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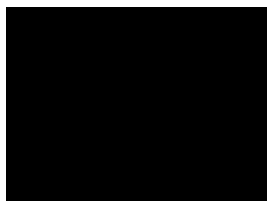


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## **ABSTRACT**

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel that gives voice to those thousands of Black women whose stories have often been erased from the history of American slavery and, thus, proves to be not only one of the most relevant works in African-American women's writing, but also a pivotal piece in contemporary literature. In her novel, Morrison presents the story of Sethe Suggs, a woman who is determined to claim freedom and control over her life in a time and place in which such a thing was not allowed for Black women. This paper will provide an analysis of said character in relation to slavery, motherhood and stereotypical images of African-American women with the purpose of illustrating her subversive nature.

Keywords: African-American, woman, slavery, motherhood, stereotype

## **RESUM**

*Beloved* de l'autora Toni Morrison és una novel·la que dona veu a totes aquelles dones negres que sovint han sigut esborrades de la història de l'esclavitud a Amèrica, demostrant ser així no només una de les obres més importants en l'àmbit de l'escriptura de dones d'ascendència Afro-Americana, sinó també una peça essencial de la literatura contemporània. En aquesta novel·la, Morrison presenta la història de Sethe Suggs, una dona que està decidida a exigir la seva llibertat i el control sobre la seva vida en un moment i un lloc en el qual aquests drets no estaven a l'abast de les dones Afro-Americanes. Amb el propòsit de demostrar la seva naturalesa subversiva, aquest treball presentarà un anàlisi sobre el personatge de la Sethe en relació a l'esclavitud, la maternitat i certes imatges estereotípiques de la dona Afro-Americana.

Paraules clau: Afro-Americà/na, dona, esclavitud, maternitat, estereotip

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This project is aimed at providing an analysis of the main character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe Suggs, that can illustrate the different ways in which one may consider her to be subversive. As a novel narrating the life of a Black slave woman, one may expect the story of Sethe to be one about sorrow, misery and despair; a story which focuses solely on the injustices that she had to face throughout her life. Instead, what Morrison presents in her text is the story of a strong African-American slave woman who is determined to claim the rights that white patriarchal society has historically deprived Black women from. As a result, *Beloved* narrates the story of a woman who subverts the limitations that have been imposed on her, and who will not surrender to slavery or to white patriarchal authority.

In order to fulfill its purpose, the first thing that this paper is going to explore is the character's evolution throughout the story, highlighting the different ways in which she challenges the hardships that white patriarchal society and slavery impose on her. Secondly, an analysis of the character in relation to her role as a mother will be provided, focusing, first, on the notion of motherhood within the Black slave community and, then, on the concept of good motherhood. Thirdly, several stereotypes that have been used to maintain the oppression of the Black woman will be explored in relation to the character of Sethe with the purpose of illustrating how she challenges them. In particular, this paper will deal with the images of the "breeder woman", the Mammy and the Black matriarch. Finally, the last part of the novel will be commented, focusing on how the protagonist is able to overcome the hardships that she is faced with and, in doing so, performs one final act of subversion.

## 2. SUBVERTING VICTIMIZATION

With the narration of the stories of the ex-slave women living under the roof of 124 Bluestone Road, Morrison's *Beloved* succeeds at exhuming the buried stories of those mothers, daughters and sisters whose humanity was denied and ripped away in a society in which colored women were relegated to a powerless and inferior position; those women that were considered to be property of a white male subject from the very moment they were born. Nevertheless, Morrison's intentions behind her text seem to go further from simply exposing and denouncing the effects that slavery had on the Black women population during said period of time in American history, as the novel also focuses on how its characters survive, deal with and rise above their enslavement. As put by Gardner (2016), "[the author] endeavors not merely to expose the wounds of slavery, but to heal them" (p. 203). While it is true that the novel engages in the retelling of those stories of suffering and injustice of its characters during their time as slaves, throughout *Beloved* one learns about stories of resistance, defiance and freedom. Hence, the reader is in front of fearless and tenacious female characters who are far from taking the position of the victim, and which Rahmani (2015) describes as "ambitious Black women characters who want to free themselves from the clutches of injustice and the white male dominated society" (p. 61). Among the diverse female figures starring in *Beloved*'s story, Sethe Suggs, the main protagonist in the story, is perhaps the clearest example of a female character refusing to spend the rest of her existence under the degrading conditions of slavery and aiming for a future better than a life marked by disgrace, indignity and humiliation. Despite her position as the Other in a white patriarchal society, Sethe disrupts the system of slavery and defies the limitations it imposes on her. She is a Black woman with a strong sense of self-determination in a world in which such basic human right is denied to her. Thus, as Gardner proposes, her actions can be read as "both agented and subversive" (2016, p. 205).

Born as a slave child in a plantation, Sethe discovers from a very young age the pain and sorrow that come with being a slave and, more specifically, a slave woman. Having to witness their children and loved ones being sold or hanged, spending their days toiling in the field and being victims of constant abuse and harassment were just part of what Sethe's mom and the rest of the slave women working in the plantation had to go through on a daily basis. However, Sethe seems to be saved from experiencing such tragic fate when she is purchased by Mr. Garner, a slaveowner with "high principles" and "smart

enough to make and call his own niggers men” (Morrison, 2010, pp. 12-13), to become a slave worker in the Sweet Home plantation at the age of thirteen. During her early days at Sweet Home, Sethe and the rest of slaves working for the Garners, consisting of a group of five men to which the protagonist refers to as the Sweet Home men, are granted a life that most colored people living in nineteenth century America would consider to be a blessing. A life in which the humanity of enslaved people is acknowledged, and they are privileged enough to have the right “to buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to” (p. 147). In the case of the female protagonist, the only slave woman working under the roof of Sweet Home, she is even allowed to marry one of the Sweet Home men of her choice and mother the children that come from such union. In comparison to what she experienced in the plantation she was born in, the Garners’ form of slavery allows Sethe to get a taste of freedom, but not enough to quench her thirst for complete liberty and independence. Even when being granted far more liberty than what was generally allowed Black people in nineteenth century America, Sethe keeps aspiring and longing for more and finds ways to defy the limitations imposed by a society that does not acknowledge her most basic rights. Hence, when she discovers there would not be a ceremony to celebrate her marriage to Halle Suggs, the man she freely chooses and wishes to marry among the Sweet Home men after they have been waiting one year for her to decide, she immediately opposes the idea of not having one just like her slaveowner did. Convinced about her entitlement to have an official wedding, “a meal maybe, where [she] and Halle and all the Sweet Home men sat down and ate something special” (p. 70), she is determined to celebrate her marriage. Therefore, she sews a wedding gown for herself made out of stolen fabrics and secretly escapes with her loved one to the cornfield in the manner of a honeymoon. It is in instances like this that Sethe’s subversiveness as a Black female slave becomes apparent, when she aims for the recognition of her dignity and is determined “to attain agency despite the degree to which it is denied to her” (Gardner, 2016, p. 204). At a time in which the minds of the Afro-American population were colonized with racist discourses to prevent them from achieving free will and from considering themselves to be worthy of it, the novel’s female protagonist seems to resist the restraints that are imposed on Black women. As Rahmani writes in her article “Black Feminism: What Women of Color Went Through in Toni Morrison’s Selected Novels”, Morrison’s female characters present different ways of reacting to the abuse and discrimination imposed on their lives by the institution of



slavery, and *Beloved*'s protagonist does so by defying it and reacting against it (2015, p. 61).

Sethe's relative freedom within the limits of Sweet Home and, in the words of her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, her "amazing luck" at having been able to fulfill her role as both wife and mother during six years of her life come to an end the moment Mr. Garner passes away and, upon Mrs. Garner's cry for help because "people said she shouldn't be alone out there with nothing but Negroes" (Morrison, 2010, p. 232), schoolteacher comes to Sweet Home to take his place. The arrival of this character at the plantation involves a drastic change in the lives of Sethe and the Sweet Home men as they lose the privileges they have been benefitting from as Sweet Home slaves and have to face the hardships and misfortunes of what slavery looks like outside the Garners' roof. Contrasting with the previous slaveowner, schoolteacher plants the seed of terror in Sweet Home with his sadistic and dehumanizing methods of asserting his power. By shattering the "illusion of security" that Mr. Garner successfully conceives for Sethe, Halle and the other four men (Furman, 1996, p. 4), he turns the lives of those under his servitude into a living hell and Sweet Home into a place where "there was not a leaf [...] that did not make [Sethe] want to scream" (Morrison, 2010, p. 7). Physical evidence of the devastating effects of servitude to schoolteacher can be found in Sethe's body, where the marks of the whipping she received from her new master formed a "chokecherry tree" (p. 18) whose trunk, branches and leaves spread all over her back "like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (p. 21). Apart from physically abusing and humiliating them, the new master in Sweet Home inflicts severe psychological damage on his slaves, opening a wound so deep in their minds and souls that it will mark them for the rest of their existence. Therefore, by means of exploring Sethe and Paul D's memories from this period of time on their lives, Morrison presents what, perhaps, could be argued to be the most devastating effect that slavery had on enslaved subjects: losing one's humanity. Using the power that he is granted as a white male slaveowner by the power structures upon which the American society of that time was build, schoolteacher takes away the humanity of those under his mastery and treats them as beings inferior to any other living creature. Thus, when Sethe and Paul D recall some of their memories under schoolteacher's mandate one of the first things that come to the latter's mind is the feeling of injustice and humiliation he felt after his new master turned him into "something else"

which “was less than a chicken”, because at least that chicken “was allowed to be and stay what he was” (p. 86).

The process of dehumanization the Sweet Home slaves are forced to undergo during their servitude to schoolteacher is mostly achieved by the slaveowner taking away the power of self-definition from them. The Sweet Home slaves had been able to nurture their ability to formulate language up to a certain extent during their time serving Mr. Garner. This “command of language” allowed them to form their identity and exercise the power of self-definition within the boundaries of the Garners’ plantation (Fuston-White, 2002, p. 465). The novel mostly illustrates this idea through the character of Sixo, “who can be most closely identified with the active, rational subject” and is able to outwit his new master in “game[s] of language and logic” (p. 465). Thus, when inquired about the stealing of a shoat by schoolteacher, Sixo does not merely claim he did not do so, but is also able to provide an explanation through which his actions become a way of benefitting the master and his plantation:

“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 crops. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.” (Morrison, 2010, p. 224)

Once schoolteacher takes this human faculty from the slaves through his verbal and physical violence and “teaches” them that “definitions belong to the definer– not the defined” (p. 225), he takes control of their identity formation processes and forces them to accept the degrading identities he imposes on them (Fuston-White, 2002, p. 465). These new identities are built upon the white man’s notion of colored people possessing animalistic features that differentiate them from white men. Hence, he keeps a record of the characteristics the Sweet Home slaves seem to manifest on his notebook, where he also writes the measures of their body and even the number of teeth in their mouths, studying them as if they were some sort of creatures unbeknownst to the white man.

Imposing this process of dehumanization on Sethe and the Sweet Home men and, thus, treating them as animals or even beasts which he believes require his “teaching” does not bring about the submission and passivity in them that schoolteacher expects. Instead, what results from imposing the “wildness” —the term which Morrison uses to refer to the inhumanity that schoolteacher’s methods instigate on their victims— on the slaves is a strong desire for freedom. It is precisely this “wildness” which, in the words of Fuston-White (2002), “becomes a site of agency for Morrison’s characters”, eventually motivating them to devise a plan to run away from the plantation (p. 466). Although the effort of the men and woman to successfully execute what at first seemed like a master plan, their escape is frustrated by schoolteacher and his pupils, the Sweet Home men ending up either killed or cruelly punished and Sethe raped and whipped. Nevertheless, the female protagonist is determined to escape from the plantation and reunite with her children, whom she has been able to send off on a train that would take them to her mother-in-law, where there will be “no notebook for [them] and no measuring string neither” (Morrison, 2010, p. 233). Believing that carrying a baby on her belly and her back hurting from the brutal flogging that it had received would prevent her from trying to run away, the white men underestimate Sethe’s resilience and determination. Even Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men she speaks to before she begins her journey to Cincinnati, does not think she will ever make it alone and under such precarious conditions. However, Sethe finds the strength and courage that may have seemed impossible for someone to pull in such an unsettling situation and turns down the preconceptions that the men may have had about her. Thus, after her loved ones have been killed, beaten or gone missing and both her body and soul have been severely harmed by schoolteacher’s cruelty, the protagonist decides to run away even if that means facing the dangers that await her outside of Sweet Home on her own.

Throughout her journey to freedom, Sethe has to go through hardships that put her physical and psychological strength to test. Alone, exhausted from what she has endured in her last days at the plantation, and in her sixth month of pregnancy, the protagonist “could not, would not, stop” even if her swollen feet cannot take the weight of her body any longer, and her thinking is hindered by the “clanging in her head” that would eventually turn into “a tight cap of pealing bells around her ears” (p. 36). While it is true that she is assisted throughout this journey by characters such as Amy Denver or Stamp

Paid, Sethe is the one responsible for the ultimate success of her escape from Sweet Home, something herself acknowledges later in the novel:

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. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. [...] 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. (p. 190)

Hence, doubting her active role in her journey to freedom because of the help she is given throughout it is to underestimate this character's agency and self-determination just like the men in the novel did when doubting she would be able to escape from Sweet Home. Sethe is the one who decides to continue to live when the thought of giving up crosses her mind throughout her odyssey to Baby Suggs' home. After all, the help she received would have been in vain if it had not been for her determination to reunite with her children and save the one she was carrying in the womb from slavery even under the most devastating circumstances.

Against Paul D's predictions, the protagonist eventually arrives in the arms of Baby Suggs and is able to enjoy "twenty-eight days [...] of unslaved life", which she describes as "days of healing, ease and real-talk" (p. 111). Nevertheless, what seemed to her as a prosperous future surrounded by her loved ones ends the moment schoolteacher arrives in 124 Bluestone Road. Upon the arrival of the slaveowner, Sethe takes her children to the woodshed and tries to murder them in an attempt to save them from living the life of a slave, only succeeding at killing her Beloved, her "crawling-already" girl. As Gardner (2016) proposes, this decision of hers to spare her children from slavery by taking their lives is, perhaps, the clearest evidence of the protagonist's agency; "the action she takes is her own, the individuality of her behavior evidenced by the shock of those around her" (pp. 203-204). Although her actions mark the beginning of the "eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" she spends living under the roof of 124 Bluestone, only with the company of Denver and the ghost of her "crawling-already" child, Sethe never loses her agency. Throughout the novel, the reader learns how the protagonist continues to be determined to choose for herself even if her actions are of "inward-sabotage" (p. 203), such as her decision to isolate herself from the community. Thus, Sethe shows herself to be the "quiet, queenly woman Denver had known all her life" (Morrison, 2010,

p. 14). The “iron-eyed” woman who, even in front of the most horrible situations, “never looked away” (p. 14).

### 3. SUBVERTING MOTHERHOOD

#### 3.1. *Black Motherhood*

Prompting its readers to reflect on the consequences that slavery had on Black women for death to be the only way a mother may spare her children from experiencing them, *Beloved* opened an important discussion surrounding the impossibility of enslaved women to fulfill their role as mothers. Although motherhood is what the female gender is generally persuaded to aspire to, not all women seem to be provided with “the tools necessary to do so successfully” (Gardner, 2016, p. 204). As Spillers (1987) explores in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, the institution of slavery forced African American people to arrange themselves into “support systems” different from what Western thought understands as “family”, that is a social configuration based on “the vertical transfer of a bloodline” (pp. 74–75). Problematizing their formation of affectional bonds and weakening their sense of kinship, slavery “forced [African Americans] into patterns of dispersal, [...] into the horizontal relatedness of language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names, and properties” (p. 75). One of the ways in which the institution of slavery succeeded at disrupting Black people’s formation of family bonds was by dispossessing African American women from the children they gave birth to and turning childbearing into “an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties” (p. 75). As enslaved subjects, Black women did not have the right to claim the babies they delivered as theirs and slave children became the possession of the slaveowner and another source of labor in the plantation. In the words of Spillers, “under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not “‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner’, though the latter ‘possesses’ it” (p. 74). Morrison mostly illustrates this harsh reality of slavery in her novel by means of Baby Suggs’ story, who witnessed how “[slave] men and women were moved around like checkers” throughout her sixty years of enslavement:

Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby’s eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped

playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (Morrison, 2010, pp. 27–28)

As an enslaved woman, Baby may give birth to children, but she “ha[s] nothing to say about [their] future” and, therefore, is denied the right to fulfill the role of a mother (Rothstein, 1987, August 26). After her first three children are ripped from her arms, she resigns herself to not showing affection for her future babies, knowing that one day or another slavery may put its hands on them. Even when it seems that she will be able to be a grandmother upon the arrival of her grandchildren and her daughter-in-law at her home, schoolteacher appears to take them with him. As she says once “her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse” after slavery takes away from her the very last piece of hope that resided inside of her: for a slave woman “there [was] no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (Morrison, 2010, p. 105). Nevertheless, this is not the only perspective from which the characters in Morrison’s novel approach motherlove, as the protagonist’s life revolves around her determination to be fulfill her role as a mother against all odds.

In *Beloved*, one learns about the stories of men and women whose experiences with slavery have taught them that loving something too much is dangerous when the thing you love can be taken away from your life at any moment, especially when it comes to a mother getting too attached to her children. On the contrary, Sethe forms strong affectional bonds with her sons and daughters. Thus, Paul D is unable to understand how Sethe, after having lived as an enslaved subject most of her life and knowing her mother-in-law’s experience as a slave mother, is still willing to love something so much as she does her daughter Denver:

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 she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one. (p. 54)

Describing it as being “too thick”, Paul D warns the protagonist about the risks of the deep love she shows towards her loved ones. Further in the novel, Sethe is once again warned about the consequences that loving something too much may entail for a Black person. This time, Ella, an ex-slave woman who helps Sethe to get to the arms of her

children and her mother-in-law once she arrives in Cincinnati, goes further in telling her not to love so intensely as she insists on the need to refrain oneself from loving at all:

[...] “When was this one born?”

“Yesterday,” said Sethe, wiping sweat from under her chin. “I hope she makes it.”

Ella looked at the tiny, dirty face poking out of the wool blanket and shook her head. “Hard to say,” she said. “If anybody was to ask me I’d say, ‘Don’t love nothing.’” (p. 108)

Upon the probability that Denver, the baby Sethe gave birth to during her escape from Sweet Home to Cincinnati, might not survive due to the precarious circumstances under which she and her mother find themselves, Ella discourages the protagonist from getting too attached to her newborn. As a slave woman, Ella already knows the pain that may come from forming strong affectional bonds with others and losing them, and she tries to prevent Sethe from experiencing it herself. However, neither Paul D nor Ella can prevent Sethe from believing that “love is or it ain’t”, because for her “thin love ain’t love at all” (p. 194). The protagonist’s “thick” love surpasses the limits that the rest of the Black community warn her against exceeding. She will not allow slavery to set boundaries to her love or take it away from her like it did to her mother-in-law, nor will she abstain from loving her sons and daughters even if that may bring more devastation to her life. Perhaps, what is more subversive in Sethe’s approach to motherhood as a Black woman living in nineteenth-century America is that she declares her sons and daughters as hers, a bold statement for a Black woman “in a slave system that said to Blacks, ‘You are not a parent, you are not a mother, you have nothing to do with your children.’” (Rothstein, 1987, August 26). As the author also commented:

Under those theatrical circumstances of slavery, if you made that claim, an unheard-of-claim, which is that you are the mother of these children—that’s an outrageous claim for a slave woman. She just became a mother, which is becoming a human being in a situation which is earnestly dependent on your not being one. (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 246)

As mentioned by Spillers in her text, the child that a slave woman gave birth to immediately became the property of the slaveowner. Nevertheless, the protagonist opposes to said conception of motherhood and fights for her right to claim Denver, Beloved, Howard and Buglar as her children. She devotes her life to the fulfillment of her

role as a mother; as the author herself states: “she merges into [her role as a mother], and it’s unleashed and it’s fierce. [...] It’s an excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender to that commitment”. However, as one learns later in the novel, “such excesses are not good” (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 252).

### 3.2. *Good Motherhood*

Sethe shows a devotion so strong for her children that they become the source of her strength and courage. As the author points out, mother love allows women to do “some rather extraordinary things” (Rothstein, 1987, August 26), which in the case of the novel’s protagonist consists in escaping from the clutches of slavery on her own, mentally and bodily exhausted, and with a sixth-month-old baby in her womb. Being driven by a mother’s eagerness to breastfeed her “crawling-already” girl, nurse her two baby boys, and put the child she has with her out of slavery’s reach, Morrison presents the protagonist’s “journey from slavery in Kentucky to the free state of Ohio as a maternal quest” (Wyatt, 1993, p. 475). Furthermore, the narration of the protagonist’s arrival at 124 Bluestone Road seems to aim at “celebrat[ing] not the achievement of freedom but togetherness” (p. 476). The author presents this moment in the story not as a fugitive slave’s long-awaited attainment of liberty, but as a woman’s fulfillment of her role as a mother. The protagonist’s narration of this part in the story reinforces this idea and makes the strength of her affectional bond for her children more evident:

I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. (Morrison, 2010, p. 190)

As stated by Morrison, a mother’s self “is suppressed or displaced and put someplace else - in the children, in the lover, in the man”, who become another part of her (Rothstein, 1987, August 26). When Sethe reunites with all of her children, the parts of her which she considers to be “the best thing she [is]” (Morrison, 2010, p. 251), she feels herself to be bigger in size because she has gathered all of the pieces of her that she had missed throughout her “maternal quest”. As a result of placing the self into her children, considered by Morrison to be what motherhood consists in (Rothstein, 1987, August 26), Sethe displays what Wyatt (1993) refers to as “maternal subjectivity”, referring to the fact



that a woman's subjectivity becomes tightly "embedded in her children" after becoming a mother (p. 476). This "maternal subjectivity" is precisely what seems to allow the protagonist to decide that, upon schoolteacher's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road, the only possible way for her to protect her children from slavery is death. The protagonist "extends her rights over her own body – the right to use any means, including death, to protect herself from a return to slavery – to the "parts of her" that are her children" (p. 476).

As motivated by her maternal instinct as her escape from Sweet Home was, the murder of Beloved and Sethe's failed attempt at doing the same with the rest of her infants problematizes her image as a mother. Condemning the protagonist's actions might seem inevitable for some, since "it is painful to search for redemption in the death of a child, or in a mother having brought about that death" (Gardner, 2016, p. 203). However, analyzing the circumstances under which Sethe commits such act might allow one to understand that "it was the right thing to do" (Rothstein, 1987, August 26). As a slave mother, surrendering to schoolteacher did not only entail her return to the miserable life of a slave woman, but it also meant the subjugation of her children to the institution of slavery. Hence, it is in front of slavery's claim of ownership over her children that, after having already managed to run away from it, death becomes the only way the protagonist might have to save her infants from enslavement once and for all. The intentionality of her actions is further explored in the novel when the author gives us access to the protagonist's thoughts: "[Beloved] had to be safe and I put her where she would be [...] I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Morrison, 2010, p. 236).

Upon the arrival of schoolteacher and his pupils at Baby Suggs' home, there only seems to be two options for Sethe: either she allows slavery to take her children and sentence them to the miserable life of a slave, or she spares them from experiencing such fate, even if murdering them is the only way she might have to do so. Determined to save her infants from having to experience what she had to endure during her last years at Sweet Home, she chooses the latter. As she states, "whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean" (p. 296). If she had not tried to take their lives, they would have lived a life of suffering as enslaved

subjects, what, in the eyes of the protagonist, who had already experienced it herself, seemed worse than death.

Despite having to carry the burden of her actions for the rest of her life, Sethe does not seem to regret having tried to end the lives of her children and, in doing so, having killed Beloved. In fact, when confronted about the issue, the protagonist resists to believe there could have been another way of saving her infants from the clutches of slavery:

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

“It worked,” she said.

“How? Your boys gone you don’t know where. One girl dead, the other won’t leave the yard. How did it work?”

“They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em.”

“Maybe there’s worse.”

“It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.” (p. 194)

Sethe is aware of the shame and guilt with which her actions are received by the rest of characters, but that does not stop her from believing that what she did was the right thing to do. In her own eyes she has not failed as a mother; she succeeded at protecting her babies from being taken back to Sweet Home and that was what she had been trying to do from the moment she sent them off to Baby Suggs and the reason why she embarked on her journey to Ohio. Nevertheless, it might still be difficult to empathize with Sethe’s actions, which lies in the fact that they seem to flout the principles upon which motherhood has been socially constructed (Gardner, 2016, p. 204). As a mother, taking the lives of her infants is something “[the protagonist] had no right to do” (Rothstein, 1987, August 26). According to the “cultural requirements of motherhood”, mothers “must be willing to sacrifice their children to the interests of the state”; they “must be willing to send their children to war, to expose them to the inhumanity of slavery, or to enforce upon them laws and regulations not in their genuine best interests” (Gardner, 2016, p. 209). By refusing to let her children live under the clutches of slavery and using death as “a milder alternative to a lifetime of slavery and mortification” (Nedae, 2017, p. 50), Sethe defies these limitations mothers are imposed on by patriarchal social structures and that not all women can meet. She is determined to be a mother at a time in which such role was denied to slave women, and in a society that condemns her actions based on the “ideological constructs for that role” (Gardner, 2016, p. 203).

## 4. SUBVERTING CONTROLLING IMAGES

### 4.1. *Controlling Images*

The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.

– Malcom X, 1962

As P. H. Collins (2002) explores in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, oppression is “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (p. 4). This has been the case of the African-American woman, who since her arrival at America has been the victim of the “intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (p. 69). Throughout history, the Black woman has been defined as the Other in America’s society and, thus, forced into a subordinate position in the binaries of “oppositional difference” by which said “intersecting oppressions” abide, such as the “white/black” and the “male/female” binaries (p. 70). To understand how subordination works in these binaries, it is important to consider the process of objectification inherent in binary thinking, which can be described as the “separation of the ‘knowing self’ from the ‘known object’” (Richards, 1980, as cited in Collins, 2002, p. 70). Through objectification, one of the halves of a binary is displaced from subjectivity and turned into object. In a white patriarchal society, the Black woman is the one to fall into the object position and the man into the subject position. The consequences of objectification are further explored by bell hooks in her work *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*:

“As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject.” (1989, as cited in Collins, 2002, p. 42)

One of the means by which America seems to have justified the subjugation of Black women throughout time is the creation of stereotypes with which “ideas about Black womanhood” are manipulated (p. 69). These stereotypes, which Collins refers to

as “controlling images”, contribute to the legitimation of the oppressing forces of “racism, sexism, poverty, and other[s]” and, thus, make them “appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 70). One can also find these stereotypes in American literature, where the figure of the Black woman has been constantly constructed resorting to images such as the “breeder woman”, the “Mammy” and the “Black matriarch”. Against such a background, it is important to take into account the literary works of Black female writers, which dismantle these “controlling images” and inform one about “Black women’s struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black wom[en]” (p. 93). The idea of African-American female writing redefining the identity of the Black woman from her own perspective is clearly embodied by many of Morrison’s literary works, but especially by *Beloved*. Placing Black women’s experience of slavery at the forefront, Morrison’s *Beloved* presents the story of an African-American slave woman subverting and dismantling the “controlling images” through which the Black woman has been defined throughout history.

#### 4.2. The “Breeder Woman”

At a time in which the economy of the country depended much upon the free labor that slaves were forced to provide, the preservation of the slave system became one of the main preoccupations of slaveowners. In such a context, childbearing became the mechanism through which slavery could perpetuate itself, since “every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves” (Collins, 2002, p. 78). This situation led to “slave owners’ intrusion into Black women’s decisions about fertility” and the sexual exploitation of female slaves, which was justified by asserting that Black women “were able to produce children as easily as animals” (p. 78). As a result, the image of the “breeder woman” appeared, one of the “controlling images” through which the identity of the Black woman was constructed during slavery times (p. 78). With the emergence of this stereotype, being a slave woman entailed one’s sexual subordination and subjugation to the institution of slavery. The image of the “breeder woman” fomented the oversexualization of Black women’s bodies and “portrayed [them] as more suitable for having children than White women” (p. 78). In this context, female slaves were treated as machines or instruments for the proliferation of a slaveowner’s property, their worth being measured depending on their reproductive capacity as if they were cattle.

In contrast to other slave women in the novel such as Baby Suggs, Ella or her own mother, whose stories illustrate how the bodies of Black women were used as “units of capital” by the institution of slavery (p. 51), Sethe’s fertility and reproductive capacity do not appear to be exploited or controlled during her time serving the Garners. Whereas the rest of slave female characters in the novel were forced to get pregnant in order to give birth to children that would provide the slaveowners with free labor, the protagonist is never explicitly used for slave breeding purposes throughout the years that Mr. Garner is the slaveowner at Sweet Home. In fact, she is able to explore her sexuality in her own terms as one learns when she recalls her first “bedding” with Halle, the man she willingly decides to marry and to have her first sexual experience with. Hence, it may be argued that during this time in her life she is free from the burden that comes with being identified with the “breeder woman” image. As Collins explores in her book, one of the main functions for which female slaves were purchased by slaveowners was childbearing (2002, p. 51). Nevertheless, Mr. Garner’s intentions when purchasing the protagonist were not based in a slaveowner’s desire to “proliferate [his] properties” (Spillers, 1987, p. 75), since he simply wanted to get a slave girl who could replace Baby Suggs in her job, which did not imply any form of sexual exploitation. As Baby herself recalls:

The Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted known. And he didn’t stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to “lay down with her,” like they did in Carolina, or rented their sex out on other farms. (Morrison, 2010, p. 165)

Furthermore, Sethe is purchased at the age of thirteen, a symbolic age since it was the time in which, as Simkin (1997) states, “child-bearing started”. However, as her memories of such time illustrate, she was never insisted on having children neither during her first years at the plantation nor the last days under the servitude of Mr. Garner. In fact, the only time childbearing seems to be discussed by the Garners takes place during a private conversation between Sethe and Mrs. Garner, in which getting pregnant is not something she seems to be forced to go through as a Sweet Home slave, but as something that will naturally come from her liaison with Halle:

“Halle and me want to be married, Mrs. Garner.”

“So I heard.” She smiled. “He talked to Mr. Garner about it. Are you already expecting?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, you will be. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” (Morrison, 2010, p. 31)

As Collins states, “slaveholders’ efforts to increase fertility encouraged Black women to elevate motherhood over marriage” (2002, p. 51). In Sethe’s case, however, marriage is prioritized over motherhood and, thus, the latter is understood as a consequence of the former and not the other way around. Furthermore, it is also important to consider Mrs. Garner’s reaction when Sethe tells her about schoolteacher and his pupils raping her. Although unable to articulate any word due to the lump in her throat, the slaveowner is clearly horrified by what she’s told as “her eyes rolled out tears” (Morrison, 2010, p. 19). It is precisely in this part of the novel in which one realizes how exploiting the sexuality of the only female slave at Sweet Home was never part of the Garners’ plans, and how different Sethe’s experience of being a slave woman during this time in her life was from that of the rest of female slave characters in the text.

The relation between Sethe and the Sweet Home men also illustrates the protagonist’s escape from the hyper-sexualized role of the “breeder woman”. As one learns through Paul D’s memories, Sethe’s arrival at the plantation causes quite a stir in the lives of the male slaves serving the Garners:

And so they were: Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man. All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl—the one who took Baby Suggs’ place after Halle bought her with five years of Sundays. (p. 13)

Being the only slave woman at Sweet Home, the protagonist immediately turns into the object of desire of all five slave men. As Collins argues, “many Black men [...] internalized the controlling images applied to Black women” which in many cases led them to participate in “Black women’s objectification as pornographic objects, and, in some cases, their own behavior as rapists” (2002, p. 148). Collins’ idea seems to resonate with the behavior of the Sweet Home men, who see Sethe only in terms of their sexual gratification. Nonetheless, what is important here is not how the men may oversexualize and objectify her, but how she does not submit to their gaze and continues to be in control of her sexuality. She makes all five slave men wait for her to pick one of them as her

lover. Hence, she frustrates their sexual desires and they have to find other ways to quench their sexual appetite. Despite being “young and so sick with the absence of women [...] that each one would have beaten the others to mush to have her”, they have to wait a whole year for Sethe to make up her mind; “a long, tough year of thrashing on pallets eaten up with dreams of her” and “of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life” (Morrison, 2010, p. 12). Moreover, when she finally decides to marry Halle, the rest of the men seem to respect her decision. As the protagonist herself recalls, she never felt threatened by any of them nor was “scared of the men beyond [the Garners’ kitchen]”, who “slept in quarters near her, but never came in the night” and only “touched their raggedy hats when they saw her and stared” (p. 27).

Nevertheless, Sethe’s control over her sexuality is challenged when schoolteacher replaces the late Mr. Garner as master of the Sweet Home slaves. Under the servitude of the new slaveowner, Sethe is forced to fulfill the role of the “breeder woman”. Throughout her memories of this time in her life, the reader learns how the protagonist is the slave which the slaveholder seems to pay more attention to. As a young slave woman with “at least ten breeding years left” (p. 177), Sethe is seen as a precious possession for schoolteacher; he sees her as a tool with which his property can be augmented in numbers. Schoolteacher’s intentions on using the protagonist for slave breeding purposes become evident when she is raped by the slaveholders’ pupils first attempt at escaping from the plantation. As the protagonist narrates, prior to raping her, the white men “dug a hole for [her] stomach so as not to hurt the baby” (p. 239); in order to protect the baby that she was carrying in her womb and whom they consider to be their property. The protagonist, however, resists to schoolteacher’s imposition of the “breeder woman” role and, before he can use her for such purposes, she escapes to where her sexuality will not be exploited and she will be able to fulfill the only role that she seems to be interested in fulfilling: the role of a mother.

#### 4.3. *The Mammy*

Another “controlling image” which is worth analyzing in relation to the character of Sethe is the image of the Mammy, which defines the Black woman as “the faithful, obedient domestic servant” (Collins, 2002, p. 72). Embodying “the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power”, said stereotype has been historically used “to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and [...] to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (p. 72). As a result,

it became “the normative yardstick [...] to evaluate all Black women’s behavior” (p. 72); the criteria through which the actions of the African-American female population have been, and still are, analyzed throughout history. As Wallace-Sanders (2009) argues, the figure of the Mammy became present in American literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (p. 2). In such context, works such as Morrison’s *Beloved* become essential as they dismantle said “controlling image” and give voice to those individuals who have been or are affected by it. In this case, Morrison does so through the character of a slave woman whose values and behavior differ from the Black woman which the Mammy has commonly represented and been associated with.

Although she may be respectful towards the slaveowners and devoted to her labor in the plantation, during her time as a Sweet Home slave, Sethe defies the obedient and submissive role of the Mammy. On the one hand, the protagonist’s dissidence and resistance to the limitations which slavery imposes on her life contrast with the Mammy’s faithful obedience to the slaveholder’s family. Whereas the Mammy represses her own self in order to fulfill the servile role which is imposed on her and her life revolves around the well-being and interests of others, Sethe’s actions never seem to be influenced either by the Garners or schoolteacher; she continues to fight for her subjectivity. In fact, as mentioned in the first section of this paper, the protagonist’s strong sense of self-determination leads her to disobey both slaveowners in a couple of occasions. Undoubtedly, her most relevant act of disobedience is her escape from Sweet Home, which clearly opposes the Mammy’s resignation to a life of self-neglect and oppression under the servitude of White people. On the other hand, Sethe also differs from the image of the Mammy in the fact that she does not display the gratification which the latter finds in her work as either a Black female slave or a maid working for a White family. As Wallace-Sanders (2009) argues, apart from “her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice” or “her self-deprecating wit”, one of the most important “stereotypical attributes” assigned to the Mammy is “her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites” (p. 2). In contrast, *Beloved*’s protagonist does not seem to be pleased with living the life of a slave. The Garners’ subdued form of slavery may allow her to live a somewhat privileged life in comparison to other female slaves in the story, but that does not seem reason enough for her to give up on aspiring for a life where she is not property of a White person. As one learns through her memories, she tries to “feel like some part of [her work at Sweet Home] was hers, because she wanted



to love the work she did, to take the ugly of it”, which usually consisted in “pick[ing] some pretty growing thing and t[aking] it with her” (Morrison, 2010, p. 27). Whereas the Mammy “accept[s] her subordination” and “knows her ‘place’ as obedient servant” (Collins, 2002, p. 73), Sethe does not accommodate herself to the inferior position she is forced into in a white patriarchal slave society and tries to find ways to rise above it and escape.

Sethe’s subversion of the Mammy image can be further illustrated by taking into account her role as a mother. As Collins proposes, one of the ways in which the presence of said image in US culture and society has interfered in the lives of the African-American female population is by trying to redefine “Black maternal behavior” (2002, p. 73). Under the archetype of the Mammy, the Black woman is given the role of caretaker of White children, whom she “lov[es], nurtur[es], and car[es] for [...] better than her own” (p. 72). In the case of Sethe, however, this idea is problematized by the fact that neither the Garners nor schoolteacher have offspring, avoiding her having to perform said role during her time at Sweet Home, and by her deep affection and devotion towards her own children. Moreover, the Mammy image also dispossesses African-American women from their sexuality. Being labelled “as an unsuitable sexual partner for White men” and “typically portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features”, the figure of the Mammy is commonly an asexual Black woman (p. 84). However, as her relationships with Halle and with Paul D illustrate, Sethe does not abstain from exploring her sexuality neither during her time at Sweet Home nor throughout her life as a free woman. Furthermore, the image of the Mammy encouraged African-American women to “transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammied jobs” and to “their assigned place in White power structures” (p. 73). Nevertheless, Sethe resists the pressures to “become [an] effective conduit[t] for perpetuating racial oppression” and saves her sons and daughters from having to live under the clutches of slavery (p. 73). In fact, her opposition to letting her children become enslaved subjects and live the degrading life that comes with it is what motivates her to murder them once schoolteacher and his pupils set their feet in Baby Suggs’ home. As Gardner (2016) argues, Sethe “chooses to end life precisely to avoid perpetuating her own enslaved ‘legacy’ in the life of her daughter”; since she cannot “‘pass down’ freedom to [them], she refuses to pass down anything at all” (p. 205).

#### 4.4. *The Black Matriarch*

As Collins proposes, “the mammy image by itself cannot control Black women’s behavior” and, thus, a new “controlling image of Black womanhood” emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Black matriarch (2002, p. 74). In order to “regulate Black women’s behavior” and “influence White women’s gendered identities”, said stereotype portrayed African-American women as “failed mamm[ies]”; as “overly aggressive, unfeminine women” who “allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands” (p. 75). The main reason behind the Black matriarch’s key-role in perpetuating the oppression of the Black woman lies behind white patriarchal authority’s use of it to force her to “[her] proscribed rol[e] as subordinate helpmat[e] in [her] famil[y] and workplac[e]” (p. 77). Many consider Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* as the text which brought about the ideas behind “the Black matriarchy thesis” (p. 75). In his text, Moynihan “argue[s] that African-American women who failed to fulfill their traditional ‘womanly’ duties at home contributed to social problems in Black civil society” (p. 75). Consequently, the image of the Black matriarch was imposed on those “African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant” (pp. 75 - 77).

Early in the novel one learns about Sethe being a strong independent Black woman. Denver’s description of her as a “quiet, queenly woman” who “never looked away” successfully captures her character:

The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer’s restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either. And when the baby’s spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away. She had taken a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, wiped away the blood and saliva, pushed his eye back in his head and set his leg bones. (Morrison, 2010, p. 14)

The protagonist's strength and self-sufficiency may lead one to immediately tie her with the figure of the Black matriarch. After all, her situation is similar to the woman which said “controlling image” describes: she is a single mother who rejects the passive role which society tries to impose on her. Nevertheless, the love and affection that she shows

towards the men in her life contradicts the aggressive and emasculating image of the Black matriarch. Hence, when Paul D expresses his desire to “make a life” with her and her daughter in Cincinnati, she willingly accepts:

“Sethe, if I’m here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, ’cause I’ll catch you, girl. I’ll catch you ’fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out. [...] We can make a life, girl. A life.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Leave it to me. See how it goes. No promises, if you don’t want to make any. Just see how it goes. All right?”

“All right.” (p. 21)

Sethe sees the arrival of Paul D to 124 Bluestone Road as “a good sign”; as hope for a better future other than spending the rest of her days secluded from the rest of the community with Denver and the ghost of her “crawling-already” daughter. Contrary to the Black matriarch, she allows the “last of the Sweet Home men” to protect and to take care of her, feeling relieved that someone “was there to catch her if she sank” (p. 21). Furthermore, the appearance of Paul D in her life as a free woman causes Sethe to show her most vulnerable side, which clearly contrasts with the emotionless and tough figure of the stereotypical Black matriarch:

Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. [...] And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else’s hands. (p. 20)

Showing the “chokecherry-tree” that extends over her back and sharing the story behind it, Sethe allows her vulnerability to come to the surface in front of Paul D. Moreover, she lets her guard down and allows Paul D to relieve her from the burden that she has been carrying all along with her, what she describes as leaving “the responsibility for her breasts [...] in somebody else’s hands” (p. 20).

## 5. SETHE'S FINAL ACT OF SUBVERSION

The strength and tenacity which characterizes Sethe starts to fade away with the coming back from the dead of her daughter Beloved, who suddenly appears one evening on the steps of 124 Bluestone Road in the body of a “poorly fed” girl. Contrary to the strong woman capable of enduring and surviving the dehumanizing consequences of slavery that she had previously showed herself to be, Sethe begins to be consumed by the meanness and greediness of Beloved, which eventually turns her into a passive and submissive individual. To explain said change in the protagonist it is important to take into consideration how Beloved’s return raises questions about Sethe’s motherhood. Sethe’s complete immersion into the mother role leads her to develop what Wyatt refers to as “maternal subjectivity”, which causes her to “experie[n]c[e] her own existence only in relation to her children’s survival” (1993, p. 476). In other words, her subjectivity is so attached to her sons and daughters that she can only see and define herself as being the mother of her children, which resonates with Gardner’s idea that, as mothers, “women are expected to subordinate the self [to motherhood]” (2016, p. 206). As a woman who pours her heart and soul into trying to fulfill her role as mother even if such thing was challenging for Black female slaves, Sethe “subordinate[s] the self” and prioritizes the well-being of her children over hers (p. 206). Absorbed into motherhood, then, she becomes obsessed with taking care of Beloved. Eventually, the daughter’s hunger for affection and her seeking of attention get so demanding that exhaustion begins to hit the mother:

Listless and sleepy with hunger Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved—her lineless palms, her forehead, the smile under her jaw, crooked and much too long—everything except her basket-fat stomach. She also saw the sleeves of her own carnival shirtwaist cover her fingers; hems that once showed her ankles now swept the floor. She saw themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out. (Morrison, 2010, p. 285)

Sethe’s immersion into motherhood reaches such extremes that she completely surrenders to the taking care of Beloved. As Denver narrates, the protagonist neglects the rest of her duties, such as going to work, and even renounces to taking care for her own well-being, as the only thing that seems to please her is meeting Beloved’s greedy demands. What

Morrison is trying to explain with such turn of events in the story is what the protagonist herself already knew and actually told Paul D when he suggested they should have another child: that “[u]nless carefree, motherlove was a killer” (p. 155).

Seeing the protagonist slowly dying from hunger and exhaustion and “broke[n] down [...] from trying to take care of [Beloved] and make up for [her past actions]” (p. 286) may problematize one’s conception of her as being subversive. Indeed, throughout the last pages of the novel there does not seem to be any trace left of the strength she had been showing up until that point in the story, and she eventually requires the help of others to escape from the vicious cycle of abuse and violence she is caught up in with Beloved. However, to disregard her subversiveness only because of the vulnerable and defenseless position she finds herself in the last pages of the text may be a very rushed assumption to make, as it underestimates the resilience and strength of her character and the sacrifices that she had to make in her life. As Morrison states, “Sethe makes it, she’s tough, but some things are beyond endurance and you need some help” (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 250). Under such claim, what the purpose of the author with the last section of the novel seems to be is to tackle the necessity for the Black community to aim for togetherness. As Suero Elliott (2000) proposes, Morrison’s novel illustrates how “[a]ttempts at self-liberation fail when they are not founded on mutual trust between individuals or support from community” by “delineat[ing] a process of self-liberation through communal support within the colonial context of slavery” (p. 182). Even if Beloved is the reincarnation of her late daughter, she is also the embodiment of the African-American experience of slavery, what the author herself already mentioned when being interviewed about the novel:

“I wanted [Beloved] to be [the African-American’s] past,” she said, “which is haunting, and [Sethe’s] past, which is haunting —the way memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it head on. But I wanted that haunting not to be really a suggestion of being bedeviled by the past, but to have it be incarnate, to have it actually happen that a person enters your world who is in fact — you believe, at any rate— the dead returned, and you get a second chance, a chance to do it right.” (Rothstein, 1987, August 26)

Sethe is incapable of escaping from the clutches of such past not because of her deteriorating condition, but owing to the fact that, as a collective duty, it requires the effort and participation of the community as a whole. Hence, it is only when the Black

women of Cincinnati, who had ostracized the protagonist for the last eighteen years, decide to help the women of 124 Bluestone Road, that Sethe will be able to finally free herself from the “demon-child” and, thus, from slavery. It is precisely in this moment in the novel, when the community decides to stop holding grudges for the past and to help Sethe, that the importance of togetherness within the Black community seems to be more explicitly foregrounded:

Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison, 2010, p. 308)

This picture of the community coming together with “thirty neighborhood women” standing in front of 124 and joining their forces to expel the “demon-child” closes with a strong sense of togetherness as the protagonist “run[s] into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind” (p. 309).

Although the ghost of Beloved, and, with her, the past of the African-American community, is expelled from 124, Sethe is left in such a deteriorating condition that there does not seem to be hope for her. Lying down in the same bed in which, feeling a similar exhaustion and weariness, Baby Suggs passed away, the protagonist seems to have given up on life as there does not seem to be any energy left in her to hold onto it. Worried about her health, then, Paul D decides to visit her:

To the right of him, where the door to the keeping room is ajar, he hears humming. Someone is humming a tune. Something soft and sweet, like a lullaby. Then a few words. Sounds like “high Johnny, wide Johnny. Sweet William bend down low.” Of course, he thinks. That’s where she is—and she is. Lying under a quilt of merry colors. Her hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow. Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is. There is too much light here in this room. Things look sold. (p. 319)

The vision of Sethe, the “queenly woman”, “s[itting] around like a rag doll” (p. 286) shocks Paul D, who is determined to help her. During the short exchange of words that takes place in that moment between the two of them, the protagonist makes reference to events from her past. Thus, the first thing that she talks about when Paul D comes into the room where she is lying down is how “[schoolteacher] couldn’t have done it if [she] hadn’t made the ink” (p. 320) and, as he offers her his help, she asks him whether he will “count her feet” (p. 321) as the slaveholder did at Sweet Home. Her motherly devotion to Beloved seems to have caused Sethe to be stuck on an interior battle with her past, a fight that she cannot win on her own and, thus, will require the help of the Black community once again. Hence, it is not until she accepts the help from Paul D that, as Suero Elliott states, she can aim at “self-liberation” (2000, p. 182):

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?” (p. 322)

With the help of Paul D, the protagonist finally realizes that she is her “best thing”; she is able to put an end to the repression of the self she had to make as a mother. Thus, Sethe’s subversiveness comes to the surface for the last time in the novel as she performs what, perhaps, can be argued to be her most subversive act: achieving self-liberation despite the circumstances under which she finds herself. As the protagonist herself mentions, “[f]reeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (p. 112); she had been physically freed from slavery all those years, but it was not until said moment in the novel and with the help of the community that she claims her “freed self”.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In *Beloved*, Morrison presents the story of a Black slave woman who does not conform to her status of victim in white patriarchal society; an African-American woman who “had to make some choices about slavery, about motherhood, about love, about parenting” and, thus, “[is] anything but a victim” (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). Even during her time as an enslaved subject, she keeps aiming for the right to self-determination and finds ways to challenge the restrictions that are imposed on her. If one considers the social and historical

background in which the story is set, her determination to decide for herself and her resistance to submit to the oppressing forces of racism and sexism renders her subversive.

Analyzing Sethe in relation to motherhood illustrates further the subversiveness implicit in her actions. On the one hand, by refusing to allow slavery to claim the property of her children and by pouring her heart and soul into her role as a mother, which leads other characters to warn her about the dangers of her “thick love”, she challenges the notion of motherhood for Black women living in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Whereas the rest of female characters give up on their roles as mothers, Sethe is determined to be a mother in a time and place in which such a thing was almost impossible to accomplish by the African-American female population. On the other hand, her decision to put an end to the lives of her children, instead of surrendering to the slaveowner and letting her sons and daughters spend the rest of their lives as enslaved subjects, defies general understandings of good motherhood. Consequently, Sethe proves once again to be a woman that challenges the restraints that are imposed on her life and who is determined to make her own decisions, even if that means losing the trust of the rest of the people in Cincinnati.

Equally, the protagonist subverts the stereotypes around which the identity of the Black woman has historically been built with the aim of prolonging the oppression of African-American women. Morrison provides her readers with the story of a woman who resists submitting herself to “controlling images” such as those of the breeder woman, the Mammy and the Black matriarch. In doing so, the author puts into question the veracity of said stereotypes and presents a Black woman who escapes from said images and, thus, thinks, acts and expresses herself in her own terms without submitting to the roles that are tried to be imposed on her.

Sethe’s strong sense of self-determination starts to fade away with the arrival of her daughter Beloved. Consumed by the greediness and meanness of the latter, the protagonist turns into a passive and vulnerable individual that contrasts with the proud and strong woman that she had been shown to be throughout the first sections of the novel. Despite her deteriorating condition, she is able to survive and escape from the clutches of Beloved, who does not only represent her “crawling-already” daughter, but also the spirit of slavery. This time, however, Sethe requires the help of the rest of the community, which hints at the author’s insistence on the necessity for the Black community to aim at togetherness. After she receives the help of the Black women from Cincinnati and Paul



D, she performs one last act of subversion as she finally claims her freed self and, thus, achieves self-liberation.

To conclude, it is important to mention the relevance of texts such as *Beloved*, since they challenge the narratives about African-American women, and specially slave women, that have historically been imposed and which have contributed to sustain the oppression of the Black woman. As Angela Davis states, “it was an extraordinary turning point in the history of [America] and [...] the history of the world because [Morrison] urged [the world] to imagine people who were slaves as human beings. Individuals with subjectivity who also loved, who also had imagination even when they were subjected to the most horrendous modes of repression” (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). Sethe and her story give voice to the often-forgotten figures in American history; they make the world listen to the silenced voices of thousands of Black women who had to suffer the consequences of slavery and were never given the chance to speak on behalf of themselves. In doing so, *Beloved* captures the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, and the sadness and the happiness that marked the lives of those Black women living in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, but, most importantly, it gives them a chance to be heard.

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