ES Review
SPANISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Ed UVa EDICIONES Universidad Valladolid

The Love That Wounds: Ambivalence of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*

El amor que hiere: la ambivalencia de la maternidad en *Beloved* y *Sula* de Toni Morrison

MAHMUDA KHANAM
Institution address: Department of English, University of Chittagong, Chattogram-4331, Bangladesh.
E-mail: mahmuda.cu.18@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0002-5497-3652

TUHIN SHUVRA SEN
Institution address: Department of English, University of Chittagong, Chattogram-4331, Bangladesh.
E-mail: tuhinshuvra@cu.ac.bd
ORCID: 0000-0002-3977-0067

Received: 30/10/2025; Accepted: 03/02/2026.
How to cite this article: Khanam, Mahmuda, and Sen, Tuhin Shuvra. "The Love that Wounds: Ambivalence of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 47, 2026, pp. 263–82.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24197/5g2k3171

Open access article under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0).

Abstract: Though often romanticized as inherently selfless and nurturing, motherhood is neither uniform nor eternal. Rather, it is shaped by cultural norms, social constructions, and historical circumstances of oppression and resistance. The portrayal of motherhood is recurrent yet intricate, and often shocking, in many of Toni Morrison's novels. In her seminal works *Beloved* and *Sula*, maternal identity is depicted as a site of profound ambivalence, where love and trauma coexist. Morrison's Black mother figures navigate the intersections of historical oppression, racial marginalization, and socio-political constraints, revealing mothering as simultaneously nurturing and destructive. In explicating these dualities inherent in motherhood, Morrison neither sanctifies nor vilifies motherhood; instead, she reveals its complex reality offering a radical reimagining of maternal identity. Through critical engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of maternal feminist and Black feminist theorists, this paper seeks to interrogate and foreground the radical, political, and deeply personal dimensions of Black motherhood, conceptualizing it as a paradoxical terrain simultaneously marked by vulnerability and empowerment.
Keywords: Motherhood; ambivalence; slavery; resistance; maternal agency.

Summary: Introduction. Theoretical Framework: Motherhood as Institution and Experience, "Motherwork" as a site of Resistance, and Mothering as a Transformative Act. The Ambivalence of the Maternal Role in *Beloved*. The Paradoxical Dimensions of Motherhood in *Sula*. Conclusions.

Resumen: Aunque a menudo se la idealiza como una labor intrínsecamente altruista y protectora, la maternidad no es uniforme ni eterna. Está marcada por normas culturales, construcciones sociales y circunstancias históricas de opresión y resistencia. La representación de la maternidad en muchas de las novelas de Toni Morrison es recurrente, compleja, y a menudo impactante. En sus obras fundamentales, *Beloved* y *Sula*, la identidad materna se presenta como un espacio de profunda ambivalencia, donde coexisten el amor y el trauma. Las figuras de madres negras en Morrison navegan las intersecciones de la opresión histórica, la marginación racial y las limitaciones sociopolíticas, revelando la maternidad como algo simultáneamente protector y destructivo. Al explicar estas dualidades inherentes a la maternidad, Morrison no la santifica ni la demoniza; en cambio, revela su compleja realidad, ofreciendo una reinterpretación radical de la identidad materna. Con base en fundamentos teóricos de maternidades feministas y teóricas feministas negras, este artículo cuestiona y destaca las dimensiones radicales, políticas y profundamente personales de la maternidad negra, conceptualizándola como un terreno paradójico marcado simultáneamente por la vulnerabilidad y el empoderamiento.
Palabras clave: Maternidad; ambivalencia; esclavitud; resistencia; agencia materna.
Sumario: Introducción. Marco teórico: Maternidad como institución y experiencia, "Trabajo materno" como sitio de resistencia, y maternidad como acto transformador. La ambivalencia del rol materno en *Beloved*. Las dimensiones paradójicas de la maternidad en *Sula*. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood, long enshrined as the cornerstone of feminine identity, is often draped in idealized notions of selflessness, nurture, and sacrifice. Across epochs and cultures, motherhood has been immortalized in art and myth, and institutionalized in societal expectations, with a woman's status as a "childbearer" having been "made into a major fact of her life" (Rich 11). Ann Dally in *Inventing Motherhood* states that "there have always been mothers, but motherhood was invented" (17); it is not a timeless essence, but a cultural construct, historically reshaped and burdened with idealistic expectations. Yet, beneath this gilded veneer of maternal idealism lies a space fraught with paradoxes, a site where domination and resistance, love and loss, creation and destruction converge, especially for Black women whose maternal experiences are shaped by histories of racial oppression, cultural erasure, and socio-political marginalization. It is in this complex terrain that Toni Morrison, one of the most applauded African-American literary voices, situates her narratives of Black motherhood, challenging both the literary canon and the ideological foundations of maternity. Through her nuanced characters and lyrical

prose, Morrison offers a vision of mothering that is at once deeply personal and inherently political. In her novels, the act of mothering becomes a radical gesture—one that asserts humanity and spiritual wholeness in a world that seeks to deny Black mothers these very things. Motherhood, in her fictional world, is a space where historical wounds are both inherited and resisted, where maternal bonds can be nurturing yet destructive, and where identity is forged at the crossroads of oppression and self-determination. Morrison unearths the ambivalence that haunts Black motherhood, a space where the mother becomes at once a healer and a source of inherited pain.

Unlike Western feminists, such as Beauvoir who considers motherhood as the main feature which causes women to be seen as "others" (484) and Kristeva who reads pregnancy as "the overtaking of woman's identity and corporeality by a foreign body, an alien intruder" (Grosz 162), Black women often reclaim and reframe motherhood through cultural traditions uniquely their own. Hence, maternal feminist Andrea O'Reilly observes, "mothers and motherhood are valued by, and central to, African American culture" (*From Motherhood* 11). Barbara Christian also echoes O'Reilly's view, contending that the "concept of motherhood is of central importance in the philosophy of both African and Afro-American peoples" (213). The maternal figures in Morrison's oeuvre pose themselves as embodying these dynamic paradoxes who can be both empowered and enslaved, rather than static archetypes. They occupy a site somewhere in between resignation and resistance. Because they have had to survive in a society that makes their feelings subversive, these women exhibit a striking ambivalence. By concentrating on the psychological, emotional, and political landscape that Morrison's fictional mothers traverse, this paper aims to uncover the dualities inherent in the maternal experience as it is depicted in *Beloved* (1987) and *Sula* (1973). Drawing upon maternal feminist theories—particularly Adrienne Rich's notion of the "institution of motherhood" versus the "experience of mothering," Andrea O'Reilly's concept of empowered maternal subjectivity, and Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought—this study argues that Morrison destabilizes normative maternal scripts. Her maternal characters inhabit a space where caregiving is entangled with power, absence, and unresolved grief. In foregrounding the contradictions inherent in a Black woman's mothering practices, Morrison exposes the psychological aftershocks of slavery, patriarchy, and systemic oppression. However, she also inscribes within her narratives a deep, if painful, insistence on

maternal agency, with a refusal to allow Black motherhood to be reduced to either victimhood or sainthood. Through lyrical fracture, temporal disjunction, and psychological interiority, *Beloved* and *Sula* become more than novels; they are palimpsests of generational trauma and maternal survival. Ultimately, this paper contends that Morrison does not seek to redeem motherhood, nor to vilify it, but to reveal its raw, ragged truth that to mother in a world that systematically denies Black women autonomy and dignity is to live in constant ambivalence, a love that both cleaves and clings, a bond that can both redeem and destroy.

1. Theoretical Framework: Motherhood as Institution and Experience, "Motherwork" as a Site of Resistance, and Mothering as a Transformative Act

The analytical foundation of this paper rests upon an interdisciplinary framework that foregrounds the insights from Black feminist thought and feminist literary criticism. Central to this methodology is the assertion that Morrison's depiction of motherhood cannot be extricated from the racial, historical, and socio-political contexts in which her narratives are situated. To interpret the ambivalence coursing through Morrison's maternal figures, this paper primarily draws upon the insights of Adrienne Rich, Patricia Hill Collins, and Andrea O'Reilly. Their feminist theories of motherhood dismantle mythologized ideals and expose maternal ambivalence as an embodied, racialized, and politicized reality, especially for Black women navigating the interwoven oppressions of race, gender, class, and history.

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* provides the foundational distinction between motherhood as an institutionalized social construct and as an intimate lived experience. She asserts:

> I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (13)

For Rich, the institutional model imposes patriarchal expectations of self-sacrifice and obedience on mothers, thereby rendering women's reproductive power as a site of control rather than of autonomy. This

distinction is dramatized in Morrison's *Beloved*, where Sethe's maternal act of infanticide defies the institutional model of nurturance. It is not merely a horrific crime, but a desperate attempt to resist slavery's commodification of Black bodies. Her action, born out of trauma and maternal love, exposes the paradox Rich outlines in her book that motherhood can be both a site of empowerment and deep suffering, of liberation and loss. In *Sula*, Eva Peace, who burns her son alive and sacrifices her leg to secure financial aid for her family, also epitomizes Rich's theory that motherhood, under patriarchy, is too often cast as monolithic and idealized. Eva's decisions disrupt romanticized narratives of caregiving; her maternal agency is pragmatic, ambiguous, and fiercely unsentimental. In this regard, Rich writes, "We know more about the air we breathe . . . than about the nature and meaning of motherhood" (11). Morrison's work, when read through Rich's critical creeds, seeks to redress the imbalance inherent in institutionalized representation, where the myths of motherhood eclipse its raw paradoxical reality, and to reveal the submerged emotional, ethical, experiential, and existential struggles inherent in Black maternal identity.

While Rich critiques the universal myths of patriarchal motherhood, Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, focuses on the racialized dimension of maternal identity. For Collins, Black motherhood emerges as a dual site of oppression and resistance, wherein mothers negotiate both systemic racism and patriarchal norms. She introduces the concept of "motherwork"—a political form of caregiving that involves not only physical sustenance but also the transmission of cultural memory and oppositional knowledge (Collins 208–09). In *Beloved*, Sethe's refusal to let her child be enslaved is a radical form of love that insists on protecting the child's humanity even at the cost of life. Her maternal body becomes a battleground and a weapon scarred by history, but is fiercely active in shaping a counter-narrative to White supremacist violence. Moreover, Collins critiques how dominant Western ideologies of motherhood systematically exclude Black women. In Morrison's work, this exclusion is palpable. Sethe's mothering is criminalized by both White institutions and her own community. Similarly, Sula's refusal to mother is framed as a failure and her assertion of autonomy is criticized in the community. In this circumstance, to be a Black mother is to constantly resist and reimagine motherhood in the face of erasure.

Andrea O'Reilly's contributions to maternal theory, particularly in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's* Of Woman Born, and *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, concentrate on "Black Motherhood" by centering mothering as a self-conscious, transformative, and inherently political act. She challenges binary thinking that labels mothers as either "good" or "bad," arguing instead for a view of motherhood that honors moral ambiguity, complexity, and maternal agency (O'Reilly, *Maternal Theory* 801). Sethe's act of infanticide, when seen through O'Reilly's critical perspective, becomes not a moral aberration but a tragic assertion of maternal power. O'Reilly posits that "the focus of Black motherhood . . . is how to preserve, protect, and empower Black children" (*From Mothering* 11). Sethe's decision to kill her daughter is an anguished effort to achieve precisely this. In *Sula*, Eva's authoritarian control, Hannah's sensual maternal ambivalence, and Sula's outright rejection of motherhood—all suggest that maternal identity cannot be defined by convention. Besides, O'Reilly's emphasis on the mother-daughter dyad enriches the understanding of how trauma, love, and resistance are inherited. Denver's eventual growth is rooted in the emotional wreckage of Sethe's maternal decisions. Sula, marked by the coldness of her mother, seeks emotional depth elsewhere, which demonstrates how daughters internalize, reinterpret, or reject their maternal legacies. O'Reilly frames this as part of a continuum of mothering, one that complicates the notion of motherhood as either wholly redemptive or utterly ruinous.

Together, Rich, Collins, and O'Reilly construct a theoretical foundation based on which the ambivalence of the maternal role in Morrison's work can be explored and understood. Rich reveals the tension between the experiential and the institutional, where love and oppression coexist. Collins situates Black mothering within a broader historical and communal struggle, highlighting how resistance emerges from both care and critique. O'Reilly reclaims maternal agency, emphasizing its transformative potential even in morally ambiguous contexts. Seen through these critical lenses, Morrison's maternal figures emerge not as archetypes of nurturance or neglect, but as radically human women, navigating the fraught terrain of motherhood with defiance, sorrow, and love. The theoretical framework not only informs the literary analysis that follows, but also affirms the power of maternal ambivalence as a site of feminist inquiry and Black feminist resistance.

2. THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE MATERNAL ROLE IN *BELOVED*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel suffused with the spectral presence of history, memory, and the unrelenting weight of maternal love. Nowhere is the tension between nurture and destruction, devotion and despair more palpable than in the character of the protagonist, Sethe, a mother whose love is as boundless as it is ruinous. Sethe's motherhood, in *Beloved*, illustrates how slavery distorts and devalues maternal identity, reflecting a grim reality in which "[b]lack maternity is removed from the realm of the human" (Wilt 160). Hers is a love that defies convention, a love that, shaped by the brutality of slavery, both affirms and annihilates. Andrea O'Reilly, in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, asserts that "Anglo-American perspectives were hopelessly inadequate for an understanding of Morrison's maternal vision" (xi). She points out a distinction between African-American maternal practices and those of the Western world. The central claim O'Reilly puts is that Morrison rejects the role of mothers delineated by American culture and "defines Black motherhood as a site of power" (*A Politics* 1). Morrison's portrayal of motherhood indicates that mothers neither follow fixed roles and set boundaries, nor can they be fitted in uniform definitions. Instead, there lies a keen awareness of the fundamental contradictions of Black motherhood, a significant issue aptly put by Patricia Hill Collins: "Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal costs. The range of Black women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect motherhood's contradictory nature" (133). The ambivalence of motherhood in *Beloved* emerges from the convergence of Sethe's maternal instincts, the sacrifices she makes for her children, the indelible scars of trauma and guilt she carries in her heart, and the haunting embodiment of all her struggles in Beloved herself. The novel resists a singular definition of motherhood, instead offering a complex and layered portrayal of maternal devotion as both a redemptive force and a site of deep and inescapable torment.

Sethe's love for her daughters is elemental. It is fierce and unwavering, shaped in the iron grip of a world that denies enslaved women ownership of their own bodies, let alone of their children. Her mothering is a refusal to relinquish her claim on her offspring even as the institution of slavery seeks to sever the ties between them. This maternal instinct, as Morrison illustrates, is neither simple nor sentimental, but wrought with suffering and resilience. Sethe is a devoted mother who prioritizes her

children in every possible way and asserts that her children were the "precious and fine and beautiful" (Morrison, *Beloved* 163) parts of her. To Sethe, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't no love at all" (164). Even in the midst of the most unimaginable suffering, her foremost concern is the child within her womb, a testament to the way maternal love survives even in the face of physical exhaustion and violent subjugation. A pivotal moment in *Beloved* unfolds with the theft of Sethe's breast milk, a violation that embodies the dehumanizing brutality of slavery. In a conversation with Paul D, Sethe recounts the harrowing events preceding her escape from Sweet Home. Having sent her children ahead to the house in Cincinnati, including her nursing infant, she remains behind and falls prey to Schoolteacher's nephews. In an act that reduces her to mere livestock, they forcefully suck the milk from her breasts. Her profound attachment to her children is underscored by her strong emotional response to this dreadful act. Breastfeeding, for Sethe, signifies more than a biological necessity. It is an act of profound intimacy and the sole expression of care she can offer her children amidst the brutality of enslavement. The theft of her breast milk by the slave owners is not merely a physical violation, but a symbolic assault on her identity as a mother. It robs her of the one nurturing power that remains hers, reducing her to a state of helplessness and desecrating a sacred maternal bond. Sethe does not grieve for her own suffering; rather, her sorrow is rooted in the loss of her ability to nourish her child, a loss that signifies the depths of her maternal instinct and the centrality of motherhood to her sense of self. This indignity becomes a psychological wound that time cannot heal. The memory resurfaces with unspent fury when she recounts it to Paul D, underscoring the enduring trauma of a mother whose love was rendered powerless by a system designed to break both the body and the spirit of a Black mother.

The punishment scene is also both unexpected and unspeakably cruel. Schoolteacher's nephews, in a grotesque mockery of care, carve a hole in the ground to cradle Sethe's six-month-pregnant belly, preserving the unborn child while unleashing their violence on the mother. With a leather strap, they lacerate her back into a grotesque map of scars and mutilate her feet to prevent any attempt at escape. The wounds inflicted on Sethe's body in that barn are among the most visceral and abhorrent acts of violence one can imagine against a human being. The chilling contradiction that her womb is shielded even though her body is brutalized reveals the cruelty of slavery: she is to be broken and subjugated, still expected to serve as a vessel of life for the plantation's profit. When Paul

D expresses his concern about the scars on Sethe's back from being whipped, she instead fixates on a more profound violation, repeating, "And they took my milk" (17). For Sethe, the physical pain of being harassed and beaten is not the most harrowing aspect of her experience under slavery, but the theft of her breastmilk is—a violation that Paul D, as a man, cannot fully grasp. This scene sheds light on the dehumanization she endures, reducing her from a person to a mere reproductive object.

Sethe exemplifies how mothering and nurturing children can be a source of not only empowerment but also resistance against the brutal system of slavery. To nurse one's child in a world that dehumanizes Black motherhood is a radical assertion of love and agency. This love, however, is not without its burdens. Morrison, in *Beloved*, writes the story in blood, milk, and memory, refusing to sentimentalize it. Sethe's love is suffocating, obsessive and, at times, destructive, an intensity that stems from the knowledge that at any moment her children could be taken away from her. Motherhood, in *Beloved*, is inextricable from sacrifice. The most harrowing expression of this sacrifice is, of course, Sethe's act of infanticide, an act of love so consuming that it collapses into violence. In this novel, slavery "renders love, particularly maternal love, a risk" (Jeremiah 64). Sethe believes, with the clarity of a woman who has endured the worst of human cruelty, that death is preferable to enslavement. As she puts it: "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" (165). Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, in *Maternal Thinking*, also makes the point that "in any given culture, maternal commitment is far more voluntary than people like to believe" (22). For Sethe, the required violence embodies the purest form of maternal love since she believes that she has protected her children from every possible threat, human or otherwise. She avers: "I stopped him … I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (164).

In Adrienne Rich's opinion, "[m]otherhood without autonomy, without choice, is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control" (13). From this perspective, Sethe's act of infanticide is an extreme and terrible manifestation of such a sense. When faced with the horror of possible re-enslavement, Sethe acts with terrifying resolve: "If I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (200). This chilling declaration underlines the paradox Morrison threads throughout the novel: in a world where Black motherhood is continually violated by external forces, maternal love

becomes both a weapon and a shield. Renee Gardner delves into these inherent contradictions and untenable conditions of enslaved motherhood in *Beloved*, positing that motherhood operates on a dual axis: "one of which invests a woman with power, the other which strips it from her" (209). Seen from this perspective, Sethe's decision emerges not as madness, but as a radical assertion of maternal agency, driven by her uncompromising desire to shield her child from the horrors of bondage. Yet, Sethe's act of protection becomes the source of her eternal suffering. She exists in a liminal space, haunted by the consequences of her motherly love, becoming a figure trapped in an endless cycle of grief and justification, unable to move beyond the act that defines her. Her love, once a force of salvation, transforms into a spectral weight that refuses to be exorcised. Paul D understands the destructive power of her love for her children as he considers it 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" (Morrison, *Beloved* 45). The act of infanticide underscores this entanglement of maternal love and violence.

Gloria Wade-Gayles points out that mother figures in Black women's fiction are strong and devoted, but they are "rarely affectionate" (10). Sethe's relationship with her children, both living and dead, is irrevocably shaped by the trauma she carries within her. Her relationship with Denver is marked by an almost claustrophobic protectiveness. Denver becomes both the daughter she must now shelter from the world and the lingering reminder of the daughter she lost. In spite of limitless complexities, her maternal devotion stands out. To Denver, Sethe is the "quiet, queenly woman" (Morrison, *Beloved* 12), steadfast in the face of adversities without ever turning away. Sethe's guilt is not only about the act itself, but about what it means to be a mother who has chosen death over life for her child. The spectral presence of Beloved, both as a revenant and as an embodied girl, personifies the lingering trauma existing in the mother-daughter relationship. In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, O'Reilly states: "The matrilineal heritage metaphorically represented by Beloved is a radical reclamation of the mother and daughter bond that was denied and severed under slavery" (111). This act of reclamation, however, cannot be disentangled from Morrison's wider undertaking of what Edwards calls "a revision of history" (19), which reveals accepted accounts of the past to be contingent and partial. In *Beloved*, the repressed history of slavery resurfaces not as a static memory but as a living, embodied presence. Beloved demands more than just

recognition; she demands recompense. She is insatiable, consuming Sethe's love, attention, and, ultimately, her sense of self. She embodies what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory" (96)—the inherited trauma that refuses to be buried. Sethe, desperate to atone for her past act of infanticide, submits herself so completely to Beloved's suffocating presence that her maternal love ultimately destroys her sense of self. The past here is not a distant echo but a living presence, manifested in the guilt that permeates every aspect of Sethe's being.

Thus, maternal power in *Beloved* is shadowed by an unrelenting vulnerability—a reminder that the maternal body is both a sanctuary and a site of irrevocable loss. Sethe embodies this fragmentation, unable to mother freely because she is always mothering against something—against loss, against enslavement, against the ghost of the past. She was trying to "[o]ut-hurt the hurter" (Morrison, *Beloved* 234). Barbara Christian has pointed out that Morrison in this novel demonstrates that "mothers have a right to fullness of life and that sacrifice should be a means to more life rather than an end to itself" (247). Sethe asserts her power and resistance following her heart while protecting her children in an extreme manner. She embraces mothering and considers it as her very own space. Morrison, thus, portrays this space of motherhood as complex and ambivalent, intersecting love, sacrifice, guilt, and trauma. It is not confining; rather, it is a site where a mother can assert power.

3. THE PARADOXICAL DIMENSIONS OF MOTHERHOOD IN *SULA*

In *Sula*, Morrison resists any monolithic portrayal of motherhood, instead mapping its various manifestations across a spectrum that oscillates between nurture and neglect, freedom and entrapment, social conformity and personal autonomy. The novel explores a terrain where maternal figures are both revered and resented, where motherhood is both an identity and an imposition. Many Western feminists, including de Beauvoir, propound that if women are to claim their right to the status of being the "subject," they must reject "the feminine" (Hekman 46), up to and including the practices of motherhood. Yet, Morrison's sustained focus on motherhood in her novels, as Ghasemi notes, is "indicative of the significance of maternity as an integral part of a woman's state of being" (243). This tension between rejection and reverence, autonomy and emotional obligation, lies at the heart of the maternal experience in *Sula*.

As Robert Staples has noted, motherhood in the African-American community "represents maturity and the fulfillment of one's function as a woman" (153), and yet Morrison asks us to question what it means when women, like Sula, reject that role or perform it in disruptive ways. Susan Blake aptly draws attention to the inevitable perplexity of the readers: "whether to applaud Eva's self-sacrifice or deplore her tyranny, whether to admire Sula's freedom or condemn her heartlessness" (86). Morrison crafts maternal figures who confound expectations, whose roles are never merely biological or social, but deeply psychological and often political. In Morrison's portrayal of these complex facets of motherhood in *Sula*, ambivalence becomes not a weakness, but a fundamental truth of the maternal condition.

Conventional motherhood, embodied in characters like Helene Wright, appears secure and morally upright on the surface, but even this model is not without its contradictions. Helene's life is one of unwavering propriety, marked by obedience to societal codes that reduce motherhood to be synonymous with sacrifice and submission. Her insistence on respectability defines her interactions with her daughter Nel, inculcating within her a belief that motherhood marks the ultimate fulfillment of a woman's life. Yet, this very conviction also breeds repression. From the onset, Nel's identity is fashioned around the roles of wife and mother. She marries Jude only to be abandoned later, and though she remains steadfast in her maternal responsibilities, her emotional landscape is shaped by quiet grief and unspoken loss. Nel's version of motherhood reflects what Adrienne Rich terms "the *institution*" (13), a socially constructed model in which women must surrender their autonomy for the sake of familial duty. Rich further observes: "Most women in history have become mothers without choice" (13). Nel's life is, thus, emblematic of this controlled, duty-bound form of motherhood, a role that offers socially-imposed identity but limits emotional fulfillment.

In contrast, the maternal model embodied by Hannah Peace introduces an unsettling complexity. Hannah does not openly reject her maternal duties, neither does she embrace them in ways that conform to societal norms. She tends to Sula's physical needs, yet emotionally detaches herself from her daughter. When Sula overhears Hannah confessing: "I love Sula, I just don't like her," (57), the words become a quiet wound, shaping the contours of Sula's emotional isolation and future defiance. This confession underscores the uneasy truths that underlie many mother-child relationships, truths that are often repressed in traditional maternal

narratives. Hannah's emotional distance, paired with her sexual freedom, leads Sula to construct her identity untethered from conventional familial roles, seeking instead a life unbound by the attachments and obligations her mother and grandmother are expected to comply with. Sula not only refuses to become a mother in any conventional sense, but consciously distances herself from any maternal impulse. Her decision reflects both resistance and rupture, at once a claim to personal freedom and a silent scream against the social expectations that render women valuable only for their reproductive roles. This abandonment becomes a metaphor for the existential ambivalence of motherhood itself. Sula's cold, detached reaction to her mother's death reveals the emotional chasm between them, as she watches the fire with unnerving calm: " . . . standing on the back porch just looking" (78). Her stillness, often read as cruelty by other characters, may also represent emotional exhaustion, a response to the failures and contradictions of maternal intimacy. Jiao observes that such miscommunication between mothers and daughters may turn mothering "awry," resulting in "the contempt of mother by her own children" (554). The novel repeatedly portrays how absence, silence, or emotional disjunction are passed down across generations. Thus, the ambivalence between love and resentment, care and detachment, becomes an inherited condition rather than a personal flaw.

Nowhere is maternal ambivalence more harrowingly portrayed than in the character of Eva Peace. As both a matriarch and an enigma, Eva embodies the contradictions of motherhood in extreme terms. Her decisions to sacrifice her leg for insurance money and later to kill her son Plum in an act of mercy or control illustrate the blurred line between love and domination. Her motherhood is not gentle; it is exacting and relentless, forged in the fires of deprivation and survival. Hence, the narrator voices that " . . . she left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day. Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg . . ." (34–35). As Remi Akujobi states "[t]he idea of self-sacrifice emphasizes the centrality of motherhood in African society" (2), yet, Eva's story unsettles this patriarchal discourse and her acts of sacrifice, whether by surrendering her leg or ending Plum's life, complicate the notion of instinctive, nurturing motherhood. The discourse of patriarchal, normative motherhood presupposes that mothering is the work and responsibility of primarily one person (the woman), and it assumes that mothering is and should be natural or instinctive to women rather than the product of skill and conscious

commitment (O'Reilly, *Matricentric* 14). The ideology of patriarchy shapes "women's as well as men's view of motherhood" (Rothman 125). However, mothers in African-American communities "combined work and family without seeing much conflict between the two" (Collins 49). Eva becomes the only parental figure to bring up her children in the absence or unavailability of the father. Ghasemi asserts that the oppressive social system considers mothers only as "the nurturer, protector, and servant of their children" (239), but Morrison's mothers are distinguished from these stereotyped ones. It is "their attempt at determining the course of their own and their children's destinies" (Ghasemi 239) that makes these fictional mothers extraordinary and unconventional. Judith Butler's notion of agency as "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power" (15) helps frame Eva's choices not merely as acts of control, but as deeply embedded responses to structural violence. Eva is both a fierce protector and a terrifying wielder of authority. Hannah's death, engulfed in flames even as Eva hurls herself from a window in a desperate attempt to save her, becomes a haunting metaphor for the peril of maternal overextension, where devotion turns destructive. She becomes a victim of her own self-sacrificing instinct.

The relationship between Hannah and Eva Peace in *Sula* stands as one of Morrison's most subtly devastating portrayals of the complexities embedded within the mother-daughter bond. Beneath the surface of their shared household and mutual survival lies an undercurrent of emotional estrangement, shaped as much by the harsh demands of life in the Bottom as by the unspoken expectations of womanhood and motherhood. Eva, the iron-willed matriarch, exists at the extreme edge of the maternal spectrum where love is indistinguishable from control, and protection is almost identical to annihilation. For Eva's daughter Hannah, this brand of maternal authority seems both awe-inspiring and alienating. Their relationship is not characterized by warmth or verbal affirmation, but by a distance that reveals itself in one of the novel's most strikingly understated exchanges. When Hannah asks her mother: "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (67), the question is as plain as it is shattering, cutting through years of unspoken dissatisfaction and emotional ambiguity. Eva's response is laced with both defensiveness and quiet pride: "What you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you" (69). In this reply, Morrison distills the duality at the heart of the mother-daughter bond. For Eva, love is proven not through sentiment or softness, but through sheer endurance; the physical act of surviving, of sacrificing limb and autonomy is her language

of love. Yet, for Hannah, the absence of affection in its tender, recognizable form leaves an emotional chasm, one that no gesture of material sacrifice can bridge. This exchange reveals not only the gap between maternal intention and filial expectation but also the generational shift in the understanding of love itself. Eva's world, carved by poverty and racial hardship, permits no luxury for emotional vulnerability, whereas Hannah yearns for a love less bound by duty and more infused with warmth. Morrison, thus, positions their relationship as a meditation on the limits of maternal power: Eva's sacrifices secure her family's survival, but cannot foster emotional closeness; Hannah's longing for maternal affection is met not with denial, but with a kind of tragic misalignment.

In juxtaposition to Sula and Hannah's emotional detachment, Helene and Nel represent an opposite, but equally troubled, maternal paradigm, rooted in discipline, conformity, and emotional suppression. Helene imparts to Nel a blueprint for survival, that is rigid and exacting. Nevertheless, the same model ultimately fails to protect Nel from pain and disillusionment. Her identity as a mother becomes the shell around an empty self, one that cannot shield her from betrayal or abandonment. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins offers a more empowering vision of Black motherhood as a space of self-definition and autonomy, a site where women "learn the power of self-definition . . . and a belief in Black women's empowerment" (118). However, Morrison's portrayal of Nel's maternal role suggests how difficult this empowerment becomes within communities that insist on respectability, silence, and obedience as essential principles of motherhood. Nel's private grief and quiet despair ultimately reveal the deep fissures within even the most seemingly stable maternal roles. Sula, then, stands as both a culmination and a critique of the ambivalent maternal legacies she inherits. She does not simply rebel; she withdraws from motherhood entirely, staking her identity on radical freedom rather than relational bonds. As Adrienne Rich puts it in *Of Woman Born,* motherhood is not "an identity for all time" (36–37). Sula lives this truth, refusing to define herself through children or caregiving. Yet, her freedom is not without its cost. She becomes a pariah in her community, a woman both envied and condemned, an emblematic figure of both liberation and loneliness. Her sexual autonomy, her rejection of maternal sentiment, and her refusal to conform reveal the power and price of non-maternal womanhood. When she abandons the child born of her affair with Shadrack, she marks a turning point not only in her own life but

also in the community's perception of her, becoming a warning and a rupture in the collective maternal narrative.

Morrison's *Sula* thus reveals motherhood not as a sacred duty or biological instinct, but as a conflicted, contradictory space where love and loss, freedom and responsibility coexist. The maternal figures—Helene, Hannah, Eva, Nel, and Sula—are not types, but anomalies. Each embodies the paradoxes of the maternal role, from devotion to defiance, from nurture to harm. The novel insists that we reckon with motherhood as an ambivalent condition—one shaped by history, race, gender, and power, but also by the intimate and often painful terrain of individual choice. While Takševa reminds us that "the universal and essential category of mother exists only within the fictional landscapes of patriarchy" (40), Morrison deftly dismantles that fiction, replacing it with an honest, though uncomfortable, portrayal of mothers as whole, fallible, and fiercely human.

CONCLUSIONS

Toni Morrison reimagines motherhood as a fluid-fraught domain, shaped by struggle, empowered by resistance, and imbued with layered expressions of maternal agency. She subverts the sacrificial maternal idea through the portrayal of maternal ambivalence. Sethe's act of infanticide—both desperate and deliberate—reveals the extremities of maternal love within the socio-political context of slavery. Her love becomes an act of salvific violence, challenging the traditional notion of motherhood as solely nurturing. Eva Peace represents a matriarch whose maternal love is expressed through a cold pragmatism that borders on cruelty, while Hannah's laissez-faire approach reveals a maternal detachment that unsettles conventional norms. Sula's own maternal inheritance, or lack thereof, casts a long shadow over her identity. Escaping from the nurturing embrace of a conventional mother, she forges an identity marked by radical autonomy and social defiance. This absence of a traditional maternal model echoes the void left by Beloved's death in *Beloved*, where the lack of a maternal presence haunts future generations. Morrison's mothers are neither idealized nurturers nor vilified abandoners; rather, they are portrayed in all their aching humanity, caught in the relentless interplay of personal desire, communal expectation, and historical trauma. Morrison portrays these women as guardians, creators, and destroyers, whose love is never simple and whose power, though often muted by suffering, remains indomitable. She does not romanticize motherhood; she ennobles

it by honoring its pain, its paradoxes, and its aching truths. Her maternal figures become vessels of historical memory and cultural survival. They resist not through grand gestures, but through remembrance, love, and endurance. By representing Black motherhood as a dynamic and multifaceted space, Morrison reclaims it from reductive patriarchal constructs and redefines it as a realm of agency, legacy, and profound resilience.

This paper has wandered through that vision, seeking to trace the silhouettes of Morrison's mothers as they move through grief and glory. Motherhood in Morrison's novels does not fit a singular definition, but mirrors a kaleidoscope of maternal realities, each one pulsating with life, with struggle, and with unspeakable beauty. Ultimately, *Beloved* and *Sula* reveal motherhood as a condition defined not by the purity of purpose, but by its irreducible contradictions. It is a realm where tenderness and severity coexist, where the impulse to protect may also wound, and where acts of resistance are often inseparable from acts of surrender. Viewed through the lenses of Black feminist thought and maternal feminist theory, the tales of Morrison's fictional mothers illuminate the ambivalence at the heart of the maternal role, an ambivalence born not of moral failing, but of the profound human reality of mothering within histories of dispossession, racial violence, and communal resilience. In embracing rather than resolving these contradictions, Morrison affirms that maternal agency is not diminished by the inherent complexity of motherhood; it is made more enduring, more truthful, and more deeply human because of this paradoxical intricacy.

REFERENCES

Akujobi, Remi. "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–7. doi: 10.7771/1481-4374.1706.

Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*, 1949, edited and translated by H. M. Parshley. Vintage Books, 1974.

Blake, Susan. "Toni Morrison." *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Fiction Writers after 1955*, vol. 33, edited by Thadious Davis and Trudier Harris. Gale Research, 1984, pp. 187–99.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge, 1993.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. Pergamon Press, 1985.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2002.

Dally, Ann. *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*. Burnett Books Ltd., 1982.

Edwards, Thomas R. "Ghost Story." *New York Review of Books*, 5 Nov. 1987. nybooks.com/articles/1987/11/05/ghost-story/.

Gardner, Renee Lee. "Subverting Patriarchy with Vulnerability: Dismantling the Motherhood Mandate in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2016, pp. 203–14. doi: 10.1080/00497878.2016.1149029.

Ghasemi, Parvin. "Negotiating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels." *CLA Journal*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2010, pp. 235–53. www.jstor.org/stable/44325640/.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. Routledge, 1990.

Hekman, Susan. "Reconstructing the Subject: Feminism, Modernism, and Postmodernism." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1991, pp. 44–63. doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb01392.x.

Hirsch, Marianne. "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Representations of Motherhood*, edited by Donna Bassin et al., Yale UP, 1994, pp. 92–110.

Jeremiah, Emily. "Murderous Mothers: Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy Adrienne Rich's* Of Woman Born, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, SUNY Press, 2004, pp. 59–71.

Jiao, Min. "Mothering and Motherhood: Experience, Ideology, and Agency." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2019, pp. 541–56, doi: 10.5325/complitstudies.56.3.0541.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2007.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Knopf, 1974.

O'Reilly, Andrea. *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's* Of Woman Born. SUNY Press, 2004.

O'Reilly, Andrea, editor. *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*. Demeter Press, 2007.

O'Reilly, Andrea. *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*. Demeter Press, 2016, doi: 10.2307/j.ctv1k2j331.

O'Reilly, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. SUNY Press, 2004.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Virago, 1997.

Rothman, Barbara Katz. *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Society*. Norton, 1989.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Ballantine Books, 1989.

Staples, Robert. *The Black Women in America*. Nelson Hall, 1973.

Takševa, Tatjana. "One is not born but rather becomes a mother: Claiming the maternal in women and gender studies." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, vol. 10, 2019. pp. 27–44. jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/40552/.

Wade-Gayles, Gloria. "The Truths of Our Mother's Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women's Fiction." *Sage: A*

Scholarly Journal on Black Women, vol. 1, no. 2, 1984, pp. 8–12. psycnet.apa.org/record/1986-14113-001/.

Wilt, Judith. *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction*. Chicago UP, 1990.