

*Masculinity \ Feminity in Toni Morrison's Beloved ... by N. Salehi Babamiri, N. Dashtpeyma, L. Jamali*

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## Research Article

# Masculinity\Feminity in Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Womanist Approach

Navid Salehi Babamiri, Naser Dashtpeyma, Leily Jamali

*Department of English, College of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Tabriz Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Iran.*

### Abstract

Beloved is Morrison's response to the representation of heroic female's life in African American literature with the special focus on the negative, undesirable and traumatic effect of hegemonic masculinity over female characters. This novel deals with the oppressions along race, class and gender that women have to tolerate, furthermore; it shows black men's paradigm in using physical assault and constructing the assumed identity for women. So not only should women struggle against enslavement with the masculine world but go on their quest for subjectivity by revising the terms of love, autonomy and liberty. In addition, the present study deals with the black women's experiences as both oppressed and marginalized groups due to the masculine functionality. In order to be successful the black woman should resist all kinds of oppressions as beating and abusing and even the controlling negative stereotypes like "mule" and "jezebel." The role of community gathering is also one of the most important factors in women's encouragement towards emancipation.

**Key Words:** Abuse, Childbirth, Nursing, Motherhood, Language, Identity Crisis.

## I. Introduction

### *Statement of the Problem*

Historically speaking, what we generally consider as African-American literature, in other words, black literature is rather a recent genre refers back to its 18<sup>th</sup> century and also it is an enslaved one.

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*Corresponding author: Navid Salehi Babamiri. Islamic Azad University, Iran. Email address: navid\_salehi1988@yahoo.com  
Consultant authors: Naser Dashtpeyma & Leily Jamali. Islamic Azad University, Iran.*

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African-American women who wrote spiritual narrative had to arbitrate the problematic position of being both black and women in early America.

Being black and female as if you have done double sin, the black woman's plight and subjection go far beyond that of either male blacks or white women. They showed in extensive details the bitter life of female slaves and showed that because of unwanted intercourse oppression, flagrant abuse, imposed breeding, and burdens to do the housework, black women suffered in more ways than black men. The background of patriarchy as the highly powered structure of male dominance, invites males of all races and classes to mark out their masculinity by acts of physical aggression and coercion toward women and children. Thus the term masculinity refers explicitly to men and applied to male bodies and their effects to keep woman downtrodden, frustrated and denying them equal power. So the traditional way of understanding the term "masculinity" implies to white male-dominated society, where women are the marginalized groups. This established opinion on masculinity as male renders the possibility to speak about traditional masculinities as a product of patriarchal society.

Alice Walker In *Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984), coins a new concept womanism in order to stabilize the equality between all races and sexes. Therefore, the present study conducts an investigation into the pernicious influence of masculinity is being prevented by women in the novel *Beloved*. That is to say, this essay testifies to the traditional boundaries of masculinity as a signifier of the power of the man and reveals that masculinity can also be related to women. The study may have its profound significance on womanistic approach changes inequality and discrimination dissolves into resistance and survival.

*Purpose of the Study*

The present essay aims at considering masculinity in *Beloved* written by a womanist writer. It shows the negative and problematic influence of white men over their black slaves especially the female ones. They try to behave them aggressively but women have no tolerance to accept these regular oppressions. They either escape or do some dangerous work to show their resistance and also to announce that they are human beings and they should be treated well. So the present article tries to study the reflection of masculinity impact and also acting masculine and being strong among female protagonist in this novel; this will be done through womanist approach.

*Significance of the Study*

This study gains significance as the findings might shed more light on how men try to entrap and domesticate women under their own complete dominance. They manipulate different ways to suppress women as having unwanted intercourse, giving assumed identities and separating them from their children to annul them of being unified. Womanist concept also appears to bestow a

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meaningful, cultural context for women, which they can take leading roles and liberate them from the dominant and long lasting shadow of male dominance. The novel is being discussed in this essay tries to picture women who begin to revive and improve their lives physically and psychologically in spite of difficulties posed to them from masculine deeply held belief and stratified society.

*Discussion*

Morrison's novels are easily recognizable by their close attention and recognition to dynamics within the black community and their emphasis on female experience. One of her aims was to search for the identity of the black woman that was repressed by the white imagination and invention. Morrison states that her work must "bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded." She also suggests the special difficulties that the black woman had to face in American society even outside the rings of slavery. The oppressive environment within Toni Morrison's novel shows how her characters suffer physically and emotionally. Morrison loathes slavery and without any hesitancy responds vigorously that slavery is a disaster to all women and mothers (qtd. In O'Reilly 73) because it follows flesh exploitation, malfunction and losing their children. As Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, sees slavery as a poisonous serpent (qtd. in Dissenha 58). Atwood also names it "[slavery] one of the most vicious anti-family institutions, human beings have ever devised" (qtd. in Plooy 6). So in the novel the white resort to any power to suppress the black women in view of the fact that they can be used for both pleasure and production to work on their field. Morrison's indictment of science is especially appropriate given the crucial role played by European science and technology in the domination and colonization of Africa and America and in the establishment and maintenance of the institution of slavery.

Thus this essay intends to show how the black women have been robbed away throughout history by both black and white men. At the beginning of the novel, Sethe, the tragic heroine of the story was a young black girl who was separated from her breastfeeding mother so it is no wonder she was denied from her mother's milk and love. She remembers nothing more than a brand implanted in her mother's breast and knows that her mother was never close at hand when she [Sethe] needed her urgently. According to Barbara Scaphiro, Sethe was emotionally starved as a baby; she was denied "a significant nurturing relationship. If she has no nursing milk to call her down, she feels without a self to call her down"(198). In her troubled childhood, Sethe lacked milk from her mother because the woman was not present and she [Sethe's mother] worked full-time in the fields, and had to provide food and milk to nourish the white master's children. Sethe's extreme passion denotes also the need for care, love and intimacy. Nurturing, the main part of mother's duty, later is mirrored mutually in her relationship with her dead daughter *Beloved*. Although Sethe was grown up, even breastfed by other black women and

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became mature, she felt the emotional lack of a nurturing and always pined for her mother. According to Schapiro; "Sethe's mother, deprived of her authentic selfhood, her status as a human subject cannot provide the recognition and affirmation that her child craves" (201). Sethe, *Beloved* and many other black women were deprived by slavery which later culminated to the most unfortunate aspects in which human beings couldn't preserve their relationships. According to Christopher Peterson, Orlando Patterson argues that "slavery destroys slave kinship structures" (qtd. in Putnam 38). Thus she is ravaged as an infant, robbed for her milk/essence by the white social structure (Bloom 95). In addition, this kind of exploitation devises the unnatural, animalistic and inhuman behavior that dwells on the work. Both Baby Suggs and Sethe's mother were forced to have unwanted intercourse relationship, take silence against the oppressive power and provide their masters with children and to have them taken away because they have no absolute power to keep them by their sides. Slave women were defined in terms of "non-mothers" and thus denied totally the basic right to mother their own children. In the words of Barbara Hill Rigney: "The disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter . . . is perhaps the greatest horror of slavery"(qtd. in O'Reilly 130).

In one of the short prodigious encounter Sethe has with her mother she understands that maternal violence is also an act of altruistic love because it focuses on possession and recognition. Sethe doesn't know about the aberrant root of familiar possession, interestingly beseeches her mother to have the same mark as her so that they could be similar to each other. But Ma'am slaps Sethe for the derogatory remark, and doesn't explain the point. Sethe learns that maternal violence as slapping the child to make her understand may be the declaration of possession, devotion and even care. Like her mother, later Sethe is marked seriously too. They draw scars on her physical body as the sign of extreme brutishness of slavery, and also they put her under pressure to reenact infanticide. Later when she kills one of her children because she didn't see any difference between herself and her daughter, she thinks that she has the absolute power to possess her.

Throughout the novel all women try to put end to their children's life or at least leave them behind which shows not only a typical kind of violence the black mother takes because they are forced but also determines a special kind of love which Paul D calls it "too thick love" (*B*<sup>1</sup> 314). Baby Suggs does not murder her children but instead; she is ultimately decisive not to pay attention or love them full-heartedly. Baby Suggs realizes that she is on a higher moral ground than Sethe, in the view of the fact that she quits her children at birth, because she knew that they would eventually be taken away within the legacy of slavery. In contrast, Sethe never abandons her children she abides by them, even though her method of mothering becomes extremely

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<sup>1</sup>Here after, *B* stands for the title of the novel *Beloved*.

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brutal. Similarly, even Ella, a woman who also does not turn a deaf ear to the choice Sethe has made, has her own innermost secret mother violence; she delivers “a hairy white thing,” (B492) but does not nurse him. These choices of maternal ignorance show that mother violence takes many forms and while Sethe is castigated for her tough choice of brutality, there are several others who similarly make life-and-death decisions about their own offspring.

In *Beloved* all women are considered as “domesticated animals” because they should mass-produce human capital. It was a cheap commodity for the slave owner to get profits because they have forced intercourse with black women and get them pregnant. It has two advantages for them; first they sell the slaves second they enlarge their labor force without spending too much money. So as Baker states; “pregnancy in black women was seen as profitable business to white masters.” In such context, “women are considered of no value unless they continually increase their owner’s stock. They are put on a par with animals” (qtd. in Dissenha 74). The slave women were never created for being loving mothers. They were considered strongly only as the breeders and stock raisers. They produce more children but they are sold away as calves from the cows. Sethe’s mother-in-law does not even recall the faces of her eight children accurately. Even Paul D recognizes that mother-love for a slave is too risky. To quote: “Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children” (B 88).

As Hazel V. Carby points out, the slave woman’s “reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves (qtd. In Booker 299)- so by making women to produce more children they can help the “capital” rather than to maintain the human relationship. Furthermore, these kinds of women had no pervasive sense of loving to each other for they knew that one day they all may be come apart from each other. Baby Suggs thought her life was like checkers game since all came to her were also taken. So by giving this “divide and conquer” strategy (Booker 301), the white make it difficult for slaves to establish and maintain strong interpersonal ties; they help assure that the slaves will not band together in revolt.

The white also put a heavy step forward and they use their slaves for both pleasure and tortures. In the part of the novel it is also cited that there was a black girl who was whipped and imprisoned by the aggressive white man to do sensual gratification on her or Baby Suggs was forced to have unwanted intercourse with a farm boss for four month if she wants to have the child with her and when Sethe and other members wanted to escape from the harrowing condition, they were caught and punished unfairly and severely. By torturing, they wanted to keep them with the circle of slavery. When Sethe was caught she was in horns of dilemmas and she, like all the cows was milked, maltreated and whipped which Barbara Schapiro writes, “[s]he feels robbed of her essence, of her, most precious substance, which is her maternal milk” (qtd. in



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Field 3). So in the novel female slaves experience much abuse and also various forms of subjugations. Alice walker states, "they stumbled blindly through their lives, creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope" (qtd. in Daniel 15). Therefore; the novel shows how women are denied as human beings by white men, Sethe's stolen milk and horrible scars on her back which her daughter Denever describes as "tree" and the horrible scenes Baby Sugg witnesses are all the sign of both physical violence and psychic wounds inflicted on Sethe and all women around her. So by treating them like animals, the white masters label these women with negative stereotypes as ravished females and inept mothers. This counts down the virtue and integrity of black women, smears their honor, their social status and do not allow them to carry out the most basic needs of human beings, as developing emotional and affectionate ties, and to have familial relationships.

When Sethe spent her time in Sweet Home she didn't have to work hard as before and even there was no bad master to rape her and she found that real chance to select one husband for herself among all men and to become a mother. Mr. Garner had also all the absolute power and took them as their domestic slaves and seriously curbed them to achieve fundamental powers by his concocting strategies. He didn't allow the slaves to have the most essential movements toward reading books or loving their children. "Love," as a negation of power in the hand of whites was a great threat, therefore; they tried to leave off power of love among slaves, to disunite them in order to remain their power. In the novel Baby Suggs was not allowed to care and love her only left son Halle, but what makes the Garners unlike other slave masters was that he, though euphemistically, called his slaves "men".

When all black people lived with Mr. Garner, They had to be strong in reaction against crisis of assumed identity. As Remer pinpoints; "white seeks any outlet to assuage their blood stained consciences, contorting languages and names themselves in a futile attempt to legitimize slavery and conceives themselves that slavery is justified" (1). So by exchanging the names based on their own wishes, Whites used their own authority to denigrate and debase slaves. Sethe's name stamped to masculine origins while the D at the end of Paul's name shows the lineage and succession of male slaves all named Pauls. Sixo is also another character in the novel that was called by number. The undignified and unfitting names ascribed to the slaves mean that they have been ruined, robbed away from their wills; their names superficially and inattentively have all the verve and zest of animals, which have been cursorily given. Baby Suggs got her name from black patriarchy and rejects to be given the name by devastating white patriarchy. The white patriarchy tries to distort grossly her name by giving her another name because to decide on somebody's name may reduce his/her power. Although she never calls herself anything at sweet home, she immediately picks up her courage and decides to shed Jenny 'Witlow' the name

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that Mr. Garner thought was hers. Baby rejects but sticks to her real name, because she wants to keep her connection with the man she took as her husband and also as the power to define her as a black man's wife and a mother, not a white master's slave anymore. As Collins expresses, "the formation and articulation of a self-defined standpoint is a key to black women's survival (qtd. in O'Reilly 3). Later in the novel when she is free, She is described as an "unchurched preacher" (Hirsch 102). She goes on and has her own struggle to gather people from the community to stand against patriarchy which has made all women's life blighted and teaches them to love themselves. Baby's push on Black people to love their heart is deeply significant as the heart is the major organ which lets people pour out their emotions, feelings and affection so that they can understand each other better, respect their own values, develop senses of love, care and tendering that were denied to them in slavery, and thus they achieve healing.

Morrison also shows plainly how slavery can have a heavy toll on black men and their identities too. Paul carps and lodges a protest against the school teacher bitterly because he "broke into children what Garners had raised into men" (B 419). The school teacher also addressed them "Here Boy!" (B 519), showing that the slaves are merely passive of slavery and they must be called in the same uncivil, dehumanizing and emasculating manner as well to preserve their power. Furthermore, they forced black men to mate with black women as if they were animals to produce more children and sometimes they were raped by doing oral pleasure for someone that it made one of the salves, Paul D, puke out.

Walker's inclusion of gender inclusivity as "male" signifies that both sexes must engage in conflict for gender, racial, economic and environmental justice around the globe. It is not just up to women to pronounce gender justice and equal rights and promote their agency but men must be engaged in this work too. Walker's inclusion of black men's voices, lives, and experiences for womanist inquiry is significant because it functions as a response to critiques sometimes projected by black men and others who claim that womanists are only mirroring the same kind of gender discrimination that they face. For this reason, it is important to note that Walker's sense of community and wholeness includes men (qtd. in Harris 67).

When Sethe arrives at 124 Bluestone, she needs much care and attention. As a sister, Baby Suggs provides her with what she needs and brings her to life. Baby Suggs' care allows Sethe to gradually recover from her physical and psychological wounds and both begin to heal emotionally from the trauma which slavery imposed on them. Baby Suggs, on the other hand, does her best in order to alleviate the marks slavery had on Sethe's body. Baby Suggs is a kind of matriarch who preserves the verve and enchantment senses of the words to affix love and affectionate relationships in the community. Amy Denever also cared and supported Sethe's daughter and later Stampaid saved Sethe by crossing her from Ohio River into freedom. Ella didn't hesitate to give both foods and supplies and told that your children would be safe. Barbara

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Schapiro emphasizes the importance of community in *Beloved* and argues that Morrison's book suggest that human selfhood is defined only through relation to others: "The free, autonomous self, *Beloved* teaches, is an inherently social self, rooted in relationship and dependent in its core on the vital bond of mutual recognition" (qtd. in Booker 310).

Ranging in age from children to adolescents and to adults, these female characters resort to violence to find an escape because they have suffered within a white patriarchal society where they are racked, mortified and subjugated by social and racial domination, oppression, exclusion, and rejection. So by the end of her first month of freedom, the school teacher's unexpected arrival traumatizes Sethe and also threatens an air of her dignity she restored in few months. Sethe doesn't like to deliver her children by hand; yet desperately she does something which is beyond the logic of words, reason and justification, she grisly murders her daughter even to assert her role of motherhood over societal mores. According to Mondal, Sethe's murder of her daughter seems a less legally and morally reprehensible crime because it becomes an act of self-defense (1). Yet, in doing so, she achieves astonishingly powerful status. As it is mentioned in Kocher's essay, Susan Bowers remarks, "The prefiguring of the novel climactic, redemptive moment is the most violent episode in the novel. This violence is especially notable because it consists of the victim inflicting the violence on her own children out of utter hopelessness to show a kind of resistance" (592). This animalistic act of infanticide puts Sethe's status in peril but with a deep contemplation it seems that there is no greater option than death, suicide or even quitting from one place to another if they want to keep themselves and their children away from the toxic of slavery. Her act of infanticide also flashes her back to the time when slavery destroyed family kinship and her mother was hanged and she had to take all the responsibilities. To a more consideration Sethe negates and postulates the power of slavery on account of the fact that she terminates her daughter's life and doesn't deliver her. Delivering her children to the oppressive power affirms the fact that her milk and even her essence have been granted to provide the mood for abuse and even to abandon her children without any foods to satiate white masters ones. Finally she would never permit her daughters to be smeared by white man's hands. By developing her considerable flair to choose death for her child, Sethe exposes the final vicious violence; but in real, it is an act of rebellion and a form of resistance. As Morrison's stated, *Beloved* is not only Sethe's dead child but the faces of all especially women whom they lost in slavery, carrying in her the history of the "sixty million and more" (Bloom 64). Christopher Peterson's analysis indicates that Sethe must "kill her own daughter . . . to claim that daughter as her own over and above the master's claim" (qtd. in Putnam 37).

After the misery Sethe has committed, she thought of herself as self-sufficient and independent thus alienated and abandoned by the residents of the community. She fuels the bitter anger and ire of the community. Therefore she was named as a sinful woman. Her incompetence in



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seducing herself to take such a horrendous action is the fear of slavery and exploitation for her daughter. The owners of the Plantations, schoolteachers and his nephews have made preparations to violate her motherhood by whipping and stealing her milk from her bosom. All these incidents constitute Sethe's past and they are reconstructed in the novel through the discourses of Sethe and Paul D, who were the co-victim of slavery.

The removal of the ghost makes it easy for Sethe to be relieved of her past and her guilt. Paul D gives Sethe some happiness and convinces her that she can have a better life and to be gleeful because she can remember mourn and heal. He also tells her that he abides by her for good. This passage depicts Paul D sharing the pain and secrets of black women, which brings him into the circle of female friendship. He arouses Sethe's interest to forget and jump over the bad-potent memories. But *Beloved's* ghost reappears and her voice is hoarse, she hates Paul D and is her rival. She wants to have intercourse with him and gets Paul D's semen and becomes pregnant. Indeed, Barnett links her to succubus, "a female demon and nightmare figure that sensually assaults male sleeper and drains him of semen (qtd. in Field 5). This action shows Paul D's emasculation with slavery too. It fulfills Paul D's thirst and desire for wanted intercourse with a young lady, something that he dreamt about but never had the opportunity to do during the slavery period (Ayadi 267). So Paul D's arrival at Sethe's house brings with it the ancient fear of women and feminizes him. (Andrews and Mackay 130).

*Beloved* is also incubus. She wants to take revenge on Sethe for her unreasonable murder. She is in a form that of a vampire who drains Sethe's vitality by kissing her neck. Denever notices. However, Denver realizes that before she saves Sethe, she must save and help herself. Thus, Denver tightly corresponds to Walker's definition of a womanist that a strong woman should love herself first. Alice Walker claims that a womanist "Loves herself. *Regardless*" (qtd. in Harris 4). Though Denver, like *Beloved*, is victimized by Sethe, she ferrets for ways to outstrip this victimization and obstacle through community and strength rather than anything else. In doing so, Denver fits into Walker's definition of the womanist as being, "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" (Harris 3). When Denever searches for food, it rises up the reaction of the community and they understand and identify with residents at 124 Blue stone. The community responds by helping with food and a job for Denever. Denever's strength is dedicated to struggling to restore wholeness to the fullness community. Because of Denever, Sethe has succeeded as a mother and she has known how to overcome her past which once traumatized her. Denever and community save Sethe by injecting her great power to know her life. They provide food and walk away *Beloved*. The support of her peers enables Sethe to grasp power again. This final act justifies how Sethe is freed from her guilt and re-conciliated for what she has done. Thus, Denver puts an end to the infantile stage in her life and starts as an active and vigorous member of the society. She remodels herself by taking over all the responsibilities

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for her family's success. She becomes a free inner self, interacting with others and inserting herself as a member of the community. Denver's maturity is evidenced in her last encounter with Paul D. He is perplexed by the change that has come over her. She appears confident and tendering. She is now working in the outside world so that she earns some money to help her mother. She believes in her own capabilities and centers on her newfound maturity, civility, sincerity and flexibility. She advances from a shy, reticent, introverted and idle girl as described at the beginning of the novel to a strong, competent, self-assured, stalwart young working woman at its end. Denver's womanist ideology is also fixed in her desire to know more. Walker's womanist definition includes that a womanist wants to know more and to be knowledgeable of all things around. Later Denver will become a schoolteacher by taking up the educational task to enhance the great vitality of the body and psyche as a foundation for the improvement of society. Education as a powerful tool implants the important connections among self and also a step toward change and empowerment in African American communities. By being a Schoolteacher, Denver will be in a position that allows her to take from the white Schoolteacher the power to define African Americans and make their history in a way that steals their past, their souls and their humanity (Chouchane 7-8).

The novel indicates a positive life for Sethe and women who survive the harrowing circumstances. Black women in the middle of both racism and sexism did survive, and their ability to do so was the glue that bound together black communities. It's both positive and corroborative that Morrison shows how homes and communities serve as places to gather strength, to formulate strategy, and to take rest. Community is also a space for healing, for comfort, and for care for those characters caught in the traps of a system that denies the black people the status of human beings (qtd. inDissenha22).The reconciliation with her daughter, along with the community is good and finally Paul D returns to the house to help her. At last Denver finds Paul D, and he returns to Sethe to take care of her and heal her tortured soul. All of them have a chance to leave the past behind and start again by focusing on the future.

## **II. Conclusion**

Toni Morrison is one among the most influential voices of our time. In her works she deals with the plight of black women's lives who have been debased not only by white history but also by black history while stressing that women should always stand obedient and submissive regardless of all the oppressions. In this novel women share the same draconian codes of behavior remarkably disturbing. The societies which all these women live in go by patriarchal rules and values that exploit any women in anywhere. The institutions that degrade these women may stabilize their rules to prevent any rebellious act. Sethe, the protagonist of the story, was born into slavery. She didn't experience love relation with her mother and was almost left alone till the novel's end. Trauma and abuse were two striking elements which subjected all the women

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in the novel. This trauma is physical, psychological, and emotional and has a strong impact on the woman, forming their identities in similar ways. From the beginning of the novel all these women are abused, violated and even abased by both hegemonic whites and also the black men, but women gathering has the high power to liberate the women from all the oppressions. Sethe, the protagonist of the story, is abused but with the help of other women even her daughter Denever, saves herself and tries to forget all the sufferings.

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