Foregrounding Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Sula and Beloved

Lindsay Green

University of South Carolina Aiken, SC
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In the fiction of Toni Morrison, the African American woman emerges as a strong, central figure despite circumstance. Whether she is well-loved or not, happy or not, she retains tremendous strength. The dynamics of the family, including family obligations, familyheritages, brothers, sisters, mothers, and so on, take center stage in Morrison’s work. Mothers are very important. It is interesting, then, to note how motherhood affects or determines their behavior as women, as wives, and as social individuals. Two of Morrison’s novels in particular, Song of Solomon, set in twentieth-century Chicago, and Beloved, set in nineteenth-century Lorraine, Ohio, reveal patterns and similarities in these resonant maternal figures.

Several things surface as similarities among these women. Their experience or lack of mothering during childhood affects the mothers they are as adults. Their motivations as mothers are very enlightening as some seek con-
control, some seek love, some seek freedom and sisterhood, and some seek redemption. In all cases, the importance of patriarchy fades into the background as everything these women do revolves somehow around their daughterhood and its impact on their motherhood.

*Song of Solomon,* less blatantly concerned with motherhood than is *Beloved,* best reveals its coherence when one understands the motivations of the mothers and the way the mothers figure in the story's structure. In *Song of Solomon,* there are two main mothers, Ruth Foster Dead and Pilate Dead. Pilate Dead also represents, by extension, her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. Ruth Foster Dead is the unloved wife of a well-to-do landlord; before she was his wife, she was a wealthy doctor's daughter. Ruth never had an attachment with her mother, and she had devoted all of her affection, however excessive, to her father. Though she has three children, two daughters and a son, understanding her relationship with her son Milkman is the key to understanding Ruth. She uses pregnancy and motherhood as a means of exercising control in a world where she otherwise has none.

Pilate Dead, Ruth's sister-in-law and an extremely unconventional woman, has borne and raised her daughter without a husband. Pilate, though perhaps not the strongest woman in *Song of Solomon,* is certainly one of the strongest women in the book. Her weaknesses become apparent only when Pilate is understood both as a mother and as a child. Like Ruth, Pilate did not know her mother. Unlike Ruth, she lost her father very early. Haunted by her past, she attempts to find some emotional stability in the matriarchal household she establishes with Reba and Hagar.

Another woman haunted by her past is Sethe, the main character in Morrison's *Beloved.* Sethe is different from Ruth and Pilate because of her drastically different position in history and social situation. Sethe, like Ruth and Pilate, suffered the lack of a mother in her own childhood, having only fragmentary memories of her "Ma'am." As an adult, she suffers the theft of her milk by her white oppressors. Most famously, she is a runaway slave who kills her next-to-youngest child, a daughter, to protect her from slave catchers. The ghost of this child returns to be with Sethe.

*Song of Solomon* is a book rich with relationships, particularly mother-child relationships. Ruth Foster Dead is an important character to understand both as a child herself and as mother to the main character, Milkman. Likewise, the three-generational family of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar must be understood in terms of its mother-child bonds. One finds, as the text develops, that these women are not fully functional. Their families are unstable configurations, and these women are the sources of the instabilities.

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Ruth Foster Dead is herself emotionally unstable. This instability may be the result of her strong bonds with her father rather than with her mother. According to Gary
Storhoff, Ruth obediently “conforms to the stereotypical image of a devout housewife” and describes herself as “pressed small” in her marriage (8). On the surface, Ruth’s passive behavior may seem to be nothing out of the ordinary.

When the reader understands that Ruth has a simultaneous desire for control and for victimization, then her relationship with her father assumes paramount importance. Ruth says to Milkman of her relationship with her father: “I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package... but I didn’t think I’d ever need a friend because I had him” (124). Storhoff characterizes the relationship as “a family legacy of enmeshment” (8); since Ruth was so enmeshed with her father, even at his death, she became a mother who sought the same type of enmeshment with her own son. Ruth even “understands... that she cannot use her ‘smallness’ as a mask to disguise her own efforts for control” (Storhoff 8).

Ruth, who had never imagined her life without her father, “attempts to deny [her father] the relief of death,” and she “ostensibly perpetuates her victimhood by prostrating herself before him” (9). The reader is unsure whether there was a literal act of incest between Ruth and the wealthy Dr. Foster, but it is clear that Ruth had an unhealthy sense of belonging to her father. She even “prostrates herself” before him after he is dead by lying on his grave. When she marries Macon, she “continues her role of self-abasement for her father’s sake” (9).

As a husband and as a father, Macon leaves much to be desired. He is presented as:

solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice. Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. (10)

Ruth is an abused wife who, in Morrison’s words, “began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and ended them animated by it” (11). As a daughter, Ruth abased herself out of love for her father. As a wife, she abases herself out of fear. Nonetheless, she tries to continue the “affectionate elegance” (12) of her childhood by continuing to arrange centerpieces, regardless of Macon’s contempt for them. By continuing the “elegance” of her childhood, she is honoring her father’s memory by keeping the house as he preferred it—continuing to abase herself as she honors his memory. At the same time, she spurns her husband’s exercise of domestic power.

Though abused, then, Ruth is also a wife in control. Her ultimate act of control is her son, Milkman. Ruth and Macon’s sister Pilate scheme together to orchestrate Ruth’s pregnancy, so that Ruth can have something to bring to her marriage that will “hold them together” (131). Ruth knows that her husband will be enraged when he finds out that she is pregnant. This is strongly related to her desire to always be a victim. By being the victim, she thinks that
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she has ultimate control because her victimhood is somehow necessary to her husband. Ruth sees Milkman’s birth as her one “aggressive act brought to royal completion” (133). Milkman provides Ruth with another man to serve, to take the place of her father (Storhoff 10). She is possessive of him, then, not only as her child, but as the manifestation of her control and the embodiment of her master. She dotes on him more than she does on her daughters, Lena and First Corinthians who, as females, do not embody the same legacy as a male child.

Ruth’s son earned his embarrassing nickname, after all, because she was known to have breastfed him long after he was too old, as a way of prolonging his dependence on her and of asserting her control over the satisfaction of his needs. When Hagar, Milkman’s former lover and first cousin, is attempting to kill Milkman, it is Ruth who approaches her and threatens to cut her throat if she succeeds. Ruth’s explanation for doing so is that she believes she is Milkman’s only “home” in this world. Obviously, Milkman does not agree, since he spends a substantial portion of the book seeking his true home elsewhere. Ruth even acknowledges to herself that “her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion” (131).

Ruth sees her child as an extension of herself, as an extension of feelings inside of her. She may possess secret desires to be with and serve her father again or even to be a lover to her husband. Since she cannot fulfill either one of these desires, she may see Milkman as the embodiment of a part of her own flesh, of her own desires. Ruth is a mother who uses pregnancy as a tool—a weapon, a means of having someone to control and worship simultaneously. The fact that her own mother had little to do with her life leads the reader to believe that Ruth may be acting to compensate the affection she never felt from her own mother. Or, conversely, if Ruth sees Milkman as a “victory over her husband” (Storhoff 11), then perhaps she is trying to obtain some sort of symbolic control over her dead father through her child.

The household of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar Dead consists solely of mothers and daughters. Like Ruth, however, Pilate carries the weight of her dead father with her. Pilate has lived almost her entire life literally carrying around a bag of dead man’s bones from a cave where she once hid as a child. She had seen her father killed and she knew little of her mother, not even her name. She believes that the ghost of her father told her to keep the bones of a man she had seen killed in the cave so long ago, to carry around the remembrance and its physical anchor for her entire life. She never settled down and married; many of her lovers were repulsed by her lack of a navel, an anatomical anomaly that suggests that she in fact literally had no mother.

Pilate is a self-supporting woman who lives on her own and earns her money by making and selling wine. She seems very different from her sister-in-law, Ruth, but,
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Pilate is a self-supporting woman who lives on her own and earns her money by making and selling wine. She seems very different from her sister-in-law, Ruth, but,
in actuality, they may be similar in the way in which they view their children as a means of correcting the deficiencies of their own lives. "Morrison does not privilege Pilate's unconventional, matriarchal, marginalized family unit over Macon and Ruth's conventional, patriarchal, bourgeois nuclear family" (Storhoff 2). In fact, Pilate may even be "seeking to fuse" with her children in order "to satisfy [her] own emotional cravings" (2). If this is the case, then perhaps Pilate is lonely and hurt by the idea that she has no companion and that her brother will not even speak to her. As Morrison's text dodges back and forth in time, the reader learns that on the occasion of her pregnancy with Reba, Pilate would not marry Reba's father because she "wouldn't be able to hide her stomach from her husband forever... once he saw that uninterrupted flesh, he would respond the same way everyone else had" (147).

When Reba was born, Pilate looked first to see if her daughter had a navel, and she was relieved that she did. Perhaps, to Pilate, the navel is symbolic of a chance at life and family that she did not feel that she had. Also, with the birth of her own child, Pilate may have felt a special connection to a mother she never knew. Directly after Reba was born, Pilate says that her father came to her again, and, very clearly, said "Sing, Sing" (147). At the time, Pilate thought that her father was literally telling her to sing. At the end of the book, however, the reader learns that Sing was in fact Pilate's mother's name. Living to see her daughter and living so closely with her, Pilate may be living out a personal emotional craving, as Gary Storhoff calls it, through her daughter and later through her granddaughter. This craving for brother, mother, and husband may find some satisfaction and ease in a matriarchal household.

The truth, however, is that Pilate does not understand what her dead father is trying to say to her for most of the book. Only at the end, when Milkman reveals the truth to her, does she realize what her father was saying about the bag of bones. This confusion about the past molds Pilate's identity as a woman and as a mother. Because she lost her home, she has taught Reba to care nothing for property or possessions; because she lost her own family, she is very involved in the lives of Reba and Hagar in order to compensate. Pilate also projects an image of independence:

when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at ground zero. (Morrison 149)

Almost predictably, Pilate imposes no sense of patriarchy upon Reba and Hagar. As a result, Reba thinks nothing of sharing herself and any material possessions she may have with any man. Gary Storhoff asserts that Reba "magnifies the destructive aspect inherent in Pilate's self-denial by allowing herself to be exploited by nameless lovers" (7).
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She constantly gives away gifts, money, and herself to men.

Hagar, the beloved granddaughter, has always had to deal with two mother figures in Pilate and Reba. When she is rejected by Milkman, she falls into a deep and violent depression, eventually dying from her madness. Most would blame Milkman for Hagar’s actions; however, Pilate and Reba may be just as responsible for making Hagar suffer. Pilate and Reba have always spoiled Hagar, wanting to give her anything she asks. Most importantly, they have given her their sense of independence. “Her feeling of entitlement is a result of Pilate and Reba’s enmeshment” (Storhoff 7). Hagar feels that she is indeed entitled to Milkman, which is why she tries to kill him when she realizes that she cannot have him. Hagar never becomes a mother herself, but her behavior is certainly directly influenced by that of her mother and grandmother, who have unwittingly cast her in the enduring role of the pampered child.

Pilate, like Ruth, lives out her desires through her child. With Ruth, being a mother serves as a sexual means of power and control, of totally enmeshing herself with another. Pilate does not deliberately plan to have children as Ruth does, but having a child changes her nonetheless. The child becomes so important to her that she actually begins her life again, starts over, lives alone, and pours her life into pleasing her child. Pilate’s household is not really an ideal one; if it were, the reader is inclined to believe, then Hagar would not have succumbed so easily to madness. Hagar, like Ruth, becomes the sufferer, but there is nothing devious or intentional about her suffering. Her household simply harbors it.

The matriarchs, Ruth and Pilate, both seem to be affected by a lack of contact with their own mothers. Ruth has become obsessed with her father; she was isolated in the house because of their wealth, and he was her only “friend.” Pilate’s mother died while she was being born, and Pilate pushed her own way into the world. Pilate never enjoyed the lengthy company of mother or father. To some extent this leaves her more free than Ruth as she carves out her own lifestyle and centers her world around her family of women. At the same time, she is more ignorant of parental relationships. Where Ruth has some knowledge of the uses of control, however unfortunate, Pilate has none. Both households suffer as a result.

The dynamics of the mother-child relationship are also the key to understanding the events in Morrison’s Beloved. In this book, there is one central family and one very central mother, Sethe. Sethe is a slave who has managed to run away to freedom and has given birth along the way. She lives contentedly with her four children at her mother-in-law’s house until, one day, she knows that slave catchers are approaching the house, looking for her. In an act of desperation, madness, and, it seems probable, love, Sethe flees with her children to a shed where she attempts to kill them before the slave catchers can arrive and take them back into slavery. She manages to kill only one, the
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toddler Beloved. The book begins around eighteen years later, and the reader learns that Beloved has been haunting the house ever since her throat was cut.

Sethe, "like all slave mothers, cannot claim her children" (Hansen 65). In this case, Sethe is both victim and property, though not by her own choice. Trying to kill her own children may even be viewed as an assertion of power, because by doing so Sethe is "usurping the slave master's rights" (65). Unlike Ruth, who seeks her own victimization through her child, Sethe is a mother who, when she finds herself and her children becoming victims, reacts by bringing immediate death to her child. In both cases, the women's actions are about exercising power. Sethe's case revolves around escape; she is consumed by the need to save herself and of her children, all of whom escaped slavery once. She faces a completely different situation than Ruth, who, never having to escape from anything, uses her pregnancy and her child to preserve the survival of herself, of her marriage, and of her own personal desires.

Ruth is, arguably, a selfish mother, as is Pilate. Sethe's situation could be argued either way; she is selfish because she wants control over whether her own children live or die, and she is also selfless because she is actually capable of killing her own child in order to secure that child's safety from slavery. The slave-holding society which Sethe has fled dictates that Sethe cannot claim her children. Sethe is strong because she claims her motherhood. Doing so, she claims the strength to act in her child's behalf.

According to Marianne Hirsch, most Americans see African American families as "matriarchies in which mothers rather than fathers have power and presence" (95). She also states that Morrison's Beloved "tests the notion of matriarchal power and its effect on children" (95). The strong sense of matriarchy permeates Beloved. Back at Sweet Home, where Sethe was a slave, she was concerned as a child only with knowing which one of the workers was her mother. She was happy to know that she was the only child that her mother had kept through the years. When her mother took her outside and showed Sethe the mark that could always distinguish her as Sethe's mother, Sethe pleaded to have one to match it. She wanted a sense of identity at Sweet Home, and she wanted to identify herself with her mother. This same longing for identity and for identification with one's mother brings back the ghost of baby Beloved.

Beloved cannot bear to be separated from her mother, even in death, so she returns to enjoy her as much as possible, meanwhile driving out Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men and Sethe's lover, who has driven the earlier manifestations of the baby ghost from the house where he now lives with Sethe. Now Beloved seeks to oust Paul D. First of all, Paul D is not Beloved's father; secondly, Paul D represents fatherhood in general, an institution that is not seen by any woman in the book as an
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Sethe, “like all slave mothers, cannot claim her children” (Hansen 65). In this case, Sethe is both victim and property, though not by her own choice. Trying to kill her own children may even be viewed as an assertion of power, because by doing so Sethe is “usurping the slave master’s rights” (65). Unlike Ruth, who seeks her own victimization through her child, Sethe is a mother who, when she finds herself and her children becoming victims, reacts by bringing immediate death to her child. In both cases, the women’s actions are about exercising power. Sethe’s case revolves around escape; she is consumed by the need to save herself and of her children, all of whom escaped slavery once. She faces a completely different situation than Ruth, who, never having to escape from anything, uses her pregnancy and her child to preserve the survival of herself, of her marriage, and of her own personal desires.

Ruth is, arguably, a selfish mother, as is Pilate. Sethe’s situation could be argued either way; she is selfish because she wants control over whether her own children live or die, and she is also selfless because she is actually capable of killing her own child in order to secure that child’s safety from slavery. The slave-holding society which Sethe has fled dictates that Sethe cannot claim her children. Sethe is strong because she claims her motherhood.

According to Marianne Hirsch, most Americans see African American families as “matriarchies in which mothers rather than fathers have power and presence” (95). She also states that Morrison’s Beloved “tests the notion of matriarchal power and its effect on children” (95). The strong sense of matriarchy permeates Beloved. Back at Sweet Home, where Sethe was a slave, she was concerned as a child only with knowing which one of the workers was her mother. She was happy to know that she was the only child that her mother had kept through the years. When her mother took her outside and showed Sethe the mark that could always distinguish her as Sethe’s mother, Sethe pleaded to have one to match it. She wanted a sense of identity at Sweet Home, and she wanted to identify herself with her mother. This same longing for identity and for identification with one’s mother brings back the ghost of baby Beloved.

Beloved cannot bear to be separated from her mother, even in death, so she returns to enjoy her as much as possible, meanwhile driving out Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men and Sethe’s lover, who has driven the earlier manifestations of the baby ghost from the house where he now lives with Sethe. Now Beloved seeks to oust Paul D. First of all, Paul D is not Beloved’s father; secondly, Paul D represents fatherhood in general, an institution that is not seen by any woman in the book as an
ultimate power. Beloved is jealous of Paul D's attention to Sethe, and she proceeds to drive him away from her mother by forcing him to sleep with her. Sethe willingly forsakes the company of Paul D in order to enjoy the company of her two girls.

Sethe's attitude about motherhood, fatherhood, and Paul D is evident when he asks her to have a baby with him:

Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer. What did he want her pregnant for? To hold onto her? Have a sign that he passed this way? He probably had children everywhere anyway... No, he resented the children she had, that's what... that is what he resented. Sharing her with the girls. Hearing the three of them laughing at something he wasn't in on... They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it. (Morrison 132)

Motherhood, then, is indeed the most powerful bond in the book. To Sethe, a woman having children is of greater value because of the hard labor and time involved. This is clearly implied in the above passage of text when she says that Paul D probably had "dropped" children everywhere. She knows that the children do not mean the same thing to fathers as to mothers, and she draws a kind of pride and power from this belief. The pride shows through in her last statement: "they were a family somehow, and he was not the head of it" (132). Sethe's attitude about her newly reunited family may stem from what Hirsch refers to as "maternal fantasies of reparation and recovery" (97), the desire to triumph over the man who has cast her in the role of mother.

Pregnancy and birth, with all their painful associations, also symbolize a condition or act of bonding with other women, a sisterhood that is not shared with men. This special type of bonding is evident in the scene where Sethe gives birth to Denver on her way to freedom. Pregnant and trying to escape alone to get to her other children, Sethe finds herself in the woods suffering labor pains. A white girl, Amy Denver, discovers Sethe in the woods and helps her deliver her baby while comforting her and keeping her company. Sethe and Amy are briefly "united by their gender, their poverty, their subordinate social status, and by their stories of cruel masters, absent mothers, unknown fathers" (Hirsch 100). Denver, while acting as a midwife, almost takes the place of a father figure in the situation; after all, the baby is named after her (100).

The story of Denver's birth is crucial to the development of Denver herself. It is the only story of Sethe's that Denver enjoys hearing, and only because it is about her. Sethe tells Denver small segments of the tale at a time, about her swollen feet and about Amy, about Denver's birth truly being a miracle. The full story develops when
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Denver and Beloved are playing in the attic, and Beloved asks to hear Denver's story. It is then that the reader is completely filled in with the details of the birth. It is a particularly significant birth for Sethe, symbolic of her new freedom. For Denver, the story of her birth is a means of finding herself: According to Hirsch, "Morrison allows the daughters to find themselves in the mother's story so that Denver might develop into the mature, self-reliant, caring, and community-oriented woman she becomes at the end of the novel" (101). Denver finds her place in life from her mother, not from her hometown or her father, but from the story of her birth. The strength of the women is threading down through the matriarchal line.

Sethe, who saw her own mother killed and knew her only by her mark, likewise finds strength in the matriarchy of the family. Her strength comes from Baby Suggs, who is Sethe's mother-in-law. Baby Suggs had been bought by her own son, Sethe's Sweet Home husband, so that she could live in freedom. It is to her house that Sethe and her children flee when they escape. "Baby Suggs, the freed mother who lost all of her own children, can offer Sethe an alternate to the maternal care she could have had from her own mother" (Hirsch 102).

Sethe, the reader discovers, repeats the actions of a mother she never really knew when she kills Beloved; her mother, as mentioned earlier, killed many of her children that were fathered by men she did not care for. In Baby Suggs' house, Sethe is nurtured and cared for as she had never been before; upon Sethe's arrival, Baby Suggs cleans her from the birth and washes her all over. This scene is similar to the one in _Song of Solomon_ where Pilate cares for Ruth after Macon attempts to abort their child. One could say, then, that just as Baby Suggs is a surrogate mother to Sethe, Pilate is a surrogate mother to her sister-in-law. The women find strength and purpose in one another, if not in their children, and mother each other as well as their own offspring.

All of the women suffer terrible losses. Sethe can never forget Beloved, who vanishes once again at the end of the book. Pilate can never forget her father and does not find closure until she properly buries his bones. Ruth probably never finds a sense of closure; after all, she has lost her son, both literally and figuratively. Baby Suggs, who lost all of her children during slavery, finds comfort in caring for her daughter-in-law. Denver, who is not a mother and who has been denied anything like a normal childhood, must rely on the story of her birth and her matriarchal lineage as a touchstone from which she can begin her life. Hagar, by contrast, cannot find a touchstone, and she drifts away, regardless of the efforts of her family. Because these women are without mothers—Ruth, Pilate, Sethe—the reader cannot help but notice that maternal absence shapes the way they behave. They may try to relive a part of their life that is missing through intentional pregnancies, as Ruth does, by claiming motherhood as an exercise of power. Alternatively they may pour themselves
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into their motherhood; although because they lack so much in their own pasts, like Pilate and like Sethe, they never pour exactly enough. Sethe even repeats the behavior of her mother, though for somewhat different reasons. Some, like Baby Suggs, find purpose in surrogate. Others, like Beloved, find some purpose in reconciling themselves with the children they lose, and some never find purpose at all. Nonetheless, Morrison makes known the power of motherhood as a system in and of itself, separate and independent from patriarchy, feeding its members with an ever-renewing strength.

Works Cited


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