Resisting the Norm: Maternal Deviance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur

Author: **Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur,** Department of English**,** University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana**. Email:** hannah.arthur@ucc.edu.gh/hannah.wood-arthur@ucc.edu.gh.

Published date: Dec 04, 2024

How to cite the article: Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur, "Resisting the Norm: Maternal Deviance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Ahyu: A Journal of Language and Literature* 7 (2024): 27-39.

DOI: doi.org/10.56666/ahyu.v5i.124

Abstract

This paper examines slave mother characters who defy the master narrative set by their communities and protect their children. The focus of this paper will mainly be on Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs and Sethe in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison who are representations of emblematic slave mothers. These two characters challenge the stereotypical concept of motherhood and deviate from the dominant view of the definition of a mother as one who only protects her children from harm. They extend the definition of "mother" to one who can ensure her children endure pain and sometimes death to express or confirm their love for them. Employing the concept of motherhood through African-American feminism, this paper analyses the two characters in terms of their personalities, their unique ways of nurturing their children and their exclusive approaches to protecting them. The paper concludes that different thematic representations are employed to enable mother characters to help their children survive the absurdities and perversions of slavery.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Maternal deviance, Slavery, Slave Narratives.*

Introduction

The characters Linda Brent and Sethe are 'unique' individuals who journey through slavery, flight and freedom as mothers. I label them 'unique' because they are characters who experience all the periods of slavery, flight and freedom under this study and yet maintain their status as mothers. Their destinies emerge and diverge at different times and under different circumstances. The idea behind juxtaposing them is to assess their upbringing and their lifestyle and equate it to how they manage to be unique amongst the slaves in their various plantations and openly defiant of their slave masters. Putting these two characters at par does not, in any way, influence the renditions of the term 'mothering' which this paper seeks to provide meaning to.

The notion of motherhood has been naturalised into an inevitable routine by the patriarchal social order represented by the generic human community to the extent that mother and the reproductive and child-

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

raising functions have invariably become synonymous. This synonym has set the tone for the quintessential prominence of mothering in the periods of slavery, flight and freedom in African-American history. The whole concept of motherhood relates to the biological trajectory of pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing of the young into adulthood. These social and biological ideals portray the stereotypical involvement of the mother, the family members and, sometimes, the community. The obvious assumption is that under the tutelage of a mother, a child cannot become a deviant in society due to the set of rules and regulations expected of the mother to influence the child. To deviate from that expectation of society therefore calls for a critical outlook into the personality of the mother(s) in question.

It is essential to note that African-American women writers, especially the feminists among them, have divergent ideas regarding the expected role of the woman in the context of the socially constructed notion of motherhood. The experiences of slavery, together with their alternatives of flight and struggle for freedom, provide a definition of the term "motherhood," which to these writers encapsulates the ideals of giving life, nurturing, and raising children who are considered 'well-brought up'. Without any alteration and fixed definition, therefore, the term "mothering" is adopted by African-American feminists to advance the idea of motherhood, which is more aggressive, protective and ferocious and can only be linked to people who have experienced slavery. This term 'mothering,' though not exclusive to the African-American community, is one that has been embraced by them and its popularity is established in a lot of their women's writings. Another concept that is embraced by the African-American community is the practice labelled othermothering by some scholars (Edwards; O'Reilly; hooks) which extends the relationship between mother and child to include other 'mothers' in a scenario that is still very prevalent in some parts of rural West Africa established right from birth through breastfeeding to the first steps of the child and beyond. According to Edwards, othermothering migrated from "West African practices of communal lifestyles and interdependence of communities" (Edwards 88).

It is imperative to acknowledge how characters such as Linda Brent and Sethe bring out this issue of mothering. In order to understand this concept of mothering from the African-American perspective, it is essential to look at these two characters. The analysis can be thematised under four very important aspects: othermothering, bad and good mothers, anthropomorphic tendencies and society's perception.

Regarding space, it is essential to note that both Linda Brent and Sethe share a spatial commonality, a plantation, since they were both born into slavery. The plantation therefore becomes a turning point in the lives of these women about the decisions they make that affect their lives and those of their children. The definition of slavery differs significantly as regards the lives of these two women as observed in the novels. Raised by different women, Linda Brent, though born in slavery, is ignorant about classifying herself. She has the privilege of staying with her parents, her brother, as well as her grandmother in a home. This idea of familial stability evokes a kind of love, protection and affection for Linda in the early years of her life. She experiences othermothering later in life in the form of her grandmother Molly Horniblow and her mother's sister, Aunt Nancy. To this she says:

> I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away… In complexion my parents were a

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

> light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safekeeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment. I had one brother, William, who was two years younger than myself – a bright, affectionate child. I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother (Jacobs 7).

Linda Brent's family members are mulattoes and this affords them a position in society. Mulattoes were the offspring of white and black parents and, as such, were seen to resemble white children more than blacks. The mulatto breed was bought at higher prices on the market and was very easy to sell (hooks 1982). Although the representation of the family as mulattoes does not unravel the mystery behind their living comfortably together, it prompts the reader on how mulattoes were treated and regarded as compared to black slaves. Carby is of the view that "the mulatto figure is a narrative device of mediation; it allows for a fictional exploration of the relationship between the races while being at the same time an imaginary expression of the relationship between the races" (Carby 171). The mulattoes were a complex part of the slave trade. They were people denied by their own white fathers and were considered blacks just because they had a drop of blackness in them from their mothers. Mulattoes, therefore, represented the falsities of race. This identity of mulattoes in Linda Brent's family can arguably justify why her life as a slave was easier as compared to that of Sethe, who was black. Hence, Linda Brent's inability to reduce her status to that of a slave till the death of her mother is of no surprise to the reader.

Sethe, on the other hand, is denied the opportunity of recognising her mother and sharing a bond with her. The idea of being nursed by different women at different times and by her own mother only after nursing her mistress's babies (Morrison 30) is an indication of the disoriented nature of life imposed on a child born into slavery. Sethe grew up on the slave plantation. In a quest to be recognised as the birth mother, Sethe's mother reveals herself to Sethe with an identification mark under her breast which she secretly shows to Sethe (Morrison 61). This mark serves as the only means of identification and bonding between mother and child by a woman who feels the need to be recognised by her own child and mourned after she dies. Just like her predecessors, including Baby Suggs and Sethe's mother, the predominant fear in Linda Brent and Sethe's lives is that of not being loved by their children. This is because of the fear of 'losing' a child after birth, not due to ill health or death, but to being sold and lost forever. According to Davis, enslaved (black) women who birthed children were not seen as mothers but as instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labour force. They were considered to be breeders like animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers (Davis 10). Since slave women were classified as breeders as opposed to mothers, their infant children could be sold like calves taken away from cows. It is because of this social and cultural construct which is the backbone of the slave society, that Sethe, as I have previously pointed out, experiences the idealised system of othermothering in which different women take on the role of being mothers for the children of their fellow slaves. In the text, it is written:

> Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? Or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother, who was pointed

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

> out to her by the eight-year-old child who watched over the young ones - pointed out as the one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field. Patiently Sethe waited for this particular back to gain the row's end and stand. What she saw was a cloth hat as opposed to a straw one, singularity enough in that world of cooing women each of whom was called Ma'am (Morrison 30).

This system of othermothering serves as the ultimate form of idealised mothering to the slave population, with the agenda of being each other's keeper in order to survive and maintain the possibility of posterity. According to Davis, the slave women left their infants in the care of small children or older slaves who were unable to perform hard labour in the fields (Davis 11). The two characters, Sethe and Linda Brent, project the concept of othermothering. The African-American woman borrows the concept of othermothering from her ancestral West African traditions to help her children survive the absurdities and perversions of slavery.

Consequently, Collins observed that "[m]othering [in West Africa] was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men." Rather, mothering expressed itself as both nurturance and work, and care of children was viewed as the duty of the larger community. To sum it up, "it takes a village to raise a child" (Collins 45). To Collins, these complementary dimensions of mothering and the practice of communal mothering/othermothering give women great influence and status in West African societies. She elaborates: First, since they are not dependent on males for economic support and provide much of their own and their children's economic support, women are structurally central to families. Second, the image of the mother is culturally elaborated and valued across diverse West African societies. Finally, while the biological mother-child bond is valued, childcare was a collective responsibility, fostering cooperative, age-stratified, woman-centred "mothering" networks. (Collins 45). These West African cultural practices, Collins argues, were retained by enslaved African-Americans even under slave conditions and gave rise to a distinct tradition of African American motherhood in which the custom of othermothering and community mothering was emphasized and elaborated. Edwards, in her article "Community Mothering: The Relationship between Mothering and the Community Work of Black Women," explains:

> The experience of slavery saw the translation of other mothering to new settings, since the care of children was an expected task of enslaved Black women in addition to the field or house duties. [T]he familial instability of slavery engendered the adaptation of communality in the form of fostering children whose parents, particularly mothers, had been sold. This tradition of communality gave rise to the practice of othermothering. The survival of the concept is inherent to the survival of Black people as a whole since it allowed for the provision of care to extended family and non-blood relations (Edwards 80).

The practice of othermothering therefore remains central to the African-American tradition of motherhood and is regarded as essential for the survival of black people. The name 'othermothering' reveals the identity of empowerment to the women who are responsible for the slave children they cater for. This identity is portrayed in the authority and the role one woman plays in the lives of the children of another woman. This kind of empowerment, I strongly argue, rather could confuse the child who later is

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

unable to recognise or differentiate her birth mother in the midst of all the other women who have "mothered" her in one way or another. A typical example is how Sethe, at a point in time, cannot even identify her biological mother from the other women at the plantation. But as has been argued earlier, the practicality of othermothering being very common in the slave era enabled slave women to be on the lookout for each other's children and enable their safety in diverse ways.

The status quo set out by the community, in this case, the African-American community concerning mothering, can be captured through the definitions given by these scholars (Rich; O'Reilly; Green), who opine that the general interpretation given is that mothering, which is interchangeable with motherhood, covers the period of pregnancy, through childbirth and even beyond. Mothering is representational and has a particular style of nurturing, which brings the idea of a "good or ideal" mother and a "bad mother." Of course, the "good or ideal" mother is defined by the community as one who follows all the ideals expected of a mother. To scholars such as Ashe, "bad mothers" come from particular cultural or class backgrounds or deviate from social stereotypes (Ashe 214). This brings into question the particular class backgrounds to which these women belong. In order not to be biased, I presume Ashe holds the view that any cultural or class background can have a representational "bad mother." To this end, this paper will concentrate on the latter part of the definition by scholars like Ashe, which propounds that bad mothers are women who deviate from social stereotypes. The African-American community provides a status quo that ostensibly provides a clear-cut difference between a "good or ideal mother" and a "bad mother." This disparity between the two types of motherhood brings into question the symbolically linked idea and definition of mothering by feminists which, in my opinion, confers the same idea as that of the definition given to a "bad mother" by the community. To some African-American feminist scholars (Reyes, Rich, O'Reilly), mothering is devoid of patriarchal influence and empowers women. I opine that this kind of empowerment bestowed on women gives the community the arguable labelling of them as "bad mothers" and deviants.

The state of being a mother is replicated in both Linda and Sethe in that they become mothers at very tender ages. The fight for their children is a confirmation of their non-compromising attitudes towards matters related to them. This emotional expression is felt when Linda has her first child. She prefers her premature child to die with her to avoid the pangs of slavery. "I heard the doctor say I could not survive till morning. I had often prayed for death; but now I did not want to die unless my child could die too" (Jacobs 68). Her preference for being alive is based on the survival of her son.

Sethe's state of being a mother takes a different emotional rendition. Sethe's plans of escape coincide with the birth of her last child, Denver, whom she is pregnant with in the course of her flight. The vulnerable nature of a pregnant woman to undertake such an exploit of flight presents a rather assertive character. The courage to plan as well as escape without her husband Halle depicts the slave woman's determination. Paul D expresses his surprise in a conversation: "You had that baby, did you? Never thought you'd make it. He chuckled. Running off pregnant." (Morrison 8). This statement by Paul D is an indication of what the community thinks regarding a pregnant woman escaping from slavery. The idea of a vulnerable pregnant woman in a dress soiled as a result of un-sucked breast milk escaping slavery is a sight which the community fails to fathom. The whole idea of escape, which shall be henceforth referred to as 'flight',

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

means everything to a woman who is bent on getting to her children and reconciling with them. If it means walking on feet so swollen that she cannot see her arch or feel her ankles in the sixth month of pregnancy and will and cannot stop because her "little antelope" rams in her womb every time she makes a stop (Morrison 30), then she will continue the flight all alone. The thought of her dying first and leaving her "little antelope" in her womb to suffer before dying "grieved her so she made the groan that made the person walking on a path not ten yards away halt and stand right still" (Morrison 31). It is this form of mothering that Lawson attests: "Black women's participation in mothering is a form of emotional and spiritual expression in places that marginalise Black women" (Lawson 26). This emotional expression deployed by Sethe portrays the symbolic attachment in the form of an umbilical bond between mother and child. Why would a dying woman be concerned about her unborn baby? This is because this umbilical bond I am suggesting here symbolises an inexplicable form of attachment between a woman and her child. This bond, I further argue, can push a woman to send her children away on flight as she struggles to get milk to one of them, Beloved, to be precise, who is starving for the food she carries no matter the circumstances. To Sethe:

> Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her upon your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn't have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it (Morrison 16).

Deploying the definition of mothering further, both Linda Brent and Sethe undertake what I would term 'aberrant mothering' because the murder Sethe committed to "save" her children does not in any way deviate from the definition of mothering discussed above. As a mother and a father to the children she has birthed, Sethe has the power to provide all that she thinks is good for her children, so murdering one child and attempting to murder the others in order to save them from the pangs of slavery is no small feat. Not only does it take an aberrant woman to display such an outrageous act, it also takes a woman who is bent on resisting the norm to do so. To buttress this point, I agree with scholars like Collins who are of the view that four controlling images of Black womanhood are borne as a result of the dominant ideology of slavery: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the Jezebel. These images she describes as enabling women to resist the negative evaluations of motherhood to rearticulate the power inherent in the everyday experiences of motherhood (Collins 5). This is not to suggest that mothering encompasses only these terminologies. The ideas posited by Collins are implied in various forms and call for reinterpretation from several scholars. I would interpret Linda Brent and Sethe as matriarchal mothers because they have no male figures to affirm their statutes as mothers. Linda has her children with a white man in a nearby area to avoid the constant sexual harassment from her master. On the other hand, Sethe's husband, Halle, mysteriously goes missing on the day they decide to take flight together as a family. Sethe is, therefore, left alone to escape with the children. Nevertheless, the idea of flight

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

becomes an integral part of their history. Both Linda Brent and Sethe make some form of escape in the early stages of their lives. Linda Brent escapes from her master's sexual advances by having children, whereas Sethe makes an escape to save her children from the pangs of slavery. Both forms of escape therefore are made with the sole decisions of the women involved. Sethe's killing of her child is the mark of a mother who is bent on disassociating her children from slavery in all ways possible. In the text:

> Inside, two boys bleed in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels, in the other. She does not look at them; she simply swings the baby toward the wall planks, misses and tries to connect a second time, when out of nowhere…the old nigger boy…snatches the baby from the arch of its mother's swing…But now she had gone wild…He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewing old man, but who'd tend her? Because the woman-something was wrong with her (Morrison 149-150).

It is this action that provokes the community into labelling a mother as bad; yet this same action is seen as empowerment by feminists, though it must be noted that the times and the circumstances in which these events happen are different. The stance taken by Sethe in attempting to kill all her children before they are recaptured by the slave masters is one that can only be taken by a woman who knows what is best for her children. To Sethe, infanticide becomes the only condition to portray her motherly love to her children. The appropriate response I would give to the nephew of the Schoolteacher (slave master) when he keeps asking, "What she go do that for?" (150), which most likely represents the question on the minds of all those around, can be captured in a very simple term called "mothering." This "mothering" gives Sethe the stability and nonchalance to nurse the same baby she attempts to kill moments before:

> Sethe reaches up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shakes her head. "One at a time," she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth. Baby Suggs slammed her fist on the table, and shouted, "Clean up! Clean yourself up!" They fought then…Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost…So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister. And that's the way they were when the Sheriff returned… (Morrison 152).

The ambivalence of the term 'mothering' is vividly established by Sethe through an ironical lens. The irony is that at one moment, she escapes from a slave home just to be there for her children. She refuses to die in the onion fields because of the thoughts of how her children would survive without her. Yet, there is no hesitation by the same woman in attempting to kill these same children as well as offering them breast milk. Sucking of breast milk represents as well as symbolises life for a new-born baby, as breast milk right after birth is believed to offer all the necessary ingredients needed for a baby to survive. Agreeing with Mock, breastfeeding between mother and child represents an act of a sacred state of communion, and to her, therefore, breastfeeding is the ultimate expression of maternal love (Mock 118). This act of breastfeeding is so essential for Sethe, as she orders that the baby be fed with sugar water from a piece of cloth when they are escaping so she will not forget her mother (Morrison 16). Blood, on the other hand, symbolically represents various concepts, including death. In Sethe's case, the blood on her is that of her girl, Beloved, whom she kills violently by sawing off her neck. This is to say, the bloody

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

nipple she has as a result of the murder of her baby symbolically links blood and breast milk. The juxtaposition of both life (breast milk) and death (blood) given to her baby through the bloody nipple establishes a covenant between a mother and her child, which can result in either life or death. This symbolic gesture can also be interpreted as neutralisation between life and death. Life and death are, therefore, diffused at this particular moment, bringing into question the antithetical image expected. This covenant established between a mother and her child through the infusion of breast milk and blood interprets the authority of a mother over her child and establishes the argument that a woman can give life to a child and can equally take it. A mother has unlimited control over her children and can decide their fate. The act also justifiably interprets Sethe's culpability at the time due to the dilemma she finds herself in: whether to allow her children back into slavery or kill them all to avoid it.

Linda Brent's situation is no better than Sethe's. Her life is based on the survival of her children and her capriciousness is embedded in the lives of her children. She thinks to herself, "My life was spared; and I was glad for the sake of my little ones. Had it not been for these ties to life, I should have been glad to be released by death, though I had lived only nineteen years" (Jacobs 87). As depicted earlier in Sethe's life, since these mothers attempt to shield their children no matter the consequences, there is also the idea of elimination of these same children when the mothers feel insecure regarding their lives and the lives of their children. When Linda Brent feels the lives of her children are being threatened, she says, "I thought to myself that, God being my helper, they should never pass into his hands. It seemed to me I would rather see them killed than have them given up to his power." (Jacobs 89). The killing of these children is not Linda Brent's intention in the first place; she is resolved to kill them if it becomes necessary. She plans on executing her thoughts regarding their killing and carrying their dead bodies along if it means being branded as a bad mother. The idea of going into hiding just so her children can 'have life' in the form of being sold, which to her means their father, who is a white man, can purchase them and give them a better life, gives her the boldness to go in a shed under her grandmother's house for seven years to hide from her slave master. To have life in this context means to be alive as well as to be taken good care of. To her therefore:

> To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed… Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children…this continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave (Jacobs 128).

The image depicted is that of a caged animal. The imagery evoked by her words appeals to all the senses and portrays her uneasiness in the hole. Her visual sense is expressed through the perpetual darkness she finds herself in. Her tactile sense is expressed through the rats and mice that run over her bed and the uncomfortable nature of her bed. Her auditory sense is expressed through the noises she hears, especially from her children, and her olfactory sense is expressed through the stifled air she inhales every day. This image portrayed is of an individual that is

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

denied all the important humane senses and creates sympathy for the situation that reduces the person to the status of an animal with no importance attached to any of the senses whatsoever.

The uncomfortable nature of Linda Brent's hideout deprives her of all the senses she has or can experience, but it is obvious that the love for her children keeps her going and surviving in that 'hellhole'. It is interesting to note how a woman empowered by her own instincts and decisions endures living in such a den for almost seven years with the assurance of buying freedom for her children. This den has a great impact on her life and thereafter. The question posed is how a woman can hide in a hole just underneath a house where she hears the sounds of her children each day and stubbornly restrain herself from meeting them or even revealing herself to them when it becomes dire. This marks a significant characteristic of mothering, which is obvious with both mothers. This attitude of Linda's puts both herself and her children in a very compromising situation: the psychological and emotional trauma of seeing and hearing her children each day without being able to hold them or show affection to them, and, on the other hand, her children living with the idea that their mother is dead. Yet her brazenness denies her the emotions associated with these situations:

> Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, "Your mother is here". Sometimes it appeared to me as if ages had rolled away since I entered upon that gloomy, monotonous existence. At times, I was stupefied and listless; at other times I became very impatient to know when these dark years would end, and I should again be allowed to feel the sun-shine and breathe the pure air (Jacobs 166).

These two women, Linda Brent and Sethe, do not conform to the ideals of society concerning who a good or bad mother is. Their concern is the protection of their children at all costs, and that is exactly what they do.

In discussing the tendency to be zoomorphic when the need arises, it is expedient to discuss the geographic situation of Linda Brent, which is the hole or garret. This hole, which Linda Brent has inhabited for almost seven years, has psychological as well as intellectual implications for her. A woman who has 'caved' herself for this long period of time as a form of escape will most definitely suffer from cognitive and intellectual disabilities. Amissah-Arthur theorises the concepts of 'caving' and 'caging' in his work: *Towards a Theory of the Colonialist Novel: Caving, Caging, Theft and Voicing as a Structural Grammar* and finds that the concept of 'caving', which is, being kept in a cave or being presumed to live in a cave, represents any circumstance that circumscribes a person and inhibits the exercising and enjoyment of his or her inalienable God-given rights and freedoms (Amissah-Arthur 2017). In other words, caving leads naturally to 'caging' which he defines as "shackling." In Amissah-Arthur's theory, caving and caging can take many forms, such as physical and psychic.

He stresses that the physical cave always produces psychic or intellectual disabilities and cites Plato's allegory of the cave as a classic example of the physical caving producing psychic caving for those chained in the subterranean aperture. The mental deficiency and retardation that result from caving and caging lead to a zoomorphic representation of the caved and caged. He cites the Amahagger tribe of Henry Rider Haggard's colonialist novel, *She* (1887), as an instance of caving and caging inflicting psychic deficiency and promoting animalistic behaviour (Amissah-Arthur 167). I shall

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

borrow Amissah-Arthur's concept for the present study because I discern in Linda self-caving and caging, which leads to metaphorically transforming her into an 'animal'. The slave era conditioned slaves under the impression that they were below the rank of animals. This comparison is clearly seen in Toni Morison's *Beloved*, in which the cockerel is called Mister, and in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which the pet dog is valued over a slave. The values placed on these pets over slaves by the slave masters had psychological effects on the slaves in the long run. Caving herself for such a long time, therefore, brings out the anthropomorphic tendencies in the slave mother, who unhesitatingly descends to the level of a caged animal without any concern for social norms in the attempt to save her children. She says, "My friends feared I should become a cripple for life, and I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on." (Jacobs 141)

This zoomorphic tendency is equally comparable to Stamp Paid's description of Sethe's attempt to protect her children when she sees Schoolteacher coming for them. He compares her to the hawk and describes vividly the other parts of her body as that of the bird that preys:

> So Stamp Paid does not tell him how she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed filled with just sunlight and shavings now because there wasn't any wood (Morrison 157).

The predominant image employed is the symbol of an animal archetype. Sethe is symbolised as an animal, specifically, an eagle, which uses all its predatory features to protect its young. It is expedient to mention that Linda Brent eventually leaves her cave to embark on a flight to freedom, which, though very adventurous and hazardous, is propelled by her love for her children. Juxtaposing Linda Brent and Sethe, these two slave mothers all embark on flights to freedom. Linda Brent, to get away from her children whom she fears were unsafe around her, and Sethe, to get to her children she feels are unsafe without her. The flight in both instances carves a niche for these mothers as brave and powerful but also as deviants. In totality, the flights initiate the beginning of journeys that have implications for these women. These flights nearly cost them their lives (at Snaky Swamp for Linda Brent and in the onion field for Sethe). The precariousness of these flights determines their status later in life. Should they have been caught in their flights, the focus of their plans would have been thwarted. What they are fighting for would be lost to them, and they would stop being mothers who are bent on saving their children. I argue that the flight is the pivotal point in the lives of these women and concur with Reyes that "to take flight" implies moving from slavery to political freedom (Reyes 2002). This is clearly the case for these slave mothers who are bent on obtaining freedom for their children irrespective of the consequences.

The community's misconstruction of the conduct of these women playing their mothering role has no effect on these women in their quest to achieve what they have planned. These slave mothers are misunderstood and called names by the community. In Linda Brent's case, her grandmother always attempts to portray her as a "bad mother" to her children:

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

> Whenever the children climbed on my knee, or laid their heads on my lap, she would say, "Poor little souls! What would you do without a mother? She don't love you as I do." And she would hug them to her own bosom, as if to reproach me for my want of affection; but she knew all the while that I loved them better than my life (Jacobs 102).

Linda Brent's grandmother, who is representative of the community in which Linda finds herself, has an impression of Linda as being a "bad mother" who does not care about her children. Her decisions, such as abandoning her children, are seen as weird and very unlike a mother who has the welfare of her children at heart. Her escape serves as a form of heartlessness for all and sundry even after her young children are jailed just to appeal to her senses to come out of her hiding and save them. Her slave master, Dr. Flint, voices the loud thoughts of those around when he says:

> As for their mother, her ladyship will find out yet what she gets by running away. She hasn't so much feeling for her children as a cow has for its calf. If she had, she would have come back long ago, to get them out of jail, and save all this expense and trouble. The good-for-nothing hussy! (Jacobs 115).

The comparison made by Dr. Flint between Linda Brent and her children and a cow and its calf depicts the same symbol of an animal archetype as given to Sethe, which degrades the slave mother to the lowliest of beings. This description is equated to Paul D's statement to Sethe about having two legs and not four legs. Equally, therefore, the community regards Linda Brent as an "animal." This comparison, which conveys the voice of the community, describes the animal tendencies of these mother slaves.

Sethe's action of holding herself up and walking confidently is misconstrued by the community as being the actions of a proud and arrogant person. Their attitudes depict this mentality:

> Outside a throng, now, of black faces stopped murmuring. Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers. She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all. (Morrison 152).

The quotation above depicts what I would label as the narrative 'misrepresentation' of Morrison on both Sethe and the crowd. Sethe is misrepresented as an arrogant person and a flat character who does not succumb to change or misfortune. The crowd, on the other hand, is depicted as ready to empathise with Sethe if need be but retreat upon observing Sethe's demeanour. This misrepresentation of Sethe is construed to signify the heartless and emotionless state of a slave who is called a mother and who plays a significant role in the lives of her children. The excerpt above explicitly portrays the attitude of the community towards a woman they presume to have a psychological problem. There is no discourse after Sethe is taken away except for the humming. The refusal of the community to engage in a series of discourses in an attempt to comprehend what really happened depicts their stance. To them, Sethe has flouted the status quo

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

concerning mother and child. She has behaved irrationally, and to sum up their thoughts in Paul D's words, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Morrison 165). She has been labelled as an "animal" by all standards. Her posture after the incident creates enmity between herself and the community because the community finds her posture inappropriate and portrays unrepentance. It is at this juncture that the issue of mothering, which "devours and destroys," is established (Reyes (2002). Sethe has destroyed her children and has no shame about it.

Just as Linda Brent goes through a stressful journey to secure a job in another land in order to buy her daughter back and educate her better as she feels owning herself is the only way out in protecting her children, so Sethe is prepared and willing to sacrifice about thirty minutes of her time and body for a name to be chiselled on the tombstone of her daughter.

Even in their freed lives, the urgency to administer the mothering roles is evident and very vigorous. Sethe's ten-minute sexual encounter in exchange for the name 'Beloved' to be inscribed on her murdered daughter's tombstone presupposes the conviction of a mother who wants her daughter to rest peacefully wherever she is:

> The welcoming cool of unchiselled headstones; the one she selected to lean against in tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was and sprinkled with glittering chips. Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free. Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten she could have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible – that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved (Morrison 5).

Conclusion

The community or society plays a key role in defining the characteristics of who a mother is. Despite the importance of its role in the lives of Linda and Sethe, these women take on a form of radical mothering, presumably female empowered in the fight to prevent their children being enslaved. Their attempts represent aspects of bad mothering as defined by the community at large. Amongst their mothering qualities is embracing zoomorphic identities in a quest to protect their children. Linda Brent and Sethe "become" animals not only to themselves but to the community. The effects of this change go a long way in affecting their relationships with others and even the children they are protecting. Linda Brent and Sethe, therefore, challenge the stereotypical concept of motherhood and deviate from the dominant view of the definition of a mother being one who only protects her children from harm. Their actions lead to new definitions of a mother as one who has the ability to ensure her children endure pain and, sometimes, death to express or confirm her love for them. These two characters define the term "mothering" in ways stereotypical of the African-American women who went through the era of slavery and its aftermath.

Works Cited

Amissah-Arthur, Joseph B. "Towards a Theory of the Colonialist Novel: Caving, Caging, Theft and Voicing as a Structural Grammar." University of Ghana, 2017. Web. Retrieved from <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/handle/123456789/24686>.

Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford U P, 1987.

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)

Collins, Patricia H. "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships." *Double Stitch: Black Women write about Mothers and Daughters*. Eds. Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Collins, Patricia H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.

Edwards, Arlene E. "Community Mothering: The Relationship between Mothering And The Community Work Of Black Women." *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices, and Ideologies*, Eds. A. Phoenix, A. Wollett, and E. Lloyd. London: Sage, 2005.

Green, Fiona J. "Feminist Mothers: Successfully Negotiating the Tension between Motherhood as "Institution" and "Experience." *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's of Woman Born*. Ed. A. O'Reilly. Albany: State U of New York P, 2004.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1982.

hooks, bell. *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. U.S.A: South End Press, 1984.

Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. New York: Penguin Books, 1861.

Mock, Michele. "Spitting out the Seed: Ownership of Mother, Child, Breasts, Milk, and Voice in Toni Morrison's "Beloved"". *College Literature* 23.3 (1996): 117-126. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112278>.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

Reyes, Angelita. Mothering across Cultures: Postcolonial representations. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002.

Lawson, Erica. "Black Women's Mothering in a Historical and Contemporary Perspective: Understanding the Past, Forging the Future." *Mothering in the African Diaspora*, Ed. A. O'Reilly. Canada: York U, 2000. 21-30.

Author's profile:

Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur, Ph.D, is a lecturer in the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Her research interests include African American literature, slavery studies, African literature. Recent works include: "Clandestine, Circumscribed and Coded: Sexuality in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero." Drumspeak: International Journal of Research in Humanities* 6.2 (2023): 61-73, https://doi.org/10.47963/drumspeak.v6i2.1268 and "Theorizing Black Mothering: The Road to Matriarchy," *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 10.1(2023): 1-13. **Email:** <hannah.arthur@ucc.edu.gh>/<hannah.wood-arthur@ucc.edu.gh>.

ISBN 2636-5839 (print)
ISSN 2814-2446 (online)