OTHERHOOD, DEATH AND THE REMAKING OF AN IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S "UNBALANCED" WORLDS

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Abstract: s Toni Morrison conjured, "There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me. . . . Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal «other.»."[1] *It is the force demonstration of a writing which explores burdens and suffering, the dark hallow of an inner turmoil sometimes bordering insanity, sometimes bordering self-dissolution, but also, sometimes giving birth to higher worldviews, reshaping the unknowable through death and living. The precarious balance between living with guilt and the guilt of living takes Morrison's female "explorers" beyond themselves, in order to become sacrifices of their own determination. The multiple expressions of motherhood and womanhood are therefore dangerously juxtaposed in Beloved, Sula, Song of Solomon, A Mercy, and Paradise, declining the chanced appeal to the silence of the mind. The constructs against which Morrison's heroines are defined are enrooted in African myths and human sacrifices reasoning for the breaking of the chains or the engulfing mysteries of insanity.*

Keywords: Motherhood, black womanhood, myth, alternative realities, trickster

The Black Woman, according to Joyce Ladner, *suffers from the twin burden of being Black and female*. [2] It is a double jeopardy which has haunted, tormented, and also, paradoxically, liberated black women.

Sethe (*Beloved*, 1987) is, first of all, a traumatized human being. Having lost her mother before the age of twelve, Sethe has been moving in a closed continuum between the lack of knowledge of her mother and the social obliteration as a generalized experience of a slave in South Carolina. The cycle of a-socialization was doomed to trigger a kind of disjunction[3] between the self in searching for wholeness and the restricted role of the mother.

Sethe is also a mother, shackled by the lack of communication and experience with the real life to a role which must obliterate her individuality as a woman, the recourse to black identity and slavery markedly constricting her sum of choices to the only one redeeming her children: death as a rebirth. The killing of her first child becomes the sign and substance of her love, and in a reconstructed reality, her murder becomes the absolute question of re-creating the interplay of identity and non-being.

Motherhood comes as an experience of the psyche's total surrender to a belief containing the good not to be found in the surrounding reality. Sethe chooses to end the life of her children in order to ensure them a better place. This is the ultimate alteration of the maternal complex, brought by the realization of one's lack of humanity. She seems to believe

[1] Bill Moyers, *Toni Morrison: On Love and Writing,* presented by WNET/New York and WTTW/Chicago, 1990, Public Affaurs Television, Inc., reprinted by Truthout, 3 May, 2012, http://truth-out.org/video/item/8886-toni-morrison-on-love-and-writing.

[2] Ladner Joyce, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1972.

[3] Sandra Mayfield, *Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Psychological Reading*, *Journal of Scientific Psychology,* January 2012

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that she is assisting their passage into another state of being, [4] whose core is made more appealing by the hope of liberty.

Her identity is limited by her choices to the reign of motherhood, and her psyche will from this moment onward oscillate between motherhood and childless. This conflict will trigger the incidence of the Child, the life-consuming child who would seek revenge altering Sethe's perception upon the world. The aftermath of her murder will find Sethe still limited to the matriarchal complex, unable to view herself as a more laborious concept; she denies herself an identity as Sethe. It is Paul D the one called to show her the limitless vision of a Sethe exiting for herself, and not for her children. In Paul D's recognition that he wants to build a shared past with Sethe, she will finally be able to recover her Ego, by referring to the Other. But it takes the intervention of a man, the second half of Jung's androgen, to construct a whole being, because, as Paul D 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?». [5]

Seethe, the mother, hears hummingbirds, the flight as a return to the ancestral origins of Africa, and her child's death becomes the perfect escape into the world where their ancestors would be free. The myth of the flight, whether in a symbolic form, or in human forms, will frequently occur in the works of Toni Morrison, signifying as in Sethe's psyche, the last resort to a recognition of the self.

The Sethe found by Paul D after eighteen years is a flame of passionate motherhood. She loves her second daughter, Denver, so much that the male protagonist is intrigued by her depth of feeling. And his wisdom as a slave tells him:

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. [6]

Sethe reaches an equilibrium between Paul D and Denver and the reconstruction of the self seems to finally set the equation of meaning. At least, the determination to conjure a peace of mind seems to "dwell" in Sethe's psyche. But the mental processes are not so easily disarmed and the past returned to haunt the killer/liberator mother. The murdered child returns and with her, the Jungian shadow inhabits the empty place in the motherly heart, the empty place in which the turmoil oscillates between reason and insanity. In this place, in the dark abyss of the subconscious, the image of the past, the crime and the lost love are trying to reconcile with each other.

For Sethe, Beloved is her daughter returned from the land of the lost to give her the chance of justifying her extreme measure in bestowing a sense of freedom. For Paul D, Beloved is a psychological figment of a turned-apart world in which reality is ultimately altered under the tension of inner forces.

Sethe sees in the second Beloved a new chance to happiness and fulfillment of her meaning as a mother.

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[4] Carmen Gillespie, *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison. A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008, p. 30.

[5] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Penguin Group, Penguin Putnam Inc., New York, USA, 1998, p. 273-274.

[6] *Idem*, p. 45.

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Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing... My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped us from getting there, but they didn't stop you from getting here. Ha, ha.[7]

The shadow appears in beloved as an all-devouring malignant entity, seen alternatively as a construct of Sethe's psyche, or as a real human, escaped from the ship of slaves. It could be perceived as a symbol of the past, but all the same as a doppelganger of Sethe, of the mother guilty of killing her child, a non-force trying to effect the purgatory of a dissociated mind.

Beloved is *the trickster, the undifferentiated psyche which hardly left the animal level*[8]. Seethe perceives Beloved as a type of reality, one which, despite challenging the knowledge of her death, succeeds in breaking down the barriers of Sethe's rationality, and embodies a real person. The trickster Beloved represents the altered personality of Sethe, or the demon returned to take revenge, even a human being saved from the Middle Passage. Whatever her shapes as a trickster, she does have some therapeutic characteristics: her devouring of Sethe triggers the awakening of Denver, the symbol of the future

The fear that destabilizes Eva Peace, in *Sula* (1975), is the other side of this coin of motherhood; the one of returning to the state of simple and exclusively mother, a bond that would trigger, so Eva fears, her dysfunctional identity. Asked what determined her decision to kill Plum, she answers: "(…) Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts... and messing up his pants again… I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb... I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again."[9]

Both Sethe and Eva are absorbed by forces beyond their control. [10] And their excessive and abnormal love, a love born in the darkness of sub-human will and fight for a inner strength, will end up in the same extreme act, the murder of a child. Eva sacrifices part of her body in order to feed her family, Sethe sacrifices her entire mind in order to ensure a free life for her child. Sethe is a sublimated Eva, through which the hardship and the engulfing injustice of the slavery become the darkness beyond which the human spirit and mind can no longer maintain their integrity.

One of the most deliberate and strong images in African American literature is that of the "outraged mother." She "bears witness" to the drama of African American people, robbed by their individuality, their past and their voice. This mother is the symbol of the battle, a battle for the survival of a black identity. She is the law, the scribe and the army of a nation, and she will never cease to outcry the despair of her without-history children.

One of the most imposing of all outraged mothers in fiction, Pilate embodies the heroism, self-sacrifice, and the supernatural attributes of her historical and mythical counterparts.[11]

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[7] Toni Morrison, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 124.

[8] Carl Gustav Jung, *Archetypes of the collective unconscious*, in: *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 9, Part 1, 2nd ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, pp. 3-41, quoted in http://www.voidspace.org.uk/psychology/jung_abstracts.shtml.

[9] Toni Morrison, *Sula*, New York: New American Library, 1973, p. 71-72.

[10] Laurie Vickroy, *The Force Outside/The Force Inside: Mother-Love and Regenerative Spaces in Sula and Beloved*, in Marla W. Iyasere, ed., *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula, Selected Essays and Criticisms*, 2nd volume, New York: Whiston Publishing Company, 2000, p. 298.

[11] Joanne Braxton, *The Outraged Mother*, reprinted from *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andre Nicola McLaughlin, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990, *S&F Online*, www.barnard.edu/sfonline.

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Pilate (*Song of Solomon*, 1977) exists through herself, she doesn't need a man or a social kinship because she has the strength and the inner resources to live in a world constructed by herself only for herself. The woman without a navel is "believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel."[12]

Her entire personal history is in a brass box worn as an earring. Her clothes are symbols of her resolute distancing from men and women alike. Long-sleeved, long-skirted dress, unlaced men's shoes, a non-feminine, and yet non-masculine attire, marking only the belonging to human race, as an androgyny's would. She has chosen a lover, as an in-breeder in searching for the perfect heritor, from a "colony of Negro farmers on an island off the coast of Virginia," and when she became pregnant, she "refused to marry the man" in order to protect the secret of her continuous flesh. Her fierce independence is the gate to her individuality, an individuality rooted in a deep sense of her own self. She doesn't need to measure against somebody, or against the scale of a social group because all the knowledge is in herself. She is the feeler, not the interpreter. The darkness in Pilate's heart is a too-bright light, at the perception of which the human eye recoils within itself.

But deep inside her incomprehensible soul reside the power of a goddess, a mother earth, an ancestral matriarchal symbol. When danger threatens her daughter, Pilate becomes a fearful force of nature, defending Hagar with all her determination sublimated from her motherhood, a motherhood which obliterates any other motivation or restrain engaged in the self-preservation.

[A]pproaching the man from the back, she whipped her right arm around his neck and positioned the knife at the edge of his heart. She waited until the man felt the knife-point before she jabbed it skillfully, about a quarter of an inch through his shirt into the skin. Still holding his neck, so he couldn't see but could feel the blood making his shirt sticky, she talked to him. [13]

The knife becomes a symbol of will, a skill driven by determination and the desire of protecting the child. The mother in extreme anguish, but a mother with the wisdom and the desire to make the enemy comprehend that he is the source, and the source can always be constrained between boundaries of human volition instead of being destroyed.

Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. And you know how mama's are don't you? You got a mama, ain't you? Sure you have, so you know what I'm talking about… We do the best we can, but we ain't got the strength you men got… You know what I mean? I'd hate to pull this knife out and have you try some other time to act mean to my little girl. Cause one thing I know for sure: whatever she done, she's been good to you. Still, I'd hate to push it in more and have your mama feel like I do now…[14]

And in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison depicts a woman who, out of her absolute kindness, had nothing. She gave everything away, and "while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it."[15] The gesture of giving is sufficient enough for assuring the frame in which Pilate's contribution to the Other's welfare could be delineated. But despite her benefactions, despite her openness to

[12] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* , New York: Random House, 1977, p. 95.
[13] Toni Morrison, *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 93-94.
[14] *Idem*, p. 94.
[15] *Idem*, p. 39.

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others' impoverished present, despite her freely assumed engagement in searching for an investment of her power and abnegation, Pilate is too different, too hard to convey in a sum of simple characteristics. She is somehow above and beyond common suppositions about your generous neighbor.

And as Morrison reminds us, "women who are self-assured and independent are actually feared, shunned, and treated as though they are evil." Pilate will be perceived as alienated, even her symbol of belonging to a different realm will imprint unto her the deep scars of lack of human understanding. So in trying to share her wisdom, wisdom so ancient as to become archetypal, Pilate remains in the primal soliloquy of motherhood and womanhood.

One of Morrison's "good, normal, loving" mothers, *minha mãe*[16] (*A Mercy*, 2008), decides to send away her daughter, hoping she would prevent the sexual abuse hovering upon her destiny. But the mother, as pure and motherly her reasons may have been, in her lack of communication triggers a negative, long-pervading and mentally-abusive response in her daughter, who translates and internalizes the sacrificial liberation as abandonment. The sorrow and the deep wound opened in the girl's soul becomes obvious in the repetition of the pronoun *me*, like an incantation conjuring up the revision of her psychological imprint.

(…) forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me.[17]

Being both slaves, the options are close to zero for the mother. But, because she acknowledges that *Sir* has "no animal in his heart."[18] There was a chance her daughter to be saved from a destiny resembling hers: rape, cruelty, and lack of horizon. Florens is too young to understand the sacrifice her mother was forced to assume, as the renunciation to a child is a torture of the mind not for the strongest, but for the handicapped souls. Perceiving the estrangement from her mother as a stern abandonment, Florens will preserve for her entire life an altered perception of what it means to be a mother, a nourisher and a provider: "mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose (…). Holding the little boy's hand." [19] *Minha mãe* keeps the infant with her, even if the choice is the most painful and tormenting decision a woman could make. And one that will mark them both, mother and daughter, for life. The mother will never escape the feeling of guilt, anguish and integrity, she will remain forever haunted by the desire to explain her reasoning, her "abandoning her daughter." Florens' mind and soul will be all her life obliterated by the anguish of having children, and being forced to abandon them.

Florens' mother is a prototype of the enslaved black mother, a mother deprived by her motherhood, with a truncated spirit and a vicious need to turn against her own psyche. The lack of confidence in herself and in any kind of relationship will exacerbate the maternal complex conjuring the insanity of her mind. The jealousy deeply embedded in her heart from that moment in which her mother said "take her..." will culminate in violence, violence against a child, a surrogate of the brother for which "she was traded," or so she thinks. The child becomes a competitor, challenging for the second time in her life, her right to love and to be loved. Because she fears the danger of being once again banished. From the moment she sees the boy, Florens predicates: "This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering

[16] *minha mãe* = Portuguese for *my mother*.
[17] Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, Inc, 2008, p. 7.
[18] *Idem*, p. 163.
[19] *Idem*, p. 8.

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around my mother's dress hoping for a hand that is only for her little boy…. Both times are full of danger and I am expel."[20]

This reiteration of the "abandonment" which is not an abandonment, in the proper sense, but only the altered perception of the pain of a hurt girl, a scared, lonely and eventually psychologically deformed human being, this second treason is undoubtedly the triggering element of a chain of violence with roots in the first gesture of the *Minha mãe*, the enslaved mother trying to save both her children in the only way she knows how. Denying them and in this way denying herself.

Florens evinces a disturbed perception of the reality presented to her troubled psyche, her own memories and reliving the past experiences determining her to transfer upon the boy her feelings from the past: "He is silent but the hate in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This cannot happen. I feel the clutch inside. This expel can never happen again."[21]

Florens will hurt the boy, the brother of the past, because he is competing with her for a share in the affection that should be exclusively hers. In her trying to overcompensate for her life lacking in motherly safety and warmth, she sees the same kindness her mother exhibited for the younger child as reflected in the relation of Florens' lover and the abandoned boy. And Florens is unable to sustain one more shock of alienation, as she perceives in her distorted reality. She snaps. What she couldn't do to her brother, because she was still young, innocent and sane, she tries to inflict upon his surrogate. And paradoxically, the lover's rejection of Florens takes place "not because he favors the boy but because he has seen the violence inside her, bred and fostered within slavery and that system's forcible abandonment by her mother."[22]

In her mother's attempt to save Florens, as in her lover's enterprise in expressing pure kindness, we find a drama of sacrificial depth, and the depth of the rupture resides in the acknowledgement of not ever knowing the true valences of the gesture will be correctly understood.

And as the reader learns, the fear of the misunderstood mother was not without reason. Florens sees the event in the past as the locus of her incipient destruction. She considers her mother responsible for the evil brought upon her by a life of unsuccessful relations. She is contextualizing in the light of the out-rootedness, and the causal factor in triggering hatred and lack of communication is the very silence of the moment in which she was denied the reasoning within which her experience would have ceased to be a punishment. As a result, the victim will become the punisher, and the ordeal of inflicting pain will drive her more and more into the darkness of alienation.

Florens cannot conjure a meaning in her past, and lacking any markings on which to sustain the belonging to a family, she becomes alienated, she feels banished from the order of normality and starts acting as a stranger, but a stranger whose individuality is more aggressive in facing love, than in fighting hatred. She never learns how to belong to a relationship, how to trust another human being; she never learns what her mother knew – that love doesn't come without sacrifices. And as Amanda Putnam concludes: "(…) and so the innocent and self-martyring act of rescue from the mother becomes also an act of violence, setting in motion her daughter's future brutality and ultimate self-destruction."[23]

The demons here are the unspeakable words, the words that should have been told, but didn't find the means of being spoken. The cultural annihilation and the personal insecurity

[20] Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, p. 137.
[21] *Ibidem*.
[22] Amanda Putnam, *Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's* The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved, *and* A Mercy, *Black Women, Gender, and Families*, Fall 2011, Vol. 5, No. 2 pp. 25–43.
[23] Amanda Putnam, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

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brought by slavery enslaves not only the embodied human, but also the discourse of deeply felt statements about human belonging.

Patricia (*Paradise*, 1997), the daughter without a mother, is a recourse to the consequences of living without a motherly figure, a mother model to emulate in her future role. In her relation with her daughter Billie Delia, she is flabbergasted by her lack of inhibitions, by her instinctual and untamed behavior in a world to which Patricia wants to belong as a prerequisite for the wholeness she cherishes so much. Patricia is the mother who sees motherhood as a pro-active measurement of social engagement. She suffers of a "hypertrophy of the feminine," translated into an endorsement of all her feminine instincts, first of all of the maternal instinct. Her own personality being negated and pushed in the eternally challenged substance of the subconscious, the heroine becomes a transference from her child to her child, her identity diminished to only one dimension, that of a mother. The child becomes her *raison d'etre*. And as Carl Gustav Jung said, "she arrogates to herself the right to possess her daughter."[24]

In this possession Patricia externalizes the need and greed for power, and when her daughter fails to fulfill this need, she ostracizes Billie Delia, ceasing to act as a pro-active factor of socialization. Motherhood diminishes furthermore her role in the society of Ruby and this transforms her daughter in "a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like."[25] The liaison established between Billie Delia and one of the girls residing at the Covenant disobeys the law of Ruby, one of the laws that kept Ruby in its stasis of life sanctuary, because nobody ever died in Ruby. And a transgression could have meant the outbreak of the curse of death.

Patricia also tries to kill her daughter, not to give her freedom or to preserve an identity already denied, but to maintain a place in a community of pure race – 8-rocks - which, nonetheless, was to banish her for cherishing a true ancestry nobody wanted to remember. Patricia attempts at destroying "the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was."[26] And the dilemma will taunt and torment her entire life after Billie Delia's leaving the community. "(…) The question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her. And was she sacrificing her still?"[27]

Unlike Sethe and Eva, Patricia is an exponent of the society, a society born in tribulations of pain, a membership which was founded on the idea of racial purity, a black purity. African Americans proud of their heritage, perfected a system of laws that was too close to the laws enslaving them. A deviant counter reaction to peer denial inflicted upon blacks by the white race. Replacing an injustice with a crueler one, one within which your conscience must deny its very roots, the inhabitants of Ruby, and Patricia among them, choose to destroy the very diversity which informed their philosophy, and in doing so, they become the hunters they had been running from their entire lives.

Eventually, even Patricia will become an outcast, and she will, finally realize, that not her daughter was one impelling reclusion upon her social being, but the past of the "founding fathers" of 8-rocks, a past which was rebelling against its truth, transforming history in story. Alienated from her society, from her belonging to a spirit and a perspective upon the future, motherless and de-fragmented, Patricia is incapable to find her place in this new world built on "the blackness of Ruby." Ruby wants "to know about Africa" because "if you cut yourself off from the roots, you'll wither," says Reverend Misner, for whom Patricia seems like she

[24] Carl Gustav Jung, *Opere complete*, 1st volume, *Arhetipurile şi inconştientul colectiv*, Bucureşti: Editura Trei, 2003, p. 97.
[25] Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999, p. 203.
[26] Toni Morrison, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 204.
[27] *Ibidem.*

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would despise Africa, the roots turned "into termite dust" in their ignoring their branches. For Patricia the sole equilibrium and the perfect truth is in "the periodic chart of elements and valences," and in the lack of emotions chased away in order to make room for the sternness and immutable nature of science.

With Toni Morrison's women, the unconscious becomes the center of collision bringing the worlds together and sending them apart; behind the masks and the little plays they play for each other and the rest of the world, the depth lurks beyond their cognition, and they are lured to look into the abyss, even if this means they could become its victims, its puzzles and its dominoes. Some characters regress to emptiness, and the firm grounds of knowledge, some regress into the past, and its drive to love and hate imprinted in a collective burden.

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