

THE APPROPRIATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*  
AND J M COETZEE'S *FOE*

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**Abstract**

*Representations of motherhood abound in almost all great literatures and cultures. While the traditional portrayal of motherhood followed a set pattern and favoured the mother-son relationships, the contemporary literature contests with and problematizes such conventional notions. Here, the author examines the contemporary delineation of motherhood as revealed in the two postmodern novels under consideration. These novels are themselves hypertexts—Toni Morrison's *Beloved* being a historical appropriation of the African American slave trade history and J M Coetzee's *Foe* being a literary appropriation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British classic *Robinson Crusoe*. Within the broad scope of their textual appropriations, these novels also appropriate and problematize the traditional notions of motherhood through their strong female protagonists, namely, *Sethe* and *Susan Barton*.*

Universally acknowledged as the culmination of womanhood, the theme of motherhood has found expression in almost all literatures and cultures of the world. It is widely recognized that the mother-child relationship is the ultimate bond of attachment any two individuals can attain and that the child establishes its own identity and locates its place in the world in relation to the nurturing care it receives from its mother.

Conventional portraits of motherhood abound in literature and culture: Niobe the wailing mother of Greek mythology; Gandhari the grieving mother of Hindu mythology; Madonna and Pieta the two phases of the merciful Virgin Mary; Maurya and the Mother Courage the tearless and the fearless mothers of *Riders to the Sea* and the *Mother Courage* respectively, are just a few of them. Since the greatness of character is often measured against the touchstone of tragedy, great mother-characters are seen pitched against the theme of child bereavement.

While the mother-son relationship has found portrayal in various disciplines such as art, literature, sculpture, sociology, psychology and religion, the mother-daughter type has found relatively less numbers of delineation. This is quite an interesting aspect since it is in relation to the daughter (child of the same sex as the mother), that the mother finds an extension of her own personality and at once a possible competitor.

The archetype of the mother-daughter bond can be traced back to the Greek mythology, in the tale of Hades' abduction of Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, to the underworld. According to the myth, Demeter desperately searched for her daughter all over the world and in her anguish, forbade the earth to bear crops. The hungry people complained to Zeus, the king of gods, who then ordered Hades to restore Persephone to her mother for two-thirds of every year (Summerscale 453).

In *The Lost Tradition*, Davidson and Broner point out that the only fully explored mother-daughter relationship found in the Bible is that between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi; that Kriemhild and Clytemnestra are punished for their independence and separated from other female family members by patriarchal ideology; that Shakespeare virtually condemns his heroines to motherlessness, except in *The Winter's Tale*, where the reconciliation of Hermione and Perdita has the mythic force of renewal similar to the reunion between Demeter and Persephone (qtd. in Hirsch 215). Hence, until the twentieth century, strong and powerful motherhood is perceived as an inhibiting force to the character development of the daughter-heroines and therefore silenced and absented from literary accounts.

However, very rarely do artists portray unconventional mothers such as Sethe of *Beloved* and Susan Barton of *Foe*. Both *Beloved* and *Foe* are novels published in the 1980s and hypertexts that revisit and appropriate history and literary canon, simultaneously featuring as their protagonists, single mothers who cannot be stereotyped. The present article is an attempt to compare and contrast between these two mothers and analyze the nature of the mother-daughter relationship as revealed in them.

### Theorizing Appropriation

Appropriation, as a process, can be perceived as a sub-genre of the concept of "intertextuality", a term associated with Julia Kristeva and that of "hypertextuality", associated with Gérard Genette. While Kristeva argues that all texts work and rework other texts to form "a rich and ever-evolving cultural mosaic" (Sanders 17), Genette based his theory on those forms of literature that remain intentionally inter-textual. In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Genette defines hypertextuality as "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5). Thus, the

hypotext is an earlier text or a source text, which is reworked in the hyper text, that is, a later text or an after text. For instance, Homer's *Odyssey* is the hypotext of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Allen 108). Viewed thus, appropriation becomes a process that both encourages and celebrates such interactions among a network of texts.

Julie Sanders defines 'appropriation' as "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain", which "may or may not involve a generic shift", with the result that "the appropriated text or texts occur in a far less straightforward context" than that of an adaptation (26). The effectiveness of any appropriation is dependent upon the readers' participation in the play of similarity and difference perceived between the hypotext and the hypertext. Hence it is important that the hypotext is familiar enough to belong to a "shared community of knowledge" that has cross-cultural, even cross-historical readerships. This necessitates the employment of canonical texts such as Shakespeare, classics, mythology, history, folktale, arts and science as hypotexts. The impulse to appropriate the canon often originates from a desire to highlight the possible gaps, absences and silences within the authorized or canonical texts they revisit. As a result, the hypertexts strive to discover new angles, new routes and new perspectives on the familiar, thus establishing entirely novel possibilities.

### ***Beloved*—A tale of passion**

*Beloved* is a fictional return to the years of slave trade in America, to the pre-Civil war era that witnessed the horrors and inhuman atrocities meted out by the white plantation owners of Kentucky to their black slaves. The novel is partly based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner, the black slave woman who murdered her little daughter and attempted suicide in 1856 to prevent recapture by the posse. Here the hypotext is the history of American slave trade, which includes the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that permitted the slave owners to pursue slaves across state borders, and the life details of Margaret Garner. Such factual details are appropriated to shape the magical realistic world of *Beloved*.

Sethe, the African American slave woman, flees from Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation where she worked, and at the end of a hazardous journey, reaches her mother-in-law's house in Ohio, where her older children are waiting for her. Within a month, she is tracked down by her master, who arrives with the local sheriff to take her and her children back to the plantation. In her frenzy, Sethe grabs her children, runs to the tool shed and attempts to kill all of them, succeeding only with her eldest daughter called "Beloved", then two years of age.

Years later, a strange young woman arrives at Sethe's doorstep, who calls herself "Beloved". She is taken in, fed and looked after, and Sethe eventually "recognizes" her as her murdered daughter returned to her mother. Because of her guilt, Sethe pampers Beloved, who

in turn, becomes highly demanding and resorts to tantrums with a vengeance. Sethe is so much engulfed by the presence of Beloved that she sacrifices her own needs to cater to Beloved's whims and fancies.

Through *Beloved*, Toni Morrison attempts to rewrite and reclaim the history of the African American enslavement that would have been otherwise lost to forced silences and deliberate forgetfulness. Sethe's story is narrated from the perspective of a people who were suppressed and silenced by the authorized version of history. By revising the "master-narratives" of authorized history and by replacing it with the 'slave narrative', Morrison writes back to the historical context of slavery and the historical conjectures that shaped the racial discrimination.

### ***Foe*—A tale of reason**

J M Coetzee's *Foe* is "an exemplar of the counter-discursive move of cultural appropriation" (Sanders 106), a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's canonical 'castaway adventure' *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and his lesser known last novel *Roxana* (1724). Set in the early eighteenth century, the hypertext (the appropriative text, in this case, *Foe*) displaces both the author Defoe and the hero Robinson Crusoe from the textual centre and inserts the female protagonist Susan Barton along with a marginalized and speechless Friday. By rewriting the canonical novel "whose story and theme has become part of a universal mythic consciousness" (Dodgson-Katiyo 44), Coetzee successfully subverts the myth of Crusoe. Such an appropriation reveals the absences and silences suppressed by the hypotext (the source text, in this case, *Robinson Crusoe*), which is a grand narrative of empire.

On Susan Barton's voyage from Bahia to Lisbon in search of her abducted daughter, she is thrown overboard by the mutinying crew. Swimming ashore, she finds herself in the desert island inhabited by a sixty year old Cruso, with a rambling mind and a contradictory memory, as well as his black servant, the tongueless Friday. Within a year, the three of them are rescued, though Cruso dies during the voyage back home. In England with Friday, Susan tries to get her island-adventures published with the help of Mr. Foe, an established writer. In between, her long lost daughter approaches her, calling herself "Susan Barton" while the older Susan refuses to recognize her.

### **Sethe and Beloved**

Motherhood is universally venerated as the culmination of womanhood by all cultures. A mother who takes the life of her own child is never forgiven—by the society, the family and even by herself. Hence the black community of Ohio ostracizes Sethe, her own boys run away and after the death of her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, she is forced to rebuild her life with her youngest daughter Denver, who is all left with her. Even Sethe refuses to

remember the incident until Paul D interrogates her. She will rather remember her perilous escape across the Ohio River, giving birth to Denver on the way, with the help of a white girl. Such a journey is a sign of her strength, her motherhood. By repeating tales of victory and deliberately forgetting those of sorrow, Sethe chooses to present the picture of an independent woman to herself and to the readers. She returns the society's "disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated" (96). But in the African tradition, there is no individual existence apart from community life. The picture of a strong, self-reliant woman is shattered first with the arrival of Paul D and then with that of Beloved, as they constitute what looks like a family. But neither solace nor family is destined for a murderer mother and hence Paul D is ousted by a revenant ghost.

In fact, killing one's own is regarded a feline rather than a feminine attribute. Even Paul D tells her, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four..." (165). The comparison with animal is found throughout the brutal treatment of Sethe at Sweet Home where the slave woman is needed to work hard, breed new work hands, nurse white babies like a goat, and lose sight of her family when they are sold and re-sold by the white masters. She finds herself at the centre of a pedagogical discourse when she overhears her new master, the schoolteacher, instructing his disciples to analyze Sethe: "...I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193).

Sethe herself explains her gruesome act as an attempt to save herself and her children from the unendurable cruelties of slavery. To her neighbour Stamp Paid, "[Sethe] ain't crazy. She love(sic) those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter" (234). Even Paul D understands that her love is "thick". Sethe's murder can be explained in terms of the black slave woman's challenge to her masters wherein she kills to own, reclaim and repossess through an act of renaming. As we are told, "Beloved" is the name she chooses to call the dead child. The appearance of Beloved is interpreted as that of an "*abiku* child, from the West African Yoruba mythology, who returns to be born again to the same mother" (Bowers 86). By introducing the African myths into the narrative, Morrison brings in cross-cultural significations, thus connecting Sethe to her racial past.

With the restoration of Beloved, Sethe comes to terms with her social identity, as the Other to both the Blacks and the Whites, and embraces irrationality, wildness and madness—the zones reserved for women. Accepting the patriarchal logic that men are essentially rational, while women are beyond rationality, Paul D and Stamp Paid offer a rational explanation for Beloved's appearance. As Monika Kaup observes, "marginal—insane and colonial—experience is given the status of female heroism" (Kaup 93), Sethe the protagonist is presented as mentally disturbed. Through her acceptance of the new Beloved, Sethe falls into the role of a feeding, protecting and nourishing benevolent mother, and thus becomes a "proper" woman according to the African American tradition. It is only after her mothering role does the black community steps in, to rescue her from the clutches of the ghost.

### Susan Barton and Susan Barton

Susan Barton is introduced into the context of Crusoe's island as a mother searching for her abducted daughter. But once she is rescued and brought back to England, she no longer pursues her daughter; instead, she wants to publish a book on her adventures on the island. A girl does come to Susan's doorstep in England, claiming to be her daughter, having the same name as Susan Barton, and having followed her everywhere, including the island. After a thorough interrogation of the girl, Susan Barton comes to the conclusion that the girl is either mad or sent by Mr. Foe. Susan's response to the mysterious girl who claims her affection is that she is "father-born." She means that her father is Daniel Foe, for Susan suspects that this phantom daughter is merely a character brought to life by Foe in order to provoke her into some kind of a narrative reunion and closure. She even tries to leave the girl in the forest. Towards the end of the novel, when they reach Mr. Foe's residence, the girl reappears with her nurse Amy. Susan Barton continues to claim that her own daughter as she remembers "is tall and dark-haired and has a name of her own" (130), and so this girl is a "substantial ghost" who "haunts" her for unknown reasons and who "brings other ghosts in tow" (132). Thus the mother-daughter relationship becomes a minor episode in the narrative.

By seeking out Mr. Foe as a ghostwriter, Susan Barton accepts her own identity as the Other in the 18<sup>th</sup> century publishing world of England, which is essentially masculine, and which refuses to take in a female perspective. Mr. Foe, as a representative of that world, is more interested in the personal details of Susan—her daughter, how she lost her, Susan's life in Bahia and so on. Susan refuses to cater to the curiosity of Foe, just as she refuses to acknowledge the girl as her daughter, thus emphasizing her identity as "a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131). In the end, Susan assumes the girl to be "a fictional creation" of Foe, which is true, if we read the novel intertextually in connection with Defoe's 1724 novel *Roxana*, where "Susan Barton's long-lost daughter returns only to be murdered in a hideously misjudged act of loyalty by Amy the maidservant" (Sanders 111).

The discovery of the corpse of a baby girl on the road to Bristol can be interpreted as that of a murdered daughter, suggestive of a mother who smothers all familial ties in order to serve the more ambitious purpose of writing a novel. Susan Barton's refusal to acknowledge the girl can be read as her refusal to accept the marginalized "angel of the house" role traditionally assigned to women. By expressing a desire to "author" a book rather than "mother" a girl, Susan is attempting to appropriate the male territory of writing. Since writing itself "will mark her as the Other, as unfeminine" (Allen 146), she seeks the help of Defoe, who, as a literary voyeur, steals her story to compose two of his novels—*Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*.



### **Sethe and Susan Barton**

While Sethe blindly accepts “Beloved” as her daughter returned, Susan remains suspicious of the girl throughout the novel. Susan even calls the girl a “ghost”, a term which Sethe never uses when Beloved returns to her. Sethe’s lonely expedition to Ohio and to freedom reveals her masculine traits, though finally she accepts her motherhood and settles for a family life with Denver and Paul D. Quest being predominantly a male motif, Susan, by her very search for her daughter, reveals masculine characteristics. By rejecting her daughter and by desiring to write a novel, she further dispenses with the female role. Whereas the layered narrative supports and emphasizes the truth of Sethe’s story, the same repeated lines emphasize the falsity and unreliability of Susan’s narration. Despite her arguments, Susan’s story is not told and she falls back to water as a muted corpse, just as Sethe is absorbed into her traditional role.

Sethe commits an act of “altruistic filicide” because “she believes death to be in the child’s best interest” (Friedman & Resnick 137) than a lifetime of chains. Similarly, Susan Barton refuses to slide into the traditional mothering role as a protest against the intellectual slavery to which the author-figure Foe subjects her. Slavery is physically imposed on Sethe; whereas Susan Barton is neither a slave nor a black, yet she cannot “free” herself from the traditional female role to which she is hurled by the patriarchal society. The male dominated literary world of the 18<sup>th</sup> century would prefer a courtesan-mother to a female intellectual and author figure.

### **Conclusion**

Even though semantically opposed to each other (“Beloved” signifying “love” and “Foe” signifying “enmity” or “hatred”), the two novels are postmodern in character as they also rewrite the traditional roles to which mothers are confined—loving, caring and ever forgiving goddesses incarnate. Mothers like Sethe and Susan have undergone a paradigmatic shift as a result of the horrors of slavery (both physical and intellectual) they underwent. When these women step out of their conventional roles, they cause anxiety and insecurity for the patriarchy that originally cast them into such roles. They also remind us that motherhood is just another role played by us humans in this world-stage and that the divinity associated with motherhood often becomes a device to marginalize womanhood to subaltern positions.

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