable position as a patriarch weakens even further as the novel progresses. He feebly tries to assert his position by withholding money for food, and by taking more wives, only to experience that one of them, Adaku, leaves him to live independently. Finally, in an

attempt to show his power by trying to kill the father of his daughter Kehinde's fiancé (a Yoruba man who is not considered a fit candidate as Nnu Ego and her family are Igbo), Nnaife shames himself in front of his neighbours by appearing naked and drunk, losing all his pride. In the court case that follows, he is ridiculed for his old ways and Nnu Ego is laughed at for defending her husband. Her testimony in the court room reveals the conflict and self-contradictory relationship between tradition, culture and the importance of appearances:

“Well your second son is at St Gregory's. Who pays his fees?”

“I do, I pay his fees with the profits I make from selling firewood and other things.”

There was a suppressed ripple of laughter in the court.

“But your husband told us he pays the school fees, how is that?”

“Yes, he pays the school fees.”

“Do you mean the two of you pay Adim's school fees?”

“No, I pay.”

The laughter that followed this could no longer be suppressed. ...

“Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays.”
(216-217)

The court case illustrates not only how Nnaife has become effeminized in the eyes of the community, but also the traditional Nigerian men's failure to adapt to the new lifestyle that has developed under the British. The regendering that the men are subject to, of course also affects the women. With the new life in Lagos, Nnu Ego discovers that she can no longer cling to her old images of what a woman should be and do. Despite her discovery and her efforts, however, she continues to let the norms of her childhood dominate her perspective and it is only painstakingly, during a life of poverty and hard work, that she changes her view on women's roles. By then it is too late and she dies deserted and helpless. However, in the afterlife, when she has been given the powers believed to be held by the dead, she refuses to grant the wishes women who pray to her to have children. This posthumous resistance will be explored below.

At the crux of women's position in the novel and of the changes that Nnu Ego goes through, is motherhood. What marks this motherhood, in my opinion, is the tradition of the Good Mother. On the surface, there does not seem to be many similarities between the slave mother from the slave narratives and Nnu Ego. The slave women worked for the benefit of a more or less brutal master; Nnu Ego works to provide for her own family. Where the slave women spent their days in close proximity to their "colonisers" the slave owners, Nnu Ego hardly ever meets any British people. Furthermore, for Nnu Ego there is no immediate risk of losing her children, as with the slave women whose children could be sold at any time; Nnu Ego's children do not ultimately belong to an external power. Despite these great differences, then, I claim that Nnu Ego can be defined to as a Good Mother. One crucial point here is that her colonisers are not only the British, but also the community and her husband, who is ultimately the one who decides the family's destiny. The British colonisers make Nnaife feel emasculated which in turn allows him to assert his inherent power as a man and Nnu Ego is moved further down the proverbial "pecking order". Also, although the children are Nnu Ego's responsibility, it is the father who owns them, as her speech in the court case quoted above illustrates. Furthermore, as with the slave women, motherhood is a currency in the Nigerian culture portrayed in the novel. Without children, Nnu Ego feels worthless as a woman, and it is her numerous children who grant her the high status towards the end of her life. Her motherhood, then, ensures her safety, which reflects the way motherhood was an asset for the slave women.²⁴ Also, Nnu Ego's way of raising the children mirrors the way slave mothers would prepare the children for both slavery and freedom (Shaw 313), in that she teaches the children to honour the old traditions (which she believes are confining) while trying to prepare them for the modern way of life.

²⁴Of course, I do not mean to imply that the people in Nnu Ego's community that are in a position to endow status or power can be compared to slave owners in relation to the women of their own family/community (though some, like Nnu Ego's father Agbadi, were indeed slave owners before the British banned slavery). My intent here, however, is to point out motherhood's function as currency, which applies for both the slave women in the U.S. and the women in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

The last and perhaps most important point when it comes to Nnu Ego's status as a Good Mother, is that she, as the novel progresses, comes to regard herself as a slave of motherhood – with this, the link to the Good Mother of slavery is anchored. Nnu Ego is pulled by the urge to both retain her traditional roots and to adapt to the new, modern impulses. Her struggle to provide for her children is what she believes is necessary to truly be a woman, which to her is the same as being a mother (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 61, 62). What she ultimately does is to step into the Good Mother role of self-sacrifice as, in order to provide for her children, she denies herself an alternative existence as something more than a mother. Finally, she enters another dimension of the Good Mother figure as she, in the afterlife, rebels against the traditions which she feels oppressed by, echoing the rebellions of the slave mothers in the U.S. who through abortions and infanticide reduced the reproduction which upheld the slavery system (Shaw 313).

The Revenging *Chi*: Nnu Ego's Identity and "Demented *Jouissance*"

Considering the character of Sethe in light of Kristeva and Irigaray's theories of identification, it appears that they to a great extent shed light over her development and experiences of motherhood. She is embedded in her "too thick" love for her children and her identification with Beloved, and is trapped in a merging of mother/daughter roles (in part due to the lack of an Imaginary Father or Third Party). In the case of Nnu Ego, however, an identification process such as this is difficult to establish, and there are no portrayals of any exchange of roles or an overly sense of identification with the children. It seems that where Sethe identifies with and is inextricably tied to her children, Nnu Ego identifies with the role of motherhood itself, rather than her children. While she does want to provide and care for her children, she also sees her becoming and being a mother as the only way of truly establishing herself as a subject, of being what a woman should be. Thus, because it is to the role of

motherhood itself that Nnu Ego ties her selfhood, the process of identification differ from that of Sethe. I will examine Irigaray's texts in relation to Nnu Ego later; in the following I will, as with Sethe, explore Nnu Ego's experience of identification and also of "demented *jouissance*", all the while keeping Kristeva's texts and Kristevan theory in mind.

An important factor in the development of Nnu Ego with regards to happiness and motherhood is her *chi*, her personal spirit. This *chi* is a slave woman who was killed by Nnu Ego's family because she refused to let herself be buried with her dead owner, the senior wife of Nnu Ego's father. Before she died, however, she swore to come back as a member of Agbadi's family, and when Nnu Ego is born she is identified by the village medicine man—the *dibia* – as the slave woman. The *dibia* also makes some predictions about Nnu Ego's life: "She will always have trouble with that head. If she has a fortunate life, the head will not play up. But if she is unhappy, it will trouble her both physically and emotionally" (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 27). These premonitions seem fulfilled; Nnu Ego experiences "trouble" with her head in the sense that she, because of her hard life, begins to question her place as a woman in the social hierarchy, and not least the value of motherhood, which she at first believes to be a woman's greatest asset.

The fact that Nnu Ego's *chi* was a slave when she lived becomes an important aspect throughout the text, as Nnu Ego not only holds her *chi* responsible for her difficulties, but actually becomes more like her *chi* in the sense that her status and worth – at least to herself – decrease with time until they approach a state she herself perceives as that of a slave. This devaluation is analogous to her relation to motherhood and starts with her first marriage, when she is sent back to her father because of her alleged barrenness, and the bride price is returned. Significantly this bride price is twenty cowries²⁵, which is the amount Nnu Ego is worth, according to her name: "This child is priceless, more than twenty bags of cowries. I think that

²⁵Cowries are a type of shells used as currency.

should really be her name, because she is a beauty and she is mine. Yes. ‘Nnu Ego’: twenty bags of cowries” (26). Thus, the return of the cowries signifies how Nnu Ego’s name proves false; she is no longer worth twenty cowries and her value as a woman is reduced due to her inability to conceive. As the value of a woman is directly connected to her ability to foster children, Nnu Ego experiences an increasing feeling of inferiority and begins to plead with her *chi* to grant her a child, not doubting that it is her revenge that causes her barrenness²⁶: “O, my *chi*, why do you have to bring me so low? Why must I be so punished? I am sorry for what my father did and I am sure he is sorry too. But try to forgive us” (32). During her first marriage, she begins nursing the child of her husband’s second wife and even contemplates running away with the boy, being willing to become a criminal in order to obtain her greatest wish of becoming a mother. Furthermore, even if she does eventually have a child by Nnaife she unconsciously lowers her status by accepting used clothes from Mrs Meers for her newborn son, a practice which in her culture is acceptable only for slaves (54). Another example of lowering of self-worth is when Nnu Ego runs into the beggar on the way to the bridge after finding her dead son. She compares herself to him, feeling helpless as he believes she is trying to steal from him:

He was blind and walked with his stick held menacingly straight in front of him; his other hand clutched shakily at his begging calabash. Nnu Ego in her haste almost knocked the poor man down, running straight into him *as if she too was without the use of her eyes*. . . . Nnu Ego just managed to escape the fury of the beggar’s stick as she picked up the calabash for him. She did this *wordlessly* though she was breathing hard. (8-9; emphasis added)

Here, Nnu Ego’s momentary physical crippling makes her the parallel of the Hausa beggar, who is not only from a lower social class than she is, but who is also of another ethnic group. A resemblance, then, exists also here between the Hausa beggar and the slave *chi*, in that they

²⁶Though at the bottom of the social hierarchy when alive, in the afterlife the slave woman, like all *chis*, is the object of reverence and worship.

are both strangers forced to beg for their lives in different manners, and through this, the identification between Nnu Ego and her *chi* is emphasised even further.

Nnu Ego's lowering of status continues in this fashion throughout the novel, emphasising the link established by Emecheta between slavery and womanhood/motherhood (Robolin, "Gendered Hauntings", 2004; 78-79). As the story progresses, Nnu Ego becomes conscious of her "degradation" and starts describing her situation as slavery, realising that she will never enjoy the status and respect of her neighbours the way her foil Mama Abby does. Mama Abby, it is mentioned, is a single mother who is not "naturally" respected in the neighbourhood as her daughter "had had to get married very early"; an out-of-wedlock pregnancy seems hinted at (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 107). Mama Abby has nonetheless achieved success due to her children's father, a European who is now gone, but who left her with money. Mama Abby has invested her money in her son, Abby, who is able to get a good education and who at the end of the novel is a wealthy man that makes sure his mother lives in comfort and luxury, at least compared to her friends. Her name (all mothers in the novel are occasionally called by their eldest son's name with the prefix "Mama") and the fact that her real name is never given, signify both the root of her success and the relationship between a woman's status and her children. Nnu Ego, or "Mama Oshia", hopes her sons will become as successful as Abby, but there are several factors that make this almost impossible. The income of the family is not high, and where Mama Abby has one child to provide for (her daughter being married), Nnu Ego eventually has seven. Furthermore, the times change even through the short period that passes between Abby's coming of age and Oshia and Adim's, Nnu Ego's eldest sons. Nnu Ego's children are deeply embedded in the urban culture, and want to get ahead for their own sake, not necessarily in order to help their family financially, though they depend a great deal on financial support from their parents in order to pursue their education. The independence of Oshia and Adim is reflected in their country which is in

a process of liberating itself from its British colonisers. Significantly, before going abroad, Adim lives with Abby, working as his servant, something which might signal that although the top part of the hierarchy, the British, is gone, the gap between rich and poor is still there.

Thus, although she is known as the “mother of very clever children” (197), Nnu Ego will never be surrounded by children to take care of her, having alienated them by clinging to her old ethics and passing on to them her own conflict between old and new values. She realises that according to the very code she herself is trying to uphold, she is not a person in herself, but only in how she is in relation to her family, namely her husband and sons. Inextricably tied to her children, she begins to regard her motherhood as a prison:

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. ... It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children. (137)

Nnu Ego’s feeling of imprisonment in motherhood reaches a climax when she realises that she will never be free, that she is her children’s property even after death:

“God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” she prayed desperately. “After all, I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them, I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them: it will be hailed as a good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is a famine, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free?”
But even in her confusion she knew the answer: “Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood.” (186-187)

The identification process that occurs between Nnu Ego and her *chi* is fully completed after her death, when Nnu Ego, like the slave woman, becomes a vengeful spirit –at least she is regarded as such – refusing to grant any children to the young women worshipping her.

This somewhat uncanny symbiosis of motherhood between protagonist and spirit stands out as a rather grim contrast to the Kristevan theory of identification between mother and child through pregnancy and birth. The image of the “mad”, happy mother is also present in *The Joys of Motherhood*:

“If you think I shall go mad, brother-in-law, I’d like to go back with you. ...” Nnaife’s brother ... explained to her in a kind voice: “New wife, I don’t mean that kind of madness. I mean the kind that goes like this –” he crossed his arms, couched his shoulders as one would when holding a small baby and rocked his arms – “cootu, cootu! Ha ha ha! Cootu, cootu, cootu!” Then Nnu Ego laughed too. ... women talk and behave like mad people with their infants who are too young to make sense of any such noises. (46)

However, Nnu Ego does not seem to experience the Kristevan notion of a symbiosis between mother and child – this “whirl of words” (Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Bellini”, 239) – through the birth of their children. Rather, it seems that it is through the *death* of children that Nnu Ego experiences such “complete absence of meaning and seeing ... feeling, displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes ...” (239-240). When finding her dead son, Nnu Ego loses contact with her body, while at the same time being aware of the sensuousness of things around her:

Nnu Ego backed out of the room, her eyes unfocused and glazed, looking into vacancy. Her feet were light and she walked as if in a daze, not conscious of using those feet. ... Her whole body felt the hazy mist in the air, and part of her felt herself brushing against the white master’s washing on the line. This made her whirl round with a jerk, like a puppet reaching the end of its string. ... her senses were momentarily stunned by the colour of the road which seemed to be that of blood and water.²⁷ ... she felt and at the same time did not feel the pain. This was also true of the pain in her young and unsupported breasts ... unlike the milk, this pain could not come out ... there was an unearthly kind of wildness in her eyes that betrayed a troubled spirit. (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 7-8)

²⁷The colour of the road as it is perceived by Nnu Ego signifies the death of both her son and the death that she imagines for herself, blood symbolising the shock and brutality of Nnu Ego’s discovery of her son, water symbolising her imminent death by drowning. The road, then, which takes Nnu Ego to the bridge, literally becomes a path between deaths, though of course Nnu Ego’s is prevented.

In “Stabat Mater”, sensuality and alienation from the body are “symptoms” of what Kristeva calls “demented *jouissance*” (“Stabat Mater” 255) the pleasure-filled pain of motherhood and pregnancy:

My body is no longer mine, it doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold ... And yet, when its own joy, my child’s, returns, its smile washes only my eyes. But the pain, its pain – it comes from inside, never remains apart, other, it inflames me at once, without a second’s respite. (240-241)

Nnu Ego, however, in the face of death and struggle, never seemingly gets to experience the *jouissance* of motherhood, at least not in the way it is described in “Stabat Mater”, although this is difficult to judge, due to the novel’s prosaic narration. It seems, that although Nnu Ego loves her children (“All she wanted was a child to cuddle and to love”, Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 34), she abandons the feeling of joy and *jouissance* more with each child, as she begins to slight the birth of girls and ends up regretting bringing new children into the world. She does, however, towards the very end of the novel, take pride in having many children, due to the status that comes with motherhood and the feeling of accomplishing womanhood that it gives her, and as such, a kind of *jouissance* seems to be located even in Nnu Ego’s increasingly wearisome life. Huma Ibrahim, in “Ontological Victimhood” (1997), reads Nnu Ego’s wish for children despite her unhappiness as a result of “demented *jouissance*”, and sees this urge as a kind of madness that eventually stretches itself to Nnu Ego’s afterlife (156-157).

The death of children is part of the definition of the Good Mother of slavery, as the mother is willing to sacrifice her children’s life rather than seeing them continue life as slaves. Sethe, then, as examined previously, can be said to actively become a Good Mother due to the killing of her child. The death of Beloved, though making Sethe a pariah, can be seen as an empowering act for her (and one which, although she begs for Beloved’s forgiveness, she defends vehemently) as it is an act of defence against an oppressive power which seeks to

damage her. This is not the case with Nnu Ego, who did not kill any of the two children she loses; she is devastated when her firstborn dies. It is, however, not only the loss of her son that she mourns, but also her own failure to be a woman, i.e. a mother (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 61), which she also believed her previous barrenness to be. Again, motherhood's function as a currency and as a ticket to social acceptance is underlined. Several years later, when her ninth child dies at birth, Nnu Ego is not as grieved:

Nnu Ego stared at the picture she made with her dead daughter in horror. She felt like crying, but at the same time did not want to. She felt the loss of this little piece of humanity ... *Oh, poor baby*, she thought. *I am sorry you are not staying; I am also glad that God has seen fit to take you back. My own reward, the joy of knowing that at this age I can still have children for my husband. The joy of making the world know that while some of our friends and their wives are at this moment making sacrifices so that they may have children, I can have one without any effort at all.* (194; emphasis in the original)

Though her relief quickly turns to guilt, Nnu Ego is aware that her initial reaction is due to the knowledge that the family's poverty would make it difficult for her to care for another child. Knowing the difficulty of giving the child what she needs in the circumstances, she is relieved at her daughter's death, and she is also relieved due to the toll motherhood has taken upon her. She has already come to consider her love and obligations towards the children as slavery (137), and as such, her relief that her child dies is a sign that she does not wish to be a slave any longer and that she does not want to bring a child into such a life. Nnu Ego's changed perception on the death of a child from desperate grief to quiet, though guilt ridden, relief anchors her even more thoroughly in the Good Mother-tradition.

In "Stabat Mater", it seems that becoming a mother and experiencing the "demented *jouissance*" of motherhood and child birth is a way to enter into contact and identification with your own mother. For Nnu Ego the "dementia" of motherhood, which at an early point in the novel only entails death, grief and disappointment, rather than a symbiosis between mother, the mother's mother and child, marks a cutting off of the possibility to connect with

the children and her own mother. Nnu Ego never knew her mother, the independent Ona who felt torn between her father and lover; it was she however, who made Agbadi promise to let their daughter be a woman, i.e. to let her be married, thus sentencing Nnu Ego to the prison she comes to consider motherhood to be. Nnu Ego seems to be more of a parallel to her father's senior wife, Agunwa (who owned her *chi*) than to her biological mother – both Nnu Ego and Agunwa are senior wives, both are first and foremost seen as the mother of their husbands' eldest sons, and both suffer as their husbands take new wives (or in Agbadi's case a lover). The fact that of the two women who died before her birth, Nnu Ego resembles her stepmother rather than her mother, suggests both that the Kristevan theory of an identification process between mother and child in this case “fails” to be realised and how culture and tradition dictate a woman's position. A senior wife has a certain role that she must fill and like Agunwa before her, Nnu Ego must play the part. She can not – and will not – be like her mother, who stayed with her own father as long as he lived, refusing to marry even after she had a child (though of course her refusal of marriage was according to her father's will). To Nnu Ego, on the other hand at least at the beginning of the novel, being a woman means being a wife as well as a mother.

Thus, as opposed to Sethe, who connected and identified with her mother through their shared experience of infanticide, the death of Nnu Ego's child cuts her off from her mother, whose experiences she does not share, as it leads her to a strengthened identification with her *chi*. Here, as seen also in Nnu Ego's similarities with Agunwa, the bonds between women are not based on family relations, but on a sense of fellow destiny and on the manner in which one fills the role one is allotted; this can also be seen in how Nnu Ego longs for female friends towards the end of the novel, regretting that she did not cultivate connections outside of her family. This longing echoes the notion of sisterhood among the second class feminists, and also Irigaray's text “When Our Lips”, where the love between women is established as an

alternative to the inhibiting love between men and women: “I love you who are neither mother (pardon me mother, for I prefer a woman) nor sister, neither daughter nor son. I love you – and there, where I love you, I don’t care about the lineage of our fathers and their desire for imitation men. And their genealogical institutions” (72). However, this love between women is seemingly unachievable to Nnu Ego in all spheres; within her family as her mother dies when she is young, within the extended family as Agunwa dies before Nnu Ego is born, and outside the family, as she feels compelled to cultivate family relations and not friendships. Nnu Ego then, does not achieve identification with her mother; moreover, she does not seem to reach a state of identification/symbiosis with any of her children. One reason for this might be the feeling that though she is the one who has to care for the children, they ultimately belong to their father:

“In Ibuza sons help their father more than they ever help their mother. A mother’s joy is only in the name. She worries over them, looks after them when they are small; but in the actual help on the farm, the upholding of the family name, all belong to the father...” (Emecheta *The Joys of Motherhood* 122)

If the children grow up to disgrace the family, however, the blame is put on the mother:

That man [Nnaife] would never stop blaming her for what had happened to him; his people, and many of the Ibuza people in general, blamed her for bringing up her children badly. ... At home in Ibuza, Nnaife’s people branded her a bad woman, and she had to go and live with her own people in Ogboli. She had expected this, knowing full well that only good children belonged to the father... (219, 223)

Where Sethe resembles the “original” Good Mothers of the slave narratives in that her children belong to an explicit, external enemy, the ownership of Nnu Ego’s children is dictated by tradition; it is the father who can ultimately claim some kind of ownership over the children. The displacement of ownership links both Sethe and Nnu Ego to the Good Mother tradition, but where Sethe’s sense of connection and love for her children is made

stronger – even “too thick” (Morrison, *Beloved* 164) by her having to protect them against a brutal force, Nnu Ego’s position is different. Because her relationship to the children is based on tradition and culture, the issue of ownership over her children does not stimulate feelings of protection and identification in the same degree as with Sethe. In fact, it is Nnu Ego who belongs to her children, as she knows that she even after her death will be held responsible for the welfare of the family. Sethe is a slave in the true sense of the word; and after gaining her freedom, she is still enslaved by her love of her children, yet she feels she has love – and milk – enough for everyone. Nnu Ego, in a sense, has too many people to love, she feels enslaved not only by love, but by the practical tasks in feeding and nurturing her children; her love does not grow only from herself, but from a need – and it is a fundamental need, as she would be worthless did she not comply – to follow the traditions and norms for women. This is why, as she herself points out (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 187), she is so upset when Ngozi dies – and because she feels she has no more to give, she is relieved when the baby girl dies at birth. This feeling of inadequate love and the fact that the children ultimately belong to their father, contribute in making Nnu Ego regard motherhood as slavery, a slavery of futile love and toil, where she feels she cannot connect with her own self or with others: “... she had shied away from friendship, telling herself she did not need any friends, she had enough in her family” (219).

Thus, instead of her biological mother or her children, Nnu Ego reaches identification and contact with a slave woman; in this way, I believe *The Joys of Motherhood* shows not only the different cultural implications of motherhood, but also the limitations of Western theories when confronted with other cultures. Whereas motherhood in “Stabat Mater” is portrayed as a symbiosis of identification and *jouissance* which again is connected to life, to Nnu Ego, as an underprivileged, “Third World”, black woman, motherhood culminates in madness and death as portrayed through the disconcerting identification with the slave

woman.²⁸ This is not to say that motherhood amounts to this for all such women (which I would assume is not Emecheta's claim either); it is rather the way the paradigms of motherhood/femininity differ culturally that is underlined through the portrayal of Nnu Ego, who in her particular situation is pushed towards the perception that motherhood is slavery to women.

“I Don't Know How to be Anything Else”: The Madness of Nnu Ego

As seen in the way the identification process and notion of *jouissance* are significantly altered from Kristevan theory when it comes to Nnu Ego's relationship to her children and her motherhood, Nnu Ego ties her subjectivity and selfhood first and foremost to her status and position as a mother, which is what defines her as a true woman. This in turn puts her in a certain position in relation to the mother-figure of Irigaray's text “And the One”. Nnu Ego is nothing but a mother, in her own view, and in this regard it might be said that, like Sethe, she “feeds herself” to her children (“... what do I have to feed them on? On my life.” Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 186) in that she gives up a possible identity as something other than a mother, a sacrifice which she comes to regret. Irigaray's daughter-figure reflects on the mother's nurturing: “You feed me/yourself. But you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering” (“And the One” 61). Like Irigaray's mother-figure, Nnu Ego is obsessed with feeding the children. This obsession, however, comes not from an overly strong sense of identification with the child itself (at least it is not portrayed as such in the novel), but from a real social and practical need to work hard to keep the family on its feet. Nnu Ego's children experience their mother as someone who nurtures

²⁸As an extension of this, the identification and symbiosis between Nnu Ego and the slave-*chi* might also illustrate the similarities between the situation of the slaves in the old tribal system and the situation of the Nigerian labourers who are trying to adapt to a modernising, urban society under British rule.

and protects, not someone who conveys aspects of her own person to them. The daughter-figure of Irigaray's text longs to see her mother as separate:

We would play catch, you and I. ... I throw an image of you to you, you throw it back, catch it again. But then you seem to catch yourself, and once more you throw back to me: "Do you want some honey? It's time to eat. You must eat to become big."

You've gone again. Once more you're assimilated into nourishment. ... Again you want to fill my mouth, my belly, to make yourself into a plenitude for mouth and belly. ... Will there never be love between us other than this filling up of holes? To close up and seal off everything that could happen between us, indefinitely, is that your only desire? To reduce us to consuming and being consumed, is that your only need? (61-62)

Nnu Ego contemplates her own position as solely a source of nourishment as her children grow older and start to separate themselves from the family, making different choices than the ones she imagines for them: "All the poor boy had ever seen of her was a nagging and worrying woman" (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 185).

Towards the end of "And the One" the daughter-figure reflects that although the mother has "poured" herself into her (65), she was already lacking subjectivity before the act of nourishment begins:

And the home of your disappearance was not in me. When you poured yourself into me, you'd already left. Already become captive elsewhere. Already entered into someone else's gaze. You were already moving into a world to which I had no access. I received from you only your obliviousness of self, while my presence allowed you to forget this oblivion. So that with my tangible appearance I redoubled the lack of your presence. (ibid)

This passage seems to reflect the subject of "When Our Lips Speak Together". Here, as explored earlier, Irigaray criticises the damaging power of the patriarchal society which defines women and which separates everything into dichotomies. To challenge this, she calls for love between women and for a discovery of a new language which will not define and reproduce discrimination:

If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. ... Listen: men and women around us all sound the same. ... If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each other. ... We have fled into proper names, we have been violated by them. ... Get out of their language. Go back through all the names they gave you. (“When Our Lips” 69)

What the daughter-figure of “And the One” recognises, then, is that her mother has been defined as a mother, as a lack, as it were, of subjectivity – she has “fled into proper names” – even before the act of mothering began. Likewise, it might be said that the foundation of Nnu Ego’s lack of subjectivity, or the foundation of a subjectivity inextricably tied to motherhood, has been laid before she ever conceived a child. Her main purpose in life is pre-defined by the society and culture in which she lives, and her desire to become a “real” woman, i.e. a mother, has been embedded in her since her mother wished for her to be allowed to become a wife and a mother on her deathbed. The “draining” (to use the image of the succubus again) of other aspects of Nnu Ego’s subjectivity seems to have started from that point on, and it explains, at least in part, her desperation to conceive and her reaction to her son’s death.

Hirsch, as examined above, describes Irigaray’s two texts as a reflection of the movement within second wave feminism from what was perceived as a patriarchal family system towards sisterhood. Such a movement can be said to also take place in Nnu Ego, although she never puts it into practice. After Nnaife’s imprisonment and as her children move, she comes to appreciate her friends more, and regrets having put all her identity and efforts into her children:

She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman. ... Still, how was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children could face a lonely old age, and maybe a miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman? ... Nnu Ego told herself that she would have been better off had she had time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship; but she had never had the time. (219)

However, her change of heart when it comes to family is not merely a longing for a sisterhood and mutual loyalty between women, but is also founded on her traditional beliefs in the importance of not shaming your family. As she moves back to Ibuza, she advises her son Adim, on how to live, conveying her new found feelings about the value of friendship, as well as the importance of maintaining family honour. With this, she once again reveals how she is torn between tradition and the modern, urban way of living:

“Many people have volunteered their homes to you, but I want you to trust tested friends, not relatives. If you are hungry, you have two married sisters; you can go and eat with them. But don’t do it too often, otherwise you lose your self-respect. It is better to lose respect among people who do not know who you are; don’t do it nearer home or it will rebound on you people.”(220-221)

Nnu Ego feels hurt towards the end of the novel when she leaves for Ibuza after Nnaife’s court case. Her eldest sons are occupied with their education, her eldest daughters are each married (one of them taking care of one of her little sisters), and Nnu Ego is left with only two children as she returns to her home village. Seeing her function as a mother coming to an end, she despairs: “I don’t know how to be anything else but a mother. How will I talk to a woman with no children? Taking the children from me is like taking away the life I have always known, the life I am used to” (222). Feeling useless and deserted by her sons whom she hardly ever hears from, Nnu Ego lapses into senility and eventually dies alone by the road. Without her motherhood, she loses her identity, which is similar to what happens to Sethe after *Beloved* begins to “drain” her of memories and stories. Without her child, Irigaray’s mother-figure too experiences a sense of loss:

You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In what frame must you contain yourself? And how to let your face show through, beyond all the masks? It’s evening ... You take off your face of a mother’s daughter, of a daughter’s mother. ... You thaw. You

melt. You flow out of your self. But no one is there to gather you up, and nothing stops this overflow. (“And the One” 63)

The same quotation that I used in relation to the analysis of Sethe’s mother role takes on a new meaning when perceived in relation to Nnu Ego. Whereas Sethe through her daughter understands and identifies with her mother, Nnu Ego does not connect with her mother as the children leave her. It is not her mother that Nnu Ego is linked to, but the *chi*. The reflection that she sees in the “evening” of her life is a slave, and this is what she has come to see herself as. Irigaray’s mother-figure has faces, or masks, that signify her identity and role in relation to her family, and Nnu Ego, too, has these faces; at first, she was Agbadi and Ona’s daughter, then, when she is married, a mother. Now her parents are gone, as are her children; she takes off her “face of a mother’s daughter, of a daughter’s mother” (ibid), and loses her identity and her sanity as she drifts into senility. She begins to “thaw”, losing her definition of her self – again she is reminiscent of the mother-figure:

Before day’s end you’ll no longer exist if this hemorrhaging continues. Not even a photographic remembrance as a mark of your passage between your mother and your daughter. And, maybe, nothing at all. Your function remains faceless. Nourishing takes place before there are any images. (ibid)²⁹

Nnu Ego has always “nourished” her children; now that this has stopped, it becomes evident that her persona and subjectivity have relied on the act of nourishing. Again it is clear that as she fed her children, she fed them her potential subjectivity as someone other than a mother. As in *Beloved*, the children function as a type of succubae, draining their mother of identity, which she willingly gives up, believing the act of nourishing is enough. But, as seen in Irigaray’s daughter-figure, the nourishing not only hinders the mother’s development, but also

²⁹The translator of “And the One”, Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, comments that the word she has translated as “images” in the original French is *figure*, which connotes both the concepts of “face” and “identity”. (ibid, footnote). Thus the final sentence of the quote could also mean that “nourishment takes place” before identity/faces; this underlines my point that as Nnu Ego loses her role as a source of nourishment, she loses her identity, or even realises that her identity – or her true face or image – has not been established.

the child's, as through the proverbial food it feels forced to mimic and to become the mother, a feeling which in turn forces the need for separation to grow forth:

I look like you, you look like me. I look at myself in you, you look at yourself in me. You're already big, I'm still little. But I came out of you, and here, in front of your very eyes, I am another living you. ... I'll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you. ... See from afar how I move with measured steps, me, once frozen in anger? Aren't I good now? ("And the One" 61-62)

Like the daughter-figure, Nnu Ego's sons separate themselves from her, not wanting the burden of providing both the family's future and its honour.

In "Ontological Victimhood", Ibrahim analyses Nnu Ego's motherhood as a part of the exploration of the victimising of "Third World" women. The dementia Nnu Ego experiences in her motherhood is seemingly prolonged after her death, as she refuses to grant children to women who pray to her for them; this act earns her the description of being a "wicked woman even in death" (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 224). Ibrahim calls this refusal a "posthumous rebellion" (157), and believes that it "... is symbolic of the slight power/madness that mothers are allowed" (ibid) and that Nnu Ego with her rebellion "manifests the ambiguity of the same 'demented *jouissance*,' that is also responsible for her desire for them" (ibid). Nnu Ego's act in the afterlife can indeed be read as an active attempt of resistance against the continuance of motherhood, which Nnu Ego believes enslaves women.³⁰

As Nnu Ego, in her "posthumous rebellion" (which is interpreted as a sort of madness or wickedness by the community) denies motherhood to other women, a link between motherhood and madness is established: "Madness, like motherhood ... is a space into which the woman allows no one but herself to enter. For the mother, this private sphere always

³⁰The interpretation of the barrenness of other women as a result of Nnu Ego's revenge/rebellion relies, of course, on accepting the reality and power of *chis* and spirits in the novel. This, however, is taken for granted by the narrator and more importantly, by the people of Ibuza – combined with the fact that the very character and personality of Nnu Ego in turn has relied on her affiliation with the *chi*, the reading of Nnu Ego's afterlife as revenge or attempt of correction is a valid one.

provides joy, suffering, and power” (Ibrahim 157). Motherhood has certainly provided Nnu Ego with joy and suffering, in the form of having and losing of children, and has also given her power as it has established her as a “real” woman and given her a prestigious position both within her family and her local community. Towards the end of her life, however, this power is gone with her children, and it seems, then, that she grasps madness as a means to enter her “private sphere” (ibid) once again. The power of madness, however, only reveals itself after Nnu Ego’s death, as it makes it possible for her to deny other women the “joys of motherhood” (the ironic title of the novel coming fully to its right in the portrayal of the beaten Nnu Ego). Her posthumous dementia, then, is the only effective resistance to the plights of women, yet it does not seem to hold any lasting power as the people observing this do not perceive the resistance as such, and do not alter their structuring of society because of it. They see Nnu Ego as an honourable woman according to their traditions, a woman who “had it all” (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 224), and do not understand why she refuses to let barren women experience the same honours, especially after she has received such a big, honourable funeral. However, even if it is not immediately apparent to the people surrounding Nnu Ego, to the reader the notion of motherly bliss – or the Kristevan concept of “demented *jouissance*” – is twisted into a madness which ultimately functions as a resistance against the structures and the traditions which confine women in the role of the mother; traditions which are upheld also by women themselves. The madness, then, functions as a counter-language, making it possible for Nnu Ego to express her anger and revenge herself.

Madness as a discourse used by women is a notion Felman addresses in “Women and Madness” in which she looks at Phyllis Chesler’s book *Women and Madness* (1973)³¹ in connection with and in opposition to the theory of Irigaray. Chesler, in her book, perceives madness in women and men as either an overly identification with a gender role or a rejection

³¹Phyllis Chesler. *Women and Madness*. (New York: Avon Books, 1973).

of the same (Felman 2). This rejection, however, is neither strong nor effective; and Chesler argues, according to Felman, that although it is a result of cultural and political restriction, she does not see madness as a rebellion against society (ibid). Going against the English “anti-psychiatry” movement which sees madness as political protest (ibid), Chesler does not wish to romanticise madness. Likewise, Felman too asserts that mental illness is a plea for help (ibid). Hence, Felman and Chesler establish a point of view that defies Ibrahim’s notion of madness as power:

Depressed and terrified women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction: quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, “mental illness” is a *request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration. This socially defined help-needing and help-seeking behavior is itself part of female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioral pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such. (2-3, italics in the original)

Thus, the concept of madness is complicated through the somewhat contradictory definitions of it. Chesler sees it as either too much identification with a gender role *or* a rejection of it and it can further be seen as resistance to the constricting norms of society *and* as compliance with it, if one sees mental illness as “help-seeking” behaviour which in turn is a part of the socialisation of women.

Where, then, does the madness or dementia of Nnu Ego position itself? It can be seen as a rejection of a gender role, as she refuses the honours bestowed on mothers with many children and also refuses to let others have this honour. Furthermore, it can also be read as resistance against a society that constricts and defines, and it does seemingly keep some women barren, which one must assume is Nnu Ego’s intention. As Felman notes, however, madness is not an effective remedy to an oppressive society; the people in Ibuza, as examined above, interpret her rebellion as wickedness and do not take it as a sign that something in their

society is at a miss. They still agree that the joy of motherhood is “the joy of giving all to your children” (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 224). Nevertheless, on a personal basis, Nnu Ego’s dementia is a rebellion and a protest, even if its effect is slight. Thus, Nnu Ego’s rebellion/dementia seem to both support Chesler’s claim that madness is a result of gender role rejection and go against her claim that madness can not function as political or social protest. With regards to the possibility that it stems from an overly sense of identification with a gender role, Nnu Ego’s dementia does not seem to follow this pattern. It is not a cry for help – as Nnu Ego in the afterlife would be in a position either out of help’s reach or in one where she wouldn’t need help – and furthermore, “help-seeking” behaviour (Felman 2) is not common amongst the women in Nnu Ego’s community, as seen through the inherent shame in accepting used clothes and through Nnu Ego’s neighbour’s hesitation in offering food to the sick Oshia, lest his mother be offended. However, I believe the rebellion might be, in addition to being a rejection of the role of mothers, derived from an identification with a gender role, as it is from her motherhood – the epitome of womanhood – that her ability to rebel arises. Thus I arrive at what is perhaps most interesting about Nnu Ego’s madness or dementia; not her power to deny women children in the afterlife, but the source of this power and the source of her madness. As Ibrahim argues, the madness might be read as an alternative personal sphere to motherhood, a sphere in which it is possible for Nnu Ego to rebel against the forces she feels have made her into a slave. Thus, Nnu Ego’s rebellion/madness reveals a seemingly contradictory nature; it is a counter-reaction to her motherhood, but at the same time it is her motherhood which enables her to rebel, as it is from this that the sphere of madness is diverted. In line with her main subject of the Western victimisation of “Third World” women Ibrahim analyses another of Emecheta’s characters, Adah from *In the Ditch* (1972)³², and looks at how motherhood becomes a protection for her against the racism she faces in living

³² Buchi Emecheta. *In the Ditch*. 1972. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994).

in Britain (Ibrahim 155-156) and at how she is made stronger through her children. Some of the same elements concern Nnu Ego as well; she is made stronger because of her children, e.g. through becoming economically independent to a certain degree, but at the same time it seems like (as with Adah) she would not have had to become stronger, nor bear so many hardships, were it not for the same children. As opposed to Adah, Nnu Ego seemingly does not come through her hardships with her head high, but dies alone and demented. As seen, however, it is in this dementia that Nnu Ego finally finds her strength and a way to exert power. Thus, an interesting circular movement arises between her motherhood, a source of sorrow, discontent and joy, and her rebellion/power which is the madness derived from the source of motherhood. The one, it seems, can not exist without the other. In fact, Ibrahim claims that “Third World” writers often do not see motherhood as something that victimises, but as a “tenacious resistance against the victimizing world” (155), and furthermore that “it is this small power, as bell hooks would say, of “talking back” with legitimate tools of resistance that gives mothers, even as victims, their survival credence” (ibid). Ibrahim also sees this form of resistance as a means for women to achieve true selfhood (ibid), and this is the final interpretation of Nnu Ego’s madness. Though she has indeed always nourished, and “fed herself” to her children, giving up, it would seem, her subjectivity, a new sense of subjectivity is established on the ashes, so to speak, on the one that is taken away. She is still a mother, but now her motherhood has empowered her by combining with the post-mortem powers that are given to the spirits of deceased people. Her madness, then, functions as an opposition against the motherhood that she has come to regard as a prison, but also as an assertion of her subjectivity and her identity which has been strengthened and developed by the very same motherhood.

Finally, the power given to Nnu Ego leads to a question concerning women who are not mothers. Had Nnu Ego stayed barren, had she been refused by more husbands, she would

on the one hand have escaped the prison of motherhood, but on the other she would also be a social outcast, a failure. She would not have achieved the same degree of economic independence, for instance, and she would not have experienced the honour of being a mother of many children. Is Nnu Ego, by denying other women “the joys of motherhood”, also denying them the power to oppose? Are women who are mothers more equipped to rebel, to “talk back”? In the society Emecheta portrays, motherhood is indeed a source of social power (and in the pre-colonial cultures described by Patton also of political power). Given the hierarchies at play, Nnu Ego’s rebellion is even more striking as she deems the powerlessness of a barren woman to be easier to bear than motherhood.

Good Mothering: The Power of the “Victim”

The sacrifices Nnu Ego makes, the duality of her preparing the children for a life similar to hers while at the same time giving them the equipment to move beyond this, and finally her rebellion through the attack on the reproduction system, all link her to the Good Mother of the slave narratives. As I have explored above, her Good Mothering, while being illuminated by the Western theories of motherhood, is also constructed very differently from it. Thus I return to my point that the way these theories are employed does not, to a large extent, take into account the experiences of motherhood that divert from the modern, Western one. They do not consider how different political and social conditions affect the human psyche or the act of mothering, and do not, for instance, recognise that living in slavery, where motherhood becomes a currency, necessarily affects the way mothering is acted out and structured. The *jouissance* of motherhood, the identification between mother and child, and the very act of mothering, are influenced by class, race and the social and historic context that the mother lives in. Nnu Ego, for instance, does not experience pregnancy and motherhood as something concerning only herself and the child, as it is described in “Stabat Mater”. Her conceiving and

having children is a matter for the whole family and the whole community. Her motherhood functions as currency in securing her a certain status among those who make the laws and the rules. As with the U.S. slave women whose children increased their value in the eyes of the slave holders, her children increases her value as a wife, family member and community member. She sacrifices herself through hard work to ensure her children's future (and her own) and finally, after years of enormous pressure, stress and "enslavement", she attacks the reproductive system. All of these facts establish Nnu Ego as a Good Mother – a type of mother that seems remote from the a-cultural, a-historic mother figure of both Kristeva and Irigaray's texts. In "Stabat Mater", for instance, Kristeva talks of the position of the Virgin Mary in Western religion, art and culture and how this influences the perceptions of motherhood. It is thus interesting to note that she does not say anything about how the perception of motherhood in countries where Catholicism has not been dominant is structured. Then again, of course, this is not the subject matter of the text, but as she does use some expressions to suggest that motherhood is an experience that is structured similarly to all women, it still seems relevant:

But a mother is always branded by pain ... A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. ... A mother's identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit ... For a mother ... strangely so, the other as arbitrary (the child) is taken for granted. (241, 254, 255, 262; emphasis added)

Nnu Ego, through the portrayal of her hardships and thoughts, and her miserable death, in one sense seems to live up to the Western image of the "Third World" woman as a victim, which Ibrahim is concerned with. Her disgrace as a barren woman, her own perception that her life as a mother is like the life of a slave, emphasised through her connection with the *chi*, and the futility of her resistance, all contribute to establishing her as a victim. Other women of the novel, though some of them move from their original social position, also seem to be

victimised. The pattern of discrimination repeats itself in Nnu Ego's daughters; though stating early that she wants all her children to learn English and have an education (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 179), the family can only afford to send the boys through higher education. However, the grown-up daughters do experience some degree of development, either on a personal or a social scale. Kehinde defies her father and marries a butcher's son (an act the reader would imagine as unthinkable to the teenage Nnu Ego), and Taiwo marries a clerk, thus moving up the social ladder. Her husband, however, prefers an old fashioned, uneducated wife to "bear children, keep his room clean and wash his clothes" (203). Thus the oppression of women seems to continue even in the younger and educated generation. Adaku, Nnu Ego's co-wife, becomes tired of not having any rights in the family, and of being discriminated against because she has no sons. She takes her daughters and leaves Nnaife to become a prostitute and to run her own market stall. Though she no longer has to care for a husband and though she reaches a higher degree of economic independence, it is questionable, as Robolin points out in "Gendered Hauntings", whether Adaku really manages to escape the restraints of the patriarchal society. She must still rely on men for money, and even if she wants her daughters to be self-reliant, she reproduces the tradition of self-sacrifice for children as she sells her own body for their benefit. Because of this, Robolin questions the possibility of resistance: "The trap(pings) of patriarchy become clear, then, but is this grid of power inescapable and hermetically sealed? Are there any methods available to resist, or create a space outside, patriarchal power?" (88).

This space is indeed found by Nnu Ego, however, in Ibrahim's private sphere of the madness which is linked to motherhood (Robolin too recognises the possibility for resistance in Nnu Ego's afterlife). Thus, it is the potential rebellion within the seemingly confining spheres available to "Third World" women that is overlooked by benevolent Western feminists:

I, white academic feminist, claim you, Third World woman, not being able or desiring to carry the class label of feminist, as victim. I, white feminist, name you victim in defining/calling you victim. I call you thus, often with complicitous silence from Third World academic feminists. (Ibrahim 157)

Ibrahim also addresses the relationship between white, Western feminists and feminists from developing countries and the split between them in relation to the need to develop an understanding of the history of black women:

The fundamental distinction that Third World feminists went on to make between themselves and white/Western, middle-class, liberal feminists was that the latter did not take into full account the complexities and intersections of race, class, and gender. (147)

Despite this split, Ibrahim claims that academics from the developing countries have incorporated the image of the “Third World” woman as victim in their discourse (148) and that there exists a “discomfort” which academic feminists from developing countries feel when working with the victimised “Third World” women:

I, Third World feminist, subject, look at you often with varying degrees of “critically conscious” discomfort. How do I find room for defining this discomfort? I, Third World feminist, who often share with you the questionable title of ‘victim’ often at the cost of feeling like a “fraud”. (157)³³

The discomfort felt by the scholars stems from a feeling of having become Westernised, and of having removed themselves from what is real and genuine about their ethnic origin (149). This underlines an important point in the question of understanding and accounting for the various kinds of living and mothering, namely that the gap between those who write the theories and the texts concerning so called “Third World” women might be as far removed from their subject matter as are their Western colleagues. Emecheta, for instance, has a more privileged “subject-position”, than many of her characters (157). Emecheta left Nigeria at the

³³Ibrahim borrows the term “critically conscious” from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Seabury press, 1968).

age of “almost eighteen” in 1962 (Emecheta, *Head Above Water* (1986) 26) and has lived in England ever since. Her project, then, is in a way one of “writing back” about her own past and that of Nigeria, but her look is from afar. In many ways, then, it might be said that as the theories of motherhood that I have employed in this thesis do not always open up for various expressions and shapes of motherhood, Emecheta herself may be equally removed from the society she describes both in terms of time and geography. The difference, of course, lies in the fact that though neither texts claim to apply to all realities and all mothers, Emecheta’s novel is a work of fiction based on her knowledge of her native country, whereas the theoretical texts claim some sort of truth about motherhood. In line with this, I believe that part of the problem with Western theory and texts about motherhood is that they seem fleeting and ungraspable; it is hard to apply to the historical conditions and characters dealt with in Emecheta’s fiction. That is not to say that it can not shed light on the way motherhood functions or how the human development and psyche function, or that this is not important when it comes to “Third World” women. It means that in disregarding culture, race and historic circumstances, one loses out on an important step in approaching a more thorough understanding of motherhood.

Returning to the portrayal of women from developing countries as victims, Nnu Ego might, then, in many ways indeed be described as a victim, and, perhaps more importantly, she considers herself to be a victim. Her motherhood is the reason why she suffers, is the reason why she feels enslaved, and why she ultimately is regarded as an ungrateful and malicious woman by the people who witness her actions in the afterlife. The same motherhood, however, is also the source of her social status and power, and it turns her into a Good Mother who uses her motherhood as a source for her strength to keep her family on its feet, and, finally, as a source for her rebellion. Nnu Ego is indeed a victim; but she is not only a victim, she is a woman made strong by her situation. Thus, while Emecheta illuminates the

predicaments and sacrifices of women in the society she describes, she also portrays a strong woman, who will not be victimised, but who through her motherhood manages to secure a future for her children and who, again through her motherhood, attempts to rectify what she believes to be a victimising situation for women.

Conclusion

When I came across Wright's trope of the Good Mother in my reading on motherhood in connection with African-American literature, I was fascinated by this symbol of self-sacrifice and decided to make it my point of departure for this thesis. I found the figure to be so compelling that it did not, in my opinion, confine its validity to African American literature, but could be traced in literature from several cultures, and I certainly found it in Nnu Ego, the strong, traditional hard-working mother who faces new impulses in a new and modernising environment. Thus, I have tied the concept of the Good Mother not only to a specific time period and the special circumstances of slavery from which this term originated, but to a state of colonisation, which I have defined both as the dominating power of one nation over another and as circumstances such as poverty and an oppressive society. Whereas Sethe is very close to the Good Mother that Wright describes, I have shown that Nnu Ego too belongs to the tradition of the Good Mother as one who makes great sacrifices for her children and who places her value "outside" of herself (Henderson 83)³⁴, believing that her children's lives are more valuable than her own. Another feature of this "colonisation" or the oppression of the Good Mother might be the appropriation of "ownership" over children, as in the slave system, where the children were the property of the slave holders, to be sold at whim, and in the tribal community portrayed in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where the children are considered first and foremost the father's property. Circumstances of "colonisation" or oppression also frequently lead to what I have called a regendering of the people who are subject to it; a superior, external power often shifts the original hierarchical gender systems and both men and women loose – or are robbed of – the traditional gender "qualities" as new definitions of gender and gender roles are established. These circumstances of colonisation and the

³⁴Naylor/Morrison 584.

regendering of the “colonised” people may create a firmer link between women’s identity and motherhood as seen in how the female slaves of the U.S. were attributed animal characteristics and defined primarily as “breeders” (Patton 1). In this respect Sethe is an example of the dehumanisation the slaves were subject to – the fact that her value lies in her motherhood contributes to her own devaluation of her self, or rather the placing of value with her children. Likewise, the tribal communities as portrayed in *The Joys of Motherhood* traditionally value women first and foremost as mothers and according to the number of sons they have. Thus, for Nnu Ego and the other women of Iboza and Lagos, motherhood becomes a great part of their identity both in the eyes of others and to themselves; motherhood also functions as a currency as they have to utilise their position as mothers to gain a more privileged position within both family and community. Of course, motherhood is a currency also in the system of slavery, and for Sethe, the renunciation of motherhood – inherent in her act of infanticide – becomes a renunciation of slavery as it is a removal of the trait by which she is valued and by which she values herself.

Motherhood lies at the core of the novels I have engaged, and is also that by which Sethe and Nnu Ego judge and define themselves. The focus on their motherhood as currency and its function as almost a character trait, ties their sense of self inextricably to their roles as mothers. Due to the fact that both characters themselves declare this affiliation between identity and motherhood, it has been interesting to look at them in the light of Kristeva’s and Irigaray’s theories and texts on the mother/child relationship, theories which I believe may be seen as a framework to the way the motherhood of Sethe and Nnu Ego is structured. However, as I have argued, the texts by the two psychoanalytic theorists do not always supply the conceptual framework to obtaining a more complete understanding of the characters’ mothering; the framework needs to be supplemented with other factors, some of which support the theories, some of which counter or problematize them. The Kristevan notion of a

“symbiosis” between mother/child has shed light on Sethe’s relationship to her ghost-daughter Beloved and the need they both have to separate from each other, though both are unwilling. They need a “Third Party” or an “Imaginary Father” to do so, and Paul D’s role as a potential deliverer of subjectivity is illuminating in this connection. In relation to Irigaray, Sethe’s subjectivity might be said to be threatened by the “melting” that faces Irigaray’s mother-figure in “And the One” (63) as she feeds her being into Beloved. The role merging in this latter text is also present in *Beloved* as Denver observes Beloved taking the role of the mother, and Sethe the role of the child, in a process which makes it clear that Sethe desperately needs to separate herself from both the destructive ghost-child and from her own past. Denver, the daughter who has separated from the mother (ironically due to the sister which threatens their mother), is the one needed to save her mother from annihilation, and it is the gathering of local women that eventually manages to expel the ghostly presence from the world with the help of the “original” sounds of the semiotic “language”.

The union with a ghost is a central feature of *The Joys of Motherhood* as well. Nnu Ego’s revenging *chi* is a haunting presence that forebodes Nnu Ego’s final realisation that she has become a slave of her motherhood. Throughout the novel, Nnu Ego’s social status and sense of self-worth increasingly approaches that of the *chi*’s slave status as she sinks into poverty and back-breaking work to provide for her family. The union is completed as Nnu Ego dies and becomes a spirit herself, denying the “joys of motherhood” to other women. Nnu Ego’s life is centred on providing food and basic needs for her children, and as such, Irigaray’s “And the One”, with its emphasis on the act of nourishing in the mother/daughter relationship proves to be illuminating. Like Sethe, Nnu Ego “feeds” her potential independent subjectivity to her children; when this nourishing stops, Nnu Ego disintegrates, “melts” and lapses into senility. Although only portrayed in the last pages of *The Joys of Motherhood*, the dementia of Nnu Ego – and the spiritual haunting that is the result of it – has been a central

point in my analysis as it ultimately functions as a rejection of the mother role and as a site of opposition to the oppressive forces of society and tradition. The parallel to Sethe's infanticide is obvious here, and it is at this point, that the similarity between the two protagonists is most striking. The characters' motherhood culminates in an act of resistance and it is this that unites the characters and ties them even closer to the Good Mother role, which incorporates the mother who attacks the reproduction system (e.g. female slaves who aborted or killed their children; Shaw 313). Motherhood causes the two women sorrow and hardships; they are judged because of it, treated according to it, and they both end up with almost annihilating the part of their subjectivity and value that is not connected to motherhood. At the same time, when they finally do react against the oppressive forces, it is with the strength that they have derived from the very hardships motherhood has provided them with. The Good Mother figure is illuminated, in my opinion, by the theories and texts by Kristeva and Irigaray that I have engaged; they provide a means of exploration into the identification processes that occur between mother and child which in turn may shed light on how a placing of the value of one's life "outside" of oneself is possible. Combined with the expropriation of ownership over children and the definition of women solely based on their motherhood, the notion of a union between mother and child may contribute to the "rise" of Good Mothers, who might turn their motherhood against the colonising force.

Hence, Western theories may indeed be useful in examining the Good Mother and the motherhood of women from the so-called "Third World", but as mentioned above, they need to be complemented by other perspectives. In connection with *Beloved*, I engaged Barnett's and Christian's readings which regard folkloristic and African religion, and I consider these to be highly valuable contributions to the readings of the novel. The significance of Nnu Ego's *chi* further underlines the importance of considering cultural aspects when approaching literature. Furthermore, I believe that there is a predominant Eurocentric view in much

Western theory on motherhood, and that the way motherhood varies with circumstances is not always considered. As argued in the introduction, motherhood is never static, it does not exist in a vacuum and is of course influenced by historical, social and cultural circumstances.

Where motherhood is a currency, it is only natural that this influences the mother/child relation; where infanticide becomes an act that is, if not defensible, then at least excusable, there is something in that act of mothering that differs from the “symbiosis” of mother and child as it is portrayed in psychoanalysis. Also, in families that differ from the heterosexual two-parent model (one-parent families, homosexual parents, polygamous marriages etc), the notion of e.g. separation must necessarily function differently; as with the slave families, the image of the threatening father is not necessarily always present, or there may be many “mothers” etc, and as such the concepts of “castration”, “Oedipus” and the transition to the “symbolic” might need to be re-considered.

Of course, as mentioned previously, Kristeva and Irigaray do not, in the texts I have explored, claim to speak for all mothers – rather, one “column” of “Stabat Mater”, for instance, is highly personal, as are Irigaray’s texts which are written in the first person singular – and there seems to be no reason why they should speak for all mothers. Embedded as they are in Western discourse, it would be impossible to “cover” all experiences of motherhood. However, these theories have become central in the discourse of motherhood, and it is here one needs to include new experiences and voices, though one risks the danger of speaking “in the name of” another, which Felman warns against (Felman 4) and by it repeating the discrimination e.g. “Third World” women have been subject to. To include new voices means that one needs to take not only folkloristic, religious and cultural aspects into consideration when approaching literature, but also that one must listen, record and write about the numerous and varying stories of motherhood.

By using the Good Mother trope as a point of departure for my analysis of Sethe and Nnu Ego's motherhood, and by drawing on certain theories of mother/child identification as well as texts that do consider folkloristic beliefs and religion, I believe I have shed some light on the characters and on the tradition of the Good Mother itself. The displacement of self-value is possible for the characters both due to the desperate situation of the "colonised" and to the perhaps "too thick" identification with the child; however, the struggles of motherhood give them strength and enable them to eventually strike back. Though one mother withers away and the other is dead at the end of the respective novels, the hope and the possibility for a self where the value lies "inside" are very much present, a self both threatened, but paradoxically also saved, through motherhood.

Areas of Further Research

As mentioned in the background chapter, the gendered ways of reacting to slavery have led to certain portrayals of genders within modern African-American literature; while mothers are typically self-sacrificing, hard-working, and strict, fathers are often absent, or figures of dominating authority. If the portrayals of mothers can be traced back to the Good Mother of the slave narratives, then certainly the fathers can be traced back to the narratives as well, and this may be an interesting area for further research. Investigating the narratives and exploring the "male" acts of resistance – fighting back or escaping, leaving their families behind (the opportunities for which women often did not have due to children) – might open up for a tracing of the stereotypical male figure (a "Bad Father") within both the slave narratives and the literature that followed the abolition of slavery. Another aspect of the slave communities or other "colonised" communities which I have not been able to fully pursue in this thesis (although I have commented briefly on it in relation to Paul D and Nnaife), is how the de/regendering that occurs in such societies affects men. As mentioned previously, such

regendering must necessarily influence family relationships, and as such an interesting field of research would be what this male regendering or effeminising means to the structure of a family, how it influences the relationship between father and child, husband and wife and not least how it affects the sense of identity and self. Although black or African-American masculinity in society is not a new field of research (see e.g. bell hooks' *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 2004) it would also be an interesting topic to follow within literature, specifically in relation to the slave narratives and modern African-American literature, but also in relation to African postcolonial literature. Here, as with the trope of the Good Mother, exploring the relationship between regendering, "colonisation" and psychoanalytic theory may be a valuable contribution to the discourse on African/African-American masculinity both with respect to the development of the male child and the relationship between the "colonised" man and his family.

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